

HACK

**Sex, Drugs, and Scandal
from Inside the Tabloid Jungle**

GRAHAM JOHNSON



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*For
Emma, Sonny, Raya
Connie and Clara*

Also by Graham Johnson:

Darkness Descending

Powder Wars

Druglord

Football and Gangsters

The Devil

Soljas

Gang War

The Cartel

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Introduction

The phone rang. It was Rebekah Brooks.

Acting Editor of the *News of the World*. Cold-eyed corporate killer. Supreme Top Operator.

At the other end of the line was me. Tabloid extremist. Prolific story-getter. Fleet Street's Next Big Thing.

I knew why she was calling – she wanted to find out for herself whether the photographs were real or fake. The conversation opened up something like this:

Rebekah: 'Hi Graham. How's it going down there?'

There were golf balls of stress in my shoulders. I was pacing around a chintzy, overheated hotel room on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall. This was the most important conversation that I would ever have in my life.

If I could blag my way through it, there would be glory beyond my wildest dreams. Triumphant return home. Fortress Wapping at my feet. But if I fucked up, there would be untold doom. Disgrace. Unemployment. Exile. The stakes were stratospheric. Just the way they always were.

For a brief moment, I zoned out trippily, even though she was still on the other end. I had to be honest with myself. Mad though it was, deep down, at that moment, I didn't really care about either outcome. I was oddly detached. Success was the preferred option, of course. But all that I really wanted to do, in my heart, was to please her. Make her think nice things about me, even if it was just for a short while. I was consumed with an unstoppable and irrational craving to give her good news. Like many corporate functionaries, I was in the grip of a modern phenomenon – an unnatural and slavish desire to satisfy my superiors, even if it was not in my interests to do so.

My other motivation to get through the conversation fast was fear, fear of nothingness. Of just existing. Of thinking. I just wanted to get to the next stage of the caper ASAP. I moved at 800 miles per hour, at all times: the mean velocity of a tabloid terrorist, whether I was coming through your door to destroy your life, filing copy or irritably phoning my mum once every six months. I had so much latent nervous energy coursing through my veins that I was often charged with static, even when I was crashed out in a heap. I got electric shocks every time I got into a car. I worried so much about stories that within two years of becoming a journalist, I had a stomach ulcer. Like a German tank column, I only ever ate on the move, mostly out of 24-hour garages – Ginsters curry pasties, Lucozade to dissolve the exhaustion and a couple of Zantac popped for dessert. I had the thousand-yard stare of a soldier who couldn't take much more. My mind was so disturbed with passion and vice, I took beta blockers in an attempt to make it still. I was in my twenties.

On top of all of that, I had the impatience of a rapist – and I don't say that lightly. I myself had a conviction for Section 47 assault for pouring boiling water over a fellow degree student my girlfriend

had accused of raping her. A fitting end to my graduation ceremony that signaled the start of my working life. The wounds were still smarting. Not for her, I was worried my bosses would find out that I had a criminal record and it would hold me back from my jet-powered journey up the greasy pole to the top of News International. These were the degenerate impulses that powered my warped ambition. Aristotle found impatience to be a vice. The World's Biggest Selling Sunday Newspaper nurtured it as a virtue. So when Rebekah called, I just wanted to get through it and then for something else to happen, even if it meant the end. Experiencing nothingness is agony for a red-top reporter.

Rebekah carried on with her call, getting down to business: 'I've seen the pictures of the Beast of Bodmin.' She said they were amazing or something like that. The Beast of Bodmin Moor was a mythical big cat that roamed the ghostly hills of North Cornwall, according to folklore – and the local freelancers who made a few hundred quid every year selling stories about mysterious sightings. There were tales of the Beast spooking tourists with bloodcurdling roars from across the moon-washed, foggy fields. During the nineties, the Beast had etched itself into the national tabloid psyche, quickly becoming the equivalent of the Loch Ness Monster for Britain's godless Generation X that also believed in crop circles. What's more, no one had ever tracked the Beast down, and papped it close up. Nor got irrefutable evidence of its existence. Except of course for Yours Truly. Earlier that day. Wow.

'They're great pictures,' Rebekah continued. She buttered me up a bit, by saying that when she had sent me down to Cornwall a fortnight or so earlier, she'd never expected me to nail the Beast, to stand the story up. High praise indeed, because at the end of the day, that's what great *News of the World* reporters did week-in, week-out – they stood up stories that were impossible to stand up. They made their own luck. They beat the odds.

'But we've all had a good laugh,' she went on, turning subtly. My spider senses picked up the tremors. Rebekah had a unique talk-round trick, one that would take her right to the apex of the News Int. pyramid. She often spoke through a wry smile that laced you up with condescension. This had the effect of locking both parties of the conversation into a narrow relationship of superior – inferior. She was also nimble enough never to allow her prey to move away from the submissive role. However, here was the rub – Rebekah used the sealed confines of this channel to love-bomb her target like a cult leader. She made them feel like they were the only person in the world.

Rebekah said something like: 'I can take a joke like everyone else. But c'mon, the joke's over now. We've all got a sense of humour here, in the office . . .'

These conversations were always very tricky because each party was trying to suss the other person out, decoding the nuances. Then she tried to outflank me.

'By the way, I've got the phone on loudspeaker.' She was bringing in the big guns to test my mettle. 'Stuart Kuttner's sitting in with me . . .'

Kuttner jogged in with a 'Hello Graham' in his clipped, whiney voice, an East End drawl that had been machined for full spectrum dominance by elocution lessons. Stuart Kuttner. Known amongst the reporters as Cuntner. Or simply The Cunt. By day, the Screw's Managing Editor. By night powerful Fleet Street fixer.

