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The New Republic

Written by Lionel Shriver

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LIONEL SHRIVER



THE NEW REPUBLIC



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To Sarowitz, of course—
a solo dedication being long overdue

My experiences with journalists authorize me to record that a very large number of them are ignorant, lazy, opinionated, intellectually dishonest, and inadequately supervised . . . They have huge power, and many of them are extremely reckless.

—CONRAD BLACK

Political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

—GEORGE ORWELL


ATLANTIC
OCEAN
Porto
PORTUGAL
Madrid
Lisbon
SPAIN
Seville
BARBA
GULF
of
BARBA
Cinzeiro
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
MOROCCO

THE NEW REPUBLIC

CHAPTER 1
Honorable Mention



WHISKING INTO HIS apartment house on West Eighty-Ninth Street, Edgar Kellogg skulked, eager to avoid eye contact with a doorman who at least got a regular paycheck. His steps were quick and tight, his shoulders rounded. Unable to cover next month's rent, he peered anxiously at the elevator indication light stuck on twelve, as if any moment he might be arrested. Maxing out the credit cards came next. This place used to give him such a kick. Now that he couldn't afford it, the kick was in the teeth, and tapping cordovans literally down at the heel, he calculated morosely that for every day in this fatuous dive he was out ninety bucks. Waiting on a $175 check from the *Amoco Traveler* was like trying to bail out a rowboat with an eyedropper while the cold, briny deep gushed through a hole the size of a rubber boot.

Up on the nineteenth floor, Edgar shot a look around at what, underneath it all, was a plushly appointed one-bedroom, but the management's cleaning service had been one of the first luxuries to go. At only ten a.m., Edgar found himself already eyeing the Doritos on the counter. One thing he hadn't anticipated about the "home office" was Snack Syndrome; lately his mental energies divided evenly between his new calling (worrying about money, which substituted neatly for earning it) and not stuffing his face. God, he was turning into a girl, and in no time would find himself helplessly contriving sassy Ryvita open-faces with cherry tomatoes (only twenty-five calories!). The thought came at him with a thud: *This isn't working out.* Quick on its heels, *I've made a terrible mistake.* And, since Edgar was never one to put too fine a point on it, *I'm an ass.*

This was not the positive thinking that the how-tos commended in the run-up to a job interview, in preparation for which Edgar cleared off the beer cans and spread out the *National Record*. Hours in advance, his concentration was already shaky. Picking out single words in strobe, his eyes skittered across an article about terrorism: these days it was news that there wasn't any. Further down: some correspondent had gone missing three months ago. The gist: he was still missing. If it weren't a reporter who'd vanished, this "story" would never have run, much less on the front page. After all, if Edgar Kellogg disappeared tomorrow, the *Record* was unlikely to run frantic updates on the ongoing search for a prematurely retired attorney turned nobody freelancer. In the argot of his new trade, "freelance" was apparently insider jargon for "unemployed," and when he mumbled the word to acquaintances they smirked.

Yet instead of getting up to speed on current events, Edgar found himself once again compulsively scanning for a Tobias Falconer byline. Funny thing was, when he found one, he wouldn't read the article. And this was typical. For years he'd snagged this oppressively earnest, tiny-print newspaper—one of the last austere holdouts that refused to go color—solely to locate Falconer's pieces, but he could seldom submit to reading them. Edgar had never tried to identify what he feared.

Collapsing into the deep corduroy sofa, Edgar surrendered to the free-floating reflection that ten frenzied years on Wall Street had so mercifully forestalled. For all that time, Toby Falconer's supercharged byline had given Edgar a jolt, its alternating current of envy and wistfulness confusing but addictive. These little zaps made his scalp tingle, but reading whole features would be like sticking his fingers into a light socket. In that event, why buy the paper at all? Why monitor the career of a man whom Edgar hadn't seen in twenty years, and of a traitor to boot, whose very surname made him wince?

