

The

BLUE CIRCLES

Part One

The Eleven

“The subject of criminal rehabilitation was debated recently in City Hall. It’s an appropriate place for this kind of discussion because the city has always employed so many ex-cons and future cons.”

—Mike Royko

1. Danny Lonigan's Interview

A HERD OF CITY WORKER WANNABES dressed in jeans, flannel shirts, and work boots huddled on or around chairs and benches inside a Streets and Sanitation garage that on its best day could only be described as gray and dismal. These men awaited their opportunity to dazzle the interview panel with their knowledge of circuits, amps, and ohms in hopes of landing one of the eleven primo jobs posted for City of Chicago electricians. Ah yes, a city job—to die for. Outside, a heavy April rain beat down on the city, pelting the metallic garage roof, causing the wannabees to gaze up every now and again towards the heavens. Some found the sound soothing—Mozart keying a soft melody of sorts—while others saw it as an endless stomping of angry feet. A sliver of sunlight sliced through the few windows in the garage, supplying just enough light to compensate for the numerous burnt out bulbs overhead. Some of the hopeful read the newspaper or toyed with their phones to pass the time, while others gathered in small groups to talk about the Sox or the Cubs. It was early April, after all, the start of a new baseball season, and such chatter was certainly appropriate. And there was Danny Lonigan standing in the midst of the crew, alone and off to one side. With his long, angular frame, he looked very much at home among the other blue-collar workers. A wannabe who had just completed his interview pushed through a door near the far corner of the garage and strutted across the cement floor, followed by a secretary dressed in jeans that were far too tight.

“Daniel Lonigan,” the secretary barked. Her gravelly voice surprised Danny, reminding him of his fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Cooper, a woman who consumed cigarettes with such rapidity, her students thought smoking was her second job.

Danny stood up with a “Yo.”

The secretary smiled. “This way,” she announced and led Danny into the interview room.

Positioned at the back of this smallish room, Ted Flynn, one of Danny’s high school classmates, and two other men sat behind an

eight-foot-long, fold-up table that looked better suited for a poor man's poker game than for conducting interviews. Danny eyed the paneled walls as he entered, bare but for a White Sox poster displaying the 2005 season schedule and a few restaurant menus attached to the paneling with strips of electrical tape.

"Have a seat, please," Flynn said, his beady eyes resting like tarred BBs on his face. Danny dropped onto a metal chair across from the three men and watched as the secretary squeezed into a small grade school-style desk off to the side of the room. She scribbled something on a sheet of paper.

"Okay, Danny, you already know me," Flynn said. He tossed his right arm in the direction of the other men, "But this is Dan Cullinan and this is Mark Morgan."

Danny smiled. "Nice to meet ya." Cullinan and Morgan nodded their sizeable, balding melons at the same time and stared across the table with glazed eyes.

"Okay, let's get started," Flynn said and then cleared his throat. "On this table, as you can see, Dan, there's five different tools. I need ya to point out each individual tool and identify it for us."

Danny's face went blank. This can't be the interview, Danny thought. No way. No fuckin' way. He pushed his right hand through his shock of black hair. Danny was certainly no virgin to the interview process. He had been through plenty in his thirty-seven years, the roughest of which came with the multiple, stone-faced panels he appeared in front of before he landed the job as a prosecutor with the Cook County State's Attorney's office. But tough as those interviews were—tell us your thoughts on the death penalty, Dan; could you prosecute a father who kills the man who raped his eight-year-old daughter, Dan? how would you handle things, Dan, if a family member of yours got a drunk driving ticket and was assigned to your courtroom?—he never found them confusing.

"Is this the interview or, uh, does that come later?" Danny's eyes roamed the faces of the three men, who exchanged glances but remained mute.

Flynn finally eked out a laugh and said, "Okay, let's try this thing again, huh, Dan? Just point to each tool and identify it for

us.”

Danny quickly eyeballed the tools on the table and picked up the first one. “Okay. Well, this one here . . . this is a pliers.” Danny set the tool down and immediately snagged another. “This one’s a screwdriver.”

“What kinda screwdriver?” Flynn barked.

Danny glanced at Flynn’s beady eyes for a moment, before returning his focus to the screwdriver.

“This is a Phillips screwdriver. A Phillips.”

