

Murder in the Propaganda Factory

By William S. Klein

Author's Note

Everything in this book is true, except for the parts that aren't.

By this I mean, most of the people, places, events, buildings and furniture are real. I made up the murder.

Chapter One

I was watching the naked pollster in the window across the street when the telephone rang.

"Is Tommy Foot taking in the fresh air again?" It was my pal Peter Kelley, a flack for environmental groups and occasional paying client of the Propaganda Factory. Peter was one of the two or three thousand close friends with whom I'd shared the news after I looked across Connecticut Avenue one day and discovered how the networks' favorite pollster liked to relax before a big interview.

"It looks like he's got a video on today," I leaned against the window. "Forget it, he's closing the blinds."

"How would you like Abbie Hoffman's desk?"

"Abbie Hoffman's desk? Are you serious?"

"Mostly. It really was Abbie's desk, but the truth is a little complicated. I'll tell you the whole story when you get here. But you have to hurry."

Even better. I like complicated truth, although I prefer my truths simple, straightforward, and about as subtle as a brick wall. I'm a propagandist by trade, and truth is my most powerful weapon.

People think "spin doctors" like me lie all the time, but the best way to manipulate the media is to tell the truth. Which truths are told, and how to tell them -- now that's where I come in.

Abbie Hoffman was a talented truth teller and one of my political heroes. I've always liked the motto Abbie put in his classic, "Steal this Book." Free speech, he said, is the right to shout theater in a crowded fire. His desk would make a wonderful addition to the Propaganda Factory.

"I'll be right over," I told Peter. I picked my hat off the life-size inflatable Richard Nixon sitting across the desk. "How would you feel about perching on Abbie Hoffman's desk?" I taunted the Big Dick. Nixon had no comment.

Visitors invariably did a double take when they climbed the landing to the Propaganda Factory and saw the life size inflatable Nixon sitting in my office. He looks so real from a distance...and so ugly up close. I've tried to keep my Watergate obsession out of the office but there are some things I just can't live without, like the Big Dick, my

Spiro Agnew wastebasket and the Nixon/Mao ping pong paddles. (All right, I'll tell the truth. I have two Spiro Agnew wastebaskets, one for home and one for the office.)

I closed my office door and went across the landing to lock my partner Guido's office. As I started down the stairs, I heard the fax machine squeal at an incoming message.

"Aren't you going to get that?" It was Suzanne -- *the* Suzanne. That's what everyone said when I told them my office was above her restaurant. "You know *the* Suzanne? What's she like?"

I called her the Queen in tribute to the way she ruled our brownstone with such grace, style and wit. She called me her Prince of Propaganda (and Guido the Duke of Doughnuts, but that's another story). As she had to pass our door on the way to her tiny attic office she often graced us with a royal visit

"I'm sorry, your eminence, but neither that fax nor your royal presence can stop me from my quest. I'm off to get Abbie Hoffman's desk!"

"Abbie Hoffman's desk?"

"That's just what I said. I'll tell you all about it when I get it back here, particularly if you let me borrow one of your actor/waiters."

"Go get Gary, he's not doing anything." Gary wasn't an actor/waiter but an actor/counter man in Suzanne's gourmet shop on the ground floor.

"Who you gonna believe, me or your own eyes?" Gary was saying to an irate customer on the other side of the cheese counter. His Italian accent was almost as ripe as what he was serving. He caught my eye and laid it on even thicker. "Hahaha. That's-a some joke, eh, Boss?"

Gary was a talented actor who happened to look and sound uncannily like Chico Marx. Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot of work in Marx Brothers revivals around Washington this season, so Gary was spending more of his time slicing cheese and dishing out desserts for Suzanne.

"Come on, Chicolini, Freedonia needs you. Mrs. Teasdale says it's OK." Before I was obsessively fascinated with Richard Nixon, it was Groucho Marx. I would have loved to have stuck around and done shtick with Gary all day, but history beckoned.

"I need your help moving a small piece of furniture. Free yourself from the yoke of capitalism for a few minutes and come with me to get Abbie Hoffman's desk."

"Abbie Hoffman's desk?" Gary said in his normal voice. "Really?"

"What about Abbie Hoffman's desk?" I turned around and saw a bike messenger standing in the doorway. I recognized her from the delivery service we used.

"Number 11," I greeted her familiarly. "We didn't call you, did we?"

"No, the Propaganda Factory's favorite messenger said as she unstrapped her helmet. "I think I may be on a wild goose chase. But what's this about Abbie Hoffman's desk?"

"Gary and I are about to go pick it up," I explained. "A friend says he's got Abbie Hoffman's desk and I can have it. Stick around and you can help us carry it upstairs."

"I've got two more calls after this and then I'll stop back here. But it might be awhile before I straighten out this job. Who's got the office under yours? I thought it was empty."

"I don't think it's so empty anymore," Gary said. "I saw someone in there yesterday when I was coming down from Suzanne's office. Looked like an insurance agent. Blue suit, bad haircut. When he saw me coming down the stairs he closed the door."

"Well, I've been buzzing upstairs and no one's answered," Number 11 complained.

"Do you want to go upstairs and see for yourself if anyone's there?" I got out my key to the upstairs door.

