

A DYING INDUSTRY

Written by

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FADE IN:

INT. NEWSPAPER OFFICE - NIGHT

The messy offices of a local newspaper are dark and empty, except for the glow of a single desk lamp and the figure of a young kid typing through his last assignment of the night.

This is MAX, and he's sitting below a sign that once read "Obituaries," before a crudely-placed sheet of paper altered it to "O-bitch-uaries." It's obviously not a job of high regard at this particular newspaper.

Max has a cell phone cradled against his shoulder. He's in mid-conversation as he types away on a laptop.

MAX

Just wrapping up these last three,
mom. Then I'll be home.

(beat)

Mary Clemmons. Walter Miller. Betsy
Walsh. Suicide. Car crash. Cancer.
Just another day at the obit desk.

As our perspective slowly shifts to face Max, we see the figure of a woman in a red dress standing behind him on the other side of a glass window. Watching.

This is MARY, and the half of her face that was not blown into a crater is quite pretty. She begins scratching the letter "R" into the glass. Max doesn't seem to notice.

MAX (CONT'D)

Well, it's not Shakespeare, but
it's a college credit.

(beat)

I don't think this one's going on
the resume. This place won't even
exist in five years.

As Max talks, Mary continues scratching letters onto the glass. E. V. I. S. E. She gives him a long, cold stare, then turns and walks down the hall, out of sight.

Max turns and sees the letters scratched into the window.

MAX (CONT'D)

Mom, I gotta let you go. I think
someone's pulling another prank.

Max hangs up the phone, puts his laptop into his backpack, and looks back at the window.

INT. NEWSPAPER PRINTING PRESS - CONTINUOUS

The lights flicker on with a boom as Max flips the switch and peers into the industrial maze of an old printing press floor. No one in sight. He begins to look annoyed.

MAX

Hey guys, I only have a week left here. If you're going to pull something, just get it over with-

Max is interrupted by a mechanical roar as the machinery rumbles to life.

Massive wheels of paper and ink cylinders begin spinning. Gears creak and moan from the belly of this ancient beast as rows of paper race across the assembly line to be inked, cut, and folded.

Max looks confused and checks his watch. He shakes his head.

MAX (CONT'D)

Thought I had a few more hours.

He walks toward a tray which is gradually filling with freshly-printed newspapers. He picks one up.

The headline reads: "WE HAVE EDITS." He tosses it aside and picks up another. "THERE'S MORE TO MY STORY THAN A PARAGRAPH." Another. "DID YOU KNOW I WAS ALSO A DANCER?"

He tosses each paper to the floor and runs his hands through his hair, a look of panic spreading across his face as a man's voice echoes behind him.

WALTER (O.S.)

We had a few suggested changes.

Max spins around to see WALTER, a middle-aged man in a tuxedo who looks impeccable aside from the steering wheel shaped dent streaking across his face.

Max's eyes widen as Walter walks toward him.

MAX

You're Walter Miller. I- I just wrote your obituary.

WALTER

You wrote half of it. If that. 250 words for 63 years of life?

Max begins to step backward as Walter moves toward him.

WALTER (CONT'D)

For instance, did you know I was also a boxer? Did you know I fought in a war?

Max looks over his shoulder to see a bathroom door at the other end of the printing press room.

WALTER (CONT'D)

It's the details, Max. All the little pieces that make up this puzzle of life. That's what makes a proper obituary. We've re-written ours. Freshly-printed. But now Max, we need to write yours.

Max turns and sprints toward the bathroom door. Walter follows.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Max slams the door behind him, locks it, and falls backward onto the toilet seat as Walter pounds against the wood.

Max begins to cry as he unzips his backpack, pulls out his laptop, and begins writing with frantic fury.

WALTER (O.S.)

I WAS A PAINTER, MAX! I WAS AN ARTIST! YOU FORGOT TO MENTION THAT!

MAX

I'm changing it! I'm changing it!

Walter's fists pound rapidly against the door, rattling its hinges as Max's tears fall atop his manically typing fingers. The laptop shakes as the wooden door begins to crack. Max finishes typing and throws his hands into the air.

MAX (CONT'D)

Done!

The door slams inward with a burst of splinters and broken hinges, crashing against the bathroom wall and revealing nothing but the empty printing press floor. The machines continue to rumble.

Max looks around the bathroom and sees only a plunger in the corner. He grabs it and walks out the door, laptop in one hand, the plunger handle extended defensively in the other.

INT. NEWSPAPER PRINTING PRESS - CONTINUOUS

The tip of the plunger shakes as Max inches his way forward.

MAX

I fixed it! I'll put you on the
front page! Just let me go home!

As he walks forward, three capsules in the machine burst, spraying black ink into the air and across the floor. Max continues onward into the black mist. He raises the laptop above his head as an offering.

MAX (CONT'D)

Or just tell me what to write! I'll
say whatever you want!

The silence is interrupted by the faint sound of a hospital heart monitor. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. The sound gets louder as Max steps further into the inky haze and sticks the plunger onto the floor beside him.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. Max stops, droplets splattering against his face and the screen of the upraised laptop.

MAX (CONT'D)

I'll give you every section! Even
the crossword puzzle! I'll fill the
whole damn thing with your stories!

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. As Max stands trembling in the black fog, a footprint emerges on the ink-covered floor behind him. And another. And another. Creeping his way.

MAX (CONT'D)

I'm only an intern! It's just a
crappy local newspaper!

The sound of the heart monitor flatlines as a thin rubber tube crawls across his neck and pulls tight. A soft voice whispers from behind him.

BETSY (O.S.)

You should have more pride in your
work, Max.

Max spins around to see the gaunt figure of BETSY WALSH, the elderly subject of his third obituary. She's wearing only a hospital gown and standing next to an IV drip stand, the tubing of which is coiling tightly around Max's body.

Max opens his mouth to scream, but the IV tube pulls tighter around his neck. It wraps around his arms and legs, immobilizing him. Between him and Betsy is the plunger.

BETSY (CONT'D)

A quick paragraph calling my
sickness a battle? Very original.
How many of those have you whipped
out just to make a deadline?

Betsy raises a hand and the IV tubing tightens, dropping Max to his knees in front of the upright plunger. His eyes bulge as he gasps out a desperate plea.

MAX

Please. I tried my best. Honest.

BETSY

I've lived a life, Max. Eighty
years.

She looks away with a nostalgic smile and laughs to herself.

BETSY (CONT'D)

Oh, the stories I could tell!

With a sudden jerk the IV tubes tighten one last time, pulling Max forward and slamming his face directly into the plunger's handle. Its tip slides into his eye socket and strikes the back of his skull with a wet thud, leaving him propped up at an angle. The IV tubes loosen and fall.

As blood mixes with ink on the printing press floor, the machinery stops and Betsy walks away, leaving him to rest.

INT. CHINESE RESTAURANT - DAY

A stack of newspapers is dropped into a bin in a low-end, colorful Chinese restaurant.

The hand of a COOK removes a paper from the top of the stack as he passes through the restaurant to the kitchen area in the back of the restaurant.

The paper is laid onto the surface of the cook's counter. On the front page are the smiling faces of Mary, Walter, and Betsy below the headline: "OUR STORY."

We hold on their smiles for a brief moment before a dead fish is dropped on top of the paper, smearing the ink with brine, water, and blood.

The cook begins de-scaling, gutting, and filleting the fish atop the front page stories of the dearly departed, which few people, if any, will ever read.

FADE OUT.