

MAKING HEADLINES

June 5, 1968

Bates, you ready? Tom McBride crooked the telephone on his shoulder, waiting on Hank Bates at the rewrite desk of the *Tribune*. As he wiped raindrops from his brow, he caught the eye of the night nurse who tapped a pencil on a crossword puzzle at the counter of Green County Hospital's emergency room. Bates?

Mac, you better have a fatality. We're up against that midnight deadline. The foreman is itching to run the presses.

McBride scanned his scribbled notes. Like the police scanner reported, a motorcycle accident. Cycle skidded on wet blacktop on the ridge of Route 50. A fatal—like that sports car crash last week.

Any I.D.?

Police aren't saying. Looking for next of kin.

Snoop around and get a name. Sweet talk an ER nurse. We'll bump the Vietnam War to an inside news page for a change.

McBride hung up the receiver as an ambulance siren pierced the rain outside.

At his right the nurse nodded toward a chain purse stained with blood on the counter. She turned away and left through a swinging door that thump-thumped itself closed. Staring at the blood, he arched his eyebrow when he realized the purse belonged to the victim. He snapped it open and riffled inside for a driver's license or ID card. He checked his wristwatch and called the newspaper's rewrite desk again.

Bates?

Talk to me. We're pushing eleven o'clock. We need to get the story typed and the copy back to the typesetter in composing, you know.

McBride hesitated. The fatality . . . Bobbie Dee was on that motorcycle. She's dead.

The sound of Bates's typing on the Remington stopped and deadened the phone line. Was she D.O.A.?

Yeah, Bates, dead on arrival.

Oh God. Whatchya got—any more details?

Happened in a flash. The motorcycle skidded sideways and flew over the embankment.

Call back if you have anything else.

The sound of typing once again came through the telephone receiver.

McBride drove to the newspaper office. A wind-swept rain slapped his face as he crossed the parking lot. Inside the newsroom, the sound of wire service tickers filled the vacuum with overwhelming click-clacks. The night reporters had gone home.

Hank Bates stood looking through the window, his hand in a pocket jingling car keys. Beaded rain droplets squirmed down the pane, which reflected his face like a ghost. As a night editor, he assigned young reporters to routine stuff: obits, parades, city zoning board hearings. Except one evening, after a police report of a local co-ed's murder, he gave McBride an order. Go interview the girl's parents. They'll talk because they're in shock. By tomorrow, you won't be able to get close. This is a front page headline. Don't go soft on me, either.

McBride stood in the shadows after the janitor switched off the lights.

Good work tonight, Mac.

Bates swiveled his rotunda shape on his heels, facing McBride. Oh God, Mac, why did this happened? Her dancing made me feel good. No, proud. I'm headed to the La Ja but she won't be there. I feel like getting smashed, maybe talk to her spirit.

Drinking, not a good idea.

Don't worry about nothing.

Bates grabbed an umbrella. He pushed open the exit door.

McBride passed through the newsroom and into the pressroom, where rotary cylinders shook the concrete floor.

He picked out a fresh morning edition, the ink still wet. On page 1 Bates had inserted the motorcycle story below a wire service photograph of Bobby Kennedy, his thumb up after early returns from California showed he had won the state's Democratic primary for the Presidential nomination.

Against heavy rain McBride drove across town to Alton's Tavern, a favorite of lawyers and reporters. The pub got the name from the owner, a onetime U.S. Army

heavyweight boxer. At the bar he grabbed napkins to sop rain from his hair, the printers' ink fresh in his nostrils. The overhead television had the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson doing a comic sketch in which he portrayed a psychic called Carnac the Magnificent.

Hey, Mac. Don't cha love Johnny? Alton had his sleeves rolled up, displaying a U.S Army Infantry tattoo as he rinsed beer mugs in the steel sink. Ya know for real psychic action, guys go see Bobbie Dee on stage at the La-Ja. That's the place on a Tuesday night. He slid an iced mug across the bar top. What's this I heard on the police radio? A crash on the ridge road? Just then a network anchor appeared on the TV, confirming the latest vote tallies in California's primary election. Hey, we missed Johnny's damn punch line. Heck, no matter what candidate takes the nomination, our sitting-duck President might get us deeper in Vietnam. Says he wants to withdraw our troops. If someone can fix boxing – and I should know – you'd guess a President could fix a war.

Beer foam flowed over the edge of McBride's glass mug and smeared the ink of the newspaper.

He wanted to tell Alton of the tragic news but could not say right away. He knew of Bobbie Dee's photogenic dancing tease. When the stage lights dimmed, all the guys' faces – bankers, construction workers, and semi truckers – reflected white and blue strobe lights. Each waited on her entrance from behind the thin curtain. They relished the seduction she could conjure using a new experimental device that projected images on a pull-down screen.

