

Simple Triple Standard



The Real Official, Almost True
Backstory for Modern Commercial Radio

RAY PALLA

Also by Ray Palla

KRILL AMERICA

A fiction action, adventure, thriller, suspense novel.

Available in Hardcover, Paperback and eBook @
RPalla.com, on Amazon, and Barnes & Noble

Simple Triple Standard

The Real Official, Almost True

Backstory for Modern Commercial Radio

RAY PALLA



SIMPLE TRIPLE STANDARD

The Real Official, Almost True Backstory for Modern Commercial Radio

Copyright © 2015 by Ray Palla, RPalla.com
All rights reserved.

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher constitute unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at Info@rpalla.com Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Ray Palla - RPalla.com

First Edition: August 21, 2015

ISBN-13: 978-1682221327 (hc)

ISBN-13: 978-1515165811, ISBN-10: 1515165817 (pb)

Amazon ASIN: B01255UUXY (eBook)

Printed in the United States of America

Simple Triple Standard

The Real Official, Almost True Backstory for Modern Commercial Radio

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Live On-The-Air.....	5
The You Bet Your Life Game	29
Ain't Nothing but a Little Change	50
More Trade-Off than Trade-Out.....	73
New Fashioned Picnic.....	90
Impending Political Tragedy	109
New Meaning to the Term 'Dead Air'	126
Jerry Jeff Got Drunk	145
Texas Justice and What's in Your Pocket.....	167
Failure, Progress, & Success—All Feel Pain	184
The Road Ahead & Signs of the Times.....	203
Epilogue	224
Appendix A: Tribute to Trav.....	237
Acknowledgments	239

Approximately 84702 Words

INTRODUCTION



Hey Kids, remember when radio was King? Don't give up yet. The music business, print media, and other industry giants have all suffered the onslaught of the future. Who knows what's next for radio, but it sure ain't dead yet! Common people in the world still need free local news, weather, and traffic just as much today as they did in the golden years. The forecast just has a lot more technology behind it in the twenty-first century than it had a few short decades ago.

I'm from the radio old school where disc jockeys had to spin vinyl records and all the air personnel worked by the seat of their pants to match the sweep second hand of an old analogue clock, without a script, live in front of an audience of thousands. If you made a mistake or had a technical glitch you quickly learned to punt or ad-lib as if you had planned all along for things to happen just exactly the way they occurred. Broadcast air talent was very similar to a cat that occasionally falls into the bathtub and then walks away as if nothing at all is out of the ordinary.

Bob Dylan had it right long ago, "The Times They Are a Changin'." The pundits of his day said TV and then Satellite Radio would soon take out the commercial radio broadcast industry, put it out of business, but the beat still goes on. Don't give up on local entertainment, true personalities, air talent, and toe tapping... those things are still working. Corporate conglomerates of the year 2015 can't give everyone everything, and their heyday will also run the course of time as media dollars just continue to

roll along with the flow of technology and the next big thing. Remember VCRs and cassette tapes? Some things just come and go. Passion and gusto will always grab a fair share of the money at the advertising gambling game table. In my day passion and gusto were the only things that really mattered at all. Technology was secondary; a whole nuther animal. Technology like satellites, digital data, and computers were a tertiary set of variables that frankly we hadn't even imagined, but were soon to get a full nose scent of.

In the early 1970s within the music and radio culture something did begin to happen that got everyone's attention. It was something that would be written about for decades in various industry periodicals like "Billboard Magazine." A tide was changing, and the wave was destined to be felt with the story told around the world. By 1972, FM radio was beginning a deadly assault on the old standard AM band. Along with that assault, came a siege on historic double-standards for music. "The Top-40/Rock-n-Roll" scene and the "Country/Western" genre *started* to blend together.

No place was more influential in that generational upwelling than Austin, Texas where the music scene was, to say the least, "more than a tune on the radio or a place in the heart." In that pivotal time in Austin, music was a way of life. Music represented a passion that brought individual idealists together in a way that, frankly, in other cities might have pitched folks into barroom brawls.

Austin locals called themselves rednecks and hippies (ropers and rockers) and, although they gathered on opposite sides of the room, they all ate and drank at the same watering holes, danced on the same hardwood floors, and they all lived the same weathered, rugged lives every Texan had before them. Both sides of the equation loved life and lived for their popular brand of music and song.

Like with most things, when you put two opposites together something new comes from it. Austin radio called their brand of the newest merger, "Progressive Country." And so, with the idea of commonality and a strong appetite for "the good times," a new standard was born out of the same soil that also cultivated Willie Nelson picnics, Jerry Jeff Walker anthems,

and Michael Martin Murphey cross-over platinum hits.

The age of “sex, drugs, and rock & roll” had given way to an era of “live and let live.” It made sense! A “Simple Triple Standard” became the new, *latest and greatest* standard.

If you’ve ever lived in a small town or a close-knit community, you certainly know about double standards. Clearly we need standards; but *double standards* often come with the stigma of being something corrupt or evil. Frankly, double standards often are wicked. Take for example the rule of law where, to be on the opposite side of the law is rightfully considered to be *distorted dishonesty* or an example of exploitation.

For the most part, double standards are not always rooted in bad policy. *Love and hate, black and white, heart and mind, body and soul...* without context, double standards appear to be just opposite ends of a spectrum like north and south; just opposites with no malicious intent. *Church vs. state, education vs. indoctrination, woman vs. man, hurricane vs. drought, life vs. death*; all these examples sound like they may attack each other at any given point in time and quite often it actually feels like they really do, but in truth they simply provide balance for opposite perspectives.

The old adage, “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction” tells us that because we have standards, double standards are inevitable—and they affect us every day whether we perceive their presence or not. Take art for example; one single standard for art just won’t do. One person’s concept of art is another person’s notion of bad taste.

Just try to imagine only one single standard for making barbecue ... or beer. To a pit-master or brewer the concept of one recipe for all of the craftsmanship in their work is completely absurd. It would be insanely ridiculous to expect barbecued ribs in St. Louis to taste exactly the same as hickory-smoked riblets from North Carolina, or mesquite-pit baby-back ribs from Texas. The same goes for beer ... If ale tasted the same as lager, the saying, “variety is the spice of life” would lose all relative meaning in culture. After all, the keys to culture are the distinctions between how

things are done and celebrated. So, double standards exist, and for good reason.

With that said, how much more complicated can a triple standard be, right? — A simple triple standard. Given that one times two is two, and two times three is six, a triple standard is three times more complicated than a double standard. The math is simple. However, dealing with the possibilities is not always quite so painless.

When I was young and impressionable I saw some things that permanently changed me, changed my mind, and altered life even as I live it today. Things that are defined by standards are often that impactful. Although the world would surely be a terrible place without standards, and given that we must have them—it's easy to forget that too much of a good thing is also impacting. Relative to where you stand in the equation, the impact of standards can potentially and notably become irreversibly deadly. I know that may sound like a bold and unproven statement, but please allow me to elucidate, and welcome you to the cold cruel world, my friend!

In the 1970s I wake up every day wondering who or what might be found dead or dying. It's a hazard of my trade. I'm a radio news reporter and, to many pundits and casual observers, the demise of radio and the death of innocence have already begun.

LIVE ON-THE-AIR



“Rise and shine, Austin ...The word for the day is: *Legs*. The phrase for the day is: *Spread the word!* You’re listening to the Major Mac Pecan Show.” Mac announces the top of the hour on his daily morning radio program, “Nut-up y’all! Get out of bed! This is K-N-U-T, The Nut.”

Mac is the meat and potatoes of the KNUT programming day. I’m just a legal F.C.C. licensing requirement, a side dish; but I’m forever grateful that in the early ‘70s, news on the radio is *still* a viable marketing product.

“Good morning, Texans, It’s exactly nine o’clock on KNUT, Austin. It’s partly cloudy and sixty-eight degrees. Here’s what’s making news in your world today. I’m Bryant L Herman ...”

Officially, the glory days of radio were in the ‘30s, ‘40s, and early ‘50s. Once television flashed its ghostly image into American living rooms by 1955, radio was soon to become a completely different animal. By the late ‘60s voices on the radio had become less authoritative and more comediotic. It would be only slightly more than a decade before people like Howard Stern began to find ways to command listener ratings with shock-jock comments and rhetoric designed to grab immediacy and thought provocation through a short morning commute window-on-the-world.

In the late summer of 1972 the idea of one radio program *for all your*

listening needs was already obsolete. The days had already faded when you could pull up to a traffic light and see the person in the car next to you bopping to the same tune pulsing from your own dashboard. Sure, there were still days when UT campus block parties, like on Halloween, kept the single-channel concept alive ... even infrequent times when every house on the block blared their massive Marantz amps and JBL speakers across the yard as residents mowed the lawn and washed their sedans ... There were a few occasions still remaining when every single home had the same commercials and the same music station on the same radio frequency ... but for the most part, today, those wonderful golden, glory days of radio are unceremoniously ending.

“The Nut” in Austin is becoming just as irreverent, recalcitrant, and blue-humored as New York’s future, blatant Stern. I credit (blame) Arbitron for segmenting the audience. Arbitron compiles the radio ratings, and if you don’t have ratings, you don’t make any money in broadcasting. Ratings are broken-down by age groups and various other demographics. For DJ’s and newscasters alike, the audience is now being systematically divided exponentially. Of course, Howard Stern doesn’t come into radio history until the 1980s, but the seed is already being planted in 1972.

Major Mac Pecan is still the local go-to morning show in Austin for audiences of all ages, but he is of late taking on a constant barrage of competitive hits from the new rocker in town, a station owned by the thirty-seventh, recently-retired President of the United States, Lyndon Baines Johnson. KLBJ-FM is a comer in younger circles, and KNUT, the local country music standard, is losing traction with some of the bigger advertisers like Coke, Pepsi, Ford, Chevrolet, and a host of national concert promoters. Three-Dog-Night is becoming a bigger draw than Merle Haggard on the concert circuit, and long-revered broadcast industry standards are already rapidly changing nationwide.

Lyndon Johnson is a Democrat and was recently unseated by the Republican candidate for President, Richard Nixon. That is certainly an important footnote to my story and to this account being underwritten by ad moguls, but more about that later. Lyndon is popular with Viet Nam era

America ... But, in Austin, Major Mac Pecan is *very* popular, and has been for a long time.

Pecan is crafty and wily. He has a melodious voice and a magnetic way of captivating the attention span of a few minutes without completely alienating his audience or sponsors—usually. On this particular morning, however, he almost loses his day job permanently.

Immediately following the “spread the word” joke, Rob Robbers, the new KNUT station manager, bursts into the studio as soon as the on-air light goes off outside the control room door.

“You can’t talk about having sex on the air.” Robbers has only been on the job for about two weeks, but has already alienated *his* primary audience, his employees. There’s a bitter water cooler gossip rumbling in the halls about his impatience and demanding nature, not to mention his condescending, self-righteous Baptist demeanor.

Robbers had once tested his worth as a DJ himself, so he thinks he knows something about putting on a show. To his disappointment, the Rob Robbers Program, with his high-pitched voice, was a toilet bowl cleaner. He only lasted in the six p.m. to midnight “late shaft” slot for about two months, before being cut by the program director and replaced with a girl. Robbers still believes that women have no place behind the microphone.

“What? Spread the word? I can’t say that?” Major Mac is stubborn in the face of authority, and especially with the new guy. Robbers, is getting constant push-back from Pecan.

It all started on Robbers’ day one at the station employees’ meeting announcing his taking over the management chair. Mr. Robbers is replacing a long-time friend of the KNUT family, and, in particular, a great old friend of Mac. Even though the replacement is because Jim Conner, the previous manager, had already made his big bucks and retired, Mac just never seems to accept a new leader. Toward the end of the staff meeting, Robbers said that he is, “looking forward to working with the ‘now infamous’ Major Mac Pecan.”

Pecan then coughed under his breath, “Top Nut to the rescue! More like

LEFT NUT!” Everyone, including Robbers, heard it and they all laughed—all but Robbers.

Mac Pecan has been the number one DJ on The Nut since it first took the name K-N-U-T in 1962. The whole concept of the station is a tribute to his national stature and name, as well as the state tree, the Pecan Tree, and the University of Texas Longhorns’ fans (whom Pecan lovingly calls “the UT Horn Nuts”). All the DJs here have last names that end in something to do with pecan trees. It is the mildly edgy, humor-oriented, *Country Giant, Tall as Trees, KNUT—The Nut*. Believe it or not, The Nut is a grand success and nationally recognized with countless CMA awards and impressive ratings.

Actually, until recently, no other station comes even close to the constant crush The Nut makes on the market. KNUT market shares double all of the rest of the Central Texas broadcast markets combined. The station effortlessly generates acclaimed, lasting reputations for musicians, singers, songwriters, and radio talent alike. Mel Tillis, George Jones, Willie Nelson, and the biggest and smallest names in country music regularly grace the microphones and turn-tables on KNUT, Austin.

As a city, Austin isn’t very big in 1972. Home of the state capitol and the government center of Texas, as well as the local city and county leadership hub, Austin has, however, always been a political town. I think the population is around two-hundred-fifty-thousand people in the early ‘70s, but we have an oddly unique flavor that America seems to admire and takes notice of. I think Mac Pecan helps cement that image on television, complementing his radio program with a wildly-popular national TV venue.

Regarding politics (and everything else), the self-proclaimed “Major in Mac Pecan’s Army,” Major Mac has recently been pushing the boundaries for catchy words and phrases he uses on the air at The Nut. His top rating in town is lately being jeopardized, and so, he has been upping his professional ante. As the control room monitor belches out the last two seconds of the national pre-recorded ‘Sanka Coffee’ campaign, Mac pops open the mic, the on-air light flashes, and Pecan begins to rant.

“I can’t say, ‘*SPREAD THE WORD?*’” Pecan isn’t smiling or joking anymore. “Is that in the manual? I don’t remember reading that in the holy book of radio.” He abruptly lets go of the new hit record he is holding slip-queued on the already spinning turn-table, cranks the pot (attenuator, volume control) to the halfway mark, slaps at the mic switch toward the off direction, and storms out of the control room and down the hall to the restroom.

Radio talent is very much like all other talent—actors, artists, and writers—moody, emotional, and normally overly dramatic. At least, that’s how I seem to always see them. Pecan is no exception. He was discovered professionally in the late ‘50s when the traveling “Ed Sullivan Talent Show” came to the Austin Auditorium. Pecan has a small-time local comedy act and plays a big Mexican-style bass guitar in a loosely-managed group of musicians called, “Goosedogs.” The name of the band is Mac’s esoteric personal reference to “goosing and hounding” the ladies. Not surprisingly, in the ‘50s, Pecan’s odd, eccentric, vaudevillian act actually won the big talent contest and soon thereafter Pecan became a protégé to Mr. Sullivan himself. Mac now regularly appears on national television’s weekly live “Ed Sullivan Show” from Broadway in New York City. That notoriety has made Mac a local hero. As a once-monthly, recurring guest, Mac is laughingly introduced each time as “Goosedog P. Can” on Sullivan’s variety hour. Speaking and dressing like a country bumpkin, catchy words and phrases are always the Pecan moniker. In spite of the disparaging, gooberish image, the people of Austin love Mac dearly. I’ve even witnessed people watching the show on the TV display models in the South Congress Avenue Appliance Store—and they shout back at Sullivan’s introduction to the act, “It’s Pecan, (pi ‘kän) not Pee-can, you Yankee.”

Unfortunately, when Mac slams the mic to the off position on this particular, seemingly predestined morning, he fails to actually switch it off. Maybe it’s intentional, maybe *not* ... but with the microphone still on, Robbers begins yelling down the hall after the keynote speaker voice talent that he suddenly fears is leaving the podium.

“You son of a bitch, you know damned well what I mean. ‘Spreading legs’ is vulgar, it’s offensive. What if Sanka hears that shit? That’s not entertainment. That’s a flagrant slap in the face. It’s frickin’ blasphemy, you arrogant prick!”

Of course, Robbers’ untimely panic is broadcast to the entirety of all Central Texas, clearly and graphically, and much louder than the country tune playing on the radio. In the days to come the incident precipitates a turning point for all of us on KNUT. Things are somehow never the same at the station that Pecan had so proudly hailed the day before as, “the place to get your Nut.”

You would think that management would learn not to mess with the air-talent when they are *live on-the-air*, but managers have egos, too, and probably never will get the memo. Rob Robbers never does seem to learn. He cowls and stomps toward the men’s room after Mac.

Pecan has been ritualistically and briefly terminated a dozen times in the past for things he’s renowned for blurting out in front of the mic. “Let’s get down to The Nut cuttin’!”—“Get your daily Nut with Major Mac!”—“That new song is smooth as Nut Butter”—“Everybody loves my Nuts!”—“Even a blind squirrel gets his Nut, now and then.”—The list goes on and on. “KNUT is home to the biggest *Nut-job* radio personalities in Texas.” With no regard for the consequences, Mac plugs on.

Pecan has a bull’s-eye way of grabbing onto a word and never letting go. These quips of his are perceived by Robbers to be jabs at management, and not coincidentally, they almost always are. Robbers, over the past two weeks, has sent Pecan home for as much as two days at a time, suspending him, “long enough to think about things.” But the time-off usually only gives Major Mac the inspiration to think up sneakier, more cunning jabs.

Robbers clearly wants respect and isn’t going to let it go so easily today though, especially since he has just so profusely, and unwittingly embarrassed himself for all the world to hear. Robbers soon realizes his “live-mic” mistake as he’s rounding the hallway corner, still cussing, and bumping into Grant Justice.

Head salesman, Justice is a six-foot-five tower of dollar bills. He sells more advertising in Austin than anyone. “You know you just made an ass of yourself, LIVE?” Grant smirks and rubs his eyes.

“What?”

“Your inane *screaming down the hall*; your bitching at Pecan? It was on the air!” Grant laughs, “Every person driving to work this morning heard it.”

“Oh shit!” Robbers wipes a grubby little hand across his brow.

“Yup..! You gonna fire yourself?” Grant almost always sides with Pecan. He knows who gets us the ratings and where the money comes from. Grant towers over Robbers’ short, five-foot-four, fat frame in the hallway and stoops over to take a sip from the water fountain. “Nobody made coffee this morning?”

“Craigers, take the board; cover for Pecan, hurry up, and get in there.” Robbers orders midday announcer and Program Director, Craig Grove, into the booth. Grove is sleepily just entering the building.

Exiting the rest room and tightening his belt, Pecan is greeted with the now biggest news story of the day.

“Mother—‘*Ugh!*’ You’re fired! Get out of my station,” Robbers tiptoes to get into Mac’s face.

Pecan looks to Grant with a smirk, “What did I do?”

Of course, Pecan has heard the whole thing throughout the hallway and on the bathroom speakers.

Grant moves away from the confrontation and toward the break room to prepare a cup of the free instant Sanka on the counter. “I can’t help you, buddy. I’ve got an appointment with Capitol City Chevrolet. You guys iron this out amongst yourselves—that was pretty funny about the legs, though.”

Robbers is fuming. “Pack your bags, bitch! And don’t go anywhere near the control room.”

As Robbers turns to stamp into his office, slamming the door; Pecan

immediately, almost as if mandated by God, swaggers directly into the broadcast booth where Craigers is frantically trying to get a handle on where he is in the programming log. Although Craig usually follows Pecan at ten a.m. every weekday, the turn of events this morning has him taking over some fifteen minutes early, and without his morning cup-o'-joe.

"What happened? I was outside in the parking lot; did I miss something?" Craig adjusts the height for his stool and inches toward the microphone, but hesitates to open it or speak into it. Instead of outroing the fading record, he methodically fires off the cart machine that he has just loaded with the next commercial. Leaning into the intercom, he presses the NEWS ROOM button, "Bryant, can we go straight to sports after this? I'm in a jam."

I squawk back, "Sure pal, I've got a Longhorn staff change report that Evans recorded last night. I'll grab it right after you do the live-station promo."

"No, you do the promo and give me two minutes." Craigers is quick to take the reins. He's the consummate professional, a no-nonsense announcer with a proven track record of never having dead air. He is the kind of DJ who can walk (jock, talk over) the intro of a record that he's only just moments before previewed and never step on the first word of the lyric. He's tight.

"Don't sweat the small stuff..." Mac is determined to keep a stiff upper lip. "Same crap, different dog ... I'm headed to the house for a large bowl of inspiration. You'll want to do a live tag on that Alka-Seltzer spot and, oh yah, I forgot to log the last Sanka ad. I got interrupted by Left Nut." Glancing at the program log and leaning across Craig, Pecan signs-off the log and then calmly pivots to remove the clipboard from the equipment cabinet, reads the gauges, and jots-down his transmitter meter readings, also signing those.

"Monday's another day. Looks like the transmitter temperature is high again, better have the chief engineer check out that AC unit one more time

... Have fun, Craigers, and tell the fans that I had a station promotional event to attend.” Then, casual as a cross-eyed cat, Pecan screws the top onto his homemade jug of iced-tea, tucks it under his arm, and calmly marches out of the station as if still on an official call to duty from the heavens.

I know Mac well enough to imagine exactly what he did when he got into his freshly-restored rag-top, rumble-seat, 1934 Ford Roadster. Man, he gets the coolest trade-outs! I’m sure he immediately switches the radio-station so he can listen to his new competition in town as he checks-out his hair in the rear-view mirror. He is large! I don’t mean that like, he is a big guy. He probably isn’t over 5’10” ... round, not too rotund, but he keeps his shirt outside his pants. I mean, in his mind, and in the mind of most of his fans, Pecan is a legend, invincible—the best thing since salt and pepper—but even under that huge ego he is extremely insecure, vulnerable, and constantly, self-loathingly introspective. Pecan likes to show-off at events like the Shriner’s Thanksgiving Day Parade up Congress Avenue, perched up behind a top-hatted chauffeur, puffing on a stogie in his rumble-seat, waving to the crowd like a grand marshal. Actually, sometimes he is the Grand Marshal.

Mac’s public image is similar to that of the famous comedian W.C. Fields (an old time Hollywood misanthropic and hard-drinking egotist who remained a sympathetic character despite his snarling contempt for dogs and children). Mac received his beautifully pristinely refurbished Ford Roadster along with a clear title from a body shop on Ben White Boulevard just for mentioning their work on the air a time or two each week. Today, however, Major Mac wallows in constant fear that KLBJ is going to rain on his own personal lifestyle parade.

“KLBJ and the Morning Zoo at 9:52 in the morning, this is Bart Max with the new ‘Beatles’ hit ‘Get Back,’ bidding you ado until ‘Magic Monday’ when we’ll be giving away a brand new 1973 Chevrolet C-10 pickup truck to some ecstatically, ear-to-ear-grinning, son-of-a-lucky-schmuck, downtown at Capitol City Chevrolet. Listen in at seven a.m. or be there with us for a tailgate picnic lunch at noon. It could be you with

that gargantuan smile on your kisser. Good morning, Austin, it's a beautiful Friday in the capital city and seventy degrees outside. Marsha has your news and party plans for the weekend coming up next. 🎵 Jojo was a man that thought he was a loner, but he knew it wouldn't last. 🎵"

Bart is tight, you've gotta give him that. "Tight" is something Pecan completely avoids. As a matter of fact, Pecan exploits "dead air"—it's funny to him. His slow-moving nature is a trademark trait.

That end-of-show sign-off must really chap Mac Pecan's ass. The KLBJ competition is a staff of three full-time announcers, two news reporters, a sportscaster, plus one dedicated on-air producer. They call the group "The Zoo." Mac does his entire morning show alone—well, he has me, one lowly newsman. I say lowly now that people are getting their news more and more from television, and radio newsmen, like me, are becoming small-fry in the big skillet of marketing. Another thing that likely bruises Mac's ego is that the new KLBJ morning guy has chosen the name Bart Max to use on the air. "Mac—Max," I know the similarity in stridence must rub Pecan's ball hair in the wrong direction.

It's a good thing there are no cell phones or internet connections in the '70s because Mac would probably immediately dial-up KLBJ or spam their consoles with insults and harassments for the next hour. Instead, I'm sure he enjoys the song as much as he can. Mac actually likes the new songs and rock-and-roll; he just can't stand the fact that he is losing footing in market share. He hates that big Chevy Truck giveaway... and on top of it all, he despises Robbers with that continually dysfunctional, maladjusted rubbing-in-the-face he uses like a drill-bit. Mac is steaming, "Punk, your name is not Bart Max; you're friggin' Les Johnson."

That's funny. That really is his name. Leslie Johnson is an Austin High School Graduate and UT alumni. At probably near thirty years old now, there is no wonder why "Bart" uses a pseudonym on the air and for his public persona. The name, "Les Johnson" just doesn't set the tone right for getting ratings. On another note, having party plans for the weekend as part of the news chaps my ass, but that's another story entirely.

The situation is a basic simple triple standard. It's like when you know what you must do—you know what society says the rules are—and you know what your gut feeling is, when the situation is something wildly outside of the norm. Common sense would be for Pecan to head home, smoke his bowl, and simmer down some.

Society would say it's best to let Robbers hang himself on the gallows of radio cronies past. But Pecan's ego and volcano-burning gut tell him to go on over to Capitol City Chevrolet and back-up Grant Justice to cinch a sizable contract for the new Chevy line. Pecan often goes along with the sales staff to help close deals, and national money is being budgeted this week at all the car dealers across the market for the new model year fall car showings. Yup, Mac should just go home, but he doesn't. He goes with his pudgy little gut ... He pops a handful of antacid tablets, gulps a long swig of Pepto-Bismol, and drives directly to the downtown Chevy dealership.

Before I go too far down this road, let me elaborate some on a few of the standards regarding how radio stations make money. We sell air by the minute. We sell advertising and call the product "air time." I know it sounds insane, but that's the entire premise. Furthermore, if you are one of the top stations in town, you make more bucks per minute than if you're a pristine modern new facility with no listeners. It's just that plain and simple. It's not so much about how much grand equipment you have or how much power your transmitter can put out so much as it's about your numbers; the entire game is all about your ratings score.

So, the standard way of determining if you get rich or go broke in radio is a tried and true method of polling the audience. That polling occurs twice each year by an outside service and is known as a "ratings tabulation period." If you listen closely you'll notice that all radio stations put up big promotions or have large events during ratings periods in order to pump up their otherwise lukewarm or moderate numbers. Notably, that's *one* standard that has yet to find an equal and opposite *double standard*. There is just one commonly accepted method for gathering ratings data and "Arbitron Radio and TV Ratings Service" is the biggest company in the

nation for getting to the crux of who's on top. Yes, there are other companies, but Arbitron is widely considered the *gold* standard. If your Arbitron book looks good, the advertisers and ad agencies flock to your doors, but if your numbers are down the list, your salesmen wear out dozens of pairs of shoes pounding the pavement for sponsorships, and more often than not, your own babies at home go with no shoes at all.

Right now, Austin is in the middle of an Arbitron rating. We have about one more week to go. It's one of the two times each year that Arbitron randomly calls phone numbers in the area for a period of two weeks, asking anyone who answers the phone a few mildly-probing questions. "How old are you?" If you're under eighteen, they ask to speak to one of your parents and then, "What sex are you? Are you listening to the radio right now?" If so, "What station," and if not... "What station do you regularly tune to?" It's very simplistic polling by twenty-first-century standards, but in the day, it is the meatball on the pasta. It dictates both cash flow and careers.

Consider a career in radio to be a lot like acting on a movie set. When your part is done, the show goes on without you; with no regard for the past, or you, or your talent. There's always a new talent waiting in the wings. Position changes, and seemingly random staffing changes handed down by management, occur on a regular basis, especially before and after rating periods, but rarely in the middle of ratings. The difference between being number one and number two in any market is tens of thousands, and often even millions of dollars in advertising revenue ... and ultimately, personnel incomes and the total number of staff members on the payroll. In the early seventies a million dollars is still a million dollars.

Arbitron is supposedly un-biased as an 'outsider to the community and market area' — BUT in order to get a copy of the Arbitron report, stations have to pay for it. I always think that the final outcome has some bit of a reflection in favor of the stations that buy the report and against the stations that don't. Money makes the world go 'round. That's the first lesson for *all* standards.

Ratings that are Arbitron tabulated for your particular station can cost

five to ten thousand dollars. If you want the full report for all stations, depending on market size it can be well over fifty thousand smackers. Some stations just can't afford the cost, but most ad agencies and big-league advertisers like car dealerships get insider access to the reports, even before the information becomes public.

That's the real reason Pecan is heading over to Capitol City Chevrolet. He knows his buddy Chuck Bridger, the dealership owner, has some pre-release stats on how the current ratings are going here at the mid-point. It's adding to Pecan's heartburn to learn the scoop.

Pulling onto the Chevy house lot and with his antacids kicking in, Mac parks his classic Ford right on the street side front row of the dealership, where it is readily visible to all the passing traffic. He then takes a long pause to draw a sufferable swig from his homemade iced tea and rechecks his hair in the mirror. Everyone who knows Pecan well is also aware of the reality that his ever-present "iced tea" is, "99.9 percent pure, always freshly made, naturally organic, plain Jane, nonprescription, over-the-counter..." Smirnoff Vodka. He completes his preparation for the meeting by chewing two spearmint flavored Life-Savers candies and then exits his vehicle brushing the front of his shirt with the backside of his hands. He's ready for what he believes will be an easy 'get in and sign-off' on a lucrative contract covering not only next month's reveal of the new model car season, but also for upcoming holiday sales blitzes; and perhaps, just maybe, given his long relationship with the dealership owner, he can help swing the deal to take the budget well into 1973's advertising campaigns. Even if they don't go that far, today should easily write business for the entire next quarter, through the end of the year.

Mac is slightly surprised when he looks-up to find Chuck's outstretched hand marching toward him. "What the hell, man? What do you mean parking that 'found on road dead, fix or repair daily' FORD on my front line? You've got a lot of nerve, you old pecker head. When are you going to let me put you in a Cadillac? You know you deserve it."

Mac grabs Chuck's grip in mid-stride and slaps him on the back. "You know I'm just a big-grinning, quick-glance in the rear-view mirror in the

general direction of a Cadillac, old man.”

“Ha, ha, I’m gonna turn your corner one of these days. How are you? Good to see you, Mac.” Chuck is smooth as silk, but very candid with his friend of more than ten years. “You still a teetotaler, big boy? Putting on some pounds, ain’t you? When are you gonna slow down?”

“Hey-hey-now, I got a long way to go to catch up with your imposing character.” Pecan always has a comeback.

“Come inside, get out of the sun, Justice isn’t here yet, but he’s on the way. You’re a few minutes early, want a cup of coffee or a Coke?”

“No thanks, I’m well taken care of in the liquids area. How’s business, Chucky?”

“Great! I was going to ask you the same thing. I heard your new jackass boss on the radio this morning. You still got a slot, don’t you? It sounded like you were about to get fired.” Chuck Bridger is always straight to the point.

“Naw, naw, you know me —I always bounce back like a fast cat in hot coals.”

“You’d tell me if he’s redecorating your fireplace and furniture, would you?”

“Hey, you have as much insider information as I do, probably more. I’ve got lots of probing questions for your nurse, too.”

“Dang it, man, good to see you! Hey, there’s Grant! Let’s let him know we’re ready to roll on an ad deal! I do have some questions about next year for you guys. Are you looking that far ahead?” Chuck is already marching toward Grant before he finishes parking. Still marching, Bridger again stretches out his right hand and opens Grant’s car door with his left.

Grant ducks his head to exit the vehicle and stands to shake. “Hello, Chuck. Who’s your little buddy here?”

“Hey you’re late, sky scraper, Pecan has already closed this deal; you can head for the showers, my man.”

“That’s funny. Did he remember to cross the “I”s and dot the “T”s?

He's dyslexic, you know. He talks a fine line of bull, but you better check the paperwork." Smiling, Grant slaps Mac on the shoulder.

"Come in. Coffee? Coke? Some Pee-can tea?" Chuck laughs generously.

These three salesmen are like three open books, and from the looks of things, all are on the same page—ready to close. I think that's how all salesmen simply inhale air. To them it's a fine art—and this painting is promising to be a masterpiece.

As the trio enters the showroom, Chuck yells out, "Miss Melamie ... Get these guys a Coke, please, and hold my calls for a while, will you? You, guys want a scoop in it?"

Grant says, "Sure, chocolate."

Mac states, "Not for me, my doctor is allergic to dairy. He says it gives him gut rot."

From behind the desk, the primed, proper, attractive receptionist rises and extends her palm to Mac. "It's so nice to see you again, Mr. Pecan. How are you, sir?"

"Very well, my dear! And you?" Mac lightly cradles the receptionist's hand and bows like a Victorian waltz partner. He's always the lady charmer.

Clearly enchanted, Melamie gazes into his blue steely eyes, instinctively stretches out her cute sock-hop style pleated skirt with her left hand, and quite properly curtsies. "Glad you're here, Major Mac."

Mac raises her hand above their heads and Melamie does a seemingly choreographed pirouette for him.

Dazzled, Melamie exits to the kitchen without greeting Grant, but catches herself and turns-back to say in-stride, "You look especially smart today, Mr. Justice."

Aside to Mac, Grant asks, "Do you know her?"

Mac stares after her slender figure and shakes his head no with a boyish grin on his face. "Uh, no, but her numbers are already at the top of the

charts in my book!”

“Melamie, you’re a favorite, I’ll tell you that!” Grant winks after her backside and makes a side note to Chuck, “I don’t remember those fifties poodle skirts being that short. Nice high-heels, huh?”

Chuck says under his breath, “Got that right! I always love the new model year. I like the new car season, too!” Chuck cackles at his own joke. “You’ve gotta put your best show right out front—Am I right, Mac?” Then louder, after Melamie, “Make one a chocolate Coke float, please, Miss Melamie?”

“Yes sir, coming up.” The echo of her heels fades out across the showroom floor.

No one notices, but Mac doesn’t respond to Chuck’s comment about the best show. It almost makes him consider his career, but he brushes it aside and follows into Bridger’s office, closing the door behind them.

“Geez, I’m getting too old ... How young is she?” Grant asks.

“Twenty-one, RTF student, she’s only here a few hours in the mornings.” Once in private, Chuck immediately changes the subject. “Well, let’s get right to the nut cut, boys. I want to do some business with you two. What have you got for me?”

In the present context “nut-cutting” is not an especially entertaining thought to Mac and Grant. The passing thought of cutting KNUT from the Capitol City Chevrolet account is actually not at all entertaining. The two associates catch each other in a fast glance before Grant takes the floor.

“Okay—so, Chuck, here’s what we’ve put together.” Grant pulls a proposal from his briefcase, lays it out on the desk in front of Chuck, and begins his well-rehearsed five-minute presentation.

“Hold on! —Come in, Miss Melamie.” He motions to open the door as Melamie peers through the glass window.

Melamie enters with a tray of Cokes-on-ice in those famous Coca-Cola-brand shaped, green crystal, drugstore malt shop glasses with straws. She places coasters for all three men and serves the sodas, leaving with the

question, “Can I get you fellas something more ... Fresh popcorn maybe?”

All three simultaneously thank her, declining further attention. So she exits and again closes the door.

Chuck doesn’t lift his eyes from the proposal, and is already leafing forward to the last page and the bottom line.

“Let me stop you here, Grant.” Chuck doesn’t allow Grant to continue the standard presentation, which is out of character for him. Chuck, in the past, has always wanted to hear everything and probe every detail. It’s a little unusual for him to step right to the end.

“Sure, Chuck. Talk to me.” Grant takes the change in stride with an edgy, but accommodating smile. “What’s up Chuck?—‘Up-chuck’, bet you haven’t heard that yet today? You seem punchy, pal. We’re here to help. Tell us what’s bothering you, my friend.”

“Well, I don’t know how to approach this other than to just come out and say it. You know I love you guys. Hell, the only radio station I listen to is The Nut. It’s on right now in the showroom and out on the lot, and in the shop. That’s not a problem for me—but.” Chuck takes pause to stare at the bottom line again.

“But what, Chuck?” Grant is consoling as if he’s here to assist a stranded calf in a wooded section of the pasture, away from its mom.”

“It’s corporate.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know I’m a franchisee, not an outright owner.”

“Yah, I remember that.”

“Corporate’s been jumping up-and-down about advertising diversification.”

“Where is this headed, Chunky?”

“They want to take 25 percent from KNUT and put it into politics on the ‘Democrat side.’” Chuck turns his hands up on the desk. “I’m not really in control of this decision.”

Here’s the part about politics that I mentioned before. KNUT is owned

by a group of members of the Texas Legislature, two Senators and three Representatives. All of the owners are staunch Republicans and very vocal in both State and National political circles, resulting in a great deal of attention to detail for managing public opinion, perceptive scrutiny, and microscopic dissection.

Since it was founded, KNUT has been very discrete about its political roots, although, and I'm not particularly proud to say it; even I have to admit that political viewpoints and, yes, even favoritisms have bled over into conversations on the air. Especially on Mac's show where he often prods and pokes politics with his quips and jabs. The *usually subliminal* political tradition has even made an intrusion into the news stories reported by me and the other news staffers. I'll confess further that we've even been encouraged not to run some Democratic-flavored stories, and then, on the other hand, urged to promote less worthy news-making events that were sponsored solely by the Republican vote. I won't say we've been directed or mandated in any specific direction ... after all, professional ethics for newsmen require a non-biased position ... however, with that said, I will concede that we have in the past been buffalo-herded and somewhat circled in the hunt.

Additionally, from another, entirely different perspective, there's the whole AM/FM *political thunder* thing. KNUT is AM radio (Amplitude Modulation). KLBJ is FM (Frequency Modulation). AM and FM fundamentally travel differently through the air (AM: bouncing up-and-down, gathering RF noise within the electromagnetic spectrum, and FM: traveling straight out sideways, without an inherent reflective return). FM is the next big thing; it truly, inarguably *is* the future for a more quality sound. FM is a cleaner signal and sweeter to the audience audio palate. It now comes from the factory in all new cars and is the top band on every new brand of portable radio or home stereo. FM broadcasts in rich static-free stereo clarity that you can listen to under a bridge or in a tunnel. FM is no longer elevator music. FM is a waking giant on the radio waves of the horizon.

So there it is —the biggest nut to cut is politics ... of one kind or

another, pick one. It's double jeopardy. I've worried about that for some time, and it has finally come back to bite us in the rear. Just now saying it, the ramifications appear to be more damaging than I had previously imagined.

Unlike Mac who dives right into political issues, it's easy enough for an average DJ to avoid politics by simply focusing on entertainment, comedy, and music. For a news reporter, however, politics is a major part of the job. If you're in news and not reporting on politics, you're just ignoring the facts, and you're probably a terrible reporter. The reality is that political references can *often* bite your hind-end, so that's why the standard in news is to report both sides of the facts. The job gets much messier, though, when there are more than two sides to the story. I call that political position, "the triple standard," but more on that later.

My point is that, although money makes the world go around, politics makes the money go around. Don't get caught in the middle!

"Chuck, you are talking about chopping your outreach to an already well-established following and just walking away from it; just forgetting your customer base and loyalty." Grant looks grim.

"You think I don't know that, boys? I'm pissed about it, men. Hell, I voted for Nixon for God's sake. You think I want to put my hard-earned cash into the pockets of the opposition?"

"Corporate wants me to saturate that frickin' LBJ retirement fund with my money ... I'm not happy about it at all. And, oh yah, what about that lady-boy, Les Johnson? I mean that butt licking sycophant, Bart Max ... he hasn't got the clout of a pimple on my naked ass. I'd much rather just give a free Cadillac to your man, Mac Pecan, here, than work with that weaseling *punk-starter without the fireworks*."

"Hey, I'll putter your Caddy around." Mac is drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair. You can see in his eyes that he's mind-bent.

"Hold on, Mac." Grant redirects. "Chuck, Chucky, Huckster... we've been around the dance floor together on more than a few double-dates.

Interrupting, Mac injects a new turn of thought, "So what do you know,

Chuck? Have you heard something about numbers? Is corporate reading something more into this than the politics?” Mac fires his lone shot pistol into the now apparently mounting onslaught and brewing melee.

“Damn it, Chuck. They can’t change your vote. Let’s take this back to the table.” Grant remains on track.

“Well, there is that little point Mac is leading toward.” Chuck is hesitant to proceed.

“Ratings? You’ve seen some early Arbitrons?” Grant leans forward to follow the lead.

“Not me, no, but corporate has some friendly handshakes from time-to-time and they passed this to me yesterday.” Chuck pulls a report from his center desk drawer and slides it across the table, resting it between both Grant and Mac.

The two press in and Mac pulls his specs from around his neck and places them on the bridge of his nose. He’s quick to note that, “There’s only a two-line statement here.”

“Yup, KNUT down 25% and KLBJ up 25%. Now don’t take it personal, Mac. This is just what the big boys in Detroit see from their ivory-towered chairs clear across the country. It still means you’re number one all day long.” Chuck is apologetically wincing and he reaches to sip his Coke straw.

The room goes silent for an instant. It’s rare for Grant not to have a quick comeback, but Mac is the master of dead air. Mac just drums his chair arm and stares at the report for a minute. Even when Grant inhales and appears to have something vital to say, Mac points his hand towards him, cocks his head to a listening pose, and then lifts a single index finger to the sky as if to say, “Hold it and listen ...” without ever actually saying the words. The room is frozen in the uncomfortably-silenced conversation for yet another full eight-count. That’s when Mac doubles the tempo.

“God-damn it, Chuck, you already gave that little shit over there my pickup truck campaign. You know, that was my idea. I had that campaign plan back before the first of summer. I was gonna give a car away on

KNUT. Now look at us! We've got squat—and Lyndon and Leslie Johnson got our baby, the bath tub, and all the frickin' dirty soap and water. What the hell, Chuck? We had a dealio!" Mac is on a fast-track toward a downhill roll, but takes a breath.

Chuck is getting hot and uses the instant to get back on top of his soapbox. "Again, stay calm, Mac. I swear this is not about you and KNUT. I didn't pay shit for that pickup deal! You guys wanted five grand for the dealio, remember. I can honestly look you square in your good eye and tell you that new punk-assed KLBJ 'queer' gave his farm away for free, along with all the milk—and the cow! That new 'Morning Zoo' host, Bart Squat, with all his mambie pambie "NEW way and NEW sound" college-educated ideas, talked LBJ's sales staff into marketing it as an integral part of their whole NEW station image launch. They gave it to us for free! Just so they can say: *KLBJ and Capitol City Chevrolet*. They've made an entire *Americana*, "American Way" anthem theme out of it."

"I didn't do that, fellas! Honest, all I said was we'd like to give away a car. Corporate took that ball and ran with it straight over to the KLBJ side. They think they'll make a touchdown pass with it! Corporate did that, not me, and they fully have the right to do it, too. After all, they're supplying the God-damned vehicles!"

Back peddling, "Mac, that actual truck is still three weeks out. The giveaway Monday won't even have a real truck on the showroom floor or outside for people to test drive. All we'll have on-sight will just be pictures."

"The new line doesn't come out until the third week of September and I still want to put all of my balls in your court for that entire delivery week." Chuck pauses. "Of course..." Chuck squirms uncharacteristically just a little.

"Of course what, Chuck?" Grant really doesn't think he wants to know any more but asks anyway, "Vehicles? Plural?"

"The real downside to that 'reveal week' is that corporate has dictated that they want to repeat the *American Way Chevrolet Giveaway* for the

two weeks prior to, and the week of the new model unveiling. And they're staying with KLBJ."

"It's already signed; it's a done deal. The bastards at LBJ were even the ones who suggested doing a truck as the *first* of *two* promotions, beginning during ratings, so they could specifically goad some numbers from KNUT with a product that all the country fans would like to have, a pickup. My guy in Detroit says that was the icing on the cake that cinched the deal for an *All Americana* Malibu campaign for the finale in three weeks."

"Right behind Monday's truck event they're planning to announce that they're also giving away a new Malibu, too. It's a double whammy, the ole one-two punch. They've already started stunt-looping the Don McLean '♪ Bye, bye Miss American Pie ♪' song for fifteen minutes at a time, every two hours after midnight. It started last night. The loop doubles air time each day 'till they make the official announcement here, live Monday at the pickup giveaway. And the kicker is that they're also bringing in Don McLean for a free show on Auditorium Shores the night of the Malibu delivery. NEW Chevy's, NEW free concerts, NEW mambie-pambie boot-licking air talent. Newness, newness, newness! I'm already sick of the ass kissing."

"Crap men, I'm handcuffed!"—"So, there I said it, I wanted you to get it from me first.

I didn't want you to hear it somewhere out on the street. It's a bitter pill, I know, for all of us." Chuck exhales exhaustedly.

"I'm sick of that damned song ... Over and over again. ♪ Kiss my baby goodbye, Miss America Died ♪! I can't believe this shit. I've got to go. I gotta meet me a man about some meat to beat!" Mac rises from his chair and instinctively rubs his gut. His antacids are wearing down.

"Mac, you'll be ok. We'll let them spit fire for a while and then it will all die down. Next Fourth of July, I want in on that Willie's Picnic thing. Tell Willie I'll give him and Kris Kristofferson a whole fleet of demo cars to drive their musician buddies around town in. I'll sponsor the whole

thing from the start of the promotions to the end of the after-party. It's all yours, Mac. You know that *has* to go to KNUT!"

"Oh-kay—uh, I got it! So, I'll do this, Chuck ... I'll reset these numbers to match what we've talked about, and I'll rewrite the proposal to account for a whole frickin' new strategy. Can we get back together after next Monday?" Grant is visibly disturbed as he rises to shake Chuck's hand.

"Not a problem. How's Tuesday?"

"Tuesday's fine."

Mac has already opened the door and is leaving without a handshake. He controls his reflex to shout obscenities throughout the lobby and turns to leave. As he walks away he waves goodbye with his back turned to Chuck. "I'll take delivery on that Cadillac now! I helped make you the King of Cadillacs! Thanks a buck, Chuck!"

Melamie says, "And thank you, too, Mr. Pecan. Hope to see you soon! I'll be listening Monday."

"Thank YOU, Miss Precious."

When Mac is out of ear range and when he has also gathered himself to exit, Grant leans back into the office to footnote under his breath, "Robbers fired Mac again today."

"In the middle of ratings?"

"Yes sir, go figure?"

"Jackass." Chuck is sympathetic to the pressure on Mac and disgusted with the new management, too. Chuck is a huge, loyal fan from *way-back-when* in the glory days.

"Anyway, I know Mac is really grateful for everything you've done. I am, too. We both owe *you*! He'll be back sooner than later. Don't let this BS get in under your chin. Next week, Chukers!" Grant clicks his tongue and points at Chuck with an index finger; it's his trademark goodbye salute.

"Tell him I'll have a brand new black Suburban for him to tool through

town in. He can use it for the entire month around Willie's Picnic Party. Insured! He and all his entourage will be styling! I'll even buy the gas!"

As Grant is leaving, Chuck rises from his seat and shouts after him, "It looks just like the governor's new cars!"

Melamie yelps out, "Have a great weekend, Mr. Justice!"

Hurriedly Grant calculates back over his shoulder, "Thank you. We'll talk soon."

Chuck's voice interrupts the KNUT music that is playing from Melamie's intercom at the front desk. "Miss Melamie, can you get me Senator Harwood on the telephone, please?"

THE YOU BET YOUR LIFE GAME



When Monday morning rolls around, what would your best bet be? Will Mac be back? Do you think Rob Robbers will be in a stronger power position over Mac and the rest of the staff? Will staff tension and market competition simmer down? Will the ratings game be lost to the tune of twenty-five percent?

Well, let me think. “No. Surprise, no! Absolutely not... And I sure hope not!”

Monday morning Mac doesn’t show. There is no explanation, no staff memo. And Rob Robbers’ office is empty. I don’t mean he isn’t there, I mean his personal stuff with all his petty little award wall-plaques, his bowling trophy, his desk photo of his wife and kids, him, and everything he owns, is gone. The weekend guy says Robbers came in Sunday afternoon in his sneakers, shorts, and tee-shirt; and without saying anything “cleared the wreckage and swabbed the decks.” That phone call on Friday from Chuck Bridges to Senator Roy Harwood had wielded the final, fatal, swift sword for Robbers.

For me, it’s time for the news. My job begins at five a.m. The first live newscast is at six o’clock sharp. Three-and-a-half to four minutes of “National, State, and Local News,” followed by thirty to ninety seconds of sports, and thirty seconds of weather. Precisely, five minutes of live reporting occurs every hour, on the hour, down to the very second. Traffic is still years away, we don’t have traffic reporting in the format for at least

another six years. 1972 is a more innocent time. Well, at least as far as traffic is concerned. Everything else is up for debate.

It isn't easy, but I force my attention toward my work. There are several things that need to be accomplished before the six a.m. broadcast. While the on-the-air program in the control room is constantly broadcasting across a five-thousand square-mile swath of Central Texas, it is also insistently heard throughout every nook, cranny, and corridor inside our modest, two-story brick building; I'm working like a housemaid: making coffee, clearing all the overnight printed pages from the teletype machines, restocking paper in the teletypes for the day, checking typewriter ribbons, you know, important news stuff. Drinking coffee is the most important part. That and reading—reading the newspaper along with at least the last hour of teletype data.

