

## **The Wannabes on Amazon**

**2300 words**

**ted.gross@comcast.net**

Bart's a native, he knows the city pretty well, and he follows the sports teams.

Factual newspaper errors always bugged him but they seem to irritate him worse lately. That, or there are more of them.

So when he spots errors he corrects them. Typically he emails the reporter. If that doesn't work and he's still ticked off he'll sometimes contact the section editor.

The worst part, in the rare case someone does acknowledge his correction, they don't change it in the online paper.

Bart scratched his head at that one . . . how hard could it be, and what happened to your standards and self-respect?

Cal played USC and the article labeled a player, who made a big catch late in the game, a senior. Which of course was flat-out wrong, he was a redshirt sophomore. A friend of Bart's told him he was too critical, this was piddly stuff, he was losing his perspective. Bart said well

if you're writing it up anyway why not get it right, and he got rid of the friend.

One of the regular columnists wrote a piece in the Lifestyle section, where he made a day trip around the city looking for hidden landmarks from the 1920's.

Bart didn't see any problems until the writer referenced the iron work in front of a building at Washington and Pierce.

The problem being, there *is* no Washington and Pierce. If there were it would be smack in the middle of Alta Plaza park. Bart played there as a kid.

So Bart emails the columnist, that you have your legit *Jackson* and Pierce, and your *Clay* and Pierce, and your Washington and *Steiner* and Washington and *Scott*, all right there--so surely you must have meant one of those other combinations.

The next day he gets a reply from the columnist:

**Dear Mr Mack:**

**Please know that your--and all readers'--  
comments are valued and appreciated.**

**I hope to continue to hear from you going forward.**

**Best Regards,  
Laurence Blyleven**

Bart refreshes the article and there's no correction. There is however a note that the article *has* been updated, and Jeez, it's from like 20 minutes ago. He can't figure out what the update may be, it's buried in there somewhere, but it's not his.

Bart gets word of an old classmate who unfortunately had to go to prison. Guy committed some kind of financial fraud. He was a good man, asked you how you'd been. Someone said they ran into him occasionally at Tommy's Joynt, before things went south.

Bart hasn't been to Tommy's Joynt in years but tonight seems as good as any to hoist a couple for the poor guy. He sits at the bar, orders the pastrami sandwich, not great only fair compared to the real delis, but the vibe is fine.

There's a guy talking to the bartender, they're laughing, various topics in play. Another guy shows up and joins them. Bart listens enough to get the impression they have something to do with local TV. Channel 7 is nearby, though maybe he's way off.

Either way, Bart's on his third Heineken and feeling a bit aggressive and speaks up and throws it out there-- *Have we gotten that sloppy, all someone does is set you guys straight, and you tell him to take a hike?*

They look up for a second and go back to their conversation. Bart says, 'See now, you're doing the same thing.'

The bartender comes over and quietly says you've made your point my friend, let's all keep it civil please.

He's a sturdy looking chap with sideburns and a thin moustache and you wouldn't want to mess with him. Bart's guessing he's a native, he knows the type, grew up with some of these guys, they enjoyed drinking and brawling back in high school, a lot of them became cops and firemen. Wouldn't be surprised if the guy came out of Sacred Heart, right in the neighborhood.

Bart says, 'You're generous with the *let's all*. Since I'm the only one out of line.'

The bartender smiles and asks him what the hell he was yelling about.

Bart tries to explain it, throws in the response from the newspaper writer, and it's coming out butchered and stupid and irrelevant.

The bartender surprises him, says it's okay to be passionate, and if I understand you, that guy shouldn't have blown you off, that's weak.

Bart says yeah but it's his own fault, he should have gone into journalism instead of the home and garden business, might be less cynical.

'Never too late to go for it,' the bartender says. 'Should meet this gal comes in here, maybe'd have a suggestion.'

'She's in news you mean?'

'Some part of it. Came to the game late she said. Tough broad, was a bicycle messenger, downtown.'

Hmm . . . Bart was a bike messenger himself once. Might be kind of fun. 'She's not here now though you're saying.'

'Nah haven't seen her. You come around enough I'll point her out.'

So why not, and it took a couple weeks randomly dropping into Tommy's Joynt and finally she's there at a

corner table and the bartender says something to her and you see him indicating with his head toward Bart.

Nothing happens, Bart thinks she's blowing him off, but eventually she comes over.

'So,' he says, 'and I appreciate your dropping everything to say hello--you were a messenger? For who?'

'I didn't *drop* anything,' she said. 'I'm doing a favor for Kevin.'

'Okay that's my bad, we can start over,' he says. 'How'd you get your foot in the door, in the business? If that's where you're at?'

'Well, this is about 12 years ago. The Chronicle still had a Friday section. It was different depending where you lived, North bay, South bay, East bay, City. You get me.'

'I know, I was around.'

'So I was in Marin, the Marin stuff was shlocky, I told the Friday editor I could do a better job and I pointed out weaknesses in the stories, rewrote a few passages. She ignored me for a while but then said go ahead, write something on spec.'

'Like a challenge then. And meanwhile get out of my face.'

‘Yes. So I profiled a local softball player headed to Florida State on scholarship, they printed it and inserted me in the rotation. It didn’t last long, the money dried up and the Friday section got canned, but I had a toe-hold. I squeeze out a living freelancing. A bit of stringing for the Washington Post helps, and if I have to I ghostwrite.’

‘You mean, like celebrities?’

‘No. Wannabes on Amazon. Who would never get a real book deal. None of them are any good, but a few have some bucks and want me to help them fake it better.’

Bart says, ‘You have a good backstory, you know it? Can I get you another drink, some sliders, anything?’

‘I’m good. Circling back to the messenger question, I worked for Aero. This was late 90’s.’

