

*This is a reimagining of the classic 1941 film "Meet John Doe."*

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It was an era of gumshoes and potboilers, a time when the daily newspaper formed the opinions of everyday men and women, from the lowest sweeper in the sub-basement of a skyscraper to occupants of penthouses on its top floors, a time when ordinary folks gathered in mass assemblage to help each other out, while behind the scenes rich and powerful persons, primarily men, schemed to control all matters of importance, trampling any persons that might get in their way.

Such a scheming and powerful man was a crass individual who went by the name of D.B. Norton. Born into modest wealth, Donald Baynard Norton used his innate talents to maneuver his way into society's upper echelon. His methods were not brutish, but rather more thoughtful and nuanced, taking keen observation of those he could manipulate, and then forcing their hands with nary a notice of what he had accomplished. With his rotund figure squeezed into immaculate three piece suits barely fitting around his midsection, he scarfed down companies in one large gulp, acquiring the raw power he needed to pursue his goals, which were both economic and political.

One such acquisition effected by D.B in the fall of 1939 was his purchase of a fledgling newspaper in New York City called the *Evening Post*. With the intent of revamping the editorial direction of the paper to suit his personal ambitions, D.B.'s first act as owner was to streamline its operations so that he might have direct control over its editorial content. To accomplish this, it was essential to lay off many of the staff who would detract from the paper's new purpose.

A list was given to a lowly copy boy to deliver the bad news. With a whistled sound effect to indicate a swift hanging by the neck, the boy pointed to each affected person, and that was that. They were to clear out their desks and be gone by end of day. Most took their dismissal with a quiet shake of the head.

But one employee who did not take this news lightly was a scrappy young columnist by the name of Ann Mitchell. The brash Ann marched into the office of her boss, the managing editor of the paper, and pleaded for her job. "Don't you see, Mr. Connell, I've just got to have this job. Ever since my father died, I've been taking care of my mom and well, you know how it is."

"Sorry miss, that's just how it falls."

"You're paying me thirty dollars a week. I'll take a pay cut if I have to, twenty-five or even twenty if necessary."

"Ann, it's not the money. We're looking to breathe some new life into this paper, and your column doesn't cut it. D.B. wants fireworks."

“I can do fireworks. Believe me, whatever you want.”

“Beat it, kid. You’re a day late and a dollar short. And don’t forget to turn in your last column before you go.”

Ann slinked back to her desk and gave the waste can a swift kick. Onto the floor rolled a couple of bunched up letters she had tossed an hour ago. Silly stuff not worthy of consideration. But now she had another thought.

“So it’s fireworks they want,” she said out loud. “Fireworks they shall have.” She found the letter she was looking for, a pathetic rant from a poor soul complaining of his struggles and searching in vain for some answer that was never to be.

Ann took that letter and turned it into a searing protest against civilization, a laundry list of everything wrong in society, how the poor are mistreated and forgotten, how the rich trample over the common man, how even the frugal can’t get by anymore. Such injustice had to be stopped. And to make sure the article had sufficient punch, she added that, in protest, the man intended to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge on Christmas Eve, and then signed the letter John Doe.

Ann handed the column to a runner and it appeared in the evening edition. And that’s when the real fireworks began. Early the next morning, Connell took calls from scores of people feeling sorry for the man.

“Where is that lamebrain Ann. Get her in here,” thundered Connell.

“We have everyone looking for her,” his assistant replied.

“Good, she has a lot of explaining to do.”

Amid the commotion, Ann sauntered into his office. “You’re looking for me?” she asked.

“No, I’m looking for my dead grandmother, what do you think? I’ve got a million people asking about that column you wrote. People don’t want your John Doe to jump. Who is this guy anyway?”

“Just your typical nobody on the edge of despair, a forgotten soul done in by a heartless world.”

“Well, whoever he is, we’ve got to get him a job. And then you’re still fired. Get that man in here. We’ll set him up, take a photo and end this thing.”

