



1

“Joe-Joe, the dog-faced boy,” Don Kimmey howls as he starts up Medic 2.

Joe Reilly gives me a look that is both bemused and long-suffering and slams the passenger door. Joe is a paramedic stationed at Engine 4 usually, in Troy’s urban war zone. Today he is “riding the seat,” acting as lieutenant on the medic rig for Terry Fox, who is on vacation.

“ATTENTION ALL FIRE UNITS. ENGINE 3 AND MEDIC 2 ARE RESPONDING TO TROY HILLS APARTMENTS, BUILDING . . .”

As the door lifts clear and Don pulls out of Central Station, to the right, the wrong way on one-way State Street, Joe switches the black siren-knob from its 10 o’clock position at STANDBY, past WAIL at 12 and YELP at 2, and settles on the 4 o’clock, HI-LO position, which Don likens to the Bobbies’ sirens in England, and its immediate wail swallows up the voice of the dispatcher announcing the call address.

Don laughs and looks past me toward Joe, who isn’t rising to Don’s normal bait, and past him to see if cars are coming down 5th Avenue. There aren’t any, and he accelerates hard now

into the turn. Ever since Don saw the Cheers episode where Carla called Cliff “Jo-Jo,” after P.T. Barnum’s early sideshow attraction, a Russian boy with silky yellow hair that covered his entire face, he jumps on every opportunity to toss out the hook and wait for Joe to bite. That Joe has dark hair and no beard, since firefighters can only grow moustaches, is clearly beside the point: His name is Joe, isn’t it? Don even went to the trouble of cutting out small dog faces from magazine ads and pasting them onto Joe’s face in the miniature gallery of firefighter portraits that hangs in each of the six fire stations in Troy.

Joe yanks the siren knob to YELP as we approach the intersection of Congress and 5th Streets, hoping the change in sound pattern will alert the drivers racing down the Congress Street hill, but Don slows there before he turns onto Congress, just in case. A lot of drivers even ignore the big Federal sirens on Engine 5 and the Rescue Squad, so why would they stop for the smaller, electronic siren that Medic 2 has?

Sirens seem mysterious and ordinary at the same time, like rivers or cemeteries. In Troy, which stretches seven miles along the Hudson River and merely two miles east, up over the hills toward Brunswick and Wynantskill, they’re a common sound. Because Troy has its fair share of crime, more than its fair share of homeless and elderly citizens, and because emergency vehicles often have to race at least half the narrow length of the city to reach a call or a hospital, people in Troy are used to hearing plenty of sirens. The pedestrians we’re passing, who turn or cover their ears, still look at us curiously as we flash by, but the drivers who have to pull over to let us screech by simply look annoyed.

“There’s Adam,” Don says, and he waves at one of the department’s homeless regulars, half of him sprawled on the cold cobblestones in the Williams Street alley and the other half propped against the side of Famous Lunch, with its rows of three-inch hot dogs grilling next to the greasy front window, already steaming at 9:30 a.m.

"We'll have him before lunch," Joe says.

"Nope, right in the middle of lunch," Don counters. "Eat fast."

Joe moves to restore the HI-LO setting, but thinks better of it, and leaves it at YELP as Don turns south onto 3rd Street.

"Where we going?"

"Troy Hills," Joe answers, but his words drown in one of the siren's swells.

"Where?" Don asks again, cocking his head forward. There are two outfitted pick-ups that serve as medic trucks, and Don claims the siren on this one is the loudest. He swears riding in it for thirteen years has wrecked his hearing. "You can hear this in Watervliet," he says. That's the town where Don grew up, just over the Congress Street bridge, across the river from downtown Troy.

Joe leans in front of me. "Troy Hills Apartments, Building 5," he shouts.

"What do we got?"

"Unresponsive man," Joe answers, and sits back.

Troy Hills Apartments, at the southern tip of Troy, are near Stow Avenue, just up from the Menands Bridge. 3rd Street is the designated route south for fire vehicles from Central Station, which have almost four miles to travel if the call is at the far reaches of the city. Medic 2 and the Rescue Squad, both housed at Central Station on State Street, go anywhere in the city, while the six engines, each assigned to its own fire station, serve geographical "still" districts. That's why Engine 3 will assist Medic 2 on this call: Troy Hills Apartments are in their district.

