

Spiked:

A Reporter's Memoir of Covering Christ

By Michael Doyle

The story is as true as
I could make it.

Some names have been changed.

Chapter One

I was bound for the morgue when the first call came.

"Judas Iscariot," the switchboard girl purred. "Line three."

The name meant zip, and Dorene showed neither clue nor care. It was just some guy, probably a flack. All day long they cast their hooks. Sometimes I rose to them, for want of a byline. The City Editor was keeping score and I needed something terrific. A good death is what I craved, ripe enough for A-1.

Dorene gestured, impatient with my drift. The switchboard kept her too busy to dally. Everyone came through Doreen, and she had no time to waste. Besides, she and I were still rubbed raw by our shared history, which we recounted differently. She led with the comical take, casting me as the sad clown with floppy shoes. After hours at The Night Shift, she'd confide in the girls as they sipped their umbrella drinks and slip the occasional pitying glance my way. Doreen had a knack for milking the joke. My version was more pathetic, and I shared it only with myself, over and over at night.

I reached over to the closest desk and punched the phone's blinking button for line three. Dorene popped her gum and resumed editing her nails.

"Stone," I said.

"I'm sorry." I later came to remember that, the first words I heard from Judas. "Who is this, again?"

"This is Stone."

"My apologies," Judas said. "I was trying to reach Mr. Slade."

Dorene was blowing her fingernails dry. This week's color looked to be in the Purple Tart family. The misdirected call didn't surprise me. Her newsroom reputation lay outside her secretarial skills, though her shorthand technique was whispered to be second-to-none.

But Slade. I wondered what the caller might want with the likes of him. Slade was my nemesis of the moment. Our byline count for the year was even. The scores were there for all to see, updated daily on a big Byline Blackboard that the City Editor had wheeled into place near the editorial conference room. Reporters consistently atop the blackboard's byline list earned pats on the back. Reporters at the bottom got erased.

Slade was a good reporter, which was bad enough. He also carried himself with a cocky swagger that I couldn't match. Sometimes, sitting in the City Editor's glassed-in office for some contrived consultation, he'd twinkle his fingers at me across the newsroom.

So I filched the call.

I figured, at the least, I'd keep Slade's hands off it. Impoverishing him was its own reward. Besides, there was the off chance this Judas character had something of value. If I had his number right, Judas just wanted coverage and he didn't care from whom. Like the City Editor always said: The only ones who notice bylines are mothers and other reporters.

"I can help you," I said.

Judas pivoted immediately. His loyalties were transitory.

"Are you on deadline?" Judas asked.

That was smart of him. It's the first question one reporter asks another before gabbing. It means: Can you talk now? It suggested Judas was an old newsman himself. It bought him some time, out of some residual sense of fraternity.

I grunted, a ticket good for limited time only. He read me right.

"Mr. Stone," he said, down to business now. "I'm following up on a release, about a good story I think the Chron would be interested in."

I looked around the Chronicle's hazy newsroom. Scarfo, the cops reporter, leaned back in his chair, thick hairy fingers laced behind his head. The squawk box he tended was, for the moment, silent. Other reporters caressed their typewriter keys or banged them into submission. Fragments from half-a-dozen conversations, diatribes and telephone calls muddled the room. Watt, our lead Sanhedrin reporter, was inside the Executive Editor's office, supplicating the high command. Slade, I could not see.

Dorene was starting on her toes.

"About Jesus," Judas said. "If you have a minute."

Dimly, I recalled the name. An elderman I knew had mentioned Jesus in passing, something about Rome taking an interest. This usually meant misfortune, for those in whom interest was being taken. There was something else about Jesus, too, but it eluded me.

"Jesus," I said.

"Yes. I sent your newsroom several copies of a release about it last week."

"Okay," I said.

"Yes," Judas said, "and I'm following up to see if you have any questions or if you think you might be able to attend."

"Remind me."

"Of course, of course. I know just how busy you are."

And then he launched into the pitch. He said it was going to be big, really big. He said it was A-1 material, for sure.

