“IT’S NOT NEWS”
What today’s high school journalist is taught
By Rich Cohen

The ideal newspaper should be like a portrait of a small town: the dark streets and the shanties and the mansions all visible at once. A school newspaper should be this in miniature, for what aspect of the nation cannot be found in embryonic form in the halls of a public high school? Such a paper is therefore a kind of laboratory, though perhaps it is better described as one of those rats on which new drugs are tested—the symptoms turn up quicker here, the diseases tend to race through the body. Several months ago, wanting to look into the current health of my old school, and so (if you follow me) of the republic, I went back to Winnetka, Illinois, where I spent an autumn week at New Trier High School following the reporters of the New Trier News as they took their meetings with editors and stitched together an issue of the paper from the life and flow and small talk of the school.

New Trier, especially if you’re a freshman and the sort of late-blooming kid who runs for student council under the slogan SMALL IN STATURE, BIG IN IDEAS, is mean in the mode of Dickens. It’s a helter-skelter of red brick, smokestacks, basement rooms, chin-up bars, and dank gymnasiums, a classic in the nineteenth-century nut-house style, tiny windows peering out of vast concrete walls and cages in the stairwells to catch the suicides. From their first week, students are indoctrinated in the belief that this is the best public school in America. The word “success” is tossed around, graduation rates are mentioned, a list of prominent alumni is drummed into each head: Ann-Margret, Ralph Bellamy, Charlton Heston, Rock Hudson, and, now at the top, Donald Rumsfeld, whose tough little presence seems to stalk these halls, asking intrusive questions about your extracurriculars.

The New Trier News was originally intended as a simple voice of propaganda, a Red Star or Pravda that, in issue one, published on September 30, 1919, explained its mission as follows:

We offer our readers a full-fledged, live-wire newspaper, dedicated to boosting energetically our school, its departments, its activities and its ideals. We come upon the scene as another ardent worker and staunch supporter of every constructive measure, and as such, we pledge ourselves to cooperate impartially with any and all of the school’s boosters. May they ever increase in number.

Over time, of course, the News has changed, becoming, like much of the media, a staunch defender of the status quo: less interested in giving offense, or in probing the depths, or in getting suspended or sent to study hall or sued; more cautious and more responsible and more sensible and less nutty and less fun and less connected.

to the life of students; so out of touch with the true engine of any great newspaper, which is the simple human need for gossip.

Every school day the reporting staff of the paper meets for journalism class in a room in the basement of New Trier. These are mostly juniors, who, in addition to learning about nut graphs and leads and kickers and the inverted-triangle diagram that can be made of any proper news story, write an article for each week's edition of the paper. When I took the class, in the mid-1980s, we were also taught advertising. One assignment had us devise slogans for a dairy product and for the Devry Technical Institute, which, we knew from the commercials that interrupted Bewitched when we were home, sick from school, would award a diploma through the mail. My slogans, in succession: EAT CHEESE, IT'S AN ADVENTURE and YOU EAT AT HOME, WHY NOT STUDY AT HOME? The class operates like one of those New Jersey flight schools: after a few months in the second seat, the kid gets his wings and buzzes away in his little Cessna. The most successful students go on, as seniors, to be the officers of the paper.

The class is currently taught by John Lucadamo, a white-haired, red-faced adult. He also teaches English and advises and oversees the newspaper in a Pinch Sulzberger capacity. This is his early retirement. For years he worked as a reporter for the Chicago Tribune. When a student protests an assignment, usually on grounds of lameness, Mr. Lucadamo shows, on his overhead projector, a story he was assigned by an editor at the Tribune about a freakishly large pumpkin someone had grown in suburban Chicago. "And so here I was," Mr. Lucadamo tells the class, "a man in his forties, with a wife and a family, driving to look at a big pumpkin. But you know what? I gave the story respect. I treated it like it was a summit, and I came back with a nice little piece of journalism."

Mr. Lucadamo says each issue of the News should give a reader a sense of what it was like to be a student at New Trier that week. He says the paper is allowed tremendous freedom, giving, as an example, a story he published about a teacher accused of "fondling"—a word that made the hair on my neck stand up. Mr. Lucadamo talked about checking a van out of the motor pool, driving his students to court, watching the accused testify, and the meticulous care the class took to keep the name of the possibly fondled student secret. "Being fondled is not the kind of thing you want everyone to know about," he told me. "Fondling." In his time, Mr. Lucadamo claims to have encountered only one red line. It concerned Photoripinion, a feature in which students, accompanied by their picture, give thoughts on an issue of the day. Photoripinion was discontinued after a student responded to the question "What would you do about overcrowding at New Trier?" by saying, "Kill the Freshmen," a joke considered unacceptable in the wake of Columbine. "In the picture, this kid was giving all kinds of gang symbols," said Mr. Lucadamo. "I didn't even know it."

