

‘Pleasure Island’ by Pete Byrne

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Sample Chapters

Get A Job

The Joe College personnel guy who told me I had passed the test wasn't much older than me. He said that I would have to be interviewed by the boss of the department that needed help. If I got through that, I'd have a job at DelEd, The Delta Edison Gas and Electric Company. It was November of 1957. I was twenty years old and just three weeks out of the Army. My plans to coast for a couple of months collecting unemployment checks had come undone when a legislative glitch had rendered separated servicemen ineligible for unemployment compensation. Pissed off, I hit the streets in search of work. According to the news, the economy was in another slump, and jobs were scarce. I could have returned to my old job at the A. & P., but I'd promised myself I'd go back in the Army before doing that.

Each morning, I'd circle help-wanted ads in the paper. I even looked at a police department application, but discovered I didn't meet the height requirement. It was probably just as well; I don't think I was tough enough to be a cop. I spent a couple of days walking along Cayuga Avenue, going in and out of factories, asking if they were hiring. I'd usually get short shrift from some snotty woman at a desk. But I'd always ask if I could fill out an application and have it put on file. Mr. Ryan from next door had suggested that idea. After three weeks of going in and

out of places, filling out applications, the only call back I had gotten was for a really lousy job with a box lunch company.

One twelve-hour day delivering box lunches to factories was enough. I got home to find my girlfriend and my parents waiting up for me. They were unanimous; telling me that they didn't believe the box lunch business was my proper niche. I think my girlfriend was worried that I would walk unannounced into her office some morning selling sandwiches. But I knew they were right, it was a terrible job. My Aunt's husband worked in the personnel department at the phone company. Uncle Walt, it was always noted, had a good job. He wanted to help, but my performance on the manual dexterity test for a telephone lineman's job was an embarrassment to both of us. The best he could offer me was a fifty-five dollars a week coin-box collector's job in the black neighborhoods in West Metro. I figured the job had a life expectancy of about two weeks. I thanked him for the offer but said "no thanks."

Throughout this ordeal not a day went by without my mother telling me that Eddie Cassidy, the husband of one of her lady friends, had a good job with DelEd, the electric company. "Why don't you try there," she would say, adding that Eddie had never lost any time, "not even during the Depression." "But Mom," I would protest "I don't know anything about electricity." She wouldn't leave it alone. Finally one morning, to end the nagging, and in the knowledge that I hadn't another idea in my head about how I'd ever get a job, I said "yes, I'd give the electric company a try."

Fashions had changed while I had been away in the Army. The pegged pants and suede shoes look that I had cultivated in high school didn't seem appropriate to my getting a foothold in corporate America. The only warm coat I had was a juvenile-delinquent style "Six-Button Benny" overcoat. I had taken to removing the coat before walking into prospective employment sites. On an unseasonably cold, early November morning, with all the false confidence I could muster, and with my hoodlum overcoat draped over my arm, I walked into the downtown personnel offices of the Delta Edison Gas and Electric Company. As I expected, there was the cold-eyed receptionist. "Is the company doing any hiring," I asked trying to match her indifference with my own version of a casually studied disinterest. She looked me over, took my measure, and seeing dozens like me every day, responded with an icy "no." I countered with my best, "can I fill out an application to be put on file," figuring it would be in the waste can next to her fancy desk before I was out the door. I was about two-thirds through the form when this Mr. Prep School type in a suit and necktie walks by. He stops, backs up, and begins looking over my shoulder at my application. Without a word, he reaches down and pulls it out of my hand. Scanning the application, he says, "Come with me." We go into a paneled cubicle and he tells me to sit down. He tells me that he does have one job opening. He waits a couple of seconds, stares me in the eyes and asks if I would be willing to work rotating shifts. I have no idea what rotating shifts mean. I figure it probably means night work but beyond that, nothing. What I knew was that I was broke, that I was using my father's car, and that after nearly a month of trying to get a job, no one had shown any interest in the fact that I was really a neat kind of guy.

