

A Buzzard Named Rabinowitz

by Mike Resnick

Justin O'Toole had it made.

It took him a while. He'd started by illustrating the Continental Lingerie catalog ("for the oomph girl!"). Then he'd worked on the daily War King Sky Killers strip. From there he'd jumped to the editorial page in Hackensack, then to Dayton, and finally, the big time—chief editorial cartoonist for the Chicago Beacon.

He had wit, he had talent, and now that he was in Chicago, he had more subject matter than he could use in half a dozen lifetimes.

At first he'd gone the normal route, caricaturing everyone from the President to the Mayor, but then a fan sent him one of Walt Kelly's old Pogo books, the one in which Senator Joe McCarthy had been drawn as a wildcat (and which subsequently made Kelly's reputation as a political satirist), and he realized that no one had done anything like that for years.

So the President became a bellicose rhino, and the Mayor became a sly weasel, and Alderman Berlinski became a skunk, and Senator Neiderman became a cockroach, and Police Commissioner Ryan became a sloth, and within two years O'Toole had won a Pulitzer Prize and published his first book of political cartoons, which became an instant bestseller, not just locally but nationally.

Of course, not everyone was pleased with his approach. The President was above it all (or at least pretended to be), but the Mayor actually took a swing at him when they met outside the opera. Commissioner Ryan kept a 24-hour watch on him, and if he went one mile over the speed limit he could count on a ticket. Alderman Berlinski actually sued him for defamation, though the case was laughed out of court. As for Senator Neiderman, he mailed O'Toole a box of dead cockroaches on his birthday.

But no one—repeat: no one—was more outraged than Saul Rabinowitz.

Saul lived in Glencoe on Chicago's posh North Shore. He wasn't a politician himself, but he owned more than his share of them. He had no party affiliation; he'd buy any politician of any political stripe. And suddenly farms would be condemned, to be replaced by Saul Rabinowitz Developments, complete with golf courses and recreation centers. Public parks would vanish, to be replaced by modern new Saul Rabinowitz Office Buildings. Old city blocks would be replaced by brand-new improved Saul Rabinowitz City Blocks.

It wasn't long before O'Toole began looking into Rabinowitz's dealings, and found, to his surprise, that the Catholic Church was no longer the biggest land-owner in Chicago. Rabinowitz was. He owned 3,016 apartment buildings, 82 office buildings, 3 shopping malls, 4 local airports, and the word was that he was the real reason the Chicago Bulls had been able to afford Michael Jordan's salary.

It was when O'Toole discovered that in addition to his real estate empire, Rabinowitz also controlled most of the prostitution and drug traffic in the Chicago area, that he began incorporating him into the editorial cartoons—as a buzzard, an ugly eater of the city's carrion.

Rabinowitz was on the phone the next morning, the soul of reason, suggesting they have dinner and discuss the situation before his lawyers were forced to sue. O'Toole agreed, met Rabinowitz at an upscale steak house on the Gold Coast, started listing what he had found out about the drugs and the prostitutes and the bought politicians, and left before dessert when Rabinowitz threw his main course against a wall in a fit of rage and began threatening O'Toole's life.

The subpoena arrived after the third cartoon appeared. A black Lincoln tried to run him down after the fifth. A wild shot came through his bedroom window after the eighth.

O'Toole kept drawing, and the people kept reading, and before long the Mayor was serving 15 years for fraud, and Commissioner Ryan had been fired for incompetence, and Alderman Berlinski was sitting in the cell right next to the Mayor, and Senator Neiderman was censured by a vote of 92-7 in the Senate (the only abstention was Illinois' other Senator)—and Saul Rabinowitz was serving six consecutive 30-year terms with no hope of parole.

O'Toole soon accepted an offer, at double his current salary, from the New York Globe, and spent the next couple of years happily turning the New York city government into a new batch of animals. Then one day he got a phone call from the Cook County Jail.

“Yes?” said O'Toole.

“Do you know who this is?” demanded a familiar voice.

“Hi, Saul. How are you doing?”

“I'm dying, that's how I'm doing!” grated Rabinowitz. “And it's all your fault!”

“I'm not responsible for your bleeding ulcer or whatever the hell you've got,” said O'Toole calmly.

“It's your fault,” repeated Rabinowitz, “and I'm going to get you for it!”

“I thought you were dying.”

“I'll come back from the grave if I have to.”

“Give my regards to Hitler and Caligula and that whole crowd,” said O'Toole, hanging up the phone.

And that was that. He saw on the wire that Rabinowitz had died the next week, and a few weeks later the Mayor committed suicide and Alderman Berlinski contracted cancer, and within a year everyone he'd gone after back in Chicago was dead.

He didn't give it another thought, until one fall day when he was walking through Central Park on his lunch hour. There was a flash of motion off to his left, and he turned and saw a weasel, which was passing strange, since there aren't any weasels in Central Park.

This wasn't just any ordinary weasel, either. It looked exactly like his rendering of the Mayor in the Chicago Beacon. Curious, he approached it. It snarled and bared its teeth.

He walked a little farther and suddenly came to a skunk. Not any skunk, but an Alderman Berlinski skunk. It glared at him with red little eyes.

Frowning, he passed under a tree, and suddenly felt a heavy weight fall onto the back of his neck. Claws dug into the flesh, and as he reached up and tried to disengage whatever it was, his foot hit something and he fell heavily to the ground.

It was a sloth—the very image of Commissioner Ryan—that was tearing at his neck, and as he tried to get to his feet he found the weasel holding one arm to the ground and the skunk gripping the other.

Then he heard a rustling sound above him and looked up. It was a buzzard, a huge black creature with Saul Rabinowitz's face, diving down toward him, claws extended to rip out his eyes, beak razor sharp to tear open his belly, hooded eyes filled with hatred.

Just before the raptor reached him, Justin O'Toole heard a familiar voice say, "I told you there was nothing funny about a buzzard!"

In the moment of life remaining to him, O'Toole found himself agreeing.