We have four teletype machines: *Associated Press* (AP), *United Press International* (UPI), *Texas Broadcast News* (TBN), and the *National Weather Service* (WX). For anything immediately going on locally, we have a full array of emergency band radio scanners that we continually monitor. Of course, the "*Austin American-Statesman*" is our primary source for weekend carry-over local news and information. I read it from wall to wall in the course of a day, but for the first broadcast I simply scan the headlines and write a brief three-or-four sentence synopsis of the top stories.

From AP, UPI, and TBN I always look for the same things, the biggest stories, and a brief summary of the events. Once I've typed up the sentences (written phonetically for especially oddly-spelled words or proper names), I sort them by category and order of importance. The newest top story is the lead story and often becomes more than two or three sentences, and may include a sound bite or two. It doesn't matter what category it naturally falls into, National, State, Local, Sports, WX, The lead is the lead; but after that story, everything else is delegated to remain within its proper category in order of most recent and most important. Generally, the lead story is a national or state report on something in Washington, DC, or a big storm somewhere. It's not often

that we get much newsworthy action around here over the weekend, but sometimes the morning paper has a headline on Monday morning that demands local notice.

Today is one of those rare days where the lead headline in the *Statesman* specifically grabs local radio audience attention. “KLBJ/Capitol City Chevrolet Pickup Giveaway Today.” You have to admit, KLBJ had all the bases covered with that Americana anthem they are pounding home. I don’t believe there is a single person in town who is not still smoking from the deep-tissue, seething penetration of the “American Pie” song. In its originally-released form, that song is over eight-and-a-half minutes long; KLBJ has made it an all-day-long dirge. God, that thing permeated every crack in the walls of this entire city over the weekend. I even heard thirty seconds of it on my way to work this morning.

Another thing I do every morning is check the top story on the other stations. KLBJ morning news begins at 5:55 AM. So, it’s now that I switch on the competition air-monitor. It’s unusual that the news doesn’t start exactly on time. That inane *pie* song is playing. Thirty seconds goes by—then calmly, uneventfully, “Hi, this is Marsha Gaines and the news today is exciting in Austin.”

The song continues behind her and that annoys me professionally. Nobody does news with music behind it. That’s weird.

“This morning is dedicated to the spirit of America and the American dream. Today at noon some lucky person in our fair town will be driving down I-35 in their own brand new 1973 Chevrolet C-10, fire truck red, chrome and silver trimmed, heavy-duty, four on the floor, Holly four-barrel-intake, dual-exhaust, 454-big-block, short bed pickup truck. They’ll be STYLIN’ ‘round town, with custom chrome grill, rims, and side mirrors from ‘Anderson Lane Body Shop,’ sleek black side-steps, chrome rail guards, and full-tilt-boogie ‘Tuff Box’ bed liner and toolbox, along with a no air-foil black ‘Turbo-Net Tailgate’ from ‘Pickup Heaven’. Their friends are going to envy the rugged-duty sixteen-thousand-pound ‘Reese’ towing package, it’s a *big-boat* hitch; and this beauty packs a breaking punch that stops-on-a-dime with any payload, packin’ its ‘Curt Venturer’

electric trailer braking system. This entirely gorgeous, brand new Chevy Truck also rises above the crowd with a serious ‘Wall Climber’ lift kit, custom ‘Train’ air-powered shocks, and snaps the attention of Polaroid cameras everywhere, touting custom ‘Cooper Rock-Hopper’ tires, ‘Binford’ rear-end, and bright red tucked-‘n-rolled leather seat covers from ‘Miller’s Auto’ on Lamar. Of course, the rest of this beast is just a simple, regular-Joe, stock Chevy pickup—with a hundred mile-an-hour speedometer.”

Seems odd that it would be red, I think, shouldn’t it be blue? Damned line-crossing Democrats! “God, that music is killing me.” Nice promotion otherwise, though.

When I finally switch-off the monitor, the competition is three minutes into the news of the day, still talking about the truck promotion, and still playing that annoying, last year’s Don McLean song in the background. I blurt out-loud, “Where’s the news?”

Miffed, I roll my chair up to the control board and mic and speak into the intercom, “God, I love my job, did you hear that?”

From the control room the overnight DJ is ending his shift. At six o’clock the Mac Pecan Show is scheduled in the logs. “Yup, damned nice truck. Every mamma’s cowboy in Texas would love to have that bitch hauler! Have you heard from Mac?”

“Nope” I re-key the intercom button. “Thirty seconds?”

“Thirty-seven. There’s a long tail on this one, so start when you want. I’ll fade it out after your intro.”

“Who’s covering you, Bob? Craigers?”

“Yup, he’s running ten minutes late. Says he got the call at five o’clock that Mac is sick. Stand-by.” Bobby wiggles his raised finger.

“Who would have guessed that?” I tort as we both catch each other’s eye briefly smiling. It’s always a good idea to smile before you go on the air. People can hear it in your voice.

Usually when the control room throws the programming to the news

room, the entire control of the broadcast is handed to the newscaster with it. Meaning that I gain control of the cart machines and essentially everything leaving the control room going to the transmitter. Bobby loads my outro cart and the station promo. His next record is already queued, waiting for the next five minutes of me reporting the news.

For a few seconds while I say my intro today, we will be doing something that is called “simulcasting.” It’s not a really big deal right now, but later in this story it will prove to be a prominent factor in an event that changes the course of some things.

As the song is ending, I open my mic and my on-the-air light blinks to life outside my booth door. While I stand-by for my queue from Bobby in the master booth, I clear my throat. My mic is open, but my master volume control is turned down to zero. The sequence is important; you wouldn’t want to clear your throat after the volume is up because you never really know when the control room DJ is going to throw the switch to make the news booth live.

Bobby and I have our signals well-rehearsed. Thumbing-through the pages, I double-check my stack of copy and line it up between my fingers by bouncing the bottom edges of the pages on the desk and I then place it on the copy board in front of me at eye level. I adjust my microphone position, placing it very close to the side of my mouth, but not directly in front of me where it would pick-up sharp blasts of air when I inhale, or any persistent pops from my lips. I have a slight problem with my sibilance; I tend to whistle my “S”s through a small gap between my front teeth. In elementary school, a speech therapist instructed me to imagine a “T” after every “S.” In theory it works, but that isn’t always mentally practical when delivering live copy; so the mic position, off-to-the-side helps hide the “pss, pss, pss” or other mechanical mouth sounds generated as I read aloud.

Bobby’s voice breaks the stillness in my room which is now silent except for the muffled constant ticking of the teletype machines that are directly behind me and encased in a sound-dampening cabinet. Anyone using this room for broadcasting or production has the constant sound of

the tickers in the background behind their voice. It sounds official, and it really is the actual sound of what's coming across the machines at any given moment. If the bells start ringing and you're live, listeners can hear it on the air. A bulletin can set-off all kinds of alarms and, in some instances, depending on which alarm sounds, can force the newsman to supersede his previously written news copy with something that needs immediate broadcast, like a tornado.

Over the intercom I hear, "Stand By!" Bobby holds his index finger over his head. I hack my throat clear once again with two or three more short swift bursts of air and recheck the weather gauges to my left.

For a few brief moments everything is still. Bobby and I both watch the sweep second hand on the wall clocks predominantly placed above both sides of the sound-proof, double-pane, glass picture window dividing our rooms. At exactly six a.m. and zero seconds, Bobby throws the switch for broadcast booth control to the middle position and simultaneously lowers the music while snapping his index finger toward me. I instantly turn my master volume to max norm and begin speaking.

"Good morning, Texans, It's exactly six o'clock on KNUT, Austin; clear and sixty-four degrees. Here's what's making news in your world today. I'm Bryant L Herman."

By the time I'm done with that intro, Bobby has faded the song tail. At that point he throws the control booth switch from the middle position to the far right. I now have total control of all the machines in the next room. If I have a coughing spasm or something weird happens, I can bail out and start a previously loaded promo, carted commercial, or just sign-off and hit the news outro. Even if Bobby has stepped to the restroom or kitchen he can hear it on the ever-present monitors throughout the building and rush back into the control room. We have a method.

I have five lighted buttons for the cart machine stack. Cart One is my outro, which I hit every time I close out the news. Cart Two is a station promo, Cart Three is the next commercial on the log, Cart Four is a Station Jingle, and finally, Cart Five is a new song that I can start after

anything else runs out in the event Bobby can't get back to his seat in time.

Every station has something similar. It may be slightly different and sometimes can be weirdly eccentric, but we all have a method for handling this logistic, depending on how many booths are in the loop and how much budget the station can afford. It's not really very technical... more mechanical than anything else. Here at KNUT, we have three booths in the loop, the DJ (control room), me (the news room), and the production room. Production is set up like a mini DJ booth in case we need to use it for continued broadcast while the actual DJ booth is undergoing maintenance or if something important in there breaks down.

Once Bobby is ready to take control again, he just returns the booth switch to the far left. That deactivates any of my buttons and console which allows me to use my equipment for recording phone calls, producing news tapes, or anything else the news team chooses, without any fear of getting out over the air accidentally. That booth switch is properly maintained meticulously under threat of termination if someone fails to have it correctly in the appropriate position at any given moment, all the time. It's managed religiously. Found in the wrong place, it can get a DJ fired.

My lead story this morning is from overseas. I jump straight into it following the intro.

"Thirty-year-old Prince William of Gloucester, cousin to Queen Elizabeth, died early today in England. The airplane he was flying apparently malfunctioned and crashed during a competition air race. Prince William was notable as fourth in line for the British throne until 1948. More details are expected to be released later this afternoon following an investigation being conducted by UK authorities."

"Overnight, President and Mrs. Nixon hosted four-hundred Hollywood celebrities, including Frank Sinatra, John Wayne, Zsa Zsa Gabor, and Susan Hayward yesterday evening at the Western White house in San Clemente, California. Among the attendees were Vice-President Spiro

Agnew and National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, who was there with his glamorous date, Jill St. John. The invitation-only extravaganza was part of...”

You didn’t think I would lead with the pickup truck story did you? Oh, hell no! Rule sixteen of the *Broadcaster’s Bible* is: You never mention the competition—on the air *or* on the street out in public. But especially on the air! If something else had been the newspaper’s local lead story, I might have led with it, but hey, that pickup was not a news story. It’s a promotion. KLBJ running it as their lead story, when a prince was killed in a plane crash just an hour ago is a disgrace to the reputation of professional newscasters everywhere. Had that been a KNUT promotion, it still wouldn’t be part of my newscast. There is a serious breakdown in the traditional thinking of what constitutes news over there on the new rocker Zoo. It grinds against my grain to have entertainment or anything else injected into a true news segment.

My heroes include UT alumnus Walter Cronkite and, in the later years of my career, Tom Brokaw. Those guys would never put promotional programming in the news block. It’s unheard of—ridiculous.

As soon as I’ve completed the temperature and once again said, “I’m, Bryant L Herman, KNUT News,” I fire the outro cart, kill my mic, and rush into the control booth.

“Greetings, earthling!” I’m all over Bobby like a cyclone. I’m coffeed-up and dying to know the internal news. “Are you still working here?”

“I think so, but that may change in ten minutes.” Bobby is droopy-eyed and ready for head home and get to bed.

“So what’s the score? Who does and does not have a job today?” I’m champing at the bit.

“I don’t know, they don’t tell me anything. I’m the night guy! They treat me like a mushroom; keep me in the dark, and feed me shit.” Bobby rubs his eyes and scribbles on his log. “Craig is on his way, and Robbers is out. That’s all I know.”

“You think Mac is really sick?” I ask.

“No, he called at five-thirty, just to make sure Craig was coming in. I think he’s throwing a power-play temper tantrum over the whole getting-fired, management-interference fiasco from Friday. Mac is just being Mac—you know.”

“Wow, missing Monday morning, with that big promotion across town ain’t gonna fare well with our sales department when you consider that we’re smack in the middle of a big Arbitron period.”

I’m really a little shocked that Mac isn’t here; he is highly professional when it comes to being on-time and ready for the program. He’s never late or missing-in-action, unless, of course, he’s pouting and then that usually becomes part of the show.

“I don’t think he has anything to worry about. My buddy at KTAP says they got some preliminary Arbitrons Friday, and Mac still has a solid seventy-three share. He’s only down three points.” Bobby looks toward the door and sees Craig in the kitchen grabbing a coffee. “The boss is coming in. Are you going downtown to see the circus today?”

“Yah, I’ll probably park down the street at the courthouse and hide in the shadows for a peek.”

My schedule after ten a.m. puts me in the field, driving the KNUT news car downtown, making rounds and sniffing for stories at the court house, sheriff’s office, county commissioners’ court, and police department. The Court House is just a few short blocks from Capitol City Chevy. I certainly wouldn’t want to park our car out in front of their promotion, or carry my tape recorder, and of course I’ll remove my ID badges, but I’m curious about what kind of draw and reception the Bart Max debut remote appearance is going to get from *our man on the street*.

“I’ll let you know how it goes—c’ya tomorrow. Have a day, Bobby.” I exit to refresh my coffee cup and pass Craig in the hall. “Morning, buffalo herder! What are you doing here so early?”

Craig is reticent, “I’m covering for Mac, he’s got a stomach cramp, or PMS, or something.”

“I guess you heard the news?” I ask.

“Um huh. Kissinger’s dating Jill St. John—Sucks to be him!”

“That’s funny, you should use it. Catch you later, wrangler, break your legs!” I leave the boss alone in the break room and return to my news cubby-hole, closing the doorway to the hall behind me.

Craig is making a good point about Kissinger and Jill St. John. She is renowned for doing a striptease in the 1966 film, “Pt. 2 - The Oscar.” In the mid ‘60s her dance was a very risqué movie scene, and was prominently featured in the Academy Awards live television broadcast hosted by Bob Hope that year. Not only did the movie get some jaw drops, but it also raised a lot of eyebrows when it showed on TV. Craig knows that it still, six years later, upsets a lot of the female audience.

Kissinger is popular as the National Security Advisor, a job he accepted in 1969 during the Johnson Administration. Actually, next year Kissinger will be appointed by Richard Nixon to also become Secretary of State, a job he’ll hold through the Gerald Ford Era. That job will run concurrently with the head security position. For his actions negotiating the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, Kissinger will receive the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize. Right now in 1972, he’s just gaining in popularity on both sides of the political fence. Political figures in the future, thirty to forty years down the road, would be afraid to be associated with such a scandalous woman as Jill St. John. But today, here in the tumultuous ‘70s, Kissinger easily commands a powerful position. His clout is undented.

We call Craig “the boss.” Technically, the news director, Mike Bitters, is *my* boss, but he’s never around until after nine, sometimes later. I look up to Craig. As program director, he’s up the chain from my boss, manages all the voice-talent, and is second in command only to the station manager, but he’s also a great mentor. He’s sharp as a tack, and a booming voice talent. Besides, he’s funny. He always goes for the laugh rather than the politics. He’s a formidable showman in the market, and, although he’s not as big a draw as Mac, Craig is often on the air in Mac’s place since Mac is on the road a lot and in New York City, sometimes as much as twice a month. So it seems likely that the listeners won’t notice anything is amiss this morning, and Arbitron Book ratings likely will not suffer any

more than they already are expected to, given the LBJ stunt promotion and today's newspaper headline story.

I have the headlines to report in twenty-five minutes, so I return to the newsroom which is cornered and surrounded by windows overlooking the halls and front lobby. It's a fishbowl type of room for public show, and also houses the news broadcast console and teletypes. As I approach the machines to check for anything new, I monitor all the fire, police, and sheriff's scanners. I can also see into the coffee room across the hall and catch Craig staring at the photo of KLBJ's Bart Max on the front page of the paper. He throws it down and heads into the control room for his 'sitting-in' shift where he'll cover for Mac.

I imagine Mac is glaring at the same newspaper right now at his kitchen table, at home. He's got something up his sleeve. He would be here otherwise; I just know it! Me, being the proverbial news hound, I smell a rat stirring garbage in the trashcan of local radio.

Just before ten o'clock, and just before I leave in the KNUT car to check my traps and make my rounds, Major Mac Pecan and Monsignor Grant Justice enter the building celebrating, arm-in-arm, grinning, slapping hands, and dancing jigs, like two little drunk Irish leprechauns. I knew it, *something's going on*, but I can't leave the booth. I'm dying to step out to the coffee room to get the scoop, but Craig's voice cracks the intercom with, "Stand By!" I'm confined to *go-live* and stuck trapped behind a mic boom for the half-hour news break.

By the time I'm off the air and have turned the news reins over to the midday anchor, Pecan, Grant, Craig, and the entire sales staff is sequestered in the conference room behind closed doors. They've even drawn the shade on the conference room door window.

"Hmm." Something big is going down, but I can't hang around to find out what. I'll have to wait 'till later this afternoon and get the news second-hand. Right now I need to hurry downtown to grab a good vantage point for a first-hand view of Bart Max's big public debut appearance at Capitol City. I'm determined to see how he handles himself and, more

importantly, how he is received by “our man on the street.” So, I’m off to the races.

The phrase, “*Our ‘man’ on the street,*” is the common euphemistic term used by the staff and industry associates in the ‘70s and is the vernacular of the day to refer to radio listeners. We’re not sexists or prejudiced *out of the ordinary*, it’s just the way people talk. And in the case of Chuck Bridges using the word “queer,” well, maybe he is prejudiced, I don’t know for sure, but I doubt it; it’s just a way of expressing a thought pattern, it’s a quick means to expressive verbal communication.

Vernacular and terms of common slang language change over time and with public opinion. In future years you will likely be shunned as *not politically correct* if you use some of the terms we consider normal in 1972. The “man on the street” may have a “woman” or “person” reference in the future, but today it’s usually a masculine reference that is most commonly used, like, “John Q. Public.” It’s always “John” not “Jane” or “Generic,” and never intended to insult or offend.

Like the man on the street, radio stations use layman vernacular as well. However, we watch closely for certain phrases and words you absolutely cannot say on the air. We’re licensed and overseen by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Everyone knows the seven words you can’t say on television. Well, in radio there are a lot more. You can’t even make an innuendo in a lot of cases.

Consider the statement that got Mac in trouble about the word of the day being “legs” and “spreading the word.” Five years ago, that joke would have been the kiss of death for a broadcaster. Today, those types of phrases are becoming more and more commonplace. The world is changing. You still need to be really careful, and if you actually said, “spread your girl’s legs,” that would probably get you fired, at most stations.

I really can’t wait to see how advanced the thinking and vernacular of KLBJ’s Bart Max will be. He represents a new generation. There can be things said under pressure and in a live public appearance that make or

break careers. Bart has a reputation of taking it to the limit, even more than our guy, Mac. I'm anxious to take notes on how Bart acts and reacts when faced with a cheering group of truck-loving fans and listeners "Large and *LIVE*."

That's my mission. I want to catch him in a mistake or faux pas. It would be fodder for the jokesters back at KNUT if we can make cackle about something KLBJ broke down on in public view. It's like catching the governor in bed with another woman. The opposition is going to take that to the bank in public opinion polls. I'm not being hateful, or mean, or even out of the norm in any stretch of the imagination about it. That's just the present-day radio mindset, vernacularly spelled out.

I'm sure I'll see guys from every station in town at this new truck promotion. We all scout the competition a lot like soldiers tracking the enemy's every move. It's just what you do because, if you don't, you might miss a big opportunity to win the war; and believe you me, it really is war. People take this job seriously. After all, it makes reputations and public images that can be indelibly imprinted on the public mind's eye or even permanently change the perception of history. It really is that important.

By the time I get to within four or five blocks of the war zone downtown, I think *thank goodness we have media-car parking at the court house*. Downtown is a mobbed frenzy. I wonder if there are enough cops. Traffic is nearly gridlocked, and people are walking two to four abreast on every sidewalk on both sides of every street, headed toward Capitol City Chevrolet.

Three blocks away I can hear the music and occasional PA system interruptions. It's loud. And, of course, it's being broadcast live on KLBJ-FM.

"Just an hour-and-a-half away from now we'll draw that lucky name for a new 1973 C-10 'road hog ...' Stay with us. We're LIVE at Capitol City Chevrolet, we're KLBJ."

Man, they're pulling a huge crowd. I'm anxious to get over there so I

quickly park and speed-date through my leads to make my regular rounds in record time. The only thing I haven't checked is the cop shop on the other side of town, and I'll get over there early this afternoon. All I've heard this morning on the police band is chatter about "this cotton-picking hippie party," although there was a report of a three-car traffic accident on Sixth and Congress. The cops had that cleaned up fast, though. I can see vulture tow trucks on every corner. They're having a heyday with the parking catastrophe. It looks like any thought of parking cars for all these people and getting them in-and-out of this tight downtown area in a timely, smooth manner was not on the agenda for the day for anyone at KLBJ. It really is one of the biggest ever cluster-ups I've seen for traffic management. But aside from that; man, what a crowd, this is bad to the bone!

It's ten 'till noon when I finally get over there. KLBJ has discontinued all regular programming and has cancelled all regular newscast times since ten o'clock this morning. For the past hour they have only aired that damned McLean "Pie" song over and over again, or an occasional sixty-second to three-minute promo pitch with the song behind it. I'm doing a rough count, and I'm guessing that they've pulled somewhere around fifteen thousand people into the car lot and streets around it. Damn, that looks pretty good. I've never seen KNUT do that on any downtown street corner.

There's a stage set up directly in the center of the auto dealer's showroom window with twelve-foot KLBJ logo banners and giant photographs of new-model Chevy cars and trucks. Over the center of the stage there's an even bigger picture of a fire-engine-red, decked-out, 1973 pickup truck. The graphics look good and include a lot of headshots of Bart and the Zoo Crew. They're plastered wall-to-wall.

Their shiny, brand new, four-wheel-drive, heavy-duty KLBJ-FM news/remote van is gorgeous. It makes our KNUT car look like a matchbox toy. That thing is the tits; all in black with its top of the line, full service DJ booth trailer. I'm a little jealous. They've got flags on poles extending forty to fifty feet into the air atop that rig sporting all the logos

of KLBJ and the sponsors. Cool.

I'm pretty sure the giveaway was rigged as nicely as the news truck is. The winner was a very photogenic blonde from UT. She is going to look really good in all the newspaper pictures and follow-up marketing. What are the chances of that being random? I don't know, but that looks a little iffy. Hell, even Marsha Gaines, the LBJ morning news girl is disappointing to look at.

On the air Marsha sounds like a beautiful, sultry angel, in charge of bringing the sun up every day. In real life and on-stage, she is short and heavy. She wears black jeans and a T-shirt, with pink tennis shoes and sports a rainbow-colored umbrella (or I guess parasol, because she even parades it in the sun). She carries that thing everywhere. It's part of the show! They are obviously playing up to the fast-growing gay community in Austin.

Not long ago rainbows evoked thoughts of pots of gold or leprechauns, but not any more ... unless it's Saint Patrick's Day. Like I said before, things change; nuances and meanings along with accepted behavior and words morph over time. Nowadays, the double meaning of a rainbow can instigate hostility from some anti-gay bigots and haters, but that doesn't faze the persistence of a modern movement or mindset. A big morph for radio is underway in tandem with the signs of the times. The parasol is just a small example of the changes that are occurring.

I'm underway, too, "I gots-to-go." I hit the cop shop and then get my "band bus" back to the station as soon as I can. I'm beside myself to know what the big pow-wow meeting behind closed doors this morning was about.

It takes me until my regularly-scheduled shift end, two p.m., to get back to the station. All is quiet on the home front. All the salesmen are out on the street, management is missing in action, and the only people in the building other than the office staff are the midday DJ and our two afternoon guys in the newsroom. They're in the middle of a shift change and ready for air, so I can't go in there just yet.

The midday news anchor bails in fast haste after his final newscast, saying little other than, “Cool, you’re back, I need the keys; we’ve got a floater in Town Lake.”

Before I can ask him about the morning meeting or share anything about the truck show, I toss him the car keys, and he is out the door and off to the races for his four-hour stint in the field. You never know what to expect around here. A body in the lake or something is always popping up.

Just as I’m able to get into the room and talk to afternoon-drive anchor and news director, Mike Bitters, my boss, The WX teletype starts alarming. The morning weather forecast had called for the possibility of afternoon thunderstorms. Although the day has been partly cloudy and very pleasant until now, late summer Texas weather can change on a dime. Like I said, something is always popping up. The alarm contains a severe thunderstorm warning for three of our coverage counties: Travis, Hayes, and Burnet.

“Hey, boss, how’s stuff? You want me to hang around and help out with this weather?” I ask.

“Naw—I got this. It looks like just a wash.” Reading, Mike says, “Slight chance of dime-size hail in Burnet. Have fun at the show?”

“Like goobers in a roaster!” I comment.

“Tough crowd?” he asks.

“You wouldn’t believe it.”

All the while Mike is speaking with me; he is focused on reading the weather feed.

I can’t wait to know. “What was that big meeting about this morning?”

“I can’t tell you. It’s secret until five o’clock.” Mike is evading telling me, because “loose lips sink ships,” and he’s clearly been sworn to not allow something to get out on the street. He knows I’m going home and, well; he just doesn’t trust me to not tell my friends about something that might be really big. I mean, after all, I’m a news reporter, and honestly, we’re all blabberjockeys. Never tell a newsman a secret. That’s rule thirty-

two in the *Radio Bible*.

“What’s at five o’clock?” I ask.

“Treemont is making the announcement.” Mike rolls his chair from the typewriter to the intercom and hits the button, “Got a weather bulletin here. I’ll have copy up in sixty seconds.” Mike turns back to the typewriter and pounds out a quick, short, four sentence script. He’s going to be busy for a while.

“Got it ... Your sounder is in Cart Three.” With that short statement Treemont tells Mike that the news booth is in control of interrupting programming with the push of button three on the console.

The booth light comes on, and now both booths are in simulcast mode. When he’s ready Mike will play the sounder, and Treemont will dump the song that is currently playing live on the air.

Mike glances back at me, “You still here?—Ok, I’ll give you a hint. You know that old TV game show, ‘You Bet Your Life’?” He merely teases me.

“Yah?”

“It’s better than that ... and bigger than a truck.” He laughs, and gestures a zip of his lips. Then, using his best Groucho Marx impression he says, “Say the secret word, you get the bird!” and he buttons it by shooting me the finger.

I chuckle and say, “Get to work, boss!”

I back out of the room, closing the door as he rolls up to the console and microphone. I leave him to it and make my way outside and back on home, because I know there’s no use asking Treemont what the scoop is. He won’t tell me either, and he’s obviously already pre-occupied in his booth. His shift is two to six like Mike’s, and weather bulletins put a pinch on both of them. Treemont’s going to be busy, too, until the weather changes, and if I popped into his room now, it would just be an unnecessary intrusion.

That Groucho show went off the air somewhere around 1960. I don’t

remember much about “You Bet Your Life.” It wasn’t something I watched much. I was young then. I recall little about it other than that occasionally a duck came out of the rafters with a hundred dollar bill; and Groucho Marx, the host, was a pretty snappy talker. He played a lot with words. Hmm ... I wonder?

Mike really hadn’t given me *any* clues. Since eleven o’clock this morning, we’ve been running a teaser promo almost every ten minutes:

(Music: You Bet Your Life Theme)

(Whacky Voice): Say the secret word, you win the bird!

(SFX): Cuckoo Clock.

Be listening this afternoon at five o’clock, Texans, for KNUT’s Terry Treemont to make an enormous announcement.

(Secretive Voice): Something is coming to Austin that’s better than a bird in the hand ... and bigger than a truck.

(SFX), (Music: Dramatic Theme):

(Annrcr.): YOU ARE DEFINITELY going to want a piece of this, Mamma!

For *you* ... your *daddy* ... and *all* the Kids!

(Music: Crescendo)

(Annrcr.): Your life in Austin is about to change forever!

(Music: Stinger), (Jingle)

-30-

Whatever it is, the timing couldn’t be better for something big; right in the middle of the Arbitron, and on the heels of today’s KLBJ pickup show. You can tell from the slug that it’s targeting housewives and families. I’m betting that blue-humor on the morning show like “spreading legs” is being taken off the breakfast menu, too (so to speak), and replaced with a more family-oriented morning humor diet.

By the way, I almost forgot my fodder about the pickup promo that I wanted to bring back to the jokesters here at the station. I have a headline—“Pickup Parking Fiasco!” Yup, KLBJ, you made your

lunchtime debut sandwich—now eat it!

While downtown, I radioed several reports about the lunch-hour traffic problems over the Marty from the KNUT news car back to the station. Several aired live—and Mike is going to begin rotating-in three that I've recorded for the night shift beginning at four o'clock. It's the afternoon-drive lead story.

When I was at the police station this afternoon the chief told me that he will probably be petitioning city council to restrict, or at least modify, the current permitting options for holding high traffic events in the downtown district. I got a quote from him where he says, "We're going to need higher fees for these bigger events to cover extra traffic control and greater manpower costs."

That's a good sound bite. And he gave me one more, even tastier, morsel, "In the future, city council may want to even disallow certain types of events downtown during the daytime hours to prevent disruption of regular federal, state, county, and city business." That's the one I'll probably lead with (even a day later) in tomorrow morning's newscasts.

What can I say? The chief likes The Nut. He also told me and the *Statesman* reporter that sixteen people were arrested for drug and alcohol abuse at the KLBJ event. The chief is a Republican.

Of course, we have to be extremely careful while walking on eggshells about what we say regarding the sponsors of the whole event and KLBJ itself. We never will mention the fact that it was a radio station promotion at all. We don't want our listeners to scan the dial for anything new. Seriously, we don't want them to listen to anything else, ever. Also, we don't want to mention any of the sponsors, especially Capitol City Chevrolet.

When all is said and done, they are still our account, our customers, and our listeners, too; and foremost, they are our present and future cash cow. We leave it to the newspaper to name names and brand the event as a spectacle, or whatever they decide to run with.

We simply say things like, "Traffic was bogged today in downtown

Austin by a ‘new-car-season’ giveaway at one of the local auto dealerships. Police were hampered by several problems generated by the crowd that included a multi-car pileup on Sixth and Congress, pedestrians failing to remain on sidewalks, and apparent drug trafficking paired with public alcohol consumption. The Chief of Police tells KNUT that he will be petitioning city council for some future changes and ways to better manage gatherings in the downtown district.” Then we play one of the sound bites the chief gave me, and just move on to the next story.

For a Monday, it’s been a pretty good day—a real show-stopper and a ‘cultural tell-all.’

Days like today drive me crazy, trapping my mind in an endless loop of questions and self-imposed concern. I think I’ll go home and tinker. I have a hobby that keeps my mind busy on days just like this one. I listen to the radio while I do it; and that way I can stay on top of the spinning world, while still realizing something actually mind fulfilling and tension numbing. Being a newsman is a twenty-four hour-mental job that can absorb your very being if you let it, taking over your sleep as well as your desire to think about anything else. So, I don’t let it. I’m into UFOs! Who would have guessed it, right? The reality of news and the science fiction of space travel are a nice contrast to each other. The juxtaposition keeps me sane (relatively speaking).

My current project revolves around imagineering a magnetically-powered engine. It’s the same power that holds the planets in alignment, and has been widely speculated on by propulsion scientists since December 1969, when an acorn-shaped object reportedly crashed near Kecksburg, Pennsylvania. You’ve probably heard about it. It’s widely thought by many UFOlogists to be the derivative of a Nazi war relic called, “Die Glocke” (the bell).

Since the first American man walked on the moon in 1969 I’ve had my eyes toward the skies. For my dollar, I suspect those two events (the bell and the moon walk) are just a mere “small step” prelude toward many more eye-opening things to come from space. My money says space is going to be a big deal in the years ahead.

Now, if you think everyone who has anything to do with radio is “pretty much nuts,” well, you’re kind of right! Autumn is nearing. The nuts are about to fall from their trees like dominoes standing on end in a cyclone. And, an impending new ratings book can be much like a severe storm for advertising; changing both the growth of the trees themselves, and shifting the entire game for all concerned.

Outside my car window, the winds begin to blow and lightning strikes to the northwest over Travis County. Let the games begin!

AIN'T NOTHING BUT A LITTLE CHANGE



Opposites attract and equals repel each other. It's a basic law of physics. Magnetic poles are a prime example. Put two magnets near each other and the north pole of one will be snap-attracted to the south pole of the other. Likewise, two south poles respond equally as powerfully and quickly away from each other. I call it the *snap effect*. It's instantaneous and never-changing.

In addition to researching the Nazi Die Glocke allegedly powered by some type of mercury substance, I've found a number of articles suggesting space flight can be achieved using a type of electromagnetic power field. For my imagination the magnetic option seems more plausible, but I would think the power control would be in three dimensions and not just one, like north and south. My imagination goes wild with that kind of thing. North/south polar controls would have to run in conjunction with east and west operation, and also have the ability to move front to back. That configuration, if constructed, would give the operator three inter-acting systems of influence for maneuverability; you know, something of a triple standard of control for locomotion. The contraption would clearly not be something simple, but it intrigues me.

I don't know why I think about people the same way, but I do. People want to wake up every day without any effort, hit the floor running, do as they please and avoid changing the way they go about their lives. People hate change. It's just a human thing. Since change is inevitable, the

paradox lies in how the human mind accepts the future. Instinctively, we want to move effortlessly into the future, but we also want the future to be just like today, well understood, and leaving ourselves in complete control. Realistically, I don't believe that expectation can be accomplished—it can't be done! Along the way forward, sideways, or up and down—if we refuse to let go of where we are now, accepting new positions in life, we, or the thing we're clinging to, will *snap* like a mighty tree in a windstorm. Maybe I'm totally wrong, but I think about those things. People, life in general, to me, is like a continual journey, a constant motion, but not necessarily a smooth motion. Sometimes life is more of a snapping jolt into a new position.

On this now irreversible Tuesday morning, things have begun to snap into a new place for Austin's radio stranglehold top station KNUT. The effect is already beginning to ripple throughout the entirety of the well-rooted conventional system of Austin's broadcast market. The tree of radio life is creaking.

After yesterday's noon KLBJ-FM pickup giveaway, our guy, Terry Treemont, reveals the next big KNUT-AM advertising promotion. I can tell you for sure that, yes sir, it *is* bigger than a truck. Initially, I see it as the next big play for all local ratings ad game strategists.

While KLBJ plays their number one song, "Alone Again (Naturally)" by Gilbert O'Sullivan, followed by seven fifteen-second truck giveaway sponsorship commercials, and a thirty-second Capitol Chevrolet commercial/promotion, Treemont introduces our next new promo campaign at 5:10 p.m. after the five o'clock news.

The 5:05 programming begins with Country's number one hit single, Jerry Wallace, "If You Leave Me Tonight I Will Cry," immediately followed by two commercials: one 30-second spot for a new local KNUT account, Accredited Services Moving & Storage, and the other, a sixty-second spot for long-time sponsor, Cash-Hillman-Lotus Homes.

As you may already perceive, none of the programming is random or coincidental. It is all a meticulously-arranged and choreographed. It's

gravitas to the ratings war.

Treemont begins by rolling fifteen seconds of the theme song from TV's "You Bet Your Life" Groucho Marx show; and then, over the top of it, reads a carefully-crafted script very casually, as if he is talking at the dinner table to his family or a handful of close friends.

"Texans, we here at KNUT have been spending a lot of time over this past summer thinking of better ways to make your life easier, simpler, and happier. You are the neighbors that make our little family here at The Nut feel more like home and part of something grand."

"When you consider what could be better than living in Austin, Texas, few things come to mind ... But what if you were able to live in this awesome place and do it rent free? We thought about that, and we thought that we needed a little help in order to achieve such a lofty concept and outstanding idea. So, we asked a few of our Central Texas friends to help us out and they came through in flying colors."

"Beginning tomorrow morning at 6:05 a.m. Major Mac Pecan will give you further details on what is coming. I promise that you and your whole family will love it. Tomorrow morning Major Mac Pecan will begin giving you a chance to win a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill, once an hour, every hour, until the rent's paid. Dial-in tomorrow and be ready to call Major Mac and just ask for the cash with this password—The word is: LAWN."

Treemont then immediately releases his slip-queue on the number three song on the billboard charts and begins to walk the intro. "We're giving away hundred dollar bills every hour. And if you know the word that wins; you automatically enter the drawing for something much bigger, something bigger than a truck. This is K-N-U-T!" The song lyric is right on time, immediately after Treemont's last syllable. Treemont is tight every time.

"That's the old, *Lead and Tease!* Nice!" Treemont looks up from his copy to three captivated onlookers in the control booth: Major Mac, Grant Justice, and sponsor, slash President, of Cash-Hillman-Lotus Homes, Gary

Cash.

Cash applauds, “Beautimous! Man, I like the drama in this promotion. The buildup mounts every time.”

“That’s the whole idea,” says Grant. “It keeps pulling the audience back in, again and again. Mac will give the audience another clue to what the real prize is tomorrow morning when he gives away the first hundred dollar bill to someone who knows the secret word is *LAWN*. We’ll promote it every hour with another hundred bucks ‘till midnight.”

“And when do you tell them what the big prize is?” Cash questions for contractual and personal reaffirmation reasons.

Waving to Terry, Grant says, “Thanks for letting us in, Treemont! We’ll be listening.” Grant opens the door and gestures for the entourage to exit the booth.

“That’s slick, Treemont. Thanks, my friend.” Exiting, Cash is excited about the campaign launch.

“We’ve already got your spots in rotation; one-sixty and two-thirties, every hour. They move around within the hour rotating on the five and ten minute marks. Right now, they’re just plain-Jane pre-canned CHL spots; we haven’t changed the copy in any way. Later, when we go live with the whole package, the rotation and quantities will bounce. That’s also when we add dozens of live tags and five-second leads. Cash-Hillman-Lotus Homes, is about to become a bigger household name than ever before. Did you like that? Treemont is pretty sharp, don’t you think?” Grant leads the men downstairs to the parking lot, “Let’s grab a happy hour somewhere.”

Cash is nodding his head all the way out the door.

The tease continues for the entirety of the last remaining week of ratings. Hundred-dollar bills keep “them neighbors,” our listeners, constantly listening for the secret word, and Treemont and Mac keep passing out words. The words hint to what the final big prize will be. Words like: “mailbox, loft, fence, driveway, shower, and gas range.” Naturally, like you, the audience begins to put the pieces together and imagines that we’re giving away a house. Not a hard puzzle to solve.

Over the week when people may occasionally listen in to the competition that has already fired their big shot for the rating period, listeners will be compelled to switch back to KNUT to play for the hundred dollars or to catch the new secret word—and with two new words per day, the secret word is constantly changing, forcing listeners to tune-in in the morning and again in the afternoon. It's genius. And it's just a teaser.

The real game begins next Monday and runs right up until Christmas, and I'll give you a clue: Cash and Grant Justice just made a deal for five houses in five new subdivisions around town, but here's the kicker, only four will be given away. One of those new model homes already belongs to Mr. new homeowner, Major Mac Pecan. He just got a ninety-thousand dollar, four-bedroom, two-bath, two-car garage, fenced corner lot, twenty-five-hundred square foot, brand-new home in posh Northwest Austin. They gave him a house! He has a clear deed and Accredited Moving Services is already scheduled to move him into his new residence next Monday. I don't mean he gets to use the house, I mean all he has to do for the rest of his life is pay the insurance and property taxes. His name is already on the title. Papers were signed this morning when Mac missed work and was supposedly out sick.

Cash Homes just bought a half-million dollar deal for advertising on KNUT. Damn, they gave Mac a house! That certainly is bigger than a truck. Listeners are going to literally go nuts when they discover that there is not one, not two, not three, but four houses up for grabs in the big give-away, along with crisp one-hundred-dollar bills to help pay for utilities. Hell, not just listeners, the competition is gonna go nuts. Christ, I wish I could play.

Cash has made a shrewd move, putting Mac in a house right away. Sure, it is a ninety-grand new-home write-off, up-front to pay for immediate marketing cost, but it will pay-off bigtime in the long run. Mac will be living in a home and talking about it daily, just as he already talks about the house he presently lives in. Mac uses his life as an example in all of his on-air stories and he includes his neighbors, his neighborhood, and

even his local 7-11 management as conversational strong points. The only difference is that now he will be talking about a home that a sponsor built for him and saying the name of Cash-Hillman-Lotus Homes when he refers to his new vista overlooking the future site of the Highway 360, Colorado River Pennybacker Bridge.

Mac does a lot of live spots for his personal following of sponsors and not coincidentally, they always get a lot more air time than other sponsors. Think of it like this: If you purchase slick recorded advertising-agency commercials, they are always sixty-seconds long, exactly. If Mac does a commercial *live* and then chats, goes-off on tangents, gets into a groove, or is making a political point, he could effectively double the amount of time he's talking in reference to a client. After all, the client is buying air-time, that's what we sell. More air-time for the dollar is exactly what Cash Homes has just so cleanly acquired. It's a smart achievement. In the eyes of the FCC, it's not blatantly illegal for Mac to have a poor awareness of just exactly when sixty seconds has ended—and he *is* a talker. That's his shtick!

Actually, Cash Homes is getting a greater deal than meets the eye. Cash can build those houses (lot and all) for a fraction of what they bring in the housing market. Mr. Cash is getting list price for all five homes, just not in mortgage company money. He's getting it in public image, and that can be priceless.

It is a good deal for the station, too. Think about it, five homes for a station promotional event spanning several months. The value of the homes on the current market totals somewhere around four hundred thousand dollars. Cash Homes also paid an additional one hundred thousand for stand-alone ad-agency-provided spots. KNUT got five homes and also got real tangible money to pay for overhead. And since timing is everything in radio, the timing of this campaign debuting during the ratings period is invaluable. When you think about it, we are on the air all the time anyway. Air time costs us no more in electricity to talk about a house than it costs to talk about a new song or even absolutely nothing at all.

The exchange does, however, make things like internal politics a little more complicated. Perhaps it's a little easier now to understand why Rob Robbers was always butting heads with Mac, and why Mac always seemed to have the upper hand. Robbers probably thought he should have a free new house, too (you know, for his vitally-necessary job as such an excellent manager). But, it's Mac who actually makes the art in an ad campaign come alive, and Mac gives public image a high-gloss finish.

Speaking of management, KNUT will see two more managers come and go over the next few months. It will take some time longer to find a manager who fits well into the mix. The format at KNUT is just that tight, ha-ha. Even though we specialize in personality radio, the personalities in the picture have to mesh together well and with a certain polish.

Not to go without notable mention, the fall Arbitron book comes and goes with little effect on the budget. Overall, KNUT loses seven points of its original 72 percent share. That's much better than the predicted loss of 25 percent. KLBJ picks up five points in the rating. So you may ask, "Where did the other two points go?" Well, since FM is growing bigger and doing it quickly, it is tugging listeners to the cleaner FM sound in several niches.

One of those new niches is a recently-launched station in town dubbed KOKE-FM. It broadcasts a progressive country/rock music format including everything from Willie Nelson to Lynyrd Skynyrd. It is fresh, edgy, and a brave new format idea that has never before been tried on radio anywhere. KOKE-FM is taking "a two share."

In the big scheme of things KOKE seems like such a small pea in the pod—and in most markets it wouldn't be considered a threat at all. However, Austin is not most markets and likes odd, weird, and diverse perspectives on the big wide world. Remember the motto, "Keep Austin Weird?" Well, Austin is growing a unique culture and taking a lot of liberties politically by setting itself apart from the norm and standing-out from the crowd. Austin has a big-boy reputation in a world of big towns and little cities. Face it, travel anywhere you like, take a look around, Austin is just different.

Something people fail to take into account; something hard to put into ratings and projections, is no little side note. It is, “what the consumer wants.” What is the buyer searching for that he or she may not be readily finding? Even harder to estimate is the fact that customers don’t always know they want something new until they actually find it. In 1972 in Austin, the listener is becoming savvy to the ways of ratings. Our man on the street is adapting to perpetual changes. We have hippies, we have cedar-choppers; we have ropers and rockers all working together, sharing the same paths and streets to success, and imbibing at the same watering holes. Austin is a melting-pot culture and none of the sides in the equation seem to mind the other game players much, if any at all. Each faction seems content to go its own way without interfering with the other’s progress or direction.

People in Austin may not always completely agree—actually they never do—but they continue to try to work together, or if necessary, work around their differences. All considered, it is much like an arranged marriage. The opposing groups actually seem to attract each other when they’re not repelling each other, bringing both factions growth ... and profitability to the community. Let’s not fail to mention, the Austin coffers are relatively full right now, too, and that fact pushes aside a lot of the politics that would normally plague a growing social atmosphere or affluent society.

So, amid innocence, ignorance, and generosity, KOKE-FM is pulling some numbers. Just the fact that KOKE is getting any rating at all is notable, and is a caption on today’s snapshot of the city while Austinites stretch their legs in a new growth spurt. I believe, and others believe, that Austin is primed and ready to snap into a new future unlike any other city in the country. Be it right or wrong, or of a third-party opinion, amid altering standards, the old methods of doing business in Austin are finding a new dance partner waiting in the wings.

While, the flashy KLBJ New Rock sound is still attached to a fast-polka southern rock style and function, the old grey country-two-stepper, KNUT is holding its own with the same-old-same-old “one-upsmanship”

that they've used since the fifties. You've got to love them both—and still, as much as things appear to remain much the same, Austinites are moving miles apart from where they've lived for decades. It's happening not only on the airways of commercial radio, but also in the eyes of those looking to the future for another “newer-than-new” concept. A new standard is being born.

“I'm laughing at the inevitability, but it does sting a little.”

It must really sting for Rob Robbers. Let's give credit where credit is due; ironically, giving away a house was his conception and creation. In reality the promotion was designed by Robbers to premiere last week when the ratings first began. He dragged his feet on the contract, though, because he didn't want to give a house to Pecan. Robbers wanted the house for himself; causing the sponsor to scoff and hold off from launching the campaign. Those on the inside, like Grant Justice and Mac Pecan, know that the real reason Robbers got canned is because he stood in the way of the promotional package sale at the last minute, two weeks ago. After all, it is a half-million-dollar contract.

Now that Robbers is gone you can see who really runs the station. It's Grant and Pecan, and they have a lot more changes up their sleeves for the competition to ponder. More stuff is about to hit the fans. No pun intended.

Aside from announcing the giveaway of four new homes, the political shuffle of the staff following a “losing-ground” rating period is also about to begin. On the Monday morning, immediately following the ending of the Arbitron, I, too, get a surprise that directly affects my regular morning routine. I've been assigned an intern news reporter/producer who is to be a shared resource for both the news department and Pecan's morning show. Actually, there are two new interns (one on the afternoon drive shift as well) and the midday newsman is gone, fired, terminado.

That's the real shocker to me. I didn't even know something was amiss with the slot. But, without notice, the midday news guy has been replaced ... and what's primarily surprising is, the replacement is being made with

a woman—Debra Wright.

The days of an all-male announcer staff have finally come to an end at KNUT. That cultural change and one other is something few fans of historic Austin style radio would have readily predicted. Aside from the stigma of narrow-minded male chauvinism, pure sexism; one more thing is important to point out in The Nut's new refinements—it's the fact that Debra Wright is not just a woman, she's a black woman. Personally, I welcome the change as a breath of fresh air, but Debra is soon to run into some pushback in the field and from our man on the street that can only be described as racist dogmatism and sheer sexist bigotry.

As a matter of fact, the changes are considered so drastic by internal management that Program Director, Craig Grove, and News Director, Mike Bitters, call a mandatory announcer staff meeting for the Saturday afternoon immediately after the ratings end. Although the meeting is short, it is a rare intrusion on everyone's weekend. Highlights include the formal staff-change announcements, and a thirty-minute discussion of the rules (do's and don'ts) of the new *homes give-away* promotion.

Following the oddly scheduled meeting I pull aside Mike Bitters and ask him why the midday guy is gone. I get an evasive response. "You're going to love Debra Wright ... she's an investigative star performer."

Bitters tells me little more, other than that he got a complaint from the Austin Fire Chief that the midday field reporter (we'll say his name is Bob Baker) interfered with a news event last week. After some prodding, ND Mike refuses to give me more insider detail, but I am able to put more pieces together from a few things I learn on the street from other news people later in the week.

Usually, many of our best sources for leads and information in the news business come from listener tips, rumor mills, or even straight from the competition. Of course, as a competent reporter, it's always a good idea to make your own confirmation of the information before repeating any hearsay or gossip. With that said, word on the street is, when that body was being recovered after it was found floating in Town Lake last week,

Bob Baker made a rookie mistake. He became part of the news himself, and not in a good way.

While at APD on one of my routine visits, I run into the veteran *Statesman* reporter, Wes Landers, who had been on the scene at the lake. He paints a grim picture for me of what he saw when Bob Baker arrived. “You’ll recall that there were thunderstorms the afternoon the body was discovered ... Well, Baker pulls up in The Nut car with his galoshes and gloves on. When he steps out onto the muddy river bank, he has a certain air about him, like he’s better prepared than the others there, who are all getting soaked in the rain.”

