

Chapter 1

It was a hospital bed, that much appeared certain, though certainty was coming and going. It was narrow and hard and there were shiny metal railings standing sentrylike along the sides, preventing escape. The sheets were plain and very white. Sanitary. The room was dark, but sunlight was trying to creep around the blinds covering the window.

He closed his eyes again; even that was painful. Then he opened them, and for a long silent minute or so he managed to keep the lids apart and focus on his cloudy little world. He was lying on his back and pinned down by firmly tucked sheets. He noticed a tube dangling to his left, running down to his hand, then disappearing up somewhere behind him. There was a voice in the distance, out in the hallway. Then he made the mistake of trying to move, just a slight adjustment of the head, and it didn't work. Hot bolts of pain hit his skull and neck and he groaned loudly.

‘Rick. Are you awake?’

The voice was familiar, and quickly a face followed it. Arnie was breathing on him.

‘Arnie?’ he said with a weak, scratchy voice, then he swallowed.

‘It’s me, Rick, thank God you’re awake.’

Arnie the agent, always there at the important moments.

‘Where am I, Arnie?’

‘You’re in the hospital, Rick.’

‘Got that. But why?’

‘When did you wake up?’ Arnie found a switch, and a light came on beside the bed.

‘I don’t know. A few minutes ago.’

‘How do you feel?’

‘Like someone crushed my skull.’

‘Close. You’re gonna be fine, trust me.’

Trust me, trust me. How many times had he heard Arnie ask for trust? Truth was, he’d never completely trusted Arnie and there was no plausible reason to start now. What did Arnie know about traumatic head injuries or whatever mortal wound someone had inflicted?

Rick closed his eyes again and breathed deeply. ‘What happened?’ he asked softly.

Arnie hesitated and ran a hand over his hairless head. He glanced at his watch, 4:00 p.m., so his client had been knocked out for almost twenty-four hours. Not long enough, he thought, sadly.

‘What’s the last thing you remember?’ Arnie asked as he carefully put both elbows on the bed’s railing and leaned forward.

After a pause, Rick managed to say, ‘I remember Bannister coming at me.’

Arnie smacked his lips and said, ‘No, Rick. That was the second concussion, two years ago in Dallas, when you were with the Cowboys.’ Rick groaned at the memory, and it wasn’t pleasant for Arnie either, because his client had been squatting on the sideline looking at a certain cheerleader when the play came his way and he was squashed, helmetless, by a ton of flying bodies. Dallas cut him two weeks later and found another third-string quarterback.

‘Last year you were in Seattle, Rick, and now you’re in Cleveland, the Browns, remember?’

Rick remembered and groaned a bit louder. ‘What day is it?’ he asked, eyes open now.

‘Monday. The game was yesterday. Do you recall any of it?’ Not if you’re lucky, Arnie wanted to say. ‘I’ll get a nurse. They’ve been waiting.’

‘Not yet, Arnie. Talk to me. What happened?’

‘You threw a pass, then you got sandwiched. Purcell came on a weak-side blitz and took your head off. You never saw him.’

‘Why was I in the game?’

Now, that was an excellent question, one that was raging on every sports radio show in Cleveland and the upper Midwest. Why was HE in the game? Why was HE on the team? Where in the hell did HE come from?

‘Let’s talk about it later,’ Arnie said, and Rick was too weak to argue. With great reluctance, his

wounded brain was stirring slightly, shaking itself from its coma and trying to awaken. The Browns. Browns Stadium, on a very cold Sunday afternoon before a record crowd. The play-offs, no, more than that – the AFC title game.

The ground was frozen, hard as concrete and just as cold.

A nurse was in the room, and Arnie was announcing, ‘I think he’s snapped out of it.’

‘That’s great,’ she said, without much enthusiasm. ‘I’ll go find a doctor.’ With even less enthusiasm.

Rick watched her leave without moving his head. Arnie was cracking his knuckles and ready to bolt. ‘Look, Rick, I need to get going.’

‘Sure, Arnie. Thanks.’

‘No problem. Look, there’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll just be blunt. The Browns called this morning – Wacker – and, well, they’ve released you.’ It was almost an annual ritual now, this postseason cutting.

‘I’m sorry,’ Arnie said, but only because he had to say it.

