



ROUGH  
MAGIC  
PRESS

Rough Magic Press

El Cerrito CA 94530

[www.roughmagic.com](http://www.roughmagic.com)

Copyright (c) 2014 by William Brasse

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced without written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

ISBN 0-9667301-2-8

Rough Magic Press logo by Judith Ogus


Rough Magic Press typography by Andrew Ogus

First Printing April 2014

Printed in the USA

Cover design by William Brasse

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance between the characters in this book and actual persons, living, dead, or manufactured, is entirely inconsequential.

Warning: Closed course. Professional driver.  Do not attempt.

For Mammon

With Love

You don't have to build a better  
mousetrap to catch stupid mice.  
Leo Pillish

Chapter 1

“Winning is everything, Dross. Never forget that.”

William Randolph Crease idly tapped a pencil on the huge expanse of desk that lay in front of him. He leaned back slightly in his executive chair, activating its well-oiled, precisely fitted and ever so silent ball bearings. Crease positioned the chair so his back inclined slightly away from his desk. Thus situated, he could more comfortably look down his nose at his listener.

That listener promptly answered, “Yes, Mr. Crease.” It was a phrase that was never far from his lips. His name was Michael Dross, and he occupied the position of Chief Executive Underling to the CEO. He stood in a posture that would be called Parade Rest if he was a military man. As soldiers know, the position has little to do with rest. Dross kept himself still and rigid, waiting.

Crease was a big man and solid, but not trim. He fit a size 52 long suit to perfection, and he owned perhaps a hundred such suits. He might be considered handsome if you went in for that sort of look, and he had a very square jaw. Not just your garden-variety square jaw, but a particularly square jaw, a phrase that should roll off the tongue like a line from a Gilbert and Sullivan song. *A par-tic-u-lar-lay sssssquare jaw.*

His underling was also a big man—not as big as Crease, but trimmer. He cut a very different figure, however. Crease loomed larger than he was and seemed to fill the space around him, whereas Dross looked less large, looked small even. His suit, which was a very good one and fit him quite well, manifested itself in bags and droops. Nothing about him inspired

## THE NEEDLE IN THE CAMEL'S EYE

---

confidence, much less a lilt or a rhythm or a bit of doggerel.

"All that rot about how you play the game and good sportsmanship and that boy scout rubbish. You can forget all that."

"Of course, Mr. Crease."

"And those books." Crease slowly shook his head in bewilderment.

"Books, Mr. Crease?"

"You know the kind of thing I mean. Books that tell you how to be successful by imitating people who are successful. That sort of drivel."

Dross tried not to hang his head in embarrassment. "I think I know the sort of book," he answered.

"The people who read those books are losers. You want to know what the winners are doing while those losers are reading? They're winning. No book can tell you how to do it. If you don't have it here," Crease dramatically slapped his chest, "then you don't have it."

Dross made no reply, and Crease seemed to have ended his lecture. Silence reigned on the hundredth floor of Tweezer Towers in lower Manhattan.

The building's original name, The Tuileries, had disappeared in the early days of its construction, a victim of blue-collar reluctance to confront the wimpy French vowels. The complex had been planned as two massive towers, not only taller than the World Trade Center, but uglier as well. Construction had reached the 98<sup>th</sup> floor when the 9/11 tragedy struck. The builders decided to cut back, not only out of respect for the collapsed towers, but also to make themselves a less likely target. The architect, somewhat miffed by the diminution of his dream, was allowed some design liberties to compensate. He added a daringly original and freakishly unattractive falsework cap that joined the two towers at the top, making them look like a single building. The unintentional result was that the structure actually resembled a gigantic pair of tweezers, making the new name irresistible to the public.

Crease's current self-satisfaction derived from a recent deal in which his firm, Big Inc., had acquired the retail chain of Caveat Emptorium at a better than expected price.

"I did well on the Caveat deal, right?"

"Very well, Mr. Crease."

"Good. Good."

Crease's success on the Caveat deal, as well as his success on a long string of others, had nothing to do with his business abilities, which were slight at best. They resulted from his appearance—masculine, hard, sartorially perfect, masterful—and his vagueness, which people mistook variously for contemplation, contempt, rejection or depth. When adversaries thus misunderstood him, they began to question him to determine his thoughts, or they would make concessions to overcome his rejection. As he continued to ignore them, they continued to talk, ask, cajole, wheedle, compromise, offer and counteroffer until such time as Crease returned to the here-and-now and accepted their offer, always considerably better than one would have expected.

"Very well, you said?"

