

Hope to Chrysalis to Greed...Again.

Their honesty had been polluted by hope. It was clear. I had been covering the political beat, a fly dive-bombing donkeys and elephants for eighteen years, and believe me, hope can do strange things to people. . . especially when it's mass marketed, has an agenda and suffers an insatiable jones for Power. Hope changes when it's more agenda than emotion. It becomes vague yet polarizing; ubiquitous yet one-sided; visionary yet blatantly derivative. . .it develops sub-routines and grows teeth. The bottom line was that it was the hope for absolute power, which through the chrysalis of the political machine brings forth flitting oceans of greedy little butterflies, but on the ground among the staff, as yet and just mid chrysalis, it was just fuel. Hope.

The campaign staffers for Chicago's Democratic presidential contender, Warren T McClurg, worked like Iditarod dogs and, when congregated, chattered like panic-stricken geese. Sleep deprivation was a scheduled necessity. Malnutrition was considered an honorable act and, to quote a young, eager staffer, was:

“No biggie in the bigger picture.”

At McClurg's campaign HQ an apostolate air seemed to permeate people's gray matter with a neuron-devouring intensity not unlike syphilis. You could feel the hum of their collective momentum. They were following the new change. They were working toward a better tomorrow by warping, twisting, and generally mutilating today; lying most earnestly to themselves, but (of course) buying it. It was the bond that held them together. It was The Hope.

They were in the beginning of the final primary wind-up. Digging in their heels and steadying for the race to the November election, only four-point-five months away, the gloves were coming off. It was an ass-hot June, even for Chicago, when the intra-partisan blood began to boil over and into the streets. Politicians were staring at their reflections for hours a day, and filing their teeth to points. Embarrassing personal eccentricities and past social faux pas were being bought and sold for leverage, and as the blame-hurling and skeleton-trolling were revving up McClurg was sharpening his tongue, eager for a fight and saturated with something like a boxer's desperate confidence. In the press he spoke in quick jabs and danced around issues. He had been quoted at an elite cocktail party saying "float like a butterfly, debate like a bee," but, wisely, denied this.

Despite some political chops and momentum, the general consensus was that he'd end up dividing the party; a sin pardonable only if it lead to the underdog victory, or suicide. But anything is possible with the right PR, balls and money. . . and McClurg had more than serious money behind him. Spin was being met with counter-spin, and in that arena the will to go farther than your opponent creates torque. . . truth becomes steam, and embellishment turns into lubricant. This was the New Left. This was the progressive hope, and there was venom in the air like rain.

To understand politics is to understand something very fundamental about the human condition: Bullshit can self-replicate far faster than cells can divide. In order to give the people what they want, you have to give them something so vague it could be anything. You have to sell them mirrors but say they're windows; hell, you have to convince people they're getting windows with a *view of the future*. And, when you sell the people on it, when you *really* sell

them, and get their whoop up, the bullshit/hope will spray across the country like zest from a gigantic orange peel. Utterly unreasonable and near-mystical optimism will spread, as the ever-repeated promise of change rings out like a country-wide call to prayer, *yet again*.

During this process, the new stock of political staffers will slowly turn grey and ghoulish, chatting incessantly about victory, honesty, Ohio and hope. . . all while sinister thoughts of wire taps and traitors will increasingly repeat in their sleep-deprived heads, night and day. Paranoia will gradually puncture their souls, but it'll happen slowly enough that they'll never remember exactly when it took hold. There are parallels here with inner-circle occult training. They will believe just about anything by the time the primaries end, and forget that they're (after all) expendable.

The man they support, Warren T McClurg, is a brutish hulk. Squat, wide and linebacker-ish at five-ten and two-hundred and seventy pounds; he has the look of an Irish farmhand whose parents hit the whiskey something heavy throughout mom's pregnancy. With a family history in the trades he's a staunch union guy, and did a (clerical) tour in Vietnam. His family is five generations in Chicago. There will one day be a McClurg Avenue. According to the campaign literature he "talks tough, stands his ground and doesn't mind getting his hand's dirty." (sic)

This helps with the blue-collar vote.

