

FIT TO PRINT

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SAMPLE

THE EDITOR

SAMPLE

Chapter I

“Evenin’, Bern.”

“Roy.”

“Thom.”

“Roy.”

Hearty greetings thus exchanged, silence ensued as Roy, the Warbler city police officer, tried to get a better look at the large piece of equipment his two townsmen and friends were trying to load into their van while the two townsmen and friends of Roy, Bernie and Thom, tried to obscure themselves behind said piece of equipment. As it was nearly as tall as they were, this was not difficult.

After a long, respectful pause, Roy ventured: “Whatchall doin’?”

Relief animated Bernie’s explanation: “We’re taking this ol’ blame thing inta getting repaired.”

After another long pause, Roy persisted—maintaining respect, seeing as he was much younger than either of them and still thoughtful, seeing as he was a rookie in the police force, but seeing as he was also a newlywed, puzzled all the same: “At one o’clock in the morning? Ya’ll could save me a load a trouble if ya did your hauling during normal working hours. Then no one’d be calling me up to swing around to see what’s up and bothering yew.”

Thom cleared his throat and assured in his rich baritone: “It’s no bother—for us that is.” The glaze against his large glasses lent him the aspect of one blinded, as if from some great light. But there was no great light. The Oklahoman summer night was inky dark. Only the slick granules of gravel impeding his progress and ever so slightly shortening his temper emitted a weird, weak light from the shabby asphalt. Perhaps they were blinding him. Perhaps it was

Roy's badge which also gleamed ever so faintly. Be nice if Roy had never showed up. "We had to finish up our work here first."

"It was working," Roy asseverated.

"Well . . ." Thom was dumbfounded.

"Not this ol' thing," Bernie supplied.

"Not the way it's supposed to," Thom regained a degree of suavity. He was the newspaper editor, the real man of language. Bernie was just newspaper owner and community show-off, who exposed the gaps in his intelligence in his lengthy editorials. It was up to Thom now to get up the strength to ease his boss ever so gently to one side and explain to Roy clearly, concisely, but not necessarily truthfully what the hell they were doing. "We made due. With deadlines being as bad as they are around here, we had to keep a going until just about now. One reason it took so long was this heap of junk."

Roy put a leg forward, looked down towards the faint particles of gravel and shook his head. "I wish ya'll'd do your hauling when evra'body else did his."

"So do we, Roy. So do we. But in the newspaper business, you haven't got that luxury."

"Tain't got it on the pó-lice neither. Save me some legwork, though." He didn't really mind. All he wanted to know was what he was supposed to do for the rest of a Saturday night that was going to crawl so painfully into Sunday.

At least he could write up a report about this. "You two take it easy, if ya can. Say, want some help?"

"Roy, you'd be doing your second good deed for the day," Bernie enthused. "And we'll be outta here that much quicker."

"What was my first one?" Roy asked skeptically.

"Taking such good care of our city," Bernie replied fulsomely.

Roy grunted reluctant acknowledgement, put his shoulder to the heavy load and heaved a good sixty percent of it up the ramp and into the van before saying goodnight, clapping himself back into his patrol car and disappearing into the night like the young knight he was in sole command of a powerful engine whose limits were as yet untried. When Bernie and Thom emerged from the van to start moving the next piece of equipment, Roy was long gone.



Rudy Serling coaxed his wife out of the pickup truck and into the moonless Oklahoman night. It was raining lightly and the alley was deserted and uninviting, but Natasha complied. A second pickup truck, with chrome and umph and a wavy-haired youth at the wheel, pulled up quickly but quietly behind them, briefly splashing light across the tableau of Rudy herding Natasha towards the back door of a plain brick building. Snapping off the headlights and cutting the engine, the driver hopped out of his jazzy machine and immediately lost his starch to assume the persona of Reed, enervated, slouch-shouldered progeny of Rudy and Natasha Serling, new owners of the Times and Free Press newspapers, taking a sneak peek at their possession on the eve prior to their grand entrance.

