

# PETER AND THE WOLF

How the big bad American  
network was fought off by Uncle Knowlton  
and other senior CBC officials:  
*the inside story of the moves and machinations that  
helped keep Mr. Mansbridge here*

Wednesday, November 11, 1987, was a slow news day. At 10 p.m. Knowlton Nash, anchoring CBC-TV's *The National*, led with a story about Remembrance Day ceremonies across the country, followed by items about the lockout of printers at Montreal's *Gazette* and Daniel Ortega's visit to Washington. At 10:22, when Nash usually signs off, he solemnly faced the camera and said: "And to close *The National* on an unusual personal note, I'm really pleased to report that my fellow CBC news anchor, Peter Mansbridge, is staying with the CBC. He's been agonizing for a couple of weeks now over the offer of what was a tantalizing major CBS network anchoring job. But his sense of Canadianism and his pride in CBC news led him to reject it in spite of the extraordinary financial rewards.

"I felt it was critical for Peter to

stay with us and I'm pleased to have played a role in persuading him to do so. And starting next May, Peter will be sitting here as the principal anchor at *The National*, while I combine some anchoring with documentary projects and a new hour-long program.

"And finally," Nash concluded, his voice trembling, "if I may be really personal, Peter, thank you for staying."

With that, a remarkable three-week drama ended. Nash had given up his anchor post to help keep Mansbridge, his heir apparent, from accepting the job of co-host of a new CBS morning news show and a contract reportedly worth nearly a million dollars in salary and perks. For Nash and a small group of CBC loyalists, keeping Mansbridge in Canada had become a crusade to save the soul of the man many call "the best television journalist of his generation."

BY DAVID HAYES

important living logo.

Nash, who deliberated over making the announcement, triggered an outpouring of nationalist sentiment across the country. Judging by letters to the editor and correspondence sent to Nash and Mansbridge, Canadians saw the event in ways that reflected their own view of themselves and their country. It went something like this: Nash, a selfless, venerable father figure, murmured a catechism into the ear of Mansbridge, a troubled patriot forced to choose between God (Canada, the CBC) and the Devil (the United States). That interpretation reflects only the approximate size and shape of the story, minus distinguishing features and shadows.

The Mansbridge affair, uniquely Canadian, is about three things: the struggles of the CBC, an embattled bureaucracy with an inferiority complex and a world-class reputation; the attraction and repulsion Mansbridge experienced when faced with fame and fortune in the U.S.; and finally, it has to do with a tradition of journalism that, in the end, was worth at least a million bucks.

"Some of the reports and audience letters went too far," says Mansbridge ruefully. "They were too flaggy. This country was part of my decision but not all of it. At one point I was gone."

Mansbridge rises and walks out to the kitchen of his rambling midtown apartment to pour more coffee. Light floods the room from floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Rosedale ravine, a view that friends said could have been duplicated in an Upper West Side apartment overlooking Central Park. All he had to do was tell CBS he wanted it.

"Like everybody else, I'd read about what guys make in the States," he says when he returns. "Part of me thought it was bullshit, so I set a bottom-line figure that I thought was very high and they opened fifty per cent higher. Suddenly I realized they weren't pissing around."

Mansbridge crosses his legs and reaches for a package of Kents. His two teenaged daughters, who live in the West with their mother, have told him to quit smoking, which he managed to do but had started up again in the fall. He's a tall, rangy man with an easy smile and blue-grey eyes that soften his appearance when he's relaxed, and dissolve to smoked quartz when he's concentrating or uncomfortable or angry. Although he has forged many friendships in high places, he is considered "one of the boys."

"As much as I told myself not to make my decision based on the money, for about twenty-four hours that was all I could

think about. And then they'd call back and sweeten it. It was a little bit like holding a winning lottery ticket." Mansbridge shook his head as though he were telling a story about somebody else. "I was falling fast into the enemy camp."

Mansbridge began receiving calls from CBS in the latter part of October. It was not the first time. In 1978, he was asked to become Paris correspondent for CBS News. Mansbridge, who was covering Joe Clark, was part of a crack team made up of some of the brightest young talent in Canadian broadcast journalism—Mike Duffy, Don Murray, Mark Phillips and Larry Stout—who were excited about what was going on in Canadian politics at the time. He was approached again by CBS in 1980—at first to go to Johannesburg and then London—but declined. This time his superiors agreed to begin using him as a studio announcer and anchor for live specials. By 1985, when NBC courted him, Mansbridge was not even tempted. He was anchoring *Sunday Report*, a 10 p.m. newscast he had helped revamp, and filling in on *The National* and *The Journal*. He was also used for all news specials, everything from elections and royal visits to terrorist incidents. Everyone knew he would succeed Nash and it was quietly acknowledged that although Nash had become an effective and popular anchor, he lacked the ability to absorb and synthesize rapidly changing information while hosting live events.

