

AUDIO (VOICE-OVER): "A mystery solved is a fine remedy for death. It suggests there is sense, or justice, in the messy unraveling of mortality. It presumes to clean up ragged edges, explain all events and sell it back: case closed. Such a nice feeling—while it lasts."

THURSDAY

10:00:00 a.m. Sign-on

Bad days are the raw material of life. Good days are earned. Apparently, I was undeserving as well as unemployed.

"Sorry, Rich. I'm solo."

"Not anymore. Not if you want this job," Richard Gatt shot back at me. Picture your typical midwestern fireplug of a guy—shiny head, white button-down oxford and a blunt, booming voice.

I could feel my interview smile warping into a grimace. Must have made for a fabulous ensemble, with my current suicide-blonde-in-leather-pants look. My fingertips worried the seam across my knee. My lucky pants.

News flash: the pants weren't working either.

"Come on, Richard. Why tie up resources? I'm a one-woman show. It's part of my charm." I attempted the smile that once got me out of a cardboard box and into a bullet-proof truck in Somalia. Works pretty well on bartenders, too.

Gatt ducked his chin into his collar. I caught a tinge of blush on his unprotected forehead. He pulled a handful of sugar packets out of his desk drawer. "We can help each other out here, O'Hara. But if you want this job, you gotta train my kid."

"Kid?" The sudden déjà vu resulted in serious stomach acid.

News of Gatt's job opening was whispered in my ear by a friend at the tippy-top of the network-TV food chain who owed me a favor. WWST was a small sister station camped in western suburban Chicago Land. Not exactly top ten, but Gatt was the only program director in the state looking to hire a producer for a position that offered both salary and benefits. People in jobs that sweet sat tight until ratings off-ed them or they actually died.

It wasn't my dream job. But I'd stopped feeling picky two months ago. Too long between gigs. Every freelancer knows the feeling that creeps over you as the jobs spread thinner, the fear that what you've got inside—all your dreams and abilities—no longer match what's happening outside. If you aren't working, you're a fraud.

My stomach issued another warning shot.

Gatt pretended not to hear it. He ripped the tops off three sugar packets and dumped them all into his cup at once. "We want stories with a local slant. Warm-fuzzy midwest shit. Local, but with national appeal."

"Sure," I said. Local but national. Oxymorons are Television Marketing 101.

"How much do you know about this area, O'Hara? They told me you're local."

"I grew up in the city. But my parents brought us out this way occasionally. My dad used to race dirt bikes when I was a kid. We'd always end up picnicking at that war museum out here where you can climb on tanks while you eat your tuna sandwich... You know the place I'm talking about?"

“Cantigny.” Gatt nodded.

It was one of many grand summer homes dotting the farm county, built by Chicago’s landed gentry of a century ago. Cantigny’s owner survived France and the First World War. His house was a monument created to display the souvenir tanks-*cum*-lawn ornaments he’d brought home.

My grandfather survived that same war. He claimed all he’d been allowed to bring back was a bad case of foot rot.

“Nice spot.”

We did the mutual *yeah*.

My eyes kept straying to the window behind him. The view from Gatt’s office was the visual definition of horizontal. Farmland at the horizon blended into a field of grassy weeds that ended at the black-topped parking lot.

War. Tanks. Foot rot and flatland. Unfortunately, local story associations weren’t looking very warm and fuzzy.

Gatt bent his mouth into something like a smile. “Born and raised in the city myself, O’Hara, and I’ll tell ya, this ain’t Chicago. But it has its moments, you know? Small town. People know people. Sometimes, reminds me of the neighborhood.” He raised an eyebrow and opened his palm, the regional gesture for *your turn*.

“Grew up in Longwood.” The far south side neighborhood I hadn’t seen in years.

“Then you know what I’m talking about. Neighbors help each other out.”

Translation: the kid Gatt wanted me to train was a favor. Payback.

The best way to think of a Chicago neighborhood is like a clan designation. Clans are all about relationships and alliances. Favors are the currency most often traded. *I might know somebody; I’ll make a call* is Chicagoan for money in the bank. Who you can call is the last best measure of the good life, whether you need a driveway plowed, a ticket fixed or a special order birthday cake from a really good German bakery.