I told the personnel guy I had no problems with rotating shifts, whatever they were. Now he starts telling me why he has this job opening. He says that he's been trying to fill this opening from within the company for several months, that the people who wanted the job couldn't pass the test, that those who could pass the test didn't want the job because of the shift work. Would I be willing to take the test? I nodded yes and did my best Boy Scout version of eager sincerity. The written test took almost three hours to complete. I've always possessed a questionable facility to test far beyond my capacity to perform. By the time I had come downstairs from of the testing room, my new friend, the personnel guy, had the results. He gave me what might pass for a warm smile, shook my hand and told me that I could be the solution to what had been a real "pain in the neck" for him. "Now do you understand," he again asked. "This job is a shift work job." He looked at me with the posed seriousness of some Second Lieutenant to some Private First Class and asked; "you're not going to take this job and then bail out on me, are you?" I hadn't a clue of what I was going to do, but I gave him another of my "on my honor as a Scout, sir," assurances. "Okay," he told me, "the job is titled Assistant GSO, which stands for Gas System Operator. It's shift work and their office and control room is around the corner on the fifth-floor at Fourth and Aspen Streets." I had an immediate image of my self in a gray industrial uniform turning the wheel of a big valve, deep in a manhole, and under a bare electric bulb. Plus I was doing it late at night. Now, the only thing now standing between this real job and me with the electric company was an interview with the man who would be my boss. I sat while the personnel guy got on the phone and made the arrangements for me to meet with a Mr. Davis Crane in his office on the fifth-floor of the Olympia Building on Aspen Street, just a block or so from where we were sitting.

The Olympia Mercantile Building, an old bank building until the Depression thinned out that herd, was a faux gothic stone fortress dating to the 1890s. The electric company rented the upper two floors. Tucked away in a far corner of the fifth-floor adjacent to, but separate from the general offices of the company's Gas Operations Department, was the control room and office space of the Gas System Operator. The man I had been sent to see was the company's Chief Gas System Operator, Mr. D. R. Crane. The "D" was for Davis, as in Jefferson Davis. Mr. Crane I would learn was a native Georgian. Getting off the elevator, I ditched the James Cagney overcoat on a reception area chair. There were directional signs on the wall, one of which said "Gas System Operator." I threaded my way through a maze of carpeted aisles, past cubicles, open-floor areas filled with people working at desks, drafting tables and file cabinets. Secretaries sat clacking away on typewriters, telephones were ringing from several different directions. I got lost twice and had to ask to be put back on the right path. Going down three steps into a dark recess leading to the fire exit, I stood before an imposing wooden door with a small metal plate engraved "Gas System Operator." I had no idea what lay on the other side. Very cautiously I pushed open the door. A large well-lit room, on one wall a backlit, ceiling-to-floor map covered with red, blue, black and green lines. Out from that map, a long table with dual switchboards. Two guys in shirts and neckties, wearing telephone headsets sat at the switchboards, one of them talking, the other operating a big, noisy, electro-mechanical calculator. On the far wall were several desks with more neck-tied guys doing whatever it was they were doing. I nodded to the nearest guy, an old guy, and asked, "Mr. D. R. Crane?" The guy stood and poked his head into a paneled office and said, "Hey Doc, the kid's here." I got a thumb gesture to go ahead into the office. I was conscious of

being checked out by the guys on the switchboard and at the desks. I was glad I wasn't wearing the Six-Button Benny.

Mr. D. R. Crane stood and offered me a handshake, motioning me to take a seat. He was another old guy. At that stage of my life most adults were older people. He wasn't any taller than me, and he was on the chubby side. He had those hanging, hound-dog kind of jowls, and he wore a dark suit. He reminded me of what I thought a Protestant minister or a public high school principal might look like. He seemed pleasant enough, but without so much as a who are you, he launched into a detailed explanation of something he called the "company's gas system." I learned later that he had lived in this area for over forty years but his inflections and speech patterns remained those of the Deep South. He sounded like one of the drill sergeants I remembered from basic training in South Carolina. I was quickly awash in terms I had never heard of but would come to know in a highly integrated, systemic and intimately internalized way. Words like compressors and holders and gas plants and high BTU sets and regulators; low-pressure mains and high-pressure mains and of course, rotating shift work. Now did I understand what he was telling me? "Of course. Yes sir. Of course, Mr. Crane."

I do remember two things specifically from that interview. One was that I got a detailed explanation of rotating shift work. I was told I would be working a four-week shift cycle; a twenty-eight day cycle with six-days of day work, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., two-days off, then seven-nights of 4 p.m. to 12-midnight with four-days off; and seven-nights of midnight-shift, midnight to 8 a.m. with two-days off. That's twenty-eight days. Got that? And he told me that the cycle repeated itself thirteen-times a year. He could have been talking in Magyar or about plasma physics for all

