

Take Two, A Smart-ass Mystery

by John Ostapkovich

A sample of the opening pages

Chapter One:

Monday

Waking up at 2:14 a.m. sucks. Waking up at 2:14 a.m. to an annoying phone sucks more. And being told to drag your aging, aching butt out of bed to cover some dumb-ass story, well, that's show biz.

The woman on the phone was polite enough. There's a big fire in Kensington, and she gave me the address. Big fire? Hell, that's urban renewal.

Jen didn't budge, God love/hate her. My wife could fall asleep in an elevator between floors, in an airplane before they were done with safety feature theater and anytime the announcer said, "Now pitching for the Phillies." I sat there for a moment looking at her, wondering how, if I was smart enough to get her to marry me, I was stupid enough to be working for a radio pirate. It's like being the last horseshoe salesman in town.

I was in a pickle. This fire had to be at least three alarms to trigger the phone call from our off-hours emergency radio monitoring service and, as the on-call reporter then, I was expected to go. But the station was all-network overnights. There was nobody minding the store until maybe 4 a.m. when Silcox found his way in from whatever bar or boudoir in which he'd spent half the night. I could just lie down for an hour, all right maybe a half hour, and be at the barbeque in plenty of time.

Nevertheless, I grabbed my glasses and rose from bed like a sleepwalker because that was pretty much true. The bathroom nightlight beckoned but when I had closed the door behind me and flipped the switch I was assaulted into wakefulness by bright globes and mirrors. All it needed was neon and it could have been Broadway.

A quick shower and shave completed, I was picking up steam. Yes, yes, this is a toothbrush and you put the tooth paste here. Shirt and pants were no problem and I accessorized with socks, shoes and a belt before heading out of the bedroom. A last glance at Jen and a peek into the kids' rooms, then it was downstairs to pat my jackets in the closet looking for keys. There were a bewildering number of places they hid and I swore it was a game to them.

My car didn't seem any happier to be awakened than I had been. It growled and grumbled but

got with the program in a plume of exhaust and a dashboard sound and light show that reminded me of a pinball machine saying tilt.

I turned on the big news radio station. It was traitorous of me, listening to the enemy, but they were at least open all night, local all night, and while they also had no reporter at that hour their traffic service did a pretty good imitation of a scene-setter.

Be sure to avoid thus and such intersection due to fire department activity. Detours are posted. I, of course, was heading straight there.

There was nobody on I-95, which allowed me to further muster my thoughts. Street lamps began rushing by as I crossed the city line, adding a certain tempo to my deliberations. Get to the scene, work up to or hopefully through the police cordon, find the fire commander, get something official from him, some comments from the neighbors, a little siren or natural sound action if there is any and then set up shop in my mobile studio, also known as my dog-eared Honda.

If only I'd saved what I'd done during the last urban bonfire, or the one before that, I could have stayed home.

By the time I passed the Bridge Street exit, I could see what all the fuss would be about, a cantaloupe glow like all the city's streetlamps in one block. The radio traffic guy said it was now five alarms and fire crews were spending as much time squirting nearby structures as the burning one. I hoped no firefighters were inside. There was such a thing as too much news.

I parked a couple of blocks away, close enough to see the glare of the flames in row house windows but out of the general line of fire. If I'd had a station car (if we HAD station cars), I could have gone closer but what's the point? I was out of the Honda and, gear grabbed from the trunk, moving toward the fire in a moment. I stepped carefully over plump fire hoses bringing water in from blocks away, each little leak threatening to form a keester-kissing ice-patch for the unwary.

I noticed a couple of people on a front stoop, bundled up but enjoying the show. I pulled out my microphone and fired up the recorder.

"You guys see how this started?" I asked.

A woman with bloodshot eyes (or maybe it was just the fire) turned to me lazily, a cigarette dangling from one side of her dentally challenged mouth.

"Nah, but it's been burning like a motherfucker for an hour. Me and the Mister" indicating with a nod the other spectator "were watching Comedy Central, must have fallen asleep, then all of a sudden, woo, woo, woo, fire trucks and cops all over the place. I ain't seen a cop on this street in three weeks. How about you, Franny?" Franny grunted. "Takes something like this....." Her voice trailed off.

"What is or was that place?" I wondered.

"Shit." It was Franny this time. "That's been just about everything except City Hall. My grandpa worked there when it made locomotive parts for Baldwin. I think they had a still in there during the Depression. Clothing factory, PVC pipes, fuck, I think there's even a city recycling center in a corner of the place way around on McDougal. Mostly lately it's a warehouse although who'd want to store shit around here?"

