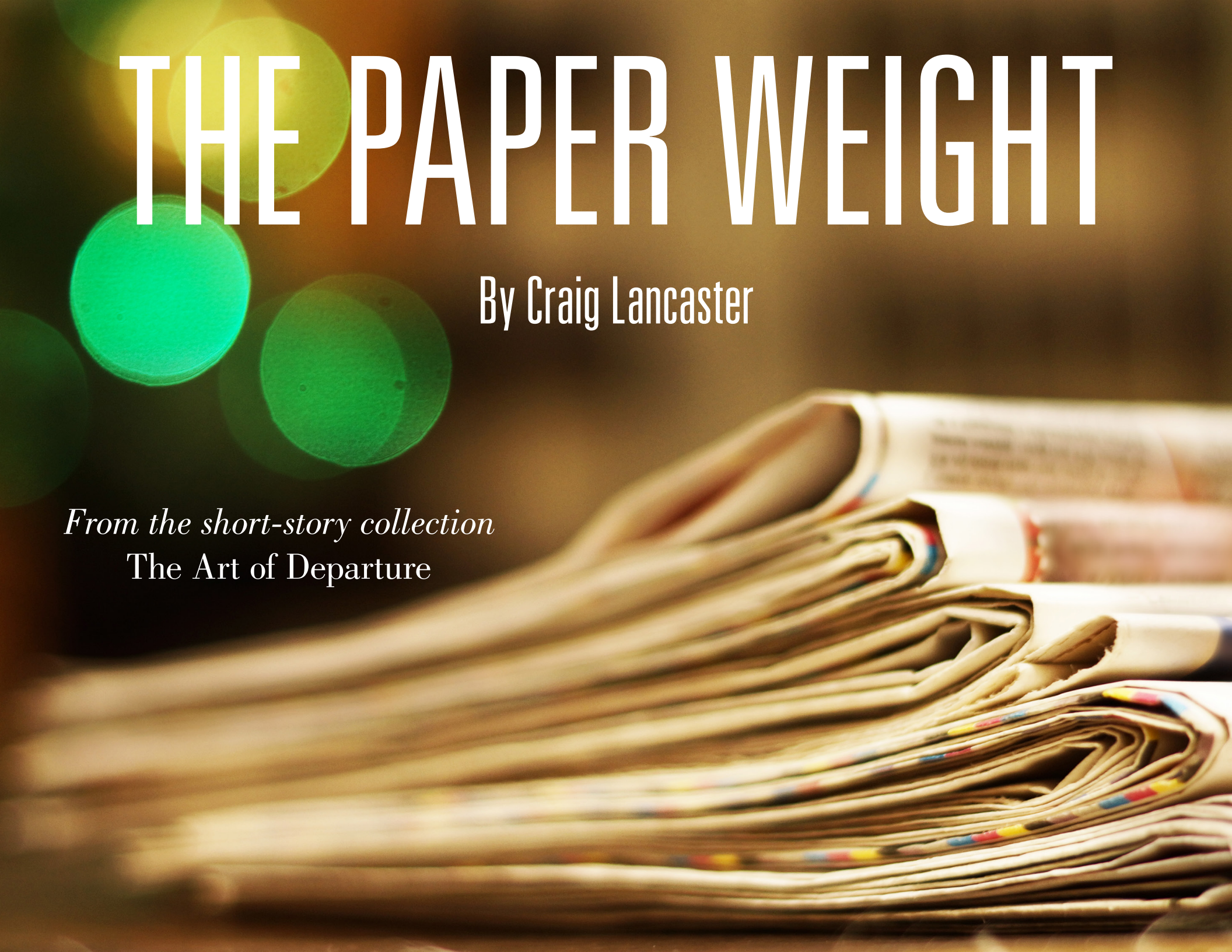


THE PAPER WEIGHT

By Craig Lancaster

From the short-story collection
The Art of Departure



GILCHRIST SUSPECTED IT WOULD BE BAD WHEN THE DRONE called him at home before nine in the morning. The eggs burned while The Drone ripped through half of the OED just to tell Gilchrist that he should clear his schedule for a meeting at eleven. Gilchrist's long experience with the guy suggested there wasn't a detour or digression he wouldn't take, especially if he were somehow, probably by accident, in the general vicinity of a point.

An hour later, when The Diploma didn't even say hello at the coffee pot, the picture became clearer. Kevin Gilchrist hadn't honed his bullshit detector just to ferret out the lies of politicians and other professional windbags. Something big was going down, and from the pallid looks on the faces of The Drone and The Diploma, Gilchrist guessed that whatever it was would land on him.