Flynn nodded and smiled as if he were saying, “That’s it, Danny Boy. That’s the stuff. Keep going, man. You are one smart son of a bitch, and today you are demonstrating that keen intelligence of yours to the three electrical gods in this room.”

Danny set the screwdriver down and tapped the next tool on the table.

“This tool here, this is a hacksaw. Ya know, the kinda saw used for cuttin’ pipe.” Danny fingered the next tool. “This one’s a screwdriver too. But it’s a flat-head screwdriver.”

Silence fell upon the room as Danny eyed the last tool, a blue and yellow tool about five inches long and an inch wide on all four sides. Tapered ever-so-slightly at the top, a small metal head jutted out about a quarter-inch from its base. Danny twisted the tool between his fingers, studying it, before setting it down.

“I don’t know what that tool is. No idea. Never saw it before. Never used it before.”

Flynn snatched the tool and held it just inches from his face. “This is a punch tool, Danny,” he said as he shook it. “It’s for communication work, low voltage stuff. Ya know, wiring for phones, computers, routers, data—all that sorta shit. You punch down the wires with this thing. Can ya picture that?”

“Gottit,” Danny said. “Just never did any work with that before. So I never used one.”

“That’s okay, Dan,” said Flynn with a smile. “Four outta five ain’t bad.”

From her little desk, the secretary released a not-so-little belch. The four men turned their heads in unison towards her as if she were an E. F. Hutton spokesperson preparing to offer promising

investment advice. The secretary ignored their eyes and continued to mark the paper on her desk. It was only then that Danny noticed she was playing tic-tac-toe against herself.

Flynn glanced at his cohorts. "Anything else?"

Cullinan and Morgan wagged their heads. Flynn climbed to his feet. Danny joined him and as he stood, he saw a small frog tinkering around on the wooden floor near the wall behind the three men. Danny did a quick double-take but his eyes had not deceived him. The frog was still there, and Danny wondered what the hell a frog was doing hanging out in this sad excuse for an interview room, let alone anywhere in Chicago. He wondered if perhaps Ted Flynn or one of the other two electrical gods had a frog terrarium in one of their offices and forgot to close the damn thing after feeding time. Danny considered saying something, but decided against it.

"All right, Dan," Flynn said, "thanks for comin' down for the interview today. We'll contact ya in about a week."

Danny's face was a confused knot. Flynn walked towards the door with Danny in tow, both men stopping just outside of the doorway. Flynn turned back.

"Ginette, go ahead and bring the next guy in."

"Sure," said the secretary, and then she wiggled herself free from her desk. Danny pawed at his chin as he waited for the secretary to walk past.

"Michael Broderick," the secretary barked into the garage, ready to start the process all over again.

"Am I okay?" Danny whispered. He looked out into the waiting area, his forehead matted with wrinkles. "I mean, there's a lotta guys out here today."

"You're good to go," Flynn said. "Don't worry about the numbers."

"Okay, but what about, ya know, what about the other shit—the shit that was in all the newspapers?"

Flynn sighed. "No one here cares that you got disbarred, Dan. Big fuckin' deal." A twisted smile claimed Flynn's face. He nodded towards Morgan and Cullinan. "Hell, if anything, some of the guys around here might just hit ya up to do a will or a closing

for ‘em. You’ll have side jobs right off the bat.”

Danny’s face was still a wall of wrinkles. Flynn set a hand on his shoulder. “Look, talk to your brother, okay? He’ll fill ya in. Everything’s gonna be fine.” The men went mute as the secretary led the next wannabe past them into the interview room.

2. Hat Takes in a Movie

FIMMY “THE HAT” SCARPELLI SAT ALONE in the back row of a movie theater. A city electrician for fifteen years, Hat had long known how the system works and how to work the system. Some city workers always give a good day’s work, some never give a good day’s work, and some—like Hat—fell somewhere between. If this is news to you, then an appropriate salutation must now be made: WELCOME TO CHICAGO. Hat’s baby blue Streets and San van slept in the parking lot beside the movie theater. From his seat, Hat watched the noon matinee unfold onscreen and laughed his ass off. He loved comedies. Sure he was fond of good shoot-’em-up, action flicks, too, but comedies—that’s where Hat’s heart truly sat. The eight-inch beef sandwich in his lap was half gone. Some of the juice had leaked through the butcher’s paper and foil onto Hat’s jeans and Sox hoodie, but that didn’t faze him. Not one bit. You can always wash a pair of pants and a sweatshirt, but you don’t always get a chance to munch on a Tony’s Beef sandwich. Between chuckles, Hat continued to devour that beef. Once every few weeks or so, Hat rewarded himself for his hard work on the other days by taking in a movie, or he might go bowling or golfing. Today was one of those days. And the Ford City Cinema at Seventy-Sixth and Cicero was the perfect place to take in a flick. Pushed off near the far southwestern city boundary, there were never many eyes around this theater, and Hat liked that. A lot. He didn’t have enough fingers and toes to count the number of flicks he’d seen at Ford City over the years: *Dances With Wolves*, when he was a kid; *Good Will Hunting*, on