“It sure was a good idea to go out,” Rudy laughed, holding open the heavy door to the windowless, utilitarian shipping room, the most inhospitable room of the newspaper offices, its every surface raw cement. “Welcome to the Tiiiiimes, etcetera.”

Natasha gave him a weary look as she slipped past him but just inside the door, she stopped. Reed slouched in behind her and Rudy brought up the rear, but they too stopped and all three huddled at the door for a long moment, confounded by the room’s profound darkness. Weak light from the alley came in through the slightly opening in the doorway that Rudy preserved with his flexible foot, which did nothing to pierce the cold black mass of air confronting them. The sound of the light Oklahoma night rain chilled them, but still they hung back.

Before them yawned the chain of offices that would be their future livelihood, strange offices in a strange town, but the smells that breathed out to them were very familiar. Here were resident the spirits of the newspaper world with which the Serlings had intimate acquaintance. The greeting, surprising them in total darkness, beckoned to their very souls.

The components of this potent olfactory mix—smells of ink, machinery, cold cigarette smoke, carpet dust, and coffee grounds—were pedestrian, but together they evoked the world of the living news, and the dead. They were the odors produced when those intent on fixing the living news had become raw, overworked, irritated, had drunk too much coffee, had smoked too many cigarettes. It was the time of impassionment, when they were capturing what just happened, what nobody knew, what was exact

and true, what was meant for the world to know and which would probably change everything. In that passion, breathing in those odors, they perfected their work and sent it off to the printers. In an exhausted euphoria, while waiting for the paper to come back, they reclined and smoked a cigarette they could finally enjoy.

But in that moment, the news had become dead. The world and its gossips had tumbled on; there were new bumps and bruises to chronicle. When their perfected work returned to them fixed on the printed page, they saw that it was old and worthless and fit only to be thrown away. As if in testimony to this, hundreds of newspapers lay unseen in the corners of the lightless shipping room where the Serlings hung back, scattered across the floor, strewn under counters and under foot, and no one noticed them. They were like dust. But the Serlings breathed in the lingering odors of cigarette smoke and machinery and their passion for fixing the living news stirred.

A trickle of water on her neck brought Natasha round. She shook off the water she discovered hanging from her cuffs and hair, and shuffled towards a red bulb that glowed somewhere to the right. She let her hand fall briefly on the cold surface of a waist-high machine that stood next to the wall. Just above the red glow, Natasha remembered, was the light switch. She flicked it on and, wonder of wonders, they remained in darkness but the room next door lit up brilliantly, revealing walls lined with bright yellow rib-high counters.

Natasha passed through the room to disappear into the shadows of the room beyond. The flick of a light switch was heard and that room suddenly glowed like a jack-o-lantern, lined with more high yellow counters and crowded with large, messy desks and a huge, blue metal box—a typesetting machine in just about the middle of the room. Natasha found the coffee machine, plugged it in and, wondering aloud if the thing worked, set about making a pot of coffee. Reed poked around the offices lazily, the consummate vicarious owner, not concerned with what might be private. After some time, he and Natasha were startled from their listless activities by a yell which brought them hurrying to the typesetting room where Rudy was pacing the floor. Natasha asked him what was wrong. Without answering, Rudy rushed back to the production room and then further back to the shipping room from where they

could still hear his growls. When he reappeared, he began what seemed to be a hurried but careful search of the offices. Reed brought him out of it.

“Pop, what’s wrong?” he asked softly.

“God-damn it, look!” Rudy gestured toward a brown square in the floor where the carpet had been cut out. After a pause which told him that they didn’t understand, he spit out, “A typesetting machine is missing. I bought two. I bought the damn office and what was in it. God-damn it! And there were two typesetting machines in this room. And a light table is gone from the back.”

Reed shrugged. “The ol’ boy’s probably getting them fixed. May not have been in the best shape.”

“Or he’s having them replaced,” Natasha added.

