

Jones

Flash Fiction for Guests of the WordFeeder
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"Jones," the older man at the first desk nodded without looking up.

"Good evening, Mr. Colby. How are you?"

"Jones," as almost everyone called him, was just arriving for the night shift, midnight to 9 AM, as an Assistant Producer – one of those titles that sounded more important than it really was, that they gave you instead of money – for one of the local TV station's news department.

"Hmm," was Mr. Colby's only response. Jones had no real idea what Mr. Colby did there, and wasn't sure Mr. Colby did either. Some administrative task that didn't require supervision, or contact with other humans apparently. Whatever it was, he'd been doing it for years.

"Jones," the next person he saw mumbled, rushing past him, her attention focused on some papers she was desperately trying to read before she got to wherever she was going.

"Good evening, Ms. Collier."

"Jones." Up ahead, it was the thin man with the unusually large Adam's apple holding his tie out of the way while he bent over the water fountain.

"Hey, Mr. Stedman," Jones returned the greeting, continuing on his way. "How's your daughter feeling?"

"Much better, thank you," Mr. Stedman, on his way back up, wiping a few late arriving drops away from his mouth, seemed surprised that Jones knew to ask. "And how, uh..." He wanted to reciprocate, but was in the process of confusing Jones with someone else he didn't really know.

Sensing the awkwardness, Jones thought he'd help Stedman out. "I don't have any children," he smiled politely in passing, "but thank you for asking."

"Of course, not," Stedman said going away.

"Of course, not?" Jones thought to himself, a look of concern rippling across his eyes and forehead. "I could have children."

"Hi, Robert." Robert was the sports AP, in the first carrel around the corner, in the row of carrels where Jones would spend the night, getting up occasionally to go to editing, the bathroom or throw something from the refrigerator into the microwave. Tonight was special. He'd

brought a fresh French baguette, some shaved turkey and Swiss, enough for a couple of sandwiches – and a small, two person bottle of cheap Sangria that he'd left in the bag so no one looking in the refrigerator would see it.

“Yo,” was apparently all Robert had time to say, his eyes glued to some game on his screen – Brazilian women's volley ball – that had nothing to do with his job. The shift before him had already collected all the local high school and college scores. His job was to redo the major league scripts they'd used at 11, update the clips they had for the sports-head to review when he came in, adding anything interesting that was still happening in the western time zones, plus any feature material worth airing that he could cop from newspapers and other sources out of the area.

Robert was to sports what Jones was to city life. Together with the other APs they'd produce hours of material that would be edited into 22 minutes to air between 5 and 6, and then again between 6 and 7 until the national feed took over. The other 22 minutes would be weather and traffic – two ex-cheerleaders pointing to graphics.

On most nights, it was a two to three hour job they'd manage to stretch into nine. On the other hand, it was the middle of the night, which is how they all got hired while the normal people spent their nights, and days, doing what normal people do. For Robert, it was because he needed the money. For Jones, it was about breaking into television news, his first real job out of college.

“Is that you, Elijah?” Dawn was the only one who called him by his first name, and his whole first name at that. Without bothering to turn around, she looked up from her screen in the carrel just past his, and he could feel her smiling as if she'd been waiting for him to get in.

“Hey, Dawn,” Jones responded, plopping his worn leather saddlebag of papers down on his desk, taking off the light jacket he threw on top of the metal bookcase behind him, in the space next to the dead plant he kept for unexplained reasons. Just hearing her voice was reason enough to be there. “How's politics in the big city?”

“Boring,” she sighed back at him. “Any delicious, salacious, blood dripping sexually charged crime you want to talk to me about? ...Pleeeeeease?” she fake begged him.

“Maybe later, sweetcakes,” he said in his best Philip Marlowe voice. “Let me see what's up first, and then we'll...” he started to say, only to be interrupted by the loud “Pffuuuuuuuu” sound his chair made when he sat down. The pneumatic poll that supported the seat hadn't worked for weeks. He was instantly short, the front edge of his desk just about at his armpits.

“Honestly, Jones,” Jack Rawlings, the stick-up-his-ass night editor, was just walking past, on his rounds to make sure everyone was in place. “It's not like you're the only one here. Next time, take that to the men's room.”

“Hysterical,” Jones thought to himself sarcastically while Mr. Rawlings continued into his office down the hall, his door – He had a door. – closing hard behind him.

“Don’t worry, Eli,” Dawn pretended to console him. “Farting is a perfectly normal bodily function,” she continued, unable to suppress her giggling, “that, uh, you needn’t be embarrassed about.” Dawn had a face that couldn’t lie, a mouth and eyes that spoke more than words could ever accomplish, a radiant confidence and intelligence that cried out for air time, some day – not to mention a smile that instantly became the only thing anyone could see, its reflection lingering on your eyes well after she’d left the room.

“You just like to say the word “Fart,” he snapped back, lifting his body up while pulling the lever on his right. “God,” he said to himself a few seconds later, waiting until the moment had dissipated in his head, “I love to hear the sound of her laughing.” Rubbing his whole face with his hand to get the blood flowing, it was time to get to work.

For the next few hours, he’d be on his computer and phone until the 5 AM news team crew came in to get ready – to read stories he and the others there would write. His job was to look for breaking local news, mostly crimes and fires, locally, but around the country too, get the details and write 30 to 60 second stories he’d produce, with tape if he thought the visuals would be that interesting and the story was worth the expense – maybe even bring in one of the reporters on call if it was a really big deal.