At that point I realised for definite that Rebekah was trying to blag me. Kuttner – a sense of humour? He looked like someone who slept on a stainless steel mortuary slab. He may have been one of Murdoch's Angels – the inner sanctum of British consiglieri that had helped the proprietor build up his empire from the early days – but he had deathly, sunken eyes and a blank expression.

I also noticed Kuttner had used my name in his opening gambit; he was trying to be nice. But, at the same time, obviously taking the Beast of Bodmin issue very seriously. There's no way he'd want to be sucking up to me with a first name unless he had good reason to.

Rebekah carried on with her patter: 'If you say to me, "It was all a joke – we took the pictures for a prank," then that's fine. No harm done and we can move on and everyone can forget about it.'

She had sprung her first trap. Like all the best blags, it was half crude/half clever. She wasn't confronting me directly, by asking outright if the pics were spoofed-up. That would be seen as a gratuitous frontal assault on my integrity. *News of the World* reporters were assumed to have impeccable credentials. In truth, executives rarely challenged the integrity of reporters directly because it was a no-go area. Simply because many of us had no integrity at all. We lied for a living, cheated members of the public and broke the law routinely. Direct questions threatened to penetrate the Chinese Walls that were supposed to protect executives from contamination. The same nuclear-strength, labyrinthian walls behind which executives stood for so long during the phone-hacking scandal that blew up 15 years later.

Rebekah was trying to coax me into an admission by using the sugar-coated joke-line as bait. That was the crude part. She was also giving me a pretend outro, by claiming that if I said it was a joke, then all would be forgiven. That was the carrot. But of course, she was lying on all counts. The situation was already out of control. If I said this was all a joke, it would have meant instant dismissal.

Back against the wall, I would have to try and blag her that it was all true. The problem was Brook was a top blagger as well. She'd started out as doe-eyed secretary on *Sunday*, the *News of the World's* glossy celeb supplement. Seven years later she was the Deputy Editor of the paper. And everyone knew she was being groomed for a top slot in the corporation.

It's hard to blag a blagger. But I launched into it anyway. First of all, I deferentially confirmed to her that my sighting of the Beast of Bodmin wasn't a joke. Humbly, I said that it was all true and the pics were genuine. I played a little hard done-by, as a result of her attempts to undermine me, but not too much because that would have been to show disrespect. To disagree with what your superior had said, even when she was trying to trap you, was political suicide.

Following my denial, I then started to tell her the story of how I'd managed to track down the Beast of Bodmin so that it could be photographed. It was a whopper of a tale that involved a six-foot-long puma jumping out of a bush and going for me. At the right points in the yarn, to heighten the drama, let the blag breathe. But during the adventurous bits, I machine-gunned the words into the phone, reacting to and embracing what Rebekah was asking and saying, the two of us twisting and turning in an elaborate merry dance. I paced the floor animatedly like a big cat stalking its prey, throwing all my effort into convincing her. The excitement of the story contrasted with the depressing backdrop of the room – the bog floor selfishly littered with piles of dumped newspapers. A half-eaten Full English on a wood-effect tray. An unmade, wanked-in bed. The trademark hotel detritus of the Lone Wolf reporter on the road.

The story was very far-fetched but she went for it anyway and at the end of the conversation I was sure that I had persuaded her that the pics were real. I can't claim all the credit for her swallowing it, though. The reason was simple – she wanted the Beast of Bodmin to be true. She was desperate for it to be true. This week she was in charge. The real *News of World* Editor Phil Hall was away on holiday and she was in the hot seat. She wanted a big story to kick off with. She wanted to have an impact. She wanted his fucking job. The whole Beast of Bodmin scenario had been her idea in the first place. It was on her direct orders that I'd been sent down here, dressed as Sherlock Holmes, for fuck's sake. Now that it had worked out, she wanted to claim all the credit. Who was going to spoil the fairy tale? certainly wasn't. Silently, and without expressing it explicitly, it seemed we had agreed to believe in each other. In my mind, a manufacture of consent had been consummated.

Star Wars on Earth

Two years earlier, my job interview at the *News of the World* had been secretive and shadowy. I entered through a side-door, so that I wouldn't be seen. Straight into a rat-run of roller-shuttered filing cabinets that gave me cover until I got to a blacked-out room in the corner of the office.

Many years later, in the fourth line of her resignation letter, Rebekah Brooks spoke of 'her desire to remain on the bridge' as she exited this room for the last time. The newsroom looked like the bridge on the Death Star – a grey, airless state-of-the-art office bathed in 100 per cent unnatural light. An ominous hum lurked in the background – hushed voices, subdued ringtones and the tapping of keyboards. The audible holocaust of lives being destroyed by remote all round Britain. Well-groomed functionaries glided purposefully between green screens on long Formica-topped workstations, arranged in parallel, like a war room. An all-pervasive terror emanated from the aloof, powerful executives bunkered up in the glass offices around the perimeter. Some of the reporters dared to look up at me as I hurried past. What were they thinking? Were they quietly praying for my soul as I entered their lair? No, I knew what they were thinking: 'Who is this scruffy cunt – and is he after my job?' This was the black heart of the Evil Empire – and I craved to be part of it.

Fortress Wapping was largely windowless and cashless. Security doors on permanent lockdown. Red signs in the corridor warned of threats and attacks because of 'the business we are in'. Like the Death Star, the atmosphere was drenched in fear and repression. Dread so powerful at times, so tangible, that it weighed down on the bodies of reporters like the atmospheric pressure under the ocean, often crushing them.

A good example was Sean Hoare, the former *Screws* whistle-blower who was found dead during the middle of the hacking scandal. I first met Sean around Christmas 1995, a few weeks after my job interview. He was a showbiz reporter at the *Sun*. He was a laddish, rough-and-tumble journo who often arrived to work falling out of the back of a builder's van. He was ideally placed to ride the wave of the *Loaded* generation that had just broken into mainstream popular culture. Sean was dating a gorgeous, shiny-haired secretary in my department. Noel Gallagher's mobile was keyed into his Nokia 2120 and he was high on life.