“You don’t fix what you’ve already sold to some idiot.” Rudy went to a phone, pulled out a stack of paper scraps he managed to store in his wallet, and shuffled through them until he found the number he was looking for, then dialed. He slammed the phone down a moment later. “I’m not talking to any damn machine! *And* you pay for the call.” Calmly Natasha got the number from him, called back, and left a message that Mr. Filo should call the newspaper office as early as possible the following day. She then set about the work of unpacking the boxes that held the personal office supplies they had had shipped. She chose the typewriter she wanted from the motley collection the office offered and arranged her desk in order to be able to get right to work the following day, a day she was dreading. Reed continued to poke around, sniffing out the secrets of the place. Rudy growled and complained, but finally set to shoving his new desk to the spot in the front office where he preferred it to be, in a cubbyhole out of sight of the front door but within earshot. He then went about sorting out his things.

Suddenly Reed appeared. “Pop, that small office in the next room.”

Rudy nodded complaisantly. “Take it.”

“No. It’s been cleared out.”

“I know.”

“But why?”

“Advertising people all up and quit. No rollover there.”

Reed forced several small sighs, his way of expressing not only exasperation, but controlled exasperation. “So?” he finally asked.

“You could do a little bit of that? Sports editor and advertising heh heh heh!” When Reed hesitated, Rudy reassured him, “There won’t be anything to it.” He held his hand out briefly as if offering something. “You give them a call, introduce yourself, and tell them to keep sending in those checks.” He laughed and went back to work.

SAMPLE

Chapter 2

Rudy received his first call as Warbler newspaper editor a little after eight o'clock in the morning. He answered with alacrity. "Times and Free Press. Who am I speaking to?"

"Cain't believe you're at work already," the caller drawled flippantly, but continued immediately giving Rudy no time to react: "I've got a correction for that ad? Hank came up with a different feed to advertise as the weekly special? It's going to be—"

Rudy interrupted him, asking him to hold on and saying he would have to get his rate cards.

"Come on burn. I thought we talked all about that stuff? 'Till kingdom come! It's all set."

Rudy, still puzzled by the man's speech, assured him they hadn't and asked him again to hold on. He got a little irritated because Natasha did not know where the rate cards were. Overhearing the sudden commotion, the proofreader Elsie, the gray dame of the establishment, bustled forward saying she wasn't sure but they used to always keep them . . . there. And she pulled open a drawer of a desk in the small advertising office Rudy had given to Reed, revealing a disarray of rate cards. Back at the phone, Rudy drawled a "Hello" to which the caller countered somewhat sarcastically with Rudy's initial question: "Who am *I* speaking to?" On getting the answer of Rudy Serling of the Warbler Times and Free Press, the man replied that that's what he thought and asked to speak to Bernie.

"We don't have a Bernie here. There may have been one here before, but we're kinda new and—"

"Shoot!" the voice muttered. "I got the old number. I'm sorry about that." The caller hung up.

“Musta meant that damn ratty shopper,” Rudy laughed as he related the incident to Natasha. “Well, that won’t last. We’ll run ’em out of town in a month. Thing only stayed in business because that bastard Filo owned it. Damn stupid way to operate. Thought he could get double income without anyone noticing. Business community’ll find out quick enough—this town doesn’t need a shopper. Doubles their costs, that’s all. We’ll make that clear.” He wrinkled his nose and his voice dropped in disgust. “He must be a stupid son-of-a-bitch, you know it?” He sauntered back to his desk, but on a few minutes reflection, rose again and wandered into Natasha’s office. “Whatever those rate cards say,” Rudy told her, “we’re raising them five per cent. Our rates are just a little higher than theirs were. Gotta think of progress, you know. Our progress.”

Natasha also received a puzzling call that morning and it troubled her. Someone called to cancel his subscription. She asked if she might ask why and then, after a pause and silence from the other end, went ahead and asked why. “Well, he said he thought he’d give the little guy a chance for once,” she told Rudy minutes afterwards, with a worried look. “Says that’s the way it’s always been in these parts. Sees no reason to change a good deal.”

Rudy screwed up his face. “Musta meant the shopper.”

“That’s what I said and I think he laughed at me. ‘Yeah,’ he said, he was going to subscribe to the shopper. Rudy, you don’t subscribe to a shopper. I tried to explain that to him. Subscriptions simply are not available. They’re distributed free.”