"Who is it?" I ask Joe, as Don slows again where the tunnel under Russell Sage College funnels onto Ferry Street.

"We don't get the name," Joe says, turning to me, "just the address and the nature of the call, like this one — unknown unconscious."

“We’ll go to the hospital and the nurse or doctor will ask what the name is, and that’s the last thing you get. You never find that out,” Don says, looking straight ahead. He doesn’t address most people when he talks. He has to concentrate on driving, of course, but it’s more than that. Of his nicknames — Nipper, the Little Dutchman, Duke, the Big Cat, Granite-head, Diesel Don — Nipper seems most apt: Don acts like the family dog protecting the house and family when a stranger appears. He’ll wag his tail, because charm is a useful tool, but he lets you see his teeth the whole time, and you can see he’d be happy to take a chunk out of you.

“I never wonder about who they are,” he continues. “You just go and take care of them. As soon as they give an address, you can tell. You know exactly what you’re going on, because we may have been there, you know? The name, ah, the name might ring a bell, it might not, but the address, bang, it clicks right in.”

Rows of 3-story brick houses are flashing by, many with realtors’ For Sale signs on them, promising you can assume their mortgages, as we fly past Liberty Street and approach Washington. A young mother on the corner up ahead is dragging her toddler away from the curb, holding her free hand over one of her ears as the small boy jumps up and down and waves at the red, screeching truck that’s whizzing past him.

“Wait till you see Terry Fox drive,” Joe says now.

“Foxy starts in the center,” Don jumps in, “straddling the painted line, and if someone’s coming at him, he veers left, right at them, and forces them toward the curb. The cars ricochet off the parked ones at the curb and then they come back into their lane and Foxy can say, ‘I didn’t touch them,’ you know?”

In the park that runs from Washington Street south to Adams, from the first president’s street to the second, the trees have a stripped, late-November look already, even in this strong, mid-October sunlight. Only the brown leaves on the oaks are left to shiver in the morning breeze.

A woman pushing a stroller by Caprara's Auto Body Shop wheels suddenly when she hears us and hurries in the same direction we're traveling, south, as if she has had some sudden premonition that we might be heading toward a person she cares about.

Joe finally flips the siren back to HI-LO, and over the truck radio we hear the captain of Engine 3 mark its arrival at Troy Hills Apartments. Then the dispatcher comes on, repeating Engine 3's message for everyone else listening, and he ends with the time of day, 9:35.

Don laughs. "I'm telling you, I used to be really scared every once in a while, because Foxy never had control of the wheel." Don is demonstrating Foxy's style for me. "Foxy will get the gas and brake with his right foot, and then he has the high beams going with his left, and he's also got his hands busy as hell with the horn and spotlight, like this."

A driver in front of Kennedy's towing garage nods at us and heaves an armful of chains into the back of his truck. We cross Jefferson, then Ida Street. Don blows the horn a couple of times as we fly over the bridge that spans the Poestenkill Creek, throwing a wave at the closed door of Engine 6 at Canal and 3rd, but no firefighters are standing out in front to wave back.

More presidents' streets now — Madison, Monroe, where a huge, blue minaret sits atop the Ukrainian church, Jackson Street with the Carmelite Priory of St. Joseph's — and on past Van Buren, where 3rd Street merges into 4th, which is U.S. Route 4. Not far now, and I wonder if the unconscious man's family is there with him, and if they can hear our siren.

"So Ric Moreno named Foxy the one-man band," Don continues, "because he always had everything going." Then he smiles over at Joe for confirmation that it's all true.

A construction worker directing traffic where 4th Street becomes Burden bows and waves us through. We shoot up Burden, past the South End Tavern with its sign still advertising a

LADIES ENTRANCE, and onto Stow Avenue. Troy Hills Apartments appear above us now, to our left, row after row of 2-story, light-brick garden apartments with white front doors that are framed by four thin, white columns stretching the full height of each building. We can see the lights of Engine 3, still flashing, in front of Building 5.

