

THE FOURTH ESTATE



By
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Issue

#1

CHAPTER ONE

The madness began, sources would later say, in New York, on a gray January morning. Throughout its history the city had never been a boring place and 2000 was no exception. There, amidst the chaos of morning traffic, horns blared, tires screeched, and beleaguered commuters shouted to the heavens for the sort of justice never found on a Monday.

At the heart of all this a small yellow taxicab veered wildly through the sea of traffic. This wouldn't be especially notable were it not for the fact that this particular cab happened to be occupied by the protagonist of this story. The other cabs, we can only assume, were being occupied by the protagonists of someone else's story.

The protagonist in questions is Harold Foster, a short, nervous twenty-four-year-old man wrapped in a suit far more fashionable in his father's days. It should be noted that he is by no means a great hero -in fact, he's a journalist and were it not

for a matter of circumstances set to befall him, he would probably be a poor choice of protagonist for this story.

Fortunately he is, as mentioned, in New York City, a place where circumstances are rather difficult to avoid.

Harold never asked to be a protagonist, or a journalist, or for that matter in New York. Like everything else in his life these were all things that had simply happened to him and if given the choice now he wasn't sure what he'd ask to be -aside from perhaps less anxious and mildly successful. He wasn't though and had actually just completed an interview that was by all accounts unsuccessful, albeit impressively so. This was the reason why we now find him in this cab -which is currently speeding down the road at a pace and precision that can only possibly be mastered by a veteran driver under the influence of cocaine (which of course the driver was).

With a death grip on the brown leather tote wrapped around him, Harold was flung back and forth as the small cab veered sharply around turns. Just as his face collided with the cold windowpane he heard a familiar beeping emit from inside the tote. With a sigh he began to rummage through it, pausing for only a moment as the cab flung across the backseats yet again. Finally, he managed to retrieve the large ringing block and bite his lip as a steady stream of profanity filled his ear.

“-the hell is wrong with you, Harold?!” shouted the disembodied voice of Louis Reid. “I give you one assignment – one shot at *something* respectable- and you manage to blow it and take the paper down with you!”

In a desperate flurry Harold tried to gain his footing, all the while wondering just what his defense was actually going to be. “Lou –look– I know this didn’t go as planned but–”

“James Bentzen, the richest man in America –in fucking America,” Reid shouted, “–and in a matter of fifteen

minutes you manage to insult his work–”

“It was a joke,” Harold cut in. “It was meant as–”

“insult his work, destroy his presentation, and personally vomit on his shoes!” the voice continued.

“I did try to apologize about the shoes.”

“You have completely humiliated this paper –and more importantly, you didn’t even come away from it with a story!”

“Um, are we sure about that?” Harold offered, fumbling desperately through his notebook. “Because I actually think that ...from the right angle we could–”

“We’re not running *anything* about this!” Reid snapped. “As it happens James Bentzen now *owns* this paper, so congratulations, you’ve at least accomplished one thing this week.”

“Lou, look I’m really sorry but ...let’s be honest ...I’m not even sure this story was right for us anyway. I mean this isn’t *Forbes*, nobody’s buying this paper to read about some

faceless rich guy and his stupid business plans.”

For several seconds Reid said nothing, and Harold had begun to wonder if he’d simply forgotten to hang up. Finally, the sound of heavy breathing, followed by a loud snap, cut through the phone. “Well, as it happens,” Reid said, “this paper now *is* one of his stupid business plans.”

“And what? I don’t have a job anymore, is that what you’re saying?”

“On the contrary ...somehow. Bentzen was quite adamant on keeping you. Something to the effect of wanting to keep an eye on you so you’re out of his way. No. You’ve still got a job and so do I. My job is to keep you away from anything remotely important.”

“I see.” So, it was business as usual then.

“And with that in mind I’m gonna need you back at the office pronto,” Reid continued. “I’ve got a new assignment here that even you should be able to handle.”