“The fire department search and rescue team has a small flat-bottom boat in the water and is edging the very bloated body gently ashore with a pair of oars toward an off-standing coroner crew. Whoever it is that died must have been in the water for at least three days. The corpse is very tightly packed into the jeans and t-shirt it wears, and the hands and bare feet look like very overinflated blue balloons.”

Landers continues, “I suppose Baker thinks he’s helping, and in his galoshes he surprisingly steps calf deep into the river and grabs the left hand to pull the poor stiff ashore. As you can well imagine, the result is not pretty. The body bursts; and the blue, swollen flesh slides right-off the bones of the hand. The air is instantly permeated with the penetrating stench of long rank death, sending a dozen firemen and four or five reporters heading for the hills in post haste.”

It’s a horrible image, now indelible on my mind, as the *Statesman* reporter describes it to me. “One rookie fireman even ran from the river bank, projectile vomiting into a trash can while bending over a picnic table. You know that smell! There is nothing else like it in the world. I can’t imagine what Baker was thinking in that moment, but the shit really hit the fan, in more ways than one and especially with the fire chief.”

I uncomfortably snicker and begin to swap an old war story with the *Statesman* reporter about my first time around that smell. “You know, you see some things on this job that most people would find quite difficult to

stomach—revolting. It's often not a glamorous or prestigious work environment and usually, just as soon as the day comes that you think you have your ducks in a row, somebody shoots them."

"I'm six feet tall, but very thin, only about one hundred-thirty pounds. About a year ago I was on a call to an apartment complex in Tarrytown. Some old guy had been missing for a couple of weeks and APD got the call of a bad aroma emitting from his second floor room. All the cops and firemen on the scene were thinking of bashing the door down as I arrived, and when they saw me they asked if I could slide into the transom window above the entry. Since I was the most slender guy there, I said sure and without question was boosted over the door and through the open window. I could see the body on the bed in the next room." I pause to clear my throat.

"One of the cops said," I continue, "Just ease down and unlock the door, we'll take over from there. He seemed to me to be very confident that the team of first responders had absolutely everything under control."

"Then when I drop to the floor (and really only very lightly) the whole damned rickety old building shakes unexpectedly; and with a Jell-O jerking aftershock and farting rumble-bust the old man's swollen body burst. Oh my God, it is instantaneously eye-watering. All in one single motion, I seize the door ajar and clamor to dart from the apartment." As I remember the story, my eyes burn even now, making my nose run.

"Like keystone cops, two police officers and three firemen rush the door and run directly into the cloud of stench—and then, just as quickly, they immediately do an about face and rush right back out the door onto the narrow balcony, which again vibrates the entire building. Coughing and gagging they are forced to inhale another wave of the awful stink."

I chuckle, "It was so cartoon-like that I laughed out loud; and then I was immediately, totally ashamed of myself. That's when I learned to control my laughter ... somewhat!" Again, I smirk a little, "Ha. They had their ducks in a row ... or at least they thought so."

Try as you may, there are just some things that you never forget. That

odor is like nothing else. You could have a freezer full of wild game meat break down in your garage and discover it two weeks later—or raw sewage running through a Texas-sized cattle feed-lot—but nothing can prepare you for the odiferous pungency of human decay. That smell is so distinct that for me, it remains at the top of the list of things to, if at all possible, always completely avoid. That, and making any attempt at forcing ducks into straight lines.

I understand now why there was no discussion or second chance for Baker. If for no other reason, he had to be fired for just being stupid. Breaking the unwritten rule of reporting, getting involved in the story is unforgivable; but unless you are a coroner, touching a corpse is just creepy.

The unwritten rule is, “Always remain an observer; never become part of the unobstructed account of the facts.” Becoming part of the story is never acceptable. It can only become fodder for the competition and disgraces the ethic of journalism protocol. Baker had sealed his own fate to be completely shamed and disgraced in journalistic circles and ostracized from mutual broadcaster respect. He’ll have to leave town to get any other job in news.

The *Statesman* reporter comments editorially, “We didn’t report the Baker part of the story in the paper because it’s just too gruesome. It’s not a “G-rated” visual. I did get a priceless photo of Baker’s face, though. Nobody got a bigger surprise than he did.” Landers laughs. “I think that guy literally crapped his pants. Numb nuts! Come to think of it, he did leave a duck-shit stain behind when he left; oozing from those goofy duck-foot galoshes.”

For the remainder of the day, I can’t get the graphic image out of my head.

It takes the entire weekend and a little drinking to fully flush my brain of lingering thoughts of smells and to get my mind wrapped around the all-new structure that’s been rather abruptly imposed on the staff at KNUT. At five a.m. Monday I dutifully arrive at the station to find my

new producer/reporter/intern waiting outside the back door. I'm sure I appear to be jarringly awakened when the introductions begin.

"Hi, I'm Melamie Masters. I'm the new morning show producer. I'm here to see Mac Pecan and Bryant L Herman."

"Hello, I'm Bryant." I'm stupefied. Melamie is gorgeous. She's not at all the news person type I had envisioned in my mind's eye.

"Bryant—it's so nice to finally meet you. Good morning. How was your weekend?" Melamie asks.

"Wonderful, beautiful!" I lie. "I was expecting a college intern."

"Yes sir, that's me, I'm here to answer your beckoned call, you and Mr. Pecan. I'm anxious to start learning everything I can from you two."

"Well, come on in." I punch in the key code and wave my hand for her to enter the building ahead of me, following her through the doorway and scratching my still aching, hung-over head. "Well, this should be fun," is all I can think to say.

To be honest, I'm intimidated by her looks. This girl, Melamie, is probably near my same age. I'm twenty-three and she looks to be about twenty-one years old. However, unlike me, she is stunningly good-looking. "You're an RTF student?" I ask. "You look familiar. Weren't you at that KLBJ pickup giveaway last week?"

"Yes sir, my major is Radio, Television, Film, but I'm also planning to pursue a master's in psychology." She's quick with her responses.

"Please, you don't need to call me sir, call me Bryant." I speak as if on autopilot.

"You have a good recall! I *was* at the pickup show. I've been working as receptionist for Mr. Bridger and Capitol City Chevrolet since I moved to town from Seattle. I'm all yours now, though. Thank you, Bryant. You can call me Mel." Melamie couldn't be more cordial.

It crosses my mind that Miss Melamie could easily be a movie star. I wonder why she's following a menial career path into local radio or news. Guys like me with a face for radio know where we belong, but she should

be at least on a TV weathergirl camera, if not on the big screen.

“What’s your interest in the radio part with all of your studies?” I acknowledge that she’s clearly smarter than her appearance would indicate. I can tell from her instant repartee that she’s not just a pretty bimbo, but has a clear and perceivable amount of snap.

“I like getting down in the trenches and building from the ground up,” she replies confidently. “Getting a media job in Austin is quite daunting. There’s so much competition from the large RTF student body at UT.”

We may be the same age and have similar interests, but this girl is way out of my league. I wouldn’t have a *chicken foot chance in China* of having even a simple conversation with her of more than “hello” on the street or in a night club—But, I know immediately that if she can tell time, read copy, and report news without stuttering, we are going to become great pals. Her voice doesn’t sound like it will be especially sultry or sexy on the air, but at least it’s not brutally high-pitched or squeaky. I like her instantly.

Melamie inquires, “Point me to the coffee machine and I’ll start a fresh pot for us.”

She has already hit my sweet spot. “You like Swiss Miss in your java?” I ask.

“Oh, I love that. Is the Swiss Miss the kind with the little marshmallows in it?” She flips her flowing brown hair over her slender right shoulder and smiles back at me.

I’m smitten. “Duh, is there any other kind? Coffee, Swiss Miss, half-n-half, and lots of sugar ... It’s my life’s-blood in a nut shell. Speaking of nuts, welcome to KNUT, Melamie—I’ll get the papers off the front porch; the coffee is in there.” I point her toward the kitchen.

When I return to the studio with my armload of *The Dallas Morning News*, the *Houston Chronicle*, and the *Austin American-Statesman* I notice Mac Pecan in the break room already gesticulating wildly and engaged in reckless abandon with Melamie in a conversation about his morning show. I wave at his recognition and enter the news room to give them some time

to acquaint themselves, although they already appear to be long, fast friends. I don't know how that old fart does it, but the girls always seem to take right to him. Through the glass I see him do a "Sim-Sala-Bim" magician bow and rolling-hand gesture, welcoming Mel into the fold.

While I begin typing up my headline story, he and she enter the newsroom with Mac saying, "You met the precious Miss Mel yet?"

"Yes sir, she's a ringer," I spout.

"Got a typewriter she can use?" Mac is intent on putting Mel into the mix immediately.

"Yup, right there."

Melamie takes the seat beside me, inserts a sheet of paper, and begins typing what Mac dictates, word for word. Damn, she's fast. I can type about sixty words per minute. She must be blazing in at around ninety, and we haven't even had our first cup of coffee yet. I'm a little jealous as she effortlessly keeps up with Mac's cantered verbiage. I can't help but notice that she even has time between Mac's breaths and pregnant pauses to brush a few flecks of cat hair from her shirt.

"Where can I get the weather forecast?" She asks of me.

I point toward the teletype machines, which I have yet to reload with paper. She instinctively opens the soundproofing cover, cracks open a fresh case from the ten large reams next to the WX printer, and threads the paper onto the hole punch guides, precisely, correctly, at the top of a new page, exactly as if she's done it a hundred times before.

I become a little intimidated and self-conscious, clumsily dropping my orange glow highlighter to the floor and hooting out a short, "ha" as I bend to retrieve it near her feet. After a weekend of reliving a series of awful smells, Melamie is absolutely a breath of fresh air. She smells like the girl Mary Ann from Gilligan's Island must smell ... Coconut oil and honeysuckle. Yummy. Her shoes look like they've never been worn.

"Mel worked a summer at KOMO in Seattle, Washington after graduating high school and before moving to the University of Texas." Mac notes that "It looks like you've got a handle on this. Y'all play nice,

kiddos. Don't get pins and needles in your pants." Mac winks back at me as he grabs the *Chronicle*, exits closing the door, and heads back into the break room where the coffee steam is beckoning and where he can finish prepping for his show. By some inane intuition, Mac prefers to read his news from Houston. On the other hand, the news director, Mike Bitters, likes the Dallas paper. Nobody reads the *Fort Worth Star Telegram* any more since the mid-day coverage is changing, so we've discontinued having it delivered.

Aside from all the new staff changes, the morning show programming format is also changing some, but only slightly. Now, I'll be closing my newscast after the last story with a simple, "Bryant L Herman, KNUT News." And then Melamie will be doing the weather and introducing the Major Mac Pecan Show.

So now, in close quarters and in the presence of Mel, I'm almost too self-aware and embarrassed to perform my morning voice exercises to wake-up my mouth and vocal cords. It's a ritual I run through every morning; I really can't talk if I don't do it. So I have to make the call and finally, after getting somewhat flustered, I decide to just do it, and I start by rolling my tongue against the roof of my mouth and making a sound that mimics an aged hedge trimmer.

Then I begin my mantra, "Rubber baby buggy bumpers, toy boat, toy boat, she sells seashells by the seashore while sifting sand, toy boat, toy boat," then rolling the tongue rapidly between my lips and teeth, "la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la, r-r, la, la, la, la, toy boat, toy boat, rubber baby buggy bumpers, rubber baby buggy bumpers." It sounds crazy, but it warms up the lips, tongue, throat, and voice box. I usually follow the entire routine with a long drag on my always lit Marlboro, and clear my throat with a variety of draped, coughing word combinations like, "bastard, mutha, crap, give it up" all covering my mouth and expelling air quickly as I'm hacking. It works. It's as important to clear the throat and sinuses as it is to sound like you're smiling when you are on the air.

Melamie looks amused by my non-conventional verbal procedure, but

she just smiles, doesn't appear to be annoyed, and never says a word as she focuses in on soaking up *The Dallas Morning News*.

Six o'clock comes and goes, I report the news and sign-off; and Mel's first shot on Austin radio airs without a glitch. Miss Mel tags out of her unceremonious inaugural weathercast with, "Beautiful and sixty-eight degrees. That's KNUT news and weather; I'm Melamie Masters—and now—The Major Mac Pecan Show."

The number one song rolls behind her and Mel continues, "The secret word this morning is: FIREPLACE. Good morning, Texans! Spread the word—FIREPLACE is the secret word." She nails the intro really tightly. Mac never really ever does that! I'm impressed.

Of course, her weather and intro were totally pre-recorded and carted-up as 'my outro,' but without question, we already sound better. It sounds like we have a bigger, more diverse staff. It sounds pro. I'm pretty impressed with the air-check Mel takes home on her first day.

I'm further impressed that I may need to watch my "Ps and Qs" for a while. She looks and smells good. Me, on the other hand—I could use a good spit shine this Monday morning. I hope I have time to get that from the courthouse shoe-shine attendant today. It will cost me three bucks, but I'm wondering if I shouldn't *brush up some*. Besides, the shoe-shine man gives good news tips.

People often think that radio pays well. What with all the potential for disaster, the microscopic timing constraints, and strict demand for somewhat shrewd political savvy in judgment, good pay may seem to be a likely foregone conclusion. The reality of it is that radio, and especially radio news pays very little. There is always a college student or newcomer to the industry who is willing to work for near free, just to get some real-life experience on the air. Of course, getting a first job in broadcasting is not just so easy.

To get any on-air job in radio, you first must have a demo reel, an actual recorded air-check of how you sound. Getting that first few minutes of tape can be the biggest challenge of all for potential inductees.

Additionally, in Austin there also exists one of the biggest broadcast schools in the nation, making local competition for jobs a big challenge.

The UT campus only covers forty acres, but moreover when school is in session UT hosts forty-thousand students that make up about 16 percent of the entire population of Austin (20 percent or more of the spending population). Ten thousand of those students are doing some type of media coursework in the Radio, Television, and Film (RTF) School.

The chance of getting a good-paying job in Austin broadcasting is far less than in almost all other cities in the nation. In reality, the chance of getting a good-paying job in radio is little-to-none, world-wide. The words “good pay” and “radio” rarely appear in the same sentence. The words “RTF student” and “experienced broadcaster” are even scarcer in radio résumé terminology.

Melamie, and the afternoon-drive intern are just that, “Interns.” They don’t get an actual paycheck. Melamie gets twenty dollars per week in free gasoline for her car from a “Mom-n-Pop-Shop” service station/convenience store on South Manchaca Road. In addition to that, the interns get about ten dollars per day in coupons for free meals at any number of restaurant sponsors we have in our stable of advertisers. It’s called “trade-out.” We air advertising and the sponsors give us food and other compensations in barter. It has worked that way for years and works very well for everyone involved. Although “payola” is considered obsolete and illegal, “trade-out” is still very much alive and well.

Payola was something in the glory days that was usually done under the table; as in a singer paying a DJ to play his song, even though it would probably never get airplay otherwise. The FCC determined some time back that there was a conflict of interest in the once common industry practice and declared payola deals to be underhanded and a fineable crime. Trade-out is conversely the practice of contracting for advertising and paying for it with products or services. The FCC considers the idea of trades or barter to be above the table and never officially limited that traditional custom of payment.

Even Bob Baker had a deal with Texas Hatters. Manny Gammage is world famous for making high-end cowboy and other styled hats that have been worn by Presidents like Kennedy and Johnson, and famed heroes like astronauts. Baker recorded about three spots for Gammage and in return, Manny made him a seven-hundred-dollar “High Roller,” thirty “X,” brown beaver hat with a rattlesnake hatband and authentic turquoise and sterling silver pendant. I notice right away today that those spots have been replaced with a newer version, produced with Terry Treemont’s voice. I imagine Treemont will be making public appearances in a new hat himself soon.

That’s just the way things get done. Manny is a great guy, and I absolutely admire his work—after all, making quality, fine hand-crafted toppers is a true dying art; but myself, I don’t envy the hat deal at all. My extremely curly hair just gives me bozo-the-clown hat-hair, whether I wear a baseball cap or a seven-hundred-dollar head-piece. But I do have a trade-out for a new set of car tires every year, and I never worry if I need to have an alternator or air-conditioner repaired. I’ve got those in the bag.

True, there are some trade-offs to working for trade-outs, like, I don’t get to choose what brand of tires I want; I usually get the discontinued stock from the back room, but hey, I do get new tires. “I highly recommend good traction,” and I personally couldn’t survive without some trade-out deals.

For Melamie to be getting on-air credentials and college credit at the same time is a good deal by itself; but being able to gas-up, go to the movies, or attend a UT football game in the press box, and eat a steak at GM Steakhouse or The Stallion Drive-Inn Restaurant is a real bonus. Food at GM or the Stallion isn’t expensive in the early ‘70s, but it’s still a bonus when it’s on the house.

A twelve-ounce butter-grilled sirloin, stuffed baked potato, and salad at GM on the Drag is less than five dollars, any day of the week. And at the Stallion on North Lamar near Koenig Lane, you can get a single patty chicken-fried steak, french-fries, or giant onion rings, and an iceberg lettuce salad with bottled French dressing for just a dollar twenty-five ...

Three-patty plates are just a dollar ninety-five, but I hear they're going up to two-twenty next week. Really, even if you don't like the yellowish orange color of the gravy (or whatever that stuff is) at the Stallion, just about anything tastes good with a Lone Star Longneck Beer when it's at the modest price of a buck and a quarter; and especially when it's completely free with no strings attached and no gimmicks designed to make you buy something more. Trade-out really is a sweet deal, and the recognition that comes with it is a positive boost to one's ego, too. It's nice to be recognized by our man-on-the-street. It's a fringe benefit.

Austin really is a wonderful place to live. In 1973 GM Steakhouse and the Stallion only scratch the surface of the wide variety of places to just grab a bite to eat or something to drink. As a melting pot, Austin is beginning to simmer, and the times are brewing a blended new flavor with a bubbling fermentation of history in local beer gardens and bars across the community. You can consider for your enjoyment: the "Big Wheel" in Oak Hill for home cooking; "Mad Dog and Beans," or "Dirty Martin's" off the Drag for burgers; "The Salt Lick" for barbecue; "Armadillo World Headquarters," "The Split Rail," and "Antone's" for live music and beer. Austin is just plain cool! Sure, it's a little eccentric, but there's really nothing wrong with that. Being different is "normal" here, and that makes it comfortable for almost everyone. In the '70s Austin is wide-eyed alive and open for business.

Agreed, "Big Wheel Diner" on 290 South is a little dark and dingy, and the owner, Vic, is more often than not somewhat a-holeish to everyone and a little creepy with the ladies; I've even heard some folks say that they're "pretty sure the grill guy is a serial killer," but you gotta love the place. The food is delicious, and the fried cat fish is, "mmm perfect." Built as a truck stop in the '50s and open all night—ranchers, farmers, businessmen, and locals join at the Wheel on a daily basis for coffee, breakfast, lunch, dinner, and to just shoot the bull and discuss the weather with each other.

Same for the Stallion—it's basically a juke-box beer joint with those little Wurlitzer coin-op roll-o-dex machines on all the table-tops so you

can play songs by the nickel without leaving your seat. The waitresses there even smoke cigarettes right at your table as they take your order and then use your table's sooty ashtray to pound out the butt without even suggesting that they may come back around later to empty it and clean it up. Even still, Stallion is a rare gem with a certain unexplainable charm and a warm feeling of family and home.

The Broken Spoke is another example of *Austintatious* character. There's not much that hasn't already been said about the Spoke. With walls covered in memorabilia, James White's place is like the name suggests, a tattered old wagon trail of a place; but will probably one day be pictured in the dictionary as *the* definition of a Texas dancehall.

Sure, The Spoke is a dive; it's just a dank neighborhood bar with a local band that usually figures that "if you can't play good, you should at least play loud." But, more than once, I've seen it get so busy in The Spoke that folks will dance straight out the front door and then dance right back in again. Unashamedly, braggadociously White says that "the parking lot is paved for free in beer caps. We were voted the best place to bring a newcomer in Austin—the State Capitol building is third!" White is funny, but he's telling the truth. And yes, it is a dive, but it's Austin's very own "easygoing, contented style" kind of a dive. "Easygoing" and "unique style" are a priority for Austinites.

When I took my first job in the Austin market, I worked for nearly free, too. Now, of course, as morning anchor of the top station in town, I certainly do get a regular paycheck. I make a whopping two hundred dollars a week. Indubitably, nobody gives news reporters a new house; however, I'm quite content being here and living the Austin good life. Even if I'm smack in the middle of a market war and a "hurricane of a storm" on the radio horizon, I can still afford a small apartment and a ninety-dollar-a-month, cheap economy car payment. Life is good for me for now!

I've never been privy to the rewards of radio payola since they're no longer prolific in the '70s. I am, however, told by an excellent DJ friend who is a decade or more older than I am that the days of payola were

super, but “I should have asked for more. All I ever made was chump change.” For now, in an entirely different age of change for broadcasting, radio double standards are about to double down. Unexpectedly and unfortunately, this time things may get just a little ugly.

MORE TRADE-OFF THAN TRADE-OUT



Before the new KNUT staff-members can reap the benefits of any trade-out, we need to get them legitimized. They need their “Press Passes.” ND Mike has left me a memo and signed applications and letters for Melamie and Debra. Mike is going to escort and initiate the afternoon intern, and I am to orient Mel and Deb. So, first thing on this Monday, just after sign-off at 10:05, Debra joins Mel and me and we begin their orientation with an overview of all the rules and equipment in the news car. I give the spiel the way I learned it from ND Mike—quick and to the point.

“Gasoline, oil changes, and regular maintenance are provided by a place on South Manchaca; Towing or road service, if needed, is provided by Allstate Motor Club. All the phone numbers and documents are in the glove box. If there ever *is* a problem, the procedure is to radio back to the station on the Marty first.”

“The Marty is our private two-way radio. We not only use it for direct communication to-and-from the newsroom, but we also use it for live broadcasting from the field. We can plug a tape recorder directly into it and play back pieces of interviews when reporting on the scene from any event, whether it be a news event or remote broadcast for a sponsor’s promotion.” As I continue my rapid initiation of the girls I point out that, “In addition to the Marty, the news car has an entire array of other radios, too.”

“Naturally, there’s an AM/FM/Cassette player in the dash, but under the dash there are all the scanners and receivers.” The ladies jockey for position to peer into the car to see. “Police band, fire department, sheriff’s band, DPS; each scanner is assigned to scan a specific range of open frequencies for traffic and then play it, in real-time. So if a cop on the south side of town broadcasts from his unit his location (ten-twenty), we immediately hear it and we hear the response from the dispatcher. It’s like being a cop in regards to what we hear; however, we cannot transmit over the channels. In regard to the scanners, we mentally not only need to listen to the cop shops, but we have to distinguish each scanner from the others to determine which media source is creating the chatter, since they all come out of the same mutable speakers. Having all those scanners running all the time can be ear numbing, but it’s a necessary hazard of the job. We listen to them at all times, unless of course, we are sending a broadcast feed to the station, when we mute them, with this switch.”

Both girls take notes.

“Memorizing and knowing the ‘ten code’ is essential. A short list of the code is here on the visor. Funny thing about that, though—from department to department, fire to police, to DPS, they all use a slightly different code system, basically the same, but with some tweaked esoteric departmental idiosyncrasies. Learning the subtle differences in the code is a big help in knowing which scanner you are listening to, that and the fact that each frequency has a slightly different nuance in how the signal sounds. The cop shop has slightly less static than the sheriff; the fire radio has a little higher-pitched tone than the DPS, you’ll get used to them. It takes a few weeks of listening to the constant gibberish before your ear can begin to tune-out all the clicks, pops, and crackles to make sense of all the different codes and unique lingo, but it does come with time ... Any questions?”

The girls have no immediate response.

“So obtaining credentials is a lot like getting a driver’s license for the first time, only without the test. Instead of a test, you need a signed application and introductory letter from your media supervisor, in our case

the news director of KNUT, the guy who hired you, Mike Bitters. Additionally, there's the photograph and fingerprint process, and then after that a waiting period while your background check is being approved. The Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) provides credentials for the State Capitol and Federal Courts Building; the sheriff's office serves the county jail, courthouse, and Sheriff's offices; and the Austin Police Department handles APD, city hall, municipal court, and fire department access. Additionally, each of those news sources has a media room with badge access for reporters. So once you have your badge, you can plug into any media room around town for on-air reporting, telephone interviewing, or just accessing a typewriter at will.

"As you can imagine, on days when a big story is occurring at any particular place, the media room can become quite chaotically crammed full of jabbering reporters. On the other hand, on days when the news is slow, you may be the only person in the room with the exception of an on-duty *American-Statesman* correspondent or an occasional internal maintenance/janitorial staff member."

"The newspaper has full-time people for each media source, and those reporters basically office from their assigned location." That's why the *Statesman* got the same information about the downtown traffic jam that I was able to obtain from the Police Chief. "The *Statesman* police correspondent is almost always there, unless he's on break or down the hall conducting a private interview in someone's office. KNUT reporters can get private interviews, too, but since we are in-and-out of the media rooms routinely several times a day, we generally keep our visits short-and-sweet and on the telephone. Still, I can say, 'Reporting live from APD, Bryant L Herman, KNUT News,' and it's an accurate true statement of fact that I'm really in the police station."

"Having the proper badge can get you 'in' almost anywhere. Just strap a cassette recorder over your shoulder with an official looking microphone, flash your badge, and you can waltz past security and straight into the backdoor of almost any public meeting, political session, concert, sporting event, invitation-only function, or just about anything you like,

anywhere in town. It's comparable to having an open-ended hall pass in high school for every day of the year, all day long. They're not readily handed-out to just anyone because they do wield a certain amount of power that can potentially be abused, but be careful not to abuse it. Badges can be taken away much quicker than they're issued."

I conclude the verbal orientation and ask the ladies to join me in the car. Fortunately, Mondays are usually relatively slow news days, so today there is little fact-finding, follow-up, or discovery to be done with any urgency. We begin our rounds to each source to get the girls introduced to some key people, like the police and fire chiefs, and sign them up for their respective hall passes. With a lot of ground to be covered in two short hours, the girls and I buckle into our seats and I chauffeur them first toward downtown.

Mel is chatty in the news car, but Debra is reserved and only speaks when asked a direct question. These two newbies are completely different types of people. I'm still surprised that Mel has taken a job as a newsperson. Debra fits the M.O. for a field person, but has little exposure to live announcing or the time crunches of broadcasts every half hour. Melamie rarely stops to take a breath and has the nerve of a barracuda. Watching each of them in action should be interesting and prove to be quite contrasting in regard to individual technique and style.

Melamie immediately wants to know from Deb and me what kind of music we enjoy. She's first to say, "I'm not particularly fond of country music, although I listen to everything; but my favorites are rock, hard rock, and Avant-garde music like Frank Zappa."

Deb is quiet, so I say, "Zappa? *Phi Zappa Krappa*! I like him, too. You know, he's playing at Armadillo World Headquarters this weekend. I'm planning to go there with some friends... grab a few longnecks, and percolate a little to 'Montana' aka: 'Dental Floss Tycoon.'"

Sort of singing, "♪ I might be movin' to Montana soon... ♪"

Mel chimes right in, "♪ Just to raise me up a crop of dental floss ... Raisin' it up ... Waxin' it down. ♪"

That cracks me up. Mel looks so above the low-brow humor of Zappa, but you have to give the girl credit, she knows a unique value when she sees one. Deb, from the backseat, in my rear-view mirror, appears confused, but remains attentive as if she's hearing a foreign language for the first time or something.

"What's your music style, Debra?" I make an effort to include her in the conversation.

"Oh, I'm more of a jazz, rhythm, and blues, and Motown girl." Deb doesn't elaborate.

"That's cool. Not a Charlie Pride fan?" I don't know why I ask that question, but it is the first thing that comes to mind to see if Debra has any country savvy. In retrospect, the fact that Charlie is the only black artist on the country charts seems like a racial reference to me now, which is unintended on my part, but it's already too late to take it back.

"Oh, I like Charlie. You know, he's a trailblazer. I believe "Kiss an Angel Good Morning" is his eighth number one Billboard Hot Country Single." Deb is again relatively short with her expertly correct answer, but offers, "Yes sir, I like Charlie. What do you like, Mr. Herman?"

"Call me Bryant, ma'am—and I'll call you for dinner! What do you say?" I see Deb nod her approval with a little smile in my mirror.

"If I could sing, it would probably only be described as 'Hick' country. I like Charlie, too, but I also listen to a little bit of everything. B.B. King and The Motown Supremes are some of my favorites." I can see in the mirror that I gain a little ground in Deb's opinion of me with the B.B. King side-note.

I get a little chatty and begin to digress, "I was raised on southern gospel like 'The Statesmen Quartet' I like harmonies; that's what I like about country music—harmony vocals. 'The Oak Ridge Boys' have the sound I grew up with. I love the bass singers like 'James S. (Big Chief) Wetherington' with the 'Statesmen' and 'J.D. Sumner' with the 'Stamps Brothers.' Did you know Big Chief is partly responsible for Elvis Presley's gyrations! Elvis liked to get down with gospel." I notice another

smile in the mirror.

“Um huh.” Deb chuckles with a little glint in her eye. “I was raised in the Assemblies in Atlanta. I know!”

I continue, “Of course, when I listen to radio just for pleasure and entertainment, I often catch top-forty station KILT in Houston or WLS, ‘A Mountain of Music!’ out of Chicago. When the atmosphere is right you know you can get them both on a regular car radio, right here in town, more often than not.”

“Oh, me too. WLS is a clear-channel, a fifty thousand watt powerhouse. At night sometimes, it skips right-over Oklahoma entirely and bounces smack into Austin.” Deb begins to relax some.

“You know the reason WLS skips over Oklahoma is the same reason why Texas doesn’t fall off into the Gulf of Mexico?” I jest.

“Why is that?” Debra asks.

“Because Oklahoma sucks!” I blurt.

We all laugh.

Deb is probably a little uneasy because she’s not in the same age group or in the same cliques as Mel and me. Mel and I are likely to be some ten years younger than Debra. With respect to age, Debra is actually our senior. As far as air-time experience is concerned, she literally is in the back seat. Her history is in print: newspaper and magazine news. Oh, and just as a point of interest on an aside, in respect to our seating positions in the car, Deb volunteered to ride in back.

“Kilt is cool.” Melamie continues the train of thought, “I think ‘Robert B. McIntyre, KILT News’ is one of the best broadcast reporters in the business.”

“It’s funny that everyone on Kilt uses an air-name that is Scottish. Kind of like all our DJs have a state tree reference in their names on KNUT.” I dot the conversation to bring it full circle as we pull into the city hall media parking lot. “Let’s go get you two girls a real life! Got your picture faces on?” I ask, “Got fingerprints?”

“Yes sir!” Together, both ladies still continue to call me sir.

“Hardy-har-har!” I’m amused. It’s the little things in life that make my day.

“Debra, what would the Oak Hill Gazette have to say about Zappa?” I poke Deb in the arm gently.

“They wouldn’t.” She snarks and smiles as she nudges me up the stairs to the Chief Information Officer’s workplace on the second floor.

Deb may not be an announcer type, but she definitely knows the beat. The CIO greets her first when we enter the office. “Hey Deb—Mr. Bryant—who’s your new friend?”

“Miss Deb and Miss Melamie Masters are both on our team now. How are you today, Mr. Info-ma-tion? Got a big scandal to tell us about? ... Is anybody getting fired ‘round here today?”

“I heard about the midday slot. You still got a job?” The CIO jokes back at me; but fails flagrantly to break his unchecked stare, which is locked directly onto Miss Mel.

“For today.” I answer and I press into the business of formal introductions for both Mel and then Deb, in that order. I didn’t plan it that way. The sequence of who is first is really dictated entirely by the CIO’s glaring point of view.

After the Melamie first impression, I point to Debra and say, “...and, of course, you know Deb. She’s taking the midday deal, starting tomorrow.”

“I heard the night guy in there after your slot today. I wondered if he was changing shifts permanently or just standing-in.” The CIO is a fan of The Nut.

“Yup, me too; hey, time goes on; we’re headed to the DPS. Need anything from us?” I prod forward because we have a lot of stops before noon when Melamie has to be back for the beginning of her afternoon new-semester classes.

“Nope, I’m good. Look forward to working with you ladies.” He nods at Deb and gestures a tip of the hat toward Mel.

Until now I've never thought of the City CIO as a lecher, but I can tell that's how both Deb and Mel think of him in the moment; although, *he* doesn't even seem to perceive it at all. My opinion of his professionalism and demeanor has just been modified somehow. I had thought more highly of his stature as a better ambassador for doing the right thing. I think to myself that *I have a severely limited, purely masculine perspective on things by default*. I wonder if that is about to become different, having two new *girls* on the staff.

I don't find out until tomorrow that there is only one girl who shall remain.

The news has been light, like the rain all day today, so after dropping Melamie back at the station, Deb and I drive out south to gas up the car. We grab a soda and a snack on the station trade-out nickel; and while shooting-the-bull with the gas attendant, we're interrupted by the sheriff's radio dispatcher on the scanner.

"All units, we have a Code 2 (Urgent - no light or siren), 10-54 (Possible dead body) on Onion Creek Road, a half mile north of US-71. 11-79 (Accident - Ambulance sent), 10-62 (Meet a citizen), and advise."

Two units respond. "10-4 en route." "Roger! Stand-by. ETA two (I'll be there in two minutes)."

Deb and I are on IH-35 about seven minutes from the reported location as we glance at each other.

"Not much else going on today ... Are you ready to get your feet wet?" I ask Debra.

"No time like the present." She comments.

"Let's do some reporting." I grab the Marty, "Base, we've got a 54 just outside the city limits, in the county ... Copy?"

Mike's voice blurts back, "Copy, stay out of the way, you two!"

"Yowser, Bowser. Roger, that!" I respond to Mike's permission to take the assignment.

Obviously, Mike is saying it's okay to go, but he is also referencing

KNUT's recent bout with *getting into* rather than *just reporting on* the news. The Bob Baker incident is still fresh on Mike's mental radar.

We're a lot more informal in our private two-way conversations than the officials on the scanners are. In addition to the Baker reference, the mental picture of flesh and bone, and the horrid smell of human remains pop back into my mind for an instant. *I hope this body is fresh*, "...we just had a breakfast snack, too! Cross your fingers we don't gag."

"Four. What's your twenty?" Mike's voice smiles as he inquires.

"Ben White at Riverside Drive ... ETA in five, clear." I respond in our typical manner.

I'm compelled to ask Debra, "Have you ever been out on one of these before now?"

"No, it's not been one of my standard beats. A dead body in the rain doesn't sound like my first choice for news, but it is what it is. I can stomach just about anything ... After all, I can deal with politicians ... I don't have any problem not puking on them!" Debra is being funny, but I sense that she's also somewhat apprehensive.

"Just lay low and follow my lead," I say. "You'll pick this up quick."

When we arrive on the scene, we see one deputy's car in a gravel driveway, well off to the side of the main road. We pull in near his car and exit into the drizzle and damp air. The officer is outside his car, up the driveway about fifty yards, talking with a farmer who is apparently the person who first discovered the object lying between us and them. On the right shoulder of the driveway and still not yet covered is what appears to be a small-framed woman sleeping in a fetal position on her right side. Instinctively, Deb and I step forward to get a better look. The deputy, who knows me, tips his hat at us; so we proceed.

The left arm of the victim is cocked awkwardly upright in the rain with little droplets of water dripping from the hand onto the left eye which abnormally remains open and unflinching. We can clearly see that the individual is dead. The body appears to be that of a quite attractive, young black female. She has a little hole in the left side of the neck and a big hole

out the top of her right-side scalp. My estimate is that she's between eighteen to twenty years old, five-four, long black straight hair, and ninety to one hundred pounds. I glance briefly at Deb to get her reaction.

Deb just stares at the corpse like a deer in the headlights; wide-eyed and petrified.

On closer inspection, I observe that the individual on the ground is wearing a wig. That's not natural hair—and the neckline looks a bit masculine. She has an Adam's apple. Oh, my Lord, this is not a female victim. This is a dude!

My investigation is interrupted by a second deputy sheriff's car entering the driveway.

For a bit Deb and I are left to ponder our own thoughts while the two deputies converge for a little pow-wow briefing at the second car's driver-side window. We can hear the sheriff's radio snapping. The second deputy keys his mike, "10-97 (Arrived at scene), 11-42 (No ambulance needed), 11-44 (Deceased person—Coroner required) ... Copy?"

The dispatcher answers back, "4. 10-36 (Confidential information); advise, ID comes back (through the static the last name is inaudible to me), Turcel, 19, male, black, 5-4, Austin, registered sexual, six counts prostitution, no warrants."

"Copy." The second deputy opens his door and steps from his car, walking directly over to me, as I step away from the body. Deb briefly remains transfixed.

I vaguely know the deputy; he's a sergeant. He introduces himself first to Debra drawing her attention away from the dismal scene. "I don't believe we've met?"

After a few formal words of greeting the sergeant tells Deb and I to, "Hang tough. I'm still gathering a little intel on this one, but I think we'll be able to say something to you in a few minutes. You ok?" The sergeant takes note of the somewhat uneasiness that's showing-up as sheepishness on Debra's face.

"No problem. Thank you, we can wait as long as you need to take, sir."

Debra is steadfast and quickly gathers her composure.

She and I return to our news car to get in out of the moisture where we both struggle a little bit in a vain attempt to visually clear our minds. What we've just seen is not normal for an everyday person on the street. I mean really—it's not even normal for me.

I'm not so well-seasoned and hardened by this job that things don't altogether evade my impressionability. I'll have to admit, I'm a little shocked at these developments myself. I begin checking my mental notes against what Debra has interpreted.

"That's a guy dressed like a hooker." I half make a statement and half question my impression.

Debra responds, "I think they know this guy. I wonder if they have a lead on the shooter."

"It looks like a clear homicide and dump." She's right on the nose with her diagnosis.

"You're probably right. I didn't see a gun anywhere; can't be a suicide. I don't see any other vehicle up in here either."

Deb injects, "Those were high-dollar shoes."

"I didn't see that, but that would mean if it is a hooker, it's a pricey one." I don't know why I said that. It's so immature of me to lean toward something that sounds funny when I'm slightly uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, that sounded wrong. Have some respect for the dead, right?" I squirm out of my ignorance only enough to not look entirely like an idiot.

Meanwhile, Debra is regaining her reporter legs. "Here comes Sergeant—What's his name? I missed his badge."

"I don't remember ... Rainier maybe? I've only interviewed him a half-dozen times! I've never had to quote him, though. He usually just says get the report back at the office." I open my car door to greet the sergeant.

As I step out into the gathering gloom of the increasingly rainy day the sergeant motions me aside and puts his head down, gesturing me to keep our voices down.

“What’s up, Sarge?”

The officer looks to ensure that Debra can’t hear him and then without a change in his expression says, “Bryant, we don’t want you to report this on the news, if you don’t mind.”

My blank face questions him as he continues in a whispering tone.

“We’re not going to investigate this as a homicide. This is a known, black male transvestite, a hooker from down off sixth street. He must have grabbed-hold of the wrong set of balls.” The sergeant makes a face, like *what can you do* and shrugs his shoulders.

I’m a little shocked, and it catches me without a comeback question. So I simply salute, turn to leave and auto respond, “Roger that, sir, we’ll just get out of your way. See you at the races. Thank you, Sergeant.”

As I re-enter the car, Debra asks, “What was that about?”

Crap, I don’t even know what to say. I’m torn between saying *we’ll need to get the report back at the sheriff’s office*, the pat-answer or, out of respect for another reporter, tell her what I’ve just been asked to do. I have to think about that for a minute. If I give her the pat-answer, she’ll expect me to file a report on the Marty for the top of the hour news-break back at the station saying, “...we’ll have an update on the story as details become available.” Ostensibly there is never going to be any update. This is a non-story. It never happened! We didn’t see anything!

As I come to grips with my own disturbed gut reactions to the past ten minutes, I ponder not telling her anything at all. I clearly can’t get away with that, though, without completely corrupting the entire newfound professional relationship we’ve only today entered into. I’m not at all happy about it, but I don’t think I can avoid letting her know the truth. So I do ... I repeat word for word to Debra exactly what the sergeant said to me.

“Don’t we have an obligation to our listeners to say something?” Debra asks rhetorically, thinking aloud, “What about freedom of the press, and free speech, and all the ethics of being an unbiased reporter?”

“I don’t think freedom of speech applies to people who have a job and

get a paycheck ... That's something reserved for those individuals who have nothing to lose—right?" I'm flippant, but her questioning of authority rings true to my ear. I'm just as bothered about this unusual situation as she seems to be.

"I just have a hard time looking away from truth and justice. It makes me feel somehow responsible for the whole crazy charade. It makes me feel dirty and wrong." Debra is clearly upset. "Don't you feel like we've just been asked to sell a little piece of our souls to the devil?"

That hurts. Debra just stepped on my feelings, so to speak, with that comment. I don't say it, but I know she has a very good point. I ponder if we should ignore the request and decide I should wait to discuss it further with ND Mike. I'm clear that if I report the incident I could become a target for ostracization by the sheriff's office, and that's something no newsman can afford. On the other hand, I have a conscience. Unfortunately, my conscience has basically just been knocked unconscious with a one-two punch.

On the way back to the station, Debra doesn't talk much more at all. I don't either, but I can't get her words out of my mind. I think we're both dumbfounded enough to know that anything we say at this point is going to be ancillary to the eyeful and earful we've just witnessed. Our mutual BS meters are in no further need of stimulation.

After that awful sequence of events, I never see Debra on the job at The Nut ever again. She never does get her KNUT press passes, and no one initially explains to me why. She is just gone the next day. She never shows up again.

There's no official or unofficial discussion in any meeting, no memo; there never is even anything mentioned in the rumor mill at the station about Deb's disappearing act. Sometimes people just don't talk much about certain things. I do have my personal perception though, as to why Deb left.

I personally hope I didn't have too much of a negative impact on her impression of radio news and the goings-on behind the reputed scenes. I

know I didn't really help solidify her comfort level with my black singer references, but I did have good intentions and I do hope she doesn't hold it against me. I feel really bad about how just one single day's events seemingly affected her so deeply. Although to be honest, the circumstances have affected me, too.

As a matter of fact, I feel emotionally drained by the whole story; I mean, non-story. Even after visiting with Mike about it, and being told to "just let it go, we have bigger fish to fry." It still disturbs me.

And even though I do comply with the sergeant's request and do not report the murder, I wonder about the killer who is still out there somewhere. I wonder about the young girl (I mean guy) who died on that driveway shoulder. I also wonder—*if that had been a white dude*—would things have been different. I never speak much more of it, but really? *Is the double standard of life really that black and white..?* "No 'fun' intended." I think *not*. The place where your mind can take you sometimes is not always comfortable or funny, or fun in any way.

For the record, let me first say that there are a lot of things that many humans do that I don't in any way condone or take part in, but that guy doesn't deserve being treated any differently than any other human on the street, *does he?* If it were you or I in that ditch, we would certainly expect some type of investigation, a public autopsy report, or something, right?

I'm disappointed in our city today. It's off-putting to realize that the basic rules of engagement in radio and political wars have many more than just two standards ... And what about me as a good human being? Since I so readily acceded to the officer's request, I secretly fear for my own complicity. It appears that Debra quit her job rather than do that. She seems to illustrate a stronger character and sense of decency than I do, *no?*

It is becoming clear to me that *the colors of the rainbow or the number of shades to gray are much broader in spectrum than meets the common eye*. It's further introspectively pointed out to my unsettled gut that I may not completely be the entirely confident person that I've always thought I am. I'm beginning to see why a lot of people in this business often gain a

close relationship with antacids.

I've interviewed state senators, mayors, city councilmen, judges, you name it; and I've always felt that I've readily understood their situations and was able to carry any conversation forward. I hate to admit it, but radio may not be the only thing changing in the early '70s—I personally may be going through a type of mental metamorphosis of my own.

I really don't think I want to do that, but from the looks of how today has gone, I apparently have no choice in the matter. Obviously it's no longer my decision; I gladly made my decision when I took this job. *God, I LOVE this job, but self-doubt is not my cup of tea, and self-justification or self-serving rationalization isn't appetizing in the least.*

I'm beginning to feel similar to the way Germany's Nazi leaders must have felt when they were "only following orders" and later realized the real consequences of the German Gestapo formed by Hermann Göring in 1933, or Antwerp, Belgium's history as a death camp. Damn, the name Hermann Göring is way too close to my own name, *Bryant Herman*, for me to have any level of comfort at all in such an uneasy, unwanted comparison. *Just following orders* or doing something simply because someone in authority makes a request is a sucky way to live a life. I despise feeling like a sycophant, *yes man*.

Although, my shift is now done for the day, I have little doubt that I will certainly be thinking about work well after I get home today. Taking work home with one's self is a common hazard of the news trade. I wonder if there is any good in the world sometimes. I wonder if the City CIO realizes what an ass he made of himself this morning. Thank goodness it doesn't rain every day. That would surely wear-down any newsman—or woman.

Debra Wright was right; it makes me feel like I need a shower. At every possible level I need to wash-off some of the grime and grit from my bared soul. I'd give anything for a simple new UFO story right now. Attacking aliens would be a media pool party compared to what's gone down (or didn't happen at all) today. My strength of tenacity is being

tested. I have repressed guilt that is clearly trying to get out and expose its ugly snake-like head. I fully understand Debra's reasoning ... but, everything else—not so much. I wish I could go back and say just one more thing to Debra now.

If I could roll back the clock, I would give a little wink to both Deb and the morbidly-disgraced body of nineteen-year-old Turcel lying in the ditch outside of town and say ... “I agreed not to report the story on the news today, but I never said anything about not writing a book about it some day in the future. The powers-that-be may be able to steal my thunder on a single sad and rainy summer afternoon, but they cannot silence my mind or my will completely, without my exclusive permission. I will not let them have my soul.” I feel completely exhausted, terrible. I wish I could apologize to young Turcel and Miss Debra ... and privately I do beg God for forgiveness for my complicity.

The world may have its secret societies, good-ole-boy networks, and private sets of complicated rules with multiple layers of double standards, but, hey, that doesn't mean that I can't have mine, too! I may have not filed an initial report today, but I ask God to help me find a way to make it right. *I feel nasty and wrong* and right now in the innocence of a budding and blooming spring of 1973, forty years after Göring's formation of the Gestapo, *I just need a gentle, cleansing shower*. Instead, it begins to pour buckets and lightning claps as thunder rolls across the city.

The next week is fairly uneventful. Melamie blends into the morning set like a finely-tuned piano among a band of banjo and guitar players. She's not only cute and charming, but her sense of comedy and suspenseful tension add nicely and skillfully to the morning's entertainment and news. I begin to gain a comfort level with having her around. However, when we're in the newsroom, I keep everything on a professional level conversationally and never mention my internal concerns to her.

“I saw you across the beer garden at the Armadillo Zappa show Saturday night.” Melamie makes a casual injection after the first Monday morning newscast following the Zappa Concert weekend. “Great show,

huh?”

“Yah, killer sound! I saw you, too, with that football-player-looking guy. Who is he?” I ask politely, but I already know.

“He’s a quarterback for the Horns. They recruited him from Arkansas. His name is Brad Lyman. We’re just dating a little.” Melamie seems to want to talk about his acclaim and her night out with him.

I know Lyman is on the third string and I give short, flippant attention to the conversation. I’m aware of Lyman’s senior year football talents or lack thereof, and also I’m keenly conscious of his reputation as a frat-house pot-head partyer, and his woman-chasing public antics. It’s not a subject I wish to delve into at the moment, so I gently ignore Mel’s interaction and continue forward with my daily chores, carefully redirecting her.

“Do you mind calling the City Works Department to see if you can get a comment on that story about the water-main break on Burnet Road? Find out when they will open the street there and when folks can expect water service to be restored.” I make the plea, hoping Mel won’t continue down the conversational path of personal enlightenment.

She complies whole-heartedly and takes the ball and runs with it, “Yes, sir. City Chief Information Officer?”

“Yup. Does he bother you?” I ask.

“Nope, just another rat in the gutter,” she snarks back as she immediately thumbs through the roll-o-dex for the number and begins to dial while simultaneously pressing “Record” on the Ampex reel-to-reel. “Although, I would love to fry his rat ass up on tape and cater a picnic for all his fat rat friends.”