Just before eleven, The Drone came out of his glass office and signaled Gilchrist to step into The Diploma's much larger adjacent office, also glass. Gilchrist had been the one who coined the term "the glassholes" as a collective for The Drone and The Diploma, a moniker so enthusiastically embraced by his colleagues that the name—and Gilchrist's role in promulgating it—inevitably made it back to the two people who were supposed to be out of the loop. The transgression hadn't come with punishment, *per se*, but Gilchrist didn't think it was an illusion that his ass, and his copy, had been hurting a lot more lately.

"Kevin, come on in and have a seat," The Diploma

said. The Drone closed the door and sat down in the chair nearest The Diploma's desk.

Gilchrist looked along the wall behind The Diploma and found the reason for the nickname. There, framing twenty-eight-year-old William Pennington's head, hung his undergraduate and master's diplomas. He had graduated *summa* in 2003 from the University of Kansas with a major in journalism, and then he went on to the University of Missouri and picked up a master's, also in journalism, two years later.

These facts about The Diploma caused Gilchrist to despise him on several levels.

First, he had only four years of honest-to-goodness, in-a-real-newsroom experience. And in those four years, he had kissed enough of the right asses to be running the whole shooting match at the *Herald-Gleaner*, which, back in the days when people actually read newspapers, had been a pretty damned good one.

Second, the guy went to Kansas and Missouri, for Christ's sake. If one were to equate collegiate sports with politics, it would be a little like defining oneself as an abortion-rights Republican from Alabama. (Gilchrist had begun to suspect that The Diploma didn't care much for sports. On the odd occasions when he would join a newsroom bull session, uniformly uncomfortable moments for everyone, The Diploma would put on a serpentine smile and slink away when talk turned to whatever game was in season.)

Third, The Diploma had a master's degree in journalism, which Gilchrist figured to be about as useful as a screen door on a battleship. Journalism—real journalism, the kind practiced by Gilchrist and those who had come before him at the *Herald-Gleaner*—didn't happen in a laboratory. It wasn't theoretical. It was real. It happened outside the glass walls, on the street, among people whose stories demanded to be told and among people who, as a matter of course, would lie, equivocate, prevaricate and falsify to keep somebody like Gilchrist from discovering the truth. The Diploma came out of Missouri with big ideas about databases and web hits and social media, none of which meant a damned thing to Gilchrist.

And then there was The Drone, Mike Lindell. A decade older than The Diploma, he didn't have any fancy sheepskins. He was a Montana boy, born and raised in Billings, schooled first at Northwest College in Wyoming and then later at Eastern Montana College. Gilchrist had shared a newsroom with Lindell for more than a decade and more or less tolerated him, but it was only in the past year that their stations had changed, to Gilchrist's considerable dismay.

The Diploma arrived the previous spring and immediately set about finding a managing editor, a right-hand man. A few people in-house put in for it—some of them damned good, like the region editor and Gilchrist's boss, Ann Benjamin. But one by one, as they came to figure out what the job would entail, they bowed out. So,

too, did the handful of candidates who emerged from outside the office.

Lindell, in Gilchrist's estimation the weakest link on the *Herald-Gleaner* copy desk, was the last man standing and got the job. The Drone's talent, aside from taking any piece of writing and strangling the life right out of it, lay in a willingness to carry water for The Diploma. (Gilchrist, in a pique a few months earlier, had told a colleague within earshot of The Drone that Lindell would be the one who someday showed up at work with a bucket of Flavor Aid. Gilchrist then had to explain the reference to Lindell before he was written up for conduct unbecoming.)

Now, Gilchrist looked warily at the glassholes and waited to hear what was on their collective mind.

"Kevin, thanks for coming in on such short notice," The Diploma said, rocking back in his chair and cupping his hands behind his head. "As you know, we're still looking for a night cops reporter."

"Yeah," Gilchrist said. "Tough break, losing Dodson to the *Denver Post*. Good kid. Smart. He'll do well down there."

"Yes, well," The Diploma said. "At any rate, we're still looking. But we think we have an idea."

Discomfort—more discomfort—hit Gilchrist.

"Go on."

"We want you to do the job," The Drone broke in. "But we want to do it in a new way, a way that might be more efficient."

Discomfort gave way to nausea. Gilchrist swallowed hard. He hated words like “efficient.”

“What we mean is that we want cops news to be much more web-driven,” The Diploma said. “For years, we’ve been writing long, involved crime stories. Readers don’t care. They don’t have time. They like car crashes and civic mayhem in small, easy-to-digest pieces. You should see our web traffic when we post a—”

“So, rip-and-read stuff,” Gilchrist cut in.