“I know that.”

“But he didn’t!” she squeaked with frustration. “And he canceled his subscription to our paper. Anyway, I’ll go ahead and do it, but it’s a little discouraging on the first day, isn’t it?” she asked mildly as she headed toward the front counter where Pam and Betty, the two part-time circulation clerks, sat listening to every word. Together they found the man’s name and pulled his subscription card. With the card in hand, Pam went back to what looked like miniature filing cabinets in the shipping room. The drawers held thousands of inky blue slides framed in heavy white cardboard. The plates were pulled through the machine that stamped the addresses of the subscribers onto the papers prior to mailing them. She found the plate that corresponded to the address in her hand, pulled it out, took it back up to the front desk, and laid it aside instead of throwing it away.

Rudy came over, picked it up, held it up to the light of the front window, and squinted through it. “Renllerg retsub,” he said slowly. “Sounds like just the kind of guy that would try to subscribe to a shopper.”

“Buster Grellner,” Pam corrected him, smiling as if she were already exasperated with her new boss’s corny sense of humor. But her smile was too pretty to think anything other than that she liked him very much.



“You can go home,” Rudy told Donna, who was standing by Elsie’s desk and whining in a soft drawl as she twisted a strand of her honey-colored hair around a finger. “We don’t have anything for you to do until we get the typesetting machine back.”

“Did you ever find out where it went?” Elsie asked.

Donna decided to put her two cents in although she felt this man didn’t want any small change from her. “Roy said some people were working around here late at night.”

“We were,” Rudy enlightened her impatiently.

“Oh, well, he said it was like real late, like late enough for the police to think someone might be doing somethin’ they didn’t want anyone to know about.”

“Like how late?” Rudy asked, the edge still in his voice.

“Like the middle of the night.”

“Who’s Roy?”

“Who? Roy? That’s her husband. Evra’body knows that,” Elsie answered him. “He’s a city police deputy. Dudn’t like it much though, huh, Donna?”

Donna gave her an irritated look, but agreed in a soft whine that he didn’t like it much.

“Well, I’m sorry he doesn’t like it, but it doesn’t change my situation any,” Rudy interjected. “I can’t get any answer from Myron Filo, so you take some time off until we get a machine you can use.”

“Can’t I do proofreading, Elsie? If I take a day off, I won’t get paid for it, will I?” she challenged Rudy. He looked down and shook his head as if sorrowfully. That spoke clearly enough to the girl, and she was reluctant to leave. After a few minutes of polite back-and-forth, he asked her very plainly to go home and wait until he called her. Or that she could stay as long as she liked just as long as she

punched out first. She pulled her time card out of the rack, looked at it with a heavy sigh, punched out and left, dragging her purse, which had very long straps, on the ground behind her, obviously wanting the others to know that she was displeased with the treatment.

“Idn’t that something?” Elsie asked, but Rudy was already gone.

SAMPLE

Chapter 3

Rudy called on the city police chief midmorning and found the dispatcher-secretary's question of "where you from?" irritating. On hearing the name of the southern Oklahoman town, she exclaimed, "Oh! You're not from 'round here or I'd'a heard of you." He dismissed the woman's black-eyed curiosity as idleness and reappraised Warbler as being backward in comparison to his smaller hometown. The police chief wandered out from a back office to shake hands with Rudy, but he also seemed less than affable. Rudy put it down to the man's youth and unnatural occupation.

"Say," Rudy remarked to him, taking in the man's spindly form with a downward sweep of his eyes. "I heard there were people in the Times and Free Press office late one night? Like the middle of the night? I was just wondering if you wrote up any report on it?"

The chief said nothing, rubbed his chin, stared at the floor, and finally shook his head very slowly. He appeared to be in a complete fog. Apparently Rudy was the first person to ever come around asking sneaky questions about what he did.

Rudy treated the police chief's manner as if it were amiable Oklahoman laconism and made a few laconic remarks of his own. The moment he made it clear he was leaving, the chief followed him outside and down the front steps. They now stood on the sidewalk in front of the police headquarters, each looking pensively at the Laundromat across the street as if it were something to see.

