

# NEWSROOM

by Frank Wilkie

EXTRACT

# Newsroom

## CHARACTERS

Geoff Browning: *A rugged, 40-50-year old News editor of The Heartland Herald, a newspaper recently purchased by a global media firm.*

Leanne Worthy: *A hardworking single mum, casually-employed, general rounds journalist, aged in her 30s.*

Noel “Knuckles” Talbot: *mid-50s, experienced, unkempt, knockabout reporter.*

Sammy Wilson: *A fresh-faced, cadet journalist, in his early 20s.*

Philip Banks: *The recently-installed Editor in chief. Well-dressed, suit and tie, in his late 40s-early 50s, energetic, a “go-getter”.*

Prue Legrand: *The managing editor, attractive, ambitious, immaculately-groomed, divorced, late 30s/early 40s.*

Ed McLaren: *An elegant, older gentleman, aged in his late 60s, early 70s, former editor/owner of the newspaper.*

## SETTING

*The play is set in the years shortly after the events of September 11, 2001 in the newsroom of the Heartland Herald, a daily newspaper recently purchased by international media firm, Global Corp. A poster-sized photograph of the 9/11 event on the wall may help indicate the period.*

*A basic set of a large central table with chairs for news meetings. At least two desks positioned to the sides of the room, each with a laptop and phone. Coffee station and/or water cooler off to one side.*

ACT ONE

Scene One

*A very stressed Geoff is standing at his desk with the latest Heartland Herald and talking on phone*

Geoff: (*furious*) One of your clowns has ballsed up the page three headline...yes Roy, again....that's 10 this month.....I know it's too late to do anything about it now you stumpy little wombat...just lift your game or I'll rip your arm off and beat you to death with the sloppy end. (*slams down phone*)

*(phone rings again)*

Geoff: Heartland Herald, Browning here....there's no one here mate, three on stress leave, two on holidays. Global Corp's going through this place like a dose of salts. More sackings on the way. Email me the info and I'll try to get a photographer there, otherwise I'll do it myself. Ok, bye.

Leanne: (*Enters and speaks to audience*) That's Geoff Browning, my boss. He's been the hardline editor here forever. Total workaholic. Me? I always wanted to be a journalist. Since I was five I fancied myself as a bit of a Lois Lane.

Together we've seen a lot of changes at the Heartland Herald. New managers come and go but Geoff and I have seen most of them off. This new mob was different. The world was different.

The week started like any other. Geoff was dispensing his unique brand of mentoring.

Geoff: (*brandishing article on an A4 sheet*) What's this rubbish?

Leanne: Something wrong with it?

Geoff: The first paragraph is supposed to grab the reader by the short and curlies and command their attention, not lull them into a coma.

Leanne: You're overreacting.

Geoff: Next. The middle of the story, supposed to be a white-knuckle roller-coaster ride that leaves readers savaged, ravaged and panting for more.

Leanne: Savaged?

Geoff: I want you to craft me compelling, powerful stories that suck the reader in, like anti-matter to a black hole. Make every word sing. Is that too much to ask?

Leanne: Under the circumstances, yes. *(reaches for paper, their hands touch)*

Geoff: Hey, I'm giving you feedback here

Leanne: Anything else?

Geoff: It's full of typographical errors.

Leanne: It's the American spell-checks. They change everything.

Geoff: I want our copy in English.

Leanne: *(fiery)* Alright.

Geoff: And I don't like the wet-arsed headline you've given it. "Sumptuous saucy seduction". What the hell is that? Harden it up will you.

Leanne: Aren't you overlooking something?

Geoff: What?

Leanne: It's a bloody dining review.

Geoff: Sorry.

Leanne: So you should be

Geoff: It's not a bad piece of writing, considering you've never actually set foot in any of these establishments.

Leanne: I would if you weren't too tight-arsed to pay for an occasional meal.

Geoff: You know the thinking on this.

Leanne: Yes. We can't risk pissing off advertisers with genuine critiques.

Geoff: That's right. Let's not forget Lennie from Seafood Palace.

Leanne: Who?

Geoff: Ex-rugby union prop, head like a dropped pie?

Leanne: Before my time.

Geoff: One of the reporters had a bad oyster there or something and got food poisoning, so we wrote it up. Next day, Lennie charged in, smashed up the office and sent four ad reps to hospital.

Leanne: God.

Geoff: Legal threats we can handle. It's the characters who take matters into their own hands you've got to watch. I don't want some nutter putting a bomb in your car.

Leanne: I didn't know you cared.

Geoff: I just...can't afford to lose you

Leanne: Anyway, I can't do seven dining reviews a week, hard news for you and general features for Prue if I had to actually go to all these places.

Geoff: It would help if she could write

Leanne: Editor in chief, editor, managing editor, assistant editor. Everyone's a bloody editor now. Am I the only fool left here writing stories?

Geoff: One hell of a takeover.

