

PRAISE for *The BLUE CIRCUS*

"Chicago speak is such a great language and in *The Blue Circus*, Dennis Foley, a native Southsider, brings that language, the city itself and its rambunctious characters to life. Neighborhood streets, dive bars, and shady city deals waltz across the page, spread out like a deck of cards. But Foley holds some of the cards back and delivers them in a timely fashion, causing the reader to shake his head and marvel. This is a wonderful story about the City that Works, or doesn't work, and a family trying to push forward to survive, as only an insider can tell."

—*Reviewer's Bookwatch*

"This left-jab-and-a-solid-right-hook-to-the-jaw of a novel packs as powerful a literary punch as I've seen in years. That "stormy, husky, brawling" city that Sandburg described is still with us, and it comes surging to life in these pages. *The Blue Circus* is Southside Chicago down to the very marrow of its bones."

—Jack Lynch, former English Department Chair,
St. Laurence High School

"Part family saga, part murder mystery, part city worker tell all. Foley nails it."

—City Worker No. 1

"Make no bones about it, Foley, a former Streets and San worker, paints characters who could be twins with guys I have seen on the job site. Foley knows the city, he knows the city characters, and he knows how to write. Like one of the places in his earlier book, *The Streets and San Man's Guide to Chicago Eats*, I give Foley's book Four out of Four Forks.

—City Worker No. 2

Also by Dennis Foley:

THE DRUNKARD'S SON (Side Street Press, 2012)

THE STREETS AND SAN MAN'S GUIDE TO CHICAGO EATS
(Lake Claremont Press, 2004)

The
BLUE CIRCUITS

Dennis Foley

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This is a work of fiction. All characters in this book are fictional and any similarity to actual living, breathing human beings or current or past Chicago city workers is coincidental.

For my father, Jack Foley, who died far too young, and for my grandfather, Michael Roche, who said little but did much.

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The

BLUE CIRCLES

Part One

The Eleven

“The subject of criminal rehabilitation was debated recently in City Hall. It’s an appropriate place for this kind of discussion because the city has always employed so many ex-cons and future cons.”

–Mike Royko

1. Danny Lonigan's Interview

A HERD OF CITY WORKER WANNABES dressed in jeans, flannel shirts, and work boots huddled on or around chairs and benches inside a Streets and Sanitation garage that on its best day could only be described as gray and dismal. These men awaited their opportunity to dazzle the interview panel with their knowledge of circuits, amps, and ohms in hopes of landing one of the eleven primo jobs posted for City of Chicago electricians. Ah yes, a city job—to die for. Outside, a heavy April rain beat down on the city, pelting the metallic garage roof, causing the wannabees to gaze up every now and again towards the heavens. Some found the sound soothing—Mozart keying a soft melody of sorts—while others saw it as an endless stomping of angry feet. A sliver of sunlight sliced through the few windows in the garage, supplying just enough light to compensate for the numerous burnt out bulbs overhead. Some of the hopeful read the newspaper or toyed with their phones to pass the time, while others gathered in small groups to talk about the Sox or the Cubs. It was early April, after all, the start of a new baseball season, and such chatter was certainly appropriate. And there was Danny Lonigan standing in the midst of the crew, alone and off to one side. With his long, angular frame, he looked very much at home among the other blue-collar workers. A wannabe who had just completed his interview pushed through a door near the far corner of the garage and strutted across the cement floor, followed by a secretary dressed in jeans that were far too tight.

“Daniel Lonigan,” the secretary barked. Her gravelly voice surprised Danny, reminding him of his fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Cooper, a woman who consumed cigarettes with such rapidity, her students thought smoking was her second job.

Danny stood up with a “Yo.”

The secretary smiled. “This way,” she announced and led Danny into the interview room.

Positioned at the back of this smallish room, Ted Flynn, one of Danny's high school classmates, and two other men sat behind an

eight-foot-long, fold-up table that looked better suited for a poor man's poker game than for conducting interviews. Danny eyed the paneled walls as he entered, bare but for a White Sox poster displaying the 2005 season schedule and a few restaurant menus attached to the paneling with strips of electrical tape.