Out on the East Coast, it’s all about the pedigree. On the West Coast, it’s only about the paystub. Here on the Third Coast, it’s the clan pact.

From the look on Gatt’s face, the only way I was getting this job was if I agreed to train his kid.

Settling deeper into the chair, the faux leather protested with the kind of rude noises my pants would never dream of making. “First things first, Richard. Let’s hear what you’ve got.”

Exactly what the man was hoping I’d say. “Network’s launching a new magazine show, half-hour format. It’s a late-season fill but they’ll go sixteen weeks if it gets any kind of numbers. Most of it’ll come to us in the can. They’re leaving a hole for each market to drop in a local story.”

“How long?”

“We get four to six minutes,” Gatt said.

I nodded. Six minutes was a hell of a lot of network time. “What’s the time slot?”

“Pre-prime or first half hour. They want to see if we can pick up viewers drifting from the news. You’ll produce one story a week. Schmooze the network crap as necessary.” Gatt spun the scenario without fuss. “Deliver the story to engineering before we pick up the satellite feed and that’s it. You don’t even have to cut me promos. Those assholes in promotion need to stay busy, or they start bitching about what kind of doughnuts they’re getting free every morning.”

Free? Any money bet, most of those people didn’t clear 30K a year for the privilege of working here at the crap-end of the business.

“What’s the angle?” I tried to sound like it didn’t matter. Like I hadn’t spent the last ten years building a reputation. “What kind of stories they looking for?”

“Crime, sex, local movie stars. Whatever you get that captures a ‘midwest sensibility.’” He put little air quotes around the words. “New York will help set you up.”

“The ‘midwest sensibility’ on crime, sex and movie stars?”

He shrugged, *what can you do?*

Sound effect: *Ker-flush*. That would be my reputation going down the throne in the name of health benefits and geographic stability.

I smiled.

There aren’t a handful of women in this world who make a living freelancing in international crisis scenes. It took me years to earn the respect that would buy me access. Years before I got the chance to take the picture people remember, be the one that shouts, *look at this! Do something!*

And one phone call is all it took to send it down the tubes.

“But—” Gatt raised a finger in the air. “I don’t care how many New York big-shits you get to blow smoke up my ass, O’Hara. You want this job? Train my new guy. He can camera for you. Drive the truck. Whatever.”

“How ‘new’ is this guy?”

Gatt made a show of adding another pair of sugar packets to his coffee mug. “First job. Got his card last month.”

“Just got his union card?” I almost laughed. “A college newbie who doesn’t know an f-stop from—No way. That’s not going to work.”

The man flopped backward in his chair. He was so short, it made him harder to see behind the cluttered landscape of his desk—three years of flip-page calendars, a dozen remotes for the monitors behind me, piles of color-coded files, a tower of old black tape boxes and a phone that could double as a NASA console.

“Let’s be honest, O’Hara.” He spread his hands. A classic how-bad-do-you-need-it move. “I’m willing to offer you a nice predictable gig, but I don’t want the station left high and dry if, or should I say *when*, you decide to blow.”

He had a point. “I’d have to meet this kid first.”

“Sure you do.” Gatt hit a button on his phone. Nothing happened. He jabbed at a few more, grumbled a few expletives in the back of his throat, then stood up, which didn’t really make a lot of difference to my overall view.

“Barbara! What the hell is going on here?” he shouted in the direction of the door. “Barb’s my assistant. My absolute right hand. Make her happy, she’ll take care of you. Make her unhappy, everybody suffers. Barbara! Damn it, I’ll be right back.” He walked as far as his office door, flung it wide and shouted, “Barbara!” at the top of his lungs.

I could see from where I was sitting, there was no Barbara at the nearby desk. Gatt disappeared through a side door to the WWST reception area, a time capsule of early ’80s—retro with a touch of grunge. Dark paneling and mirror tiles on the walls, olive-colored carpet with a plastic runner, and orange burlap upholstery on the lobby chairs. A stunning first impression.

The nasal drone of the receptionist drifted this way.