Don turns left onto Cottage Street. Joe switches the dial back to STANDBY and the siren abruptly stops. He keys the radio.

“Medic 2 arriving.”

And the dispatcher answers, “MEDIC 2 ON THE SCENE, ZERO NINE THREE SIX. MOHAWK AMBULANCE EN ROUTE.”

Each identical building has its distinguishing number above its door. Don and Joe grab their bags from the side compartment and we rush in under the number 5.

Inside the living room, Harold Burke appears to still be watching *Regis and Kathie Lee*, but with his eyes closed. Except for that, he seems perfectly attentive: His long fingers, draped over the arms of the overstuffed chair, don't drum or fidget; he sits up pretty straight; his head is bent just slightly to the left, as if he wants the chance to make one final appraisal of Kathie Lee's legs; and his mouth is closed in a pale, tight line, ensuring his silent reception of every televised sound. Harold has become the eye of this particular storm, the only calm spot in a swarming room.

“Harold N. Burke,” the captain of Engine 3 repeats, writing as he speaks, filling in the PCR (pre-hospital care report) which, if Harold was almost dead, the paramedics would take with them to the hospital to complete.

“M,” a woman crying and holding her forehead with both of her hands says, but Regis and Kathie Lee are sitting in among the audience, stumbling through an introduction for a country and western band, and the fan next to Kathie Lee is hugging her

and screaming, so the captain can't hear her and asks her to say it again. "Not *N*. It's *M*. Harold *M*. Burke." She is shouting now in her frustration and grief. "It's an *M*. in the middle."

"How old is Harold?"

"He'll be 72 next Friday."

"What's your name?" the captain asks.

"I'm his daughter. I'm his daughter, okay?" she says, sobbing hard now, staring hopelessly at the unanimated body in the familiar, flower-print chair.

Don eases back one shut eyelid, then the other, shining a penlight into each before he slides it back closed. Then he unbuttons Harold's shirt and sticks three white circles on Harold's chest and side. They're fast patches, for the monitor/defibrillator, and he hooks the white and black leads to the patches that will show any electrical activity in Harold's heart. Joe holds a finger on Harold's carotid artery and tries to look expressionless.

The curtains are drawn, creating a palpable gloom that is strobed erratically by flashes from the TV as the camera angles switch, and I can see there are five or six other people, relatives or friends or neighbors, who have arranged themselves around the room. Two older women huddle together on the couch, and a younger woman kneels by their legs. A middle-aged man leans against a far corner, covering his eyes. A boy about ten stands near the window, as far away from the body as he can get, but he watches everyone curiously. He is the only one who isn't crying, except for the firefighters, and me, and I know I'm getting close.

The country and western group is rolling now, their pedal steel accompaniment immediately grating in this stricken room, and Don throws the TV a menacing look.

"Get that off," he commands, and one of the engine crew searches for the power button a few seconds and then finds it. Don watches the dark, rectangular monitor screen, and a flat

green line moves horizontally across it, from left to right, uninterrupted by a single peak or valley.

Joe tips Harold's body toward his left side to see his lower back and his right arm flops against his leg with a heartbreaking thump in the new quiet of the room. Don rolls his right sleeve back and checks his forearm for dependent lividity — the pooling of blood in the low areas of a dead body — and even from near the door anyone can see the long, purple smear there.

Don is all business here. He is the shortest man in the room, as well as on his shift at Central Station, about 5' 7", but he radiates confidence. He unsnaps the monitor leads and quickly winds them. He folds Harold's shirt closed and rolls his sleeve back down. Even in these menial tasks, he exudes a professional air. He projects the studied invulnerability of coordination, moving wordlessly in front of Harold's family as he packs up his tools. No turning to talk to a family member. No contemplative glance at the still-warm body. With the deep half-moons under his eyes, his wide forehead, a hair-line that recedes deeply on both sides of a shock of fine-brown hair that curls down and to the right, and his face far too boyish to suggest that he will be 42 in a couple of months, Don looks and acts very much like Napoleon Bonaparte's American brother.