"Have a seat, please," Flynn said, his beady eyes resting like tarred BBs on his face. Danny dropped onto a metal chair across from the three men and watched as the secretary squeezed into a small grade school-style desk off to the side of the room. She scribbled something on a sheet of paper.

"Okay, Danny, you already know me," Flynn said. He tossed his right arm in the direction of the other men, "But this is Dan Cullinan and this is Mark Morgan."

Danny smiled. "Nice to meet ya." Cullinan and Morgan nodded their sizeable, balding melons at the same time and stared across the table with glazed eyes.

"Okay, let's get started," Flynn said and then cleared his throat. "On this table, as you can see, Dan, there's five different tools. I need ya to point out each individual tool and identify it for us."

Danny's face went blank. This can't be the interview, Danny thought. No way. No fuckin' way. He pushed his right hand through his shock of black hair. Danny was certainly no virgin to the interview process. He had been through plenty in his thirty-seven years, the roughest of which came with the multiple, stone-faced panels he appeared in front of before he landed the job as a prosecutor with the Cook County State's Attorney's office. But tough as those interviews were—tell us your thoughts on the death penalty, Dan; could you prosecute a father who kills the man who raped his eight-year-old daughter, Dan? how would you handle things, Dan, if a family member of yours got a drunk driving ticket and was assigned to your courtroom?—he never found them confusing.

"Is this the interview or, uh, does that come later?" Danny's eyes roamed the faces of the three men, who exchanged glances but remained mute.

Flynn finally eked out a laugh and said, "Okay, let's try this thing again, huh, Dan? Just point to each tool and identify it for

us.”

Danny quickly eyeballed the tools on the table and picked up the first one. “Okay. Well, this one here . . . this is a pliers.” Danny set the tool down and immediately snagged another. “This one’s a screwdriver.”

“What kinda screwdriver?” Flynn barked.

Danny glanced at Flynn’s beady eyes for a moment, before returning his focus to the screwdriver.

“This is a Phillips screwdriver. A Phillips.”

Flynn nodded and smiled as if he were saying, “That’s it, Danny Boy. That’s the stuff. Keep going, man. You are one smart son of a bitch, and today you are demonstrating that keen intelligence of yours to the three electrical gods in this room.”

Danny set the screwdriver down and tapped the next tool on the table.

“This tool here, this is a hacksaw. Ya know, the kinda saw used for cuttin’ pipe.” Danny fingered the next tool. “This one’s a screwdriver too. But it’s a flat-head screwdriver.”

Silence fell upon the room as Danny eyed the last tool, a blue and yellow tool about five inches long and an inch wide on all four sides. Tapered ever-so-slightly at the top, a small metal head jutted out about a quarter-inch from its base. Danny twisted the tool between his fingers, studying it, before setting it down.

“I don’t know what that tool is. No idea. Never saw it before. Never used it before.”

Flynn snatched the tool and held it just inches from his face. “This is a punch tool, Danny,” he said as he shook it. “It’s for communication work, low voltage stuff. Ya know, wiring for phones, computers, routers, data—all that sorta shit. You punch down the wires with this thing. Can ya picture that?”

“Gottit,” Danny said. “Just never did any work with that before. So I never used one.”

“That’s okay, Dan,” said Flynn with a smile. “Four outta five ain’t bad.”

From her little desk, the secretary released a not-so-little belch. The four men turned their heads in unison towards her as if she were an E. F. Hutton spokesperson preparing to offer promising

investment advice. The secretary ignored their eyes and continued to mark the paper on her desk. It was only then that Danny noticed she was playing tic-tac-toe against herself.

Flynn glanced at his cohorts. “Anything else?”

Cullinan and Morgan wagged their heads. Flynn climbed to his feet. Danny joined him and as he stood, he saw a small frog tinkering around on the wooden floor near the wall behind the three men. Danny did a quick double-take but his eyes had not deceived him. The frog was still there, and Danny wondered what the hell a frog was doing hanging out in this sad excuse for an interview room, let alone anywhere in Chicago. He wondered if perhaps Ted Flynn or one of the other two electrical gods had a frog terrarium in one of their offices and forgot to close the damn thing after feeding time. Danny considered saying something, but decided against it.

“All right, Dan,” Flynn said, “thanks for comin’ down for the interview today. We’ll contact ya in about a week.”

