

Graphic Times

By Joe Costanzo

Chapter 1

I was stoked, and not from the cannabis fog that was swirling through the air-conditioned cocoon of our rented Rover. This was no second-hand high, though I cracked my window and pleaded again with Jettie to toss the weed. This was the Arizona desert, I reminded her, where people came to purge their lungs of poisons. Exhausting hers, she dipped the glowing tip in her coffee and flicked it out her window. A blast of hot, dry air shot through the cabin, scouring it of the narcotic fumes and artificial chill.

“Hey, there’s Big Bird again,” she said, grabbing her camera and taking aim.

The monstrous black creature, or its twin, first glided into view as we were crossing the Agua Fria and then soared out of sight over the top of a steep bluff. Now, it had cut us off at the pass and was spiraling lazily above a copse of skeletal trees and shrubs at a bone-dry wash.

“Whoa, Rip! That’s one big ugly buzzard,” Jettie declared.

“California condor.” I recognized it from having covered its homecoming at the Vermillion Cliffs. “It’s an endangered species: *Gymnogyps californianus*.”

“I know that,” Jettie said.

She knew a lot more than I gave her credit for, though who could blame me? She did most of her work for the *Graphic Times*, one of those stupefying tabloids that caters to an alarmingly overpopulated cultural fringe, including my landlady, for whom it represented a weekly supplement to the Bible; my dentist, whose extraction of a nearly two-inch long incisor had been featured on its “Medical Marvels” page; my sister, who stashed it beneath her sofa whenever she saw me coming; and Jettie herself, who delighted in reminding me that it had twice the circulation of my precious *Times*. For all I knew, hers had covered the condor story as well, in its own deranged way, tagging it with “EPA’S FOWL SECRET: SUPER-SCAVENGER BRED FOR TOXIC CARCASSES!” or the like. Given my utter and unconcealed disdain for that rag, it was a wonder Jettie ever rode shotgun for me, but she often did.

We were stringers, marionettes dangling from the fiber-optic lines of our *Times*. It’s all Jettie ever did, as far as I knew. But whenever I got the call, I had to drop whatever I was doing, which was usually teaching journalism in a stifling college classroom or immersing myself in it inside my suffocating apartment, and dash off to practice it on assignments deemed too menial or too speculative for the by-liners on staff. Not that I minded it. I loved it. I took whatever I could get, and this time I got a killer: Peter DiSanti. I was racing toward him like a cub reporter on his way to a four-alarm fire. Never mind the class work I had left behind. To hell with classes! “He who can, does...”

I wasn't always a stringer. It seems like only a lifetime ago that I was one of those selfsame by-liners who would have had better things to do than chase down a dubious story in the Arizona desert. Except even then, I'd take any assignment I was given and I'd like it. They were all to my liking. I enjoyed my work and I was good at it. Journalism suited me. I had the perfect temperament for the job, preferring the observation of life to participation in it, and I was content to efface myself in my writing. There was nothing of me in it with the exception of my tightly-organized perspective on the facts and only the essential facts. A Virgo, to be sure, but this was hard-boiled, old-school, *AP Stylebook* journalism, pure and simple.

There was no place in my stories for the thunderhead that was spreading like a purplish bruise in the sky above the wreckage of a commuter airplane, or for the sad confusion in the eyes of a mentally retarded child being used as a prop at the governor's press conference, or for the yellow stain on the trousers of an old homeless man who was protesting police harassment in the park. No place for me. I left the embellishments to my younger, hyperventilating colleagues and to the feature writers, the aspiring novelists who colored reality with their own impressions. Like the best photojournalists, I preferred to work in black and white, to report what I saw, not how I saw it.

What got me up in the mornings were the thrill of the hunt for news and the adrenaline rush of the deadline. Get it right, get it first, get up and go. I was at the top of my game. And then came my fall.

