

FISHWRAP  
A comedy in two acts  
by Ben Bromley

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## ACT ONE

(Lights go up on SCANNER)

### SCANNER

All units be advised: We have a report of a crowd gathering at the (venue). Officers report the (theater troupe) is putting on a play titled "Fishwrap." Officers are en route to ensure all patrons have turned off their cell phones. They will also enforce the theater's restriction on flash photography. Officers on the scene report the play is about to start.

### Scene 1

(The setting is a small-town newspaper office. Papers overflow atop desks, classic front pages and historic photographs and awards adorn the walls. The furniture is worn, time-tested. A counter stands between the front door and the newsroom and advertising saleswoman JESSICA's desk. The publisher HOFFMAN's office is at rear, as is a conference room.

An emergency scanner squawks periodically.  
Phones ring in the background.

All characters, when not speaking or interacting, go about daily tasks - reading, typing, shuffling papers, taking calls.

It's shortly after 8 a.m. Only IMOGENE, the hypochondriac office manager, is at work.

Enter WILLARD, a newspaper carrier. He sports a long beard, oversized glasses and a stench worthy of a rendering plant. IMOGENE tries valiantly to carry on a civilized conversation despite the overwhelming smell. It's as if she's chatting while dicing onions.)

### WILLARD

(Approaching IMOGENE at front counter) Mornin,' Imogene. How are ya?

### IMOGENE

(Shielding her nose from the smell with her hand) Good morning, Willard. I'm OK, but I think my sciatica is flaring up.

### WILLARD

You always seem to be afflicted with something.

IMOGENE

It's my cross to bear. Any returns today? (She gasps for air. Subtly unleashes a blast of air freshener.)

WILLARD

Thirty-seven. The Independent doesn't sell out at the grocery stores anymore. Rack sales are way down.

IMOGENE

(Comes up for air, then speaks.) Everybody's buying their food at the Mega Mart, and corporate stores won't carry local papers like the Independent. So, you're ready to call it a day, then?

WILLARD

Nah, I'm headin' to the back to wrap up some bundles. Then to the bar.

IMOGENE

(Under her breath, while doing busywork.) The only bar you need is a bar of soap.

WILLARD

Whassat?

IMOGENE

Hmmm? Oh my stars, *dope*. I'm such a dope – can't seem to get these figures to add up. You have a good day, now, Willard. Go get yourself some rest. (WILLARD exits.) And a bath. (She thoroughly sprays air freshener.)

(The SCANNER squawks.)

SCANNER

We have a report of a 10-23 at the Gas and Go. Juvenile subject attempted to walk out with 12 candy bars stuffed down his pants.

(Enter LESTER, the local rabble-rouser. He is in his 60s, sporting a worn and outdated navy suit, an ill-knotted red tie and a red baseball cap sporting the logo of a feed company. He also wears an ornery disposition. He is brandishing a copy of this morning's paper, rolled into a tube as if he means to whack someone with it.)

LESTER

Where is she?

IMOGENE

Who?

LESTER

You know damned well who.

IMOGENE

I expect Judy in two shakes of a lamb's tail.

LESTER

I know you people are all cozy with the sheriff, but you aren't going to get away with this.

IMOGENE

Now Lester, you know the sheriff has no say over what goes in the paper.

LESTER

Bullshit. I know better. I'll bet he and that editor of yours sit around laughing it up at my expense. I know what Sheriff Gunderson is up to. He's got his nose out of joint because I let those stoners throw their dope festival at my farm last summer. He's trying to get back at me. That's why he got the DNR to start snoopin' around lookin' for environmental violations. And then you "yes men" publish everything the sheriff says like it was gospel.

(Enter JUDY ALWORTH, editor of the Independent. She is in her 40s, with a sharp mind and a dull wardrobe. She approaches LESTER at the front desk.)

Ah, speak of the she-devil. (Ominously) Good morning.

JUDY

Well, it *was*. What can I do for you, Lester?

LESTER

You can stop dragging my name through the mud on the front page of your daily fishwrap. You can stop taking Gunderson's every accusation as fact. And you can put a retraction on tomorrow's front page, under a banner headline.

JUDY

You want fries with that?

LESTER

(Holding his rolled-up paper aloft) You tell the sheriff and his DNR flunkies that the next time they trespass on my property, I'll be waiting, with a loaded shotgun!

JUDY

Easy, now, Lester. Look, the DNR and the Sheriff's Department are public agencies, and it's our job to report on their activities. If they find no violations at your place, we'll report that. If you're dumping raw sewage into the creek, we'll report that, too.

LESTER

The only raw sewage I see around here flows right from Gunderson's mouth into your news columns. (Pulls a folded document from his chest pocket, hands it to JUDY.) This is a copy of

the lawsuit I just filed against this newspaper. I am suing you in circuit court for libel. Consider yourself served. Do some reporting and publish the truth about my creek, or I'll own this rag!

IMOGENE

Oh good heavens.

JUDY

Owning a newspaper is no way to get rich these days, Lester. You might as well board the Titanic. Be sure to bring a flotation device.

LESTER

Keep on cracking wise, missy. If you don't clean up the mess you've made, the joke will be on all of you! (Storms out.)

JUDY

(Walking past front desk to her own desk.) Well, that was fun. I think tomorrow maybe I'll start my morning by swallowing broken glass. (Sits.) Any other complaints this morning?

