

# One

There is nothing more pathetic than the sight of a bunch of inebriated journalists bitching the night away after work. Unlike most of them I had a home to go to and children to play with. From time to time I forced myself to make an appearance at some of these bitch-fests to keep up my credibility in front of my illustrious scribbling colleagues. So that night I joined them at Dirty Dick's near Liverpool Street Station to prove to them I wasn't as stuck up as they thought, and could hold a pint or two. I even took part in some bitchy banter to show them I could be one of them.

I joined the *Financial Review* a couple of weeks before Tom. The editor always hired youngsters in twos in case one of them failed their probation period. I looked after engineering and mining while Tom wrote about pharmaceuticals. Tom arrived late on his first day, wearing a reefer coat, polo neck and a five-day stubble. In his hand was a large canvas duffel bag. He was around six foot in height, heavily built and had reddish hair with a fashionable quiff. I was slightly shorter, slimmer and already seeing my mousy hair thinning at the temples.

He'd come straight from Weymouth, direct from his yacht. Yes, he owned his own forty-foot ketch at the age of twenty-seven. I was two years older and all I owned at that time was a second-hand Ford Fiesta.

Storms in the Channel had apparently delayed his arrival. Charles, our editor, didn't seem to mind a tiny bit. In fact, he was damn right paternal towards Tom, asking him questions about his boat and how many days it took him to sail from the South of France. I couldn't hear everything, but they looked so relaxed in

each other's company. Then Charles brought Tom over to where I was sitting to show him his desk, which was juttied up against mine.

Tom and I stretched over the desks and shook hands. Just a cursory glance at each other, although I couldn't help but notice his dazzling blue eyes. My wife would have killed to have a pair like those. She never thought much of mine, a sort of muddy brown.

Charles was coasting towards retirement, and did everything without any sense of haste. He was a tall willowy man with a prominent forehead full of socialist ideas, swept back grey hair and a matching Karl Marx beard. Charles always wore an old moth-bitten cardigan in the office and would fidget with his glasses, whirling them in his hand like a parade flag when throwing out new ideas or sucking on them when deep in thought.

'I'll leave you in the good hands of Martin, who can show you where everything is,' he said, pointing the arm of his specs around the room. 'Come over to my office around twelve-thirty, and I'll take you out for a spot of lunch.'

Charles always bought the new boys (and girls) lunch on their first day. I would have gone to mine on my first day had there not been a bit of a crisis at home. My wife, Pippa, had rung me in a hysterical state to say that she'd pranged the car, and from my panicked reaction Charles offered to take me out on another occasion. Of course, he never did.

From that morning, Tom became known in the office as Popeye because of his nautical entrance. He seemed to like it. Even when Bunker, the office dogsbody,

randomly sang out the cartoon's theme tune, along with all the sound effects, it didn't upset him. Charles never called him Popeye, and neither did I.

It was a bit of a balancing act, bringing the drinks back from the bar. I had to leave some behind on the counter as I was frightened to spill them on my tan corduroy jacket, a bargain Pippa had picked out for me at a local charity shop. But as I approached our office encampment, I could see Linda and Jenny patting Tom's back. Charles was also there, smiling. He must have arrived when I was at the bar buying a round for everyone. Then more pats on the back from Faisal and Bill.

'What have I missed?' I asked, unloading the drinks into grateful hands.

'Charles has just given Popeye the industrial correspondent's job,' said Linda, a pint-sized woman who was not to be messed with because of her sharp tongue. She was in her early thirties and thought she could fool everyone about her height by wearing long flares over her multi-storey platforms.

After taking a sip from her glass, she looked up at me and said, 'The sod.'

I wasn't too sure whether she was referring to Charles or Tom. 'Congrats Tom,' I shouted over the heads of the others surrounding him. He didn't hear me.

I turned to the bar to get the rest of the drinks when Charles offered to give me a hand. When we reached the bar, I remembered I hadn't bought him a drink because he'd arrived late, presumably to tell Tom the *good* news.