It all began with a few words uttered out of pride and politeness in a courthouse stairwell during a break in the sensational murder trial of Peter DiSanti. No ordinary defendant, Peter DiSanti was a young Italian Renaissance scholar who stood accused of

plunging a medieval misericorde into his father's heart. No ordinary victim, Frank "Bets" DiSanti was an amicable mob kingpin who had made his name and fortune in gambling, of course, but who also dabbled in drug trafficking, money laundering, and investment scams, including a spectacular Ponzi scheme that collapsed on thousands of investors from coast to coast.

The younger DiSanti, whose recondite monographs on the likes of Niccolo Machiavelli and Girolamo Savonarola had earned him prestigious fellowships and other academic honors too obscure to mention, was in due course dubbed "The Prince." What had driven this unassuming scholar to patricide remained, going into the trial, a mystery. That he was guilty was never in doubt. Prosecutors had spun at best a fragile web of circumstantial evidence, but they had an eyewitness, a neighbor who could place Peter DiSanti at the scene of the crime with the murder weapon in his hand on the morning in question. A morbidly obese man, the neighbor had paused to catch his breath after shooing an orange tabby out of his flower beds when he saw Peter slip the bloody dagger through the grate of a storm sewer at the curb in front of his father's house. One of Bets' slowest runners could have come up with a better way to dispose of the evidence, but very smart men sometimes do very dumb things. I speak from personal experience.

During a recess just ahead of the neighbor's damning testimony, I pushed my way through the crowd of giddy reporters and spectators outside the courtroom and headed for the back stairwell, where I often organized my notes and thoughts for an approaching deadline. As I was settling down on the top step of the landing, the door behind me opened slightly, and the vaguely familiar face of an elderly woman appeared in the gap.

“Oh my!” she said, her soft, mirthful features overtaken by surprise. “This isn’t the ladies’ room, is it?” I offered directions, and she thanked me, but then hesitated in the doorway. “Why, you’re one of the reporters,” she surmised from my *Professional Reporter’s Notebook*. I confirmed it and identified myself. “My goodness, Anthony Logan of the *Times*! I read your articles all the time. How exciting. You always have so much information. Inside information, isn’t that what they call it?” I modestly admitted as much. She clasped her hands and eyed me with motherly pride. “Tell me,” she said, adopting a sweet, conspiratorial tone, “did that nice young man really kill his father?”

I soon found myself repeating the answer in the funereal chambers of the presiding judge, who smiled sadly and turned to the phalanx of attorneys for guidance. The defense lawyers bowed their heads like morticians while the prosecutors scowled at the ceiling. Had the old woman not shared my verdict with two of her fellow jurors, one of whom dutifully reported it to the bailiff, the trial might have continued with one of the two alternates. But three out and it was over, a mistrial. On that day, I was the news, the loudmouth reporter who had sabotaged the trial of Peter DiSanti. And the news got worse a few months later when the neighbor dropped dead of a heart attack while shooing away that same orange tabby. No witness, no motive, no case. Retry as he might – as he did – the District Attorney could not convict DiSanti on the circumstantial evidence alone.

For the first time, I understood what it was like to be on the receiving end of the news business. It was as if I had been stripped naked to expose some grotesque physical defect for the amusement of strangers. At first I felt numb, and then the embarrassment set in. I remembered a long forgotten telephone call from the wife of a rookie cop who had fainted while holding a mugger at gunpoint. She couldn’t quarrel with the accuracy

of my article, nor even the tone. “It’s just so unfair,” she cried. “He was trying so hard, and now he can’t do it, he can’t face them anymore.” I had no idea whom she meant by “them,” but I assured her it would blow over. I didn’t really care. Her husband was just a name in my story; he was news. Sobbing, she hung up.