A few years later when I last saw him, Sean was rattling like a smack-head. He had the body of a doddering, Alzheimered-up pensioner. Speech slurring Ozzy Osbourne-style, and I could see slo-mo thoughts framed on his face, thoughts that he found frustratingly difficult to express. He had the kind

of bag-head teeth – blackened and corroded by cocaine acids – that you only find on a working girl banging it out on the street.

As someone who had been in theatre with him, I recognised the symptoms of the Fleet Street equivalent of Gulf War Syndrome – the limp unfocused gaze, the soul shrivelled by years of lying for a living, darkened by the abuse of cruel, torturous bosses that had left this hulk of a man timid like a runt dog. Then the injustice of being disposed off when he had passed his use-by date. Cause: driven drink and drugs by the constant pressure to deliver stories. Verdict: bullied to death by News International.

Back on the bridge, my ‘job interview’ was about to begin. Enter Darth Vader. Feature’s Editor Ray Levine. Today’s interrogator. I was guided to a black leather chair, rammed tight up to his paperless desk. A glaring table lamp shone in my eyes, so close I could feel the heat on my cheeks. Slivers of fluorescent rays, from the blinds that fronted his office, dramatically striped parts of the room by the door, giving it the appearance of a death row cell in an old black and white film. But these were quickly extinguished as the door shut tight, until Ray Levine was reduced to an amorphous umbra in the shady recesses of the room. Moving around me like a CIA inquisitor at Guantanamo Bay.

Foolishly, I had brought along a cuttings folder, photocopies of my previous stories to show off. I was very proud of them – Ray fucked them off immediately. Ray was a dark-skinned Iranian of Jewish heritage with an incongruously boyish grin. I’d known a few Israelis and like them, Ray was tough, cocky and loud.

‘What type of stories do you like doing?’ he asked, without looking at me and busy doing five other things. It was a Saturday afternoon. The next day’s paper was being put to bed and Ray was hunched over his laptop, answering last minute subs’ queries, legals and niggly demands from the Editor.

‘I like turning people over, stitch ups – drugs, vice that kind of thing,’ I replied deferentially. ‘I’ve also done a lot of brothel stories.’ Referring to a genre of journalism that I would later come to know as ‘investigations’.

Dan Collins, the Deputy Features Editor, stood over me and picked up a handful of my cuttings. I didn’t let his cherubic Harry Potter-face deceive me. His bookish, straightforward manner masked a paper-cut wit and an unnerving eye for detail. He looked more like a Cityboy than a junior news executive – double-cuffed, stripy shirt, dark suit, textured leather shoes. Murdoch paid his officer class well.

‘Why haven’t you got the originals?’ he fired at me, referring to the copies I’d shadily made from the office cuts’ book the day before. Dan was probing to see if I was blagging it. To suss out if I’d ripped off someone else’s exclusives to pass them off as my own.

‘No time,’ I said. The sub-text of the answer was this – I spend every waking hour booting in doors and chasing stories – no time to make a fucking scrapbook of them. Not *Blue Peter*, mate.

Dan parried: ‘How come you haven’t got any bylines on these stories then?’

He was just trying to rattle me – he knew very well that lowly-paid agency reporters rarely got credited for their hard graft.

Dan scanned a bondage story I’d done for the *Sunday Mirror* about a sado-masochist party at a club owned by former Tory Defence Minister Tom King. King hadn’t known about the sex party but the fact that it had been held at one of his business addresses made it worthy of a spread. To get the story I’d had to go under cover as a rubber fetishist, disguised in skin-tight plastic trousers and a homoerotic black string vest. I looked like the secret fourth member of Right Said Fred gone wrong. Very embarrassing, especially on my pale, battle-fatigued frame. Ray looked half-interested because of the *Screwsy* sex angle.

I told them how I had done some sneaky stills on a Canon Sure Shot of a semi-naked girl hung up on a meat hook being whipped – a difficult task in low light whilst being overlooked by pervy bouncers. Even so, Ray’s expression was half ‘I wouldn’t wipe my arse on that story in the executive

bogs down the corridor' and half 'So fucking what?' This was a Fleet Street legend who had hidden in a bedroom cupboard to catch another minister – David Mellor – shagging in his Chelsea kit (allegedly). Ray had served his time on the *Sunday Sport* in its 'London Bus Found on The Moon' heyday. *Private Eye* dubbed him Ray Latrine.

'Yes, nice one,' he said diplomatically. 'But how come you gave this to the *Sunday Mirror*? Why didn't you offer this to us first?'

'We did – we offered it to you first. Well, News anyway,' I explained naively. 'Words and pics – but they knocked it back. So we moved it on, to the *Mirror*.'

'Cunts,' he spat.

'Who? The *Sunday Mirror*?'

'No! Fucking News.'

'Oh!' I said.

'We're not fucking News. We're Features. Putting it up to them is hardly giving it to us, is it?'

I'd just walked into a political minefield. One wrong move and I'd be confined to a journalistic wheelchair for the rest of my life. I should have realised. But how was I to know? I didn't know anything about office politics anywhere, never mind at the vipers' nest that was the organ read by a quarter of all the British population. No one in my family, nor anyone I had ever known, had ever worked in an office – except a betting office. So it wasn't something that came naturally.

Later I found out that the two main editorial departments at the *NoW* – News and Features – were fierce competitors that would have gladly sent each other to the gas chambers. They sabotaged each other's stories. They doubled-up on jobs, each assigning reporters without the other knowing. They bled each other on buy-ups. They tried to fuck each other at every turn. They robbed each other's stories. They would have robbed each other's women, if they could.

