

**PLEASE BE AWARE THAT
THIS PLAY IS FULLY PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT**

All plays, books, music and other materials published by Heartland Plays, Inc. are fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America and all countries which the United States has reciprocal relations including, but not limited to all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, The Universal Copyright Convention and the Berne Convention. All rights to the plays and materials on our website are strictly reserved including, and without limitation, professional and amateur performance rights; motion pictures; public reading; radio and television broadcasting; audio and video recording and reproduction of any type known or yet to be invented; information storage and retrieval systems of any type known or yet to be invented; and the rights of translation into any and all languages. No individual or organization whether amateur or stock may perform this or any play published by Heartland Plays, Inc. without first obtaining advance permission from Heartland Plays, Inc. and paying the appropriate fees including Royalties and Single-Use Copyright fees. Heartland Plays, Inc. collects royalties on behalf of the Playwrights whose plays it publishes. Unauthorized copying, transcribing or reproduction of this or any play or excerpt, or storage or transmittal in any form and by any means whether known or yet to be invented, is strictly forbidden except as provided by Agreement with Heartland Plays, Inc. Any unauthorized use is a violation of copyright laws and will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

FIVE SIMPLE RULES TO REMEMBER

1. DO take advantage of the free online perusal of our plays to help you make the best choice for your particular needs or production.
2. DO enjoy the convenience of our online purchase application for performance rights and single-use copyright.
3. DO understand that this play and all plays and materials on our website are controlled by Heartland Plays, Inc. and fully protected by copyright.
4. DO NOT attempt in any way to copy, transcribe or reproduce this play by any means or perform this play or use any play or material from our website without first receiving permission from Heartland Plays, Inc. Any attempt to use this or any other work without first obtaining permission is a violation of copyright and punishable by law.
5. DO NOT rob this Author or any of the Authors we represent of their right to be paid for the use of their property. It is a crime and it is wrong!

Product Code A0532-F

A Paper
Tiger
in the Rain

by

David J. Swanson

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
REPRODUCTION WITHOUT SPECIFIC WRITTEN PERMISSION
PROHIBITED**

**Performance Rights Available Exclusively through
Heartland Plays, Inc. at heartlandplays.com
playsnow@heartlandplays.com
customer service: 406-431-7680**

Copyright © 2014 by David J. Swanson

A Paper Tiger in the Rain

by David J. Swanson

*Winner of the 2014 Mildred and Albert Panowski Playwriting Award
by the Forest Roberts Theatre at Northern Michigan University.*

5F/4M

CAST OF CHARACTERS

- NATHAN:** *m, 50. A likeable and competent Managing Editor and a 26-year veteran of the newspaper industry. Becoming Editor-in-Chief has been his dream job.*
- BEN:** *m, 23. New to the newspaper business, Ben is politically progressive and cynical toward the traditional establishment.*
- DAMON:** *m, 70. Outgoing Editor-in-Chief. An old school editor, he keeps an eye on the paper he helped build.*
- LAURA:** *f, 46. NATHAN's former love. Age has not only taken her beauty, but also some of her confidence. She is not the woman Nathan remembers.*
- CATHY:** *f, 55-70. Efficient and congenial secretary. She manages to run the office without knowing intimately how to run a newspaper.*
- AVA:** *f, 26. A former college athlete, she was hired as sports editor right out of college, willing to work for next to nothing.*
- KELLY:** *f, mid-30s. Business and State/Reg editor. She knows her job and has the respect to work in a typically male-dominated position.*
- JESS:** *f, mid-30s. Jess is the Design and Layout lead. As a laid-back graphic designer, she's responsible for the look of the paper, but not the content.*
- EDWARD:** *m, mid-40s. As Metro Editor, Edward is the heir apparent to the vacated Managing Editor position. A longtime employee of the paper, he's made this newspaper his career and the hope for his future.*

SETTING/TIME

*A Newspaper Newsroom
Present day: Autumn. Beginning on a Friday afternoon*

ETC.

A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

A Paper Tiger in the Rain is a play about waiting. It is a cautionary tale about investing months, years, entire careers into something and believing that at some indeterminate moment the payoff will come. What if the promise could not be fulfilled? What happens when that investment is crushed by the weight of unrealistic expectations or false promises? What is truly worth the wait of an entire lifetime?

Nathan Parker is a man who has been lied to his entire life. He's been lied to by his employer, by society, and most egregiously, by himself. He's been told that if he waits long enough, it will all be worth it. These lies keep him enslaved with the false hope of future happiness. Nathan Parker will either learn the value of living in the present or he will lose his life entirely.

~David J. Swanson

PREMIERE PERFORMANCE

A Paper Tiger in the Rain was first performed in the James A. Panowski Black Box Theatre at Northern Michigan University on September 30, 2014. The cast was as follows:

Cast

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Nathan</i> | Rusty Bowers |
| <i>Ben</i> | Dorsey Sprouls |
| <i>Laura</i> | Alexandra Marks |
| <i>Jess</i> | Samantha Cole |
| <i>Damon</i> | James Greene |
| <i>Edward</i> | Tom Lee |
| <i>Ava</i> | Jill Vermeulen |
| <i>Kelly</i> | Liz Trueblood |
| <i>Cathy</i> | Korinne Griffith |

Creative Team

| | |
|--|---------------------------|
| <i>Director</i> | Paul Truckey |
| <i>Dramaturg</i> | Meghan Digneit |
| <i>Production Stage Manager</i> | Coop Bicknell |
| <i>Assistant Stage Manager</i> | Abby Schneck |
| <i>Lighting Designer</i> | Victor G. Holliday |
| <i>Scenic Designer</i> | Steve McClain |
| <i>Costume Designer</i> | Allie Johnson |
| <i>Sound Designer</i> | Dan Zini |
| <i>Assistant Sound Designer</i> | Claire Alves |
| <i>Properties Master</i> | Emily Kinne |
| <i>Assistant Properties Master</i> | James Porras II |
| <i>Technical Director</i> | David Pierce |

A Paper Tiger In The Rain

by David J. Swanson

ACT I SCENE 1

SETTING: *The stage is a newspaper newsroom. Double doors center-upstage are the main doors to the newspaper and lead out of the building. A receptionist desk is just stage right of the doors where CATHY, the receptionist sits. Stage left of the main doors are several desks where the various beat editors sit. Upstage far left is a table and chairs and a long bar with a sink that forms a break area. Between the break area and the beat editor desks is a hallway which leads offstage to the rest of the offices. Stage right of CATHY's desk is a door that says "The Office of Editor-in-Chief" on the glass. This leads to the Editor-in-Chief office. Since much of the play happens in this office it is a large part of the stage. The office contains a big desk, a sideboard and bookcase running along the back wall, a window, two chairs and other office accoutrement.*

The newsroom has an old feel to it and features well-worn wooden desks and wooden doors. It is an office that, aside from the computers, has changed little in fifty years. There is a sense of the office being well cared-for, but not having seen much investment. Entropy has been staved off only with the newsroom's flurry of activity and frequent, though superficial, tidying up.

The Beacon Telegraph is on the brink of transformation. The sole daily paper serving the city of Willow Falls faces an uncertain future.

AT RISE: It is an autumn Friday evening. The scene opens on a joyful office party at the Beacon Telegraph in Willow Falls. Today is the retirement party for DAMON HALSEY, Editor-in-Chief. DAMON and CATHY talk stage left. JESS and EDWARD congregate around CATHY's desk. AVA and KELLY fill out the party near the editors' desks. NATHAN hangs out near them but isn't part of the conversation. Paper cups. Plates of cake. A few bottles of store-bought punch. The sound of several overlapping conversations fills the room- a dull murmur- as the lights come up.

EDWARD

Speech! Speech!

CATHY

Yes! Damon, you must give a speech.

DAMON

Must I? Well, I wouldn't want to disappoint such a happy gathering.

DAMON steps center stage to address the entire office.

DAMON (CONT)

I look around this room... this dirty, decrepit, broken-down newsroom...

Laughter.

EDWARD

(Above the laughter) Hey, now.

DAMON

And I see the finest friends a man could ever ask for.

A smattering of "Awww" mostly from CATHY and AVA.

AVA

We'll miss you, Damon!

DAMON

I see top notch journalists. Dedicated editors. Newsmen- Newshounds. I see men and women who have worked for me, sometimes eighteen hours a day, to get the story right. To get the words on the page just right. To publish a newspaper with integrity, honesty, and courage.

KELLY

(Jokingly) Are you talking about this newspaper?

DAMON

And before I get so sappy that you dismiss my ramblings for senility, let me say this: Thank you. Thank you for allowing me to be your Editor-in-Chief these past sixteen years. In all my time in the newspaper business, I never could have imagined that it would end like this. Retiring at the top of my profession... without Mr. Woodsen firing me first.

Laughter

DAMON (CONT)

But, not to worry. The paper is in good hands. As most of you know, in what is the worst kept secret at the company, Mr. Woodsen has chosen a new Editor-in-Chief.

The OFFICE starts giving it away. "Yeah, Nathan!" "Nathan!"

DAMON (CONT)

Yes. Okay, let's make it official. Nathan, come up here.

NATHAN has been hiding in the back of the crowd. He now moves towards DAMON.

DAMON (CONT)

I'm pleased to tell you that your new Editor-in-Chief is Nathan Parker.

Cheery applause. It is a popular choice.

NATHAN

Um... thank you.

Pause.

DAMON

Come on, man. You make your living with words. Find something to say.

NATHAN

Oh, you know... Thanks. It's great... really.

DAMON

You'll find your words, eventually. I also must say thank you for this lovely party. Cathy, is this your doing?

CATHY

You're welcome, Damon. It wasn't very diff—

NATHAN

(Awkwardly interrupting) –I'm glad that he—um, I thought about something to say. *(To Cathy)* Sorry. *(To all)* Yeah, there was a rumor going around that Mr. Woodsen was going to hire someone from outside of the company. For this job. *(Beat)* Well, I'm really glad he didn't.

Pause.

DAMON

Okay, then. Thanks... for that.

EDWARD

What about Managing Editor?

DAMON

What's that?

JESS

He wants to know who is going to replace Nathan as Managing Editor.

EDWARD

Thank you, Jess.

DAMON

Great question. Mr. Woodsen doesn't have that ready just yet. So for the time being Nathan will serve as both Editor-in-Chief and Managing Editor until such time as we can get him some help. Well, enough blabbering from me. Continue to party. Thanks again. There's more cake, I think. Nathan, it's time I showed you around the office of the Editor-in-Chief.

There is a smattering of applause, but generally the rest of the employees go back to talking amongst themselves. The central focus is broken.

DAMON leads NATHAN into the Editor-in-Chief office and closes the door. The Editor-in-Chief office is barren and has clearly been recently vacated.

NATHAN

It's a big office, but I think I can find my way around.

DAMON

Ah yes, but have you sat behind that desk? Your desk? Go ahead. Try it on for size.

NATHAN slowly and carefully sidles behind the desk, pull out the chair and sits, enjoying every moment.

NATHAN

It's a dream come true, Damon. Seriously. All of my life I've wanted to run a major newspaper. And now... it's happening. I have my paper.

DAMON

Now, where were these fine words when we were out there?

NATHAN

I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I just felt this anxiety, like I was going to jinx it, or someone was going to tell me it wasn't going to happen. Have you ever dreamed something for so long that you almost don't want it to come true because the reality can never be as good as it is in your mind? I guess I'm worried that this promotion will make those dreams go "poof" in a cloud of disillusionment.

DAMON

You're a good man, Nathan. That kind of passion will serve you well. And you'll need it for the challenge that is in front of you.

NATHAN

Oh, you're leaving the paper in a great position. I think we'll be able to continue-

DAMON

-The paper is in trouble, Nathan. (*Sits*)

NATHAN

What kind of trouble?

DAMON

The worst kind.

NATHAN

Legal trouble?

DAMON

No. Financial trouble.

NATHAN

I see.

DAMON

You've no doubt heard of this already.

NATHAN

I've heard rumors, but I must say I didn't pay them much attention. I guess I just discounted them since our circulation is still doing well.

DAMON

Look at the numbers. We've been pulling every trick we know to keep them up. We've even started counting the papers we give away to schools.

NATHAN

But even considering that, we're still doing well. Better than it was five years ago.

DAMON

The problem isn't our circulation. It's advertising. Revenue is down and the prospect for advertisers returning is bleak.

NATHAN

Oh, wow. What's Mr. Woodsen planning to do about it?

DAMON

Nathan, Mr. Woodsen owns a hundred and eighteen newspapers all across the country. He doesn't save papers. He buys and sells them, and at times, he shuts them down.

NATHAN

How could he—?

DAMON

—He closed three last month. No, my friend, this is your problem now.

NATHAN

Poof.

DAMON

My grandfather was an old sailor with the merchant marine. Big arms. Square jaw. You know what he used to say? "It's the second wave that sinks the ship." The first wave breaks your rudder or floods your engine; knocks you abeam the oncoming waves. You set things right before the next big one. It's the second wave that sinks the ship.