After coming from a middle-class upbringing and putting himself through school, he managed to get himself into Yale for law, so he's no slouch. . . despite the slight fetal-alcohol-syndrome(ish) appearance. Part of me would like to think that he came from humble stock and was tainted, but he was probably born with his now obvious taste for human flesh. He exudes a style of conditioned evil that the Ivy League schools can only perfect, not really create. It's an

emergent evil that drives the rawest forms of ambition; an animal hunger draped in social savvy and a Teflon hide, coupled with a kind of high-octane, cognitive knife-play. . .equal parts Clinton, Patton, Rasputin and Vampire Bat.

This helps with the white collar vote.

He's run the spectrum, he says, of America's dream. He *knows*.

I did a few interviews with random campaign staffers, but was told I'd have to come back another day to talk with the Big Guy. They like to keep you wanting, these people. McClurg will most likely lose and try again in four years, and the staff will change but look the same. I got a free campaign button and a bumper sticker from a girl who looked fifteen and talked with amphetaminic fervor about "hope, change and tomorrow." The Bumper Sticker said *McClurg for Change*, and the button read *McClurg Knows*. . . which was so absurdly vague as to seem ballsy, and would probably produce a weird peripheral guilt in the democratic catholic base.

However, unknown to nearly all involved, a storm approached from behind the skies, bringing a will dripping with malice and a heart as cold as the void. That storm was a mistress, and I had her story as an exclusive.

An hour after my lame campaign HQ tour, Melinda Sykes walked into the hotel room we'd agreed to meet in, downtown. She exuded a confidence only the sociopathic or stupid can really pull off. Imagine a composite image of Jackie Onassis, Elvira and a disturbingly beautiful weasel. My eyes met with eyes both dark and beady. It's a horridly lame description I know, but I'm sorry they were simply exactly that. Her voice purred with a practiced velvet, and her lips looked nearly as expensive as her chest.

After a brief intro from her bodyguard Vic, who insisted on telling me (3 times) that he'd be standing right outside the door, Ms Sykes and I had sat at too small a table. I'd've preferred to do this over the phone, but this day was out to get me. I turned on a digital recorder and took occasional notes as she divulged.

"Ok: Ms Sykes, thanks for meeting with me."

"Call me Melinda, please. How could I pass up meeting with Keith Carlen?"

"Many have and will."

"I want my story to come out in the *Trib* first, to really hit at home, and I knew you'd want in on this."

"In on what, exactly?"

"This will be international news, Keith. I've read your work and like, well...this is huge: I have *more than a stained dress*."

Her voice actually went up in pitch toward the end. . . as if that statement could've ended in a giggle. At least she was direct.

"Uh, wow."

"I have audio, video, DNA and photos."

She grinned like a cartoon snake. Her Lewinsky nod was something she relished saying a bit too much. It was practiced. Everything about her was practiced. This was all part of the plan, which meant, of course, that I was part of the plan.

A blimp hangar's worth of dead air seemed to rest between her ears, but she had *the hunger* and maybe that made up for low synaptic facility. Of course, maybe it was an act. . . the air-head thing. I wondered if there was such a thing as a ditz sniper. One clear aspect was that

she foresaw a book deal, talk-show tours and money in great abundance. Her position in all of this was becoming something of a viable profession, for those willing to go the distance.

“I have to ask this, Ms...ur, Melinda: Do you have ties to any of the other candidates?”

“On the record?”

“Up to you.”

“Off the record, I have interests. On the record” - she looked away and waved her hand casually to the side - “I am simply a used and abused intern who was tossed aside once the idea of Warry leaving his wife came up.”

“Warry?”

She turned to face me again and responded, after a second appearance of the cartoon-snake grin, with a rushed:

“That’s W-A-R-R-Y...I have emails.”

“And you managed to film, record, photograph, save emails and gather trace micro and macroscopic evidence of this uh, unanticipated abuse?”