What's more, I was astonished to find out, the cut-throat rivalry was a deliberate management tool based on the arrogance of being a market leader. The *News of the World* was so powerful that they didn't even consider rival papers like the *Sunday Mirror* and the *People* competitors. Ray wouldn't wipe his arse on them in the executive bogs down the corridor. Even though he'd earned his spurs on the *People* under Phil Hall. Phil Hall later moved to the *News of the World*, bringing Ray across with him, before becoming Editor. Rival papers' names were never mentioned. The management's ethos was: 'Well, if there's no one to compete against, we'll just have to compete against ourselves.' That's what Ray later told me, anyway.

Street of Shame

The interview was dragging on in newspaper terms, almost 20 minutes gone. Dan was still holding the S&M story. ‘So was there any shagging at this party then?’ he asked, throwing me a line, and a hand grenade at the same time. Our eyes met for a second, and then I looked away. The moment of truth. Or rather, the concealment of it that always happens when a tabloid reporter is quizzed about an undercover sex story by his peers. When quizzing another myself, I always looked for the clues that were a window onto a man’s soul. The bad breath. The horrid smile. The lead forehead. Subliminal signals, put there by Mother Nature, to get the moral measure of a man. Indicators as to what had really happened in the masseur’s cubicle when the tape recorder had been deliberately turned off. I wondered whether I was emanating signals of my own.

‘No, just kinky stuff,’ I replied, trying to brush it off. ‘It’s weird. That crew aren’t really into sex’, glancing back up at both Ray and Dan. ‘It’s all about power and domination.’ Today, I was the gimp. I could see Ray’s leathers hanging-up in the corner. He liked to ride high-powered motorbikes with sex pictures of flowing-haired women sprayed on to the tank. The portrait was reportedly based on a voluptuous Features reporter who used to like being shagged in the executive bogs down the corridor after the paper had been put to bed. My no-sex reply was the answer Dan had wanted to hear. But not the one that answered the real question. I knew exactly what Dan had really been asking – Dan’s code question had been: ‘Were you involved in any shagging at the sex party? Did you get carried away and fuck one the guests at the sex club?’ This was crucial in a job interview. A *News of the World* reporter was supposed to make his excuses and leave at all times – a key trait and a test of your moral fortitude. If you got caught with your pants down on a brothel job, it would be very embarrassing for the company.

If Dan was expecting me to squirm and show my shame, then it wasn’t going to happen. Like him, I was a supercool blagger. The truth was, I hadn’t made my excuses and left. I’d copped off with a bus nurse who’d been dragged along to the party by a freaky couple she knew. She wasn’t exactly a Miss Whiplash-type, but in a dark, damp corner of a gothic dungeon, after a few bottles of Grolsch bought with the *Sunday Mirror*’s flash money, one thing had led to another. Pressed against the crumbling brickwork, the sordid action (all straight-up – no kinky stuff) had not even stopped when she had unzipped my shiny shrunken-bin-bag-style kecks and found a tape recorder stuffed down my boxies. I never wrote about that part of the story in the super-soaraway *Sunday Mirror*. How could I, when I

was sermonising against these sicko creeps for staging the sex parties in the first place? And I wasn't about to mention it now either, and fuck up my shot at the title. We moved on.

'Have you got good contacts?' Ray asked. Contacts are people that tip you off about stories in return for money.

'Yes,' I said. 'I've got a good royal contact who gives me good stuff about Camilla Parker Bowles. At that time, Camilla was having a secret affair with Prince Charles. My tipster was an eccentric antiques dealer who lived in a posh village near Camilla's family home in Melksham, Wiltshire. She'd often tip me off when Charles was making a secret visit to Camilla's house for a midnight tryst. Me and the snappers, from the agency I worked for, spent hours in the bushes outside waiting for Charles to come out. Then as his official car roared off down the muddy track, we sprung a flashgun ambush. Freezing the countryside in a silver wash of brilliant light. For a moment, it looked like a scene from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* had come to a dark field in the middle of the English countryside.

'I've also got a few hookers on the firm,' I boasted. My main vice contact was an alcoholic, drug-user called Gina, known in the trade as a 'tart with a heart'. She worked the dismal massage parlours of market towns in Avon, Somerset and Wiltshire. Getting hoofed day-in, day-out by stinking EU-subsidised farmers and the toothless peasant underclass – the depressing reality behind the countryside's chocolate box image in which I loved to poke around. Gina hadn't exactly given me any big stories yet, but she was always hinting that she was going to blow the lid on her big fish clients – coppers, judges, celebs, the town mayor etc. I couldn't see it myself – her face was pock-marked from years of boozing, skin flaking beneath her make-up. Her body had been battered all round the Gulf States during her glory years as a high-class call girl at the time of the oil crisis – most hookers claim to know Saudi princes personally. In these leaner times, she kept the fat tyres around her waist in with a bulging Lycra vest, reeking of talc and stained with baby oil. Her appearance was a human storyboard detailing years of abuse at the hands of men, including a disfigured jaw – courtesy of a pimp – that she hid by constantly brushing her hair on to her face. I always made my excuses after a debriefing from her. However, her promise of vice exclusives was enough for me to tolerate her rambling late-night phone calls. She knew how to work a reporter and during my time I would go through many Gina-style informants.