You've been a good Managing Editor, Nathan. We're just in some rough seas right now. When that first big wave comes, I know you'll find a way to set things right and keep the money coming in.

NATHAN

I'm not a businessman, Damon. I'm a newsman.

DAMON

If you want to sit in that chair, you'll have to be both. The business is changing. The world is changing. That's why I'm getting out. I'm too much of an old dog to learn any new tricks.

NATHAN

Come on, Damon. You could captain this ship for another twenty years.

DAMON

No. Not even close. My ship had sails and oars and was made of timber. But we live in an age of steel hulls and nuclear reactors. The next generation can lead the charge. I know it's time I got out. And when your time comes, you'll know it too. *(Pause)* Now this is a dreary conversation isn't it? I'm going to return to the party. I suggest you join me. Let tomorrow worry about itself.

NATHAN

Alright. I'll be out in a bit.

DAMON

(Rises to leave) Oh, and Nathan, before I forget... I've hired a blogger. He'll be in on Monday.

NATHAN

(Distracted) Huh? Yeah, yeah... Wait. A blogger? Why?

DAMON

No more business. Cake!

DAMON returns to party in newsroom.

NATHAN takes a moment to gaze around the room. He sits back in his chair, the moment sinking in. Satisfied he's alone, he finally celebrates. It's a stifled self-congratulatory celebration.

NATHAN

Ha-ha! Woo! Are you kidding me? Editor-in-freaking-Chief! Can you believe it?

He spins around in his chair and pounds on his desk. He looks up, reminiscing.

Oh, man. Oh, geez. Laura, Laura, Laura. Where are you now, Laura? Oh, if you could see me here. I've got my paper. *(Thinks a moment)* We did it. You were right. You were so right. I didn't even know. You believed in me. Before anyone. Before me. Editor-in-Chief! Hot damn.

Softer. His joy gives him pause.

(Now melancholy) Where are you now, Laura? Where are you now?

BLACKOUT.

In the blackout the sound of printing presses running fills the air.

ACT I
SCENE 2

AT RISE: The following Monday. The newsroom is hopping and many people have been at work for quite a while even though it is only mid-morning. NATHAN has settled into his office though he hasn't fully unpacked as seen by various cardboard boxes set around his office. CATHY works diligently at her desk. EDWARD and KELLY grab some coffee in the break area.

NATHAN sits at his desk looking at his computer monitor. He scowls and presses his intercom button.

NATHAN

(Via intercom) Cathy! Get Jess on the phone. This layout of hers isn't going to work.

CATHY

Yes, Mr. Parker. Would you rather wait until your staff meeting to talk to her?

NATHAN

I'd rather she give me a layout that didn't have ten square inches of empty space! Sorry, yeah, it can wait.

EDWARD knocks on NATHAN's door.

EDWARD

Getting settled in okay?

NATHAN

Eh. Kind of. It'd be nice if the news cycle could take a day off so I can get unpacked.

EDWARD

Ha. That'll be the day. The news waits for no man.

NATHAN

True. Hey, find out what's up with Jess. She sent me a blank ad. It's not like her.

EDWARD

Sure. I know she's got a lot on her plate-

NATHAN

-Oh, and we're getting a new blogger today.

EDWARD

A new blogger? Who?

NATHAN

I don't know. Some kid. Damon hired him.

EDWARD

Is this another one of Damon's experiments? Like Ava?

NATHAN

I guess. *(Starts)* What? You don't think Ava is working out?

EDWARD

Damon hired her to be sports editor right out of college. She'd never written for a newspaper in her life, much less edited.

NATHAN

And she's turning out okay.

EDWARD

After six months of training. I don't see what Damon saw in her, other than her legs and her smile.

NATHAN

If you tell her I said this, I'll deny it, but Ava works for less than half what we were paying Marty. And she's a hard worker. So, there's a learning curve to this job, so what? Everyone takes a little while to get settled in. How are things in Metro?

EDWARD

Ship shape.

NATHAN

Yeah?

During this conversation, BEN FLYNN enters through center door. He is dressed in skinny jeans, an ironic t-shirt and hoodie. He carries a trendy messenger bag. He is a hipster in the modern sense. CATHY is busy and doesn't notice him. At first BEN is looking at his phone and doesn't look around. Slowly he starts to take in the surroundings before finally getting CATHY's attention.

EDWARD

Though I do have one problem. They've called a last minute news conference at City Council. But all of my reporters are assigned to other things.

NATHAN

Take McHale from Sports. I'll tell Ava at my staff meeting.

EDWARD exits Editor-in-Chief office and gets coffee from break area.

BEN

(To CATHY) Good morning.

CATHY

Oh, hello. Sorry. How can I help you?

BEN

I'm Ben Flynn. I'm here to see Damon Halsey.

CATHY

Mr. Halsey?

BEN

Yes. He hired me as a blogger for your digital space.

CATHY

Mr. Halsey retired last Friday.

BEN

He what? But he—Um. I don't—

CATHY

Just a sec. *(Into intercom)* Mr. Parker. I have a...

BEN

...Ben Flynn.

CATHY

Ben Flynn here to see you. He says Mr. Halsey hired him as a...

BEN

...a blogger.

CATHY

(On intercom; unsure) A blocker.

NATHAN

Yes. Send him in.

CATHY

Through that door.

BEN

Thank you.

BEN finds his way to the Editor-in-Chief office.

NATHAN

Mr. Flynn? Please. Have a seat.

NATHAN stands, looking down at BEN.

NATHAN (*CONT*)

Mr. Halsey hired you last week?

BEN

I just learned that he retired. Is that right?

NATHAN

It is indeed. I've succeeded him as Editor-in-Chief. So you could say that this is my first day on the job as well.

BEN

(Smiles) Are you new here too?

NATHAN

Oh no, no, no. I've been at this paper for twenty-four years. What are you, twenty? Twenty-one?

BEN

I'm twenty-three.

NATHAN

Ha. I was working at the Beacon Telegraph before you were a zygote. Back then I was a simple beat writer before moving into copyediting. Eventually became an editor and then Managing Editor.

BEN

You must know the newspaper business pretty well.

NATHAN

I like to think so. What I don't know is what to do with you. I pulled your resume, but it really doesn't tell me anything.

BEN

Well, I've been blogging for four years now.

NATHAN

About what?

BEN

Whatever is of interest. Mostly city politics and building projects around town. Local stuff. Sometimes I talk about our sports teams. Sometimes, I also give dating advice.

NATHAN

Dating?

BEN

You know. Love. Sex. That kind of thing.

NATHAN

You mean like Dear Abby?

BEN

More like LoveLine.

NATHAN

God help us.

BEN

Come on. Everyone likes to read about love. Don't you? Isn't there a Mrs. Editor-in-Chief?

NATHAN

(Kindly) Yes. There was. But that was a long time ago.

BEN

(Unsure) I'm sorry. Did she...?

NATHAN

She passed away. Cancer.

BEN

Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to bring up-

NATHAN

-It's fine.

BEN

But you got your one great love. Many people go their whole lives without finding that one magic love.

NATHAN

Is that what you believe? You only get one?

BEN

Maybe it's the romantic in me.

NATHAN

You'll learn. What else do you do?

BEN

(Shifting gears) Uh...sometimes I live-blog events.

NATHAN

Live-blog?

BEN

Yeah. If there's some sort of major event on TV, I'll blog my thoughts and people can read them as they watch the show.

NATHAN

Who edits your work before you post online?

BEN

No one. It's... live.

NATHAN

Hmmm.

NATHAN isn't happy.

BEN

I'm also on Twitter. *(Pause)* I have over eleven-thousand followers.

Pause.

NATHAN

Is that a lot?

BEN

Some people might think so.

NATHAN

And how much have you made blogging and twitter...ing?

BEN

Excuse me? How much-?

NATHAN

You said you've worked for four years as a blogger-

BEN

-I said I blogged for four years. I went to school and worked at a restaurant. I made a few dollars off ads, but mostly it was a labor of love.

NATHAN

So you worked for free as a blogger. And you went to school for... journalism?

BEN

Business, actually.

NATHAN

(Laughs) Ha! So you're telling me a business major worked for free for four years?

BEN

It wasn't about the money.

NATHAN

See, Ben. And I hope you don't take offense, but this is why you bloggers aren't going to last. You have no business model. You work and you write and it disappears into the ether of the internet. It's unsustainable. Look at this paper, Ben. We've been printing for a hundred and seven years. The entire city of Willow Falls looks to us for a new first draft of history every twenty-four hours. When people open the Beacon Telegraph they know they are reading unbiased stories that have been double sourced and properly edited by professionals. The newspaper, Ben, is the gatekeeper to this city. The important fourth branch of government.

BEN

Yeah? I've read that newspapers are America's fastest shrinking industry.

NATHAN

(Snaps, bitterly) Did you read that online? *(Pause)* I'm sorry. Yes, we have had some headwinds. And I can't vouch for the entire industry, but this newspaper... This is my life's work. Everything I have I've put into this paper. This newspaper will survive and it will flourish. It has to. *(Pause)* So the question is, what do I do with you?

BEN

If you don't want my services, I can leave.

NATHAN

No. I'm going to use you. If Damon hired you as an experiment, the least I can do is honor his idea. I want you to learn journalism, Ben. I want you to see what it means to work for a proper newspaper. Now, let's see. You're used to working for a blog that you give away, so you can write for our website... which we just give away. You'll feel right at home.

BEN

Yeah. I looked at your website last night.

NATHAN

And?

BEN

Honestly? It's terrible. I've seen better websites from Geocities.

NATHAN

(To BEN, dismissively) A little more unique content from you and it'll be fine.

BEN

What is it that you think your website does for you?

NATHAN

Advertising. *(Beat)* It sells subscriptions to the real paper, of course.

BEN is astounded.

EDWARD pokes his head into the office. The others have gathered in the newsroom.

EDWARD

Staff meeting?

NATHAN

Edward. Just the man I wanted to see. This is Ben. He's the new hire I was telling you about. Ben, this is Edward Higbee, Metro Editor. He's responsible for all of our in-city coverage. Ed is a good guy who's been with this paper almost as long as I have.

EDWARD

Welcome aboard.

BEN

Hi.

BEN extends his hand to shake hands, EDWARD ignores him and takes a drink from his coffee.

NATHAN

Why don't you introduce Ben to the team? I've got an email I need to write, and then I'll be out.

EDWARD

Follow me.

BEN and EDWARD step into the newsroom. KELLY, AVA, JESS, and CATHY have gathered for the staff meeting, everyone showing up sporadically over the previous minute. It is a stand-up meeting though some sit and others lean on desks.

EDWARD *(CONT)*

Everyone, I'd like you to meet Ben. He'll be writing for the website. Damon hired him as kind of a parting gift to us all. Lucky us, right? Relax, Ben, I'm just kidding.

BEN

Got it.

EDWARD

This is Ava Johansen.

AVA

G'morning.

EDWARD

Ava leads our sports desk. She played volleyball in college and graduated with a degree in... *(He forgot)*

AVA

Media Communications.

EDWARD

Right.

AVA

Hi. I hope you like working here.

BEN

(Liking what he sees) Things are definitely looking up.

EDWARD

Jess leads our design and layout team.

JESS

Greetings.

EDWARD

Jess has been doing our layouts and design for three years or so.

JESS

It'll be four years next month.

EDWARD

Not if you keep sending Nathan layouts with empty space.

JESS

You heard about that, huh? We had some trouble with a customer's graphic. We sent it back for rework on typographical grounds. The entire ad was in Comic Sans.

BEN

Gasp!

AVA giggles.

JESS

I know, right?

EDWARD

This is our Business Editor, Kelly Shagers.

KELLY

Welcome, Ben. Nice to meet you.

EDWARD

Kelly is working double duty. She picked up State and Reg last year when Henry left. But she does a great job.

NATHAN emerges from the office and joins the conversation.

BEN

Hello. *(To Edward)* Looks like there's more than a few people doing several jobs.

NATHAN

It's how it has to work these days. When things pick up and we start making money again, we'll backfill.

EDWARD

And when is that going to be, exactly?

NATHAN

(Annoyed at EDWARD) Ed. Geez. Okay, everyone look. You may or may not be aware that the paper is running in the red right now. Damon may not have let on, but I want to be forthright about it. And yes, some of us, including me, will have to do a couple of jobs. But we're going to get through this. We're going to survive with the same high quality journalism we've been selling for over a century. This community needs the Beacon Telegraph.

BEN lets out a little laugh, which he then self-consciously converts to a small cough. There is an awkward silence before NATHAN continues.

NATHAN

Alright people. Welcome to the Nathan Parker era of the Beacon Telegraph. You'll be happy to hear that I'm not considering any major changes as Editor-in-Chief. But I'm going to need some help, so I'm going to delegate some work to you all. Kelly, I'm going to have you pick up some of the copyediting work that I used to do on the classifieds.

KELLY

Now I'm a copyeditor too?

NATHAN

For the time being, yes. And Ed, I'm going to show you how I file the budget reports. It won't do to have me file a budget to myself. So I'll pass that little chore on to you.

EDWARD

Yay! Money! Who wants a raise?