‘Call the other teams,’ Rick said, and certainly not for the first time.

‘Evidently I won’t have to. They’re already calling me.’

‘That’s great.’

‘Not really. They’re calling to warn me not to call them. I’m afraid this might be the end of the line, kid.’

There was no doubt it was the end of the line,

but Arnie just couldn't find the candor. Maybe tomorrow. Eight teams in six years. Only the Toronto Argonauts dared to sign him for a second season. Every team needed a backup to their backup quarterback, and Rick was perfect for the role. Problems started, though, when he ventured onto the field.

'Gotta run,' Arnie said, glancing at his watch again. 'And listen, do yourself a favor and keep the television turned off. It's brutal, especially ESPN.' He patted his knee and darted from the room. Outside the door there were two thick security guards sitting in folding chairs, trying to stay awake.

Arnie stopped at the nurses' station and spoke to the doctor, who eventually made his way down the hall, past the security guards, and into Rick's room. His bedside manner lacked warmth – a quick check of the basics without much conversation. Neurological work to follow. Just another garden-variety brain concussion, isn't this the third one?

'I think so,' Rick said.

'Thought about finding another job?' the doctor asked.

'No.'

Perhaps you should, the doctor thought, and not just because of your bruised brain. Three interceptions in eleven minutes should be a clear sign that football is not your calling. Two nurses appeared quietly and helped with the tests and paperwork. Neither said a word to the patient,

though he was an unmarried professional athlete with notable good looks and a hard body. And at that moment, when he needed them, they could not have cared less.

As soon as he was alone again, Rick very carefully began looking for the remote. A large television hung from the wall in the corner. He planned to go straight to ESPN and get it over with. Every movement hurt, and not just his head and neck. Something close to a fresh knife wound ached in his lower back. His left elbow, the non-throwing one, throbbed with pain.

Sandwiched? He felt like he'd been flattened by a cement truck.

The nurse was back, holding a tray with some pills. 'Where's the remote?' Rick asked.

'Uh, the television's broke.'

'Arnie pulled the plug, didn't he?'

'Which plug?'

'The television.'

'Who's Arnie?' she asked as she tinkered with a rather large needle.

'What's that?' Rick asked, forgetting Arnie for a second.

'Vicodin. It'll help you sleep.'

'I'm tired of sleeping.'

'Doctor's orders, okay. You need rest, and lots of it.' She drained the Vicodin into his IV bag and watched the clear liquids for a moment.

'Are you a Browns fan?' Rick asked.

'My husband is.'

'Was he at the game yesterday?'

‘Yes.’

‘How bad was it?’

‘You don’t want to know.’

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When he awoke, Arnie was there again, sitting in a chair beside the bed and reading the *Cleveland Post*. At the bottom of the front page, Rick could barely make out the headline ‘Fans Storm Hospital.’

‘What!’ Rick said as forcefully as possible.

Arnie snatched the paper down and bolted to his feet. ‘Are you okay, kid?’

‘Wonderful, Arnie. What day is it?’

‘Tuesday, early Tuesday morning. How do you feel, kid?’

‘Give me that newspaper.’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘What’s going on, Arnie?’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Everything.’

‘Have you watched television?’

‘No. You pulled the plug. Talk to me, Arnie.’

Arnie cracked his knuckles, then walked slowly to the window, where he barely opened the blinds. He peered through them, as if trouble were out there. ‘Yesterday some hooligans came here and made a scene. Cops handled it well, arrested a dozen or so. Just a bunch of thugs. Browns fans.’

‘How many?’

‘Paper said about twenty. Just drunks.’

‘And why did they come here, Arnie? It’s just you and me – agent and player. The door’s closed. Please fill in the blanks.’

‘They found out you were here. A lot of folks would like to take a shot at you these days. You’ve had a hundred death threats. Folks are upset. They’re even threatening me.’ Arnie leaned against the wall, a flash of smugness because his life was now worth being threatened. ‘You still don’t remember?’ he asked.

‘No.’

‘Browns are up seventeen to zip over the Broncos with eleven minutes to go. Zip doesn’t come close to describing the ass-kicking. After three quarters, the Broncos have eighty-one yards in total offense, and three, count ’em, three first downs. Anything?’

‘No.’

‘Ben Marroon is at quarterback because Nagle pulled a hamstring in the first quarter.’

