

TONY HOLLERMAN

Bestselling author of
TALKING GOD and **A THIEF OF TIME**



THE FLY ON THE WALL

"PROVOCATIVE ... STUNNING."

—THE NEW YORKER

**TONY
HILLERMAN**



**THE FLY
ON THE WALL**

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TO KILL A FLY

The car of John Cotton, widely read political columnist for the Twin Cities *Tribune*, plunged off a bridge into Rush River near the state capitol late Tuesday. Police were dragging the rain-swollen stream for the body of the driver. Witnesses said the driver was the only occupant. The identity of the driver was not immediately established. However, Cotton could not be located at his apartment or at his desk at the capitol and Police Captain James Archibald said, "We presume he was the victim." A native of Santa Fe, New Mexico, Cotton joined the *Tribune* staff after serving as police and general assignment reporter on the *Denver Post*.

"That's it," Danley said. "I didn't know you used to be on the *Post*."

"I was," Cotton said. He felt numb.

Books by TONY HILLERMAN

FICTION

**Coyote Waits
Talking God
A Thief of Time
Skinwalkers
The Ghostway
The Dark Wind
People of Darkness
Listening Woman
Dance Hall of the Dead
The Fly on the Wall
The Blessing Way
The Boy Who Made Dragonfly
(for children)**

NONFICTION

**The Great Taos Bank Robbery
Rio Grande
New Mexico
The Spell of New Mexico
Indian Country**

Author's Note

Both the state capitol used in this book and the politicians who inhabit it are products of the author's imagination. However, I acknowledge my debt to Larry Grove, Don Peterson, Loyd Hackler, Mary Goddard, Paul McClung, Hugh Hall, Howard Wilson, Pete Peterman, Bob Brown, Phil Dessauer, Peter Mygatt, Frankie McCarthy, Carter Bradley, Jim Bradshaw, John Curtis, Jesse Price, and the others who have been my friends, competitors and allies in the news profession—and to all those statehouse newsmen who know how it feels to be the fly on the wall.

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WALL**

John Cotton had been in the pressroom almost an hour when Merrill McDaniels came in. He had written a five-hundred-word over-nighter wrapping up the abortion-bill hearings in the House Public Affairs Committee. He had teletyped that—and a shorter item on a gubernatorial appointment—to the state desk of the *Tribune*. Then Cotton had stood at the window—a tall, wiry man with a longish, freckled, somber face. He had thought first about what he would write for his political column, about how badly he wanted a smoke, and then had drifted into other thoughts. He had considered the dust on the old-fashioned window panes, and the lights—the phosphorescent glow of the city surrounding the semidarkness of the state capitol grounds. In the clear, dry air of Santa Fe there wouldn't be this glow. Each light

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would be an individual glitter without this defraction of cold, misty humidity. Twenty blocks away, by the river below Statehouse Hill, the glow was faintly pink with the neon of the downtown business district. It outlined vaguely the blunt, irregular skyline: the square tower of Federal Citybank, the black glass monolith of the Hebron Building, the dingy granite of the Commodity Exchange—the seats of money and power rising out of a moderately dirty middle-aged Midwestern city, clustered beside a polluted Midwestern river. Not very large and not very small. About 480,000 people, the Chamber of Commerce said. Exactly 412,318 by the last federal census, not counting the satellite towns and not counting those who farmed the infinity of cornfields and the hilltops of wheat that surrounded it all.

Farm-belt landscape. Rich. Nine-hundred-dollar-an-acre country. Beautiful if you liked it and Cotton had thought again that he didn't like it. The humid low-level sky oppressed him. He missed the immense skylscapes of the mountains and the deserts. And he thought, as he had thought many times before, that one day he would write Ernie Danilov a letter and tell the managing editor

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he was quitting. He would enjoy writing that letter.

And then, just a few minutes before McDaniels walked in, he sat down again at his desk. He typed "At the Capitol" and his by-line on a sheet of copy paper and wrote rapidly.

Governor Paul Roark remains coy about the U.S. Senate race upcoming next year. But if you make political bets, consider these facts:

1. The tax-reform package the Governor and his supporters are now trying to ram through the legislature would make an excellent plank for a campaign in the Democratic senatorial primary.

2. Friends of incumbent U.S. Senator Eugene Clark say privately that they're dead certain Roark will fight Clark for the nomination. They see Roark's campaign as a last-gasp effort of the once-dominant liberal-labor-populist-small-farmer coalition to retain its slipping control over the Democratic party machinery.

3. Roger Boyden, Senator Clark's press secretary and hatchet man, has

moved back from Washington. Boyden isn't talking, but those he has been contacting say he's mobilizing Clark's supporters for a primary battle against Roark.

4. An "Effective Senate Committee" has been registered with the Secretary of State as a repository for senatorial campaign funds. The listed directors include an aide of Congressman William Jennings Gavin and two long-time allies of National Committeeman Joseph Korolenko. The veteran Congressman and Korolenko—himself a former Governor and ex-Congressman—are close friends of Roark and supported his race for Governor four years ago.

It was exactly at this point that McDaniels came through the pressroom doorway. Cotton was leaning back in his chair, looking at his note pad. Halfway up the empty room, the Associated Press teletype said, "Ding, ding, ding," and typed out a message in a brief flurry of clicking sounds. And there was McDaniels wobbling into the room, fat, rumpled and obviously drunk.

"Johnny," McDaniels said, "you're working

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late." McDaniels's smile was a joyous, drunken smile.