“I don’t care if her entire family has Ebola. You promised me coverage from nine ’til five, Monday through Friday. Either you get someone in here to answer my phones or I tell Mr. Gatt we’re doing an ex-*pose-ay* on a certain local weasel who runs a temp agency.”

It was a voice you didn’t forget. On the way in, the woman had looked me up and down

and assumed I was a courier. Didn't care for the biker boots or the leather pants. The boots might be a little butch, but the pants were my mother's finest Gold Coast Goddess knock-off. What's not to like?

"Barbara," Gatt whined. "What the hell are you doing at reception?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? And I will tell you right now, Richard, I go on break at ten. I don't care if this whole switchboard crashes."

"Where's Katie?" he asked.

"Schmed's got her unpacking boxes."

Gatt grumbled something I couldn't hear. "Leave it. Go find the boy. Please," he added, with some effort.

"You don't pay me enough for this, Richard," she threatened. "I am serious."

He came back into the office rubbing the top of his shiny head. "Okay. Ainsley's on the way."

"Ainsley? Are you shittin' me?"

"No, Ms. O'Hara, I am not 'shitting' you." He plopped back into his chair and answered deadpan. "It happens to be an old family name. Ainsley Prescott is my sister's kid, so I'd appreciate you keeping it clean around him."

"Your sister's kid?" My mouth stayed open. Possibly from the foot I'd inserted there.

Maybe it's the same everywhere, but the majority of men in the television business seemed to have only recently evolved from the single-cell organism. Behind the scenes, we've got the engineer geeks who think it high-end comedy to splice beaver shots into color bar pre-roll and behind the closed doors upstairs, we've got skanky VP executives waving their standing invitation to lunch. Talk about something that'll put a girl off her feed.

You learn to cope or you get out. Harassment is CDB—cost of doing business—if you're a female in Television Land. A little garbage mouth helps. I learned early how to do the boy patter, what would help me pass and what wouldn't. Most of the women I know in this business cuss like soldiers, skim the sports pages enough to blend and would personally scoop out their eyeballs with plastic spoons before they shed tears in public.

What was Gatt expecting me to teach this kid?

A quick knock was followed by a bright blond head around the door. "Hello?"

"Come on in, buddy." Gatt took a swallow of his candied coffee and waved.

Welcome, Ainsley Prescott—poster child for the Aryan nation, all flaxen haired and sweet smelling. He flashed me a mouthful of sparkling teeth and popped out his hand to shake.

I turned back to Uncle Gatt. "I don't work with stand-ups."

The kid's perfect smile down-shifted from eager to encouraging. The offer of his hand was not retracted.

"Ainsley's not talent," Gatt assured me. "He wants to camera."

"I want to *produce*," he corrected and pumped up the output on his kegel-watt grin. "But I'm willing to start with camera."

"Sure you are." I forced myself to smile back and take his hand.

Nearly six-foot in my boots, I'm tall as the average American man and could probably bench press him too, if he'd stick around long enough. I usually get a pretty good feel for a guy by eye-balling him in the clinch and watching for flinch.

Ainsley didn't flinch. He tipped his head nearer my ear and in a private voice added, "Cool pants."

Gatt beamed, the picture of a satisfied matchmaker. "Look, Ms. O'Hara, you want this

job, Ainsley gives the tour, shows you to the truck and you two go get to work. Our first feed is next Wednesday. So there's—"

"—less than a week to produce the story." Typical.

"That's right." Gatt started making himself busy sorting his stack of phone messages. I was being dismissed. He had me and knew it. "You don't want the job, say so now. I got a conference call in five minutes."

I looked the kid over again. He wore razor-pleat khakis and a white button-down shirt so squeaky clean-cut it hurt my teeth. Most camera jocks lumbered around in size double XL athletic wear. Ainsley barely topped six feet, had the beanpole build of a young man who hadn't fully grown into his feet and the smooth blue-eyed complexion of the perennial ingénue. How was he going to handle fifty pounds of camera equipment at a jog?

Ainsley's head flipped back and forth between Gatt and me, looking for one of us to say something. His smile faded on a sigh of resignation. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, elbows locked, exactly the way my eight-year-old niece, Jenny, does when she's worried.

