

A short story by John Moore
From the "Recurring Dreams" series

-30-

That's the international copy-editing symbol for "end of story," and when Ralph Moore silently pushed those buttons on his cursedly modern Macintosh Powerbook laptop computer, the grizzled old newspaper reporter savored the thrill. Though it was hardly the sensuous clack of a beloved old Royal typewriter, it was the final touch on the story of his unstoried career.

This calls for something special, he thought. His suitcase was packed and folded open on his hotel bed, leaving his plastic, portable bottle of Jameson's within arm's reach. Before Ralph sent this baby off to the mother paper, he had earned a sip of the best whiskey on the planet.

A reporter can feel the difference between just another story and the kind that will make the most cynical editor tear up the front page with gusto. This one was more. It felt like a Pulitzer Prize winner. Not bad for a 64-year-old scribe some whispered never had a prime to get past.

"I can retire with this one," Ralph said to no one, as he plopped a



few ice cubes into his glass, "because it's never going to get better than this."

He took a swig and held it in like a snapshot. The year was 1983, and it never looked, or tasted, so good.

Ralph's other bag was a computer case. From it, he took out the cables that connect the machine to the hotel phone. Next he pulled out the cheat sheet that goes with the laptop. In his ink-stained heart, Ralph knew his professional days were numbered the moment The Denver Post, in the name of progress, made its reporters give up their trusted Royals and replaced them with these sleek, soul-less miracles of modernity. In months of wrestling, Ralph still had not yet mastered this blasted, new technology.

Now, he would never have to.

But just as Ralph was about to transmit his story through the magic of fiber optics, the phone rang first. He picked up the receiver and was greeted by a youthful, agitated voice on the other end of the line.

"Ralph, where the hell is that story?" the kid demanded.

"Calm down, Teddy," Ralph said. "I was just fixing to send it."

"It's 'Ted,' goddammit, now listen: We only have 17 minutes to get this edition off the floor."

"Well, I can't send it if you're jabbering at me, son."

Ralph never could quite figure out how his youngest progeny ended up like this: Twenty-eight, high-strung, and so little joy for life. Not even a hint of a sense of humor.

Ted had followed Ralph's ink-stained footsteps into newspapers, but these two were not just night and day. When it came to living the life, they were agony and ecstasy. Ralph was part of the old school that still felt a romantic attachment to the profession. Ted was part of the new generation of journalists who eat sprouts and run marathons and typically die young from some stress-induced malady.

It's because of young journos like Ralph's son that his beloved Denver Press Club had to close down for lack of new members. To them, Gatorade is a drink. Sigh. They'll never appreciate one of life's simplest and greatest pleasures, Ralph thought: Sipping whiskey.

Ralph fumbled his arthritic fingers across the keyboard when his screen suddenly went poof, his words replaced by a disappearing dot of white light like a soul fleeing a dying body. He choked on his ice cube and spit. His pulse started to race as if responding to the firing of a starter's pistol.

"No, no, no, this can't be happening," he cried, switching from sipping his whiskey to gulping it. He pushed a few more buttons, and ... the story came back to life, like a woman who had momentarily turned her back on her lover as a playful tease.

Ralph didn't know how or why disaster was averted, and he didn't care. He breathed again. He loosened

his tie. But if that creeping sweat mark under the arms of his cotton shirt moved any closer to the Flair Pen resting in his pocket, Ralph's shirt was soon going to take on the look of tie-dye blue.

Ralph dialed the toll-free long-distance number to transmit his story into the newspaper's computer system. He expected to hear, as always, the antiseptic-sounding recording of a woman's voice saying, "You have reached The Denver Post." Then he would push a few more buttons on his phone, hear noises similar to that of a fax being sent, and then a message would crawl across the bottom of his computer screen confirming the transmission had been received and completed.

Ralph got a recorded woman's voice, all right, but not the one he was expecting. "Hey, big boy," this forward woman said, "you've made the right call for the hottest erotic phone chat anywhere. My name's Candy. If you wanna lick me, push 9."

