

Launch of a News Story

April 15, 1972

The remnants of last night's storm dribble down the window pane in a slithering path. Jarred Strauss shifts his weight in the office chair and focuses on a single rivulet as it drips in descent. The intensity of his observation leaves everything beyond the glass an unrecognizable mass. His view is not borne of concentration, but the opposite - distraction. The attempt to avoid the inevitable confrontation with his boss is pointless. It's an unfinished disagreement that surged into an argument before a phone call interrupted.

He can hear the receiver click upon returning to its cradle and the subsequent creak of floorboards behind him. Each step is measured in a shuffled gait that increases his dread.

"I don't care! We need to run with it," Ellis barks. The man resumes the discussion with a level of conviction undeterred by his phone conversation or his seventy-eight years.

The two men had been preparing the set-up for the Berkshire Banner. They focus their efforts every Saturday morning on the task of sorting through stories and allocating precious space, fitting in ads, choosing headlines, and editing articles for the weekly paper that covers Williamstown, Massachusetts and the mountainous northwest corner of the state every Sunday. Once the

Launch of a News Story

decisions are finalized the rest of the day is consumed by constructing templates for the press.

Jarred swivels in his chair to face Ellis. The reddened cheeks and scowl that confront him broadcast the rising temper of the Banner's owner and editor. He hasn't seen him this angry before, yet he feels compelled to press the point and challenge his superior, the only one above him at the small regional paper.

"But Ellis," he appeals, "we'll look like a check-out counter tabloid. Is that what your grandfather would've done when he was the editor?"

Jarred stares at Ellis, wary that not making eye contact would show deference and further tip the scales against him. The nearly five decades difference in their ages and the distinction between their titles have already placed him at a disadvantage. The candor he wields surprises him, especially invoking Ellis's grandfather, the legendary founder of The Banner.

Ellis remains still in defiance. His silence sucks life from the room. Except for the ticking of a stoic grandfather's clock that's been a stalwart sentinel in the office, and the rapid beat of his heart fueled by fear and adrenaline; Jarred hears and feels nothing. He feigns confidence by casually placing his ceramic mug down on the table without his sight leaving the older man.

Launch of a News Story

Jarred nearly misses his mark and the mug balances unsteadily at the edge of the sturdy table, the same table that's sat unmoved, like most of the furniture in the room, for nearly half a century. Not more than five seconds have passed without words, but the pause was enough to erode his shallow resolve and expose his timidity. He surrenders by looking away from his boss, down past his mug, at the thin, wavy veins of the oak wood. It's the first time he's examined the detailed grain since he began working at the paper a handful of years ago. The position became available soon after college graduation. He returned to his hometown to care for his mom once lung cancer made her a widow. That seems so long ago at this moment. He slowly raises his head, like a white flag, and peers at the wrinkled face of his mentor.

"Don't bring up my grandfather's legacy Jarred," he grumbles. "That's a poorly played card. I don't ever want to hear that again."

"Okay. Maybe that was out-of-bounds. I'm sorry."

Ellis nods his head imperceptibly.

"But Ellis, I still think we can present the story by just stating that she was killed in the crash without saying exactly *how* she died."

"The public has a right to know," Ellis counters. The elderly man's glare pinches his furry eyebrows together, giving

Launch of a News Story

the appearance of a long gray caterpillar resting beneath the creases of his forehead.

"I get it Ellis. It's a tragedy, there's no question about that. But, with everything else going on, are the grotesque details necessary for the story? Don't you think people are tired of seeing all the gruesome footage from Viet Nam on their TV screens every night?" He catches his breath before continuing in exasperation, "Give them a break and spare the particulars!"

Ellis lurches forward. "Listen Jarred, maybe I didn't go to some fancy journalism school like you, but I do know that a big part of a good news story is how it impacts the audience. Besides, in this small town, people will hear about it sooner or later anyway."

"Really," Jarred scoffs, "you truly think people need to know that the little girl was killed last night when she was thrown from the car and spiked on the branch of a pine tree next to the road, still in her car seat? Is that our responsibility?" he sputters. "Oh, and I wouldn't call UMass Amherst a fancy journalism school either."