More of a writer than a television journalist, Jones liked to write what he called “News Noir,” adding this or that detail in the text and the tape he would edit for airing – whatever he could to give the viewer some texture, some sense of reality from a medium that had become brief to the point of meaningless. It was a style everyone seemed to like, except his editor.

“Jones!” It was Mr. Rawlings voice on the intercom built into their desk phones. “Jones! Are you paying attention?!”

“Yes, Mr. Rawlings,” Jones pressed the button to answer him, even though he could hear him over the top and through the glass walls of Rawling’s office. “What do you need?”

“Get in here.”

Ten seconds later, he was standing in front of his editor’s desk, the door to his office closing automatically behind him.

“Jones,” he was exasperated, real or pretending, Jones couldn’t tell, pointing with both hands moving palms up in opposite directions to the printed scripts lying this way and that on his desk. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” (Rawlings was one of those people who overuse profanity to the point of rendering it useless.)

It was a rhetorical question which Jones knew better than to answer, although it was getting harder and harder to hold back.

“You’ve got at most 30 seconds to tell the story. Thirty seconds at most. With tape, maybe 60. I don’t need to see a rat running past garbage piled up near the crime scene. I don’t care about some little kid cowering behind his mother’s skirt, or how many children she has, or that she’s

working two jobs and doesn't know where they're going to stay or buy new stuff. Who gives a crap?! Talking head, talking head, crime scene shot and we're out. Got it?!"

And there was quiet. Rawlings, the editor may have been shouting, and Dawn and the other carrel people listening, but Jones... Jones had been busy thinking.

"No, Mr. Rawlings, I don't."

For the first time since Jones had come into the room, Rawlings sat back in his chair, his mouth atypically motionless. "What?"

"I don't 'got it.' Forget about journalism. Forget the art of telling a good story. Just... just for a moment, think about the business, about ratings, about what sells, about the fucking – to use an adjective you can understand – monetary value of connecting with our audience. You want to know why our 5 AM news is third in this market? Because it's boring, mind numbingly boring. You've crammed so many stories into so little time, no one's paying attention. And then you have the temerity to conclude that they're the ones with the problem, to justify your abbreviated style by arguing that our viewers haven't the attention spans to appreciate any more than the superficial, minimalist, bulletized drivel you're throwing at them."

"Jones, Jones" Rawlings was pissed and mocking him. "The kid with plain vanilla name is desperate to highlight the distinguishing features of his life..."

"Sure," Eli agreed. "Who isn't, not to mention to the people whose stories we write and the viewers who identify with them."

"Jones!"

"Don't interrupt." Eli cut him off, taking a step forward to edge of his oversized desk. His response was startling, the smile and passion on Dawn and the other ADP faces unmistakable. "Do you even know my first name? I've been here a year. What's my first name? Com'on. What my first name?"

It was rhetorical, but Rawling's eyes began to dart, and then look down at his desk for the answer.

"It's 'Elijah,' 'Eli' for short. You can call me 'Eli.' 'Elijah Conover Jones.' 'Conover' was my great great grandmother's maiden name when she came over here, a single mother barely 20 with two little kids, and built a business and a life out of nothing. Nothing. And now suddenly, you know more about me than about any headliner on this morning's news. How long did that take?"

"Have you ever actually read the sports stories you told Robert not to send you? Do you have any idea what cool stuff he comes up with? And Dawn. What about Dawn? Hands down, she's the best writer here..."

"Dawn?"

“Jesus,” Eli’s rage was gone now, his tone returning to normal. “Her last name is ‘Henderson.’ ...Your political issues AP? You know, there’s a lot more to politics than the occasional election or vote in the City Council or Legislature. No one understands politics the way she does. You want ratings? You understand ratings don’t you? The third floor sure does. Maybe we should take this conversation upstairs? Put her on the air. The wheelchair’s her problem. Not yours, and certainly not...” The look of surprise on Rawling’s face stopped him cold.

“What? You don’t think we know why you won’t put her on the air? ...Unbelievable. You’re such a putz. It’s not only discrimination, it’s bad business. Who would you rather watch? Some over-made-up newsreader, or a professional who actually knows what she’s talking about and who’s had the brains and physical courage to get the under-stories that count?”

“You don’t like what I write, the pieces I produce? You’re the editor. Edit. Do your job. Just keep in mind that the ratings we get are your problem, your fault as much as they are ours.” Silence. “...I’m getting back to work.” And then he left the office.

Walking back down the hallway, he saw Robert standing outside the entrance to his carrel. “I’d be crying,” he joked, “if it were the manly thing to do.”

Eli smiled back at him, mouthing the word “Thanks” in his direction, and then noticed Dawn rolling out of her carrel in front of him.

“Hey,” she smiled up at him.

“Hey,” he smiled back.

“Bend down here so I can give you a kiss.”

And he did, her outstretched arms pulling his face toward her. It was a simple kiss, the short kind that would last forever. “Let’s go,” he said to her, face to face, kneeling in front of her, “I’ve got a sandwich with your name on it and some Sangria we can share in the lunchroom.” And then, looking straight into her eyes, “Who knows? With any luck, I may finally get up the nerve to ask you out.”

“Yes!” she blurted. “Whatever you were going to ask me,” and then she paused to catch her breath and regain her composure. “Yes,” she said, this time with determination. It was 2 AM. “Now that we got that out of the way, I’m hungry. Let’s eat.”

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