Danny’s face was a confused knot. Flynn walked towards the door with Danny in tow, both men stopping just outside of the doorway. Flynn turned back.

“Ginette, go ahead and bring the next guy in.”

“Sure,” said the secretary, and then she wiggled herself free from her desk. Danny pawed at his chin as he waited for the secretary to walk past.

“Michael Broderick,” the secretary barked into the garage, ready to start the process all over again.

“Am I okay?” Danny whispered. He looked out into the waiting area, his forehead matted with wrinkles. “I mean, there’s alotta guys out here today.”

“You’re good to go,” Flynn said. “Don’t worry about the numbers.”

“Okay, but what about, ya know, what about the other shit—the shit that was in all the newspapers?”

Flynn sighed. “No one here cares that you got disbarred, Dan. Big fuckin’ deal.” A twisted smile claimed Flynn’s face. He nodded towards Morgan and Cullinan. “Hell, if anything, some of the guys around here might just hit ya up to do a will or a closing

for ‘em. You’ll have side jobs right off the bat.”

Danny’s face was still a wall of wrinkles. Flynn set a hand on his shoulder. “Look, talk to your brother, okay? He’ll fill ya in. Everything’s gonna be fine.” The men went mute as the secretary led the next wannabe past them into the interview room.

2. Hat Takes in a Movie

FJIMMY “THE HAT” SCARPELLI SAT ALONE in the back row of a movie theater. A city electrician for fifteen years, Hat had long known how the system works and how to work the system. Some city workers always give a good day’s work, some never give a good day’s work, and some—like Hat—fell somewhere between. If this is news to you, then an appropriate salutation must now be made: WELCOME TO CHICAGO. Hat’s baby blue Streets and San van slept in the parking lot beside the movie theater. From his seat, Hat watched the noon matinee unfold onscreen and laughed his ass off. He loved comedies. Sure he was fond of good shoot-’em-up, action flicks, too, but comedies—that’s where Hat’s heart truly sat. The eight-inch beef sandwich in his lap was half gone. Some of the juice had leaked through the butcher’s paper and foil onto Hat’s jeans and Sox hoodie, but that didn’t faze him. Not one bit. You can always wash a pair of pants and a sweatshirt, but you don’t always get a chance to munch on a Tony’s Beef sandwich. Between chuckles, Hat continued to devour that beef. Once every few weeks or so, Hat rewarded himself for his hard work on the other days by taking in a movie, or he might go bowling or golfing. Today was one of those days. And the Ford City Cinema at Seventy-Sixth and Cicero was the perfect place to take in a flick. Pushed off near the far southwestern city boundary, there were never many eyes around this theater, and Hat liked that. A lot. He didn’t have enough fingers and toes to count the number of flicks he’d seen at Ford City over the years: *Dances With Wolves*, when he was a kid; *Good Will Hunting*, on

his top five list, and just recently he saw *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*.

Hat's cell phone, set to vibrate, went off. He wagged his head in disgust and dug into his pocket. "Dipshit," he muttered to himself when he saw the call was from his foreman, Kip Larsen. He pushed his cell back into his pocket and eyed the big screen again. A rotund actor tripped and fell while walking down a sidewalk. Hat laughed and stuffed more beef into his mouth.

3. Late Again

THOUGH THE EARLY MORNING STORM had ceased, beads of rainwater still dotted the hood of Phipps's car. An investigator with the city's Inspector General's office, he sat parked in the back of the Chicago Department of Transportation parking lot at Thirty-Fourth and Lawndale on the city's near Southwest Side. Surveillance work came easy to Phipps. He did a fair amount back when he was a cop working in the Gang Crimes Unit at Homan Square, back when he was a young buck, before he grew tired of dodging the occasional bullet and jumped ship to become an IG investigator. A file folder and a camera with a zoom lens attachment sat on the passenger seat. Phipps checked the time on his wristwatch. 12:31 p.m. Having manned his post since 8:00 a.m, he was starting to feel the effects that came with such sedentary work. Phipps stretched both legs and then rubbed his ass back and forth across the vinyl seat cushion before turning a page of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. He'd already gone through the paper three times that morning and prepared to page through it yet again when a gray Lincoln Continental entered the lot. Phipps tossed the paper to the passenger side floor, grabbed his camera, and snapped off a multitude of photos as the Continental backed into a CDOT reserved space. Jello Pellegrini, a short, portly man nearing the age of sixty, exited the car clad in polyester pants and a red, V-neck sweater. A strong easterly wind snapped the few wisps of gray hair atop Jello's head to and fro, flogging his tanned dome. Jello stood