On a Sunday newspaper you live and die by your contacts. That's because you can't rely on news to fill the paper – leave that to the dailies. Sunday reporters work mainly on 'off-diary' stories. Some reporters are technically brilliant and can do 100 words-per-minute Teeline shorthand. They give good copy and cover press conferences accurately. For me, that was like watching paint stay wet. I had learned shorthand on my post-grad NCTJ course – but quickly gibbed it. I spent the early part of my career trying to remember what people had said or making it up. The only shorthand I possessed was the contemptuous nicknames I had for the subjects of my stories. Members of the public were known as tools, bell-ends and ball-bags. It was a simple device to dehumanise my prey. I had the perfect tabula rasa short-term memory for crunching up pop culture and spitting it out again – a blank. If a story had male and female subjects – for instance a couple involved in a 'shagging' story – I referred to the man as Jimmy Pisspot and the woman as Jenny Pisspot. These were the tools of my trade.

However, what I did possess was Factor X. A mythical quality possessed by an elite corps of hard news journalists. The ability to sniff out a story within seconds. Lock on to the person in the room who's got it and tease it out of them with a talk-round. I was a doorstep king. Factor X was the journalistic equivalent of The Force in *Star Wars*. Mainly it was about getting people to like you and to talk to you. Hard to identify but one journalist who's got Factor X in bundles is the legendary former *Daily Mirror* writer John Pilger. His articles, books and docos are dripping in Factor X. The only problem was I later identified the magic ingredient of Factor X – and it turned out to be the truth.

The irony was that Factor X got me a job at the *News of the World*, but it was like a deal with the Devil. To actually succeed in tabloids from then on in, I would have to lie, squandering my Factor X on the way. The law of diminishing returns. Law of the Red-Top jungle – destroying the thing that has created me.

Like most things in newspapers, the job interview was short and sweet and on-the-seat-of-your-pants. Now and again, Ray jumped up from his spring-loaded seat and shouted out on to the floor. Things like: ‘What the fuck’s this? What’s such-and-such saying about that story?’ directed at a terrified reporter, or ‘For fuck’s sake, what the fuck is going on?’ etc. Basically, Ray didn’t have time for all this job interview bollocks. All that he wanted to know about a prospective reporter was whether he was:

1. No hassle – low maintenance.

That I’m not going to bother anyone with daft talk of a chair to sit on on my first day. Or directions to the canteen. Or ask things like: ‘Do I press 9 for an outside line?’

And for the duration of my employment I’m not going to ask about holidays, contracts, car parking passes or pensions.

2. The Right Stuff.

That I’ve got the resourcefulness of an SAS soldier trapped behind enemy lines. Coupled with the prison cunning of a gang member in a Detroit superjail.

3. Resilience.

That I’ve got the fortitude of an American fighter pilot shot down over Hanoi who gets his leg broken by a mob of angry rice farmers and is then imprisoned in a semi-submerged rat cage for five years – in solitary. To endure privation without complaint.

4. On the Ball.

That when Ray shouts out of his office at random: ‘Get me Madonna’s person on the line,’ I’m not going to say, ‘Have you got a number? Who is that? Do you want her agent or press officer?’ You just do it. Fast.

5. Right Ideology.

The fact that I’m sitting in an office at News Int. for a job interview proves that I’ve got the professional qualifications to do the job. But all professionals have to have the right attitude. In this case, it was subordination, deference and complete realignment of my goals in line with those of Rupert Murdoch and his agents. I would never question any viewpoint or show any moral objection to any story whatsoever.

6. Hunger.

That I was as desperate to succeed. Ravenous, like a Cuban refugee drug dealer who’d just landed in 1980s Miami. The World Is Yours.

7. Fear.

Fear is the fuel that drives the tabloid news industry. In some newsrooms such as the *Sunday Mirror*’s, it’s an undercurrent, a covert but menacing presence that keeps everyone running around, looking busy. But at the *Screws* it’s a cardinal passion. Terror is as much a part of the corporate culture as footballer-shagging stories and the Fake Sheik. Fear is glorified. The more fear that managers could conjure up from the alchemy of corporate hierarchy, the better – fear of not getting a story, fear of my boss, fear of my colleagues, fear of a rival department, fear that when I get back from a week’s holiday my swipe card will have been cancelled, fear that I can’t talk too loud, fear that the all-important story confession will not have ‘come out on tape,’ fear that my indiscretions won’t stay a secret, fear that I will be sued.

The great thing was, I was a friend of fear. I knew fear. Fear blackened the edges of my thoughts like a sheet of paper on fire. I was a child of Thatcher. Brought up in a recession. Steeled in a furnace of decimated lives, mass unemployment and deindustrialisation. My dad had been made redundant from an aluminium factory. My mum worked like a donkey as a part-time settler in a bookie’s. My motivation wasn’t even fear of failure – that was a luxury reserved for podgy grammar school kids. It was fear of not having a job. Full stop. Fear of poverty. As a child the only life lesson that was drilled into me was simple – get a fucking job. That’s all that matters. Work. Work. Work. Any job. It didn’t matter which one. I never wanted to be a journalist – it was just a job.

8. Story-getting.

That you can self-generate and deliver world exclusive stories week after week.

9. Story-getting..

That you can self-generate and deliver fucking great world exclusive stories week after week

10. Story-getting..

That you can self-generate and deliver big fuck-off mind-blowing world exclusive stories week after fucking week. After fucking week. Until you fuck up then it's down the road, no questions asked.

3

Pressure

Like most first days at work, my induction into life at the paper that sold 3.5 million copies every week was a high-pressure, uncomfortable experience. Traditionally, the working week at a Sunday newspaper begins on a Tuesday morning, at the relatively leisurely hour of 10 am. But at the *News of the World*, even back then, the atmosphere felt like a trading floor on Black Monday when the Asian markets had just opened up. As soon as I walked in, head well down, I could sense crisis building. Few of the reporters looked up – they were agitated and tetchy. Fraught with the kind of latent irascibility that I'd only ever come across doing stories about the long-term homeless and the ritually abused. I could tell, within seconds, that I had already become a burden. No breaks for the FNG. I didn't have a desk or a computer and when I asked a reporter called Helen Carter 'Where's good?' she nodded exasperatedly at the chair opposite. Carter was fiercely competitive and resented giving me the marginal advantage of work space. She ended up working for the *Guardian*. I remained a refugee for many months long before hot-desking became the feng shui of corporate cost-cutting.