"Extremely well, Mr. Crease," Dross answered. He watched his boss for a response, but none came. Crease's eyes lost focus. Dross quickly realized that his boss was having one of his "spells." Dross, while unaware that Crease's spells were responsible for the man's high position, was definitely aware of the fits themselves. Not that they had been referred to when he had accepted the job of Chief Executive Underling. Like Julius Caesar's falling sickness, Crease's odd affliction remained in the realm of whisper and conjecture.

Dross waited for Crease to return to a normal state of mind, and eventually Crease's reverie ended. But he looked at Dross suspiciously, which Dross recognized as the symptom that his boss had forgotten who he was. In the years of his tenure, Dross had devised a ruse to cope with this odd aftereffect: he had to find a way to work his own name into the conversation.

"By the way, Mr. Crease," Dross said suddenly. "My mother sends you her best."

"Really?" Crease said cautiously.

"Yes. Mrs. *Dross* sends best wishes," Dross said, laying heavy emphasis on the name.

Crease's face showed a flicker of recognition. "Dross.

## THE NEEDLE IN THE CAMEL'S EYE

Weren't we discussing the Caveat deal? And what's that you were saying about my mother?"

Dross's relief that the ruse had worked gave way to a new worry at this unexpected question. "I... I think you misunderstood. I didn't say anything about your mother."

"I misunderstood?" The ball bearings rolled as Crease leaned forward.

Dross backpedaled quickly. "I must have been mumbling," he said. "I must have said mother when I meant...agenda. I get the two words mixed up. I've never met your mother."

"Of course not," Crease answered, settling back slightly. "We would hardly go introducing each other to our mothers, would we? Two men of business like us. It wouldn't be...businesslike. Mothers are...necessary. A fact of life. But not something you need to bring into the executive suite, hah?"

"No, sir."

Crease set down his pencil and pulled a second one from a shiny aluminum desk accessory that held a dozen or more pencils, none of which were ever used for writing. He tapped the pencil tentatively on his desk, first with the eraser, then with the point. Then he laid the pencil on the desk and turned his chair around to stare out the window.

"So," Crease said, his back to Dross. "The Caveat deal. Quite a triumph, hey?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Is there any way I could gloat about it?"

"Gloat?"

"You know. Gloat."

"Oh. I see. Gloat. About the deal. And about your success."

"My success. Yes."

Dross had never been called upon to provide a gloat before. "You could have the accountants make up a spreadsheet."

Crease shook his head. "Numbers bore me."

"You could go to a Caveat Emptorium."

"Go? Hmm. I see what you mean. But don't the stores tend to be crowded?"

"Very crowded."

"I don't like crowds, Dross. No, that won't do. Come up with something else."

THE NEEDLE IN THE CAMEL'S EYE

Dross plumbed the depths of his underling brain. "You could sit here and enjoy the view," he suggested.

Crease spun his chair around to face his factotum. "Is it a good view, Dross?" he asked.

"The best that money can buy," Dross answered without hesitation, as he believed that it was.

But Crease apparently had doubts. His face had a small-boy-deprived-of-cookie look. "Dross, why is the view behind me?"

"Sir?"

"Here I've got this supposedly great view, and as long as I'm at my desk, I don't see it."

"Uh. That's true, Mr. Crease."

"But *you* see it."

"Me?"

Crease waved his hand and lost his small boy look. "You or whoever is standing there. Some insolent puppy who thinks he can tell me how to run this organization, and I tell him in no uncertain terms to watch his step. And the whole time, he gets to enjoy the view." Crease allowed his dignified front to slip again. He sulked. "It's not fair."

Dross watched the CEO seem to shrink in his chair as he considered the unfairness of it. "I think the point is to impress your visitors," he said, improvising. "While they're talking to you, they're constantly confronted with the view. And it emphasizes how important you are and how...lowly and trivial they are."

Crease's slumped shoulders rose slightly. "Do you think so?"

"I'm certain of it," Dross answered sadly.

Crease nodded and leaned back in his comfortable chair. "So you look at the view and you realize that I'm a big shot and you're an insignificant insect, is that it?"

Dross moved his feet slightly. "Something like that."

Crease nodded, lips pursed. "Good. I like that. What were you saying earlier about your mother?"

Dross found himself speechless, a dangerous condition for a chief underling.

"Anyway," Crease said dismissively, "give her my regards."



## THE NEEDLE IN THE CAMEL'S EYE

---

Dross found his tongue, but the unaccustomed turns in the conversation had left him too shaky to improvise. Thus he was in the unaccustomed position of speaking the truth. "My mother died ten years ago," he blurted.

"Did she? Thoughtless of her. Well, never mind telling her I said anything. I don't suppose it would mean much to her as things stand."