that I understood. I knew only that I wanted a job, and this was a job. It was an inside job, out of the weather, and I wouldn't have to sell box lunches. I'd be wearing a shirt and tie, and if I got a job with the electric company, I'd be just like Eddie Cassidy. I'd never have to worry about getting laid off. "Now," said Mr. Crane, going on to tell me that while I'd be working seven-days straight, weekends and holidays included, I wouldn't be working more than forty-hours in any weekly pay period. He gave me another, "Do you understand that?" "Certainly. Yes I do." Huh? Huh? Huh? The second thing that sticks in my head from that afternoon was being told by Mr. Crane was that if things worked out I could look forward to someday becoming a head operator. One of the two guys on that switchboard was a head operator. The other was an assistant. I was being taken on to train for an assistant's position. Mr. Crane leaned his white-haired, flushed face forward and in a stage whisper informed me that while I was not to say anything to anyone, "some of the head operators were making as much as seventy-five hundred dollars a year. That included overtime and holiday pay of course." Seventy-five hundred dollars a year! I didn't know anyone who made that much money, not my father, nobody. At the A & P, before I went into the Army, I had been making sixty-cents an hour. And as an Army E-4 serving my country, I had gotten the princely sum of ninety-bucks a month. Seventy-five hundred dollars a year, I could do the math, was almost a hundred and fifty bucks week, almost four-dollars an hour. That's when Mr. Crane segued into the subject of my starting salary as an assistant gas system operator in training. I'm thinking. "Oh boy! Holy shit, maybe I've done it. Maybe I've walked into something I hadn't even dreamed about, maybe a hundred-bucks a week, at least. Maybe more. It was then that Mr. Crane told me that before taxes and deductions my weekly salary was to be fifty-nine-dollars a

week, less than a dollar-fifty an hour. “Oh, by the way,” he said, “there’s an extra six-cents an hour for night work.”

Weekends and holidays included, midnight shifts, seven days in a row, all for a buck-fifty an hour with a whopping six-cents for working at night. I had gotten a job, a job with the electric company, a secure, steady job that looked like it might someday pay good money. But in the meantime, at barely twenty-years old, I was committing myself to working nights, working holidays and worst of all working weekends, three weekends out of four, and what I couldn’t know was that I’d be doing it for almost the next fifteen years. On the trolley going home through the neighborhoods, I was hit by an emotional push-pull. What I had thought would be the unqualified joy of getting a job with a big company was being shredded by crosscurrents of dismay and anxiety. “What the hell have I gotten myself into?” I thought. And, for fifty-nine bucks a week, I’m going to have to work nights and weekends. That was when I realized I had left my wise-guy overcoat behind me. Three days later, when I reported for my first day of work, the chair was empty. I never mentioned the coat to anyone in the office.

Stranger In A Strange Land

The first day of my new life as a Monday-to-Friday day-worker was marked, like most new starts in life, by disorientation, failures-of-confidence and panicky urges to run away, back to the tried and true of the past. The DelEd company had changed in my years of isolation on shift work. Even the company's new headquarters, an intimidating, forty-story, modern office tower, bore little resemblance to the stodgy company premises I remembered. Something close to agoraphobia gripped me as I joined the morning crowds going into the noisy, atrium lobby. I had to stop and search for the right elevator to take me to the twentieth-eighth floor offices of the company's Gas Operations Department.

Things didn't get any better when I told the receptionist that I was expected by Mr. Thomas Meehan, the department's manager. I was directed to a soft chair and told to wait. Long minutes went by before anyone appeared. I remembered Charlie Langenbuam from years before when our control room was housed in the same stone hulk of a building that was then the gas department's general office. Reading my name from a piece of paper, Charlie seemed to be waiting for me to confirm my identity. I addressed him by his first name and told him I was supposed to see Tom Meehan, the department manager. Richie, now a senior engineer on the departmental staff, was another up-from-the-ranks night school guy like me, but Charlie was an engineer. The reality of the corporate caste system was made explicit in the tone of his voice when he noted aloud that I was the new "Technical Assistant." Mr. Meehan was in a meeting and Charlie would be showing me around. We were generally ignored as I was taken through corridors, around and through rows of cubicles, in and out of offices. It felt almost like

touring a ship or going through a submarine's passageways. I was surprised by how many faces and names I recognized. All the while, Charlie was dispensing information about the functions of all these individuals and groups and doing so in tones that implied I just might be quizzed on all of it.

Although overwhelmed and confused by Charlie's barrage, I was now an old enough soldier to act as if everything was registering. I even raised enough pertinent questions and clarifications; to give what I hoped was an impression of being not only engaged but possibly someone with something on the ball. After a nearly eternal hour of inundation, I was shown to a bare steel desk with a telephone and an office chair and was told that they were mine. Charlie said that Mr. Meehan's secretary would call the phone on my desk when Mr. Meehan could see me. At that Charlie handed me two large binders with white plastic covers and suggested that I might want to begin familiarizing myself with the contents. Left alone at last, but sitting exposed, out on the open office floor, I had no other option than to open volume one of The Delta Edison Company's Gas Transmission and Distribution Construction Standards, two hundred and forty-six-pages of engineering text with drawings. Volume two lay in wait next to Volume one. At that moment, the previous week spent on the 12 - 8 shift didn't seem all that bad; just Mike Ruhling and me in the control room; me with another World War II battle history to read, or maybe a 19th Century Russian novel or perhaps the previous day's New York Times, or maybe all of the above.