"Okay, thanks guys." My microphone drooped post-coitally.

"Hey, we gonna be on the news?" asked the woman.

"Maybe," I responded, groping for my pen and notepad. I could edit their profanity but all that would be left would be prepositions. "What's your name?" They looked at one another as if they had just been cornered by store security.

"Irma."

"Frank."

"Last names?"

The man shrugged. "Logan."

"Thanks."

"Hey, when will this be on?"

"A little later this morning."

"What station?"

"WPN, 1620 AM."

"Fuck," said the woman. "Can't get AM in here for shit." She flicked her cigarette into the street where it sizzled and died in a puddle, extinguished along with her dream of celebrity.

I checked my watch. 3:18. Plenty of time. Too much time, really. I could be freezing before I even went on the air.

I walked a block toward the inferno, past bundled up neighbors chased from nearby homes, until January felt like March (much better) and then cut around the police line long enough to see a couple of firefighters not holding hoses or otherwise engaged. Probably officers.

I approached, mike down but visible. It saved a lot of explaining, so the front line cop let me through.

"Hi," I said to the fire officers, "who's in charge around here? Can you guys comment?"

They gave each other a look that I've learned from Jen means, it's your turn to change a diaper.

One faced me, lifting a clipboard to check some notes. "First call came in at 1:37. Engine 6,

ladder 47 arrived 1:44, reported flames from lower floors....." This could go on all night.

"Excuse me, what's your name?" I could see his rank from his helmet and his last name stenciled on the jacket but I needed the first name as much as I needed to break him out of "fire-speak" which like its cousin "police-ese" is death-on-a-stick for radio.

"Lt. Henry Stempler, public information officer on the fire ground," he replied, but before he could get rolling again reading his logbook I tried to maneuver his comments into something that wouldn't bore the audience so much they'd wish they were on fire.

"What kind of building is that?"

"It's a four story, brick-fronted industrial structure, about a hundred years old, we understand. It's been subdivided, so there's mixed use, some e-commerce on the second floor, warehouse on the first."

"A city recycling center?"

"Yeah, that's around the other side where the fire is most intense."

There was a roar that caused us all to swing around. A plume of sparks leaped up from the far side of the fire. Tactical radios began blaring immediately and the other officer, a deputy chief by his insignia, stepped away to bark into his. His words also spilled out of the one in Lt. Stempler's hand.

"Captain Bevino, this is Chief Howard! What was that? Is everyone all right?" There was a pause in which the two men seemed to stretch toward the building, to lean in like someone cheating on an exam, just for a tiny peek at the answer.

The radios squawked together. "Wall collapse, sir, pretty much the entire west face. No injuries."

"Jesus," sighed Howard. Then he keyed the radio. "Good. Just keep everybody back. Let's all go home tonight."

It took a moment to recapture the spirit of the interview, to get back into the mundane give and take after a pants-wetting moment.

"Recycling," I prompted. "Old soda cans and the like?"

"Soda cans don't burn very well," said Lt. Stempler. "Old newspapers, cardboard and plastic burn like crazy."

"You think that's what's burning?"

He gave me a look. "Everything's burning. The building is a goner. Our main jobs at this point are to keep everybody safe and keep the fire from burning the neighborhood down." The money cut. I could see he regretted it as soon as he said it. Not that there was anything wrong with it, but it was just too direct, too painful and not fire-speak.

"That's it for now." He turned away and I stopped recording. Good for me, I exulted. Good nat sound and the money cut, bam bam. Another reason I'd rather be lucky than good. And the art of the stupid question didn't hurt either.

If you ask stupid questions, you often get better answers because people explain things to you like you're an idiot. They connect A to B to C in a way they wouldn't if they thought you could see the connection yourself. That way you get them to make the connection for an audience that may or may not be paying attention. And may or may not be composed of idiots.

I checked my watch. 4:07. Time to make the donuts. I patted myself down for my cell phone and called the producer, Silcox.

Eaton Shaw Silcox was a Princeton frat boy turned into a Philly fat boy, a guy who never met a cheese steak he didn't like and, washed down with a brewski or twoski, even better. He was loud, proud and completely convinced that he knew shit when he couldn't have found it with his head up his ass. The one thing he had going for him career-wise was a complete lack of remorse for being a suck-up. He even had designer kneepads.

"Newsroom, Silcox," he answered. "That you, Beanie?" The name is Bernie, you asshole!

"Yes, it's me."

