



A Lot to Learn

Chapter Twenty

Stewart signed the contract, mailed it to his contact at Fler, and drafted a note to John Whitney confirming his acceptance of the proposal. Stewart then further contacted Whitney by phone, and left a message for his secretary for her boss to call and write him with regard to the details of their business relationship.

According to the Fler contract, the initial cartoons would be required at Fler headquarters by January 4th, so he would have approximately five months to produce them, and to have a month's worth of panels for publication. At this point in the venture, no multiple strips or panels were required, but Stewart knew that he would need to prepare a few on spec, as well to further develop *The Cargyls* series for possible publication.

On the Tuesday following his movie date with Carol, Stewart requested an early morning meeting with Doug, but who was aware that Stewart's cartoons had been accepted for publication in *The New Yorker*, but who had no knowledge of any contractual arrangement between Stewart and Fler. Since becoming a full-time employee, Stewart also had had no conversations with Richard Fenimore, the general manager of the chewing gum company. He therefore made it a priority to contact Fenimore's secretary to speak first with the man who had taken a chance on him as the young Co-Op student at Temple Tech.

Stewart had asked to speak with Seiler during the lunch break and let

him know that he'd need less than a half hour at the most for a meeting.

"Is it anything we can discuss now?" Seiler asked.

"I'd really rather meet with you before work, if you have the time and don't mind," answered Stewart.

"Is Friday at 8:15 okay?"

"Sounds good," said Stewart as he returned to his work station.

Fenimore's secretary got back to Stewart with a personal note that she delivered to Stewart in his office. A note of this kind often indicated a dismissal, so it aroused the curiosity of the staff, except for Carol, who knew of Stewart's plan.

The note delivered to Stewart was short:

Hi, Stewart!

Can we meet after work today? I'll be in my office until 6:00. So stop in when you're ready to go home.

Rich

At the end of the day, Stewart left the office at 5:00 along with the others in his department, but circled back through the main entrance to Fenimore's office. Fenimore's secretary had left for the day, but the door to her boss's office was ajar. Strains of operatic music leaked through the crack in the door as Stewart knocked. The volume of the music drowned out his rap, so he banged louder and poked his head through the opening. Fenimore lowered the volume and called him in.

"Hello, Mr. Fenimore, I'm sorry if I interrupted you."

"Not a problem, Stewart. Do you, by any chance, enjoy opera?"

"I haven't really had many opportunities to hear much of it," said Stewart. "I have an uncle who likes it, and when I was young I would sometimes on the TV at my great aunts' house when he'd visit them."

“You do know Pavarotti?”

“Yes. I’ve heard of him, and I’ve even heard him sing.”

“He’s the voice of the century. In my opinion there’s no one who can compete with him... Well anyway, it’s nice to see you. It’s been a while. Do you have an issue that I might help you with?”

Stewart took a deep breath before answering. “First of all, I want to thank you for the support you’ve given me, and also for showing my work to the people at *Mad*. Just knowing they’d seen my work was a great boost for me.”

“I’m sorry nothing came of it,” said Fenimore. “But I did see that one of your cartoons made it into *The New Yorker*. Nice job!”

“Actually, Mr. Fenimore, I got two cartoons published in *The New Yorker*, and that’s why I’m here.”

Stewart then shared the story of Whitney and his response to the *Kafka* cartoons, and the proposal that had been made to Stewart.

A smile formed on Fenimore’s face as Stewart completed the tale of the offer, and being taken under contract by the rival syndicate.

“Goddamn it, Stewart!” exploded Fenimore, as he stood up from his desk and pumped his fist in the air. “Sometimes things work out for a reason. Congratulations!”

Stewart thanked the man before continuing his story. “So I’m letting Doug know of my resignation on Friday, since I’ve been made aware that according to my contract that I can’t work for both companies at the same time. I’ve also realized that I’ll need time to complete at least a month’s worth of cartoons prior to the first of the year. I’ll be letting Doug know that I’ll remain on board until he finds a replacement. I’ll also be letting him know that I will be available if he needs me before I begin my relationship in January with Fleeer, to work on a freelance basis, if time permits.”

“I thank you for that, Stewart, but I’m just happy that you’re getting a chance to spread your wings early. How old are you, anyway?”

“I turn 21 later this month.”

“My God, Stewart... you’re still a child.

“Have you contacted your psych teacher and counselor at Temple about your good fortune?”

“No. I haven’t. Do you think that they’d be interested?”