“Yes,” The Diploma lit up at Gilchrist’s quick grasp of the situation. “Yes, precisely. Get it on the web quick. We want you to be our clearinghouse of short, accessible crime items.”

Gilchrist also hated words like “accessible.”

Gilchrist set his hands on the edge of The Diploma’s desk to steady himself. He was sixty-two years old, nearly broke, just coming out of his third marriage, and now he was being steered toward a job that most newspapers turned over to a freshly scrubbed grad who was thankful for the shitty hours and shittier pay.

He flashed on the resignation letter, written but undelivered, sitting in the bottom of his desk drawer. He was particularly proud of the closing line—“The irony is, the word ‘news’ surrounds us – ‘news’paper, ‘news’room, ‘news’print – and yet I can’t remember the last time we printed anything that even resembles it”—even as he knew he didn’t have the guts to show it to anyone, even someone as contemptible as The Diploma.

“What about the job I already have?” Gilchrist asked. In the coming days, he was to hit Williston to do legwork on a story about the slowdown in the oil patch, pick up an agricultural feature in Jordan on the way home and, perhaps, to touch base with the woman in Baker who lived to tell the tale after her husband blew off her lower jaw with a shotgun.

“That’s the thing,” The Diploma said. “Given the financial realities of our situation right now, I think we’re going to have to make a choice here. Frankly, in this environment, the cops job is more important to us than covering the region. A story reported from an oil rig in North Dakota doesn’t sell tire ads here in town. You write some really interesting stories, Kevin, but they just don’t make much dent online. That’s where the future is, you know.”

Gilchrist’s temples throbbed. “But out in the rest of the world that doesn’t live in front of a computer, those stories get read, goddammit,” he protested.

“Let’s rein in the vulgarities, shall we?” The Diploma said. “Yes, your stories do well in print, but frankly, we’re ratcheting down our offerings there and making a bigger play online. You want to be a part of that, don’t you?”

Gilchrist stared at The Diploma, who picked idly at a loose thread on his cuff.

“Kevin, you’re a smart man, and I expect that you’ll do the smart thing here,” The Diploma said. “We’re giving you a chance to be on the ground floor of something very

interesting as our business model evolves. Let's give it a try, shall we?"

Gilchrist turned to The Drone, who nodded like a bobblehead doll. Gilchrist shifted his eyes back to The Diploma. He breathed deeply, considered his words, and plunged in.

"I don't need the likes of you to tell me how smart I am, OK? If I had been smart, I would have gotten out when I saw you coming. But I'm not smart, and I didn't get out, and you apparently don't have enough string to convince HR that I can be fired, so here we stand. I'll take the job, because I like to eat and to pay my bills, and I will do what I have to do."

The Diploma smiled, and for the first time, Gilchrist seized on a way to describe that peculiar look on Pennington's face. My God, he thought. The man is a lizard.

"But first, I'm going to tell you something," Gilchrist said. "A newspaper used to mean something to people. It kicked them in the ass when they needed it, it told them what they wanted to know and what they had to know, and every once in a while, it got a hold of a story so good and told it so well that it moved entire towns to act in the common good. I've never heard you talk about things like that, and maybe that's not your fault. You're just a kid. I've seen two generations of guys like you, guys who think that progress is made by changing the typefaces or making the pictures bigger or writing for people who don't give a damn

about reading. Maybe you don't have any recollection of the time I'm talking about. Well, I remember, and while I'm not stupid enough to think that it's coming back, I'll be right here as a reminder of it. Because you're dangerous, Bill. What you don't know is dangerous, and what you do know is dangerous."

The Diploma's smile faded at the edges.

"You can make me the devil if you want, Kevin, but times are changing. And we're changing with them."

Gilchrist stood up and headed for the door.

"Not for the better, it seems to me," he said.

IN THE ALLEY BEHIND THE LUTHERAN CHURCH, where Gilchrist had run after The Drone had intercepted him in the newsroom and used two hundred and fifty-seven words to say "your new job starts tonight," he tried to catch his breath and tamp down his emotions. "Jesus, Kev, it's not that you didn't see this one coming," he growled. "You're lucky you're not out on your ass."

He cupped his hands behind his head and gulped air. A sequential string of images bombarded his head—his first day at the pre-merger *Herald* in '71, glue pots and fistfights in the composing room. The teachers' strike in '75. Passing around the flask on New Year's. That crazy shit with Elizabeth Clare Prophet and the Church Universal and Triumphant. The hellacious fire season in '88 and the damn near torching of Yellowstone. The Freeman standoff. Ted Kaczynski. He had seen it all.