his top five list, and just recently he saw *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*.

Hat's cell phone, set to vibrate, went off. He wagged his head in disgust and dug into his pocket. "Dipshit," he muttered to himself when he saw the call was from his foreman, Kip Larsen. He pushed his cell back into his pocket and eyed the big screen again. A rotund actor tripped and fell while walking down a sidewalk. Hat laughed and stuffed more beef into his mouth.

3. Late Again

THOUGH THE EARLY MORNING STORM had ceased, beads of rainwater still dotted the hood of Phipps's car. An investigator with the city's Inspector General's office, he sat parked in the back of the Chicago Department of Transportation parking lot at Thirty-Fourth and Lawndale on the city's near Southwest Side. Surveillance work came easy to Phipps. He did a fair amount back when he was a cop working in the Gang Crimes Unit at Homan Square, back when he was a young buck, before he grew tired of dodging the occasional bullet and jumped ship to become an IG investigator. A file folder and a camera with a zoom lens attachment sat on the passenger seat. Phipps checked the time on his wristwatch. 12:31 p.m. Having manned his post since 8:00 a.m., he was starting to feel the effects that came with such sedentary work. Phipps stretched both legs and then rubbed his ass back and forth across the vinyl seat cushion before turning a page of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. He'd already gone through the paper three times that morning and prepared to page through it yet again when a gray Lincoln Continental entered the lot. Phipps tossed the paper to the passenger side floor, grabbed his camera, and snapped off a multitude of photos as the Continental backed into a CDOT reserved space. Jello Pellegrini, a short, portly man nearing the age of sixty, exited the car clad in polyester pants and a red, V-neck sweater. A strong easterly wind snapped the few wisps of gray hair atop Jello's head to and fro, flogging his tanned dome. Jello stood

motionless for a moment, his hands pressed onto the hood of his car, smiling as he watched a garbage truck belch clouds of black smoke into the South Side air as it rumbled down Lawndale. Once the truck disappeared around a corner, Jello entered the CDOT building. Phipps set the camera on the passenger seat and made a call on his cell.

“Talk to me,” Ed Gilbreath said. An assistant inspector general, the forty-year-old Gilbreath sat on a comfortable chair in his office.

“Jello just rolled in,” Phipps said.

Gilbreath eyed the clock on his desk. “Well, he’s twenty minutes earlier than yesterday. Maybe we should pin a medal on him.”

Phipps scratched his nose as he spoke. “I’m sure he’s late ‘cuz he had a meetin’.”

“Oh, I’m sure he had a meeting too. Important guys like him, they have all sorts of meetings.” Gilbreath stood from his chair. “How many shots did you get?”

“I dunno. Fifteen or so, I guess. I wanted to get more but he seems to be waddlin’ a little faster these days.”

“Sounds good. Did he see you?”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

A thin smile slid onto Gilbreath’s face, the brightness of his teeth matching the color of his button-down shirt. “How’d you like to make Jello dance?”

“Dance?”

“Yeah. I want you to go around to his window, that big-ass picture window of his, and take a few more shots from there. Make sure he sees you, though.”

“Sure ya want me to do that?”

“Sure, I’m sure. I want him to know we’re watching him. I want him to have to close his blinds. Piece a shit like him doesn’t deserve to have a view.”

Phipps laughed. “Gottit.”

4. Ronny Shares the News

AT LUNCH BREAK AT A CONSTRUCTION SITE in Des Plaines, a suburb twenty-five miles northwest of downtown Chicago, five electricians from Boulder Electric munched on footlong subs, their asses parked on the cement floor, their backs pressed against newly installed drywall. All five wore forest green, Boulder-issued T-shirts, jeans and Red Wing work boots. Ronny Monroe, whose belly indicated that he had inhaled far too many chocolate shakes with extra whip cream in his day, turned the page of the *Sun-Times* and read a bit.