I kept telling myself the DiSanti fiasco would blow over as well, but I hadn’t counted on an unwritten journalistic code that requires the media to atone for the misdeeds of their own with a particularly unrelenting mix of retribution and collective soul-searching. The most hypocritical among my colleagues held me up as an example of the cynicism and personal biases that were eroding the credibility of the profession. To the purists, I had sinned not by expressing an opinion but rather by having one. From the fringes came the suggestion that I had been bribed or blackmailed. Only those who knew me treated it as the mistake it was, something worthy perhaps of pity or ridicule but not condemnation. But the stand-ups were the worst.

“Say, did you see that story about the rookie cop who fainted while holding a mugger at gun point? He claims it was hot and his uniform was too tight around the collar. Yeah, right, Barney. If you ask me, he couldn’t take the heat of the collar.”

Now it was my turn, my karma. I was news.

Sympathetic, but saddled with an embarrassing byline, my editors offered to reassign me temporarily to the anonymity of the copy desk, but I took the honorable way out. There were other jobs out there, and a fat portfolio of *Times* clippings carried a lot of cachet with the lesser papers. But not enough, I discovered, to negate all the coverage of my disgrace. It was only after a year of futility that I embraced my humiliation and took a job at Buenaventura College, my alma mater. They were happy to have me. After all, I

was the journalism department's most illustrious alumnus, even after some of the luster had worn off. I traded in my notebook for a textbook and took to wearing tweed. "He who can't..."

And it might have ended there, my reporting career, if my old editors at the *Times* hadn't had pity on me. After only a few semesters of my academic rehabilitation, they invited me to sign on as a stringer. It was as if they were holding out the possibility of parole. Show us you've still got it and behave yourself, they seemed to be saying, and maybe some day we'll take you back.

"Get over it, Rip," Jettie said. She had one hand cupped over her ear and was reading my face like the Psychic Child Estelle.

In many ways a child herself, Jettie Wetherill was the most credulous, impressionable person I had ever met, and the most perfectly suited for the job of a freelance photographer. A scrappy bantamweight in a tight, slate T-shirt, baggy camouflage cargos, and combat boots, she looked as usual as if she had just stepped off the cover of a soldier of fashion catalogue. Her saddlebag pockets and pouches bulged with the ordnance of her trade as well as the miscellany another woman would have hauled around in a handbag. Her only concession to cosmetics was her astral lip color, the shade determined by her daily astrological chart. We were definitely into a redshift, which did not bode well for me. There were no rings on her fingers to scratch her lenses, though her grandmother's gold wedding band dangled from her left ear, and never a wristwatch. Frankly, she didn't believe in time, per se, but she was willing to take it on faith, since it seemed to mean so much to me.

Jettie's brain operated much like her camera, absorbing reality through color amplifying filters and a sequence of convex and concave lenses that turned everything upside down. In her head as well as on film or chip, she captured images that one would expect to find in the *Graphic Times*: the aforementioned child phenom who could eavesdrop on your thoughts; a crop circle that covered such a large expanse of the Siberian tundra and was carved with such astronomical particularity that it was visible only from space and only once a year, for a period of less than six minutes before and after absolute aphelion; the ballet dancer who in a previous life was Marie Antoinette and had the subcutaneous scar around his neck to prove it; the Doppelganger who was tormenting the postmaster of a small town near Pittsburgh; the one-hundred-eighty-six-year-old spirit caller of Sumatra; the computer software engineer with silicon-chip brain augmentation; the celebrity changelings; Sasquatch and his cousins Bigfoot and Yeti; and every other paranormal, supernatural, other-worldly, out-of-body, out-of-mind phenomenon that her way came.

Jettie was a terrific photographer, but I couldn't see it, any of it.

"It's all about depth of field," she explained.

The Psychic Child Estelle, whose ears and eyes were attuned to the fourth dimension, had discerned a constrained clairvoyant aura surrounding Jettie's crudely cropped red hair and encouraged her to release its power, a suggestion Jettie had taken to heart. She had been practicing ever since, mostly on me.

"Get over what?" I asked her.

