

## Ballot for the Artist

by Clay Rooks

“Yes, I love you,” I said, switching the phone to my other ear. “I’ll be home right after work...as soon as I can. Okay? Call me after you hear from the doctor’s office. All right, goodbye. I love you, too. See you then.”

By my watch it was almost noon. Once again I looked at the ballot on my desk. We had finished interviewing our last candidate better than an hour ago. Ronaldson had handed out the ballots as soon as the candidate left. Greggs from Personnel, Ms. Mitchell, our editor, and Ronaldson had marked their ballots right away. I had seen who they had all marked, but their choice had perplexed me. I had said that I wanted time to consider my choice. Ronaldson had looked surprised, then told me to give my ballot to him by noon.

From my office window, I could look right into the lush foliage of a live oak where squirrels and birds lived, and I often did on days like this. I had locked my door and no one could see me idly watching and thinking.

Across the way I saw Ronaldson coming out of the Coastal Research Institute. He crossed the campus lawn and entered our building. He appeared to be in a hurry. I turned quickly from the window. He hadn't seen me.

I looked again at the names on the ballot: Lungren, Jones, Whitney. No insights came to me. Why had they all voted for Jones? I thought the criteria for Publications Artist had been agreed upon by the committee, by the director, everybody. I knew who I wanted to work with, who was the best artist. As writer and managing editor, I would have to deal with the artist nearly every day to schedule projects and meet deadlines. Ronaldson's choice didn't make sense to me. It made me uneasy. I liked Ronaldson and we were on generally friendly terms, though I couldn't always figure him out. He'd been

the one who hired me. This was my first full-time professional writing job after knocking around as a freelance. Sometimes he would ride me. But just as often he would be counselor and older friend. I was getting stories about our program's work and research published in the national trade magazines. No one had been able to do that. He liked that ...a lot. He oversaw all my work.

It was noon. I had to decide. I marked my ballot and took it downstairs, quickly. I didn't want to see anyone. At the mail drop, I shoved my ballot into his mail slot and went alone to lunch.

Afterwards, I called Kate from the LSU Commons to see how she was doing. She was seven months pregnant with our second child. The sticky Gulf Coast heat often made it miserable for her. I wished I had gone home to see her for lunch.

When I returned, there was a message in my mail slot from Ronaldson. His office was at the end of the hall. The receptionist, Miss Dorie, was watching me, but instead of going down the hall, I went upstairs to my office. I had no sooner flicked the lights on and opened a story file than my phone buzzed. I picked it up.

"Yes," I said.

"Mr. Ronaldson on line one," Miss Dorie said.

I punched the button. "Hello."

"Come down to my office, please."

"Yes, sir. Right away."

The tone of his voice told me little. It had been calm and level. I had no clue what I would say to him. I tried to think of something while I walked downstairs.

His door was closed. I hesitated, considered leaving, then knocked. I heard his voice and went in. He was on the phone. He motioned for me to sit. I tried not to listen to what he was saying. I distracted myself by looking at the pictures and certificates hanging on his walls, scanned the titles in his bookcase, and remembered to check on the

weeping fig near the window. It was dying from lack of water and dropping leaves on the carpet. I made a mental note to try again to talk to the night janitor about watering it. I didn't see my ballot anywhere.

"No, I understand the situation," Ronaldson was saying. "I agree, of course. I'll see to it. Yes, sir. Goodbye."

Ronaldson put down the receiver. He was looking toward me, but he didn't seem to notice me. Then he saw me. He smiled.

"Jack, how was lunch?" he asked. "We should have gone together. You want a cup of coffee?"

I shook my head.

"No?" He got up, walked around behind me, poured himself some coffee, then returned to his desk. He seemed in no hurry now. Across the space that separated us lay the papers and clutter of his office. His desk was never cleared.

"How's the acid rain research story coming, Jack?"

"I'm about ready to write it up."

"Good. Will it make the next quarterly?"

"I think so."

"Well, let's hope we don't ruffle the wrong feathers this time. Show it to Fred."

I wasn't sure if he meant the comment to be humorous. I smiled faintly. I knew he was referring to a pollution story I had written last year. One of the university's industrial sponsors had taken exception to it and heat had poured down from the top until a contamination law suit took the sponsor's attention elsewhere. Since then Ronaldson had me clear "controversial" stories not only through the regular channels, including him, but through the program's legal counsel.

"What's the research look like?" he asked.

"All the research I've read and every scientist I've interviewed are in agreement

about the problem and the causes. Blakely in Chemistry has some very good data that he'll share with us."

