

Sid for Mayor

A fan fiction novel in honor of

Mr. Grace's Piranha Club

by S R Larson

The sign on the door said "S. Fernwilter, JD, Esq., Etc." It was a plain, brass sign, screwed on to the wooden door years and years ago. It looked like it was ready to fall down. The wooden door was not much better: cracked, dark brown paint and a handle that had seen its best days back during the Nixon administration.

The hallway was a bit dingy, but not more than the usual office building here in Bayonne. The window down at the end of the hallway actually looked like it had been cleaned recently, giving the morning sun a chance to give the worn-out hallway carpet another shot at a tan.

Mr. Fernwilter's office door was not fully closed. You could slip a BLT sandwich through the opening. The man outside the office could hear what sounded like someone inside typing on a computer. It was accompanied by a faint smell of cheap cologne.

He knocked on the door frame. That way the door would not open more.

"Yeah" said a slightly raspy voice inside the office.

The man opened the door and looked inside.

"Come in" said the same voice.

Mr. Fernwilter was sitting behind his desk. He looked exactly like the man remembered, though perhaps a few years older. Bald, with a horseshoe of short-cut hair that ran from one temple over the back of his head to the other temple. The hair was more grey than brown. So was the carefully trimmed mustache under the pronounced nose.

A pair of inquisitive blue eyes, almost matching the striped, blue blazer, looked up from the computer screen.

"Can I help you?" Mr. Fernwilter asked.

"Sonny Carbone" said Sonny Carbone and held out his right hand.

"Sid Fernwilter" said Sid Fernwilter, got up and shook his hand. "Sit down."

There were two chairs for visitors. Sonny glanced at them both before he sat down. He didn't know why. Maybe it was a professional instinct.

Sid turned off his computer, looked at Sonny and smiled. He leaned forward over his desk, resting on his elbows and clasping his hands, in a way that made Sonny reach for his wallet.

"How can I help you, Mr. Carbone?" Sid asked.

Sonny looked at him for a moment, gave away a faint smile and leaned back in the visitor's chair. For a moment he had wondered if his visit was misplaced, but seeing the man across the desk he realized that his instincts about Mr. Fernwilter had been right all along.

He rested his elbows on the armrests and let the fingertips on his hands meet, so his hands formed a triangle in front of him. Sid looked at the shape his hands formed, and looked a bit confused. But only for a moment. His visitor was immaculately dressed and had some unidentifiable, but clearly expensive cologne.

Sensing there was money somewhere down the road of this day, Sid put on a smile worthy of a New Jersey politician.

“Mr. Fernwilter” said Sonny. “Some years ago you ran for president. Briefly.”

Sid raised an eyebrow. He had actually forgotten about that episode in his career. Except for his nephew Ernie and a couple of his buddies over at the Piranha Club, he had no idea anyone else had even noticed it.

“Yes” he said, doing his best to sound professional. “Yes, that’s right.”

“How did you like your brief encounter with politics?” Sonny asked softly.

“Well” said Sid, hesitating as he wondered what the purpose was of this visit. “There was some issue with the Federal Election Commission, and some journalist...”

He interrupted himself and cleared his throat.

“Yes?” Sonny asked. “What about the journalist?”

“Well, he asked some of my peers some questions. Nothing important...”

“Ah” Sonny smiled. “Yes, I know about that.”

“You do?”

Sonny looked at Sid, drumming his fingertips against each other while considering if this was the right moment.

He decided it was. He clasped his hands and looked Sid straight in the eyes.

“Mr. Fernwilter, would you like to be mayor of Bayonne?”

Sid raised both eyebrows so high they almost vanished into the vast baldness that was his skull. The hair in his nostrils trembled artfully and his palms began sweating.

Sonny smiled. By the look on Sid’s face, it was pretty clear what his answer would be.

“Mayor, huh?” Sid said, clearing his throat and taking a deep breath. “Mayor. Mayor of Bayonne. Yeah. Yes, I... yes...”

Then he paused and looked at Sonny while a wrinkle slowly emerged between his eyes.

“Who are you?”

Sonny placed his palms on his thighs, nodded slightly and smiled.

“I am a general contractor” he said. “I am from New Brunswick, but I have a few... business associates here in town who are... not entirely happy with the current city leadership.”

The wrinkle between Sid’s eyes deepened.

“New Brunswick? What is your interest in who is the mayor of Bayonne?”

“Oh... I am actually acquiring some property here, and, well, I might relocate. Given...” and as he paused briefly he looked at Sid with a faint smile on his face, “...given that the city has a... suitable business climate.”

Sid’s reaction was not quite what he had expected. The good lawyer leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest and stretched out his legs under his desk. He looked at some spot on the wall to the left of Sonny. Then he looked out the office window for a moment.

Slowly, he turned back to Sonny, looked at him and tipped his head slightly to the left.

“Mr. Carbone” he said. “Politics is politics. Business is business. I’m not sure politics is my business. Let me think about it.”

“Yes, business is business” Sonny replied while reaching inside his jacket. “And politics is politics. But all politics is business, and all business is politics. But I understand your concerns. And I understand if you want to think about this.”

“Yes” Sid confirmed.

Sonny pulled out a check.

“In the meantime” he said, “let me contract your legal services. I need some consulting related to the relocation of my business.”

He gave Sid the check. Sid took it, looking skeptically at Sonny.

Then he looked at the check, gasped and looked at Sonny again.

“Do we have a deal?” Sonny asked.

Sid put the check down, took it up again, looked at it, put it down again and looked at Sonny.

“Yes” he said in a garbled voice. “Yes, of course” he repeated, clearing his throat. “Of course.” “I’ll be in touch” Sonny said, got up, shook Sid’s hand and left.

* * *

When Sid Fernwilter parked outside the Piranha Club later that day, a young kid approached him. As Sid got out of his car, the kid smiled a smile he must have practiced in front of a mirror for the better part of last weekend.

“Sir, can I buy your car? I’m in the used car business. Can I buy your car?”

Sid looked at him. The kid was probably old enough to have dropped out of, or perhaps even graduated high school. He was kind of short, had a roundish face, a snubby nose and very determined blue eyes.

“I never sell my car to someone who wants to buy it” Sid told him and started walking up to the Piranha clubhouse.

“Why not?”

“Because if you want to buy my car, you’ve already found a way to cheat me out of my money” Sid explained and began climbing the stairs to the entrance.

He stopped half way, turned around and examined the kid, who was still standing down there, looking up at Sid. There was something vaguely familiar with the kid’s face.

“What’s your name, son?”

“Stan Wurlitzer.”

Sid smiled and nodded.

“Ah” he said. “Who’s your dad? Frank or Ed?”

“Frank.”

Sid pointed to the Piranha Club entrance.

“You wanna come in? I think you’ll like this place.”

The clubhouse was bustling with activity. Right inside the door, Slick Willie O’Haberman was providing creative legal advice to one of the newcomers in the club. Sid did not recognize the newcomer.

“Charon Outcaster” Slick Willie introduced the young man. “Charon is my paralegal.”

Charon’s most prominent character trait was a one-inch overbite. A less prominent character trait was his ability to talk fast.

Without shaking Sid’s hand, Charon held up a ticket he had been written by the Bayonne City Police.

“Speed talking” Slick Willie explained.

“I got a ticket for speed talking!” Charon agreed.

“Can you believe this kid?” Slick Willie continued. “So he’s driving down Avenue A, right up by the high school, and this cop pulls him over, right? So Charon asks him, why he is driving so fast.”

“And I tried to explain to him all the reasons I had for driving fast” Charon filled in.

“How many reasons did you have?”

“One hundred and sixty four.”

“He was trying to explain them in as short time as possible” Slick Willie noted, “because he didn’t want to waste the city’s taxes by keeping the officer there any longer than necessary.”

“He wrote me a ticket for speed talking!” Charon lamented.
“I’m telling him to sue the cop” said Slick Willie.
“I can fix it for you” Sid promised. “I’m running for mayor.”
“Who’s the kid?” Slick Willie wanted to know.
“Stan Wurlitzer. Stan, this is Willie O’Haberman, the second most creative lawyer in Bayonne.”
“Wurlitzer, huh?” Slick Willie smiled. “Who’s yer daddy? Frank or Ed?”
“Frank.”
“I always enjoyed doing business with your dad and your uncle. Very creative guys. They kept me busy for many years. I got your dad off the hook many times. One time he wanted to pay me with a Cadillac. He couldn’t find the title for it.”
Sid put his arm around young Stan Wurlitzer’s shoulders, smiled and pointed toward the far end of the room.
“Since you’re in the used car business, let me introduce you to Elvis.”
Halfway across the room two gentlemen came stumbling out in front of them. They were engaged in an intense fist fight.
“What’s going on?” Stan wanted to know.
“Hi, Sid.”
Sid turned around. It was Enos Pork, the most creative physician in Bayonne.
“It’s that time of the year again” Enos said, pointing with his thumb at the two combatants.
“That time?” Stan asked.
“Enos” Sid said. “I’m running for mayor.”
“Who’s the kid?”
“Frank Wurlitzer’s boy” Sid explained. “It’s time for the annual Sam Peckinpah Movie Marathon. It’s their usual fist fight.”
“They’re fighting over in what order to watch the movies” Enos filled in.
“Who’s Sam Peckinpah?” Stan wondered.
Sid looked at Stan, almost with a father’s concerned eyes when he realizes he hasn’t taught his son enough life skills.
“Young man” he said and sighed. “You have a lot to learn.”
Elvis Zimmerman did not have a lot to learn. He had seen it all. He had been in the used car business for so long that some people claimed he sold Henry Ford’s first prototype to his own mother in law.
“Used car business, huh?” he said, leaned back in his chair and grabbed another couple of fries from a plateful. “How many cars have you sold so far?”
“Not many.”
“How big is your inventory?”
“I have an eighty nine Camry.”
Elvis examined the young man carefully while wolfing down more fries.
“A Wurlitzer boy, huh? In the used car business... The apple doesn’t fall far from the father’s tree.”
He put down his fries and got up.
“You know, I could use some help. Come with me. Let’s talk business.”
“Hey, Sid.”
It was Enos again.
“Bob has a business idea.”
Sid left Stan Wurlitzer in Elvis’s capable company and went with Enos Pork up to the clubroom bar. The Reverend Bob, the most creatively honest pastor in Bayonne, was having

a beer with Dick Olrog, the most creative professor of political science that Bayonne City College had ever hired.

“Bob” said Enos enthusiastically. “Bob, tell Sid about your idea.”

“A five oh one cee three” Bob said and smiled his best imitation of a politician on the campaign trail.

“A non-profit” Enos explained. “And he’s gonna need a lawyer to set it up.”

“The college is a non-profit” Dick noted. “All donations are tax free and you can keep it a secret who gives you money.”

“So is my church” said Bob. “But they just elected an accountant to the vestry.”

“My condolences” said Sid, Enos and Dick with one mouth.

“This is a great idea!” said Enos, almost sounding more enthusiastic than Reverend Bob.

“I was thinking we set up a think tank or something” said Dick. “You know, where someone writes things about something interesting and then we publish it and all donations are tax free and it’s all for a good cause, so you’ll get a lot of donations.”

“If we write about something that everyone likes” said Bob with enthusiasm, “we’ll get tons of small donations from lots of people. It adds up, and it’s iron clad from the tax viewpoint.”

“What do you say, Sid?” Dick asked.

“Wanna do the legal work?” Enos asked.

Sid wrinkled his forehead for a moment. He seemed almost a bit absent-minded. Enos got worried.

“We are talking about money here, Sid” he said, just to make sure his friend was aware of that.

“I know” Sid mumbled.

Enos crushed out his cigarette.

“Uh-oh” he said and pulled out his stethoscope. “Something’s wrong with you. There’s money in the air and your arm pits aren’t sweating. Let me...”

“No, no” Sid said and shook his head. “No, I’m fine.”

“Clearly not” Reverend Bob noted.

Even the bar tender was getting worried.

“Need a drink, Sid?”

“No, like I said. I’m fine.”

Enos squinted and examined Sid’s face carefully.

“Oh, I get it” he said. “You’ve got something bigger going on.”

Sid pulled out the check that Sonny Carbone had given him.

Enos looked at the check. And fainted.

The Reverend Bob looked at the check. And said three Hail Marys. And he wasn’t even Catholic.

Dick Olrog looked at the check. He took a deep breath, leaned forward and said, professorially:

“You know, Sid, I have this research project over at the college, and we could really use some donations...”

“I’m running for mayor” Sid explained.

* * *

The back room behind the back of the big room in the Piranha Club building was filled with smoke, worn-out Goodwill furniture, bowls that used to contain lots of chips and peanuts, an empty popcorn machine and a painted self portrait of Earl.

Sid was sitting in an armchair under the sole window. He made sure to social distance himself from the present company. After all, even from six feet away he could feel the drooling eyes of Enos, Reverend Bob, Slick Willie, Dick Olrog and Elvis penetrate his jacket in search of the check.

The rest of the Club members had decided to set up a drinking party right outside the door. For no obvious reason, of course.

“Mayor Fernwilter.”

Enos tasted the words.

“Mayor Fernwilter. Mayor Sidney Fernwilter.”

“You’d make a lot of money as a mayor, you know” Slick Willie pointed out. “And... you’d need a city attorney, of course.”

“And a health director” Enos noted.

“And a business manager” Elvis smiled.

“Not to mention a campaign manager” said Dick. “Sid...”

“A campaign manager?” Sid asked.

“Yeah, for your mayoral campaign.”

Sid hadn’t even thought of that. He hadn’t thought farther than to the check that was burning a hole in his pocket. In fact, his friends were making him a bit nervous. What did it actually mean to be mayor of Bayonne? Would he have to work? Make a lot of decisions? Would people come and ask favors?

Of course they would. Especially these guys. He didn’t mind doing favors for them. Not at all. But what was really in it for him?