But then, Falconer's fortunes had been easy to follow. A foreign correspondent first for *U.S. News and World Report*, then, seminally, for the *National Record*, he filed peripatetically from Beirut to Belfast to Sarajevo. More than once he'd won a prize for covering a story that was especially risky or previously neglected, and these awards filled Edgar with a baffling mixture of irritation and pride. Of course, Edgar had chosen the far more lucrative occupation. Yet he'd learned to his despair how little money was worth if it couldn't buy you out of slogging at seven a.m. into a law firm you reviled. "Well compensated" was an apt turn of phrase, though in the end he couldn't imagine any sum so vast that it could truly offset flushing twelve, thirteen hours of every waking day down the toilet.

When Edgar ditched his "promising" career in corporate law (though what it promised, of course, was more corporate law) in order to try his hand at journalism six months ago, he'd been reluctant to examine in what measure this impetuous and financially suicidal reinvention might have been influenced by his old high school running buddy—who, having always obtained the funnier friends, the prettier girls, and the sexier summer jobs, had naturally secured the jazzier vocation. If Toby Falconer and Edgar Kellogg were both drawn to journalism in the fullness of time, maybe the convergence merely indicated that the two boys had had more in common at Yardley Prep than Edgar had ever dared believe as a kid.

Dream on. To imagine that he bore any resemblance to Falconer in adolescence was so vain as to be fanciful. Toby Falconer was a specimen. No doubt every high school had one, though the singular was incongruous as a type; presumably there was no one else like him.

A Falconer was the kind of guy about whom other people couldn't stop talking. He managed to be the center of attention when he wasn't even there. He always got girls, but more to the

point he got *the* girl. Whichever dish you yourself envisioned with the bathroom door closed, she'd be smitten with our hero instead. Some cachet would rub off, of course, but if you hung with a Falconer you'd spend most of your dates fielding questions about his troubled childhood. A Falconer's liberty was almost perfectly unfettered, because he was never punished for his sins. Anyway, a Falconer's sins wouldn't seem depraved but merely naughty, waggish, or rather enchanting really, part of the package without which a Falconer wouldn't be the endearing rogue whom we know and love and infinitely forgive. Besides, who would risk his displeasure by bringing him to book? He did everything with flair, not only because he was socially adroit, but because the definition of flair in his circle was however the Falconer did whatever the Falconer did. To what extent a Falconer's magnetism could be ascribed to physical beauty was impossible to determine. Good looks couldn't have hurt; still, if a Falconer had any deviant feature—a lumpy nose, or a single continuous eyebrow—that feature would simply serve to reconfigure the beautiful as archetype. A Falconer set the standard, so by his very nature could not appear unattractive, make a plainly stupid remark, or do anything awkward at which others would laugh, save in an ardent, collusive, or sycophantic spirit.

Hitherto Edgar had been the Falconer's counterpart, that symbiotic creature without which a Falconer could not exist. The much admired required the admirer, and to his own dismay Edgar had more than once applied for the position. While he'd have far preferred the role of BMOC if the post were going begging, he was eternally trapped by a Catch-22: in yearning to be admired himself, he was bound to admire other people who were admirable. Which made him, necessarily, a fan.

To date, the only weapon that had overthrown a Falconer's tyranny was cruel, disciplined disillusionment. Sometimes a Falconer turned out to be a fraud. Lo and behold, he could be

clumsy, if you kept watch. At length it proved thoroughly possible, if you forced yourself, to laugh at his foibles in a fashion that was less than flattering. Wising up was painful at first, but a relief, and when all was said and done Edgar would be lonely but free. Yet taking the anointed down a peg or two was a puzzling, even depressing exercise, in consequence of which he reserved his most scathing denunciations for the very people with whom he had once been most powerfully entranced.

Edgar's public manner—gruff, tough, wary, and deadpan—was wildly discrepant with his secret weakness for becoming captivated by passing Falconers, and he worried privately that the whole purpose of his crusty exterior was to contain an inside full of goo. He couldn't bear to conceive of himself as a sidekick. Having ever been slavishly enthralled to an idol of any sort shamed him almost as much as having once been fat. Hence of Edgar's several ambitions at thirty-seven the most dominant was never to succumb to the enchantment of a Falconer again.