"Don' know," the chief remarked. Rudy assumed he was referring to his initial question.

"I got some information that a deputy of yours, a Roy, may have reported it."

“Yip. We got a call that someone was messing around there. Turned out to be the employ-ées and the officer on duty, that being Roy, continued on his rounds. Doesn’t take a report as such,” he said reasonably. “Just goes into the log. But that’s Roy for you. New. Wants to write reports.”

“What night was that?” Rudy asked, his face darkening.

“’Tween Saturday and Sunday. Way later ’n anyone should be thinking about what they didn’t do in the office that day. They should be glad the police swing by to see what’s up. ’Course ol’ Bernie was reeee-al friendly. He’s always like that. But no one’s like that at one in the morning when they’re doing what he was doing.”

“Bernie being who?”

“Bernie Turken.”

Rudy’s face wrinkled. “I don’t know any Bernie Turken and I guess I know my employees.”

“Up ’till noon Sunday, this past, he was an employee of the Times and Free Press.”

“Well, now,” Rudy replied easily. “That’s the ol’ boy that works at the shopper.”

“Ah guess. But he worked at the Times and Free Press before. He switched. Been saying he wants to concentrate his energies.”

“Weell, makes you wonder on what when a fella’s got to go into offices where he works all day at one in the morning on the last day for something or other. Figure he could go in in broad daylight, don’t cha? Meet the new owner, look him in the eye?” Rudy asked a tad sharper than he meant to.

“Oh, it was clear what he went in for.”

“Oh?” Rudy asked quickly.

“Had a van waiting outside and ol’ Thom there—”

“Thom being who?”

“That there’s the editor.”

“Of the shopper?”

“Ah guess . . . ol’ Thom there to help him pull out a pretty big piece of equipment. Told the officer on duty they had to do their hauling at that un-usual hour cause they had to get their work done first and it took ’em that long to do it.” The dark-haired officer paused for a beat or two. Rudy breathed carefully, wondering what he would hear next. “Nah. Ol’ Bernie pretends he’s something, but if you ask me, he’s just an errand boy. Myron sent him in there and

he was hauling it out for him. Nice enough guy, Bernie, but he's just a gopher for Myron. Always will be."

"Welp, got work to do," Rudy remarked off-handedly. "Oh, by the way, I'd like to report three missing typewriters, a missing light table, and a missing typesetting machine, probably that big piece of equipment you—or rather your officer on duty—saw Bernie Turken with Saturday night. Equipment I purchased when I bought the business, all written down pretty clear," he said, but in the next second, a jolt went through him as the phrase "Times, etcetera" suddenly flashed through his mind. It was something he had been joking about for weeks now. "Could you send someone around to my office to make a report? My wife Natasha will talk to whoever comes. Welp, must be gettin' along."

The two took leave of each other without any special good will. A latent mistrust marred the exchange, or so it seemed to Rudy.

Not wanting to interrupt his rounds, Rudy called Natasha and asked her to look in their purchase contract to find out when and why the phrase "Times, etcetera" appeared. "I've been hamming around with that for a while now and I don't know why," he explained to her. "I know it shows up there somewhere." On hearing that the contract was not in the office but at home, they agreed they would look at it together at lunchtime.

Yes, it was good to be out in the August sunshine, a beautiful day and a good-looking town and Rudy could use the fresh air. These thoughts took the foremost place in the editor's mind as he headed towards the south corner of the block where the city commissioners' offices were housed. There he had an unremarkable exchange with the city clerk, a friendly blond woman named Dorothy, whose fresh lipstick and neat appearance sparkled in the otherwise shadowy front office where she sat all alone. The sound of their few pleasantries drew a sad-looking man out of one of the closed offices behind the counter. He smoked a cigar and stared at Rudy with melancholy eyes that were rounder at the bottom than at the top, as if they had been slowly eroding for a long time now. His face was craggy from, Rudy guessed, drink and cynicism. The exchange between them proved fertile soil for the seed Rudy's uncomfortable conversation with the police chief had sown.

