

The Malcontent

Spring 1991

YOU ALWAYS GUARD THE DOOR YOU DESERVE

by Edward Hoyer, Jr.

I'm sitting in the Grimthorpe Police Department guarding a non-public door. Only non-publics are allowed to use the door, although on this occasion, I am to let a certain few selected publics inside. I am not a police officer, although I'm often mistaken for one. I have a fancy title; Community Volunteer Police Assistant. It's a thirty-three letter way of saying "Town Security Guard" without it sounding like "Town Security Guard". Guarding doors is one of our many "as-needed" assignments, but not nearly as important as our primary duty of standing in the road a lot.

I'm not sure how long I'm supposed to sit here staring out the door window at the side parking lot. The officer that assigned me here didn't tell me, and at seven o'clock in the morning, I was barely awake enough to stand let alone think of asking questions about what I was being asked to do.

I am reminded of my days at the shopping mall when I was a private security guard at that monument to consumerism. I sat guarding a door and staring out into the parking lot. It was boring there, too, although there were more people at the mall. Here at the police department, I'm sitting in a stairwell guarding a side entrance that not many people use in a normal day. They could easily keep this door locked, put up a sign directing people to go to the lobby, then use me to escort

these people downstairs to the Emergency Operations Center.

I keep thinking about how I could be so dumb as to volunteer for this job. I guess it's because there appeared to be very little work involved, so I said "Yes, I'll do it" when the desk officer called me on the telephone last night. I could have said "No" and stayed home and rested, gone shopping, eaten real food for lunch instead of milk and Fig Newton cookies, and just generally goofed off and enjoyed my Saturday. Instead, I'm in a lightly heated stairwell sitting next to a leaky door while the cold winter wind keeps trying to sneak inside and visit me. I suppose there's little to be gained by complaining, but I'll complain anyway.

At least, I don't have to help with crowd control out at the crash site. I'll leave that to the other officers and CVPA's. How do you guard broken pieces of steel and plastic in the middle of the woods in the dead of winter? I don't know myself, but I do know that I'm not volunteering to stand out in the cold. I'd be a CVPAscicle in five minutes flat. The thought gives me a chill, and I'm already cold enough just opening and closing this door. Although, if they move a little trailer with lights and a phone and a bathroom to the site, I might reconsider.

A small plane has crashed in Grimthorpe. While it is a tragedy that unfortunately happens almost every week somewhere in the world, it is a big deal for this small town. Very little ever happens here, which is fine with me. I mean, who wants to live in a plane-crash filled neighborhood?

The noise alone would drive you to earplugs. And I can't begin to imagine the problems of maintaining a decent lawn with all that debris strewn about.

In any case, a man borrowed an airplane from a friend of his to fly a co-worker and himself to the co-worker's retirement dinner being held at a popular inn in our town. They were intending to fly from New York to an airport in a nearby city, and then rent a fancy car and drive to Grimthorpe. They were going to make a grand entrance into town. I guess you could say their entrance did make a lasting impression. And yes, the co-worker certainly did retire. Permanently.

The weather in the Grimthorpe area that day was rotten to be generous about it. It was hard to drive a car that day. I can only imagine what the pilot thought when he flew over the outskirts of our town in his small plane. The pilot radioed the airport that he was having difficulties with the rain and sleet, the high winds, and the extremely poor visibility. He was going to try to reach the airport, but he was also going to keep an eye out for a place to make an emergency landing if he needed one. A minute or two later, the plane vanished from the radar screens.

The airport personnel made some quick calculations and figured that the plane had come down in Grimthorpe. Unfortunately, their figures couldn't tell them exactly where the plane was or if the occupants were hurt. It was too stormy to send up a search helicopter. Grimthorpe is a big town area-wise and, despite all the housing developments, the town still has large areas of forest, farm fields, swamps, and meadow lands.

The airport quickly notified the Grimthorpe Police Department about the missing plane. The town civil defense director was called and asked to open up

the Grimthorpe Emergency Operations Center, and start organizing a search using police, CVPA's, volunteer firemen, and civil defense people. Everybody involved understood that time was critical.

All that day, the volunteers searched the forests and fields in the southeast end of town. All that night, they searched the meadow lands and swamps along the river in the west end of town. It was a cold, wet, rain-soaked, storm ridden day, and an equally unpleasant night. Anxiousness turned into frustration, and then into despair. They could not find the plane.

This morning, as the sun rose to start a bright, cold, crisp day, a State Police search plane spotted the wreckage during its first pass over Grimthorpe.

The plane was deep in a small forest on top of a high hill in the south end of town. The site was not at all close to the area that was searched yesterday. The airport, and safety, was only five miles away.