In class each student talks about the progress he's making on his assignment. Reviews, editorials, sports stories. One kid is writing about terrorism—a bag of powder was recently found in the boys' bathroom, leading to an anthrax panic. There is a feature called Road Trip of the Week, which, because of the tight boundary thrown up by overly cautious suburban parents, rarely covers terrain beyond southern Wisconsin. Of these stories, my favorite was, simply, WANDERING AROUND SOUTHERN WISCONSIN. "Almost the moment we crossed the border into Wisconsin, we could sense the change from Illinois," it reads. "Large glass business buildings with their own manicured golf courses were immediately exchanged for firework shops, and cheese castle after cheese castle."

Mostly I was interested in the kids. There had been, since my time, a burst of diversity, a tremendous change in shade and hue, as if someone had been playing with the knobs on the side of the TV set. And yet the students looked more alike than ever. This is, of course, a school where the students have always been said to look alike, dressing more uniformly than any code would require. Indian kids, Jewish kids, Asian kids, Arab kids, and old-timey Wasp kids, like cobblestone showing beneath tarry blacktop, united by something far stronger than ethnicity: the ambitions of their parents. It looked like the end of the dream—not the pursuit of happiness but its actual attainment, the big beast brought down by a massive accumulation of material. No less than the iPods they all seemed to carry, many of them filled with weak music, these kids were very much what the market had demanded.

At last, a kid stood up who looked like the kids I used to know, a memory not from my time but from my sister's, when kids used to gather late at night at the beach and race around in muscle cars, and orange was a good color—the burned-out overall days of the mid-seventies. This kid was wearing torn jeans and a black concert shirt, and his face was your face before it was your face and his hair started normal and then flew away in back. But when I looked for the name of the band on the kid's shirt, I realized the name had been scrubbed out, or was never there in the first place, that it was not really a concert shirt at all but an homage to the idea of the concert shirt, which means the kid was not really dressed like he was dressed but dressed like someone dressed like he was dressed, a muddy reflection of what had itself been a muddy idea: the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-protest pose, the big-brother shrug that says, Aw, Fuck It.

This kid had run into trouble on his assignment. "I was supposed to write about the new social studies teacher," he said. "And it's not working out."

Mr. Lucadamo: What's the problem?

Kid: I can't reach the guy.

Mr. Lucadamo: But that's your job as a reporter.
Kid: He's unreachable.
Mr. Lucadamo: Keep trying.
Kid: But he's in the hospital. He was in a motorcycle wreck.
Another kid: Was he the guy that smashed his bike into the tree on Sheridan Road?
Mr. Lucadamo: Talk to him in the hospital. That's what reporters do.
Kid: I don't think he's reachable.
Mr. Lucadamo: You mean you don't know what hospital?
Kid: No, I mean I don't think he's reachable by anyone.
Other kid: I heard the guy's in a coma.
Kid: Like I said, unreachable.
Mr. Lucadamo (to class): This is a good example of how a story can die on the vine.
Kid: He's not dead yet.
Other kid: No. This is a better story. The guy went headfirst through a tree.
Kid: Yeah, I think there's some police photos I can get.
Mr. Lucadamo: Wait a minute. I don't want this poor guy to be the poster boy for bad driving.
Other kid: I know someone who actually saw the wreck. You can interview him.
Mr. Lucadamo: No, no, no. Write about the new math teacher.
That other thing, it's just not news.

The high school hallway, while being a road from here to there, is the field where you run and scurry, and we are all rats when the lights come on, and some doofus is mashed into his girlfriend against the lockers, the lucky bastard, and on the last day it's filled with loose sheets of paper and the dirty gun-smoke casings of spent fireworks. It's a real place, the same in every school, as changeless and distinct as a casino floor in Vegas. No windows, no horizons, no ins, no outs, just pit bosses, or the gearhead equivalent (his name is Clay, he has red hair and carries a role of dimes in his fist), and players, whole solar systems of kids, matter and antimatter, the losers and short-time winners. No daylight or hint of seasons; time vanished. Even in class, the outside world, as seen through the window, is flat and unreal, a crystalline landscape behind a nobleman in an old Dutch painting. To be here as an adult, and as such to be invisible to all but the most unusual kids, is to feel as if you've stepped through the wrong door into a party you left in 1985: Ahh, so this is where I left it.