"Yeah?" I said. "Why is that?"

"Mr. Stone, because of Lazarus. Everyone is talking about it."

The dime dropped. The Lazarus story had run, in fact, in my own paper. One of our provincial stringers, a kid named Tommy Sands, had filed a feature about two sisters claiming their brother had been summoned back to life after croaking. It was a cockamamie yarn, but it seized the City Editor's fancy. It went A-1, bumping one of my own stories.

"Young Tommy's got talent," the City Editor had told me when I asked why.

The kid raised my hackles, just as the City Editor intended. He habitually pitted reporters against one another. You're in the arena, he had told me on my first day. Silly me, I

thought he meant J-Town's half-a-dozen other dailies. I soon enough learned that the real competition would always come from one's own team.

So, no, Tommy Sands was the last guy I needed around, all poised for his apprenticeship potential. He'd attach himself to me or another, wide-eyed right up until the time he could lift teacher's Rolodex. I knew that plot. He'd best stay in his Bethany bureau, 15 furlongs away.

Besides, I sensed something in this Jesus bit. The idea of a corpse-raiser coming to the big city tickled me. I could have fun with it. The result might betray Judas's hopes for a puff piece, but what can I say: I'm a reporter.

"Okay," I said. "Tell me more."

"Mr. Stone," Judas said. "Can we go off the record?"

I knew he knew what he meant. Not everyone did. Civilians typically misunderstood off the record to mean a quote attributed to an unnamed source. The term for that, though, was on background. We were adjured to limit our use of on-background quotes. The J-Town Press Club had passed several stern resolutions urging abstinence.

We used them willy-nilly, nonetheless. Anonymity opened the spigots. Once the speaker had no fear of consequences, the

killer quotes started flowing. Some reporters unilaterally assigned anonymity even though the source was willing to be named. It jazzed up the story to cite "sources," conveying that this is the real inside dope.

"Sure," I said. "Off the record."

"This event at the Common Court that I sent you a release on," Judas said. "You're going to want to be there, but you've got to protect me on this."

"Okay," I said. "Shoot."

"There will be action," Judas said. "Definitive action."

He stopped, as if he had already said too much. I could hear him breathing.

"What do you mean?"

"The kind you'll want to be there for."

"Like what?" I asked. "A sermon?"

The thought depressed me. I had heard enough campaign speeches, Sanhedrin stemwinders and Chamber of Commerce bloviations to last a lifetime.

"All shall be revealed. Just be at the Temple on Monday morning, the Common Court. Be there by 8."

"And there will be news?"

"Oh, yes," Judas said. "Hard news."

Chapter Two

The presses downstairs began rumbling and I looked around for my next smoke.

The guys in Sports were always packing, but I had too many bets to settle there. My Business section sources were out at some Diamond District open house, loading up on canapes and swag. The Editorial swells were useless; they all preferred pipes.

I zeroed in on the Society editor's desk. She was gone; a stout gray-haired maiden who kept the unfinished manuscript of a romance novel moldering in her bottom drawer. Out of the blue, she sometimes started sniffing over her stillborn characters.

I sidles over and fingered a cig from a pack atop some marked-up copy. Red scribbles were everywhere. The Society editor was a loon, but she marched words around like a centurion. Out of habit, I ran my eyes around her desk. Right-side up or upside down, I could spy on anything written. I saw nothing of value. Her spike, too, was bare, though that would change. By day's end, there might be three or four flimsies impaled, stories judged and found wanting.

The spike could be a story's death sentence, though at least it kept the pages in place. Desk fans throughout the newsroom couldn't beat the swelter but were good at blowing loose pieces of paper onto the floor.

Back at my desk, I shuffled among the tumult for the release Judas had mentioned. I finally found it beneath some missives from jail. Some poor saps believed that I could pull them from Rome's grip. With my help, once, one of their compadres had, in fact, been sprung. I won a journalism prize for that series, though I tossed the plaque in light of the freed man's subsequent depravities.

I began working the blower.