It was in the grip of precisely this resolution that Edgar Kellogg had marched out of Lee & Thole six months ago, determined to cast off the dreary Burberry of the overpaid schmo. At last he would grow into the grander mantle of standard-bearer, trendsetter, and cultural icon. It was in the grip of this same resolution that Edgar set off for his four p.m. job interview with the *National Record*. He'd had it with being The Fan. He wanted to be The Man.

CHAPTER 2
Saddling Up



"WIN, THAT YOU? Guy Wallasek at the *Record*. I know it's been three months, so this is a formality—I'm way past the mother-hen stage. But Saddler hasn't *deigned* to show his face in Barba, has he? . . . Here? At this point, he wouldn't dare . . . I stand corrected. Whatever Saddler lacks in consideration, he makes up in gall." The lardy editor covered the receiver's mouthpiece and murmured to his four p.m. appointment, "Be right with you."

Edgar squinted at framed Pulitzers, nodding, pretending to be impressed. These props exhausted, from the lamp table he picked up a rectangular coaster, laminated with a reduced front page from the *National Record*, **RED ARMY OVERTHROWS GORBACHEV GOVERNMENT**. The byline, hard to make out, began with a B. He'd change places with that reporter in a New York minute. Chasing tanks with a microcassette beat the dickens out of filing another prospectus for public offering. The window behind Guy Wallasek afforded an uninspiring view of solid green glass; soon Edgar would run out of ostensible fascinations. He didn't want to seem to lose himself in the copy of today's *Record*, implying that he hadn't read it.

The desk chair squealed as Wallasek leaned back. "I'd sure like to give him a piece of my . . ." The big man chuckled. "Yeah, I'm kidding myself. I'd probably fix our prodigal a cup of tea. I'm *only* his boss, right? . . . Me? At first I assumed it was a stunt. Another one. But what would Saddler do with more attention? Keep it in jars? And that peninsula of yours is such a snake pit . . ."

Edgar's face was stiff from keeping an unnaturally pleasant

I'm-in-no-hurry expression in place for ten minutes. Wallasek could easily have made this call before their appointment. And why bother with the power play? Edgar would have stripped to his boxers and danced the cha-cha for a chance to write for Wallasek's foreign desk.

The editor guffawed, shooting Edgar a glance to make sure he felt left out of the joke. "You do see him," Wallasek went on, "tell Barrington next time he takes a vacation maybe he could send a postcard. Lucky for the *Record* the story's gone into deep freeze. The SOB hasn't claimed so much as a faulty Chinese firework since Saddler went AWOL, right?

" . . . Rich, isn't it? That bastard has drawn slack-jawed adulation by the drool bucket—not to mention apoplectic rage. But *worry* is new. Must be the odd champagne glass raised in his absence, yeah? . . . *Cer-ve-ja de puka pera?*" Wallasek pronounced with difficulty. "Sounds revolting. Thank the Lord for you brave foreign correspondents and your sacrifice for the world's hungry need to know . . . Sarcastic, *moi*?" Chortle-chortle. "Yeah, they don't make nemeses like they used to, Win. Ciao."

Edgar's amiable grin had, he feared, slid to a grimace. His girlfriend Angela always ragged on him for slouching, and his erect I'm-just-the-man-you're-looking-for posture in the director's chair was hurting his back. Meanwhile, Wallasek fussed with papers on a desk that was every job applicant's nightmare: crumpled piles doubtless dating back two presidential administrations, grease-stained with Danish crumbs. You'd never get away with a desk like that at Lee & Thole.

"So!" Wallasek exhaled, locating Edgar's clips and CV. Their binder was missing, the photocopies disheveled. An uncomprehending gaze betrayed that Wallasek hadn't read a paragraph of Edgar's articles. Next time he wouldn't bother with the color photocopying, which looked nifty but cost a buck a page. Edgar squirmed. Maybe clued-up hacks never sent color clips. The

bright borders beaming from the editor's hands looked overeager. Edgar welcomed the common charge that he was a wiseass—rude, surly, and insubordinate—but the prospect of appearing a rookie was mortifying.

He slouched.

"Mr.—Kellogg!" Wallasek exclaimed, with the same sense of discovery with which he'd looked up to find that a stranger had been sitting in his office for the last fifteen minutes. "No trouble finding the place?"