But even on that first day, I understood that my new working conditions would be a vast improvement over all I had known. Just being able to get up and go out for lunch, walking around the city, knowing I would be home for dinner, and it being

Wednesday, that I would be off on Friday night and all of Saturday and Sunday. Better yet, knowing I probably would be off every weekend for the rest of my life. All of it steeled me to spend the remainder of that first day, the next day and most of a third day studying the Gas T & D Construction Standards until I finally got the phone call from Tom Meehan's secretary. Over forty years later, I think I can still calculate the distance on either side of a gas leak on a high or medium-pressure steel gas main, the point where a Mueller compression fitting should be placed to isolate the leak, not that I've ever had much use of such information.

Tom Meehan apologized for my three days in limbo, telling me that once they got me started I might look back fondly on the downtime. I was told that I would be doing whatever the vice president, Lou Morgan needed doing, but also that the Gas Transmission and Distribution Division might assign me specific tasks. That meant more drudgework from Charlie Langenbaum. In particular I was to become the department's liaison with the clerical sections of the Company's seven geographic gas and electric operating divisions. The clerical sections in the divisions were responsible for maps and records, dispatching, and construction detailing, all were critical administrative interfaces with the Gas Operations Department. Since Lou Morgan would be out of town for the next two weeks, I was to report the following Monday to the clerical supervisor at the Eureka Division service building in Colervale for a weeklong orientation. After that, there would be stints of time spent in each of the other six division clerical sections, a month or so later I would be taking the five-week introductory gas department course for new construction detailers held at the Gas Methods and Training school at the North Ridge Gas Plant. I could hardly believe my good luck. In my fifteen years at system control, I had not had more than a couple of days of true training.

It had been an entirely on-the-job, learn-if-you-can environment, and I believed that much of the nagging lack of confidence in my abilities that affected me on that job was a direct reflection of that lack of relevant training.

My old boss, Doc Crane, himself an ex-operator, a self-made man in a stratified organization, had many of the insecurities that went with his accomplishments. All too often, he expressed anxieties of being called on the carpet by his superiors, particularly about controllable expenses, such as having to pay overtime to send his people out for field training on their days off. Because the huge, complex, physical gas system I eventually learned to operate existed for me only as a self-made model in my mind, I became the most vocal and persistent advocate for some kind of systematic operator training program. For my efforts, I also became known as a pain-in-the-ass. Doc finally relented and Dan Hargrove, the superintendent at gas methods and training put together what was to be the first in a series of three-day field visits for each of the nine guys on shift. The second guy in our group to go out for his three-days with a gas mains and services crew was the world-class cheapskate, Willie Laud. On Willie's first day out, the gas crew on the job ran late and Willie put in for two hours of overtime pay. Doc Crane went through the roof and that was the end of our training. Tom Meehan knew what happened because I told him the story when he asked if I wanted to stay in the department. Tom was a good guy and it appeared that he wasn't going to allow me to founder on my own. When the time came that I would be called upon to function, I would at least have some of the hands-on grounding in the operations I was expected to administer, evaluate and even redesign.

I spent most of my first six months out on the system working with maps and records clerks, going out to mark gas lines for contractors, helping prepare gas main extensions for new business and riding around with gas appliance servicemen. I met lots of good people, many of whom I stayed in contact with for my remaining years with the company. One of my strongest realizations from the time spent in the operating divisions was the high level of expertise and competence of so many of the people I met. In between all of this and my attendance at the gas construction detailer's classes, I wrote letters and drafted a couple of presentations for Lou Morgan and did whatever "gofer" work he needed done. I also began attending the monthly meetings of the division Clerical Supervisors, old company heads who knew where bodies were buried, and who knew who was and wasn't pulling their weight. The meetings always included lunch on the company, some of them very good lunches.