That he is a stranger arbitrarily allowed inside a family's private grief, five feet away from a daughter sobbing for the dead father she loved, doesn't seem to register as even a passing blip on his personal radar screen. He hefts the re-assembled monitor and unused oxygen bag and strides out of the apartment, purposefully relaxed, like a veteran middleweight on his way back to his dressing room after an easy bout.

"Sorry," Joe Reilly is saying to everyone, over and over. Unlike Don, Joe is visibly shaken. A very large woman has moved a lawn chair next to the apartment door, and she squats there like one of the tenement building guards in *Soylent Green*,

but without a machine gun, and Joe says, "I'm sorry," as he pushes past her as well.

Up ahead, on the sidewalk next to Medic 2, Don is laughing with Engine 3's captain.

"These shows like *Rescue 911* do us a real disservice," Joe confides to me as we walk toward the truck. "Because, you know, almost all the stories on TV are happy. There's this big crisis and the EMTs rush in and they fix everything, and then the person gets better. Very few people really get better. 90 percent of our calls, if they're heart attacks or someone who's unknown unconscious like this one, we can't save them. They're dead. And we might watch it happen five times a day."

Don slides the bags and monitor back onto the side compartment shelves now and slams the double doors. His face shows, if anything, the faint traces of a smile.

"I see every single death in this city on the days I work," Joe continues. "I can't save them. There are some streets I can't drive on anymore because I keep seeing what happened to the people in accidents there. Most of the streets in this city hold some terrible memory for me, and I live with them all the time. How do you think these reality shows make me feel?"

Harold M. Burke, 71

TROY — Harold M. Burke, 71, of Troy Hills Apartments died Monday at his residence.

Mr. Burke was born in Troy. He was educated at St. Mary's School and Troy High School.

He was employed for many years by the former American Locomotive Co. in Schenectady.

Survivors include his daughter, and several nieces, nephews and cousins.

Services will be held at 8:45 a.m. Wednesday in the John N. Clinton Funeral Home, Washington Park and 3rd Street.

Burial will be in St. Joseph's Cemetery.

Calling hours will be 4-7 p.m. today in the funeral home.

* * *

Headquarters. Central. Engine 5. Central Station. The Clubhouse. These are the agreed-upon names for the principal fire station in Troy. Disgruntled firefighters occasionally use other choice names for it, too. It's a three-story red brick building at 51 State Street. Its right side extends to where State meets Sixth Avenue and houses the Troy Police Station. The left side, set back behind a substantial apron, holds the Troy Fire Department. On the first floor, it's all doors: four tall, brown-steel garage doors, framed by ornately-carved stone panels, for the vehicles that move off the apparatus floor, and a human-scale glass door that leads to the Troy City Court, which uses the front half of the building's second floor.

Fire Chief Schultz and Assistant Chief Thompson have their offices in the back half of the second floor, as does the Troy Firefighter's Union, Local 2304. Fire and police dispatchers answer emergency calls on the third floor, in the front. Halfway up the Fire Department's side, the face of a stone lion holding a carved, drawn curtain reveals, in high relief, the date the building was completed, 1923, though the fire department didn't occupy it until three years after that.

Inside, in the common room, behind Medic 2 and the Rescue Squad and all the other vehicles parked on the apparatus floor, it's time for lunch — sausage and peppers — and Tom Miter is claiming that Frank Ryan makes love to his food.

Johnny Quest or Johnny Good Guy, those are Tom's nicknames. "Just look at him," Ric Moreno told me when I asked for an explanation: In his mid-30's, about six feet tall and a little husky, with a blonde moustache and dark blonde hair, Tom looks like one version of the quintessential fireman. He smiles now and nods in Frank's direction.

I watch as Frank diligently arranges his sausage, puckered ends curving up, like a pudgy letter "C" stretching out onto its back, relaxing down into the open torpedo roll. He laces it carefully in place with translucent onion strings and edge-blackened slices of green pepper, and then lays two straight lines of ketchup along its sides.

"Now watch this," Tom says.

Frank lifts the sandwich, squeezing gently to retain all its glistening, steaming parts, and steers one end toward his mouth. He shuts his eyes and slides it in, closing on it slowly, not just chomping off a chunk but more separating it gently from the rest, savoring it for a few seconds before his jaws go to work, and suddenly his posture reveals an unmistakable swooning quality.