What the hell. I'd made a career of specializing in disasters.

"All right. I'm in." I accepted Gatt's deal with a grim nod.

Gatt looked relieved. "Great. You're hired. I'll get Barbara going on the paperwork. You have a look around. Make some calls. Like I said, we need something in the can by next Wednesday."

Looking at Ainsley, all I could think was I'd have to change my damn hair color. Side by side, we'd look like the freaking Bobbsey twins.

"Awesome," Ainsley said. The smile was back.

"Go show her around, buddy." Gatt winked. The boy's charm wasn't lost on the uncle. "O'Hara, I'll set you up with the GM for a meet-and-greet later, and get your offer finalized today."

"Anybody pitched you a story idea for this week?" I asked.

"Nope. Network's got some ideas. You'll want to call them first. Reminds me—I logged a weird call this morning, right before you came in. Out west somewhere, Amish land. People love those Amish-in-trouble stories. Why don't you go check it out?"

"Amish? There are Amish people out here?" I tried not to sound panicky. "I thought they only lived in remote rural areas."

Gatt's cock-eyed glare begged the question, *what's your point?* "Get going, you two. I got work to do."

11:41:12 a.m.

Hanging around the office waiting for network to call back and pitch me a “crime, sex or movie star” item did not sound like a good plan to me. Seeing Ainsley the Wonder Boy in action might be a good idea before a real shoot landed on us.

It didn’t take long to pin down the necessary details. Ainsley was happy to lead the way. “Our Amish community isn’t really that nearby,” he assured me. “It’s actually way out to the edge of the county, at least a half-hour drive west and south.”

“A half hour?” I repeated, trying to adjust to the thought that I now lived closer to an Amish settlement than the city. It took an hour to get into downtown from out here, when the traffic didn’t suck. “That far?”

“Few miles past the Walmart. But there’s a Mennonite church right over in Lombard if you’re looking for something closer. You want to see the remote truck first? It’s pretty sweet.” Ainsley pointed me up the hall. “I knew this one Amish guy who got special permission to go to my high school. He was there a year. Had to ride a bus for an hour and thought it was the greatest. Hard to believe, huh?”

We turned a corner and walked past the cubical shanty town that housed sales, accounting and the promotions departments. Ainsley offered a *good morning!* to every person we passed, along with a quick introduction.

Maneuvering our way through the building, the kid pointed out the station’s highlights. “Through here’s the kitchen...doughnuts...pop machines...oh, and the bulletin board where we keep the take-out menus.”

“College boys are walking stomachs.”

“No way,” he told me. “I’m no college boy. I’m done with school.”

“Really? Where’d you go?” There were a couple of good schools nearby. A credential I could trust would be nice.

“Pretty much everywhere.” His confession melted out, sticky and sweet. “I, um, had a little trouble in school.”

“You flunk?”

“Not exactly.” The words stretched twice their usual length, long enough to include a whole range of possible mischief. “Got kicked out. Twice.”

“Twice.” I nodded. “That takes some effort.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t seem too upset about it. “Nothing for you to worry about though. I finished all the core courses in broadcasting and camera. I’m fully trained.”

“Sure you are.”

Freelancing a new job, I usually feel excited, ready to dig in, ready to work. It was different to be filled with thoughts of doom.

Ainsley, on the other hand, could not believe his luck. Taking out the remote truck on our first day. He scored points for loading the cameras with the proper awe. The remote “truck” was technically a van, with a decent bank of machines inside—playback, switcher, monitors. Some of the places I’ve worked would have considered it a state-of-the-art editing bay. He was right, it was sweet.

“Looks good. Let’s get going, College.” I slammed the rear doors after a quick inspection and climbed in beside him on the passenger side. “Stop in the front lot on the way out, would you? I need to grab my cameras.”

I always carry both still and video camera equipment to a shoot. I started as a photographer which is unusual these days. I never set out to be on-screen talent. I prefer to let the pictures tell the story. Sometimes on location, I can get straight photos where I can't get tape. With a splice of quick-cut, pan-tilt, I'll incorporate the photos into the final story. It's a distinctive look, one of my signatures.