“You’re being sentimental and stupid,” he said, again out loud, which startled him. He grew angry with himself for glossing over thirty-eight years. Yeah, there had been good times, but there had been shitty times, too. Those occasions had been arriving with greater frequency over the past ten, twelve years as the newsroom began to resemble a bank more than a saloon, as idiosyncrasies were increasingly marginalized and employee handbooks began to have a greater say in things. In Kevin Gilchrist’s darkest nights of the soul, he would ask himself if he had simply become a relic. These questions had been going on long before *The Diploma* and *The Drone* put the chain saw up his ass. With each new boss—he counted four, including *The Diploma*, in the past decade—Gilchrist had marched into the office and said, “I’ve outlasted every editor at this place since 1971, and I’ll outlast you, too.” In every case, he had been correct, and in most cases, he had eventually won the boss over with tenacity and beautiful writing.

Not so with *The Diploma* on the second part, and probably not on the first, either.

At once, a compulsion to dial up someone and vent swept over Gilchrist, and it did him no favors to realize that he didn’t have the slightest idea whom he should call. Were it in his power, he would talk to Nanette. He felt certain that she would know how to put it into a perspective he could live with. But Nanette was sixteen years dead and gone now. Gilchrist packed himself away in saltiness and sarcasm, all the better to face an unfriendly world, but he

was a believer, too. God had his reasons for taking her; the answers were simply beyond the man she’d left behind.

The two imitations of marital bliss who followed the love of Gilchrist’s life would be surprised to hear from him, of that he could be sure. He didn’t need surprise. He needed solace, and he wouldn’t find it with two women who probably wouldn’t cross the street to spit on him if he were ablaze.

I could call Carla, he thought. And then, just as quickly, came the counterpoint: *No. Not today. Maybe not ever.*

Gilchrist let out a tonsil-rattling yell and plowed a right cross into the side of the church. The pain shot back through his hand and up his arm, and he nearly passed out. When finally he gathered his equilibrium, he staggered away, his arm limp at his side. He tried to flex his fingers; they wouldn’t move. He looked down at his hand, at the blood dripping off his knuckles.

He put the back of his hand up to his mouth and sucked the blood from each knuckle, then slowly lowered his arm again.

On the other side of the alley sat the police headquarters.

“I might as well say hello,” Gilchrist said, to no one.

THE NEXT MORNING—after a night’s work that entailed six hundred and twenty-three words, total, on two stabbings and a DUI, plus enduring the guffaws of every dispatcher in a three-county area after he introduced himself—Gilchrist dialed Carla’s number.

He waited out four rings and nearly bailed before she answered.

“Hello?”

“Carla, it’s Kevin, your dad.”

A pause. “Hi.” She clipped off the single syllable.

“I’ve been thinking about you,” he said.

“Oh? That’s new.”

“Carla—”

“What do you want? I’m busy.”

“I just want to talk. It’s been a while.”

“It has. Do you know how long?”

“I—”

“Three years.”

Gilchrist felt his dander rise. “Well, look, it’s not as if a bunch of your calls have been coming over the transom here.”

“No, that’s true. I lived there for eighteen years waiting for you to give me your time. It took a while, but I figured it out.”

“Listen, honey—”

“Don’t call me that. You gave up the right to call me that a long time ago, so don’t.”

“Something bad happened. I’ve been busted down to a cub reporter. They’re trying to force me to leave.”

“Someone should tell them that’s impossible.”

“Dammit, Carla, why does everything out of your mouth have to be so tart?”

“I learned from the best, Dad.”

“I’m in a real mess here, you know? I’ve been thinking about things, things I did wrong, things I could have done better. I just want to talk, that’s all.”

Carla laughed.

“What?” he asked.

“I just think it’s funny. God, for the first time, you’re finding out that your stupid job won’t love you back and now you’re hoping I will.”

“No,” he said.

“Well, I love you, Dad. I wish I didn’t, but I do. But you can’t just come back into my life with a free pass once things go badly for you. It’s not going to work that way.”

“Don’t you get it?” he said. “I have nothing else.”

“Why don’t you retire? It’s about that time anyway, isn’t it?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Everything’s gone. Jane took half the savings. Ginny took half of what was left. I’ve got a second mortgage on the house. I need to work.”

“Ah, yes, Jane and Ginny. Things you did wrong, things you could have done better, I suppose.”

