

Way Back In The Day

Remembrance of Things Present

WIP — By Ron Kenner

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Sexy White Boulders

From: Kathlene E.

*"I was reading a romance—and it wasn't the best one ever written but I was determined to get through to the end for some obscure reason. Got about halfway through and there was the passage where he was fighting his attraction for her. About midway through the paragraph my eyes read "her white boulders." With a few more words, it was obvious the proper words for the context were *her white shoulders* but by that point I was laughing so hard the words were swimming together on the page. Never did finish that book...."*

To: Kathlene E
From Ron Kenner

I loved your "white boulders" – well. . . not yours, but has it occurred to you that not all "typos" or "slip ups" in print are typos or slip ups? I'll admit to one that I used a few times.

Years back I worked on the copy desk of a daily paper that took on a printing and publishing job for a small nearby weekly. As the new man on the

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rim I had this weekly “newspaper” dumped on me one day each week (sometimes with apologies) so that I could, either in the morning or afternoon—basically, as it was suggested, whenever I felt I could bear it—kind of fly through the thing and lay out the pages, and then send the whole awful pile (but our more respectable daily picked up a few extra bucks for printing it) to the print shop to get it quickly out of our sight. Years later I co-directed a small press bureau in Copenhagen, Denmark, and was always amused that *Berlisketidene*, the city’s respected conservative newspaper, owned and published the tabloid *BT*, while the more ‘liberal’ *Politiken*, the city’s other major daily then, owned and published the tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* (even more salacious than *BT*).

I admit that the quality of the copy coming in on that weekly was so depressing that—to maintain my sanity and to cheer myself up—occasionally I would write a “society page” headline for this weekly such as “Couple Honored in Shower.”

And sometimes I used my friend Art Zahler’s name in that paper, if I was desperate for attribution on some inconsequential article.

Well, I shouldn’t have—but I was young, and was my “Couple Honored in Shower” any worse than the headline that ran some months back in my big city home town daily that read, as I recall, something like “Women held in fire faces charges.” After that, I’d guessed there’d be editorial hell to pay by someone working the desk but then, soon afterward, they ran a headline on the order of “Women held in fire is convicted.” You’d think the fire itself was enough.

Or how about the headline that ran on the East Coast that said, “Man executed after long speech.” (I should keep that in mind.)

Or, “Two Trains Crash; Three Missing.”

And not least, of course, the headline that noted, in concert with the call for the city council to recommend abstinence—“City Council Takes up Masturbation.” (I can’t remember if, in puritanical Massachusetts, that one had an exclamation point), and these most probably WERE innocent errors.

Anyway when I got really depressed those days over much confusion that passed for writing, with or without typos, while shuffling out that weekly I’d sometimes cheer myself up by making up a clever “letter to the editor” and mailing it out to my own newspaper under a false name. Probably a number of editors then wouldn’t even have checked, or still don’t. But one time our

managing editor, the ME, Tom Keevil, a sophisticated, “skeptical” newsman, came up to both Don Cantrell (city news editor then) and me, the two of us sitting alongside each other and the ME’s first choice for culprits. The ME had a good-sized pile of these “letters” in his hand—eighteen of them, if I recall correctly, all opened up and stacked and each with its own envelope and neatly joined together as though conspiratorially, the paper clip a sure sign of the ME’s sleuthing.

One of these “letters to the editor,” I remember, was squiggled out with a kind of old lady signature and, of course, the properly chosen pen and ink color and stationery.

It innocently raised the question, “Could you please give me more information about the John Birch Society. I’ve long been interested in horticulture.”

That particular letter was written by Linda Bixby, as I remember, married then to my buddy Jerry Bixby who co-authored the original screen treatment for *Fantastic Voyage* [before the novel] and a far far better story it was then the one that finally came out in 1966 when 20th Century Fox got through with it; and of course there was my friend “Charlie Brown” at that letter writing party at my knotty pined snazzy place that night—or he went by the name of Charlie Brown then, as I recall so that occasionally, in a pinch, he could use his real name as a reference. . . . [This was in the early 60s.]

—but where was I?

“Oh, no, I didn’t write any of those letters,” I told the ME, trying for a wide-eyed expression. And he asked the same question of my good cohort, Cantrell, who also offered up (the ME was standing; we were sitting) the same startled look of innocence. The ME twitched the near-smile on one side of his mouth, shrugged, looking at us both as if to say, “Oh yeah, sure—” then moved on. After all, he had the paper to get out. The two of us waited a reasonable amount of time so as not to appear as conspirators, then huddled in conspiracy trying to determine whether he believed us.