In the fall of 1987, however, Mansbridge was restless. There had been few dramatic events to test his skills as a live anchor, and *Sunday Report*, although successful, had become routine. The Conservatives, meanwhile, had been chipping away at the CBC, and the resulting budget cuts and criticisms had forced the corporation to turn inward, limit initiatives, adopt a siege mentality. On top of that, his romantic life was in a bit of turmoil. Enter Howard Stringer, the dynamic president of CBS News, who was retooling operations after a period of layoffs, budget cuts and sinking ratings. Stringer's priorities were the fading *Evening News* with Dan Rather, and the morning program, which was low-rated tripe. Stringer wanted his morning show to do what a great morning show should: mix hard news with lighter items so viewers are informed without being made so depressed that they go back to bed.

Mansbridge assumed Stringer wanted him for the limited role of newsreader on the morning show. Although he wasn't interested, he wasn't against another

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Mansbridge is the antithesis of the "male model" newsreader portrayed by William Hurt in the film *Broadcast News*, a stereotype that is derisively called "hair and teeth" in the business, or what CBC's Ottawa correspondent Mike Duffy calls "a New York voice with a Wingham brain." The fact that Mansbridge simultaneously projects affability, concern and authority explains the value placed on him as Nash's successor: in addition to reminding viewers that despite the state of the world, life goes on, an anchor is often described as any network's single most

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meeting with executives of the most powerful news organization in the world, especially since CBS was providing his airfare and hotel. On Tuesday, October 27, Mansbridge met with Stringer and David Corvo, executive producer of what was soon to become *CBS This Morning*. To his surprise, what was supposed to have been a twenty-minute session lasted nearly three hours. As he critiqued the existing morning programs, Corvo took notes. Mansbridge learned that Stringer was also looking for a male anchor to pair with Kathleen Sullivan, a talented and fetching broadcaster whom, coincidentally, Mansbridge had met when both were on assignment in London in 1981 and with whom he had remained friends. Mansbridge told Stringer that he was the wrong guy for newsreader and explained that an acceptable role would include participation in—and a measure of control over—editorial decision-making and planning. After the meeting Corvo took Mansbridge to lunch. He arrived back in Toronto certain he would be offered one of the two jobs. Less than forty-eight hours later, Stringer asked Mansbridge to return to New York the following week to sit in a studio with Sullivan, "just to see how you look together."

Mansbridge, like every other Canadian broadcast journalist, could recite a list of countrymen who have successfully defected: Morley Safer, Robert MacNeil, Peter Jennings, Peter Kent and Keith Morrison. Even one of Mansbridge's former colleagues from the Ottawa bureau, Mark Phillips, is now CBS's Rome correspondent. Of course, no one had made him an offer yet, and Mansbridge, for all his self-confidence, is a pretty self-effacing guy deep down. "It was that Canadian thing," he would later say. "I couldn't believe that I was going to be offered the top job." Mansbridge, a quintessential reporter accustomed to working a network of sources, began sounding out his friends about the CBS overture.

One of the first people he talked to was Desmond Smith, his former producer at *Sunday Report* and now senior producer of *Venture*, a CBC-TV business program. Smith had spent fifteen years in the U.S., from 1958 to 1973, and worked at all three networks. He knew Stringer well enough that the news executive called him right after the Tuesday meeting to solicit his opinion of Mansbridge. Smith later told Mansbridge that Stringer had been very impressed, and had talked about a return to solid journalism at CBS News. Furthermore, Smith said, Stringer mentioned that talent would be needed for *48 Hours*, a documentary program that

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started in January, and he alluded to the potential for Mansbridge to become a backup for Dan Rather. But Smith cautioned Mansbridge that the environment in the U.S. was volatile, and Stringer's views might not be shared by the new profit-minded CBS owners. Smith believed that morning and evening network news programs as anything other than "infotainment" were going to die. Magazine programs, such as CBS's *60 Minutes* and *West 57th*, would be the only serious TV news efforts. Mansbridge, Smith said finally, might find himself "anchoring the death knell of morning news."