"If the Amish thing doesn't heat up, you can show me around town. But I do need to be back at the station by say, two-fifty this afternoon. You know where we're going, right?"

"Sure. I've lived in Dupage County my whole life," Ainsley admitted without a trace of embarrassment. "Wow. Is that your motorcycle?"

"Yeah."

"How old is that thing?"

"Older than me," I answered flatly. "Older than television."

"No way," he whispered reverently.

"Watch it, kid." Peg had been my grandfather's, before she was my father's, before she was mine. I pulled my camera gear out of the saddle bags and gave her a pat goodbye.

Peg's always my first choice of transportation. In the city, she was fairly practical—what with my frequent travel schedule and her fabulous parking profile. But I haven't had many chances to take her out on the road lately. Practical transport has been redefined for me.

"Where'd you get it?"

"My bike is not an *it*. My bike is a *she*." I tossed my gear into the truck. "Her name is Peg."

"Oh. Sorry." Boy didn't stay down long. "How'd you and Peg meet?"

"Grandpa O'Hara worked at the Chicago Schwinn factory back in the old days."

"The bike company?"

"They made motorcycles back in the '20s and '30s. Fastest motorcycles in the world—including the Excelsior Henderson Super X." I waved a hand of introduction. "Back in those days, boys named O'Hara needed to travel fast."

"Why?"

I frowned. "Gangs. Chicago in the '20s? The mob was Irish."

"Oh, right." That got a nod and a furtive glance, as he compared me to his mental picture of an Irish mobster's granddaughter. "Mind if I drive?"

Was he razzing me? "Knock yourself out, College Boy."

"Cool," he replied.

No sooner were seatbelts fastened than he gunned the van across three lanes of divided traffic into the left lane.

My hand welded itself to the oh-shit-bar above my door. When the truck settled into a straight away, I used my free hand to secure the camera on my lap. "Network usually hires me a driver. Someone who can translate and handle a weapon."

"A weapon?" he scoffed.

"Mostly small arms, though one guy preferred the Uzi. Whenever I traveled with him, I didn't have to worry about a bodyguard."

I made a show of giving him the once-over and nodded a tentative approval. Honestly? Most of my employers were too cheap to hire a driver. And if I needed a translator, I had to pay him out of my per diem. But the boy and I were bonding; he didn't need to know that.

"You're a light weight but I'll bet you could keep somebody occupied long enough for me to get into the truck and call for back up, right?" I gave him a friendly shot to the arm. "You

study martial arts or anything?”

His eyes jumped sideways. He rubbed his shoulder where I hit him. “Uh, no.”

“We’ll have to stay out of trouble then, won’t we?” I flashed my best buddy smile.

Given something else to think about, his driving mellowed considerably. I pried my hand from the grab bar and dug around behind the seat for my camera bag.

The light was beautiful. I wanted to shoot a few prints to play with later. I always carry a couple of bodies in my camera bag, both digital and print. Old school.

Approaching the entrance to the highway, we stopped at an intersection that presented exactly the same kind of reality shift you get on a Hollywood backlot. Behind us lay a long procession of strip malls—to the right sat a Walmart, to the left a Home Depot. Beyond the shadow of the highway overpass lay fields of feathery yellow grass on one side of the road and a farmhouse with an honest-to-god rusty red barn on the other. I felt as if I was looking through a time machine at the view of before and after.

“What are they growing over there?”

“Where?” Ainsley made a quick check out the window. “What?”

“The yellow stuff over there. In the field.”

“Are you kidding?” He checked my face. “That’s hay.”

“Oh.” I tried to explain. “I never saw it growing. All together like that. It’s pretty.”

I made myself busy testing my equipment in the silence that followed. There was half a roll left in the camera. It didn’t take long to check my lenses, so I dug out my notebook to brainstorm a few story ideas. No storms came to me; all was dry. Very dry.

“Done much location work?” I asked after a few more miles of silence.

“A little cable stuff. Uncle Rich, uh, you know—Gatt—he helped me get some freelance work last summer, so I could get my union card. The station hired me about three months ago.” He did some very elaborate mirror checking, his face turned away.