I soon discovered the reason for the bad vibes when a pretty secretary called Tara suddenly stood up and shouted 'Conference'. Conference was the name of the weekly meeting between the writers and Features Editor Ray Levine. Each reporter was expected to pitch at least three story ideas 'for edition' – i.e. for that Sunday's paper. So if you're a celebrity or politician, whose life has been napalmed by the *Screws*, and have ever wondered where the beginning of the end began – it started here in conference, in a blank room overlooking two high-rise blocks of flats in Tower Hamlets.

Each story idea broadly had to have the following attributes. Firstly, it had to be totally exclusive. Then it had to be standupable within a week. That meant that all of the journalistic bits could be turned-around relatively quickly, including evidence-gathering, 'chats' with the main characters and getting pics. Most importantly, the story also had to clear the *News of the World's* extremely high 'wow-factor' bar. No mean feat, considering the *Screws'* inglorious history of breaking big stories.

I looked around and felt the walls crowding in. The *News of the World* newsroom was adorned with intimidating illuminated light boxes showing off former front pages. Battle honours and scalps. 'Tony Boss Archer Pays Off Vice Girl' from 1987. Another displayed huge snatch pictures of Princess Diana and a shifty-looking Will Carling sharing a secret tryst. The effect of these adverts was like being screamed at by a regimental sergeant major letting me know exactly what's expected of me in conference. From 1910, there was a whole front page dedicated to the capture of Dr Crippen. Next to

six-foot-tall bus shelter-style hoarding with the headline: 'Confessions of Christine,' about the hooker at the centre of the Profumo scandal from 1963. 'Di's Cranky Phone Calls to Married Tycoon' = another headline framed in a smaller picture. Like natural light, no art or painting was allowed into the newsroom. Brainwashing tabloid propaganda was the only form of visual stimulation. On closer inspection, the strip-lights inside were littered with dead flies.

I followed a long line of depressed reporters past the rows of filing cabinets that I'd sneaked through on the way to my 'job interview'. Ray let us stew outside of the locked meeting room like a group of sixth formers waiting to sit an A-Level physics exam. Over the next few months I watched grown men turn white with fear at this point. One female reporter burst into tears. And that was even before the roastings kicked off.

A features writer called Dominic Mohan nodded a hello to me. Mohan had an Oasis-style bowl haircut. Before getting a job at the *News of the World*, he had been the youngest ever Editor of a national newspaper, when aged 21, he had taken over the *Sunday Sport*. Porn king David Sullivan had given him the top job based on Mohan's record of bagging big exclusives such as 'Monkey Lands Plane'. Mohan didn't seem to be arsed about the pressure of conference. Seconds earlier I'd watched him repeatedly replay a tape recording out loud on his office cassette machine. It contained the word 'electrical pylon' many times. It was either part of a taped interview, or a phone message that had been left by a 'nutter' over the weekend. 'Nutters' are readers that write illiterate letters to newspapers, or obsessively phone up about Elvis sightings and conspiracy theories. Mohan's looped taped recording of cranks had a surreal, comical effect in the black atmosphere before conference. He went on to become editor of the *Sun*.

I noticed that there were several veterans from the *Sunday Sport*. A sardonic, laid-back loner called Paul 'Mucky' McMullan took the piss out of my green woollen suit – even though he was much scruffier than me. Paul was a typical *NoW* reporter – an oddball-outsider defined by a kind of rootlessness found in army kids that moved around a lot during childhood. I don't know whether he was an army kid, but Mucky was completely straightforward about the absurdity of the job. He went on to become a phone hacking advocate and TV pundit made famous by his on-screen clashes about tabloid ethics with comedian Steve Coogan and Hacked Off film fop Hugh Grant.

To kill time, as I waited outside in the corridor, I looked back into the newsroom through the slits in the blinds. Over the no-man's-land of the back bench, I could make out the news department digging in for the week. Their top boys were confident and relaxed. Jimmy 'the whisperer' Weatherup, talking with his hand over mouth in case his colleagues could lip read. The Ukrainians Greg Miskiw and Ale Marunchak. Greg later left his wife and kids for a fitter, younger freelancer called Terenia Taras. Ale set up a company to import vodka from the mother country but later said that the business didn't take off. A *Today* refugee called Ian Edmondson. Neville Thurlbeck and Clive Goodman were deep in conversation. A tall, vivacious red-head interrupted them and I could see the body-language of the men smarm into servility at once.

'Who's that?' I asked McMullan.

'Rebekah.' No one ever used her surname. She had it all – power, looks and she was still only my age. A real-life Lois Lane. Marunchak would later describe the news team I was looking at through the window as the best he'd ever seen at *News of the World* – a gilded generation. All of them would later be arrested on suspicion of phone hacking – including Greg's racy new bird.

Back to reality. Ray arrived for conference, grinning sadistically, his shark-like grin matching his pressed white shirt. About ten reporters squashed in around a bleak pine table in a cold room. Plastic jugs of tea and coffee were served by an African woman. Ray put a custard cream between his teeth before looking around for his first victim.

'OK who wants to start?' he boomed. No takers.

‘OK, then let’s kick off with you, Roger – what you got, Rog?’

Roger Insall was a professional paedophile-hunter. Short, perma-tanned and a teddy boy’s quiff toned-down for the office. The middle-aged former-*People* reporter spent his working days posing as a nonce in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia and Goa, entrapping Big Fat Westerners who liked to have sex with pre-teen ‘beach boys’.