“You see this shit on this city worker?” said Ronny. He jabbed a stubby index finger at the bridge of his glasses to keep them in place.

“Ya talkin’ ‘bout Quarters McNicholas?” one of the others said.

“Yeah.” Ronny took a big bite from his sandwich and spoke while chewing. “This is quality stuff.” Ronny stuffed more of his sandwich into his mouth. “This fuckin’ guy goes to the shitter for two years for stealin’ a boatload of money from the Tollway and now he comes out—and he gets a city job.”

“You’d probably do the same shit if ya could, Ron,” one of the others said.

“What, get a city job? I don’t live in the city, douche bag.”

“No, stuff your pockets fulla quarters if you had the chance.”

“Nope,” Ronny said as he shook his head. “Take too many damn quarters to make it worth my while.”

“Well, if ya keep readin’, you’ll see that McNicholas made it worth his while,” one of the others said. “Definitely. Took over \$200,000 in a two-year span.” The electrician laughed. “All in quarters.”

“That’s alotta quarters,” added one of the other electricians.

Ronny set his sandwich on his expansive lap and pulled the newspaper in closer to read more. Again he jabbed a finger at his glasses to keep them in place.

5. Tom Lonigan

TOM LONIGAN'S PHONE INTERCOM beeped. "Tom, your brother's here to see you," his secretary said.

"Thanks, Marie. Send him on in."

The solid oak desk that Tom sat behind was a gift from his mother, Mary Lonigan, a gift delivered eleven years ago when Tom was first elected business manager of Local 247, the largest electricians' union in the country. A thick tree of a man in his mid-forties, to say Tom was a straight shooter was akin to saying Lake Michigan had a lot of water. Like Tom, his office décor was basic and straightforward. On the wall behind his desk hung a large framed black-and-white print of the Chicago stockyards. Off to the side, framed prints of a number of great Cubs players from the past lined the wall—guys like Ernie Banks, Billy Williams, Don Kessinger, Fergie Jenkins, Ron Santo, and Ryne Sandberg—all there in a display of love and admiration that had never been returned by their hapless organization. Next year—always next year. As Tom saw it, the real next year was always just around the corner. A pair of Everlast boxing gloves, tied together with gold laces, dangled from a nail in the wall, and a thick, dented, four-foot-long Irish shillelagh rested comfortably against the bookcase beside Tom's desk. It looked like it belonged.

Tom climbed to his feet as Danny entered his office. "Good to see ya," Tom said and then shook his brother's hand. "What's shakin'?"

"Had the interview this mornin'," Danny said. He dropped into one of the two armchairs in front of Tom's desk.

"Yeah, right. I knew it was happenin' today." Tom strummed his desktop with his right hand as he sat down. "Just didn't know, uh, know what time." He flashed his teeth. "So how'd it go?"

"Went fine." Danny's eyebrows shot up. "Wasn't much of an interview, though. No questions about any prior electrical work. None. They just had me . . . well, they had me identify some tools."

Tom feigned surprise. "Really?"

"Yep."

“So how’d ya do?”

“I hit on four outta five.”

“Four outta five ain’t bad.” Tom laughed. “Was Ted there?”

“Yeah. He was the one doin’ all the talkin’.”

“Okay. Good. Glad ya got that outta the way.”

Danny surveyed the room for a moment until he saw the shillelagh. “Never knew ya had Dad’s old shillelagh in here.”

“Yeah.” Tom turned and eyed the club. “I thought it’d look good in here.” He laughed. “Besides, I figure I just about own the damn thing. Most of those dents on it came from my noggin.”

Danny grinned and dropped his eyes to the floor.

“Anything else? How’s Kate and the kids?”

“Good, good. Everyone’s good.”

“All right, then.” Tom climbed to his feet.

“Hey, Tom, am I . . . am I, ya know, for sure good on gettin’ the job? I mean there were probably about thirty other guys there today. And then I got the other shit that—”

“Hey, Dan, stop. Stop. You’re good. Don’t sweat it.” Tom pushed a hand through the gray-white hair atop his head. “Look, there’s eleven guys goin’ in, and the union has four of those slots. And you’re one of those four. So you’re in for sure. It’s cemented in stone. It’s done.”