"The Equitable Building is bigger than a breadbox." Edgar chafed at pre-interview chitchat and its artifice of relax-we-haven't-started-yet, when empty schmooze was really one more test to pass. He had to stop himself from fast-forwarding, this summer has sure been a hot one and that's a *mighty fine* wife in your desk photo there and you don't have to ask where I live since the address is on my résumé and no I don't want a cup of coffee.

"Can I get you—?"

"Nothing, thanks." To encourage a cut to the chase, Edgar shot a pointed glance at his chunky gold-plated diving watch. In the context of Edgar's current average income of $300/month, its gratuitous dials spun with a dizzying exorbitance that until this spring he'd taken for granted.

"Second in your class," Wallasek muttered, running a finger down the CV. "Vice president . . . Honorable mention . . . Salutatorian . . . Second prize . . . Second-chair . . . Say, you've *almost* snagged a lot of things."

"I'm one of life's runners-up." Having failed to keep the edge from his voice, Edgar moderated pleasantly, "We try harder."

Wallasek pulled back the arm on a pair of nail clippers and stuck the end in his ear, digging for wax. "A book review for *Newsday*," he ruminated, spreading the photocopies. "The *Village Voice*—that's a freebie now, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Edgar said stonily.

"*Washington Times* . . . The Moonie paper."

Since the early eighties the *Washington Times* had been owned by a fat Korean evangelist. "The staff does maintain independent editorial control."

"Yes—or so they claim. Still, it's not the *Post*, is it?"

"No, sirree," Edgar agreed, clicking his eyeteeth, "it ain't the *Washington Post*."

"*Columbia Alumni Magazine*, *Amtrak Express*." Examining his nail clipper arm, the editor removed a sulfurous chunk from its tip before returning to Edgar's fledgling journalism, none of which seemed to generate the intense fascination of the gunk from Wallasek's ear.

"And the *New Republic*," Edgar pointed out.

"The rest of these seem to be law review. How much do you know about the *National Record*?"

"I'm a regular reader," Edgar lied; once he'd scanned for Falconer's byline he generally tossed the rag, since its sports section sucked. "I appreciate that the *Record* filled a void. For this country's only national newspaper to have remained *USA Today* would have been a scandal."

Wallasek still looked expectant; Edgar hadn't yet laid it on thick enough. "The *Record* also embraces America's post–Cold War global leadership. Your international coverage is at least as thorough as the *New York Times*. In assuming that readers care about the rest of the world, you don't condescend to your subscribers." Edgar had to stop; his inflection had developed the lilt of implausible enthusiasm employed to retail panty shields.

"Of course we condescend to our subscribers," Wallasek dismissed with a wave. "International coverage is a sop to their vanity. Only a handful read that stuff. With one exception: when our American everyman tucks the *Record* under one arm and trundles into a seven-forty-seven and one of those filthy little foreigners blows it up. Those articles get read, my friend. Every column inch."

Edgar found railing against terrorists the height of tedium. The issue invited over-obvious moralizing, since who's going to contend that wasting those two kids with a trashcan bomb in a D.C. shopping mall in April was a profound political statement? Presumably Edgar was now obliged to chime in with hearty indignation over the *Soldatsies Oozhatsies*, or whatever those sorry-ass crackpots called themselves, clenching his fist in we-shall-not-be-moved solidarity with his fellow Americans, who will *never capitulate to terrorism*. Or maybe he should small-talk about how amazing it was that the FBI hadn't collared a single one of these dirtbags, to demonstrate that he was on top of the story. But this interview wasn't going well, the application had been a long shot to begin with, and Edgar passed.

"You aware of how the *Record* managed to establish a reputation for quality journalism in so few years?" asked Wallasek.

"Astute editing, a clearly defined remit—"

"Balls," Wallasek cut him off. "By paying better than any paper in the country."

Edgar smiled despite himself. "I know."

"What I'm getting at here is that, well, you've got a few nice clips—"

"Those are only samples, of course."

They both knew that Edgar had furnished every semicolon he'd ever published.

"Still, Mr. Kellogg, aren't you aiming a little high?"

"I explained in my cover letter—"

"Yes—you 'quit the law to become a freelance journalist.' That caught my eye."