My first major assignment was a big job in the sense that my first thoughts about it were "Oh shit, how am I going to do this?" and "I've never done anything like this." These were the early years of computerization and the company was filled with anachronistic systems begging to be updated. One of them was the Gas Main Records. Gas mains were the transmission and distribution pipes in the streets that were asset property, their value included in the company's rate base. In the early 1970s, records of the company's gas mains were still handwritten in India ink on turn-of-the-20th century linen sheets kept in heavy canvas-covered binders in each of the geographical divisions. It was probably a state-of-the-art system in 1910. I was charged with overseeing the conversion of the system, some 275,000 entries, to a digital database. Fortunately for me, I didn't know enough to have any biases toward any of the competing methods for conversion. On the other hand, Charlie

Langenbaum, the senior engineer in charge of the conversion of the Gas Facility Records system, the records of the individual gas service lines and meter sets, all 300,000 of them, knew much more than me and was championing a complicated digitization process that turned into a disaster. I wouldn't have dreamed of doing anything but deferring to the engineering group's suggestion of a simplified system. And I then had the intuitive foresight to ask for the temporary assignment to the project of a bright young Conestoga Division records clerk I'd met during my orientations. He handled the day-to-day work and the supervision of the vendor's personnel doing the data entry. The new system worked and was generally well received by the field people who were to use it. Lucky me, again.

As the new kid in town and being somewhat underutilized by my ostensible employer, Lou Morgan, I found myself the recipient of many of the unwanted projects lying around the department. There were committee assignments and filling in on meetings for people who were too busy or just didn't feel like going to the meetings themselves. Much of this was no more than tedious time filling. A gas department paperwork committee assignment filled one morning a week for six months with a net result of just one piece of paper being revised. But like most meetings, these also included lunch.

The most important departmental meeting was the monthly gas superintendents meeting, bringing together the seven divisional gas superintendents and a half-dozen or more functional gas superintendents; Methods and Training, Gas Utilization, Cathodic Protection, etc. In addition, the management of many of the corporate departments that interfaced with ours would send representatives to these meetings. Each month one of the secretaries from our office would be

assigned to take the minutes of the meeting. The “girls” as they were then called, hated the job. The all-male participants in the meetings often had expressed feelings of being constrained in their speech, i.e.; they didn’t feel right talking about the “fucking” trials of their jobs in the presence of the female minute takers. I could see this train headed down the tracks straight for me.

The meetings would start at 9 a.m., with one of the superintendents rotating as host in his own location, and would be over by lunch. Really good lunches! I was given no other direction than to take the minutes. The method I developed was labor intensive and low-tech in the extreme. I had to devise my own form of shorthand while trying to catch the dialogue and interplay of over two-dozen voices, all engineers largely speaking in the arcane codes of the industry. The count of densely scrawled legal pad sheets ran on average to forty crowded, yellow legal-sized pages per meeting. Back at my desk, I used a manual typewriter to turn the shorthand into something approaching English. Each set of minutes always involved my having to go around the office floor or my phoning for explanations of procedural or technical matters that I didn’t understand. My typed first-draft would be handed off to a secretary and when it was returned, I would generate a more polished draft that would be circulated among the participants for comments and corrections. My very first exercise of unofficial power was to let Mr. Morgan know who was sitting on the draft and holding up prompt publication of the meeting minutes. It was a bear of a job and I dreaded the turn of each monthly cycle. But after a few months, I realized that I was becoming privy to all that happened in the department. While a mere “technical assistant,” I had knowledge, and access to knowledge, held closely and exclusively by people with the rank of superintendent and above. I think I began to have some idea of what it must have

been like to wear the red hat and silk shoes of the Cardinals Richelieu or Mazarin, and in the years to come I conducted myself accordingly. Unfortunately, there can be too much of a good thing. Once a month, the superintendent of Gas Utilization, a title covering gas meters, gas troublemen and a major appliance service operation, hosted a Gas Utilization Supervisors meeting. That superintendent, Tony Mc Clister, a loose cannon and a guy I liked a lot, convinced Tom Meehan that I should be attending his monthly meeting, and that, of course, I should be doing the minutes. Education never ends. The discussions in these meetings were even more esoteric and more difficult to get a grip on than the Gas Superintendents meetings. Initially I would have done anything to avoid having to take on these meeting minutes, but both of these jobs, onerous as they were; positioned, educated and benefited me in ways beyond my imagining.

It was during this period of establishing myself that Mr. Morgan and I came to an implicit understanding that indeed I would be his man. First thing one morning, his secretary called to say that Mr. Morgan was hosting a meeting of the executive committee of National Gas Association's Operating Section that morning in the 40th-floor conference room, the private conference room of the DelEd Chairman of the Board. I was to go upstairs and make sure that all was ready for Mr. Morgan's big, important meeting with his peers. And in a kind of "by the way," she said that Mr. Morgan wanted me "to make certain the pads are off the conference room table." All was fine in the room but the pads were still on the table. As I began taking off the pads and putting them in the storage room, Janice Hastings, AKA "the vestal virgin," the secretary of the corporation and the only female officer of the company, came running into the room. "What are you doing?" she shouted. "The pads are taken off only for the Chairman's board meetings, and

for nothing else.” Janice’s body language, the scowl, the protectively folded arms told me that this might be the selling job of my working life. I have no idea of how I prevailed, but the pads stayed off. I never said a word to Lou Morgan because I knew, that he knew exactly what he had sent me up there to do.

