

## Launch of a News Story

April 15, 1972

The persistent rain this morning is the offspring of the raucous storm that belched thunder, spit bolts of lightning, and drenched the area overnight.

Jake watches water dribble down the window pane of his office in a slithering path. He shifts his weight in the chair and focuses on a single rivulet dripping in descent with an intensity that renders everything beyond the glass an unrecognizable mass. His view is borne of an attempt to avoid a confrontation with his boss. It's an unfinished disagreement that surged into an argument before a phone call interrupted.

Jake strokes the tip of his wispy rust colored beard, the one he grew to look older, fearing that people might be reluctant to speak with a reporter appearing too young to be asking them questions.

The click of the receiver returning to its cradle, the creak of floorboards behind him, and a perfunctory cough signal the return of Ellis.

"I don't care! We need to run with it," the old man barks.

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

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weekly paper that covers Williamstown and the mountainous northwest corner of Massachusetts each Sunday. Once the decisions are finalized the rest of the day is consumed by constructing templates for the press.

Jake swivels in his chair to face the Banner's editor and owner. The reddened cheeks and scowl that confront him are ominous. Ellis clutches a handful of papers in one hand while his other grips a Styrofoam cup. Jake hasn't seen him this angry before. Yet he feels compelled to press his point.

"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?"

Jake rises from his seat and stares at Ellis. The five decades difference in their ages and the distinction between their titles already place him at a disadvantage. The candor he wields surprises him, especially invoking Ellis's grandfather, the legendary founder of The Banner.

Ellis remains still and defiant. His silence sucks life from the room. The ticking of an old grandfather's clock is the only other sound to be heard. Jake feigns confidence by casually placing his ceramic mug of tea down on the table without his sight leaving his adversary.

The mug nearly misses its mark and balances unsteadily at the edge of the sturdy table, the same table that's sat unmoved,

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like most of the furniture in the room, for nearly half a century. Jake looks away from his boss, down past his tea, at the thin, wavy veins of the table's 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. He accepted the position soon after college graduation, to temporarily return to his hometown and care for his mom once lung cancer made her a widow. The interim residence grew into long term as his mom remained mired in the misery of his father's unexpected death. Jake 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 Jake," he grumbles. "I don't ever want to hear that again."

"Okay."

Ellis shuffles over to the opposite end of the table.

Jake mutters an apology. "Maybe that was out-of-bounds. I'm sorry."

Ellis nods his head imperceptibly.

"But Ellis, we can run the story by just stating that she was killed in the crash. We don't have to report *how* she died."

"The public has a right to know," Ellis counters. The elderly man's glare pinches his furry eyebrows together, giving the appearance of a long gray caterpillar resting beneath the

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creases of his forehead. "Anyway, in this small town, people will hear about it sooner or later."

"I know. But, do we really need the gory details? People are tired of the carnage in Viet Nam on the news every night." He catches his breath. "Give them a break."

Ellis lurches forward. "Listen Jake, maybe I didn't go to some fancy journalism school like you, but I know that a big part of a good news story is how it impacts the audience."

"Really," Jake scoffs. "C'mon, 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?"

The young reporter turns his back to the editor and looks through the narrow streaks of water coating the window. A bright yellow umbrella grabs his attention. Most everything else in the view seems blurry and gray except for two figures beneath the shield, a young woman and a little girl. They huddle under the protection as they trudge along the sidewalk against the wind and the downfall. 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."

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Ellis has reached a crescendo, his voice nearing a scream. *"The force of the crash threw the little girl from the car and impaled her on a tree branch."*

Jake watches the two females leave his sight and wishes he could vanish as well. Instead, he's anchored to this small town by his mother's depth of despair. There's nothing here for him. Other than the cultural events designed for the college students at Williams, there's not much going on in the town. It's a stale social environment. Life seems to be passing him by. He tugs on the end of his beard again, 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. His daydream shattered, Jake delivers a vigorous return. He'll express himself, and if he loses his job, so be it. Maybe he'll have time to write that novel after all.

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

"What family?" The boss slams his papers on the table and edges toward Jake. "Her parents were killed in the crash too! All because of a drunk driver!"

