

RICH MAN, STRAW MAN

Bill Borrington entered my life as a follow-up to a cold turkey sandwich. I should have settled for coffee.

I was fresh from a disastrous marriage, still nursing a few bruises to a hyper-sensitive ego, nearly broke, and, at age thirty-two, convinced that my next career move might well be pivotal. Hero or hobo, big man or bum, there seemed at that time to be no middle ground.

I had a degree in Agrostology, which is the study of grasses, and the demand for people honed in this mode is not overwhelming. So I'd done soil survey for the government, then a turn as a technical writer for a criminally polluting chemical company. When they got caught, in a rare case where regulations were actually enforced, they dumped the balance of their toxic gunk and lit out for Brazil. I was abandoned on the marshes of New Jersey, along with a few barrels of dioxin. Showing the same moral courage as my recent employers, I packed up and skulked back to Boston. Prospects were not bright when in near desperation I called a former professor, seeking some guidance in my groping for survival.

"You just might be in luck, Joe," he chuckled. "I happened to be talking with a man this past week. He's got some pretty interesting things going on. He came to see me looking for an agrostologist....a "grassman" is what he called it. I'll give you his

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name, and you call him. And Joe, keep an open mind. It's going to sound weird, and I mean really weird, but there's big, big money here."

Well, the magic word had been uttered. I promised the good professor that my mind would remain as uncluttered as ever, waxed maudlin in my thanks, and after ten minutes of diaphragmatic breathing, I made the call. Through a secretary I agreed to a meeting with the Man at "his country club" on the Connecticut shore, for the following Monday morning.

At eleven-fifteen, a quarter-hour ahead of the appointed time, I strolled into the bar of the impossibly posh clubhouse, feigning as much indifference as my bleak prospects would reasonably allow. I was determined not to beg. Unless pressed. A sleek, well-fed barman glanced up briefly, then dismissed me as a borderline mendicant. I respected his acumen. The people who live around money have a sense for these things.

"Any chance for a turkey sandwich?" I tried to sound bored. He didn't even look up from his glass polishing.

"Kitchen's not open yet. Anyway, it's members only."

The man's attitude was poor. I sat at a small table, watching the intermittent drizzle through the huge picture window. "I'm supposed to meet a member for lunch."

He eyed me with obvious distaste and shook his well-groomed head. "Guest or member, doesn't matter. On Monday this kitchen is closed until noon. That's the way it is."

Confronted head-on by the barman's blatant hostility, I settled back to wait quietly and sulk. No point in getting heaved out

before I even had my shot at the interview. Then, at two minutes before the hour, a very long, blue Lincoln rolled to a smooth stop directly outside. The barman stared in dismay.

"Oh Christ, no!" he breathed.

"Problem?" I asked, not really caring.

"It's Borrington!" he almost shouted. "The fucking maniac who owns the place! Ah, shit! I don't need this! What's he doing here today? He only comes out to meet his big-ass friends ..."

His ruddy face turned ashen. He gaped at me in naked fear, comprehension bursting painfully upon him. He sagged against the bar even as the heavy doors of the Lincoln clunked softly shut.

"You're waitingforMister Borrington?"

It was half croak, half question.

"The fucking maniac who owns this place," I speculated.

With a half-strangled sob, he staggered back into the kitchen. I suspected it was about to open early.

The main door flew open and Bill Borrington was in the room. First impressions are usually sound, and my reaction to him was roughly the same response I'd have to a tidal wave. He wasn't tall, but he gave a feeling of bigness. People called him Big Bill and it fit: heavy-set, thick steel-gray hair, drilling blue eyes and an aura of totally uncontrolled energy. His voice was booming something to the two men who trailed him in, and yet for all his classic "Type A" behavior, there was an indefinable something about Big Bill Borrington that I found likable. As I came to know him better, that something grew ever hazier.

He thrust out a thick, hairy hand. "Glad you could make it,

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Slim," he rumbled. "Meet my attorneys, Sid Weem and Lonnie Busher."

"Slim," nodded the fat one, peering at me with suspicion.

"Slim," echoed the other, his weasel eyes avoiding me.

And so it happened, probably because Borrington couldn't remember my name, that I was taken into the family as "Slim." I hated the name then, even as I do today, but since Bill had bestowed it, so it would be. He didn't bother to introduce himself, but, then again, there was really no need. The lines of power were drawn early, the terms noted and accepted.

I needed the money.

Following Bill's lead, we seated ourselves at a table, Borrington opposite me, with the two legal men flanking him. They managed to arrange their chairs to be on either side of him rather than across from each other. It gave the impression of three against one.

"How come you're not eating, Slim?" Bill inquired.

"I tried to order a turkey sandwich," I shrugged. "Guess there's some kind of problem with the kitchen being closed."

Borrington stared at me hard, then turned in his chair and bellowed in the direction of the kitchen.

"Godammit..." He snapped his fingers twice in the air.

"Harry," sang out his legal staff in unison.