"He loves it," Tom says.

"Yeah, but will he respect it in the morning?" Dave Stevens wants to know.

The 20 by 30 foot common room is uncommonly dingy. It is part TV room, with two worn, light-brown vinyl couches, and part dining room, with three formica tables shoved together and surrounded by 14 unmatched, blue and black molded chairs. The stained, off-white sheetrock walls hang above horizontal sheets of waist-high exterior plywood and lend the whole room a grimy look. A row of streaked windows set high in the far wall allows in only a vague, gauzy light. Several of the overhead fluorescent fixtures aren't working — bulbs are burned out, and faulty capacitors buzz constantly — so the glowing Pepsi machine turns out to be the brightest element in the room.

In spite of all that, though, Central has an oddly welcoming,

distinctly lived-in, boys' clubhouse feel to it. An extended family inhabits this place. These are brothers, whether they're related by blood or not. The cliché about the fire service functioning as a brotherhood doesn't seem to apply as a cliché here. They even call each other "brother," and appear to mean it. There haven't been any women firefighters in the Troy Fire Department yet, and while everyone realizes that situation won't last much longer, this is still very much a guys' joint. You can burp with gusto here. You can fart and not apologize. You can walk around the bunk room naked. You can holler. You can argue. And you better learn how to "bust balls" if you want to survive in this place.

Right now, the argument about whether the general public in Troy really knows much about what firefighters actually do has displaced the earlier one about layoffs being certain if the Republicans win the election and toss the current City Manager and Democrat, Steve Dworsky, out on his backside.

Gary Hanna, at the far end of the table, nearest the television, yells out, "I think the basic majority in this city don't know anything about our job, except that we put out fires."

Ric Moreno, who has been reading the *Record*, Troy's primary newspaper, folds it up and takes off his glasses. Ric loves to play devil's advocate. "Come on. We've done EMS for 13, 14 years now, we'll run over 8000 calls this year, and every single one of those calls wasn't the same person, you know? That's a lot of different houses we've gone to. A lot of neighborhoods. A lot of next doors. I think a lot of people have been affected or touched by the EMS side of our service."

EMS (Emergency Medical Service) calls account for almost 75% of the calls that firefighters answer in Troy, and there is a continuing debate about the role of EMS continuing in the fire service here at all, especially among the fire veterans and the chiefs, most of whom were here long before they had to go out on any medical calls. A lot of firefighters just want to fight fires and handle rescues again.

“Nothing, they know nothing,” two or three voices agree at the same time.

“Not nearly enough,” Tom says. Tom puts his sandwich down for this. “They don’t know why a hose line puts out a fire. They don’t know why you’re breaking windows. They don’t know why you’re cutting holes in their roof.”

Dave interrupts to make a point. “They don’t know that we’re all here on Christmas Day, or what it takes to be here then, or on Christmas Eve, the emotion that’s involved in not being with your family.”

“They only know that when they call you, you show up,” Tom continues. “And after that, they don’t have any idea what you’re doing. None. What do they *believe* about us? Checkers. Cards. Beer. Women. Lazy. Noisy. Football. Lots of overtime, but only in Troy, probably. What they know is that we go inside burning buildings and they know it’s dangerous. I’m sure they don’t know exactly what goes on in there, because all they have to go on is what they see on TV, and every fire you see on TV is a TV fire — a fire that’s well-ventilated, where you can all stand up and just walk through the place and put the fire out. People know *Backdraft*. And for paramedics, they know *Emergency* from re-runs, or *Rescue 911* now.”

Strangely enough, Dick Thompson, the deputy chief, who has been feuding with the 1st Platoon about almost everything for the last year or so, has decided to eat lunch with the men today, maybe to monitor what they say in front of me, a visiting writer, because all writers are as dangerous as reporters in Dick’s eyes. Like many people entrusted with public safety, Dick has decided to be afraid of letting outsiders know too much. Suddenly, in a slightly mocking tone, he tosses out his opinion. “I don’t think most people have the foggiest idea of what it’s like to climb up a burning stairway, or what it’s like to rappel into the gorge, or what it’s like to be first in on a shooting, or what it’s like to jump into the river,” he says. “When they think about a

guy jumping into water and saving somebody that's drowning, they're thinking, *Lake George, the sun's out, a nice, clean guy who's not drunk, he's not fighting me.* That's what most people think."