Muted laughter. It wasn't really funny.

NATHAN

Funny. Ed's a funny guy.

EDWARD

What about the obits? Who do you want to do those?

NATHAN

I'll keep the obituaries. I've been doing them long enough. I don't mind.

EDWARD

Seriously?

NATHAN

Yeah. It's nothing. I insist. Alright, I'm off to an editorial board meeting. They're going to want to meet their new chief.

NATHAN exits. The staff meeting is over. JESS exits. KELLY, EDWARD, AVA and BEN linger.

BEN

He seems to be wound a little tight.

KELLY

Yeah? Welcome to journalism. Everyone is a bit high strung. But, I suppose that keeps us hitting our deadlines.

EDWARD

You'll have to forgive him. He's all business when it comes to the newspaper.

BEN

I'm sure the stress from the new job as Editor-in-Chief has him a little edgy.

KELLY

Nah. He's always been like this. He's been the first one in and last one out for years. That's what made him such a great Managing Editor.

BEN

What's with the obits? Does the Editor-in-Chief normally do something so-

AVA

-pathetic?

KELLY

It's not pathetic. That's someone's life that's being remembered.

EDWARD

It's beneath him. He just takes the reports off the wire and compiles them. They're basically classifieds for funeral homes. This rookie blogger could do it.

BEN

Thanks?

KELLY

So, he's got a little morbid fetish. Nathan chooses to write them and we don't have to. For that, he has my thanks.

EDWARD

I always thought that the obituaries would be more interesting if they said how that person died. We're always left wondering.

KELLY

Don't you think that would be a little tacky? Obits are about celebrating life.

EDWARD

Then just give us a little hint so we can figure it out. You know, "Mr. George Deadstiff died at the age of 47. He is survived by his two daughters, a mistress, and a wife who is currently awaiting trial for murder."

KELLY

You're being obtuse.

EDWARD

Or, "Billy Numbnuts is buried at Havenrest Cemetery with the fork and toaster that killed him."

AVA

Even that wouldn't be interesting enough for me to write them.

BEN

How long has he been writing the obituaries here?

EDWARD

Oh, I'd say for a couple decades or so. Come to think of it, he volunteered to do them right after his wife died. He's done them ever since. Maybe it brings him some sort of peace.

AVA

Wait. He's a widower?

EDWARD

Oh yeah. They weren't married very long before she passed away.

AVA

Oh, that's so sad.

BEN

Yeah, he said she died of cancer. Years ago.

Pause. Everyone is impressed he knows this information.

EDWARD

Wow. He told you about that already?

BEN

We were just talking.

KELLY

Already digging up dirt on the boss. Impressive. Keep that up and you'll have a nice long career in journalism ahead of you.

EDWARD

Or an extremely short one.

AVA

You know, I've never thought about him having a wife. I just figured he was a confirmed bachelor. He's never home.

KELLY

Speaking of which, I'm never going to get home if I don't get back to work.

EDWARD

(To KELLY as she exits) See? A new guy joins the newsroom and you learn all sorts of new things. It's like touring your own city when a friend comes to visit.

KELLY exits.

EDWARD *(CONT)*

Oh hey, Ava. I need to talk to McHale. Would you mind showing Ben his workstation? He'll probably be at Kevin's old desk.

AVA

Sure.

EDWARD exits. AVA and BEN are alone.

AVA (CONT)

I know who you are.

BEN

You do?

AVA

Yes. I follow you on Twitter. Your tweets are pretty entertaining.

BEN

Do you read my blog?

AVA

Occasionally. Honestly, I'm a little surprised you're here.

BEN

How so?

AVA

I mean, it's exciting and everything to have you writing for us. But usually you're pretty... I don't know... anti-establishment.

BEN

Do you mean that I think that the old institutions are broken in this country and that I look forward to their downfall so that we can build a society without corporate greed and malfeasance?

AVA

Yep. That's what I meant by anti-establishment. You haven't been too kind to traditional media. Newspapers, network TV, talk radio.

BEN

Yeah, well they deserve my criticism and they're finally reaping what they've sown.

AVA

What do you have against this newspaper?

BEN

Nothing specifically, except that it picks and chooses what stories people need to hear and represses the stories it doesn't see as newsworthy. It presumes to be a non-biased reporting agency when really it is at the whim of advertisers and regulators who both exert their influence. And they're woefully behind the times. Have you seen your website?

AVA

I don't even remember what it looks like.

BEN

The web has been around since the eighties and still you haven't figured out that you need more than four colored boxes, a disorganized list of stories, and an animated gif to make a website.

AVA

Hey, Cathy put a lot of work into that.

BEN burst out an incredulous laugh.

BEN

Cathy? The secretary does the website? You guys are so screwed.

AVA

Then why are you working here?

BEN

Oh, I'm only here ironically.

AVA

Excuse me?

BEN

It means when something happens that you wouldn't normally expect—

AVA

—I know what ironic means. So you're here as a goof?

BEN

No, no. I take this job very seriously. You know when they implode a building? Like, when it's outlived its usefulness and they want to build something new, so they detonate a bunch of explosives and the whole thing crumbles on top of itself? That sort of thing always draws a crowd.

AVA

Just so long as you aren't the one laying the explosives.

BEN

If not me then someone will. I just want good seats for the moment it all implodes.

AVA

Well, your seat will be back through here. Follow me. While you're waiting for the show, try to do your job.

AVA leads BEN down the hallway and off.

BLACKOUT.

In the blackout the sound of printing presses running fills the air.

**ACT I
SCENE 3**

AT RISE: *Two days later. Wednesday morning. CATHY works at her desk. The rest of the staff are working either at their desks on stage or are off stage as needed.*

NATHAN is on the phone. He sits back in his chair in an appearance of relaxed and comfortable authority.

NATHAN

Uh-huh.... Uh-huh.... *(Beat)* Damon. You're still working. You should be on the golf course. *(Beat)* Oh, you are? Well, your body may be, but your mind is still in the office. Look. If it'll make you feel any better, your email still works here. So feel free to keep tabs on things. *(Beat)* Sure! You see anything amiss, you just give a shout. *(Beat)* Ha ha. Right. But Damon, you gotta give us a chance to miss you first.

BEN appears in the doorway. NATHAN sees him and waves him in. BEN enters and takes a seat across from NATHAN.

NATHAN *(CONT)*

Hey look, I gotta go. Yeah. He did. Monday. Well, tell your granddaughter it takes more than three days to see if someone is cutout for this kind of work. *(Looks BEN up and down)* I don't know. We'll see. Maybe... K.

NATHAN hangs up the phone. He's in a good mood.

NATHAN

Damon. Can you believe that guy? First week of retirement and he's already calling in and checking up. It's like, get a hobby. Right?

BEN

You wanted to see me?

NATHAN

Yes. I read your first article.

BEN

Blog post. It's not really an article.

NATHAN

I'll say it isn't. Here's what I have trouble with in your writing: I don't know whether I'm reading an editorial or a news article.

BEN

It's neither, really.

NATHAN

Or is it both?

BEN

I told you up front that I wasn't a trained journalist. What I write are blog posts. They're a little like journal entries-

NATHAN

-Let's look at what you wrote, all right?

NATHAN picks up a page from his desk.

BEN

You printed it out?

NATHAN

I like to proofread in hardcopy.

BEN

(Sotto voice) Of course you do.

NATHAN

Headline: First Day On The Job, A Postmortem. First sentence: "You could say that life at the paper has been interesting, but that would be doing it a horrible injustice." *(Looks up)* Can you tell me what's wrong with that?

BEN

I don't know. What should I have written?

NATHAN

(Stands, begins to pace) Ben. I can't tell you what to write. I can only tell you when it's fit to be published. As an editor, that is my only tool. You have to do the writing. Now, just because you're here without a journalism degree, doesn't mean that you can't learn to write like a journalist. The first thing you must ask is, am I writing an informational piece or am I writing an editorial? *(Pause)* Well? Which is this?

BEN

It's both. It's my opinion on what happened during my first week on the job.

NATHAN

Are you trying to persuade your audience? Are you trying to convince them how hard or how rewarding your job is?

BEN

Uh... no.

NATHAN

Then you're trying to inform them. So back to this first sentence. What's wrong with it?

BEN

I don't know. I thought it was a good hook.

NATHAN

It's a tease.

BEN

What?

NATHAN

It's a total tease. You're teasing the reader.

BEN

It's catchy. I'm enticing the reader to continue.

NATHAN

Tease. Tease. Tease. I have information and you don't. Nah-nah-nanah-na na. In fact, you don't actually get to any real information until paragraph three. Until then, it's a Dickensian novel at best. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

BEN

I'm trying to draw the reader in. People don't read if it's just dry information.

NATHAN

Respect the reader, Ben. You must always respect the reader and his time—especially in the digital world where who knows what will distract them next.

BEN

Do you know why people read articles?

NATHAN

I think I know a little bit more—

BEN

—online, I mean. Do you know what makes people click links?

*NATHAN begins to object, catches himself,
and shrugs him off.*

NATHAN

Oh, please. Enlighten me.

BEN

They click because they think it'll be entertaining.

NATHAN

People read to be informed.

BEN

No, they expect to be informed. They click to be entertained.

NATHAN

Maybe in blog-o-world. Not at a newspaper.

BEN

So, what do you want me to say instead?

Now it's BEN's turn to throw up his hands.

NATHAN

You may find this old fashioned, but... get to your point. State what your article is about. Up front. If you don't have the audience after that, then you don't really have anything to say.

BEN

So you want me to do the old, who, what, where, when, why thing?

NATHAN

And how.

BEN

What about this: "The first blogger in the history of the Beacon Telegraph has completed his first day on the job."?

NATHAN

Better. But so what?

BEN

So... let's all have a drink.

NATHAN

Not what I meant. Why is it news? Why is it significant?

BEN

"The first blogger in the history of the Beacon Telegraph has completed his first day on the job, ushering in a new era of digital journalism."

NATHAN

You sound like an advertisement.

BEN

Nothing wrong with a little self-promotion.

NATHAN

It's okay if it's personal. I just want to know why I want to keep reading. Can you do that, Ben?

BEN

Yeah. Fine. Whatever you want. Boss.

NATHAN

Good. Okay, go rewrite it and I think you'll have something.

BEN

(Annoyed) Yeah. Sure. *(Starts to leave)*

NATHAN

And Ben...

BEN

Yes?

NATHAN

My idea of what makes a good article may seem archaic to you, but the method is sound. It's always focused on serving the readers. We write to serve our customers. That's what they expect.

BEN nods and exits. Did he understand?

FADE TO BLACK.

ACT I
SCENE 4

AT RISE: The next day. Thursday evening.

It is late in the evening. Most people have gone home. NATHAN is in his office. CATHY stands in the doorway with a notepad.

CATHY

You've got an Editorial Board meeting tomorrow at nine, and marketing wants you to have lunch with a potential client at noon.

NATHAN

Right. Where do they want to go?

CATHY

Charlie's.

NATHAN

Charlie's. For lunch?

CATHY

That's what they said.

NATHAN

Alright. Anything else?

CATHY

Just one other thing. I noticed Damon's email account was still active. Do you want me to shut it down?

NATHAN

No. I talked to him yesterday. I don't mind him being tied in. Damon put in a lot of years here and he has a lot of good experience.

CATHY

You'd think the last thing he'd want is to be sifting through emails from this place.

NATHAN

Eh. Once it gets in your blood... You can't fight it. Besides, Woodsen probably asked him to stay on a while.

CATHY

Like an advisor?

NATHAN

Or meddler. I don't know. You know what Damon said to me the day he retired? He said he didn't think he was young enough to run the paper. He thinks he's too old to learn new tricks.

CATHY

He's seventy, after all.

NATHAN

But do you think he's right? Do you get to a certain age when you're too old to learn something new?

CATHY

My grandmother wrote a poem when she was ninety-three. It won an award and it was even published in Reader's Digest.

NATHAN

Good for her.

CATHY

Grandma never finished the eighth grade. She was illiterate for most of her life. No, it may get harder, but you're never too old to learn something new.

NATHAN

One thing's for sure. Running a newspaper sure ain't poetry. You headed out?

CATHY

Yes, I'll see you tomorrow. Goodnight.

*She moves back to her desk to gather her jacket and purse.
BEN approaches her desk.*

BEN

Hi Cathy. Nathan asked me to pull the classifieds and obituaries off the answering machine. I've got them here. *(Holds up a few sheets of paper)* Can I leave them with you?

CATHY

Actually, I was just about to head home. *(Over intercom)* Mr. Parker, Ben has some papers for you.

NATHAN

(From Editor-in-Chief office) Okay. Thanks, Cathy. Send him in. See you tomorrow.

CATHY

(She nods to BEN) Don't work too late. You'll end up like him.

She smiles; it was a kind joke.

Ben enters Editor-in-Chief office. CATHY gathers her things and exits.

NATHAN

Ben! Good, I'm glad you came by. How have you found your first week of being a journalist?

BEN

It's been good. I'm learning a lot about your business.

NATHAN

It's our business, Ben. You're in the newspaper business now.

