

Redbone



Chapter 13

Le Petite Corporal

The first time in your life that you tell a lie, it's a big deal. The closet door flies open, and there you are with your pants down, playing doctor with Wendy Silverthorne—the girl from across the street. Your mind races for an explanation as your mother asks, “What on earth are you doing, young man?” After a few explosive heartbeats, the only thing you can think of is “suspender malfunction,” which, in my case, predated Janet Jackson’s Super Bowl excuse by twenty years.

Successful prevarication is an acquired skill not taught in kindergarten. That’s something you learn from the bad boys in middle school. When you’re five years old, there’s no way your mouth can save your ass. And, of course, I didn’t actually use the word, “malfunction.” No five-year-old knows what that means. I said something like, “My spenders fell down,” or maybe, “The snap got loose.” All I can remember for sure is the look on my mother’s face and that I never got to see Wendy drop her pants.

That first lie is the hardest and often marks a significant milestone in your social development. From that point on, the path you follow is determined in great measure by how things work out over the next couple of weeks. If you are lucky enough to get away with it, you’ve opened the door to a lifetime of duplicity, and, in all likelihood, you’re destined to worm your way up the corporate ladder.

On the other hand, it’s far more likely that you got busted, which could explain why you either live in a monastery or you’re known around the water cooler as Norman Peale.

But there is a third possibility. Let’s say that you did get caught telling your first lie, but you’re also a fast learner, smart enough to figure out how you screwed up. You weren’t expecting a thorough cross-examination by your teacher or your parents. After some serious hand wringing, and a little coaching from the nine-year-old punk who lives three doors down, you discover that your only mistake was your lack of preparation. With 20-20 hindsight, your subsequent lies work out better for you. In due time, you enter politics, write fiction or become a private investigator.

Admittedly, some lies remain awkward for me, but not the ones I told Gaylord Cummings. I was already persuaded that he was a jackass.

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Angele showed up at 12:30 with my blazer, some Greek take out and a dreamy-eyed look on her face. It seemed rather obvious that our amorous escapade the night before had put some glide into her stride. As I nibbled on a stuffed grape leaf, I recalled the words she shrieked just before midnight, while climaxing for the third or fourth time. *“Right there. Yes. YES!”*

Apparently, I hit the target.

“You’re looking breezy today, Angele.”

“I didn’t get out of bed until ten, Jesse. I slept like a bottle of decanted chardonnay.”

I furrowed my brow just slightly but didn’t ask for an explanation; one was surely on the way.

“I’m feeling bright, zesty and clean.”

“Really? Anything else?”

“Oh, for sure! Smooth, well-balanced and creamy, with an excellent finish.”

“I can attest to that. In fact, just moments ago, I was reminiscing about how you finished last night.”

“Did I mention tantalizing?”

“Not in so many words, Peaches, but that goes without saying.”

“Now that we’ve completed the wine review, tell me, why do you need your blazer?”

“I have a date with Gaylord Cummings.”

“Do you want me to tag along?”

“Not this time. I’m a corporate executive from REI this afternoon. Hannah told me this morning that Gaylord is a smoker. I hope to exert enough economic tension during our chat to make him light up.”

“You mean, a cigarette?”

“Exactly. I need a sample of his DNA. I’ll try to corral one of his butts.”

“If that doesn’t work, you can ask Hannah to be tested. She carries half of his DNA.”

“That’s an excellent fallback plan, but I’d rather get it straight from the horse’s mouth. Besides, I want to size him up and see how he responds under pressure.

“Angele, if it weren’t for these spirited capers I go on every now and then, I’d probably quit the business. The day to day humdrum of PI work is a lot more boring than most people think. And, as you know, Maine has the lowest rate of violent crime in the country. When a case like this comes along, I get to use all the clubs in my bag.”

“Jesse, maybe you should move to Louisiana. There’s all kinds of mayhem down there. And plenty of music and gumbo to go with it. You could relocate the band and play gigs on Bourbon Street.”

“That’s a thought, but I’d miss shoveling the snow in winter, and we’d have to develop an entirely new repertoire of songs.”

“You could become the latest new thing on the bayou. Down East Zydeco. All you’d need is a washboard, an accordion and a few harmonicas.”

