

An Excerpt

It's exam week. Let's take a break from news reports, maybe have fun, too. Consider an excerpt from [*Rufus McCoy and Profiteers in the Ivory Tower*](#). We step into Rufus' life when a colleague, Chad Holifield, for some unknown reason, takes mercy on him and his ignorance of office politics. We come in on their phone conversation:

"Here's the deal," Chad said. "You must promise not to tell anyone where you get the information. The minute I suspect you compromise me, even indirectly, I'll shut you off. And I'll make you suffer."

Rufus didn't ask him how. Chad was such a scrawny little guy—"a twit"—it seemed like a vacuous threat. But Rufus was thinking physical suffering, as in fighting. After a moment's reflection, Rufus deciphered the gist of Chad's threat.

If everybody liked Ivan Kirk, they loved Chad Holifield. He took his undergraduate and masters degrees at State University and got his doctoral degree at Mississippi Tech, just like the other State University insiders. In other words, Chad could orchestrate a mobbing and damage would be done before Rufus knew the campaign had started and was well underway.

Chad's deal sounded worth the risk. And Rufus was absolutely fascinated. Why was this insider willing to betray his friends? Whoever the real Chad was—friend to students, good ol' boy, or turncoat—he knew everybody. He promised access to very important people in the university hierarchy and local politicians like the Chairman of Mississippi's Institution of Higher Education, Harvey Alderman.

Chad could care less that Socrates existed much less pushed the credo, "Know thyself", but he was an unwitting devotee of the philosophy. By extension, he took just as seriously, "Know thy organization," both the formal *and* informal hierarchy of thy organization.

Everyone knew that the official academic pecking order began with instructors and ended at the apex with full professors. Chad was familiar with the local exceptions, the informal authority. For example, instructors with certain skills distorted the hierarchy topsy-turvy. And they were minefields for the uninitiated. That's why Chad chose to begin Rufus' education with details of the informal authority; the kind imparted in private and verbally.

The Accounting Department had three VIP instructors. Were they superstars retired from prestigious business careers? Like CEOs from top corporations or auditing firms, that is, professionals with valuable experience to bring to the classroom but without a PhD? Not the instructors at State University.

"First is Jane Swanson. She's married to Provost Jonathan Seymour. A marriage license with the force of a PhD."

"Tell me something I don't know," Rufus said.

"Relax, I'm getting warmed up," Chad cautioned Rufus. "You undoubtedly know about Sherry Munton."

"She's an instructor."

“That it?” Chad asked.

“Well, yeah.”

“Get out paper and pencil, Slick.” Chad paused, then asked, “You ready?”

“Huh?”

“Pay attention, Slick.”

“I’m listening.”

“Sherry Munton ‘earned’ her ‘PhD’ without benefit of marriage; several high level administrators and local politicians are captivated by—and scared to death of—her mouth. It could bring pleasure or an equal measure of pain.” Chad paused, expecting to hear laughter. When it didn’t come, he continued, “Anyway, if cigarettes have a warning,” Chad deadpanned, “Sherry should have tattooed on her forehead: ‘Mz. Munton is a vicious little trollop who may be hazardous to your mental health.’ Sherry knows everybody from the lowest assistant professor to the Commissioner of the Institution of Higher Education. And, her relatives are embedded at State University and the local political community like ticks in soft skin.

“Last is Susan Coal,” Chad said. “A neophyte but fast learner. She recognizes a good strategy to guarantee job security when she sees it. Sue studies for her ‘PhD’ at the feet of Sherry, the Queen of Alternative Credentials: commonly known as a QUAC.”

“It’s one big multidimensional puzzle,” Chad said, nonchalantly. “Take for example, foolin’ around. It might seem trivial or maybe irrelevant, but isn’t. Like Munton and Wallace. Sherry was furious when our good buddy, Kenny-boy, fell from grace. And with another woman. She’d . . . how should I say it? . . . invested a lot of energy befriendin’ a Vice President.”

“Sounds like an opportunity for blackmail to me.”

“No shit Slick, but what did Wallace have left to protect? His good name?” Chad tried to repress a giggle but wasn’t successful. “That’s what makes this so delicious. Sherry thought she’d earned something as good as tenure. She couldn’t get the real thing without a PhD, but if she was good in . . . if she was accommodating, she had job security. It’s a hell of a lot easier than earning a doctorate and she likes foolin’ around. A fortunate union of business and pleasure. Now, all that *investment* in Wallace was done for nuthin’ ” He tried to repress another giggle but was even less successful this time.

“That’s all very amusing,” Rufus said, “but one project at a time, Chad. Are we going some place with all this? What about Bowie, Kirk, and Webb?”

“Don’t underestimate the sins of our brethren. And sisters. That’s how we enforce conformity around here. Everybody’s got everybody else by the balls. Or whatever. It’s the Southern way.”

“Yeah, I don’t doubt that, but what about Bowie, Kirk, and Webb?”

“Study their annual evaluations. You’ll see a pattern, a *web* of lies.”

“Very funny—a *web* of lies. So, I should focus on Webb?”

“I’ll help you interpret the evaluations,” Chad said, cool and aloof.

Chad’s words and maybe the way he said them reminded Rufus of Woodward and Bernstein.

“Okay, Deep Throat, I’ll start by—”

“If you want *my* help,” Chad interrupted sharply, “those words will never pass your lips again. Period. End of discussion.” With that, Chad abruptly hung up.