IMOGENE

None yet. Other than that I think I feel another sinus infection coming on. But it might be vertigo. (Sits.) I'm sure the Happy Hoofers will be pleased with that front-page spread Charles shot.

JUDY

Hope so. Not sure they'll like the headline I put on it. But how could I resist? When an article is about wooden-shoe dancers tying up traffic with a long street parade, the headline practically calls out to you: (spreading her hands overhead) "Clogging Arteries." (A beat.) Hoffman in yet?

IMOGENE

No. But I know Mr. Malinski is calling at 9.

JUDY

Oh, great, first a visit from Lester, then a call from the CEO. Who's next, an IRS auditor?

(Enter VIRGIL SCHWALTZ, elderly owner of the downtown furniture store. He is nondescript, except for a ridiculous toupee. He storms to the front desk.)

SCHWALTZ

(Shouting.) I need to see Hoffman! Where is he? You nincompoops have really done it this time!

JUDY

(Rises, meets SCHWALTZ at front desk.) Done what? And honestly, who even says "nincompoops" anymore?

SCHWALTZ

Don't play games! Have you seen it? Have you seen my ad?

JUDY

Of course I saw it. I hope every one of our readers did, too. What's the problem?

SCHWALTZ

It's supposed to read, "Sale on grandfather clocks. *Clllllocks*. You idiots left out the letter "l."

IMOGENE

Oh good heavens.

JUDY

Give me that. (Takes paper, leafs to the page featuring the ad) You have got to be kidding me. (Reads.) Oh my God.

SCHWALTZ

You *see*? And look what it says right underneath!

JUDY

"Prices cut to the bone."

(IMOGENE stifles a laugh.)

SCHWALTZ

I'm a laughingstock. Can you imagine the grief I'm going to get at coffee this morning? Not to mention the prank calls from teenagers asking how much we're charging for grandfather ... well, you know. You've turned me into a walking Viagra commercial.

JUDY

Virgil, I am so –

SCHWALTZ

It's Mr. Schwartz, thank you very much. Now where the hell is Hoffman? I want that moron saleswoman of yours fired for this. If you don't make this right, I'll sue!

IMOGENE

Mr. Hoffman should be in shortly. Would you like to wait, or should I have him call you?

SCHWALTZ

Tell him he'll be hearing from me. And my lawyer! (Storms out.)

JUDY

Well, this has been a hell of a morning already. We need a new motto: "The Independent: We get threatened with more lawsuits before 9 a.m. than the rest of the world does all day."

(STEVE AXELSON enters. He is rumpled, unshaven, with thinning hair. He is a classic newsroom burnout, and the resident wit.)

IMOGENE

Good morning.

STEVE

It's only a good morning if you don't own stock in this newspaper. I assume Virgil was here about his ad. Vowing to sue us?

JUDY

You got it.

STEVE

Funny how a single omitted letter can make a furniture store sound like one of those adult novelty stores off the interstate. "This lawsuit is brought to you by the letter L." (Moves to his desk.)

JUDY

Glad you are seeing the humor in the situation, Steve. (Moves to her desk.)

STEVE

"L" causes trouble. This reminds me of that time the morons over at the Weekly Times ran that front-page item about the Bloomington VFW offering to collect and burn old American flags. The problem is, they left out an "L," too. The one in "flags."

IMOGENE

Oh good heavens.

STEVE

Yup, they pretty much turned the VFW into a hate group. (Sits.) It's an "L" of a problem. (A beat.) What else have I missed?

JUDY

Besides Virgil threatening to sue our pants off? Well, Lester was in, complaining about Charles' story. (Sits.)

STEVE

Complaining about what?

JUDY

About us reporting on the DNR's visit to his property. He thinks we're in cahoots with the sheriff. He has filed suit against us for libel. Oh, and Malinski should be calling any minute.

STEVE

What, no personal visit? Perhaps it's for the best: I forgot to bring a basket of rose petals to

spread at his feet.

JUDY

My guess is he's delivering the second-quarter numbers. And if he set up an appointment with Hoffman to do it, they probably aren't good.

STEVE

Wonderful. Want me to write up a piece on our demise for the obits page?

(Enter JESSICA, an attractive, young and uninitiated ad saleswoman. She hustles to her desk, frazzled.)

JESSICA

Good morning.

STEVE

(Laughing.) Yeah, right!

IMOGENE

Um, Jessica? Virgil Schwartz was in. There is a problem with his ad.

JESSICA

What's up? (Grabbing a copy of the paper from the front desk.) I proofed it myself. Looks fine to me.

JUDY

Take a closer look at the word after "grandfather."

JESSICA

What? I'm still not ... no. No! Nooooooooooooo!

STEVE

I think she found it.

JESSICA

Oh my God. I am soooo fired. (Panicking) Totes screwed. I can *not* go back to working the Clinique counter! (To IMOGENE) Has Mr. Hoffman been in?

IMOGENE

Should be on his way.

JESSICA

OMG ...

STEVE

In the market for a cardboard box? (Offers her one.)

JUDY AND JESSICA

Shut up, Steve.

STEVE

Just trying to be helpful. Hey, we all have problems. I'm into my landlord for a month's rent. I'm going to have to collect on some gambling debts.

JUDY

Where do your paychecks go? What kind of expenses can a bachelor in a small apartment have?