"You're dwelling on the past," she said. "Get over it; it's yesterday's news."

I looked at her and rolled my eyes. "What am I thinking now?"

That she was right, of course. I was dwelling on the past, but for reasons that lay ahead. Slicing through a rash of brittle tumbleweed, creosote, palo verde, mesquite, and fried wildflowers in the American Southwest, I was, at that moment, approaching what the channelers farther up north in Sedona would call a swinging portal, a convergence of the past and the future.

Peter DiSanti was yesterday's news, all but forgotten by a press corps that had once chronicled the most mundane aspects of his remarkably uneventful life. When he withdrew to his late father's formerly secret retreat in a small Arizona town called Two-Hat, not even the *Republic* thought it worthy of note. I was tipped off by a source in the Organized Crime Task Force, but the *Times* was not interested either until almost four years later, when out of the blue the national desk got a call from Peter DiSanti himself. He said he had a story to tell, something about an apparition and a century plant, and insisted, apparently with some urgency, that they send me out to Two-Hat.

My supervising editor, Roland Gammon, was reluctant to do that, of course, given my obvious conflict of interest, but we found a way around the ethical impediments. If I got anything newsworthy out of DiSanti, I would turn it over to a staff reporter, and I would not get paid for the assignment. In effect, I would be acting as a news source rather than a stringer, and I might even end up being the subject of the story. The thought of having to relinquish the writing bothered me, it bothered me a lot, but I would have taken the assignment on any terms.

Then there was the nature of the tip itself, the apparition, to consider. Frankly, it occurred to Roland and me both that DiSanti might have been struck senseless by the heat of the desert sun or had partaken of the peyote. However, we each had our own

reasons for indulging his fantasy. Roland's were simple: he was curious, and, as an old friend, he knew it meant a lot to me. Mine were more complex. I had this vague, irrational notion that I was being offered a shot at redemption. Given access to Peter DiSanti, I might arrive at the truth that I had prevented a jury from reaching. If a guilty conscience was driving DiSanti over the edge, he might confess. After all, confined to a desert prison of his own making, he had nothing to lose. I had nothing to lose. So I called Jettie, and we were off.

"I know what you're thinking," Jettie said. "But I'm okay with your skepticism because I know it's something you struggle with. The trouble with you, Rip, is that you weren't just baptized in the mainstream, you almost drowned in it. You're lucky you washed out when you did, but if you don't take that first breath pretty soon, you'll lose it for sure."

"Lose what?"

"Your mind. It needs oxygen. Open it up, give it some air! Mine's always open."

"I've noticed."

"Yeah, well, yours had better be, too, if you expect to get anywhere with this Peter DiSanti guy," she said, raising her coffee mug to the specter in the windshield.

"You mean, now that he's lost *his* mind," I said, trying to laugh off a nagging worry.

If DiSanti were in the throes of some kind of delirium, his confession would be about as credible as his hallucination, whatever it was. Unless, of course, madness was the missing motive. Was he seeing this apparition when he stabbed his father to death, or was it of recent origin? Did it drive him to murder or was it spawned by the murder? I had a lot of questions and an empty notebook.

“Why not give him a fair trial this time?” Jettie suggested.

The burnt ozone of Phoenix was behind us now. No longer fused by the haze, the earth and sky seemed to be held together by nothing more than a delicate tating of clouds on the horizon. An unnaturally green patch of desert came into view about half way to that juncture as we rounded a craggy outcropping of rock at the summit of an imperceptible swell. Jettie’s map confirmed it was Two-Hat, as did the twin, pillbox mesas rising above the town. The steep, brick-red slopes of the mesas were fired by the evening sun, spilling color into a dozen swimming pools below. The highway we were on skirted Two-Hat but emptied into another road that bisected it and branched out in either direction before turning to dust at a derelict Spanish mission in the distance.