Her grin showed more teeth.

She gave me details about McClurg best omitted here, tidbits too specific for anyone to know but his wife, physician and coroner. Her story was a blueprint of the Clinton and Lewinsky shindig, but with an excess of pornographic imagery and way more info related to size ratios, acorn references, belly dimensions and exotic positional pursuits. . . I think *intel* might be a better word. She had locations, dates, times, all the above mentioned specifics and had clearly approached the whole affair with an attention to detail on par with an IRS audit. The ditziness had to be an act.

Once finished, she stood up with an air of weird dignity. In her mind, it seemed, she saw herself as a battle-scarred veteran back from the front. I tried to ignore her and continued to jot down notes. I scribbled PTSTD, and let out a quiet little laugh, until she bent in a slow, cleavage-maximizing bow, kissed me on the cheek, and purred a vague threat into my ear:

“Everyone’s background has things they want to remain hidden, Keith.”

I knew in my marrow that she’d been coached for this, and was a total pro. Her voice was too even. Air-head my ass. McClurg was screwed.

I walked her to the door, feeling lubed. The hall produced Vic, who tried to turn his eye contact with me into something of an endurance sport. Melinda promised to “make my career” and blew me a kiss a’ la Marilyn’s Happy-Birthday-Mr-President. The two made their way down the garishly carpeted hall, and, they clearly hoped, into political history.

These kinds of people have hopes and dreams made of barbed wire and forbidden orgasms. They socialize only with those they consider prey, and respect none but predators. Politics calls to them in the same manner exposed viscera can beckon hyenas, and whether you know it or not: they are *legion*.

Since I had rented the room I went back in, striped down and showered with a focus on exfoliation that nearly went too far. I failingly tried to keep unwanted imagery to a minimum.

Mere minutes after stepping from the steam, one of McClurg’s inner circle, Frank Lipton, phoned and spat pure fury at me. He knew she’d been there. I was shirtless and just back into slacks, maybe twenty minutes after she’d left, and it was made clear to me that I was being watched. These people had people who had people. Lipton warned me of the damage that false

reporting could do to my career, and reminded me of McClurg's three children, one of whom had a rare form of Down's Syndrome. . . but looked just fine.

I went to the hotel bar and, given my day thus far, anticipated random ugliness, but instead, blissfully, received a drink without any issues. Staring blankly at televised baseball gave me time to downshift and ruminate. If what she said was true, it was both epic and dismal. Epic in my by-line possibilities, but dismal in the rather rote nature of the whole literal affair. The sexploits of politicians have been news fodder for time immemorial. Who was I to not shoot the sitting duck? A large part of the electorate hates politicians for their spotlight chasing and opportunistically double-sided views, so seeing any given politician suddenly held captive under that same spotlight, until they squirm, blister, grimace and char, is an irony some of us more cruel-minded persons downright savor. Even the people who don't care so much have something to cynically talk about and dismiss. But that's politics; it's not something anyone comes away from with dignity intact. Everyone loses something; everyone gets greasy; everyone feels dirty, at some point. You don't even have to actually *do* anything, per se, but watch. . . and for some, report.

Brian Gurney, from the *Sun-Times*, appeared at a barstool to my left. I didn't notice him arrive. The man had a habit of suddenly forming from nothing. With red curly hair and a face covered in burnt-blood-red freckles, he could easily be a psychotic cousin of the Partridge family. He always had this rabid glint in his eye. If you were to meet him you'd instinctively know he liked to chew on the bones long after the meat was gone. In short: He was a vicious and feral little man whose pen was a bit wanting, in my opinion.

"Carlen. Did she give you the goods, man?"

“What?”

“I’ve had my *Eye* on her.”

“Oh Christ, Dunlay’s here?” Dunlay was a private eye that Gurney worked with on occasion.

“Not anymore.”

“The air does seem uncommonly foul. . . his trademark wake.”

“What did she say?”

“Who?”