STEVE

Hey, chasing women is expensive. If only you hadn't gotten away, my love.

JUDY

(Angrily) I thought we were keeping that on the down-low.

JESSICA

(Momentarily distracted from her plight.) Whoa, what?!?

IMOGENE

You two dated? As I live and breathe.

STEVE

(Proud of himself.) Well, I wouldn't exactly call it a *date*.

IMOGENE

Oh good heavens.

JUDY

OK, that's enough. We all make mistakes, am I right, ladies? I move for a new topic.

STEVE

I have one: Where the hell is Charles?

JUDY

It isn't noon yet.

STEVE

Oh, right.

JESSICA

This is some tasty gossip, but I need to get to the furniture store and try to calm Virgil down.  
(Exits in a rush.)

(The SCANNER squawks. STEVE and JUDY listen intently. STEVE

tries to shoot balled-up copy into a nearby garbage can.)

SCANNER

All fire and EMS units be advised, there will be CPR training tonight at 6 p.m., provided the dummy is returned to the station by then.

STEVE

Sweet Lord, don't tell me those sickos are using the CPR dummy like a blow-up doll. So, Lester is upset about Charles' story, eh?

JUDY

Upset enough that he filed suit at the courthouse. He thinks we're part of a smear campaign, orchestrated by the sheriff and the DNR. If we were capable of such a well-organized plot, we'd find a better target than a farm occupied by a lonely old man and his gun collection.

STEVE

Exactly! If we were that organized, we'd stop juxtaposing pictures of the mayor and the Humane Society's pet of the week.

(Enter HOFFMAN, the publisher, a man in his 50s clad in a business suit. He walks past the front desk, into the newsroom. He is stern and weary.)

HOFFMAN

All.

IMOGENE

Good morning, sir.

HOFFMAN

Did Malinski call yet?

IMOGENE

No, sir.

HOFFMAN

Any fires to put out so far? Everything kosher with today's edition?

STEVE

Ha! Today's paper is about as kosher as pork rinds.

JUDY

(Approaching) Good morning. Lester was in complaining about today's lead story.

HOFFMAN

Predictable.

STEVE

Like night following day, or Charles volunteering to cover any event that features a buffet.

JUDY

He has filed a libel suit. (Hands HOFFMAN the papers.)

HOFFMAN

Terrific. So he's serious?

JUDY

Seems to be.

HOFFMAN

What does he want?

JUDY

A front-page retraction. After we do some digging and discover he's being framed, that it's all a government setup.

HOFFMAN

Any chance he's right?

JUDY

He isn't notorious as the town crackpot for nothing. But just in case, I'll have Charles follow up.

HOFFMAN

Sounds good. One thing, Judy: I want to have an advance look at anything we publish on this story. Malinski has taken an interest in it.

JUDY

Corporate is taking notice of the news product? Stop the presses!

HOFFMAN

Those are our marching orders. Anything else I need to know this morning?

JUDY

Virgil Schwartz was in about his ad.

HOFFMAN

Problem?

STEVE

Not if you like appearing on The Tonight Show's "Headlines."

IMOGENE

Seems we left out a letter. A rather important one.

HOFFMAN

(Grabbing the nearest copy.) Oh, you have got to be kidding me. Where is Jessica?

IMOGENE

In and out already. She went over to calm Virgil down.

HOFFMAN

He's pretty upset?

JUDY

Threatened a lawsuit.

HOFFMAN

Terrific.

STEVE

I don't know what he's so pissed about. I mean, the man sells old wood. So what's wrong with promoting grandfather –

HOFFMAN

Steve! Imogene, send Jessica in when she gets back. Until then, I need to prep for Malinski's call. (Exits to his office, at rear.)

JUDY

(Approaching STEVE's desk as he types.) What do you have for tomorrow's front?

STEVE

Let's see ... I have photos from last night's school play at St. John's. Oh, and I'm just about finished with that feature about the girls competing for Pork Princess at the county fair. And believe me, most of them are real oinkers.

JUDY

Well, that sounds all warm and fuzzy, but don't we have any murder or mayhem? Readers *say* they like good news, but what they *buy* is bad news.

STEVE

(Pours the contents of a flask into his coffee.) Yeah, blood sells. Speaking of which ... I just got back from the courthouse, and holy balls, do I have a doozy for you. Turns out a guy and his sister-in-law were arguing over which movie to watch the other night, and the sister-in-law grabs a sword off the wall and stabs the guy.

JUDY

Whoa!

IMOGENE

Oh good heavens.

STEVE

And that's just the beginning. Turns out the woman had a prior record ... from when she was a man. (Singing) Doo looks like a lady! For the first time in my career, I will be able to put the phrase "sword-wielding transsexual" in print.

JUDY

We'll see what Hoffman has to say about that. I think two lawsuits are enough for one day.

STEVE

I put in a request for the guy's ... er, woman's mug shots, both pre-op and post-op.

JUDY

Well, between that and the St. John's play, we should be set for art. Not sure what Charles has cooking.

STEVE

Probably another container of those vegetarian sausages he's always munching on. They smell like the hockey team's laundry hamper.

JUDY

And probably have similar nutritional value. Can you get me your stories early tonight? Something tells me I'm going to get hauled into Hoffman's office after Malinski's call. (Retires to her corner desk. STEVE nods.)

(JESSICA enters.)

