

# 1 I Encounter a Caped Giant

I got off the bus at the corner of Airport Way and Front Street at mid-afternoon, as I had no more classes at Chaud County Community College that day. The smelly bus chugged away leaving me to inhale the sharp essences of a fine autumn in Balona, CA 95232, an old town that doesn't always smell as good as it did that day. At the moment I had no inkling of the horror that soon would drain some of my fellow citizens of a vital fluid and leave others of us wondering about the safety and security of our own.

I had my bookbag slung over one shoulder, the suave way a proper college freshman should carry one, and I proceeded down the street to stoke my intellectual fires with a burger and a choc shake at Frank's Soupe de Jour. As a scholar I noted the bad French in Frank's sign but anyway appreciated the good greasy food served there.

Front Street was nearly deserted for a change and what at once caught my eye was a figure down the block in the middle of the street. It was a slumped-over man shuffling

in a circle, one arm up gesturing with its thumb, much like a winner's wardance after the Big Game.

Regrettably, without fatherly interest I was never motivated to advance beyond Cub Scout, but the desire to be a helpful guy has always been with me. So I hurried to the fellow's side, maybe to get him out of potential traffic.

Much to my surprise, I almost recognized him. It seemed to be Ned Chaud, proprietor of Ned's Sportsbar. But he was really not easily recognizable. His clothes hung on him like rags on a scarecrow. He was wrinkled as a prune, and his head seemed too small for his neck. He was croaking. "Um-umba-um-umba," he sang, seemingly quite happy with his shrunken condition. His upturned thumb beat time with his *ummbas*.

This was a Ned Chaud maybe too full of the product he sells. I wished I was able to help this mature fellow, but the best I could do was to steer him to the sidewalk and watch him shuffle off towards his sportsbar.

Chomping and slurping what was left of my order as I exited Frank's burger-smelly place in good cheer, I noticed someone who had not been there when I entered Frank's. Lounging on Frank's outdoor bench was a really unusual fellow. He was possibly more than seven feet tall, had wild, bushy orange-colored hair and beard, and was wearing a slick blue bodysuit that emphasized the huge muscles all over him. His middle was cinched-up by a wide red belt. Completing his ensemble were red suede kneeboots and a long red cape.

I knew at once that this fellow was not your regular citizen of Balona. Frank "Hound of the Basketballs" Backhouse, proprietor of Frank's is said to be over six

feet-five, and Junior Trilbend is maybe six-four, but we have only one real near-seven-footer and he is pastor at the BoMFoG Tabernacle. That one has a fake foot, and is a graduate of Yale. This one taking his ease on Frank's bench was not Pastor Nim Chaud.

"Hello, little fellow," the caped dude said to me in a deep hollow voice. I guess he was comparatively accurate in his greeting, as I am five-eight and weigh 140 pounds.

"Yes, sir," I responded. I am always courteous to older people, especially if they look like they could easily squash me. This large lounge was clutching a handful of papers.

Moving his papers probably so that I would be sure to notice them he said, "I am seeking an intelligent young person to deliver some flyers to Balona households. You look like you fit my description perfectly."

I deflected the flattery with a gracious wave of my free hand, tipped up my shake and tried to suck the last drops from the cup. I said smartly, "You could maybe get some help down the street at the *Courier* office. I'm told that they have delivery people standing around practically waiting for an assignment."

"Yes. I'll bet I could get somebody there. But right at this moment I am ready to pay twenty US dollars for any delivery service of, say, these few handfules, one of each stuffed between doorknob and doorframe of a number of residences. The job might be accomplished in twenty minutes or less. A tidy profit, I'd say." The caped fellow smiled by opening his mouth, thrusting his lower jaw, and managing to show nearly all his very white teeth and very red tongue. The color contrasts with his orange whiskers were eye-catching. I noticed a sign on his chest.

I inquired, “Sir, what is that sign on your chest advertising, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

“This is a hand-embroidered X in metallic threads, varicolored as you can see. It represents my signature and stands for my name, Xantac.” He continued to smile while stroking his X and patting his stack of flyers at the same time. I remembered how I had trained myself at an early age to pat my head and rub my stomach at the same time. I smiled at the memory.

“Your name sounds like it starts with a Z,” I mentioned.

“Yes. But one may indeed pronounce X with a Z sound and thus avoid trademark issues,” he said. He held the flyers out to me—his huge thumb securing a twenty-dollar bill atop the flyers, payment in advance. “You look to be an honest young fellow,” he said, “so I shall trust you to do the job I require.”

I stuffed the twenty into a pocket of my Levi’s and then took the flyers. “All I have to do is deliver one to each house?”