“Whaddaya mean who? You bastard, c’mon, you owe me.”

“For what?”

“For something I’ll do for you in the future.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I can.”

“Fucker. You always say that. Benton said to give you this.”

Gurney handed me a hotel key, and got up to leave.

“Bill Benton?” I asked, astonished. Benton ran the *Sun-Times*.

“I’ll let you know as soon as I can,” he said, quoting me and walking away. Gurney’s attempts at wit were always borrowed and awkward.

After Captain Freckles’ exit, I slammed a double whiskey, grabbed a fistful of cocktail mix and made my way up to room 288. Bill Benton asking me to come to his hotel room was about as awkward as my mother-in-law offering me a lap dance. He was a pitiless bastard who had made his way to the top of the *Sun-Times* via journalistic cannibalism and temporally-

reversed revenge...the effect preceded the cause; I assume he figured you'd screw him eventually so he'd go ahead and get even in advance.

But Bill wasn't there. At the door a guy who had secret service written all over him invited me inside with a small wave of his hand. There were two others dressed exactly like him, standing on either side of the bed. I was convinced they had the Mind-Ray on me. Each of them wore those little ear-buds; and donned those goddamn government-issue sunglasses, *in the hotel room*.

"Mr Carlen."

He sounded like the Smith character from the film *The Matrix*.

"You will write the story on McClurg with all the details Ms. Sykes gave you. It should have an adequate amount of traceable facts, obviously, and it should read as though you are regrettably informing the public of the sad vices of one Warren T. McClurg."

"Where's Benton?" was all I could think to ask.

"He was simply a carrier to get the key to your associate."

"What the hell is this?"

The two other guys hadn't moved, at all.

"The story should come out tomorrow, so you have some work to do."

"I don't care for being told what to write, thanks."

I turned to leave, and he motioned toward the TV. On the screen was the interior of my home. . . my wife, Kay, was cutting slices from a watermelon in the kitchen and bobbing her head a little, side to side. The point of view was from the ceiling and what I assumed to be the smoke detector. Stupidly maybe my first thought was of the watermelon, because it hadn't been

in the fridge when I left in the morning, and she hates watermelon, but knows I love it. She must have news. My next thought was:

Who the fuck are these people?

How does anyone become totally desensitized to the emotions of others? Did the infamous *They* farm these creatures, or grow them in vats? A government-run sociopath husbandry program was surely plausible. Were there even what we would consider eyes behind those sunglasses? Knowing that what they were showing me would be upsetting had no impact on them at all. . . not a bit. The invasiveness of it would be crystal-clear to a primate. These robots had cameras in my home. I'm sure they could see the appalled look on my face, but *their* facial expressions would have been no different had they been in sensory-deprivation tanks, floating on body-temp salt-water in perfectly still darkness.

The as-yet-immobile spook on the far side of the bed reached down, grabbed the remote and turned up the volume. The song "Where the Streets Have No Name," by U2, filtered quietly from the speakers, and Kay's head was clearly moving in time with the song. I could even hear her humming along. The picture quality was disturbingly good. They wanted to add the soundtrack to the insult.

"Bahhhhh weerrr uh?" was all I could manage to say.

"Yes. As I said, Mr. Carlen, you have work to do."

The creep led me to the door and said:

"We'll be in touch..."

They always say that, I bet. The Spooks. They were all a bad movie unleashed upon the world.

Twenty minutes later I was on the Metra, going home. My new (and now forced) assignment rattled around in my head like a cat in a dryer. I called Benton from the train, and sat on hold for ten minutes before he got on the phone and barked:

“Carlen! Don’t trust them, I don’t think they’re what they pretend to be, but I want no part of the whole damn thing!”

“But, Bill...”

“Don’t ever call me again!”

And he hung up. Benton had been after me to defect from the *Trib*, at least once every six months for the past eight years, and he ended every call like that. I just don’t trust the guy. . . but still kind of like him.