Later that week, Mansbridge called Mark Starowicz, executive producer of *The Journal*. Starowicz is a passionate believer in the principles of public broadcasting and the distinguished tradition of the CBC, despite its tendency toward institutional torpor. He was one of a cadre of like-minded individuals who created *The National* and *The Journal*. They call themselves the "January 11th Team," after the date in 1982 when the package was launched, and are the spiritual leaders of a new generation within the CBC.

When Mansbridge mentioned the meeting with Stringer, Starowicz said, "Play tape recorder, Peter, tell me how it went." After forty minutes, Starowicz was gravely concerned ("It was the little things, like how long the meeting lasted, the phone calls that were put off..."). Starowicz appealed to Mansbridge's sense of loyalty to the CBC, and pointed out the many indications that the morning show was dangerously flawed.

"Who's the executive producer?" Starowicz asked. When Mansbridge told him he met Corvo, he said: "Tell me about him. What are his theories?"

"I don't know," replied Mansbridge. "I started talking and he started taking notes. He kept asking me questions about the points I'd raised."

Starowicz snorted. "Did you derive consolation from that, Peter? The executive producer shouldn't be getting ideas from you, you know, five weeks from when it's going to air. This thing's gonna be a *turkey*. It's gonna be a *failure*. Let me spell that. Capital F-A-I..."

News that CBS was after Mansbridge was not yet widely known, but a red alert had been sounded among members of the January 11th Team. John Owen, who had produced *The National* during the move to 10 p.m., was head of national news. When he learned Mansbridge was going back for a studio test, he arranged to inform Bill Morgan, director of TV News and Current Affairs, who was in Australia attending his mother's funeral. Mor-

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gan, who had been one of the executives overseeing the creation of *The Journal* in 1982, was Mansbridge's official boss, responsible for contract negotiations. That weekend he shocked Mansbridge by calling him at his cabin in the Gatineau Hills.

"We don't want you to go, Peter," Morgan said from Australia. "I'm coming back early to put together a package."

"Bill, you've no obligation to do anything," Mansbridge replied uncomfortably. "They haven't offered a job yet."

It's appropriate that one of the most compelling figures in modern Canada should figure posthumously in the Mansbridge story. René Lévesque died on November 1. Mansbridge, who had just finished taping *Sunday Report*, remade the newscast for the later western broadcasts and made plans to anchor CBC's live coverage of the funeral the following Thursday. He considered cancelling his New York trip, but Stringer assured him the session would last no longer than half an hour. Two days later he sat on a stool beside Kathleen Sullivan while a pair of cameras recorded them reminiscing amiably about old times in London.

The next day, Mansbridge flew into Quebec City during a thunderstorm and found a message from Stringer waiting for him in his room at the Hilton. When he called, Stringer said, "I'm advising you that next Monday we're going to make you an offer," adding that the tapes were being shown to focus-groups on the West Coast but that he, Mansbridge, was his candidate for the co-anchor job.

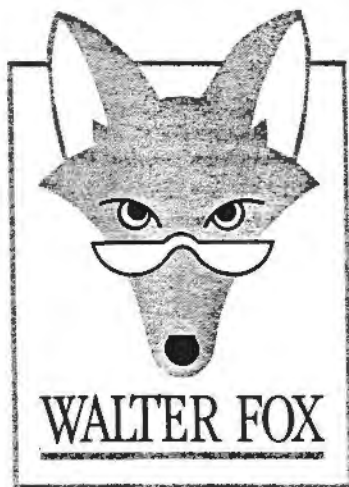
Mansbridge collapsed back on the bed with a grunt, as if it had only just occurred to him that he was an attractive, bankable property outside his motherland.

There are not many people who could earn the nickname Captain Canada and know they were being flattered. Born in England in 1948 to a member of the British civil service, Mansbridge and his family lived for several years in Malaya before moving to Ottawa in 1954. After quitting high school, Mansbridge tried to become a navy pilot but flunked out of advanced training school in Manitoba because he was spending too much time on his motorcycle and partying. Eventually he took a job as a baggage clerk for Trans Air and ended up working in Churchill, Manitoba. It was there that the personable kid with the deep voice was asked by the manager of the local CBC outlet to become an announcer on the night shift. He still remembers his first words on radio; the network line went dead and Mansbridge, summoning a memory of listening to CBC announcers as a child, said, "One

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windows—Owen, Starowicz and Stewart on a pair of sofas, Mansbridge, looking like he'd not slept in days, hunched miserably in a Boston rocker. "Nobody understands how hard this is on me," he told them. "It's tearing me apart."