"I left a top Wall Street firm where I was about to make partner," said Edgar. "Until a few months ago I was making two hundred grand a year and rising. The *Record* may pay well, but that well? Seems to me that, however you slice it, I'm not 'aiming high,' but asking for a whopping cut in salary."

"So I should hire you because you're nuts?"

Edgar laughed. "Or what's the latest prissy buzz phrase? *Learning-delayed*."

Wallasek squinted. "What possessed you?"

Edgar paused. He'd rehearsed his explanation in the taxi on the way here, the cab itself an extravagance left over from the Lee & Thole days—a habit he'd have to break. Despite his designer slouch, Edgar must have been nervous; the glib rationale fled. Only overwrought snippets from college D. H. Lawrence classes flitted back to him, like "inchoate yearning." He could not emote to some bovine newspaperman about "inchoate yearning" any more than he could assert to Toby's own boss that he was driven to become "a Falconer."

Lately he'd had to wonder, *was* he crazy? Papaya King again for lunch, when six months ago he might have dined on a client's tab at The Cub Room. Had he been asked to go to Syracuse on short notice, he could have charged the firm for a new shirt and sent a messenger to pick it up. If he stayed past 7:30 p.m. (like, until 7:31), a Dial-car would drive him home. How could he ever explain to Guy Wallasek that privilege might have enticed an overworked paralegal, but that when Edgar was finally able to overbill clients himself the practice had seemed abruptly low-rent? Or that for no self-evident reason Edgar was meant for something finer than drafting turgid briefs? Or that he wanted to "say something," when the very ache to say "something" and not something in particular must have put Edgar in the same boat as every other flailing schmuck in the country?

"I got bored," Edgar telescoped lamely.

"Writing for *Amtrak Express* amuses you more?"

"Gotta start somewhere. And the law felt, I don't know, passive. We're parasites."

"Journalists are parasites," Wallasek countered, "on everyone else's events. Plenty of scribblers spend their workdays merely

recording what you just walked away from: mergers and acquisitions, transfers of money and power. The worst thing that can happen to a correspondent is to start thinking of himself as a player. The hack who fancies himself a mover-and-shaker gets slipshod—thinks he's covering his own story. Reporting is a humble profession, Mr. Kellogg. Journalists—" Wallasek shrugged—"are History's secretaries."

"Better History's secretary than Philip Morris's lawyer," Edgar ventured. "At least hacks get bylines. Law's an anonymous profession, behind the scenes. Attorneys are paid so much because the work is drab and thankless. A predictable calling for runners-up. But I don't want honorable mentions anymore, Mr. Wallasek. I'd like to distinguish myself."

"You want to see your name in print," said Wallasek skeptically.

"I want to see anything in print that isn't solely composed to help some suit who already has more money than he knows what to do with make a little more." Edgar pressed on with a willful geekiness refreshingly unlike him, "I want to get at the truth."

"The 'truth' most reporters get at is pretty pedestrian: the secretary of state left the White House at five forty p.m. and not at six o'clock. As for the big-picture sort . . ." Wallasek seemed to take a moment to reflect, and ran a dirty nail along the stitching of his jacket. "I didn't used to camp behind a desk, Mr. Kellogg. Funny, I don't miss pounding the pavement much as I might have expected. I cut my teeth in Vietnam, hung up my hat after Grenada. I can't say for sure if I've a better understanding, of anything, than the folks who stayed in bed. Damnedest thing, but you can be right there in the middle, two armies tearing each other apart, and afterwards have not one thing to say about it. Not one thing. Way it should be. A reporter's not supposed to chip in his two cents. But this—failure to achieve perspective. It can be personally discouraging. There's no overarching 'truth'

out there. Only a bunch of menial, dissociated little facts. And the facts don't often add up to much. Lotta trees; not much forest. Oh, once in a rare while you trip over an *All the President's Men*, and get to play the hero. But for the most part you just find out what happened, and what happened is depressing."

"No more depressing than Lee & Thole."

"I only wonder if your expectations aren't a mite steep. Not only of getting a staff job at this newspaper, but of what the job would entail if I were rash enough to offer a post to an inexperienced, middle-aged cub."