IMOGENE

Any luck with Schwartz?

JESSICA

Girlfriend, that is one angry old man. Seriously, what is his problem?

STEVE

I think he's still pissed they took "Matlock" off the air.

JESSICA

Matt who?

IMOGENE

Jessica, Mr. Hoffman wants to see you in his office.

JESSICA

(Sarcastically) Great. (Sadly) I'll be selling Mary Kay by the end of the week. (Enters HOFFMAN's office.)

STEVE

(Typing.) Think I can use the term “she-male” in print?

IMOGENE

(Phone rings.) Hello, Independent. Oh hello, Mr. Malinski. Mr. Hoffman is in a meeting, but I’ll let him know you’re waiting. (Walks to HOFFMAN’s office, knocks on door and pokes her head in for a second. Returns to desk.)

STEVE

(Speaking as IMOGENE moves.) Imogene, ask him how things are at the corporate office. Is he still being fed grapes by his concubines, and lighting Cuban cigars with hundred-dollar bills? (Shoots another basket. Goes to get coffee.)

IMOGENE

(Returning to her desk.) Yeah, I’ll get right on that.

SCANNER

We have a report of a 10-51 at the corner of 12th and Jefferson. A subject is claiming to be invisible.

IMOGENE

(Picking up phone.) Mr. Malinski, do you mind holding one more minute? Judy? Yes, she’s here. I’ll put you through. Judy, Malinski incoming on line one!

JUDY

(Sarcastically) Marvelous. (Picking up.) Judy Alworth. Yes, sir. Go right ahead. (Listens intently.)

(JESSICA exits HOFFMAN’S office sheepishly and goes to her desk.  
IMOGENE pokes her head into his office.)

STEVE

(Moving to JESSICA’s desk) You get canned?

JESSICA

Nope. We’re going to offer Virgil a series of free ads and hope that makes him happy.

STEVE

You should also see what you can do about getting “Matlock” reinstated.

JESSICA

What?

JUDY

(Into phone) Yes sir, we most certainly will. You bet. I’ll put you through to Mr. Hoffman.

STEVE

What did the Master of the Universe want with you?

JUDY

He wanted to compliment us on Charles's story about Lester's creek. He encouraged me to pursue the story further, in the interest of rooting out a dangerous polluter.

STEVE

Since when does the CEO care about our news coverage?

JUDY

Yeah, he has never called me about a news story before ... or anything else, for that matter. Weird.

IMOGENE

Jessica, have you had any luck lining up ads for the business page?

JESSICA

I have to make some cold calls. There's nothing like starting out the morning with a healthy dose of rejection.

STEVE

Sounds like when I try to pick up women at bar time.

JESSICA

First up, the Merrill Lynch office. (Dials.) "Hello, is Mr. Merrill Lynch in?"

(STEVE and IMOGENE exchange a look.  
Blackout.)

Scene 2

(That afternoon. NEWSBOY enters with placard reading, "Later that day."  
Enter reporter CHARLES BECKSLEY. He is 40-50, portly, bearded and bespectacled. He wears a hat, perhaps a Panama Jack or a fedora. His voice is comically high. He waddles to his desk. STEVE and JUDY are already at work.)

CHARLES

Greetings and salutations, most revered co-workers. All is well here at the office, I trust?

STEVE

Just another day of gumdrops and lollipops.

JUDY

(Approaching CHARLES' desk.) Lester was in this morning.

CHARLES

Ah, was he nonplussed with this morning's article?

JUDY

If by "nonplussed" you mean "enraged to the point of violence," then yes. He thinks we're in league with the sheriff and DNR. He's suing us for libel.

CHARLES

A most regrettable circumstance, indeed.

JUDY

Now THAT's an understatement. I need you to do some follow up reporting on Lester's theory that he's being framed. And be extra careful. Hoffman wants a sneak peek of any stories we publish about this.

CHARLES

It shall be done immediately and forthwith! How are we fixed for photos for tomorrow's edition?

JUDY

Steve shot some play pix, but I could always use another visual element, if you have any ideas.

CHARLES

(Rifling through a mountain of papers on his desk.) Let me take a look at what's on my calendar for today.

STEVE

(Typing again.) Maybe instead of "she-male," I should go with "he-she."

CHARLES

(On the phone.) Hello, Charles. This is Charles. Remember to cover the county Board of Trustees meeting tomorrow at 10 a.m. Thank you.

STEVE

Did you just call yourself?

CHARLES

Yes. Why?

STEVE

Why would you call yourself?

CHARLES

To leave myself a reminder about a meeting.

STEVE

OK, but why the hell did you introduce yourself? Don't you know who you are?

CHARLES

Yes, of course I -

STEVE

I think if I were to call myself, I would make it a prank call. (Picking up his phone.) "Hello, I'm looking for Amanda Hugandkiss. Tell her this is Seymour Butz."

CHARLES

(Dourly) Charming. So, anything exciting happening today?

JUDY

Hoffman is in his office, on the phone with Malinski. They're talking about the quarterly numbers.

IMOGENE

Oh, to be a fly on that wall.

CHARLES

Any idea what they're discussing?

IMOGENE

I hope they aren't considering dropping dental. I've been having this pain ... I think I might need a root canal. (Eyerolls all around.)

JUDY

I don't know about dental, but you might as well kiss your 401(k) match goodbye. And don't be surprised if they institute some mandatory unpaid leave.