"You at the fire?" No, I'm in my jammies, at home in bed, like anyone with half a brain would be!

"You bet. This thing's toast. We just had a wall collapse. Scared the crap out of everybody. All they're doing is controlling the burn."

"Yeah, right..." His voice trailed off, distracted, as if I was interrupting something far more important. "Call me at 4:30. I'll put you on live." Be still, my heart.

"See you." I cut the connection. This was just what I'd expected, the regular drill. I'd nursemaid this thing for another few hours then file a report and some voice cuts and that would be that.

Since I had a little time to kill, I zigzagged down some narrow streets to eyeball the other side of the building. Although some of it looked like an evil jack-o-lantern with glowing window eyes, I was stopped in my tracks by the sight of the portion that had collapsed. It truly glared like the gateway to hell with souls writhing in the open fire. Flames roared in the center of the structure, barely contained by walls roasted into instability. Bricks, furniture, support beams, walls, floors, toilets, tables, computers, recyclables and anything else joined the grand old slag dismissing firefighters' fountains like the merest mist. A dog pissing on a tree down the block was doing as much good. I could feel the skin on my face drying in the flickering heat.

At 4:29 I called Silcox back and he hit a button plugging my cell phone into the studio control board where Anthony Freeman and Tina Lowell co-anchored our little slice of heaven. At this

time of day, the local news consisted of ten-minute blocks inserted at the hour and half-hour into the all-news feed from the Cheapo Broadcasting Network. That wasn't its actual name, of course, but it was the kind of thing you end up with when you worked for a crook.

"In the news at this hour," I heard Tina say on cue-back through the phone, "a six alarm industrial blaze in Kensington chases residents into the January chill. We'll have a live report. The Mayor declares a moratorium on the Governor's moratorium on riverfront development and the Flyers lose ground in a divisional clash with New Jersey."

Anthony picked up with the weather forecast, which, imagine this, was cold with a chance of snow, cold with a chance of ice and cold with a chance of cold. Why did we bother?

Tina was back on an instant later. "That six alarmer is still burning in Kensington." I took a breath, and looked up again into the inferno, trying to spot inspiration. "Let's get the latest live from We're Philly's News reporter Bernie Gaston. Bernie..."

Show time....

Chapter Two

Five live shots and two and a half hours later, the fire had died down and lost all its color to the gray January dawn. I had retreated to my car to ward off frostbite. The fire ground was a winter wonderland with ice bearding lights, signs, railings, and the occasional fireman squatted down taking a break. The building was no longer ablaze but what was left between its teetering outer walls steamed under the continued deluge, the fire's orange anger doused into monochrome surrender.

I had gotten some more sound with neighbors (they were shocked, absolutely shocked), another sound bite or two with the Lieutenant and retreated to my car in hopes of producing a couple of spots. Once I defrosted my fingers, my laptop ran off the cigarette lighter as I alternated between a word processor to write the script, my recorder to voice the track and the Sound Forge application to mix the elements into a finished piece. I wondered if I could slip out early and get a nap once the adrenaline rush faded.

I had just hit the "send" button to e-mail the second story back to the newsroom when there was a rap at the window that nearly caused me to drop my computer on the floor. I swung around to see a policeman pointing his nightstick at me.

"Hey, Jimmy Olsen, get a move on before I write you up." I still hadn't gotten much of a look at the face since the windows were pretty fogged up but the voice....

"Hi, Frank," I said dully. "Imagine meeting you here."

Frank Tierney was my brother-in-law, the husband of Jan who was the twin sister of Jen who I had left soundly, sanely sleeping at home. Frank was an all right guy for a cop, a little gruff, a little my-way-or-the-highway and a lot into the thin blue line. Police and reporters are not the

best of friends. I try to be understanding about how they have an important job to do but so do we. Half the time, they react as if each case belongs to them, like it's their lunch or something, and to part with even a morsel is painful.

I put the laptop on the seat next to me and cranked down the window.

"How long have you been out here?"

"All fucking night," Frank replied, clipping his nightstick back on his belt. "You know, people are surprisingly ungrateful when you pound on their door at 2 in the morning and tell them to get out or they might die."

"It's bound to be a shock."

"Shock? Fuck, living near that firetrap? We had L&I out here six times in the last few months for this violation or that. It was practically arson-by-invitation."

"You saying this was arson?" He tensed up. Whoa, I thought, turn off Mr. Reporter for a moment. You know how he gets.

End of sample

Read the rest - the complete eBook is available at bibliobookstore.com