Edgar could skip the fatherly advice, as well as being classed at only thirty-seven as "middle-aged." Before he could stop it, his hand was tracing his forehead, as if his hairline might have receded another half-inch since he checked it this morning. On the way back to his lap, Edgar's fingertips traced the deep V-shaped runnels of a scowl so habitual that Angela claimed he frowned in his sleep.

"You're the one who asked me for an interview," Edgar grunted. "You could've flipped my CV in the trash." Edgar reached for his briefcase.

Wallasek raised his palm. "Hold your horses. Toby Falconer recommended you, and he's the most solid, levelheaded staffer here. Toby said you were 'persevering, thorough, and single-minded' once you'd set your sights on something."

Edgar was quietly embarrassed. Making last month's tremulous phone call to Falconer (to whom the adjectives "solid" and "levelheaded" would never have been applied at Yardley) had been so difficult that it made him physically ill. Although Falconer had been dumbfoundingly decent, Edgar had a queasy feeling that on his end the call hadn't gone well. He'd felt ashamed of himself—tapping Toby for connections, after all those years without so much as a how-do-you-do. Chagrin had made him resentful, maybe even truculent. This was hardly the circumstance

in which he'd fantasized about contacting the guy, and he'd never have pushed his luck like that if his level of desperation hadn't gone through the roof. But by then, the night sweats had begun. In his dreams, Edgar implored Richard Stokes Thole to take him back without health coverage while wearing nothing but lime-green socks; the imposing senior partner scolded that the firm had gone casual on Fridays but it was Thursday and his socks ought really to be brown or black.

As for that "single-minded" jazz? Edgar's shedding a hundred pounds in his junior year at Yardley must have left a lasting impression.

"Toby figured your law skills would transfer to journalism: interviewing, library research, writing up cases. Besides," Wallasek got to the point at last, "I have a problem."

Edgar's eyebrows shot up before they plowed into a more agreeable scowl. Once resumed, his slouch cut a jauntier slant.

"You up to speed on the Barban conflict?" asked Wallasek.

Though Edgar had scanned his share of headlines (who could miss them when they were two inches high?), the SOB's cause had sounded so tiresome when the fringe group surfaced a few years ago that Edgar had happily added Barba to the growing list of too-complicated-and-who-gives-a-fuck shit holes about which Edgar refused to read—along with Bosnia, Angola, Algeria, and Azerbaijan. Before cramming current events to prepare for this interview, Edgar couldn't have pinpointed the jerkwater within a thousand miles on a map.

"Never been there," said Edgar. "But of course I've followed the story closely."

"Wouldn't speak any Portuguese, would you?"

"I went to prep school in Stonington, Connecticut, settled by Portuguese immigrants. I'm not fluent, but I get by." In truth, his total Portuguese vocabulary came down to three words, *filho da puta*, and "son of a whore" had limited application. Still,

something was opening up here, and Edgar had no desire to go home and draft a proposal for American's in-flight magazine.

Wallasek rose and stretched; his thigh splayed as he perched chummily on the desk. "The SOB has been lying low, and the story may be played out. But some folks are convinced that this is an undeclared cessation not because they're giving up, but because they're gearing up for something big. Thomas Friedman wrote in the *Times* last week that canny terrorists vary the pace of their campaign. For a while there, the Sobs were blowing up a subway or an airplane like clockwork, every six weeks or so. People can get used to anything. Pretty soon, you've got these miscreants going to all that trouble blowing stuff up, only to maintain the impression that nothing's new. Tom was ostensibly urging we not get complacent about security, but I wasn't sure about that column myself. Almost like Friedman giving those maniacs good tactical advice."

It was Pavlovian: Wallasek mentions Barba, and Edgar's mind wanders. In fact, Edgar had been musing how when the "SOB" first emerged in the news everyone had thought the name of the group was a laugh. Nowadays even management types like Wallasek here cited the acronym with a straight face. You actually had to remind yourself that in olden times it meant son of a bitch.

"Point is," Wallasek continued, "any day now we could have another horror show splattered across the front page, and the *Record* could be caught with its pants down."

"How's that?"