BEN

Right. I've got the obit postings transcribed from the answering machine for you.

BEN hands him the papers.

NATHAN

I hope you don't mind pulling a little double duty. You know how things have been around here lately. It's all hands on deck.

BEN

I don't mind. It didn't take me too—

BEN stops as NATHAN stares wide-eyed at the paper. There is an awkward silence as NATHAN trembles in shock before speaking.

NATHAN

Are you sure about this? Is this correct?

BEN

Yes. I—

NATHAN

I can't believe it. I can't—. I just...

BEN

Are you all right?

NATHAN

And you're positive? It's not a joke or a—

BEN

A joke? I just—it's just from the answering machine.

NATHAN sits in his chair and stares gob smacked.

NATHAN

We need to verify this one. We need to be sure.

BEN

Which one?

NATHAN

Steven Bowen, of course.

BEN

I'm sorry.... Did you know him?

NATHAN is a bit absent minded. He's talking to BEN, but his mind is elsewhere.

NATHAN

Steven Bowen. Steven.... Hmm. Uh- no. No, I didn't know him. I mean, I'd never met him. I knew his wife, though. I know Laura.

BEN

Did you go to school with her or something? Or did she work here?

NATHAN

Wow. This...I should call her. Do you think I should?

BEN

His widow?

NATHAN

Yes.

BEN

Why? To confirm the obit?

NATHAN

Confirm the—? Ah, yes. You're right, of course. No, I shouldn't call her.

BEN

All right. I can get the funeral home number if you'd—

NATHAN

—I'm gonna call her. I'm going to. It's been twenty years. Why wait? Am I right?

BEN is confused. He says nothing. NATHAN is lost in memories.

NATHAN (CONT)

Twenty years, Ben. It seems like yesterday, or maybe like a few months ago. How did time get away from me?

BEN

It happens to the best of us, I guess.

NATHAN

So it does.

BEN

(Pause) So, who is she?

NATHAN

Laura is... was... a friend. More than a friend, she was... I don't know...

BEN

Did you two date?

NATHAN

No. No, we never dated. I thought we might... someday. But she married Steven. March sixteenth, nineteen ninety-four.

Pause. It's weird he remembers the date. NATHAN is lost in memories.

BEN isn't sure what to say when the PHONE RINGS.

BEN

I'll let you take that.

NATHAN begins to come out of his trance. He looks at phone display screen.

NATHAN

It's Damon. I should—

BEN

Yeah. I'll go. But, um... Nathan?

PHONE continues to RING.

NATHAN

Yes?

BEN

If it was me, I'd give her some time. Her husband just died. It's a lot to handle, you know?

NATHAN nods. BEN exits. NATHAN picks up the phone.

NATHAN

(On phone) Damon. I—

LIGHTS UP on DAMON located off set on the phone. He is dressed for bed but has a laptop open on his lap.

DAMON

(Urgently) –Nathan! Good, I caught you.

NATHAN

It's late. What can I do for you?

DAMON

Did you see the email from Schmidt's?

NATHAN

No, I—

DAMON

Schmidt's is pulling out. Their weeklies, circulars, full-page spreads, everything.

NATHAN

Oh, God... No, I hadn't heard that.

DAMON

They're probably going direct mail, those bastards. You really hadn't heard this?

NATHAN

I'm sorry. It's been a hell of a week.

DAMON

I've already talked to Mr. Woodsen.

NATHAN

Damon!

DAMON

I told him the market is soft and that the paper needs time to adapt to new strategies.

NATHAN

I really wish you'd talked to me first, Damon.

DAMON

Look, you've been Chief for four days. He knows this isn't your fault. It's mine. I'll own up to this. But, he doesn't want excuses, Nathan, and he doesn't care about blame. He wants action. The paper can't continue operating like this. You need new streams of revenue. If you can't find a way to replace that advertising in the next thirty days, he's going to cut your staff.

NATHAN

We're working a skeleton crew as it is. There's no way we can run a newspaper if he lays anyone else off.

DAMON

Then Willow Falls won't have a newspaper. Mr. Woodsen won't tolerate losing money like this.

NATHAN

No. I understand.

DAMON

Look. You've got a month. That's all I could get you.

NATHAN

Thank you. We'll think of something.

DAMON

I have no doubt. And Nathan.

NATHAN

Yes?

DAMON

I'm sorry. *(Beat)* I stayed too long. It's clear to me now. Change is here. It has to happen with you.

Hangs up. Blackout on DAMON. NATHAN stares at the phone for a second before hanging up. He pulls out some large LEDGER BOOKS and begins studying as:

SLOWLY FADE TO BLACK.

In the blackout the sound of printing presses running fills the air.

ACT I SCENE 5

AT RISE: The next morning, Friday. NATHAN is asleep on his desk in the same clothes as yesterday. A number of books are scattered over his desk. The door to the Editor-in-Chief office is closed. CATHY works at her desk. KELLY approaches CATHY's desk.

KELLY

Good morning, Cathy. Is he in yet?

CATHY

You know, I haven't seen him come in. *(Looks at watch)* He's usually here by now.

KELLY

Oh, he's got my Elements of Style and I need it. Do you think he'd mind if I slipped in and borrowed it back from him?

CATHY

Not at all. Knowing him, he probably forgot that he has it.

KELLY smiles and pushes the door open into the Editor-in-Chief office.

KELLY

Oh!

NATHAN starts awake like he's been shocked. he responds n that panicked, "oh crap, I overslept" tone.

NATHAN

Ah. Kelly. Hi. I'm sorry I- I must have dozed off.

KELLY

Have you... Have you been here all night?

NATHAN

(Still waking up) Uh. Yeah, I guess I have. It was a long night.

KELLY

I'm sorry to have disturbed you. Um. I was looking for my Strunk and White and I thought you might have it.

NATHAN

Uh, yeah. Here it is.

NATHAN uncovers the book from his desk and hands it to her.

KELLY

Thanks. Okay. So. I'm going to go... and leave you to your rest. I'm so sorry.

KELLY exits Editor-in-Chief office and returns to newsroom.

NATHAN

Not at all. It's a new day. Time for a new edition. The newspaper waits for no man, am I right?

KELLY has slipped out and doesn't respond. CATHY overheard and is a bit mortified.

CATHY

Kelly, I am so sorry. I had no idea.

KELLY

He's been in there all night!

CATHY

No. Really?

KELLY

He's wearing the same clothes as yesterday.

CATHY

He wouldn't be the first Editor-in-Chief to have spent the night here.

KELLY

Yeah, but usually that's when we have special coverage or a special edition or something has gone wrong in printing. But everything is... okay, isn't it?

JESS approaches.

JESS

Hey, is Bossman in?

CATHY

Yes, but give him a second.

KELLY

He spent the night here.

JESS

Why? What happened?

KELLY

Nothing that I know of.

CATHY

I'm sure he's just getting caught up on his new responsibilities.

NATHAN emerges from his office. He attempts to look put together, but is obviously a bit shaken.

NATHAN

Cathy? Oh. Hi, Jess. Cathy, can you please call a staff meeting for me?

CATHY

Sure, Nathan. For when?

NATHAN

Now. And I could use some coffee.

NATHAN returns to his office and shuts the door. CATHY sends out a quick email to the staff and then pours a cup of coffee for NATHAN.

JESS

I don't like this at all.

KELLY

It's the middle of the morning. Why's he calling a staff meeting? Everyone's working their beat.

EDWARD enters.

EDWARD

G'morning, ladies.

KELLY

Ed, do you know what's going on?

EDWARD

What do you mean?

JESS

Nathan just called a staff meeting.

EDWARD

At this hour? Must be important. Maybe it's about promotions.

KELLY

I don't think so. From the look on his face, he wasn't about to make anyone real happy.

AVA and BEN arrive just as NATHAN emerges from his office. CATHY hands him his coffee.

NATHAN

Alright, I'll make this brief. I know you all have work to do.

The STAFF settles into a circle.

NATHAN (CONT)

Last night I got a call from Damon. Now, you all know the problems that the paper's been having, financially speaking. Unfortunately, the situation is worse than I suspected. We just lost Schmidt's Grocery. They're pulling everything.

EDWARD

Everything?

KELLY

But we have more readers than we did a few years ago.

NATHAN

It has nothing to do with readership. It has everything to do with clients not believing that their advertising is working. They need to know that their investment is more than fish wrap and recycling.

EDWARD

Well, they're stupid then. There isn't a place in this city that reaches more readers than the Beacon Telegraph.

NATHAN

(Scolding) My purpose for calling this meeting was not to debate the intelligence of our advertisers. I called this meeting to tell you what Damon said. *(Pause, changing tone)* And what he said was.... if we don't replace them with someone else by the end of the month, we will be forced to start layoffs.

AVA, JESS, EDWARD, and KELLY react more or less simultaneously.

AVA

–Layoffs?

JESS

–Who?

EDWARD

–Are you kidding?

KELLY

–We're already doing multiple jobs. Who's going to do the work of those that are laid off?

NATHAN

I don't know, Kelly. I wish I could tell you how it's going to work. For now, I'm more concerned with keeping it from happening. Last night, I stayed up most of the night looking at figures and I think I have another solution. While it would be nice to pick up another advertiser, it's not likely to happen by the end of the month. However... if we could sell more papers, I think the added subscription revenue could replace the advertising that we lost.

EDWARD

How much? How much do we have to sell?

KELLY

Five percent? Ten percent?

NATHAN

Higher. Try thirty percent.

KELLY

Thirty percent?!

NATHAN

I didn't say it was going to be easy. Schmidt's was a substantial portion of our total revenue.

JESS

How can we possibly do that?

NATHAN

I don't know. And I didn't say you had to figure it out right away either. But I want everyone to be thinking of ways to move more papers. In the meantime, I need you doing your jobs better and cleaner than ever. Now, if anyone has any ideas, I'll be in my office. OK, let's get this paper out.

NATHAN returns to his office while the others converse.

KELLY

Thirty percent. Look, I've been the Business Desk Chief long enough to know that no business grows by thirty percent in a month.

EDWARD

Not without something disruptive.

JESS

Yeah, what we need is a disaster. One of those long drawn-out things.

KELLY

Oh, don't say that.

JESS

I'm not saying I want it to happen. Just that if it did happen this month it would really help us out. A natural disaster. An environmental disaster. A political disaster. Really, any kind of disaster will do.

EDWARD

How sad is this? Reduced to hoping that something horrible happens to save our own skins. What kind of business are we in, anyway?

JESS

Keep saying sensitive things like that and they're not going to let you be Managing Editor any time soon.

EDWARD

Pshh. In six months I wonder if they'll even need a Managing Editor. They may not have anything for me to edit.

EDWARD and JESS exit. KELLY returns to her desk. BEN sits at the table in the break area. AVA follows him over.

AVA

You've been awfully quiet.

BEN

I'm just... observing.

AVA

Are you enjoying this? Watching people freak out about their jobs.

BEN

I take no pleasure in other people's misfortune.

AVA

But you don't exactly feel sorry for them.

BEN

I only feel sorry for two people in this office. The first is Nathan. He's committed to this company. His whole life is to see that this paper survives. And yet he's almost unwilling to learn anything new.

AVA

And who's the other?

BEN

You.

AVA

Why on earth would you feel sorry for me?

BEN

Because I haven't had the chance to take you out to dinner and a show.

AVA

And that is such a tragic loss, isn't it?

BEN

Absolutely. Have you ever seen Proletariat Rising?

AVA

Is that a movie?

BEN

(Laughs, a bit condescendingly) Ha, no. They're a band. I discovered them a few years ago before they got huge. They're playing the Beachland this weekend and I was thinking about going. You should come with me.

AVA

And what makes you think I'd go anywhere with you?

BEN

Because you're nice to me, even though I've bagged on your employer.

AVA

Maybe I don't date coworkers.

BEN

I've seen your coworkers. I wouldn't blame you.

AVA

But you're different?

BEN

I'm glad you noticed. So pick you up at six?

The main door opens and in walks LAURA. She is a middle aged woman in conservative dress. Her eyes are sad and she clutches her purse like a security blanket.

AVA

I'll think about it.

BEN smiles.

AVA (CONT)

That doesn't mean I said yes.

BEN and AVA notice LAURA and hear the following exchange.

CATHY

(At her desk) Hello. Welcome to the Beacon Telegraph. How can I help you?

LAURA

Hi. I got an email that there was something wrong with my submission and I was to come down here to resolve it.

CATHY

Your submission? What was wrong?

LAURA

Several things, apparently.

CATHY

Interesting. Usually we handle that sort of thing over the phone. I'll call Mr. Higbee. He's our Metro Editor.

LAURA

Thank you.

CATHY

What did you say your name was?

LAURA

Um. It's Laura Bowen. B-O-W-E-N.

BEN hears this and freaks out.

BEN

(Dragging AVA aside) Are you kidding me?...

AVA

What? Do you know her?

BEN

No. I—I can't believe he did this. That's...

AVA

...who?

BEN

Excuse me.

He tiptoes past LAURA and quickly goes into the Editor-in-Chief office, shutting the door behind him.

NATHAN

Ben? What's the matter?