Much to his credit, I thought, a few days later we all read on the editorial page one of those “letters to the editor” from among that multi-colored paper-clipped pile Keevil had in his hand when he approached us. It was the missive I had written, in red ink, of course, and one which I’m proud of to this day—no doubt one of the more important contributions of my career; **although admittedly, looking back over the long haul, undoubtedly not many of us “writers” could match the contributions of a good school crossing guard.**

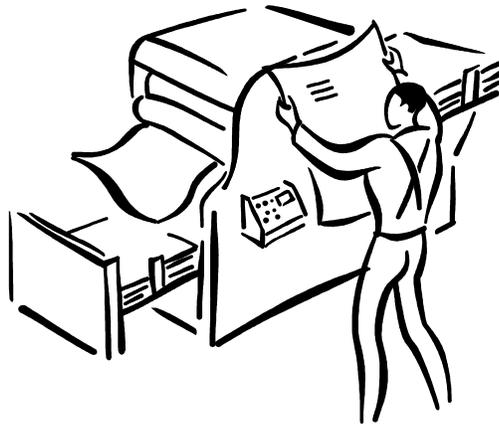
I'm still rather proud of that letter, written back when in the '60s even if I didn't sign it with my own name.

The epistle, as it read in the newspaper on the editorial page, said:

"Dear editor, would you please bring me up to date on the Communist threat. I've been out of town over the weekend."

This is all prelude, of course—and possibly one of my shorter ones—to let you know that if I'd known about (your) ☺ white boulders I might well have used that "typo," too, same as way back when, editing the society page of that same daily in those days when "society pages" were nothing but glorified telephone books; when the copy coming in from this section was often so bad that on the copydesk you couldn't bear to read it and so, if it was halfway near legible, you simply rushed it on to the print shop.

Those were the times when the annual awards for society page writing often went to some of the worst society page writers, since—ask yourself—who else would get their "society" copy, pages that a true deskman would typically hold gingerly at the edges, completely rewritten on the desk. Right, Gordon (Keith)?



Stopping the press!

This is another prelude to that special day in my life when, as a fledgling newsman, I enjoyed—the only one time in my journalism career—that rare and distinct honor of STOPPING the presses.

Admittedly, it wasn't me who actually got to push the button, but a squealer cohort on the paper, Burt Casey, the star reporter then and also the Sunday magazine editor.

As if all that wasn't enough Casey was still making points with the ME (Keevil), I surmised, though he denied it to me. Meanwhile he'd pointed my headline out to the managing editor who also just happened to be in the back shop then and one or the other hit the button—and all because of a little headline I wrote that even fit the top of the page just perfect.

A few minutes after the big moment in the back shop, Casey told me about stopping the press. I didn't see Keevil, fortunately, but Casey was still shaking his head, laughing. But first, a little perspective.

Actually, I didn't think the headline was all that bad, hardly so offensive as when many newspapers in those days—'50s and '60s—and some much later yet, ran only pictures of white brides on the wedding pages so that one might infer from what you read in the newspapers that, although the odds surely defied it, no black person had ever gotten married throughout the whole history of many if not most (maybe all, for all I knew) major cities around the good 'ol US of A then.



Hit the button!

The headline. It was the lead story for the society page, a normal full size and called for an occasional six (those were the days of "pioneering" graphics when we were one of the few papers around adventurous enough to use the wider columns in a six column format) or eight column banner strip completely across the top of the front page of the local society section.

It was a seemingly "breathless," hyped-up article about a "really" big fashion show coming up, and . . . so help me—after all, on the society pages even their readers never had money problems—the lead took up the theme that because of the coming fashion show you (the reader) would "no longer have any excuse" that you didn't have any clothes to wear (for any occasion presumably).

Well I was sometimes fast but this time I wrote the headline as if with white heat—the lead coming trippingly off my tongue, you could say. I made the letter count and headline fit just perfect across the top of the page in what was maybe 48 or 60-point type. The *Wall Street Journal* not that far back in the '40s might have conceivably have used that larger 60 or 72-point size to announce World War II. At least it didn't have wraparound comics with a teasing small box in the upper left or right corner that pleaded—"World War II

starts, please turn to inside pages!" (a funny, plagiarized from an interview I once did with myself).

Meanwhile, I know the suspense is just killing you—the headline read, as I well remember it: **Fashion Show to Strip Feminine Excuse!**

Now you tell me, was that so bad? (No big deal, actually, when compared to some of the headlines and captions I'd see written occasionally by some disgruntled reporter at the 'ol *Herald Express*, the evening Hearst paper in Los Angeles. This one, a little show and a strip, was pushing it a little, perhaps a little heavy handed, but it still hardly carries the full *impact* of "your" (Kathlene E's) sexy white boulders.