The rest of the train ride was full of me being assaulted by conjecture I couldn’t not think. Worry wafted thru my head like thunderclouds unleashing bolts of paranoia. A couple of seats ahead a teenage kid was rapping along to whatever was playing in his headphones. He turned obliviousness into performance art. . . at least it was distracting.

Getting off the train, the sun and humidity had fused into a densely humid brew. A sweat cake. I imagined this is what it felt like to be in utero when mom had a fever. After fumbling for my sunglasses and realizing that I’d left them in the hotel bar, I looked up and saw the limo. The driver stood in the punishment of the June heat in full gear: black hat, black suit, black shiny shoes and black gloves, holding a sign that said “Carlen.”

Fuck.

I didn’t have the energy to run.

He opened the door and I slid into the opulent interior.

“Keith!” said Warren T McClurg.

“Mr McClurg.”

He handed me a Scotch and smiled. His close-up, non-televised appearance was more, well, bulbous.

“How is that popular column of yours coming?”

“Oh, you know, sometimes I write it, sometimes it writes me.”

“I think your current story falls pithily into the latter category, eh?”

It seemed odd to hear the phrase “pithily into the latter category” come out of the mouth of the Union’s Politician. . . as odd as if he’d displayed an encyclopedic knowledge of figure skating.

“Keith” - his jowls seemed to form a kind of abstract punctuation - “Keith, my friend, we need to have a very serious conversation about Ms Sykes.”

“Ahhhh...” I said, and took far more than a sip of the Scotch.

“Poor Ms. Sykes is a friend to my family and I’d hate to see her humiliated. The public knowing of her shaky mental state would embarrass her and her family. She’s been put up to this by parties best not yet named. I’m sure her performance was believable.”

“Ahhhh.”

He refilled my glass from a crystal decanter that was clearly worth more than my car.

“She’s been hospitalized you know. Immediately after your interview. The poor thing. A nervous breakdown. . . had been coming on for months. You are in no way to blame, of course. It could happen to anyone at all, really. . . given the right circumstances, and pressure. Such an unstable young lady can. . . can,” - he quickly raised his hand and sneezed. I could see the sneeze

ripple through him, underneath the three-thousand-dollar suit. A fine spray shot between the thick fan of his splayed and sausage-like fingers. It was one of those moments when time kind of freezes. He looked like an over-fleshed basset hound, with hopes of world domination, spitting a spray of nerve toxin. However much she wanted for banging this guy, Melinda Sykes deserved the money.

“Excuse me, Keith. . . such an unstable young lady can create unnessecary complications for *all of us*.”

With no outright threats he then told me, via subtext, that if the Sykes/McClurg story came out I would die horribly. But if I was on his side in this, I would do very, very well in *his* Chicago, whether he won the election or no. I thought of the novel I’d been unable to get published and wanted to scream. It’s always all about connections. But why does it have to be greasy? You don’t fight your way to the top, you *slime* your way there. You ooze your way up the pole of success by using the same flavored lube you use to kiss ass and not taste it. Or, of course, you’re just lucky. I am not lucky.

After that, our ride was overly pleasant. We talked about Chicago’s architectural history and football, while being merrily chauffeured up the Outer Drive to Bryn Mawr, then back south to Belmont, where I was let out at the harbor. He winked at me and said goodbye. He actually *winked*.

I was feeling the scotch pretty heavily. It was some asininely expensive single-malt that people of McClurg’s world saw as a foundational necessity to any social interaction of serious merit. It tasted like an oak tree, soaked in turpentine and bog. Perhaps my palette was uncouth.

Lake Michigan was a beautiful undulating blue. Members of the suicidally fit jogged by me, through the heat-thickened air, sweating with the forcefulness of spitting llamas. Things were getting complicated. I didn't deserve this day.

"Mr. Carlen!"

Myron Dunlay pulled up on the shittiest motorcycle I'd ever seen. It was covered in duct tape and let out a pathetic little bleat as he came to a stop. He was the private eye Gurney hired all the time, and looked and moved a bit like the scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz.

