

ink in his BLOOD
... a short story

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Sadness, certainly, cloaked the newsroom, but to a person, they knew that today was inevitable and that Peter Gentry had died with his boots on, the predictable end of a spiral he had put into motion an easy decade before anyone else in the newsroom was born.

Peter was born to a family in the clutches of the Great Depression and the economies of necessity from those days later would emerge as an obsession in a focused, obsessive life. As an only child, he grew up fast but also grew up apart from others, competing with and against himself and sorting life’s priorities to his liking in a self-imposed vacuum.

School was a contest and education was nothing more than a low hurdle. In Peter’s 12 years of public school, a single B marred an otherwise perfect succession of As, and 55 years later, he still fairly spat out the teacher’s name who gave him the noxious B.

But it was during those same school years that he experienced the heady intoxication of newspapering. The intoxication of knowing details of an event before others did; the thrill inherent in the subtle power of acting as a filter for news and dictating how a story was presented and played; the surge of adrenaline as deadlines drew near.

Even as a high school sophomore and junior, he drank deeply of journalism’s queer potion and his life’s mold was cast; his after-school haunts becoming the library and the inky local weekly newspaper rather than the playing field and soda shop.

But this new love affair was not without its frustrations. Peter's insistence on doing everything himself and his incessant criticism of and impatience with other's efforts when they fell short of his standards took their toll. He quickly found himself in the "always a bridesmaid, never a bride" situation when competing for leadership roles.

After graduation, he found brief flashes of satisfaction in the Army of the Korean War that suited him well. A highly structured, "no surprises" atmosphere accommodated his predispositions but challenges on post newspapers waned even as promotions came his way. After all, he reasoned, if Ernest Hemingway was in the Army, the brass would have him behind a desk managing younger writers.

And so he left the service when his short hitch was up and sought higher education with a vengeance, completing his bachelor's degree in a whirlwind record and thrusting himself into a master's degree program, completion of which allowed him to write his ticket to virtually any paper he chose.

And choose one he did, accepting a reporter's job on one of the country's top 10 journals. Strangely, though, his stint was one of less than a year when he left for reasons about which he later was vague and returned to his hometown paper.

But returning home was returning to where he thrived. If anyone ever hit the ground running, it had to have been Peter Gentry. There wasn't an organization to which he wasn't privy or a city agency with which he wasn't familiar.

His schooling had paid off and could he write. Write with a conciseness and clarity that fellow reporters admired. He was good at what he did and woe be the editor careless with a red editing pen.

But Peter found ways to combat other interfering with his writing. By delaying and delaying turning in a story until the last minute, there never was the time for more than a cursory glance by supervisors. His sacred copy, therefore, was spared the coarse touch of the damned rookies, a gloat he enjoyed while winning the battle — but losing the war.

Peter's cards always were played close to his vest and he mastered the poker-faced

expression while, in reality, acting as a sponge when any conversation turned to city affairs or current events. Acquaintances had best brace for an argument if they carelessly questioned anything within his area of expertise.

Succeeding years saw that sharpness grow, but inflexibility and bitterness grew along with it. Anyone with less time in the trenches was forever branded a rookie despite their accomplishment, despite their credentials. His quest for scoops caused him to insulate himself even from other members of the team, focusing on his own job, his own story, his own beat.

That focus began to show itself in other ways. Things became increasingly black and white. One day he decided that anything he wrote, whether it be a news story, grocery list or letter to his family, would be in Associated Press style, the bulletin-like, inverted-pyramid, hard-core style more akin to dispatches from the battlefield than a chatty letter. “One less thing to worry about,” he said.

Later, he opted against using a credit line on his stories, bucking an attempt by newspapers to become more personal and associated stories with their writers. “One less thing to worry about,” he said.

Another day, when the alternator in his car failed and caused him to be late for work, he began walking the three or four miles to and from work, shunning the offer of a lift from others with a grunt and a brush of his hand. “One less thing to worry about,” he fumed.

Clothes and routine hygiene no longer held the priority they once did and newcomers to the paper could rarely see beyond the idiosyncrasies to see the driven, penetrating mind when it was focused on a story or interview.

The perfectionist in him rebelled when any job, large or insignificant, was done sloppily and rather than take the time to teach others how to do it correctly, he quietly acquired the task, imposing slavish hours on himself.

Peter raised checklists to a science and methodical orderliness became his hallmark.

But one day, things changed.

Each month, the 20-odd days worth of papers are collected and bound into a single hard-

back volume and a year of so worth of these past issues are kept in the newsroom for reference and for the public to look through.

As the books were dropped off from the bindery, Peter choose to scour the latest volume for binding flaws, missing issues and other faults, and as often as not he would find an imperfection that required it be sent back and redone to make it perfect.

This being late April, Peter neatly undid the brown Kraft paper from the newly arrived book and checked its spine to make sure the book was imprinted with the previous month and current year.

“It’s about time, April is nearly over and we’re just now getting the March issues,” he fumed to himself.

With a scow and a clear “Damn it,” he saw that instead of March — the previous month — the binder was printed with May — the next month — on its spine. “And I wrote the instructions myself, the damned rookies.”

Peter wasn’t prepared for what he saw when he opened the cover and saw a May 1 issue. He recoiled and physically took a step backwards but immediately began to pore over that first page, his finger racing to the nameplate — yes, it was the current year and all the stories dealt with topics that were ongoing, some reporting on decisions that weren’t to be reached for better than a week.

“Alright, which jerk is trying to pull my leg,” he thought, looking around from desk to desk to detect a smirk or even a sideways glance from a junior reporter bent on upstaging him.

His thoughts raced ... He ripped over to May 2, to May 3. There was a story on the finale of the upcoming basketball tournament with the local team losing in overtime, complete with pictures. “Pictures,” he thought, “they couldn’t fake those...”

He found himself holding his breath and feeling almost light-headed. “Do I share this or use the one break in my life to my advantage,” he pondered. He made his decision with a careful closing of the book, tucking it under his arm and self-consciously strolling back to his cubbyhole of an office.

Next month's primary election. Who won it? The Kentucky Derby. Wait 'til that office pool is circulated. The fighting in Yemen. Did the U.S. finally send troops in? Question beget question and his heart pounded as he wedged the book between his desk and the wall and tried to plan his strategy.

Forty years of fighting with himself had disciplined his patience, had made checklists a part of his daily routine and had honed a meticulous neatness to a science.

He would savor this stroke of luck as long as he could, deciding to ration himself but to the next day's news. That's what any professional would do, he reasoned. Besides, that would let him test his ability to predict the outcome of scores of ongoing news situations.

He closed the door to his office for the first time since he had moved in, pulled out the book and looked on Page 1.

"The school board renewed the superintendent's contract. And gave him a bonus, to boot," he muttered. "We were expecting the renewal, but no one's talked about any bonus. Wait 'til I rag that damned rookie Terry about not speculating on that in his advance stories," he thought.

A knock on his door startled him and he shoved the book back into its hiding place.

"What is it," he snapped.

"Just the editors' meeting, it's 1:30 you know," the copy desk chief said.

"I was on my way. Just answering a phone call," Peter lied.

"Whatever," his co-worker sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

Those daily meetings, where the various editors discuss what they anticipate for the next day's edition, shortly stopped being a necessary evil and became a cat-and-mouse game in his mind. And he was the cat.

Those were odd opinions Peter had and when did he become so zealously interested in Yemen, the others wondered. But day after day, his predictions came true and their respect for him grew.

After a week, Peter bolted upright at midnight and had trouble sleeping the rest of the night, anticipating the next day's news and how he could make the best use of his treasure.

The Derby situation remained a puzzle. With the name of its winner in hand, he could have placed some discrete, but sizable bets, and broken the bank in Louisville. Instead, he simply made his choice in the office pool, won his \$45 and crowed about his knowledge of horseflesh. The prize went into his desk drawer with three or four months' previous paychecks.

Days grew long as he read word after word and story after story, trying to outguess what he knew he would read the next morning. He grew resentful when newcomers scoffed at a prediction he knew would bear fruit. So many times he wished he could grab a fellow reporter by the ear and show him the truth, but the game would have ended there.

Peter grew possessive and paranoid of the book and by week's end began spending the night at the newspaper, explaining away his behavior by saying he simply was staying late, waiting for a call-in interview.

Hollow, gaunt eyes accompanied through the succeeding days but, without fail, he was able to dazzle his coworkers with an unlikely prediction that bore fruit, complete down to the finest detail.

As time for the primary election arrived, Peter engineered a classic coup, arranging pre-election interviews that foretold the striking upset only he really anticipated.

Even Peter knew the game was taking its toll when he would find himself falling asleep at his keyboard by the end of the third week, snapping back to a hazy state of alertness he was nursing with countless cups of rank coffee.

He actually welcomed the coming end of the month for the strain of secrecy had left him as little more than a Zombie and everyone had distanced themselves from him and his strange, driven, obsessive behavior.

On that last day, he awoke from his chair at 3 a.m., cracked open the book and pored over every word and sentence on the front page — but there was nothing of monumental interest there.

He turned the page and started at the top. Midway down the page, a tightness enveloped his chest and he struggled for breath as his finger ran across the last story — the obituary of Peter Gentry.

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