Two-Hat was not so much a town as a confederacy of trailer homes and shanties, a few sunburned ranches, lavish haciendas behind screens of oleander and Arizona cypress, an incipient subdivision of tanned adobe ranchettes, and a general store and service station that they collectively sustained alongside a hangar at an airstrip. The typical exo-metro of the New West. There was no main street, town hall, church, school, saloon, café, or motel, and no one in sight.

“Why do people live in these places?” I asked. “Stuck inside their climate-controlled spaces all day, they might as well be living in Antarctica.”

“Reminds me of Mars,” Jettie said. “We’ll be living there pretty soon, too, under some kind of bubble. It’s human nature to go where we don’t belong. It’s the allure of the intemperate zones, an adventure, the challenge of survival. Beat the heat, kill the chill, and keep your powder dry.”

We had been given clear directions to the DiSanti family hideout, though that was not our immediate destination. Peter DiSanti had declined to put us up, fearing we would disturb his ailing mother, but he had arranged for us to stay at the neighboring Red Walls Ranch. We were to be the guests of Evangeline Shaw Montoya, a sculptress who had achieved a measure of fame, including a recent spread in *Arizona Highways*, for her line of “Southwest Garden Grotesques.”

The “RWR” atop a fantastically adorned iron arch at the bottom of a long, red gravel lane told us we had arrived. I stopped briefly while Jettie snapped a few pictures of the leering faces in the scrollwork. Then we drove on through a gauntlet of unanimated kinetic wind sculptures, past an assortment of birdbaths that were being weathered under a complex misting device, and finally around a large, two-tiered fountain in the middle of a circular drive. Water shot out from the mouths of a four-headed desert tortoise rising up out of the fountain’s shallow pool and poured over the rim of a goblet in the clutches of three Gila monsters that were standing on the tortoise’s shell.

“Señora was expecting you earlier,” her maid complained from the doorway of the hacienda. Consulting a copper clock face in the flagstone wall behind her, she concluded that the Señora had begun her evening meditations and could not be disturbed. We could wait in the casita, she said, leading the way through a cavernous living room. A wall of windows looked out across an expanse of desert and up at the two mesas, which were slowly sinking in the shadows. We stepped out onto a freshly hosed and steaming patio, where we were joined by a sleepy old Doberman who followed us the rest of the way out of some inbred sense of duty. His name, the maid told us, was Diablo. Hers was Urcina. A stone path took us alongside a swimming pool trimmed in azalea and a gentrified barn

that looked as if it had never been mucked, except perhaps of metallic filings and stone shavings, the effluent of Señora Evangeline's art.

The casita, the guesthouse, was larger than any house I had ever lived in and much more luxurious. Urcina showed us to our rooms. In mine, a miniature version of the four-headed tortoise fountain was feverishly bubbling and splashing. Jettie couldn't wait to hit the pool. I preferred to kick back with my laptop and a scotch from the well-stocked bar. Halfway through my e-mail, however, I drifted off into a mental rest stop just beyond consciousness but just short of sleep, a spot Jettie would have put nearer to the mid-range of my theta brain rhythms.

It's a kind of neurological circuit breaker I have that tripped with some frequency when I was a child, when my senses were constantly being overloaded. With age and experience had come a capacity to process stimuli at a conscious level, eliminating much of the static going into to sleep. However, the circuits had been tripping again of late. Perhaps there comes a point where too much age and experience results in a different kind of overload, one caused by an overprocessing of life. The effect was the same.

Part of me was still on the guest house bed blinking back at the cursor on my screen and listening to the water splashing in the fountain while another more essential part of me suddenly materialized on a desert highway under a blinding white sky. I knew I was dreaming. I could even relate what I was experiencing to the tedious drive from Sky Harbor Airport to Two-Hat. But I was helpless to stop it, to refocus my mind. I had no choice but to start walking, twitching and fretting like a slumbering old hound dog on the scent of a sugar plum rabbit, walking until I was dead on my feet.