Harold didn't hear the rest of what Reid had to say. At that moment the cab had reached an abrupt halt, throwing him face-first against the driver's seat and breaking his nose.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Harold quickly handed a wad of dollar bills to the driver before tumbling out onto the ground in front of the airport. A few passersby had paused to stare at the spectacle as he clumsily attempted to gather his possessions and straighten his suit.

"Well then," he whispered to himself. "Okay, I still have a job ...I still have ...my shitty shitty job."

Harold continued to mull this reality over as he found his seat aboard the next plane to Columbus, Ohio. He was still plagued by the vague notion that there was something terrible awaiting him which had yet gone unmentioned. After all, one hardly vomits on a multi-billionaire and walks away unscathed.

Back and forth his eyes darted between the runway

outside and the newspaper in his lap – "**First Lady to Enter Senate Race**" it read. Finally, he grew distracted by the sound of a muffled argument coming from just beyond the cabin. One of the voices in particular sounded vaguely familiar.

"Look, *clearly* there was mix-up –it said first class!"

"Sir, I'm very sorry but I'm afraid–"

"No, no, no, no, no... Listen I ...*I can't go back there.*

I... I mean I've got a reputation –You understand, right?"

"I'm afraid I don't, sir. Now if you will please–"

"What do you *mean*? Surely you know who I am –don't you *read*, woman?!"

"Sir, I've been more than polite with you now if you don't return to your seat–"

"Okay, okay, okay ...fine. I was out of line ...I apologize."

"Thank you, sir."

"....So how much is it gonna cost?"

“Sir?”

After this the discussion became lost to Harold’s ears for several seconds until at last it resumed, now with several more voices shouting until at last all fell silent and from behind the curtain emerged a well-dressed scowling man drenched in more cologne and hair gel than most would have believed possible. He stared at the crowd of passengers seated before him, sighed, and trudged to the empty seat beside Harold.

Harold himself remained perfectly still, his eyes glued to the familiar face whose identity was only now dawning on him. In silence he watched as the man proceeded to polish his glasses, glance around his surroundings bitterly, and finally retrieve a silver flask from inside his jacket.

“Peter Richardson!” Harold said at last.

The man paused, mid-gulp, his eye slowly descending upon Harold. Finally, after a moment’s consideration he put down the flask and turned to face his accuser.

“Have we met?” he asked suspiciously.

“It’s me Harold,” Harold said, suddenly thinking to remove the tissues from his nose. “Harold Foster. We used to work together at *The Cardinal*.”

Peter stared blankly for a moment. Finally, a stiff smile forced its way onto his face as he responded, “Harold! Yeah – Reid’s new guy.... Hey, how it’s been?”

“Oh just ...great,” Harold said, hoping to sound even slightly confident.

“Still writing for that rag, then?”

Harold paused to consider the question. “So far,” he said at last, “But what about you? Mr. Big Shot, eh –you’ve been all over the place since you left.”

Peter nodded as his bitter discomfort gave way to a familiar smugness. “*The Times* now,” he said. “Yeah, you know it’s tough work and all but the story’s really its own reward.”

After a moment he added, “Hey, let me see that,” gesturing towards the paper.

Harold handed it to him before turning his own attention back to the runway as they began to take off. “It’s great stuff,” Peter nodded, scanning the First Lady article. “Just hope it’s for real.”

“Really?” Harold asked. “You never struck me as a fan of hers.”

At this Peter snorted and shook his head. “You’re hysterical, Harold.”

“I don’t understand...”

“You’re a *journalist*, Harold.” Peter continued sternly. “Get your priorities straight. I’m a *fan* of whatever sells headlines ...and damn if the Stantons don’t sell.”

“How noble,” Harold said as the bitter reality began to come into focus.

“Hey, you know it’s true. Where would *The Cardinal*

be without the Pinarski Scandal? How many papers did *that* sell? And let’s be honest do you really think a race between Nance and Keaton is gonna get people tuning in? No, no, that’s not where the show’s at.”

“Then where *is* the show at?” Harold asked, wondering if he’d regret the question.

“Malone,” Peter said. “That’s who they’ve got me covering these days, over in the Republican primaries. People love the whole ‘straight-talking curmudgeon’ thing.”