"Is that it? Just because Sam Chalke said he smelled alcohol?" Jake pivots back to his desk, yanks his notes from the typewriter, crumples them up and tosses them into the adjacent

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trash can before stepping back in the direction of Ellis. "We don't know for sure what caused the crash. The driver of the other car died 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 several 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've been drifting apart incrementally, debate by debate, for the last couple of months and the weight of this issue may be a breaking point.

"Everything okay guys?"

It's Mitch, the jack-of-all trades general receptionist, head of information, classifieds and the obituaries, and the only other full-time employee of the paper. He pokes his head around the corner of the entry to the main office.

"Yeah, we're just working out the details of a story Mitch."

"Okay Ellis," he says, looking at both parties for assurances, before retreating to his work station.

Jake sips from his mug of tea in the interlude while Ellis fidgets with something in his pocket.

The reporter tries to alter course. "What about the Apollo mission to the moon? Remember, we have the text and pictures the

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AP wire provided in advance of tomorrow's blast-off. Or how about the IRA and British killing each other?"

"Old news on the Apollo stuff. It's the fifth trip to the moon and nothing's changed. People aren't impressed anymore. Not even me, and I've been alive since Kitty Hawk and everything in between." He folds his arms and transfers his weight from one foot to the other as he leans against the wall. "The IRA-British thing. People are more concerned with what's going on in their own backyard," Ellis sneers, "and the Ivory Tower at Williams get what they want from the New York Times." He casually dismisses Jake's transparent attempt to divert the focus of their argument. "If you want to cover wall to wall news, then go to work at a daily like the Times Union or The Republican, or," he adds sarcastically, "the Boston Globe."

Jake refuses to yield so easy. He ignores the derisive remarks and pursues his original objective of not publishing the grisly facts of the infant girl's death. "It's a little too convenient to push Kirkland's campaign pledge to get tough on crime, especially 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."

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"That doesn't make the actual way she died any more newsworthy!"

Ellis stands erect like a statue. Moving only his lips, he dryly poses a taunting question. "How'd you like to be the unlucky son of a bitch that had to pull her off the branch?"

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

The boss's temporal artery is bulging. A fear that his grip at the helm of the paper is shrinking like his frail, aged body exacerbates his plight. A growing list of doctor appointments have filled his calendar and prompted reflection of his life. He was destined to inherit his role as the third generation of the family to lead the paper and laments the absence of an heir. His wife walked out on him before bearing any children, claiming she was tired of being a mistress because he was really married to the paper. That began a dive into depression, drinking himself to sleep each night while wondering what else he could've done



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if he hadn't been born in servitude to the job. He's convinced himself the haunting habit is a self-medicated elixir for loneliness rather than what it is - a problem with alcohol. That view absolves his actions even while he blames a driver in the crash of operating under the influence. Mortality is shadowing him, his days become fewer as his tumor becomes larger, but he sees no reason to acquiesce to his protégé now. His years in newspaper have left him with many acquaintances and few friends. Here he is, tangling with the one person he's been closest to the last several years.

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

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Banner, and," he hesitates like a 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. Jake motions to the child.

Before the boy can react, a man old enough to be the boy'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 school, kids are rarely seen in the room. It's generally off limits to even the paper delivery boys. Both men 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. Judging from Mitch's downcast eyes, he's not receiving information for a used car ad or a yard sale. Jake'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 this pair before.

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Mitch is an experienced employee with the Banner. Jake respects his colleague and 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 a coherent and respectful obituary.

The boy slowly turns in the direction of Jake 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 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 leaves the counter, grabs the boy's tiny hand in his and lumbers toward the door. He pauses and nods his head toward the men as he exits the building.

Mitch exhales an extended sigh of sympathy. The mysterious visitors and Mitch's reaction 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?" Jake asks.

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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 your parents and your twin sister are killed in a car crash."

Mitch breaks the ensuing silence by informing his stunned colleagues that the boy was spared due to his wheezing and coughing. He had to stay with his grandparents last night instead of going out with his family. 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. Jake 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

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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 out-of-town allegedly 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 his expression of vulnerability and distress is readily apparent.

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 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 60<sup>th</sup> 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 and the hopeful blast-off of the spacecraft.