STEVE

They're probably scheming to charge us for the toilet paper we use. Or make us buy our own office supplies. Maybe they'll find a way to get *us* to pay *them* when we take vacation time.

CHARLES

All chiding aside, it has been a difficult time for our industry.

STEVE

(Standing, throwing papers down to his desk.) Oh, yeah, cry me a damned river. The owners have been demanding a profit margin of what, upward of 20 percent, all these years? And now that things are getting tight, rather than settle for a more modest take, they lay off staff and strip benefits so they can keep their yachts. (To JUDY) And management goes along with it, because if certain profitability levels aren't achieved, they don't get their bonuses.

CHARLES

Is this accurate, Judy?

JUDY

First of all, I'm too far down the ladder to get any bonuses. So don't look at me. But as for the rest, let me do my best impression of a news source and say "No comment."

(JESSICA enters.)

STEVE

This is what pisses me off ... well, there are lots of things that piss me off, but this is the one I'm currently focusing on: The investors get their payday, and the corporate suits get their bonuses. What do the rest of us get? A travel mug bearing the company logo? (Sitting.) Do you realize Malinski makes 30 times what we pay a starting reporter?

JUDY

You don't know that.

STEVE

Wanna bet? I've seen the financials.

CHARLES

The man is a digger. Bravo!

STEVE

Does Malinski or anyone else think they're 30 times more valuable than anyone else in the company, or should be compensated as such? I'm no Socialist, but how about a more equitable distribution of wealth?

JUDY

I will say it is getting harder to recruit students to become journalists. What's our sales pitch? "Hey, join us and work evenings and weekends for a salary that just barely tops the federal poverty standard. The good news is you get free pizza for working on election night."

STEVE

(Pours himself a refill.) And you get to drink booze at your desk.

JUDY

I didn't hear that.

CHARLES

(Helpfully and loudly.) He said we get to drink booze at our desks!

(Right on cue, HOFFMAN enters from his office. STEVE hastily takes a swig from his flask before stashing it in his desk.)

HOFFMAN

(Fretfully ) I just got off the phone with Malinski. (Rubbing at his temples.) Staff meeting tomorrow, 9 a.m., conference room.

STEVE

9 a.m.?!? Holy balls! I don't usually get done puking until 10! (Approaching JESSICA's desk.) Hey, Jessica, I have some leads for you on those business page ads. Call the bank and ask for Amanda Hugandkiss.

JUDY

You hear that, Charles? 9 a.m. That means you may have to turn off the SyFy Channel before 5 a.m. and get some sleep.

CHARLES

Indeed. (Picking up phone.) Hello Charles, this is Charles. Remember to arise in time for tomorrow's staff meeting at 9 a.m.

HOFFMAN

This bean counter crap is not what I got into this business for. I went into journalism to write clever phrases that grab readers. Like that time my lead for a hunting season preview read, "The woods will be full of turkeys this weekend, and some of them will have guns."

STEVE

Nice!

HOFFMAN

The next thing I know, I've been made editor. A couple years later, publisher. Look at me now. Wearing a coat and tie, spending the day poring over spreadsheets. I can't remember the last time I dipped my pen in ink.

JUDY

(Interrupting STEVE, who is about to make a crack.) Steve, don't even.

HOFFMAN

And now, for the first time in my career, I have grave doubts about the future of our industry.

IMOGENE

Heavens to Betsy. Let's just hope Mr. Malinski was right about bright young minds leading us out of this mess.

JESSICA

Yes, hello. This is Jessica at the paper. I had a message to return a call to a Mr. Seymour Butz.

(STEVE fails to stifle a snicker. Blackout.)

Scene 3

(Later that afternoon. STEVE and CHARLES occupy the newsroom.)

STEVE

Run this by me again. You're going to seriously contend that "Dune," one of the biggest box office bombs of all time, is an under-appreciated sci-fi classic?

CHARLES

Absolutely! Keep in mind that the film's shortcomings, such as lackluster special effects and the forced casting of Sting, were not under the purview of David Lynch. The director did the best he could with a convoluted script. I submit that he single-handedly rescued the project to craft an epic unlike any other mainstream blockbuster.

STEVE

Whatever, man. Who's your favorite "Star Trek" captain? Kathryn Janeway?

CHARLES

Uh, no, that would be Captain Jean-Luc Picard. (Sings "Star Trek: The Next Generation" theme.)

STEVE

Oh, come on, numb nuts, nobody beats James Kirk! Go ahead and leave yourself a voicemail reminding yourself of that. (Phone rings.) Speaking of phone calls. (Picks up.) County morgue. You stab 'em, we slab 'em. (A beat.) The Independent? Never heard of it. Sure, no problem. Call us back if you happen upon any corpses.

CHARLES

Uh, are you supposed to be messing with our poor callers?

STEVE

Who cares? This whole operation is going down no matter what we do. Might as well screw with the callers and have a little fun. Give it a try.

(Phone rings.)

CHARLES

(Picking up.) You've reached the third ring of hell. Head Slavemaster speaking ... Oh, hello, Mr. Malinski.

STEVE

(Taking a call of his own.) Axelson here. Yeah, that was my column. What about it? (Listens.)