‘I’ve got a good dogging story,’ Roger began, before going into the details of his next sting. Roger the Dodger, as he was known, was a one-man vice search engine, whose water-cooler conversations were cluster-bombed with references to orgies, swinging parties and tarts. He spoke non-stop about snuff movies, gunrunners and kiddie porn as though it was normal, in the same way a mother would talk about her kids’ schools or one of the lads would go on about last night’s footie. But his seedy fanaticism paid off – he repeatedly broke big exclusives and was credited with coming up with idea of the Fake Sheik.

As part of his cover story, Roger had successfully morphed into looking a bit like the degenerate predators he exposed. He was dripping with sleaze and gold trinkets. But tabloid journalism had not only taken a toll on his appearance – it seemed he’d paid a heavy price on the inside too. There was something dark in his soul, not in criminal way, but it was clear he’d seen too much of the demonic side of humanity and some of the residue had seeped in. Roger finished off with a couple of fillers, before Ray said, ‘The dogging story sounds good – speak to me later.’ Sensitive material was always dealt with one-to-one in Ray’s office afterwards.

It wasn’t long before it was my turn.

‘OK, Halloween’s coming up,’ I said. ‘What about a Halloween brothel story? There’s a massage parlour in Bristol that’s got a special offer for the 31st October. The girls dress up as witches. They decorate the rooms with turnips with candles in, that kind of thing . . .’

‘No,’ said Ray, cutting me off.

‘Fuck,’ I thought. That was a banker – a straightforward vice exposé. *News of the World* bread and butter. I’d scanned the small ads of the local papers to find that one – and if that particular massage parlour didn’t work out I’d planned on bunging my hooker snout Gina a few quid to get one of her mates to mock it up, just to make sure of my debut piece.

‘Next,’ Ray said.

I hit him with my next three ideas, which I had saved up and secretly squirrelled away during my last weeks at the agency. With each ‘no/next’ the anxiety increased. I couldn’t understand why – all of them were decent stories. I even put up a Royal belter about Camilla that I’d got off my posh antique dealer. I later realised that Ray knocked this one back because of politics – he was careful not to tread on Royal reporter Clive Goodman’s toes. Further down the line I had to drop my Royal contacts altogether so as not to upset Clive. Like most *NoW* reporters, Clive was territorial. He believed that empire-building offered protection. Ten years later, Clive was the first reporter to be jailed over phone hacking after he listened to Prince William’s advisor’s messages. Conference was devastating – it turned out my ideas were good daily stories that would have waltzed into the *Sun* or the *Mirror*, but they just didn’t have the depth of a decent Sunday tale. I knew I’d have to get it together fast or it was back to the regions in disgrace.

I didn’t get a bollocking – even Ray would have looked bad kicking the puppy round the room on its first day out of the pet shop, despite the baying crowd of News hoodies egging him on. But he was certainly snarling at me a bit. Later, I walked past his open door. He was sat there in his office, his face half in shadow, like a crazed *Clockwork Orange* droog. Head tilted into his chest, so that his face was almost in the horizontal plane. Eyes glaring at me through his brows, mouth open. He looked like an electro-shocked Jack Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. I could tell what he was thinking: ‘What a fucking let-down. You talked a good game in the interview, giving it all the nuclea

news Jedi stuff, but on the day of reckoning, you crumbled in the ring like a big girl.'

~~I was harder still on myself. I began to doubt my abilities. Was I really any good at this job? Or was I just another,~~ 'I have recently merchant. 'I have recently' merchants were the journeymen offspring of Britain's media-obsessed middle class, who bombarded news editors with CV cover letters that almost always began with the phrase 'I have recently . . .' Take your pick, as to what followed – 'finished my internship at the *Guardian*/come back from my gap year teaching windsurfing on the Nile/got a first in PPE at Oxbridge.' All of this meaningless over-achievement drew howls of derision from the talentless eccentrics who hacked out a living in the newsroom. Consequently, the 100g vellum cream-laid paperwork upon which the CVs had been obsequiously typed, got binned immediately. Such-like Fleet Street failures inevitably faced a life of humiliation and despair – they often ended up working for the BBC.

My conference fuck-up got me thinking – was I too just another overblown twerp who would end up running around White City in a North Face jacket with a furry hood on, a pair of combat trousers and bright blue Gazelle trainers? Was I just another beautiful person who couldn't face getting a proper job down the plastics factory? Or was I the hard news guerilla killer that I thought I was? Trained at the *News of the World*'s secret training camp in Libya. Behind Enemy Lines and Licensed to Thrill.

Dep.Feat.Ed. Dan lifted my spirits. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'You did all right today. Ray's a tough operator – but he isn't that bad compared to some of the editors I've worked for.' Dan was good at telling stories – his own was pretty good. He was 'discovered' by former *Sun* Editor Kelvin MacKenzie after his plane was delayed at a Midland's airport and Kelvin was flicking through the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* where he came across a showbiz exclusive written by Dan when he was cub reporter. Dan was summoned down to the Smoke immediately to work for *Bizarre*.

Dan carried on with his story to cheer me up. 'One day, when I was on the *Sun*, my mate was so terrified of getting a bollocking off Kelvin that he pretended to faint in his office, hoping that Kelvin would show mercy and stop roasting him.'

'What happened?' I asked

'Kelvin carried on bollocking him as he dropped to the floor. Then he leaned down to get right into his face, wagging his finger at him and telling him that he'd fucked up. My mate was still laying there pretending to be unconscious.'

'Fuck's sake,' I laughed, buzzing off the anecdote. Everyone loved a bollocking story.

'What happened next?'

'Kelvin then stepped over his body and walked out into the newsroom, leaving my mate to be carried back to his desk. Still pretending to be out for the count.'

4

Stories

Over the next few months I learned that the key to getting through conference was to have a range of different stories. From then on, in the mix, I always put in one sex story, one feature idea and one showbiz exclusive.