A startled Ralph dropped the phone and stepped back. Wrong number -- but what a wrong number! He hung up and dialed again. Busy signal. That wasn't just unusual. That was supposed to be impossible. "What the hell?" he said, glancing down at his cracked Timex. His flight to Denver would leave in an hour.

"I'll just have to transmit from the airport," he said. The boss won't like that, but Ralph knew this story was worth the wait. He zipped his computer case shut and flipped his suitcase closed. The one Teddy had once borrowed when he played Willy Loman in his high-school play. Ralph smirked at the memory and rushed out. Well, rushed as well as any 64-year-old with gout can rush anywhere.

Ralph shook hands with the doorman of the hotel, a familiar black man wearing a '40s-style concierge suit and white gloves. Ralph slipped him a \$5 bill along with his room key - an actual key attached to a wood block.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Moore," the doorman said, holding open the door of a waiting cab. "How goes the war?"

Ralph always loved that expression. When he turned back to respond, he was struck by the facade of the Algonquin. He hadn't noticed when he checked in that the hotel had undergone such a stylish retro renovation. Good to see some appreciation for the past, he thought.

"Hasn't anyone told you, Stanley? The war is over," said Ralph. "Except for the one we're waging with the Rocky Mountain News. And after tomorrow's edition hits the street, that one might be over, too."

"Well, you keep up the good fight," Stanley said back, disappearing back into the hotel.

Ralph didn't immediately think it odd that the cab he stepped into was remarkably similar to the first car he had bought in 1946 at the age of 27. It was comfortable, like re-visiting an old friend. "To the airport, my good man. And step on it. I've got a deadline. ... I've always wanted to say that to one of you guys, but I really do mean it today."

The cab driver said nothing, making contact only with his eyes through the rear-view mirror. When the cab came to a stop, Ralph climbed out and his feet touched down not on the airport sidewalk but on the floor of a musty old school room. Ralph had been here once before. In the third grade.

"Once again, you're late, Mr. Moore. Be seated. Quickly."

"I'm sorry, schoolmaster Barner,"

Ralph said, his Pavlovian instinct winning out over his disbelief. He walked sheepishly to his desk and sat down, all young eyes cast upon him. As he hung his head in shame, Ralph marveled at his chubby little 8-year-old legs, so white and hairless and small, poking out of his navy blue uniform shorts. He snapped his tiny suspenders and smiled, wondering how he ever fit into this get-up. Then he looked up at the clock. Only seven minutes remaining.

"Mr. Moore, did you hear me?" said the schoolmaster, cracking his pointer against the boy's desk. "I said, walk to the front and read your essay to the class!"

Schoolmaster Barnum had always commanded respect through intimidation and his little piece of wood. It worked.

"Where is your story?"

Ralph looked around. He had left his computer bag and suitcase in the taxi.

"My s-ss-sss-story?" Ralph stammered. His babbling was stopped cold.

"Silence! I am weary of your excuses, young man. You don't have an essay at all, do you, Mr. Moore? Admit it! There is no story at all ... is there?"

Ralph's eyes darted about. "But there is a sss-story, sss-schoolmaster Barner," the boy said, tears welling in his eyes. "And it's the best sss-story I've ever written. I sss-swear it!"

The sss-schoolmaster simply shook his head in disgust. Well, then, you won't mind explaining to the class exactly what your story is about."

And at that moment, Ralph drew a blank about exactly what his story was about.

"Go to the principal's office," Barner yelled.

"Now! Get out of my sight!"

Ralph ran from the room and down the hallway. But he only made it a few steps before he became winded. His huge pot belly, big enough to hide a bowling ball after too many years of potato chips, Pepsis and bologna sandwiches, was again flopping in front of him. His chest hurt. His feet hurt. He couldn't catch his breath. "A man my age should never run," Ralph said, slowing to a walk. "It's undignified."