The old nightmare—back in school, two credits short, the gravity of the old universe dragging you into its orbit. You've imagined returning with your grown-up knowledge, climbing through the ranks, running the joint like a Yankee in Shanghai. But watching these kids, chattering in tight knots of bad will and cold stares, you see it was all a dream: these kids would make a hash of you. The years on the outside have, if anything, made you weaker, more vulnerable to the crushing blow. Here and there, the faculty has hung pictures of students from times gone by. In the fifties the girls held their notebooks like a shield between their bellies and the world; in the seventies the boys had long hair and made peace signs. In school, time is arranged into now and before now, sixties, seventies, eighties, blurred into a single wash of gone. The librarian sits high on her chair behind the checkout desk. Once, when a kid named John Campbell jammed eight copies of the book Black Boy into my pack, which set off the security gate, I spent an entire period arguing with this same woman. There is a picture of a kid in a football jacket. His hair is blond, long in back, he is leaning over a Xerox machine, chew in his lip, and I realize I knew this kid. He was my year. I remember staring into the engine of his car as he explained something complicated.

The newspaper's basement office sits among a dozen rooms set aside for clubs. In a school like New Trier, with more than 4,000 students—it cranks them out like packets of artificial sweetener off the factory belt in Brooklyn—such clubs are often the only place a student can expose his true nature free of mockery, or violence. The members of each club, like the street gangs of old New York, have a neatly defined public persona: In the Math Club, kids wear high-water and short sleeves like the boys at Mission Control in Houston. In the Year Book, blonde bow heads smile and say, Let's include this picture of Steve. He's really had an impact! In The Simpson's Club, kids flinch from too many walk-by charley horsings discuss Itchy and Scratchy. The kids at the News tend to be a mix—smart girls paddling college applications, jocks interested in sportswriting, geeky boys interested in smart girls, gay students interested in jocks, other kids actually interested in newspapers, and glory chasers convinced a newspaper is a street-level door to the world of celebrity.

The staff meets during ninth period—the last period of school. There are desks along the wall of the office, dictionaries, bound volumes of old issues, and four or five computers on which stories are edited and the paper laid out. The staff sits around talking over the upcoming issue or working at the computers, helping the juniors, or doing on the beat-up old couch. When I visited, the News had two editors in chief: Joe Rosenberg and Clark DenUyl, who not only worked together but were also close friends. Together they made a fetish of classic rock, driving to distant arenas to see the Rolling Stones, the Moody Blues, any band that was big three moments before this moment. Clark is beefy and blond and laughs a lot, sucking extra spit into his mouth with a vacuum—rush of air. Joe wears sandals and sweats to school and likes to sit on top of a filing cabinet, voice floating down from above. When I visited, he and Clark were sporting YES concert T-shirts. Joe was talking about a story he wanted to pursue. A few months before, a dead body had been found in the woods, and Joe wanted to write about it: who was it, how did he die, how was he found? When Joe mentioned this, all the editors started shouting opinions.

* I was stopped in the hall on occasion by Danny Mandel, the kid reporting on me. He was skinny and earnest, with a big head, and at some point I realized that Mr. Lucadamo had essentially taped me with a slightly better dressed version of my own youthful self.
Finally, Mr. Lucadamo sighed and said, "It's not news."
"Why?" asked Joe.
"The kid wasn't a student at New Trier."
"He used to be," said Joe.
"No one cares."
"Everyone wants to know about it," said Clark.
"It happened too long ago to be news," said Mr. Lucadamo.
One of the editors turned to me.
"What do you think? Do you think it's news?"
I said, "Yeah, a dead body in the woods sounds like news."
Mr. Lucadamo gave me that bug-eyed-teacher look I remembered from high school. "Sorry," he said. "It's not news."

Joe Rosenberg is one of the reasons I wanted to write this story. I had been at New Trier the year before, and, when I walked with Joe through the halls, I was amazed by the ease with which he moved from group to group, like he was walking through a tunnel of hands. I thought, Yeah, this is what the life of a newspaperman should be: everyone convinced you're one of them, right up until the story breaks. Joe is gung-ho in a just-through-the-awkward-years way, features still wild and elastic but giving off a tremendous senior charisma, one of those kids who, okay maybe there were rough times, and sophomore year, the NCAA betting pool aside, is rough for everyone, but he had come through it, emerged, proved there are girls and beers even for the thinking man. As a freshman, looking to make a name, he had begun writing for the Frosh Soph Journal, which, for the brainy New Trier mediaphiles, is the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette or Dade County Sentinel, the paper in the provinces where you cut your teeth. "Everyone was telling me, you have to find your niche," Joe said. "I thought it was going to be debate, but that did not work at all. So I started writing for the Journal, and I thought it was geeky at first but decided, okay, let's see where it takes me."

