

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

STEPHEN GLASS' RISE IN JOURNALISM WAS METEORIC. HE WENT OUT IN A BLAZE OF UNTRUTHS.

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By Suzanne Sataline

He gave us the First Church of George Herbert Walker Christ, the National Assembly of Hackers, Monicondoms, White House "clutches," Truth in Science ("a Christian organization skeptical of global warming"), Federal Reserve cultists, the "Newt-o-meter," a widow's worship of Paul Tsongas and his basset hound gaze, and - lest anyone forget - the gin-guzzling, marijuana-hazed, misogynistic distemper of Republican youth.

Between the covers of the New Republic, and in several national glossies, Stephen Glass spun tales of a capital culture awchirl with conspiratorial conservatives, paranoid contrarians and cadging capitalists. Glass was the only reporter to venture to a memorabilia convention where salesmen schemed to profit off Monica's alleged Oval Office escapades, selling special condoms and a talking "Loving Lewinsky" doll. He penetrated a convention of greedy computer hackers and visited a shrine to Alan Greenspan where discouraged traders sought inspiration by sitting in the chairman's chair. The Newt-o-meter was a Democratic invention that tallied the speaker's mounting ethics fine. And Glass infiltrated a church that worshiped - literally - the nation's 41st president:

Inside the leaflets is a complicated genealogical web that purports to show that Bush is descended directly from the Messiah. ... Members adhere to strict dietary laws similar to Jewish kosher rules, but include other Bush-specific prohibitions, including one against broccoli. Bush's fondness for pork rinds sparked an agonizing theological debate until the church decided that the Great One must have misinterpreted doctrine.

Readers ate it up.

Glass' work was a throaty cheer in a city choking with dreary self-importance and bombastic discourse. He was no snide and dyspeptic cynic. Glass was a 25-year-old baby-faced prankster, insecure and anxious to please, someone who played down his successes and reveled in life's theater of the absurd. Who else but the kid from Chicago would dial C-Span and pose as a New England Yankee who fretted over racism? Or immerse himself in a crowd of Polish nationals and cheer for a fighting thug?

When the theater wasn't absurd enough, Glass improvised. In reporting on fighter Andrew Golota, Glass offered several radio shows his knowledge as a "biting expert." "I'm someone who knows a lot . . . about `chomping on flesh under extreme stress.' "

In May the show closed. An online publication alerted the New Republic that Glass' tale about a teenage hacker (alias Big Bad Bionic Boy) failed to check out. In the weeks after his firing, the Washington magazine discovered that the writer had incrementally manufactured people, organizations, scenarios and finally, entire stories, since 1996. Two-thirds of his correspondence was tainted - and that's just what the editors can confirm. His admissions have sparked one lawsuit against Glass and forced his editors to apologize to readers and sources. Glass isn't talking, and his lawyer says his client has no plans to comment.

Reading his prose in one sitting, it seems obvious that Glass was a brilliant satirist who practiced a bizarre parody of journalism. His takes on fantastic conservative movements and political conspiracies make the galloping prose of David Foster Wallace seem amateurish. How could anyone have believed?

Part of the answer lies in Glass' auspicious start in journalism. While executive editor of the University of Pennsylvania's student newspaper, Glass insisted on publishing a column considered racist - and persisted after angry students retaliated by trashing 14,000 copies of the Daily Pennsylvanian. Glass' defense of free speech made him a First Amendment darling.

In the working world, Glass used his reputation, humor, intellect and charm to exploit an industry that rewards savvy and chutzpah. He was a shrewd observer who consistently produced colorful people and causes that illuminated the drama of balkanized modern America. In short, he crafted fables. And like any great satirist, he peopled them with knaves and fools. His editors, it turns out, were among them.

"Journalists like to think about the world as a place that's populated by wacky characters with a good deal of human comedy," says Glass' former editor, Michael Kelly. "Most of his stuff turned out to be original. Rather more original than we knew."