NEW FASHIONED PICNIC



By June, 1973, things are getting well into the swing for Willie's Picnic in Austin. Word is spreading nationwide that Willie is holding his own kind of "Woodstock-ish" big event somewhere in the Austin Hill Country and he's expecting artists from cross-genre music styles to greet "some fifty-thousand people." Predictions and speculation can be highly overrated; however, Willie's Fourth of July Picnic is being hailed as the biggest picnic party ever to grace the cow paths of any hallowed Texas pasture land. It's a really big deal to radio stations, too. It means big advertising campaigns, ticket giveaways, and a sponsorship jamboree, especially for three markets in town. Certainly KNUT is one market—and you can guess KLBJ is one, but the one really making a killing on the three-day concert show is KOKE-FM. Koke's progressive, country rock, loose format is especially attractive to many of Willie's friends and musicians—and, well, quite frankly, to Willie himself.

Until this year, on any given Independence Day, a picnic for central Texans would mean time in the park with relatives. Truly, when you think of Austin in the early '70s you picture a vivid, iconic Saturday Evening Post, with a Normal Rockwell cover illustration of downhome family and friends, good times, parties, and barbecue. Zilker Park on Barton Creek immediately comes to mind. Truthfully, you can't be in Austin for any amount of time at all without at least once visiting and falling in love with Zilker Park. Whether your visit is only for a quick swim and miniature

train ride with just the kids, or for a full-blown extended family gathering and grand Fourth of July celebration: complete with horseshoe-pitching contests, potato-sack races, and slow-smoked brisket white bread sandwiches—Zilker Park is the go-to place.

Zilker has a world-class and famous swimming hole called Barton Springs Pool. My family has picnicked there with friends from around the state every summer since I was a tike in diapers. I think I recall that the water in that pool is a constant sixty-eight degrees: summer, winter, spring, or fall. In reality, that water is frigid cold every time you jump in ... And really, that's the best way to do it ... just hold your breath and take the dive. Wading in will discourage most out-of-towners when they first get a toe wet and start to suck air. Once you take the plunge, though, you sort of get used to it after a few short gasps ... and it's especially exhilarating on a typical one-hundred-degree Texas summer afternoon.

The pool has been a swimming hole since native Indians gathered on the shores of the wild Colorado River in the days prior to the great western migration. Barton Springs is crystal clear and fed by the limestone-filtered Edwards Aquifer. Barton Creek, up-stream from the pool, is home to some of the most highly-prized waterfront hill-country landscapes in the entire state. Homes up into the hills south of the river and along the creek are basically only affordable to the rich and famous. Sunsets and sunrises in those hills are majestic, and though they're called hills, they're almost as tall and abundant as any part of The Great Smoky Mountains between North Carolina and Tennessee. Texans mockingly laugh at Appalachian Mountain lovers, "You call those mountains? We've got hills bigger than that!"

However bigheaded and arrogant that may sound, things in the hills south of town are becoming more profusely braggadocios and outspoken today than they ever were just one short year ago. The term "Picnic" has a whole new meaning to everyone in Indian smoke-signal range. And the signals are smoking from hill to hill in more ways than one. The notoriety of Willie's Picnic is getting much local attention and even some international high acclaim. Austin is beginning to take its proper place in

the annals of music and entertainment history. Yup, the Austintatious head is swelling!

Predominantly, “the pot head” is becoming much more prevalent. You can’t talk about this time in Texas without taking note of it. Austin has a lot of pot smokers among the man-on-the-street population, and quite plentifully in the “homegrown and rapidly budding,” emergent music scene. Who would have guessed, right?

I may be wrong about the timing, but I believe it is around this time that Willie Nelson went on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson and divulged a funny little habit of his own. Willie, at some point in his career, maybe it is 1973, admits that he smokes pot, and that he once smoked some on the White House rooftop while he was an invited guest of the President in Washington. That may or may not be true, but I’m betting the story is 100 percent fact. Willie is quick to note that, “the statute of limitations is long-past gone,” and he’s content to let it be known that he finds nothing wrong with “sparkin’ up a little herb now and then.”

“I’d rather see my kids smoke weed than have a drink, especially if they’re planning on functioning.” Willie is a NORML (National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws) advocate—and he’s not afraid to tell anyone that he’s a follower; that he lives by his own beliefs and practices what he preaches.

Smoking pot or even talking about it, is something that is just simply not tolerated at KNUT or even KLBJ. We’re country folk, and KLBJ is also just too politically connected—but KOKE-FM, with its racy “drug-referencing name” is just the opposite. The attitude at KOKE is live and let live. Talk about anything you want, and do whatever you like at home. It’s a “whole ‘nuther’ country” over there at KOKE-FM. *It is progressive country!* “Bless their little hearts; their intentions are in the right place!”

Leading up to the big summer concert show, KNUT and KLBJ do get a lot of advertising dollars from Willie’s Picnic and subsequent ad campaigns, including tickets to give away, a number of freebie trade-out mechanisms, and even quite a bit of free publicity boosts generated by

news coverage from dozens of press events prior to the big show. I'm no exception to the feverish media crawl. I cover the picnic buildup like a news story. For Austin's national image, and for the community's vested financial interests, this show is proving to be turning into a really big exception to the basic rules for any simple summer picnic in the park.

I don't know if it is because of the pot-smoking agenda or simply for budgetary reasons, but unexpectedly in the market, KOKE-FM is getting a lion's share of the advertising budget that is being spent around town. Even Chuck Bridger at Capitol City Chevrolet who had so adamantly promised his entire picnic budget to KNUT and Major Mac last year is now spending a full third of that prematurely-committed account at KOKE. Sure, Willie's entourage is riding around town in new Chevys, but the promotion is hosted over at KOKE and not on Mac Pecan's morning show.

Maybe it's just because KOKE spots are cheaper-by-the-dozen than anyone else, or maybe it's the fact that Willie's boys can visit the studio at random and talk about things on their mind, at just about any time of the day or night. But you can't help but think that maybe it's just as simple as the fact that the musicians and artists can casually sit and chat in the studios of KOKE-FM while at the same time puff on whatever they happen to have in their hand, much like American Indians did a hundred years ago while socializing around the campfire with the passing of a peace pipe. Tobacco or *not*-tobacco; either one is simply viewed as a common function similar to social drinking, or an activity akin to sipping a glass of water over there at Koke.

Sure, we smoke Marlboros throughout the building, at our desks, and in public view at KNUT, but man, KOKE is really on the leading edge at this stage of the smoking game—I mean, way out on the edge. The activity is a lot like a smoking gun in some of the more conservative public eyes. Regardless (and maybe even because of) the public opinion, KOKE-FM, to the surprise of everyone (even to themselves), has been named the official "Picnic Party Station." Willie and his friends are there more than anywhere else in town as the picnic date draws near.

“This is KOKE-FM, I’m Dusty Dillon, and I’m happy to announce that Friday afternoon between two and eight p.m. Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Rita Coolidge, and several members of the Billie Jo Shaver band are going to be in the studios with us, live for six hours continuously to give us all the latest scoop on Willie’s monster 4th of July Picnic coming up this next week.”

Surprising or not, KOKE-FM is building quite a prominent reputation and cultivating a notable, emerging claim-to-fame both in layman’s terms and in professional broadcast circles. Austin radio has finally made a turn for full-blown change. Since the spring rating period, KNUT and AM radio are becoming a mere reflection in the rear-view mirror of sprouting commercial broadcasting things-to-come. I can’t help, but make the observation that the early ‘70s may be the beginning of the death of commercial radio as we know it.

In reality, Willie’s Picnic is on Monday through Wednesday of next week. I know—the middle of the week, right? Unconventional as the timing seems to be, gatherings and media events are set to occur all across town the weekend prior to the big debut of the actual concert. KOKE-FM, as the “official” party station is halting regular broadcasting to host a two-day straight “sit-in of picnic guests and notable entertainment legends, *all* weekend long starting on Friday afternoon” according to KOKE’s Program Director, Dillon who is justifiably elated.

“It’s summer vacation time, so plan to bring the whole family, wrangle up the lawn chairs, and lots of suntan lotion for the kids, and we’ll see you in Dripping Springs.” Willie’s voice is heard on Koke every five minutes. I’m not kidding. “Get ready to caravan south from Austin, past the Big Wheel in Oak Hill, and just look for the signs. Willie’s first Fourth of July Friends and Family Picnic has finally come home for the holiday! God bless Texas and God bless KOKE-FM!”

Now, you may think that Willie Nelson is just some long-haired, “effed-up” red-necked, odd-ball whackaloon, but you’d be dead wrong in that assumption. Willie is a shrewd businessman, and though he doesn’t share a lot of what he’s thinking with all the people around him, he has a

master strategy and an especially inventive game plan. Willie is no boneheaded bumpkin and this ain't his first rodeo. Willie spent a number of years writing songs and wagering on his hand in Nashville. Willie knows how to play poker—and well, let's say Willie got tired of the *political* part of the music business long before he moved back to his home state of Texas and the Austin/Dripping hill country.

Now, just to be clear from the start, I personally don't smoke pot, or at least, I haven't up to this point in my life. Actually, I was raised Baptist in Texas, in a slightly more innocent time. You laugh, but really, I never even had a single beer until my last semester of high school when I was fully the legal age of eighteen, according to Texas State Law. I got my Viet Nam draft card and started drinking on the same day. I was lottery picked as number 172. So, I have yet to experience, examine the practice of, or indulge in doing any kind of recreational drug, and that includes marijuana.

I've been working full-time on the radio; I've had sheltered raisings and a meager existence until now; plus, I'm way too deeply into other things like news events to have any interest in wasting my time experimenting with drugs. "That's my story, and I'm stickin' to it." No, really, that's true! "I'm young, dumb, and green." Simply stated, I'm still very naïve. Keep in mind, I'm just a kid (23 years old), remember? I've still got a lot of wild oats to sow.

On the other side of the fence line, though, is a hardy crop of corn. I'm not totally unaware of the shifting culture, climate, and environment around me and in our fair city. Austin is in between the "sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll" days left over from the '60s and the early days of "make love not war" inspirations of the '70s. This particular coming week will prove to be among Austin's most notorious and infamous days in a future full of vastly-widening political and cultural views and colorful history. It may one day be called the decade of "live and let live." But whatever you call it now, Austin is simply taking that next obvious step up the stairway to whatever is to become in the life of a still small town destined to rapidly expand. Sure, there will be growing pains for the city as well as good and

bad crops on the farms, but feeling pain is not scheduled to be on the agenda for at least the upcoming week, that's been made fairly certain. All things to kill pain are readily available, the weather's looking good, and, well, "*all's fair in love and war*," whether it be in the high-speed traffic lane, the oat patch, or the corn field.

My buddy from the overnight KNUT DJ job is learning quicker than I am just how to benefit and profit from the sociological revolution and smoke signals in the air. During our Wednesday morning shift-change, Bobby Bark tells me that he has an "order" for him and his roommate (for legal purposes, we'll call him Gordon) to be "on the third floor of the Hilton, on Thursday night." The "order" purportedly has come from the attorney, slash promoter, slash manager for Willie Nelson. Guess what? Gordon sells pot by the pound.

As an entrepreneur Bobby leverages his job in radio in the '70s for his own personal gratification sometimes. Right or wrong, think about his point of view for a moment. Radio is designed to imprint pictures on your mind and tell a story that you can see as your own reality, without you ever actually being present visually; or even physically at all. Routinely, consistently, broadcasters universally draw on our aggregate mental picture of the world to help shape our cumulative mind's eye. Perspective is simply a figment of imagination in radio. Like magician stuff, smoke-n'-mirrors, broadcasters are simply the voice of the art. What I mean is that radio just facilitates the artist's stroke; you and all the other listeners actually define and paint the picture. It's a nice working relationship—symbiotic, don't you think? Well, Bobby has taken that concept and reinterpreted it to also include imagination induced by getting high.

Bobby would say, "We're living halcyon days ... draped in gossamer." He just loves a badly-mixed metaphor. "Bobby Bark, after dark on KNUT" is quite the anomaly in the traditional country music broadcasting sense of the word. His mind-set and algorithm is much more rock-and-roll than country-and-western. So, I can't personally say for sure if Bobby is telling the truth; after all, it is hearsay, but I do know Bobby, and I know Willie, and I just bet they both know Gordon well enough to trust him. I

would wager that Bobby didn't just make up the story about selling a lot of weed to picnic patrons just to sound cool.

Aside from that, I do know for sure that KOKE-FM is off-the-air for two hours straight, right smack in the middle of their highly-promoted Friday afternoon LIVE "sit-in" broadcast. I'm *compelled* to listen-in. *Monitoring the competition* is part of my job, right? As advertised, Dusty Dillon is hosting Kris and Rita, and a number of the artists who are scheduled to perform at Willie's Picnic.

You know how you can hear in someone's voice whether they are smiling or not? You can also hear if they are fully intact and mentally functional. As a simple audience listener, I'm pretty sure something is amiss in the studio, just prior to a sudden and prolonged silence from the KOKE transmitter. Kris is rambling on and on about a religious encounter and how his soul was saved by Jesus when he wrote the hit, "Why Me, Lord" which became a number one hit for him on last year's country charts and also crossed-over to number sixteen on the US Billboard Hot 100. Rita Coolidge sings backup vocals on the single, and is soon to become Kristofferson's wife.

Well, Kris had told this story before on Ralf Emery's Nashville national television show, and so, as he repeats it on KOKE-FM, he sounds a little bored, or maybe half attentive as he describes how he was "... moved by a song I heard [Larry Gatlin] singing in church. Jimmy Snow's church. Connie Smith took me to church." Kris takes a long breath. "... and I had a profound religious experience ... uh, during the session ... something that I hadn't had happen to me before. And uh ... and uh 'Why Me' came out of it."

Dusty Dillon fills the sluggish delivery. "It was pretty impactful, it sounds like?"

Kris continues, "Yes, it was um, uh ... Everybody was kneeling down, and Jimmy said, said, uh, something like, 'If anybody's lost, please raise their hand.' And I's, I was kneeling there, I don't go to church a lot. And uh ... uh the notion of raising my hand was out of the question." Kris

laughs as do several others in the studio and then after a long pause Kristofferson continues his story. “And I thought, uh, *I can’t imagine who’s doing this*. And all of a sudden I felt my hand go up, and I was hoping that nobody else was looking.”

Just then as if precisely on queue; silence interrupts the broadcast. As a listener, the break in tempo is *for me* somewhat foreboding and more than just a little eerie. At first, it seems like Kris may be pausing to clear his throat or even weep. Two seconds go by, then five. Where’s Dillon? Dusty should be filling the gaps and saying something like, “We’ll be right back with more from Kris Kristofferson, right after these messages.” But he doesn’t. Nothing happens ... absolutely nothing at all. Just dead air—for two full hours, KOKE-FM is spookily silent.

Again, as hearsay, one of the audio producers from KOKE who was there at the time tells me that the station instantly “goes into utter chaos. In the booth, Dillon frantically checks all his switches, mic cords, buttons, knobs, bells and whistles. Nothing is off keister! Everything looks right.”

“Snatching-up the phone, Dillon blusters to the engineering staff, ‘Did we take a lightning hit? We’re down! Get somebody out to the transmitter immediately.’ Dillon is checking his transmitter meters as he’s speaking into the telephone. ‘I’m showing a full stack. The transmitter looks right. I’ve got meters and monitors in the control room. I’m broadcasting; we’re just not getting out from the tower.’”

“The race is on; everybody scrambles like a half dozen eggs in a hot buttered cast-iron skillet. The clock is ticking.” My producer source continues, “... and I’m laughing my ass off. We all took some acid just before the show! Well, most of us did. I’m pretty sure Kris dropped a tab, too.”

I’m skeptical. “For two hours? What the hell?” I find the story really hard to believe.

But the producer swears it’s true. “Kris had raised his hand while telling his salvation story and leaned back against an equipment rack, inadvertently flicking the booth switch to the off position.”

Remember I mentioned before that most all radio stations have a simulcast switch for broadcasting from booth to booth? Well Koke has one, too, and apparently Kris found it. The problem is that Kris doesn't realize that he has hit it, and no one else immediately looks for the problem to be something so simple.

The real funny thing about the whole story is that according to my source, "When the switch is found and returned to its proper position, quite some time later, Dusty and Kris resume their programming and Kris's story—and believe it or not, Kris does it again! He hits the same switch, the same way, again! Rita laughs so hard, she almost pees herself."

It's ironic to me. I suggest, "God must have resented the story about church being told while Kris was so messed up and tripping on acid." Again it's hearsay, so the LSD usage may be just a high-strung, wild-eyed producer's story embellishment, but I wonder.

Realistically, Kris is well respected in the music and movie industry and a notable professional. Kristofferson is quite the ladies' man and commonly considered a "pretty boy" who is actually taken quite seriously in both the press and the entertainment business as a talented actor, singer, and song writer. I can't take any of that away from him; and the producer's story could be drug induced, but everybody in town who knows Kris, and radio, and Dusty Dillon believes the story could be true. But again, I'm fairly certain the producer was pretty dopey even as he tells me his account of the anecdote.

All interpretation aside, I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall that afternoon in the studio with Kris and Rita. If the story is a true account of what actually happened, it's the kind of thing you would tell your grandkids for the rest of your life. It's a prime example of what not to do on the radio.

Willie is absolutely smarter than that. I've actually never met someone I admire more than Willie. For the mild-mannered way he approaches life and manages both perceptual and tangible obstacles to fruition and ultimate success, Willie is genius. The first time I am markedly impressed

with his demeanor in form and function occurs the next day where the stage is being erected on the grounds of the picnic. Two days before the beginning of the big event, on my Saturday day off, I visit the picnic site around noon to get a glimpse of how things are being setup and organized. It is essentially a scene in total, random chaos.

As you may well imagine, considering that this is officially the first time the picnic has ever been put together, things are extremely crazy. All the hands on deck; all the organizers, helpers, caterers, security people, technicians, and even the performers are unusually excitable and fundamentally frantic. Chaos is an understated, nice word for describing the view of things as I step out onto the stage that will be the artist's perspective for the throng of fifty thousand guests and party-goers over the course of the coming days.

The panorama from the almost fully-erected scaffolding platform, out across the fifty acres of rolling ranch land and natural valley is one of sheer destruction like you might expect to see after a natural disaster. Construction materials, trucks, crews and tools are scattered in every possible direction and in a manner that really appears considerably less organized than post catastrophic tornado debris. One can't help but wonder if this show is ever going to get started at all. Crazy people are bouncing around everywhere like "heads with their chickens cut off!"

Several days of rain last week and caravans of crews have rutted wagon-trail trenches in the fields and vehicles have been left scattered, stuck in the mud, and strewn everywhere across the landscape from peripheral to peripheral vision. Temporary trailers and makeshift food and beverage huts are randomly dropped like hailstones from the sky all over the place. Cranes and wiring harnesses are a mess of tangled equipment with no apparent reason for positioning. From the far left to the far right and straight up the center of the field coming out from the skirt of the stage like they had been positioned by a fireworks-stand explosion, things are strewn everywhere. None of it appears to make any sense with the exception of the sound system, which is blaring test tones and mic checks across a (seemingly) nine-county area from the forty-foot-tall wall of

speakers on either side of the platform. In my imagination I compare the site to an epic Hollywood movie lot where everything has gone wrong, and the movie's pyrotechnics crew blew-up on themselves.

As about twenty guys dangling from the trusses above hang wiring and lights, Willie steps out onto the center of the stage that's still being erected and takes the microphone into his hand. "Test." He's as calm as a dead-pan drifter in a barroom brawl. It's as if he has no dog in this fight at all, and yet he is fully aware that this scene is his empire, his entire reputation and name on the line, laid out in front of him for all-the-world to see and judge.

"Zeik, let's get those food and beverage trailers all lined up between this tree and that boulder on the horizon." Willie casually points from left to right. "The beer stands should be placed every third booth."

"Trader John, we need those porta-potties lined up three rows deep just over that little knoll on the south, and use the same idea on the other side about twenty-five yards past that cow path over there, just over the north ridge. Try to stagger them in a way that keeps them looking less visible, one behind the other about twenty feet. Be sure to leave plenty of room for lines to form in front of them."

"Bill, I like where that sound tower is. Let's get it tarped and rain-proofed on top right away, and hang some lights from it pointing to the concessions in all directions. I want to be able to see through it all the way to the top of the hill, so no signs or banners on it below the bottom floor. We need a fence all the way around the bottom of it, too, but I don't want the fence attached to the scaffolding stilts themselves. Put the fence about five feet out from the bottom, please; we don't want people even capable of leaning or climbing on the tower."

"Wilson, that temporary fencing needs to be rolled out all along the perimeter. I know this ground is rocky, but take your time to get those posts well pounded into the ground. We need them to be substantial. Give them some solidity, sir. And let's make sure we don't have any jagged edges or protruding wires. We don't want folks snagging on them."

“Hospital tents go here and here, and over under that tree.” As Willie points in one direction and then another he sounds the way I would imagine that Jesus Christ must have sounded at the sermon on the mount. He is patient, mild tempered, passionate, caring, kind, even loving toward his host of crewmen and stage hands. Essentially, everyone on site is a friend of Willie’s and he obviously likes them.

“I like where you’ve put that water truck, Steve. Put the other one on the other side and then let’s get a bulldozer blade on those ruts. No more trucks up here in the middle after today, guys; we want this grass to stay alive as long as we can keep it going. We’ll do one final mowing tomorrow morning. Is everybody happy? Everybody got something to eat? It’s hot, stay hydrated. Drink plenty of water.” Willie gets a round of applause from the two hundred or more people scattered across the site.

“Play us some working-man tunes, Pete!” Willie salutes the sound tower and nonchalantly steps away from the mic with a simple, “Thank YOU!”

The sound system begins blaring Merl Haggard’s “Workin’ Man Blues” across the valley.

I move forward for a quick interview with my KNUT microphone in hand, “Willie, how many people are you expecting?”

Willie recognizes my presence with his famous stage grin and in-kind wipes the summer moisture from his upper lip with his sleeve. “I don’t know for sure, Bryant. We’ve sold a lot of tickets and KNUT has given away about five hundred. I believe another bunch will be given away today and tomorrow to them neighbors on the radio. Your guess is as good as mine as to how many will show, I suppose a lot of it depends on the weather. Do you have the new forecast?”

“They’re saying clear and cooler than normal through Wednesday,” I report.

“That’s good news. Can we count on you to make that forecast stick?” Willie is a bit of a comic.

“Yes sir, I’ll make that my agenda.” I’m hoping to get a quote for the

weekend news; even though I'm officially off-the-clock. I'm excited to help out and fan the fire (so to speak). Willie knows how to create a good sound bite, and I can see in the glimmer in his sun-squinted eyes that he's mentally editing his clip when he speaks.

"We'll be ready for the friends and family, right on time. We're almost there. I don't want to over exaggerate, but I'm pretty sure we'll have at least ten to fifteen thousand music fans out here on this hill come noon Monday." Willie is modest.

I repeat what the newspaper has printed this morning. "The *Statesman* is predicting there could be fifty thousand attendees. How do you feel about that, Willie?"

"I saw that. We're planning to accommodate MORE if they come! We'll have enough barbecue and beer to feed everyone, and I'm happy to say that the caterers are working over-time to prep for every possible scenario. As far as the music and entertainment is concerned, the more the merrier. It's a holiday affair, let's party, y'all." Willie is especially generous with his willingness to share what he knows without two-stepping on his own two feet. When you're in direct contact with him, you can't help but have a magnetic admiration for him.

"See you at the races, right?" Willie tips his hat to me and steps away to give his attention to a gathering mass of other media folks and countless crewmen.

"Thanks, Willie, we've got you covered, my man!" I turn off my tape recorder and move to leave the stage and make my way home so I can file a report with the station by phone. Interaction with Willie is a dominant imprint among the highlights of my career. By the time I leave, two hours after I've arrived, the chaotic site I witnessed when I drove up is looking like a magician has waved a hand full of magic dust everywhere and the venue is now noticeably much closer to appearing readied for an event hosting a beautiful white wedding ceremony or a group of dignitaries. The contrast between before and after Willie's little speech is emphatically amazing. The soft-spoken Willie has made all the difference between

“epic” and “epic failure” with just a few simple sentences and unpretentious kind words. Impressive!

The weekend does welcome cooler temperatures than normal for July and the requisite coastal Gulf-breeze rains hold off to the east, leaving the grounds pleasantly warm and dry for the hundreds of imminently gathering blankets and lawn chairs. People start showing up at the gates, patiently waiting, a full day and a half before the show is scheduled to begin. Music fans line up for about a mile outside the entrance and just pitch tents. Many of the folks bring a picnic basket; others sell sandwiches, beer, and cokes from coolers along the trail. The crowd is calm, cheerful, and seemingly prepared for whatever, come-what-may. People who’ve never met each other appear to be instant friends, assisting each other with parking and sharing whatever supplies they’ve brought with them. Seemingly everywhere someone is passing a joint to someone else, even complete strangers. They don’t even attempt to hide the fact that they’ve come to party, and it looks like pot is the honored guest. I swear, neighbors two miles down-wind could get a contact-high from the haze of smoke in the air.

By the time the gates open, the barbecue stands have also been smoking for twenty-four hours themselves, and the beer trucks have chilled tons of brewskies to the point of frigid with a supply of ice and dry ice that would make Alaska jealous. The apprehension of show-time has been plugged repeatedly on every radio and television in the state for days giving people the sense of being on the verge of taking a front line role in the pages of history.

You would think that there would be a lot of tension created by the anticipation generated by the event, but oddly the whole environment is more like a gathering for a close family reunion rather than one of a professionally-prepared stage show. People are courteous and generous. No one seems to have an uneasiness or single care in the world. It’s like everyone has been pre-programmed to make this entire week a huge success. I can’t help but think that is due to the way Willie presents himself and how he’s advertised the show. His calm, no-hype manner has

really paid off in a big way, evidenced by how thousands of people have arrived fully prepared in their own peaceful states of mind.

The show starts almost to the minute, right on time.

Just an hour or so into the music on the first day of the three-day event, Willie, Major Mac Pecan, me, UT Head Football Coach Darrell Royal, and Travis County Sheriff Preston Bank, are all standing in a circle discussing the smooth beginning of the big 4th of July “Progressive Country Music” celebration. Willie is happily celebrating a great start to the now famous occasion. Almost twenty-thousand people are out front synchronously swaying back and forth to the music of Steve Fromholz. Not only is the show on time, and off without a single hitch, but the crowd is on point and on tempo, too; if you don’t count the fact that an ambulance ran into a passing pedestrian, just before the gates opened earlier in the day.

The ambulance incident would prove to be the biggest news story of the hard news day and the only mention of it in the newspaper also stated that the pedestrian was found to be on drugs. The ambulance driver is credited for his quick response and excellent care of the injured individual. The pedestrian was not hospitalized, but if the truth be known, the ambulance driver let his foot slip off the brake and the accident was his own fault. Someone in line said they saw him drop a lit joint into his lap just prior to the little bump. Some folks may hesitate to talk about things like that. I don’t think it’s because folks are ashamed, it’s just that certain activities, although prolific, are quite simply illegal. So, much of the story never makes the news.

Like I said, we’re having an excellent day, so Willie pulls a hog-legged fatty from his shirt pocket and right before God and everybody lights one up, himself. After taking a few good puffs to make sure it’s burning well, Willie passes the “hooter” to his left.

Coach Royal accepts it and takes a few healthy tokes and then passes the joint to the sheriff. I’m caught off guard and show some surprise on my face.

Sheriff Bank laughs at me, or at least looks at me when he laughs, “What’s news now, radio boy? Got any bright idea, gripping news-story plans?”

I must look petrified. Failing to have a snappy reply, I merely smile and swallow hard.

Bank doesn’t hesitate to waft the aroma. Everybody says Willie’s stuff is always the best smoke you can find for miles. The sheriff takes two full, long drags and comments, “That (cough) shit’s tastier than a young girl’s sweet lips, Willie-man!” And then Bank attentively hands the joint directly to me.

Willie comments nonchalantly, “Preston, Preston, Preston ... You, sir, are as twisted as a twelve-string banjo. The guy I get this stuff from only grows Sativa. This weed will make you taller than trees ... As a matter of fact, I’ve never been this high before.”

Major Mac says, “We’ve all been high, but never this high before. Let the good times roll.”

So there I am. I’m a mediocre radio station reporter; just an early twenty-something, young, dumb, naive, and easily malleable kid. Sure, I know Willie fairly well, and I also know Pecan smokes pot because he’s told me so. Pecan and Willie have become very close homies who hang together daily. I also know that the coach and the sheriff are each aware of who I am, as well; I’ve interviewed each of the men on many past formal news occasions—but, of course, we’ve never ever smoked pot together.

In my mind, that makes me the only odd-man-out in the group. The sheriff and coach aren’t on duty. Mac is enjoying his day off, and Willie is hosting his own well-managed picnic. But me, I’m here officially. I’m specifically assigned to report the news back to the radio station. So I ask you one simple question, “If the sheriff offered you a joint, what would you do?”

Honestly, on the one hand I’m humbled and honored, elated to be considered trustworthy enough to be included in part of Willie’s personal inner circle of friends. I know that the simple fact that Willie has lit the

joint in my presence is a gesture of confidence and respect for me. On the other hand, I'm torn between smoking and sharing in the celebration versus not smoking by declaring my loyalty to professionalism and duty. "Seriously, what would you do?"

I think twice and take into consideration that I've actually been meaning to try weed just to see for myself if there really is something to its reputation. So, with no further deliberation, I take a hit, inhale it in, and pass the joint to Mac. It makes me immediately spasm, sputter, and cough like no Marlboro I've ever tasted. Gasping for air, and embarrassed to be looking so green, I hack out the words, "By-golly (cough), that stuff's strong! (Hack, hack) Whew!" My eyes water-up like a spring-fed stream.

The sheriff says, "I told you, boy."

"Suck it up, heathen." Mac takes the doobie and snarkily remarks, "Get a pair of big boy pants, young'un."

Everyone in the circle gets a good laugh at my convulsing expense, including me when I finally catch my breath; and the joint goes around the circle again two more times before Willie field-dresses the roach and sprinkles the remaining particles on the ground. With that, the humble man gestures a thumbs-up, steps-away and out onto the stage at the end of the first music set, to finally, initially greet his evidently very close family of friends, the gathering masses. I'm so stoned-to-the-bone that I completely forget to roll my tape recorder for his almost religious invocation, but I will remember forever how the crowd cheers and how Willie is received like a loved king in his own promised land of liberal freedom.

I often hear a lot of people say that the summer after their high school graduation is the most memorable time of their lives. For me the first Willie's Picnic easily marks the most pivotal summer I believe I'll ever see. As an immature young man, that summer picnic will prove to remain mystical and magical in my memory for many years. Willie makes a lasting, strong impression in more ways than one.

When I think about it in retrospect, I realize that I learned much about

life when I stood in that circle; much about standards, double standards, and more. Certainly the word *picnic* in my mind has forever been graphically altered. In addition to that my impression of the public, political, and private life of the sheriff is somehow marred, and I have some reflection on how he appears now to me to be some kind of bully or self-righteous snake-in-the-grass. Moreover, it occurs to me that what will be remembered of the entire event is something bigger than all the separate pieces to the puzzle.

This day in July, 1973 is something greater than the sum of all of its individual parts. That concept keeps coming back to me again and again. The triple standard concept tells me that today is much more important than anything that initially meets the eye. When I look back on what I've witnessed and seen, the picture is in vivid full color 3D. For the time being, I simply attribute that impression to be the pot.

Stoned, I laugh at my *simple triple standard* word play and think about how that would be the real headline news story for the day, and not something about whether or not the coach and the sheriff get high as Preston Bank implied. Of course, when I try to write it into any report I find it especially difficult to explain. There really is nothing simple about it.

On my drive home that evening I can't get the sheriff's imposing posture out of my mind. I consider how that posture is enforced by Bank's demeanor more often than not. I think uneasily again of a young dead black man who would likely agree with my disdain.

IMPENDING POLITICAL TRAGEDY



By the time fall comes around, Melamie and I have settled into an excellent working relationship. She is tactfully poignant in her opinion about what should be in the morning KNUT newscasts, while acquiescing politely to my nudges and soft-handed leadership. When she wants to talk about something as trivial as television actor antics, and there is a more natural news story about city budget, Mel always agrees with my direction to run the budget story. Alternatively, when news is lean and Mel likes a particular human interest story about a dog rescued on a freeway in Dallas, I give her rein and she always makes the story interesting and worthy of broadcast. We make a great team, and her quips with Major Mac are also a pleasant contribution to the morning show, as a whole.

Just this morning, Mac was on a rant about his local 7-11 store not having roasted cashews in stock. Melamie instinctively breaks the audience discomfort with her impression of a Pakistani convenience store attendant. “Mister Major, we do not have nuts of the kind cashew on this day. We are missing our delivery from the truck at this time, my kind sir. Please, have a consideration from the salted peanut selection. We have for you: a most pleasantly roasted peanut pack, a sweet honey-roasted flavor variety, and a peanut mix with raisins for your traveling trail. Please choose your pleasure ... for you, just one dollar, and ninety-nine!”

Mac responds with, “Peanuts?—Do I look like a goober lover to you?”

“No sir, Mister Major, you look like a goober would very happily love

you, my friend.” Mel makes me laugh as I listen to the monitor from the newsroom.

“Those nuts look old to me.” Mac barks.

“Those nuts are very tender and happy as compared to you. YOU are being OLD nuts! I can assure you of freshness and flavor from the nuts that I have to offer to you at this very time.” Mel continues the Pakistani charade.

I’m practically rolling on the floor in the other room and Mel and Mac both can see me through the window. Mac’s belly is beginning to shimmy with internal laughter.

“Mister Major, you must grab the nuts that I have for your availability. Otherwise, perhaps you may kindly hold for another, more-timelier occasion, your very insistent need for variety-nuts.”

Mac finally cracks-up and rolls a fresh new hit record from his new song playlist. “OLD nuts? ... Don’t call me OLD! This is Major Mac and Mel on the very nutty KNUT, with the all-new hit from Johnny Rodriguez. Stand-by, Mel has tickets to give away in the next half hour to see Johnny R., on-stage at the Split Rail this weekend.” Still laughing, Mac actually thinks that he’s nailed the intro.

In reality, there was a second left where Mel (still with a Pakistani accent) says, “Please sir, eat the nuts that are here for you.”

Like I said, Mel carries her weight well (although slight), both on and off the air. I don’t care who you are, that bit is funny; and they just make up most of that silliness on-the-fly. Mel has mastered the beloved art of time-honored broadcasters who devote themselves to cracking-up any peer member who is live on the air. Making someone laugh *while live* is a big part of the behind the scenes comic relief we get in the biz. It’s one of the biggest things we use to entertain ourselves and Melamie does it well. She’s a natural.

Unfortunately, later, during the coming weekend, Mel makes the brutal mistake of finding herself in a poor public light. Her “on-again, off-again” boyfriend makes the newspaper entertainment section during the Saturday

night Johnny Rodriguez show at the Rail. That third-string, preppy *quarter-slack* friend of hers decides a game of pool is something that is extremely important in life. Late in the evening when the dance hall is packed to standing-room-only, people are stacked wall-to-wall with a waiting-line around the parking lot. At that inopportune moment, with himself fully schnockered, Brad Lyman chooses to start a bar fight over whether or not he is, “next in-line to shoot pool.”

The incident begins with harsh words between Brad and some other local, drunk cowboy and ends with Mel crying in her beer, wearing half a blouse, and smearing mascara from her face with her torn sleeve. Melamie should just walk away as if she has no idea who Brad is; after all, she isn’t even drinking. Instead of pausing to think about the consequences though, Mel sacrifices good judgment in a vain attempt to stop the impending threat of violence by getting between and separating the two men and pushing on their chests.

That’s when the beered-up cowboy’s girlfriend also snaps and attacks Mel, screaming at the top of her lungs, “Keep your butt-mouth hands off my man, you cheap radio rodeo cow pie bitch!” So when the *beer hits the bar*, Mel is still standing right smack in the middle.

The Sunday paper says Lyman is suspended from the football team. Fortunately, there is no photo and the *Statesman* only casually mentions Mel as someone in the crowd, but that’s enough. Monday morning, Mel is no longer part of the KNUT cast of characters. Management at The Nut considers even non-paid interns to be necessarily required to remain cognizant at all times of public image. Bar brawls are not good ways to make the headlines, no exceptions. Drunk or not, that kind of public attention is not at all tolerable.

Mel cries in front of me and Mac both, when she comes in Monday, but the memo on the typewriter is already handed-down from the News Director who had to come in on his day off to write it. “Sorry Mel,” ND Mike says, “we have to let you go.”

That was that. Mel brushes some cat hair from her shirt and snatches at

her purse to leave the studio. Both Mac and I miserably shake our heads. There is nothing we can do to save her.

“Sorry Mel,” I say, “I’m going to miss you. Stay sweet. Stay in touch.”

Even Mac just lowers his eyes and prepares for the show to go on without her. All he can say is, “Well, today is gonna suck.”

It’s just that easy! Mel is gone; however, as fate would have it, she is not long forgotten. It’s funny how that one incident sort of bites KNUT in the rear. By Wednesday morning Mel is on the Zoo team at KLBJ—and not as an intern ... She has landed her first paid reporter slot. Almost as instantly and certainly as a flea cinches down on a startled bull in full stampede mode, Melamie has become a competitor in the radio bull riding main event.

She and I still cross paths in the field quite often these days, and I routinely enjoy her pleasant personality and genuine, natural charm, each and every time. With that said, it’s not unusual that when we meet on the street, we greet each other as friends, and pass along news tips to one another; as long as the conversation isn’t something that could be perceived as fraternization or as having any hint of containing a competitive edge. We’ve both learned that harsh lesson and faced its full enforcement.

Mel’s ability to make us all laugh will likely be the thing I miss most. Her quick wit is something that is often difficult to find in live radio. Even seasoned broadcasters tend to second-guess themselves *when live* and, as a result, often miss the cadence or timing for good humor and comedy. Self-editing is more of a curse than an asset in that way. I’m someone who self-edits to the point that I often don’t even say the funniest punch line that immediately comes to my mind, for fear of offending someone in the audience.

I think that because of my second-guessing nature ‘Bobby Bark After Dark’ finds it particularly amusing to attempt to make me laugh almost every morning when I’m on-air and reading my first newscast for the day. Bobby’s determination to crack me up has become such a common-place

ritual each morning that I've learned to completely ignore his presence in the studio when I'm on the air. I know that if I give him any attention at all, he is going to make a face or press his mouth to the glass between us and blow fog on the window. As juvenile as it may be, he often enters my booth, once I'm in the middle of a serious news story and makes farting sounds with his armpit, or belches-out hiccup noises or words under his breath like, "booger, ding dong, or rich witch." He never draws enough attention for his antics to be perceived as something other than background noise to the listeners, but I can clearly hear the commotions in the room and faintly over my headphones; and I can see him in my peripheral vision dancing like a court jester around me and grinning from ear-to-ear like the Cheshire Cat. It's a symbiotic relationship. Bobby keeps me sounding like I'm smiling on-the-air and I remain intent on reporting the news, whether it be good news or bad. Off the air, Bobby can almost always make me laugh, but on the air, no, no way.

I take my job seriously and, until today, I've never cracked or needed to stop my story to play a commercial, but I know the day is probably coming when Bob-o will make me laugh out loud. I have mentally prepared for such an occasion by planning words like, "more on this story after this." And, "stand-by for more news in a moment." I hope I never need to use those lines, but I'm consciously prepared, should the event arise.

In 1974 the biggest news story of the year, and perhaps the biggest event of the decade finally culminates as a major development. It's my lead story and up for the first broadcast on the morning of August 9th following months of the now infamous "Watergate Scandal in Washington D.C." Bobby has for weeks made jokes about President Richard Nixon on his "Nut after dark show" and has constantly tried to sway my non-biased professional position for "reporting just the facts" to something more appropriate for an episode of the '60s variety show, "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In."

On the fateful night before this now historical Friday morning, President Nixon told the citizens of the U.S. on national television that he

would, “resign as the 37th President of the United States at noon” today. If you remember the mid ‘70s, you recall the concern and political instability created by the events surrounding the resignation. It’s a story that is taken very seriously by all reporters and listeners alike. Bobby has already harassed me this morning about how he believes, “the puppet master has been caught with his pants down.”

I’m intent on getting-out the news and again ignore Bobby’s prods to make light of the resignation’s historical importance. With that on my mind and the weight of the moment predominant in my intention, I begin my newscast at six o’clock after Bobby throws the booth switch with my standard intro “Good morning Texans...”

Just as I being the words, “Today at noon, President Richard Nixon has declared that he will resign...” I hear in my headphones the door to my booth opening and the obvious sound of Bobby’s zipper. From the corner of my eye I catch Bobby dropping his testicles onto the desk next to me and I see him make his balls dance like finger puppets toward my right elbow. Instinctively, uncontrollably I pause and before I can complete my sentence and withdraw my elbow away from Bob-o’s approaching junk. In that brief moment, something deep inside me just snaps. I’m not sure why, perhaps it’s purely because of the absolute seriousness of the story, but for some insane reason I irrepressibly crack.

I bust out laughing like a school kid when the substitute teacher takes a spit wad right between the eyes. I just can’t help it! —And if that isn’t enough, I’m just so stunted that I can’t stop laughing long enough to get out any words like, “more in a moment.” In addition to that and to make things worse, Bobby has not put a commercial in the cart machine for me to divert to.

When I punch the commercial-break button, nothing happens. I panic trying to hide the hysterical snorting and gasping sounds coming from my now frenziedly, red face; but I’m helpless to hold in the spamming, breathy outbursts, I have completely lost control. So, mid-sentence in the fracas, I just bail out! I push the button for my news outro! It is the shortest five-minute newscast of my career.

Before I can gather my senses to close my mic, Bobby cackles, zips his jeans, and runs back to his booth to roll the next record on the turntable. By the time I've gained frantic control and realized that I've completely embarrassed myself and simultaneously made a mockery of the office of the US Presidency, it's way too late to salvage the newscast. I'm stupefied with my own immaturity. I'm absolutely certain that I have just crossed the line to becoming the newest member in the club of KNUT newscasters past.

As you can imagine, I bound from my seat into the control room to blast Bobby with hate and criticism, but he can't stop laughing long enough for me to insult his integrity. Then, at just that very moment, our outbursts are halted by Major Mac Pecan who is entering the studio for the shift change. He is ten to fifteen minutes late for the day and apparently in his own world enough to not even notice how Bobby and I have completely lost all composure.

I'm pissed. My face is still beet-red and I'm shaking with fear of being fired.

I'm aware of how distasteful this part of my life in radio must appear to someone on the outside. I can't think of any practical way to justify the indiscretion, except to say that it's a narrative on how the broadcast industry puts young boys in a position of doing a man's job, simply because kids cost a lot less money. It's a double standard. It happened. I'm sorry. It's what you get when you have immature boneheads running your radio station.

Bobby clearly has no agenda for anything other than having fun. Decidedly now, I have to include myself in that recalcitrant group of slackers, even though I've often said that I would never stoop to such a lower level of intellect. I'm ashamed as I skirt past Mac and quickly retreat to my cubbyhole in the newsroom.

For the next four hours I'll sweat knowing that Bobby and I both may have just lost our jobs this morning like a couple of simple-minded juvenile delinquents.

Just before leaving for the day, Bobby pokes his head into the newsroom, grins, and says, “Finally got you. I knew I could!” It’s like he has no awareness of the weight of the story I was reporting.

With my head still spinning in concern, all I can think of to respond with is, “Dude, the President resigned. Are you absolutely insane? I’ll bet we both just got canned.”

Bobby leaves with the final words, “Made you laugh! You said canned!”

By nine o’clock, after finally composing myself and having an otherwise normal news day, I get the idea that maybe it may actually all just blow-over. Ten o’clock rolls around and, by now, I’m sure no one listens to the six a.m. radio news at all, anymore. No one says anything! I have no idea how that didn’t explode in our faces; but apparently in the few seconds the behind-the-scenes commotion transpired—anybody important was either in the shower at home, in a parking lot, or just plain not listening. I never even receive a phone call about it—at all. ND Mike never says a word, and station management doesn’t mention it. Not even a receptionist or traffic girl gives me a hint that they heard the prank. I know! I’m as surprised as anyone could be. Perhaps my fellow employees (mostly Republicans) are as ashamed of the President as Bobby is. Whatever the case may be, luck is apparently on my side this time; and that isn’t something that I’ve become accustomed to on a regular basis. I actually expect to find a pink slip in my next check for several weeks following Bobby’s *puppet master* prank.

As a reporter, I’ve always been aggressive and unafraid to tackle any beat. Whether it be: politics, sports, entertainment, you name it, I’ve covered it without prejudice. I make it a personal philosophical habit to always tell both sides of the story, even though there are times when I personally disagree with all the sides. Like I always say, “You can please some of the people all of the time, and you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can’t please all of the people all of the time.” Sometimes I’m just as surprised by outcome as anybody else and I’m often someone who ends up disappointed or dissatisfied—but you learn to

take your lumps with a grain of salt, keep your nose to the grindstone, and never complain out loud. Inevitably there always seems to be an impending doom lurking, waiting to take your job away.

By late in 1974 my personal and professional agenda has somewhat changed in venue along with the tides of the music culture and the political climate. I almost never cover the Capitol beat, but this week, I've become a Capitol Hill investigator. If radio were a dramatic play; this week I'm playing the "public aware investigative reporter" part. It happens by accident during the weeks of holiday party nights following Thanksgiving, 1974 and not by any contrivance of my own. I have a friend with whom I was having a beer and he let something slip that I wasn't able to let go of. Let's call him a source (for lack of a better word and no name). He works in the governor's office at the State Capitol. Yup, he's a male secretary in the basement and supports the gubernatorial staff with documentation, research, and publication. We went to school together. He told me that the State Governor's offices hadn't opened on time for at least a month and on Monday the doors were actually unlocked well after ten a.m. That sounds interesting to me so I delve into my friend's reasoning.

"What do you mean, that's an office owned by the people of the State of Texas. They're open from eight a.m. to five p.m. sharp every day, right?" I'm nosey sometimes, but it's purely a personal novelty interest to me at this point, simply conversational. We're both having a Lone Star Beer, remember.

"Nope, ten-fifteen on Monday! ... The governor has been out of town for three months. Couriers are running paperwork back and forth between Austin and his hometown. Do you know it costs thirty-nine thousand dollars a day to run the Capitol remotely?" My source is not trying to give anything away, but he's just hit on my pet-peeve nerve. I hate to see public money wasted.

"How can that be true?" I ask.

It's all innocent as it happens, but I have just now hit on what quite possibly could be the biggest lead of my up-till-now, dully illustrious

career. I begin seeing headlines running across my brain.

I think, “*Governor Not at Home, Lights Not On,*” “*Daily 39K Communication Cost*”... *Story by Bryant L Herman.*” I’m totally intrigued now. I know better than to report anything until I have my verification process completed, but I smell a story on the capitol steps, and so I request and get permission from ND Mike to follow the scent.

Most of the radio stations in town do not have a continual Capitol beat reporter because the House and Senate are only in session a short part of the year and little action occurs on the Hill in the off times. So it’s unusual for me to don a tie and jacket, but it is almost necessary whenever someone graces the doors of the Capitol Building. Some of the legislative chambers have a very strict dress code that requires a coat and tie for anyone who enters. Actually, they even have spares for you to borrow if for some reason you fail to show up in the proper attire. For my assignment this week, I spiff-up my normal casual look and put on a little-used suit to go to work. The early December morning is cool with a fresh north breeze so I don’t mind so much wearing the coat. Sometimes in the Texas heat of the summer, the fact that you must wear a coat in the Capitol discourages me from even wanting to go in there at all.

When I arrive inside the entrance to the grand rotunda, it is around eleven a.m. I’m a little surprised to see Marcia Gaines from KLBJ walking the halls, even though I know the Capitol is her normal coverage assignment. She recognizes me and inquires as to why I would be “bouncing around the Capitol?”

I evade the real answer with a quickly-crafted response, “I’m here to meet a buddy for lunch. Is there anything *newsy* going on around here today?” I shift the focus back to Marsha.

“No, not yet, it’s been fairly quite here in the halls this morning. You clean-up well—nice suit,” she says.

Her hair is a mess, and her pant suit has a mustard stain on the lapel, so I avoid returning the compliment. It doesn’t cross my mind that she would worry much about my presence in the building.

“Thanks. Have a good one, I’ll check you later.” I dismiss myself to make my way to the second floor public Governor’s office, not giving any credence to the chance meeting with Marsha.

Inside the Governor’s office, it is abundantly clear that the suite is just getting opened for business for the day and the receptionist is busy turning-on lights, office machines, and getting organized. I wait patiently to inquire about the tardy start to the day and as I do, by sheer chance and happenstance, Lieutenant Governor, William P. Hobby, Jr. enters the chamber, notices my press pass badge, and microphone; and immediately approaches me at the front desk. “Good morning.” He introduces himself to me.

I’ve never interviewed Hobby before now or any other lieutenant governor for that matter, but when I tell him who I am, he is extremely amiable and asks, “So what brings you to the Hill today. Are you working on a story?”