The Popcorn Summit is destined to become a CBC legend. Throughout the evening, there were phone calls from friends and acquaintances—the mechanical burbling of Mansbridge's answering machine was haunting. "People in the information service think of themselves as servants of the Crown," Starowicz reminded him. "It's like the Mounties; it's a higher calling. We've created an ethos, and you're more central to it than you apparently know. There are people who hope to be Peter Mansbridge one day."

When Starowicz was on a jag his speech took on a mantralike quality and he drew so furiously on his pipe that embers flared up from the bowl like dragon's breath. "Think long and hard, Peter," he said. "You have to make a decision, and in doing so you affect all of us."

"Think of the message you'll send throughout 'the service,'" added Owen. "It's still okay to go."

Mansbridge repeated his rationale for leaving: a fresh challenge, the opportunity to join a frontline news organization, the financial security. Then Stewart, who had remained quiet, said he had thought American networks offered unlimited opportunities as well, but they didn't. CBC's commitment to news and current affairs was far greater. He would have incomparably more influence in Canada and help define an entire generation. Besides, Mansbridge's salary was about \$150,000 already and efforts were under way to improve it. The difference between the CBS deal and his present circumstances was the difference between comfortably well-off and filthy rich.

"I think you owe the CBC one last crack," Stewart concluded. "Something's going on. I've never seen anything like it at CBC. It's a real compliment that people are willing to fight this way for you. Give us twenty-four hours."

A subtext through all this was the possibility that Mansbridge might become anchor of *The National*. It was always alluded to delicately, the way adults discuss whether their parents need to enter a seniors' home. It was a job Mansbridge wanted, the only logical promotion available. But Knowlton Nash, at 60, was obviously happy, performed well, and was as healthy as a horse. After more than three decades as a foreign correspondent, senior executive and, finally, anchorman, Nash had earned the right to set his own


agenda. He had discussed an orderly transition with Owen—probably within two years—but there had never been a pressing reason to accelerate the process. Besides, Nash loves his role as Mister CBC, and takes great delight in personally responding to his mail and giving speeches in communities across the nation. Although he is a bureaucratic warrior of some renown, a master at jerry-building compromise solutions, Nash presents an image of benign, paternal seniority. His nickname, intended to be affectionate or mocking depending upon the speaker, is Uncle Knowltie.

Nash is, above all, an unrepentant CBC loyalist—he had been a key member of the January 11th Team. Over the past two weeks he had discussed with Owen whether there was anything he could do to influence Mansbridge, including stepping down as anchor. His only concern was that so radical a gesture be meaningful; would Mansbridge accept?

At noon on Tuesday, November 10, Nash met Owen, Starowicz and Tony Burman for lunch at Bangkok Garden. Burman, senior documentary producer with *The Journal*, had been executive producer of *The National* in 1982 and had worked closely with Nash. Burman had kept abreast of the Mansbridge developments, and agreed that everything possible had to be done to convince him to stay. After Owen and Starowicz summarized the events of the night before, everyone agreed Mansbridge was wavering. How significant was Mansbridge's departure to "the service," Nash wanted to know. Everyone felt the effect would be devastating. Nash then asked whether it was time to pass the torch, whether everyone believed that Mansbridge might stay? In turn, Owen, Starowicz and Burman said, Yes, it might be the key.

Several hours later, after conferring with his wife, CBC producer Lorraine Thomson, Nash told Owen and Morgan that he would offer to step down. For nearly four panicky hours after that, Nash tried to locate Mansbridge, leaving messages all over the city. He found him at Arthur Gelgoot's office at 8:30 that night, and a midnight meeting was set up at Nash's apartment.

Afterward, many of the central figures would look back with amusement at the way events unfolded. It had been like a series of screenwriters' inventions to build suspense and prolong the climax. There had been booze at The Popcorn Summit, so perhaps an alternative refreshment should characterize The Midnight Mass. Nash, so virtuous he rarely drinks, finally meets the talented young hero, who has lost eighteen pounds and looks like Adam, forced to choose between celibacy and a



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plump red apple. Nash poured Mansbridge a wine goblet of chocolate milk and one for himself. After a conversation that Nash later described as "naked, without defences, just two souls together," he said to Mansbridge, "I think what I want to do is step aside and let you do my role." Once Mansbridge had left, Nash called Owen. "I still don't know what he's going to do," he said, "but it was an extraordinary time. He said it meant a lot to him."