Joe was talking to me on the phone—I was in a hotel room in one part of the suburbs, he was in a house in another part, talking fast because he was getting ready to leave for a Guns N' Roses concert. In this, we were following the script of all high school friendships, face time in the hall followed by rambling exchanges on the phone. Joe took journalism junior year, where, along with his friend Clark, he caught the attention of the senior editors and of Mr. Lucadamo. At the end of the year, he nominated himself to be the next editor of the News. There was an interview in a basement room, where he was questioned and teased by seniors, then he had the job. He soon realized a newspaper can be used as a weapon—to change the landscape, crusade. It was in this way that Joe, and co-editor Clark, wanted to go

"Later I got a phone call from Danny Mandel, my reporter, doubleganger. He had a number of questions, mostly about his time versus my time, and, sadly, in answering I found myself as canned and correct as a father on Career Day.

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after the school-bus company. Extrapolating from their love of classic-rock concertgoing, which passed among friends as an eccentric activity, Joe and Clark had started a club called Outside the Box. Mostly strange kids going on excursions that are one kind of funny and another kind of funny at the same time. On a trip to Northbrook, for instance, members of the club sat in an Indian sweet lodge some guy had set up in a crabby back yard in the suburbs. "The man was a licensed shaman," Joe told me. On another occasion, Clark and Joe and other kids were waiting in front of school for a ride to a haunted house, but the driver never showed. The result? A series of proposed pieces, a muckraking look into the practices and delinquencies of the bus company, followed possibly by a scathing editorial of the What-Hath-Arrogance-Wrought variety.

Joe, in other words, seemed to embody a pure quality of journalism, which, beyond the desire to find a niche, is a drive for the real story behind the fake story, and why the fake story is selling. For Mr. Lucadamo, who when not in the newspaper office is in the hall, at a desk entirely too small for an adult, grading papers, the task is to encourage students but also to tamp down such exuberance, to channel it toward the interests of the school, steering clear of the red lines where high school journalism interferes with high school policy. "We've covered deep issues," Joe told me. "Drugs, sex. But there are always areas where we cannot go. We have to be politically correct and can't really affect anybody."

And this raises the big questions: What is a high school journalist? How much freedom does he have? A small matter but also not so small, one kind of funny and another, in that these relationships set the parameters for everything beyond high school. Mr. Lucadamo is training your journalists, teaching them to shape a story like a triangle but also where to stand in regard to authority. The result is a tension that, in miniature, replicates the ancient struggle between reporters and reported on, those who know and aren't saying and those who don't know but want to find out. When touched the right way, this tension twangs like a guitar string: In Elkton, Oregon, for example, the administrators of the public school pulped the student newspaper, The Elk Call, after a student, responding to a letter to the editor about high failure rates—"It is said that it takes a community to raise a child. Well some members of this community are telling you, 'You're grounded!'"—published a prayer: "Oh Lord, we are asking you now today that you open up these suffering inebriate's eyes." In Fort Wayne, Indiana, at Northrop High School, a student uncovered screwy financial doings by a coach and had his story spiked. In New Jersey, in a case heard by the State Supreme Court (Desples v. Clearview Regional Board of Education) a junior high kid had his views of Mississippi Burning and Rain Man killed because, as R-rated movies, they should not have been seen by the reporter. The issue is always the same: Does the First Amendment protect student journalists? The big case came in 1988, after the principal of Hazelwood East High School in suburban St. Louis pulled two stories from the paper, one about a pregnant student (he thought the subject matter inappropriate), the other about divorce (a student had complained about her father). The case went to the U.S. Supreme Court (Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier), which found in favor of the administration, setting the rules for an entire generation of student journalists. According to the justices, "Educators do not offend the First Amendment by exercising editorial control over the style and content of student speech in school-sponsored expressive activities so long as their actions are reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns."

With this ruling, young reporters everywhere were taught that they are at the service of the truth only as far as the truth serves the greater good. A student first, reporter second. For "pedagogical concerns" you might as well substitute "the safety of our troops," or "the fate of the war on terror," or "the integrity of the financial markets." The magic words may change, but they always conjure the same trick: whole parts of the world are rendered "Not News."