Wallasek sucked his cheeks between his molars and chewed. He stood up. He jammed his hands in his pockets and jingled his keys. He glowered piercingly at his toes, as if trying to burn extra holes in his wingtips.

"Barrington Saddler."

He didn't ask, "Have you heard of—?" or introduce, "There's this fellow called—" The editor simply plunked the name in the

room like a heavy object he'd been lugging around and was relieved to chuck on the floor. Wallasek himself gazed at a midpoint in the office as if some large physical presence would manifest itself.

Sure, Edgar had caught references to some bombastic-sounding buffoon while he was waiting for Wallasek to get off the phone. But that didn't altogether explain Edgar's nagging impression of having heard the name before.

In any event, the name put Edgar off from the start. The "Barrington" bit was overblown and beefy, and anyone who didn't have the wit to shorten the pretentious appellation down to "Barry" was a pompous ass. The tag evoked adjectives like over*bear*ing and un*bear*able, and New Englanders would experience an irksome impulse to place the word "Great" in front of it.

"Barrington Saddler was sent to earth to try my personal patience," Wallasek had resumed. "Maybe it's because I'm still trying valiantly to pass God's test of my character that I haven't fired the man. That and because Saddler is supposedly one of our star reporters. I'll spare you the nitty-gritty unless someday you appear in need of a cautionary tale, but Barrington was posted to Russia, where Barrington was bad. I could've axed him then, but his boosters would've put up a stink, and I do have this indefensible fondness for the lout.

"So I decided to exile him instead. I spread out a map of Europe and located the most far-flung, poorest, *dullest* corner of the Continent. This worthless jut of Portugal hadn't rated passing mention in the American press for two hundred years. I figured, here was the perfect place for Saddler to contemplate the error of his ways. Here was the one place he'd never draw a crowd—another protective, gossipy clique that goads him into mischief. Because *no one went there*. No tourists, no expats, much less any of his journo buddies on assignment, because there was jack to cover, just a bunch of Iberian crackers babbling a language he'd

be too lazy to learn and good Catholic girls who'd keep their bodices buttoned. I'd keep him on salary until he'd learned his lesson, and he'd come back from this sandbox having got nothing in the paper all year, suitably chastened and ready to play by the rules as one more humble steno in History's secretarial pool.

"And *where* is this Podunk across the pond?" Wallasek charged ferociously.

"Barba," Edgar guessed.

"BARBA! Which within months of Saddler's arrival sprouts the single most lethal terrorist organization of the twentieth century. Ever, I reckon. And there's Saddler, happy as a pig in shit, in the very center of the story, firing off front-page leads on the ultimatums of the SOB. A predictable cadre descends on the dump—the *Times*, the *Post*, and the *Guardian* now have permanent staffers in the provincial capital, Cinzeiro. Even the London *Independent*, which is terminally broke, keeps a string. Presto, Saddler's leading a hack pack again. I'd say the man is charmed, except that lately I've wondered if this cat is finally on life number ten."

"Saddler's in trouble?" Once again, Edgar felt a weird familiarity with this preposterous character, a shared exasperation.

"Maybe he cozied up to those murderous douchebags too close, I don't know. He's reckless; he thinks danger is funny. Anyway, three months ago he disappeared. Vanished, poof, gone. Practically left his coffee cooling and his Camel burning. Which is where you come in."

"I was a lawyer, not a PI."

"I don't expect you to look for him. That's the cops' job, which they've already done, badly if you ask me. This Cinzeiro police chief Lieutenant Car-ho-ho, or whoever, *claims* to have left no stone unturned. He's one of those parochial rubes crazed with petty power who's very possessive about his patch. I've talked to him. Try to suggest maybe he hasn't tried all the angles, and

he gets snippy and defensive and patriotic on you. You'll see—Barbans are all like that. Touchy. And all roads lead to their cloverleaf politics. Mention the flipping weather—which I gather stinks—and you've insulted their precious national pride. Anyway, the guy came up with diddly. No leads. Left me to believe Saddler must have been abducted by aliens or something."

"So what's the gig?" Edgar pressed, forcing his leg to stop jittering.