A month or two later, another in the now routine calls from Lou’s secretary, “Mr. Morgan would like to see you.” Lou was testifying the next day in the state capitol before the senate energy committee on gas supply issues. He had a series of colored overhead slides that he had decided would work better if he could distribute sets of prints of the slides to each committee member. He told me he’d need them by 7:30 a.m. the next morning. I called Pete Hill who ran the engineering department’s photo lab. Pete asked me if I was kidding. “No way could we do a job like that overnight,” he said. I asked him if he knew anyone in town who could. He sent me to a commercial graphics operation on the 4th floor of an old factory, three blocks down Aspen Street. The guy running the shop exhaled audibly when I told him what I needed. “We can do it. But kid, you’re going to pay, big time” He gave me a per/print price and I did the math in my head. “You’re talking about sixteen hundred bucks, right,” I asked him. “ You got it,” he said. The next morning the package of prints was on Lou’s desk for his trip to the capitol. The context for my going ahead with the job was my reading of Lou against how he ran the department. God help the division engineer who made a bad estimate and overran the budget on a minor gas main replacement job, or the gas superintendent with a suspicious item on his monthly expenses. Lou had a fearsome reputation for budgetary accountability. About a week after the meeting in the state capitol, the photo invoice landed on Reggie Phillips’ desk. Reggie was the department’s general office manager. “Jesus Christ,” he said into my earpiece,

“I hope for your sake you got approval before you went ahead. Morgan’s going to go ballistic.” I probably swallowed hard before telling Reggie to just give the invoice to Lou’s secretary. I never heard a word. From that day on, I knew that when Lou told me he wanted something done, he wanted it done. The rules were for other people.

A non-critical highlight of my working for Lou came when recurring shortages of pipeline natural gas supplies to distribution companies like DelEd remade the economics of onsite production of synthetic natural gas to supplement pipeline deliveries. Lou was hosting a meeting on securing petroleum feedstock, a first step before committing capital to the construction of an SNG plant. The feedstock proposal under discussion was a residue of crude oil that would be coming by tanker from Venezuela. When the meeting broke to allow private discussion among the DelEd brass, I was called in to babysit the two Venezuelan national oil company representatives who had made the pitch. “Take them to lunch,” I was told. It was then ten-o-clock in the morning.

Both of the Venezuelans were petroleum engineers and both were regular army officers, something I thought telling of their country. We ended up in the bar of one of the city’s better restaurants killing time and nursing beers. While their English was better than my Spanish, the initial conversation was all desultory small talk. I learned that baseball was big in Venezuela. I knew that the country had finally emerged into something like a democracy after decades of rule by juntas and *caudillos*, and that anomalies like army officers running oil companies was a hangover from years of military rule. The breaks in conversation lengthened and they apologized for lapsing into Spanish when talking to each other. Having been

a history major, I asked about some of the details of when the country had gotten its independence from Spain and that brought up the name of Venezuela's liberator and national hero, Simon Bolivar. With that my mind lit up. The previous week the local morning daily had featured the discovery, in the dusty basement of a local university museum, of one of the few extant life portraits of Bolivar. When I threw that out onto the table, my two companions became animated. I had gotten their attention. They asked if there was any they could get to see the portrait before their flight home later in the day. This being prior to cell phones, I spent the next twenty-minutes in a phone booth before getting us access to the painting. The people at the museum were gracious and my guests were reverentially moved in the presence of this rare image of their country's founding father painted from life. In the cab back to the office, I was treated like a *viejo companero*, told that I must come to Venezuela and that when I did, I must be their guest. The DelEd synthetic natural gas plant project came to naught and the Venezuelan oil deal was forgotten, but my two Latin buddies, in the presence of Lou Morgan and the assembled corporate brass, sang my praises. When leaving they stopped at my cubicle and showered me with vigorous *abrazos*. I went back to whatever it was I was doing, but I knew that I had accrued some points, and not just in Venezuela.