"I followed you and McClurg that whole time."

He seemed very proud of this.

"Dunlay. . . what could you possibly want with me today?"

"Look, after Gurney got in touch with me I got in touch with a friend at a publishing company called Little, Brown. She knows your work. She said that if you had a story that involved McClurg in a sex scandal, she could pretty much guarantee you a book deal."

"And what do you get out of it?"

"If I deliver you to her, I get a small cut. And, maybe since I facilitated your getting a book deal, you could write me into the story?"

"Dunlay, today is very strange."

"If I was in it it'd really boost my business."

"..."

"Book deal. . . guar-aun-teeed. You should just write me in. I got all kinds of ideas. . . ok?"

"Ahhhh."

"Whadaya think?"

“I think I’m going to get a cab. Give me your card.”

“All right!”

I hailed a cab, got in and slid Dunlay’s card into the space between the seats, where I hoped it would forever remain. What a jackass. I told the cabbie my address and sat back, letting my head fall backward so I could peer out the rear window and upward, into the sky. It was a clear, brilliant and calming blue.

There wasn’t much point to any of this, really. The story was simple, but it was clearly writing me. It was also the same old crap, which made it a bit, well, shitty. People were manipulating one another for what they perceived as their own betterment, yet again. They allowed their consciences to be whittled away for what they deemed gain. And that gain would be the salvation. The big score. The lift UP. It was the same as the promise of Change that occurred over and again in political campaigns. Change for a better tomorrow. Change from the administration that gave us the wrong change last time around. Change the change. The hopes of individuals were single neurons linked together in a vast network, allowing whole nations to dream, and they’re really both one in the same; it’s just a matter of scale. The new and possible change in the lives of 350 million individuals was the necessary change the country needed to help create the longed for change in the people’s lives; for the sake of the country. It was all so clearly unclear. . . a tsunami of positive feedback, on an interwoven personal/national level.

You can watch the people around you pursue their little scams, darting around like cheese-starved mice in a maze, planning and running and worrying and scheming. (You can see them, in your head, right now...saying: “Ya gotta get into the *game*, man.”)

It was all about power in varying degrees. But that power was only power over other people; one mouse convincing many mice it was in their best interest to bring him/her the cheese. But no one ever questions the validity of the maze itself.

“That’s just the way things are,” being the mantra of the damned.

I paid the cab, got to the bottom of my apartment’s steps, stopped, then walked around the block to think.

Blitzkrieging the McClurg campaign seemed suicidal, dynamite by-line or no, and by my laying out on it he’d made it clear that he’d owe me something of a favor. After doing a little digging, I could’ve written a story about the (possibly phony) spooks and their support of one Ms. Melinda Sykes, who had apparently been recently incarcerated for mental problems (how McClurg did that *within hours* proves his reach is scarily deep). But, that would still shed a shady light on McClurg, and diminish the luster of my owed favor. I also could’ve seen if Benton had any involvement in any of this, or even Lipton. I could even have given it all to Gurney, sat back and watched him get turned into freckled hamburger, or dumbly pursued that jackass Dunlay’s notion of a book deal. The smart thing would’ve been to convince Kay to quit her job, so we could move to a remote mountain location in New Zealand, but I wasn’t that smart.

The real question was how to get it out there intact, the whole thing, the full monty. How do I capture the entire breadth of the beast of this politics-as-usual story out in such a way that no one gets hurt and:

I’d get owed a favor by a presidential-primary underdog.

Maybe the faux-spooks would be satisfied.

Ms. Sykes would have something to read in her padded cell.

Gurney'd get pissed he didn't have the inside track on the story, and Dunlay would finally figure out I think he's an idiot.

*

I smiled and made my way back up the street to my place. I was going to change the smoke detectors. I was going to ask for watermelon and Kay would ask me how I knew. I was going to sit at my laptop, type all this up and release some of the miasma from my noggin, in a fine spray of text-based vitriol. . . I knew what to do. It was so obvious:

Change the places and names, and call this shit fiction.