

## **The First Two Pages of “Public Relations” by Neil S. Plakcy**

From *The Great Filling Station Holdup: Stories Inspired by the Songs of Jimmy Buffett*

Edited by Josh Pachter (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by Neil S. Plakcy

When Josh Pachter offered me the opportunity to contribute a short story to *The Great Filling Station Holdup*, I was flattered to be invited. It’s always wonderful to receive the respect of your peers, and getting such an invitation is like opening a special present. I was also excited because Jimmy Buffett is one of my favorite musical artists, and I thought it would be fun to create a piece of crime fiction based on one of his songs.

I immediately began to look through my CDs, and quickly came upon *Don’t Stop the Carnival*, which is based on the Herman Wouk novel of the same name. I saw and enjoyed a production of the musical at the Coconut Grove Playhouse, and I love all the songs on the album. But which one to pick?

With my taste for puns and double entendres, the obvious choice was “Public Relations.” The second song on the CD, it explains the connection between Norman Paperman’s previous career in PR and the work he does running the Gull Reef Club on the fictional island of Kinja in the Caribbean.

Immediately I knew that my story had to involve someone having sex in public. Several sexually explicit videos had hit the internet at that time, and I

thought I could weave a crime out of such a video. I wanted to let readers know what kind of a ride they were in for right from the start, so I began the story this way:

When Dick Jeffries was caught on camera barebacking a young male exotic dancer, I kicked into full damage control mode. It wasn't just that he was a married man and a member of the WASP establishment—he was the CEO of a company that made and marketed condoms.

Maybe naming the character Dick is a bit obvious, but I had fun with it later on. And I wanted to establish the stakes—a married man having a same-sex dalliance and a corporate CEO caught not using his own product.

I felt I could take a risk here: Parrotheads are live-and-let-live folks, and I think the majority of them will find the situation funny and not be turned off simply because there's some man-on-man action involved. And I believe strongly in the current movement to bring diversity to crime fiction, and my experience writing LGBTQ characters is one I wanted to add to this anthology.

In the musical, Norman has left his PR career for the Caribbean, so I established that similarity in the second paragraph. I also wanted to set the stakes for him. He's been keeping his PR business on a slow burn while in semi-retirement, and if he can't get Dick out of this jam, his career is going as dark as the setting sun.

The next paragraphs contrast Dick's haggard look with the press photograph Norman orchestrated for him, which minimized his double chin and posed him as a "kindly grandfather" who happened to be the head of a company that made male contraceptives.

That PR shading is in direct contrast to the grim reality of the article from the *New York Post*, which reads,

"Richard Jeffries, CEO of Custom Resources, Inc., manufacturer of the Wilde Men line of prophylactics, was videotaped Monday night having unprotected anal sex with Justin Case, an exotic dancer at Ethel's, a gay bar on the Lower East Side. Case alleges that Jeffries picked him up at the bar after Case's last performance and accompanied him to Case's apartment in Alphabet City."

I didn't think the explicitness of this squib was out of keeping for the *Post*, which after all created the pioneering headline "Headless Body in Topless Bar." I dropped a couple of Easter eggs in there, too. The condom line is named for Oscar Wilde, who was himself jailed after a revelation of homosexual activities. Justin Case is so obviously a cute nom-de-danse, and the bar was named for Lucy Ricardo's goofy sidekick, Ethel Mertz.

I write both amateur sleuth novels (the golden retriever mystery series) and police procedurals (the Mahu Investigations and the Angus Green FBI thrillers), and it's a lot harder to draw an amateur into a case. There needs to be a personal connection to either the victim or the suspect and a way to use the amateur's special abilities to solve the mystery.

I've tried to establish both of those early on. Dick's in trouble, and he calls on the man he believes can help him. Norman has skill manipulating the press, which seems the most important problem at the time. Not only is he uniquely qualified, but he's the only one who's going to go the extra mile to investigate.

According to a legal website, "Federal laws also prohibit videotaping or photographing someone who is nude or engaging in any form of sexual activity in an area where they enjoy a reasonable expectation of privacy." With a \$500 fine and imprisonment of up to five years for the person who uploaded the video, there's a crime here—but not necessarily one the NYPD is going to pursue vigorously, especially considering the locker-room humor involved in this particular case.

So it's up to the PR professional to minimize damage. And by the end of the second page of the story, Norman is ready to dive into that issue.

These first two pages serve as a justification for the involvement of the amateur sleuth. I've established Norman and his relationship to the victim, if we'll call him that, though perhaps at this point Dick is only the victim of his own carelessness. The stakes of the case are low to the police, so there's likely to be little investigation, and yet there's a definite need for Norman's intervention.

At the same time, I've established the relationship to the song, and the reason why this story should be in a crime fiction anthology. Later on, I use more

imagery from the song to deepen the connection to the music, and of course there's a murder involved in which Dick is a major suspect. But by then, I hope the reader has been hooked into this amateur investigation and its connection to Buffett's music.

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Neil S. Plakcy is the author of over fifty mystery and romance novels, including the best-selling golden retriever mysteries and the highly acclaimed *Mahu* series, a three-time finalist for the Lambda Literary Awards. His stories have been featured in numerous venues, including the Bouchercon anthology *Florida Happens* and Malice Domestic's *Murder Most Conventional* and several *Happy Homicides* collections.

He has seen Jimmy Buffett perform in concert many times and knows many Buffett songs by heart. He is a professor of English at Broward College in South Florida, where he lives with his husband and their rambunctious golden retrievers.

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