“Well... hang on,” Harold said. “Didn’t you write like a dozen stories demonizing Stanton?”

“I never said *positive* press sells,” Peter answered, handing the paper back. “Nobody wants that sappy shit. Why do you think Bert Hall got destroyed four years ago? The miserable bastard...”

“I thought covering Hall was your first major assignment,” Harold replied.

“Yeah,” Peter grimaced. “The only time anybody ever bought a story about the guy was after I pushed him off a stage!”

“I thought he tripped?”

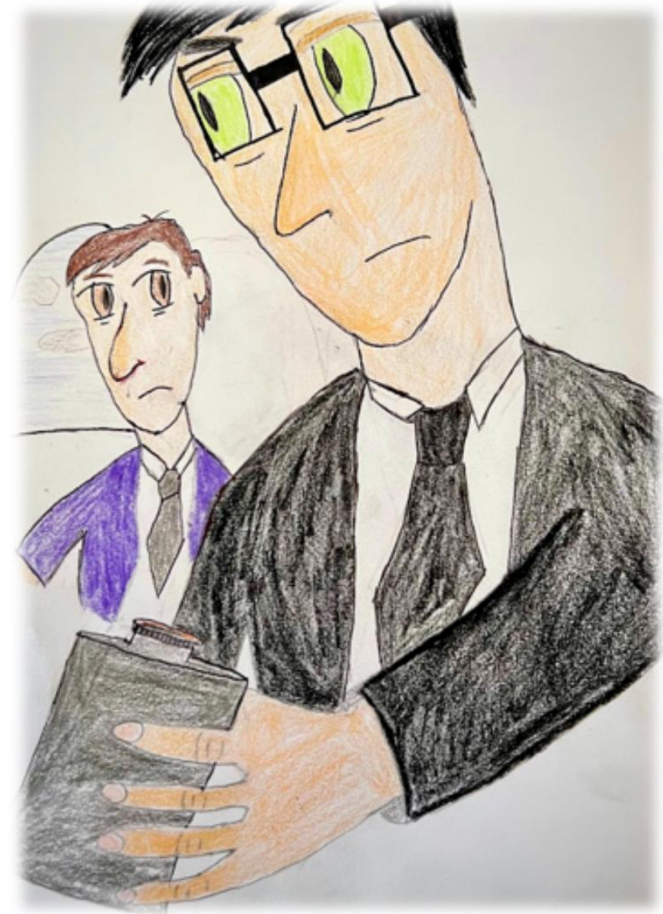
“That’s what I wrote.”

“Peter, the man was 73 years old!” Harold cried.

Peter shrugged. “He lived and I sold a story. All things considered, I’d say I did him a favor.”

After this the conversation fell silent for some time, with Harold returning to his paper and Peter to viewing the environment around him with as clear a contempt possible.

Eventually the silence was broken by a single sentence from Peter. “You know I don’t normally fly coach,” he said.



You know I don’t normally fly coach.

On East Broad Street in Columbus, Ohio there stands a tall brick building that is home to *The Cardinal*, the fourth most popular newspaper in the state. This was not so much a status achieved through genuine popularity so much as merely outliving most of its competitors. Nevertheless, the staff took pride in their ranking, having risen steadily from the twenty-sixth most popular over the course of fifteen years. After all, as its owner Stephen Chase observed, if the newspaper industry really was dying as fast as many claimed “then all we’ve got to do is hang in there longer than those other bastards and we’re bound to end up as number one.”

The Cardinal did not, however, take pride in having Harold Foster on its staff. This was what made Harold so efficient (that is, efficient at all). As no one ever actually wanted him around the office he generally found himself being sent away immediately to cover whatever potential story could be found. It kept him employed but he’d begun to suspect it

would do little beyond that. Over the course of three years the only things to have come his way were the failed interview with Bentzen and, now in its aftermath, a stern lecture in his editor’s office.