"Yeah," Cotton said. His voice was curt. Cotton didn't like drunkenness. It made him nervous. When he drank seriously himself, he drank in the safety of solitude. He didn't know exactly why he didn't like drunks, any more than he knew why he didn't like people putting their hands on him, why he always shrugged the hand off his shoulder even when it was a friendly hand. He recognized it as a weakness and he had tried once or twice—without success—to understand this quirk.

McDaniels tossed a stenographer's notebook onto his desk, sending an avalanche of papers cascading to the floor. He sat down heavily and fumbled with copy paper. Cotton felt himself relaxing, relieved that McDaniels was not in the mood for alcoholic soul baring. The Western Union clock above the pressroom door showed 9:29, which meant Cotton had thirty-one minutes to write four or five more brief items to complete his column, punch it into perforated tape and teletype it three hundred miles across the state to the *Tribune* newsroom before the overnight desk shut down. Plenty of time. Cotton wasted a few moments of it wondering where

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the *Capitol-Press* reporter had been doing his drinking. Probably down the hall in the suite of the Speaker of the House. Bruce Ulrich always had a bottle open.

Across the room, the UPI telephone rang. It rang four times, loud in the stillness. Two page boys, working late for some committee, walked past the open door, arguing about something. Their voices diminished down the corridor, trailing angry echoes. McDaniels started typing, an erratic clacking. Cotton inspected him, regretting his curtness. It hadn't been necessary. Mac's drunkenness was past the stage at which it would threaten the arm-around-the-shoulder, the maudlin, all-guards-down indecent exposure of the private spirit. And since the snub hadn't been necessary it had been simply rude. Cotton looked at the humped figure of McDaniels and felt penitent.

McDaniels mumbled something.

"What?"

"Said can't find my notebook."

"You threw it on the desk," Cotton said.

Mac groped among the papers, found a notebook, peered at it, put it down. "That's an old one," he said. "Full. Need to find the one I'm using now."

"Maybe it fell off," Cotton said. He got up

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and looked over McDaniels's shoulder. In the lead paragraph, Mac had misspelled the name of the committee chairman and left out the verb.

"You know what you ought to do, Mac? You need to go home and sleep it off. I'll call your desk and tell 'em you got sick and had to go home."

"Maybe so," McDaniels said.

"If you send in a story like you're going to write with all that booze in you, you're in real trouble. I'll tell 'em you got food poisoning."

McDaniels thought, his forehead wrinkled with concentration.

"Yes," he said. "Good idea." He got up carefully.

"I can tell them you said to use AP on the committee hearing," Cotton said. He said it hurriedly. Mac was peering at him, his eyes watery.

"Y'know what I'm celebrating?" McDaniels asked. He spoke slowly, forming each word gingerly, beaming at Cotton now. "I've got me a hell of a story. A real, screaming, eight-column ninety-six-point, earth-shaking bastard." He put his glasses on, slightly askew, and then took them off again and put them carefully back in the case. "Going to make the heads roll, and thrones topple, and rock

this old statehouse right down. I got it solid now and in a day or two I'll have all the loose ends, and when I break it, Johnny, you know what I'm going to do?" He waited for an answer, peering at Cotton.

"What?" Cotton said reluctantly.

"You son-of-a-bitch, I'm going to give you part of it."

"That's fine," Cotton said. "But how're you going to do that? You print in the morning and the *Tribune* is an afternoon paper."

"Got more than I can use," McDaniels said, careful with the shape of each word. "I'll give you the background the night before I bust it and you can get it out in advance for your column the next day. Make it look like you were right on top of it."

"What the hell is it?" Cotton asked. "Something about somebody big?"

"Something about stealing the taxpayers' money. Something about a big screwing for the good old taxpayer."

"That's not news," Cotton said. "Who's doing the screwing this time?"

But McDaniels wasn't listening to the question. McDaniels was looking at him, his eyes watery. And then McDaniels was saying: "Johnny, you're a good son-of-a-bitch. You know that? You know, all my life I never

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broke a really big one like this. Never did. Mostly worked on little *pissant* stuff. All my life I wanted to win the Pulitzer Prize. Wanted one of the big prizes." He put his hand on Cotton's arm. Cotton flinched, his biceps rigid. "Wanted somebody to pay attention to me. Always wanted . . ."

Cotton pulled away from the hand. "Go home," he said. "Take a cab."

"Yes," McDaniels said. "O.K." He paused at the door. "You're a good son-of-a-bitch, Cotton."

From McDaniels's retreating figure Cotton glanced upward at the white face of the clock. It was an act of professional habit, and now of nervous release. It was twenty-two minutes before ten, still plenty of time. He dialed the *Capitol-Press* city-desk number on McDaniels's phone, gave Mac's excuse to a harassed-sounding copy editor, and went back to his own typewriter. He spent perhaps a minute wondering about Mac's story—about whom he had caught stealing. Then he put the question aside and typed rapidly.

A primary-election showdown
between the young Governor and Gene
Clark would split the state's
Democratic party machinery

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approximately down the middle. If Roark runs and loses, the losing effort would almost certainly cost the Korolenko-Gavin bloc its balance of power in party decision making.

Backers of Senator Clark have made obvious inroads into that balance in the past three years. The election last year of George Bryce as district attorney of the Third Judicial District illustrated how Clark's forces have extended their grip.

Bryce is a former partner in Clark's law firm. He won the Democratic nomination despite the bitter animosity of the Gavin-Korolenko people. The election put a Clark man in control of law enforcement in the state's most politically sensitive area—the district which includes the state capital.

Whether or not . . .

Cotton stopped typing, aware of movement to his left.

A tall, dark-haired man in a blue topcoat was poking through the litter of papers on McDaniels's desk.

"Looking for something?"