For all his charm and hilarity, Glass hurt many people. He embarrassed his colleagues, hoodwinked his readers, and trashed the conservative movement that had embraced him. As his fictions went undetected, they grew bolder. Like the central character in the movie *The Grifters*, he was a master of the long con, where initial lies - and the trust they engender - give new lies the cloak of truth. Except Glass wasn't stealing money; he robbed people of trust.

The initial dismay over his tale was drowned in a subsequent flood of journalistic catastrophes. In June, the Boston Globe fired columnist Patricia Smith for fabricating characters. The Cincinnati Enquirer paid Chiquita Brands International a \$10 million settlement after the paper discovered a reporter was involved in stealing information to write critical stories. CNN produced a story accusing the U.S. military of gassing defectors in Laos - only to retract the tale, fire the creators, and apologize for biased reporting. Earlier this month, Boston Globe columnist Mike Barnicle resigned amid charges that he had fabricated a 1995 columnist.

What could be dismissed as an isolated incident, perhaps a vagary of youthful ambition, seemed to be a national problem. Suddenly Glass was part of a trend. Fakery and hype no longer seemed rare. Reputable press organizations were being painted with the same brush as supermarket tabloids, dragging journalism to the level assumed by its worst critics. And Glass had contributed the paint.

New Republic staffers weren't alone in wondering to what degree one liar could infect an organization - even a trade. Concentric circles of doubt spread outward. How well could you know anyone, even a respected colleague? And how could friends, readers and editors alike have fallen for his scams?

At Penn, Glass was one of the few freshmen who entered the windowless fortress on 40th and Market to work for the Daily Pennsylvanian. The following summer, 1991, he stayed in Philadelphia and wrote an unusual story. It traced the tale of Johnnie, a 39-year-old addict, and his gang of cronies as they scrounged for change near campus, sipped Thunderbird and smoked crack.

Amid the usual stories about speeches, administration appointments and campus politics, "A Day on the Streets" stood out: "The three men bend over and insert the crack crystals into a glass pipe. ... After they light the pipe, they hold the smoke in their lungs for as long as possible."

His fellow students were wowed. Looking back, they wonder if the story was true. No character was identified by last name, assuring continued anonymity. The accuracy is questionable: Most addicts don't mix poisons. Crack addicts stick with crack.

And there is the question of entree. "I'd be very surprised if they told him the things they did," says Sister Mary Scullion, the director of nonprofit Project HOME, which assists the homeless. "Usually if a person is into an addiction they say 'leave me alone.'"

Despite the splash of the homeless story, Glass did not enjoy the reputation of an aggressive journalist. Thinking back, Peter Spiegel, one of Glass' first DP

editors, questions how this nerd from the suburbs could have penetrated the world of homelessness so quickly and deeply.

Glass was brought up in the middle-class suburb of Highland Park, Ill., outside Chicago. It is largely white, Jewish, professional and highly cultured. Glass' father practices internal medicine there; his mother is a nurse. "There's a fair amount of pressure on kids to succeed and do well," says Howard Libit, a Baltimore Sun reporter who has known Glass since kindergarten.

At the DP, Glass was liked for his kindness. He would change the toner in the copy machine. He was a cute nerd who dressed not in the student uniform of jeans, but in button-down shirts and khakis. His insecurity became legendary; he'd often wave his hands and fret, constantly quizzing coworkers and friends: "Are you mad at me?"

In his junior year, he won the post of executive editor. He was the sole candidate.

From the start of their reign, Glass and his staff sought to impress. "We wanted to cause a debate on campus, to provoke, question, to doubt," said Kenneth Baer, the paper's 1993 editorial page editor.

The paper plunged into investigating student housing, mail delivery woes and faculty troubles. Junior Gregory Pavlik was soon offending with his columns excoriating admissions standards for minorities, immigration policies and the designation of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday as a federal holiday.