BEN

Why is she here?

NATHAN

Why is who here?

BEN

You know very well who.

NATHAN

(Jumps up; fear rather than excitement) Laura's here? Now?

BEN

Yes. She's talking to Cathy. She says she received an email to come down here.

NATHAN

Of course she did. I asked her to.

BEN

What happened to giving her some time?

NATHAN

You don't understand. For two decades I've dreamt of the moment that I could show her around here, show her what I've achieved. A woman respects a man who does well at his profession. What's the point of having the Editor-in Chief office if you don't get to show it off?

BEN

I don't know. To do work?

NATHAN

(Ignoring him) So, after I got the phone call from Damon I thought, hey, if I can't save this paper, I may not get another chance to do this. *(Flustered)* Okay, Mister Loveline, what do I do now?

BEN

What do you mean? You're asking me?

NATHAN

Yeah. What do I say?

BEN

I can't—

NATHAN

(Frantic) You gotta help me!

BEN

Alright, Okay. First of all, calm down. You look like you're being led to a firing squad.

NATHAN

Right. Of course. Sorry. (*Calming down*) Calm. Cool. How do I look? Is this all right?

BEN

(*Considers NATHAN's work attire*) There's no fixing this.

NATHAN

Oh, God!

BEN

It's fine, it's fine. Just be confident. Be smooth.

NATHAN

I can do that. I can be smooth.... Maybe. So she's out there, huh? Does she look all right? Is she okay?

BEN

I don't know. Yeah, she's... fine.

NATHAN

(*Still fidgeting*) Here I go. Wish me luck.

BEN

Be cool.

NATHAN

(*With a wink*) As a cucumber.

BEN

Oh, boy.

NATHAN pauses, big exhale, then opens Editor-in-Chief door to newsroom. LAURA is turned away from him.

CATHY

(*To NATHAN*) Oh, Mr. Parker. I can't get a hold of Ed. This lady says—

NATHAN

—I know, Cathy. It's okay.... (*Softly*) Hello, Laura.

LAURA turns around. They both freeze as they see each other for the first time in 20 years.

LAURA

Nathan?

A pause as he waits for her to speak.

NATHAN

I'm glad you came...here.

LAURA stands mortified.

LAURA

Nathan, I—

NATHAN

It's good to see you.

LAURA

Oh my... I...

NATHAN

Are you alright? *(Pause)* Laura?

LAURA

I shouldn't have come. This wasn't right.

NATHAN

Come into my office. Let's talk. We have a lot to catch up on.

LAURA

I shouldn't have come. I shouldn't have come!

*She panics and quickly exits through the main door.
NATHAN is gobsmacked as the newsroom looks on.*

BLACKOUT.

END ACT I

**ACT II
SCENE 2**

AT RISE: The next Monday. KELLY, JESS, AVA, BEN and EDWARD are gathered around CATHY's desk in a close circle of gossip. They speak in urgent, muted tones.

CATHY

So, he kept that flame burning for twenty years?

BEN

That's what he told me.

EDWARD

I'm shocked he didn't tell the rest of us.

BEN

He probably wanted to keep it a secret. It is a little creepy after all. I can't believe he never moved on.

EDWARD

So all those years of editing the obits. He was...what? Just waiting for news that her husband had died?

CATHY

Rather romantic, isn't it?

AVA

You must have a different definition of romance than me.

JESS

Yeah, I'm with Ava. And she didn't think it was so sweet either. She couldn't get out of here fast enough.

CATHY

I'm sure it took every ounce of courage in him to invite her down here. It must be devastating to him.

The front door opens and NATHAN walks in. He is sullen and grumpy. He speaks with his usual directness but his love for what he's doing is gone. He has been emasculated by LAURA's rejection and this has turned him harder and colder.

The STAFF go awkwardly quiet as he enters.

NATHAN stops dead, considering the gossip circle.

NATHAN

Don't you all have work to do? This paper isn't going to print itself.

NATHAN moves purposefully to his Editor-in-Chief office and closes the door behind him.

The gossip circle widens as they begin to get back to work. However the conversation isn't quite finished.

CATHY

It's a shame, really. He finally gets to be Editor-in-Chief and immediately he has to deal with finances. Now this. (*To BEN*) It must be difficult for you too, I'd imagine.

BEN

I had nothing to do with his plan to invite her here.

CATHY

Not that. I mean this company. You just got hired on and now they're talking about downsizing.

BEN

Oh. No, I'm okay. I'll do whatever. I mean, I like working here and blogging for the paper, but you aren't exactly paying me a lot. I'll go elsewhere if this doesn't work out.

EDWARD

There isn't another newspaper in town. Where else would you go?

BEN

It doesn't even have to be in this town. It could be halfway around the world.

EDWARD

What newspaper is going to let you cover stories from halfway around the world?

BEN

(*Getting frustrated*) I'm not talking about newspapers. Newspapers are staring obsolescence right in the face. I'll get work, but I'm sure it won't be at a newspaper. This one, or any other.

What he's said has shocked those within earshot.

KELLY

You know you could be a little more respectful. Sure, maybe newspapers aren't as relevant as they once were, but you can't tell me you aren't the least bit sorry to see them marginalized.

BEN

I'm not talking about them being marginalized. I'm talking about them disappearing forever.

KELLY

So, where would you go?

BEN

Blogs. News websites. Online TV. It's all going digital and the web is screaming for content.

EDWARD

Look, you little techno-brat. The Beacon Telegraph has been printing a paper every day, sometimes multiple times a day, for the last hundred and seven years. You can't tell me you wouldn't empathize if an institution like that were to go under. You can't tell me that wouldn't hurt just a little bit.

BEN

Looks like you've got that disaster you've been hoping for.

They pause. KELLY has a sudden realization.

KELLY

Wait a second. Wait, just a—. Say that again.

BEN still doesn't get it and is trying to win the argument.

BEN

I just meant that you all were hoping for some catastrophe to help you sell more papers. Ironically, it looks like you're that catastrophe.

KELLY and EDWARD get the idea.

KELLY

We have to take this to Nathan.

EDWARD

No. No way. He'll never go for it.

KELLY

It's perfect. In fact, it's so obvious I'm wondering how we missed it.

EDWARD

We missed it because it's crude and juvenile and—

KELLY

—Do you have a better idea?

He doesn't. She rushes to the Editor-in-Chief office door and knocks. NATHAN has been working at his desk. He continues editing and doesn't look up.

NATHAN

Yes?

Atypically, KELLY decides to talk through the door in deference to his emotional state.

KELLY

Nathan, I have something you need to hear. I—we have an idea. It could save the paper.

NATHAN stops what he's doing and stares pensively at the door. Does he dare get his hopes up?

NATHAN

Come in, already. Don't stand there shouting through the door.

KELLY and EDWARD enter. BEN follows them in casually.

EDWARD

Just for the record, I completely disagree with this.

KELLY

What if I told you that a major institution is foundering? It's been an instrumental part of this community for over a century and now it is in trouble. Would that be news?

NATHAN

I should think so. Tell me more.

KELLY

It's been indispensable in countless elections and has brought meaningful action by concerned citizens in this city numerous times. Without it, the city would be run by corrupt officials and its people would be oblivious to the excesses of power.

NATHAN

I see. *(Beat)* You're talking about us.

KELLY

Yes. It's the major story we need.

NATHAN

Absolutely not.

KELLY

But we have to.

NATHAN

We are journalists, Kelly. We report the news. We don't make the news.

KELLY

Who then? Who's going to tell the city that we're missing? Who's going to write our obituary? The time is now; before you've been forced to watch every one of us walk out that door with our things in a box. Before it's just you and Cathy turning out a monthly newsletter.

NATHAN

You're talking about blatant self-promotion.

KELLY

I'm talking about activist journalism. Informing the population and activating them to a cause.

NATHAN

To our cause.

KELLY

Yes, to a cause that means something to this city. Who else is going to do it? Television and the Internet are gleefully relishing in our troubles or, at the very best, ignoring our situation.

EDWARD

We are the fourth branch of government, not some Cash-for-Gold commercial enterprise.

KELLY

You know what the little secret about that "fourth branch of government" trope is? The other three branches don't really want us. Government at all levels can't wait for us to disappear so they can go on doing whatever they want.

KELLY moves close to NATHAN in a more personal appeal. She is quieter and sincere.

KELLY

We're on an island, Nathan. We're alone in this. We've got to do this for ourselves because no one else will.

NATHAN considers what KELLY says and sits back at his desk.

NATHAN

Call the rest of the staff.

KELLY smiles and then leaves the Editor-in-Chief office. She exits to pull JESS and AVA into the meeting.

EDWARD

You can't be serious.

NATHAN

Kelly is right. If we're going to go down, we're not going to go without a fight. *(Beat)* Ben, you're awfully quiet in the back there. What do you think about all of this?

BEN

Maybe this violates your sense of journalistic integrity, or whatever, but it makes sense to me.

KELLY returns with JESS and AVA in tow. NATHAN, EDWARD, and BEN join them in the newsroom.

NATHAN

Okay team. As you know, we've got just over three weeks to increase our circulation or snag some powerhouse advertisers. What I want is an all-out blitz about the state of this newspaper. I want stories about our history and the issues we've been able to address. Ava, I want stories about how we cover our local teams. Highlights. Championships.

AVA

Yes, sir.

NATHAN

Ed, Show 'em the city. Do the 29th Street Bridge scandal. City Hall. Downtown.

EDWARD

I still don't like it.

NATHAN

Your opinion is noted. *(Moving on)* Kelly. Charities. Promotion and Food Drives. Give us orphans and disease and hunger and poverty and what we've done to help.

KELLY

I've got several good ideas already.

NATHAN

Jess, we need all new graphics for this. Every story about the paper needs a special border. New Graphics. New font.

JESS

I'll make it sparkle.

NATHAN

Ben, I want you on the street. Public opinion. Let's put the bug in their ear that we may not always be here. See what they say.

BEN

I can do a poll.

NATHAN

And let's use the blog. Explain why we're running so many stories about ourselves. But keep it earnest. No cheap shots. No fluff.

BEN

Of course.

NATHAN

I want great articles, people. Keep your journalistic wits about you. Everything sourced. Everything in AP style. All right, that's all. Go to it. I want the first article in tomorrow's paper. We've got three weeks. There isn't a moment to lose.

The group eagerly disperses. NATHAN returns to his office.

FADE TO BLACK.

In the blackout the sound of printing presses running fills the air.

ACT II SCENE 2

AT RISE: It is evening the following day, Tuesday. The newsroom is once again abuzz with activity. They are launching their first edition with stories focusing on the paper itself.

EDWARD and AVA discuss a layout. KELLY works at her computer at her desk. CATHY handles a phone call. NATHAN exits the Editor-in-Chief office and drops some papers off with CATHY who takes them deftly without interrupting her phone call.

CATHY

Is that so? *(Beat)* And what does Linda say about that? *(Beat)* Oh, Damon. You'd better be careful. She'll be telling you need to get out of the house and get another job soon. *(Laughs)* Oh... you know. Busy as ever. Nathan has some new idea for the paper. He's got everyone running around like little rabbits... *(Beat)* No, I couldn't. I'd have to ask Nathan first. *(Beat)* I work for him now. I—... Ask him yourself. *(Beat)* All right. Tell Linda I said hello.

She hangs up.

NATHAN

Was that Damon?

CATHY

Yes. I think he's just lonely. Poor guy misses us.

NATHAN

Did you tell him what we're up to?

CATHY

Are you kidding? That's a conversation you get to have with him.

JESS enters with a section of the newspaper.

JESS

Nathan! Nathan, I've got the first print. What do you think?

NATHAN considers the paper.

NATHAN

"Beacon Telegraph Faces Trying Times". I like the headline.

JESS

Yeah, much better than our first idea. "Send Us Money!"

NATHAN

(Laughs) Hang on to that. We may yet use it. *(Returning to paper)* I think it looks good. I like what you've done with the double border. It really sets it off nicely.

JESS takes the paper and sits at his desk. AVA brings a copy of her sports section to NATHAN.

AVA

Hey boss. What do you think about this feature? I've got a spread of all of our championship sections.

NATHAN

Good. I like it.

AVA

You know, the AP even picked up one of our stories on steroids and it ran nationwide.

NATHAN

Good, but let's save that for next week.

AVA

Okay, yeah.

AVA exits. BEN hurries through the newsroom holding a clipboard. NATHAN catches him.

NATHAN

Oh, Ben. What do you have on the poll results?

BEN

They're not in yet.

NATHAN

Let me know when you've got the results. It'd be good to know what the population thinks of us as an institution.

BEN

I'll let you know when they're ready.

NATHAN returns to his office. BEN looks after him and relaxes once NATHAN closes the door.

EDWARD looks at BEN suspiciously. JESS joins the conversation.

EDWARD

Why'd you tell him that?

BEN

Whaddya mean?

EDWARD

I know you've finished your poll. Why did you lie to him?

BEN

I just felt... I don't know. Like it wasn't the right time. They're not the results he's looking for.

JESS

What do you mean?

BEN

It doesn't exactly support his cause.