CHARLES

You want Mr. Hoffman? I'm afraid he's in a meeting ... yes ... (giggling) with a Mr. Dante and one of his associates, the Prince of Darkness. Sure, I'll tell him you called, Mr. Malinski. (Hangs up, giddy and gleeful.) That *was* a bit of a lark!

STEVE

(Into the phone.) Dude, I KNOW the Germans didn't bomb Pearl Harbor. That was an "Animal House" reference. It's a humor column! Call me back when you develop a funny bone. (Hangs

up.)

(LESTER enters, brandishing a jar.)

LESTER

All right, Becksley, where's my correction?

CHARLES

(Approaches front desk.) I'm working on a follow-up piece.

LESTER

I don't remember it taking this long to prepare your original story on this topic, when the DNR was throwing around blatant lies.

STEVE

We had to get the word out before half the county became afflicted with cryptosporidium. You know what that is, Lester? It's a waterborne pathogen, a parasite. Sort of like the people who read the paper online instead of buying a subscription.

LESTER

I know about crypto. And I know I didn't dump cow crap in my creek! The sheriff and the DNR framed me!

CHARLES

Why would they do that?

STEVE

Yeah, Lester, you're more full of shit than your creek.

LESTER

You'll feel otherwise if you test this sample I took from my creek. And perhaps while you're waiting for the results to come back, you could do some digging and get to the bottom of things.

STEVE

Look, Lester, I get it. I think you're right about the sheriff having it in for you. After all, you hosted that dope festival on your farm and created a huge pain in his butt. He probably blew the whistle and called the DNR on you.

CHARLES

We had to report the DNR's findings. And if we learn there's something rotten in the state of Denmark, we'll report that, too. It just takes time.

LESTER

Don't take too long. Our court date isn't far off. (Exits.)

CHARLES

Any legal action could impact our coverage. You know Mr. Hoffman won't want to hire a lawyer when we can barely afford toilet paper.

STEVE

And I suppose answering the phones like a couple of knuckleheads isn't exactly helping matters. (Phone rings.) Hello. Oh, you again... sir, I'm sorry your house is covered in ink. Blame the Germans. I read somewhere that they bombed Pearl Harbor.

(Blackout.)

Scene 4

(The next morning. NEWSBOY enters with placard reading, "The next morning." All staff members exit the conference room after their meeting.)

HOFFMAN

Imogene, I'll be on the phone with Malinski for at least an hour. No interruptions, please.

IMOGENE

Yes, sir.

(HOFFMAN closes his office door.)

JUDY

Well, that sure was a feel-good hit. Anybody else want to proceed directly to the bar?

STEVE

That's not going to do it. I need an IV with a Jack Daniel's drip. (Sits.)

CHARLES

I had no idea things had gotten so dire. (Sits.)

STEVE

It would help if we could sell a freakin' ad or two. Preferably some that don't include profanity.

JESSICA

Screw you, Steve. I'd like to see you try to sell ads in this economy. It's ridiculous. *Nobody's* spending money. And your little "leads" don't exactly help. I can't set foot in the jewelry store after calling and asking for Ollie Tabooger. (Sits.)

JUDY

Steve, you didn't.

STEVE

(Smiling.) Oh, I did. Next time ask for Oliver Klozoff.

(The SCANNER squawks.)

SCANNER

We have a report of a 10-42 at St. Cecelia Care Center. Elderly subject claiming she has been possessed by Satan. She's spitting up strained peas. Please respond.

CHARLES

So, no raises this year, no more company contributions to our retirement accounts, and a one-week unpaid furlough for all.

STEVE

Furlough. There's a misnomer. In the service, that means a weekend of debauchery. Here, it means a vacation without pay. But you're leaving out the scariest part of Hoffman's little horror story. If these short-term belt-tightening measures don't work, they might stop printing the paper and go strictly online.

JUDY

That is a day I thought we'd never see. (Sits at her desk.) The good news is that smaller papers like ours are weathering this storm better than the big boys.

JESSICA

So like, why is that, anyway?

JUDY

We don't have as much competition from cable TV and the Internet.

CHARLES

Yes, luckily for us, no other media outlets bother to cover the local sixth-grade spelling bee.

JUDY

Or the county zoning hearings.

STEVE

Or sword-wielding transsexuals. Holy balls, does that phrase just sing, or what?!?

JUDY

So, what does everybody think about Hoffman's fundraiser idea?

JESSICA

I think it sounds like fun. Par-tay!

STEVE

You would.

CHARLES

Come on, Steve. A costume ball could be a blast! You could go as someone who actually gives a shit.

STEVE

Har dee har har. You really think people are going to fork over money to bail out a private enterprise like this fishwrapper? It's like Congress handing out billions to the banks and car makers. Only the people in this town are smarter than Congress.

JESSICA

You have to admit, it could be a lot of fun. And if we generate some buzz, people will come.

JUDY

Let's put Steve in charge of that. Generating a buzz is his specialty.

STEVE

Nice. Honestly, who's going to show up for this thing? There's a charity event every weekend in this town. People are sick of benefits.

CHARLES

There certainly is no shortage of worthy causes.

JUDY

And I'm not sure we qualify. If our industry hadn't started giving away its news content on the Internet, we might not be in this fix today.

STEVE

I agree, we were too quick to give it up for free. Sort of like Charles' sister.

CHARLES

Hey!

JESSICA

OK, so I've only been in this business for like, four months. When - and why - did everything start breaking bad?