More than 200 students and faculty signed a letter complaining about the column: "We have always given the newspaper the benefit of the doubt, and assumed the staff was ignorant, not intentionally prejudiced. However . . . if the DP prints it, then we must infer that they agree with, and condone, it." DP staffers tried to refute charges of racism, but with a nearly all-white staff, they had trouble.

In April 1993, a group of irate students destroyed the run of 14,000 papers and left notes protesting "the blatant and voluntary perpetuation of institutional racism."

Penn president Sheldon Hackney, who was up for Senate confirmation to head the National Endowment for the Humanities, issued a bland conciliatory statement, saying "diversity and open expression seem to be in conflict." Hackney now says he should have been more forceful but was worried at the time about the chance of a campus riot.

A week later, with the campus still tense, the Wall Street Journal ran the story of the Penn investigation of freshman Eden Jacobowitz for racial harassment, for yelling "water buffalo" at a group of African American sorority sisters who were making noise under his window late one night.

The collision of events - and Hackney's national stature - gave the story legs. Reporters from the Washington Post and the New York Times descended. Syndicated columnist Robert Novak appeared on CNN's Capitol Gang calling Hackney's statement "the outrage of the week." The Wall Street Journal lambasted Hackney. Liberal columnist Nat Hentoff hailed a column by Glass: "It is not sufficient, Glass says, to simply `not condone' terrorism."

Already a campus leader by dint of his position, Glass was becoming known around the nation. He eagerly sought the opinion of Frank I. Luntz, a young Penn alum and politics lecturer. Sitting around pizza boxes, Luntz and Glass would debate the best way for the paper to maintain its image and score points for free speech.

"He was giddy about it," said former DP colleague Scott Calvert of Glass. "The Washington Post was on the telephone. It was heady stuff for all of us."

No one was prosecuted for trashing the DP. Interim president Claire Fagin, acting on faculty recommendations, chose not to punish the thieves. Hackney left campus with the Senate's blessing. The sorority sisters dropped their charges. A controversial code barring derogatory speech was rewritten.

And Glass' career had been launched. From Penn, he went directly to the conservative Heritage Foundation's policy journal. A year later, Luntz - by then a firebrand GOP pollster - hired him. Luntz, 35, had achieved fame by helping to develop Newt Gingrich's Contract With America, the conservative agenda that led to the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994. Later, Luntz admitted using unscientific polling to back his claim that 60 percent of Americans supported the agenda.

Glass didn't work on the poll, Luntz says. His job that summer of '95 was to lead several interns in crafting a book, *American Dreaming: The Public Hopes and Private Fears of an Angry Nation*. It was a disaster, Luntz says, confused and poorly written. The publisher rejected it. "Good thing," Luntz says. Luntz had assumed the public's angst would deepen. "I would've been wrong."

Thursday mornings at the New Republic are set aside for a staff meeting. Sitting around the conference table in a low-lit room lined with black bound volumes of the magazine dating back to 1915, staffers take turns discussing current projects.

It's a tough crowd. The magazine has typically sought youthful Ivy Leaguers willing to forgo money for the chance to write about national issues. And there is a certain competition to tell the most hilarious story. Most weeks Glass and his collection of odd souls won.

It began with his search for Kae Bang, the Korean cab driver-turned-elusive vigilante. He discovered the Union of Concerned Santas, worried about Claus-harassment suits. And he joined Mount Vernon interns who sought - not too strenuously - to recreate the slave experience.

Always, Glass' outrageous characters and anecdotes seemed to perfectly echo trends in the national political landscape. The First Church of George Herbert Walker Christ, for instance, smartly summarized the Christian conservative effort to polish Bush's image. Kelly, just arrived from the New Yorker, thought Glass had an incredible eye.

"I would encourage him to get more detail," Kelly says, "in the way you would encourage everybody else."

Many stories featured Steve embroiled in absurd situations that allowed him to snicker at populist politics. He attends a conference on the modern American presidency and finds a Bush disciple staging an Americans with Disabilities tableau: five children of various races, in wheelchairs, flicking American flags. Suddenly the white child leaves and the activist pleads for Glass to fill in. After hearing the story, the staff roared. Amid a group of news wonks, Steve was comic relief.