Ghoolian would be my best bet, as far as tapping Rome's information. He was a lieutenant and likely to stay that way, being not far removed from the Armenian Organization. The rest of his family hewed to the old ways. His younger brother was an apprentice in the Organization's enforcement operations, still learning to pull his punches so the debtors might live. His older sister managed the frankincense and myrrh rackets. Their father was out of the picture; still occupied, apparently, by a late-night lodge meeting he'd been summoned to several years before.

Mama Ghoolian called the shots from the diner.

With her detective son, I didn't need preliminaries. I knew his number by heart, as he knew mine.

"Jesus of Nazareth," I said. "So he's coming to J-Town."

I could hear Ghoolian breathing.

"I'm told he's pretty interesting," I said.

Ghoolian waited some more. In his business, the other guy spoke first.

"I talked to his flack, Judas," I said. "He's pushing this pretty hard."

"Edify me, Stone," Ghoolian said, finally. "Why would you care about the likes of him?"

"He might be a story."

"The provinces," Ghoolian said, musing. "They're so full of characters."

He was a connoisseur of characters. He collected them, sometimes in cages, sometimes just likenesses pinned to a bulletin board.

Both of us were silent. The next move was his, and he finally made it with a stage whisper that made me wonder who might be passing by his office.

"Jesus," Ghoolian said. "The Nazarene. A real nut job."

I cradled the receiver against my shoulder and started my notes on a yellow legal pad I had marked with an encircled G and an underlined OTR. All my conversations with Ghoolian were born off the record, it went without saying, but I wanted no doubt in my notes. One time, I had credited a potshot at Council leadership to a freshman who thought he'd been granted anonymity. Next time we spoke, it was from his new office: a remote broom closet three blocks away from the Council chambers.

With Ghoolian, a misunderstanding might be more consequential.

He spoke, and I noted. Jesus was on one of Rome's watch lists; but then, who wasn't? My own file included more than mere clippings, Ghoolian once hinted. About Jesus, the information was sketchy, with gaps that Ghoolian suggested invited suspicion. He had gathered about him a disreputable crew, whose members were given to outrageous claims. He voiced insurrectionist notions.

"He's a Zealot?" I asked.

"Maybe. But the Pharisees hate him," Ghoolian said, "and the Sadducees are none too crazy about him, either."

"So listen," I said. "Could I get paper on this guy?"

I meant documents, of any kind. Raw field reports, the 302s, would have been golden, but unlikely. Rome's men held them dear. The files, though, might include much more: clippings, billing statements, tips tossed over the hedge. Even the smallest tidbit might help me. At the least, it would allow me to write "according to records obtained by the Chronicle," which would give the City Editor a hard on.

"No paper," Ghoolian said. "I've already said too much."

We both knew that was a joke. Ghoolian measured his leaks like an apothecary, doling out the drops just so. He'd give no more unless I had something to trade.

We both hung up at the same time.

I was dialing again within seconds. The phone was my speed bag, and I worked it fast.

The elderman answered right away, as if he were expecting a call about an envelope's location. He was a gamy sort, well-suited to his South J-Town ward, and we got along fine. We had both cut our teeth on the same campaign, from different sides.

His boss had gone down, hard, and he had survived. Prospered, actually, by his boss's professional demise. It was funny, how that had turned out. Anyway, it served neither of our purposes to hold a grudge.

"Stone! How good to hear your voice!"

"Elderman," I said.

Some reporters called pols by their first names. Some pols insisted on it. Me, I didn't trust the bonhomie. It was bad enough to endure their meaty handshakes, the dominating squeeze of the back of the arm. I wielded their titles like a stick that kept us at bay. Even so, I faced about five minutes of folderol. He asked after the publisher, the Colonel, his way of reminding me they were thick as thieves. I said he wasn't around the newsroom much, my way of saying back off. He praised Slade's latest. I asked after his wife.

Finally, the score even, we settled down to business.

"I'm doing a profile," I said. "About Jesus."

"Who?"

"Jesus. Healer of the dead."

"The dead."

