

Lanny Larcinese
326 S. 46th St.
Philadelphia, PA 19143
(215) 476-9332
Lanny633@AOL.com
3,152 Words

**MEMOIR NOIR:
INCIDENT ON 46TH STREET**

Cities don't scare me. I've been in the hell-hole parts of towns all over the country and I'm still around—unlike my lemming friends in red-lined suburbs where crime is crabgrass and threat is a neighbor who doesn't mow. Yeah, they argue, but they're safe for kids. Maybe. But when their children come to school in Philly, to Penn or Drexel—forget about Temple—and they venture away from their ivory tower enclaves into the bowels of the beast, they get the vapors. I see it in their student newspapers all the time. I know the code words. I'm not saying shit doesn't happen, but I mean, c'mon.

#

I've always been at home in cities. People and places are constant surprises, though sometimes risky, even terminal. The idea of danger can turn into the reality of fright. I know this. It's a price I pay.

In my acne period, I delivered spareribs and chicken for the Bungalow Bar B-Q, a joint my parents owned in a working-class, mixed-race area near Motown's auto assembly factories. We had mostly night hours. Two-thirty a.m. on weekends was when hell broke loose, when the taverns emptied and half-tanked bar-rats buried greasy chins in slabs of Morrell's tender short-ribs. During rush hour, all you saw was a sea of faces painted with house-special hot sauce and

bloodshot, glassy eyes—each person of whom could have been Bozo the Clown or John Wayne Gacy, but mostly were assembly line workers from Dodge Main up in Hamtramck.

I'm in bed. Did that noise come from downstairs? Maybe it was one of Lisa's tenants putting something in the trash. Her trash cans are in the narrow alleyway between our houses, almost beneath my second floor bedroom window. In fourteen years, neither I nor my neighbors have had a burglary, but one of the effects of my lousy hearing is that I can't tell the direction of different tones.

On weekends, the streets of Detroit in our part of town were a circus—my windshield a wide-angle lens to the gritty, industrial cityscape—like the two women fighting with shredded blouses and flopping breasts, each circling in a half-crouch trying to flay the other with a broken beer bottle. Or delivering food down dark streets to upstairs-rear apartments dimly lit by red bulbs while the zoned-out men draped over drunken women danced in their underwear as the likes of Coltrane or Gerry Mulligan blew lullabies accompanying feather-bed highs. Public sex, muggings, police brutality and bar fights were as common as basketball nets in suburban cul-de-sacs, but so were sights like happy revelers high-kicking like Rockettes down the middle of Forest Avenue—all tableaux unfolding before my eyes, dioramas of strangeness—like a dog in a tutu riding a unicycle. Most people would get the hell out of there, but it was a show I wouldn't miss—broken rules and busted lives filling more of my boyhood than Ozzie and Harriet.

A few years later, after a pizza guy refused to deliver a large mushroom and pepperoni because a riot had begun and I didn't know it, I walked slack-jawed down Livernois Avenue, near my home, and gawked as gangs of angry black people exited smashed store windows with

arms loaded with TVs, clothes, or whatever the stores had sold. Suburbanites spewed racial anxieties all over the media, but I had no fear of walking the two inch carpet of broken plate glass in the midst of looting, still-burning buildings, and rioters run amok. I knew the black people had nothing against me; rather, the smug institutions that believed liberal giveaways should placate them. Standing amidst a riot changes a man. The risk-bar gets higher. He gets arrogant. He can survive most things. Bullshit happens to other people. And he becomes stupid.

When I come in I think I have locked the door behind me. I twist the lever which slides the bolt into place. It's a heavy door. It takes a knee to force it shut. I think it is locked, but what the hell, even if it isn't, it will be fine. It always is.

Later, as a young married guy, I was recruited to a job in Chicago where stunning skyscrapers reached for clouds and the blue water of Lake Michigan a chasuble for the City of Big Shoulders. Again, I had a city home, though now my typical ride took me down Lakeshore Drive in an orange Corvette past marinas and beaches to my office beside the Chicago River. There, the only crimes I witnessed were a martini with two olives instead of three at Johnnie Lattner's, or maybe four martinis instead of one.

Brief stints in Boston and Hartford followed, then Philadelphia, where I made my final home, and the worst urban insult I experienced was the slashed top of my blue Mustang convertible. It was a bitch to get it replaced, but even then, I figured that's why God made insurance. Better my top gets slashed than my throat.

I love my 1913 Arts & Crafts home near the University of Pennsylvania. It has drop-dead woodwork, leaded stain glass windows and is perfectly suited to my Stickleby and Victorian stuff. Of sixteen rooms, only the first two floors are nicely appointed; the upper floors consist of tiny, impractical spaces, too many closets, and look as if constructed from salvage. The only improvement I made over fourteen years was having the stairs carpeted so my collie, Kate, could make it up instead of circling dozens of times before giving up. I guess collie genes evolved for gentle meadows rather than what must have looked to her like El Capitan. At that, most times I just pick her up and carry her. This is her home, too. Nobody ever carried me, but what the hell, she loved me like no woman ever did.