“Harold, you really are something,” sighed a sober Louis Reid, head hanging as he leaned over his desk. He was only 39 but his job had clearly taken its toll and, with premature gray hair and constant shadows beneath both eyes, the man looked closer to his mid-fifties. Certain coworkers didn’t help.

“Thank you, sir.”

“That wasn’t a complement, you dolt! I finally think I can trust you with something important and what do I get?”

“I’m assuming this a rhetorical q-”

“I get you single-handedly putting this paper’s survival at stake!”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“Reid, to be fair, James Bentzen *is* insane,” Harold said

“Of course he’s insane,” Reid snapped. “He’s rich, that’s not the point!”

Shaking his head, Reid turned away and began to pace. Harold on the other hand remained still, his eyes wandering to the cubicles outside as he wondered whether or not he was free to leave. Finally, Reid stopped and picked up a manila envelope from his desk.

“Bentzen won’t let me fire you,” he said, “and it’s clear you’re not to be trusted with anything remotely important. So, with that in mind, I’ve found just the assignment for you. I’m sending you out on the campaign trail.”

At this, Harold lit up. “All right, Louie! Hey, so -uh, I guess I’d better go get packed. Am I headed to New Hampshire or Iowa? Who’s the candidate? Malone? Nance? Do I get to ride the Straight Talk Express?”

“No,” Louis said flatly. “Like I said, I’m to keep you away from important stories. Believe it or not, that actually includes potential future heads of state.”

“So....”

“No, you’re going to cover one of the lesser-known guys. To be honest, it’s really more human interest than a regular political story.”

Harold sank back into the chair. “Lou... c’mon, not Nadler?! Seriously?”

“No. Still too high profile.”

“Then ...who?”

Reid handed him the envelope. “There’s this town in the southeast, Appalachian region of the state -Sardis. Some guy there -just a local guy- is putting himself forward as an independent candidate for president.”

“What is he, then?” Harold asked, “Local councilman?”

“No.”

“Lawyer?”

“No.”

“Any political experience at all?”

“None.”

Harold stared at the window behind Reid for a moment in silence. “I.... don’t really get it. What, is he on the fringe? Some sort of political extremist or something?”

“Nope, from what I’ve read he doesn’t really seem very political at all. Just some guy who wants to be president.”

“Just some guy....” Harold repeated, trying to wrap his head around the idea. “And you want me to follow his *campaign* around then? Waste my time covering some village idiot just because Bentzen is a media-mongering ghoul whose demonstrations induce vomiting?”

“Yes. I’m glad we have an understanding.”

“Come on, Lou, I’m better than that. Honestly, I’m sorry about the Bentzen story but this is overkill. There are so



many more important things you could have me covering for the paper.”

Louis sighed and walked towards the door. “Maybe... But I’ve already given you one shot and because I did Stephen Chase is now working as a radio disk jockey.”