“You might be on to something, Angele. But let’s wait till hurricane season is over.”

“Good call.”

When our imaginations finally ran dry, and we were all out of metaphors, I had just enough time to pick up a rental car, my new business cards and a pack of Marlboro Lights, and then get to the Cummings’ estate in Cape Elizabeth by 2:45. I had planned to arrive a little late anyway. I wanted the old man to fidget long enough for nicotine withdrawal to unsettle his nervous system. If there were some charred filters in his ashtray when I arrived, I might get in and out of his place without lighting up. A little misdirection or sleight of hand was all it would take for me to pilfer one of his butts.

The security gate opened after I announced my alias. I wound along the narrow, wooded lane until I reached a circular driveway in front of the Cummings’ home. An attractive, young,

blond woman, with a well-paid look on her face, met me at the door and escorted me ceremoniously through the bowels of the manor. The place looked a lot like the Big Lebowski mansion, and the woman reminded me of Bunny. She did not, however, offer to perform carnal acts upon my person for large sums of cash.

Gaylord's office was at the back of his home and had a marvelous view of the ocean, which was churning away as usual at the bottom of a steep and rocky cliff. The room also reeked of tobacco, but the ashtray was clean. Bunny probably had tidied his desk just before I arrived.

The first thing I noticed about Gaylord Cummings was how tall he was...or, rather, how short he was. He looked to be no more than five foot two, five-three at the most.

I had seen several pictures of Gaylord on his website, but after meeting him in person, it was clear why all those photographs were neatly cropped. He was alone in every image, and none of them provided any hint of his diminutive stature. Unlike Randy Newman, I have no principled reason to disparage short people, per se, but as I approached Gaylord from across the room, Randy's quirky song began to play between my ears.

*Short people got no reason
Short people got no reason
Short people got no reason
To live*

*They got little hands
Little eyes
They walk around
Tellin' great big lies*

His office must have been twenty-five or thirty feet across, and by the time I reached him on the far side of the room, my feet were synchronized with the song's quirky tempo. Gaylord was standing behind his desk. When I offered a hand to shake, he glowered at me and spoke sharply, "Have a seat, Mr. Wheeler." It looked as if we'd be cutting to the chase a lot quicker than I had hoped, and it also occurred to me that Randy Newman's take on short people might have some merit.

"So, you're with REI."

Without responding verbally, I reached into the breast pocket of my blazer and removed a newly minted business card with a silhouetted tree and mountain logo in the upper left corner—one of Billy's finest renditions, I might add.

Gaylord took it from my hand without removing his beady little eyes from my own. He flicked it over to the side of his desk and said, "Let's get right to it. I'm a busy man."

"I notice you have an ashtray on your desk, Mr. Cummings. Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Go right ahead," he replied in a monotone.

"Would you care for one?" I asked graciously, shaking a second cigarette loose from the pack single handedly. I had removed half the cigarettes from the pack on my way out of the market, so it slipped forward rather easily and stood up like a sentinel ready for duty.

"I have my own," he said dismissively, but he chose, for the moment at least, to let me smoke alone. This presented two challenges. First, I'd have to get through my cigarette without choking, and then I'd have to gab long enough for a nicotine urge to have its way with him.

"All right, *Teddy*," he said, pronouncing my nickname distinctly through his teeth in a derogatory manner, "I'll ask you again. What exactly do you mean by an *agreement*?"

"As I mentioned on the phone, Mr. Cummings, REI is looking to expand into Maine. We like to discuss various possibilities with our competition before purchasing or leasing any

property. Generally speaking, there are three ways to proceed. First, we can avoid competing in certain specific lines of equipment. We eliminate some of our regular products, and you eliminate some of yours. For example: We noticed that you offer a number of beautiful handmade wooden canoes. We could agree to not sell anything similar, if you would agree to eliminate your aluminum canoes. That sort of thing. We'd have to compare inventories item by item. This is the most complicated and least effective arrangement of the three."

Gaylord didn't say a word. He continued to stare through my face. It was clear that he was waiting for me to continue, so I did.

"The second is the simplest, and preferred, plan. We buy you out and set up our store in your present location. We'd start with your two Portland outlets and eventually do the same in Brunswick and probably Bangor. For the time being, we are not interested in either Belfast or Boothbay Harbor."