During the thirty-six years I made my home in The Quaker City, I dried out by becoming a serious runner and often ran through Center City to the ritzy Parkway, past the stunning, behemoth Philadelphia Museum of Art and into Fairmount Park. But there was no neighborhood I wouldn't run in, even North Philly—through knots of street-whores, pimps, dealers, and macho tough-guys yelling derisive obscenities. I knew I could outrun them if they chased me, and I tendered more than a few fuck-yous of my own.

Then, when I owned a couple of pizza shops as a sideline gig, I bought a thirty-eight. One of the shops was in a tough area on Stenton Avenue where I often bumped bellies with rowdy riff-raff, after which I would turn my back and walk away, which meant, “go diddle yourself, cowboy.” Yet, I knew anything could happen. When a guy from a nearby competitor got murdered, I began carrying the piece.

#

But back to the house where I now live alone, my Kate long gone. For all practical purposes, I only occupy a couple of rooms: my bedroom and my office. I never use the kitchen. Even the fridge has long been empty since I get take-out for all of my meals. Wash dishes? Are you kidding? Weeks, months, go by without visiting my basement or the top floor. My plumbing and heater work and no water drips down on me from my bedroom ceiling, so why go there? In cold weather I keep the thermostat on fifty-six degrees, enough to prevent the plumbing from freezing. I heat the two rooms I occupy with little electric heaters. Eccentric? Well, yeah.

During the day when I run errands I never lock my front door. I often return with packages. Fishing for keys is a hassle. Despite floodlights, there are so many ways a burglar could break in via the alley between me and Lisa's place, or the backyard, that an unlocked door doesn't make much difference. Or so I think. Sheer anonymity is probably a better defense against burglars. Besides, the only time I got caught with my pants down was with Lucille—an abstract artist who had a studio down on Spring Garden. She wanted me to see her stuff. Her husband walked in on us while I was applying some gesso onto her canvas. Turned out he only wanted to watch.

Lying in bed at night with the whole house dark except for the room I'm in, I am on the alert for prowlers. When my bedroom doors are shut, I occasionally glance through the transom window to the hallway, looking for untoward reflections of a flashlight; or going to the bathroom I listen for noises coming from downstairs, or look for shadows, or again, lights meandering the walls. If I discovered a prowler, I would make noise, let him know I detected him. They say that burglars are there to rob, and if discovered, will run. Finally, while in bed, I keep said thirty-eight loaded on my nightstand. It is always strategically placed on its left side with its grip

angled just right for my easy reach and grab. I don't realize it at the time, but my imaginings are rehearsal.

The gun doesn't have a safety. Its safety is a heavy trigger-pull, meaning it takes a lot of pressure to squeeze off a round, but cocked, becomes a hair trigger. It is loaded with hollow-points. When they enter the chest or belly, they leave a neat little hole that may not even bleed, then bust up into little pieces that ramble through the body pulling carloads of flesh and organ tissue and bone and blood en route to the shattered spine.

It is about eight forty-five p.m. I am in bed in my usual state of undress, meaning naked. I am reading a manuscript. CNN is on in the background. Both of my bedroom doors are closed to conserve heat. Crime in this area is seldom more than a stolen laptop or bicycle, or a random late-night mugging of a naïve student for credit cards or cell phone. But I don't feel too vulnerable. I've survived a lot of shit. I am a city guy. I am comfortable in my skin. I am secure in my home.

A weird thing happened a few years ago. I accidentally left my car double-parked with the door open outside the house. I was carrying stuff in but somehow got distracted and forgot to properly park the car. A couple hours later, neighbors noticed it and feared something had happened to me. They called the police. I was again lying in bed when I heard frightening shouts from inside of the house, "Hello! Hello! Philadelphia Police!" They had come right in through my unlocked door.

As I lie reading my manuscript I hear another noise. Where did it come from, Lisa's tenant? Sometimes street noise echoes between our narrowly-spaced, four-story homes—revelers or thumping bass from a car radio, or a motorcycle. Maybe it's a banging radiator in a distant room. Random noises are an every night occurrence in a hundred year-old house in the city.

I am calm. I am at peace. The holidays are coming and my daughter Amanda and her husband are leaving soon on vacation, as is my girlfriend Jackie who is going to Israel with family. Also, I am excited about the manuscript I am reading. My financial life is much improved after digging out from the real estate bust, and my remaining investment properties are well-situated. My health is good for my age, as is that of loved ones. All is well.

Out of the corner of my eye I see something. A belt is draped across the doorknob of the closed door. Did it move? It is swaying. Nah. Imagination. There were times I felt the whole house quiver though was never able to confirm even a mild temblor. But I felt it okay. I must be spooking myself.

The only other person who has a key is my daughter. She would never come in without calling. But taking a cue from my experience of the police coming into the house, firemen may come in too. A fire could start on my ground floor or at Lisa's place; they might get a call even before I knew about it. I disarmed all my smoke alarms for Kate. Their chirping made her crazy. But I don't smell smoke, so I return to my manuscript and Wolf Blitzer's droning.

