

HACK

He lifted his chipped coffee cup to his lips, and took a long sip. It was his first of the morning, and it was as bracing as his first on any other morning. The hot, dark fluid went down his throat, waking every cell in its descent.

His son walked into the room, groggily rubbing his eyes, and the man looked up. "It's about time, sleepy-head." The seven-year-old muttered something in reply and sat down at the table, determinedly awaiting his Corn Flakes.

The man got a bowl out of the cupboard, poured out the cereal, then the milk, and set it down in front of his boy, who set to work on it immediately. The father pretended to read the newspaper while he watched his son eat. The son ate his cereal while he pretended not to notice.

"Any big plans at school today?" the man finally asked.

"Tryouts for the soccer team, remember?" the son answered, with some exasperation.

The man grinned. "Another excuse for money from your poor papa. Well, good luck. Better get ready, then, and I'll drop you off on my way in."

He poured the remains of the coffee into the sink, shut the machine off, and adjusted his tie in his reflection in the window. He hoped to hear the results of another tryout today, and the anticipation of good news, no matter how private, always makes people want to look their best.

He strode into his Dupont Circle office with a burst of confidence. "Looking mighty chipper today, Jack," one of his colleagues commented. "Whooooo," another joked. "Someone's dressed up today!" He merely smiled his assent.

He swung into his office, throwing down his leather bag on the slightly tattered cloth couch. Sitting down at his desk, he brought up his e-mail. Who am I going

after today, he wondered. Or is it *whom*? No matter. Who or whom, he hoped it would be his last.

"Your mission, should you choose to accept it," he often joked in his head on reading a new assignment. Except there was no choice. This was his job. It wasn't bad, though, don't get him wrong. It was a living. But that was all.

His last piece of work had been a report targeting a new energy bill ready to hit the Senate. He had been tireless in his research on the vice president and his cronies, who were believed to be behind it. It was almost a work of art, he mused. If you considered attack-dog politics to be an art form, which his bosses and colleagues certainly did. He didn't have much of an opinion himself. He had fallen into the work, recommended by an old college friend from the Progressive Club after years of just getting by, going through research job after research job among the tiny think tanks and lobby groups in the city. This job was different—in pay no more than goals.

He'd guessed there would be something new awaiting him this morning, and he was right:

Jack,

Great work on that energy piece. I assume you saw the sputtering reaction over the weekend from The Washington Times, The Weekly Standard, National Review, et al? Always a sign of success. Of course they all accused the Party of being behind it, and wondered how you got access to certain documents... Anyway, as I said, great work.

But no reason to rest on our laurels. Word has it that some heavy lobbying has gone into some new proposed EPA regs. Dig into it and see what you can find.

—Frank

BY KELLY JANE TORRANCE