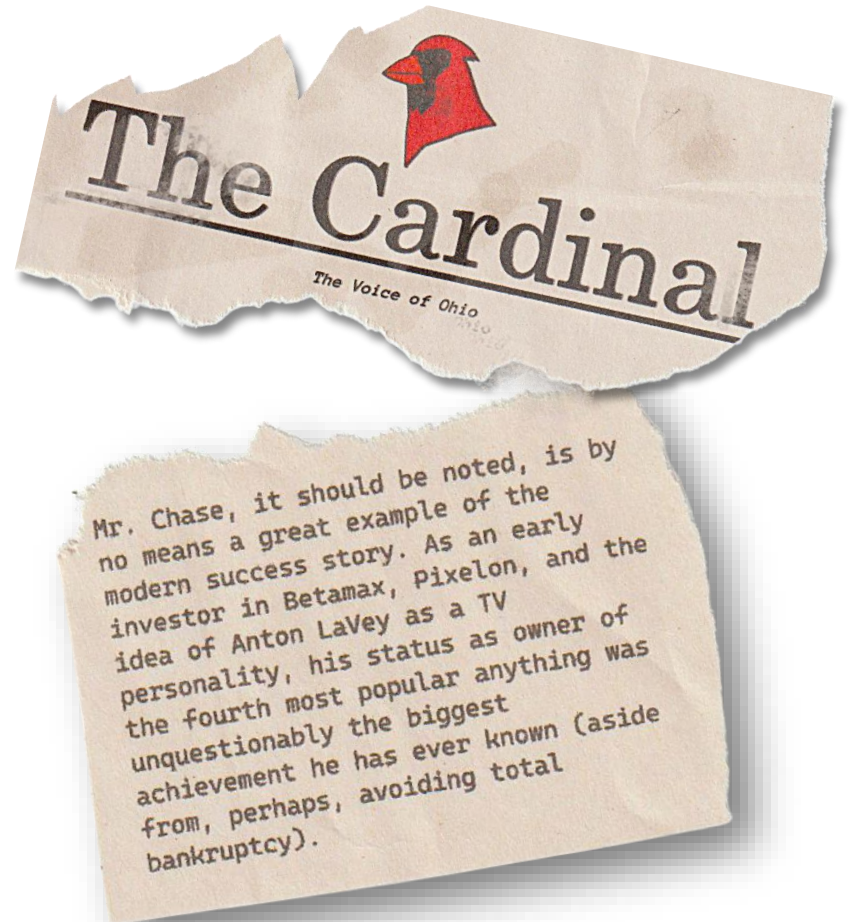
“Really?” Harold lit up. “What station?”

Ignoring this, Louis opened the door and gestured for Harold to leave. “You’re to be in Sardis tomorrow morning. All the details and directions you need to know are in that envelope. Don’t screw this up.”

Picking up the manilla envelope, Harold slung his bag over his shoulder and slouched out of the office. On the way back to his cubicle a young woman scooted by on her chair.

“So I take it I’m not getting your desk then?” she asked.

“Not today, Susan” Harold replied, still scanning the envelope in his hands. “it turns out if you screw up bad enough it can actually benefit you. As of today I am un-fireable.”



“Failing upwards....” Susan said replied, twirling a pen between her fingers. “Remind me to screw up a major interview sometime.”

“It wasn’t as bad as it sounds,” Harold said, taking a seat at his own cubicle.

“I already heard the story from Dan over at the Dispatch,” Susan smirked. “I know for a *fact* it was as bad as it sounds.”

Harold said nothing. Instead, he simply took a sip from his *Star Wars* coffee mug, opened the envelope, and began to read over the directions inside.

“Still, there’s no point beating yourself up about it,” Susan continued. “It’s like you said, you’re un-fireable! This is a call for celebration!”

“Probably,” Harold nodded, “Unfortunately there’s no time to celebrate. I’ve got a campaign to cover.”

“A campaign?!” Susan said, nearly falling out of her

chair. “Who’s Reid sending you after *now*?”

“Eh, just some nut,” Harold said.

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Susan smirked.

But Harold said nothing, his eyes having returned to scanning the paper in front of him before finally turning their attention back to the envelope itself. On the front was a small red label which simply read: **Russell Kingsly**.

CHAPTER TWO

It was a small house, sitting alone by the side of a dirt road at the forest's edge. In fact, rough might have been a better word for it. The outer walls were unfinished and actually appeared to have come from different structures entirely. The only other sign of civilization in sight was a small shed and a rusting red car. At the road's edge stood a dented tin mailbox with the name *Kingsly* inscribed in red paint on the side.

After slowly driving down the gravel road, stopping, and turning around three times, Harold finally accepted that this was, in fact, the right place. With a sigh, he took a long swig from his coffee mug and parked the car.

Walking up to the house, a new sight caught Harold's attention. There, beside the mailbox stood a small plastic blue sign that read in bold red letters: **Russell Kingsly 2000!** Harold shook his head and paused to examine his surroundings. He hadn't expected much but he'd still expected something more

than this: a back road ramshackle hut on the outskirts of what didn't even legally classify as a 'town'. At the very least, he'd thought there'd be an office -some sort of campaign headquarters ...some sort of anything, actually —anything with at least a hint of being official.

Well, he thought, I suppose this is what you get when you screw up an interview with the big shots.