"Godammit, Harry! What the hell's going on here, man?"

From behind the batwing doors came the sound of breaking china, and a muffled moan. Harry emerged jerkily from the kitchen, head shaking and hands spread in preparation of a weak defense.

He never got a chance.

"Godammit, Harry!" Borrington's voice held menace. "I don't like my people kept waiting while you putz around breaking dishes. Slim here wants a turkey sandwich, and I pay you goddam well to take care of my people. Right?"

The barman flinched visibly before the laser-like stare.

"Yessir, Mister Borrington," he managed.

"Was that a hot turkey or a cold turkey, Slim?" snapped Big Bill. He was getting involved.

Harry's eyes went pleadingly to mine, and I realized why. Cold turkey he could handle, but with the kitchen fires banked in a Monday morning phase, the order for a hot turkey sandwich would put Harry out on the street. I looked at the barman dispassionately, thrilling to the power I held over his precarious future. For a count of five I let the insolent bastard sweat.

"Cold," I said quietly, and a blast of relieved pressure escaped from Harry's dry mouth. He didn't deserve a break, but I gave him one anyway, because the bottom line was that Harry and I were both hired help, and Bill was management. Or maybe this new guy Slim was just one helluva decent human being.

Power doesn't always corrupt.

Borrington gave his big head a short nod and turned back the table, while from the kitchen came the soft humming of a man whose position is secure.

"OK, Slim," Bill began brusquely, "I'll spare you all the bullshit. We're going for instant putting greens. Everybody who plays golf will be able to have a professional green in the back yard.

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I've done the research and, goddammit, the market is there! Now, the real breakthrough here is this idea I've got for setting the green in place. I've got two acres of top quality bentstock already growing on my place in the Berkshires. And I've got the endorsement of one of the top goddamned pro golfers in the country. Cost me a bundle for that. Got a high-powered ad campaign waiting to roll and no competition in sight. How's it sound?"

My mind was predictably slow in getting the picture.

"How are you going to grow the green ... and then install it in somebody's yard? That's a big job."

Borrington lowered the big head, shaking it from side to side, chuckling quietly. Almost immediately his attorneys were also shaking their heads, laughing rather more loudly.

"Slim seems a little confused, boys," Borrington observed to his lawyers.

"Slim can't keep up with your mind, Bill," offered Lonnie, the fat one, squirming in his chair.

"Slim's just not very bright, Bill," smirked Sid, drawing a knuckle across his nose and inspecting it.

My limitations established, Big Bill continued. "Here's the breakthrough. You must know, being a grassman, that bentgrass isn't usually grown from seed. They cut up those little stems and the stems sprout."

"Stolons," I said, needing to say something intelligent.

Bill considered that for a moment, then nodded.

"Right. Stolons. Anyway, my plan is to blow these chopped-up stolons onto a layer of fiber, like they use for those instant

flower gardens. Clear off a little area with a rototiller, smooth it out, roll on the fiber, and water it. Bingo! In three weeks you've got a top-quality putting green. Now, what do you think, speaking as a professional grassman?"

As a professional grassman, I thought the idea was totally worthless. Without trying I could punch a dozen holes in it.

As an unemployed grassman, I saw considerable merit to the scheme.

And doubtless, some low-level, needy, unprincipled grassman might well term the idea brilliant.

"Brilliant!" I breathed, softly.

"Well, there it is then," Borrington grinned, broadly. "I've come up with the brainwork, and all it takes now is for somebody like you, with the technical know-how, to put it into motion. And I want to get moving on this, Slim. I'm talking August fifth as the day we go public. That's a little over six weeks for you to set it up. So, have we got a deal?"

I hesitated, then plunged ahead. "We need to talk about money, I guess."

Bill frowned slightly, cocked his head to one side, and spat out a figure that stunned me. It was two and a half times what I'd ever hauled in before. "Plus two percent of the profits," he continued. "I find a man goes at top efficiency when he's getting a piece of the cake."

I don't remember much after that. I know there was a cold turkey sandwich that looked like the centerfold from Gourmet Magazine, and a fawning barman who couldn't do enough. And Big

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Bill was on the phone advising someone in New York that he had just landed the "the Top Goddamned Grassman in the Northeast" and the operation was about to hit high gear.

"I'm giving you a chance to get in early, friend," he confided to someone in The City. "We'll be splashing ads coast to coast within a month. Don't get caught standing in line. This one's a winner."

It was heady stuff.

Through the welter and confusion of events, there was agreement that I should be at the farm on Thursday, when Bill would be arriving. I'd need a couple of days just to get accustomed to this high-level lifestyle I'd achieved.

I recall driving out through the gates of the country club, noting with quiet satisfaction that the sun was breaking through the overcast. Even the gods approved. And that phrase that Bill had used kept echoing in my mind ... with hypnotic cadence.

"Top Goddamned Grassman in the Northeast."

I had to confess, I liked the sound of it.

The real problem was, I started to believe it.