One afternoon, I went to a room in the basement of the school where back issues of the Neus are stored. The paper has been published continuously since 1919, except for a brief stretch during the Depression, and I thought that if I looked through the entire run I might get a sense of how the paper has changed. The Neus, as it turns out, is a perfect mirror on the country, only it's convex, everything distorted and strange. In it you see the end of World War I: "We were excited from school and we went to the city of Chicago, where the cheering was deafening; where the hats were flying into the air; where great crowds swarmed." You see the last of the old America, the faith in institutions that built up after the Civil War. "If you are loyal to the school you will do more than cheer," reads an editorial from 1919. "You will play your part, you will back up all the projects of the school." You see the coming revolution. In 1920, New Trier was visited by an educational commission from China. "We had the idea that New Trier was just a high school in a country district," the commissioner told the Neus. "It was quite a surprise for us to find a modern school building with all the modern facilities. But while these fortunate boys and girls in your school are enjoying the privileges of this fine institution, undoubtedly they also think of the less fortunate brothers and sisters."

In the fifties, with a feature that each week offered a sort of celebrity profile of a student, you sense the emergence of the modern America, which is the culture of personality:

Dotsy Banker... can’t stand oysters, her ring, rock n’ roll, Sunday night homework, social climbers, hot days, nasty rumors, and people who are always complaining and talking about themselves.

Often called "the friendliest girl in New Trier" Eloise Eberhart is living proof of what a smile can do... "Where did your get your dimple," is a question she says she has always disliked.

Although Cam Avery admits that most girls are "quite confusing" he has definite ideas about his ideal girl. She
must have a fabulous personality and be “pint-size.”

Julie Arnold says people who ooh and aah over her long hair and give her pony tail “such a hard yank it feels like my head is falling off” also annoy her.

Missy Cook believes Latin boys are very mature and smooth for their age.

The News, in other words, offered a picture of a complete world—the sixties, as experienced in the paper, is a process of tearing this picture apart. The first blow comes with the campaign to open the smoking area, a fenced-in yard where students can smoke without hassle, where, over time, they would construct a kingdom of cool. “Instead of patrolling the washrooms of the school, why doesn’t New Trier take a realistic view of the situation and create a smoking room where students, if they have parental permission, can go and smoke in a complimentary atmosphere?” a student wrote in 1969. The area, as had been predicted, quickly led to harder stuff: MEDITATE ALL YOUR TROUBLES AWAY is a headline from that same year. Then the first naps are on the scene, busting kids in the student lounge, and then there is the experiment in co-ed gym, and then the dress code is abolished: “Junior Jim Douglas doesn’t mind girls wearing pants, but thinks whether or not they look good depends on the girl.” In VISTA WORKERS TELL OF GHETTO EXPERIENCE, a student turns on his parents: “Integration is slow because you can’t bring home a black brother to a white racist mother.”

From there, decades flash by like laundry in a spin cycle. The seventies, with a piece called STUDENT ROCK BANDS JAM NT: “Over the years the high school rock tradition has been carried out by such named bands as Backwater, Orpheo, Spring Hill, Pegasus, Shattered Silence, Northern Comfort, Rhythm System, Pearl, Boko-Maru, Frion, and a host of others who never performed publicly.” The eighties, the wilderness of Reagan, with a freaked-out student overreacting to a plan to have students sign pledges in an effort to clean up the student lounge. “To sign this card . . . is to throw away your soul,” writes the student. “For those students who prefer the lounge to the patrolled stagnation of the library, there is no alternative and the card is signed. Student Alliance and the paraprofessionals now have you by the balls—if a piece of garbage falls anywhere in the lounge, no matter how disgusting its origins or how far digested, you must pick it up.” The oughts, a sea change, with a renewed love of authority in the 9/11 era, the beatification of public workers, the very forces seen a few issues back ratting out kids: “Every student and staff member at New Trier are likely to notice parapros working throughout the school,” reads a story. “But how many realize and appreciate the responsibilities that these individuals take on for those of us who attend New Trier every day?” We come full circle on career day, when a student from an earlier time turns up like old Rip Van Winkle, a relic from the unfathomable past: NT BEGETS A LONG-HAIRED HIPPIE. “When you think of 100 year’s worth of New Trier alumni, a list of lawyers, doctors, celebrities and CEO’s comes to mind. . . . Mike Oehler, class of ’56, is a self-proclaimed hippy.” A picture of Oehler as a clean-cut senior runs alongside a picture of him today, scraggly as a prospector, a freakish warning to stay on the path.

The biggest changes are caught in the pages by accident, like bits of archaeology snagged in a fisherman’s nets. In 1977, when the number of Jewish students began to climb, the paper ran a story called BAGELS INVADE NORTH SUBURBS, with a photo showing a criminal lineup of water bagels and egg bagels and dark-skinned pumpernickels looking like they’d been caught jumping the country-club fence. It happens that this story carries my sister’s byline, but I can tell from the style that it was written by my father: “Back in the days before black was beautiful, before radical was chic, and before Bobby Vinton was Polish, a bagel was as revealing about a person’s religious identity as a cross or a star of David.” The story suggests a demographic shift both on the North Shore and in my own house, where
my sister had begun dating guys in moon boots—well, just one guy; his name was Elliot—while my father managed an end run, pumping up her extracurriculars and so getting her safely away to college.