“I’m a poli sci professor” Dick reminded everyone, looking around the room, placing his palms on his chest. “I know all about running a campaign.”

He took a deep breath, put his hands down on his arm rests and tried very hard not to look at Sid’s jacket.

“And... of course... you need someone to manage your campaign funds...”

“You’re just out for his money” Elvis accused him.

“Absolutely not” Dick lied.

“Yes you are.”

“Am not.”

“Are, too.”

“Gentlemen” said Reverend Bob, raising his hands and smiling televangelically. “Gentlemen, please... let’s show the future mayor of our city some respect here.”

He turned to Sid.

“Sid, let me ask you... why?”

“Why what?” Sid asked him back, even though he had a pretty good idea what Bob was after.

“Why do you want to be mayor?”

“Why not?” Sid asked pointedly.

“With that kind of money” said Enos, turning to Reverend Bob, “I’d run for governor. Senator. Heck, I’d run for president of Hell for that kind of money.”

“You know, Bob’s on to something” said Slick Willie. “This Carbone fella, why is he writing you a big check like that?”

“He wants me to help his business establish itself here in Bayonne” Sid explained. “Nothing wrong with that.”

“Sure, but why you? There’s plenty of politicians out there to choose from.”

“They’re all thieves and bandits” Elvis grumped. “The zoning board came to me last week and demanded that I get zoning compliant. If I don’t, they’ll fine me.”

“What do you mean zoning compliant?” Sid wanted to know.

“They say half my lot isn’t zoned for business. It’s residential, and the property tax is higher if it is residential.”

“Doesn’t Arnold live there?” Enos asked. “In that trailer behind your pile of Crown Vic spare parts?”

“Exactly!” Elvis confirmed. “So that half of the lot is residential. I... I just haven’t reported it that way.”

“Don’t you have to?” asked Slick Willie.

“Depends on how you interpret the zoning regulations.”

“How about the city’s interpretation?”

“I looked at it when I did my taxes. It didn’t seem appropriate.”

“See, Bob” Enos said and turned to the creative reverend. “We need Sid as mayor. He can take care of things.”

“I’m just looking at this from the moral dimension” Reverend Bob replied. “I’m looking out for Sid.”

“And that big check in his...” Enos said but was interrupted by Sid.

“Look” he said and raised his hand. “There’s a lot of questions. But with this kind of money, what’s there to lose? Besides, being mayor... you can... you know, make a difference for people with government problems. Like Elvis.”

“Or Sonny Carbone” Slick Willie reminded him. “What’s in it for him?”

“Some building permits, probably” Dick Olrog suggested. “Sid, I think you should go for it.”

“Yes” Sid agreed. “Let’s get started. Why don’t you become my campaign manager?”

“Excellent” Dick smiled. “I’ll get to work on setting up the campaign. But first... what party are you going to run for?”

“What?”

“Democrat? Republican?”

“Party? I don’t care about party. I’m not even registered to vote.”

“You’re not?” Dick asked, surprised.

“Me neither” the Reverend Bob noted.

“Anyone else not registered?” Dick asked.

Everyone raised their hands.

“Guys!” Dick exclaimed. “This is intolerable. You all have to register at once.”

“Why?” Elvis asked.

“Because otherwise you can’t vote for Sid.”

That was a good point, of course.

“What party do you think I should choose?” Sid asked Dick.

“Neither. You should run as an independent.”

“Doesn’t a party give you a lot of campaign support?” Slick Willie asked.

“Yes, but you also have to promote their ideas” Dick noted. “Plus, you have to share your campaign money with them.”

He pointed discretely at Sid’s jacket.

“And with that kind of cash... you don’t need party support.”

It was all agreed, then. Sid was going to run for mayor as an independent. Dick Olrog was going to be his campaign manager, Slick Willie would be his legal advisor and Elvis Zimmerman would be his advertising agent.

“What about you, Enos?” Dick asked.

“Enos will keep Mother Packer out of the campaign” Sid declared.

“Actually” Enos noted, “she might be useful. She’s got this uncanny ability to convince people.”

And that would come in handy for the campaign. But first, Sid needed to deposit Sonny Carbone’s check, so he could take them all out to a celebratory dinner at Mr. Squid.

* * *

Ernie was never happy to see his uncle Sid and Sid’s friends enter Mr. Squid. He knew they would do just about everything they could to squeeze a free meal, or three, out of the visit. But the businessman he was – or at least manager he tried to be – Ernie put up a smile that looked like he had paper clips in the corners of his mouth.

Sid, on the other hand, walked up to the register with a smile that would put Mayor Daley of Chicago to shame.

“Oh, no” Ernie blurted out.

“Hi, Ernie” Sid greeted him, his teeth doing a fair job of reflecting the neon light from the ceiling. “How is business?”

“It’s been good” Ernie replied.

He looked warily at the Piranha Club crowd behind Sid, trying to estimate the losses he would have to take from all the discounts they would try to squeeze him for.

“Until now” he added meekly.

“Well” Sid said and patted his nephew on his shoulder. “It’s gonna get better.”

“Sid, I’m not giving you any more discounts.”

Sid’s smile vanished like a \$50 bill in Las Vegas. His eyes turned wet, his mouth trembled and his breathing got short.

“Ernie” he stuttered. “My nephew... what makes you think I’d ever...”

“Stop with the sobbing, Sid” Ernie said, glancing at the door where a couple of more customers entered. “If you want to order something, you’d have to pay full price, like everyone else.”

Sid followed Ernie’s eyes, saw the growing line and realized he actually had an opportunity here.

“Well, Ernie” he said and reached for his wallet. “I am here...” and he unfolded his money-keeping leather “...to celebrate...” the smell of dollar bills filled the room “...that I am officially running for mayor.”

Ernie looked at Sid’s wallet.

“You have money?” he asked, astonished and a bit doubtful.

“A full dinner for every one of my friends!” he said. “Is this going to cover it?”

Ernie saw the stack of cash. He frowned, leaned forward, touched it with his index finger, looked skeptically at Sid, then picked it up and realized it was real cash.

“Sid” he said. “This is real money. How did you...”

“It’s a campaign donation” Sid explained casually and returned his wallet to the lockable inside pocket of his jacket.

“Campaign for what?” Ernie asked as the cashier started taking orders from the Piranha gang.

“Mayor. I told you.”

“Who’s running for mayor?”

“I am.”

Ernie giggled. He stopped and examined Sid's face, looking carefully for signs that it was all a joke. When he didn't find it, he giggled again and raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, alright" he said, still a bit reluctant to accept it. "I guess... congratulations. I guess..."

"Good" Sid nodded. "I might come back with some fliers for the campaign later, but now, we're just gonna celebrate the campaign."

The dinner at Mr. Squid was what a dinner at Mr. Squid always is. Somewhere between the ocean and a kitchen that had seen its better days. But it was Mr. Squid, it was local and it was the only place where Sid Fernwilter and his friends were still allowed to dine in without filing an injunction.

Halfway through the dinner, Ernie took his break and came over and sat down next to Sid.

"So, mayor, huh?" he asked.

"Yep" Sid said in between chunks of what legally qualified as fast food according to the state of New Jersey.

"My uncle, mayor of Bayonne" Ernie envisioned, sounding a bit impressed.

"Dick here is my campaign manager" Sid said, pointing to professor Olrog. "Elvis is the outreach manager, Enos will be assistant treasurer, Bob is our spiritual adviser, and Willie is of counsel to the campaign."

"Assistant treasurer?" Ernie asked. "Who's the treasurer?"

"I am" Sid said, instinctively placing his right hand over his wallet.

Ernie looked around the table and nodded.

"I'm impressed, Sid" he commended his uncle. "You really think you're running."

"I don't think I'm running. I am running."

"And we're gonna win" Dick Olrog promised.

"You should join the campaign" Slick Willie suggested. "A mayor can do a lot of favors."

"That's true" Ernie agreed. "About zoning and things, I imagine."

"Especially zoning" Elvis Zimmerman said, beaming a smile at Ernie. "Especially zoning."

"We could use that" Ernie noted, looking around the restaurant. "I hear there is a developer in town who wants to tear down this entire block and build luxury condos."

"Can I have a refill on my drink?" Enos asked.

"Sure" Ernie agreed reluctantly, grabbing Enos's cup.

"Me, too" requested Dick.

"Here, take mine too."

"And mine!"

"Here we go" Ernie sighed and walked over to the drink fountain without noticing the particularly well dressed Italian-looking guy who just walked in from the street.

* * *

"Mr. Carbone" Sid said and offered Mr. Carbone to sit down. "How nice to see you!"

"Likewise, Mr. Fernwilter" Sonny Carbone replied, smiled and took a seat at the end of the table. "Who are your friends?"

"This is my campaign team! We are having our kick-off dinner here."

Sonny Carbone looked around and nodded.

"Not too expensive" he noted. "A prudent way to spend campaign funds."

"This is Mr. Carbone" Sid introduced him to the rest of the group. "He is... ahem... a supporter of my mayoral campaign."

They all introduced themselves and made sure to smile with extra intensity.

“What a surprise to see you here” Sid said. “I was just going to contact you and schedule a meeting at my office.”

“Oh” said Sonny Carbone and examined his finger nails. “I was just taking a walk around the neighborhood.”

“This neighborhood?” Elvis Zimmerman blurted out. “What’s there to see here?”

“Not much” Sonny Carbone noted, giving Elvis a friendly smile. “Not yet.”

“You’re in the construction business, aren’t you?” Dick Olrog asked.

“Mr. Carbone is a developer” Sid corrected him, looking a bit sternly at Dick.

Dick opened his mouth to say something, then he noted Sid’s look and shut his mouth again. He tried to replace the inquisitive look on his face with a smile that would not look fake. It did not work very well, but Sonny Carbone seemed to be happy with it. He cordially smiled back.

“Anyway” said Sonny. “I must be going.”

He got up, corrected his tie and his jacket and glanced out the window.

“Oh, I almost forgot” he said and turned to Sid. “I am not very well versed in the building permit process here in Bayonne. Would you mind looking into it for me?”

“Of course!” Sid said happily while bravely sinking his teeth into the last couple of ounces of Mr. Squid’s highest priced dinner choice.

“Good” Sonny smiled. “I’ll be in your office tomorrow at nine.”

The campaign team finished its dinner on an upbeat note. Elvis and Enos even ordered to-go dessert. On their way out they all promised to get started on campaigning the following day and dispersed.

All but Slick Willie. He pulled Sid aside and waited until the others had left.

“Sid” he said, looking around to make sure nobody was listening. “I’m a bit worried about this Sonny Carbone fellow.”

Sid frowned.

“What’s there to worry about? He’s a businessman.”

Slick Willie looked Sid in the eyes, leaned his head back a bit and waited a moment. Sid’s frowning face slowly faded away.

“So” Sid said. “Even if he has a self interest in supporting my campaign... what’s the big deal? He wants some building permits, that’s all. Who doesn’t?”

“He’s the kind of guy who doesn’t take no for an answer” Slick Willie pointed out.

“What do you mean?”

Slick Willie leaned in a bit and lowered his voice.

“Really, Sid? You don’t see that the guy is a mobster?”

Sid scoffed at him.

“Don’t be stupid!” he blurted out. “He’s a developer and he has an Italian name. Doesn’t make him a mobster.”

Slick Willie looked around again.

“Well, I think you should be careful with him. And don’t take any more checks from him.”

Sid gave him a crooked smile.

“Slick Willie O’Haberman is telling me not to take free money.”

Slick Willie looked down at his feet and shook his head.

“Well...” he muttered. “At least be a bit cautious. I smell a rat.”

“And I smell the mayor’s office” Sid said and walked over to Effie’s car.

“What happened to your car?” Willie asked, stopping next to the driver’s door as Sid got in.

“I sold it” Sid explained.

“To whom?”

“That Wurlitzer kid.”

“How much did he pay you?”

Sid said something while starting the car. Slick Willie couldn't hear him. The engine made loud noises, the kind that a car makes on its death bed. It sputtered, whined and quit for good.

“Just what I needed” Sid muttered. “Now I have no car.”

“Buy a new one” Slick Willie suggested while checking his watch. “I gotta go home.”

“We just had dinner” Sid reminded him and got out of the car again.

“No, it's Married with Children on TV. Come on, I'll give you a ride home.”

They started walking down the street.

“Why don't you just let Elvis pick you a new car tomorrow?” Slick Willie suggested.

“Elvis? Are you kidding me? No, I need something reliable, especially if I am going to run for mayor.”

Slick Willie's face lit up.

“Hey! Get a campaign car!”

“Buy a car for campaign cash? Is that legal?”

Slick Willie unlocked his car while putting on his best President Nixon smile.

Sid saw the smile.

“So not legal” he concluded.

“I'd be more worried about Sonny Carbone than a car” said Slick Willie as they got in the car.

Sid thought for a moment.

“You have a point” he said. “I am running for mayor. So I'm going to need a car.”

“And if it's not legal we'll just sell it again when you win the election” Slick Willie suggested.

“And if I like the car I can sell it to the city” said Sid. “And use it as the mayor's car.”

“This campaign can't fail” Slick Willie said confidently as they drove off.

* * *

Elvis was incensed.

“A Lexus? You bought a Lexus?”

His face was almost tomato red. It was actually an improvement, adding to his overall ketchup bottle proportions.

Sid looked at Elvis with a quiet, confident smile on his face. They were standing outside the office at Elvis Zimmerman's car dealership. It was too early in the morning for anyone to get upset, so Sid didn't take Elvis's feelings very seriously.

“You don't sell imports” Sid said.

“I do sell imports!” Elvis pointed out, still angry.

“Elvis” Sid said and put his hand on his friend's shoulder.

He was interrupted by a screeching sound from around the corner.

“What's that?” Sid asked.

“Oh, just Arnold Arnoldski” Elvis said and rolled his eyes. “He's been trying to build this bungee-jump thing all week.”