"Yeah," I said. "You know, your favorite voting bloc."

He chuckled mirthlessly.

"Come on, Stone," he said. "Don't believe everything you read."

Two elections back, an entire roster-full of compliant stiffbs had risen to their civic duty. Fun story, it led the paper three days running as our designated scandal of the week until the Colonel said enough, already.

"Jesus," he said after a moment.

"That's right. You know he's coming to J-Town?"

"Maybe," the elderman said. "Maybe I did hear something like that."

Every conversation was a transaction with this character, and it always started with maybe. The ambiguity upped his rental price. On the Council, he was the last to vote while he waited for the bids to rise.

I finally teased a quote out of him, enough to swell my story, and he dropped some other political litter I could trade to our Council reporter. He said we should get together for lunch. I told him we would. He said, no, he meant it this time. I said yes, absolutely.

We hung up at the same time.

After a minute I scraped my chair back and went to the morgue, a windowless interior space located on the outskirts of the newsroom and primarily populated by several rows of gray steel file cabinets. Bookshelves along the walls held a staggeringly complete set of regional telephone directories, reverse and otherwise, along with unreliable provincial histories, pay-to-play Biographies of the Notables, all three editions of the Colonel's self-published Collected Thoughts and volumes 2 through 6 and 9 through 12 of the J-Town Municipal Code.

The clip-keeper was out and I was alone save for an unfamiliar gal sitting at one of the three cramped classroom desks. I looked her over, just an elementary scan that recorded her owlsh glasses and fresh dusting of freckles, but she remained engrossed in her reading. Several green file folders were on her left and one was open in front of her.

I first went to the "C" cabinet. Nearly one whole drawer was devoted to Caiaphas, the head of the Sanhedrin. I flipped through the folders in the top drawer, each tagged with neatly penned subject labels held in plastic sleeves. It was Caiaphas, Caiaphas, Caiaphas all the way until the very back, where thinner, single folders were labeled Capernaum and Caesarea, each of them remote municipalities of only sporadic interest to

J-Town readers. News is what happens next door, not far away, the City Editor once told me; although, to be sure, sufficient mayhem can sound across many miles.

Once, an associate prof at The U had spent a week as a newsroom ride-along and produced at the end a formula calculated to predict story play. It began with Let P=Proximity and included functions for Deaths, Sexual References and Prior Celebrity, augmented by the inverse of the Age of Victims.

Last I heard, the associate prof had secured tenure but was still refining his formula.

The next drawer contained more "C" file labels, the last being a "Council: See Sanhedrin" cross-reference. Then, the folders started up with a march through the "D"s.

I closed the drawer and reconsidered my search for the Christ file. Maybe there wasn't one, and my story was starting from scratch. Maybe, I thought, Slade or some other reporter had already spirited it away and the newsroom race was on. Maybe it was a simple case of misfiling. I flipped through half of the D files. But, no.

I shoved the drawer back in emphatically enough that the gal with the owlish glasses looked up. She smiled.

Idiot. I was looking in the wrong place.

I squatted down to slide open the J drawer and there I found the folder I was searching for. Labeled "Jesus," right behind "Jeremiah," the latter a civic square shouter known for his obnoxious prognostications.

There wasn't much to the Jesus folder, but I took it to one of the spare classroom desks anyway. The girl smiled again. Something in the way she peered through her round glasses at the open file in front of her reminded me that owls are big-eyed because they're predators.

Clip files, like the one I had pulled for Jesus, were the bread and butter of the morgue's operation. A clip was simply an individual story cut from the paper, dated with a felt pen, typically red, and preserved in a subject-labeled folder, typically drab. A clip, to a reporter, was also something that happened, now safely in the past and ready for recounting to the boys around the bar.

The Jesus file consisted mostly of small items, the B-3 kind that, outside of our morgue, only a mother might notice and clip for the family album. Judas was quoted in one, identified as a spokesman. Another story had an observation attributed to "a source familiar with Jesus' thinking," who sounded just like Judas, as well. Jesus's name, underlined in purple, was one of several cited in a column about the troubling rise in

insurrectionist agitation written by Alldyne, the Chron's long-time establishment know-it-all. The column quoted in succession an unnamed "source," "official" and "law enforcement authority," all of whom might have been, in fact, the same individual.