The young reporter turns his back to the editor and looks through the narrow streaks of water coating the window. A bright yellow umbrella magnetizes his vision. Everything else in the view seems blurry and gray. The umbrella shields a woman in her twenties and a girl of about five. They huddle under the

Launch of a News Story

protection as they trudge along the sidewalk in the morning drizzle. The rain is unforgiving, and so it seems, is his boss.

"That's right young man! Details matter to a story. I learned that years ago. Practical experience as an apprentice right from high school. Now that I think about it, *impaled* would be the better descriptor." Ellis has reached a crescendo, his voice nearing a scream. "*She was launched from the car like a rocket and impaled on the tree branch.*"

Jarred watches the two females leave his sight and wishes he could vanish as well. He inhales deeply, preferring to tune out Ellis, while imagining the ability to quit work and pursue his dream of writing a novel.

Ellis's heavy, labored breathing is a rude reminder of the storm inside the room. The shattering of his daydream disposes of caution and Jarred delivers a vigorous return. He'll express himself, and if he loses his job, so be it. Maybe he'll have time to write his novel after all.

"Jesus Christ! How about respecting her family's privacy and their feelings Ellis?"

"What family? For Chrissakes, her parents were killed in the crash too. That's the point, don't you see?" He slams his papers on the nearby desk. "And, it's all because of a drunk driver!"

Launch of a News Story

"Is that it? Just because Sam Chalke said he smelled alcohol? Bullshit!" Jarred pivots back to his desk, yanks his notes from the typewriter, crumples them up and tosses them into the trash can next to his desk. "We don't know for sure what caused the crash. Maybe the storm had something to do with it. The driver of the other car died too, remember? On the way to the hospital before Sam or anyone could get a word out of him."

Ellis parries, "But one of the cops found some broken wine bottles in the guy's car."

The men have drawn closer to each other with every sentence. As the distance between the pair narrows, the philosophical gap separating them widens. They had been drifting apart incrementally, debate by debate, for the last couple of months and the weight of this issue will likely jeopardize their working relationship. That prospect is not lost on either of them.

"It's a little too convenient to push Kirkland's campaign pledge to get tough on crime, notably drunk drivers, don't you think?"

"That's a load of crap!" Ellis waves a handful of papers in a sweeping arc as he responds to his colleague. "Sam told me it was the worst thing he's seen in all the time he's been county sheriff."

Launch of a News Story

"That's terrible, but it doesn't make the actual way she died any more newsworthy!"

Ellis stands erect like a statue, his passive form nonetheless oozing aggression. Moving only his lips, he poses a taunting question in a dry delivery. "How'd you like to be the unlucky son of a bitch that had to pull her off the branch?"

Jarred imagines the paper's audience. Except for the people here in town the population is mostly rural, with houses sprinkled here and there throughout the region. It's largely a middle and lower middle-class area with little transiency and an increasing median age. Not much changes in Williamstown but the seasons of the year. The specifics of the issue are not important, or appropriate, for review at the breakfast table. Armed with that contention, he fights back with a stinging salvo, "Ellis, you're prostituting the paper."

The older man's temporal artery is bulging despite his vain attempt to control the anger brought on by the senseless death of four people. A fear that his grip at the helm of the paper was shrinking like his frail, aged body exacerbates his plight. Perhaps time is gaining on him, but he sees no reason to acquiesce to his protégé now, especially in the wake of Jarred's insolence.

There's a break in the duel, as the editor again opts to deflect the reporter's verbal shots with silence. He lifts a

Launch of a News Story

Styrofoam cup to his pursed lips and nonchalantly sips the tepid black coffee. Finally, he gently places the cup alongside the pot without taking his eyes from the assistant, reaches inside a shirt pocket, retrieves a pair of eyeglasses, and sets them atop his nose. He straightens himself up and calmly reiterates his position.

"I'll try to forget you said that Jarred," he offers. "But don't you ever forget this," he raises his long, crooked index finger and directs it at his adversary. "No governor has ever come from this county, and what's good for Kirkland is good for the county, and what's good for the county is good for The Banner, and," he hesitates like an experienced, disciplined marksman patiently reloading, "what's good for The Banner is good for *you*."

The exchange is halted by unexpected movement behind Ellis. A little boy, a toddler, suddenly appears in the doorway, wandering alone in the cramped foyer of the building. Jarred escapes surrendering to Ellis by motioning to the child.

