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Two Scoops Shy

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The day was Monday, June 19, 1972, and I was at police headquarters in the District of Columbia. The officer I had come to interview had put me on ice in an office he'd borrowed for a few minutes while he went to answer increasingly frequent calls from his boss. My eyes fell on the material scattered randomly, it appeared, across the desk. There were maps, road maps, one of West Virginia with a route marked in red through the middle of it, and dozens of other pieces of paper, some of them in plastic bags.

Don G. Cherry had been the acting sergeant at the scene of a break-in at the Watergate over Saturday night, and the stuff he had collected at the scene was there in front of me. I sorted through it, without a lot of interest. There weren't any pictures. I remember yawning.

I'd been asked by the editor of The Washington Post Magazine to do a story on Cherry, an 11-year veteran of the police force who was also an artist and who had an uncanny way of drawing suspects whom he'd never seen just by interviewing witnesses and victims. He was almost psychic.

Between calls from his increasingly anxious chief, he returned to me, and eventually we went in to interview a rape victim whose assailant he was going to sketch from details she would provide. She had agreed to let me sit in on the interview. As we talked, walking down the hall, Officer Cherry babbled constantly about what had happened the previous Saturday night, June 17, but I was interested in this magazine story, which would go a lot farther

toward helping me make my rent that month than a story about a third-rate burglary caper that hadn't gone anywhere. I hadn't paid much attention to the story anyway, and the names he was mentioning didn't mean anything to me.

I asked the rape victim what her name was, and she said it was Ann Arbor, which, in my midlife naivete, I wrote in my notebook and later in the story I turned in for the magazine. The editor took it out and looked at me oddly. I was running real hot that day in the journalism game.

This wasn't my first brush with the shenanigans of the White House that Richard M. Nixon ran, and it wasn't my first miss, either.

My earliest encounter with the Watergate story preceded the event by almost two years, and nobody knew it then nor has it been mentioned since, until now. Having a wonderfully marred journalistic hindsight (I knew Jonestown was a great story several days after it broke), it took me two decades to realize what a hot property I had here in this wig story, and I will withhold it from you no longer.

It was an earlier time. President Nixon had been in the White House a year and a half, and I had been in the Style section of The Post for a year when Elsie Carper, or maybe it was Henry Mitchell, asked me if I'd like to go over to Woodie's and do a story about a new line of men's Dynel wigs just in from Hong Kong (one size fits all). Being an editor and not a reporter, I did not have the option of declining the assignment, so I picked up Ken Feil, a photogra-

pher, and asked a friend if he'd like to go along—with the idea of stopping for a sudsy aperitif somewhere along one boulevard or another on a hot August afternoon in 1970.

Now you will recall that one of the Watergate players, E. Howard Hunt, was to show up in 1972 as having worn what was described as “an ill-fitting red wig” as part of a disguise furnished by the CIA. It was the sort of episode one came to expect as the whole business of the White House Plumbers came to light during that time. Nobody ever asked where this red wig (it was really brown, according to some testimony) and its companions came from, except that Richard Helms, who had been director of the CIA, testified one afternoon with a smile that it would not be like the CIA to supply anything that could be called “ill-fitting.”

At Woodie's, though, in the summer of 1970, we took before-and-after pictures and tried on the wigs, one of which was called the “Pan,” and the friend I'd asked along hit on the sales clerk, an attractive woman, and somehow got her telephone number.

Having some journalistic skills, I interviewed that clerk and another, making two sources for the story, and got enough of an interesting angle to write these two paragraphs as my lead:

“On a recent warm summer day a United States government official rode the escalator to a downtown store, bought 16 men's wigs for \$720, swore the staff to secrecy, and returned to wherever it was he had started.

“You may like to speculate that the CIA is

going to send 16 men out into the cold with little rugs of Dynel to keep them warm, or that 16 Secret Service men are going to look even more alike than usual; but the staff remains sworn to secrecy, and all you know for sure is that the government man joined the growing numbers of Washingtonians who are buying up stretch wigs faster than craftsmen in Hong Kong and Canal Street can make them.”

I guess Howard Hunt's suppliers had to get their wigs someplace. But it turned out it wasn't going to be at Woodie's, at least not at the downtown store.

My story appeared on a weekend, as I recall, on a Saturday or maybe Sunday, and a day or two later my friend, who'd gone along in the spirit of adventure, called the wig saleswoman with the idea of asking her out.

“You've got a lot of nerve calling me, you [expletive deleted]!” she snarled at him.

He of course protested, and she got specific, and grim:

“I told you not to put that in about the government men, and first thing Monday morning the guy brought back all 16 of the wigs, he was [expletive deleted] as [expletive deleted], and there went my commission!”

And there went my career. But I didn't know it until yesterday.

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