"No," answered Dross. He could think of nothing more to say. The office, though not exactly as quiet as the tomb, lapsed into an uncomfortable near silence. Dross could hear the hum of the fluorescent light, the slight percussive sound of skyscraper foundations being hammered into place a few blocks away, and the whisper of air shimmering from the ventilation system. Dross felt that if the silence continued, he would fall into a fit of oblivion like the ones that affected his boss. He cleared his throat, but the sound disappeared like a small pebble dropped down an impossibly deep well. Dross looked at Crease, motionless and silent in his chair. Then Dross remembered the call from publicity.

"That new internet newspaper wants to interview you," he said.

"What newspaper is that?"

"*CEO Illustrated*."

"They want to interview me, huh?"

"I was thinking it would give you a chance to gloat."

Crease pushed back his chair and stood. "Good idea, Dross." Then abruptly he turned his back. "This view. Is it really so great?"

"It's an excellent view, sir. One of the best. Or so I'm told."

Crease walked around the desk and put a friendly executive hand on Dross's underling shoulder. "Well, I earned it."

"You did."

"It was hard, but I was harder." Here Crease stepped back from Dross and held his coat open. "You want to hit me in the stomach? Try to hurt me?"

After the recent stresses, Dross felt relieved to get back to the completely familiar, and he assumed the requisite self-disparaging look. "No, Mr. Crease. I wouldn't want to risk hurting my knuckles."

## THE NEEDLE IN THE CAMEL'S EYE

---

Crease smiled and let the folds of his coat fall back into place over his heavy torso. He smoothed the non-existent wrinkles from the fabric and beamed like a sadistic youth squashing a bug. He looked out the gigantic window one more time. The quality of the view eluded him still. He moved right to the window and looked briefly down. The height was dizzying. "It's all about winning, Dross," he said. He thought of all the losers he had left behind him on his climb to the hundredth floor of Tweezer Towers. Life was good.

Wasn't it?

## CEO Illustrated

Where the Bang Meets the Buck

New York One hour ago. Exclusive by SG  
Big Inc., the envy of all conglomerates,  
took on another battle in the market fray  
and steered its ship of commerce  
through the many loopholes of mega-  
mergerdom. When the tsunami receded,  
Caveat Emptorium lay on the beach as  
detritus, a stranded whale who had  
finally met his Moby Dick. The question  
now is, is Big big enough? Or does this  
acquisition only begin the Big Inc.?  
Analysts speculate...[more]



lorem ipsum gamus ragamuffus ipso fatso omnia  
divisa canem sanctum quod maximus troglodytus  
tepero cum laude lux vinces vidi hic quo est vuffo  
ivanta lego beo lobo rex  
buncus duum adeste  
ultima benedicta amare  
XII constantium dolores  
mangus melonius  
quigquam tempus  
rerum...

Vote for Senator  
Augustus Maximus  
Snort.  
Reliable, trustworthy.

Buy Amazon Vodka. It  
leaves you breastless.  
Add to cart...



## **404 Page Not Found**

The requested URL was not found on this server.

Chapter 2

"I don't have any stuff on my desk."

Steve Ping looked down at the huge expanse of desk that lay in front of him. Nothing blocked his view of the polished wood surface.

"I believe that was your designer's idea," answered his executive assistant Beulah Mae. Beulah Mae, a woman of more than ordinary girth with a fat, happy expression, grabbed the hem of her loose dress and rubbed at a spot on the desk. The spot remained, so she raised the cloth to her mouth, exposing her chubby thighs. Steve looked away.

"Don't do that," he said.

"I just want to get your desk clean," she answered, applying new energy to the spot with her spit-moistened dress.

"I mean don't pull your dress up like that. It's indecent."

Beulah Mae rubbed until the spot had faded to her satisfaction. She released her dress and smoothed it back into shape. "Do you like this dress?" she asked. "It's new."

"I don't like it."

"Do you think it makes me look fat?"

"What do you mean?" Steve spun back around to face her. "You *are* fat."

"That doesn't mean you have to say so."

"You want me to lie to you?"

"Of course. That's known as being polite."

"Well, I won't. You're a tub of lard. You look like a... a tub full of ... lard."

Beulah Mae turned so Steve got the full advantage of her

profile. "That's unkind," she said cheerfully. "You could hurt a girl's feelings talking like that."

"You don't look like your feelings are hurt," said Steve sulkily.

"I have never been thin-skinned."

"You've never been thin anythinged."

"Sticks and stones may break my bones..." Beulah Mae answered in a singsong.

"What?" asked Steve, dumfounded.