'What will you have?' I asked.

'Martin, it was a close thing between you and Tom, but on balance I thought he'd give more time to the job,' he said, tilting backwards and looking down at me, his glasses resting on his forehead like an Alice band. 'Imagine attending all those

union meetings, conferences, door-stepping ministers and bosses, CBI jamborees, strikes that could go on for weeks on end. You'd have to give up your home life completely to spread yourself around, you know. And you are doing such a marvellous job in mining, why spoil a winning formula, I told myself – I'll have a Scotch, by the way. Make it a double, we're celebrating.'

I just had enough change in my pocket for the whisky and followed Charles back to the pack, careful not to spill a drop, handing out the remainder of the drinks.

Then I raised my glass and gave a toast to the new industrial correspondent.

When I reached home I broke the news to Pippa that we'd have to put on hold any ideas of moving to a bigger flat with the twins.

'I thought you said the interview went well, and that he liked your ideas of more profiles on industries and the people behind them,' she said, taking my plate out of the oven. Some sort of risotto with sprigs of burnt broccoli.

Pippa was in her pyjamas that made her look like a six-year-old. Her auburn hair was in need of a wash and her face looked tired. The twins were already in bed, but she still had some marking to do.

'Charles was very nice about it,' I said, with my mouth half full. 'He said the correspondent's job wouldn't have suited me, and I distinctly got the feeling he's lining me up for something more senior.'

'That sounds exciting. Managing the office, you think? Because that would pay well, wouldn't it?'

'I think Tom is a bit pushy. So Charles had to please him in some way. It's the perfect job for him really as he hates being in the office. Our last industrial

correspondent, Trevor, hardly ever visited the office. He just lived out of a suitcase. His hotel expenses were legendary.'

The risotto was as dry as sawdust, but it helped soak up the alcohol. Cooking wasn't Pippa's thing. I swallowed another forkful and said, 'I know you don't like Charles, but he's been straight with me. He's right, the industrial correspondent's job is a young man's job.'

'You're only a couple of years older than Tom.'

'But he's footloose and fancy-free.'

'Meaning?' Pippa's eyes were fixed on mine, waiting for some sort of retraction.

'Nothing,' I mumbled. 'Family always comes first.'

'As long as you don't think I'm holding you back.'

I shook my head.

'But we do need the money, Martin, if we're ever to get out of this place.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'You shouldn't take it lying down. You should prove to Charles that you're better than the likes of Tom, or otherwise you'll be looked over when another job comes up.'

'You really think so?'

'Just leave the dish in the sink and come to bed when you've finished.' She pecked my cheek, and moved towards the door.

'I thought you were going to do some marking.'

'I'm too whacked out.'

I didn't follow her to bed as I wasn't particularly sleepy and switched on the TV to watch Sky News instead. But my mind kept wandering back to the industrial correspondent's job. Not getting that promotion was a serious setback to my career because I needed it as a stepping stone to landing the big one – that plum job in journalism we all dreamt about but could never quite define.

I'd never bothered to look up anyone I'd worked with before, but that night I felt an extraordinary urge to do so on my laptop. This was the start of my obsession with Tom de Lacy.

All his bylines popped up on the screen, both from the *Review* and his previous mag as well as sites he'd worked on. Articles about drug companies mostly, deals, product news and the ubiquitous *People and Places*. I skimmed through them, paying little attention to them. His writing style was very laboured and stilted. The intros were frankly limp, and my God was he verbose. His writing had become much better since joining the *Review*, mind. Shorter, neater sentences that got straight to the point. But I have to say, his writing was in no way better than mine. No competition really. Pippa was right: I shouldn't just take this on the chin.

While I continued to scroll down the page I noticed there was something on a Sir Meredith de Lacy. Any relation to Tom? Sir Meredith was chairman of the brokerage firm, De Lacy Lang; married to Mary Theobald, granddaughter of the great Arctic explorer Peter Theobald. Lived in Hampshire, sat on various charities; hobbies included: painting, writing choral pieces, climbing, sailing, flying, half-marathons, motor rallying, parachuting, martial arts, *fighting bears, swallowing swords, riding bulls bareback*. Oh, and one son, Tom – journalist *and sailor*.