Before the boy can react, a man old enough to be the tot's grandfather, appears from behind the wall separating the entryway and the main office, scoops him up and hauls him off in the direction of the news counter.

The unusual sight of a child in the newsroom also distracts Ellis. Except for the occasional field trip from a local grade

Launch of a News Story

school, kids are rarely seen in the room. It's generally off limits to even the paper delivery boys. Both men, perhaps to avoid continuing a skirmish that could lead to unwanted emotional casualties, walk over and peek around the corner.

The child clings to the stooped figure of his elder companion, a nondescript man in his mid to late sixties, talking to Mitch Blennan. Mitch is the jack-of-all trades general receptionist, head of information, classifieds and the obituaries, and the only other full-time employee of the paper. Judging from Mitch's downcast eyes, he's not receiving information for a used car ad or a yard sale. Jarred's assumption is bleak; the man's wife probably passed away.

Neither newspaperman recognizes the visitors. There are only 8,000 people in the town, including the students of Williams College, but they haven't seen the two of them before.

Mitch is a veteran, second only to Ellis in experience at The Banner. Jarred has often wondered how Mitch can gather the bits and pieces of someone's life, no matter how scrambled their story or the circumstances of their death; and produce an obituary with coherence and respect.

The boy slowly turns in the direction of Jarred and Ellis and gazes up at them. His pallid face reveals a weary and somber expression. Red, swollen eyes offer a contrast in color. A thumb is tucked into the corner of his mouth. Dried trails of tears

Launch of a News Story

stand out against dirty cheeks. Snot trickles from a leaky nostril. His scruffy brown hair is damp from the rain. The clothes are askew and mismatched, like they were put on in the dark or wrestled onto him by someone without experience dressing a young child.

The man turns away from Mitch, grabs the boy's tiny hand in his and lumbers toward the door. He hesitates to courteously nod his head toward the men as he exits the building.

Mitch exhales an extended, sympathetic sigh. The mysterious couple and Mitch's reaction combine to lure both men to the counter.

"What was that all about?"

"What a shame," Mitch mumbles as he collects his notes and heads to his desk.

"His wife?" Jarred asks.

Mitch stops and replies with a barely noticeable sway of his head side to side.

"Death is never easy on anyone," Ellis adds.

"No, I suppose not," Mitch responds. "And it's never fair either, especially for that little guy." Mitch drops his notebook on the desk, plunks himself in his chair, and looks up blankly at his colleagues. "Not when a drunk driver kills both your parents and your twin sister."

Launch of a News Story

Mitch breaks the ensuing silence by informing his stunned colleagues that the boy was spared when he had to stay with his grandparents last night because of his wheezing and coughing. He twists in the direction of his typewriter as soon as the last word passes his lips and before either of his co-workers can spot his watery eyes.

There's no need to look at Ellis. Jarred accepts defeat, rightly sensing the man he was just arguing with about the specifics of the tragedy is sporting an, *I told you so*, expression. Nothing more needs to be said. The victor departs without further words as a silent exclamation point to the issue's resolution.

The next morning, The Berkshire Banner will announce the arrival of April 16, 1972 with a headline of the dreadful accident that claimed the lives of three innocent local people, including a little girl who was catapulted from the car and skewered by a tree branch. Beneath the photograph of the gnarled metal taken by a free-lancer at the paper, are two smaller pictures, one of the fourth victim, the alleged, out-of-town drunk-driver being carted away by an ambulance crew; the other of a tiny boy standing alone in the glow of a lamp on the rain-draped porch of his grandparent's home. Despite the dim lighting one can easily detect a haunting expression of vulnerability and distress.

Launch of a News Story

The canned feed from the Associated Press, a prepared "background" story of the early morning blastoff of Apollo 16 on a manned mission to the moon, was not viewed as important as the deadly collision. It was relegated to appear beneath the fold of the front page of the paper. Every other story in the paper, from the pictures of the auxiliary rummage sale at the local firehouse and the promotion of the upcoming high school musical, to the feel-good article of the 60th wedding anniversary of a joyous Williamstown couple, was squeezed in print space and swallowed up by the emotions of the depressing report of the tragic crash that launched a little girl to her death, and the hopeful launch of the spacecraft.