Charley Willson is sitting to my right, finishing his sandwich and trying not to get involved in the discussion. Like most of the guys on the 1st Platoon at Central Station, he's a veteran, with eighteen years on the job. He's on the thin side, maybe 5' 11", with a dark moustache and a haircut that makes him look a little like Alfalfa from the 1930's Little Rascals comedy shorts. Charley works on the Rescue Squad and everyone calls him Teflon Charley, because Dick never seems to blame anything on him.

He asks me what the call was at Troy Hills Apartments, and I tell him. But then I want to know how firefighters process all the deaths they witness, and why Don seemed to be acting so detached on that call.

"Other fire departments, when they have a death or something, you know, whether it's a fireman or somebody else, they bring in counselors," Charley says. "We've never done that. And I think a lot of our counseling gets done right here, while we're eating. I mean, with black humor and all, that's a big part. As bad as it is, it's a big part, and you've got to just break into the trauma, especially when we see kids get hurt.

"You'll see, if we have a kid in a bad accident, where he's mangled or something, you bring that back and you're stuck on that all night, you know? And you never know, because sometimes the guys who stay quiet about calls, you say, 'Oh, that doesn't bother them,' but they're the ones who are holding it inside. They might be the ones who are worse off, because the other guys are getting it out, talking about it. So you can never know what people are thinking."

Tom has been listening to Charley, too. "The family's a distraction on calls," he says. "Unless you're in a dangerous situation, you've got to have tunnel vision. You let the company officer talk to the family. You just do what you've got to

do. And Don's the best paramedic on this job. He's got the most experience, and he really cares about the program. Not that I think I'm lousy. I'm not. But working with a guy like that, you'll never make him look bad, even if you're a bad paramedic. The worst you'll do is complement him, because he's always going to know what to do."

Charley jumps in again. "You see dead bodies almost every day you work, and it's not always traumatic. It's ordinary," he says. "Out of the ordinary is, say, somebody's mangled or something, the type of situation where how they died isn't ordinary, but we're so used to people dying. It's not that we're cold to it, but we can accept it better. It's just part of the job."

"You know, like we had this one guy. Tom, you remember the guy down at Levonian's meat plant there, he got caught in the sausage maker? His arm got dragged in. After that call, we came back here and we were having sausage and peppers, like today, and we were saying, 'I'm glad we got these before that new batch hits the racks, you know?'"

"He was trapped inside this sausage-making machine. His arm was so broken, it got his shoulder, too, you know? He got pulled in so bad he even had a puncture wound on his forehead." Charley is trying to contort himself to approximate the way the guy was all twisted inside the machine.

"He's in there and he's just like this and he had all these clothes on, because down there it's freezing inside that plant. They got like two or three sweatshirts on and a jumpsuit on, like a white jumpsuit on, and we had to cut all these clothes off him to get at him because we couldn't tell what was what. And then his blood's dripping out and everything while we're doing it so you don't know what's broken or anything."

"Well, then, we get him all out, and he says, 'All right, before you lay me down, can I have a cigarette?' And we're going, 'Are you shitting me?' You know, that's all the guy wanted. 'Well, I know they won't give me one in the hospital,'

he said, and the guy was in so much pain he couldn't move, and all he wanted was a cigarette. I said, 'I guess this isn't your lucky day, you know? I don't smoke.'

"So that was his mentality, and I felt bad, because he was probably in shock and he was probably thinking the only thing that was going to make him feel better was a cigarette, because he didn't even want oxygen. He was just in so much pain.

"Then we came back and, like I said, we had to sit down and we were eating the sausage and here we still had that smell like the meat, you know, the meatpacking shit. It's just got that aroma to it. And we were all laughing about it, because it's a way to deal with the trauma, right? And it's not something where you're laughing about that guy, because you know what he's going through. I know he had a bad summer. I mean, there's no doubt about it."