“There’s only one problem with that scenario,” said Ann. “There is no such person. I made him up.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said,” said Ann. “You wanted fireworks, so I gave you fireworks. It’s a complete fabrication.”

2

As it turned out, Ann not only kept her job but bought herself a bonus and a raise. Although Connell was skeptical, D.B. sensed the potential of the situation. “But what do we do when someone figures out it was a setup, that it’s all a fake?” asked Connell of D.B.

“We’ll take care of that,” replied D.B. “That’s what we have lawyers for.”

And so the green light was given to turn Ann’s column into a daily diary of one man’s struggle, an everyman’s quest to find some shred of meaning in a crazy mixed-up world still reeling from a depression and possibly on the brink of war.

Of course, this meant that a real John Doe would need to be produced. Other papers were beginning to question whether such a person truly existed. As Ann explained to Connell, this would be simple. There were dozens of men who’d do anything for a dollar, and that would include lying about a letter they didn’t write. They found such a man the very next morning. Ann gathered a bunch of scruffy hobos milling about in the lobby and found a suitable candidate, a gentle man with a kind face, someone who had once been a pitcher in the minor leagues but broke his arm and fell into homelessness. He called himself ‘Long John’ Willoughby, the moniker having been given to him during his baseball years. They took his photo, gave him fifty dollars and set him up in a hotel where he could remain out of sight while Ann’s column ran. Of course, there was the little problem of what they would do with him after he’d presumably commit suicide on Christmas Eve but they’d work that out later.

3

In her first few columns, Ann had John Doe rage against the brutal indifference of the upper classes toward the working man. But by reading the letters that came in, Ann realized people weren’t terribly concerned with these broadsides against society. They only cared that John Doe not jump off the Brooklyn Bridge on Christmas.

With that realization, Ann began to inject a more hopeful note into her columns. Her mother suggested she utilize the words of Ann’s father who, in his work among the needy, had preached the idea of the common good, of helping one’s neighbors, of reaching out to those in need to make sure all could walk the earth with a little dignity. His diary had everything Ann needed. Subsequently, the column’s John Doe implored his readers to reach out to their fellow man to help each other and fight injustice however they could.

This struck a nerve with the public. Within days, John Doe clubs spontaneously sprouted up throughout the area. Circulation of the *Evening Post* skyrocketed and D.B. Norton took notice. Sensing the possibility of using the clubs to his advantage, he called Ann to his private residence for a meeting.

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Ann made her way to D.B.’s palatial mansion on the upper east side. A butler took her coat and walked her to the study. Entering through double doors,

she found D.B. sitting on the other side of a massive mahogany table. He rose from his place and offered Ann a chair.

“I suppose you know why I brought you here,” said D.B.

“I have a pretty good idea,” offered Ann.

“This column of yours, this was all your doing?”

“Yes,” replied Ann. “I hope I didn’t cause too much trouble.”

“Not at all,” replied D.B. “On the contrary, I’m intrigued. Tell me about the John Doe clubs.”

“They seemed to have started on their own. It’s really quite remarkable. There aren’t too many here in the city. We’re far too sophisticated for that. It’s happening more in rural areas, a smattering around White Plains, up in the Catskills, in the Poconos and Jersey.”

“I’m glad,” said D.B. “You may think me an uncaring old man, but the truth is that I find comfort in these John Doe clubs. In fact, I think there should be more of them. What would you say to putting John Doe on the radio so we can take this to the entire country? You do know that I own a network of radio stations?”

“Yes,” said Ann, “but how would that work? I’m not so sure our John Doe, I mean, the John Willoughby we hired for the job, is capable of speaking on the radio. He’s a nice fellow but not much of a talker.”

“Never you mind, I already have that figured out.”

“You have?”

“Certainly, my dear. You know, you’re going to have to learn to trust me. I haven’t gotten to where I am today without knowing all the angles. The way I see it, John Doe can have his speech. Of course, you’d write it for him. He’ll say a few words, then hand the paper to me. I’ll then read the speech on his behalf.”

“Can we do that?”