“Carla—”

“I’m sorry, Dad. No. Not now.”

LONG AFTER IT HAD ALL PLAYED OUT—after Gilchrist did what he had to do, and after the consequences had been rendered—he remembered the catalyst.

The fucking Drone with his fucking juvenile sense of what constituted the news.

“Kevin, you hearing that?” Lindell called across the newsroom. “You ought to roll on that.”

Gilchrist looked up from his notes. He’d exacted a promise from The Diploma that he could work on some meatier stories if he could fit them in alongside his new duties. Gilchrist had hooked a good one about chronic underpayment of overtime at the fire department.

“It’s two kids rutting in a car,” he said. “It’s nothing.”

“Go ahead and check it out. It might make a fun web story. People love stuff like that.”

Gilchrist stood, walking over to The Drone’s desk.

“Mike, it’s two teenagers fucking. It’s a pointless story.”

The Drone looked up and looked through Gilchrist. “Go out there. Or go home.”

GILCHRIST WROTE THE ITEM, about the sixteen-year-old boy and his fifteen-year-old girl and their scantily clad walk to the cop car. It immediately went live on the website under the headline “TEENAGE TRYST: BUSTED!” Over the next two days, it became the most-commented-on of all the stories on the *Herald-Gleaner* site, emailed more than thirty-five thousand times. It became the episode on which people cast their fears about the direction of the country or their belief that the fucking pigs should just leave those kids alone. In any case, Gilchrist learned well the meaning of “viral.” Two nights later,

the insufferable late-show host was cracking wise on it on television: “Now there’s crime prevention. Just fill the parking spaces at Makeout Point with cop cars. Problem solved! And doughnuts!”

The Diploma gave Gilchrist a twenty-five-dollar coffee card and a note: “Thanks for buying in to the concept.”

That’s when Gilchrist decided to go upper deck on the place.

He waited until nearly one in the morning, until The Drone was gone and he was alone in the newsroom. He went into the men’s room, into the first stall and removed the lid from the tank. Then, ever so gingerly, he climbed above the throne, wedging his feet into the handrails, and squatted his ass over the water.

His bowels released, dropping chunks of excrement. The cold splash of tank water struck behind his knees, and he threw his head back. *Damn*, he thought. *This is the best idea I’ve ever had.*

He clambered down and put the lid back in place.

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, Gilchrist wrote several items that drew online interest and huzzahs from The Drone and The Diploma. A post-graduation street brawl. A robber who hit the adult bookstore, grabbed the cash register and left a trail of ticker tape for the cops to follow to the park where he’d succumbed to drink. A home invasion that left a burglar with scrambled brains when the homeowner hit him with a seven-iron.

With each bit of supervisory praise, Gilchrist would drop another load into the toilet tank. As his esteem in the newsroom grew, so did the stench.

“Good lord, what is that smell?” an ad rep asked one day.

“Something’s wrong with the pipes,” The Diploma said. “We’ve got somebody coming out tomorrow to take a look.”

Gilchrist, walking by, said, “That’s the smell of journalism, baby.”

AT SHIFT’S END, The Drone stopped at Gilchrist’s desk. “I looked at your fire department story,” he said. “It’s good stuff. Really.”

“Thanks, Mike.”

“Kev, I want to tell you how much I appreciate what you’ve done. You’ve really owned this assignment. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

The Drone extended a hand. Gilchrist smiled at him and shook it.

“You have no idea what’s in me, Mike.”

AHALF-HOUR LATER, Gilchrist closed the stall door and removed the tank’s lid. *They’ll figure out what’s happened tomorrow and probably install video cameras or a even card lock, he thought. Better give them one more as a token of my esteem.*

He set a foot on the handrail and started up, same as

he’d done before. As he turned and began to hang his ass over the tank, his left foot gave way, sliding off the handrail. His legs flew out in front of him, and his head and shoulders crashed against the upright tank. He heard the crack, like dead wood baked in the sun, and he knew, even as he headed for the floor.

On his back, Gilchrist remained alert. It didn’t even hurt. His arms and legs, though, wouldn’t move. The smell of his own watery waste, pouring onto the floor around him from the busted tank, enveloped him. He would be stuck here until morning, until someone arrived and discovered him—his pants down around his useless legs, the toilet tank lid set across the seat, the tank obliterated and his feces carried across the floor by the water. They would find him, and they would know what he’d done, and that would be that. He would be the story they always told at the *Herald-Gleaner*. He might even end up with his own place in a police report after all these years.

And Kevin Gilchrist’s only thought was how much he wished he could write this story.