‘I worked for Speedy’s,’ Bart says, ‘earlier than that.’

‘So, there’s your jumpstart,’ she says.

‘Now how is *that*?’

‘I had an idea for a story. I pitched it to the LA Times, their Sunday magazine. This is the tail end of when they could pay. The gimmick was I get back on a bicycle for a week, and compare it to back then.’

‘Jeez . . . that’s not bad,’ Bart says. ‘I mean yeah, I’d read that for sure. What happened?’

‘The editor went for it, but by the time I got my rear end in gear to physically do it someone else was in charge, and they weren’t as enthusiastic. Still might have flown, but now I’m putting in that week with no guarantee.’

‘I hear you on that. Plus these days, drivers more distracted, you might have got killed.’

‘Conceivable.’

Bart says, ‘You wanna, take the discussion somewhere else maybe?’

‘With you, no,’ she says. ‘And I gave you the lead, no wonder you’re a screw-up.’ And she gets up and goes back to her spot in the corner.

Bart’s thinking she has him pegged pretty good, he doesn’t follow through on stuff. Still . . . how would you work it? Contact one of the current companies, dupe ‘em that you’re a writer, and can you deliver packages next week and take notes?

He spends the morning putting together a pitch, trying to get it just right. He sends it to the major California papers, and even throws in the New York Times, what the heck, aiming for the features editors.



Hopefully has the right people, not always clear on the websites who handles what.

He doesn't bother with the messenger services, get the gig together first, then worry about engineering it.

A week goes by and zip. He calls the bar gal, who in the end was sporting enough to give him her number.

'They closed ranks on me quick,' he says. 'Only one even responded, the Mercury News. They told me the idea's interesting but without clips, no can do.'

'Par for the course,' she says. 'You're going to need to drop it down a notch.'

'Meaning the freebie rags, I'm assuming. Pacific Sun type thing? They can be decent.'

'No, lower.'

'Ah.'

'Or,' she says, 'get some friggin clips and then pitch the good story to the real papers.'

He understands what she means, cut your teeth somewhere obscure, develop a little inventory, and then hope someone legit gives you the time of day.

Bart considers it. 'I'm too old for that,' he says. 'You want to ride some bikes?'

'Come again?'

‘Hows about I try it in reverse? I go downtown, ride around, establish some of the old delivery routes, and write about *that* . . . Or not *even*, just ride around.’

‘You’re a nut. Hopefully not a nut *case*.’

‘I’m thinking Sunday. Hardly any traffic in the financial district. You got some obviously south of Market but not with the weekday intensity. Hopefully we survive it.’

‘I have to go,’ she says.

‘I’ll be there at 9,’ he says. ‘Front of the old stock exchange. Pine between Montgomery and Sansome. But you knew where it is.’

Sunday Bart digs out his old bike, puts air in the tires and rides downtown.

He’s going to give it until 9:15 tops, even that’s generous, but son of a bitch . . .

‘I’m *double-taking*, is that actually her?’ he says. ‘Jesus.’

‘I can use the exercise,’ she says. ‘I brought some coffee.’ Pulling two cups of Peet’s out of her handlebar thingamajig.

‘Dang, you softened up a little. But lemme guess. The job.’

‘Yes. I won’t deny it, one of the better gigs I’ve ever had.’

‘The all-time *best* gig *I* ever had,’ he says. ‘You checked in first thing, picked up your two-way radio, and you’re loose all day, no one looking over your shoulder . . . I still remember the call-in handle: KRW-776.’

‘I don’t remember mine,’ she says. ‘I only lasted a couple of weeks. I do remember sleeping pretty well.’

‘Ah. But you use the experience--even the limited version now--to your advantage. First thing Kevin told me, she’s a tough broad--she was a bike messenger.’

‘I like Kevin,’ she says. ‘But no way he’d say that to my face.’

Bart says, ‘When I got the job, I rode back *down* here the first weekend. I was so into it I wanted to streamline everything.’

‘You mean practice.’

‘Yeah, master the buildings, the one-way streets, the shortcuts . . . You want to actually go somewhere, or keep talking about it?’

She says, ‘It was a bittersweet couple of weeks actually. My parents, they announced they were getting

a divorce. It never happened, officially, they tried to work it out several times, but in the end they separated.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'I mean I was 20 years old, I was a big girl. These things happen. My dad, he was my world.'

'He, passed away?'

'No, he hasn't. But our relationship changed . . . A few months later someone contacts me, the dispatcher is retiring, they're having a thing and I'm welcome. So I go. A sweet man, he's not that old. In fact all of them, the other messengers, nice people.'

'I don't like this.'

'The next call I get, the man died. I didn't ask how, it didn't matter, but it added up.'

They're quiet for a while.

'I must say,' Bart says. 'You really . . . know how to put a damper on things. A *double*-team even. Thanks.'

She says, 'I don't know you well enough to tell if you're serious.'

'On that note,' he says, 'call it a day? My stupid idea?'

'Let's ride around,' she says.

He says, 'Well, there was one pickup we had to make. Not sure about you guys. It was a blueprint place

by Aquatic Park. You had to watch the cable car tracks, didn't want to skid, especially when you got your speed up. Coming back you had some uphill but it was less dicey with the tracks.'

'I'm game.'

She follows him Pine to Grant to Columbus, to the Wharf. It's nice.

'Kinda turned back the clock there,' he says. 'I mean some of the old feel came back.'

They're in front of The Cannery at the foot of Columbus, historic and brick, redone for the tourists now.

She says did you know it was once the largest canning location in the country, and he says no he didn't, and she says it was, she did a report on it once.

Soon a comedy juggling duo gets started on the sidewalk. Their skills aren't the greatest, they drop a club once or twice, but Bart says they're funny and she says yes that made up for it.