"Fine. I look forward to seeing your story. I know you're eager to publish this one."

His tone was hard to read.

I waited. He finished his coffee, unhurried, as if nothing else was on his mind. He was almost leisurely about it.

"Is that all you wanted to see me about?" I heard myself say, suddenly.

He gazed at me, blankly, then his expression tightened, slightly. "No, Jack, that's not all." His voice flattened, then eased. "There's the matter of your ballot."

"I put it in the mail slot at noon."

"Yes, I know. I have it here," he said, lifting it from a stack of papers. He scrutinized it as if he hadn't seen it until just now.

I kept quiet and waited.

"I see you checked Lungren's name," he said, not taking his eyes off the paper.

"Yes, sir."

He laid the paper down and looked at me, straightforward. "Why did you do that, Jack?"

"Because he's the best qualified."

Ronaldson slowly rubbed his hand down his face to his chin. He paused, choosing his words. "That he might be, but I thought Jones was a better choice," he said.

"Jones?"

"Yes, Jones." He looked at me again as if trying to convey meaning through his expression. "Didn't you like Mr. Jones?"

"It's not a matter of liking, sir. He doesn't have Lungren's experience or talent."

"Experience and talent are not everything." His words were becoming very

pointed, yet his tone was low and even.

"Sir?"

"Are you reading me, Jack?"

"Reading you how?"

Ronaldson stood up and came around his desk. "Come and walk with me, Jack."

He reached over and lifted the telephone receiver. "Dorie, Mr. Stevens and I will be out for a while. Please take our calls. Thank you."

We headed across campus toward the Student Union. It was sunny, hot, and humid. He seemed not to mind and we walked, almost strolling, in mutual silence.

"I don't always like to talk in the office," he said when we stopped at a street corner.

I waited to see where his conversation was going.

"How old are you, Jack? Twenty-eight?"

"Twenty-nine."

"You like working for the program?"

I wasn't sure where this talk was going. "Yes," I said, realizing I had hesitated and knowing I shouldn't have.

Ronaldson betrayed nothing of what he was thinking in his voice or expression.

We crossed the street.

"So you like Lungren?" he asked.

I considered a moment, then answered, "Yes, I do."

"I do, too," Ronaldson said. "He would be a fine asset to our program."

"But you voted for Jones. Didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," he said.

"You think Lungren is the best, but you and the others voted for Jones?"

"Lungren is the better artist, but Mr. Jones is the best choice."

"Sir?"

"Jack, you must learn how things work. You have wonderful talents as a science writer, but you lack other necessary skills."

"Other skills?"

"Yes, Jack. You don't seem to recognize certain realities in our environment. Or you don't care. I sincerely hope that it's not because you don't care. That would disappoint me."

We had reached the Union and I walked with Ronaldson into the cool interior. We went to the lower floor, toward the cafeteria. He led me to the snack food.

"You like ice cream bars?" he asked.

When I said that I did, he took two from the freezer case and paid the cashier. As we walked the aisle through the tables, he handed me one. I thanked him and followed him outside to the terrace. Live oaks shaded round tables. We ate ice cream for a while in silence. I kept thinking about being somewhere else.

"You know that the chancellor has placed the university under a hiring freeze?" he said. "You are aware of that?"

"I received your memo."

"But you also are well aware that we need an artist right away."

I nodded. It seemed to be a definite problem, at least temporarily. I had deadlines coming up fast.

"You nod, but I don't think you fully understand. What do you think we should do?"

"There doesn't seem to be much we can do right now but wait for the freeze to be lifted. Then hire someone."

Ronaldson finished his ice cream bar and licked the stick clean. Then he turned his attention back to me.

"We can't wait, Jack," he said. "We'll miss deadlines that can't be missed." He paused and looked at me intently.

"Special needs can be handled in special ways. But it must be done very discreetly. I can get an artist in spite of the freeze by going directly to the chancellor. You see, I know that the chancellor will approve of us hiring Mr. Jones. He won't approve of Lungren."

I didn't say anything.

"You understand now? I'm talking about Affirmative Action." His voice was low and steady. "It can work for us this time."

I leaned back. "You're saying that the chancellor won't approve Lungren because he's white, but he'll approve Jones because he's black?"

Ronaldson looked pleased, then shook his head. "Not because he's black. Because he's a minority. Any minority would do."

The air around us suddenly seemed very still. I couldn't help but stare at him, and I realized that I didn't know him like I thought I did.

"You want me to change my vote to Jones even though Lungren is best," I said.