EDWARD

Enlighten me.

BEN

For instance— (*Looking at paper*) Ah, here. When I asked how vital do you think the Beacon Telegraph is to the city? Most people answered either Only Mildly Important or Not Vital At All. Only 12% thought it was Very Vital.

JESS

See? This is why I said we shouldn't send the new guy to conduct the poll. You probably screwed up the questions.

BEN

I know how to ask questions.

EDWARD

Is there any good news in that poll?

BEN

Good news?

EDWARD

Good news for us. For the paper.

BEN scrolls through his phone, taking a long time.

EDWARD (CONT)

Oh, come on!

BEN

Ah, here. I asked "How much would civic life be hurt if the newspaper closed" and 62% said very hurt, or somewhat hurt. That was significantly more than those that thought it wouldn't hurt at all.

EDWARD

That's something, at least. They see value in us.

BEN

Then I asked, "How much extra would you be willing to pay to keep the newspaper alive?"

EDWARD

And what'd they say?

BEN

On average?

EDWARD

Sure.

BEN

Nothing.

JESS

That's going to make for a miserable infographic.

BEN

(Smiling) I know, right?

JESS

You sound positively giddy about this.

BEN

(Checking himself) I wouldn't say giddy. I find it exciting.

JESS

You better explain that.

BEN

I mean, to be part of this. It must be what it was like to work for the steamships after the railroad went in, or the railroads after the airlines came in.

JESS

(Threatening) This isn't some sideshow to entertain you, kid.

BEN

Nevertheless, it's entertaining. It's why I'm here.

JESS

You're here to help.

BEN

Is that what you think? The great unsinkable Beacon Telegraph has been heading for trouble for as long as I've been alive. And now that you've finally bounced off an iceberg or two, you've decided to spin the helm. But it's too late. You're already taking on water.

JESS

Why do you have to be so damn dramatic? It's just a lull in the business. We'll be fine.

BEN

And the band played on.

JESS

You'd better talk to him, Ed. This kid is a cancer. *(Sneers at BEN)* I've got work to do.

JESS exits

EDWARD

If I were you, I'd think about making some friends here. I don't care what career you end up with. You're not doing it alone.

EDWARD exits leaving BEN alone in the newsroom. BEN takes a step and then looks back at the Editor-in-Chief office door. He thinks a moment, sighs, then marches back to the Editor-in-Chief office door.

BEN knocks on the office door.

BEN

Nathan?

NATHAN doesn't look up from his work.

NATHAN

Yeah?

BEN enters, closing the door behind him.

NATHAN (CONT)

What is it Ben, I'm very busy.

BEN

I know, I –uh– just was wondering, uh...

NATHAN

Is this about poll results?

BEN

No. Um. I just wanted to know if you wanted to talk about last week.

NATHAN

Why? What was last week?

BEN

Come on.

NATHAN

It's fine.

BEN

I don't know what you were expecting from her, but that wasn't your typical twenty-year reunion.

NATHAN

And what would you know about it?

BEN

Look. I'm just saying. I get that it's tough. And if you wanted to talk about it...

NATHAN resumes his work, ignoring BEN.

BEN (CONT)

Fine.

BEN turns to leave. He opens the door.

NATHAN

Wait.

BEN pauses, then closes the door. He turns. We see that NATHAN has changed demeanor and is now wearing the full emotional weight of the situation.

NATHAN (CONT)

I wasn't... very good. As a husband. In fact, to my shame, I was terrible. Unfaithful. They don't tell you about the faults of your heart, do they? In the movies and books? They don't tell you about how fast the feeling of being in love goes away. Marriage is about reminding yourself day in and day out why you chose her. Why you committed yourself to her for the rest of your life. You know why?

BEN shifts his weight and starts to answer, but is interrupted by NATHAN continuing.

NATHAN (CONT)

—Because you forget. So easily. So fast. And the next thing you know you're somewhere else, somewhere you shouldn't be, and you're there with her and not your wife and you don't know how to go back. How to undo the damage. Not to her, but to you. To your heart. It's stupid. The heart is. It will attach to the strangest things. You have to watch it. Like a serpent. Like a scorpion. It will deceive you. It will betray you. (*Beat*) Brin found out. To her credit, she didn't leave me. She said that we were going to get through it. Then she got sick... We thought we'd get through that too. Laura sent a quick note to my office. Said she heard Brin was ill and hoped and prayed for her speedy recovery. That was the last I heard from her. Laura married soon after that.

NATHAN (CONT)

Once she was married, I didn't want anyone else. Laura was the standard by which everyone else was measured. They all fell short. She was the ideal woman and I couldn't have her. She was off the market. Until now. Two decades later.

There is a pause while NATHAN retreats into his own thoughts.

BEN

I'm sorry. I didn't know she was—

NATHAN

—So we've got to save this paper Ben. You and me. If we save the paper, maybe I can get another chance to see her. This paper is my life. It's my past and future, and I'm giving it everything. Everything.

BEN

Save the paper, win the girl?

NATHAN

Perhaps. Yeah, something like that. *(Beat)* So, that's my story. Maybe it explains things. Maybe it doesn't. Maybe you think I'm crazy.

BEN

No, I—I get it. You've been waiting. For her.

NATHAN

I need this. She'll be back again and I'll be sitting in this office. Then she'll see... She'll see.

SLOW FADE TO BLACK.

In the blackout the sound of printing presses running fills the air.

**ACT II
SCENE 3**

AT RISE: *Two weeks later.*

NATHAN sits in his office reviewing some copy. CATHY tends to the reception desk. AVA and BEN sit at the break area. They rise and exit just as EDWARD enters through the main door.

EDWARD

Is Nathan in?

CATHY

He is, but he asked not to be dis—

EDWARD

—Great!

EDWARD ignores her and pushes into the Editor-in-Chief office.

EDWARD *(CONT)*

Nathan? Can I have a word with you?

NATHAN

What's going on Edward? I'm really tied up right now.

EDWARD

It's this.

*He throws a copy of the newspaper
on NATHAN's desk.*

NATHAN

Yesterday's edition. What's wrong?

EDWARD

It's not a newspaper anymore. Look at it.

EDWARD jabs at an article with double box around it.

EDWARD (CONT)

It's a vapid commercial, right on the front page. This has gotten out of hand. Look at what we've become.

NATHAN

We're trying to save the paper, Edward.

EDWARD

With this?!

NATHAN

I don't have time for this.

EDWARD

Damon recommended you to Mr. Woodsen because he thought you were a man of integrity. He thought you were a man of principles.

NATHAN

And now I'm not?

EDWARD

Nathan, look at our newspaper. It's reality television. It's a personal ad. It's the worst form of self-aggrandizement.

NATHAN

We need people to understand our situation.

EDWARD

Look Nathan, I just want to hear it from you. You're not trying to change this paper, are you? This is just a temporary thing, right?

NATHAN

Good day, Edward.

EDWARD

I've put far too many years of my life into this paper to see you muck it all up.

NATHAN

And I haven't? We must change, Edward. We have to, if we want to survive. You of all people should understand that.

EDWARD

(Angry) I come here out of concern for something we both hold dear and you throw it right back in my face.

NATHAN

Get to work!

EDWARD

Just tell me one thing. This advertising that we're doing. Is it working? Are we selling more papers?

NATHAN

(Pause; doesn't look up) Not really. *(Beat)* Half a percent.

BEN approaches CATHY'S desk and stops, listening to the argument inside the office.

EDWARD

If you're going to take this paper to your grave, Nathan, at least do it with dignity.

NATHAN

If you're too embarrassed to work here, maybe you should leave.

EDWARD

Maybe I should.

NATHAN

There's the door. We're done here.

EDWARD

(As exits the office) This isn't over. Not by a long shot.

EDWARD storms out of the Editor-in-Chief office with NATHAN behind.

CATHY

I told you he didn't want to be disturbed.

EDWARD

We're all disturbed.

EDWARD exits.

CATHY

(To NATHAN) What did Edward want?

NATHAN

He doesn't approve of our current strategy.

BEN

Did he just quit?

CATHY

Oh no. Ed is a diehard. He loves this place. No, he just needed to blow off some steam. When he quits, you'll know it.

NATHAN

(To BEN) Oh, Ben. Your blog post. I read it this morning.

BEN

Let me guess. You loved it. It changed your life. It was—

NATHAN

(Carrying the energy from his fight with EDWARD) Knock it off with the sarcasm, already. It gets real old, real fast.

BEN

(Taken aback) Right. Sorry.

NATHAN

I thought you showed marked improvement. Much more compelling story-telling and more authoritative voice. Just watch those idioms, okay.

BEN

Uh, thanks. And sure.

NATHAN

But something bothered me at the end.

BEN

Oh? What was that?

NATHAN

(Thinking) It was your last paragraph. Something about how it's not possible to measure the extent to which the paper influences our society.

BEN

What didn't you like about it?

NATHAN

What does it mean? Why isn't it possible to measure it?

BEN

It's just a little throw-away line to wrap up the article.

NATHAN

It's lazy and I don't like it. If you need to know a figure, go find a figure.

BEN

How would you do that? That sort of information isn't exactly freely available.

NATHAN

Yes. That's the question you need to be asking. We're not a news aggregator, Ben. You want to write articles based on internet search engine results? Fine. But not here.

BEN

I can't measure every possible impact of this paper? It's too much.

NATHAN

Your instincts tell you what we've done for this city. Think ahead to where the story will lead. Then go see if your research proves your instincts correct.

BEN

Trust my instincts, think ahead, and then investigate.

NATHAN

They don't give Pulitzers to the guy who retypes the press release. Okay, get to it.

BEN smiles and exits.

NATHAN returns to his office. He sits and considers the stack of work on his desk. He rifles through the ledger with the financial statements. Sighs.

He picks up the phone and dials. A pause, and then:

NATHAN (*CONT*)

Hi, Laura. It's Nathan, again. I don't know if you just never answer your phone or what, but... uh... I thought I'd leave you another message. I'm sorry for the email thing. I didn't mean to scare you off. If you could call me back or come by the office or something. It's just that I don't have much time. Just wanna talk, that's all. Okay. Uh. That's it.

He hangs up.

BLACKOUT.

In the blackout the sound of printing presses running fills the air.

**ACT II
SCENE 4**

AT RISE: One week later.

Night-time. Most of the staff has gone home for the evening. CATHY's desk is empty. NATHAN is on the phone in the Editor-in-Chief office. EDWARD marches across the stage with his coat on and his attaché case in his hand.

The low rumble of the presses printing papers is heard in the background.

NATHAN

(On the phone) Alright, just get it to me before one. It has to run tomorrow. Great. Thanks. *(Hangs up)*

EDWARD stands in doorway to Editor-in-Chief.

EDWARD

I'm going downtown.

NATHAN

This late at night?

EDWARD

Yeah. I'm meeting Hoying to shoot some cityscapes for a layout we're planning for Friday.

NATHAN

Alright. Enjoy. See you tomorrow.

EDWARD

Yep.

Edward moves towards the door, but it opens. LAURA comes through the door, sheepishly. She nearly runs into EDWARD who moves to the side, takes an awkward pause, and then hustles out the door. NATHAN sees her enter since the Editor-in-Chief door is open. He rises and crosses to her. NATHAN and LAURA are alone in the newsroom. NATHAN tries to speak but can't find the words.

LAURA

Hi, Nathan. *(Beat)* I was in the area. I thought I'd...

NATHAN

Yeah. You came... I'm glad you're here. You got my message?

LAURA

Yes. All four of them.

NATHAN

I'm sorry. I—

LAURA

—It's okay. I needed to see you anyway. Wanted to, really. I owe you an apology. Is this a bad time?

NATHAN

No, in fact, it's just about perfect. Most everyone has gone home for the night. *(Awkward pause)* I'm sorry I missed the funeral. I—I didn't think it was appropriate—

LAURA

—No. It wasn't. I'm—it was fine. It was a funeral. We had a viewing and then a service at the cemetery.

NATHAN

Did you have a lot of people to... pay respects?

LAURA

Yes. Steven was quite successful. Professionally, I mean. He was an architect. So, you know, lots of work friends came. And family, of course.

NATHAN

So, he was well liked?

LAURA

(*Beat*) Yes, Nathan. He was well liked. He was loved by many.

NATHAN

Good. That's good. How did he, um? I didn't hear why he passed on. Wasn't in the obituary.

LAURA

Right. Yeah. Uh, he had a heart attack. It was a company softball game.

NATHAN

That must have been quite traumatic.

LAURA

I wasn't there. The girls were there, though. They haven't really talked about what happened. But yeah.

NATHAN

The girls?

LAURA

Yes, my daughters. Terri is seventeen. She's going off to State next year. Can't believe she's headed for college already. Izzy is thirteen, though sometimes she acts older than her sister, I swear. She's my baby, she just won't accept it.

NATHAN

I always wanted daughters. (*Awkward silence*) I'm sure the three of you get along great.

LAURA

Terri and I do. Izzy... it's a battle. She's most like her father. Impetuous but quite smart. Too smart for her own good sometimes.

NATHAN

How have they taken all this?