Without missing a beat; and brushing aside my intimidation created by Hobby’s presence, I jump right to the point. “Do you mind if I record our conversation?” Hobby nods and I click-on my machine. “We’re following up on a tip that the governor has been absent from Austin Capitol offices for the past month, or more, to be in Uvalde and near his mother’s beside during her recent illness. Is that something you can confirm or quash, sir?”

Hobby makes no attempt to hide from or skirt the rumor and goes directly into what seems to me to be a prepared statement on the topic.

“As you likely already know, Governor Dolph Briscoe’s mother, Georgie Briscoe has been stricken very ill and is in need of constant care. Respecting her wishes she is being closely attended to at her home in Uvalde, Texas, rather than in a hospice or Austin area hospital. She is eighty-six years old and feeble, but her family remains by her side through this difficult time for all of them. Governor Briscoe is especially close to his mother and has not taken himself away from Uvalde for any extended period since she became ill.”

“Does that leave you in charge of the day-to-day goings-on here at the

Capitol, Mr. Hobby?” I stick to my agenda.

“No, actually, everything is being handled, *business-as-usual*, with Governor Briscoe fully in control; the only difference is that he is working remotely. We have a detail of security and couriers surrounding him and his family; and all state business transactions are being handled by the governor himself. If Mr. Briscoe needs to sign some official documentation or make any decision regarding the operation of state affairs we courier all necessary paperwork to and from Uvalde for him to attend to personally.”

“That sounds like it may be somewhat more costly than running state functions from here in Austin. Have you found that to be the case?”

Hobby doesn’t blink. It’s like he’s been expecting the question to raise its ugly head at any given point in time; and again he seems to have a prepared answer.

“Yes, it is somewhat costly. We estimate that we are spending about thirty-nine thousand dollars per day for the remote operation; however, we stand behind the governor and his decision to be with his family during this especially challenging period. You may well already be aware, the state has a budget for emergency operations, knowing that situations like this one can arise unexpectedly in the normal course of life.”

My mind sums the totals quickly. “Wow, that’s over a million dollars extra for operations this month, is that right?”

“Unfortunately, that is true, it’s a little over one point one million—but again, we believe that it’s the right thing to do under the circumstances, and our thoughts and prayers are with Miss Georgie and the whole Briscoe family during this stressful time.”

Lieutenant Governor Hobby is quite frank and non-evasive in regards to the uncomfortable subject matter of our conversation.

“That’s a very nice thing to say, sir.” I commend the lieutenant governor’s respect for the Briscoe family and snap the ‘*Off*’ button on my cassette recorder. “Thank you so much for your generosity, and for visiting with me this morning. If I can be of any help to you in the future,

please feel free to let me know. Have a good day, sir.” I attempt to lighten the tone with the comment, “It’s definitely Monday all over town!” I smile reassuringly.

I’m amazed at how easily that entire chain of events just materialized. In less than five minutes I’ve confirmed that the offices are opening late and that the daily budget is exactly as my friend had said. I have my story! It seems well worth having put on the monkey suit this morning and wearing a tie. I can’t wait to get back to the station to begin editing my tape. Before exiting the office, I greet the receptionist who has seemed to be entirely transfixed on my conversation with Mr. Hobby. “Thank you, ma’am, have a good week.” I say.

As I pull the handle to the ten-foot-tall stately, heavy hardwood office door, Marsha Gaines brushes past me to enter the room. “Hi Janice, how are you today?”

Marsha has a friend in the receptionist, and I’m afraid my investigative cover has just been blown. I can’t let that bother me now, though. I have a job to do and simply exit, smiling and saying, “You two play nice now.”

“See ya, Bryant.” Marsha is curt and immediately moves in close to Janice for a private conversation. As you can imagine, by the time I get back to KNUT, Marsha has inquired about my line of questioning and has put two-and-two together enough to come up with the same story that I’ve just exposed.

I’m steadfastly driven, however, and realize that KNUT and I have the jump on the story and that it will probably get picked up by the AP, UPI, and TBN affiliates before morning. As I prepare my lead story for Mike’s approval and possible use during the afternoon-drive-time newscasts, Mike asks me to write the copy and cart up the story with my voice-over and the Lt. Governor’s tape excerpts. So I get everything ready for air with the tag line, “Bryant L Herman, KNUT News at the State Capitol.” I then prep the story for release to the wire services and grin as I place my name on the by line, convinced that this report is going to be my first *big gig* breaking news debut. I spend the remainder of my afternoon anxiously

listening to KLBJ to make sure they don't break the story before we can. Mike has my tape scheduled as his five o'clock lead with the slug that the report is a KNUT exclusive from me. Naturally, I'm elated.

For most things in life "timing is everything." That statement especially applies to radio broadcasting. Sitting on the story for several hours seems like it could be a mistake, but Mike knows that we are currently the only ones with the report and with actual tape from the Lieutenant Governor. Mike also knows that five o'clock will get the biggest audience, with listeners just beginning to pile into their cars for the afternoon ride home. Meanwhile, I pace the living room floor at my home all afternoon waiting for my *big time* story to be released. I methodically scan all the local stations to be certain that no one else is running it yet.

By four-thirty, KLBJ has not said a word about it so I'm becoming more confident that I will be the one reporter breaking the news. I imagine that by the six o'clock hour the story will be all over television when local TV reporters will have heard my scoop—and since it is being reported after five o'clock they will not be able to follow up with William Hobby or anyone else at the Capitol. They will be forced to credit KNUT as the source of the report. "*KNUT's Bryant L Herman reports this afternoon...*" I imagine the lead-in on Channel Seven and Channel Thirty-Six as a feather in my hat and a notch in my belt.

Need I say it again, "Timing is everything." At four-fifty-five on the button KLBJ breaks the story. It is almost word for word what I have written. "KLBJ Capitol Reporter Marsha Gaines has learned that having Governor Dolph Briscoe's operation of the state from his mother's bedside is costing the state more than one million dollars for each month that the governor is not in Austin. Marsha Gaines files this report from Capitol Hill."

"Damn it, man!" I blurt out loud my dismay. "Marsha, you fat bitch hog dog!"

Then almost as if on cue ABC television interrupts programming with a news bulletin. "We interrupt this program to bring you a late report from

Uvalde, Texas and correspondent Richard Weiss, where it was confirmed just moments ago that Texas Governor Dolph Briscoe's mother, Georgie Briscoe has succumbed to a long illness today."

"Oh no!" with three minutes left before Mike is to air the story, I frantically dial the hotline number to the newsroom and Mike answers the phone. "KNUT News, Mike Bitters."

I can't get the words out fast enough. "Mike, kill the story!"

"What?" Mike is confused.

"Kill the Governor story. His mother just died."

"You're being funny, right? I'm just about to go on air! I don't have time for your BS, buddy boy." Mike is almost harsh with me and seemingly upset at even a remote prospect of changing his lead article.

"I'm not kidding. ABC just reported it." As I speak I can hear through the phone that the teletype is beginning to ding an alarm behind Mike. "Check your wire. Kill the story, it will look bad. The timing is terrible."

Over the phone, I can hear Mike swivel his chair and pivot to the AP wire. "Oh shit. You're right ... Gotta go!"

With just seconds to air, Mike rips raw copy from the wire, and begins his five o'clock newscast with the words, "Good afternoon, Texans, It's exactly five o'clock on KNUT, Austin; partly cloudy and seventy-three degrees. Here's what's making news in your world today. I'm Mike Bitters."

"This just in from the *Associated Press*, Georgie Briscoe, mother of Texas Governor Dolph Briscoe has passed away this afternoon at her home in Uvalde, Texas with her son and family by her side. The elder Briscoe was eighty-six years old and had been bed-ridden for the past several weeks due to an undisclosed terminal illness. Reporters near the home expect a statement from the Governor within the hour." Mike adlibs after reading the copy cold and live, "KNUT will have more on this breaking news as soon as it becomes available, and if necessary we will be interrupting programming for further detail."

Mike makes it sound so smooth and effortless. With only seconds to spare he has just rescued me from a brutal hazing in the reporter community. I draw a long breath of relief, sigh, and ponder how Marsha Gaines is going to explain herself when she gets all the flashback and flack for poor timing and bad judgment from all the other local reporters, and especially the ones from around the state on the Hill. If it weren't such a dismal outcome for the Governor, and disrespectful to his mom, I would almost smile right now. A mental image of Marsha being drawn and quartered is somewhat entertaining for me. I'm a little bitter since she stole my story.

It is quite simply *just the nature of the game*. One minute you are scouring a slow-news Monday, scraping-up anything worthy of a report; and the next minute there is more information than you can physically keep arranged in your mind, and you're left desperately flying by the seat of your pants. Remaining politically correct in either event is a challenge especially when you consider than any direction you move is being scrutinized ruthlessly by managers, owners, sponsors, and thousands of listeners. Mike knows it, I know it, and Marsha Gaines knows it.

Even though I'm peeved, I can't help, but feel sorry for Marsha. She must be feeling awful right about now. She and KLBJ will take all the bad timing flack. We, on the other hand, (Mike, KNUT, and I), come out smelling like a rose in a field of ragweed. "Wow that was a close one."

I'm certain Marsha never would have planned for such a random end to the story. Mike and I clearly overlooked the possibility and the uncanny timing of Mrs. Georgie Briscoe's death. I'm compelled to think that the standards for being *politically correct* and the standards of *life and death* will never be clearly defined by simple human rules of conduct. Professionally, I'm both disappointed and relieved by the result of my brief investigative reporting stint. On a more human level, I'm stunned and amazed at how life and destiny enforce their own set of rules for balance and justice.

Within the next week things on the Zoo crew take another shift with the wind. Marsha Gaines is replaced as the morning show news anchor on

KLBJ. I'll bet you can guess who gets the job. Yup, Melamie Masters is now fully in the hot seat and has become my direct competitor for drive-time news listeners in the market. Melamie was just in the right place at the right time. Again, timing shows its true nature and value. "Melamie, Melamie, Melamie. I hope your nerve is as strong as your fast wit and aspiration to succeed. You're still a little green behind the ears, Miss Mel. Watch your step, girl!"

As far as Marsha is concerned, Austin is in her personal history book. In order to continue her career, Marsha has to find an entirely new market. Austin sees her now as "damaged goods," and no one will hire her here anymore, at least until people forget the whole ordeal and how she is singlehandedly forced to bear responsibility for the public perception of a seemingly "brash and mean report." Maybe she will do well in someplace where it's easier to get lost in the crowd, like Dallas or Houston. She's always been a professional and a well-respected reporter here, but one bad timing mistake can really take a toll on a person's image. I'll bet she wishes she had never *oneupted* me like she did. ("Oneupted" is my own personal vernacular and a made up word.)

Had things turned out differently, Marsha Gaines could have been as much of a local hero as I imagined myself to be in my personal delusions of grandeur today. "Best of luck, Marsha, I'm sorry the fact that you tried to scoop me left you in such a bad light." In the words of my old DJ friend, Jim WW Travis, "One day while I was looking out for number one, I stepped in number two." There's a double standard that draws a mental picture no one wants to see.

NEW MEANING TO THE TERM ‘DEAD AIR’



In the months and days of early 1975, KNUT sees two new interns and has gone through yet another two radio station managers. I don't know why management is so hard to place, but I don't let that get in the way of what I know I need to do. Even though I can see some of the writings on the wall with our continual ratings losses; all seems normal and stable to me on the radio ranch home-front. Lesson four of the *Radio Bible*: “Never take anything for granted.” Mid-summer has come now and Mac, unlike me, is taking the ratings-hits especially personally. He seems more and more angry every day. By late-July, Mac rarely laughs on the air anymore, and his jabs at politics and “the system” are becoming more and more insistent and frequent, and less and less amusing.

“Nine-fifteen and it's already ninety-two degrees this morning on a steamy, hot, sultry day in Austin. This is the Major Mac Show ... (Cough).” Mac pauses his airshow as if he is about to make a key announcement. “Are we still on the air (muffled cough)?” Wheezing, “I'm suckin' air here! *Goodnight* nurse!” Then there's a much longer, protracted pause.

In my mind, Mac is apparently on another of his now infamous rants about something he deems pertinent enough to broadcast to “them neighbors.” I'm not paying attention. I have other urgent news and events on my mind.

Looking back, I'm made to realize that individuals on the street, the

people in your building, and the persons in the next room don't always correctly comprehend what is happening just a few feet away from them. Sometimes it comes as a complete surprise when you find out what you may be ignoring or overlooking ... even something that is right in front of you.

Considering all of his past history, I naturally presume that Mac, "The King of Dead Air"—Mac who has always mastered silence as a work-of-art is probably making a point of something mundane that he thinks is relevant to his now dwindling, otherwise always loyal audience. I figure it's just another verbal, "Major Mac Attack" at work once again. But it doesn't take long for me to notice the especially long hush being broadcast from the control room.

With my back to the DJ booth, the stillness in the hallways of the KNUT building is deafening. Everyone in the offices and corridors, even the building air conditioners seem to stop what they are doing to listen to the internal on-air monitors staggered throughout the station. Everyone seems to be suddenly frozen by a vile, unnerving silence.

As the silence further insists on getting my attention, I lean in toward my gear to turn up my monitor for the next expected Major Mac quip. Every person here (the building is fully open for business by this hour), all of the staff (including me) expects the next words out of Mac's mouth to be a punchline to some joke.

I count eight beats in my head, but then no one doubles the timing pace. That's not the way Mac's pattern usually goes. Something is wrong. Mac is off-tempo. I turn my head and focus my attention on the control room.

Mac is "off to the races!"—And not in a good way—I'm staggered. Mac is slumped over, dead.

It's no joke, Major Mac Pecan has just died, live on the radio. *The proverbial top nut* has, just like that, choked on a cashew and *died on the air!*

It seems unimaginable, but as the impending industry storms of change have turned our direction and as predictable as rain, the gathering winds

and fate are now making a final lashing assault on KNUT. The long-lived “Country Giant of Austin” is suddenly face-to-face with a perfect storm that no one would have predicted would include the loss of the biggest giant in our castle, the illustrious Major Mac. Like a massive hurricane at the end of a long summer I realize instantly that this is the big one.

As my mind tries to wrap around the shocking result in the control room, just beyond the window from me, it’s hard for me to actually take in Mac’s sudden and jolting demise. I’m in shock to become keenly aware of the fact that Mac is gone, and not for just a day or two this time. It takes me several seconds to gather an initial impression enough to pick up a telephone for a panic-ridden emergency call.

For a moment, I take it all so personally ... I realize that this development could affect me directly. My job could now be in severe jeopardy. This event is going to have a *Major, no fun intended*, impact on the entire radio station. *God this can’t be true!*

KNUT-AM radio in Austin (like my friend Mac) is not going to survive this deluge and gale. Metaphorically, the windows have just broken, and now we’re taking storm waters directly into our living room. The sight of clamoring paramedics and KNUT station personnel in the control room and adjacent halls is unbelievable, stupefying.

The following day’s morning *Statesman* carries the headline: “Major Pecan Dies.”

Like Bob Dylan says, “The Times They Are A-Changin’”

“♪ Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you
Is worth savin’

Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'. ♪”

The Dylan reprise is played in memoriam as some fifteen hundred to two thousand Texans gather at the First Baptist Church for the final public appearance of the once quite-revered Mister Major Mac Pecan. It's a standing-room-only crowd for the modern downtown Trinity Street sanctuary. Speakers include nationally famous Ed Sullivan who is quoted in the *Statesman* as saying, "It's a sad day for all of us; not only in Austin and New York, but across the country."

In retrospect, I think it is a mistake that we decide to broadcast the memorial service on live radio. The music selections and the on-air presence of our air personalities on the day of the funeral must sound more to the public like a burial dirge than a tribute to a good man. My only public comment to the paper and other media reporters is, "I miss you already, Mac. God must be in need of a good court jokester, my friend!"

After that and within just a few short weeks, Grant Justice announces his retirement as Sales Director for "The Nut Family." That fallen domino is immediately followed by another, and another, and so on and so on. A new "green-horned" station manager gets ushered through the door again. And, as you would expect, shortly thereafter the imminent budget cuts begin to bluster around and down through the halls with the first cold winds of winter, chilling all of the staff to the bone similar to a preamble for a foreboding death march to an ice covered cemetery. We can't seem to see anything that can be done to save ourselves from dire impending doom.

Like everyone else on the staff, I know that my final broadcast on KNUT is likely to be coming soon. With the arrival of the new station manager it is announced that the entire morning programming format will be changing. The new guy is not saying what the details of the change will be, but an AM Sports Talk Show speculation is already present at the water cooler rumor mill. And if that's what happens, it will put some

sports announcer type of person in my present budgetary slot, and ultimately put me out on the street with nothing to eat. Why am I not too surprised, I should have read the figurative memo on the wall?

As PD, Craigers Grove takes the morning show (full-time for the interim) the résumés from all the other announcers on the KNUT staff begin flying out the door and around the country like bats leaving a cave at the dusk feeding hour. Since I'm not sure when any new programming will be announced, I don't immediately join the majority of those fleeing ... I hesitate to put out my feelers for a new gig right away. That may be a mistake, but my brain is stunned and needs some time to grieve and get over the depression of everything that's happened. A dead transvestite, political corruption, and now the loss of Mac weigh heavy on my rattled head.

Within days Bobby Bark takes a mid-day gig in Nashville; ND Mike Bitters goes to a new station in Dallas where a long-time Country Music Station has become Top-40; and another weekend DJ of ours whose air-name here is "The Tree Surgeon" goes to a little known station in Corpus Christi under the guise of, "The Horse Doctor."

I stand my ground with Treemont, but I'm a little weary of our fight for the right to party anymore. I'm already having nightmares about what the new KNUT call sign might become. *KRAP-AM* comes to mind more often than something better. The mood at work is sad and to say the least a little distracting. We've become so comfortable with being on top of the charts that the new developments are mentally numbing, and stealing a lot of our heart along with our broken spirits. You can hear it on the air that we've been crushed ... No one has smiled on the air at KNUT for weeks.

On the Friday morning after the new manager, Troy, "The Trojan" Tutman quietly takes his seat in his *un*-exalted leadership role; I painfully take my work days one at a time. When I arrive at five and begin to read the papers, it doesn't really cross my mind that the news of the day will become a "final straw that breaks the camel's back." But, *The Dallas Morning News* has a shocking headline that grabs my attention.

Remember that KNUT is owned by a group of Texas Legislators? One of them is House Member, Jason Stubbs, a Republican from Austin.

Today the Dallas paper is reporting, “Representative Stubbs Indicted on Federal Monopoly Charges.” It seems that the F.C.C. has implicated Stubbs as having holdings in several media groups, including not only KNUT, but also a local FM station, a local Television station, and a local subscription music service for area businesses called MUZIC, which is primarily automated elevator music. The charges have arisen on new federal regulations designed to disband industry monopolies and potential conflicts of interest. Although the accusation of possible corruption seems trivial and a little trumped-up to me, it is my obligation to report the news that’s in the papers.

Since I know Representative Stubbs quite well and have interviewed him on many occasions, I have no problem with making a follow-up call on the story in an attempt to get a statement about the Dallas report, for us to put into our local broadcast. It never occurs to me that the request could become a conflict of interest for me.

Just after our first six o’clock news I roll a tape and make the call to Mr. Stubbs’ home. Stubbs answers the phone rather gruffly.

“Mr. Stubbs, this is Bryant L Herman at KNUT. Good morning, sir.”

“Hello Bryant, what can I do for you?” Stubbs is none too friendly.

“Have you read the Dallas paper this morning, sir?” I’m cautious not to just blurt out the headline.

“Yes.” Stubbs is much shorter with me than normal. In the past we’ve always had a casual, conversational repartee.

“I wanted to follow-up with you, sir, to see if you might have a comment about the headline, something that we might use on the air in our local news.” I walk softly as if on eggshells in my approach. “Is there something you would want for us to say in how we handle our report of the story?”

“No comment!” The brief answer from Stubbs is very unusual and catches me off-balance.

I ask, “Would you prefer that we just report that you have no immediate response to the morning news account, sir?”

“If you have to report the story, all I can say is, *NO COMMENT.*” Stubbs hangs up on me.

I’m a little disturbed, but report the story on the remaining morning news broadcasts as a third-string headline and include the detail that, “the new federal guidelines for monopolies have only recently been enacted and there is no precedent for the charges against Stubbs or his business holdings, which include KNUT.” That comment or *no comment* report precipitates my last broadcast on The Nut.

Following my final newscast for the day at ten a.m., I’m greeted at the newsroom door by the new station manager, Troy Tutman. He does not appear to be happy, but in a calm, authoritative voice he speaks to me for the first time directly. “You should have called me first this morning, before calling one of the station owners. I’m going to need the keys to the news car and your press passes. I’m letting you go.”

I knee jerk with a defensive reaction. “What? You must be kidding, why would I call you first? No news department in the world could function that way. I was just doing my job of following up directly with a news source.” I plea to Tutman, “...can we talk about this, sir?”

“Nope; my decision is final. You’re done here, Bryant. Pack your stuff and hit the pavement, young man.”

“No! ... No notice? No severance? No discussion? No chance we can come to some agreement here, sir?” I stumble on my words as I speak. My head is blown. “I really don’t understand. Why would you just let me go?”

“Let’s just say you’ve not been keeping the coffee pots clean and full enough in the mornings, Herman. Just take it for what it is; we won’t need your services any longer. The keys, please?” Tutman is harsh and unbending.

From the sudden, massive, brick-like lump in my throat to the bottom of my duodenum I’m completely paralyzed. It’s as physical as if I’d just been impaled, eviscerated by a large butcher knife while still standing upright

and keenly conscious.

As Tutman turns to walk away I recognize there is no chance for conferring with him. It occurs to me that *he'll probably not be in his new job longer than a month or two* and it infuriates me that his justification for firing me is so superficial, so disrespectful, it's just plain wrong. "*Coffee Pots!*" I'm sorry, but I just lose it.

I abnormally, unprofessionally, irreverently, unconcernedly, totally lose behavioral control, breaking character and blurting out, "I don't believe we've had two words between us since you started working here." I raise my voice to a level that is loud enough for people down the hall to hear and then with full intention *burn that bridge to the ground*.

"You must be making a lot of friends in your new job, Tutman! Everybody knows you don't know anything about radio—everybody knows you're just a hatchet man." I verbally attack Tutman without remorse as the paralysis spreads from my gut to my legs, and my feet become glued in place on the floor. "You're nothing more than a flea on a bull, new boy! Grow a life and get some talent! You suck horse shit! Loser! Pecker head!" Eventually, my jaw slacks agape and I'm frozen alone in time with my once comfortable world crumbling to a heap around my ankles.

I have no idea what made me think I would be one who could survive the demise of KNUT. I should have begun putting out my résumé weeks ago like the rest of the staff when the writing on the wall first appeared. "*Radio Bible* rule number seventeen: Never become too secure in where you stand. It can only lead to a painfully-hard fall."

That weekend I give my friend Bobby Bark a call in Nashville to give him the update on my career, and he laughs at me.

"You should have left already. Everyone else did." Bobby likes to talk, no surprises there, he's a radio guy.

Before I can cry on his shoulder too much, he takes off on one of his personal tangents.

"I almost got fired *here* yesterday!" He begins like he has a long story

to tell me.

I almost always get a laugh or at least a smile from his nonsense, so I take the bait, “Oh, what happened?”

“Did you hear that Olivia Newton John went on Johnny Carson the other night and declared that she is bisexual?”

“Oh, I guess I missed that one.”

“Well you do know who Anita Bryant is, right?” Bobby is patient with my lack of knowledge of pop artists and television. “She was Miss Oklahoma years back ... pop singer now, does a lot of Florida Orange Juice endorsements ... big anti-gay activist.”

“Okay yah, I know of her.” I’m vaguely interested.

“I took a live caller yesterday who requested the new Olivia Newton John song, ‘If You Love Me,’ right? —Well I snapped back, “No, I’m not going to play it because we don’t play any Anita Bryant records, and I don’t want to appear to be biased as either gay or anti-gay. We have to play both sides of a story or none at all, you know.”

“You jerk!” I cackle. Yup, he got me to laugh.

“Well, the phones lit up like you wouldn’t believe, for more than an hour and a half. Then the station owner gets a call from the phone company saying they don’t know what we’re doing, but we have to stop because we’re jamming all their switchboards.”

I’m still chuckling.

“I think the owner really thought it was funny, but the PD didn’t care much for getting the owner up his snout about my sense of humor needing to be monitored.”

“I can see that. I’d be upset with you, too.” I’m still laughing.

“Man, I had more than four hundred calls in an hour. Pro-gays, homophobes, mothers, fathers, teachers, preachers; everybody wanted to talk about it on the air. I finally had to play the damned Olivia Newton John record to get them off the phones. Can you believe it?”

“You never cease to amaze me, Bob-O man. I miss you in the

mornings. You always made me laugh. Stay out of the politics, stick to the humor. Even the politics of humor are off limits; you know better than that.”

“Yah, but it was worth it; that was fun. Good times.” Bobby never changes. He says what he thinks.

That call is really the only laughing I enjoy for quite some time. I just get a *gut in my wrench* every time I think about my job or looking for more work.

It takes me all of two weeks to even begin a job search, and the only opening that I can find in town is the midnight-to-six slot at KOKE-FM. Unfortunately, that position is not for a news desk job, but for the all night DJ shift. In my mind, it's a step backwards. First of all, I'm not the snappiest quip maker and a disk jockey needs to be funny and entertaining; and secondly, I'm not particularly enamored with the KOKE-FM Progressive Country format. For my taste it's like they have an identity crisis and can't figure out if they want to be country or rock.

I realize they're trying to invent a new music standard, create a new mainstream groove; however my reaction to the eclectic style of programming is less than fully enamored. Sometimes it sounds to me like a pretentious reach to broadcast songs by local artists who are less talented than national chart makers. More often than not, it feels like Koke is playing second rate records when it could be playing more hits. I do agree that the old standards for country and rock are segregating audiences, and the thought of bringing people together is intriguing, but initially it's against my instincts to give it a run for the money. Decidedly, it is a job, and so I take it as an interim band aid to put dinner on the table. Meanwhile I continue to apply to other stations around the state for a good news gig. News is what I love. News is where I belong.

It doesn't take me long to determine that working for Dusty Dillon is no great joy either. His arrogance always enters the room ten paces ahead of his physical arrival. If you ask him, I'm sure he'll tell you that he knows more about radio than any other living human being. Regardless, I

plow through and do my best to put aside my bruised ego and gutted attitude by trying to shift my focus to more pleasant interests like getting to know Kinky Friedman. It's a welcome distraction to get acquainted with Kinky. He has become quite the local hero lately with his recent album, *Sold American*.

Friedman and his band "The Texas Jewboys" have an odd assortment of cult followers, and KOKE is playing most of the tracks from the album. "Ride 'Em Jewboy," "We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to You," "The Ballad of Charles Whitman," along with the title track; all are fairly popular Austin listener favorites. Who knew?

I originally assume that working the over-night shaft at Koke would be the most boring job ever. I expected to be alone in the studios with most of the building *lights dark*, just me and the strange (yes, odd) collection of vinyl records on the shelves. I never expected the gig to become one of the highlights of a career ... but when Kinky just drops by one night to chit-chat, the hole in my appetite for news and information becomes filled with a new genre of entertainment.

Richard Samet Friedman, "Kinky," is one of those guys that you just can't forget, once you meet him. He's flamboyant, crude, irreverent, recalcitrant, kind, considerate, and a well-thought-out cursive linguist, all at the same time. Quite the paradox, and quite conversationally revealing and uplifting, Kinky must have a hard time sleeping.

When he isn't working a gig, making some other personal appearance, or taking in a show as a fan himself, Kinky likes to drop in after the bars are closed to just sit around and listen to records with me, or (*maybe he just wants to*) visit with "them neighbors" on the radio station telephones.

We talk about everything ... and when he visits the nights fly by as quickly as the test jets from Bergstrom Air Base that break the sound barrier in the stillness of a Texas summer at dusk; rattling windows, pictures on the walls, and dinner plates in the kitchen cabinets. Kinky's passion for verbiage is just as stimulating as are those common, but unscheduled sound barrier booms; and can be as unexpected and mentally

jarring.

Kinky is almost a decade older than I am, and I'm intrigued by his popularity and liberated personality. Although many folks find Kinky offensive with his persistent use of the "N" word in his song lyrics, and his constant, comical, Semitic point of view; but I find his notions to be a glimmer of highlight in my otherwise waning perspective on the glitz and glamour of radio. The Kinkster sees himself as a grand leader of a covert, secret army, "Someday I'll probably enter politics," he says. "Hell, I might even run for Governor of the great State of Texas." Kinky makes me laugh; and we both enjoy that.

"When I'm Governor, we'll legalize pot." Kinky supports the full legalization and cultivation of hemp and marijuana, declaring that the end of marijuana prohibition is "a health and education funding, prison cost reduction, border security, and state's rights issue." One of his stated more poignant goals is the "dewussification" of Texas. "How hard could it be? Why the hell not?" He predicts that when he "runs" there will be large crowds of proud Texans flaunting the banner, "He Ain't Kinky, He's My Governor!"

Ballyhooing is the order of the day whenever Kinky drops in. We discuss everything from cars to women, and bars to religion. Of his band bus Kinky often says, "The tour bus, a Cadillac with expired plates and a nasty predilection for going into a coma at the most inconvenient moment is still *a favorite* wherever she goes." According to Friedman, the Cadillac's "talents lay in her ability to stop on a dime and pick up the change." Of religion, Kinky says, "Oh, they ain't makin' Jews like Jesus anymore; they ain't makin' carpenters that know what nails are for."

On the topic of women, Kinky's famous song lyric stands on its own legs, "Get Your Biscuits in the Oven and Your Buns in the Bed." Regardless of the fact that people no longer agree with the actual sentiment in the words, the idea and satirical humor always ring out a tone of truth wrapped in swamp fog, with a less than subtle background surge of a large tidal wave. And although his music lacks the classic traits of a great composer, the melodies in his head are a symphony of amusement

and desire for “mo-better days.” He cracks-up even the staunchest politician, and often crosses lines between Democrats and Republicans. Kinky is the first guy I’ve ever met who can walk into any political arena and make friends on both sides of the fence.

“You’ve got your cats on one side and your dogs on the other; someone has to walk the fence and feed the animals.” Kinky is a card.

When I ask about how he got his nickname he denies that it has anything to do with his sexual prowess. “It’s about my hair; it’s kinky.”

It’s true, his hair does look like a dolled up black French poodle, only much longer.

He says he declined several nicknames including *Brillo Pad*. “Not because it has anything to do with cleaning pots and pans, but because it reminds folks of feminine hygiene.”

He has a crazy answer for everything.

While a record plays I mention to him that “I’ve been getting sexy phone calls from a listener every night since I came here to Koke.” I confide a little about my new job to Kinky regarding one particular call. Our conversation is absolutely off-mic. “I’ve never met her, but she says she’s nineteen years old, and has a job with the state. She always calls around three in the morning, and she’ll keep me on the line until I leave at six. What kind of girl has a state eight-to-five job and talks on the phone until six in the morning?”

“What kind of things do you talk about?” Kinky asks.

“Well, she’ll start off with a sultry, ‘Hi, this is Trisha, do you have your pants off yet?’” I laugh as I repeat the ongoing conversation.

Kinky raises his eyebrows and twirls his cigar.

“Then she’ll request one of your songs, she likes the Jewboys, and she’ll want to visit with me on the phone for hours. I thought you may know her. Does the name Trisha ring any bells?”

“Not in *Awtin* (Austin) ... I know a Trisha from *Youton* (Houston).” He listens for more information.

“I try to get rid of her by saying I have nine other phone lines to attend to, or that I have to go grab the weather report, but she just taunts me with things like, ‘Put me on hold, I’ll wait for *you*, baby,’ and ‘I don’t mind being tied-up and blind-folded ... I’ll be here waiting to hear your voice again.’ It’s weird ... I think she’s nutso. I’ve even left her on-hold for as much as an hour and when I come back to the line, she’s still right there saying something like, ‘I missed you, baby, but I’ve been warming-up for you.’”

“God, those girls make the world’s ears perk up, don’t they? You’ve got a real live-one there.” Kinky is all smiles. “I want to talk to her!”

“Our management made us quit playing your song *The Ballad of Charles Whitman*. They said it’s a little too edgy for some of the more sensitive people in Austin, especially since so many people died that day at the UT tower—Anyway, Trisha called last night and requested it. I told her that I couldn’t play it anymore, that ‘the satire is a little hard for some people to swallow.’”

She said, “I swallow it all ... Every drop.” And begged me to play it anyway.

“Oh yah! You gotta love my fans!” Kinky boasts.

“You sure you didn’t put her up to it?” *I’m certain it’s one of Kinky’s pranks.* “After all, she never seems to call when you’re here.”

“My taunted friend, I have much better things to do than pump your handle. I get plenty of airplay here, what’s one song to me?” Friedman grimaces his offense to the implication, but the glint in his eye doesn’t assure me of a sincere response. “Whitman needed a check-up from the neck up. I don’t take repercussion from his actions to be *in any way* personally detrimental to me.”

“Just checking ... Trisha insists that she knows you.” I pause to ID and introduce the next song, “KOKE-FM, Austin. It’s three-o-three in the morning. Kinky Friedman is a guest in the studio this morning; stand-by for more Jewboy mania from him—in the meantime, here’s Jerry Jeff Walker and Gary P Nunn’s ‘London Homesick Blues.’”

As soon as I close the mic, the ‘til now silent phones light up, all ten lines. People love to talk to Kinky. “KOKE-FM!” I answer. “Sure, Kinky is right here, I’ll ask him if he wants to visit.”

Kinky nods and I switch on the speaker phone.

“Dust-off your saddle bags and pop-a-top on a fresh longneck ... Tell the Kinkster what’s stickin’ in your craw, partner.” Kinky is always ready with a twist-of-phrase.

After only two or three callers, thirty minutes have already passed, and Kinky has not even said a single word on the air. It’s almost infuriating. When he’s not here, there are times I sit for hours without a single call; but when he’s in the studio the lines light up like we’re running a contest to give away a thousand bucks.

Switching lines, “Caller number four, your check is in the mail!” Kinky is on a roll, joking with them neighbors.

“Hey baby, I don’t need your money ... All I want is you.” The sexy voice on the phone is Trisha and I waive my arms in the air mouthing “It’s her!”

Kinky reaches over to mute the speaker phone, “She sounds gorgeous. I’ll bet she’s four hundred pounds and rolled in so much lard that she could fry whole chickens when she gets hot. Tell her that I had to go wash the toilet and put her on hold.”

“I don’t want to talk to her.” I back my chair away from the phone and throw-up my hands.

Unmuting, Kinky takes the call, “You got someone there with you, honey?”

“No baby, I’m all alone and in need of some of your kind of *Kinky* attention.”

“Well listen, sweetheart; I’m leaving here in about half an hour. Why don’t we meet somewhere and get those hot-pants of yours out on the town for a late night snack?” Kinky is getting *kinky stinky* and I roll my eyes. “Or I can just hand you over to your radio lover, Night Rider here.”

I shake my head “no” and throw-up my hands again. Since I’ve left The Nut, I’ve been using the air-name “Night Rider.”

“Oh, I’d much rather talk to you, my fine Kinky boy. Besides, I’m not wearing any pants. I’m not wearing anything, actually.” Trisha is unaware that she is on the speaker.

“Sure thing ... What part of town are you in, lover girl?” Kinky winks.

“Oh, I’m not very far from you at all. You’re on Lamar aren’t you?” Trisha doesn’t back down.

“I’m dyin’ to see you, what time do you want to meet? Four o’clock? How’s the Big Wheel in Oak Hill work for you, darlin’? They’re open all night!” Kinky tests her willingness to meet publically.

“Why go to all the trouble of driving down south? Why don’t you just come by here? I always say, ‘come when you can, cowboy!’” Apparently, Trisha is not planning to leave home.

“Oh, I’m scared of your neighbors; they may recognize my Cadillac. I don’t want you to become a gossip topic for people with nothing better to do. Being the Kinkster, I have a bad reputation to uphold, you know.” Kinky pauses for her response and holds up an index finger to say to me “*wait for it.*” He flicks his cigar into the ashtray.

“My neighbors can’t see through the trees and my driveway enters from the alley. Besides, why would I want to get dressed to see you? Come over here and I’ll make sure we both get something to eat. I’m already warming something up.” Trisha insists.

I have to snap-on the phone mute and bust out laughing with a snort.

“Ha, Ha, Haaaa!” Kinky is horse laughing right along with me. “Shhh...” He motions me to un-mute, “Let me give her one more go!”

“Kinky, you still there, hero?” Trisha’s voice is still lascivious, indecent.

“Tell you what, Trisha is it?”

“Yes.”

“Draw the drapes and unlock the back door. I’ll be over there in two

shakes. What's your address darlin'?"

"My drapes are always drawn and the lock don't work. I'm snuggled up in bed already wishing you were here with me." Trisha doesn't give her address immediately.

"O-kay?" Kinky again pauses to lift a finger. "Wait for it," he mouths.

Trisha asks, "Are you coming, honey?"

"Not yet! What's the address, dear?" Kinky is beginning to belly roll.

"Uh oh, someone is at the door ... I'll call you right back." Trisha disconnects the call.

"God, that was horrible to have to listen to." I can't contain myself and don't even try.

We both laugh hysterically.

"She's probably a head case. And I mean that in more ways than one." Kinky again cracks himself up.

"I kind of feel sorry for her. Maybe she's bedridden, or really ill." I'm as sympathetic as I can be while still snorting. Looking back I feel guilty that we could be perceived as cruel or mean, but the whole thing is just hilarious to me when it actually happens.

Kinky is rolling, too. "Oh she's ill; you can bet your back-pack, Jack! Man, I know at least a dozen guys who would sit right here for hours by the phone waiting for her to *call right back*. Hell, I miss her already. That's as much fun as I've ever had with my boots on."

It's time for another break so I hold up a finger to queue Kinky and open my mic. "KOKE-FM and Night Rider, here with the masterful wordsmith, Kinky Friedman." I point my finger to the Kinkster and switch-on his mic.

"Friends, I'm here on the phones with Night Rider. We enjoy talking about music, politics, and subjugation. Give us a call." Kinky makes a *cut* gesture across his throat.

"555-KOKE is the number, and this is Blaze Foley." I'm short with my intro to Foley's record because I'm still bursting to laugh inside.

“You’re a cruel bastard,” I exhaust.

“That’s why they love me.” Kinky tips his hat, crosses his leg, taps his cigar on his boot sole, and then points again to the flashing phones, “Give me another one.”

“I’m a newsman; we don’t get calls like that. All we get are complaints and problems. I had no idea what I’ve been missing.” Again I confide a little about myself, but see Kinky is not interested in anything more than the calls. Who can blame him ... it’s radically entertaining.

“Well, there’s little difference in the problems and complaints you hear at this level. You just can’t put some of these caller issues on the air.” Kinky is again quick with a sharp remark.

“Words of wisdom from a sick man!” I jest at first and then take the high road. “Without someone screening the callers and a six-second delay for the ability to bleep-out a lot of the words, none of these calls could ever go on-air.”

“We should make a show like that!” Kinky isn’t kidding. “We should pitch that to some sponsors—I know some big-money men who would pay to listen in on some of these weird-assed calls. I’ll bet you could even sell an album of phone sex tapes.”

“After tonight, I’ll be thinking about audiences very differently. It pays to know who you’re talking to. These folks at three in the morning are obviously not interested in hearing any news. I’m going to need to learn how to speak more in terms of double entendre than I have been. It’s a whole new genre.” As I say the words I get a glint from Kinky’s diamond pinky ring.

I can see Kinky shaking his head in agreement as he lifts his folded hands to cross his legs in the other direction. He seems to know exactly what I mean ... “I’m just trying to help you learn ‘your new genre.’” I can tell he’s being sincere. That’s a generous thing about him.

“New Genre?—I knew her, but I didn’t think she was *new* at anything.” I get a gut laugh reaction from my new mentor. I feel better now.

I do my half-hour slug, “KOKE-FM and Night Rider.” I cue Kinky.

“I’m the Kinkster!”

“At six this morning Dusty Dillon will be here with your favorite Progressive-Country-Rock hits. Join ‘Dusty-at-six’ after your own personal ‘dusty-six’ tonight.” I’m a little quirky as I try to develop a basic on-air persona.

Kinky winces at my miserable stab at subliminal humor and then smirks. “You’ll get the hang of it, weirdo.”

I think he’s tickled a little, though.

Clearly there are a lot of standards and double standards at work when Kinky is around. In my present position of being inexperienced on my new DJ job and learning some new ropes, I have a lot to garner, especially when it comes to understanding people. I’ll reserve what I’ve absorbed from my tenure at KOKE-FM for a later date—after I’ve had some time to process my thoughts. For now, my head is swirling.

JERRY JEFF GOT DRUNK



Even fifteen years into the twenty-first century, the iTunes Music Store will continue to pay homage to *Viva Terlingua* and Jerry Jeff Walker with glowing verbiage on their product marketing pages, in the “Editor Notes.” I’ll just try to paraphrase what they might say here, because their essay about the ‘70s is likely going to be extremely lengthy.

== *Future Prediction for 2012 JJW Album Promotional Material* ==

Viva Terlingua (Live)—Jerry Jeff Walker

Luckenbach was an abandoned Texas ghost town when eccentric rancher Hondo Crouch purchased it wholesale for three thousand dollars in 1970. His first order of business was to reopen the local dance hall, which soon became a hangout for Jerry Jeff Walker and his coterie of Austin musicians. The Luckenbach Dance hall was the site of Walker’s biggest artistic and commercial triumph, 1973’s *Viva Terlingua*, which was recorded there on August 18, 1973. Walker and his pals aimed to invest country with the wild abandon of rock ‘n’ roll, while also maintaining respect for excellence in song craft. “Gettin’ By,” “Get It Out,” and “Sangria Wine” belong equally to hippies, truckers, and cowboys. Despite his mischievous streak, Walker also sang moving versions of Guy Clark’s “Desperados Waiting for a Train” and Michael Martin Murphey’s “Backslider’s Wine.” The album’s signature anthem performance is “Up Against the Wall, Red Neck Mother,” a satire of hillbilly stereotypes embraced by both the cowboys and the

counterculture. Jerry Jeff was perhaps the only performer capable of simultaneously laughing at both without the other knowing.

Viva Terlingua is among the most legendary of "live" singer/songwriter albums ever released. It's the *Live at the Fillmore East* of redneck Texas folk-rock. Essentially, it's Jerry Jeff fronting the Lost Gonzo Band at the beginning of their long run together playing, living it up, having a ball, giving everybody the impress that life was a party, and to be sure, it was for a while. Given the loose, inspired performance on this set, Walker was every bit the equal of Willie, Waylon, and Billy Joe Shaver at the time. The material is terrific. Half of it is from Jerry Jeff's catalog and the rest can't possibly do better and includes Gary P. Nunn's "Austin City Limits" anthem, "London Homesick Blues." It doesn't sound anything like it was recorded in front of an audience, but it does sound live as hell. These folks were partyin' it up and layin' down the tracks in white heat. This record was made on a hot summer night and it feels like it was made in your living room. It's guaranteed to lift any dark mood within fifteen minutes. This record asks no questions and there are no hidden meanings in Walker's or anybody else's lyrics; it's all there for the taking. And that's what makes it the enduring classic it is.

===== *End Future Prediction* =====

See what I mean? In the future, critics won't be able to bellow enough about Jerry Jeff; not that that's a bad thing. Jerry does get more commercial recognition than a lot of the other Austin musicians, except for maybe Willie, and perhaps Michael Martin Murphey. It's because Jerry markets a more commercial song to a broader audience than most locals ... His albums are painstakingly produced-up. He doesn't just put a set of drums in the garage and gather around to record "raw talent" all in one-take. Don't get me wrong, there is a lot to be said for raw talent, but there is also a lot to be said for production and marketing value. Walker is learning how sales works. He has a new song that crosses genres and within a few weeks will be topping the charts to become more popular than all the other current local singles put together. "Jaded Lover" on the *Ridin' High* album is destined to kick ass and take names in Billboard—in

both Pop and Country, although admittedly higher on the Country-100 side.

It seems to me that the important take away from Walker's striking development over others is that there is no longer a term, "Western" or "Country/Western." Country stands alone and Country seems to be changing more than Rock around the world. Pop/Rock is perhaps becoming more of a Dance/Disco style, but Country is ... Well maybe, I'm wrong now! Country isn't changing much at all outside of Austin; Rock is going nuts with lots of funk and junk. Country music is still twangy and full of banjo and steel guitar, except in Austin where it's more like folk music.

In 1975, Jerry Jeff Walker is one of the Austin community's biggest music ideal inventors and he is well-regarded as a great *Country* leader. Another thing that may be important to remember here is that "Great leaders do not create followers; Great leaders create more leaders." I don't remember who said that quote from some time in the future (maybe Marsha Wright—perhaps J. Sakiya Sandifer), but I wish I had said it at any point, here today.

As it just so happens, I am lustfully in the right place at the right time for Jerry to invite me to his house to hear the final mix for his new album, before it's pressed to release. Dusty, the KOKE-FM PD is on vacation and the Music Director will be on the air at the time, so neither can attend; but in lieu of their preferred presence, I just happen to be available. Like Kinky Freidman, Jerry drops-by the station at night sometimes, too.

"What are you boys doing?"

"Ain't no boys here! Who wants to know?" I look up from my logs to see Jerry entering the studios accompanied by a tall, slender, distinguished looking woman. I've never met Jerry's better half and so I look right past him ... she's a beauty. "Hello ma'am, I'm Night Rider." I extend my hand. "Can I get you a coffee or Coke or something?"

"We hear that you're the new late night wrangler in town. Keep away from my wife, Herman." As always, Jerry is crudely suave. "Have you

met Sue?”

“It’s very nice to meet you, ma’am.” Then to Jerry, “Sorry bastard, I’m trying to pay some bills here.” I basically cry for pity from a trusted friend. “Are you okay, how’s the album coming? Got nerves yet?”

“Got no news about it ... I’m trying to get some attention ... Got headlines?” Jerry knows me from the news department at KNUT.

“I’ve got denial disease ... Help *me*.” I give him the short sob story. “Sorry, I’m so on edge here. My life is crushed to a cinder; I don’t even have a trade-out deal for dinner anymore. Tell me some good news. What’s the word, bird?”

“We’re looking to do some promotion. Give me some tips on how to make the news without shooting my own foot off. I need as much free advertising as I can get. You’ve got a leg-up on that stuff.” Walker is quite candid.

“Well you know we’ll do all we can here on Koke, especially me being here all night. I’ll push the crap out of it.”

“So, you think it’s going to be full of crap?” Jerry is amused.

“*No!* You know, I don’t mean it like that. Have you talked to Melamie Masters?”

Jerry looks at his wife and she shakes her head. “We don’t know her, I guess? Who is she?”

“She’s the new morning news anchor on KLBJ. She used to be my intern at The Nut.”

“Oh, that makes sense; we’re never awake enough to hear the radio in the morning.” Sue remarks.

“Mel loves music and she’s sharp as a tack. She has a whole ‘nuther’ set of listeners over there.” I comment.

“Cool—so you gonna make the listening party this week?” Jerry is unable to hide his excitement and obvious pride.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Have you got a preview that I can play on the air tonight?” I throw a thumbs-up.

“Ha, ha, you’re a funny man. We won’t be ready for prime time for another week or two. Of course, you could play *Desperados* or something else—I’m just sayin’.” Jerry is always straight to the point.

I go through the mechanics of playing a short pre-recorded promo and spin the next record without saying anything on air. “Prime time—*that’s funny!*”

Jerry picks-up where he left off. “Sorry to hear about what happened to you and The Nut. Good to see you’re back on your own two feet, buddy. You like it here?”

“Yah, I’m beginning to. It’s a learning curve—I’m still on the delta.” I circle my ear with my finger and cross my eyes, indicating that it’s making me crazy.

Walker chuckles, “You’re doing fine big boy. I heard some of Kinky’s BS on the air the other night. You’re gettin’ it goin’ on.”

“He’s nuts, right?” I grin.

“There will never be another Kinky, my man.” Walker sticks his tongue out to the side and looks up through the tops of his eyes. “Crazy Kinkster! Bitches gotta’ luv him, man.”

“We’re having brownies and beer at the party. You have to come. I have the best brownie recipe.” Susan Streit (Sue) has been Jerry’s wife for a while.

Although we haven’t met before now, Sue’s reputation precedes her. I’m told that behind the scenes, she runs the show around the fashionable Walker five-acre ranch outside of town.

“You know Jerry can’t smoke pot. He gets all choked-up, so we make brownies. They’re the best aren’t they, honey?” Sue smooches Jerry on the lips. “Don’t eat more than one or two; they’ll make you see God.”

Jerry laughs, “We can’t stay; we’ve got a lot of getting ready to do. I have to preheat the oven, if you know what I mean.”

“We just wanted to stop by to say hi. Friday at three, right? Be there or be square!” Jerry is already moving to the door.