motionless for a moment, his hands pressed onto the hood of his car, smiling as he watched a garbage truck belch clouds of black smoke into the South Side air as it rumbled down Lawndale. Once the truck disappeared around a corner, Jello entered the CDOT building. Phipps set the camera on the passenger seat and made a call on his cell.

“Talk to me,” Ed Gilbreath said. An assistant inspector general, the forty-year-old Gilbreath sat on a comfortable chair in his office.

“Jello just rolled in,” Phipps said.

Gilbreath eyed the clock on his desk. “Well, he’s twenty minutes earlier than yesterday. Maybe we should pin a medal on him.”

Phipps scratched his nose as he spoke. “I’m sure he’s late ‘cuz he had a meetin’.”

“Oh, I’m sure he had a meeting too. Important guys like him, they have all sorts of meetings.” Gilbreath stood from his chair. “How many shots did you get?”

“I dunno. Fifteen or so, I guess. I wanted to get more but he seems to be waddlin’ a little faster these days.”

“Sounds good. Did he see you?”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

A thin smile slid onto Gilbreath’s face, the brightness of his teeth matching the color of his button-down shirt. “How’d you like to make Jello dance?”

“Dance?”

“Yeah. I want you to go around to his window, that big-ass picture window of his, and take a few more shots from there. Make sure he sees you, though.”

“Sure ya want me to do that?”

“Sure, I’m sure. I want him to know we’re watching him. I want him to have to close his blinds. Piece a shit like him doesn’t deserve to have a view.”

Phipps laughed. “Gottit.”

4. Ronny Shares the News

AT LUNCH BREAK AT A CONSTRUCTION SITE in Des Plaines, a suburb twenty-five miles northwest of downtown Chicago, five electricians from Boulder Electric munched on footlong subs, their asses parked on the cement floor, their backs pressed against newly installed drywall. All five wore forest green, Boulder-issued T-shirts, jeans and Red Wing work boots. Ronny Monroe, whose belly indicated that he had inhaled far too many chocolate shakes with extra whip cream in his day, turned the page of the *Sun-Times* and read a bit.

“You see this shit on this city worker?” said Ronny. He jabbed a stubby index finger at the bridge of his glasses to keep them in place.

“Ya talkin’ ‘bout Quarters McNicholas?” one of the others said.

“Yeah.” Ronny took a big bite from his sandwich and spoke while chewing. “This is quality stuff.” Ronny stuffed more of his sandwich into his mouth. “This fuckin’ guy goes to the shitter for two years for stealin’ a boatload of money from the Tollway and now he comes out—and he gets a city job.”

“You’d probably do the same shit if ya could, Ron,” one of the others said.

“What, get a city job? I don’t live in the city, douche bag.”

“No, stuff your pockets fulla quarters if you had the chance.”

“Nope,” Ronny said as he shook his head. “Take too many damn quarters to make it worth my while.”

“Well, if ya keep readin’, you’ll see that McNicholas made it worth his while,” one of the others said. “Definitely. Took over \$200,000 in a two-year span.” The electrician laughed. “All in quarters.”

“That’s alotta quarters,” added one of the other electricians.

Ronny set his sandwich on his expansive lap and pulled the newspaper in closer to read more. Again he jabbed a finger at his glasses to keep them in place.

5. Tom Lonigan

TOM LONIGAN'S PHONE INTERCOM beeped. "Tom, your brother's here to see you," his secretary said.

"Thanks, Marie. Send him on in."