Ralph entered the principal's office thinking how silly a 6-foot-3, 270-pound man must look in navy-blue shorts and suspenders. The man behind the desk had his back turned to the old boy. When he spun around, it wasn't the old-fart principal who had so often chastised Ralph in his youth.

"Looking for this?" said Stanley, producing Ralph's computer bag.

"Oh, thank God," said Ralph, looking up at the wall clock. "There's still time!"

And there was a telephone on the principal's desk. Ralph grabbed for it, only to land his fingers in the holes of its rotary dial.

"No, it can't be!" he said. Without no modern push buttons, there would be no way to transmit the elusive story of his career with this phone.

Ralph grabbed the bag and darted from the office as if pilfering a loaf of bread from the dime store. It was now dark outside, and poring rain. He saw darkened doors and boarded-up storefronts, but nothing that looked familiar through the sheets of rain. But down this pock-filled, asphalt street, he spied an honest-to-God phone booth. It was like spotting a faraway lake while crawling across the desert. The kind that so cruelly turn out to be mirages.

"Thank God," said Ralph, shuffling toward the vision despite the excruciating pain in his feet. Once inside, he saw first its blessed keypad, right below the logo for Michigan Bell. So that's where he was.

"Downtown Detroit," Ralph thought. And apparently, not a very good part of it. No matter. Ralph furiously unzipped the bag. What he found inside filled him with a momentary rush of warm wonder. In the laptop computer's place was Ralph's trusty, rusty old Royal typewriter, the one he had used faithfully to write newspaper stories for 34 years before The Denver Post deemed them obsolete. His eyes welled up again as he fondled its vintage green-lettered keys. He cradled the relic in his bosom.

And then the pay phone rang, jostling him back to the cold and rainy reality that if the Royal had indeed taken the place of his Powerbook ... it had taken his story with it.

"Three minutes, old man," said the merciless voice on the phone.

"Teddy ... Ted ... Son ... I don't know what's happening. But I ... But I don't think I'm going to make it."

Ted allowed for an excruciating pause that belied any idea that he was in fact pressed for time at all.

"I knew that all along, old man," Ted said calmly. I knew you never had the story in the first place. That's why I never even bothered to hold space for it."

"But there is a story, Ted. There is. Maybe the next edition ..."

"There is no next edition for you, dad. Stop the presses. ... You're done."

Click. Dial tone.

Ralph hung up. "The little bastard," Ralph muttered as he slipped the typewriter back into its bag, zipped it up and held it gingerly as he left the phone booth. It was now cool and crisp outside. The rain had stopped. Ralph walked without direction down the street. Within seconds, he was surrounded by four menacing young toughs. Ralph had neither the stupidity nor the bravado to fight them.

"What's in the bag, old man?" their leader demanded, brandishing an 8-inch knife. Ralph looked down in surrender, noticing that he was now wearing not a cracked old Timex but a thousand-dollar Rolex. A gold chain wrapped his neck. Gaudy rings weighed down his plump fingers. The Flair pen in his shirt pocket was now a protruding wad of bills.

"I said, what's in the bag, old man?"

"Oh, the bag?" Ralph said with the hint of hope. ... It's just an old typewriter. No one uses them anymore. Now, if it's money you want, look, I've got plenty ..."

The leader closed his knife and got all up in Ralph's face.

"I want what's in the bag!"

"Please. Here. Look. Take all my money. This chain. These rings. Anything but the typewriter."

The thug spoke with calm deliberation.

"I don't want your money, old man. I don't want your gold. I want your typewriter ... because apparently, that's the one thing you don't want to lose."

Ralph clung to the typewriter and closed his eyes tight, as if to will himself to simply disappear. He did not.