“Oh, that” Sid said a bit meekly.

“Didn't you and Enos get into that business?” Elvis asked, squinting at his friend.

“Well” Sid said evasively. “Briefly.”

“What happened?” Elvis wanted to know.

“Uh, nothing really...”

Elvis was just going to ask a pertinent question when Arnold Arnoldski came charging around the corner, his arms up in the air, his hair flying all over the place and his face brimming with excitement.

“I finished it!” he declared ecstatically. “It works!”

“What works?” Sid asked, looking at his watch.

“Do you have to be somewhere?” Elvis asked. “You know, I’m still mad at you about that car. I’m your friend, and you won’t help a brother out when...”

“I am meeting with Sonny Carbone in half an hour.”

“It works!!” Arnold repeated, jumping up and down with joy.

“And stop being mad about the car” Sid said, though his voice did echo a little bit with guilt. Elvis caught on to it.

“You know” he said, shamelessly shifting his tone toward guilt shaming. “You could make it up to me.”

“You wanna see it?!” Arnold asked.

“How?” Sid asked.

“I’ll show you!” Arnold yelled and ran back around the corner.

“By buying a car from me.”

“Alright.”

“For every member of your campaign team.”

“What?” Sid asked incredulously.

Elvis looked at Sid with the exact same face that his dad had used when he wanted Elvis to feel guilty about having been out chasing girls instead of doing his chores.

Sid saw his face.

“I don’t have that kind of money” he tried.

“Your campaign has all kinds of money” Elvis reminded him.

“Come see me bungy jump!!” Arnold yelled from around the corner.

“Alright, damn it” Sid said. “How many is that? Four?”

“Let’s go see Arnold jump” Elvis said. “Then we’ll get some paperwork done.”

* * *

The problem with Arnold’s bungy jump wasn’t that he couldn’t jump. The problem was that he couldn’t stop jumping.

And jump he did.

“Deja vu” Sid muttered as he watched Arnold crash into the ground at the foot of his bungy-jump tower.

“This is actually funny” Elvis noted without smiling.

Sid agreed.

Arnold didn’t agree. He did nothing at all. He had turned into a sack of potatoes.

“I’ll get the paperwork for the cars” Elvis said and went into his office.

“Come on, Arnold” Sid said. “Get up.”

No reaction.

Sid rolled his eyes.

“Come on, Arnold” he said, slightly irritated.

A faint, gurgling sound came from the pile on the ground.

“I’ll be right there” Elvis shouted through the open office window.

Sid examined Arnold. A small wrinkle developed in the middle of his forehead.

“Arnold” he demanded.
More gurgling. A hand started moving a bit.
“Elvis” Sid said.
“Almost there. Just printing...”
A leg poked out from what could still be said to be the young Mr. Arnoldski.
“I think Arnold is hurt” Sid suggested, actually sounding a bit worried.
“I’m sure” Elvis chuckled. “There, that’s the last one...”
The pile in front of Sid made a hissing sound, then Arnold’s head popped out. His eyes tried to focus.
“I think Arnold needs an ambulance” said Sid, actually sounding like he meant it.
Elvis came out from his office, with a stack of documents and a clipboard.
“Oh, don’t worry about him” he said. “He’s been doing that all week. Practicing.”
“Practicing?”
The pile started moving. A foot made contact with the ground. A hand reached in somewhere and pulled out the other foot.
“All week?” Sid asked and grabbed Elvis’s pen.
“Yeah, he’s been moving the tower around, raising the platform, lowering the platform, tilting the platform... he’s been jumping like this day in and day out. Same result every time.”
Arnold’s hands and feet all reached the ground. He rocked a bit, then slowly got up. He slapped his own face a couple of times, took a deep breath and focused on his audience.
“He’s probably made fifty of those jumps” Elvis noted. “Here, sign here.”
“And same result each time” Sid noted and signed.
“Yep. And here...”
Arnold regained his balance and his excitement.
“Da capo!” he yelled and almost ran up the ladder again.
“Arnold!” Sid said.
“Yeah!” Arnold shouted while pulling up the rope again.
“How high up is the platform?”
“Eighty feet!” Arnold exclaimed and began tying the rope around his feet.
“And how long is the rope?”
“Eighty six feet!” Arnold confirmed. “I built it just like you taught me!”
He made two thumbs up and jumped again.
As he crashed into the ground, Sid noted:
“I bet people would pay money to see this.”
Elvis looked like he just got an idea.
“You know what?”
“What? I’m not buying another car from you.”
“You just bought six.”
“Six??”
“Why don’t we organize a campaign event?” Elvis suggested. “Right here, on my lot.”
“Why here?”
“You just said it. People would pay cash to see Arnold jump.”
Sid looked at Elvis. He turned and looked at Arnold. Or what was supposed to be him.
He turned to Elvis again.
“Sure. Let’s do it.”
“Sweet” Elvis smiled.
Sid examined his face. He noticed the sweat emerging from Elvis’s forehead. He saw Elvis licking his lips. His nostrils widened.
“Wait a second” he demanded.

Elvis looked at him with most innocent eyes.

"The campaign gets all the proceeds from the cars you sell" Sid requested.

"Sid!" Elvis gasped. "I'm shocked. How could you even..."

"All the proceeds."

Elvis looked at his friend for a moment, exploring his options.

"One third" he tried.

"Half."

"Deal."

Just as they shook hands, Arnold declared another Da Capo and darted up the ladder again.

"We'll charge five bucks to see him jump" Elvis suggested, watching Arnold tie the rope around his neck this time.

"Ten for a family" Sid proposed.

"Good idea" Elvis agreed. "But we'll have to put up a sign that says 'Don't try this at home'."

"Nah. Kids are too smart for that."

"I'm talking about the parents."

"What about them?"

"We don't want them to try this. They're the ones who vote."

"Voters aren't that stupid."

Arnold crashed again.

"I sell used cars" Elvis noted. "Trust me. They are that stupid."

* * *

Professor Wolkenkratzer looked at Dick Olrog with an uncomfortable smile on his face. He was a bald man who was trying to grow new hair across his scalp. The new hair had just about started growing and Dick Olrog did his very best to not laugh at his boss.

It was not easy. Professor Wolkenkratzer was shorter than Dick, so much shorter in fact that when good professor came right up to Dick, his newly hair-populated scalp ended right in front of Dick's eyes.

Professor Wolkenkratzer knew that he was short. He did not like being short. Whenever he spoke at some conference he put on shoes that made him look taller. But it was still not enough, so he started planting new hair on the top of his head so he would look a little bit taller, still.

His wife did not like it that he spent money on planting new hair on the top of his head.

"There is nothing wrong with being short" she said to him in a tone that reminded Professor Wolkenkratzer of his mother.

"Yes, there is" Professor Wolkenkratzer lamented. "People don't listen to me."

Mrs. Wolkenkratzer looked at him and thought for a moment.

"I'm taller than you" she reminded him.

"Yes, I know" the professor muttered.

"And I listen to you."

"Yes, well..."

"And besides" she smiled at him. "At least you are proportionate. You are short everywhere."

That was perhaps not the compliment that Professor Wolkenkratzer needed when he was going to go meet with Dick Olrog. Especially not when he had to remind Dick about Dick's need to be impartial and academic about his work.

“You need to be impartial and academic about your work” the good professor said as they were standing in the hallway at the department of political science at Bayonne City College.

“I am impartial and academic” Dick reminded him.

Professor Wolkenkratzer had not expected that response.

“No... uh... well, no you’re not” he said.

Dick frowned.

“What is this all about?” he asked.

Professor Wolkenkratzer looked around, then pulled Dick aside so their conversation would not be as easy to overhear.

“As you know” the professor proclaimed, “I am the chairman of the city board of elections.”

“And a fine chairman you are.”

“Yes, thanks... uh, but I wasn’t looking for a compliment. But thanks...”

All of a sudden, Professor Wolkenkratzer felt a little bit taller. He looked around and hoped that someone would notice.

“Well, if that’s all...” Dick said and turned to go back to his office.

“Uh, no” said Professor Wolkenkratzer. “No, actually...”

Dick looked at him with a grain of impatience in his face. Professor Wolkenkratzer took a deep breath.

“As you know I am the chairman of...”

“Yes, I know.”

“And we have received complaints.”

“About what?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why have you received complaints?”

“About what?”

“Me.”

“You? Yes, yes, right... There are people who complain that you cannot be an impartial professor and at the same time manage the campaign for a mayoral candidate.”

A couple of students walked by and said hi to Dick. Dick smiled back. Professor Wolkenkratzer looked after them as they left, wondering why they did not say hi to him.

“Of course I can” Dick said.

“Yes, of course you can” said Professor Wolkenkratzer absentmindedly, still looking after the students. “What?”

“Are we finished here? I have a class to teach...”

“Look” said Professor Wolkenkratzer and tried to grow another inch or so. “There is a perfectly fine Democrat candidate, and a perfectly fine Republican candidate. Why do you have to be the campaign manager for a third candidate?”

Dick shrugged his shoulders.

“Because he asked me to be.”

“But... but this is upsetting the balance in the election” Professor Wolkenkratzer tried. “Both the Democrat and the Republican are down in the polls, neither of them is doing very well at all.”

Dick examined him with inquisitive eyes.

“They are both very unpopular” Professor Wolkenkratzer explained.

“Why are you so upset about that?” Dick asked.

“About what?”

“The opinion polls.”

Professor Wolkenkratzer’s demeanor changed. He put on an uncomfortable smile, shrugged his shoulder and shook his head.

“Oh, nothing” he said evasively. “Uh, nothing at all. I was just thinking, expressing a thought, you know. Oh, is that the time? I have a class to teach.”

He took off toward his office in as brisk a pace as his short legs could muster.

“You don’t teach on Thursdays” Dick said after him.

* * *

Elvis Zimmerman had drummed up support from the entire Piranha Club. This fundraiser was going to smash all records.

Sid and Enos had brought a hot dog stand. Slick Willie and his paralegal Charon Outcaster set up a stage where kids could compete in a spelling bee. Charon got his overbite entangled in the microphone wires, but fortunately they were not connected to power.

Stan Wurlitzer had been assigned to charge people to watch Arnold Arnoldski do his bungy jumps. The Reverend Bob had brought four of his church members to sell raffle tickets.

“What’s the prize?” Elvis asked.

“What prize?”

“Raffle prize.”

“Why would there be a prize?” The Reverend Bob asked casually and went over to buy a hot dog.

Dick Olrog had brought a reporter with him.

“Pete Meconius” he introduced the reporter to Elvis. “He’s a reporter. And my former student.”

“What paper are you with?” Elvis asked.

“The Bayonne Tattler. I’m covering all the mayoral candidates.”

“He’s gonna write a great story” Dick promised.

“I hope so” Elvis grumbled. “Your paper charged a fortune for that ad for this fundraiser.”

“Elvis, you need a hot dog.”

It was Sid.

“Thanks, Sid” Elvis said and looked for a hot dog in Sid’s hands.

“They’re only five bucks” Sid said and pointed toward the stand. “Who’s the kid?”

“Pete Meconius” said Pete Meconius. “I’m the political reporter for the Bayonne Tattler. Are you the candidate?”

“I am” Sid said and tried his best President Nixon smile.

It did not look too good, but before he realized it, Pete had snapped a picture of him.

“Well” said Dick, looking around. “At least I think that ad worked. People are beginning to show up.”

They did indeed. Sid rushed back to his hot dog stand to help Enos out. Slick Willie and Charon Outcaster got the spelling bee going. Stan Wurlitzer put all his salesman skills to work to get people in for Arnold’s bungy jumps.

So did Elvis. Before noon he had sold eight cars, including an old Yugo that had been sitting in the back of his lot since the Raiders last won the Superbowl.

“I even sold your nephew a car!” he told Sid.

“Is Ernie here?”

"I am" said Ernie and proudly showed the keys to his new used Oldsmobile. "Doris likes the color."

"Hi, Sid" said Doris while carrying their newest baby.

"Buy a raffle ticket!" suggested one of Reverend Bob's parishioners. "Only five bucks!"

"That's a lot for a raffle ticket" Doris complained. "What's the prize?"

"Oh, you know, the usual" said the parishioner. "It's for a good cause."

"I don't know...." said Doris.

"It's for a good cause" said Ernie, smiling at his wife.

"We just bought a new car" Doris reminded him.

"A used car, honey."

"A new used car..." Doris agreed, still looking skeptical.

"We will win something good, right?" Ernie asked the parishioner.

"Of course! Just five bucks!"

"Alright..." Doris agreed reluctantly.

The parishioner dashed over to The Reverend Bob. Just as Dick Olrog and Pete the reporter walked by, she exclaimed that she had just sold her last raffle ticket.

"You know, I'm impressed" Pete said. "This fundraiser is a real success. Look at the spelling bee. Must be twenty kids there."

"Yes" Dick agreed. "You will have plenty of good stuff to write, won't you?"

"I sure will" Pete agreed as they lined up for a hot dog. "But I'd like to interview the candidate before I go back to the office."

The interview actually went down more easily than the hot dog.

"He is a nice candidate" Pete said as he and Dick were walking back to Pete's car.

"How does he stack up against the other two?" Dick wanted to know.

"Quite well, actually. In fact, there is a poll out that shows both the Democrat and the Republican are very unpopular with the voters. They say the Democrat is a crook and the Republican is a thief."

"Well, that certainly puts Sid in good company" Dick mumbled. "Well, I hope you have some nice material for a good article."

"Oh, definitely" Pete confirmed as they came upon Ernie and his family.

Doris was chewing out the Reverend Bob.

"In fact," Pete continued, "I'll be as bold as to say that Sid is the favor..."

"What do you mean no prizes!" Doris yelled at the good reverend.

"We forgot to set money aside for prizes" the Reverend Bob explained in a voice so soft it would put a baby to sleep.