Beulah Mae eyed another possible spot on Steve's desk as she answered, "That's a nursery rhyme. Don't they say that in China?"

"I've never been to China. I was born here just like you."

"I wasn't born here. I was born in Tennessee. I think being exposed to other cultures is just fascinating."

Steve groaned and cradled his head in his hands. He tried to shut Beulah Mae's incessant chatter out of his mind, but when he did, he was sure he heard laughter. It was an ongoing hallucination that had afflicted him for some time.

"Is somebody laughing?" he asked, looking up suddenly.

"Well, I certainly hope so. It would be a sorry day if someone somewhere wasn't laughing. Now I guess I'd better get out of your way and let you be the high-powered executive that you are. I just admire the way you sit behind that big desk. You're so cute and small and Chinese and that desk just swallows you up."

"That reminds me, I don't have anything on my desk."

"I told you, that was your designer's idea. So you would look important. Only us little people have things on our desks. So we can do work. You don't work, you just think and make things happen."

"I didn't even know I had a designer," Steve said. The sound of laughter at his back made him look around suddenly, but no one was there.

An extra chair stood at some distance from the desk. Beulah Mae pulled it over to Steve's left and sat down bulkily. "It must be wonderful to be so important," she said in a low voice.

Steve groaned again and lowered his head to the solid,

## THE NEEDLE IN THE CAMEL'S EYE

---

glossy wood. Beulah Mae was hard to bear, but the auditory hallucinations spooked him and bothered him even more than her silly chatter. How, he wondered, did this happen?

Anyone who had been reading the papers could have answered that assumedly rhetorical question. Steve Ping, the man with his head on his empty desk, was of course the inventor of the Steve Loop and Cache Module (SLACAM) that had been incorporated into the main boards of every computer now coming off assembly lines. Steve's story was the familiar Silicon Valley garage-to-riches story. Starting on a shoestring, Steve Incorporated had grown to become Statewide Steve. When the industry realized the product wasn't just a nerd niche device, sales skyrocketed, and the company morphed into United States Steve. With the penetration of the Asian market, International Steve was on the verge of being born when Steve had discovered the abandoned crab and seafood storage facility at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. He had immediately purchased this odd-shaped brick structure composed of a long, main rectangle and two rectangular extensions, one at each end, like an E with its middle missing. To Steve, the building looked like a crab, and though no one else shared this fantasy, no one argued as Steve gutted the building and rebuilt it into the headquarters for what became known as Large Scale Integrated Crab. The San Francisco *Chronicle's* interview with Steve gave readers an in-depth look at the workings of his mind:

*'I knew right away that I wanted that building,' said the twenty-one-year-old visionary entrepreneur. 'It looked to me just like a robotic crab with a big, square body and two square claws. So I realized that the company name had to fit the building.'*

That was how Steve Ping found himself as an executive at LSI Crab, behind the big desk with nothing on it, with an executive assistant whose cheery demeanor and rotund form vexed him with a vexation that stung like an adder. But it didn't explain the laughter.

Steve looked up at Beulah Mae. "I want something on my desk," he said, interrupting her chatter.

“What would you like?” she asked agreeably. “Some papers?”

“Newspapers? Why would I want newspapers?”

“Not newspapers. Printouts. Reports. Schematic drawings.”

Steve shook his head feebly. “That would give me a headache. Get me something that *does* something.” Suddenly his eyes brightened. “A stapler,” he said with more energy than he had been able to muster since Beulah Mae had entered the room.

“You can have my stapler.”

“I want a *big* stapler.”

“How big?”

“Hella big. As big as they come. Go get on your computer and start a Twiddle search for industrial strength stapler.”

Beulah Mae smiled and heaved herself out of the chair. “Now that’s good. You’ve just made an executive decision, which is what executives do. I was getting worried about you. I’ll go see to it right now.” At the door, she stopped and looked back. “That friend of yours is here again. Titus. That other little Chinese fellow.”

“Tell him to go away.”

“He says he’s an old friend of yours from high school. He told me that you all had an organization called UCC.”

“God. He told you that? Did he tell you what it stood for?”

“No. He just said it was a very exclusive club. Shall I send him in?”

“Tell him to go away.”

“I can’t do that. I can tell him you’re busy or that you can’t see him.”

“Whatever. Just get rid of him.”

She left, closing the door behind her. Steve sat alone in his big office at his big desk, which had been designed to be empty. In the surface of the desk he could see the ceiling light fixtures reflected. He got up and turned off the light, then returned to his desk. Its surface was now nearly invisible. A few limp rays of light leaked into the room from a heavily curtained window. Steve sat in the dark and listened to the ever increasing sound of laughter.