As I flipped through the volumes, browsing hundreds of stories, I gained a sense of the News as a vast project that each new class of reporters and editors added to, while remaining ignorant of the larger pattern—the reverse of that process whereby successive generations destroy something once considered too big for humans to touch. The way, in a few centuries, by common endeavor, the men who built the mansions along the North Shore wiped out the wildlife along the South Shore, polluting a lake that, to the Frenchmen who first charted it in canoes, seemed infinite. So here were high school students, working over the course of those decades that had remade their town and school, destroyed rules and codes, teaming with partners long since graduated or dead or else not yet born, building a monument bigger than anything that could be built by any one generation, or any two or three: a record of the nation as seen from a high school. It was like watching the country on a clear afternoon on a flight from New York to Los Angeles and seeing, from 30,000 feet, how all the roads and farms and plowed acres set amid what is still a terrifying wilderness actually do add up to one country.

When I worked on this vast project, the Fincher Sulzberger was Robert Boyle. He was a doctor of some sort, and made us call him that, though, in earlier issues, ten or twelve years before, he had been identified as "Mr." So you see, here is the News capturing, in a small way, a change that would come to mean a great deal in our lives—a change of one letter signifying all sorts of night classes, research papers, and dreams of academic glory. Dr. Boyle was, I think, the only openly gay teacher in the history of New Trier. He was gay in the way I came to expect from watching Mel Brooks movies—a neat goatee years before the return of the goatee, a black turtleneck, and eyebrows that, in their boomerang over his eyes, were as suggestive as the golden arches over McDonald’s. He also taught English: one class for smart kids, another for regular kids, of which I was one. Each book he assigned was given a gay interpretation: in Heart of Darkness, Marlowe was heading upriver to meet his gay lover, also his secret gay self. In All the King’s Men, Jack Burden, in digging up secrets about his father, was plunging into and revealing his own terrible and beautiful secret. Ditto Proust, Melville, Poe. In one class, a girl named Leslie, who came from a strict Catholic family, and I knew this from asking her out, said, "Dr. Boyle, is it just me, or is everyone in every book homosexual?"

Dr. Boyle said, "It is just you. And if you look with an honest eye at most of the great literature of the West, you will find it shares a homoerotic theme."

On another occasion, Dr. Boyle began class by asking, "Do you still use the term 'tool' when referring to an erect penis?"

I dropped the class, not because I minded all the gay stuff but because Dr. Boyle did not like me. He said, "Mr. Cohen, you’re not the smartest person in the world, but then again you don’t pretend to be." In my new English class, taught by a sort of hippy (we spent one week on Heart of Darkness, four weeks on Apocalypse Now; when an important passage came up, he would say, "Conrad handles it well, but it’s done much better in the movie") they were just starting All the King’s Men, so I thought: gold mine. I already had pages of notes on the book. Each morning, I peppered the class discussion with insights—"Because he is gay," or "Can’t you see that he is gay?"—that sent up murmurs in the back of the room. What’s up with Cohen?

Dr. Boyle was not the sort of person I would have pegged for a newspaperman. I had been raised on the movies of my father’s generation, the favorites being the newsroom comedies, the Frank Capra movies Meet John Doe and Mr. Deeds Goes to Town and The Front Page and its remake, His Girl Friday, each plot driven by the worldly, cynical, hard-drinking city editor. Only later did I learn that many of these characters, because they had been created by a handful of screenwriters, such as Herman Mankiewicz and Ben Hecht, who had worked together in newsrooms, were in fact based on one man, the ur-editor, William Randolph Hearst. A personification of the city, the ambulance chaser with an insatiable need to know. In The Hudieusker Proxy, the Coen brothers’ paeon to the genre, the editor sums up the mood and philosophy of the entire era: "I wanna know everything about this guy," he tells his reporters. "Has he got a girl? Has he got parents!... What’s his hopes and dreams, his desires and aspirations? Does he think all the time or does he set aside a certain portion of the day? How tall is he and what’s his shoe size? Where does he sleep and what does he eat for breakfast? Does he put jam on his toast or doesn’t he put jam on his toast, and if not why not and since when?"