"Steve's style was magnetic," says former New Republic coworker William Powers. "There was a charisma about him that was very, very attractive."

No one questioned him when he decided to become a telephone psychic.

The idea, Glass writes, flowed from one of his thousands of sleepless nights spent channel surfing till dawn. One cable channel advertised 1-900 phone psychics. The result was the elegant "Prophets and Losses," Glass' tour de force for Harper's magazine. Glass not only describes conning Psychic Believers Network into hiring him, but details how he swindled hundreds of dollars out of needy folks who relied on his shuffled playing cards for guidance. In the end, it was an essay on need and manipulation in modern America.

I am the family-values psychic. No matter what cards I turn over, I tell callers they should go back to school, go to church more regularly, wait until they're married to have sex, and that they have been born under such a dark cloud they will never win the lottery. This alleviates my guilt a bit and . . . most callers eat up

the advice.

His New Republic coworkers recall seeing Glass in a vacant office, shouldering a receiver at all hours, watching the Republican National Convention with the sound off as he dealt jacks and spades. The piece is filled with hubris, and a fresh reading foreshadows trouble:

I predict the future, chat with the dead, and cure disease. .. Like God, my powers seem endless. Unlike Him, I'm pricey and don't guarantee results.

Glass' charisma launched his journey, in two years, from editor's assistant to respected writer with contracts at George, Rolling Stone and Harper's. In the beginning, he labored in obscurity, writing stories that sat unread on editors' desks for weeks. When Kelly arrived in summer 1996, he put Glass in charge of a small and overworked fact-checking office.

Kelly propelled one of Glass' first longer stories, "Taxis and the Meaning of Work," onto the magazine's cover. The story mused on the immigrant work ethic while pointedly questioning why few young blacks drive cabs. At story's end, Glass and a driver are robbed at knifepoint - an incident, friends say, that seemed barely to faze the young writer. Within a year, other magazines were trying to hire him. Kelly bumped Glass' salary up to \$45,000, and promoted him to associate editor.

As a former fact-checker, Glass was always conscientious, coworkers say. He kept neat and careful notes, tabbed with the location of quotes, spelling names in huge block letters. He would ask the fact-checkers "please don't call [this source]. If you do I'll lose this story."

A few story subjects complained of inaccuracies. David Keene, chairman of the American Conservative Union - which had sponsored the Republican conference Glass described as drug- and orgy-filled - received scores of complaints from donors and participants. The magazine published his letter grumbling that Glass was "quite a fiction writer." After being questioned, Glass produced notes that seemed to refute the charges.

"It never occurred to anyone that he was concocting," says New Republic editor Charles Lane. "Steve was everybody's friend. You don't instinctively distrust your friend."

One night in February 1996, Glass asked a group of friends over to his Dupont Circle apartment to watch the New Hampshire primary results. They munched chocolate chip cookies and monitored the returns on C-Span, watching as the host invited New Hampshire residents to discuss the tallies toll-free. Glass picked

up the phone. On air, he told the host he was from Manchester. What do you do, the host asked. "I'm a worker." His friends burst out laughing. He described how he was backing conservative Lamar

Alexander because "I'm concerned about Pat Buchanan's anti-Semitism."

His buddies couldn't believe it. How could C-Span buy it? How many New Hampshire residents were concerned about anti-Jewish bias? And who identifies himself as a "worker"? Jonathan Chait, a staff writer, remembers thinking: "It didn't come across as 'this guy is a brilliant schemer of false identities.' It came across as 'this guy is a horrible liar.' "

Maybe not that horrible. By the fall '97, Glass was writing for George and Rolling Stone. He dashed off a proposal to the New York Times Magazine for an essay that would explore why women believed he was gay. At the New Republic, he upped the ante - finding more incredible anecdotes each week. Still, he disparaged his work and downplayed his successes. Inexplicably, he enrolled in Georgetown University's Law School, taking classes four nights a week. He would show up at the office on a few hours' sleep, glassy-eyed and unshaven. Several friends told him he was out of his mind. Chait argued fiercely with him.