“That’s it.” But he held one flyer face-up so that I could read the contents. “You might want to read it.”

I sat down next to him and read.

It said, “Get a university degree with no extra effort, no class attendance, no books to buy, no professors to cultivate, no homework, no academic work to submit, and not one penny to pay. All you need to qualify is some life experience.

“Register and contribute some life experience and your leather-bound diploma from the University of Balona will be awarded within two weeks. Additionally, your name and your new degree will be entered and prominently

displayed in *Who's Who in Balona*, a leather-bound *Book of Distinction*.”

Then followed where and when this meeting was to take place. I was surprised that the venue was to be the Celebration of Life Hall of Hannibal Chaud's Funerals rather than at the Balona High School auditorium, where stuff for the public is usually touted.

“Wow,” I said. “This is pretty cool, Mr. Xantac.” I could not stop nodding my head at the potential this deal offered, especially compared with bus-travel to Delta City day after day, sweating out classes year after year.

This new deal was a lot like the several being advertised on TV where they're also always assuring viewers that you cannot get away with saying stuff that is not true.

So, possibly true, this one was right here in town, and it was totally free. I could get into law school right away. Another thought flashed through my brain:

Maybe the University of Balona also gave out free law degrees.

I wouldn't have to go off to law school after all, and I could take over my decrepit father's office free of charge.

Things were looking up.

Mr. Xantac smiled again, this time only with his lips. He then said, “Just call me Xantac. No ‘mister.’” He made a mouth. “On the other hand, you could refer to me as ‘Professor’ Xantac. And if you have some friends who might like to make a little pocket money by delivering my flyers, well, bring them over to our office.”

Surprisingly, and unlike most non-natives of Balona he pointed with his thumb, instead of with an index finger. His target was a storefront across the street from the

*Courier* office with a big new sign over the door stretching from one end of the office to the other.

“I am setting up shop over there,” he said, still smiling. We both stood, and he was so tall that I found myself looking across at his X. “Huh-huh-huh,” he chuckled deep in his chest. “You just saw our first successful degree candidate pass by.” He was referring to Ned Chaud.

“Ah. Mr. Chaud was chanting, ‘I’m number one?’”

Xantac nodded, yawned, and stretched as if awakening from sleep. “Now, about your own diploma...uh, wait,” he said, looking at the top of my head. “Nice big head, sorry to say. Do you mind if I measure your head?”

I felt the twenty burning a hole in my jeans, so how could I say no to a simple request like that? I wondered briefly why he said “sorry to say,” but at that moment thought no more of it.

Xantac pulled a yellow fabric tape-measure out of a pocket under his cape, wrapped it around my head, and muttered, “Hmm. Very good. Very, very good for her.” Putting the tape-measure away and jotting something in a small notebook, he said, “Well, you have a fine skull and are sure to be rewarded because of it.” He smiled his open-mouth smile again, this time (because of the angle of vision) allowing me a vista of the red roof of his mouth.

I did not understand his reference to “her” but it seemed no matter of importance at the time.

And so we parted, he to resume his nap, and I to stuff flyers into doors on all the five blocks home, which took care of most of the stack he had provided. I could feel the twenty-dollar bill where I had folded it into my pocket. The bill seemed quite warm nestled there.

I then considered how I might get some kids involved and maybe extract a commission from them for my efforts.

I could not think of any unreservedly honest kids offhand, so my second thought was of one of my many cousins, Joseph Kuhl, a tall, blue-eyed, yellow-haired young guy somewhat older than I, but a constantly broke perennial frosh at C4.

Joey lives across the street and would likely be home, as he spends little time in class, feeling that it is beneath his dignity to submit to community college teachers after having more or less earned a diploma from Balona High School. For a small amount, certainly far less than twenty dollars, Joey would probably be willing to deliver flyers. He might even be a candidate for Xantac's degree program.

I was halfway up the steps to my house thinking of how best to get Joey to come along, when I stopped in mid-step, gripped by another sudden thought: A no-fee university diploma without any schoolwork at all. This was a great idea. This would be practically something for nothing, more or less. I started thinking in high gear.

We have two social groups that attract a goodly number of residents and provide places for people with opinions to drink tea or beer and voice their thoughts. Tea comports with the Daughters of the Delta, a women's group. Beer is the beverage of choice of the all-male Delta Doodle Dandies.

It occurred to me that probably none of the members of either of these groups has a university degree. It also was apparent to me that those residents of Balona who do have degrees do not belong to either group.

So, one can readily see that acquiring a free university degree without any schoolwork at all might appeal to some of our citizens. I must confess that the opportunity did appeal to me.