In these movies the editor embodies a philosophy no less convincing than the world-weary pose of Bogart—it’s the hard-earned knowledge of how things really work. By the seventies this type had been remade in the image of Watergate heroes Woodward and Bernstein, appearing in movies like All the President’s Men, then in TV shows like Lou Grant, where the original sense of fun was reborn as a crusade. But in old movies, the editor knows his job is to titillate and to entertain. The reporter is never center stage in such movies, serving instead to drive the action, in the process demonstrating the amoral worldliness suggested by the line Dr. Boyle used to read aloud from All the King’s Men: "There are some kinds of a son-of-a-bitch you don’t have to be even to be a newspaperman." Which implies there are some kinds of son-of-a-bitch you do have to be, and maybe it’s even good and right to be that kind of son-of-a-bitch. It was this image that first sparked my interest in the press. The newspaper less as official record than as a way of managing the world, gathering
and holding information, controlling the story.

So these were the ideas I had when I signed up for journalism class, but, as I said, Dr. Boyle had taken a dislike to me, so when it came to being assigned a beat I was given the Ham Radio Club. Six kids in a field with a radio, trying to raise six other kids just across the border in the land of cheese castles. Later, when I was told to cover Tri-Ship, the boys' club that ran the Christmas-tree sale, I broke a scandal in my first week: a few days before, a janitor had found food in the Tri-Ship Club room. Food was verboten, and so, as a punishment, the club was closed for one day. Members, for reasons I still can't figure, were told to keep quiet about the episode. But it was leaked to me by a member who was upset by a double standard: Evidence of food had also been found in the girls' Pep Club—an empty carton of Frusen Gładje. No action was taken. "Now 'no eating' signs paper the walls," read my kicker. "Members want to know where it will stop. Soon there will be no breathing signs."

When the story ran—BARTON EVICTS TRI-SHIP FROM OFFICE FOR ONE DAY—I was called out of class and brought to see Mr. Barton, a big, scary, square-jawed throwback of an administrator. Dr. Boyle was also in the office—it was like finding Bill Keller laughing it up with Paul Wolowitz. The whole thing stunk. Mr. Barton said he wanted the name of my source. I told Mr. Barton what Dr. Boyle had told us in class: for a reporter, there is no obligation more sacred than protecting a source.

Mr. Barton said, "Cut the crap. This kid violated a trust."

I said, "Then how can you ask me to violate a trust of my own?"

Dr. Boyle leaned close and said, "Mr. Cohen. This is for real. We need the name."

The name? It was Matt Berns. He was a senior and had dark curly hair. On the last day of school, we drank beer and marveled at the fact that he would soon be in college. But I would not tell. There was arguing. Dr. Boyle said, "You have one more chance." I said, "I don't need it." Dr. Boyle apologized to Mr. Barton. I was taken back to class and suspended from the paper for three weeks. It was the most important lesson I learned in high school.

After final bell, when the halls had emptied of all but stragglers, the editors were in their office, like the last occupants of a bombed-out city, at computers, on the beat-up couch, closing the issue. It had been Eighties Day at New Trier: a big change in the culture of high school is the explosion of theme days, the use of the recent past as an arch comment on being arch. One kid was wearing a T-shirt on which he'd written SAVE FERRIS. On the way through the lounge, I found a fragment of a term paper written about the eighties called "A Go Go Decade." Because I found the whole thing embarrassing, I ignored it. Theme events have always made me uncomfortable, mostly because such events make even people who are not dressed up look like they're in costume. If he had come on Sixties Day, Mike Oehler, the old hippy, would've looked like just another kid with spirit.

A boy and a girl were on the couch, going over a story, then flirting, then wrestling, then groping. Noticing this, and noticing me noticing, Mr. Lucadamo, who'd been reading over shoulders, flushed and said to the boy, "That is no way to act in public. Sit up and act like a person."

The boy said, "Come on, Mr. Lucadamo, share the love."

Mr. Lucadamo said, "Why don't you share the maturity?"

The boy said, "I got maturity to spare."

Mr. Lucadamo said, "Outside."

A moment later, I saw Mr. Lucadamo's head in the window in the door. It was red and he was yelling. The boy came back in the room. "If I'm not needed here, I'm going home," he said. He grabbed his backpack and left.

Mr. Lucadamo then asked me to step outside. "I'm sorry you had to see that," he said. "We're trying to put out a newspaper and I've got that lunkhead in there and sometimes I feel like a baby-sitter."

"It sounds like the usual problems of a newspaper editor," I said.

He said, "Thank you very much for saying that."
When the newspaper had been put to bed, the editors talked about ideas for future issues. Mr. Lucadamo mentioned the upcoming football game between New Trier and Evanston. He wanted a story on the rivalry. A reporter would interview old students and faculty about the high jinks of days gone by. In 1986, Evanston had held a New Trier day: the students wore acid-washed jeans and penny loafers and drove their parents’ fancy cars to school.