Inside, an electric guitar could be heard playing what Harold suspected was supposed to be *Rebel Rebel*. Suddenly it broke off, followed by several crashes and the sound of broken glass. A few seconds later the front door swung open and (after fumbling with the doorknob, tripping over something Harold couldn't see, and momentarily getting his shirt caught in the screen door) there stood Russell Kingsly. He was a gangly man, bug-eyed, and clad in bright pink shoes and the largest pair of glasses Harold had ever seen. On the front of his bright red sweater vest he also sported a small tin '**Russell Kingsly**

2000!’ button. After spinning around to check on something out of sight, he turned his attention to the reporter standing before him.

“Hello!” he called, flashing a wide grin..

“...Hi,” Harold said, momentarily forgetting how best to proceed

No sooner had he said this than a shadow passed over Russell’s face.

“You’re not here about that leaf blower, are you?” he asked, pointing a finger at Harold.

“Leaf blower ... er, n-no.”

“Because I swear, I don’t have it. I’ve been on the phone with your boss and... well, yeah I -I don’t know what’s going on over there but it’s not here.”

“Wait, what?” Harold raised his hands in the air, “No. No, sir ...you are Russell Kingsly?”

“Um....” the color began to fade from Russell’s face as

he spun around nervously to see if anyone else was in sight.

After seeing that no one else was, he turned back to Harold before quickly tearing off his button and stuffing it into his pocket. Immediately, however, both of their gazes fell upon the small yard sign.

“Um.... yes,” he said.

“Mr. Kingsly, my name is Harold Foster,” Harold said, extending a hand. “I’m the journalist from *The Cardinal* sent to cover your presidential campaign.”

Russell approached him slowly and stared at the outstretched hand for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. Then, without warning, he snatched it and flashed his grin a second time.

“Ah-well, Pleasure to meet you, Hal!” he said, confidently before turning away to stare up at the house.

“Yes. Glad you could make it...,” he added.

After another pause he spun round again to face Harold,

a newfound intensity burning within each eye.

“We have to talk,” he said, walking towards the front door. “Right this way.”

Entering the house, Harold found himself standing in a small, dimly lit living room. It seemed, on the whole, fairly normal.

“You’ll notice my rundown shack,” Kingsly said with a calm wave. “It’s ...It’s okay. I like it.”

Harold looked around. He wasn’t sure if shack was the term he would use but ...it did seem to serve its purpose.

“Ah, my piano I play very profusely,” Kingsly continued, gesturing to the small instrument in the corner with an air of pride, “and the television which I watch ...very *very* much. I’m very good with keeping up on events.”

Harold began to wonder if he ought to take notes.

At this point they entered the kitchen where a young man stood in front of a large chart labeled ‘CAMPAIGN

PLAN’.

“And this is Mr. Mark MacDougal,” Kingsly said.

“Mark, this is Harold –Harold? Yes, this is Harold Foster from *The Cardinal*.”

Mark shook Harold’s hand. “Pleasure,” he said before adjusting his sliding glasses and promptly turning back to the chart

“Mark’s joined the campaign as my chief strategist.”

“Fascinating,” Harold said. His real attention remained fixed on the chart which, so far, didn’t appear to have many real ideas on it. At the top was simply a few notes hastily sketched in marker, including *Make speech* and *Get Running Mate*. Below that, four pictures were taped to the page. They were photos of Vice President Alex Nance, California Governor Richard Keaton, Senator Chuck Malone, and the Green Party’s Ray Nadler. Below each, were a few vague notes about each opponent which Harold now struggled to decipher.

This effort proved to be fairly futile due to the nature of the notes. For example, beneath Keaton all that had been written was *California* and *shoes* while under Nadler it said *surprisingly popular* and *TV*.

“So,” Russell continued as he motioned for Harold to have a seat at a nearby table. “What exactly is the plan then?”

Harold stared at him blankly. “The plan?”

“Yes. You know, how will you play into all of this? What’s *The Cardinal* role in all this?”

“Oh. Well, I mean, I thought I’d just sort of ...follow your campaign around and write an article on it.”