Ronaldson shook his head. "No, Jack. For us, Mr. Jones is best."

"But he can't draw," I heard myself say.

"Who can't?"

"Jones."

"What do you mean he can't draw?"

"We had agreed at staff meeting that we needed an artist who could draw, who could illustrate. We all agreed before the interviewing started. It's the most important requirement."

"Mr. Jones had drawings in his portfolio."

"He had graphics. We need someone who can draw freehand...a real artist...like

Lungren."

"Jack, we can't have Lungren. We can have Mr. Jones."

I leaned forward again. "What will I do about illustrations?"

"Use the files. Use photographs. Be creative."

I turned slowly from Ronaldson to look beyond the terrace. The afternoon sun was glaring all across the campus.

"I'm asking you to reconsider, Jack."

"But he's not even as qualified as Whitney."

"Whitney isn't a minority. I wish to hell they all were, but only Jones is. And he meets the minimum qualifications. And that's enough."

"It is?"

"Yes."

"Well, you don't really need my vote. Three of you voted for him. That's a majority."

"That's true. But under the special circumstances, the chancellor will want to see a unanimous vote for our candidate." Ronaldson's voice was clear. "It makes everything better that way. It smooths out the process."

I didn't say what I was thinking. I began to wonder just how much was at stake...not only for Jones but for Ronaldson...and myself.

"Let me put this on a different level for you, Jack. I'm talking to you not simply as program director or superior to employee. That would be inappropriate." He sounded a bit more urgent now. "I'm asking you as someone who sees a promising career for you; someone who is interested to see you achieve and succeed." He paused. "A friend. Understand? I've taken you into my confidence. Put yourself in my place, Jack. It's really a simple choice. After all, what's in a name? One's as good as another for our purposes. Think about what I've said."



He stood up, but motioned for me to stay. "I've got an appointment. I have to go. There's another ballot in your mail slot. If you decide to reconsider, drop it in my mail before five."

Ronaldson left me in the shade with my thoughts and a heavy feeling in my chest. No one had ever done to me what he had just done. Before, I hadn't known him very well, but I had liked him and respected him, as my boss. I wasn't sure how I felt about him now.

On the way back, I debated and argued with myself. I weighed the options...and consequences.

I took the unmarked ballot to my office. There was phone message that Kate had called; I had called back.

"Hi sweetheart. Did the doctor's office call? They did? What did they say? What about the baby? Really? That's great, babe. Sure, don't worry. What? Ryan's a great name. No, I like it. That's okay, we still have some time. Okay, talk to you later, 'bye."

I put down the phone and went over to my window and looked out into the live oak. Two birds I couldn't see were squabbling over a nest deep in the foliage.

I turned away and tried again to consider my choices, but I couldn't think. It was no good. I began to mark Lungren on the ballot. I needed him; the publication room needed him. I held my pen by his name.

Ryan, I liked the name Ryan. I looked down the ballot, quickly marked Jones, and initialed it. At the communication desk, I fought down an impulse to tear up the ballot before putting it in Ronaldson's mail slot. Then I closed my office and went home without telling anyone.

Kate was surprised to see me in the middle of the afternoon. "Why are you home so early?" she asked, looking at me closely. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"I wanted to come home."

"Why?"

I didn't answer; I just shrugged my shoulders.

She stood very still watching me, concerned. "Is something wrong, Jack?"

"No. Things are fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling good. The baby's fine. We're both good."

I smiled and hugged her. Kate murmured on my shoulder as we held each other. Then she went into the bedroom. When she came out a few minutes later, I was sitting on the couch idly flipping through the newspaper classifieds.

"Pete's at Murphy's, playing," she said. "I might go over there."

"Okay."

"When I come back we'll talk. All right?"

"Sure," I said. "Don't mind me. I'm fine. Just tired."

"Everything is okay, isn't it?"

"Yes, I always do things right, don't I?"

She sat down beside me and put her arm around me. "Yes, you do," she said, kissing me on the cheek. "Here." She took my hand and placed it on her stomach. "Guess who's awake. Feel the baby kick?"

"He kicks hard," I said. I left my hand there until the kicking stopped.

"So, what happened at work?"

"Nothing, Kate. We hired an artist today....that's all."

"Good, you need some help." She looked at me closely, then she let it go. "I'm going over to Murphy's."

"Okay," I said, "see you later."

She eased herself up and headed for the door, slow and heavy.

As she went out, I called after her, "I like that name Ryan." But the door close before she heard me. I picked up the newspaper. "I do," I said to myself. "I like that name. It's a good name."

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