



INTERLOPER ON TOAST, TO GO

By KIERAN CROWLEY

IT'S NOT OFTEN THAT ANYONE gets the chance to dramatically unmask an impostor or confront an elusive nemesis.

But what do you do when the impostor doesn't mind being unmasked at all and your wife feels sorry for your nemesis?

This particular unmasking took place at a \$250-a-plate black-tie dinner given by the Columbus Citizens Foundation at the Waldorf before the ill-fated 1983 Columbus Day Parade, which was cancelled because of the death of Terence Cardinal Cooke.

When the guest of honor, Sophia Loren, made her entrance at the Waldorf's Starlight Roof for a pre-dinner awards presentation for the press, she was resplendent, as we say, in a red-and-black sequined gown and dripping, as we also say, with diamonds.

Characteristically resplendent in tuxedos and gowns but characteristically dripping with cameras—elbowed Governor Mario Cuomo aside in their stampede to snap La Loren.

As part of continuing coverage of the death of Cardinal Cooke and the cancellation of the parade, I did a brief, unscheduled interview with Sophia for The Post's Monday edition.

Sophia said how sad she was over the cardinal's death and the cancellation, expressed her pride in being the first woman chosen to lead the parade and said she intended to return in 1984 to lead the throng.

I thanked Miss Loren for her patience under fire, tucked my notebook back in my blazer pocket and switched from working to playing press. Yes, blazer. Because of the eleventh-hour cancellation of the parade leading to my cover-

age of the affair, I was the only male in sight not wearing a tux.

On my arm as we strolled downstairs to the giant main ballroom, however, my wife, Riki, was quite resplendent—if not dripping with diamonds—and quite amused by the proceedings.

At one of the two press tables in the main ballroom, we sat next to UPI's then-Metropolitan Editor Joe Gambardello, whom I knew from around and about when he was a reporter on the street, and his wife, Gisele, a writer and producer from Cable News Network.

As we were settling down, a pudgy, pink-faced and balding gentleman in a basic tux strolled over.

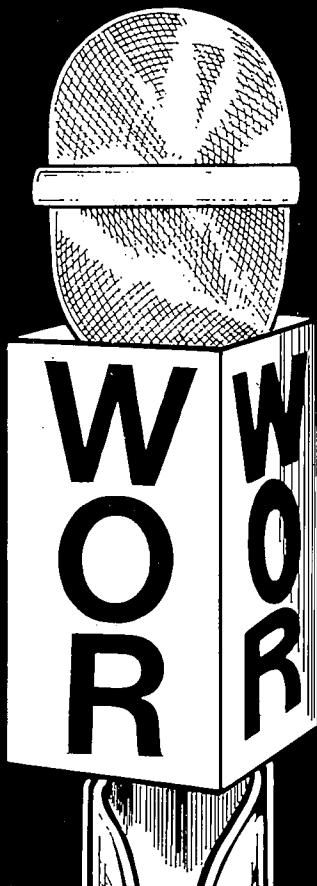
"Is this the press table?" he asked unctuously, peering through thick, horn-rimmed glasses.

Assured it was, he took the last empty chair and began introducing himself. When I told him who I was, he said he was pleased to meet me and announced

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United Press International."

"UPI in New York?" I asked, realizing that he and Joe from UPI had betrayed no sign of recognition.

"Yes," he said.

"Oh. Then you know Joe, Sidney," I said, gesturing to Gambardello, who was intently exploring a somewhat mysterious-looking appetizer. Sidney sat bolt upright when I referred to him as one of Joe's UPI colleagues. Joe looked up from his plate, craning his head around the floral centerpiece to get a look at Sidney.

As their eyes met, Sidney's face fell.

It was fascinating to watch Joe's face, as polite curiosity first turned to puzzlement, blossomed into a wave of wide-eyed enlightenment and then exploded into rage.

Joe shot to his feet, almost toppling his chair, threw his linen napkin down like a gauntlet and declared:

"You, sir, do not work for UPI and have never worked for UPI. You, sir, are an impostor!" Joe said loudly, wagging his finger forcefully at Sidney, as if he were auditioning for a southern melodrama.

A hush fell over our table and the adjoining tables—except for me. I was laughing forcefully.

"We have sworn out a criminal complaint against you with the police department and I suggest you leave before I have you arrested," Joe said louder, barely containing his building fury.

Because it seemed as if there might be a duel at dawn in the making, I asked Joe if he was joking. He was not.

"This guy has been going around pretending to be one of our reporters at all these affairs," Joe said. "He's been driving us crazy."

"Listen, Sidney, pretend to be from AP for awhile—give UPI a break," I said, laughing until tears came to my eyes.

Joe did not think it was funny. Sidney did not think it was funny. It was an affair of honor.

"Have I upset anyone?" Sidney asked in a polite but suitably pitiful tone, rising with his napkin still on his lap.

Bob McLaughlin from Newhouse interceded in the manner of a genteel second, pressed Sidney back into his seat and convinced Joe, also in the best manner of the gallants, not to "make a scene in front of the ladies."

I got into the act only to ask Joe if there was any possibility that the great impostor might be armed or dangerous, since Sophia and the governor, possible targets, were not far away on the dais.

"Nah, he's just a moocher," snapped Joe, loudly enough for everyone to hear. Joe's wife Gisele winced and looked

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pitifully at Sidney, who was waiting patiently for his fate to be decided.

"I've been looking for this guy for six months and now I suddenly come face-to-face with him at a black-tie affair," Joe said. "I can't believe it.

"He goes to these events—wherever there's good food and booze—and pretends to be a UPI reporter," said Joe. "Sometimes, he even pretends to be me! We call up to do a story and people say, 'Well, your guy was already here.' It always turns out to be this guy Sidney.

"He's probably been doing it for years, but I only found out about him when I was made metro editor," Joe said.

It was then agreed to ignore the issue until after dinner and everyone sat down.

Within five minutes of the gentlemanly truce, Sidney was chattering away as if the confrontation had never taken place. Indeed, he seemed more relaxed after he had been exposed as a poseur—among friends.

"More white wine, ladies?" Sidney asked graciously, pouring and passing, as he chatted animatedly about international adventures we assumed were fictitious.

"Does this sort of thing happen often?" whispered Riki, who was taken aback when her question nearly caused me to die laughing a second time.

As agreed, Joe did nothing until the

meal was over. Calmer, Joe sat down beside his soft-spoken nemesis during dessert and tried a bit of diplomacy:

"Look," Joe said, taking a deep breath. "Give me that phony UPI ID card you have, stop pretending to be from UPI and we'll forget the whole thing. I'll drop the charges."

"But I couldn't give you my cards, Joe," Sidney replied incredulously. After all, how could he cover things without his cards? Sidney was, of course, polite, but his tone made it obvious that he was humoring someone who wasn't making any sense.

"I tried. I tried," Joe shrugged to us, as he got up and headed for the telephones just outside the ballroom doors to call Police Headquarters.

Sidney paused for a brief, decent interval after Joe disappeared through the double doors, gently dabbed the corners of his mouth with his napkin and folded it neatly beside his plate. Rising slowly, he said calmly and sincerely:

"Ladies, gentlemen, it's been wonderful meeting you and I hope to see you all again. Good night," leaving a circle of sagging jaws in the wake of his cool chutzpah.

"You are too much," I said admiringly, as he glided by.

"Thank you. Good night," he said with a friendly smile and strode away purposefully into the night, as if he had a deadline to meet.

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