A plot twist remained. That morning, as Owen returned from a jog, he found a message from Brian Stewart on his answering machine. Stewart's voice was tight: "John, I've got to tell you. Stringer's flying up." Owen's spirits sagged. What's left? he thought. Do I trot out Pierre Juneau? The Governor General? Maybe I can arrange to have drugs planted on Stringer at the border.

Mansbridge arrived at Gelgoot's office, on Bay Street, at 10:45. Stringer was sitting on a sofa, and another man, an agent representing Mansbridge in New York, sat quietly in a chair. Complicating everything was the fact that Mansbridge liked the engaging Stringer immensely. Stringer began to make his final pitch.

"He was brilliant," says Gelgoot. "I would think, for ninety-nine out of 100 people, he would have been irresistible. After all, he'd gone through an enormous number of tapes and decided Peter was a special talent. He kept saying: 'I've seen hundreds that don't have it. They may be good, but they haven't got it.' Whatever that is, a chemistry, a way of capturing the imagination of your audience, is what Stringer saw in Mansbridge.

"The amount of money involved for CBS was staggering. If Peter raised the basis points (of *CBS This Morning*), not only does the network rate card go up but all your affiliates love you again because they've got a bigger audience to sell peanut butter to at 7:30 in the morning. That's why the starting point for their negotiations was such a major piece of money. As Canadians, we hate to say, Gosh, golly, is this really what's happening? But that's really what's happening.

"He talked about the possibility of opening with a rock star, although he missed on that. George Shultz would have been more like it. He also said, 'Consider the fact that within a month or two of coming to the United States your face will be on the cover of every major magazine as the new star,' although that wasn't necessarily very attractive to Peter either.

"The pressure never seemed to let up," Gelgoot says in wonderment. "It was incessant. It was irresistible. Here was one of the major players in world broadcast-

ing sitting in Toronto and offering the ranch. Gosh. Golly."

Finally, Mansbridge began to speak, eloquently and with great dignity, about the nature of public broadcasting in Canada, how important it was to him, and how he believed he had a significant contribution to make. In summary, he told Stringer: "I'm sorry. I can't do it." With that everyone shook hands, and Stringer took a cab to the airport.

Half an hour later, Mansbridge and Gelgoot arrived at Bill Morgan's office. Morgan, his number 2 man, Don Richardson, and Owen were nervously expecting to hear that a battle-fatigued Mansbridge had succumbed to the last person to present him with a forceful argument. When he walked in, Mansbridge avoided eye contact and began pacing around the room, smoking and mumbling something about "the toughest decision of my life." Finally he said, "Well, I've just turned down what is probably the best offer ever made to a Canadian television journalist."

Upon reflection, no one comes out of the Mansbridge affair badly. Nash, who will continue to anchor *The National* on Friday nights and will take over an expanded *Saturday Report*, will also work on documentaries for *The Journal*. His profile will go undiminished and the salary and benefits package he's received as anchor of *The National* is unlikely to change. Mansbridge, who will probably leave many of the Mister CBC duties to Nash, has a long-term contract that provides something in the neighborhood of \$250,000 annually, as well as benefits and a guaranteed senior role in the proposed all-news network. Howard Stringer's pride may have been damaged by Mansbridge's rejection, but he can take solace in the fact that U.S. critics say *CBS This Morning* with Sullivan and Harry Smith, an American, is a vast improvement over previous shows.

There remains speculation about Mansbridge. Some wonder whether a man of his talent and ambition, turning 40 in July, will grow dissatisfied with the top job in Canadian broadcasting and have nowhere else to go. "He's profoundly Canadian, I'm sure," says Desmond Smith, "but he's also one of the world's great journalists. In the tradition of Morrow. In the same class as Cronkite, Huntley or Koppel. Someday, Peter Mansbridge will have to play on that broader playing field." Sitting in his Rosedale apartment, Mansbridge accepts the notion with a hoot and a flat palm against his forehead. "How could I even think about that after what I went through?" he says. "I'd have to sneak across the border at midnight, leaving a note behind." ■

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