"It's a raffle!" Doris shouted right in his face. "Raffles always have prizes! How could you forget to add prizes!"

Pete stopped and looked as if he wanted to hear the conversation. Dick Olrog got nervous.

"So, Pete" he said and gently pushed Pete forward by holding on his upper arm. "I'm glad to hear your article will paint a true picture of Mr. Fernwilter."

"I'm sorry, Ma'm, but..." the Reverend Bob said with honey all over his words.

"You're sorry!" Doris replied. "I'll show you sorry! Ernie! Get my cat from the car!"

Pete looked at them over his shoulder as Dick gently but firmly moved him along, away from the debate over the raffle finances.

"Well, no need to get upset now" the Reverend Bob suggested.

"You think I'm upset!" Doris asked. "Wait until you meet Bobo!"

"Were there no prizes in the raffle?" Pete asked.

"Oh, it's just a misunderstanding" Dick tried to say, imitating the reverend's dewy sweet voice. "So, we can look forward to a truthful article?"

They stopped at Pete's car. Pete glanced over at the Reverend Bob, who ran for his life toward Arnold's bungy-jump tower with a very determined cat a couple of inches behind his rear end.

"Oh, yes" Pete said. "A truthful article indeed."

* * *

It was too early in the morning for most of the men in the meeting room in the back of the Piranha Club. Perhaps the early hour contributed to the sour atmosphere, but the smoke, the lack of snacks and the broken pinball machine did not help. Nor did the article in the Bayonne Tattler.

"It's a disaster" lamented Elvis Zimmerman.

He sighed and got some McDonald's fries from his shirt pocket.

"It's your fault, you know" said Enos Pork and pointed at Dick Olrog.

"My fault? How is this my fault?"

"You brought the damned reporter to the fundraiser!"

"I thought we needed some press coverage!"

Sid raised his hands.

"Guys" he said and gestured at them to calm down. "No need to fight over this. We all know politics is a business for crooks and thieves and reporters. Dick was right to bring that Meconius guy. It was just unfortunate that he happened to overhear a conversation about the raffle."

Sid was right of course.

"How much money did the raffle bring in?" Enos asked the Reverend Bob.

The Reverend showed him the pile of cash.

"That much!" exclaimed both Enos and Dick.

"Financially we did well" Elvis confirmed. "It's just this publicity thing..."

"The press is killing us" Stan Wurlitzer complained.

"This is the kind of stuff you don't recover from" Enos muttered.

"You don't know that" Sid said. "Have you ever run a campaign before?"

"I ran for president of the American Medical Association."

"How did that go?"

"I got minus one vote."

"Which is where we're gonna end up if we don't recover from this" Elvis sighed.

The air in the room got more depressed. Even Earl was showing signs of hopelessness.

"Not so fast" said Slick Willie.

The others looked at him. The smile on his face was not a politician's smile. It was the smile of a lawyer who just realized that he was going to win his case.

Slick Willie basked in the sunshine of the attention.

"Well?" Dick Olrog asked.

"This reminds me of a client I had long ago. The mayor of Secaucus had been accused of tampering with city funds for his own gain. Nothing serious, of course, just a little extra travel money on the side. But the D.A. saw it fit to file charges, and, well, it got a lot of attention in the press."

"That could not have been good" Enos muttered.

“Well, yes and no” Slick Willie smiled. “People started looking at him in more detail, reading up on what he had done for the city. And they finally decided that he wasn’t all that bad after all. Especially not compared to the competition.”

“Great point!” Dick Olrog exclaimed. “You know, Sid, both of your opponents have very unfavorable ratings. The Democrat is a crook and the Republican is a thief. That’s how people perceive them.”

“How does that help us?” the Reverend Bob wanted to know.

“Sid is an honest crook” said Dick.

“I think I see where you’re going with this” Enos nodded and crushed out his cigarette. “At least with Sid you know what kind of crook you’re voting for.”

“Of course I am” Sid agreed.

The mood changed for the better. Dick started working on a new ad campaign. Slick Willie called the Bayonne Tattler and asked for a chance for Sid to make a rebuttal to the article. Enos went home to enlist Mother Packer in a door-to-door shoe leather campaign to talk to voters about how Sid was the honest crook in the race.

Elvis ran down to his cousin’s print shop and had him make new yard signs.

“The Crook You Can Trust” Dick read the sign.

“We’re gonna have one in every front yard in Bayonne” Elvis promised.

“That’s a lot of front yards to cover.”

“I hired Arnold. He’s already down in Bergen Point handing them out to people.”

And hand them out he did. Carrying more yard signs than he could count, Arnold rang the doorbells of every house on 3rd Street and explained enthusiastically that the residents just needed to put at least two signs in front of their house.

It worked better than anyone could have imagined.

“Aren’t you the bungy jumper?” asked one guy.

“I am!” Arnold confirmed.

The guy looked at him and chuckled.

“I saw you make three jumps” he said.

“So have three yard signs!” Arnold suggested.

The guy laughed.

“Sure, what the hell. I’ll take them.”

By noon Arnold had plastered the southern tip of Bayonne with so many signs Elvis had to run back to his cousin to print more.

“And the Tattler is going to run another story” Slick Willie explained as they all had lunch at Mr. Squid. “Sid, I even got you an interview with KRAP AM180.”

“How is Mother Packer doing with the voters?” Sid asked Enos.

“She is making them an offer they can’t refuse” Enos reported.

* * *

The front yard at Professor Wolkenkratzer’s house was immaculate. When he wasn’t trying to boss around the political-science professors at Bayonne City College he mowed his lawn, weeded out the weed, watered the flowers and manicured the bushes in front of his house.

It was a very nice front yard.

“You have a very nice front yard” said Mother Packer when the good professor opened his front door.

Professor Wolkenkratzer did not reply. He looked up at the impressively dimensioned woman on his front porch. She was almost so tall he had to look up past her boobs to see her face.

“Uhm... thank you” he said meekly.

“It would look much better if you put this sign up” said Mother Packer and handed him one of Sid’s yard signs. “And vote for him.”

Professor Wolkenkratzer looked at the yard sign.

“I’m a... I’m a registered Democrat...”

“Democrat, Republican, what’s the difference?” Mother Packer asked.

“Well...”

“That was not a question” Mother Packer explained.

Professor Wolkenkratzer looked up at her again.

“Okay, but I’ve already decided who I’m voting for.”

“Of course you have. You have decided to vote for Sid Fernwilter.”

“Uh... no...”

Mother Packer sighed, put her left hand on her hip, ashed her cigarette with her right hand and looked sternly at the professor.

“Look, son” she said in a low voice, as if talking to a peevish child. “I don’t have time to stand here all day. I’m a busy lady. You’re gonna go down there, on to your lawn, right now, and put this sign there. And then you’re gonna go change your voter registration so you can vote for Sidney Fernwilter for mayor. Understand?”

“But...” Professor Wolkenkratzer mumbled.

Then he saw the look on Mother Packer’s face and decided to keep the rest of that sentence to himself.

While Mother Packer and Arnold put their particular campaign skills to work to gently nudge Bayonne in Sid’s direction, Sid, Enos and Dick went down to the KRAP radio station for an interview.

The talk show host was an old dog in the game.

“I’ve seen it all” he explained to them as they sat down in the studio. “Crooks, thieves, honest candidates. Trust me, they’re out there. Somewhere.”

He sipped his coke and glanced at the clock.

“Time to go” he said, put on his headphones and turned on his microphone.

“KRAP, the home of the real talk here in Bayonne! With me here in the studio I have none other than Sidney Fernwilter, who is running for mayor. Sid, let me get right down to it. There was a not so flattering article about you in the Bayonne Tattler. It said that you held a raffle during your fundraising event without prizes. Is that true?”

“Yes” Sid said plainly.

“Oh, wow!” the host exclaimed. “Just like that! You’re admitting you are not entirely honest!”

“Sure” Sid said and grabbed a lollipop from his shirt pocket. “I’m a crook. But you know what, Paul?”

“What?” Paul said, looking with confusion at Sid’s lollipop.

“I’m an honest crook.”

“An honest crook?! Is there such a thing?”

“Of course” Sid said, inhaled and leaned back in his seat. “You know how the other two candidates portray themselves, right?”

“I’ve had them both on this show. They both say they’re as honest as a newborn baby.”

“And you know how the voters see them?” Sid asked rhetorically.

Paul nodded.

“Sure I do” he said. “People call me all the time yelling and shouting about the Democrat, and then they call and do the same about the Republican. All the time. And people call them liars, thieves and crooks.”

“Well” Sid smiled. “I’m not lying. I am a crook, sure, but I am honest about it. I don’t lie about bending the rules to my favor. I don’t hide the fact that I will do whatever it takes to get elected. I am open about the fact that I’d like to be mayor because I can do people favors. But you know what else?”

He finished his lollipop and dropped the stick in Paul’s coke bottle. Paul looked at his bottle with disbelief.

“I know what it is like to be a working guy here in Bayonne” Sid continued casually. “I grew up here. I know the ins and outs in this town, and I know there’s a lot of families and small businesses who are trying to make it here, but who are struggling because the politicians who run this city pretend to be for them, but aren’t really.”

“So do you have like a political platform or something?” Paul asked.

“Not really. But let me give you an example of what I’ll do if I’m elected. My buddy Elvis Zimmerman has a used car dealership. Great cars, really nice. It’s up on 41st and E, by the Shell station. Great cars, good deals.”

“Did you come here to make a commercial for a car dealership?”

“Elvis has a problem with the city” Sid continued, sounding like he was in court arguing a case. “The building code is getting in the way of his business. I’d like to help him out. And I’m sure there’s a lot of guys and gals with businesses all over the city who have problems like that. I’d like to help them out.”

“So you are for the little guy” Paul noted, actually sounding as if he liked Sid’s little speech.

“I’m a crook” Sid repeated. “Like all politicians. But unlike my opponents I am not afraid to admit it. They will tell you long stories about how honest they are, but a crook who says he’s honest is not an honest crook. I am an honest crook. I’ll tell you I’m not honest. I’m a crook. But I’m a crook who will make a deal with anyone. And when I make a deal, I stand by it.”

When they exited the radio station they saw a line of men alongside the house across the street.

“What’s going on here?” Sid asked.

“Isn’t the DMV in there?” Enos asked.

“This is actually an opportunity” Dick noted.

“How?” Sid asked.

“You could win over some voters if you go talk to them. You know, about government bureaucracy and stuff.”

The first man they talked to was not very talkative.

“I’m... uh... here to change my voter registration” he mumbled evasively.

“From what to what?” Sid asked.

“To... uh... independent...”

The next guy was about as uninterested in talking to them.

“Are you all here to change your voter registration?” Dick asked.

The line hummed affirmatively.

“Uh-oh” said Enos. “I think I know what’s going on here.”

He was right. The first thing they saw when they turned the corner was...

“Mother Packer” Sid blurted out.

Mother Packer was standing at the entrance to the voter registration bureau, staring sternly at the men in the line, pointing not-so-discretely at the door.

One man looked like he was going to break ranks. Mother Packer took one step forward, eyed him sternly and crushed out her cigarette with her right shoe. She moved her foot around a little bit as if to warm it up.

While eyeing the man's private parts.

"Please don't try to run" Enos prayed.

As if he had heard Enos, the man bowed his head and went inside.

Dick thought he heard a "good boy" from Mother Packer, but that might just have been his own self-preservation spirit talking to him.

Just as they were about to leave, Dick spotted a familiar face.

"Rufus?" he asked with surprise.

Professor Wolkenkratzer looked away.

"Rufus, what are you doing here?"

Dick thought he heard something about "change" and "voter registration", but Professor Wolkenkratzer's words were drowned out by Mother Packer's:

"Enos! I see you! You're not registered to vote! I know you're not registered! Get in line!"

* * *

"Yes, hello."

"Mr. Fernwilter? Sonny Carbone."

"Hello! How are you today?"

"I am well, thank you."

"What can I do for you?"

"I heard your interview on KRAP. Very good."

"Thank you."

"It certainly compensated for that article in the Tattler."

"Oh yes, well, you know how reporters are."

"Yes. I was considering making a phone call to the editor. But that probably won't be necessary. For now, at least."

"Thank you, Mr. Carbone. I appreciate your support."

"Yes. You are in fact now ahead in the latest poll, with a fairly good margin to the other two."

"The campaign is working hard."

"Well, I was thinking about what you said about making deals."

"Sure."

"I do appreciate your openness to helping business grow in Bayonne. Very good. We are all for that."

"Thank you. Yes, that's what I want to do, of course."

"I would like to make a deal with you."

"Sure. How can I help?"

"Well, my business partners and I have been eyeing Bayonne for some development projects, including building a large block of upscale condominiums. It would be near the 45th Street train station, and also access to Route 440 and the Turnpike."

"For commuters, of course" Sid nodded into the phone.

"Yes, I'm glad you understand" Sonny Carbone smiled back through the phone. "Now, this is a fairly large project with a considerable investment, and obviously not something we can do without long-term commitment from the city."

“Of course.”

“So now that it looks like you are the frontrunner I would like to propose an agreement, a bit more formal perhaps than just a handshake.”

“What kind of deal?”

“You would pledge to use all city resources to make sure our project can go ahead.”

“I’m not sure I can do that until I am elected.”

“Oh, it’s just a memorandum of understanding between you and me.”

“Well, like I said, I’m willing to make a deal with anyone. But I should really be in office first, shouldn’t I? This sounds a bit capricious to me.”

“Let me send one of my associates over with a formal document. For your review, of course. Then you can decide which way you want to go with this.”

An hour later a man knocked on the door to the Piranha Club. Stan Wurlitzer opened. Stan looked at the man outside without uttering a word. Then he said ‘one moment’ and went back inside.

“What’s the matter?” Sid asked. “You looked like you just saw a ghost.”

“It’s the horse head” Stan whispered.

“What about it?”