JUDY

Here's the deal, Jess: Back in the '90s, when the Internet was new and Steve still had his original liver ...

STEVE

Appreciate that.

JUDY

... nobody knew how to handle the Web. It was exploding, and everyone saw the importance of gaining a foothold. So we all launched Web sites, assuming we'd figure out a business model later.

CHARLES

Uhhhhh the problem is, we still haven't found a way to make money on them.

JUDY

Most papers haven't found success charging for online subscriptions because so many sites offer news for free.

JESSICA

I hear you, girl. The other problem is online advertising is a tough sell. A lot of business owners still don't use computers, so they won't buy Internet ads.

JUDY

A lot of them couldn't tell a laptop from a lap dance.

JESSICA

Right? And many say they like the printed product because it sits around the house for a few days, rather than disappearing from a screen after a few seconds.

CHARLES

So we began by giving away our content without recompense, and now, having foresworn that loot, we're out of luck.

JUDY

Right. Everyone expects everything online to be free ... we can't put the toothpaste back into the tube.

JESSICA

(Catching on) And if people can't get the news they want for free from us, they'll find it elsewhere.

STEVE

Unless they need results from the fourth-grade tiddlywinks finals at St. John's.

CHARLES

It is a fascinating case study in macroeconomics.

JUDY

I might find it more fascinating if my job weren't on the line. I doubt there's a lot of demand out there for middle-aged former newspaper editors.

JESSICA

Sounds like everyone's job here is on the line. Total buzzkill.

(A brief silence.)

CHARLES

So, when is this ball again?

JUDY

Two weeks from Saturday night, at the country club.

JESSICA

(Rising.) OK, so I totally know you guys won't like this idea, but what if we all go with a group theme for our costumes? You know, like if we went retro and all went as members of the Village People?

STEVE

Seems appropriate, since soon we'll all be staying at the YMCA.

JUDY

You know what? A group theme is not a bad idea. It'll help us stand out from the crowd, and as hosts we should set a fun, festive example.

STEVE

(Taking another swig.) I can't believe you're going along with this.

JUDY

(Rising.) Sure, it's cheesy, but if we can get the community to rally around this event, it could save our necks. A few grand in the bank could get us through the third quarter, and if the economy turns around, we might not have to take jobs working overnights at Denny's.

JESSICA

OK, so what theme might work? How about "Snow White?"

JUDY

Well, Steve would make a great Grumpy, but there's only six of us. We couldn't even cover the dwarves, unless we drafted Willard.

STEVE

I don't remember there being a dwarf named Stinky.

CHARLES

How about "Star Wars?" (Sings "Star Wars" theme, wields invisible light saber.)

STEVE

Charles, you just want to see Jessica in Princess Leia's brass bikini from "Return of the Jedi." We need to pick something that isn't completely dorky.

JUDY

Does that mean you're in?

STEVE

Yes. But I won't consent to complete public humiliation.

CHARLES

Then you're in the wrong line of work.

JESSICA

Ooooh, I've soooooooo got it: We'll go as characters from "The Wizard of Oz." I could be Dorothy, you guys could be the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion. Mr. Hoffman could be the Wizard!

IMOGENE

So what does that make me, the Wicked Witch of the West?

JESSICA

Oh, ummm ...

JUDY

I think I'm a better fit for that role. Imogene, you can be the Scarecrow.

CHARLES

I would agree to portray the Cowardly Lion.

STEVE

If you only had the nerve. I guess that makes me the Tin Man. Seems fitting enough. Not sure even a cardiologist could find my heart.

JESSICA

So, it's settled then! I'll put in an order. Email me your measurements, OK?

STEVE

I'd like a copy of your measurements, Jess. (JESSICA shoots him a look.) Well, at least playing the Tin Man means I'll have a hatchet for fending off disgruntled news sources.

IMOGENE

(Rising, looking out a window.) Speaking of which, Lester's truck just pulled up out front.

CHARLES

(Clicking heels together.) There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home ...

(Blackout.)

Scene 5

(It's a week later, the day before the benefit. NEWSBOY's placard reads,

“One week later.”

SCANNER

Car 23, please respond to Main Street and Fifth. An uncooperative subject won't identify herself. She is claiming her name is Anita Bath.

(Lights go up on STEVE, who is on his cell phone, stage center.)

STEVE

Look, Stretch, you know I love playing poker with you. But how long can you expect me to let this debt ride? I'm not exactly living on Easy Street here. I'm behind on my rent, man. (A beat.) Sure, you took some bad beats, but come on, I know you make good money. Even though you're into me for about a thousand, I'll bet you have it, and you're just holding out. (A beat.) What? Please tell me you didn't fall for the Nigerian email scam ... and you gave them your bank account information?!?

(JUDY and IMOGENE enter from the conference room.)

OK, Stretch, forget about what you owe me, for now. Come on over for the game Saturday night. OK, bye.

JUDY

Somebody owes you a thousand dollars?

STEVE

Yeah, a poker buddy. Stretch is a smart guy - he's a water quality expert, a consultant - but the world's worst Texas hold 'em player. And apparently a sucker for scams. If only I had some Florida swampland to sell him. I certainly need the cash.

(JESSICA and CHARLES enter. The SCANNER squawks.)

SCANNER

We have a report of an incapacitated male passed out in the parking lot outside Jimbo's Tap and Bait.