Although she's in her early thirties, Sue waves a little like a young sorority girl. "See ya, 'Night Rider.' I'm a fan; more than you know! I'll explain why on Friday; it's a cool coincidence. Dedicate 'Bojangles' to me, honey. I'll make sure you get one of the *big* brownies at the pre-drop party."

"Melanie?" Walker asks.

"*Melamie*, with an 'm' in the middle. *Melamie Masters*. She's a sweetie pie." I wave back.

"Thanks, my man. I owe you one." Jerry exits with Sue draped over his shoulders.

Lucky guy, I think. Sue puts on quite a show herself.

By the time they get to their car in the building basement and pull out onto Lamar Boulevard, I've got the record queued and standing-by.

When I see their headlights hit the pavement through the front window, I roll the intro saying, "Jerry Jeff Walker is releasing a new album soon. We're excited about it here at KOKE-FM. By all accounts it promises to be some of his best work yet. Keep listening for details about where and when you'll be able to buy *Ridin' High* in the coming days—In the meantime, here's one of Jerry Jeff's all-time favorites, 'Mr. Bojangles.' This one's for the satiable Miss Sue! 555-KOKE, this is Night Rider, Austin's naked cowboy."

I'm still unsophisticated, callow in my new gig—misperceived, and desperate to find a niche market outlet for my burgeoning new persona as a DJ. The name *Naked Cowboy* gets a lot of attention, but still doesn't feel exactly right. Actually, *Night Rider* feels a little pretentious, too, even though the television series "Knight Rider" about a talking 1982 Pontiac Trans Am named KITT is still a few years off, in a far faster-paced future. In the mid '70s, I'm still muddling for a proper handle. My old moniker, "off to the races" seems to be a thing of the much slower, distant past.

I like the people I'm meeting, and I seem to carry the conversations and sense the innuendo well, but my instinct tells me that I'm terribly out of my element. People still seem to think of me as a news reporter and not so

much an entertainer. I suppose that *if discomfort were a popular shtick, I would be a huge hit as a jock*—but it's not. "... *new late night wrangler in town?*" *Ha!* I'm amused, but I know it's not even close to true. I'm very lucky to be invited to Jerry's record review party.

By the time Dusty Dillon arrives on this pleasantly cool morning to take his six o'clock board shift, the street lights outside the window over Lamar are still buzzing with moths and bugs swarming around their soft blue mercury vapor glow. The sun is not yet above the horizon. Although the sky is showing signs of coming out of slumber, traffic on the road consists of only a handful of vehicles, mostly delivery trucks with milk and bread for the masses that will get out and hit the pavements by seven.

Dillon and I exchange the usual, obligatory greetings and passing of the radio baton; and I head for my '62, two door, hardtop sport coupe, Chevy Impala in the basement parking garage. Since it's nice out, I reach past the massive steering wheel to roll-down the passenger window for the ride home. I love *my new* old girl and have been keeping her cherry, despite my recent shortage of income and time off from work.

Even though she's a gas hog and handles like a boat; she's got one of the best sound systems on wheels and has a classic style that the ladies just can't resist. If she were a convertible she'd get more looks, but she can absolutely hold her own—all dressed up in her new light-cream paint job and burnt-orange stripe down the center of her chrome side moldings. I got lucky. I got a great trade-in deal for her at Capitol City Chevrolet and I also got a sweet *trade-out* for "the works" at Andersen Paint and Body just a month before I lost my gig at KNUT. APB not only striped her up with the "Longhorn Orange" molding, but they also completely refurbished the interior, implanted the quad sound, and rebuilt the big honkin' 327-V8 engine. She's a sweet glide of a ride.

While I'm only a few brief weeks into my new job at Koke, I'm beginning to feel comfortable with these morning rides. Working nights is new to me, but I'm beginning to like it, and as I pull out to make a right turn onto Lamar I breathe in the fresh air, run my fingers through my hair, and turn-up the volume on Dusty's Morning Show.

As I head south toward my apartment in the west university district I'm curious to catch in my rear view mirror a black Cougar exiting the parking lot next to the radio station. I know it's a '67 Cougar because, after entering onto Lamar behind me with no lights at all, the headlights finally flick on; and then a second later the headlight covers flip open. It's a classic Cougar characteristic and it catches my attention. Momentarily, the anomaly of no other traffic on the road gives me a tense grip on the wheel. But then I pull up in the center lane to the first red traffic light on my route and relax into the music on the quadrophonic speaker system.

Just as I come to a lazy, slow halt, the Cougar screeches up beside me on the right. Four teen-agers are jeering at me from inside and the driver revs his engine. I think they must want to race or something. "Howdy boys, nice car." I lower my radio volume.

"Trisha says you got her pregnant, *Low Rider!*" The driver is not smiling when he speaks.

"Trisha? Who's Trisha?" I ask in bewilderment. My mind races like the Cougar's motor. *Could he be talking about sexy Trisha from the telephone?*

"She says you've been putting the moves on her and that you knocked her up, bitch—She's my girlfriend. You know she's only fifteen years old don't you?" The driver pumps the gas again and then the guy in the seat behind him slides the barrel of a sawed-off shotgun from the small triangular rear window and points it directly at my head.

"Shit!" I duck and bust the light with a quick left turn onto 29th Street, squealing tires like Mario Andretti and spewing road grime all over the Cougar, which immediately screams to life and jumps in behind me. Two flames of light and smoke flash in my rear-view mirror along with the bouncing headlights when the shotgun reports begin. The shockwaves ricochet rapidly between the small houses on the usually quiet street amid an abrupt, rude awakening to startling anarchy. It sounds like a machine gun in a canyon. That's gotta make your ears ring inside that small back seat. I haul ass, and by the time we get to Guadalupe, we're running over

sixty miles per hour and bottoming out with sparks at every dip in the road.

I don't think I've ever been that scared. I make the corner onto the Drag in split-seconds, nearly on two wheels, and gas on it like there's no tomorrow—begging for a cop to see me. The Cougar behind me barely makes the corner and hits the right front rim on the curb, swerving to regain control and squealing tires like a pissed-off chimp on psilocybin mushrooms. I blow every traffic light on Guadalupe down to 19th Street in nothing flat, and then double back by making a right and then another right on Nueces.

My adrenaline is pumping buckets, and my heart is pounding out all four barrels from an entirely new location; an engorged, pulsing lump in the middle of my throat.

Even though I have the “Powerglide” automatic transmission, and the Cougar is a stick, the much lighter sport car with its smaller 307, or maybe the younger, inexperienced driver, and full car load just can't quite keep up with me. I'm driving like a madman, manually downshifting at corners, like I have a *three-on-the-tree* for quicker gear change response and to make much higher-powered turns. I'm jacking that tree, double pedaling both the brake and the gas in perfect sync, *Indy car magician* style. My timing couldn't be better.

Thank God I bought the three hundred big block horses under my hood and not one of the more economical six-cylinder engines. Two quick lefts and before the Cougar can round the corner behind me at 24th, I douse my lights and drop into the alley between Nueces and Rio Grande. I take care not to tap on my brake lights by using only my emergency brake pedal. My rear wheels lock when I stab the pedal with my left leg and simultaneously let off the gas with my right foot. I jerk my giant ship's-wheel slightly to the right with my left hand at the top of the steering column, and then spin it hard to the left, all the way around. My car jumps like a rabbit, pivots on a pea, makes a perfect one-hundred-eighty degree *J-turn* in the loose gravel of the still dimly lit backstreet, and then drifts to the passenger side. “Yah, girl!” I shout out loud and slap the dash. I'm

pumped.

I figure that if they follow me into the alley, I'll just run straight at them.

As my Impala finally rocks to a full stop between two dumpsters, the Cougar smokes past the alley and breezes west on 24th, and out of sight and sound. I'm panting. Dumbfounded, I pause to catch my breath and reach out to kill the radio. "Oh my God! Where in the hell are the cops when you need one?"

I'm left gasping in the alley for several long moments in time. I'm sure that the entire world can hear my heartbeat and afraid to slip back out onto the otherwise quiet streets. A siren belches out a squelch a few blocks to the north and I imagine *someone must have just reported the gun fire. Too bad they're a few short minutes too late to have saved my life.*

I'm a little afraid to go straight home so I zig-zag the backstreets to make it to the 24-hour Jack-In-The-Box drive-thru on the Drag; both for a more publicly visible location and also for a wet, cold coke to help quench my quick-dried mouth and lumpy throat. *All I've had since midnight was some coffee at the station. I don't think I can eat now, though. Just the coke will have to do. I'll eat leftovers if I want something when I get home. Oh yah, I was going home.* To say the least, I'm a little in shock and mentally numbed.

I don't like asking for help, but I do ask the guy at the drive-thru window if he saw "that *gangster-style* car chase down the Drag just a few minutes ago."

He laughs and says, "It was probably just a couple of drunken frat boys on a bet—in a couple of cars their rich daddies bought for them. Probably some of the same guys who drove through our drive-thru window in reverse about an hour ago. They were loaded up on stilts ... Backed right through the lane without hitting a single pole, though."

I don't bother trying to explain, but I do ponder the thought that those weren't frat boys. Those were kids. They couldn't have been more than sophomores in high school. That car was likely not something their daddy

bought for them, but rather, daddy's actual car.

I calm myself with the coke, and keenly wide-eyed aware of every vehicle in the day-to-day traffic emerging for the morning commute around me, make my way home. *No more Cougar in the mirror!* Just to be sure I'm not being followed I park my car two apartments up the driveway from mine. *I've always liked those cars. I don't know any kids who could afford one.*

It's too bad I'm not still in the news business; otherwise I could ask one of my cop-shop friends to run a check on any black Cougars in town. Everything happened so fast that I had no chance to see a license plate number. How many of those cars do you think could be rolling around the city at six in the morning, though?

Rejecting the idea of any unwanted media attention, I decide not to report the incident to the police. I hope that won't prove to be a mistake. I think my newly-acquired liking for early morning drives with the windows down on the sleepy streets of Austin will be taken with a lot more apprehension from this day forward. This morning's ride has made a big and uncomfortable impression on me.

The first thing Kinky asks when I tell him the story privately at Jerry Jeff's party is, "Do you really think that girl is only fifteen?"

"Hell, I don't know. She might not even be the same Trisha. I get twenty or thirty lonely girls calling me every night. I try not to get too personal with any of them. I certainly haven't met any of them." I tell him everything, hoping The Kinkster might have some sensible advice for me.

"You sure you didn't meet her somewhere on the street and play a little poker with her? Maybe you're the delusional one," Kinky jokingly pokes at my ribs.

"Hell no! You're the mental case, cracker." I give him tit for tat. "You think I should report it?"

"Got a gun? I carry a forty-five six-banger with me, everywhere. I'm packin' now." Kinky gives me the stink eye.

"I've got a thirty-eight, but it doesn't do me a lot of good flopping

around in the glove-box when I'm white-knuckling the wheel, bouncing around town like a mouse sucked into a twister with nine hungry rat snakes." My eyes must still show my edgy concern.

Kinky pauses to check me up and down and says, "Well, hell, you ain't dead yet. That's something, ain't it? If you call the cops, it might just piss off whoever was driving that Cougar more, and things could get worse. Besides, the cops are never going to be there at the time you really need them—I'd be sure not to have any time for anyone named Trisha when the phones ring, though."

"You got that right, but I haven't heard from her since that night last week. She's quit calling since you talked to her."

"I've been accused of that before!" He laughs. "Tell your PD, Dusty. He may have some different advice than me." Kinky finally takes my distress seriously. "I would imagine that if, like you say, these are kids in daddy's car; the worst of it is likely already over and done. They probably just wanted to scare you."

"That makes sense to me. I'll see Dillon again Monday ... I'll think about telling him, although I don't think he gives a rat's ass about anything other than his own ego."

"Any holes in your car?" Kinky asks, grinning.

"Not yet, but my muffler is loose."

"I've got a friend who had an old Dodge truck with two slug holes in the metal dash on either side of the radio. He put it up for sale with an ad that said, '*Only Shot Twice.*' He says the guy who bought it paid the asking price in cash, and made up his own story about the bullet holes to tell his friends. Go figure." Kinky is *so* reassuring for me.

Being discreet we drop the topic for the time being as Jerry and Sue start gathering people into their game room around an old school, fifteen IPS, reel-to-reel Ampex tape recorder and a concert-sized stack of speakers. "They're getting ready to play the new master. Let's get in there for a good listen." Kinky leads the way into the assembly of (surprisingly, just a few) friends.

About thirty people or so have shown-up at the Walker ranch for the pre-showing of Jerry Jeff's new album. Willie Nelson and drummer Paul English are already seated, front and center in comfy sofa chairs with matching soft crushed leather, natural cowhide ottomans, placed strategically between the speaker columns.

The home is likely four thousand square feet of plush Texas rustic décor and modern amenities perched atop a peak that is overlooking a vast canyon through the expansive hill country toward the southeast. Ten-foot-tall raw cedar-framed windows make up the wall between the great room and the back deck where an infinity edge swimming pool appears to hang precariously out over the bluff. The pool seems to be pouring its black pond of water out into the sky and demarking the center of a fifteen-mile-long view of the valley where it bends to the south. The unmatched panoramic vistas from the ranch are simply tremendous.

Jerry takes Sue's hand and holding a long-neck above his head begins his welcome for the small audience. "Hey, everybody! Come on in! God love ya for coming out!"

As the group tightens in on the hosts, Jerry lowers his voice and looks around the gathering. "You may think there aren't many people here for a national album debut, but we wanted to keep this small and just for close confidants ..." Jerry looks at Sue, "I think everyone we've invited is here, am I right?"

Sue smiles and nods graciously at their guests, "Two folks will be arriving late, but yes, everyone is here, and we're very happy to see all of you."

"All the band members are here, and a few industry notables from around town that we admire, respect, and look to for advice. We wanted to get your opinion about this ... before we release it to the world to pick apart." Jerry gets a laugh from the group and then continues,

"We will be going into the studio for a final mix in three days, and we wanted to hear from you guys before we press something into stone and make some permanent, dumbass mistake." Walker is a pro at commanding

the spotlight. “So—we’re going to play our most recent final mix here today, and when we’re all done, Sue and I want all of your comments, critiques, bashes, dashes, hyperboles, yanks, and cranks, okay?”

The room applauds, “We love you, Jerry!” Several voices can be heard above the group.

“Hit ‘em between the eyes, buffalo herder,” someone shouts.

“Welcome all. Thank you for being here. On behalf of the boys in the band, Sue and I give you, *Ridin’ High!*”

When the tape rolls, you may think there are movies, videos, pictures, flashing lights, a group of dancing girls, or some other dramatic exhibitions, but there aren’t.

Susan steps forward, “Everybody, please, play pool, shoot craps, eat the munchies; we’re just going to play the tape and you can listen to it in your own way while you visit and play. Think of it as a mid-day night out!” Sue is an excellent promoter.

“Eat! There’s plenty of barbecue! —We even have clam chowder for our Yankee buddy, Mike Blunt from Billboard Magazine in New York ... it has a Texas Cajun twist, we’ve put some crawdads in it! Jockey yourselves to meet Mike, he’s a greenhorn!” She smiles at Blunt to let him know that she’s joking. “There is plenty of Lone Star—we also have Crown Whiskey—and I made brownies for dessert. By the way, the brownies on the left are neutral. Everyone eat, visit, and enjoy! Welcome to the ranch, y’all!”

“Woo-hoo!” The party is fully engaged.

Jerry and Sue step away from the center of the room and, as Sue brushes past me she says, “This song is called ‘Public Domain’; but be sure to listen to track five, Mr. Night Rider, it’s my favorite.”

I’m impressed—not because Sue remembers my cheesy air name, but because she associates me with the new song, “Night Rider’s Lament,” which is, for me, one of the finest tracks on the album.

“Bryant L Herman, what are you doing here, son?” Wes Landers

pushes past several guests to extend his generous handshake in my direction.

“Hey, I’m not *just* a newsman ... I listen to music! I have taste!” I smile. “How’s life at the *Statesman* these days, pal? What’s news?”

“Just this; this is fun, huh? Sure beats the average daily news beat on the street, don’t it?” Landers catches himself and backtracks. “No offense, I heard you have a new DJ gig.”

“No offense taken, I’m still looking for the right thing for me, but I’m surviving the onslaught.” I know Landers means no ill intent with his snappy small talk. “Good to see you, Wes, you good?”

“Great ... all’s well. Hey, don’t feel bad about the death of KNUT. It certainly has nothing to do with you. AM radio as a whole is dead. KNUT held out longer than most. You’re a good newsman; if that’s what you want to stay with, just hang in there. You’ll get a damned good offer I’m sure, something you’ll really enjoy.” Landers is sincere with his gesture on behalf of my welfare.

“Thanks, man. That means a lot coming from you. You’ve seen it all over the years.” I reflect, “In the short term, I’m enjoying being a DJ, actually more than I expected to. It’s an interesting change of pace; but you’re right, I am a news guy, and I plan to stay in my lane. I’ve been swapping calls with Dallas and Houston, but so far they haven’t opened any wallets yet. Right now, the Austin market is saturated; as a matter of fact, stations are reducing their news staff footprint. FM stations are not selling as much news as they are music and quadrophonic sound systems.”

“It’s a sign of the times, my friend. Hang tough. No need to let any of it get you down. Hey, have you talked with that Billboard guy yet?” Landers is clearly working a story.

“Blunt? No, never heard of him before today. What’s his shtick?” I show mild interest.

“I think he’s some kind of specialized editor—I think his arena is crossover music.” Landers is not withholding. “I don’t really think you can call Jerry Jeff a crossover artist anywhere other than in Austin, but

maybe this new album is going to be ‘less cowboy and more hippified,’ so to speak. With KLBJ, KOKE, UT’s KUT, and KRMH all playing his songs, he has certainly crossed over here in town, but that’s not reflected so equally in the national charts.”

“You plan to bend Blunt’s ear?” I change the swing of the conversation because speaking candidly about Jerry Jeff’s music behind his back, in his own living room feels a little disrespectful to me.

“I do. I want to know what he’s expecting to see and hear out here in Texas that he can’t find in New York or Los Angeles.” Landers takes redirection well and begins to comment on the food. “Check out that venison German sausage from La Grange. Man alive, that stuffs good ... lean and mean! Catch you later.” Landers steps away.

As the tape begins to play the third album track, the doorbell can be vaguely heard under the music. Sue moves to greet the late-arriving guest at the front door, which is on the sunny side of the house. When she opens the door the sun is perfectly positioned so that the individual in the doorway is silhouetted by a stream of color and light under the eave of the wrap-around front porch tin roof.

At first I nearly expect to see a saint or some other heavenly entity enter the foyer. I can tell the lone visitor is a slender female, with long billowing hair, and short full skirt whipping in the afternoon breeze. *Alright!* It’s Melamie. I hate to abuse the overly-used cliché “angelic,” but you already know how Miss Mel can stop a truck on a dime with her looks. Seriously, every eye in the room focuses through the streams of light to observe Mel’s almost theatrical arrival. Her timing and poise are impeccable for grabbing attention. *Oh man, I miss seeing that every morning.* As she stretches her legs to step down the four stairs from the entryway, Melamie’s high heels click on the terrazzo tiles in perfect tempo with the song, “Like a Coat from the Cold.”

She’s a vision to me, but clearly I’m not the only one enamored or enchanted. The guy from New York can’t take his eyes off of Mel as Sue leads her newfound friend into the event and expansive “open

architecture” kitchen. “Everybody, this is the new morning news anchor for KLBJ, Melamie Masters. Welcome her into the family. Mel, come on in; help yourself to something to drink; grab a plate and chow down; make yourself at home, girl. Welcome ... Introduce yourself around.”

Heads slowly retrain and the focus of the room gradually returns to the music as Melamie places her tape recorder on a sidebar alongside several others that have been intentionally discarded for the time being. She is graceful and fluid as she removes a Lone Star longneck from the ice-packed washtub at the oval center-island countertop. Standing alone under the island’s ambient incandescent lighting and heavy-beam vaulted ceiling, Mel pauses to glance around to capture the faces in the room. The lights make her piercing green eyes sparkle. Then she locks in, and she waves across the spans to me.

“Bryant! Hey buddy!” Still half the room is watching her from their peripheral vision, and her gesture makes folks turn to look in my direction with a bit of noticeable disbelief—like, “Who’s that bum?”

I can’t help it. I grin from ear to ear and flag Mel over to where I’m standing.

As she and I exchange common pleasantries, Kinky Friedman makes a bee-line toward us, and saying, “Mel-a-ME!” Swaggering, “Who have we here, Night Rider Boudreaux, my buddy-ole-pal?” He extends his hat and bows at Mel’s breasts. If you haven’t already guessed, Kinky is renowned as a flagrant ladies’ man.

“I’ve missed you, Mel.” I pry my gaze from Mel to say, “... and, Kinky, this beauty was an intern for a while, for Pecan and me at KNUT. She’s bigger than both of us now. Melamie Masters meet the world infamous, Kinky Friedman.”

She greets him respectfully, “It’s my pleasure, sir—I love your song, ‘Biscuits in the Oven.’”

“Stick with me, girl, and I’ll introduce you to the biggest thing in the house.” He laughs, “Have you met Jerry and Willie yet?” Kinky nudges her to move away for some introductions, but she doesn’t immediately

budge.

She looks back to me, “I’ve missed you, too, Bryant. I’m using ‘*rubber baby buggy bumpers*’ and ‘*she sells seashells*’ in my morning warmup ritual now. ‘*Toy boat*’ was hard for me to get right away.” To Kinky who continues tugging her elbow, “Hey, hold on a second, hard hat.” She gently smiles to the Kinkster and then back to me saying, “I was wondering if you would do me a favor and be my plus one escort for the mayor’s Christmas party? I just got my invitation. It’s so cool ... but I’d like to go with someone who knows the ropes a little.” Melamie momentarily ignores Kinky and continues her attempt to complete our short-lived conversation.

“Are you joking? You’re kidding me, right?” I believe Mel is just being gracious and kind.

Still refusing Kinky’s leadings to introduce her to the guests of honor, Melamie remains focused on my look of adolescent astonishment, “No, I can’t think of anyone else that I’d like to go with more.” She flashes me an honest smile.

“Are you serious? Hell yah. I’m there! I’ll rent a tuxedo and wash my feet and hair for that!” I smile back at her like a blushing schoolboy who’s just been invited to the eighth grade teen dance.

“Cool, I’ll call you.” With Kinky still gently tugging on her arm Mel swishes away, “Catch you in a little while.” Kinky takes her straight to where Willie, Paul, and Jerry Jeff are pow-wowed near the recording equipment; but her smell lingers with me long enough to leave me wanting more. If it were available at the bar, I’d drink nothing but whatever her perfume is.

“Damn, Kinky, keep your doggies in the corral and out of the garden, will ya?” I know Mel’s out of my league, but that won’t keep me from anything genuinely human. I try not to show my displeasure with losing her attention to the Kinkster. “Don’t hurt her, madman. She’s a delicate flower!” *Man, I like her—even walking away! LOOK at that!*

Sue interrupts my stupification and approaches to gently lift my

lowered jaw back into place. “You didn’t tell me she was so awesome. Keep her away from my Jerry. He’s *my* man!”

“Mel is definitely a class act,” I say to Sue.

“Hey, this next song is the one I wanted you to hear.” Sue has an agenda. “You’ll quickly find out that most of the folks here are going to say that the big single off this album will be ‘Jaded Lover,’ but I think this next one is perfect for your late night show. It’s called ‘Night Rider’s Lament.’ It’s perfect for you and your show! What about that title? What a *co-inky-dink*, don’t you think! Listen, here it is.”

It’s the first time I hear the song, but I’m immediately impressed with its mood and attitude. It seems to echo some of the things I’ve recently been feeling about myself. It’s a somber, smooth, perfect slow waltz tempo with a solemn, reverent lyric, and the sadly distressed tone of a slide on the pedal steel guitar. It’s not *crossover* at all to my ear. It’s just plain good music to me; an honest cowboy, Texas-folklore sound. Within the first few bars I can tell, “Hell ya, I’ll play that. When can I start?”

Sue applauds quietly like a cheerleader in a library, not wishing to gather attention. “I’m not pointing out that one to anyone else. It’s just for you and KOKE-FM. It’s your song—Michael Burton wrote that one after hearing about Major Pecan and you leaving your old home on the AM. We were sorry to hear about Mac; and you, well you just got done damn wrong.”

“Wow.” I don’t know what to say. I’m not sure if Sue is just blowing smoke at me with that disclaimer of hers or not, but I’ll take it. “I love it. Thanks. And thank you for saying that, Sue. I see why everyone says Jerry got a good one when he snagged your attention.”

“Aww, you’re just saying that. I’ll see you before you go?” Sue turns to resume brushing shoulders with the rest of her guests and shifts her attention toward the game room.

“Thanks, Sue. You’re too kind.”

“Don’t let me stop you from having fun here, carry on, young man.” Finally walking away, Sue gestures in the general direction of Melamie,

who is now surrounded by six or seven more guys, in addition to Kinky, Willie, and Jerry. “Go for it! You can do it!”

I’m no longer sure if Sue is talking about my new job as a DJ or Melamie as a potential date, but as I glide-waltz from where I’ve been standing toward the beer barrel, I’m floating; feeling like I’m on top of the world today—*Must be the brownie kicking in!*

I imagine myself years in the future saying, “...and so, kids, that’s how Jerry Jeff’s wife helped give me the courage to go on a first date with your mom.” Hey, a man can daydream, can’t he!

By the time the tracks have all been played and the frenzy of questions and comments have all been addressed, Jerry is getting a little stoned. He’s been steadily nursing a tall glass of Crown along with a Lone Star most of the afternoon. Dare I mention, that by now, the brownie pan is completely empty, crumb-less.

I contemplate leaving and move out onto the covered patio to watch the sunset shimmer over the pool and to enjoy the spectacle of the royal plum and lavender hills highlighted with a pink-orange horizon. Fall in Texas is the best time of year here. It’s magical.

I finish my beer and, as I light my last cigarette, Melamie exits the great room and joins me out on the deck. “Just beautiful!”

“Got that right ... I can see myself living in a place like this.” I don’t make eye contact, afraid I’ll look immature.

“I was hoping to interview Jerry, but I think he’s too far gone. I’d be editing all night.” Mel removes all tension with her calm, candid remark about the main man of the evening.

“You know, if I were still on the beat, I’d talk to Paul English, or Willie, or even that Yankee guy from Billboard. You have a good sense of news; use your charm to get some insider comments.” I encourage her.

“That’s a good idea. Thanks.” Melamie waits for me to refresh the conversation, but I’ve got nothing.

“I wanted to talk with you.” She brushes her shiny, wavy brown hair

from her face in the rising steam of the warm evening air. “Do you remember Debra Wright?”

“Yah, I do, she started the same day you did, but never came back. I’ve always wondered what happened to her.”

“She called me a few days ago. She said she had tried getting in touch with you, but after you weren’t at KNUT any more, she asked for me, and they told her I was across town. She claims she has a ‘bigtime, corruption-busting’ investigation story ‘about the sheriff and his henchmen.’ She told me that she never showed up for work again because she got an offer from a station in Atlanta and decided to take a couple of weeks off before going back down there. But—in her time off she got nose-y and learned some things about a body you two ran up on out in the county. Any of that sound familiar?” Mel looks me in the eye.

“Not her reason for leaving, but the body thing, yah, that happened. I thought she left because she couldn’t stomach the crazy-crass, glaring reality of *politics, horny-tips, contradicts, and censorships*.” I chuckle.

“Well, I wanted to catch you about it. I’m getting ready to leave, I think I’ll make my *final comments* round with my tape recorder and go get ready for tomorrow’s early morning show. I still have to work Saturdays. By the way, how do I get one of those cushy five-day-a-week *good gigs* like you had?”

“Oh yah, I’ve lived the good life!” I’m sarcastic. “Are you drunk? Are you good to drive home?”

“Absolutely, I don’t really drink much.” She holds up her first beer which is almost full, “I carry a bottle or cup around so people don’t constantly offer me booze, but I really don’t like the taste—Can we have coffee sometime next week? I want your advice on this sheriff thing. I’m out of school now ... I graduated, and I get off at two.” Mel is sincere. “I know you work nights, but maybe we can sync-up for an hour or so?”

“Sure, I’ll call you Monday. Congratulations on graduation!”

“Great.” She steps forward and takes my hand, kissing me on the cheek. “Thanks, don’t forget.” Before she re-enters the ranch house, Mel

pauses at the open door to gaze out over the landscape. “You, and me, too ... I could absolutely live here! Got millions?” She waves goodnight and fades into the crowded living room.

“No, but I’d gladly give it if I did!” Under my breath my voice trails after her as I think to myself, my problem is that paradise is like a pair of dice. At the craps table of life, I always seem to come out with snake eyes.

Years after the debut of *Ridin’ High*, Jerry Jeff and Sue, along with their grown kids, move to Belize to retire and retreat from so much public scrutiny. Jerry never does have another album that’s as strong as *Viva Terlingua* was, but Sue continues to promote and support him well into the “2Ks” after becoming his full-time manager in the ‘80s when the Gonzo Band dissolves.

People say Jerry gets too high. People say Sue cusses a lot for a woman. Who am I to say? They seem happy to me, and I would swear continuously, too, if I had to live with Jerry Jeff Walker. He’s a callous cowboy cuss himself, a sailor on a horse, but absolutely a one-of-a-kind.

In the metaphysical *Radio Bible of Life*, Jerry Jeff is an entire book of prophecy. In the school of standards and double standards, Jerry Jeff and Sue are simply alumni photos on the walls in the halls.

TEXAS JUSTICE AND WHAT'S IN YOUR POCKET



After a weekend in giddy anticipation of seeing Mel again on Monday and curiosity over what Debra Wright might have up her sleeve, I get an ominous call at noon from PD Dusty.

“Can you come into the office at two this afternoon for a quick meeting?” Dusty is short with his greeting and conversation.

“Sure, what’s up?” I ask.

“Just need a quick sit down here. See you at two. Be on time.”

“No problem, I wanted to visit with you anyway.” I answer.

“See you then.” Dusty hooks the call.

That doesn’t sound good, I think. *Wonder what that’s about—damn, I need to call Mel at two!*

Getting up at noon for me is like being awakened with a call at three in the morning for most folks. I’ll have to grab a long power nap somewhere between five and ten this evening to get to my gig at midnight with any sense of presence at all. Oh, the life of an all-nighter. It’s been a mental and physical adjustment for me to switch from being an early morning man. There are advantages to not having a lot of people around while I’m working, but the downside is that the rest of the entire thriving world is working from a clock on the opposite side of town (so to speak).

At one-thirty, I call KLBJ and ask for Melamie.

“I’m sorry sir, she’s in production. Can I take a message for Miss Masters?” The receptionist is friendly, but it’s a little disheartening as I finish my shave and ready for *whatever the hell* is about to go down at KOKE-FM. No Monday afternoon meeting is ever a good thing.

When I arrive at the station and enter the ramp to the parking garage, I’m immediately halted by a disturbing sight. A black 1967 Mercury Cougar is parked in the visitor’s parking, up front. The right front wheel rim is bent. Instinctively, I grab my notepad from the glove box and jot down the license plate number. *Oh, this looks like trouble. Could a hostile kid be waiting upstairs for me?* I cringe at the thought.

Our receptionist is on the phone in the building entry, but she flags me in toward the station manager’s office rather than down the hall toward Dillon’s desk. I swallow hard and enter to hear Dillon saying, “We’ll get to the bottom of it, Night Rider is here now. Come on in, Cowboy.”

Nobody calls me Cowboy ... I wonder why he doesn’t call me “Bryant.” I notice a guy who looks to be about thirty-five to forty years old sitting near the entrance, and the manager motions me to enter and close the door behind me. I get an edgy feeling of impending ambush.

“I’ll get right to the point here, Rider, this is Wilson Malmquist.” I reach to shake his hand, but he fails to reciprocate. I uneasily take a seat on the other side of him and Dillon.

“Do you know Trisha Malmquist?” the manager is stern-faced and somber.

“No sir, I don’t believe I do. That name doesn’t sound familiar.”

“Mr. Malmquist here says his daughter tells him that she’s pregnant—and that you are the father. What do you have to say about that? Are you sure you don’t know Trisha Malmquist? It would be best to come clean now if you do.”

I’m immediately frustrated, I *am* being ambushed. What kind of guy is this Dillon, and why didn’t he pull me aside to give me a heads-up on what this meeting is all about. Why didn’t he address this question privately with me? He should have allowed me to tell him what might be

going on first—before putting everything on the manager’s desk in front of the customer. Frankly, I’m more pissed at Dillon than anyone else at how this meeting is starting off.

“I’m the father? That’s absurd. I don’t know any Trisha or Mr. Malmquist here at all.”

“I’ve got phone records. I have more than three hundred dollars in long distance charges this month alone, from my home in Granger to your radio station studio line between the hours of two and five in the morning, spanning a period during the past few weeks since you came to work here. How do you explain that?” Malmquist is assertive for a man who initially appears to be uneducated.

“There’s nothing to explain. I haven’t called anyone in Granger. I’ve never met a Trisha from Granger.”

“She says she knows you, and that you two met at the Stallion a month ago.” Malmquist presses me.

Dusty interrupts to ask me, “Have you taken any calls from Granger during the overnight?”

“Not that I know of, but I wouldn’t have any idea where they are calling from. We get a lot of callers. I rarely get their names or ask them where they are.” I’m adamant.

“Trisha claims she met you for a beer at the Stallion about four weeks ago. Did you meet someone there and then go to a motel on North Lamar?” The manager begins to bulldoze me.

“Hell no!—In the first place, I didn’t start working here until about three weeks ago. In the second place, I don’t know anything about any of this. I’m sorry, Mr. Malmquist, but I don’t know your daughter!” I’m more than a little upset with the direction this meeting is moving from the get-go, so I instinctively jab back. “Is your daughter a little quirky, sir?” I unabashedly insult the visitor, while reflecting on my encounter last week with the ominous Cougar with four teens inside. I intentionally fail to mention the sexy caller and Kinky fan named Trisha.

“My daughter is fifteen years old, and if I find out that you’re lying to

me, I'm going to demand that you get fired. I'm also planning to file 'man-act' charges in Williamson County. I *will* get to the bottom of this. How old are you, Mr. Night Rider?" Malmquist is twitching his leg and rubs his right eye uneasily.

This guy may not be stable, I think to myself. I'm also pretty sure that the sexy caller, Trisha is a lot more than fifteen years old. I start to play some of the cards in my hand. "Let me ask you a question, Mr. Malmquist. Were you in Austin last Friday morning around six a.m.?"

"No, I was at work in the pit at the crushed limestone plant in Round Rock. I work the third shift, at night. What's that got to do with anything?" He snaps.

"Do you own a black '67 Cougar, sir?"

"Yes, I'm in it now, but how does that have anything to do with this?" Malmquist is caught off guard.

"Well, your car with four teenagers in it chased me out of the radio station parking lot after I got off work Friday morning. They SHOT a sawed-off shotgun at me, twice, and we sped down the Drag at over sixty miles an hour—like we were in some kind of Mafia movie chase scene. Does your car have any damage to the under carriage or show any signs of curbing a front tire?" I ask.

"I still don't see any connection here." Malmquist pauses, "My daughter doesn't lie to me, and if she says you knocked-her-up, then I believe her. My car has got nothing to do with that, *Rider*, or whatever your name is."

"Well, that's another question. Does your daughter even know my real name, sir? Can she tell you what I look like? I swear to you, and my managers here, that I don't know her. I've never met her; much less had sex with her. Has she described me to you, sir?"

"Well, she did say that you are six-two and blonde."

"I'm five-eleven, six foot in boots, and brown-haired, and I can assure you that every girl I've ever been out with knows my real name. What about that, can you tell me what my name is?"

“Uh, no, I don’t know, but that doesn’t mean anything. You could make up any name.” Malmquist begins back peddling.

“So, if we go out into the parking lot and take a look at your car, sir, would it have any signs of scraping bottom and hitting a curb?” My reporter skill-sets kick in, and I zero in on him. “I may have some charges I want filed on you, Mr. Malmquist. Did anyone borrow your car recently?”

“Trisha has a boyfriend who takes it to the store from time to time when I’m in my truck at work. He’s not allowed to go any farther than that. He’s the only one, though. I’m a widower, and Trisha doesn’t drive yet.”

Dillon looks to the manager who takes rein on the conversation. “Why didn’t you tell us about this car chase thing, Rider?”

“It just happened at the end of my shift last week. I haven’t seen Mr. Dillon since then. I planned to come in today to tell Dusty about it and find out if he thinks I should report it to the police. I told a friend of mine about it and he thought it might just exacerbate any threat, if I do report it, so I haven’t done any of that yet.” I’m pointed and matter of fact, straight to the chase, so to speak.

“Mr. Malmquist, do you think that your car could have been in town last week and involved in what Rider is saying?”

“When I drove in this afternoon, I did notice that the steering is out of alignment. But that might be just a coincidence.”

“Do you think your daughter could be covering up something involving her boyfriend?”

“I hate to say it, but something does smell really fishy about all of this.” Malmquist stands from his chair. “I am missing some shotgun shells, too. I noticed it yesterday when I chased a bobcat away from the chicken coop.”

“Is your shotgun a two-barrel, sawed off to about fifteen inches?” I ask.

“Look, guys, I’ve got some further investigation to do, I’m going to talk to my kids a little more, and I’ll call you back.” And with that

statement Malmquist abruptly rises to leave the office and end the meeting.

I'm sweating like a pig and wipe my brow with my sleeve as I continue to talk to Malmquist while he walks away. "Figure out who you know who's recently become deaf or hard of hearing ... That gun went off twice, right behind his head. He'll be your driver!"

"What the fuck was all that shit?" The manager looks at me and Dillon. "Are you fuckin' with me, Herman?" he asks, glaring into my eyes. "If this is a joke, I'm not laughing."

Dillon chimes in, "Bryant, this better not be something you've done."

"I swear, men. I don't know that girl, and someone took a couple of pot shots at me when I left the station the other morning. Those are the facts. I told Kinky Friedman about the car chase Friday afternoon at the Walker party. By the way, that went well, and I wanted to also ask you, Dusty, about a song they want us to play at night."

"Well, now's not the time. We'll talk more soon—But, if this guy Malmquist continues to poke around and festers up a blister, I'm going to have more to discuss with you than our music selection." Dillon is not sympathetic with my position and more concerned about the station image than my personal welfare or otherwise legitimate concerns. "Go home and get some rest. We'll talk in the morning at the shift change."

I leave the offices still sweating and thinking *I'm lucky I still have a job, at least for the time being. Damn, a three-hundred-dollar phone bill ... Wow!* It concerns me that if Trisha Malmquist and sexy Trisha turn out to be the same person, it probably won't be good for me or my new friend Kinky. I can only hope that this Trisha doesn't know or mention Kinky Friedman. I would hate for that story to make the management rounds. Nothing about sexy Trisha's calls would play well in any meeting. I have reason to sweat. This may not be all said and done yet.

I pass the visitor's phone on the coffee table in the lobby and think about giving Melamie a ring, but I don't want any more attention on me, so I hasten out of the building to get home to make the call. It's already

two-forty-five now. I decide not to wait ‘till I get home and hit the pay phone outside the Stop-N-Go on the corner. She’s already gone for the day. *Damn!*

When I arrive at my apartment, I immediately check my message machine.

“Hi Bryant, it’s me, Mel. Sorry I missed your call. I guess you’re sleeping now. I have a new place near the lake, but we don’t have a phone yet. I’ll call you later on, or give me a ring in the morning between five and six at the station ... Our hotline number is: 555-1911. Hope to see ya soon.”

“Damn.” I swear at the fish in my aquarium and kick off my sneakers, smashing them into the bathroom wall. My damp towel from today’s early-bird shower slips from the curtain rod I’d barely hung it on, dropping to the floor. I just leave it there as I stomp past the bathroom door, unbuckling my jeans and pouncing face-first into the pillow on my still-unmade queen bed in my tiny ten-by-ten bedroom. I’m too wired and too weirded out to eat, but after several days with little rest, I’m just exhausted enough to dive into a long hard, deep sleep. Not wanting to think anymore, I’m out like a light in a matter of seconds. God, I miss my comfortable old *no news Mondays of way back when!*

It’s not until two days later when Melamie and I finally put our schedules together enough to meet for lunch. By the time we get seated at Hut’s on 6th Street, I’ve pulled two more night shifts and had no more calls from anyone named Trisha. Thankfully, neither KOKE-FM nor I have heard anything further from the Cougar-driving dad in Granger. I’m still uneasy when leaving the studio in the dark, though, acutely aware of my surroundings and sure to have plenty of gas in the car.

Mel is wearing a black pant suit and white tie when she arrives, just getting off from work. I show up dressed Austin casual, in jeans and a tee shirt. “Been interviewing the Senate?” I ask.

“No, but having the Capitol beat has been a real wardrobe challenge for me. I’ve had to buy more clothes for this job than I bought for all of

college. My budget for any other real life is suffering. You're casual ... how's the new gig treating you?" I like how Melamie is always forthcoming, and then at the same time interpersonal.

"I admit, I thought I might get bored with a late-night shift, but I couldn't have been more wrong, up to now. You look like you're at the top of your class. Speaking of class, congratulations on your graduation; we haven't had much time to talk since school let out."

"Thank you."

"Are you still planning to go for more post-graduate education?"

"No, I don't think so, not right now." Melamie browses the chalk board menu on the restaurant wall. "I'm comfortable with the fact that I already have a suitable career path, and being from out of state, school here at UT is very expensive for me and my family. I think I'll wait, at least for a while. I like it here in Austin, but if something happens to make me think I need to go for my masters' degree, then I'll probably return to Seattle. U-Dub is a good school, too, you know."

We both order the "Blue Plate Special," a half beef, half buffalo hamburger steak, with two sides of veggies, and a roll. "I love the lunches here; better than grandma used to make!"

"I know. They don't have buffalo burgers in Seattle. Lots of trees—it's always green there, hence the name *The Emerald City*, but I've become quite attached to 'warm and dry' here in Texas. If I go back, I'd miss a lot of things like the *Texas Two-Step*, too. This part of the world has started to feel more like home to me than *The Great Northwest* ever did."

"What about you? Do you plan to stay in the DJ booth or do you miss the news beat?" Mel asks.

"You know, at first I was completely a fish out of water behind the board, but in the past couple of weeks I've relaxed and become a little more comfortable, relatively speaking. I'm still shopping the market, though. I don't think I'll ever get entirely rid of my newshound blood line." I smile.

"Yah, I know what you mean; it's addictive. Do you mind if I ask who

you've been talking to? Is anyone in town punching your dance card yet?"

I think about Malmquist and Trisha immediately and then realize Mel is inquiring about who I've been talking to in regard to finding a news job. "No, I haven't had any takers here in Austin, so far. I've talked with WBAP in Dallas, and KILT in Houston, but I'm getting my best fishing line action at KIKK in Houston. I guess everyone thinks of me as a *Country* guy more than anything else. KNUT branded me, I think. You're lucky to be in *Rock* radio. I think the future of *Country* is narrowing." I stir more sugar into my sweet iced tea.

"You know, I think the entire future of radio is narrowing. I talked to a guy last week who is doing digital research for IBM. He was in Japan for a month and says they are working on a computer chip, the size of a postage stamp and thick as a nickel, that can store the entire music library of the *Beatles*. He says digital music is the future, and he also says that, in less than five years, the *Sony Walkman* will replace radio as we know it. I don't know if any of that's true or even possible, but I do know how things always seem to change whether we're ready or not." Mel smiles, "just as I'm beginning to build a career in radio news, I interview a guy who is predicting our demise, sounds about right, don't it?"

"As far as news is concerned, people have been migrating to the morning and evening television reports for quite some time now. It used to be that the F.C.C. enforced the rules for station licenses more, requiring so many minutes of news and public information each hour, but FM is changing all of that. FM is better suited for more music and less talk. Your IBM guy could be right; what if in the next decade or two, someone invents a digital *Walkman*? We could all be out of a job if people could listen to whatever they want, anytime they want it." I shrug, "who knows what might be commonplace by the twenty-first century. Newsmen might become obsolete entirely, if people could get their news any time they want it, on a computer or something. These green beans are excellent, don't you think?"

Mel nods, "I know, I love the bacon in them. I like these thick ones much better than the French-cut style."

“So, what this you mentioned about Debra Wright? You said Deb had a follow-up story to our *non-story* a few months back. What’s that all about?” I’m dying to know.

“Well, that’s what I want to talk to you about. I’m a little wary of doing anything about it, and thought you might have a better established view of how to politically handle it. I believe it’s an extremely hot potato, and I don’t want to burn myself.” Mel looks me in the eye and lowers her voice.

“Deb says that the sheriff’s office asked you guys not to report on a body that was found out in the county. Is any of that true?”

I also keep my voice down. “Yah, that happened.” I recount my story, and Mel hangs on every word.

“That’s too much! I didn’t believe her at first. Why didn’t you ever say anything about any of that to me?” Mel asks.

“I didn’t tell anyone, except ND Mike. He said it would be best to just let it all go. So, I tried to forget it, but I’ll have to admit that it has bothered me more than just a little, many-a-time since it happened.”

“Debra said the same thing. As a matter of fact, she said it bothered her so much that before she took her new job in Georgia she did a little leg work and talked to that farmer who found the body. She says she went back out there, off Onion Creek Road, and the farmer opened her eyes to something that has bothered her even more, since.” Mel checks my reaction.

“What? Spill the story, Mel—hey, I’m no longer your competition; I can’t get the scoop on you anymore.”

“Well, Debra says the old guy came home around three in the morning and a 1975 black Chevy Nova was leaving his driveway with no headlights. He claims the car was like the ones the county uses for official unmarked and constable cars, and that the plates were covered with mud, so he couldn’t get a positive number—but he did get a good look at the words *Official Vehicle* and there was a Sheriff’s Posse Supporter sticker on the back window.”

“The old guy apparently went on to say that he didn’t notice the body

in the driveway and just figured the S.O. was simply patrolling the neighborhood, so he didn't think much more about the car until the next morning when he discovered that dead kid on his property." Mel takes a breath.

"Hmm, I wonder if that car had anything to do with the murder," I think out loud.

"Yah. So, Deb thought the same thing! Evidently, she did some poking around at the Police Department and found out more about the dead guy. He apparently had a record as a prostitute, and she was able to get his full name and gather a few notes on his background."

"Oh, and what did that turn up?" I'm fully invested in the story now; my news sense radar just perked up its ears and fully pivoted toward Mel!

"Well, that's the interesting part. Deb says the police report was first initiated by the sheriff's son, Roger Paxton Bank." Mel makes a face like she's shocked.

"Are you kidding me? That's a juicy tidbit." I become wide-eyed and take another swig of tea.

"So, maybe the S.O. knows something about that death that they're not saying. Debra thinks the sheriff's son had something to do with the body that was found. What do you think? I did some checking, and apparently the sheriff drives one of those county Novas home from work at night. You think Preston Bank let his son drive his car and something went down between the son and the cross-dresser?" Mel is zeroed in on my eyes for my thoughts.

"Deb thinks the bullet that killed *Turcel Williams* was from a county-issued service weapon. She says she talked to the coroner and found out, it was a nine-millimeter hand gun, and that they're not really as common on the street as a basic Saturday night special."

"Well, you and Deb have certainly piqued my interest, but if there is a Sheriff's Office cover-up keeping this story down, I certainly wouldn't want any part of looking into it, unless I lived in another county, or better yet another country." I wipe my mouth with a napkin and take a stern

glance at my lunch partner. “You’re not thinking about digging up some old bones are you?”

“Well, what do you think? It sounds like there just might be something hiding there.” Mel is insistent to get my opinion.

“Yah, but Mel, it could be a thing that, if you were to look into it on the record, you could get into some serious, deep doo-doo. I think that even I would be afraid to murk the water on this one. You’re just a fragile flower. If someone doesn’t want the story told, you could be mowed over like just another weed in the lawn.”

“I’m no flower. I have a thick skin, remember.” She has the look in her eyes of a hunting dog with the scent of a big raccoon up his snout.

“Yah, but believe me; you don’t want anybody at the county trying to shut you up—not in this county. Keep in mind, you’re not in Washington anymore. Texas Justice can be an unrelenting animal. You don’t want to find one of those Novas in your rear-view mirror on some dark, rainy night. I’m serious. I wouldn’t want to spend any time losing sleep over a news story that may not even be a story. I’m wiry, but I’m not self-destructive.” I consider telling her about my episode with the Cougar last week, but I hesitate because I don’t want to scare her.

“But if it is a cover-up, don’t you think that someone should expose it to the public?” Mel presses me.

“Yah, but it doesn’t have to involve you.” I pause and briefly change the subject, “Didn’t you say you just moved out by the lake?” I ask.