Danny leaned forward in his chair. “Good. Good. ‘Cuz Ted said things would start up in about a week or ten days.”

“That’s right. The new guys’ll start up on the next pay period, on April 18th.”

“Okay. Good, ‘cuz . . . well, I’m headin’ back to work after I grab a quick bite, but if I’m for sure gettin’ the job, I’m gonna make this my last day, then.” Danny rubbed his forehead as he stood. “Probably take off a little early today. And then, ya know, take some days off before I start the new job. But I didn’t wanna quit if the new job wasn’t a for sure thing.”

“Gottit. But no, you’re good to go. You’re set. And take some time off. Makes perfect sense. Take it now, ‘cuz you won’t get any vacation time for about half a year once ya start with the city.” Tom cracked the knuckle on his right index finger. “Just do me a favor, though, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. What?”

“Give Stack a call to say thanks for keepin’ ya workin’. He had ya there a long while. That’s all.”

“Will do. Glad to do it.”

“Sounds good.” Tom moved towards his door. Danny followed. “I’ll talk to ya later,” Tom said and then faced his brother.

“See ya, Tom. Thanks again for everything.” Danny started to leave but stopped in the doorway. He turned, a shit-eating grin on his lips, and crouched into a boxing stance with his left hand in the lead, his right cocked and ready to fire. He slid to the left and then the right, dodging imaginary slow-motion punches. Tom laughed and dropped into a matching stance. And then both men, in perfect synchronization, bobbed and weaved and fired off three slow-motion punches at each other as Danny sang, “Hit ‘im with the left, hit ‘im with the right, punch ‘im in the gut, and watch ‘im fly outta sight.”

6. The Three Stooges

FLYNN, CULLINAN, AND MORGAN were still holding court in the interview room. Empty Styrofoam coffee cups stood before all of them as they prepared to question Davis Winslow, the last interviewee of the day. The years had been kind to Winslow. Though thirty-five years of age, his smooth, black skin showed nary a trace of those years. You could drop him on any campus in the country, and he’d blend in with the rest of the students. There were no tools on the table for this interview. Not a one. The secretary still sat in her tiny chair in the corner doodling on scraps of paper.

“Okay. Mr. Winslow, my name’s Ted Flynn.” Flynn pointed to the other men. “These other guys are Dan Cullinan and Mark Morgan.”

“Gentlemen,” Winslow said with a smile.

Cullinan and Morgan nodded in silence. Flynn reviewed Winslow's application, circled a paragraph from the note sheet attached to the application with a red pen and slid it along the table. Cullinan took a moment to review the note and then passed the application to Morgan, who pushed it back towards Cullinan without a glance.

"Your application says you worked for Forrester Electric up until about six months ago," Flynn said.

"That's right," Winslow said.

"How long were ya there?"

"Jess about one year. A year and two months, maybe."

"Well, why'd ya get let go?"

"It was a long call," Winslow smiled. "The gift that just kept giving finally stopped giving." The three men were triplets for a moment, all of their faces bunched together in confusion. "The job ended. I went back to the Union Hall after that. Did a buncha short calls then."

Flynn leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Is that right?"

"That's right."

"Now I gotta tell ya. A buddy of mine is a foreman over at Forrester." Flynn kicked his feet up on the table. "I jingled him up the other day and asked about you. His story's a bit different than yours." Morgan and Cullinan both leaned forward.

"Oh yeah? What he say?"

"Well, according to my guy, you got shit-canned for stealin' some power tools from the job site."

Winslow chuckled. "Well, maybe he got the story wrong."

"Is that right?"

"That's right." Winslow adjusted himself in his chair. He'd had enough of these three white men. He especially had enough of Ted Flynn with his sheet-white, pasty face that looked like it should be plastered across an I HATE BLACK PEOPLE T-shirt or hiding inside a KKK hood.

"By the way," said Winslow, "what'd y'all circle on my application there?"

Flynn played dumb. "What?"

"Y'all circled somethin'. What's the big secret?"

"No big secret. I, uh, I circled the part where it says you were

convicted for carryin' a gun."

Winslow tilted his head to the side and massaged his left temple. White people, he thought. They don't understand any damn thing outside of their own lily-white world. He released a half smile. "C'mon now. You gone get your shorts all in a bunch over a little ol' misdemeanor like that. Gotsta have a pistol on ya for protection. Everybody know that."