“At the door. It’s the horse head.”

“Why would someone leave a horse head at our door?” Sid frowned.

“No, he’s here. He wants to talk to you.”

Sid looked at Stan to see if Stan was still within possession of all his faculties.

“I’m calling Enos” Sid said. “No one tells me a horse head wants to talk to me without having gone over the edge.”

“He’s a lawyer” Stan insisted. “And he’s at the door.”

The man at the door did not at all look like a horse head. He had an impeccable Italian suit, a dark hat, meticulously maintained shoes, a briefcase and a face so void of expressions that it would make Death Valley look lively.

“Mr. Fernwilter” he said in a somewhat raspy voice.

“Yes.”

“I have a document for you.”

He hauled out a piece of paper that said ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ with Sid’s name at the bottom, right under a line where his signature was supposed to be.

“Sign here” the horse head explained and pointed to the line.

“I’d like to read this first” Sid replied.

“It’s not complicated” the horse head pointed out.

“Still” Sid insisted and started reading the document.

The horse head reached into his briefcase.

“Mr. Carbone asked me to give you this” he said and handed Sid an envelope.

The check inside had so many numbers on it that the entire Piranha Club came wandering, noses up in the air, all the way from the back regions of the clubhouse to the entrance.

“Where do I sign again?” Sid asked.

“Here. Thank you. Here is your copy. Goodbye.”

“Another donation?” Elvis asked.

“A big one” Sid said, his palms sweating so bad he could barely hold the check.

“What’s that piece of paper?” Slick Willie asked.

“Some memo of understanding” Sid said absentmindedly and gave it to Willie. “I have to go deposit this check before I wake up from this dream.”

“Sid...”

“This campaign is on fire” Sid smiled and opened the door to leave.

"Sid" Slick Willie insisted.
"What?"
"Do you know what this contract says?"
"It's a memorandum of understanding."
"Do you know what you are understanding to do?"
"Help Carbone out with some development project" Sid said and started walking down the stairs to his car.
"You're promising to tear down a whole bunch of businesses."
"I'm sure it will all be for the better."
"Including Mr. Squid."
"Bayonne can do better" Sid declared, got in his car and sped off to the bank.
Slick Willie turned to Stan Wurlitzer.
"Why is he called the horse head?" he asked.
"Oh, he and my dad had some business dealings" Stan explained. "Apparently, my dad had... uh, acquired a car that... I guess... belonged to some guy the horse head was working for, and that guy wanted to, well, you know..."
"Get his car back?"
"That's one way to look at it."
"So what about the horse head? He sure doesn't look like a horse."
"Well, my dad was kind of fond of the car. He wanted to keep it. So... uh, well... one night when he got home he found a horse's head in his bed. The next day the horse head... uh, that lawyer... stopped by and asked if dad had thought anything more about the car."

* * *

The dining room at Mr. Squid was almost full. Business was good, so good in fact that Ernie had to leave the manager's room to help out getting orders from the kitchen to the dining room.

Every employee needed Ernie's help.
"Ernie, we need more fries from the freezer!"
"Ernie, register three is out of change!"
"Ernie, the drive thru line is out in the street again!"
"Ernie, get the shotgun! This squid is still alive!"
At least, they were making money. Lots of money. Ernie looked at the volume of orders and made a quick estimate of this month's bonus.
"It will pay for the new Oldsmobile" he said to himself as he refilled the drink fountain with sea salt water.
A customer took a sip and frowned.
"What is this water??"
"It's a new drink, exclusive to Mr. Squid" Ernie explained.
The customer looked at him skeptically.
"Sea salt water. Very healthy."
The customer still looked skeptical.
Ernie sympathized. The drink was terrible. But it was Ernie's job to sell it, and sell it he would. He needed that bonus check.
"It's very popular in Europe" he tried with an artificial smile.
"Oh" said the customer approvingly. "Okay. Actually, it's not that bad."

When he caught a five-minute break and sat down the manager's office, he put his feet up and closed his eyes. 'I needed this' he thought.

On the other side of the window to the kitchen, activity was winding down. The dinner rush was over and his employees could relax a bit.

Ernie rested for exactly 34 seconds before the phone rang.

It was Doris.

"Honey, do you want fish sticks or chicken nuggets for dinner?" she asked.

"Uhm..." Ernie said and glanced out the window at the restaurant kitchen.

They had already had Mr. Squid dinner two nights this week. He did not want Doris to have to eat it again.

She deserved better. But the choice between fish sticks and chicken nuggets was not Ernie's idea of his wife deserving better.

"I'm good with either" Doris said in a voice that made Ernie realize that she was really trying.

"Honey, pick whatever you want" Ernie said. "I'm good with either."

"Okay" said Doris. "I'll go with fish sticks. Can you stop by Rock Bottom Prices and pick up diapers?"

"Do we really need to shop there?" Ernie asked. "Their diapers aren't that good."

"I don't think we can afford any other" Doris said, sounding sad.

"I'm sorry" Ernie said and felt bad for his wife.

"Honey, I know you work so hard" Doris comforted him. "It's okay, we'll manage."

"I think we'll get a nice bonus next month" Ernie tried to cheer her up.

"See? We'll manage."

Ernie sat for a moment and stared into the wall. He was amazed at how supportive Doris was. He did not bring home much money. A lot of guys could bring home more. But she loved him anyway.

Not all guys were as lucky as he was. In fact, no one was as lucky as he was, because no one else was married to Doris Husselmeyer.

He was going to work even harder for her. He was going to climb to the next level. He was going to become district manager and make a lot more money. He was going to do it for Doris. And for their kids: Fillmore and Millard.

A knock on the office door ripped him out of his thoughts.

"Ernie, there's a guy at the register who wants to talk to you."

It was the Italian guy again. Ernie hesitated a moment, wondering what he was doing in the restaurant. He didn't look like he wanted to order dinner. But the professional manager he was, he put on a salesman smile - as best he could under his mustache - and went up to the register where Sonny Carbone was waiting.

"Mr... Carbone, right?" he asked. "What can I do for you?"

Sonny Carbone greeted him with a restrained smile. His attire was impeccable, as always, and his hair as slick as anyone could wish for.

"Thank you for taking the time" he said and shook Ernie's hand. "How is business?"

"Oh... well, business is good."

"I'm glad to hear that" Sonny Carbone replied, clearly uninterested in the answer.

He looked around in the dining room. Dinner rush hour was tapering off, and only a few guests were eating in.

Ernie got an eerie feeling from the visitor. But the loyal establishment manager he was he did not say anything. He just waited, patiently, to see what Sonny Carbone had on his mind.

He did not have to wait long.

"I am a real estate developer" Sonny explained. "I am interested in this building. I was wondering if you could tell me... does it have a basement?"

"Uh..." Ernie said, trying to recall if he had seen any stairs down to a basement. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I think it does."

"Could I see the basement, please?"

"I am not sure... but I am sure the landlord can show it to you."

"Yes, I'm sure" Sonny Carbone smiled. "But I would like to get an idea of its layout before I make my investment."

"Are you planning on buying the building?" Ernie asked, surprised. "I was not aware it was for sale."

"Oh, it isn't. I just want to know if there is a suitable foundation for new construction."

Ernie looked at Sonny Carbone in disbelief.

"New constr... but... you would have to tear down..."

"Yes" Sonny said indifferently, looking toward the back of the restaurant. "Is there a stairway down to the basement?"

"You mean, you would... but that would... what about Mr. Squid?"

"May I see the basement, please?"

* * *

With the latest donation to his campaign, Sid could buy his campaign a big, new ad blitz. His face turned up on billboards all over Bayonne, from Cullies Woods to Bergen Point. The readers of the weekend edition of the Bayonne Tattler were treated to a full-page ad with Sid's smile under the bold headline "I'll Make You A Deal!" The local TV stations blasted 30-second pieces with endorsements by regular Bayonniers.

Enos watched the ad with Sid and Slick Willie at the Piranha Club.

"That kid looks a lot like Doris Husselmeyer's baby brother" Enos noted. "What's his name?"

The kid explained:

"I don't know Sidney Fernwilter. My sister is not married to his nephew. But if she was married to Sid's nephew, I would endorse Sidney Fernwilter for mayor."

"It's not him" Sid claimed. "But if it was him, his name would be Spencer."

"And that guy..." Slick Willie noted. "Isn't that Elvis's cousin?"

A man that looked like he had been sleeping in the park the past six months stared into the camera and showed off a compelling bumped-tooth smile.

"I have never met Sidney Fernwilter" he proclaimed. "But if I had met him, I would endorse him for mayor. Is that good? I gotta go cash your check before I..."

"It's not him" declared Sid. "But if it was him, his name would be Hubert Zimmerman."

An old lady smiled into the camera.

"My name is Effie" she said. "I don't know Sidney Fernwilter, who has never rented a room from me. But if he had rented a room from me, I would have invited him for dinner. I make a fantastic squid stew!"

A voice that sounded a lot like the Reverend Bob declared:

"Sid Fernwilter... the mayor you can make a deal with!"

The ad campaign worked. When the first poll came out after the weekend Sid was ahead by a solid ten points. News organizations from outside Bayonne began paying attention. Sid's campaign headquarters, which seemed to overlap closely with the Piranha Club, started

getting calls from New Jersey TV, Fox News, CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS, PMS, OMG and even the New York Daily News.

"You should talk to the media" Dick Olrog suggested. "It's always good to get your word out."

"I am getting my word out" Sid noted. "We've got ads all over town."

"Journalists are vain people" Dick pointed out. "They might not like being snubbed."

Sid considered Dick's advice, but only until the next phone call.

"Sid, Sonny here."

"Hi, Sonny. How are you?"

"I'm good, thank you. I see you are well ahead in the polls. Good work, my friend."

"Thank you. We couldn't do it without you, you know."

"Oh, my pleasure. But I was just wondering... are you planning on talking to the media? You know, give interviews?"

"I am considering it."

"Because they could ask questions."

"What questions?"

"About deals you would make."

"I would make a lot of deals."

"Of course you would. Well, it's your decision, of course. It would just be unfortunate if the media asked about certain deals.... such as real estate development deals."

"Oh" Sid blurted out. "Oh, yes, of course. No, that would be unfortunate."

"Perhaps if I may suggest..."

"Of course."

"Maybe it would be prudent to refrain from interviews. Just to be on the safe side. Question wise."

"Question wise. Of course, Sonny."

To make sure no interview requests were processed, Sid hired Arnold to answer phones at the campaign headquarters. It worked brilliantly. Neither Arnold nor the journalists who talked to him understood anything of the conversations that transpired. And Sid could not be happier. He could spend his days planning who he was going to appoint to what job in the city administration. He wanted reliable people. People he could trust. People who would further the city's interests.

As Sid interpreted them.

The only problem was that Dick Olrog's instinct about the journalists happened to be correct. The next day the phone rang over at the Democrat candidate's office.

"Yes, Yoder Adamski's campaign office."

"Hi, it's Kelly Dirdigger from the Tattler."

"Hi, Kelly, how are you?"

"I'm good. Hey, listen, I just got a call from a friend who works for Fox News. He said that Sid Fernwilter isn't giving any interviews."

"That's strange. He's ahead in the polls. But we would be happy to do an interview."

"Yes, of course. I'd like that, too. But I was wondering... it seems a bit strange to me that a candidate doesn't give interviews. Have you guys looked into why he doesn't want to do that?"

"Uh... no."

"Well, you see, I was thinking... maybe he is hiding something."

A couple of minutes later the phone rang at the Republican candidate's campaign office.

"Hello, Walt Schadenfreude's campaign office."

"Hi, it's Kelly Dirdigger from the Tattler."

"Hi, Kelly, how are you?"

"I'm good. I just talked to a friend over at Fox News. Sid Fernwilter has stopped giving interviews."

"That's strange."

"I know."

"He's ahead in the polls."

"We would be happy to do an interview."

"Yes, of course. But it seems a bit strange that a candidate doesn't give interviews. Do you know why he doesn't do that?"

"No. Do you think he might be hiding something?"

And so, by pure coincidence, both the Democrat and the Republican mayoral campaigns started asking questions in media about why Sid Fernwilter refused to give interviews. Was he hiding something? Was he afraid of journalists? Was he really a closet New Yorker who did not even live in Bayonne?

The last question was especially effective. Bayonniers were proud of their city, but they were also proud of their state. When a rumor started spreading that Sid Fernwilter was really a New Yorker, his poll numbers plummeted.

"You have got to give interviews" Dick Olrog insisted.

"No" Sid also insisted.

"Why not?"

"Because they might ask questions."

"That's what they do in interviews."

"Yes, but not those questions."

"What questions?"

"About deals."

"You are the deal-making candidate" Dick reminded him.

"Why don't we just do another ad campaign?" Elvis Zimmerman suggested.

"That won't help" Dick said. "They will just keep saying that we're hiding something because we don't want to give interviews."

"Of course we're hiding something" Slick Willie pointed out.

"Like what?" Dick asked.

"Like that deal with Sonny Carbone."

"Yes, of course we are hiding that" Dick agreed, slightly irritated. "But we have to be able to do two things at the same time here. We have to talk to the media without talking about the Carbone deal."

They thought about it.

"We can't go out and say that Sid wants to make a deal with anyone" Enos pointed out. "Because we already did that."

They thought about it some more.

"What about promising something for everyone?" the Reverend Bob asked. "You know, like free mental care or a free car for everyone."

"Free mental care?" Sid asked. "We'd have to spend all the money on politicians."

And they thought about it even more.

And then - Elvis Zimmerman got an idea:

"That Carbone fella, he wants to build condos, right?"

"Lots and lots of condos" Sid confirmed.

"Why don't we get him to give city residents a discount?"

"Like a subsidy?" Dick asked.

"No... yeah... like a subsidy."

"How would that work?" Slick Willie wanted to know.