"Well, it's too bad—"

“Willard Burpo, one of the city commissioners,” Dorothy interjected with a tight smile to Rudy, seeing the commissioner was not going to introduce himself. Rudy gave a critical nod in the man’s direction, but Mr. Burpo, acknowledging neither the introduction nor the nod, continued without pause:

“—they don’t give people a chance to try each other out.” His off-hand tone clearly indicated that he was sorry he had let himself get drawn out of his peaceful office.

Rudy guessed his meaning. “I looked the town over and liked what I saw. Pretty little town. I can tell what I’m gonna like, all right.”

“Yeah, but who got to look you over?” A chilly pause followed, during which the coarse-featured man repositioned his cigar in his mouth and smiled wryly around it into the editor’s reddening face. The editor’s blue-black eyes remained sharp and steadily focused on him. “Now a newspaper is a good thing,” the commissioner continued insincerely. “I was talking about when businesses come in peddling anything they want. Who gets to decide what’s good for the community and what’s not? Take this guy who’s coming in now with his wife’s ceramic shop. We know perfectly well that as soon as the zoning gets changed for that very pleasant artsy little business, he’s gonna come in with his metal-working stuff and blow the neighborhood away with his machines and loud noise. Easier to get the second variance to light industrial from commercial than from residential to commercial. Much easier. Problem is, we can’t prove what he intends to do. We just know it.” He took the cigar out of his mouth and regarded Rudy.

Rudy said he guessed he didn’t know too much about that, asked which way the county courthouse was, said good day to him and to Dorothy, and continued on his rounds.

Visits to the county clerk and the sheriff’s office were the next items on Rudy’s list of activities, but he made the visits in more of a hurry than he meant to. Before he could realize that the four county clerks were easy-going, curious about him, and genuinely friendly, he had put them off with a curt business-like attitude. He let himself be instructed as to where the court records were kept: civil cases, small claims, divorces, marriages, misdemeanor, and felony. He copied the cases filed that week into his notebook, said a breezy goodbye, crossed a walkway and was in the sheriff’s office where he

experienced a cool exchange with a tall, fat deputy with warts on his face; neither wanted to talk to the other, and Rudy was soon making his way home, now sweating in the heat, thoroughly disgusted with the town officials and not sure what went wrong.

As he walked along the wide, clean sidewalk, he watched the faces of the people he passed curiously to see if the general population was as sour-tempered as its city servants, but the women looked pretty, were tall and nicely dressed; the men were short and hunched and looked like what they were: overworked farmers just out of the fields, grimy and weather-beaten and tottering around in their oldest overalls. And then the puzzling discomfort he had been feeling off and on all morning recurred when, on passing the last few storefronts before his office, he seemed to catch a plump woman with frosted hair by surprise.

She had just backed out of the shopper office two doors south of the Time and Free Press office, hunched conscientiously over a notebook. A camera—a very expensive camera—was slung recklessly over a shoulder, and both a pencil and a pen were lodged behind her ears. On stepping out onto the sidewalk and squinting in the strong sunlight, she caught sight of Rudy striding along leaning into the wind, his long, pale arms swinging freely at his sides. Her face registered discomfort and confusion and, above all, recognition although Rudy had never seen her before. She hesitated as if she would go back inside, but as he approached, an absent smile on his face, she instead skittered across the sidewalk and stepped hurriedly off the curb between two parked cars where she began to watch the major highway with severe intensity for her chance to cross and get away from Rudy. So it seemed to Rudy. He gave the incident no more thought than to ask the production man, Griff, to see if all the photography equipment was there as he and Natasha headed home for lunch.

During lunch, Rudy rapidly scanned his purchase contract. The term ‘Times, Etcetera’ was used repeatedly to refer to Warbler Newspapers Inc., the business Rudy had purchased. Rudy growled. “This whole thing seems mighty strange,” he murmured. “You’re trying to get that Filo character, aren’t you?”

“Every fifteen minutes,” she replied wearily.