Poor Tom, he had a lot to live up to. My world and Tom's world were quite different.

## Two

The *Review* belonged to Flycatcher Publishing, a ragtag group renowned for chasing its own tail. Its business model was based on snapping up financial publications with plenty of industry data that could be sold online. They'd sack two-thirds of the staff, then ditch the paper product for a website based service, tabulating all the statistical data ready for readers to download on screen.

Sometimes the acquisitions worked and sometimes they didn't. The problem was that people didn't have time to go online, they wanted something to jog their memory to do so, such as an email newsletter, or better still a magazine they could hold during a coffee break or read on the train when going home, avoiding the hassle of using passwords altogether. Only Flycatcher had burnt its bridges and couldn't go back to paper because it didn't pay as they had lost more readers in the process of going online. No matter which route you took – paper or electronic – it would invariably end up in a vicious downward spiral if you didn't have the right type of title.

The *Review* didn't fit in at all with Flycatcher's thinking. It was a proper financial magazine found on the newsstand, quoted occasionally by other papers and Radio Four's *Today* programme. It was acquired by the previous owners as a flagship title, a golden goose that would subsidise lesser titles in their stable of publications.

'I'm afraid I'm being forced to make some cutbacks, Martin,' said Charles, waving his glasses from the little finger of his right hand.

*Holy crap.*

'Don't worry, Martin. You're not one of the casualties, really.'

*Really? What did that mean?*

'I'm letting go Linda, Bill and Faisal. They've already been told. But with Linda and Bill gone, that leaves us with only Jeremy as sub -'

*Where's he going with all of this?*

'- I want you to help out Jeremy.'

'I can't report on mining and engineering as well as sub-editing everyone's copy,' I replied.

'Correct. That's why I want you to just sub.'

'Who will be writing on mining?'

'It was always a marginal sector for us, Martin -'

*Marginal? Marginal? I've spent years building up our contacts and coverage. How can he dismiss it like that after telling me I was so marvellous in the job? A winning formula?*

'- The thing is, Martin, there is no one else.'

'What about Tom?' *Your precious Tom with the huge yacht.*

Charles put his glasses on the table. 'That would be a waste of resources. You've seen the stuff he's been digging up lately on government plans to reform union laws. He even beat the nationals. The board upstairs loves the publicity -'

*Well done, Tom.*

'- So can I have your answer as my hands are tied on this one,' said Charles, looking at me without blinking.

'Can I think about it?'

'There's nothing to think about, pal.'

*Pal? A tad aggressive, disrespectful even.*

Charles leaned forward and rested on his elbows. 'You're the only one in the office that has a young family to support. Take the job or lose it.'

I nodded, and left.

Charles wanted to get rid of me, but had decided for the sake of the twins to keep me. Not because he thought I was good, but because it pricked his socialist conscience. My two seven-month-old daughters were helping their dad keep his job.

I didn't go back to my desk, but instead to Dirty Dick's for a drink. It was starting to fill up with the usual lunchtime crowd and I worked my way through to reach the bar. Two retired Canadian couples in matching Toronto Maple Leafs ice rink jackets couldn't make up their minds about which beer to try. Then one of the wives thought it was a perfect photo opportunity to have a picture taken at the *cosy oak bar* with its gleaming beer pump handles. Would I mind? Anything to speed up being served, I thought. Three clicks of her mobile phone later I was edging away from the bar with a whisky in my hand and looking for somewhere to park myself. I then spotted Linda, Bill and Faisal, sitting in a dark corner beneath a quaint exposed beam, looking terribly glum.

I sat with them.

'You too?' said Linda, thinking I'd been sacked as well. She'd been crying.

I shook my head, and drank.

'Why are you here then?' asked Faisal, holding a glass of orange. He was always immaculately dressed in a suit and tie like the typical City gent.