The Annual Report

Sweet, gentle, Rita Carbone had the large brown eyes of an infinitely sad herbivore. I held my folder just beyond her reach and waited for her burdened and weary-voiced, “Yes. Yes. What is it?” Pushing the folder toward her, I uttered the magic password, “Mr. Elliot wants to see this. Right away.” My wanting my stuff to go to the head of the line in Norman Elliot’s paper-flow was another of the many trials sent each day to Miss Carbone, one of two executive secretaries assigned to Mr. Norman Elliot, the company’s Senior Vice President of Public Affairs. The party line held that each of Mr. Elliot’s staffers and managers were, like his children, equal in his eyes. But to keep himself from being inundated and immobilized by the torrent of attention-grabbing, self-justifying reports and pleadings sent his way daily by many of his dozen or more managers, Mr. Elliot had given Rita the responsibility of screening for the stuff he needed to see.

In Norman Elliot’s universe as a corporate officer for a major, regional electric and gas utility company, much of the activity of most of his more than one hundred employees contributed little or nothing to the profitability of the company and probably little to its genuine interests. And most of what I did as a PR representative hadn’t much more relevance than the mad dances of self-perpetuation and corporate aggrandizement performed by my peers. But, I knew that the contents of the folder I was handing Rita were of critical importance to Norman Elliot in the one area he cared deeply about – Keeping his own job.

What had begun the previous Thursday as another day of coasting, one more day in what was then my eighteenth year of employment at Delta Edison, changed utterly when my phone rang. Rita Carbone's self-effacing voice slid into my ear with a whispered, "Mister Elliot wants to see you." Her equally soft-spoken but emphatic addendum of "right now" sent its intended and instantaneous jolt of adrenaline into my bloodstream. My first thought was "Oh shit, what now?" I rushed down the corridor toward the big, glassy reception area marking the offices of the "Senior Vice President, Corporate and Public Affairs." Slowing down, taking a breath, I walked respectfully into Norman Elliot's corner office.

Norm Elliot and Chip Reagan stopped in conversation and turned toward me. Norm motioned me into the chair next to Chip. Both of them looked like they were having a bad day. I did a flash inventory of my assignments thinking, "O.K, what could I have fucked up to bring this on." Norm Elliot did an eye lock on me and gave the look that said, "Pay attention, this is serious business." Pausing for effect, he said, "We've got a problem, a big problem." My increasingly defensive demeanor must have given me away because Norm softened and said, "no, no. It's got nothing to do with you." I thought, "oh yeah, right. Then why am I sitting here?" Chip Reagan swung his chair around to face me. Chip had been the number two guy in the department when Norm's predecessor, Ned Townsend was kicked upstairs. Feelings were strong that Chip should have gotten the job. Instead, the people at the top had brought Norman Elliot in from the outside. Chip looked directly at me and said, "It's Wendell."

"Wendell," I knew about Wendell. Everybody knew about Wendell. In more of a moan than a sentence, Norm Elliot said, "It's the annual report." Smacking his

hand on the desk he amped his voice up to an impassioned “Jesus Christ!” “Mauldin,” he said, referring to his own boss, “Big Tom” Mauldin, CEO of the company, had called down last night and asked when he could see the first draft of this year’s annual report. “It’s my own goddamned fault,” Norman Elliot went on. “I should never have left it with Wendell, not after last year.” I remembered talk about a screw-up last year with the annual report. Wendell, I knew was in charge of writing the narrative text of the annual report.

Wendell was G. Wendell Lippincott, III, manager of the department’s Editorial and Production Division. Wendell was a Yale man, Bachelor of Science, 1941, the son of a surgeon and a member of the city’s social register. Wendell’s father had been a Trustee of Hamilton University and a board member of downtown’s then exclusive Capitol Club. Wendell had found his way to the company the old fashioned way. Lippincott senior, in a casual aside to a fellow golfer at Pine View, noted that “young Wendell” would be coming down from school that summer, and could something be found for him at the electric company. The inquiry could have been made with similar results to any of dozens of metropolitan institutions that only people who moved in circles like those of the Lippincotts seemed to know about.

Wendell’s early service with the company was interrupted by the war. Other than mentioning once that he had served in the Pacific, he had little to say about his war years. One of his social peers and a fellow serious drinker, Walter Lafayette, spilled the beans one evening at a drunken office outing. “Wendell went in the Navy a fucking Lieutenant J. G., and four years later; he came out, still a fucking Lieutenant J. G.” Walter, ostensibly one of the company’s public relations

representatives, known for responding to members of the press as “you commie bastards,” continued his tale. “Wendell got sent overseas because he was a billeting officer in D.C., and he sent some admiral’s wife to a flea-bag, whorehouse of a hotel.” Walter told us that Wendell spent the rest of the war on some forgotten atoll counting toothbrushes and socks.