My bedroom door slowly begins to open. By itself? The hair on my neck stands up and I feel shock and an overwhelming chill. I am momentarily stunned at this incredulous sight. What th...!

A black man slowly slithers through the opened door directly into my bedroom. He steps toward my bedside, saying something about money and brandishing a chef's knife that punctuates his words. All I can process are "stranger" and "knife." The machinery of my mind tries to reconcile this vision with my confusion and overpowering emotions. Is this someone I know? "NO!" it says. It takes a full two seconds for my brain to scream DANGER! DANGER! DANGER! My fright is electric.

It takes an additional moment to adjust to the surprise and filter the possibilities. I toss the covers aside. He looks startled at my sudden movement. Now his eyes are wide. He's not big—medium build, maybe five seven or eight. I probably still can't take him. Hell, I look like the Pillsbury Doughboy. He is wearing dark clothes and a black watch-cap pulled low over his ears. He is unmasked and scowling, but instinct tells me he's not a pro at this. Another flash of insight tells me it makes him more dangerous. I can't make out what he's saying, I'm so fucking deaf. All I see is the knife as it stabs at the air in my direction.

In a single motion I leap out of bed, grab the perfectly placed thirty-eight from the nightstand, and cock the hammer. I brace the piece in two hands and scream, "No, I got YOU!" My zeal to defend myself secretes an ocean of adrenaline which quells my fear. I am hyper-alert. My hand is steady as I aim for the middle of his body. I am ready for anything.

He is eight feet away with the bed between us. To him, the barrel of the revolver must look like the maw of a Great White. Before I could fire, or need to, he darts through the bedroom

door through which he had just nonchalantly slithered. I hear a lot of thumping. Still holding the gun in both hands, I run after him into the long hallway, dark except for the few feet of light emanating from my bedroom. I am screaming, “Stop, motherfucker! I’ll blow your fucking brains out!” But I don’t know where he fled. He might still be here, anywhere, crouched, ready to spring, hiding among the house’s many dark spaces. Maybe he’s got a partner.

I stop in the hallway. He can see me but I can’t see him. Discretion demands that I reign in my bravado. I back up into my lit bedroom. Still aiming the gun toward the darkness with one hand, I punch out 911 with the other. I excitedly but clearly enunciate the address, that an intruder with a knife has broken in, that the house was second from the corner on the west side of the street. “Is he still in the house?” she asks. “I don’t know!” I yell impatiently. She asks again, then again. “How in the hell do I know, lady?! This fucking place has sixteen rooms and I’m not about to explore! Send someone! Now!” “They’re on their way,” she says. Within two minutes, cops are in the house and shouting up the stairs. They came in through the front door. The punk had left it open as he beat his hasty retreat. The fucker got away with my motorcycle jacket.

Six uniforms scatter over the property. I lay down the thirty-eight, put on some clothes to hide my embarrassment, and meet with them. One of them accompanies me as we begin at the top floor and search every room and closet for the assailant and/or accomplices. We discover that when he fled, the thug had escaped down my back stairs which lead to the kitchen. No sign of a busted door frame, broken windows or forced entry. From the street, the house had been dark. He probably thought no one was home. When he came up to the second floor, he couldn’t help but see my bedroom light on and hear the TV. That must have been when he got the knife from my kitchen and planned his mayhem.

As I am re-enacting events to one of the cops, another yells upstairs, “Mr. Larcinese, do

you own a cellphone?”

Me: “Yeah.”

Cop: “Where is it?”

Me: “Here, on my bed.”

My would-be robber (or worse) ran out in such a hurry, he not only dropped the knife, but also his cell phone which lay on my bottom step. One of the cops wearing gloves tinkers with the phone, holds it up to my face and asks, “Is this him?” There, in a full-bodied selfie, is the scary dude, this time smiling for the camera and looking like somebody’s uncle.

The knife is long, strong, and pointy enough that plunged into my chest, would find my pericardium and a valve or two.

The next day, a friend asks, “Why didn’t you just put a pill into him?” I was ready for that if he had made a move. I’m glad I didn’t have to, but when an intruder knows you’re there, and brazen enough to confront you with a knife, his intention is clear as polished glass. Even had I offered up the hundred or so fazools I typically have in my jeans, I could identify him and an armed-robbery home invasion carries serious time. Who knows how far he would have gone?

#

The following morning I cleaned and oiled my revolver. It is on me or within reach at all times. The doors to my home now stay double locked. At night, the joint is lit like Las Vegas.

The manuscript I had been reading was a draft of a recently completed memoir. The first line of the preface, written many months prior, is, “A man’s life can end in an instant with a dagger through the heart.” The next sentence is “The soul is harder to kill.” When I wrote it, it was to delve the past, not predict the future.

At seventy-four, for me, the city will always be a Siren song, beautiful but dangerous, but best if I stay lashed firmly to the mast.

Oh yeah, and keep my doors locked.

That too.

End