Flynn dropped his feet to the floor. "And what if ya worked here, what would ya do with that pistol then?"

"Oh, I'd leave it at home, Boss. For sure, I would."

"Leave it at home, huh?"

"That's what I jess said."

"Yeah, that's what you 'jess' said, all right."

Winslow gave Flynn the best fuck-you stare he could muster. And Flynn's eyes, those dots for pupils—Winslow could have sworn he saw ink oozing from them.

Flynn turned away, looked to Morgan and then Cullinan. "Anything else, fellas?" Morgan and Cullinan nodded their heads. "Okay, Mr. Winslow, that's it. You're all wrapped up here."

"You gotsta be kiddin' me." Winslow's eyes were still fixed on Flynn. "No questions on the kinds a work I done or the systems I put in. No questions about—"

"Nope. No other questions. None." Flynn's snatched his empty coffee cup and held it before him with both hands as if he were a priest hoisting the giant Communion wafer on the altar. "You're the last man standin' today. We're wrappin' up."

"Saved the best for last, right?" Winslow said with a smirk. "That's how it go. Ya always save the best for last."

"Sure thing," Flynn said. He scratched at the base of his nose.

Winslow rose from his seat. He did not offer a handshake, and none were offered to him. Flynn watched as Winslow marched towards the door.

"All right, Ginette, you can take off. Just hit the door on the way out."

"No problemo," the secretary said, and then she eked her way out of her chair yet again. Once she closed the interview door, Flynn started in.

“Did ya see that piece a shit’s name is on the List of Eleven?”

“Yeah, I saw it,” Morgan said.

Flynn paced the room, his boots beating a sorry tune into the wooden floor. “Well, I’m tellin’ ya right now, that fuckin’ shithead ain’t comin’ in here. He ain’t gonna be one of the eleven. We’re not gonna give a job to a gun-totin’ thief. And a nigger at that.” Flynn spat on the floor and rubbed the saliva in with the sole of his boot. “Now I’ll gladly give him a cell to live in, but I ain’t givin’ him a job.”

“I’m gonna give Tom a call,” Morgan said.

“For what?” barked Flynn. “Winslow ain’t comin’ from the union.”

“I know but he’s—”

“Easy, gents. Easy,” Cullinan said, as if he were talking to a couple of aging horses. He reviewed Winslow’s application again. “This Winslow, he’s, uh . . . he’s one of Alderman Moffit’s guys.”

Flynn ran both hands through his hair. “I don’t give two shits if he’s one of Moffit’s guys. He’s a—”

“Gun-totin’ thief,” Cullinan said. “Yeah, I know. Heard ya the first time.” He locked his hands together and brought them to his lips. “Look, here’s what I’m sayin’. You raise a stink on this guy and then they start pointin’ fingers and lookin’ at everyone’s rap sheet. And if that happens, Danny Lonigan sticks out like he’s got his face on an old-time milk carton.”

“Yeah, I know,” Flynn said, “but what I’m sayin’—”

“Ted, c’mon,” Cullinan said. “Lonigan’s a convicted felon. A disgraced lawyer. He’s lucky he stayed outta the shitter. But if we try to muddy up the waters and bounce Winslow over a misdemeanor rap, it’s gonna throw the spotlight on Danny Lonigan. And quite frankly, if we do all that, neither one of ‘em gets in, and then Tom Lonigan is one pissed-off mother. And we don’t want him pissed.”

“You’re right,” Flynn said. “You’re right.”

Morgan released a big breath. “That man scares me.” Flynn and Cullinan nodded in agreement.

“So I say we leave the list alone,” Cullinan continued. “The four from the union’ll be good workers, and the other seven won’t know

their asses from a hole in the wall, but that's okay. The eleven come in quietly, without any fanfare, and no one gives a flyin' shit."

"Fine. That's fine," Flynn said. He moved towards the door. "Just don't put that fuckin' guy in my department. One of you guys gets 'im."

"I'll take him. I'll keep an eye on him." Cullinan smiled. "Hell, I might even have him take me out to the range to gimme some shootin' lessons."

Morgan snorted out a laugh. Flynn wagged his head in disgust and walked out of the interview room with Morgan a few steps behind him. As Cullinan prepared to leave, he spotted the frog on the floor. When he knelt down, Cullinan could see that the frog was flattened and dead. He bunched his face into a frown.