"Journalism may not work out," Glass said to him.

"It would drive me crazy," Chait says. "He told me his parents didn't believe he could make it as a journalist."

One evening in May, the boss tossed a New Republic article toward Adam L. Penenberg. "Why didn't we have this?"

Penenberg, an electronic editor with Forbes Digital Tool in New York, glanced at the piece and sighed. Some guy named Stephen Glass had invaded his turf to write a tale that was news to Penenberg: computer companies paying big bucks to hire teenage hackers who had penetrated their systems.

Nothing sounded familiar in the story: not the firm, Jukt Micronics, nor an interstate effort to discourage firms from hiring hackers. First thing the next morning, Penenberg, 36, called Glass on the chance that the New Republic would share its sources, especially the number for Ian Restil, the 15-year-old hacker said to have infiltrated the California software firm. Penenberg left a voice message.

"I figured this guy got lucky," says Penenberg, who covers electronic commerce and piracy. "You have to develop an expertise in this world. It is so easy to be taken for a joyride by hackers." With his contacts, Penenberg hoped to take

Glass' story to the next level.

Using computer search engines, Penenberg tried to find Jukt Micronics. There was nothing on the Web. Odd, he thought, considering that every large software firm parks something on the Web. He ran through every conceivable research tool to document anything in the story: the Software Publishers Association of America, the California Tax Franchise Board, the California secretary of state, data bases like Lexis-Nexis, even old-fashioned telephone listings in each of California's 15 area codes. No Jukt Micronics. He even put out a note to his hacker sources, who e-mailed their friends. No one had heard of agents for hackers or the convention he said he'd gone to in Bethesda.

Other reporters called every public school in Bethesda. No child named Ian Restil existed.

By the day's end, at his editor's behest, Penenberg called New Republic editor Lane: "I have serious questions about an article you ran." Penenberg gave him a taste of the research he had done. Lane promised to get back to him.

Lane, who honed his skills covering wars in Central America and Bosnia, had approved the piece after it was edited. He summoned Glass to the office. As usual in those days, the writer was unshaven, his hair grown long. "What did I do wrong?" Glass asked defensively. Lane pressed Glass to produce phone numbers for Jukt Micronics and other sources. Glass glared at him, shifting in his chair.

Lane called Penenberg with a number for Jukt in the Silicon Valley. The Forbes newsroom was quiet as Penenberg dialed. He got voice mail. Two reporters called simultaneously. Busy signal. They checked with a source at Pacific Bell: Is this a residential or business phone, Penenberg asked. Neither, the operator replied. "It's a cell phone!" Penenberg shouted over his cubicle. Vindication. The room erupted in cheers. "It was like Watergate breaking."

Lane spent the night doing his own research - looking for Jukt, Ian Restil, and checking the phone numbers provided by Glass. He feared the story might be worse than inaccurate. "I got to find out," he vowed. "I got to find out before Forbes publishes." Late that night, he received a call with chatter in the background. "I'm George Simms with Jukt Micronics." The voice apologized for the noise, an office party. "We don't have any comment on the story. Goodbye." Strange. But Lane was relieved.

The next day, May 8, Penenberg, his editor and his publisher made a conference call to Lane and Glass. Penenberg ran through the story. You were in Bethesda at a gathering of the National Assembly of Hackers. Where was it

held? Glass faltered. He started to admit he couldn't verify aspects of his article. "I should have checked. It's misleading." Glass offered a number for a Nevada law-enforcement official in the 781 area code. "Nevada," Penenberg said, "is 702."

The Forbes team pressed on. Which agency is the source from?

Glass hesitated.

Lane butted in. "Stephen, answer his question!"

Glass said he got the information secondhand.

"Is it possible you got duped by hackers?" Penenberg's boss asked.

Glass' voice quavered. "Yes, it's possible."