Leanne: *(to audience)* Prue's made my life hell since she arrived. The harder I worked, the better I wrote, the more she hated it. You think women would stick up for each other, knowing how hard it is to balance family and career. I mean, she's a single mum too, sort of. Three kids in boarding schools, one from each of her three marriages, all to high-flying CEO types. I've got to give it to her, she can play a man like a violin.

Leanne: You're more uptight than usual

Geoff: Looks like they're going to axe a few more journalists.

Leanne: Not again.

Geoff: The ones on AWA's should be safe. My bet is they'll sack the older staff, the ones still earning wages.

Leanne: I wouldn't mind the workload so much if I just had a bit more job security. Why haven't you put me on full-time? After 12 years as a casual I'm getting a bit frayed.

Geoff: We prefer the flexibility to flog you as needs arise.

Leanne: I don't mind the flogging so much. Depends on who's dishing it out.

Geoff: *(Points to page)* Oh, here we go again. Page seven lead headline, "Evidence stolen in police safe scandal". Scandal, s-c-a-n-d-l-e. Shit. Where do they get these subs?

Leanne: How's the anger management going?

Geoff: Not good. Sherry called before. Danny and Jess were upset I didn't pick them up last weekend.

Leanne: Why didn't you?

Geoff: We had a training seminar on the new anti-terror laws. Get this. We can be jailed for reporting on ASIO raids, except for the ones the feds or pollies selectively leak to us. And if a spook is caught passing on dirt to one of his political mates or blackmailing some punter, and we print it, we can go to jail for longer than he does. Reporting the crimes of those entrusted with national security is now deemed a threat to national security.

Leanne: Good one.

Geoff: I hardly ever saw the kids anyway. I'm always bloody here.

Leanne: You need rest.

Geoff: Can't sleep. I've been having strange dreams

Leanne: What sort of dreams?

Geoff: Almost every night for the last month. Weird

Leanne: You're on overdrive. You need to delegate more.

Geoff: I would if I had the staff.

Leanne: So, how're we going to feed the beast if we don't have the reporters to generate copy?

Geoff: They reckon we can fill more pages with celebrity gossip and entertainment off the wire services. Apparently when Paris Hilton drops her duds or flashes her tits, that's big news.

Leanne: I'm kind of getting used to seeing Big Brother stories on page one, three and five. I suppose it gets everyone talking.

Geoff: Ah yes. Australians, united at last by a nation-wide dialogue on turkey slaps and bum dances.

Leanne: Phil says it's not about dumbing down, it's about lightening up.

Geoff: Here's the brains trust now.

*(Philip and Prue enter, laughing)*

Philip: Good morning Geoff. Hello Leanne. How are you both this fine morning

Geoff: Living the dream

Prue: That's a lovely outfit Leanne. Been op-shopping have you?

Philip: I think it's quite an eclectic and elegant ensemble, Leanne.

Leanne: Thank you. *(to audience)* Philip Banks, the new editor in chief. He's straightened out most of the Global Corps media operations around the world. The company's top troubleshooter. His three lads are making waves in the London, New York and Sydney bureaus and his wife's safely tucked in bed bombed to the eyeballs on Valium.

Geoff: What's this I hear about you culling staff?

Philip: An old journo like you would know you can't place much store in rumours

Geoff: Depends on the source, and mine's pretty bloody good

Philip: I'm not here to spook the herd or create instability. It's all onwards and upwards as far as I'm concerned.

Prue: Phil's already made it quite clear, we love the way you've been running things.

Philip: Head office requires an inventory of all positions, that's all. Otherwise it's business as usual.

Geoff: Who've you got in your sights?

Philip: We're not interested in changing a winning formula.

Prue: Yes. We're just here to add a bit of polish. So far, it's worked beautifully.

Philip: Absolutely. You've had great front-page stories all month and today's was sensational.

Geoff: Bullshit. Look at this facile garbage. (*grabs paper off desk*) "Boom town- new growth powers Heartland's future".

Philip: One of the best I've seen.

Prue: Fabulous.

Geoff: Before you got to it, this *was* a shock expose of the dodgy deals done to rezone twenty thousand hectares of prime farmland into housing development. The Heartland Fruitbowl will be concreted.

Phil: The story just needed a little tweaking that's all.

Geoff: Tweaking? More like a total whitewash

Prue: Polish, Geoffrey. Polish

Geoff: Agriculture was Heartland's future- its saving grace in the face of skyrocketing food and fuel costs. It'll be an environmental disaster. It's a bloody floodplain.

Phil: Engineers can sort all that out. We only report the news Geoff. And you have to ask yourself, are you a glass-half full or a glass half-empty type of person.

Prue: Fantastic story. My phone's been ringing hot all morning. Everyone, especially our advertisers, want to know how they can get a piece of the action.

Phil: Excellent. You can't stop progress. Keep up the great work you two.

*(Philip and Prue exit)*

Leanne: You've got to admit, he's pretty smooth.

Geoff: Yeah, I don't like him either.

Lights Down  
End ACT ONE, Scene One