Wallasek clapped his hands. "I need a correspondent in Barba. I've given up waiting for Saddler to send flowers. So I'm offering you a string. There is a retainer, which technically makes you a 'super-stringer,' but don't let the heroic title go to your head; our monthly gratuity will keep your tape recorder in fresh batteries, and that's about it. Flat-rate four hundred bucks an article, plus expenses, but only for the pieces we print. We'll pay your initial freight. No benefits. You can set yourself up in Barrington's digs; I gather he even left his car.

"But this arrangement would be provisional," Wallasek barreled on before Edgar had a chance to say yes or no. "Barrington's been on board this paper from its inception. He's an institution, if you like. If he shows up with an explanation I can even pretend to swallow, the posting's his again. He knows this story, been on it from the ground up. So Saddler shows up next week, your string is for one week."

"The retainer, how much . . . ?"

"You're embarrassing me," Wallasek cut him off. "Three-fifty a month, which is as appalling as it is nonnegotiable. Furthermore, you gotta be prepared for plenty of computer solitaire. It's possible the SOB has called it quits, or maybe they've clawed each other's eyes out; these hot-blooded paramilitary outfits often self-destruct. In that case, the story's dead, and you're on your own. I can't guarantee another posting, either. This is a one-time offer. On the other hand, the story heats up, Saddler's still among the

disappeared? You could spin this into a big break. Think you could handle that?" In brandishing disclaimers, the editor clearly read Edgar as so hard-up that he couldn't afford to be choosy. Wallasek was right.

This was indeed a big break, so Edgar's hesitation was absurd. The offer far exceeded his expectations, the very expectations that Wallasek had mocked for being set so high. Edgar had figured that at best he'd get the go-ahead to submit a feature on spec, or a promise to keep his CV "on file"—that is, incinerated only after he walked out and not before his eyes. This "super-string" paid peanuts, but had a spicy *ring* to it, and was a foot in the door. Maybe sometime soon 245 civilians would make him a lucky man: **DEATH TOLL IN HUNDREDS AS SOB CLAIMS SABOTAGE OF UNITED FLIGHT 169**, *by Edgar Kellogg, Barba Correspondent.*

Still, something in the setup oppressed him. Whoever Saddler was, sight-unseen the guy clearly belonged to the elite Exception to Every Rule Club, whose members cast the sort of shadow in which Edgar had lived all his life: the eponymous Falconer, of course, but Edgar's super-jock older brother as well; the suffocatingly august Richard Stokes Thole; Angela's affected ex-lover on whom she was secretly still stuck; all those valedictorians, first-chairs, first-prize winners, and presidents.

Furthermore, Edgar was leery of substituting for a minor-league celeb who could show up unannounced any time to reclaim his home, his car, his beat, his half-smoked Camel, and his cold coffee. The very name "Saddler" sounded burdensome. Edgar imagined himself trudging a bleak landscape mounded with his predecessor's baggage, like a loose burro too dumb and biddable to buck the chattel off his back.

"I guess I'm game," said Edgar uncertainly. "How soon should I go?"

"ASAP. And here . . ." Wallasek scribbled an address, which he

apparently knew by heart. "Saddler's digs." He held out a sheet of paper, adding obscurely, "You won't suffer."

Edgar accepted the paper. "So how do I . . . ?"

"Book a flight, submit a receipt, we'll reimburse," Wallasek yadda-yadda-ed. "Oh, and one more thing." The editor thumbed a furry leather contact book on his desk, then snatched the paper back to scrawl a number. "You might get a key to the house from Nicola." Returning the page with a teasing shimmy, Wallasek leered. "One of Saddler's *friends*. His very best *friend*, from all reports. I've never met her, but it's funny how often Saddler's numerous *friends* turn out to be good-looking women."

A red flag went up: after spending ten seconds on the logistics of Edgar's whole new life and forty-five minutes on this feckless cad playing hooky, *Wallasek still couldn't stop talking about Saddler*.

Edgar folded the paper, stalling. He was sure there were dozens of questions he should be asking, equally sure that they wouldn't occur to him until he was on the plane. "So, um. What's my first assignment?"

"The strange and terrible fate of Barrington Saddler, what else?"