Lane's stomach flipped. But he couldn't explain away the call from Jukt Micronics. If Glass was lying, he wanted to catch the writer undeniably. He suggested they drive to Bethesda so Glass could show him where the Sunday hackers' conference convened.

After meandering around in Glass' Honda, they finally stopped at a suburban Hyatt Regency office/hotel complex. There, both a security guard and the maintenance worker said the office building was closed on Sundays. "I was here," Glass kept saying. Lane suggested they ask for the security tapes.

The two climbed back into the car. "Look, Steve," Lane prodded, "anybody can make a mistake. If there's something you're not telling me, you should tell me now." At a traffic light, Glass began crying. He admitted he hadn't attended the conference. He had embellished aspects of the story. Lane suspended the writer for two years.

What about the Jukt call? That night an editor mentioned to Lane that Glass had a brother at Stanford - the heart of Silicon Valley. The next morning, finding Glass in the office, Lane asked: "Steve, is your brother George Simms? This will be very serious business if your brother is involved in this." Glass faltered, then explained that he couldn't reach the real George Simms, so he had asked his brother to fill in.

"Steve," Lane said, "you've lost your job."

When the work week began, Lane gathered the staff together. Glass had approached several friends, saying Lane was unfairly attacking him. One staffer

pleaded for leniency. Lane announced that they would begin a thorough rechecking of Glass' articles.

The staff was intrigued. Things that looked preposterous turned out to be true. Some of their favorite characters were manufactured - the rabid pro-Bushies among them - while others, such as the Korean cab driver, existed. The search became an obsession.

Lane made a list of the facts they couldn't confirm and sent that to Glass' lawyer, Gerson Zweifach, who reviewed the stories with Glass. In the end, the magazine published an apology, acknowledging that Glass had entirely fabricated three stories - about the hacker, the Monica-tchotchke convention, and a meeting of anti-Clinton activists. He had fabricated material - quotes, sources or scenes - in 23 others, even creating notes, e-mails and memos from fake people to cover his tracks. Many stories can't be confirmed either way. "A sensible reader will no longer trust the pieces," Lane says.

After the firing, people outside the magazine mentioned to Lane that they either knew or suspected there were falsehoods in Glass' pieces. "People were afraid to dispute it. Once they see it in print, there's a certain imprimatur," Lane says.

The postmortem continues. Lane and most journalists dismiss theories that Glass became overextended or was too young for his job. Lane believes Glass fabricated initially for the prestige and the freelance contracts, and later, to survive.

"The paradox was, the more he did, the more possible [his tales] became. The more wild his stuff, the more wild stuff he got away with," Lane says. In a small place like the New Republic, everyone is close - and that contributed to the problems. Doubting Steve would have meant doubting a friend. "Steve was exploiting a whole chain of trust," Lane says.

"Of course there was something wrong with Steve," Lane says. "A person who knows the difference between right and wrong doesn't do this."

Glass' editors worry over litigation; the antidrug group D.A.R.E. already filed a \$10 million lawsuit against him. Friends and former colleagues wonder if he truly was the selfless, kind person they believed him to be. They refer to him in the past tense, fearing their reputations may be sullied by association. Even folks from Penn wonder if there was something in that self-doubt and solicitousness, that constant question he peppered them with: "Are you mad at me?"

"It's an extremely odd and jarring experience to watch someone you thought you knew become someone you didn't know in front of your eyes," says Peter

Beinart, a New Republic senior editor. "It's a bit like having one of your senses fail you. It's deeply unsettling."

As for the increasingly maligned community of journalists: We can say things, Stephen Glass, that your friends cannot. You had wit and charm and incredible luck. You were handed the opportunity to cut loose, work the margins, bushwhack through contemporary America. But you created the landscape in your imagination, not through observation and the painfully slow collection of detail. You wasted your promise, and we have all been burned.

Perhaps we weren't paying attention. We should have heeded your pangs of guilt. Yes, Stephen, we're finally mad at you.

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