"Aw, Richie D, what the hell happened to ya?" He scooped the dead frog and slid him into his shirt pocket before exiting the interview room.

7. Ziggy Returns From his Interview

CHERYL RAMIREZ LAY STRETCHED OUT on her den couch watching the History Channel on the TV. She wore a pair of her husband's sweats, the string bow-tied at the waist, and an oversized sweater. As she cast her eyes downward and rubbed her stomach, she tried to picture what her child would look like when he or she entered the world in a few months. And then she set both hands on her belly. She never thought she'd get this big. Not in a kazillion years.

Ziggy Ramirez returned from his Streets and San interview and parked his Ford Ranger in front of his Northwest Side bungalow. He entered his house and dropped his keys and sunglasses on the front hall table.

"Hey, how's my baby doin'?" Ziggy called out.

"Which one?" Cheryl hollered. Ziggy laughed and walked to

the den where he dropped onto the edge of the couch and kissed his wife.

“How you feelin’, baby?”

“Feeling fine. Just bored. That’s all.”

“Bored?” Ziggy feigned shock. “C’mon. Sitting here all day long on this lovely couch. Watching TV, reading magazines. How could you find that boring?”

Cheryl laughed. Ziggy tugged on one of the strings dangling from the sweats Cheryl wore.

“Doubt this thing’ll ever fit me again.”

Cheryl shook her head and then reached for the remote. She snapped off the TV. Ziggy set his right hand gently on Cheryl’s stomach.

“And how about Little Zignacio. How’s he feeling? Any kicks today?”

“You don’t know if it’s a boy. You don’t—”

“Oh yes, I do. I know.”

“Okay, fine,” Cheryl adjusted her body on the couch. She placed her hand atop Ziggy’s. “So how’d the interview go?”

Ziggy offered a winning smile. “It went good. Real good.”

“Really?”

“Well, yeah. It went as well as it could go, I guess.” Ziggy softly massaged his wife’s belly. Cheryl’s hand moved along with his. “Weird, though. They didn’t ask me any questions about my prior jobs or my prior training. They just asked me to identify different tools. Five tools. That was it. And then, well . . . there was a damn frog on the floor of the interview room.”

“A frog?”

“Yeah. A frog. A fricken little frog.” Ziggy twisted his face into a ball and stood up. “I sort of stepped on it by accident when I was leaving.” Cheryl stared at Ziggy with concerned silence. “No one else noticed the frog.” He scratched his head. “But hey, I can pick out a pliers and a screwdriver with the best of ‘em, so I think I’m good on the job.”

Cheryl released a nervous laugh. “I just won’t feel good about all of this until we know for sure.”

“I know, baby. But don’t worry. Trust me. It’ll be good. The

union put the word in for me.” Ziggy again sat beside his wife. “And you trust those guys?”

“Yeah, I do.” Ziggy smiled. “Plus, if they help out a burrito-eater like me, it makes the union guys look good too.”

“I sure hope you’re right.”

8. A Good Book

RAINBOW BEACH ON CHICAGO’S SOUTH SIDE was the sight of a good deal of friction in the mid-1960s as black and white teens laid claim to its Seventy-Ninth Street sand. With time, as the surrounding neighborhoods changed from white to black, the whites reluctantly vacated their ties to this Lake Michigan jewel. From time to time, an occasional person of paste would still stroll across the sand or take a dip in this cozy cove. Today was one of those days.

Hat sat on a bench at Rainbow Beach, his arms stretched out to the side, resting atop the wooden backrest. Other than a man walking his dog along the shore, Hat was alone. His Streets and San van rested in the parking lot beside the beach house. The early morning rains gave way to the sun, and Hat soaked up that sun. A strong wind pushed through the area jerking the seagulls and terns across the sky as if they were kites on a string. Hat swung his right foot over his left knee, his face one of utter contentment. A cricket bounced up out of the sand onto Hat’s jeans. He watched as it slowly ambled its way along the denim, stopping atop his knee. There it rubbed its elbows together and eyeballed Hat for a moment, before turning and taking in what the lake had to offer. Hat unleashed a crooked smile and reached for his book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and opened it. With an hour to kill before he made his way back to the garage, the bookmarker took Hat to a point two-thirds through the book. The cricket stayed put and enjoyed its view as Hat turned a page, ready to get back to Tom Joad and Route 66.