Everyone else at the table is still eating, or saying the city administration is talking about closing down Engine 4 on North Street. They're not even paying attention to Charley's story about blood and broken bones and life-threatening sausage machines.

"Apparently, he didn't lose his arm," Charley goes on. "He had broken ribs, he had a broken shoulder, he had a compound fracture of the arm and everything. It was the big, weaving sausage-maker. Did you ever see one of those? His clothes got caught and he got pulled in, and the machine was still going. Somebody ran over and shut the machine off, but his arm was still in there. You've just got to get that out of your system, you know, what you went through. It's just so gross to see and everything. And then, everybody always wants to know, 'Oh, jeez, how can you eat? How can you get through stuff like that?'"

"We're lucky here in Troy," Tom says. "We have a real good working relationship with the city, because of EMS. When it was just fires, you didn't talk to the people. You went in, put the

fire out, and you didn't have time to talk. This is high visibility now. It's not like Schenectady, where—"

Suddenly Chief Thompson interrupts. "Wait a minute, now," he says. It looks like Tom has touched on one of his sore subjects. "It's not the EMS. The city needs a fire department. We're just doing EMS because we're already here. You can see right over in Schenectady where it's working against them. The City of Schenectady is saying, 'Lookit, we don't have the money no more. What are we gonna get rid of? Let's get rid of EMS. We don't need it. The ambulances can take care of it.' And the same thing can happen here, I'm telling you."

At this point, I ask how EMS got started at the Troy Fire Department, but I can see right away I've asked the wrong question. Dave and Tom get up and clear their places, and Ric heads for the kitchen to start the red sauce for supper. Frank becomes even more involved with his food. "Ron Baker," a couple of guys say, but nobody seems to want to talk about him in front of Chief Thompson, and an awkward silence begins.

I know Ron Baker was hired in the late 1970's to start the EMS program for Troy, I was told he left a few years ago to become EMS Coordinator for the Town of Colonie, and I learned almost right away that there had been some bad blood between Dick Thompson and Ron when he was working in Troy, but nobody's going to tell me much more right now.

Don Kimmey, in his usual seat at the head of the table, finally breaks the silence. "Know what we do?" he calls out. "The poor people in Troy, yeah, they know. They see us all the time. The rich people, nope. They just know that when they call, they get somebody right away. It doesn't matter to them, they could have a plumbing problem. They could have anything. They call the number, they're going to get somebody right away to come take care of them. The rich people, they got insurance to pay for everything. They don't care. That's why the

EMS system is the best thing that happened here, because it takes care of all incomes. Poor, middle income, high. Everybody. Because we're all going to get sick. We're all going to die."

* * *

"He wasn't making no sense," the woman in the white blouse and badly-wrinkled brown skirt is saying.

"What's his name?" Don Kimmey shouts.

He looks too old to be a student, Don is thinking. What the hell's he doing here? This is supposed to be for students.

We are at Campus View Apartments, on Route 4 leading east out of Troy, next to Hudson Valley Community College, for the second call of the afternoon. The one right after lunch was a dryer fire that Engine 4's crew put out before we even got there.

"He didn't have no coherence, just rolling all over like that. He was drinking all weekend," she says.

The man, wearing only a stained, torn undershirt, suddenly flops off the bed and smashes face-first onto the hardwood floor.

"His name's Wayne, Donny," Tom Miter says, and then turns back to the woman. "Are you his wife or his girlfriend?" he asks her.

"He was complaining of a headache, trying to put his shirt on as though they were his pants. I went to give him a drink and he just threw it into his own face. He was drinking, you know. 100 proof, Mr. Boston vodka. I found the bottle."

"Are you his wife?"

She hands Tom a prescription bottle and says, "Here's what I told you about, what he keeps in his drawer. I don't know what they're for. Jesus, I have kids in here. I don't want them to see this stuff."

"Wayne, come on, pal. Relax," Don is saying. "You know who the President is, Wayne?"

Tom throws the prescription to Don. "Here's what he took,

Don. She thinks the most he got was six. Most likely just five. But she says there could be other things she doesn't know about, too."