"The city pays their down payment" Elvis suggested. "Ten percent or so."
Sid got so excited over the idea that he almost swallowed his mustache.
"Elvis, you genius!" he exclaimed. "I'd buy a car from you if I trusted you! That's a brilliant idea."

* * *

It was a brilliant idea, of course. The only problem with it was Professor Wolkenkratzer. Dick ran into him in the hallway at the department of political science. The impressive professor, who stood 5'6" on a sunny day wearing his well-heeled shoes, explained plainly:

"That's a very bad idea."

"It's a very good idea" Dick insisted.

"The city budget is in the tank. Where would they get the money from?"

Dick did not believe him. He called his city councilman.

"The city budget is in the tank" the city councilman told him. "Where is the city going to get its money from?"

Dick did not believe him either. He called the city finance director.

"Why are you calling me anyway?" the city finance director asked. "I'm gonna raise your property tax."

"Is the city budget in the tank?" Dick wanted to know.

"You bet. We have a big budget deficit. We're going to talk about it at the city council meeting tonight."

And that was how Dick Olrog ended up going to a city council meeting for the first time in his life.

The city finance director was there. He was a short, stocky, bald and grumpy man who was full of beans and void of humor. Dick approached him with his hand out.

"Dick Olrog" said Dick Olrog. "I called earlier."

The city finance director had a folder under his right arm. He looked at Dick with grumpy eyes and made a grumpy face. He did not shake Dick's hand.

"It's a big budget deficit" the finance director grumped.

Next to him was a tall, slender man with carefully manicured nails, an impeccable hairdo and a professional suit.

"Mayor" Dick said and offered the mayor his hand.

The mayor shook Dick's hand while looking a bit confused.

"Dick Olrog" grumped the finance director.

"Sid Fernwilter's campaign manager" Dick explained.

"Oh, right" said the mayor, let go of Dick's hand and put on his best toothpaste commercial smile.

The city council was not very big. Eight members plus the mayor took their seats at a V-shaped table on a podium. The public sat on uncomfortable chairs, facing the city council members.

"Are you going to talk about the budget?" Dick quietly asked the finance director.

"You bet I am" the finance director nodded.

The mayor was still Colgate smiling when he opened the meeting. He went through the minutes from the last meeting and noted that they had decided to invite the finance director to explain the budget situation.

"And he is here today" the mayor declared, trying to outdo his previous smile while nodding to the finance director.

The finance director was sitting on the first row for the public, right next to Dick Olrog. He cleared his throat and muttered something that only Dick could hear.

Looking at the finance director made the mayor nervous.

"Alright, let's get right down to it" he said, speaking faster than the legal verbal speed limit. "We invite the finance director to give his testimony."

The finance director got up and walked the few short steps up to the witness testimony table. The city council members looked like they did not want to hear what he had to say.

"You guys probably don't want to hear what I have to say" the finance director opened. "But the city budget is in the tank and you have got to stop spending money. Or raise taxes. I don't care which. Just do something."

"Ahem, well, thank you" said the mayor and looked around the table. "Any comments, questions, anyone?"

A woman at the end of the left flank of the table raised her hand. She was dressed in brightly colored clothes, wore big, conspicuous glasses and had a big peace sign around her neck.

"Yes, councilwoman McVenster" said the mayor.

"Thank you, Mayor" she said. "Well, I am wondering where we could possibly cut spending. I don't see anywhere in the budget where there is a single penny we could cut. Except the police department, of course. I motion we raise property taxes. Especially on the rich."

A woman on the right flank of the table raised her hand. She was dressed in a dark blue pants suit, wore small, almost invisible glasses and a tiny cross around her neck.

"Yes, councilwoman McHöger" said the mayor.

"Thank you, Mayor. I have to object to higher taxes. People will just leave Bayonne. We can cut spending, especially on the city college and on cultural programs. Those are full of leftists anyway, so it won't hurt anyone to do it. I motion we cut spending. Especially on culture and education."

"But where would they go if we raise taxes?" McVenster asked. "Every city around us has higher property taxes."

"Taxes are high enough" McHöger argued. "We need to cut taxes."

"Spending is small enough" McVenster argued. "We need to spend more."

An uncontrolled conversation broke out among the city councilmembers. The mayor looked around the table.

"Please" he said and raised both his hands. "Please, order."

The conversation died out.

"We have two motions" he noted. "One to raise taxes and one to cut spending."

"No" said McHöger. "I want to cut taxes."

"And I want to increase spending" McVenster explained.

The mayor was confused. He looked at them both.

"But I just said that" he tried.

"No, you said the opposite" McVenster pointed out.

"But I said raise one and cut the other" the mayor tried.

"Right, but the other way around" McHöger corrected him.

"Around what?" the mayor asked.

"The other way" McVenster noted.

"Around which way?" asked the mayor.

"Just flip the raise and cut around" McVenster suggested. "Right, McHöger?"

"Left" McHöger agreed. "Flip them left."

"So cut one and raise the other" the mayor said, sounding happy again.

And so, the city council decided to cut taxes and raise spending.

On their way out from the meeting, Dick Olrog caught up with the finance director, who looked grumpier than when he had entered the room.

"So what do you think?" Dick asked.

"I don't think anything" the finance director declared. "I'm retiring in six months and then my wife and I will sell our house and move to Florida."

"But what will the city do to pay for all this new spending?"

"Go to the bank, as always" the finance director muttered. "And pay a sky-high interest rate. As always."

He muttered something inaudible, shrugged his shoulders and got in his grumpy old Plymouth.

Dick Olrog was not grumpy. He had just gotten an idea.

* * *

"You're crazy!" Slick Willie declared.

"I'm not crazy!" Dick protested.

"You are crazy! Enos! You're a doctor. Tell him he's crazy!"

They were sitting at the bar at the Piranha Club. Enos was tending the bar.

"It is my medical opinion that Dick is not crazy" Enos stated while pouring them refills on their cheap bourbon. "Why do you think he's crazy?"

"Didn't you hear what he just suggested?" Slick Willie said to Enos. "Dick! Tell him your crazy idea."

Sid came in and walked up to them.

"What crazy idea?" he asked.

"It's not crazy" Dick insisted.

"What's not crazy?"

"I know how we can get your condo-for-everyone idea financed."

Sid's face shone like the sun. He sat down on the bar stool between Dick and Slick Willie. Enos offered him a bourbon but Sid declined.

"Tell me all about it" he said and grabbed a lollipop from his shirt pocket.

"The city has a budget deficit" Dick explained while Sid peeled the plastic coating off his lollipop.

Dick looked at Sid's lollipop.

"Why do you eat lollipops?" he asked.

"Better than eating cigarettes" Sid mumbled.

That made sense.

"And they're going to borrow more money at a high interest rate" Dick continued. "You can promise to refinance the city debt at a low rate."

Sid thought for a moment.

"But what does that have to do with the condos?" he asked and dropped the lollipop stick in Dick's empty bourbon glass.

"Hold on to your hat, Sid" said Slick Willie and shook his head.

"You borrow the money from Sonny Carbone" Dick suggested. "Or one of his buddies."

"And then we use that money to buy condos in Carbone's building" Sid thought out loud. "Sounds good to me."

"Sid" said Slick Willie. "Are you sure you want to get more deeply involved with this Carbone fella?"

Sid turned to him. He looked at Slick Willie with squinting eyes.

"What exactly is your problem with Sonny Carbone?" he asked.

Slick Willie downed the last swallow of his bourbon, let it sink in and turned to Sid:

"He is too much of a gangster for my taste. I mean, sure, I'll do business with the Wurlitzer brothers, or I did while they were still around. And fellas like that, you know. But this Carbone fella... that's another league, Sid."

"How do you know he's a gangster?" Enos asked.

"Oh, come on!" Slick Willie burst out.

"I'm just saying" Enos replied. "He's Italian, he's from New Jersey..."

"He speaks with a Brooklyn accent" Slick Willie pointed out.

"He wears an Armani suit" Sid mumbled.

"He's in real estate" said Dick.

"Could happen to anyone" Enos objected.

"You forget that he has a crooked nose" said Slick Willie.

"Could happen to anyone" Sid nodded.

"I saw a baseball bat in his car" the Reverend Bob added.

"Could happen to anyone" Dick replied.

"Anyone" Enos agreed.

"I think it's time to scale back this Carbone business" Slick Willie insisted.

Sid thought for a moment.

"Dick" he said. "What are our chances of winning?"

"As the polls are now, you are in a dead heat with Yoder Adamski. And Walt Schadenfreude is only a few points behind. And he is copying your campaign style, so he's taking support from you."

It was a tough decision to make.

"Bob" said Sid and turned to the most creative reverend in Bayonne. "I need your moral guidance. What do you think we should do?"

"Well" said the Reverend Bob. "Let's all pray together."

They bowed their heads and clasped their hands for a prayer. Sid opened his right eye, glanced around the room and reached into his jacket to lock his inner pocket where he had his wallet. Right as he closed his eye, Slick Willie did the same. Then Enos. Then Dick.

"Dear Lord Almighty" said the Reverend Bob and squinted with his left eye to make sure his wallet was out of reach from his fellow club members. "We need your guidance in these difficult times. Please help us decide. Should we ask Sonny Carbone for financing for the city debt, or should we not?"

The Reverend Bob was silent for a moment. A dog barked in the alley behind the club.

"The Lord has spoken" the Reverend said, opened his eyes and smiled. "Sid, you should ask Mr. Carbone for financing. But on one condition."

"What?" Sid asked.

"Yeah, what?" Slick Willie demanded to know. "This sounds fishy to me."

The Reverend Bob looked at him with his most innocent eyes.

"Willie" he said honey-sweetly. "You haven't even heard the Lord's words yet."

"I'm a Catholic" Slick Willie muttered.

"So what's the Lord's verdict?" Sid asked.

"You should give Slick Willie and me dibs on the top two condos in the building" the Reverend Bob declared.

"Not a chance!" Slick Willie exclaimed. "I am not going to sell my lawyer's integrity for..."

He paused and glanced at Sid.

"Uhm... how tall is that building going to be again?"

"Forty floors."

Slick Willie looked around the room. He looked at the Reverend Bob. The Reverend Bob smiled pastorally.

"Forty floors" Slick Willie thought out loud.

"You can see Secaucus from up there" said Enos in a dreamy voice.

"From forty floors in Bayonne you can see Battery Park" Dick noted.

"Will it have a balcony?" Slick Willie wondered.

"A big balcony" Sid promised.

Slick Willie put on his most prudent, discerning lawyer's face. He wrinkled his forehead and pulled out his pocket copy of the New Jersey state constitution. He flipped scholarly through the pages.

"Alright" he said and pocketed the constitution again. "I voiced my concerns."

"They have been duly noted" Sid promised.

"Duly noted" Enos agreed.

"By the Lord Almighty himself" the Reverend Bob added.

"Good" said Slick Willie. "Well, in that case... I think I can reluctantly acquiesce."

* * *

The plan was a stroke of genius. It was two weeks to the election and Sid was surging in the polls. Once again, he was in high demand by media.

"I have always said I will make a deal with everyone" Sid explained to Pete Meconius from the Bayonne Tattler. "Look at this condo project. This is what you can accomplish when you can make a deal with everyone."

"But this is a luxury condo project" Pete Meconius objected. "What about the middle class?"

"I'll make more deals like this" Sid promised. "Until there is a condo for everyone in Bayonne who wants one."

"Even for me?"

"Even for you."

The only Bayonner who was unhappy was Elvis Zimmerman.

"I want one, too" he pouted. "Why is the Reverend Bob getting the top-floor condo?"

"Because he needs to be close to God so they can talk " Sid explained.

"Well, I want a condo, too. And high up."

"Is Arnold gonna move in with you?"

"What? No, of course not. Why?"

"Because I don't think the neighbors would like it if he started doing bungy jumps from the 37th floor."

Despite some grumblings from Elvis, the condo subsidy turned out to be a winner for Sid's mayoral campaign. Voters flocked to him in such numbers that the Democrat and Republican campaigns started getting seriously worried.

Yoder Adamski called Walt Schadenfreude.

"This Sid guy is a problem for both of us" he said.

"I agree" Walt agreed. "We should do something."

"I agree" Yoder agreed.

Coincidentally, Walt had an old fraternity brother from Cornell who was the editor of The Daily Skunk, a dirt-digging journalistic outfit with many creative reporters on its payroll.

"Of course we will investigate Sidney Fernwilter" the old fraternity friend said. "By the way, to change the subject completely... have you considered placing a very large, very expensive ad in our publication?"

And so it happened that both the Republican and Democrat candidates for mayor of Bayonne placed very large, very expensive ads in The Daily Skunk, a publication that had nothing to do with politics in Bayonne. It was, of course, a complete coincidence that The Daily Skunk dispatched no fewer than three of its investigative reporters to Bayonne to find out who this Sid fella really was.

Within eight hours of landing in Bayonne, one of the reporters called the editor.

"Man... ethically, this guy is like a rash all over the scale" he said, almost bursting with excitement.

"What have you got?" the editor asked.

The reporter gave him the rundown. The editor started hyperventilating.

"Oh... my... God..." he gasped. "Wow... I don't think even Richard Nixon had a rap sheet that long."

"Or Bill Clinton" the reporter said.

"You'd have to be mayor of Chicago..."

"We can have the story for you tonight."

"No" the editor said. "Why don't you get an interview with him, and confront him with that stuff. And bring a video camera. We could sell this to primetime news."

Sid was happy to sit down with the reporters from The Daily Skunk. But Dick advised him to meet them at his law office, not the Piranha Club.

"Those reporters are young" he said. "Not much older than my students. And young people are a bit sensitive. Some of the wall decorations, you know..."

Stan Wurlitzer disagreed.

"I'm young" he said. "And I think our decorations are great. Especially that one over there. She looks real nice."

Sid brought Dick and Slick Willie with him to meet with the reporters. After all, there were three reporters, so he wanted the campaign to be represented by three people.

