

**Off the Record**

By  
Robert Granader

## Chapter 1

### Journal entry:

February 19, 1990

*My baby brother died before they even got him home from the hospital. They won't tell me his name. He was only four days old. Are you born with a name? I think if he were a dog at least he would have been a month old.*

### **1999**

His boss' advice from the previous day was stuck in his head as he stroked his burgeoning beard, whiskers sat scattered across his neck like a field of poppies harvested by a mental patient.

At 23 the glorious first wet dream of puberty was a distant memory, the hairs that stood on his face each morning were not thick enough to make a meaningful cover. But the lightness of his skin made each hair a blemish. It was 8:30 and he needed to be out finding a story, not inside watching his gristle grow.

"Just go break something."

That was all he said, his boss Jeremiah Rutenberg, a newspaperman from a previous era, whose bulging belly, small eyes and labored breathing were a result of 60 years of sub-nutritional meals, mid-day alcohol consumption and lungs stuffed with poorly

ventilated air and menthol cigarettes. His manner a mix of exhaustion and futility.

Their employer, a newspaper, was in financial extremis, and Rutenberg's comments were more plea than advice.

In one of his late day lectures Rutenberg mused, "Sometimes you dig deep for stories, looking for things to break. Sometimes you're running fast chasing a story and someone else breaks it. And then there are times you're sitting down and they break across your head. No one knows the difference in how they happen, all they know is they're reading it on the front page of a paper and it's got your name on it."

His name, his byline, was Peter Alex Weaver and he preferred the third style.

Weaver played with Rutenberg's advice. Sit around all day or run around all day, either way you'll get a story?

Their paper, *The Pittsfield Eccentric* was not the *Washington Post* and Weaver knew it. But it was a byline, his byline in a bold-face type on a broadsheet that's delivered to people's homes. And it looked good whether in small Midwest suburb or LA. A byline is a byline and seeing it gave him strength.

He didn't question his hometown paper, it was the paper he grew up reading, at least when it printed, on Mondays and Thursdays.

But now that he worked there he wondered why they called it "The Eccentric." At one time had it been about cache', exclusivity? Now it was about anyone who could buy an ad, or read an ad.

"Every writer has that moment where they re-read an old article, a paragraph, a story, and it's unfamiliar to them, like they're reading it for the first time," Weaver was walking now, outside the newsroom and toward what he hoped would be a story. He was explaining himself to Nick Rust, with red hair that unintentionally formed a Mohawk, tagging him as the rooster by the newsroom junkies. Rust was a journalism student from Northwestern, back home for the summer to get some bylines. "And you look it square in the eye and say, 'That ain't half bad.'"

Weaver never had an audience before and he was loving it.

February 21, 1990

*Today they put mommy in a box and then in the ground and put dirt on top. I didn't really see her, but when I saw the box my daddy said that was mommy. I don't know why she left? I think she missed my brother. Someone said she died from a broken heart. Did she want to be with him more than she wanted to be with me?*

"There are two kinds of writers out there, just like there were two kinds of doctors or two kinds of preachers, ya hear me," he said, spitting the words at Rooster, hoping to penetrate his brain.

"The local kind and the national kind. And I know which one I want to be. The local newspaperman, like the local preacher and doctor was famous in their own small fish bowl. The local preacher wanted to know his constituency and tend it from cradle to grave. They wanted to be there for the celebrations and the tears, the fun and the funerals. Similarly, the local doctor wanted to bring his patients into the world and send their parents off. He wanted to be with them from circumcision to catheter, got it?"

"The national preacher," he continued, "was different, he meant a little, to many, and didn't mean as much to anybody. They preached about everyday life, but didn't know what everyday life was for their parishioners. The national doctor worked at an institute or a University, made money by giving speeches and publishing research, but wouldn't remember where to put a tongue depressor."

"With journalists the local newspaperman knew where the bones were buried in a city that might be a microcosm of a state, a region or even the whole country, but I don't give a shit," Weaver paused. "I'm fucking Woodward AND Bernstein."

Satisfied he let it sit in the air, while Rooster took notes. But he couldn't help himself.

"The focus of the Eccentric is local, Rutenberg is local, but me, I'm national. I'm not micro anything. I don't care what you think, I care about getting exposure so I can get the next job. Look I realize the goal of my paper is angles about people and their pets, flooded houses, trees falling on back porches during wind storms, car accidents, an occasional death, a missing puppy and someone once found a toy key chain in the Almond Chicken at Kwungs carry-out."

They stopped walking. Weaver looked at Rooster, close enough to his face that Rust's first step back knocked his head into the shelf of the 7-11 and said, "But this isn't what I want, this is what I have today and this is what gets read, so I write it. I love sitting at the Pickle Barrel eating a Corned Beef and Cole Slaw and hearing somebody blab about something I wrote."

Rooster stopped taking notes and asked, "How do you know you'll get another job? I mean you don't have a journalism degree."

"Because I'll get out," he said.

February 28, 1991

*My dad said we'd get over my mom dying. I guess he was right, because he married someone named Becca this week. She seems nice. I only met her twice before. I don't think she likes me.*

February 20, 1994

*We buried my dad today. The newspaper reporter told me the policeman said he was crushed when the truck backed up on him. He was crossing the road. Not at the light. He was getting Becca an*

*anniversary card. That's what Becca told me. Then she told me I was an orphan. It doesn't sound nice.*

March 18, 1994

*Becca left last night. I heard her leaving. Well I heard the door close. I used to hear my dad come home. The sound of the keys rattling in the front door helped me fall asleep. At first it would wake me if I was. But then the rattle of that big key ring hitting each other and then the knob and the door. It calmed my stomach and I knew I was safe. I don't know from what? But it meant something. Now with him gone the sound still gets a response. But last night there were no keys, just the turning of the knob and the closing of the door. She didn't even lock it behind her. I didn't know where she was going, I thought maybe out to smoke. Today I'm living with Payter and his parents, just two houses away. I don't think I can stay too long because he tells me the court will try to find me and make me live in an orphanage. I don't want to go.*

It was two weeks past his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday when the court found him. They told him he was free to do what he wanted. In need of money, he began to write. He had no skills, he'd say, but one teacher remarked on his "strong antennae for emotion."

*"I think it means I'm a good listener", he wrote in his journal.*