‘I remember that now.’

‘With eleven minutes to go, Marroon gets drilled on a late hit. They carry him off. No one’s worried because the Browns’ defense could stop General Patton and his tanks. You take the field, third and twelve, you throw a beautiful pass in the flat to Sweeney, who, of course, plays for the Broncos, and forty yards later he’s in the end zone. Remember any of this?’

Rick slowly closed his eyes and said, ‘No.’

‘Don’t try too hard.’

‘Both teams punt, then the Broncos fumble. With six minutes to go, on a third and eight, you check off at the line and throw to Bryce on a hook, but the ball is high and is picked off by somebody in a white jersey, can’t recall his name but he sure can run, all the way. Seventeen to fourteen. The place is getting tense, eighty thousand plus. A few minutes earlier they were celebrating. First Super Bowl ever, all that jazz. Broncos kick off, Browns run the ball three times because Cooley ain’t about to send in a pass play, and so the Browns punt. Or try to. Snap gets fumbled, Broncos get the ball on the Browns’ thirty-four-yard line, which is no problem whatsoever because in three plays the Browns’ defense, which is really, really pissed at this point, stuffs them for fifteen yards, out of field goal range. Broncos punt, you take over at your own 6, and for the next four minutes manage to cram the ball into the middle of the defensive line. The drive stalls at midfield, third and ten, forty seconds to go. Browns are afraid to pass and even more afraid to punt. I don’t know what Cooley sends in, but you check off again, fire a missile to the right sideline for Bryce, who’s wide open. Right on target.’

Rick tried to sit up, and for a moment forgot about his injuries. ‘I still don’t remember.’

‘Right on target, but much too hard. It hits Bryce in the chest, bounces up, and Goodson grabs it, gallops to the promised land. Browns lose twenty-one to seventeen. You’re on the

ground, almost sawed in half. They put you on a stretcher, and as they roll you off the field, half the crowd is booing and the other half is cheering wildly. Quite a noise, never heard anything like it. A couple of drunks jump from the stands and rush the stretcher – they would’ve killed you – but security steps in. A nice brawl ensues, and it, too, is all over the talk shows.’

Rick was slumped over, low in the bed, lower than ever, with his eyes closed and his breathing quite labored. The headaches were back, along with the sharp pains in the neck and along the spine. Where were the drugs?

‘Sorry, kid,’ Arnie said. The room was nicer in the darkness, so Arnie closed the blinds and reassumed his position in the chair, with his newspaper. His client appeared to be dead.

The doctors were ready to release him, but Arnie had argued strongly that he needed a few more days of rest and protection. The Browns were paying for the security guards, and they were not happy about it. The team was also covering the medicals, and it wouldn’t be long before they complained.

And Arnie was fed up, too. Rick’s career, if you could call it that, was over. Arnie got 5 percent, and 5 percent of Rick’s salary wasn’t enough to cover expenses. ‘Are you awake, Rick?’

‘Yes,’ he said, with his eyes still closed.

‘Listen to me, okay.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘The hardest part of my job is telling a player

that it's time to quit. You've played all your life, it's all you know, all you dream about. No one is ever ready to quit. But, Rick, ole buddy, it's time to call it quits. There are no options.'

'I'm twenty-eight years old, Arnie,' Rick said, with his eyes open. Very sad eyes. 'What do you suggest I do?'

'A lot of guys go into coaching. And real estate. You were smart – you got your degree.'

'My degree is in phys ed, Arnie. That means I can get a job teaching volleyball to sixth graders for forty thousand a year. I'm not ready for that.'

Arnie stood and walked around the end of the bed, as if deep in thought. 'Why don't you go home, get some rest, and think about it?'

'Home? Where is home? I've lived in so many different places.'

'Home is Iowa, Rick. They still love you there.' And they really love you in Denver, Arnie thought, but wisely kept it to himself.

The idea of being seen on the streets of Davenport, Iowa, terrified Rick, and he let out a soft groan. The town was probably humiliated by the play of its native son. Ouch. He thought of his poor parents, and closed his eyes.

Arnie glanced at his watch, then for some reason finally noticed that there were no get-well cards or flowers in the room. The nurses told him that no friends had stopped by, no family, no teammates, no one even remotely connected to the Cleveland Browns. 'I gotta run, kid. I'll drop by tomorrow.'