The lead reporter could barely contain his excitement.

"Well" he said. "I should tell you that we are quite frank and to the point. Blunt, I guess you could call us."

"Good" Sid smiled. "I like blunt."

"Perhaps blunter than any reporter you have met before" the reporter declared with the confidence of a young man on the doorstep of his career.

"I'm glad to hear that" Sid nodded calmly.

The reporter paused. He was apparently a bit confused by the fact that Sid did not look even the slightest bit nervous.

"Well" he said, reasserting himself. "Let's get started. You are running for mayor, and... well, the people of Barone are very interested in..."

"Bayonne" Sid corrected him.

"What?"

"It's Bayonne" one of the other reporters whispered.

"What's Bayonne?"

"This city is called Bayonne" Dick Olrog explained.

"Right" the lead reporter said, absentmindedly. "Uh... so... yes, right... uh, so the people of Bayonne expect their mayoral candidates to be honest and trustworthy. And we have found..."

"No and yes" Sid said.

"What?"

"The people of Bayonne don't expect their mayoral candidates to be honest. They expect them to be trustworthy, though."

The lead reporter almost flew out of his chair.

"Aha!" he said with a big smile on his face. "So you admit that you aren't honest!"

"Name one politician who is honest" Sid challenged him.

"What? There's plenty of them."

"Name one."

The reporter stared quietly at him.

"Next question" Sid said.

"Uhm... right... next question. Amber, do you have the notes...?"

Amber handed him a piece of paper.

"Right!" the lead reporter said and regained his confidence. "Mr. Fernwilter, we have found evidence that you sold real estate in Florida to retiring Jerseyites."

"I did" Sid confirmed.

"But the real estate wasn't even in Florida. We spoke to a man whose parents had bought property from you, property that was actually in Georgia."

"Okefenokee" Sid confirmed.

"Exactly. So you committed fraud on them."

Sid shrugged his shoulders.

"Okefenokee is pretty darn close to Florida" he said calmly.

"But it's in Georgia!" the reporter insisted.

"Barely."

The reporter stared at Sid.

"But you didn't tell them the truth!" he insisted.

"And they wrote me a bad check" Sid replied. "In fact, I have it here..."

He pulled out a file from one of his desk drawers.

"See, here's the check" he said and showed it to the reporters.

"Oh" said the lead reporter. "That's odd... the guy we interviewed didn't tell us that."

"I'm shocked" Sid mumbled and put the file away.

"But there's another thing we wanted to bring up" said the reporter whose name was Amber. "You have practiced law without a license."

"Yes" the lead reporter agreed. "We spoke to a court clerk in Hackensack. It's illegal to practice law without a license."

"Depends on how you interpret the law" Sid noted.

The lead reporter looked at him with his mouth open. He could not believe this guy.

"And... what about the way the court interpreted the law?" Amber asked.

"Didn't seem suitable for my legal practice" Sid replied casually.

"I must remind you" Slick Willie said to the reporters, "that Sid is not practicing law right now. He is running for mayor."

"But in the past..." the lead reporter tried.

"Ancient history" Sid sighed. "Bygones are bygones. This is getting boring. Don't you have any questions about my campaign and what I want to do as mayor?"

* * *

"His poll numbers are up again!"

Yoder Adamski was pacing back and forth in his mayoral campaign office. He was a gangly character with a tall face and small, professorial glasses. His long, brownish hair, which he usually kept very tightly to his skull, was flying around with his speedy movements around the office. He looked to the left, looked to the right and looked to the left again.

"His poll numbers are up again!" he repeated. "How can this be?"

He gestured in frustration at his campaign workers.

"Do something!" he demanded and stopped at the water cooler. "Call someone!"

"Uh..." said his campaign manager, "who should we call?"

"Get me Averell on the phone!"

"Averell, sir?"

"From the Daily Skunk!"

He drank two cups of water without breathing.

"He botched this for me! No, wait, don't call Averell."

"Who should I call?"

"Schadenfreude! It's his turn to do something about this Sid fella. I tried, and I failed, because Averell botched this, and I gave him a great story, and we spent an absolute insane amount of money on that ad in his publication, and what did we get out of it? Tell me, what did we get out of it? A botched... Huh? Why are you giving me this phone? It's Schadenfreude? Hey, Walt! We gotta do something about Sidney Fernwilter! Do you have any ideas? Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Your brother in law? What does he... He's chief of what?"

And while Yoder Adamski and Walt Schadenfreude plotted their next move to stop Sidney Fernwilter from coasting into the mayoral office, Slick Willie O'Haberman cheerfully reported to Sid that he had made a deal with Padrino Financial Services.

"What's this deal about?" Sid asked.

"Financing for your condo plan."

Sid looked at the numbers. He looked at them again and wrinkled his forehead. He did not understand numbers, but if he wanted to be mayor he couldn't tell anyone he didn't understand numbers.

He handed the papers to Elvis Zimmerman.

"Elvis, you're a businessman. Take a look at this."

"The numbers are solid" Slick Willie reassured him.

Elvis looked at the numbers.

"Yep" he said. "Looks good to me. That's one hell of a great deal they're giving you. I should talk to these guys about financing for my business."

"Who is Padrino Financial Services?" asked Enos Pork.

"Some outfit that Sonny Carbone recommended" Slick Willie explained.

Elvis squinted and looked at top left corner of the the financial deal documents.

"Their logo..." he mumbled while munching on a potato chip. "A bit abstract but... Enos, what do you make of it?"

He gave Enos Pork the documents.

Sid smiled.

"Good job, Willie" he said. "So now we have that deal in place. All we need to do is coast to victory."

"Interesting" Enos said and held up paper against the light to get a better look.

"You are solidly in the lead now" Dick reported. "I can't see anything that would derail this campaign."

"Do you see what I see?" Elvis asked Enos.

"Yeah" Slick Willie agreed. "I mean, the only thing that could happen now is that you get arrested or something."

"Yep" Enos said. "That's exactly what I see, too."

"See what?" Sid asked.

"Their logo" Elvis noted.

"What logo?"

"Padrino Financial Services."

"What about it?"

"It's an equine head" Enos mumbled and gave the papers back to Slick Willie.

Sid looked at him for a moment and was just about to say something when someone knocked on the door.

"Open up! It's the police!"

* * *

The interrogation room was sparsely furnished, like in a Kojak episode. Sid was sitting on one side of the table, the two police detectives on the other side. A single light hang over a table that had seen its better days a long time ago. The smell of bad coffee seeped in through the vents.

Sid leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed across his chest and his face slightly irritated. He thought he would be more upset over being hauled away by the police like this, but he actually wasn't upset. Perhaps a bit annoyed, but not upset.

The two detectives, a pair of young punks with marine cuts and ambitious faces, looked at Sid as if they had caught a serial killer.

"Alright, Mr. Fernwilter" said one of them. "Let's get right down to it."

"Take a long hike" Sid replied calmly.

"What?"

"I am not in the habit of repeating myself."

"Are you insulting us?!"

"No."

"I just thought I heard you insult us."

"Imbecile."

"What!?"

"Now I insulted you."

The two detectives exchanged a look. One of them stared at Sid with a face that balanced narrowly between denial and fury.

"Can you believe this guy?" he whispered to the other detective. "You know, Mr. Fernwilter..."

He pointed with a firm index finger squarely at Sid's face. Sid did not flinch. He did not even blink his eyes. Even his mustache was calm.

"...I'm gonna nail ya!" the detective exclaimed. "You hear me! I'm gonna nail ya!"

"Alright" said the other detective, put his hand on his partner's arm to calm him down, and started playing the good cop. "Mr. Fernwilter... may I call you Sid?"

"My friends call me Sid."

"Good. Sid, we'd like to..."

"You can call me Dr. Fernwilter."

"What? Are you a doctor?"

"No."

"So why..." the good cop started, before he realized he had stepped in Sid's trap.

The bad cop's nostrils started vibrating. Sid found it fascinating.

"Uhm..." said the good cop. "Let's move on. We have an order for your arrest from another police department."

"Which one?"

"Hackensack."

"For what?"

"Performing a marriage without a license."

"Fascinating" Sid replied indifferently.

"We know you're guilty!" the bad cop declared.

"No."

"No what?" the good cop asked.

"You don't know that I'm guilty."

"Oh, yes we do" the bad cop chuckled.

Sid had been a sensitive sociology major in college. But while he was in law school he had taken a few night classes in philosophy, and become so fascinated with ontological reasoning that he had co-founded a club called "Society for the Study of Empirical Ontology". He had left the society when he founded the Piranha Club, but he was still fond of the field of study.

"No" he repeated calmly. "You don't know that I'm guilty."

"How can you be so damn sure?" the bad cop said, laughing.

"Because no guilt exists" Sid explained.

The good cop frowned and looked at Sid with confused eyes.

"What do you mean, no guilt exists?" he asked, sincerely curious.

"There is no guilt" Sid repeated. "I challenge you to find that guilt. Where is it? Can you find it?"

Instinctively, the two detectives looked around the room. Sid wanted to help them.

"Look under the table" he said. "Can you find guilt there?"

The two detectives looked.

"No" the good cop mumbled. "But that was not the point..."

"Is it perhaps over there?" Sid asked and pointed toward a small, empty bookcase. "There is no guilt there either."

"How can you be so sure?" the bad cop asked, pointedly. "How can you be so sure there is no guilt in this room?"

"Go have a look" Sid challenged him.

The bad cop got up, walked over the bookcase and looked around it. He pulled it out and looked.

"There is no guilt there, right?" Sid noted.

"No" said the bad cop. "But I'm still not sure there isn't a guilt in this room."

"Guilt" Sid corrected him.

"That's what I said."

"No, you said 'a guilt'. It's 'guilt'."

The good cop sighed.

"Siddown, Tom" he told his partner. "Well, we're gonna keep you overnight while we investigate this case. The Hackensack police department has asked to have you transferred there. We'll make a decision on that tomorrow."

"May your beard grow inwards" Sid told him.

The news of Sid's arrest spread like wildfire through the local media. KRAP interviewed both Yoder Adamski and Mark Schadenfreude, and both expressed relief that the crook and thief had been taken out of the race. The local TV stations dispatched their reporters to find local Bayonniers who would tell them what a scoundrel and hustler Sid Fernwilter was. When not a single Bayonnier wanted to tell them that, they made a beeline for Perth Amboy.

"It's hopeless" said one of the reporters, calling his editor. "I can't find anyone down here who has ever heard of Sid."

Hopeless was also the mood at the mayoral campaign headquarters.

"This is the nail in the coffin" Enos Pork lamented.

"He'll be whisked off to Hackensack tomorrow" Slick Willie explained.

"And sentenced, and..." Dick mumbled.

"How much time will he get?" asked the Reverend Bob.

"Not too much" said Slick Willie. "Although... with the high profile of the case, you never know."

"High profile?" Elvis asked. "Who the hell in Hackensack knows who Sid is?"

"Performing marriage without a license" said Dick. "Who did he marry?"

"Carruthers and Fifi" Enos remembered.

"You know" said Stan Wurlitzer. "If Sid goes to jail, it's not all that bad. We can make a lot of money off that."

Elvis Zimmerman turned to Stan and looked at him like a father looks at a son who just suggested that unicorns poop jelly beans.

"Stan..." he said.

"No, actually" Stan insisted. "See, my uncle actually came up with this idea for a business. Wurlitzer Insultative Services. It's a registered... whatchamacall it... crap mark."

"Trade mark" Dick corrected him.

"Right. Trade make."

Enos Pork leaned over toward Stan.

"What exactly is that?" he asked. "Insultative services?"

"You insult people" Stan explained. "And charge them for it."

"I don't get it" Elvis declared. "How do you charge them for it?"

"You charge them" Stan explained. "There's a lot of people in jail who dislike a lot of people who aren't in jail, but they can't insult them."

"I get it!" Dick shouted. "Stan, that's a brilliant idea!"

"How?" Elvis wanted to know.

"If Sid goes to jail" Dick said enthusiastically, "he will make a lot of new friends in there who dislike a lot of people on the outside."

"Yeah" said Slick Willie. "Stan just told us that."

"And if Sid charges the people inside, in jail, we can go insult those people on their behalf."

"Exactly!" Stan agreed. "That was exactly my uncle's idea."

"Did he ever get it to work?" the Reverend Bob asked.

"No, he couldn't find anyone on the outside who was willing to go insult people on behalf of a prison inmate."

"But we have the perfect guy to do that!" Dick said enthusiastically.

"Who?" the Reverend Bob wanted to know.

"You!"

"Of course!" Slick Willie agreed. "Who is better at delivering an insult than a pastor?"

"It's perfect" Dick chuckled. "Damn, we're gonna make a lot of money."

They all pondered the pending piles of cash. Enos fetched some drinks. Elvis daydreamed about buying an Escalade for his cut of the profit. Slick Willie wondered what a retirement home in San Diego would cost. Enos imagined himself on a beach in the Caribbean.

His image was shattered when Mother Packer got off the plane and started walking toward him. And his phone rang.

"Yeah?" he said

He gave Elvis a half-way horrified look and made the words 'Mother Packer' with his lips.

"Yeah?" he said meekly. "Alright."

He got up.

"Dinner's ready" he grumbled. "Better go home."

"Yeah, I gotta go down and see if Arnold has sold any cars today" sighed Elvis.

As they all slowly walked toward the door, Dick picked Stan's brain on what kinds of insults they might be delivering. The Reverend Bob was not sure he was the guy for the job, but when Stan told him how much some inmates would pay for some of the insults, the smile slowly returned to his face.

Down at the parking lot they all decided to meet the next day to discuss the constitution of their insultative services business. Just as they were all getting into their cars, Enos asked:

"So what about Sid?"

"What about him?" Dick asked.

"I mean... he's spending the in jail, still, isn't he?"

* * *

"Can I help you?" asked the front-desk clerk at the police station.