“Naturally, there we be a large reward in it for you. In fact, I’d like you to work directly for me. I’m prepared to offer you a salary of eight hundred dollars a month.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“All you have to say is yes. I’ll work it out with Connell. You’ll keep your spot at the newspaper but also write speeches for me.”

“My goodness, yes that’s fine,” said Ann.

As soon as Ann left the room, D.B. dialed the phone. “Joe, It’s all set. The wheels are in motion. The next election is in the bag. These yokels won’t know what hit them. I’m going on the radio next week, and I can already taste the admiration of the dumb adoring crowds. They’ll follow every suggestion we feed them.”

The radio address went exactly as planned. John Doe introduced himself and said that he would prefer to have others speak for him. He then handed the speech to D.B., who stood up to the microphone and spoke to the nation. The address was stirring, filled with bromides about man helping his fellow man while adhering to Christian values and the golden rule. D.B. had the audience in the palm of his hands. They believed he was one of them and would fight for the little guy.

A week later, D.B. again called Ann to his residence.

“I must congratulate you. We have succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. The letters are pouring in. John Doe clubs are forming everywhere, and I can assure you that I am personally doing everything possible to help. We’re centralizing club membership and creating a national registry of all the John Does throughout the land. We’re even planning a big John Doe convention next summer, and who knows what will happen from there. Of course, I’m counting on you to write a speech for me.”

“Mr. Norton, I have to ask you a question,” started Ann. “I’ve been talking with Mr. Connell and he told me a few things that give me pause.”

“What is it, my dear?”

“Well, I don’t know quite how to put this, but there are rumors that you’re using the John Doe clubs merely to advance your political ambitions. Is it true you’re planning to run for president?”

“That is something I can’t answer. Sure, I’ve thought about it, but we’ll just have to wait and see. If the people want me, then so be it. This is where you come in, with your speech.”

“I’m not sure I can handle it,” countered Ann.

“Let me get to the point,” said D.B. “I most assuredly do have political ambitions, and this will also benefit you as well. I’m going to hire you as my chief of staff and double your salary. I’m taking you off the newspaper and giving you a position here with me. You’ll have a private office just down the hall.”

“But what are we going to do with John Doe, you know, John Willoughby, the real person? Christmas is coming up and the column says he’s going to jump.”

“The hell with him. He can do whatever he wants. I don’t care what he does. I’m John Doe now.”

“But we told him we’d fix his arm,” said Ann. “He needs money for a doctor.”

“With all he knows, he can’t be seen in public. He’s certainly not playing any baseball. Give him five hundred dollars and a one-way ticket to Mexico. That should take care of it.”

“Maybe so,” said Ann. “I’ll talk to him.”

As Ann was about to walk out, she added, “One more thing. It’s a huge gamble for me to give up on the newspaper business. Once I leave, I can never go back. I’m going to need something extra as compensation.”

“How much are we talking?”

“Five grand should do it.”

“That’s money well spent. I’ll write you a check.”

With that, Ann departed, went back to the office and cleared out her desk, then went home to her mother and cried.

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Soon afterward, D.B.’s scheme fell apart. John Willoughby took his five hundred dollars but refused to go to Mexico. Connell wrote an exposé of what had been going on and put it on page one. Naturally, he was immediately fired. Ann did some soul searching of her own and realized she couldn’t go through with it. She and her mother took their five thousand and moved to California, where they would stay until the affair blew over.

As for D.B., it was a setback, but he remained rich and powerful. Over time, his political ambitions faded. After all, he was getting old and was not in the best of health. But the John Doe clubs continued to flourish, and they became their own force. The common people who made up these clubs found one another and stuck together. They liked the idea of telling others what to do and got a kick out of asserting themselves over the know-it-all city slickers in places like New York City. And they quickly forgave D.B. for his lies and transgressions. In fact, still admiring the man, the John Does began to think of themselves as Nortons rather than Does, and in time, these simple folk, the uneducated innocents of the world, would find another rich and powerful man whom they could call their own and follow blindly.

*This is a slightly expanded version of  
the story as published in East on Central*