... **HOT COPY!**

Correction on my "white boulders" copy—make that *stationery* (with an "e") and don't *move* it! Also, in "Sexy White Boulders" message I meant to write not just "brides" but the newspaper "society pages" back in the 1950s and later tended to use only photos of "white brides."

As a *mea culpa* for the "stationery" misspelling—an embarrassing fix—I'll tell you a truly "hot story" about when I was working on my first day job at that same paper as a reporter. . . . (Of course there's always another blooper, and another, until *mea culpa*, on a whimsical day, finally got locked in as what I called *mea gulpa*.) [With a G 😊]

Well, the first day on my job then (as a "world news" or "wire editor") I didn't show up because "we" got the dates confused; and the second "first" day in I'd come in later because I'd gotten to be late and wasn't used to getting up at four in the morning or whatever ungodly hour that was.

Anyway, I was 25, had never been a wire editor before and yet had a somewhat important—you might say "big"—job: playing Atlas daily, squeezing the world into 80 column inches, if I remember correctly, which was page 2, because that's all the whole world was worth those days (early 1960s) even to mid-sized, award winning dailies.

I had mounds of AP copy and the like, twenty-inch stories that often had to be cut or rewritten into five or six inches; headlines to be written; and of course there was that Mobutu and Lumumba stuff going on, which was all Greek to me, though everyone enjoyed the stories

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about fearless soldiers supposedly told by Mobutu or Lumumba that they had magic bullets—and antidotes to magic bullets—and so on.

That was the picture. I was in deep, mostly just sweating things out, trying to get the page together in time to meet the deadline and with barely enough time for a puff on my cigarettes (I later quit when I got married) which I occasionally rested on the edge of the desk.

Casey (see “Sexy White Boulders” message) was sitting at the desk directly adjacent to mine, across from me, a tall, handsome guy, the star reporter and one of the “coolest” guys around. He also put out the paper’s (weekly magazine) where I later wrote some humor pieces and some “fancy restaurant” reviews for him—that was funny, too, since I could barely boil water.

But on this occasion I’d only just been introduced to Casey. He was friendly but we were both busy and pushing through our work; him with everything under control; me in a near panic.

From surface appearances, of course, I was totally reserved; just doing my thing like I always was supposed to have done it even though I’d never done it before, and the deadline was coming up. In the army, in clerk typist school, our motto was “Never retreat –back-space!” but you can’t always get the easy way, and this time it was “forward march,” with my cutting, chopping, rewriting, puffing away and flicking ashes. I didn’t have an ashtray.

Before long the cool Casey made some coughing noise, something to catch my attention.

“Hey Ron,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Your wastebasket!”

“What about it?”

“Well it’s on fire,” he said.



He was rather casual about it, I thought; he was the star reporter, well-used to pressure. Even so, the flames were starting to lick up toward the top of the small waste paper basket just beside me on the wooden floor.

“Oh,” I said, calmly, acting the well-seasoned reporter, my first day on the job. “What do you think I ought to do about it?”

“Well,” he said, puffing on his pipe, thinking a moment. “Why don’t you kick it out.”

“Oh”

Yet under the circumstances that made sense to me. . . . Our facing desks were maybe fifteen, twenty feet from the door into the parking lot. But of course I misunderstood him. I had some reservations, but knowing I had to act fast before things got worse went ahead and did it—jammed my foot into the waste basket!

It was hot, too!

Now I had to kick or yank the basket off my foot, which I did, of course, and then proceeded with an Indian dance—trying to stomp out all of those flaming pieces of paper which were now all over the floor—thus officially introducing myself to the newsroom as one more, what else, hot reporter.

I think it was even better than that “wonderful dance” I did (the one my friend Jim Holmes is always talking about as one of the great funny moments of his life) when we’d just come out of that giant sales outlet Costco and then a gust came along and the receipt blew out of my hands. I ran over to pick it up but, every time I got close it just seemed to *know* and blew off again.

Then, Jim’s favorite picture, after many frustrating moves but still trying I finally just disappeared around the corner of the building. What could I say, that’s how we go sometimes!

Anyway, I’m a little older now but that’s the kind of dumb thing with the waste basket I could do if I still wanted to (and sometimes do, if you ask my wife Mary). I could do worse, I supposed, then getting lost in the moment and getting myself into a kind of authorial fix by misspelling “stationery” as “stationary.”

In a way *stationary* was correct the first time, because once that sucker’s out in print it ain’t going anywhere.