'They're making me give up mining and engineering.'

'To do what?' asked Bill, our oldest member of staff, and the only one to have worked on nationals and radio. He was close to retirement, and an obvious choice for the chop.

'Sub.'

'That's our job,' said Linda and Bill in unison.

I shrugged. 'What do you want me to do? Join you?'

'Up yours, Martin. I mean it,' said Linda. 'You're always climbing up Charles' arse. I can't believe he's given my job to you of all people.'

*Me of all people? She thinks she's better than me. Was that the consensus in the office?*

'What did you do to wangle that one, son?' asked Bill in a condescending tone.

I didn't bother to answer him, and continued drinking.

'Has anyone called Tom?' asked Faisal. 'Maybe he can sort this out for us.'

'How?' I snapped, irritated by the suggestion that Tom had some sort of special human powers to overturn Flycatcher's decision to cut staff. 'What can he do? It has all been agreed by management.'

'I think it's a terrific idea,' said Linda, picking up with excitement.

'If anyone can turn them around, it's our Tom,' said Bill, taking another sip of beer.

*Our?*

'What are you going on about?' I said. 'He's not going to stick out his neck.'

'We know you wouldn't,' huffed Linda, her eyes scorching mine.

'But Tom has no influence, here,' I said. 'Be realistic.'

I hadn't noticed that Faisal was already holding his mobile against his ear.

'Tom? It's Faisal.'

We all sat in silence and listened to the conversation.

'They've sacked Linda, Bill and me. They've also demoted Martin to down table sub.'

Demoted? He was right. It was of sorts. I hadn't even asked Charles whether it meant less money. What was Pippa going to say?

'That's marvellous of you, Tom. Really? Martin didn't think you would stick your neck out for us? I know, I know.'

Knew what about me? That I didn't have the guts to stand up to Charles? If only they saw the size of my overdraft.

'I'm talking for the three of us when I say we really owe you. Thanks, mate.'

Mate? I'd known Faisal for several years and during all that time he'd never once called me mate.

Faisal put away his phone, and said, 'Tom is going to try and pull a few strings for us. Says his ol' man went to school with Rodney Harris.'

'The chairman of Flycatcher?' gasped Linda, eyes illuminated like Blackpool Tower. 'Who wants another round?' she said, jumping to her feet with a huge smile.

That was it for me, there and then. I'd become the pariah of the office. Super Tom managed to get Linda her job back, convinced Flycatcher to offer Bill generous terms for his retirement, and transferred Faisal to a new website they had acquired on precious metals. The loser, if you haven't already worked it out, was me. I was no

longer a writer, and had joined Linda on the sub's table, along with Jeremy. She just loved our new working relationship.

## Three

The advertising revenue on the *Review* picked up, thanks to a succession of scoops by Tom. But they were never really scoops in the true sense of the word. There was nothing new, for example, in his story about a new steel foundry polluting the water table near Skipton in Yorkshire. I mean, it was a story originally broken by a local reporter the year before. The foundry had fixed the problem and no one was complaining anymore. But Tom made it sound like he'd just dug up a major environmental scandal as he'd managed to get his hands on the correspondence between the foundry and council. Then he found data on a slight increase of cancer admissions in the area, claiming that while the haggling was going on, locals were reporting in sick with blood in their stools. The number of admissions varied from one year to another. Some years in the distant past were actually higher than the one Tom had written about. It was just a statistical quirk; he'd just happened to spot a new spike. That was all.

The story seemed to capture the imagination of the TV channels, and it just fed on itself for weeks, as news does. Even though someone from the Yorkshire Health Authority said there was nothing unusual about the level of admissions, no newspaper bothered to kill the story. They just included it to cover their arses, and then ignored the facts as if it hadn't been said at all.

Tom had lots of environmentalist buddies who could conjure up these stories for him at the drop of a hat or on a bad news day. And he had plenty of those.