"Does Wayne act like this most of the time?" Don wants to know.

"Not unless he's really drunk," she answers.

Wayne is sitting up next to the bed now, flailing his arms, hitting the wall and the side of the bed and then the wall again.

"Who's the President? Look straight at me, pal. You know who the President is?"

Campus View Apartments, it's students mostly. It could be the booze. It could be an overdose here with all these students. I've treated overdoses here. We've been here before.

"Why did you call us?" Tom asks the woman.

"My daughter, when she got home from school, she called me at work. 'Mom, come home,' she said. 'Wayne's not right.' And when I got here, he was like this, and rolling all over the bed. He's an alcoholic, but I never seen him like this. It scared the shit out of me."

"Put your arm down," Don tells Wayne. "Here, let me hold your hand. We just want to take your blood pressure. Easy, easy. Relax, nobody's gonna hurt you. Come on, Wayne. Help us out here, buddy."

"He kept telling me he had a headache, a real bad one," she says, and Don looks up fast.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Well, Saturday, he started complaining of having a cough, a cold, you know, and he—"

"No, the head pain," Don interrupts. "Saturday it started? Did he get hit in the head? Did he fall?"

"No," she says. "He just said he had headaches, and he started drinking the vodka, like usual."

We had that kid seven, eight years ago, Don is remembering. He was acting the same way, naked and rolling around on the bed

crazy like this and then, zoom, he just shit right in the bed. We took him out of there and we were all laughing afterwards about it, and then he died that night. He had that aneurysm in his brain and it let go and none of us caught it.

Don is animated now, kneeling in front of Wayne, between the wall and the bed. "Wayne, look at me now, right here. This is a pen-light. I want to look in your eyes. Open them big. That's it. Come on, Wayne, tell me who the President is, will you?"

"Nixon," Wayne finally says.

"Close, buddy," Don answers. "Pupils dilated and reactive, Tom. Let's get going here."

Wayne is groaning loudly now, trying to slide down onto the floor, and Don catches him.

"We want to take you to the hospital, all right, Wayne. You're acting a little bizarre. You got a pair of underwear? Let's get some drawers on you."

"Does he take any illegal drugs — cocaine, heroin?" Tom asks.

"No, he don't do nothing like that," she says.

Don finds some shorts under the bed and tries to put them on Wayne. "Put your foot in. Come on, pal. I'm trying to help you."

"I tried doing that all day, putting clothes on him," she says now, turning to walk out of the bedroom. "He wouldn't let me. He needs some help. I've got kids, you know. I can't let them see this shit."

* * *

In Medic 2, on the way back to Central Station from Samaritan Hospital, after a half hour of fighting Wayne off the ambulance stretcher and onto a hospital gurney, where he pulled his IV out and sprayed his blood all over the nurse trying to attach the leather restraints on his arms, and after the

young ER doctor confirmed Don's field diagnosis of an aneurysm and hurried Wayne up for a CAT scan, Tom and Don are doing the call critique.

"We had to re-do the straps so he wouldn't yank the IV out again. You don't want to restrain a guy who's just sick. He's not a drunk that's being belligerent," Tom says. "He will die, if you leave him go like that, if that's the problem, an aneurysm, which is what the doctor thinks. I've never had a patient like that before. I mean, I've had tons of wacky patients, but usually you know why. And it's tough when you just don't know why, and you have no idea exactly what's causing it. And the only thing we had to go on was Donny had a patient like that before, and that's what it turned out to be."

For Don, this seems to be no big deal, but this aneurysm call reveals a lot about his methods: If there's a patient who is alive when they answer the call, he'll fight harder than anybody to save him. This guy, Wayne, still had a fighting chance when we found him.

"It could have been hypoxia, where you're not getting enough oxygen to the brain," Don explains, "like the people in CHF, congestive heart failure, they'll act bizarre because the brain isn't being oxygenated enough. He could have been only hungover, but you can't take a chance. Let's just put it this way, all right — he's not acting normal. And that's what I look at. When we go to somebody's home, that's the first thing you ask. Do they act like this normally, or is this out of the normal? If they say it's abnormal behavior, then you work on him. That's it."