The thug drew his fist and hit Ralph flush on the temple. It was a

solid blow that sent Ralph sprawling and eased time into instant slow motion. Ralph lost his grip but managed to hold onto the zipper of the bag, which unfurled in his hand and sent the newly freed Royal airborne like a snake shedding its skin. Ralph, and his beloved Royal, descended slowly toward the ground together. Ralph was left holding the bag.

The back of Ralph's head hit the pavement with a sickening thud. The typewriter followed, shattering on the pavement like an exploding glass-tabletop. Keys split off from the console and flew off in different directions like so many shards of glass.

This was an old, bleeding man lying face-up in the street. But Ralph started to sob like an 8-year-old boy.

The young toughs scooped up the loose remains as if each key were a brick of gold. They then stole away into the night, save for a single key that landed softly on Ralph's breast. It was the 8 key.

If you hit a capital 8 on a typewriter, it makes an asterisk, like this: *. That's the key writers use in family newspapers when they really want to say words like, SHIT!"

"*****!" Ralph cried.

He lay there for several minutes, feeling a cool trickle of blood run down from the back of his head. He wondered if this would be the end of his story. The final edition.

Instead, he heard a beep, like the sound of an alarm. He pulled his watch to his face. The damned Rolex. But who ever heard of a Rolex with a beep? he wondered.

The time was straight up on the hour. Deadline.

Ralph struggled to his feet, shucking the unowned watch, chain and rings. He stumbled away from the

beeping noise as if a man leaving his life behind him.

He limped painfully past several darkened doors before he came upon a saloon he thought looked familiar, or at least inviting. He opened the door and he was overcome with a feeling of warmth. There was a sign in the cramped lobby that Ralph had seen many times before: "Welcome to the Denver Press Club."

His heart raced again, but this time with the flutter of a first love. He walked up the three entry stairs and took an instinctive right, toward the long, familiar bar. It was empty tonight except for the old, stooped man behind the bar. He was on his knees, stocking shelves. His back was turned to Ralph, who didn't need to see the man's face to weep with joy.

"Paulie!" Ralph called out with open arms. "When did you come back?"

The man struggled to straighten up and turn around, revealing a glistening head and a middle girth that was very much earned over time.

"Ralph," Paulie said without surprise. "I figured you'd be back."

"But I haven't been here for years," Ralph said. "Not since the club closed in '74." ...

"You left something here earlier tonight," Paulie muttered. Ralph followed Paulie's eyes to the far end of the bar. There, just 30 feet away, was his Powerbook laptop, fired up and connected to the bar phone.

Ralph approached the glowing orb with wonder and trepidation. He saw the byline, "By Ralph Moore, The Denver Post," followed by his somehow recovered, intact masterpiece. Ralph's instincts kicked in. He looked down at his watch. Only now there was no watch.

"Paulie?"

"There's plenty of time, Ralph," he said.

Ralph picked up the phone and quickly pounded out the paper's phone number. When he heard that familiar female automated voice saying, "You have reached The ..." he put the phone down and punched a quick succession of further numbers. How had known which ones to hit without his handy cheat sheet, he had no idea. All that mattered to him was the sound of the high-pitched whistle coming through the phone that means it's working normally. When Ralph looked down at his computer and saw the words "Transmitting file ..." scrolling across his screen, he let out a whoop so loud, it made him dizzy. He grabbed the bar for support. "Paulie ..."

"Jameson's on ice, coming at you," Paulie interjected, sliding the drink the length of the bar as if it were a shuffleboard disc. Ralph snatched it up and took in a long, sweet sip before turning his back to the bar and sliding down to the floor in exhaustion.

"I did it, Paulie," he gasped incredulously. "I got the damn thing in. The story of my career!"

Paulie wiped down the bar, dispassionate but polite enough. "Sure you did, Ralph. Sure you did."

Above Ralph's head, his computer blipped, signaling job completed. Ralph heard it and laughed with maniacal pleasure.

But he couldn't see the words now crawling across the bottom of his screen.

"Transmission received ..." it said, "... Thank you for contacting The Rocky Mountain News."