Russell nodded, seemingly allowing the notion slowly sink in before saying, “Yes. That does seem like the best game plan.”

After a minute he added, “Well, we’ve got a lot to do over the next few weeks so if you stick around I can promise you a good story.”

“Excellent,” Harold nodded, removing a small recorder from his pocket. “But first, I do have just some basic questions to ask you.”

“All right,” Russell nodded, suddenly looking incredibly serious as he took a seat at the table.

“First, would you mind telling the paper a bit about yourself?”

Russell leaned back and stared intently at the ceiling. “Hmm... Well, you know, I guess the first thing to say would be that I’m ...a people person. I’m the kind of person who likes people. I think that ...people are ...integral to our nation’s future. See I’m a nurse and ...and as one of those I work with people quite a bit.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yea, they’re everywhere. But I suppose beyond that what I’d like to have known about myself is that ...I am a musician.”

“A musician,” Harold replied dryly, “Do you mean beyond the piano?”

Russell nodded. “Oh yeah. My buddy’s got a band I’ve occasionally performed as a guitarist in. But beyond that I’ve performed on several occasions. Really, I guess you could say that this whole politics thing is just until my music career takes off. Would you like some cornflakes?”

“What?” Harold said, caught off guard. “Uh, no, thank you. Um, onto my next question: *Why* do you want to be president of the United States?”

At this question, Russell turned around from the cupboard he’d retreated to, cereal box still in hand. “Well... it just seems like the natural next step in my life.”

Harold turned to Mark who offered only a shrug.

“So...,” he continued. “I guess what I mean to ask is ...what would you *do* as president?”

“What *wouldn’t* I do?!” Russell laughed. “I mean, I

think it’s safe to say if you send me to the White House things are going to happen –and things are going to happen about those happenings!”

“Uh, Russ, I’ve got to get going,” said an increasingly uncomfortable Mark as he edged towards the door.

Russell nodded and gave a simple wave.

Harold glanced down at his recorder on the table, then back at the chart. He didn’t expect much from this assignment but even by the standards of journalists it was going to be hard to turn this into a story. “You are making your run as an independent candidate,” he said. “Would you consider yourself to be a conservative? A liberal?”

His brow furrowed, Kingsly contemplated the idea for a few seconds before finally answering, “I consider myself a doer, Hal. I’m a man of action.”

“I see....”

At this moment, a high-pitched beep began to emit from



Russell's wrist. This was not due to any physical anomalies but rather the result of his wearing a digital watch.

"Hey, look at the time," he exclaimed, "I've got a meeting with my main advisor –well, advisor-to-be." From the back of a nearby chair he donned a long white lab coat before adding, "Why don't you tag along?"

"All right," Harold shrugged. It wasn't as though he had much of a story yet anyway.

"Great. Here, have one of these, too." Russell retrieved yet another **Russell Kingsly 2000!** button from a nearby basket and handed it to the journalist.

A few seconds later they were back outside with Russell gesturing Harold to follow him to the small rusting red car.

"So where are we going, then?" Harold asked as he climbed into the passenger's seat.

"We're off to the local radio station to meet with my

pal about getting this campaign off the ground. W.W. Reese.”

“That’s the station?”

“No. That’s the guy.”

Sliding a small cassette into the tape player, Russell started the ignition. Before another word could be said, the car leaped out of the driveway and began barreling down the gravel road in a smoking cloud of dust as *Highway to Hell* trumpeted through the air.

“Hey, now I remember where I’ve heard your name before,” Russell said. “You were the guy who tried to interview the crazy CEO weren’t you?”

“Well... yes,” Harold winced as he stared at the winding road ahead with terror and dug his fingernails into the seat.

“Yeah, I heard about that,” Russell continued, “Crazy stuff ... What was that guy’s name? Benton?”

“Bentzen....”

“Yea,” Russell shook his head. “Man, people are too weird these days. I can’t understand it. But that’s okay I don’t *need* to. I’m gonna do my thing and that’s all I really need.”

They raced on down the road.

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