Police Officer Wroski was the first person to climb the hill and view the scene. He found that the occupants of the plane were not in the best of shape. Or even alive for that matter. He mentioned to me once that he'd rather go to a bloody car accident than to a domestic or other "talk-to-people" call. I guess he got his wish today. The odd thing is that Wroski has a pilots license, and goes flying several times a year. I wonder if seeing an air crash up close affects him more than those of us who do not understand the work involved in flying a plane?

Meanwhile, the number of selected publics that I am supposed to allow in the non-public door grows. The state medical examiner arrives and is brought to the crash site. He has to figure out how the pilot and passenger died. ("From a plane crash, what else?" somebody quips from the

hallway.) The bodies were burned almost beyond recognition and then flash frozen in the icy night air like cheap TV dinners. No doubt there'll be pictures of the scene floating about in a few days. It's Grimthorpe Police Department policy to photograph and videotape the scenes of all major crimes and accidents. The hallway humorist wonders aloud if they'll show the videotape on the local cable TV public access channel.

Civil Air Patrol people arrive. An investigator from the Federal Aviation Administration shows up. The National Transportation Safety Board sends an investigator. Every television station in the area sends reporters and camera people. Police Chief Ward gets to be interviewed on TV. I get to sit in a stairwell. The day passes slowly.

A station wagon pulls into the parking lot and parks close to the non-public door. The back of the station wagon is crammed tight with boxes. Mr. Abelldi the town civil defense director, now calling himself the Plane Crash Search Coordinator, and Mayor Mecke get out of the car and enter through my sacred door. The Mayor tells me that he's been up to the crash site. He decided that the wreckage had to be guarded overnight. He and Mr. Abelldi have just been to the local hardware store where they bought a tent, cots, sleeping bags, lanterns, a stove, and a whole bunch of other camping equipment and charged it all to the town.

"Somebody," he says, "will have to spend the night up there guarding the plane." The Mayor and the Plane Crash Search Coordinator are looking in my direction. They're not saying anything to me, but I have this feeling they're getting ready to ask me to participate in a camp-out in zero degree weather. Just then, Mr. Sheay, the town budget administrator, who had been helping out in the EOC, walks up behind the Mayor. I seize the moment. I strike first.

"That's a lot of great camping stuff you've got there Mayor," I say, "How much did it all cost?" Mayor Mecke looks pleased.

"We spent five hundred dollars!" he says, unaware of who is standing behind him. Mr. Sheay turns pale and his jaw drops ever so slightly. Mayor Mecke turns to see who it is that I am looking at.

Oh, hi Tom!" he says. Mr. Sheay says nothing. Still pale, he turns, and slowly walks back down the hallway. Somebody told me later that Mr. Sheay went into the EOC, sat in a corner, and didn't move for the rest of the afternoon.

Chief Ward walks down the stairs and interrupts my verbal fencing with the Mayor. He's going to move me into his office to answer the phone and take messages while he does another television interview. The "Tent Patrollers" leave the stairwell, no doubt to search for a volunteer to spend the night in the woods.

After five hours in a chilly stairwell, I find myself in a warm office, with a desk, a comfortable chair, and a phone.

"If anyone asks, you can release the names of the victims now," the Chief says, as he tosses the "official" press release on my desk. I suddenly realize that I had no idea what the victims names were. I had no real reason to know earlier, but it still had never occurred to me to ask. The crash somehow became more real to me as I read the "official" press release. It wasn't just two guys in a plane crash anymore. It was two real people with families, and friends, and lives once. I barely have time to ponder this when the phone rings.

The voice at the other end of the line wants to know how to get to the hospital which will perform the autopsies on the bodies. It's a funeral director hired by the pilots'

brother, and he'll be driving in from New York. I read him the directions that Chief Ward wrote up and left by the telephone. There are several more calls from newspaper reporters. I read them the "official" press release and tell them that Chief Ward will be happy to talk to them later to answer any other questions they have.

It's quiet for a few minutes, so I begin daydreaming. I wonder who has to hire the crew to take the plane out of the woods; the plane owner or the property owner?

I am rudely awakened by a loud thump. Chief Ward has returned and tossed a phone book on my desk. I'm to get a hold of the plane owners' insurance company. The owner is on his way to Grimthorpe and can't be reached until he arrives here. Meanwhile, the property owner wants the plane wreckage off his land before the end of the week and he doesn't want to pay for the removal.

I dial a few numbers and eventually find the correct office. The only problem is that I get an answering service.

"The office is closed now," the answering service operator says, but she can take a message and an insurance agent will get it Monday morning. I tell Chief Ward about this minor roadblock.