LAURA

Not.... well. It's been rough for everyone. But it's part of the process. You have to let them grieve, you know?

NATHAN

I do.

LAURA looks around at the newsroom.

LAURA

I was here once before.

NATHAN

I know.

LAURA

I mean... not counting the four seconds a couple weeks ago. I mean, back when we—

NATHAN

—Yes, I remember. We had lunch and then you asked to see where I worked.

LAURA

You do remember.

NATHAN

And I brought you back here.

LAURA

You were so nervous. I don't think you stood within ten feet of me.

NATHAN

It was crazy. Everyone knew I was married. I felt like they could see right through me and would know what was going on.

LAURA

You were cute. Your desk was right over there. Honestly the place doesn't look much different now. The computers are newer, I guess.

NATHAN

Yeah. Not a lot has changed since then.

LAURA

No....

Awkward pause.

NATHAN

I'm sorry about that email. About the obit, and having you come here and all. I must have caught you completely off guard.

LAURA

Well, not completely. I figured you'd be here.

NATHAN

But you came anyway? Why?

LAURA

I can't say. We had something at one time, I suppose. A long time ago. I guess I just wanted to see how you were doing. You've come a long way from the beat reporter I knew. *(Beat)* I'm sorry I ran off.

NATHAN

Yeah, why did you? Run off like that?

LAURA

Once you wear that scarlet letter... It can freak you out if you think everyone can see it. I just... wasn't ready. I wasn't thinking. (*Awkward pause; changing subject*) I noticed a few months ago that you were Managing Editor.

NATHAN

How'd you know that?

LAURA

Page two. Every edition.

NATHAN

Oh, right. I'm Editor-in-Chief now.

LAURA

Another promotion... Congratulations.

NATHAN

Yep. (*Beat*) Can I show you around? Give you the tour?

LAURA

If you'd like.

NATHAN points to the various areas. What he really wants to show her is his office.

NATHAN

This is, of course, the newsroom. You remember. Various desks. Break room. My admin sits here. She also acts as our receptionist. And through this door is my office.

They move into the Editor-in-chief office.

LAURA

(*Reading from door*) "The Office of Editor-in-Chief." This must be very exciting for you.

NATHAN

It is.

LAURA

(*Listening*) What's that noise?

NATHAN

That's my favorite noise in the entire world. It's the sound of the end of the work day. It's history being written in ink. It's my paper going to press.

LAURA

I remember you talking about wanting to run the paper someday. And here you are.

NATHAN

Here I am.

LAURA

You've got your very own paper.

NATHAN

It is kind of a dream come true... and a nightmare.

LAURA

Oh? How so?

NATHAN

It's just... newspaper stuff. Trying to make money doing what we do. Having to keep the whole staff happy. All the stuff you don't dream about when you're dreaming about being in charge.

LAURA

Was it worth it? Waiting all this time?

NATHAN is dumbstruck as he thinks she's asking about waiting for her.

LAURA (CONT)

Here at the newspaper... to be Editor-in-Chief?

NATHAN

Ah, yes, of course.

LAURA

What did you think I meant?

NATHAN

Nothing, I guess.

LAURA

(Looking around. Tense.) Aren't you supposed to have some brandy or something? Editors-in-chief always have a big decanter on a cart. Shouldn't you have one of those?

NATHAN

If this were the 1970's I guess. Maybe. I don't know. I think that's a Hollywood thing.

LAURA

Pity. I could use a drink.

She is starting to relax. She sits in one of the chairs.

LAURA (CONT)

Do you remember the last time we were together?

NATHAN *nods*

LAURA (CONT)

Brin had just found out about us.

NATHAN

It was a miserable meeting. It was raining... of course.

LAURA

I just remember sitting in your car sobbing.

NATHAN

I couldn't think of anything to say.

LAURA

That's true. I did all the talking.

NATHAN

Between sobs.

LAURA

I was glad you were choosing her. You needed to go off and be the man you were meant to be. Be the husband and news-guy you were supposed to. You didn't need to waste your time messing around with me. You chose wisely.

NATHAN

Did I? I didn't feel like much of a man. I remember thinking that I was just a scared little boy.

LAURA

Oh?

NATHAN

Yeah.

LAURA

I was sad to hear that she got sick.

NATHAN

Yes, I got your note. Thank you for that.

LAURA

She died not too much later, didn't she?

NATHAN

Less than a year. The cancer was... brutal.

LAURA

I suppose I was engaged by then.

NATHAN

Actually, she died... on your wedding day.

LAURA

On my wedding day? Oh, Nathan...

NATHAN

The same damn day. It was a very dark time for me.

LAURA

I can imagine.

NATHAN

Can you?

Beat.

LAURA

How come I never heard from you until now?

NATHAN pauses and folds up some papers off his desk in a lazy effort to clean up.

NATHAN

I guess because I promised Brin I wouldn't see you anymore. Then, after a while, I figured that I'd brought so much pain to her that I wouldn't do that to your husband. I wouldn't interfere.

LAURA

That was noble. But unnecessary.

NATHAN

Nevertheless, I decided to wait.

LAURA

Wait?

NATHAN

Until I could talk to you with a clear conscience. Without feeling like I was deceiving anyone.

LAURA

That's a long time just for a conversation.

NATHAN

It's not just that. It's where it would lead.

LAURA

And where is that exactly?

NATHAN

I—who knows? But it had to be better than our last conversation. Less sobs. More talk about the future.

LAURA

What future?

NATHAN

The future of us, of course.

LAURA starts to get upset, realizing that NATHAN has more in mind than just this reunion.

LAURA

Nathan.... No, no... You're telling me you waited for... for twenty years? For me?

NATHAN

I didn't know how long it would be. Look I know it's soon since your husband—

LAURA

—What are you expecting here? What is all of this?

NATHAN

What do you mean? This is finally our chance—

LAURA

—I've just buried my husband.—

NATHAN

—I can wait longer. Until you're ready?—

LAURA

(Getting angry) You don't understand! Why? What are you saying, Nathan?

NATHAN

I'm saying— Why are you upset?

LAURA

Why do you think I'm upset? That you still feel—

NATHAN

Yes.

LAURA

After all I did to hurt you? After Brin?

NATHAN

I never stopped loving you.

LAURA

Don't say that. Don't you dare say that! You were supposed to move on. It was you who was supposed to do better, more honorable things. Nathan, no. No. No. You were supposed to forget about me!

NATHAN

How could I? I could never—

LAURA

—Nathan, I have two daughters.

NATHAN

—It takes time, I know—

LAURA

—I have a whole new life—

NATHAN

—Of course. I didn't expect—

LAURA

—And I have....

NATHAN

...what?

LAURA

Someone else, Nathan. *(Pause)* I'm already with someone.

NATHAN

But your husband just—

LAURA

Why did you wait? Why did you waste so much time?

NATHAN

(Getting angry) What do you mean you have someone else? A boyfriend?

LAURA

Nathan, don't be angry with me. Don't—

NATHAN

—Just explain.

LAURA

We've been seeing each other for over a year. Taylor and me.

NATHAN

While you were still married?

LAURA

Don't judge me, Nathan. You have no right.

NATHAN

But I—

LAURA

—he was the support I needed. When I wanted to give up, when I wanted to just run away, Taylor helped me. I couldn't have lived without him.

Pause.

NATHAN

Where? How—? How did you meet him?

LAURA

Does it matter, Nathan?

NATHAN

(Angry) I'd like to know!

LAURA

He's a trainer at my gym.

NATHAN

Did Steven know?

LAURA

Of course not.

NATHAN

I can't believe—I never thought you would—

LAURA

—Cheat? Did you not think I was capable of something so heinous?

NATHAN

Now who's judging?

LAURA

He wasn't the only one, either. There was Darren and Brandan, and Kent. Yes. Go ahead. Look at me with that disappointment. Tell me I've let you down. The great martyr Nathan Parker. Tell me I'm a slut. Tell me I have no business being in your holy presence.

NATHAN

I didn't say anything.

LAURA

It's not so easy, being married. Not so easy when your heart attaches so quickly to others.

NATHAN

That's not—

LAURA

—Why did you waste twenty years, Nathan?

NATHAN

I waited for you. I waited for a chance. I waited for—

LAURA

—You waited for a fantasy.

The pain silences them. NATHAN is heartbroken.

NATHAN

Why did you even come here, then?

LAURA

I wanted to see how you were doing. That you were better off without me. I wanted to know that you were doing well.

NATHAN

Well, I'm not. Sorry to disappoint you.

Another pause while they stare at their shoes.

LAURA

I'm going to go.

NATHAN doesn't stir.

LAURA (CONT)

Walk me out?

He doesn't.

NATHAN

It's a hell of a thing, Laura. To have to face this.

LAURA

We all eventually face our disappointments. Just some sooner than others.

She looks at NATHAN with pain in her eyes, turns and exits the Editor-in-Chief office. She walks to the main door, before stopping and turning.

LAURA (CONT)

Good luck with your little newspaper. It must feel good to be a part of something that lasts.

She exits. NATHAN returns to his desk and buries his head in his arms. He is devastated.

Slow FADE TO BLACK.

In the blackout the sound of printing presses running fills the air.

ACT II SCENE 5

AT RISE: The next day.

AVA and EDWARD work on an article at a desk. KELLY and BEN talk socially in the break area.

NATHAN is in his office. He rises, goes to his door, and addresses CATHY who is talking with JESS. NATHAN interrupts gruffly speaking in a bitter tone.

NATHAN

Cathy. Cancel my meeting with the editorial board this afternoon. They can submit their whining editorials to me via email.

He turns and closes the door behind him. CATHY and JESS look at each other. That was different.

JESS

Is he okay?

CATHY

I don't know. He's been like this all morning.

JESS

Stress?

CATHY

Maybe. I'd steer clear for a while. He's on the warpath.

JESS

Damon used to get like that. I guess it's a requirement for the job.

CATHY

Tell me about it. Just this morning he gave Ava a tongue lashing for not having her box scores assembled yet. Must have spoken for ten minutes on the importance of being prompt. Ava couldn't get out of here fast enough.

JESS

Something's not right.

JESS exits, just as DAMON enters. CATHY doesn't notice him at first.

DAMON

Ahem. Is Nathan in?

CATHY

Oh, Damon! I didn't even see you. What a surprise.

CATHY rises to greet him, but his disposition keeps her away.

CATHY (CONT)

Does Nathan know you're coming?

DAMON

No.

CATHY

I see. Is everything alright?

DAMON looks at her with a stern and joyless expression. CATHY knows.

CATHY (CONT)

(Cautiously) Let me just buzz Mr. Parker. *(Through intercom)* Mr. Parker, Mr. Halsey is here to see you.

NATHAN says nothing but comes to the door.

NATHAN

Damon? Um... come in.

DAMON enters the Editor-in-Chief office and somberly shakes NATHAN's hand. They enter the office and stand for a second. DAMON goes to the door and closes it.

Meanwhile, BEN, AVA, KELLY, CATHY, and JESS all converge into a silent gossip circle near the door, trying to overhear the conversation in the Editor-in-Chief office.

NATHAN (CONT)

Is it that kind of visit?

DAMON

I'm afraid so. *(Beat)* Look, Nathan. There's no easy way to say this. Mr. Woodsen is getting out. He's selling all of his newspapers to Cameron Media.

NATHAN

Cameron? The tabloid publisher?

DAMON

Yes. They seem to be the only ones who can make money in this business anymore.

NATHAN

Wow. That's... Okay. All right. That's going to be difficult. Working for them, I mean. But we can do it.

DAMON

There's more. The sale is contingent on liquidating the worst performing papers. The Beacon Telegraph is going to be shut down. *(Beat)* I thought you should hear it from me and not some corporate memo.

NATHAN

No. No, we just need more time. Mr. Woodsen can't do this.

DAMON

He has to. It's just business. This building is prime downtown real estate; worth more than the entire company. They'd be better off selling the land than trying to print newspapers here.

NATHAN

Then move the presses. We can work out of a warehouse. It—

DAMON

—it's going to be shut down, Nathan. I don't like it anymore than you do. But Cameron wants to sell their national paper in this market, and eliminating a competitor is part of the deal.

NATHAN

(Disgusted) A national paper?

DAMON

The presses here will be used to produce it until they go entirely digital. Then the presses will be sold for scrap.

At the word scrap, NATHAN starts to realize what's happened and believe it. He sits unsteadily in his chair.

NATHAN

So that's it, then?

DAMON

I'm afraid so.

NATHAN

How much longer do we have?

DAMON

Tomorrow is your last edition. Say goodbye, and then you'll be transferring to Cameron.

NATHAN

Will they keep us on? The staff, I mean?

DAMON

Cameron will tell you they will, but between you and me, they're only interested in the press operators and maybe one or two managers to oversee distribution. I would be surprised if they kept the rest on for more than the minimum two weeks.

NATHAN stares at his desk.

NATHAN

How did this happen? How did we get to this point?