"I should probably just blow it off," she said. "But I'm a dedicated and intelligent messenger, not a slacker. I'll finish my calls and meet you back here. Abbie Hoffman's desk! What a coincidence."

"What do you mean, coincidence?" I couldn't let her leave on such a cliffhanger. But that's just what she did.

"I'll tell you later. Thanks for the key."

"Come on Ravelli," I urged Gary. He looked crestfallen.

"We're doing Duck Soup, not Night at the Opera."

"Hail Freedonia, then. Let's get moving." I opened the door to the street. "Abbie Hoffman's desk, remember?"

"Abbie Hoffman's desk?" someone clutching a baguette inquired. But by now I'd had enough of this routine.

"Oh, it's just the name of the band we're in."

I opened the door to Connecticut Avenue and Gary followed me outside. We turned right on S Street and started walking towards my apartment. My girlfriend had recently moved in with her Volvo station wagon and dog, and both would now come in handy. The wagon would make it possible to shlep Abbie Hoffman's desk, and Dexter could sit underneath it once we got it upstairs.

We got to my building at the corner of 17th and S and climbed the steps to the landing. The white brick house, with its turrets and art deco molding, had once been the home of Washington's most prominent abortionist. Now it was divided into apartments, and I had the only one with a working fireplace. I kept a pile of firewood on the front porch, and the neighborhood winos liked to take out a log or two to use as a pillow. One such character was in situ today, but when he saw Gary and me he picked up his log and scrambled away.

"Come on in," I said to Gary. "I just need to get the car keys." Before I could put my key in the door, of course, Dexter started barking. Dexter was, in Caroline's words, "sort of a springer spaniel" or alternatively, "half springer, half travelling salesman."

I'd never had a dog, or pet of any kind until Caroline and Dexter moved in. I was shocked when she explained to me where his dog bed was going.

"You mean he's going to sleep in the same room as us?" I started to stammer. "But..I mean..."

"Oh relax," Caroline said. "I promise you, he won't be interested in what we do, as long as we don't do it in his bed." I quickly got over my new pet jitters, and now Dexter was my pal. Most of the time, I took him to work with me where he would spend a productive day snoozing and barking at messengers. He loved Gary, who would always play good and rough with him before going back down to do sanitary things like slice cheese and wrap pastry.

Now Dexter was leading Gary downstairs to the bedroom, where he stashed tennis balls and bits of torn up chew toys. Caroline was sitting across the kitchen table with her friend Diotima. The two redheads were folding and stamping flyers which appeared to be decorated with a picture of Thomas Jefferson next to a witch on a broomstick.

"Look at this great Jefferson quote Dio found, honey," Caroline said. "We're going to use it at our military pagan network rally on Monday."

When my girlfriend first told me she was a witch, I immediately asked the question I think anyone would, that is, anyone who's seen the Wizard of Oz.

"Are you a good witch, or a bad witch?"

"A good witch, very much so," she explained, as she told me a little about Paganism and earth-based religions. Now she and Dio had gotten a permit to hold a rally at the Jefferson Memorial in support of Witches in the military. A right wing congressman was ranting against their constitutionally protected right to worship on military bases, and Caroline thought her side deserved some equal time.

"Let me see that." It was a good quote:

"I never told my religion, nor scrutinized that of another. I never attempted to make a convert, nor wished to change another's creed. I have judged others' religions by their lives, for it is from our lives and not our words that our religions must be read."

Caroline smiled. "You're not the only propagandist in the house." I was quick to agree.

"You both get an A. But I'm the only one who's getting Abbie Hoffman's desk. Gary's giving me a hand moving it. I'll need to borrow your car."

"Abbie Hoffman's desk?" Dio and Caroline said together. Then Caroline saw Gary coming up the stairs, picking out dog hair from his sweater. "You sure are nice to play with Dexter, Gary."

"I love it," Gary replied. "He's just like the dog I used to have. Only mine was better, of course."

"Of course," Caroline agreed. "Now what's the story with the desk?"

"I don't really know yet. Peter Kelley called up and said I could have Abbie Hoffman's desk, but that I had to hurry, and that was about a hurry and a half ago."

"Go on then," Caroline threw me her car key. "But Abbie Hoffman's desk, you say. What a coincidence."

I spun around and practically shouted. "Coincidence? You're the second person to say that! What do you mean?"

Caroline smiled sweetly again. "You said you were in a hurry. I found something today at Daddy's house that's all. I'll tell you later."

"Later? Later?" I was unable to move for a second, trying to work out what Number 11 and Caroline could both know, or what they could know separately. I felt Gary's hand on my back. He had turned back into Chico Marx.

"Come on, boss, you give yourself a heart attack. Let's go show that Ambassador Trentino a thing or three."

Ambassador Trentino? Right, the bad guy in Duck Soup! The straight man for one of Chico's all time best lines, about when he and Harpo followed Groucho's character, Rufus T. Firefly.

Trentino: Then you didn't shadow Firefly?

Chicolini: Oh, sure we shadow Firefly. We shadow him all day.

Trentino: But what day was that?

Chicolini: Shadowday. Hahaha. That's-a some joke, eh, Boss?

Only the joke turned out to be on me. I didn't know it then, but that's what day today would turn out to be. Shadowday.