"Watch this," he says as he picks up the extension phone. "This is Howard Ward, Chief of Police of the Grimthorpe Police Department," he thunders into the phone, "and we have a double fatality airplane crash in our town! The airplane was insured by your company! I need to speak to one of your agents now, not Monday morning!"

There's a short gasp, followed by a pause at the other end of the line.

"I'll call every number the company left with me," the operator blurts out. "I'll have someone call you back today."

Chief Ward thanks her and we both hang up. He grins at me. "That double fatality airplane crash gets them every time," he says.

Twenty minutes later one of the insurance agents calls. In the background, you can hear the sound of a football game on TV. This is one Saturday afternoon he won't forget.

The phone calls are fewer now. Most of the local newspapers already have the details of the story. Chief Ward leaves the room to be interviewed one more time. I decide to take a break and call my friend Kestrel. She lives close to the plane crash site and I tell myself that I want to get her outlook on all this. Actually, I just want to hear the sound of her voice.

Kestrel has been to the site.

"I was listening to the State Police on my scanner this morning," she says. "I heard them call in the position of the crash site. I was going to go up there and have a look, but then I decided that I had better things to do than hike a mile up a hill into the woods in the freezing cold to stand around and look at a busted airplane. I ended up going anyway, but I didn't have to walk. A volunteer fireman I know gave me a ride in his four-wheel drive pickup truck."

We talk for a few more minutes about this and that. Kestrel promises to call me later in the week. I hang up the phone just as Chief Ward walks back into the office. He sits down and starts sorting through all the messages I left on his desk. He looks tired. The afternoon drags on.

Around 5:30 pm., Chief Ward tells me to go home.

Tree

"All the loose ends are tied up temporarily," he says as I leave the office, "and everything will get sorted out eventually."

I walk down the hall to the roll call room. One of the rookie police officers is there. The "Tent Patrollers" have corralled him into spending the night guarding the plane. He doesn't look too enthusiastic about his assignment. Frankly, I don't blame him.

I'm sitting at my desk at home, trying to write down the events of the day in my journal. The cold winter wind is rattling the windows, still trying to sneak inside and visit me. It's a dark, bitter night. The wind dies down for a minute and I hear a sputtering noise in the distance. It sounds like a small airplane having engine problems. Then, there is silence. A chill runs down my back. I know what I must do. I reach over and unplug the telephone.

In memory of Eliz. Palatine, March 1990.
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Chemistry

Liquify
your body
and slide near me.
Let us form a mixture,
then adding
heat,
a compound,
with age and wisdom,
an element, to withstand
the forces that
oppose.

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Did you
ever wish you were
a tree?
I mean,
not just any
scrawny bush,
or some slip
of a willow.
I mean, a tree,
a brown barked leviathan,
towering above the forest,
an emerald green cap
stretching for the sky.
Home to birds,
bees,
and squirrels,
termites, and
wood borers,
susceptible to lightning,
and fire,
wind,
and rain,
bitter frost,
and clinging snow,
icy rain,
and lonely pain,
tree wardens,
and lumberjacks,
chainsaws
and axes!
Oh, my.
On second thought,
did you ever wish
you were a 1952 Dodge Coronet?
Now that was a car!

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Howl

The morning of the day I forgot your phone number, It howled outside. Usually, when I forgot something, It was quiet and peaceful. Today, It howled.

I couldn't believe what I heard. The howl penetrated every nook, every cranny. The howl even penetrated the spaces between my fingers, no matter how tightly I clamped them over my ears. The whole day the howl went on. Howl, howl, howl, that's all I could hear.

As the sun set, the howl ceased and turned to a low hum. It hummed all night long, a pleasing, soothing hum, perhaps to make up for the howl of the day.

I fell asleep at ten o'clock, and awoke the next morning relaxed, refreshed, and gritting my teeth. It was howling again.

I really felt like doing something about it. Howl, howl, howl. What a horrible noise. But I knew I wouldn't make it ten feet out the door before the howl would turn into a growl. And It's growl was much worse than It's howl.

I stayed in the house and searched for my winter earmuffs. I found them at noon, along with some shells for my shotgun. If It howled tomorrow, I would do something drastic.

Suddenly, the house shook violently. Tomorrow would be too late! I must do something drastic today! I loaded the shotgun and went to the door.

"Howl no more!" I cried, as I flung open the door and fired the shotgun into the daylight. The howl became a roar. The house collapsed about me, and I faded from the day.

The sky was dark when I awoke. It was humming again.

I live in the basement now, underneath some boards I manhandled into a crude shelter. I burn wood from the house to keep warm. It still howls all day long, but I don't mind anymore. You see, I remembered your phone number.

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Volume 1 Number 1

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Printed by GrimGraphics.

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