The solid oak desk that Tom sat behind was a gift from his mother, Mary Lonigan, a gift delivered eleven years ago when Tom was first elected business manager of Local 247, the largest electricians' union in the country. A thick tree of a man in his mid-forties, to say Tom was a straight shooter was akin to saying Lake Michigan had a lot of water. Like Tom, his office décor was basic and straightforward. On the wall behind his desk hung a large framed black-and-white print of the Chicago stockyards. Off to the side, framed prints of a number of great Cubs players from the past lined the wall—guys like Ernie Banks, Billy Williams, Don Kessinger, Fergie Jenkins, Ron Santo, and Ryne Sandberg—all there in a display of love and admiration that had never been returned by their hapless organization. Next year—always next year. As Tom saw it, the real next year was always just around the corner. A pair of Everlast boxing gloves, tied together with gold laces, dangled from a nail in the wall, and a thick, dented, four-foot-long Irish shillelagh rested comfortably against the bookcase beside Tom's desk. It looked like it belonged.

Tom climbed to his feet as Danny entered his office. "Good to see ya," Tom said and then shook his brother's hand. "What's shakin'?"

"Had the interview this mornin'," Danny said. He dropped into one of the two armchairs in front of Tom's desk.

"Yeah, right. I knew it was happenin' today." Tom strummed his desktop with his right hand as he sat down. "Just didn't know, uh, know what time." He flashed his teeth. "So how'd it go?"

"Went fine." Danny's eyebrows shot up. "Wasn't much of an interview, though. No questions about any prior electrical work. None. They just had me . . . well, they had me identify some tools."

Tom feigned surprise. "Really?"

"Yep."

“So how’d ya do?”

“I hit on four outta five.”

“Four outta five ain’t bad.” Tom laughed. “Was Ted there?”

“Yeah. He was the one doin’ all the talkin’.”

“Okay. Good. Glad ya got that outta the way.”

Danny surveyed the room for a moment until he saw the shillelagh. “Never knew ya had Dad’s old shillelagh in here.”

“Yeah.” Tom turned and eyed the club. “I thought it’d look good in here.” He laughed. “Besides, I figure I just about own the damn thing. Most of those dents on it came from my noggin.”

Danny grinned and dropped his eyes to the floor.

“Anything else? How’s Kate and the kids?”

“Good, good. Everyone’s good.”

“All right, then.” Tom climbed to his feet.

“Hey, Tom, am I . . . am I, ya know, for sure good on gettin’ the job? I mean there were probably about thirty other guys there today. And then I got the other shit that—”

“Hey, Dan, stop. Stop. You’re good. Don’t sweat it.” Tom pushed a hand through the gray-white hair atop his head. “Look, there’s eleven guys goin’ in, and the union has four of those slots. And you’re one of those four. So you’re in for sure. It’s cemented in stone. It’s done.”

Danny leaned forward in his chair. “Good. Good. ‘Cuz Ted said things would start up in about a week or ten days.”

“That’s right. The new guys’ll start up on the next pay period, on April 18th.”

“Okay. Good, ‘cuz . . . well, I’m headin’ back to work after I grab a quick bite, but if I’m for sure gettin’ the job, I’m gonna make this my last day, then.” Danny rubbed his forehead as he stood. “Probably take off a little early today. And then, ya know, take some days off before I start the new job. But I didn’t wanna quit if the new job wasn’t a for sure thing.”

“Gottit. But no, you’re good to go. You’re set. And take some time off. Makes perfect sense. Take it now, ‘cuz you won’t get any vacation time for about half a year once ya start with the city.” Tom cracked the knuckle on his right index finger. “Just do me a favor, though, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. What?”

“Give Stack a call to say thanks for keepin’ ya workin’. He had ya there a long while. That’s all.”

“Will do. Glad to do it.”

“Sounds good.” Tom moved towards his door. Danny followed. “I’ll talk to ya later,” Tom said and then faced his brother.

“See ya, Tom. Thanks again for everything.” Danny started to leave but stopped in the doorway. He turned, a shit-eating grin on his lips, and crouched into a boxing stance with his left hand in the lead, his right cocked and ready to fire. He slid to the left and then the right, dodging imaginary slow-motion punches. Tom laughed and dropped into a matching stance. And then both men, in perfect synchronization, bobbed and weaved and fired off three slow-motion punches at each other as Danny sang, “Hit ‘im with the left, hit ‘im with the right, punch ‘im in the gut, and watch ‘im fly outta sight.”