I laid down Alldyne's column and picked up the A-1 piece by Tommy Sands, the provincial up-and-comer whose follow-up I was filching.

"Preacher Claims Miraculous Powers, Attracts Growing Crowds," the hed stated, straight-forwardly enough, though the sub-hed kicked it up a notch: "Converting a Corpse: Did He Make a Dead Man Rise?"

The story, much as I remembered it, was a real humdinger, though imperfectly rendered.

The dateline was Bethany.

The lede was a grabber.

"Lazarus doesn't remember being dead."

I read more.

"His alleged four days in the grave remain a blur, at best.

But now, the long-time Bethany resident finds himself plotted in the middle of a high-stakes fight between a charismatic preacher and the local Pharisees.

The followers of Jesus insist the controversial miracle-working preacher brought a shrouded Lazarus back to life. Officials call the claims a dangerous con, but Jesus isn't backing down.

'I am,' Jesus said, 'the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.'"

The story was sound, if formulaic. A promise of conflict and consequence followed a snappy lede, drawing the reader further in. The grafs were succinct, and the high-up quote put a human voice before the jump to an inside page. The verb "insist" implied but did not expressly articulate disbelief, leaving judgment in abeyance. While the "high-stakes" and "controversial" flags were cliched calls for attention, I could not find serious fault with their employment. I regularly hired them myself, like unlicensed day laborers always around for cheap handywork.

The young woman sitting next to me pushed back from her desk and asked me where the ladies' room was. I told her, down the hall and past the last portrait of the Colonel, the one with him on horseback. I watched her leave.

The last clip in the folder was an undated story that had been scavenged out of The Morning Call's Faith and Followers

section, the latter a Saturday-only inside page edited by a credulous rummy and read by no one I knew. The piece was about a sermon Jesus delivered to a large outdoor gathering out in the foothills. I skimmed the text, which was included in what looked like its unpruned entirety, and zeroed in on some biographical background grafs that sounded awfully familiar. I picked up Tommy Sands' story again to be sure, and bingo. Three grafs in each article were identical, or nearly so. Two verbs and an inessential noun differed, but the rudimentary changes were as futile as a juvenile burglar's quick wipe-down of his prints at the crime scene. They were hardly enough to avoid conviction on a newsroom charge of plagiarism.

A quick word about that, plagiarism.

When I was starting out at The Chron, the City Editor relegated me to the School Board beat, also known as the pits. It was actually the school boards beat, plural, as several demographically and managerially distinct districts divvied up J-Town's students and, more significantly, its tax base. One district sent its scions onward and upward to The U. Another simply incarcerated its charges until their educational sentence expired at 16. The latter offered far better story opportunities, especially of the Cops and Courts variety. The board's contract management arrangements, in particular, were a

J-Town Press Club Prize winner waiting to be written. The Colonel, though, directed our attention to the district where the fraud was less explicit and the subscriber demographics more enticing to our advertisers.

My opposite number was a middle-aged woman clinging to the bottom of The Morning Call's newsroom ladder. Once she might have been a decent sob sister but by the time I met her she was a spent force, all her words wrung dry. She'd doodle in her Reporter's Notebook during board meetings, or skip them altogether, but somehow her stories always included full quotes and partial facts friendly to the board. Her ability to file serviceable stories without tangible reporting effort first impressed and then vexed me.

Finally, I found her out.

Instead of tossing the board's press releases half-read into the trash can, I began comparing them to my competition. After a half-hearted variation up top, they were word for word the same. She was a copycat, no bones about it. I figured she had escaped detection because no one outside the district administration building actually read school board stories.

I might have been the one to kill her career, right then and there, but my trigger finger froze. simply held on to the

evidence of felony plagiarism in the first degree, letting the woman alone until Slade broke her in The Wasp.