Like his predecessor, Tom was barely seen in the office. He was on the road, using his union contacts to lift the lid on evil corporations, and their murky practices

of price fixing. Yes, young Tom broke the news of a cartel agreement between the suppliers of aggregates used in building motorways. He hired a photographer to point his Long Tom on the bedroom windows of the hotel where the deals were being brokered between four supplier representatives. It made the cover of the *Review*. Just a grainy shot of four old men seated behind dirty net curtains in open-neck shirts. They looked like cronies around a poker table.

Then there was a port official who took a bribe from a Chinese electronics company for special docking privileges. This at a time when a local company had to shut down its factory because of the flood of Chinese imports.

Tom was even beating the mighty *Financial Times* to some of its own breaking stories. There was no stopping the fellow. He just worked around the clock like a white shark that never slept.

I sabotaged his work when best I could. The sub can be the most abused person in the newsroom. Most despised because he or she has the power to change everyone's prose. Those finely honed *mots justes* can be deleted so easily by the single stroke of a key.

He did complain to Charles that I was making a hotchpotch of his copy, and it was perfectly true. But all reporters complained about subs changing the meaning of their copy, and if Charles got drawn into all the rows that went on in the newsroom he'd never get a stroke of work done. I was always careful not to alter the sense of the story, but that didn't stop me being pedantic about explaining certain terms in such great detail in his copy, and make it look as dull as a European Commission press release.

But I thought I'd outshone myself when Tom accompanied a government trade mission to China. He was filing copy each day for the web before doing a thought piece for the magazine.

*Beijing strikes bicycle deal with UK*, read the headline of his copy for that day. China had agreed to open more of its market to British imported bikes and spare parts after a long-running trade row that it had been blocking access to many UK companies. Every country in the world had an axe to grind against China whose economic growth is dependent on overproduction and dumping its goods on foreign soil. The British trade mission to China was supposed to be a PR exercise in pacifying the mighty dragon with concessions in exchange for a more flexible access to the Chinese domestic market.

But I happened to notice a delicious line in the penultimate par of Tom's piece, which quite clearly quoted one of the Chinese trade ministers claiming that if Britain continued to pursue all its trade cases against China it would have no choice but to withdraw from all its major investments in the country. Well, that would burn a huge hole in our economy, I thought. Tom may have been out there taking the pulse of Chinese officials' rhetoric, but he was burying a major statement in his little pathetic bike story.

#### **China threatens to withdraw UK investments**

Now you have to agree this was a more thunderous headline bound to grab the attention of our readers. And so I continued to rewrite Tom's story, adding some archive material and wire story background stats on the way. I didn't ignore the

bicycle trade concession story entirely; I just subbed it down to one par at the end.

*Ping.* It was up on the web.

The next morning when my radio alarm awoke me, I heard the gruff voice of John Humphrys announcing that a major row had broken out between the British and Chinese trade ministries. Britain was accusing Beijing of bullying its officials into making concessions by threatening to withdraw major investments at a time when the two sides were attempting to reconcile their differences.

Then Tom's voice popped up in the BBC report, explaining how he broke the story after an impromptu remark by a senior Chinese official during an interview. My plan had spectacularly backfired.

But I still held out hope that the Chinese might arrest him for misrepresenting the comments of one of their officials. And then it dawned on me that Tom, dear old Tom, had been used by the Chinese as a lightning rod to slow down the talks with the British by engineering a row. And I unwittingly gave a helping hand to Beijing's wondrous PR machine.

When I got into the office there was an email waiting for me from Tom.  
*Thanks a million for rescuing my copy. Couldn't see the wood for the trees. Blame it on jetlag. I may have to fly home on another plane as I'm persona non grata on this trade mission. Terrific job. Must have a drink when I get back. Tom.*

Now there was a distinct possibility of having to be friends with him. Ironically, he might become my only ally in the office as no one else was talking to me because big-mouth Linda had poisoned the minds of everyone about my duplicitous pact with Charles to take her job away from her.

Buying drinks cut no ice with my co-workers, with whom the only thing I shared in common was the office carpet we walked upon.