At that point, I decided to wait and see what he'd have to say. We were almost eyeball to eyeball, but his adjustable chair must have been raised to the top because he appeared to be gazing down upon me from a higher elevation. When our awkward pause reached its critical phase, he opened his desk drawer and pulled out his own pack of Marlboro Lights. My poker face did not betray my glee, although my heart did skip a beat. Casually, I flipped open my lighter as a peace offering. He brushed my hand aside and struck a match with his thumbnail. He then lit the business end of his Marlboro, took a long drag and inhaled enough smoke to fill his lungs, stomach and duodenum. When it came time for him to exhale, his lips formed a circle, and, from the back of his mouth, he blew three perfect smoke rings across the desk toward my face.

When the air cleared, he said, "So what is your third option?"

I half expected him to slip his free hand behind his lapel at his midsection and pose like Napoleon Bonaparte. And, while that didn't happen, Gaylord Cummings most definitely out-smuggled *Le Petit Caporal*.

I glared back and continued, "Whenever possible, we try to avoid option number three. That's where we move in, set up an outlet down the street from yours and let the chips fall where they may. We sell at big discounts in the beginning, and for as long as necessary, to drive you out of business and take over the neighborhood."

Neither of us spoke another word until we had both finished our cigarettes. On my left, a grandfather clock ticked away the time, which seemed like an eternity, but in the end, probably was no more than forty-five seconds. During that period of silence, two things wedged their way forcefully through my conscious mind.

First and foremost, was the nausea that accompanied each drag on my cigarette. I had to inhale, otherwise I would have looked like a fool. As it was, I felt like a twelve-year-old lighting up for the first time, behind the barn.

And second, I could not avoid the photographs on the wall staring down on me from behind his back. There were several framed pictures of Gaylord, posing with high-profile political figures of the past. He could be seen at a podium, arm in arm with Winston James (longtime mayor of Portland), dining with Stephen Durant (governor of Maine through most of the 90's), and riding on a chairlift, with skis dangling below, while sitting next to Matthew Hammett (the late US Senator); that last photo, clearly a selfie. But directly behind him was the largest and most prominent testament to his own self-importance. The picture frame was gilded with gold leaf, and the photograph hung high enough that, from my chair, all the major figures were visible above Gaylord's living, breathing and smoking head. The shot was taken aboard a yacht, presumably on the high seas outside of Kennebunkport. With one hand firmly grasping the mainsail, Gaylord Cummings stood, not quite shoulder to shoulder, but rather along with and

slightly dwarfed by a former governor of Florida and two former presidents of the world's most powerful country.

Eventually, and to my great relief, he finished his Marlboro and stubbed it out in the ashtray resting between us on the desk. I managed to inhale one final drag from my own and put it out next to his. As he eyed me carefully, I imagined that he had spotted something unusual in the way I had smoked. Fortunately, I didn't cough, but I was definitely light-headed. At that point, all I wanted to do was to make a graceful exit with his filter in my pocket. I sat patiently, waiting to make my move.

Then he said, "It's time for you to go."

"This is not personal, Mr. Cummings. I hope that I haven't offended you in any way."

"You *are* offensive, Mr. Wheeler, but *I* am not offended. You have to drive around the country in your Alamo rent-a-car, pitching bullshit to well-established, homegrown businessmen like myself."

He paused just a moment and then added, "Let me show you something."

He got up from his swivel chair, walked over to the wall of glass on the east side of the room and looked out upon the ocean. The moment his back was turned, I scooped his cigarette butt from the ashtray and slipped it into my coat pocket. I then got up from my chair and strolled over beside him.

Without turning to look at me, he continued, "You will be gone in less than a minute...off to some sterile hotel room with its complimentary breakfast of stale donuts and bad coffee. But that, Mr. Wheeler," he said, extending his hand toward the sea, "will be here caressing and inspiring me for the rest of my natural life. Now get your sorry little ass back into your *fucking* Ford Fusion and leave my home while you're still able to walk."

It sounded a lot like "goodbye," so I retraced my steps through his home and out the front door, started the *fucking* rental car and drove away with my prize.

