

Decoding a Secret

By Dennis Knight

I was strolling down the mall yesterday afternoon when I got a special delivery by way of one of those breezes that are created by the canyons of downtown Denver. It was a piece of litter that wafted and fell at my feet. I was about to drop it in a trash bin when the words caught my eye.

“CHUPU. Circumstances habitual, ubiquitous, putrid, ugly.” That was it, the acronym and five words in a string. I held on to the paper, thinking it would be an absorbing study on the bus, and it thoroughly was. It absorbed me through supper and the rest of the evening. I was still deep in its thrall at two this morning when I worked out the solution I shall describe for you now.

I was interested in the words, of course, but the paper was intriguing. I could see from the left corner of the page that it had been once stapled. It was a stock we used thirty years ago, an onion skin that reacted to heat. The edges had taken a brown cast, but the text was clear. It was thermofax paper, which is how we made duplicates in the Army fifty years ago. You’d cover an original document with a skin, and send the pairing through a machine that burned a copy. (I bet you never knew where *that* term came from.)

It was old, at least half a century, but where did it come from? If the paper had been exposed to light for even a few days of its existence, it would have turned totally black. So I deduced it must have been undisturbed in a file cabinet until it landed at my feet. That it flew in the downtown winds was a clue it might have come from a law office. They never throw away anything.

Then I recalled passing an alley and being distracted by a truck down the way. It was stationary and driverless, but made powerful noises, the clanking of gears and the crunch of reams of paper being sliced into shreds. The solution was quite elementary: my secret message, just as it met the jaws of the feared shredder, had been liberated by a passing breeze.

Having solved the mystery of its origin, I focused on interpreting the words, and, without a benefit of a secret decoder ring, I turned to my thesaurus. Out of circumstances, I got “affairs” and out of habitual, “customary.” Eventually I extrapolated the phrase to, “Affairs in customary state, thoroughly rotten.” I now had a sensible phrase, but it didn’t fit the acronym, so I persisted and embellished, finally nailing it early this morning.

The loose page was the end of a confidential memo after a corporate attorney’s day in conference or in court. I can’t explain why he made wanted it secret, but the lawyer had simply encoded the classic military and industrial report, “SNAFU: Situation Normal, All Fouled Up.”