

## 1. Flacked

Plastic phone pressed tight to my ear by a hard-shrugging shoulder, fingertips poised above the home keys of a smudged desktop keyboard, I realized this entitled fuck was making me choose whether I was a journalist or a stenographer of lies.

“The key...” the flack whispered, his voice faint in the background.

“The key...” his sleazy boss said directly through the phone to me, from his gilded office atop the hospital.

“...is making community our first and most important priority,” the minion whispered.

“...is making community our first and most —”

It was brazen and degrading. I had called Brother’s Keeper Regional Medical Center, Santa Fe’s only hospital, to interview CEO Gilbert Lopez about an important issue, to write an article for thousands of informed New Mexican taxpayers. Gilbert’s answers, however, were garbage, fed to him by a paid spokesman *whom I could hear*.

I blew a tight gust into the transmitter, knowing the noise would at least make him pause.

“I can hear you, Hector,” I said. “I can hear you, and I already talked to you. Gilbert, again, I want to know what *you* have to say, to the specific allegation. You’re in charge at that hospital and it’s important to get your response.”

After a beat, I added “Right?”

Silence on the other end, which so annoyed me I loudly huffed “Hello?” Now came cold looks from my reporter colleagues. I glanced back at them and frowned.

I had met Gilbert in person at press conferences. His thin mustache was greased and

demonic, and I pictured it undulating above his grin as he answered, slowly, with a slithery and threatening undertone: “It’s just... you see... obviously... the fundamental fact of the matter... is that the key is always keeping community our first, and most important, priority... of course... Matthew.”

No friend or member of my family ever took to calling me “Matthew.” It sounded strange.

“Come on,” I said. “Please.”

“What is,” the demon mustache hissed, “your next question?”

“I guess I don’t see any other way to ask. There’s really only —”

“OK, Matthew. Thanks so much.”

“Wait.”

“Gilbert had to step away, Matt,” Hector said on his end of the line. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Anger juiced my nervous system. “This is crazy, man. I could hear you whispering. Why won’t he just answer?”

“That’s not correct, Matt, but, hey, I’ll look forward to your article and you go ahead and let me know if you need anything else, and thanks so much, OK? Yeah. Good-bye.”

Click.

I hung up.

On my notes, between garbage quotes, I had typed, five times, left pinkie ramming the shift key, “CAN HEAR HECTOR WHISPERING!”

The keck that came out of my throat was like a lawnmower starting, drawing more looks from other reporters at their desks. Concerned looks now, except from Jin, our cops reporter who

frequently called in sick. Jin's black eyes projected only hatred.

I growled again, quieter, pushed my rolling chair away from my desk, shot to standing, and stomped the 15 feet to Tom's office.

Tom was *Teller Santa Fe's* editor, our wise leader.

"Boss, I can't run these quotes without saying I could hear Gilbert's flack whispering in the background and telling him exactly what to say."

The office was trashed. Sheets of paper were piled everywhere, most marked by illegible scribbles in red pen. Tom's hands were likewise splattered with red ink.

He looked up angry, then turned to the digital clock on the wall. He did not heed my words, just the distraction I brought through his door. "Matt," he said, impatient, waving me away, "I don't have time —"

"I kept telling them, 'I can hear him.' 'I can hear you, Hector, whispering off your script.' Why not just hand the fucking words to Gilbert, so he can read them himself?"

Tom dropped a red pen onto his desk and brought a big hand up to press through his steel-woolly hair. At reasonable volume, but with simmering bitterness, he said "It's just gotta be 12 inches on the statement."

"They're lying though."

Tom shivered. "I don't have time for this. Get *out*." He waved his hand again, shooing, and spun his chair to his monitor, where an article from a different paper's website was up.

I grumbled back to my desk, everyone watching, and sat and stared at the internet icon on my screen, a curled little fox with fur like fire.

Sadness hit as unwelcome weight in my jaw, tugging down the corners of my mouth. It

wasn't even lunch, and nine times already I had double-clicked that fox and wasted precious time depressing myself.

Instead, I opened CopyWrite, the program where we wrote all our articles. A blue rectangle appeared in the middle of my screen. I typed, in a flurry of muscle memory, "By Matt White", and slapped enter.

Story time. First, the lead.

I typed "The nurses". The letters were rendered in gray, ugly against the blue.

The cursor blinked, waiting.

Blink.

*"The nurses"*

Blink.

The nurses what?

Blink.

...

Blink.

I shoved my desk, my chair rolled, and I was up and stomping past colleagues' desks, again, to Tom's office.

I threw his door shut and yelled "I can't report this! I won't do it."

"God dammit, Matt, I'm up to my neck in here."

"I've gotta say in my story that Gilbert was being fed answers by a lackey."

So much red ink, even the chartreuse walls were marked with red. How had he done that?

"Just write it. Just write the dang thing. It doesn't matter if he's being told what to say. We

just need a quote.”

“It matters if the other side is being honest. It matters if this story matters. Does it?”

“Get out of here.” He was shaking. Tom was a big guy, but in the drab light of his office, behind mounds of bleeding paper, he looked skeletal. Terminal.

“If I’m gonna write this straight, we gotta have an editorial that says the hospital is full of shit, not answering questions.”

“You know we can’t do that.” His eyes were down now; he marked up another story as we argued. “We’ve already chosen a side in this.”

“Albuquerque’s chosen, and they’re wrong.”

“Matt.”

“Tom.”

He shook his head, eyes clenched shut behind his glasses. “Go write me the 12 inches, while I’m in here working on 15 things at once.” He pounded his desk with the flat of one hand. “And apparently babysitting too.”

“Tom. Be real.”

“Go.”

I spun, enraged, and heaved the door open.

Two steps out, I heard “Why do I always have to listen to you?” The question came from the desk closest to Tom’s office.

“Shut up, Jin.”

“We would all appreciate it if *you* would shut up, for once,” Jin said.

Sulking mightily, I slammed into my chair and thumped my desk with both wrists, hard

enough to sting.

The flaming fox glittered and spun.

I knew what came next. I was a junkie.

“FUCK!”

Several long, heavy, silent seconds followed my outburst, ending when Jin hollered across the newsroom “Shut the fuck up, Matt!”

I rolled my eyes, planted my feet, stood, brought my hands up, and said “I’m sorry” to all the reporters I was distracting, including Jin. “I really am sorry. Bad morning. I’ll be quiet now.”

I slammed back down, though, clicked the little fox, and navigated immediately to Facebook. I typed, in another zip of muscle memory, “b-e-r-n-a-d-e-t-t-e” into the search window. Even she couldn’t type her name as fast as I could, I did it so often.

Her page came up and I momentarily forgot reality for that beaming face, her smile reflecting the sun and natural surroundings. Diablo Canyon stretched for a mile behind her. I clicked the photograph and a gallery opened, with dozens of images. She smiled in each one, outdoors among sexy friends.

Before typing 12 balanced, boring, dishonest inches about Gilbert responding to nurses threatening to quit, I spent 40 miserable minutes scrolling her Facebook shots. Click, click, click, click.

I was doomed.

Click, click, click...

Looking at her pictures depressed me, and meant it was even later when I finally finished writing.

I turned in the story and succumbed again. Clicking through those photographs, I knew I was sick.

This particular hope had to die.

A checked box in the banner of her front page said “Friend.” When I clicked it, the last option was “Unfriend.”

From the desk behind me, our copy editor asked “Matt, did you double-check Hector’s last name? I think we got it wrong last time.”

I clicked “Unfriend.”