“I did. My roommate from school and I rented a lake lodge out on Comanche Trail, off 620, just past Hippie Hollow, and before you get to Windy Point. We love it! I love the views over the lake; it’s quiet out there. You’ll have to visit. We may have a New Year’s Eve party with fireworks. You’ll have to come.”

I decide I don’t know Mel enough to confide in her about my Cougar tale. It’s not the kind of thing that I would want to have entered into the gossip mill in town. Not that I don’t trust Melamie, but I don’t know her friends or what they might make of things if she were to tell someone like

her roommate. I cough into my napkin and clear my throat.

“Mel, 620 and Comanche Trail are both very dangerous roads at night, especially in bad weather. Are you safe out there? Is your car up to snuff?” I poorly conceal my concern.

“Oh hell, yah; I’ve driven in rain and snow on Snoqualmie Pass enough to handle my trusty little jeep in any kind of weather. I’ve got four-wheel drive, and I know how to use it! You don’t need to worry about me, Bryant. I’m from the Cascades, I’m a mountain girl.”

“What if you made some enemies or drew some bad attention. Can you outrun a cop car?” I’m obstinate.

“You’re saying that you think someone at the S.O. might try to keep me quiet?” Mel is beginning to see my point, and she slowly folds her napkin, places it in her empty plate along with her silverware, and pushes her dinnerware to the edge of our booth table for the waitress to bus.

“I don’t want to put any unnecessary scare into you, but ...” I measure my words carefully, “I don’t think that it’s beyond anyone’s imagination that it would be easy for certain officials in this town to have a person run off the road with a bottle of booze broken over their head, set on fire, and left for dead.” I stack my dishes, too, and the waitress steps up to take them.

“Can I get something more for you two?” The waitress is focused only on her own work and hasn’t heard the conversation.

“Want dessert? They have a killer pecan pie here. Banana pudding?” I ask.

“Not today, thanks.” Mel shakes her head addressing the waitress directly. “Guess not ... just our check please, ma’am.”

I raise my finger. “I’ll take that check, please.”

“You don’t need to do that, Bryant. I’m a big girl now. I should buy this one for you ... you’re here because I asked for your help, remember?”

“I want to get it, Mel. I’m very happy you invited me; it’s my pleasure to be seen in public with you. You make me look good.” I laugh. “I got

this—you get some curtains for your new cottage or a new suit for the capitol building with your newfound ‘*big radio bucks* and LBJ money.’ By the way, I promise I’ll dress better next time. I’m dressed like lake trash, and you look like a million dollars.”

“Oh, you’re sweet. You look fine. I’m the one overdressed for Austin daytime. It’s a hazard of the job.” She pauses, “Maybe you’re right, I don’t need to create any new hazards in my life.”

I watch the waitress to make sure she can no longer hear us. “Well, I’m just saying there may be a way that you could expose a potential story without putting yourself in the line of fire. There’s no point in getting personally involved by nosing around at the S.O. You wouldn’t want to become the story yourself. We both know how badly something like that can end.”

“What do you mean? What have you got in your evil genius mind, *mon ami*?” Mel is attentive.

“Do you have your homework done enough on this scoop to put it to someone who can get something done?” I inquire.

She nods, “Maybe.”

“Well, before you do anything—if it were me, I would talk to my ND and maybe even station management to be sure they have my back. If so, then I would get my facts down on paper in a brief synopsis and perhaps run it up the flagpole to an even higher authority ... to someone outside of the news, police, and county departments all together.”

She blinks, “Whom would you have in mind?”

“Well, the DPS and the sheriff’s boys run together like old pals in town, pretty much as thick as thieves, but the Texas Rangers have a whole other ‘line of blue blood’ in their veins. Personally, I wouldn’t touch the story with a ten-foot pole, but if you’re so inclined as to pursue this thing, I do know someone who might have an unobstructed viewpoint of local departmental dealings.”

I see in her eyes that I’ve got Mel on a string, so I continue. “What if you send a letter requesting an interview to one of the head guys with the

Rangers? You could include the facts as you've heard them, saying you got a tip from a listener, and then ask if you can interview or talk with someone about it? You could even say your source information comes directly from the farmer."

I put my head down and lean close into Mel's attention. "They may say they don't have any interest in it, but then again, they may want to do some poking around of their own. If they were to ask some questions around town, it would keep all the attention away from you. You might even be able to get exclusivity permissions if it should turn out to be an actual story—by then the heat would be off of you and in the public eye enough to prevent any possible personal repercussion."

"I like the way your brain works, Bryant. I knew I should talk to you before taking the ball and running with it. Debra was smart enough to tell me to watch my step, too. She recommended I talk with you before moving in any specific direction. That's why I haven't done anything yet." Mel takes two dollars from her clutch and places the money on the table. "You have to let me get the tip, young man. You've done enough to help me already. I wouldn't have my job now if it weren't for you."

"Oh, you can tip the waitress, but the credit for your claim to fame is in no way a reflection on me. That's all you, my smart and lovely friend. You've earned everything that you have coming." I touch Mel's hand. "Just keep your head down and your nose to the grindstone, ma'am. Nobody gets a free ride on this fast and furious freight train."

"I'll do what you say and put something down on paper, privately. Can I run it past you before I decide on whether to contact your Ranger's man or not? I can get his name then." Mel pats the table as if to say, right or wrong, it's time to get *something* done. "Can we meet again in a few days?"

"Yup, if that's what you want to do, I'll give you a hand, but I don't want any by-line credit on this one. I left this story in a ditch on a dreary, rainy afternoon long ago. If you do this, it's all yours, girlfriend." I rise to pay the check and leave. "My friend at the Rangers is Captain Bill Sadler.

He's part of the crime investigation organization. Call me and I'll give you his number."

Mel sips a final swallow of iced tea and also rises from the booth. I can see her wheels turning.

"Thank y'all ... Come see us again." The waitress rushes to wipe-down and re-open our table for another group of four who are lined-up at the front entrance. Hut's is busy even at three in the afternoon.

"That was good. You can't get food like that back home. King crab and salmon sure, but the wharf-side market fish monger hasn't got anything as rib sticking as Hut's home cooking. I believe I like buffalo as much as venison. Thanks for the great lunch, Mr. Herman."

"I'll take you to a place out near Hudson Bend sometime. Just past Mansfield Dam, they have alligator, kangaroo, and rattlesnake steaks. The kangaroo will make you write letters home to all your friends." I smile.

"Rattlesnake steaks, serious?" Mel is skeptical.

"Well they're more like salmon croquettes; deep fried rattlesnake patties. They're delicious, though. Living out at the lake, you probably need to get a shotgun so you can make your own snake cakes."

"What? Now I know you're kidding me." Mel pokes me in the ribs.

The clerk at the register says, "He's not kidding. Those snake patties are to die for. I've eaten at Hudson Bend. Your boyfriend has good taste, ma'am."

I'm tempted to say, *we're not boyfriend and girlfriend*, but I leave it alone. I'm glad to be thought of as in the running for the position, even if it is only the viewpoint of a stranger. Moreover, it surprises me that Mel doesn't correct the cashier's assumption.

I say, "Thank you, Miss," taking my change and then back to Mel, "Call me when you get your rough draft. I'll meet you on the lake for a wine and dine session?"

"Where do they get kangaroos?"

"They raise them. Ostrich and emu, too! Texas ranchers aren't all full

of buffalo and bull, you know. Ever had an omelet made from a single egg that overflows the skillet? Some Texans are sophisticated and cultured, my dear. We appreciate the culinary arts. Fine cuisine is as popular here as it is on Puget Sound—we just have slightly bigger species for food resources and, of course, our Texas-sized imaginations. You'll learn that if you stick around a while. We don't just tell everyone right away about everything we've got going on, my dear."

"Oh, you think you're so special! She smirks. "I do have a little derringer ... you don't think I really need a shotgun do you?"

Her statement and tone is like a southern belle saying, "Bless your little heart," sarcastic and snarky.

"We are special! And yes, every good jeep needs a fully-loaded gun rack. Keep that pea shooter in your pocket or down your boot, missy, but I wouldn't want to ride range or scout the woods without a big fat hog stopper, if you know what I mean." I wave good bye.

Melamie guffaws and then is gone with the quick wit, "It is dove season!" She turns back, "Can you shoot?"

"I only shoot from the hip, my dear; but I knock down twelve out of thirteen birds." I yell after her, "I learned that method on TV from '*The Rifleman*' when I was just a kid with a BB gun. Why take aim, when you don't need to, right? Pow, pow, he nailed a bad guy every time ... just shootin' from the hip!"

FAILURE, PROGRESS, & SUCCESS—ALL FEEL PAIN



As soon as we see each other again Mel picks up right where we left off. “We have whales, you know. Of course, we don’t eat them anymore.” Melamie refers back to our earlier conversation at Hut’s. “Remember you said Texas has bigger animal species than the Great Northwest?”

“Oh, mark one up for Puget Sound, my lady,” I jest. “We’ve discontinued eating dinosaurs here in Texas, too. You must still think every Texan is full of gas and oil. You know, we don’t all ride horses and chew tobacco? As a matter of fact, you’ve probably ridden more horses than the average Texan if you ever went to the Washington State Fair and took a picture on a kiddie pony ride.” I enjoy ribbing Mel and rubbing her nose in a little flamboyant Texas dirt. We both like the banter.

Sunday dinner at Hudson Bend is just plain fun. We walk into the place through the vegetable and herb garden in the rear. The fragrances of rosemary, native flowers, and fresh-tilled soil fill the air with a sweet aroma prompting butterflies and hummingbirds to flutter past us in carefree abandon. It’s an enchanting oasis kind of place carefully cultivated and nested in the dry, rocky Texas landscape; but I’m enamored mostly with Mel. Mel is on a roll into the bigtime, in her perfect way, and so I point out the obvious career success that she is enjoying.

I mention the radio ratings which are just recently released. “Arbitron fall numbers are way up on KLBJ. You and *The Zoo* are taking Austin by

storm.”

“I hate those ratings games—I did get a pay raise, though.” Mel is rightfully proud.

“You earned it—I got *fewer hours*! The managers at Koke thought it would be cheaper to hire a guy to just run the board Saturday and Sunday, to play tapes and preachers. They don’t need to pay for air-talent if they can ‘*can*’ everything. They think no one will notice. Personally, I think people want to hear something fresh when they turn on the radio, but that’s just me.” I catch myself from going on a rant. “You should be proud! You guys are moving up ... we’re struggling to just hold on to what we have.”

“What about your nighttime numbers? You must be improving the night shift considerably over what they had before you. You’re funny, and your show is tight. I hear you on my way to work every morning.”

“Aww ... Thanks, Mel, you’re kind, but nobody tracks my numbers. I don’t even think Arbitron asks people about *anything* after ten p.m.”

“So you don’t have any official report on how you’ve improved the Austin night life?”

“Not as far as I know. I’m sure Dusty Dillon has his own chart, but I’m not privy to his *professional misinformation*. Thank goodness! I wouldn’t want to be persuaded to become so misguided.” I’m not politically correct in giving Mel my personal opinion about Dusty, but the wine is very nice; and well, let’s face it, I’d probably tell her anything.

“Well, I listen up. You make the other guys at night have nightmares when they go to bed.” Mel attempts a humorous gesture in my general direction.

“I’m not sure that’s a compliment, but thank you. You know, I’m not really comfortable in my new position.” I blush a little. “I’m embarrassing most of the time. Even Kinky Friedman laughs *at* me more than he laughs *with* me. Thank God, he and others like Jerry Jeff and Sue come in. I’d probably just take a dive if that didn’t happen.”

“Yah, well you dove from news to jock in a single leap of faith. I think

you could make a successful jump out of, or into, anything. I admire how you've transitioned." Mel is genuinely kind.

"Wow. Thanks. You want something, right? What's the rib?"

"The rib is that you aren't news director somewhere."

"Are you drunk? I'm twenty-five years old. What the hell do I know about anything? I'm no director of anything." I get totally honest, but she stops me.

"You have a natural sense for things. I've seen you in action. Some of your methods and the stuff you instinctively do are just not taught in any school. You got those distinctions on your own, mister." She's generous. "You're a self-made renaissance man."

"Hey, I'm no cowboy, I'm no hippie, and I'm no favorite son. I pay the fiddler just like everybody else does. I'm just not sure exactly what box I fit into yet—you know, I go for the gusto and take what I get. The rest of the time, I keep my trap shut. That's the secret to living long, ma'am. Be seen and not heard!" Again I find myself being more candid with Melamie than I would normally be with almost anyone else.

"It's hard to be seen and not heard when you're on the radio, bucko." Mel laughs. "By the way, I heard what you so cunningly had to say the other day at Hut's ... You know that idea you had about taking our sheriff's story to the head guns? It worked."

Melamie lights up in neon along with the "Welcome" sign in the window two tables over as we're escorted from the bar and seated by the hostess.

"I took your advice and asked my ND and manager to cover me while I sought out some Texas Ranger attention. They were on board almost immediately ... And, you might be surprised! When I flashed my credentials, your nice Ranger buddy put a little schmooze on me."

"He promised me that he will be looking into some of, what he called, 'questionable goings-on' at our friendly Travis County S.O. He was particularly interested in the county vehicle usage implications that Debra Wright dug up with that farmer. He told me he would give me first dibs on

the story, if there is one.” Mel devours me with her glance to capture my expression.

“Damn, girl!” My jaw slacks. “You already got that done?”

“Yes sir. Done and done. Captain Sadler said he smells a rat, too, and he wants to sniff around some. Nice guy, I liked him.”

“I’ll be a son of a gun! I thought you might need a little more time to get that ball rolling. You surprise me, young lady.” I scratch my head.

“I think Sadler already has some concerns of his own about the S.O. operations. He didn’t even blink when I talked with him.” Mel smiles, “So what do you think? *I done good*, right?”

The waiter approaches our table. “Good evening, folks, I’m Michael. Welcome to Hudson Bend.” He places a pitcher of iced tea on our table along with two glasses of water. “Our special blend of teas is complimentary and our fresh grown mix of garden greens comes with your choice of three homemade dressings, blended and chilled by our chef earlier this afternoon: We have Berry Vinaigrette, Sesame Seed/Ginger, and Mandarin Orange Ranch. Do you folks have a favorite flavor in mind?”

Mel looks to me to take the lead so I make the call. “Can we get a sampling of each of your dressings, on the side, sir?”

“Absolutely; good call. They’re all splendid, sir. Your palates will be charmed, I’m sure. Would you like to hear about our specials this evening?”

“Yes, please.” Mel is enthusiastically into the eventful feeling provided by the excellent service from the highly-trained Hudson staff.

“For the main course, we have a well-apportioned encrusted emu breast with a light hazelnut-and-pecan-glazed white wine sauce. It is served with seasoned steamed vegetables fresh from our garden, along with our popular red potato Fragua.”

“If you prefer a red meat this evening, we’ve prepared a savory, tender buffalo prime rib, served medium rare, with our own horseradish cream

sauce, mashed garlic potatoes with red gravy, and asparagus tips in a delicate lemongrass hollandaise.” The waiter looks first to Mel.

“Oh my, that all sounds delicious, Michael. Do you have a recommendation, Monsignor Herman?” She sweetly defers to me.

“If you especially prefer one, I’ll order the other and we can share flavor bites, if you like.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. I’ll have the emu, please.”

“...And I’ll have the prime, sir. Also, this is the lady’s first time to try wild game cuisine. Do you still have that appetizer sampler plate with a variety of several of your seasonal meats in bite-sized portions?”

“Yes sir, we do. An excellent complement to any occasion, I might add. Are we celebrating something special this evening, sir?”

“No, we’re just living large for the fun of it tonight, thanks for asking.” I sound so formal and so country all at the same time, winking to Mel and grinning. “I have no idea why I’m speaking with such Victorian verbiage.”

“I’ll bring your bread and salads shortly. Can I get you a cocktail in the meantime?”

“I would love another glass of house wine, please.” Mel looks to me for approval.

“Two please, Michael. Thank you, carry on, sir.” Pretentiously, and with a stiff upper lip, I lap my cloth napkin and pour tea for Mel and me. “I hope you’re at least entertained. You may not like anything on the menu, but you won’t forget it for a long time.”

“Cheers, Mr. Herman. This place is very quaint and charming.” She sips gracefully from her glass with her pinky finger positioned in a manner to show off her obvious formal etiquette training.

We catch eyes and both laugh aloud at how we’ve altered our personal vernaculars. Perhaps it’s the way the waiter is speaking that gives us the leap into a more formal pretense, but for some odd reason we both seem to be doing it. “This is fun!”

“You come here often, Mr. Herman?” Mel makes small talk for the

time being.

“Are you kidding, on my salary? I’ve been here twice in my life—once for my parents twenty-fifth anniversary, and once for my college graduation.”

“You have a natural knack for sophistication.”

“As do you, Miss Masters.” I raise my wine glass in her direction.

“So, what’s your take on the political climate these days, my dear man?” She’s kidding and enjoying herself.

“Oh hell, what do I know? I’m just a bumpkin from a tiny, little, hick town. You’re the one who graduated magna cum laude. Please, tell me your view of the world.”

“Well, I understand that we have a new President; although I’m not quite sure why. I believe his name is Ford. Tell me, do you know, is he an automobile industry man?” She giggles to herself.

I laugh again. “You’re not only quite attractive, but you have a very perceptive and sharp mind, miss.”

“Yes sir, and I also darn socks, hem skirts, and make my own jams.” She is self-deprecating, but alluring, with confident pride at the same time.

“I’m curious, what made you choose RTF at UT over UCLA or even drama at Juilliard? You could be anything you can dream you want to be. Why are you in Austin radio and not on national TV or an actress in professional film?”

“You know, I thought about acting for a while.” She rolls her eyes and becomes more serious.

“And?”

“Well, I finally decided that I didn’t want to go through life repeating someone else’s dialogue,” she chuckles.

“Yah, I get that,” I inject, “I’ve come to the realization that reporting the news is not like actually living either; it’s like living vicariously through the news. The truth is that as a reporter you tend to avoid getting directly into the mainstream of life, because if you do, and then somehow

make the news yourself, it usually gets you into trouble. Sometimes, when I'm sulking in self-doubt, I wonder if I'm in this career because I'm actually afraid to live *full out* balls to the walls, unafraid to face whatever comes at me. I'm fairly certain that if something in life required me to make an immediate life or death decision, that I would do the right thing, but there are times when I question myself. It's obviously easier to stand on the sidelines and report on what someone else does in a crisis, than it is to be in the predicament yourself."

"Boy, unfortunately, I have absolutely learned about that—I know news is a lot like just telling someone else's story, too, but I do like the feeling of being part of the leading edge of things, real things—acting is just pretend—and, *oh my God*, have you been to L.A.? I hate the way those people are so grandiose and self-centered. I would hate myself if I became one of them. I'm a lot like you; I'm not a city girl. I say my hometown is Seattle just because folks know where that is, but I'm really from a little equestrian ranch near the small town of Everett in Snohomish County, about twenty-five miles north of Seattle. So, you were right when you said I've probably ridden more horses than the average Texan. Believe it or not, they have a country bar in Everett where people square dance and two-step some."

"No way!" I'm a little shocked to learn that country music is popular in Washington.

"Yes sir, it's not the real *Texas Two-Step*, mind you, but it's close enough to make me feel at home here in Austin. I visited Texas on a family vacation when I was young and fell in love with the hospitality here. Besides UT is one of the best schools in the country with a long list of acclaimed alumni. It was an easy decision for me."

"So you two-step? Do you polka some, too?" I'm intrigued.

"I'd rather waltz than polka, but yah, you goof. I know how to dance."

"Me too ... polka wears out my knees and ankles, but yah, me too. I emceed a few dance contests in town, and, in spite of my left-handed, right-footedness, I picked-up a few tips from the free lessons they give,

and I enjoy a twirl every now and then. Wow, raised on horses and dancin', you're quite different than I imagined. What other secrets are you hiding behind that innocent smile of yours?" As I inquire the waiter returns.

"Your appetizers, folks. Careful, the plate is hot. Tonight's sampler consists of:" (indicating in a clockwise manner) "stuffed filet of rabbit mushroom caps, seared alligator tail, roast kangaroo loin, fried rattlesnake croquette, mesquite-smoked emu dark meat, and bite-sized honey mustard marinated ostrich breast—also, and with the compliments of the chef, we have this delicate, fresh Maine lobster bisque for your enjoyment. Can I get you something more; perhaps a bottle of our house wine or carafe of champagne?"

"This looks tremendous for now, Michael. Thank you." I look to Mel, "More wine, ma'am?"

"I'm good." Mel has done more talking than drinking.

"Enjoy."

"*Bon appetit*, Miss Mel; dig in."

"Wow, I don't know where to begin." Mel sips the bisque. "Oh yes. This is delightful! Compliments of the chef? Someone in the back is a fan of Bryant L Herman."

"No, I think they do that for everyone. It's a classy place—for a classy lady, ma'am."

"You know I'm left handed, too?" Melamie asks.

"I noticed that when you sat across the desk. Only those of us in our right minds are left handed, you know?" I smile.

"Did they slap your hand and make you write with your right hand in school?"

"They did that to you, too? I was stubborn, but now I'm all mixed up. I shoot pool, use scissors, and handle a rifle or gun with my right hand; and I write, throw a ball, and for most part do everything else with my left."

"That's ambidextrous, not mixed-up."

“Same thing ...” I mutter. “People think you’re nuts ... but I’m fine with that, I’ve worked for nuts at The Nut for years. It’s my shtick.”

“That sounds really bad. Like that’s the bigger problem. You work for nuts?” She laughs out loud.

Needless to say, dinner takes a while. We indulge ourselves in conversation and cuisine for more than two hours, until well after dark thirty.

By the time we get to the point of ordering coffee, Melamie is comfortably numb. “I have to pass this evening, Michael. Your service has been a true touch of Texas glamour. Thank you for everything.” Then to me, “I’m afraid that dawn comes early for me on Monday morning.”

“As odd as it may sound, I miss those days, myself. My body clock is still adjusting.” I rise to slide out Mel’s seat, and we retreat through the garden to our respective cars.

“It’s a full moon ... How beautiful.” Mel inhales the night air and the fragrance of jasmine pausing to gaze into the crystal Hill Country sky with its millions of stars from horizon to horizon. “You’ve given me a new glimpse into Texas class this evening and a keen sense of genuine hospitality, Mr. Herman.”

“It’s entirely my pleasure, Miss Masters. Can I take you two-stepping sometime soon?”

“That would be an actual date, young man.” She pretends to be shy and embarrassed some.

“Yes, that would be, Miss Lovely. I would be honored to accompany you to the ball, if you wouldn’t mind.” I look to get her reaction and the moonlight shimmers from her eye as she stares into the heavens.

“I’ll accept on one condition.”

“And what might that requirement be?” I don’t hesitate to ask.

“Can you kiss as fine as you wine and dine, sir?” She innocently clasps her hands at her waist and shyly glances to the ground.

I don’t need to be asked twice. I snatch her close like a movie character

from an old fashioned western and plant one on her that I hope neither one of us will forget anytime soon. So as not to over or underwhelm her, my kiss is short and sweet; and I pause to draw back some, dampen my lips, and look into her eyes to be sure she's not completely put-off or overtaken.

She slowly opens her eyes and says, "That's a date, young man." Gently she pulls me back into the charm of her cherry-flavored lipstick.

And I thought dinner was great. Man-oh-man, this is grand!

"Good night. Call me on the hotline." She steps into her jeep as I slowly close her door. Mel waves to me, absconding with my entire essence, leaving me standing in a gentle wind; and then all too soon, she's gone once again. Need I say it? I'm drunk on her magic.

As fate would have it, I wantonly alter our plans to go dancing or to the Mayor's Christmas party with Melamie. I reflect on that turn of fate and how I may be missing something more important in life when Houston calls the week of Thanksgiving. But with little hesitation, I snap at the option to take a lowly editor/reporter job in a bigger market, during daylight hours.

I guess I think things will be different in Houston, but the politics and the definitions for the word "standard" just get more complicated as you get older and wiser. There really is no "black and white world." There are millions of colors and they're all the right color, when shown in the proper light. I'm keenly aware that I have a need to grow, and so I leap at a chance to move forward with my career, and give little credence to the tugging of my heart strings. As it turns out, this single decision is potentially the dumbest mistake I'll ever make.

Self-examining my choice to move away from Central Texas and digressing, I'm reminded of a time when I had a ninety-year-old chiropractor who had extensively traveled the world. He often told me stories of Europe, or Australia, or New Zealand while he adjusted my neck and spine. I think the stories were intended to relax me and were more rhetorical and metaphorical than anything else, but they were always

engaging for me. As Dr. Irving stood me in front of a plumb bob hung from the ceiling, he would mark on my spine with a grease pencil in a few places before laying me on my stomach on a home-made bench.

“I’ve always wanted to go to Australia. I’ve looked into getting a job there, but haven’t been able to find a sponsor. Getting a visa requires you have a ticket home and you can’t look for work there *without* a sponsor—or at least that’s how I understand it.” I lay flat on the bench.

“Why would you want to go there and stay?” The doctor asks.

“Well, I keep thinking that somewhere along the way, someone in the northern hemisphere is going to pop-off a nuclear weapon and send a green cloud around the world up here. I just figure that there are fewer countries with nukes in the south and fewer warmongers.”

Starting at my feet, unlike most modern chiropractors, Dr. Irving places his hands directly on me. He doesn’t use heat guns, or mechanical contraptions. He pulls my right leg to realign my hips. “You know there were some scientists in the 1950s who were studying monkeys on several islands in the southern pacific. They would motorboat past the islands, regularly, throwing rice on the beaches to feed and observe the primates there.”

Irving works his way up to my lower back, pressing with his thumb or elbow on the pencil marks he’s made. “One day, the scientists began to notice a funny behavior from one of the small female monkeys. She would scoop-up her rice in her hand, but rather than just eating it immediately, like all the other monkeys were doing, she started carrying it to the water’s edge and washing the sand out of it *before* eating.”

Rolling me on my side to give me a good twist the Dr. continues, “Within a few days the scientists noticed that all of the monkeys on that island were doing the same thing; washing their rice before eating it.” *Crack, crack, crack.* “—Other side please—the funny thing about that, though, is that the monkeys two hundred miles away on another island had begun the exact same behavior.” *Rippling zipper crack!* Patting me on the side, “On your back, sir!”

“What is it that you’re trying to tell me, exactly?” I hang my head off the bench and lower my neck into the doctor’s hands; resting the full weight of my head in his grip.

My neck does a zipper snap left, and a zipper snap right with two flicks of his wrists, and I stand to stretch and breathe.

“It doesn’t matter where you are. People are the same everywhere.” Dr. Irving is completely sincere. “See you next Thursday?”

“Huh! That sounds like good observational information. Yes sir, that feels great. Thanks.”

By the way, I don’t believe you can get that kind of advice or snap effect from a heat gun or some kind of roller device. That old chiropractor knew some smart things.

More than once before heading to Houston, I wish I had taken a few weeks of vacation before leaving Austin for *greener meaner pastures*. I wish I had kept my dates with Mel and learned to appreciate the good life more than the career life, but I was young in the ‘70s and guileless. Twenty years into the future, I would negotiate that contract differently; but in foolish naiveté I immediately pack my bags to leave my Austin home for the big city life, in comfortable newsman shoes. Call me Jack—I’m totally a “hijacked metaphor.” I’m on the road to *bigger and betcha*.

I think a lot about Mel while I load my U-Haul. I dream about her at night. I also have a nightmare about her the night before we meet at Louie’s 106 on 6th Street and Congress for one final appetizer.

In my dream I envision county deputy sheriff’s cars chasing Mel’s Jeep up Comanche Trail in the rain. A PIT maneuver puts her over the edge. Then in my dream it becomes her roommate who has borrowed Mel’s car, but Mel’s cat is also in the car and with a rattlesnake, too. One hundred-fifty feet or more to the water the car is flipped end-over-end down the cliff to disappear into the deep. There are Camp Mabry Texas National Guard helicopters and spotlights all over the hill searching for the vehicle or bodies or something, but nothing is ever discovered.

I think about how Mel might be at a disadvantage, as a woman, in the

business of “telling the truth about the world,” better known as “news reporting.” It even crosses my mind that worse than being at a disadvantage, she could end up dead or grieving a painful loss of some kind. I also know that Miss Melamie Masters may just as well be capable enough to single-handedly kick the whole world’s hard ass. Although, I’m torn, I give her the benefit of the doubt.

At Louie’s we share a big bowl of herb-seasoned, steamed mussels, and with our hands we break fresh-baked, warm Italian bread, dipping it in a saucer of salt and peppered olive oil. We discuss everything, including all of our present options and opinions, along with all of our goals, and just as importantly, all of our wants and needs.

I even finally decide to tell Mel about my early morning Cougar race on the Drag, the sexy girl calls, the questions I still have about my entertainment value versus my comfortable relationship with doing the news. I even tell her about my dream of her car going into the lake. I’ve decided that Mel is a big girl and needs to know the truths about *this crazy world that she is comfortably taking by the horns*. I’ve realized that it’s not my job to protect her by keeping reality from her. I’ve come to terms with the fact that I can best serve her by letting her know about some of the pitfalls that I’ve encountered along my way, so she can plan how to manage her own future for herself. I at least owe her honesty about the career we share. After all, I imagine there will be more times down the road for both of us when a body may turn up in a lake or ditch, regardless of where our lives or careers may take us.

Mel is quick and assertive in saying, “You need to go, Bryant L Herman. You have to go to Houston! It’s the next big step for you.”

“Maybe I can go on ahead and get my feet in the door. I promise I will call you. As soon as I get established in Houston, I’ll do everything I can to bring you down there if you think that’s something you would like to do. I’ll call you as soon as I spy a good job for you.” I’m apologetic, self-editing my words for clarity and kindness—“I was really looking forward to taking you out on the town and excited about the mayor’s party. In some ways, I feel like my career is hijacking a once in a lifetime chance

for an even better life for me. I feel like I could be making a decision that will cause me to miss a grand opportunity with someone special, with someone like you. I really like you, Mel.”

“Even after almost two hundred years, Scots poet Robert Burns is still right; *the best laid schemes of mice and men oft go awry, and leave us nothing but grief and pain, for promised joy!*” Mel smiles to reassure me, but I can tell that she is concealing a little regret.

She’s philosophical, “I won’t lie to you, Bryant; I like you, too. But my dad always says, you can’t live on promises alone, you have to put dinner on the table tonight. Sometimes you just have to go for the big bacon; other times you need to settle for the bird in the hand. You can never know the right or wrong thing to do until you finally see it in twenty/twenty hindsight. Until then, you have to just go with your gut. Bryant, you really need to go to Houston. It’s what’s next for you.”

“While we’re swapping metaphors, how about this one? You can beat-down a bathtub rubber duck by punching him in the nose, but you can’t beat him at the game of coming back up for more.” I fake being serious. “You get it? The duck pops back up every time.”

“What?” She giggles, “What the heck are you yacking about?” Mel is snickering and hiding behind her hand.

“Made you laugh!” I grin. “What about this one? *You can’t shave a cat with a shoe.*”

“Oh, no; *no cat* jokes, please!” Laughing openly Mel pokes me repeatedly in the ribs with her index fingers, “You’re a sick, silly man, Bryant Herman!”

“It makes my day to see you smile.” Then back on subject, I report, “You know, the cost of living in Houston is pricier than Austin, and they couldn’t give me moving expenses, but they have promised me a new Ford pickup trade-out. I can always sell my car if I get in a pinch—and hey, maybe someday I’ll get to interview an astronaut and ask if he’s seen any signs of life out there?”

Readdressing her issues, I comment, “Your dad sounds like a smart

man. Are you two really close?”

“We talk at least once a week. I talked with him just last night. We discussed my choices for continuing school—He always helps me make sense of things when times get complicated. He’s my only real confidant—I was feeling a little homesick for my horses back home, and I was thinking about going back to school at the University of Washington. He reminded me that life is short and that feelings pass. He said he would love for me to come home, but that in a year as a working resident here in Texas, I will be able to go to school anywhere here and not need to pay out of state, non-residency fees—He gets right to the point every time—He said that a year passes so fast in life that I might be able to consider my career here to be a small stepping stone toward my ultimate goals, before thinking about making another giant leap in some other direction.”

Melamie pauses to reflect, “He’s very proud of me and my new job. I send him tapes and he plays them for all the family and friends. He likes to brag a little.”

“He makes a lot of sense—and who wouldn’t be proud of you? You made it to the top of Austin radio news faster than anyone I’ve ever seen before. You’re at the top of the game here in town, already—and to think you were just an auto dealer receptionist a little more than a year ago. You’ve done well for yourself, Mel. I’m proud of you, too.”

Changing subjects, “So, in your dream about me ... did anything fun happen?” Mel notices that I don’t immediately respond. “You were worried about me. I like that. Tell me what you think is going to happen with this sheriff story? Do you really think I should have a strategy for something I’ve missed?”

The waiter interrupts, “Is everything ok?”

“Thanks Guido, we’re great right now.” I take my time to answer Mel’s line of questioning.

“I imagine a couple of different things could happen. This story is not exactly a cut-n-dried, cookie-cutter example of every-day reporting. First of all, the Rangers may turn-up nothing important and just sweep the

whole thing under the rug, like the sheriff's office did. On the other hand, they could find something tangible and have a judge take the sheriff and a few of his closely-vested deputies out of office while they complete a thorough investigation to bring charges against certain members of the department. If they do that, you probably have nothing to fear. Worst case scenario is that the sheriff remains in office and somehow finds out that you were digging around in his bone yard. That might put you in an unfavorable light at the 'S.O.'—although, I think that scenario is the least of the likely ones. BUT, you should probably put out résumés in other cities, if you want to plan for that to happen." I pause to get a sense of Mel's attitude following my harsh assessment.

"That's funny you should say that, I sent résumés to Seattle and Olympia, Washington just this past week." Mel is more candid and less squeamish than I may have expected. "So, what do you *really think* will happen? I want your honest opinion."

"Truthfully, I think there's something wrong going on behind the scenes at the S.O., and especially surrounding that transvestite body *non-scoop*. So, my bet is that the Rangers will work quietly and discretely and do the right thing. I think they're going to find some impropriety that's able to be proven with evidence. When they do, I believe they'll take steps to exile Sheriff Bank and his primary strongmen, but—they'll do it in a way that is low profile and as much out of the public eye as possible. They'll likely make the announcement after seven p.m. on a Friday night or on a holiday weekend, when the story can get buried as quickly as it can. The last thing they'll want to do is to make headlines in the Sunday paper. That's too much limelight on the Rangers themselves."

Thinking, "Ok, so, that makes sense." Mel takes a sip of water. "So, you don't question what I've done, by putting this in motion?"

"Honestly? I wish we had talked about it longer, more strategically, but no. I think I would have followed up on Debra's lead, too. I believe I would be in your same shoes right now, given the same information and chance." I reassure Mel with a smile, "And by the way, I just have to say, *I would look great in your shoes!*"

I've never heard Melamie snort before, but in mid-sip from her drink, she does, and it makes us both laugh out loud.

"I want to stay in touch with you. Can I call you in the middle of the night if I get scared or need a job?" She's still laughing, but she's seriously asking.

"You can call me anytime. If you need someone to back up Debra's and your stories, I'll put my feet in the fire, right there with you. If they call me, I'll tell them the truth as I know it. If I have to testify, it will be state news and the station in Houston will probably like the media attention. KLBJ should like it, too. If it makes the papers, the whole state and much of the nation will cover it and you'll be a hero."

"Watch for the story on the TSN wire. Maybe I'll get a by-line somewhere, if the Rangers give me the initial press release first, like they promised. You know, your guy Bill Sadler seemed especially sincere to me. I think he'll keep his word. My news director loved the idea of giving the tip to him. Thanks for that."

"Hey, what do I know?" I drill the table with my index finger, "This is a hole in the ground, and this is Shinola. I don't know beans!"

She grins, "That's the worst analogy I've ever heard, you dope." Pausing and then changing the subject again she continues, "So, you're leaving after midnight?" Mel returns the topic to my agenda for moving.

"Yup."

"Why are you making the drive at night?"

"Several reasons. I don't need to be at work until next week, since the holiday season has begun, but I wanted to get into my apartment as early in the weekend as possible, so I can organize some ... Plus, I've been working nights; I'll adjust my sleep schedule back to a morning workday over the whole weekend ... Also, there's less traffic at night, less wear-and-tear on the car, less tread loss on the tires. You, know me and tires ... I highly recommend good traction." I chuckle and she diverts my flippancy.

"They're talking thunderstorms tonight. You're not worried?"

“Me worry? Oh, hell no. I know when to hide under a bridge.”

“Promise you’ll be safe, and call me tomorrow to let me know you arrived, ok?”

“At least I have a bad-boy car. You must think I’m all good looks and no grit and guts.”

“So you’ll call, right?” She insists.

“I’ll call you every day if you want. I’m *all-in* for our cutesy banter.”

“Going too far won’t get you anywhere, hot rod.” She gives me a sexy little look.

“I wish I could take that look with me.” I stop.

We both stop talking for a few seconds, just looking at each other’s face. We touch hands and just stop.

Guido breaks the stillness. “Anything more for either of you?”

“Miss Lovely?” I gesture to Mel.

“Not tonight, Guido, thank you.” Mel continues to look into my eyes and not toward the waiter.

“Just the check, sir.”

“Time flies when you’re having fun. You’ve been a big help to me, Bryant. I’ve been having a ball, ever since I came to *The Big State* ... So in a way, you did take me to the ball. I have you to thank for guiding me through a lot of the Texan learning curve ... And for being so confident in both me and you. You’ve really made an impression on me, especially since we’ve become something more than just two professional friends.”

In parting, I tenderly kiss her and say, “Stay sweet, Mel. I am going to call you tomorrow and then I’ll call for you when a killer job pops up, hopefully sooner than later ... And if you get any vacation time, you better come pay me a visit. I’ll show you the town, and we’ll two-step all over it—deal?”

“Deal! I won’t forget it! You go get ‘em and round ‘em up, Rider!” There’s a hint of sadness in her words and eyes that I may never forget.

In one final embrace we both understand that this silent moment could be a permanent goodbye. Standing on the front steps of Louie's 106, protected under the green-striped canopy a light rain begins to fall causing the streets to glisten a reflection of the evening's downtown traffic lights, flashing red, yellow, green. Gazing into Mel's misty eyes, I realize that we both wish for something more from father time. Holding her, this moment sets a personal emotional benchmark for me that I will continue to live by for the rest of my life. When it comes to standards *regarding heart and mind, obviously they won't always agree, but any one thing that continues to endure is the thing that is the most important of all.*

THE ROAD AHEAD & SIGNS OF THE TIMES



On my drive to Houston my rear-view mirror beckons me back to Austin and Melamie for a much longer time than it takes for the city lights to fade into the weather. It's been raining all night, and now, after three in the morning, lightning flashes on the highway ahead of me. Austin radio warns of thunderstorms near Giddings. Maybe I should have waited for daylight to begin driving, but I'm hoping to be at my new home by sunrise. One by one the radio stations from home fade away from my FM dial as I scan my favorites one last time. KOKE-FM drops out first to the tune of "New Riders of the Purple Sage" (a group encouraged by Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead) with "Panama Red." The DJ who took my place is "The Horse Doctor." You'll recall Steve Weldon who went to Corpus Christi after doing weekends at KNUT as *The Tree Surgeon*, well, he's back. For people in broadcasting, it's a small world. Even though gigs don't always last very long, you tend to see each other again and again. I'm surprised that it didn't take him much time at all to come home from Corpus. He sounds better than I remember.

KLBJ, with its highest powered, tallest tower is the last Austin FM station to turn to static. They're playing old rock blues which is somewhat depressing, but I continue to listen because in no time at all KLBJ will also be gone. "One of These Nights" by the Eagles changes the mood some, and I take one last look back in the rear view to think of Mel again. The memory of her will undoubtedly continue to play over and over, no

matter where I go or where I am.

I've made this trip several times over the past month, interviewing in Houston during the day and DJ-ing in Austin at night. It takes a minimum of six hours to make the round trip and that doesn't include any time on either end or in the middle to stop and pee. I made it once again earlier this week to rent my new apartment. Usually you can listen to Austin radio until just past Giddings, and then you switch to Houston and have little interruption in music and programming.

Tonight, however, the weather is having an effect on the signals, leaving the AM band with nothing but crackling sounds from lightning. Even the FM seems to be struggling to get out to the horizon as I get just over fifty miles from town. That means I'll have about an hour of little-to-listen-to other than my own thoughts and imagination. I focus past the windshield wiper blades and their steady flip-flapping to see if I can find the lights of Giddings ahead. *Nope, not yet.* It comes to my attention that there has been no one else on the road for quite some time as the rain increases its tempo. I switch to high beam headlights. *Man, it gets dark out here sometimes.*

As the rain persistently continues to pound the ground, and my hands take firmer and firmer grip on the steering wheel, my mind wanders to what the future might bring. My life is about to change on multiple levels. I squint to keep the rhythm with the white and yellow stripes going in and out of my windshield and even though it's late at night, I daydream.

What will the world be like tomorrow? What might be in the news and what might popular music become in the next few years? What about ten years from now ... or twenty ... or thirty? Based on where things have come from, I imagine there are many changes ahead. A gusty wind whips the wheel and I tighten my grip again.

Mel was probably right when she said she believes her IBM man. Ten years from now when a new, better technology comes along FM radio will probably begin suffering from the same pains AM recently experienced. Digital radio, or digital music players, or digital telephones will probably

take over what people listen to most of the time.

With another gust of wind, I'm fully white-knuckled into the zone. In my mind, I actually enter into and become the future of things to come.

KOKE-FM is gone from a slow death in less than two decades, due in part to an underwhelming popularity in "Redneck Rock" following the first few Willie's Picnics and the lack of good quality music outlaws and such, and moreover due to a lack of advertising funds.

Dusty Dillon dies unexpectedly, but not before firing the Horse Doctor at four in the morning for playing the infamous song by Kinky Friedman, "The Ballad of Charles Whitman." One late Friday night/Saturday morning, (Dillon wasn't scheduled to work the morning show at six on the weekends) in the middle of the song, Dillon walks into the studio, lifts the needle off the record and tells the good doctor to get the "F" out of his station. Dillon is characteristically drunk, but that doesn't stop him from illegally taking over the controls anyway.

Ironically, Dillon is the exact same hypocrite that initially put the very satirical ballad about the '60s shootings from the UT Tower on the playlist in the first place. Dillon himself played that same weird song dozens of times in morning drive during the initial new format launch for the original KOKE-FM. That's funny to me. I didn't think we had any listeners at four in the morning other than sexy phone callers and the like ... and they seemed to all like the crazy Kinky sense of humor in the lyric. I can't help but imagine that the person who made the song request was probably Kinky himself! The song is edgy and in bad taste somewhat, but more than a decade after the actual campus tragedy, I don't see a lot of harm in the satire. It is a *sort of funny* song although musically not very evolved. It really is a compelling social snapshot.

KOKE-FM does however get reborn on another frequency some years later. It won't be until 2012 that a handful of local DJs like-minded with a long-time local talk show host named Bob Cole resurrect something similar to the old Koke format yet again.

In the time between the '70s and the new millennium, the entire Austin

market becomes owned by large out-of-town corporations—every other station besides Koke. It happens not only in Austin, but in Houston, and most cities across the nation. Syndicated programming like the Howard Stern Show from New York becomes dominant in the '80s and by the '90s the same programs can be heard in almost every market, in every town from coast-to-coast. That trend has put the kibosh on anything else that's new, as far programming is concerned, especially when you consider the radio advertising dollars of the '70s have dried up and moved on to other monster avenues like SiriusXM satellite, the internet, and social media.

It seems like the power that radio once had over the populace was somehow moved and no one in the business got notified of the new address. Worse, none of the old radio cronies were offered jobs at the new location. Everything moved with the late '80s and '90s innovations of digital formats, cell phones, and iPods. I do think it actually started with the Sony Walkman.

In the '90s people start listening to their own selections of music in their own time requirements. The '90s is when the real *demise of radio* actually begins. The whole world of music changes in the '90s. That's when the entire record recording industry completely disappears and is replaced by things with names like iTunes, Pandora, iHeartRadio, and Amazon. Just *Google Play* it. Who needs radio or record stores anymore, right?

It takes the record industry a full twenty years of financial drought and song artist apathy to recover from the predicted *digital audio* bomb. The business of selling music has to completely re-invent itself. That's not so easily done for radio. People like being in charge of the next song on the playlist. The iPhone plays every song and in the order of your personal choosing. Plus, the iPhone doesn't play eighteen minutes of commercials every hour. I worry for the Bob Cole cowboys of the future. I wonder if radio can continue to pay the bills in the decades ahead, or if it can even be re-invented at all.

Maybe the next new wave for radio is a format that's like a lot of what country bars use in the dance clubs. It keeps people staying and drinking

with a simplistic design built around beats-per-minute (BPMs). I'd like to give it a try on a forward thinking station like the new KOKE-FM where they play almost anything from Country to Dance to Rock.

When you mix by BPM the subliminal message is to *relax, enjoy, we've got all the bases covered*. Plus, you can dance from song to song without missing a beat ... and you can play just about any song from any genre; it keeps your toe tapping in a single continuous flow. I think it would make a good office music format. If you move from one song to another by inching up the beat by four to eight BMPs the flow is exceptional.

The second part of the construct (perhaps the most important part) is that you have to break up your sets at about forty-five minute intervals and start over at the bottom to keep audience interest. You can't just keep going up and up. The bar concept says you should cycle back to the bottom at certain specific times. Obviously bars are usually using this format at night, but in radio your cycles (blocks) would be somewhat different during the day than they are at midnight.

People tend to live their lives in one-hour lots. The bars learned long ago that if you break your sets on the hour, folks will finish their drink and leave; but if you break your sets at the forty-five minute marks, you have a chance to re-engage your audience, and they're more likely to buy at least one more drink, and sometimes they'll stick around for another hour or even two.

Anyway, in the grand experiment of life, I don't know if anyone has tried it on the radio, but I'd like to test the idea. I don't think most stations could do it, because it can put George Jones or George Strait right next to Billy Joel or the Eagles when you're two-stepping moderately ... and then, when you get to the higher numbers you can have Charlie Daniels fiddling right next to Billy Idol rocking-out. Frankly, I like mixing genres; I like all types of music. But what do I know about music or being a DJ, right? I'm just a lowly news hound.

Back to the future ... Radio listeners begin getting most of their news

from television by the mid '80s. Radio news becomes more of a mandated F.C.C. obligation to stations rather than an advertising dollars asset. By the '90s the same audiences migrate to getting most of their news from the internet, or Facebook, or Twitter, or something similar; and they can pick the time they want the news, and the stories they're personally interested in. The news, like music sales, gets a shot to the brain. Advertising budgets are spread infinitely thin by the ability for businesses to more accurately target their favorite demographically-analyzed individual buyer. The landscape for news and advertising campaigns in future times will be as different as night and day for everyone in the industry—including me. My expectations and aspirations have already begun to change along with the industry climate. I'm getting more cynical every day.

In the decades ahead, the old single standard for “just the facts” hard news is overwhelmed with entertainment trivia, commentary, and showboating graphical images like shock-jocking DJs often distastefully display. Serious news broadcasters, like radio itself, become less common than alternative options. Human interests take a tangent roller coaster ride with the tides on the seemingly endless ocean of change.

A good reason for my cynicism is easily represented through the history of Houston's Beltway 8 Toll Road. By 2012 Wayne Dolcefino, an undercover investigative reporter for Channel 13 in Houston, is hammering the media and politicians with the implication that Houstonians were duped into eternally paying highway tolls. Wayne's series of reports will state that, when asked if Harris County voters wanted to build the Beltway 8 road, transit authority advertising and publications promoted the idea that the tolls would become free once the cost to construct the freeway had been fully collected (predictably within five years). Twenty-three years after the toll booths opened to traffic, the toll prices have actually been increased, even though the road has been paid for twelve-fold with already coffered coins.

Dolcefino televises the archived documentation of promotional materials used when the idea for the road was originally presented to

voters seeking public approval for the sale of bonds to begin the project. The entire series is a convoluted mish-mash of twisted misinterpretations of what the promotional materials said versus what the actual voter-approved bond proposition (wording) meant. Dolcefino quotes a Harris County Judge as saying, "The language on the ballot did not say that those would become free roads. People interpreted it that way."

See what I mean? We are often led down a primrose path and allowed to think it's a free ride. It's not; not for anyone. There really is no free lunch. Roads need maintenance, costs increase over time, and you have choices. You can make the roads toll-free and allow them to decay and resign to attrition (not really a choice), you can continue to pay tolls for the road asset, or you can increase taxes for everyone in Texas who pays road taxes (including people who never use the toll lanes at all).

Absolutely, the transit authority should never have implied in a brochure that the roads would be made free when they were "paid for." However, the concept of "roads being paid for" is not a concept based in reality. The Texas Department of Transportation spends billions to maintain our public roads over many generations. We pay for that with tax money.