Norm Elliot raised his arm to wave three or four sheets of lined yellow notepaper at me. “Mauldin called me last night about wanting to see the annual report copy, and this is all I’ve got to show him.” Chip Reagan began filling in the details. “Wendell was supposed to complete a first draft before he left for vacation.” Chip paused. “But he’s gone, and this is all we can find, a couple of pages of scribbled notes. And then,” Chip said gravely, “Mister Mauldin called down last night.” Norm Elliot picked up the chant. “Wendell’s off to the fucking Riviera or Zermatt, or where ever the fuck it is he goes to every year. Jesus Christ, what a place this is. What a fucking place.”

As the company’s senior vice President for Public Affairs, Norman Elliot was an organizational oddity in the otherwise closed culture of DeEd Company. Among top management, he was the only outsider, the only corporate officer other than the general counsel, who hadn’t come up from within the ranks of the company’s corps of graduate engineers. When Norm was brought in to salvage the Company’s battered public image following the social and political turbulence of the 1960s and the early 1970s, he met none of the reigning and sacred criteria for a managerial position. As a measure of the catastrophic state of the company’s public standing, Norm was offered the top PR position even though he wasn’t an

engineer, a golfer, or even a gentile. Norm was the company's first Jewish officer. He couldn't quite believe it himself.

"O.K.," Norm said. "Mauldin left this morning for an EGI meeting in Seattle. He won't be back until Monday night." Another stop. "That's four days counting Saturday and Sunday." He was back into his serious mode, staring into my eyes. He couldn't quite pull it off and he gave it up, his mouth twisting into something approaching a grin. "Why am I laughing," he shouted. "That asshole Wendell is going to cost me the best fucking job I've ever had." This was followed by another "Oh, Jesus Christ." "Look," he said, "four days, we got four days. Straight out, I'm asking you. Can you produce a decent first draft of an annual report by Tuesday morning? And I mean first thing Tuesday morning. The copy has to be on Mauldin's desk Tuesday when he shows up, or I'll be out on the fucking street." Norm was exaggerating, but he had made his point.

An annual report, that's thirty to forty pages of copy written to recount, supposedly to the company's quarter-million shareholders, the year's operations, difficulties and successes. It was mostly a mix of eyewash, data and bullshit, and all of it had to go through an eventual vetting process of sign-offs by a cast of at least two-dozen company officers and directors. Among those reviewing the copy would be a high percentage of egomaniacs, compulsive nitpickers, and a couple of unpredictable eccentrics with agendas of their own. "Please," I thought, "let this cup pass." Whether or not I was capable of cranking out an acceptable first draft of an annual report for a multi-billion dollar corporation was an open question. Whether I could do it in four days was a question I could answer only with another question, one like, "are you out of your mind?" But like all cowards and

all fools, I looked straight back into Norman Elliot's eyes and told him what he wanted to hear. I told him that I thought the thing doable. In an imitation of what I thought a serious young professional might sound like, I said. "It's going to be close, Norm." Until then I had usually addressed him as "Mr. Elliot." As I went on, my sense of self-importance inflating, I felt the delicious rush that accompanies the taking of center stage. It was like a sequence from "The Guns of Navarrone," and I gave it everything but the spastic salute and the shouted "Yes sir!" "Norm," I said, using his first name again. "It will be close, but it can be done." A young Mickey Rooney in an Andy Hardy role couldn't have done it better. "I'll save the company! I'll write an annual report!" While I was laying all of this on, another voice arose, overriding everything with a counter-monologue of truth, fear and panic. The internal wise guy, the one who always knew the score, was riffing along lines of, "Oh boy, this is going to be good. You don't have a clue how you're going to do this, do you, smart ass?" Norman Elliot had relaxed visibly, exhaling and sinking back into his big leather chair. Chip Reagan just stared at me, incredulous.

At exactly 7:45 on Tuesday morning, I handed Rita Carbone the folder containing five copies of a thirty-six-page annual report, "Draft Number One." It had been close, but an abundance of accessible source material; quarterly reports, press releases, news clips, along with the templates established in previous annual reports, pointed the way. The initial stages of terror and dread had begun clearing away once I was able to plot a course toward an outline. From there, the material was arranged toward a conclusion, and then it was back to write the introduction that would lay out the themes that had emerged in putting the pieces in place. It was what it was. It wasn't Beowulf, but it would do. The nightmare I had anticipated had not materialized. I was exhausted, but I had come through in the

clutch. I had delivered. And now, I would be suitably rewarded. However, what I would find out was that within that reward would lay the makings of a real nightmare.