“Of course they’d be. They knew you weren’t suited for engineering, and they’d be as proud of you as I am by the success you’re making of yourself so early... and within a field to which you’re genuinely suited.”

“I feel fortunate, but I wouldn’t say that I’m successful, yet. I haven’t even started...”

“Nonsense!” said Fenimore. “I can’t wait for Drucker and Gaines to hear about this, and what *Mad* missed by not taking you on.”

“I’m meeting with Doug Friday morning, but I wanted to let you know first, just how much I appreciate the job you gave me and the people I work with.”

“Don’t be a stranger, Stewart. I know we’ll see and hear about you as your career grows. Just be thankful for the education you got at Temple, and the people there who believed in you and cared enough to send you to our door.”

“So when are you leaving?” asked Seiler shortly after Stewart walked through the door to the office.

“How did you know? Did Mr. Fenimore...?”

“Come on, Stewart! Nobody had to tell us you were going to leave us soon. It was just a matter of time.”

“But I didn’t even know...”

“There was never a doubt in my mind after you showed me the Tunnell card you created, and the idea for a series. You’re a quick study... creative and intelligent. You’re just quite a bit ahead of us as far as vision is concerned.

“So where the hel, are you going?”

Stewart told an abbreviated story that included *The New Yorker*, Whitney and Fler, and Doug’s reaction was much the same as Fenimore’s, except it was personalized.

“I never had any idea of what I wanted to do when I got out of high school,” said Seiler. “I was a decent athlete, but never had any special talents. When the plant was built in ‘48, they didn’t have any idea of marketing. I helped Richard’s father, Ed, develop “El Bubble” and then I learned whatever I needed to know about type and graphics from the printer Ed had hired.

“Rodney?” Stewart gestured to the door to the print room in the back.

“Yep, the guy who’s still producing a lot of the material we’re sending out from the plant.”

“I had no idea Rodney had been here that long, He never told me much about his life; he just answered my questions.”

“He never would, but the Fenimores have been good to him. They even helped him buy his first home. One of those small brick villas right behind us.

“Unfortunately, he chose to buy there in 1949, and due to protests in the neighborhood in the mid-50s, he felt it safer to leave, even though he’d been there longer than some of the people who were protesting.”

“Because he was black?” asked Stewart.

“Why else?” answered Seiler.

“A white professor who lived in those same development had problems too, after they found out his maid wasn’t his maid, but his wife.”

“I lived in one of those houses,” said Stewart. “I was only three when we moved in and four when we moved out. My father couldn’t stay because the rent was too high.”

“Well, Rodney moved to a much larger house in Lansdowne, and he made his mark in the community there. He’s on the borough council, and was almost elected mayor in 1960. His kids all went off to good colleges...

Swarthmore, Bates, and Williamson, and he's worth quite a bit now... more than I am."

"It might be a cliché," Seiler continued, "but 'It's not where you start, it's where you finish.'"

Stewart thought for a moment about Rodney and how little thought he'd given to the man.

"May I ask you something, Doug? You don't have to answer, if it's uncomfortable for you, or inappropriate."

"Go ahead, Stewart."

"Am I making more a week than Carol?"

"Yes...somewhat more. But you did get a promotion."

"But she's been here longer."

"Yes, but she was married when we took her on," answered Seiler.

"But her husband was since killed in Vietnam," countered Stewart.

"This isn't my business, but would it be possible for you to hire the next person you hire to take over her job and then promote her into my position?"

Seiler thought about that and then said, "But that person would need more training in order to take over her job than is required for yours."

Realizing the irony of the statement, Stewart then asked, "Would that person get paid as much as I do?"

"That's up to Fenimore, Stewart. That's not my decision."

"How about this, Doug. I'll stay on at Carol's pay so she can get a new person prepped for the job, and then you promote Carol and give her my job at my current salary."

"Sounds complicated, but, okay. I don't think Fenimore would object."

"I don't either, Doug. Thanks."

"Then I'll get started on my work. Thanks for listening."

"All my best to you, Stewart. You deserve all of the success you can get."

"Many people deserve success, Doug, but we know that doesn't always happen."

“By the way, before I get started, is it okay if I go into the back to let Rodney know about my new job?”

“Please do. He doesn’t get a lot of visitors back in the shop.”

And I haven’t been one of them, Stewart thought, except when I’ve needed him to teach me the mechanics of the trade. I’ve never even wondered where Rodney eats his lunch, or anything about the man’s life or family. And now I’m off to launch a career that requires me to understand the ironies of cockroaches, while I still haven’t the foggiest notion of the behavior of humans...most of all myself.