Sex stories have several sub-classes. In short, they are simply excuses to get pictures of pretty girls into the paper. ‘Curtain twitchers’ are essentially minor sex-in-the-suburbs scandals. A good example of a bog-standard curtain twitcher is a story that I put up in conference headlined, ‘BMW Beauty Also Available in Blue.’ The list line is self-explanatory. ‘An elegant receptionist who greets well-heeled customers and their excited little children as they arrive to look over their latest expensive BMW car leads a secret life as a sordid porn queen.’

The story was no more than a vehicle to show pics of 36A-23-34 Verity Blain, 23, in ‘disgusting, tawdry’ spanking mags. Note the inherent hypocrisy of this sleight of hand. I assumed the reason behind the desire to show naughty pics was to thrill (i.e. give a semi-on) to the *News of the World*’s 3.64 million male readers. In 1997, 27 per cent of Britain’s population read the paper – over half of them men, the majority being C2, D and E working-class lads in their mid thirties. The *NoW* was straightforward wank material for others – it was the most popular paper inside prisons. To expose what was essentially this girl’s private life, a false justification always had to be shoe-horned into the story. In this case it was the risk that the receptionist might infect children coming to the showroom with her immorality. To counter the risk of the story being too down-market, I also made a reference to ‘well-heeled’ customers (respectable curtain twitchers). There was always another reason to inject posh or high-status people gratuitously into a story. As well as providing extra titillation to the cap-doffing peasant readers, newspapers were always trying to tap into a middle-market *Daily Mail* demographic – a lucrative golden fleece for advertisers.

‘Shagging stories’ mostly involve catching married celebrities out, who should not be shagging other people. Then of course there are kiss ’n’ tells. Whatever type, there is no doubt that sex stories humiliate and demean women – that is their strategic function in a male-dominated society. However, some newspapers were much more no-nonsense in their desire to mess with women’s heads and encourage sexual violence. They gorged themselves on what’s known as ‘rape stories’. The *News of the World* didn’t use rape to titillate their readers, but another Sunday newspaper did – shamelessly. When I was an agency reporter, before I got a job on the *Screws*, on most Friday nights we received a

call from an obscene degenerate on a Sunday newspaper who asked, 'Have you got any good rape stories?' The bosses of the agency refused to take his calls because he operated at such a low level.

But as a junior reporter, I was left to handle it. 'I'm doing a ring round for hard sex stories,' he went on. 'Any good rapes in court this week?' If the answer was yes, the questions that followed were appalling. 'Where did he give her one?' 'What's the girl like – is she fit?' 'What was she wearing at the time?' And of course, 'Was she asking for it?' I read out summaries of the court reports over the phone. I always imagined him at the end line, masturbating instead of taking notes.

Most of the reporters around the conference table had lots of pages ripped hastily from that day's *Sun*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Mail*. This was because they wanted to pitch 'follow-ups' of big stories from the news that week. I was always amazed by eagle-eyed reporters who could spot an obscure name in the story of a witness to some event. The idea would be to get a full chat and a new line out of them.

Other classic features included 'good reads'. For instance straightforward backgrounders on famous people. Then there are thematic stories. These are exclusive stunt stories that aim to ride the news zeitgeist that particular week. For instance, I remember a film called *Jerry Maguire* starring Tom Cruise was all over the papers. It was a rom-com drama about a sports agent.

This was a rare, easy steal in conference.

'On the back of *Jerry Maguire*,' I mused, 'why don't we find a real-life Jerry in Britain?'

Ray: 'Good idea.'

'I'll do a ring round of Britain's top ten football agents and scrabble together some of their anecdotes – money, pressure, sex etc.'

Ray: 'Love it.' Features Editors love these ideas because they are cheap, easy and non-libelous. But beware – reporters who routinely put 'furniture' up were considered coasters. I remember two, highly paid, middle-aged feature writers who relied on 'set-pieces' to get them through conference. Ray mauled them.

'No. That's not going to work!'

Or 'For fuck's sake, have you checked cuts? That's been done . . . etc.' Woe betide anyone who put up a story that had already 'made'. Times were changing. With their dark blue suits and shiny shoes, they looked like early retirement coppers who hadn't solved a crime for a good long while. Looking at me with contempt – I had been brought in as a child labourer on McDonald's wages to see them off. I looked at them back. They were like Spitfire pilots with tombstones in their eyes. They weren't coming back from the dogfight and everyone knew it. On the other hand, I was coming back like the Red Baron with a fuselage full of stickers – lives destroyed. Including theirs. A few weeks later they had been 'disappeared'.

Sometimes, after conference, Ray would launch into a mass bollocking: 'That was fucking shit. Most of your ideas are fucking rubbish. I want three more ideas off each of you before lunch time. Ring round your contacts and get some good fucking stories. I don't know what the fuck is going on here – you're getting lazy. If this is the best you can do . . .' etc, etc.

I didn't get anything in the paper the first week. If I fucked up in the second week as well then I'd almost certainly get whacked. In *Star Wars*, before he strangles one of his admirals, Lord Vader tells the victim, 'You have failed me for the last time.' Ray Levine was less forgiving – you only had to fail him the first time, never mind a second. A few weeks later a young Welsh girl started one Tuesday. Before lunch time, on the second or third day, she had been liquidated. For being no more than a few minutes late, and 'not taking the job seriously enough'. She explained that she'd been up all night shagging a solicitor she'd met, understandably excited to be in London for the first time. She was bundled out of the office, her hair a mess, the contents of her handbag spilling out on the way. A stony-faced junior executive called Denna Allen kept shouting after her, 'Can you just leave the office now?' over and over again. I winced when a pretty girl was publicly humiliated. Maybe I didn't see

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