He was new then, still honing his stingers at J-Town's upstart little weekly. The paper ran stories that the dailies wouldn't touch, written by youngsters who thought they had nothing to lose and a career to gain.

Slade nailed her, but good. The Wasp, showing its customary lack of proportion, splashed his story about The Morning Call's plagiarist across the cover with a one-word headline: Thief! Slade had her dead to rights. Ke had paged through a year's worth of the poor woman's stories, Without disclosing his intentions, he'd also obtained from the School Board PIO a complete set of PR releases. Obtained; that was the self-congratulatory verb Slade applied in his scoop, though he later told me his editor had insisted upon it.

The Morning Call toughed it out at first, but when Slade followed up the next week with an additional six months' worth of comparisons the paper's management sacrificed the plagiarist and offered Slade her job. He stayed put for the time being, having set his fledging hawk's eyes on The Chron. She dropped from the face of the earth.

Anyway. Plagiarism; a funny topic in and around the morgue, home to more temptresses than a Ghoolian crib. The whole place was stocked with plump files waiting to be plundered.

"Where's the owl?" Slade jutted his chin at the desk and empty chair, which the young woman had slid primly back into place when she left. "Has she flown?"

Sometimes, he just showed up like that, unaccompanied by his customary fanfare. I'd learned to check around the corners before bad-mouthing him, whether in the newsroom or the bar. He seemed to be everywhere, Slade. My colleague, my competition. My shadow. I couldn't lose him no matter how I tried.

Slade leaned against the doorway, his arms crossed and his steel-blue eyes flicking about the morgue. The scene checked, all personages and absences noted, he returned to me and smiled. He had a smile for every occasion, each perfectly rendered according to the rank of the recipient. I got the one with the teeth bared.

"Dusting her nose," I said. "Who is she?"

"You fancy her?" Slade beamed. "Is our young Stoney in love again?"

He liked to cast me that way, as terminally wet behind the ears, though I was a good nine months older. I knew that for a

fact, because I had stolen a look at his personnel file, reading the top page upside down one time while I sat across from the City Editor's desk.

"Sure," I said. "Absolutely enraptured. But who is she?"

Slade yawned extravagantly, sweeping his arms back and holding his mouth agape a beat longer than required.

"Sorry," he said. "Dora and I tossed back a few last night. Had a hard time keeping up with her."

He performed another yawn, keeping one eye on me all the while.

"Yeah," he said. "Now, that's a gal with some kind of thirst."

He yawned yet again, this time as if playing to the back row patrons of Slatsky's Burlesque Emporium.

"Finally quenched it, though," he assured me.

"Yeah," I said. "You look a little ragged. Maybe you should take a day off. You know, recuperate."

"Can't," he said. "Got a hot tip."

"That right? The Planning Commission about to rezone some parcel?"

He chuckled dutifully at my put-down reminder that the Planning Commission beat on which he'd been stuck was but one rung above the School Board in the newsroom hierarchy.

"Haven't you heard?" Slade paused to honor the return of the young woman with the freckles and the owl glasses. She smiled and settled back at her desk. Slade raised his voice a notch. "The City Editor put me on GA. Said he needed the firepower. I'm surprised no one told you."

He let that sink in for a moment, until the acid dissipated.

"Oh," Slade said jovially. "I don't think you two have met. Stone, this is Liza. Liza, this is Stone."

The young woman with the freckles and the owl glasses, henceforth Liza, looked up. Her eyes were green, her lips unplumped, her cheeks innocent of rouge. She was far too fresh for the newsroom or the morgue.

"Liza here is with The U," Slade said. "A real scholar. You went to The U for a little while, didn't you, Stone? I forget. Does that make you an alumni?"

"Alumnus," I said. "Singular."

"Right," he said.

"Oh," Slade said, like the notion had just occurred to him.
"We're going to be at The Night Shift tonight after deadline.
Join us. You, too, Stone," Stone said. "Doreen might be there."

He flicked his smile at me like a jailhouse shiv.