Not a shock to me. The entertainment industry is just as incestuous as it’s ever been—theater, vaudeville, movies, television—it ran in families like eye color and a tendency toward mental illness. Shakespeare had probably had two uncles and a chorus of cousins on the payroll. As long as the boy did his job, it didn’t matter to me.

We traveled straight west on the interstate, and then a relatively short hop south through stubbled farmland. Once we hit the exit, Ainsley got behind a state police cruiser with its lights flashing and ended up following him the rest of the way. It surprised me PD was still en route.

A crowd of assorted rescue vehicles appeared beyond a rise. Everybody’s lights were flashing like a cheap Christmas display. Police and a few bureaucrats were milling around the edge of a grassy field. Fire department was there, as well. They’d driven a ladder truck as close as the pavement could get them to the base of a huge spreading oak. Farther away, the fenced field, the white barn and simple farmhouse made a perfect country backdrop.

“Pull over, College.” I rolled down my window, switched to my longest range telephoto lens and shot the rest of my print film as the van rolled to a stop. I prefer to shoot both print and digital when I have both cameras handy. I trained on print. Digital cameras try to do the thinking for me. It’s annoying. “You ever worked with police on a shoot before?”

“No.”

With my finger on the camera’s trigger, I rattled off some basics. “When we get out of the truck, go ahead and pull a camera box, but stay behind me. Wear your credentials on your shirt. Keep your ears open and your mouth shut. Don’t try to set up the camera until I say it’s a go—got it?”

“Got it.” He didn’t sound happy about it. “Can you see any better with that lens?”

The tree must have blocked his view from the driver’s seat. It’s hard to miss a body with a crowd of public servants standing around gaping. The FD couldn’t have been more than twenty or thirty minutes ahead of us to the scene. I caught the shot of the dead man being lowered into the arms of a firefighter.

“Hanging.” My voice had gone flat. The working voice. The voice I use to face the world. My lousy luck was running true. I hate suicides.

“What?” Ainsley asked, that long, slow midwest version of *huh?*

“The dead guy was swinging from that big oak tree. Look at all these guys. Half the public servants of the county must be out here. Fire, EMT, sheriff—” I dropped the camera to peek over at my college boy. “Did you just say ‘Eeeuuu’?”

His pretty face was crunched up, one part *uh oh*, and two parts *yuck*.

There’s something else I forget. In these Great United States, plenty of people get all the way to full grown without ever seeing death any closer than roadkill from the car window.

“Maybe you better wait in the truck.”

“No way.” He worked to smooth out his expression. “I’m fine.”

I looked into those clear blue eyes and felt myself caught between two minds. Part of me wanted to toughen him up—get him out there and force him to meet reality. Part of me didn’t want to be the one that popped his corpse-cherry. I’d seen enough of the world to know innocence had a value that was always underrated.

“It’s your choice. No problem if you want to wait.” I made my voice as neutral as possible while rewinding and reloading. The film can got stuffed deep in my front pocket, out of sight. Old habit—I always hide exposed film. I switched to digital to give me electronic options—easy translation to the web and satellite feed.

“I want to go with you.” Ainsley nodded as he spoke, convincing himself.

He didn’t use the high-volt smile this time and I liked him better for it.

“Come on then. Follow me.”

We hopped a fence and strolled across the field. Broken rows of corn bristled all around us. The unfortunate oak was perched on the far side of a small rise. As my sight line improved, the corn stretched toward the horizon, creating the illusion of perspective. Except for the dead guy, it was a pretty view.

With the fire truck unable to get close enough to the tree, the guys had carried a regular extension ladder over to lean against the limb where the rope was tied. The fireman I’d photographed remained at ground zero hunched over the body. The fireman at the top of the ladder was busy slicing through the last of the rope with a small hacksaw. From his higher vantage point, he was the first to see Ainsley and me approach the edge of the action. The man on the ladder shouted to the men below. The guys beside the body stood up and stared.

I’m not sure why, but I suddenly felt protective of my camera and my college boy. I shifted the strap to hide the lens in the crook of my arm.

“Stick close, kid. These guys aren’t too happy to see us.”