Walking out, he nonchalantly tossed the newspaper on Rick's bed. As soon as the door closed behind him, Rick grabbed it, and soon wished he had not. The police estimated a crowd of fifty had staged a rowdy demonstration outside the hospital. Things got ugly when a TV news crew showed up and began filming. A window was smashed, and a few of the drunker fans stormed the ER check-in, supposedly looking for Rick Dockery. Eight were arrested. A large photo – front page beneath the fold – captured the crowd before the arrests. Two crude signs could be read clearly: 'Pull the Plug Now!' and 'Legalize Euthanasia.'

It got worse. The *Post* had a notorious sports-writer named Charley Cray, a nasty hack whose specialty was attack journalism. Just clever enough to be credible, Cray was widely read because he delighted in the missteps and foibles of professional athletes who earned millions yet were not perfect. He was an expert on everything and never missed a chance for a cheap shot. His Tuesday column – front-page sports – began with the headline: 'Could Dockery Top All-Time Goat List?'

Knowing Cray, there was no doubt Rick Dockery would top the list.

The column, well researched and savagely written, was structured around Cray's opinions about the greatest individual chokes, screwups, and collapses in the history of sports. There was Bill Buckner's booted ground ball in the '86

World Series. Jackie Smith's dropped TD pass in Super Bowl XIII, and so on.

But, as Cray screamed at his readers, those were only single plays.

Mr. Dockery, on the other hand, managed three – Count Them! – three horrible passes in only eleven minutes.

Clearly, therefore, Rick Dockery is the unquestioned Greatest Goat in the history of professional sports. The verdict was undisputed, and Cray challenged anyone to argue with him.

Rick flung the newspaper against the wall and called for another pill. In the darkness, alone with the door closed, he waited for the drug to work its magic, to knock him out clean, then, hopefully, to take him away forever.

He slipped lower in the bed, pulled the sheet over his head, and began crying.

Chapter 2

It was snowing and Arnie was tired of Cleveland. He was at the airport, waiting for a flight to Las Vegas, his home, and against his better judgment he made a call to a lesser vice president of the Arizona Cardinals.

At the moment, and not including Rick Dockery, Arnie had seven players in the NFL and four in Canada. He was, if he could be forced to admit it, a mid-list agent who, of course, had bigger ambitions. Making phone calls for Rick Dockery was not going to help his credibility. Rick was arguably the most-talked-about player in the country at that dismal moment, but it wasn't the kind of buzz that Arnie needed. The vice president was polite but brief and couldn't wait to get off the phone.

Arnie went to a bar, got a drink, and managed to find a seat far away from any television, since the only story still raging in Cleveland was the three interceptions by a quarterback no one even

knew was on the team. The Browns had rolled through the season with a sputtering offense but a bruising defense, one that shattered records for yielding so few yards and points. They lost only once, and with each win a city starved for a Super Bowl became more and more enthralled with their old lovable losers. Suddenly, in one quick season, the Browns were the slayers.

Had they won the previous Sunday, their Super Bowl opponent would be the Minnesota Vikings, a team they shut out and routed back in November.

The entire city could taste the sweetness of a championship.

It all vanished in eleven horrifying minutes.

Arnie ordered a second drink. Two salesmen at the next table were getting drunk and relishing the Browns' collapse. They were from Detroit.

The hottest story of the day had been the firing of the Browns' general manager, Clyde Wacker, a man who had been hailed as a genius as recently as the preceding Saturday but was now the perfect scapegoat. Someone had to be fired, and not just Rick Dockery. When it was finally determined that Wacker had signed Dockery off waivers, back in October, the owner fired him. The execution was public – big press conference, lots of frowns and promises to run a tighter ship, et cetera. The Browns would be back!

Arnie met Rick during his senior year at Iowa, at the end of a season that had begun with much

promise but was fading into a third-tier bowl game. Rick started at quarterback his last two seasons, and he seemed well suited for a drop-back, open-style offense so rare in the Big Ten. At times he was brilliant – reading defenses, coolly checking off at the line, firing the ball with incredible velocity. His arm was amazing, undoubtedly the best in the upcoming draft. He could throw long and hard with a lightning-quick release. But he was too erratic to be trusted, and when Buffalo picked him in the last round, it should have been a clear sign that he needed to pursue a master’s degree or a stockbroker’s license.