"William O'Haberman, attorney at law" said Slick Willie and handed the clerk his business card.

The clerk was transcribing some notes from one paper to another. She did not look up at Slick Willie.

Slick Willie put his business card back in his pocket.

"I'm here on behalf of my client" he explained.

"Uh huh" the clerk replied with microscopic interest.

"I'd like to see him now, thank you."

"And who's your client?" asked the clerk without looking up from her notes.

"Sidney Fernwilter."

The clerk dropped her pen, stared at Slick Willie like a wild animal was chasing her, and took a deep, long breath.

"Did you say Fernwilter?" she asked slowly.

"Yes."

The clerk got up, looked around and leaned over toward Slick Willie.

"Please, mister" she whispered. "Get that man outta here. On the double."

"I'm trying" Slick Willie replied.

"I'll get the sergeant" the clerk promised and dashed off into the back regions of the police station.

It took less than three seconds for her to return with the sergeant in tow. The sergeant was an older man, probably within a year or so of retirement, and looked very busy as he dashed up to Slick Willie.

"Are you Sid Fernwilter's lawyer?" he asked and grabbed Slick Willie's hand. "Thank the Lord you are here!"

He shook Willie's hand for at least half a minute.

"Can I see him?" Slick Willie asked.

"Oh, yes, and please get him out of here!" the sergeant said, his voice trembling. "Come with me."

As they walked back toward the detention cells, the sergeant again praised Slick Willie for his commitment to his client.

"I am just doing my job" Slick Willie noted casually.

"Oh, you are doing much more than that" the sergeant promised and opened the door to the detention section.

Right in front of them, on a chair in the middle of the room, sat a young female officer. She was crying profusely. An older officer was trying to comfort her.

"What's the matter?" Slick Willie asked.

"It's that Sid fella" the older officer muttered. "He insulted her."

"He called me an indolent wood louse!" the female officer cried out loud.

"A louse?" the sergeant asked.

"No!" the female officer cried. "A wood louse! And he made a point of it being a wood louse, too! Not a louse! A wood louse!"

"But you're not indolent" the sergeant noted.

"No..." she continued to cry.

"So what do you care?" Slick Willie asked.

The female officer looked up in astonishment.

"Look, sarge" the older officer said to the sergeant. "Half the day shift has already called in sick because Mr. Fernwilter insulted them. I'm hearing that the night shift won't come back to work until he's outta here."

"Well" the sergeant said. "I'll be happy to sign him out. Get me his paperwork."

The older officer fetched Sid's paperwork faster than he had ever done anything in his life. The sergeant went over to Sid's cell and showed him the form.

"Good news" he said.

"Strike good" Sid suggested.

"Actually" the sergeant replied with a smile. "It is good news. You're being let out."

"About time" Sid noted.

"There's just some paperwork first. Is your name spelled right here? What's your middle name? Pa... Pareto? Is it really Pareto?"

"You have opposing thumbs" Sid told him.

The sergeant looked at Sid.

"I don't!" he protested. "Stop insulting me!"

Sid wasn't entirely happy when he walked out with Slick Willie.

"I was just starting to make friends in there" he complained. "The guy in the cell next to me said he was so impressed with my insults he asked if I could insult some of his enemies when I got out. He'd pay me pretty well for it, too."

"We still have to take care of that illegal marriage thing" Slick Willie noted as they got in his car. "Who's Carruthers and Fifi?"

"Two monkeys" Sid explained and fished up a lollipop from his shirt pocket.

* * *

"Two monkeys?" Pete Meconius asked, shaking his head in disbelief. "Did you marry two monkeys?!"

He had caught up with Sid as his mayoral campaign made a stop outside the 99 Cent Shopping Mall. A lot of people came up to Sid and wanted to talk about his arrest. Everyone was positive.

"You know, Mr. Fernwilter" said one man. "I'm just tellin' ya, you got my vote. I'd rather vote for an honest crook than a guy who says he ain't a crook."

"Yeah, me too!" a woman shouted.

"Me, too!" another woman agreed.

Pete Meconius tried to stay as close as he could to Sid. He wanted an answer to his question about the monkeys. But when the crowd pushed him out he simply decided to wait until all of Sid's fans had congratulated him.

"See this?" Enos said to Pete. "See how popular he is? He's gonna be mayor."

"Yeah" Pete Meconius admitted. "But did he really perform a marriage ceremony between two monkeys?"

"Yep" Enos confirmed.

"Why?"

"Because otherwise their kid would be born out of wedlock."

Pete looked at Enos in disbelief.

"Sid believes in family values" Enos explained.

"That's one good good story" Dick Olrog added.

It was one good good story. Pete Meconius knew that he had to write it. Sure, he was not all that fond of Sid. Personally, he thought Sid was a crook, and his editor thought Sid was both a crook and a thief. They both knew that a positive article about Sid's monkey marriage would send Sid's approval ratings through the roof and probably win him a landslide in the election. But they also knew their readers. They knew that Bayonniers were church going people who believed in traditional values and the American way of life.

"Our readers also believe in the solvency of Social Security and that government isn't keeping any secrets at Area 51" Pete Meconius noted when he saw how popular his story was.

Sid had no time to check his popularity. He had Dick chauffeur him around Bayonne, from one end to the next, down the west side and up on the east. They stopped and visited businesses, shook people's hands, knocked on doors and left fliers in mailboxes.

"It's a week left" Dick noted as they returned to the Piranha Club. "You can't lose this one."

As if that wasn't enough good news on a day, Sonny Carbone was waiting for them at the bar.

"Congratulations" he said and shook Sid's hand. "Very well done!"

"Thank you" Sid smiled and sat down at the bar, next to Sonny. "And thank you for the deal on financing my condo plan."

Sonny smiled mysteriously.

"Oh" he said and shook his head. "You know, I just provided contact information for a business that... a good friend of mine runs..."

Stan Wurlitzer was tending bar.

"Scotch" Sid ordered.

"Just club soda for me, thank you" said Sonny.

He turned to Sid and smiled.

"You've done well with your campaign" he said. "I look forward to doing more business with you."

"Likewise" Sid smiled. "I'm sure there will be more projects in the future."

"Let's see how this one goes first. You see..."

He dwelled on the point for a moment. Sid looked at him and waited.

"There is just one little issue" Sonny noted, smiling corporately.

"What would that be?" Sid asked.

"The property tax here in Bayonne is... a bit high..."

"We can make sure it's cut" said Sid.

Dick Olrog intervened.

"I don't think that's a good idea" he said. "Not with the budget deficit we have."

Sonny turned to Dick.

"Don't you think a tax cut would be popular?"

"With some voters" Dick agreed. "But our two opponents would quickly come out and say that Sid is irresponsible because we already have a budget shortfall. Plus, we put this whole condo financing deal in place to get around the city budget."

Sonny Carbone turned back to Sid.

"You don't have to make any promises before the election" he said. "So long as your close friends can trust your good judgment once you are in office."

"Always, Sonny" Sid smiled. "Always."

Sonny Carbone was satisfied. He wished his candidate good luck and left. The campaign leadership sat at the bar and talked for a while. Sid made bold promises to them of jobs they would get, condos they would have, and even speculated about what the future might look like.

"Governor Fernwilter" he said, as if tasting the title like a fine wine.

With more than six out of ten likely voters backing Sid, the election looked increasingly like it was over.

It was time for another celebratory dinner at Mr. Squid.

* * *

It was the weekend before the election.

"You are way ahead in the polls" said Dick Olrog.

"You have this in the bag" said Elvis Zimmerman.

"You have my unwavering support" said the Reverend Bob.

"You have a lot of money in your campaign fund" said Enos Pork.

They all smiled at Sid. Sid looked at them and for some reason thought of President Nixon.

He needed a break from it all. He needed to relax.

"Why don't you come over for dinner?" his nephew Ernie suggested.

On a normal day, Sid would have asked "what's for dinner?", but this was not a normal day. He was also surprised to notice that he didn't even crave a restaurant dinner. Since his campaign started he had been practically rolling in cash. He had eaten so well that Slick Willie, Elvis, Enos and the others at the Piranha Club had started poking fun at him for gaining weight.

Ernie had not seen Sid in a while. He assumed that food was Sid's major concern.

"Doris is making lasagna" he said.

Sid looked at his watch. It was dinner time, no doubt about it, and all of a sudden lasagna sounded like a good idea. His campaign cash had allowed him to stay far away Effie's definition of a home cooked meal. At first, Effie had been offended by his absence, but from what

Sid heard she had soon made up for it by inviting an assortment of former husbands to share her creative culinary experiments.

Sid had enjoyed the finer dining opportunities in Bayonne to the point where the upper-crust Cuisine Pierre on JFK Boulevard had given him his own table.

He was definitely going to enjoy it all when he was mayor. But for now, Doris's lasagna sounded like the perfect dinner.

"I hear the campaign is going well" Ernie said.

"I'm ahead in the polls" Sid confirmed while wolfing down lasagna.

"How exciting" Doris smiled.

For some reason, Sid heard a tone in her voice that wasn't entirely happy. Was she a secret Democrat? A closer Republican?

"I hope you will both vote for me" he joked, sipping from his Coke.

Ernie and Doris didn't say anything.

But Millard did. He put his fork down and looked at Sid.

"Daddy says that... that you are going to take away his... his restaurant and... and that we are not gonna have lasagna anymore."

Sid looked at little Millard. He glanced over at Ernie. Ernie's face was frozen in the most uncomfortable smile Sid had ever seen. And he had been practicing both law and politics.

Doris gave away a nervous giggle. Fillmore, Millard's sister, looked at her brother with a stern face.

"Don't say that, Millard!" she cursed at him. "It's not nice."

"But... but it's true... it's true because daddy said so!"

* * *

It was a long way to walk from Ernie's house up to the Piranha Club. Avenue A was busy, but if you made your way out west on 24th Street you could actually find a walkway up through Veterans Park and Gregg Park. There, you could cut through the sports fields and find your way back to the Piranha Club without much fanfare.

But Sid didn't go back to the Club. He walked along the water, watching the boats on the Newark Reach and trying to get Millard's words out of his head.

He couldn't.

Sure, Sid was a crooked lawyer. He knew that. He knew he was never meant to be anything bigger than a small-town legal hustler who made it through the day on seedy deals and the occasional case he won by happenstance or slick instinct. He wasn't the best character in town, and he knew it. And he had his group of friends, who were all cut from the same piece.

But he didn't want to hurt people. Especially not kids. Millard was, what? Four years old now?

Where would Ernie and his family live? They would have to move out of their house, probably leave Bayonne. Ernie had grown up here. So had Doris.

Sid thought about his sister, Ernie's mom. She wasn't the smartest knife in the drawer, and the guy she had married wasn't exactly the kind you'd trust with a bad deal. Sid had always felt like he should take care of Ernie. He didn't know who - heck, he could barely even take care of himself. But he wanted Ernie to do well. And he was... well, proud... yes, proud of how Ernie had worked his way up there, at Mr. Squid.

Ernie fed his whole family on that money. He worked twice as much as Sid ever had, and he still managed to be a good dad.

Sid kicked a rock out in the water. A bunch of kids on their bikes came flying down the path, yelling and laughing and shouting at each other.

He imagined Millard with his friends one day.

He glanced over at the Bayonne skyline. Not that there was one, but he imagined what it would look like with Mr. Carbone's big condo building.

He couldn't do it. All he saw was a big pile of gigantic dollar bills, stacked on top of each other where the condo building would be.

For some reason, it didn't make him happy. It didn't make his palms sweat. Instead, he felt a burning sting against his chest. It was like his wallet was driving tiny needles through his shirt into his skin.

He took it out. He had five hundred in campaign cash on him.

A homeless guy was lying under a tree.

"Got a buck to spare?" he asked Sid.

Sid stopped. He looked at the guy. They were about the same age, but the homeless guy hadn't shaved in probably a year. His glasses were crooked, his shoes broken.

Sid shook his head.

"Not a buck" he said and opened his wallet. "Here, take it. Take it all."

The homeless guy looked at the cash with eyes so big they almost popped out of their sockets. He took the money, glanced through the bills and looked in amazement at Sid.

Then his face changed.

"It's fake, isn't it?" he asked.

"In a way" Sid said. "It's real cash, but... yeah, it's fake."

He put his empty wallet back in his pocket and started walking up the pathway toward the Piranha Club.

"Hey" the homeless guy said.

Sid stopped and turned around.

"Are you a lawyer by any chance?"

"And a politician" Sid confirmed.

When he got back to the Piranha Club he was met with concern for his safety.

"We were worried about you" said Ernie. "We thought you'd gone missing."

"Yeah" Slick Willie smiled. "Come on in, Sid! We don't want anything to happen to you!"

"Mayor Fernwilter!" Dick Olrog chuckled.

"Yeah, about that" Sid said, peeling the plastic coating off a lollipop he had fished out of his shirt pocket.

The others stopped. Their smiles dropped from their faces. There was something in Sid's voice they didn't like.

"Uh-oh" said Elvis Zimmerman.

"Sid" said the Reverend Bob. "I have been praying for you all day."

"Guys" said Sid and leaned against the wall. "I've been thinking."

"I'm not sure I like where this is going" Slick Willie mumbled.

They all looked at Sid. And waited. Cautiously.

"I think" Sid explained, "that in order to secure the city's finances... we are going to have to double all taxes."

The sound that followed was not a pin dropping to the floor. It was three Piranha Club members fainting and falling on top of each other.

"Sid" Dick Olrog whispered as he for air. "That... I sure hope you aren't..."

"I'm gonna hold a press conference first thing in the morning" Sid continued casually.

"But-but-but..." Elvis hyper-ventilated.

"That will lose you the election!" Dick exclaimed.

Sid nodded and tossed his lollipop stick into a trash bin.
"I'm counting on it" he said and went over to the bar. "A screwdriver, please."