DAMON

Don't blame yourself. It's the way America is these days. Everyone wants to be informed, but no one wants to pay for it. They want new music, new books, new articles to read, up to the second news, but they want it for free. They'll pay for a data plan, but not for the data. We complain that a Sunday paper costs three dollars but then stand in line for the privilege of buying a mocha for five bucks. Who needs a five dollar coffee?

We're a dying breed, Nathan, those of us who expect reasonable compensation for what we write. It's a cowardly new world where any hack with a website can put up baseless articles without sources and our readers can't tell the difference between that and proper journalism. Frankly I don't know how to compete with it. I don't even know if we can.

I used to think of the newspaper as a roaring lion, prowling the street for truth. But now I see that we're just a paper tiger. And it's finally started to rain.

Silence. NATHAN stares numbly at his desk. DAMON gets uncomfortable.

DAMON (CONT)

I should be going. *(Beat)* It's a rotten business, Nathan.

He exits the Editor-in-Chief office. The staff has gathered in the newsroom.

DAMON pauses as if to speak to Cathy. He can't find the words and exits.

NATHAN emerges from the Editor-in-Chief office. JESS, BEN, EDWARD, CATHY, KELLY, and AVA are all there in postures of defeat.

Everyone is quiet. There is the feeling of a locker room after a tough loss.

NATHAN

Good morning, everyone. *(Pause)* It's a helluva day.

KELLY

So... is that it?

NATHAN nods somberly.

NATHAN

I'm afraid so. *(Beat)* We're to be liquidated.

The STAFF gasps and begins to protest. NATHAN quiets them with a gesture.

AVA

I really thought we'd do it, boss.

NATHAN

Yeah. Me too. It seemed possible, didn't it?

KELLY

It wasn't possible. Not thirty percent. Not in a month. We were stupid to even try.

JESS

Stupid? We were stupid not to try. This is our lives here.

KELLY

We should have tried something else. Raising money from investors or selling shares or something.

NATHAN

Anything but selling more newspapers, right?

KELLY

That's not what I meant.

NATHAN

No, but it's the truth.

EDWARD

So what's going to happen to us?

NATHAN

We're being sold to Cameron Media. We'll all get two weeks' pay at the very least. After that...

EDWARD

We're on our own?

NATHAN

I'm afraid so.

EDWARD

This is asinine. This is total and complete idiocy. After a hundred and seven years, he's going to shut us down? Why not help us? Why would he let us twist in the wind? Give us some help, Mr. Woodsen! Jackass!

NATHAN

Ed, calm down.

EDWARD

I won't calm down! Where the hell am I supposed to go? Huh? There aren't any more newspapers in Willow Falls. Move? How can I cover a city I don't know? I've got two kids to take care of.

NATHAN

We tried our best, Ed.

EDWARD starts to get violent; perhaps he smashes something.

EDWARD

So what? Nathan, look at this place. Look at it. It's a dump. It's a steaming pile of excrement and I've given far too much of my life to it. And look at you. You're pathetic. You just let Mr. Woodsen sell us out without so much as a word of protest.

KELLY

Ed—

EDWARD

—Since when did you roll over and take it so well? Quitter. How could you let him do this to us, you spineless coward?

KELLY

Ed, that's enough.—

EDWARD

Doesn't this place mean anything to you?

EDWARD starts to leave.

NATHAN

Where are you going?

EDWARD

I can't stay here. Damon never would have let this place go under.

KELLY

That is totally unfair. *(Meaning, to Nathan)*

EDWARD

Yeah. Yeah, Im the one being unfair.

EDWARD exits slamming the door as he leaves. Silence... then:

CATHY

(To BEN) Now, he quit.

NATHAN

Our last issue will be tomorrow. Get your last words together to your readers and we'll publish our goodbye. That is all.

The meeting breaks up.

BEN and AVA make their way to the break area while everyone else heads back to their desks.

BEN

Don't look at me like that.

AVA

Like what?

BEN

You know what.

AVA

I just hope you're happy.

BEN

Yes. Like that. It was the "I hope you're happy" look.

AVA

You didn't exactly overextend yourself trying to keep this from happening.

BEN

I worked just as hard as everyone else.

AVA

No you didn't. Everyone else worked like their lives depended on it.

BEN

Well, mine doesn't. Neither does yours. No one's does. It's—

AVA

—You know what your problem is, Ben? You stand for nothing. You'd rather spend your time deconstructing what someone else has built rather than building something of your own. You care only about yourself and your ideas of what "should be". There is nothing worthwhile outside your little world.

BEN

I'm not a nihilist.

AVA

No, you're a toddler. And wherever someone has built a tower of blocks you can't wait to knock them down. You. The great Ben the Blogger is going to demolish the Ivory Tower.

BEN

Look, I—

AVA

–This isn't some intellectual exercise, Ben. These are people's lives.

BEN

I know, that's—

AVA

–Nathan lives for this paper. He built it along with Damon and the editors before him. He should be proud of what he built. When you're Nathan's age, you should hope that you're a tenth the man he is.

BEN

(Interrupting earnestly) –You know what? You're right. That's what I'm trying to tell you. You're absolutely right.

AVA

Shut up.

BEN

I'm serious. I get it. I've got a little blog and few thousand tweets. It's nothing compared to a hundred years of history here. But you're wrong about me. That's not who I am.

AVA

Oh, really?

BEN

Okay, maybe I used to be like that. Knocking down towers and stuff. But...

AVA

But what?

BEN

I guess... I don't know. It's different now. I've met you and Nathan and everyone else... Nathan's been teaching me all kinds of things about writing. Cathy is awesome. She didn't even complain when I blew up her webpage. Jess and Kelly are both pretty cool. Ed, even.

AVA

It's different when you know the people living in the tower.

BEN

Yes. So I get it. It's hard to build something that lasts. But it's worthwhile. And... I'm sorry.

AVA

Aw. *(Smiles; pats him on the cheek)* Little Ben is growing up.

BEN

You know, we never got to go to that concert.

AVA

I told you, I don't date coworkers.

BEN

Good thing we're getting fired tomorrow.

AVA

Good thing.

She moves to leave.

BEN

Where are you going?

AVA

I have one last sports section to put together. And you have a goodbye blog to write. If you can handle it.

AVA exits.

BLACKOUT. The sound of presses runs for a moment and then ceases with a clang followed by...

Silence.

ACT II

SCENE 6

AT RISE: *Nighttime. Everyone has gone home. The office is dark with the exception of a few security lights that always stay on.*

The door opens and NATHAN enters. He's a little wobbly. Has he been drinking?

NATHAN carries two brown paper bags with him. He looks around to see if anyone is there. Satisfied, he flips on a few of the lights, though the newsroom remains dimly lit. He makes his way to his office and sets the bags on his desk. Unpacking one of the bags he removes a brand new brandy decanter and a box of four glasses. Also from the bag he pulls a half empty bottle of scotch. He pulls the cork and takes a swig then empties the rest of it into the decanter. He sets the decanter and glasses on a bookshelf and admires them for a second. Lastly he pulls a box of cigars and a lighter from the bag and crumples the bag up. It is empty.

From the second bag, he pulls a can of gasoline, though he barely looks at it. He sets it down on the desk and throws the two paper bags away.

He considers his office for a second and then goes back out into the newsroom. Again he looks around to see if anyone is there. Then, he pushes CATHY's desk over until it blocks the main doors. There is no escape.

NATHAN

(In slightly slurred speech; he's tipsy, but not fall-down drunk) Extra! Extra! Read all about it! (Laughs a little to himself.) Extra! Extra Edition... Breaking News! So fricken' important. We had to print another... paper.

NATHAN returns to his office and pours himself a drink from the decanter. He addresses the empty chair in mock formality.

NATHAN (CONT)

Welcome to you, sir. So good of you to come. Yes, I am the Editor-in-chief of this fine news gathering organization. I'm sorry? Yes, of course. I'm honored that you're interested in doing a story on me. On me! Can you imagine? What could you possibly find so interesting about me? Can I offer you a drink? *(Pause; pours a second drink)* Well, yes, the paper. No one reports like we report. Yes, yes, and the awards. You know, it's humbling to be in such a place as this. With such quality writers. Honestly it's a pleasure editing them. I'd do it for free if they would let me. It's always such a joy. But, they insist on paying me, for some reason. I guess they want to keep me around. Ha.

NATHAN sets the second drink down and once again looks at the can of gasoline. The previous fantasy is gone. He drains the remainder of his drink and then tosses the glass haphazardly at the trash can. It misses and clatters on the floor. NATHAN finally picks up the can of gasoline and carries it out into the news room.

NATHAN (CONT)

Extra! Extra! Hot off the presses.

He begins splashing gasoline around the newsroom.

NATHAN (CONT)

Newspaper burns to the ground. No more news. No more reporting. Read all about it.

NATHAN liberally splashes gasoline around the newsroom, the break area, on CATHY's desk, center stage, and then into the Editor-in-Chief's room. He spreads the last of it around his office and then finally all over his desk and on his chair. Empty, he tosses the can aside and sits in his chair. He cuts the end off of the cigar.

NATHAN (CONT)

Let's celebrate, shall we? To a remarkable hundred and seven years of printing. Damon, you bastard.

He puts a cigar in his mouth and fondles the lighter.

NATHAN (CONT)

Don't act like you didn't know, Damon. Don't act like it was a complete surprise that we were bankrupt.

He puts the lighter up to the cigar as if he was about to light it.

NATHAN (CONT)

But first a few parting words. To the death of journalism. To the death of the free press. To the death of reporting with integrity. To the death of the fourth branch of government. A toast! To the death. To the death!

NATHAN puts his cigar in his mouth and brings his lighter to his cigar again. This time he intends to light it, but a crash comes from the front doors. Someone is trying to get in. NATHAN stares blankly at the office door trying to understand what he's seeing.

BEN

(Off) Nathan? ... Mr. Parker?

NATHAN does not respond.

BEN (CONT)

I know you're in there. Your car is the only one in the parking lot.

NATHAN does not respond.

BEN (CONT)

Is there something.... Did you put this desk in front of the door?

BEN struggles with the door eventually kicking it in enough so that he can squeeze into the office. He enters going over the desk, through the small opening in the door. NATHAN stands and gives a loud round of applause.

NATHAN

Bravo! Nice to see you made it.

BEN

(Entering Editor-in-Chief office) Ugh. It stinks in here. Why does it smell like—Hey, what's going on?

NATHAN

It's a celebration. Would you like to join me?

BEN

What are we celebrating?

NATHAN

The end of an era. Cigar?

BEN

No, I don't smoke.

NATHAN

Not yet. Ha! Oh, that's funny. Sorry, you'll get it later.

BEN notices the cigar and zippo lighter. The situation is apparent to him and now his only concern is to keep NATHAN from flicking the lighter. He never takes his gaze off of the lighter.

BEN

Why don't you put the lighter down? With the fumes in here, one spark—

NATHAN

Would you like a drink? Look, I have a real decanter like real Editors-in-Chief have in their office. Isn't that fantastic? The women love it. Let me pour you a drink.

He takes the full glass and dumps it sloppily on the floor. Then he takes the decanter and carefully refills the glass. The entire time, he never loses his grip on the lighter.

NATHAN (CONT)

Here you go, Ben. To the future of this newspaper.

Ben carefully takes the drink.

BEN

You don't have to do this.

NATHAN

Ben, tell me, what do you find so damn appealing about this place?

BEN

I'm not talking about the newspaper. I'm talking about you.

NATHAN

Me? Oh Ben, you're too young to understand. This whole business is sinking. Like a great ugly steamship in a tempest. Our boilers are coming loose from their moorings and water is coming over the side. It's abandon ship. Every man for himself.

BEN

So, get in a lifeboat, then. Live to write another day.

NATHAN

Ben, Ben, Ben. I'm the captain. I've been the captain for a cursed thirty-two days. Thirty-two. And you know what they say? Do you know? Drink. You're not drinking. A captain must go down with the ship.

BEN

It's just a job, Mr. Parker. It's not a ship.

NATHAN

So, now you're calling me Mr. Parker? Well, stop it. Call me.... Captain Parker.

BEN

There is life beyond this newspaper. I just don't think you see it. Get out and do something else.

NATHAN

Like what? Ben, you're young. So young. I am a relic. A useless artifact. And I'm to be tossed out, like yesterday's news. You can do anything you want. You can learn a whole new trade if you want. Life is your oyster. Me? I'm done. I know so little about the online world. Multimedia... digital... whatever it is that writers do these days. I belong to yesterday's era. And there's nothing left for me to do.

BEN

So retire, then. Surely you've saved something.

NATHAN

Retirement? Good God, man. Never retire. Do you know how many people die after they retire? It's lethal, I tell you. Spend the rest of my days angrily poking my finger at the TV saying "See? See? That's what's wrong with America." No, thank you. It's a horrible thing to do to a man; taking his purpose from him. No one lives without a purpose. Not for long, anyway.

BEN

(Not sure what to say) I'm sorry.

NATHAN

It's not your fault, Ben. I wish you'd leave so I can light this cigar.

BEN

What about that woman? Laura. Don't you want to see her again?

NATHAN

I've seen the last of Laura. She came by the office one evening.

BEN

What'd she say?

This is Not the End of the Play

Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes