

SKETCH

Magazine of Creative Writing
Iowa State College

Last Deadline

Robert Crossley

Ag. Jl. '39

CARL was just stepping out of the dark little washroom, wiping his hands on a wet towel, when he saw George, the foreman, and the other backshop men gather around the counter in the outer office.

He thought it strange, for usually they were working by 7:30, Lloyd at the linotype setting next week's legals, Henry tearing down the ads from yesterday's run, George back upstairs on his job work.

As he approached, they turned quietly. George still had his hat on, Carl noticed.

"Might as well go home," George said. "Haven't got a boss this morning."

"What . . . ?"

"Ben died last night . . . 'bount eleven o'clock. Mrs. Hines called just now."

"Gosh," said Henry, always wild-eyed and needing a shave to-day as he did after every press day, "I can't believe it. Why, he said he was feeling fine yesterday. Still, you never know who'll be next. Ben should have watched that heart."

"I went past the funeral home about two o'clock. There was a light on then, but I never guessed what it was for," Lloyd added. "Old Ben was just working too hard this last week."

George sighed. "I never could get him to take it easy. He should never have been out there making up. I guess, though, it was that big fair edition last week that really killed him."

CARL swallowed hard. Hadn't he sold 2,500 inches of advertising to make that a record issue? And hadn't Ben, just a couple of days ago, complimented Carl in his kindly way on the layouts and the way he had sold some of the tough accounts? Ben had gotten a kick out of the big edition. Surely that couldn't have been what killed him.

In fact, Carl thought, it was more likely the skimpy eight-page paper they'd gotten out this week. Small as it was, it had been late and Ben had worked clear through the noon hour yesterday to get it out in time for the city carriers. It was funny, wasn't it, that Ben should have bowed out with this eight-pager, his smallest edition in more than a year.

But he was gone and the shopmen were talking about him and reconstructing every small detail of the past few days.

Carl, too, had something to reconstruct—something more than he would have had even a day sooner. He went over to his desk, opened a drawer and looked at the stuff he'd brought to show Ben.

He wouldn't have brought it yesterday morning because though he admired and respected Ben then, he didn't really know him. Not like he did since last night.

A STRANGE feeling came over him, as if it was his fault that it had been too late. And yet he was glad for that talk. Ben, staying late to run through the files, had got a kick out of Carl's conversation with the two highway patrolmen whom the sheriff had brought over from Fort Dodge to tell Carl why the carnival company didn't have to buy Iowa license plates as he'd made Carl do.

Yesterday had been quite a day, when you stopped to think about it . . . lots of things to remember. That deal with the sheriff, and that car full of sideshow people who had left the two pygmies out in front to eat sandwiches while the mechanical man,

the magician, the ventriloquist and the opium smoker had gone over to the Tavern for lunch. Those pygmies, they had scared Carl's wife almost to death at the fair. Folks said they'd eaten right up at the counter at Stilenko's, at which was hardly surprising at that.

Yes, Carl remembered those things from yesterday, but not as he remembered that talk with Ben after the cops had gone.

"Guess the sheriff wishes he hadn't hooked you for a license now," Ben had chuckled.

CARL had walked back by the files and leaned across the counter while Ben looked for 40-years ago items. Ben was more talkative than usual. "My girls will be ready for college next year," he said. "What do you think of sending them to Ames?" he asked Carl. "Their mother wants them to go to a finishing school, but I'd rather see them go to an ordinary college."

They talked for nearly an hour. Carl remembered he was late for supper, and this morning that thought seemed like a tangible keepsake left to him by Ben. No one need know how this morning Carl had gone through his old suitcase to find his scrapbook of editorials and some copies of the college paper. Those were for Ben to see. Carl wondered why he had waited so long. He knew Ben wouldn't agree with the editorials, but it seemed silly, knowing Ben as he did since last night, to have worried about that. Ben would have read them and in his quiet, sympathetic way, have said, "Well, you've got a right to your own ideas."

You could have your ideas, as long as Ben could have his. Carl thought how fair Ben really was, how Walt Parr had trusted Ben enough last week to ask him just how much advertising his absent boss would want to run that week. Ben got a kick out of being fair and independent, it seemed to Carl, as he recalled what Ben had done with the Lacey divorce story when young Lacey's aunt had asked him not to print it on the front page. Ben had chuckled and put it under the society column, "where all those old girls would see it."

But Ben was gone just like that. Esther, Ben's secretary, was crying and couldn't talk to people when they came in to ask about him. Carl could talk to them. His eyes were dry, but his

mouth and throat were too, and he tried to avoid looking at Ben's typewriter, the old battered green one that no one else would use because it skipped every third space.

They came in, one by one.

Bill Hicks, the town marshal, was first; then Bill Hart, the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce; then Ray Watson, the druggist, Paul Clark who owned the men's shop next door, and young Frisk, who grumbled about the paper and never advertised.

"What's this we hear about Ben?" they would ask.

"Why, only yesterday he was telling me he never felt better in his life."

Carl talked to them all. He went out a while, but didn't feel like selling. George and Henry and Lloyd went back to work. "Ben wouldn't see any sense in closing," Henry said.

Wind Wolves

Clyde Wilson

A. E. '41

Do you hear the cry as the pack goes by,
The wind wolves hunting across the sky?
Hear them tongue it, keen and clear,
Hot on the flanks of the flying deer?

Across the forest, moor and plain,
Their hunting howl goes up again.
All night they'll follow the ghostly trail,
All night we'll hear the phantom wail.

For tonight the wind wolf pack hold sway
From Pegasus Square to the Milky Way,
And the frightened bands of cloud deer flee
In scattered bands of two and three.