Instead, he went to Toronto for two miserable seasons, then began bouncing around the NFL. With a great arm, Rick was just barely good enough to make a roster. Every team needs a third-string quarterback. In tryouts, and there had been many, he’d often dazzled coaches with his arm. Arnie watched one day in Kansas City when Rick threw a football eighty yards, then a few minutes later clocked a bullet at ninety miles an hour.

But Arnie knew what most coaches now strongly suspected. Rick, for a football player, was afraid of contact. Not the incidental contact, not the quick and harmless tackle of a scrambling quarterback. Rick, with good reason, feared the rushing tackles and the blitzing linebackers.

There is a moment or two in every game when

a quarterback has a receiver open, a split second to throw the ball, and a massive, roaring lineman charging the pocket unblocked. The quarterback has a choice. He can grit his teeth, sacrifice his body, put his team first, throw the damned ball, make the play, and get crushed, or he can tuck it and run and pray he lives for another play. Rick, as long as Arnie had watched him play, had never, not once, put the team first. At the first hint of a sack, Rick flinched and ran frantically for the sideline.

And with a propensity for concussions, Arnie really couldn't blame him.

He called a nephew of the owner of the Rams, who answered the phone with an icy 'I hope this is not about Dockery.'

'Well, yes, it is,' Arnie managed to say.

'The answer is hell no.'

Since Sunday, Arnie had spoken with about half of the NFL teams. The response from the Rams was pretty typical. Rick had no idea how completely his sad little career had been terminated.

Watching a monitor on the wall, Arnie saw his flight get delayed. One more call, he vowed. One more effort to find Rick a job, and then he would move on to his other players.

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The clients were from Portland, and though his last name was Webb and she was as pale as a

Swede, they both claimed Italian blood and were keen to see the old country where it all began. Each spoke about six words of the language, and spoke them badly. Sam suspected they had picked up a travel book at the airport and memorized a few of the basics over the Atlantic. On their previous trip to Italy their driver/guide had been a native with ‘dreadful’ English, and so they had insisted on an American this time around, a good Yank who could arrange meals and find tickets. After two days together, Sam was ready to ship them back to Portland.

Sam was neither a driver nor a guide. He was, however, very much an American, and since his primary job paid little, he moonlighted occasionally when his countrymen passed through and needed someone to hold their hands.

He waited outside in the car while they had a very long dinner at Lazzaro’s, an old trattoria in the center of the city. It was cold and snowing lightly, and as he sipped strong coffee, his thoughts returned to his roster, as they always did. His cell phone startled him. The call was from the United States. He said hello.

‘Sam Russo please,’ came a crisp greeting.

‘This is Sam.’

‘Coach Russo?’

‘Yes, that’s me.’

The caller identified himself as Arnie something or other, said he was an agent of some sort, and claimed to have been a manager on the 1988 Bucknell football team, a few years after Sam

played there. Since they both went to Bucknell, they quickly found common ground, and after a few minutes of Do-You-Know-So-and-So they were friendly. For Sam, it was nice to chat with someone from his old school, albeit a total stranger.

And it was rare that he got calls from agents.

Arnie finally got to the point.

‘Sure I watched the play-offs,’ Sam said.

‘Well, I represent Rick Dockery, and, well, the Browns let him go,’ Arnie said.

No surprise there, Sam thought, but kept listening. ‘And he’s looking around, considering his options. I heard the rumor that you need a quarterback.’

Sam almost dropped the phone. A real NFL quarterback playing in Parma? ‘It’s not a rumor,’ he said. ‘My quarterback quit last week and took a coaching job somewhere in upstate New York. We’d love to have Dockery. Is he okay? Physically I mean?’

‘Sure, just bruised a little, but he’s ready to go.’

‘And he wants to play in Italy?’

‘Maybe. We haven’t discussed it yet, you know, he’s still in the hospital, but we’re looking at all the possibilities. Frankly, he needs a change of scenery.’

‘Do you know the game over here?’ Sam asked nervously. ‘It’s good football, but it’s a far cry from the NFL and the Big Ten. I mean, these guys are not professionals in the true sense of the word.’

‘What level?’