Drawn by the flash dancer's popularity, McBride had written a feature article about her rise on the La Ja stage, and how the county sheriff began selling permits for parking, at thirty dollars each, and not giving tickets for double parking. The permits meant club regulars – and there were a lot – could park out front of the La-Ja. On a Tuesday night, the sedans, motorcycles, and pickups extended for two blocks downhill along Holland Avenue, almost to the rusted bridge across the Monongahela River. Outside the club, pushcart vendors had booming hotdog sales after midnight. Their hottest item: Bobbie Dee's photo fan book.

Ya' know, Mac, guys stand in the rain like tonight for a glimpse of Bobbie Dee. Alton leaned over the beer taps, his cheeks a rosy hue. A musty odor drifted from a towel he held. Except for our buddy Bates – he never has to wait. Between you, me, and that barstool there, I'm telling you, Bates is falling like a rock. Like they're gonna run off together. Next thing, I'll bet he buys a ring, and gets down on his knees.

McBride folded his newspaper. He shifted off the barstool and onto his feet.

Bobbie Dee dances twice a week, right Mac? You've been there, you've seen her stretch those blue-netted legs, her black curls teasing. She's soft and sultry. With that new camera she creates movie snippets that knock a customer off his chair when he least expects, and sprawling to the floor. But Hank Bates? He is in tight with her. He swears she can predict the destiny of each man in the audience.

McBride knew Bates had all he wanted in life until tonight.

Bobbie Dee adored his panda shape and his grin and black hair combed back wet amused her. He mesmerized her, too, with a gentle wit, charm, and infectious laughter. Before he met her, his cynicism infused rookies like McBride right out of j-school. He replayed the call he had made to Bates. Bobbie Dee raced on a motorcycle along blacktop wet from hours of rain. She swerved on a curve, the bike skidded toward an embankment; she went over the handlebars and flew head first into a telephone pole.

He glanced at the *Tribune* headline, *La Ja Dancer Dies*, and nudged his empty mug toward the beer tap. He wanted to tell Alton that Bobbie Dee did not reach her destination tonight, and those guys waiting at the La Ja would never see her again, and probably would avoid attending her funeral.

Overhead the televised bulletins of California's primary election again interrupted the late night show and stretched the celebrity chit-chat into early morning. The last guest sat in a sofa chair and crossed her legs as Johnny Carson amused the audience.

Say, Mac, did I ever tell you? Alton leaned in toward McBride, his thick forearms creaking the mahogany bar top. He tossed a bag of chips onto the bar. I'm the guy who discovered Bobbie Dee back when I managed the La-Ja. That film thing-a-ma-jig cost me a bundle. Heck, I gave Bates tips on stories so he'd come – she'd dance all night if he was there – but I always tore up his bar tab.

The dimness of the bar felt like an Alfred Hitchcock mystery as McBride replayed all of the voices in his mind: the young woman a week ago in the emergency room after her husband died in a sport's car crash; the tremor in her words, oh no, oh God no; and, earlier tonight, the fractured voice of Bates who had to write a story of how his own girlfriend died.

Alton pulled the beer tap. He drew a round for McBride and one for himself. He reached across to grab the newspaper off the bar. Ya' think Bates will show here tonight?

A television bulletin broke through Johnny Carson's next joke.

The TV screen showed a wide angle image of a ballroom and an empty stage inside the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. The audio carried a muffled pop-pop-pop. The camera tilted left and right awkward in movement, and swept around heads and shoulders. The scene moved from the ballroom to a back stage area when the TV cameraman wove through a pantry of pots and pans which swung from hooks. The camera came to a full stop, the lens angled down on the prone body of Bobby Kennedy. He bled from the back of his skull like he had slammed headfirst into a telephone pole.

McBride gasped and put his hand to his mouth. He backed away from the bar and hurried to the phone booth. He dropped a dime into the slot and called the La Ja club. On the other end, the bartender called out Bates's name.

A whiskey-laden slur came over the line. Rewrite desk – wha-chya got?

Bobby was shot.

What? Bobbie Dee – what?

No, Bobby Kennedy. Do you want to make over the front page?

Inaudible words emerged on the other end.

McBride let the telephone drop, ready to rip its cord from the box. He stepped from the booth and moved toward the bar. Behind the bar Alton held the *Tribune* in his thick hands. The overhead light illuminated the photograph of a smiling Kennedy, posted by Bates from the wire service before midnight: Bobby held his thumb up, signaling victory, and the heading read, Now On to Chicago.

Below the photo appeared the two-column headline of the motorcycle crash.

Alton lowered the newspaper and his eyes widened; he mouthed the name Bobbie Dee. The newspaper fell from his hands.

McBride stared at the television. The *Tonight Show* ran the credits. A TV network anchor came back on air. He repeated the breaking news of the gunman who shot Kennedy; the screen images became fuzzy, replaying the unsteady broadcast that portrayed an entourage on knees surrounding a political icon. On the screen, flashbulbs and camera lights washed over the pale face of Bobby Kennedy, blood spreading from his head wound.

McBride saw headlines but only imagined dark empty stages: Bobby Kennedy would never lead a political rally in Chicago, and Bobbie Dee would never dance again at the La Ja club.

The audio captured a chorus crying, oh no God, oh no.