The editors liked this idea but wanted to run it with a profile of a student who, the year before, said he had found himself alone in Evanston, where he was set upon by a gang of spirited rowdies and “beat to a pulp.”

This story had been pitched before, and Mr. Lucadamo responded with the special disdain all editors have for an idea that won’t stay dead. “No,” said Mr. Lucadamo. “No no.” “Why?” asked Joe Rosenberg. “Because no.” “Because why no?” “It’s not news.” “Why not?”

Mr. Lucadamo appealed to me with his eyes. I tried to show empathy, but I’ve always wanted to be liked more by kids than by adults. “Because it’s not news,” he said.

“But it happened,” said Clark DenVyl. “We didn’t make it up.” “But no one cares,” said Mr. Lucadamo.

“But everyone knows this kid,” said Joe. “It’s too old to be news,” said Mr. Lucadamo.

“It happened before the last New Trier/Evanston game,” said Clark.

Mr. Lucadamo was trying to steer the paper clear of incitement, of trouble, of the sort of reckless home-teamy journalism that fuels little wars and gets teachers fired. In the process, he was basically accusing Joe and Clark of having a tabloid mentality. “No,” he said. “It’s not news.” From here, the conversation evolved into a debate on the mission of the paper. Mr. Lucadamo saw it as the voice of the school, a collection of leads and nut graphs and kickers. For Joe and Clark, because they were young and still in the cluster-fuck world of kids, because they were much closer to that first illuminating spark of journalism, it had more to do with the great unexplainable need to know, the desire to probe and explore. For them, journalism was coming back from a baseball game and telling everyone what happened; literary journalism was telling everyone what it was like; and investigative journalism was a bunch of kids standing near the crazy old lady’s house, a house that is rumored to be filled with vintage board games, saying, “Can we sneak someone in there to get a look?”

All the pieces Joe had written, his favorite was the story about the chambers under the school. That is, Joe—and this is why he is a true journalist—crossed one of the last sacred frontiers in America, sneaking, with a notebook and a digital camera, from the gossip, test-taking world of the students into the workingman’s world of the janitors, a world of pumps and plants and break rooms, where smoking and swearing in Spanish, the janitors tell bawdy tales in storerooms as vast as those of old King Herod, among furnaces and big whirling Sheefer-esque generators that keep the mad prison chugging through the winter. It’s a world that I, too, was fascinated by as a student. And yet, because it never occurred to me that you could actually go there—I would’ve chickened out at the last minute anyway—it remained imaginary: as colorful and unreal as a scene in a pirate movie, a gleeful debauch set amid a shower of sparks. Joe offered to take me down there, and so we went, crossing a line as carefully regarded as the line between advertising and editorial. Out of the office, down a long hall, into a nondescript room, and through a low metal door. We emerged in a forest of pipes, humming and clicking, throwing off heat, the hammering underbelly of the school. It was like a picture of Earth taken from the moon. The hassles of the everyday world drifted away. We spotted a janitor in the distance, hundreds of yards away, and yet in strangely sharp resolve, as if seen in the deep focus of Orson Welles, his mouth turned down, worrying his adult worries. “Here,” said Joe, pulling me around a corner. We were standing before a vast chugging tank.

Joe said, “We are underneath the pool.”

I saw myself twenty years before, in a Speedo, in line with thirty other kids, each of the girls in a clingy one-piece. We would hug and grind in the shallow end, then stand exposed. I would stare at the wavy depths, at the lane numbers on the bottom of the pool, burning my eyes into the number eight, the symbol of infinity, the biggest thing in the world, plus one, the only idea big enough to stem the creeping blood flow—“Do you still use the word ‘tool’ when referring to an erect penis?”—the news of which, if it gets out, and please don’t let it get out, would flash through school and change my life. And all the while I floated unknowingly above floor upon floor of pipes and generators, tricks of engineering and noise. The goal of journalism: to pan out, to expand the context, to peek beyond the border at the edge of the photograph. It’s a great story, Joe, because—well, I guess, if you go deep enough, it’s true of every story—it exists both as what it is (information on how the school actually works) but also as a metaphor, the goal of the search, which, although most reporters get distracted by the kid with the boner, is to expose those depths, those hidden pipes and pumps. Joe had pierced the bubble, made it backstage, visited the basement in Macy’s where they torture the shoplifters, found the drunk tank beneath Disneyland. Then a janitor spotted us. He rushed over. He looked angry. Just as he was about to let Joe have it, he noticed me. An adult complicates. I was like a U.N. blue helmet. The janitor nodded at me, turned to Joe, and said, “All right, kid, you’ve had your fun. Now beat it.”