JUDY

Good Lord, it's not even noon.

STEVE

Gotta love third-shifters. Willard probably drank the guy under the table.

(IMOGENE delivers a large box to JESSICA's desk.)

JESSICA

(Excitedly) I think I know what these are ... the costumes! Holla! (She opens the box and peers inside.) Ohhhhh no.

IMOGENE

What? (Looks inside box)

JESSICA

We have a problem. (Distraught.) Epic costume fail.

JUDY

Jess, what's wrong?

IMOGENE

(Moving to JESSICA's desk.) Looks like there was some sort of mixup. Oh good heavens.

JUDY

(Joining them.) Enough suspense. What is ... oh, my.

JESSICA

(With IMOGENE's help, she pulls a white sheep costume and a Little Bo Peep costume from the box) Instead of "The Wizard of Oz," we got "Little Bo Peep."

JUDY

(Grabbing the invoice.) One Little Bo Peep costume with shepherd's crook, and four sheep costumes.

CHARLES

How adorable!

STEVE

You have got to be kidding me. There is no way I am putting that on. I'll go on the lam!

JESSICA

The benefit is tomorrow night. We won't have time to send the costumes back and get the right ones.

STEVE

You seriously want me to wear that? Holy balls! I might as well go as an endangered species! Remember, this is a small, rural town where the men are men and the sheep are nervous.

JUDY

Jess is right, fellas. We're going to have to grin and bear it.

CHARLES

(Pleased with himself.) And let's not be sheepish about it!

(A collective groan. Blackout.)

Scene 6

(That evening. Only CHARLES, STEVE and JUDY are in the office. JUDY is clicking at her computer. STEVE is hitting his computer.)

STEVE

You worthless, steaming pile of dog dump! Argh, I hate this machine. Judy, when are we getting the new computers Malinski promised?

JUDY

He says they're coming in August. The question is, August of what year?

CHARLES

(Approaching JUDY's desk.) Judy, I'd like to consult with you about my follow-up story about Lester's creek.

JUDY

(Stopping what she's doing.) Go ahead and shoot.

CHARLES

I've conducted some interviews. The DNR and Sheriff Gunderson are sticking by their stories, that Lester polluted the creek by allowing contaminants, most likely livestock waste, to flow into it. But Lester is adamant that the state used tainted samples of his creek water. He maintains it's clean, and that he's the victim of a government plot.

JUDY

But we have no one to corroborate his side of the story?

CHARLES

I'm afraid not. I'm at a loss how to proceed at this point. He gave us a sample of water from his creek for testing, but I don't know how we'd arrange that.

STEVE

(Jiggling wires on his computer.) Gah! I hate you!

JUDY

You know what? I have an idea. Steve knows a water quality guy. Maybe we could commission an independent test.

CHARLES

Excellent!

JUDY

Steve, what do you think? Would your buddy ... I forget his name ... Wretch? Would he do it?

STEVE

You mean Stretch? Do what?

JUDY

Test some water from Lester's creek.

STEVE

He might. I'll call him. (He dials. JUDY exits. STEVE addresses his computer.) You get a temporary stay of execution.

CHARLES

(Rubbing his hands together.) This is getting good. As they say on "The X-Files," the truth is out there. (Sings "X-Files theme.")

(Blackout.)

Scene 7

SCANNER

We have a report of a freak accident at Highway 129 and the Crosstown Parkway. Six freaks in a camper collided with three freaks in a van.

(The evening of the benefit. NEWSBOY enters with placard reading "Night of the benefit.")

SCANNER

We have a 911 call from the north side McDonald's. Customer is angry that the McRib is no longer on the menu. He is threatening to sue.

(IMOGENE is wearing her sheep costume and helping JUDY put on her sheep costume. JESSICA is dressed as Little Bo Peep.)

IMOGENE

(Sneezes heartily.) I just wish I could shake this cold. It's going to ruin my night. I know you guys think it's all in my head all the time, but I am seriously sick. I feel like I've been rode hard and put away wet.

(Enter STEVE as a sheep - while JUDY and IMOGENE are white sheep, STEVE is of course a black sheep. He looks ridiculous - and angry.)

STEVE

You have got to be kidding me.

JESSICA

(Snickering.) O to the M to the G.

STEVE

Don't even start.

(CHARLES enters, in everyday clothes. His costume will be revealed later.)

JESSICA

(Still laughing.) It's not that bad. Swearsies!

STEVE

Not that bad? Everyone in town is going to see me in this.

(IMOGENE sneezes.)

JUDY

Since when do you care about your appearance? Half the time you wear old concert T-shirts to court hearings.

STEVE

That's not true. At the very least, I wear flannel to court. Something with a collar, in the interest of decorum.

CHARLES

I think this will be fun. It's not that baaaaaaaaaaad.

STEVE

Holy balls. Kill me now. (Locates the flask in his desk drawer. Guzzles its contents.)

JUDY

OK, everybody ready to go in a few minutes?

JESSICA

Totes.

(IMOGENE sneezes again.)

Gesundheit!

(Enter SCHWALTZ, dressed in a Dracula costume.)

SCHWALTZ

(In his best Transylvanian accent.) Good eeeeevening.

JESSICA

Oh, hello, Mr. Schwartz. What are you doing here?

SCHWALTZ

Just thought I'd stop by on my way to your little soiree.

CHARLES