Days after Dolcefino's series airs, Houston commentator Peter Samuel puts the spotlight on Channel 13's integrity. I'll paraphrase his criticism of Dolcefino's criticism of the Harris County Transit Authority.

In reality Dolcefino's summation: "The next time a politician asks you to vote on something, you might want to get all the fine print in writing," is bizarre and absurd. Politicians from twenty or thirty years ago had no idea what costs would be today and, in addition to that, they are no longer in office. They are not held accountable, and they don't have to raise money for what drivers need now or for further political campaigning.

Any politician who might run now on a platform for rescinding the toll fees would face harsh criticism if not full character assassination. As long as vehicles continue pounding the pavement, hitting bridges, mashing guardrails, and throwing trash ... there will be road costs. And as long as

the scorching summer sun shines and winter frost accumulates; or until rains stop falling, winds stop blowing down road signs, and until grass never needs to be mowed ... there will be road costs. If we don't use tolls to pay for it all, then we only have a few other options: higher property taxes, a new county sales tax, or an increased gas tax; pick one; none is better than tolls.

Hoover Institution commentator, Thomas Sowell, provides some pungent words in his column. "The fact that so many successful politicians are such shameless liars is not only a reflection on them, but a reflection on us. When people want the impossible, only liars can satisfy them, and only in the short run." When the truth finally comes out, the long run is really the road you want to be driving on.

Personally, I think Dolcefino's future report is comparable to kicking a dead horse. Regardless of what the perceptions of public opinion are, the truth is what it is. Don't get me wrong, I don't endorse the misguidance of public view, but I also can't endorse complaining over spilled-milk. It just is what it is.

Every day, somewhere in America some poor air-personality schmuck will cram his foot in his mouth and get tossed off the proverbial broadcast chuck wagon. Maybe it's time to quit feeding the Dolcefinos of the world. If not that, then perhaps we should keep the infamous words of a Three Stooges sketch from the 1940s in mind. "If at first you don't succeed, suck and suck until you do succeed."

There was a time when I believed that I might someday be a senator or get into politics of some kind. After all, I'm a decent newsman. I can talk to those types of guys and make sense of what they're talking about. I've interviewed a few. I might be smart enough to be one of them. But with the advent of social media and public bashings in the court of public opinion, I've become more hesitant to put myself on the slaughtering block.

By the year 2000, my aspirations tend to avoid any public attention that might put my entire family in the line of fire drawn by public scrutiny.

Aside from the fact that you need to be rich to run, becoming a politician has lost any glint of glory in my eyes. Who in his or her right mind would want to take on that much abuse?

Corruption and abuse of power, a stagnant legal and legislative gridlock, theft and deception, and incompetent government lackeys who indoctrinate public workers are more commonly considered the norm in the twenty-first century than otherwise was historically considered acceptable. The public is becoming numb to the actual issues, and being diverted to discussions of trends or entertainment topics. The way things are, I can only *hope* that some brave soul finds a *newer/better* platform to run on without all the bashing. Maybe then we can actually get some good people in public office.

I mean, really, if I did choose to run, I would run on the platform of “Government Worker Competency Testing.” Forget demeaning and fighting political opponents; I would fight one big issue. Think about it. We have senators and representatives running our country and making our budgets who probably can’t even do simple math without a computer or calculator. We have administrators making our decisions based entirely on a “Google Search” to learn everything they think they need to know.

If you drive a truck, you have to pass a test. If you open a liquor store, you have to be qualified for the license. If you run for senator, there is *no test*! If you get a government contract to build a rocket, it’s abominable that your credentials are less important than your bid amount and your sheer willingness to accept the often hysterical specifications for the project. And yes, there are dozens of examples in history. Take Richard Nixon for one. He ran for President against Kennedy. In his first race the public saw through his appearance on TV and passed on his conventions. Then when he ran again nearly a decade later the war in Viet Nam, among other things, seemingly gave him a reason to be on top of the game. He told the people what they wanted to hear and got the job. If he had been given a truth test, the story may have ended differently.

Just give me this and I’ll stop my rant and pull off this road. If you’re made responsible for handling hundreds of people’s Social Security or IRS

income tax dollars, there's *no test* for your intellect. Shouldn't there at least be a test for math, or psychology? —Especially if you work as a FEMA or Medicare representative dealing with real lives? In the corporate world, you will most certainly need a certification for a job that impactful. It's a blatant double standard.

The common mindset is that, if a government agency is not running well, you just replace the head of the organization; and then, if he can't get the job done, replace *him*. The problem is that if you put a smart guy in the top job, and by law he can't fire anyone, he has to continue relying on the same incompetent workers that are at the core of the root problem. When did we stop firing ineffective workers? Where's the incentive for workers to not be slackers? We're paying people to do a poor job when we should just give them welfare and call them poor.

I say, put an educated man in the job and give him the authority to clean house. *Without authority no smart man in the world wants the top job in the first place.* And when you do clean house, make sure you hire replacement workers who can make the muster. I'll bet you could build a smarter, more effective government on a smaller budget than we have now. Think about it; one smart man can often do the job of two, or three, or more deadbeat dumbos. My mom says my cynicism is beginning to make me sound like "an armchair blatherer." Maybe she's right, but I vote for tests!

Give government workers and officials a test! Depending on what job they want, there needs to be an appropriate due diligence conducted regarding their qualifications for actually being able to do said job. *But that's just my two cents.* That will probably never happen. Why would senators want to lose their *licenses to run for office for life* if they fail to pass the reelection test? Just starting up the conversation is like opening a global can of worms and calling it dinner. But if they ever do give me the chance, I'll vote for worker competency testing. Take a test or take a hike!

My personal commentary and thoughts are jolted back to my present ride to Houston with another thunderbolt.

The cadence of the lightning and rain is intensifying again. *The wind is like a late summer tropical storm.* I think for a moment about pulling off to the side of the highway, but my rampant mind again pushes the present road to the back of my brain. I do ease off the gas to slow down some, but I continue on. *I'll stop for a break in Giddings. It can't be that much farther ahead,* but through the thick downpour and flashes of lightning I still can't see the lights of town. *If and when I can't see any more stripes on the pavement, I'll shut down and wait it out. Weather in Texas! Give it five minutes and it will change. Besides, it is the holiday season; it's bound to rain!* Like my old friend, Major Mac Pecan, I'm determined to not let a little rainstorm stop my personal parade.

All the problems in the future seem to point a finger in the same direction. Moving forward always seems like a good idea until you get there, where you realize you now have a whole new set of problems. When people look ahead, they always seem to see everything in black and white. "The future will look either good or bad," and you build your plans for both possibilities. The problem with that is that there are not just two potential outcomes to take into consideration. Take the sky for example.

In general, people agree that the sky is blue, right? Ask someone if the sky is blue, and they will almost always say, "Yes." They are fully aware that on some days the sky is dark and gray, or on other days the deep blue sky is actually orange, purple, red, or white. At night the sky is sometimes black. And when there's a rainbow the sky is multicolored. If the sky were only black or white, life might be based on the same principle, a double standard, but it's not. For every standard *modus operandi* there are often dozens of other possible alternatives, sometimes even millions of options, like a full-color prism spectrum. Likewise, a standard M.O. for operation when the sun is behind the clouds is necessarily different from the M.O. that's needed when the sun is down, or reflected through a blizzard or a sandstorm. I'm as guilty as anyone, I personally could be more accepting of other methods for living life. I, too, tend to get stuck in my own rutted way of thinking. For example, I think we have too many choices in the future.

In my mind, that's the thing that overwhelms public perception; too many choices, too many options. The future is the developer of all those options. People want the future, but they want the choices along the way to be simple and comfortable ... one standard is simple. Two standards, black or white, is usually a comfortable choice ... Like chocolate or vanilla in the ice cream shop, take chocolate today and vanilla tomorrow; you can always go back to either on another day. Two standards do get more complicated though, when the choice becomes a permanent selection.

When two standards force a decision, it is doubly more difficult, like when you must decide between a career and the possibility of love. Harshly, when you make a decision, you can't go back. "Decision" is taken from the Greek word "incision." To decide means to cut off other possibilities. Just two deciding standards alone can keep some people from taking the next steps in life. The fear of making the wrong decision keeps even Congress from doing many things. Apparently a natural part of being human means the more choices or decision options you have, the more you tend to get bogged down in the rationalizations, intentions, and potential ramifications.

It doesn't sound a lot more complicated, but even a simple, *triple standard* can put most people completely out of the game. Sometimes it's really hard to know for sure if you're making the right decision at the right time. I guess you really have to know yourself well, know the road you're on, and watch closely for any signs of change. I can't really talk like this in public without admitting that I still don't know enough about myself to say that I'm fully capable of managing anything at all in the real world. I still don't know if I'll do the right thing in a crisis. I too, may just do the traditional political head spin and look the other way like in the case of the young black transvestite on a somber, sobering day by the side of the road. Pretending it isn't there at all is more often than not the comfortable way of viewing something.

Hold that thought. What the heck is that up ahead? Flashing tail-lights in my lane at the bottom of the hill come into my vision so I test my

brakes to slow down. The brakes on that U-Haul trailer behind me are *little to none*. My car appropriately responds and I pump the pedal again. *I've got good traction, but the car ahead is not moving*. I slow to a gradual stop on the side of the road just before the pavement disappears into a flash-flooded dry-creek run. The highway bridge over the creek is a foot under water and a stalled car half way across the torrent is pinned to the guardrail by the current. As my Chevy touches the slippery shoulder I get a sense of just how wet the land out here has become. My car halts, but had I not seen those tail-lights in time, me and my trailer could be up to the doors in a deluge of fun right now. Lightning to the northeast illuminates the waterlogged car for a flashing moment giving me a glimpse inside the vehicle.

"Crap, there are people in there!" Oh damn, it looks like, I'm about to get wet, whether I want to or not.

I switch-on my flashers and open my door. Covering my head with a day-old newspaper from Austin I run to the water's edge and shout out over the volumes of water and raging, hammering river sound. "Is somebody in there? Can you hear me? Roll down your window and give me some kind of sign. How 'bout a thumbs-up or thumbs-down or something? Can you hear me? Are you okay? Hello. Are you alive?"

A flashlight inside the car points in my direction through the back window. I can't see anything, but the glare.

"We're here. Help us, please. Help us!" A woman cries out into the dark storm.

"How many are in there?"

"Me and my son ... We were on our way to Austin." The woman's voice is, to say the least, panicked.

"Austin? You're going the wrong direction!"

"We weren't before we hit this bridge. Please help us, mister, the water is still rising. I'm afraid to try wading out with my son."

My crack about direction seems like a good example of bad timing. I don't know why I always find humor in weird situations. I thought I had

already learned that lesson. I guess it's just always going to be my first knee-jerk reaction instinct, my natural way of coping under stress.

"Has anyone gone for help?" I shout back.

"No one else has come along," she screams.

My mind races for ideas. "Hold on! We'll get this done! I don't know what to do yet, but I'm on it. Stay put! Don't get out of the car. Hold on, I'll see what I can do!"

I know that if I go back toward Elgin, Paige was dead to the world when I passed through, and it could take twenty to thirty minutes to get to an open store or some place with a phone. Damn it, man, Giddings has to be right over that next rise, but there's no way I'm going to even try to cross this frickin' monsoon torrent. Thinking on my feet, I run back to my car for a flashlight and some flares.

I'm torn between trying to get a rope to the woman and boy in the car or trying to light the road behind me to prevent anyone else from driving into the flood. I decide that it's imperative that I light the road first or we could all get thrown in the drink. Thank goodness, I've put all of my tools and emergency supplies in the front floor board before loading my trunk with kitchenware and clothes. As I crack two flares and toss one fifty feet behind the U-Haul and another one fifty feet more up the hill, it crosses my mind that if my rope is even long enough, it's really too dangerous to have the woman and kid get out of the car. Clearly the guardrail is holding the car for the time being, but two people on foot, even with a rope could be easily swept downstream.

On the other hand, I'm pulling a trailer. My car, good as she is, can't possibly pull that car out and simultaneously back that trailer uphill at the same time. There's no way I could control the way the trailer might turn. Turning around and attempting to pull both the car and trailer on this drenched pavement would be a long shot, too. I may not have long to make a decision. By the time I return to the water's edge the wake splashing on the stricken car door has climbed another two inches or more. There's no way I can ask the hysterical woman inside to exit the

automobile with her small son and attempt to catch a rope in this dismal black darkness and pouring rain. Besides, if lightning strikes nearby with someone in that water, it will likely be the end of them in a single flash.

“Stay in the car! Keep your feet out of the water!” I can see the woman is losing control of herself when I yell in her direction.

“God help us! God take our hand! Please God, don’t take us this soon.” She’s praying at the top of her lungs.

“Put your feet up on the car seat and don’t let them get wet. I’m going to drop my trailer and see if I can get you out. Keep your feet out of the water! The lightning is dangerous if you get grounded. Stay in the seat and you’ll be fine.”

The boy is frozen and standing in the front seat, paralyzed by his mom’s terrified reactions.

I’m working to hastily crank-down my trailer hitch foot and yelling above the roar of the raging stream in unison. “Keep the boy inside the car. You stay in the car! Don’t attempt to climb out on the roof or something. Don’t touch anything metal!” I shout orders as if I’ve hired actors for a film I’m directing.

The trailer is loaded full and heavy. My arms strain under the tedious cranking, around and around, again and again. As the load shifts from my car to the trailer tongue and tandem axels I suddenly realize that I haven’t chocked the wheels. If the trailer separates from my bumper hitch without wheel chocks, she’ll promptly roll away. I shine my flashlight to the roadside in search of a small boulder or fence post I can employ. It takes another four or five minutes for me to get my car fully detached from the cumbersome load she’s so willingly towed from home.

I pull headfirst to the water’s edge knowing I’ll have the most power in reverse with the rear wheels pointed uphill and on the driest ground. My headlights are now pointed directly into the rear windshield of the stranded car, and I get a first good glimpse of the woman and child. She looks to be about thirty-five years old, petite, small, maybe a Czech or German woman; and the kid is probably around seven or eight at the most.

Neither one of them is prepared to be out here alone.

It's almost four in the morning. Shouldn't farmers and cops be on the roads soon? Giddings is famous for giving speeding tickets to out-of-towners at this time of day. Where's a cop when you need one? The DPS and sheriffs work this side of town, too. Where the hell are they, when something big is going down? Crap, what I wouldn't give to be in the future with one of those fancy iPhones right now.

Pulling forward to the water's edge, I jam the transmission into park and lean into the passenger floorboard for my coiled rope, all the while asking myself, "So, what's the plan, man?" I have no idea what I'm going to do now. I certainly don't want to get into the water myself, but I can't imagine any other way of getting my rope around the rear bumper of that "1976 Datsun Island" in the stream. I envision myself in fishing waders, but don't have any. I try to come up with something else in my mind, anything else, but I am simply running out of time. The water has come-up enough that the guardrail holding the car on the bridge begins creaking with every gust of wind. The only good thing is that the rain is easing somewhat and most of the lightning is moving farther off to the northeast.

I tie-off one end of the rope to my front frame and throw my instincts to the wind. Like a dumb-assed reporter who gets involved in the story, I step forward. I enter the water in my sneakers with no socks and brace myself against the violent current by leaning on the creaking railing. "This is crazy! Don't waste any time here, man! Get her hooked and get going. Houston is waiting." I talk myself through the ordeal every inch of the twenty-five to thirty-foot way. "God, I hope this rope is long enough!"

As I get closer to the Datsun I begin directing my personal introspection back to the two individuals in the car. "Lady, can you hear me?"

"Yes sir, I can."

"I'm going to tie you off. When I get back to my car, I'll tip my headlights twice. When I do that, I want you to shift your car to neutral. When you do that, tip your lights once and I'll try to put tension on the

rope and hope it can hold without breaking. If the rope breaks, you need to immediately put the car in park. Understand?”

“I’m scared.”

“I am too, ma’am. Can you do it?”

“Yes sir. I’ll do what you say. It sounds like the only possible thing.”

“Remember two blinks from me ... shift to neutral. Then one blink from you and be ready to go right back to park. Okay?”

“I’ve got it.”

“If you’re gonna keep praying, ask God to put some extra mojo on this old ski rope of mine.”

It takes a couple of attempts, but I finally get the rope around the bumper and tie it off tight against my car by leaning down to my chin in the deluge. Just as I get the knot in place inside the right bumper frame, a piece of floating fencepost glances off the Datsun’s quarter panel knocking out the left taillight and smacking me in the chest like a sharp kick from a poorly bred mad-assed mule.

“Ow, damn!”

“You okay, sir?”

“I ain’t dead yet, but my brain may be broken.” Struggling against the current I turn back up hill. “Got it! Okay, two blinks neutral, blink me to pull, and then pray that rope gets the job done. You ready?”

“God bless you, sir. I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.” She orders her son to sit in the seat and put on his seatbelt.

I can only hope now that the stranded car isn’t hung-up on that railing somehow. I pull myself ashore against the rope and get my butt out of that water just as quick as I can. My trusty Chevy headlights beam me directly in the eyes, blinding me all the way back to drier ground. I waste no time getting in.

“Here goes nothing.” I press the brake pedal with my left foot and shift to reverse, easing gently on the gas and praying, “God, we could use a little help right now.”

Just as I speak the words, headlights top the hills on both sides of the bridge. We haven't seen another car in more than twenty minutes and now there are four coming. One from the east; and three, one behind the other coming down the same hill I put my flares on. I can see in my rear-view mirror that they have noticed something is wrong and they are slowing down. With that assurance, I release the brake and tap my headlight switch twice with my left foot ... steadily applying pressure to the rope with my gas pedal. "Let her go, Lady!" I shout out into the wind.

Without even a jolt, the Datsun begins moving. It seems lighter than I expected. Floating in the stream, the car moves gracefully like a boat to mooring, sliding along the guardrail the way it would steer through an automated car wash ... the kind that guides a vehicle on a chain pulley system. I yell out the window, "Don't try to steer, lady. This thing's got a mind of its own."

From the three cars arriving down the hill just behind me, a total of ten people bound out of their vehicles and into the night. None of them speak a word, captivated by the scene unfolding before them. On the other side of the raging stream, the fourth car comes to a halt at the waterline and in a short moment begins flashing a police search beacon across the waters onto the Datsun. Red lights begin swirling from the top of the cop car and two officers exit their comfortably dry donut wagon to stare at the scene helplessly from the opposite shoreline.

As the Datsun inches out of the water, it becomes apparent that she's getting heavier and putting more tension on my drive train. I ease gingerly on my gas as the Datsun begins to fully touch bottom. The final six feet of the tow is the most tedious. I want to keep a smooth even pace on the backward motion, but I greatly fear, and for good reason, that the growing tension on the rope will be much more than too much strain. "We're almost there. Come on, baby, you can do it." I pat my dash with my right hand and ready myself to shift into gear. Five feet, four, three, then just as I'm two feet from having the Datsun fully extracted from the stream, snap. The rope whips into my windshield; stunning my frantically-beating wipers and making me jump like a jack rabbit in hunting season. I quickly

hit my dimmer switch several times, shift to park and stab my emergency-brake pedal.

I bound from my front seat into the glare of my headlights shouting, “Put it in park! Don’t let it go back down. Park it right there, miss ma’am.”

She does and without further concern for lightning I take three jumps into the current again and grab the handle on the driver-side door. “Give me the kid and get out here, now!”

It all seems so easy in retrospect, but I have to admit, my blood was pumping when the three of us emerged from the black water to stand on higher ground. Ten people reach out for us and being cheering and applauding. Even the cops across the creek, blip their siren twice and one of the officers barks out on their P.A. system like a voice from heaven, “Excellent job, man!”

“Yah, thanks for all the help, men! Oh God, that was a lot of tension!” I can’t help myself; I actually tear up and begin openly weeping for joy.

“Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Lord!” The petite and quite wet woman hugs me so tightly I have to catch my breath to avoid dropping the boy, who is still completely silent and in shock.

“Man, I’ve never seen this creek that high before.” One of the onlookers gathers in, “Are you guys all right?”

“I think we are now, but my mind is a little soggy at the moment. Can you check the kid?”

One of the women in the newly arriving group produces a blanket to warm the now sobbing and otherwise speechless Datsun woman.

“Damn good job, my friend; let me shake your hand!” A guy I’ve never met before wraps his arms around me like a long lost friend.

I finally spit and cough enough to realize my chest hurts a little and my shirt is bleeding. “I think I cracked a rib. Anybody got a band aid or some monkey blood?”

My resident Datsun woman laughs out loud and kisses me smack on

the lips like a pet dachshund hound.

“Oh God, woman; that was some carnival ride you put us on!”

The woman is still wildly shaken. “I thought you were some Friday night drunken nut-job when you told me that I was going the wrong direction to get to Austin. Thank the Lord you were here at just the right time. God must have put you on this road tonight. No one else had come along for ten minutes. I never saw the water. By the time I caught sight of a log floating across the highway and slammed on my brakes, it was too late; we were on skis and spinning.”

I don’t bother to let her know that I’m from the Texas home of Nut-jobs and that dumb-ass ideas are part of my DNA.

She continues sobbing, “When water started coming in the bottom of the doors, I prayed for someone like you, someone strong minded, someone who could help us. God bless you, young man, you’re a real hero. You saved our lives tonight. I don’t know how we can ever thank you. It’s a miracle you came along when you did. God bless you, son. God bless your children.”

“Lady, I haven’t been to church in more than ten years, but you took me to church tonight. *Thank you God, Thank you Jesus; Amen, Amen! Oh, Sister Amen!*”

At just that moment lightning strikes again, but much farther in the distance, and the falling rain begins to lessen considerably. Then, unexpectedly, the subsequent rumbling of thunder from the sky is suddenly joined by a crashing sound of debris on the upstream side of the bridge. The impact is able to be felt through the movement of the bridge and surrounding liquefied soil. The sound and tremor resembles a truckload of lumber in a train wreck smashing, cracking, groaning; choking free, as a gurgling massive logjam un-wedges itself from underneath the bridge and surges belching, abruptly and rapidly downstream. The bridge settles onto itself and the land responds in acceptance.

And just like that the waters disappear from above the pavement,

receding to below the muddied road bed once again. The road is opened in a mere matter of seconds and in post haste the cops cross the previously inundated bridge *that had been near three feet deep and rising*. Their lights still flashing, and the siren still bleep-bleeping, I sarcastically salute them.

“Right on time, guys! Where were you when the waters began to climb?” I’m a cocky bitch sometimes.

As I shake water from my hair, it occurs to me that there once was a time when I always respected officers of the law, but now, since one of them asked me to ignore a dead guy in a ditch, my opinion of all of them is as twisted and tattered as my broken ski rope has become. That old, bothersome double standard is something I just can’t seem to shake off so easily as rain. Albeit right or wrong, that thought and tonight’s torrents have permanently changed who I am. It’s intimidating how just one enduring thing can forever change everything.

EPILOGUE



It takes the better part of two hours for me to relax and gather myself enough to put my car and trailer back together so I can get back on the road again. By the time I get past the next hill, the sun is climbing over the eastern horizon and the lights of Giddings are shining as brightly as if there had never been any storm at all. *Texas weather, you've gotta love it.*

Sometime over the next twenty years, I'll bet that bridge gets replaced by a taller one.

As I ease back into driving mode and plan a restroom break to grab a chocolate mocha coffee at the Quick Stop in town, I switch the radio on again. KLBJ is a clear channel once more and pounding out the hit song from Boz Scaggs—"Breakdown Dead Ahead," which seems uncanny. It's Saturday and Melamie is working. I pat my dashboard to the rhythm and anxiously wait to hear her *sweet thang* voice on the air again. At the fade of the song she comes on.

"Good morning, Austin, it's 5:55 a.m. and this is the news and information this hour on KLBJ-FM. I'm Melamie Masters."

"Deadly flooding and torrential rains covered much of Central Texas overnight. We'll have a full team report on all the weather-related developments in a moment, but we begin this hour with breaking news."

"Overnight sources at the offices of the Texas Rangers have informed KLBJ that Travis County Sheriff, Preston Bank, and three of his deputies have been ordered immediately removed from office by the State Attorney

General pending an investigation of allegations of corruption and flagrant misappropriation of county resources and assets. The Texas Rangers' Crime Investigation Organization's, Captain Bill Sadler tells KLBJ that evidence has been provided to the state's attorney that constitutes misuse of county-owned vehicles and possible cover-ups involving the deaths of half a dozen known prostitutes and drug kingpins."

"Woo, frickin' hoo! We did it, Miss Mel! We caught the devil building bonfires in his cozy little den! Yah, girl!" I'm elated, "You gotta love that shit, baby! Congratulations, Melamie Masters, you just cracked your first hard-boiled egg in town ... damn proud of you, girl!"

I nearly pee myself before I can get to a restroom and make a call to the hotline, but I'm still in celebration mode when Mel picks up the phone. "Hot damn, pretty thang, you just made the entire state of Texas proud of itself again. God love you, Mel, you da bad bitch in town now!"

"You heard that? Where are you? I thought you'd be in Houston by now."

"I'm in Giddings. Want an overnight storm report for your next weather edition?"

"Weather schmeather, I'm bouncing off the walls right now. Do you believe what just happened?" Mel is clearly exuberant and deservedly proud of her achievement.

"I hope you got that last newscast on tape. Put that in your purse, and get a free ticket to anywhere you want to go in the country for the next five years. You did it, babe! You made the big time—and damn you, you beat me there by three full days, girl ... Woo-hoo, you do your daddy proud, miss ma'am."

"I know. I just got off the phone with him. I woke him up ... It's four a.m. in Washington, but he was cheering loud enough to wake up horses in Texas. God, Bryant, I'm so proud of us. We did it, Mr. Herman. Thank you—thank you—thank you. I'll owe you one forever, you handsome crazy man."

We spend only a few more minutes celebrating, because the news and

weather must go on, but, to me, it is one of the greatest telephone conversations of a lifetime.

“What kind of weather report do you have? Did you get stuck in the mud or run off the road or something?” Mel begins to gain some control over her adrenaline.

I give her a three-sentence briefing stating that I’m freelance and not under contract with any other station right now! She interrupts me to say, “I’ve got tape rolling! Give me your report in three, two, one, punch.”

I narrate my story detail in the third person, as if I had been simply watching events unfold and not actually participating in them. *Just the facts ma’am*, ending with the paragraph:

“Giddings police officers say a debris dam blocking water-flow beneath the bridge of a normally dry creek bed is to blame for the Highway 290 road closure in both directions during the early morning hours just east of Paige today. Thirty-five-year-old Austin resident, Mary Klepac, and her seven-year-old son Mike were treated and released by EMS at the scene with minor scratches and bruising after their car was towed from the center of the bridge in near three feet of water by a passing motorist. Klepac told police that she credits the complete stranger with saving both her and her son’s lives.”

I wrap the report with, “That’s the overnight weather graphic from here this morning. Bryant L Herman, on assignment for Melamie Masters and KLBJ in Giddings. Woohoo! Hey, Mel edit that the way you need ... my pants are still wet, and for some weird reason I’m acting a little giddy. I’m sure you don’t want your name in the tag, but I just like saying it.”

“I was so worried about you last night. Those storms blew through town and kept me awake until two in the morning. Thank God you’re okay. You are okay, right? You sick daredevil.” Mel is genuinely concerned.

“Yes, mom ... I think I bruised a rib, but my pride is still quite fully intact. Adrenaline is a powerful drug. Have a great day, Mel. I’ll call you after we both get home. Tell your dad that we both appreciate his support

and excellent advice. Tell him that I would like to meet him some day down the road and firmly shake his equestrian hand for raising such a fine specimen of a woman, with both horse sense and beauty.”

Mel is touched. I can hear it in her voice. “I guess you can finally forget that internal conversation you have about yourself, and whether or not you would do the right thing in a life and death situation. You’re an official true blue hero now, mister. You proved yourself. I LOVE you, Bryant L Herman! But, get some galoshes next time, genius!”

“I think you know how I feel about you, Melamie. Do you think I need to say it in literal terms here on the phone? I’d rather show you just exactly how I feel in person next time I see you again. I will see you again.”

“I don’t think there’s anything I’d rather hear more right now, sir.”

“I’ve loved you since the very day and minute you first called me sir, Mel. Always have, always will.”

I never expected to feel so relieved to be able to say something out loud.

“I miss you already, Miss Melamie Masters. I’d kiss you all over if I were right there with you in that little-bitty isolation booth you’re stuck in. I can assure you that between the two of us we could steam up that microphone enough that it would completely stop talking for at least a week or more. Bye-bye for now. Stay sweet.”

“Ride that bull, cowboy!”

And again, at least for the time being, she’s gone once more—never to be forgotten.

West of Giddings I lose her signal and dial into the station that I’m going to work for in Houston. The sound is powerful. The commercials sound like they cost thousands of dollars more per spot than any of the top ads in Austin. If you’re listening from one market to the next one, the difference in professionalism between the small town of Austin and the big city of Houston is a leap in polar-opposite direction (that magnetic snap effect I like to compare life to).

Sure, they have fake cowboys in Houston, just like in Austin! However, the media is all slicked-up with smoke-and-mirrors; the larger market has a lot more flash. The difference in sound between the Austin and Houston radio stations is like night and day, and after last night, it's nice to have the sun beaming down on me once again.

Sighing relief, I'm impressed with the notion that the proverbial standard for local broadcasting is as far apart as black and white with a double rainbow in the middle of the spectrum. In Austin fake cowboys wear faded jeans and work boots. In Houston fake cowboys wear pleather pants and pointed-toe leopard-print boots. Well, that's a bit of an exaggeration and more like a comparison to Los Angeles, but you get the idea.

The adrenaline pumping in my veins or something has me on a natural high. Maybe it's the fact that I just may have actually saved two lives. Maybe it's that, between me and Mel, we together beat the sheriff at his own evil game. I guess I can forget about writing that book about injustice (at least for now). I owe a big kiss to Debra Wright for that feeling. But maybe, just maybe *I've never been this high before* simply because Mel said *she loves me*. Whatever it is, it's a beautiful start to a new day in a much *bigger and betcha* way.

I can't wait to get to Houston to interview an astronaut. Maybe I'll get to meet Houston Oilers' Quarterback Dan Pastorini, or Coach Bum Phillips. I'm sure I'll see ex Longhorn running back and 1977 Heisman Trophy winner, Earl (Tyler Rose) Campbell, again. Last time I interviewed him at Royal Memorial Stadium in Austin, I had a twenty-nine-inch waistline and Earl had twenty-nine-inch thighs. My old DJ friend, Jim Travis, said once that I was "so thin that one day when I turned sideways, I disappeared for twenty minutes." I guess it pays to be skinny when the flood waters of life are crashing in on you.

Man I love my job. "I'm off to the races again!"

Then within the next short twenty minutes of daydreaming and celebratory exaltation, everything in my life that I believe to be stable and

finally within my control once more, abruptly changes. The Houston music programming is interrupted with a bulletin. The lead line is completely unnerving.

“This just in from Austin. Police report a hostage situation at a downtown radio station where a gunman is demanding that he be allowed to tell his side of a recently-broadcast news story. Initial details are sketchy, but it appears that a report this morning about the suspension of the Travis County Sheriff is being refuted by a man claiming to be the son of the sheriff. According to KLBJ in Austin, Texas Rangers announced earlier today that Sheriff Preston Bank and several of his officers are being suspended pending the investigation of possible corruption and conspiracy to cover up certain sheriff’s department activities. That report is now being contested by a gunman claiming to be twenty-year-old Roger (Paxton) Bank. Austin police and SWAT teams have surrounded the building which is located two blocks from the state capitol. Normal broadcast programming has been discontinued at FM rock music station KLBJ and it is reported that two employees of the studios owned by former President, Lyndon Baines Johnson are being held at gunpoint. The *Associated Press* is reporting that police and other media were alerted to the intrusion at the studio by a cleaning woman who reported that she escaped from the back door as the gunman entered the station control room when he was allowed into the studios by posing as a delivery driver for Mrs. Johnson’s Bakery, a popular donut shop. One DJ announcer and one newswoman remain in the building and are said to be the only weekend staff on duty at the present time. We’ll have more information as soon as it becomes available.”

Without any hesitation, I immediately turn my car into the first gas station and begin to fill my tank. While the pump is running, I rush to the front counter to ask the proprietor if I can park my trailer at the back of his lot, saying, “I have to get back to Austin as quickly as possible, an emergency has come up. I’ll pick up the trailer in a day or so!”

The gas station manager nods his approval and says, “We’re not responsible for theft.”

“Thanks, man, I’ll get back as soon as I can. I’ll put a padlock on the hitch and door.”

In a small wide spot in the road between Giddings and Brenham, I race to unhook my load at the Carmine Aggie Stop and haul ass back toward Austin. I have no idea what I plan to do when I get there, but I’m not slowing down now. There’s only one thing on my mind. That female reporter is Melamie and I’m nauseatingly positive that it’s partly my fault that she’s now in big trouble.

All the way back through Giddings I sweat the thirty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit and frantically try to once again tune in the KLBJ signal. The frequency is silent, and that’s more disturbing to me than any dead air that I’ve ever experienced before. Back and forth across the band, I search for some static or something, all the while praying that the local cops don’t decide to make an unusually timely appearance in my back window as I blow the Main Street traffic light and bottom out across the railroad tracks running across the highway. I hit the outskirts of town and open up on the highway at eighty. I’m sorry; I just can’t drive fifty-five.

I’m infuriated with my own results from this unexpected outcome of the sheriff’s story. I thought I had considered all possible circumstances. I had contemplated a situation where the sheriff’s office might take some retaliation into their own hands by putting pressure on anyone in the media who appeared to be snooping into their business, but I never dreamed of the sheriff’s nut-bag son making a scene. From what I know about Paxton Bank, he’s not considered entirely stable, but generally thought of as harmless. He’s been jailed a time or two on drug charges and, like Debra said, was implicated in connection with the gay community, but what can he possibly believe he’s going to help by getting into the limelight?

Thirty minutes out of Austin I get my first insight from Melamie herself. The ‘til-now silent KLBJ airwaves come alive again with her voice. Thank God, she’s still okay! Her cadence and choice of words are carefully measured.

“This is KLBJ, ninety-three point seven FM, Austin, Texas, my name

is Melamie Masters. Our morning programming has been interrupted with late breaking news. Our DJ and Saturday Morning Show host, *Buckwheat* has become incapacitated with a nine millimeter gunshot wound to the abdomen. He is breathing, but unconscious and in serious condition. I am otherwise alone in the studios with the gunman, a twenty-year-old man who is demanding that this station allow him access to our airwaves so he can clarify a recent story in the news. Although it is our policy to not air opinion or threatening mandates, I am being held at gunpoint and not in present communication with other authorities or station management. I've been told by the individual with the gun that his nickel-plated Smith & Wesson has sixteen more rounds in the magazine and that he has taken PCP and will shoot anyone who tries to enter our studios or me if I fail to comply with his ultimatum to grant him air time. This man, wearing a Black Sabbath tee-shirt, jeans, and rattlesnake boots has forced me into the main control room where I will now open the microphone to what he has to say. He says his name is Paxton Bank and that he is the son of Travis County Sheriff, Preston Bank."

Melamie pauses. "Mr. Bank when I throw this switch, you will be on the air. Please take your time and say whatever you feel that you need to say."

And then KLBJ goes silent again. *Damn!* I know exactly what she's done. Melamie has thrown the booth switch to take her and the gunman off the air. She's smart. She's just given enough information to authorities for them to know the situation, but she's upholding her ethical and moral obligation to follow station protocol. She's not going to air the gunman's demands.

I can only hope that Bank is not smart enough to realize that the signal has been interrupted and that no matter what he says, even though the lights are blinking and the needles are jumping, his words are not getting out of that room. I'll bet my life that Melamie has a tape recorder running in the other room, though.

When I enter the alley between Congress and Brazos behind the station, my car is immediately flagged to a halt by several men in black, with

SWAT rifles and helmets. I'm emphatically ordered out of the vehicle. "Show me your hands. Hands in the air! Face the car!" I do not argue. I comply with the officers' insistence.

Above me on every building top are snipers with high-powered scopes pointed directly at my head. Near the rear entrance of KLBJ, the alley is choked with flashing police lights, three ambulances, and a throng of troopers, deputies, and cops of every kind. A swarm of gathering media vehicles lines the streets in every direction, up and down Ninth and Tenth Streets. All of downtown is at full attention. "Hands on your head!" For a short moment in time, I'm petrified as a group of cops cluster around me and urgently begin to frisk me.

"I'm clean. I'm Bryant L Herman; I'm a friend of Melamie Masters. Don't shoot. I'm a newsman."

"Herman, you prick. Are you trying to get yourself shot, boy?" One of the sergeants recognizes me.

"What's happened? How's Mel, have you heard anything from her yet?" I'm breathing as fast as my heart is beating.

"Get down over here!" The sergeant motions me behind a trash dumpster alongside Leslie Johnson, aka Bart Max, the KLBJ weekday Zoo host, who is pacing back and forth and butting his head on the wall like a cornered mule deer.

"You're Bryant Herman?" he affirms.

"Yes, that's me." I immediately begin to drill him, "Has anyone talked to Mel? Is she still in there?"

"No one has heard anything since her last broadcast about half an hour ago. I'm Bart Max."

"Nice to meet you, I recognize you from your promo pics. Is anybody planning to go in there?" I don't stop drilling.

"Bank won't let her talk on the phone, but she left the back door intercom switch open. The cops told me they can still hear him talking. Paxton thinks he's on the air. They haven't heard any gunfire. We think

she's still interviewing him as if it's a live press conference." Bart diddles his thin boyish moustache and cranks the volume-up on a portable transistor radio in his blue-jean shirt pocket.

"Still nothing from the transmitter?" I ask.

"Nope. Dead frickin' air!" Bart bellyaches.

Then like a clap of thunder bang, bang, bang ... bang; four shots ring out and glass from the second floor studio window smashes onto the alley pavement below, some fifty yards from us. Troopers storm the back door of the station and some fifteen or more cops rush into the building.

"Stay put." The sergeant barks at me and Bart while running forward to cover the advancing officers who've hastened inside.

I pay him no never mind. I immediately trot behind the sergeant to the KLBJ back door where amid the chaos Melamie suddenly appears with a ghostly white blank stare on her face and that little pee-shooter derringer in her left hand.

I break into a full run through the stampede of first responders and throw my arms around her. "Miss Mel, are you having a weird whacky day, ma'am?"

Before she can respond, we're swarmed with officers prying the gun from her hand and her from my grip. We're both swept away in a wave of armored human bodies and dire personal emotions.

"Bryant." Mel lurches from her bodyguards and throws herself to me. "I was so scared, but I tried to keep calm and do like you always say, *report just the facts*. God, I'm glad to see you."

"Are you hurt? Are you shot?"

"No, but I almost *shot him* right between his beady snake eyes. He shot Buckwheat, I wasn't sure if Buckwheat would survive." Her firm exterior drops like a veil from a work of art and she openly sobs. "Buckwheat was unconscious, and when he came-to, he went for Paxton's feet and pulled off one of the bastard's creepy-assed rattlesnake boots ... Paxton tripped and started popping off rounds. I thought I'd have to shoot him, but before

I could he did it for me, he turned the gun on himself!”

Four ambulance attendants surround us, “Can you walk, ma’am?”

“Yes, I’m not hurt.” Mel continues to reach out for me.

“Come with us, everything’s okay now; we’ll take care of you.” The medics lead her to one of the waiting ambulance vans.”

“Bryant! Stay with me ... I need you beside me.”

“I’m not going anywhere else in the world, Mel. I couldn’t get here fast enough ... I’m damned sure not going anywhere now!”

“That son of a bitch ate donuts like it was Sunday brunch. Can you believe that? He just sat there and ate donuts.”

The medics finally step aside enough to allow me to engulf her. I cradle her like a child. “It’s all over now, Mel. I love you so much! I’m so proud of you, sweetheart! You were like a rock. Thank God, I’ve still got you. I was scared, too ... Scared of losing you.” I’m unable to contain the emotional drain any longer and begin to weep with her and we tremble in each other’s arms as the ambulance revs its siren out onto the downtown streets.

When we arrive at the Brackenridge Hospital emergency room veteran *Statesman* reporter, Wes Landers is first in line to meet us. Right behind our arrival another ambulance blares in with Buckwheat who is immediately rushed past us and into an operating room.

“Take all the time you want, Miss Masters, but I’d like to visit with you when I can. I know how much you may hate it, but I’m afraid you’re going to make the Sunday paper tomorrow morning.” Landers looks me up and down and winks at me with a slanted grin. “Herman, you ole hound dog, are you trying to scoop me on this one?”

Mel laughs, “Landers ... Bryant L Herman scooped me a long time ago. He’s my man!”

That night I phone a report into my new station in Houston and tell my news director that I’m being asked to stay in Austin for a few days to answer some Texas Ranger questioning. He tells me that I’ll have a job

waiting for me if I'll just keep him informed and file a story now and then, in the meantime. He also wants to hire Mel, but that's another story. Melamie is wanted by everyone, everywhere. The tape she made of Bank in the control room makes national news for days and courtroom drama for months to come.

Landers does get the morning byline for the front page story in the Sunday *Statesman*. "Twenty-Year-Old Paxton Bank Confesses—Commits Suicide."

Wes's two-page article hits all the high points. Paxton Bank admitted to helping dispose of the body of Turcel Williams in 1972. Bank further confessed to having a relationship with the then nineteen-year-old transvestite/bi-sexual Williams and admitted that he also had a gay lover, Chris Jenkins, who became jealous and killed Williams. In the tape Mel recorded in the KLBJ studio, Paxton Bank said he had borrowed his father's county-owned vehicle while the elder Sheriff Bank was asleep, and that he had found his father's service revolver in the glove box.

Although Paxton never confessed to the killing, it was later revealed in courtroom testimony by his reported lover, Chris Jenkins that it was Jenkins who had had the affair with Williams and that Paxton Bank, in a jealous rage shot the black bi-sexual. I suppose only Williams and Paxton know for sure how things really went down, and they've taken that information to the grave.

Paxton Bank had wanted news reports linking the death of the transvestite to a sheriff's office cover-up to be set straight. Paxton declared that his father never had anything to do with any of it, and that the only thing Sheriff Bank tried to cover-up was the fact that his son was gay.

Of course Sheriff Bank is still held accountable by the court for the fact that his department was ordered not to investigate the death of Williams. Debra Wright and I myself testified toward that outcome.

Debra is still a journalist and a broadcast news director in Atlanta, Georgia. She won the following year's Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting for her part in bringing the story out into the open.

I took a couple of weeks off after the initial investigation unfolded. Mel and I did finally dance at the Mayor's Christmas Ball that year. And, believe me, I've never felt more proud to twirl a girl. *No doubt about it*, that gal sure can dance!

Mel has since changed her air name. She no longer calls herself Melamie Masters. It's now Melamie Masters-Herman. I still love her like a "country rock" and I go home to her and Austin every weekend, for now, until the day when she'll probably take my job, or even something better. For the time being she no longer works weekends and has one of those cushy five-day-a-week *good gigs*.

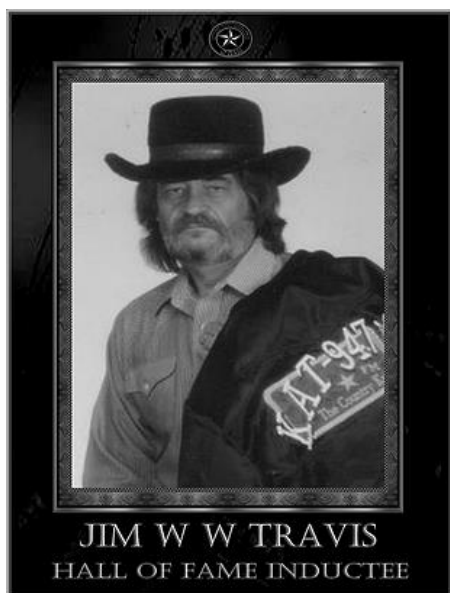
Mel and I stay in touch with Debra. We talk often; and we all still spend a lot of time taking a close look at standards, double-standards, and the ever elusive *simple* triple standard we sometimes come across around town.

Of course, given that the ultimate triple standard hinges on the human values of "mind, body, and soul," we've all learned that understanding any of it is not always that simple.

Appendix A: Tribute to Trav

Jim WW Travis (Broadcast BIO: 1959-2007)

A Man of Words: 5/17/1940 to 10/4/2013 (ten-four 2013) — Austin 2015



Country Music Association of Texas

When asked what the “WW” stands for, Jim quipped, “Wacka Wacka, of course.” No one knows what that means *literally*, but it gives us a sense of Jim’s off-beat humor and flippant view of the world. Urban Dictionary says, “*Wacka Wacka* is the sound when *Pacman* is moving through the video game.” Of him moving through life, Jim supposed, “If it wasn’t for my idiosyncrasies, I’d be fairly close to normal.” Statements like that one just about sum up Jim’s entire forty-eight year career in broadcasting. Just short of his golden anniversary on radio Jim recalled, “The day I finally got my ducks in a row, somebody shot ‘em.”

Jim Travis Dean was nineteen years old when he started his radio career at KBHS in Hot Springs. He was a disc jockey for the original KOKE-FM in Austin; and after moving to San Antonio became the morning

DJ for KBUC Radio. Famously, Jim moved to Austin to jock at the *Country Giant* KVET-AM and aired his witty laundry on KVET (off-and-on) for seventeen years, ultimately teaming up with Sammy Allred (The Goose of the Geezinslaws) and the (Afternoon Delight) Penny Reeves. While a DJ in Austin, *Trav* owned Kicker Jim’s Nightclub and traveled with his famous MUSIC MACHINE under the moniker, “I have been to more weddings than most preachers.”

Jim Travis also worked at KXOL in Fort Worth, and in the early 1990s he teamed up with a new personality, his wife JO Mama (Jo Travis). Together they worked at Austin’s KAT Radio and Round Rock’s KICK 92 FM where he was known as “Ranger Jim.” Other air names he invented for himself were: *The Snipe Warden*, *Sassafras*, & *Tumblebug Travis*; among a dozen or more others.

In his near fifty year radio career, Jim was on the air in many large and medium markets including: New York City, KWKH-Shreveport, La.; and even in Kentucky, where he was presented with the title of “Kentucky Colonel.” Jim also served as Program Director and/or Music Director at a number of his alma mater stations. In January 2013, he was inducted into the Texas CMA Radio DJ Hall of Fame—an honor he so rightfully deserves and which was given to him toward the end of life. What a way to go!

Jim's sarcastic sense of humor and his ability to tell whopping great stories will be greatly missed by everyone who ever listened to him or knew him. He truly was a master of words and slang. His astute word smithing can be described in the way he (*atypically; his standard M.O.*) reported the weather on a day when it had rained torrents for two weeks in Central Texas.

"Everything is *leaking*... the roof is *leaking*, the window is *leakin'*, my boots are *leaky*; heck, even one of my truck tires *leaks*—the weatherman says we'll all probably get *leaked on* for another few days. —Austin has *leakage*, Georgetown *leaks*, and Round Rock is *leaky* and sixty-eight degrees—I guess we all need it, though. As a matter of fact, if you get the chance this afternoon, step outside, and take a *leak* for yourself."

That's just how his brain worked.

Jim Travis also was the catalyst behind many radio careers for dozens of announcers that he helped and encouraged throughout the years.

Acknowledgments



Bobby Davis — Died on the Air in 1973 at KLBK, Lubbock
Bob Cole — KOKE-FM, Austin
Buddy Sadler — 50 yrs. Broadcast News, Nashville
Derrill Holly — Texas Radio Hall of Fame Inductee & Washington DC Journalist
Eileen Pace — NPR Anchor, San Antonio
(Harry) Jay Levine — Hollywood Sound Editor — Emmy Winner, Los Angeles
Jerry Jeff Walker & Family — Retired, Belize
Jim WW Travis aka: *Ranger Jim, The Snipe Warden* — RIP across the south in AK & TX
Joe Ladd — Retired Texas Radio Hall of Fame and CMA Hall of Fame, Houston
Kinky Friedman — Still *Kinky*, Anywhere He Wants to Be
Peter Samuel — Commentator, Houston
Ric Gilzow — *Legit* Day-Trader, Nashville
Steve Garrett aka: Bob Bennett — *Large Living* near retirement, Corpus Christi
Steve Weldon aka: *The Horse Doctor* — *Too Country for Country*, CA
Wayne Dolcefino — Investigative Reporter, Houston
Willie Nelson — *Never Gives Up*, Everywhere

Additional Credits:

Capital of Texas Chapter — Alzheimer's Association — www.alz.org/texascapital
Texas State Library and Archives Commission Talking Book Program — www.tsl.texas.gov
John Glen's Gemini Capsule, The Smithsonian Museum — Washington DC
Michael Fairchild's Old Dodge Truck & My Old '62 Chevy Impala,
Wherever They Are—Bullet holes and all.