‘I don’t know. Tough to say. Ever hear of a school called Washington and Lee, down in Virginia? A nice school, good football, Division III?’

‘Sure.’

‘They came over last year during spring break and we scrimmaged them a couple of times. Pretty even matchup.’

‘Division III, huh?’ Arnie said, his voice losing some steam.

But then, Rick needed a softer game. Another concussion and he might indeed suffer the brain damage so often joked about. Truthfully, Arnie didn’t care. Just another phone call or two and Rick Dockery was history.

‘Look, Arnie,’ Sam began earnestly. Time for the truth. ‘It’s a club sport over here, or maybe a notch above that. Each team in the Series A gets three American players, and they usually get meal money, maybe some rent. The quarterbacks are typically American and they get a small salary. The rest of the roster is a bunch of tough Italians who play because they love football. If they’re lucky and the owner is in a good mood, they might get pizza and beer after the game. We play an eight-game schedule, with play-offs, then a chance for the Italian Super Bowl. Our field is old but nice, well maintained, seats about three thousand, and for a big game we might fill it. We have corporate sponsors, cool uniforms, but no TV contract and no real money to speak of.

We're smack in the middle of the world of soccer, so our football has more of a cult following.'

'How did you get there?'

'I love Italy. My grandparents emigrated from this region, settled in Baltimore, where I grew up. But I have lots of cousins around here. My wife is Italian and so on. It's a delightful place to live. Can't make any money coaching American football, but we're having fun.'

'So the coaches get paid?'

'Yes, you could say that.'

'Any other NFL rejects?'

'Occasionally one passes through, some lost soul still dreaming of a Super Bowl ring. But the Americans are usually small college players who love the game and have a sense of adventure.'

'How much can you pay my man?'

'Let me check with the owner.'

'Do that, and I'll check with my client.'

They signed off after another Bucknell story, and Sam returned to his coffee. An NFL quarterback playing football in Italy? It was hard to imagine, though not without precedent. The Bologna Warriors were in the Italian Super Bowl two years earlier with a forty-year-old quarterback who'd once played briefly for Oakland. He quit after two seasons and went to Canada.

Sam turned the car heater down a notch and replayed the final minutes of the Browns-Broncos game. Never in his memory had he watched one player so completely engineer a

defeat and lose a game that was so clearly won. He himself had almost cheered when Dockery was carried off the field.

Nevertheless, the idea of coaching him in Parma was intriguing.

Chapter 3

Though the packing and leaving was somewhat of a ritual, the departure from Cleveland was a bit more stressful than usual. Someone found out that he had leased a condo on the seventh floor of a glass building near the lake, and there were two shaggy reporter types with cameras loitering near the guardhouse when Rick wheeled through in his black Tahoe. He parked underground and hurried up the elevator. The phone in the kitchen was ringing when he unlocked the door. A pleasant voice mail was left behind by none other than Charley Cray.

Three hours later the SUV was packed with clothes and golf clubs and a stereo. Thirteen trips – he counted them – up and down the elevator, and his neck and shoulders were killing him. His head ached and throbbed and the painkillers did little to help. He wasn't supposed to drive while drugged, but Rick was driving.

Rick was leaving, running away from the lease

on the condo and the rented furniture therein, fleeing Cleveland and the Browns and their awful fans, scampering away to somewhere. He wasn't quite sure where.

Wisely, he had signed only a six-month lease on the condo. Since college he'd lived a life of short leases and rented furniture and learned not to accumulate too many things.

He fought the downtown traffic and managed to glance in the mirror for one last look at the Cleveland skyline. Good riddance. He was thrilled to be leaving. He vowed to never return, unless, of course, he was playing against the Browns, but then he'd promised himself that he would not think about the future. Not for another week anyway.

As he raced through the suburbs, he admitted to himself that Cleveland was undoubtedly happier with his departure than he was.

He was drifting west, in the general direction of Iowa, not with any enthusiasm, because he was not excited about going home. He'd called his parents once from the hospital. His mother asked about his head and begged him to stop playing. His father asked him what the hell he was thinking when he threw that last pass.

'How are things in Davenport?' Rick had finally asked his father. Both knew what he was after. He wasn't curious about the local economy.

'Not too good,' his father said.

A weather bulletin caught his attention. Heavy