

Bright Light, Big City

by Greg Costikyan

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IBM was down a point. Not unusual, but I wondered why. Rumor had it that their profits would be up next quarter. I stared at the Quotron screen and frowned.

Something zipped past on the news line. I caught "terrorists," "New York," and "... ton device."

What?

I pulled up Hot News. "AT&T Sues IBM," aha, but where...? Dammit. They put newsflashes on the news line instanter. Sometimes it takes a minute or two to key a story in to Hot News. They didn't have it up yet. I bashed the keyboard frantically.

Steve came into the office. I looked up from the monitor. "Have you heard?" he said.

"Heard what?"

"Come on," he said. "Mary's got a radio."

So I left the office and went down to Mary's cubicle. Half a dozen people were clustered around -- most of the department. Mary had a newsradio station on. "... demanding one-hundred million dollars, the freeing of a list of 43 imprisoned terrorists world wide, and a formal apology from the United States government for last month's Djibouti incident," it said. "Mayor Cardinale has appealed for calm." And it cut to a scratchy tape of the mayor saying some damnfool thing.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"A nuke..." said Mary. She looked a little wan. "They..."

"A bunch of wackos claim they've got a hundred kiloton nuke somewhere in Manhattan," said Dave.

I looked around at them. A joke? No. Mary didn't have the imagination for anything this elaborate. And there was the radio: "... twenty-two minutes, we'll give you the world. The top story this afternoon: nuclear terrorism in New York. In other news..."

I looked at the group again. Here they were, hanging on the radio's every word. They must be shell-shocked.

I picked up the phone. 1-201-659... Damn. Busy signal. I tried again. Again. Again. I got a recording this time. "We're sorry, but all long-distance lines..."

It took ten tries before I got through to Debbie. "Have you heard?" I said.

"Mike?" she said. "What's up?"

"Listen to me," I said. "Terrorists claim to have a nuclear bomb somewhere in New York."

"What?"

Debbie and I have an odd relationship. She's usually the one that calls the shots in the family. I don't

mind. My ego is invested in other things. It was atypical of me to issue orders. Atypical enough, I hoped, that she wouldn't question them.

"Don't talk. Listen. Grab clothes for a couple of days. And baby stuff. If you can find the insurance papers for the house in a minute or less, take them. Get a recent statement for the money market account. Get the cat. Get in the car. Get on the Turnpike. Head south. Do it quickly. Do it now."

"What about you?" she said.

"I'll meet you in Philadelphia."

"What? No, I'll wait for . . ."

"Debbie, ten minutes from now, Wall Street can be radioactive slag. You, me, and the baby can all be dead. It will take me at least forty minutes to get to you. In forty minutes, you can be well out of danger. Get in the car. Do it fast, and you just might beat the traffic that's going to come boiling out of the city in any minute."

"Okay," she said rapidly. "Where will we meet?"

"When you get to Philly, find a hotel room. Then call your parents in Chicago and tell them where you are. I'll call them to find out."

"Good," she said. "I love you."

"I love you too. Bye."

When I left the office again, they were still clustered around the radio. All except Steve. Takes a while for some people to react, I guess. Mary saw me head for the elevators. I guess something penetrated, because she said, "My God! Ben!" and she picked up a phone.

It took forever for the elevators to come. I'd have taken the stairs, but I was thirty floors up. Probably faster by elevator, even with the delay.

I was surprised there weren't more people on the street. There were a lot more than you'd expect for the late afternoon, though. A lot of them looked pretty panicky. I wondered what I looked like.

I walked for the subway. I walked fast. I headed for the Fifth Avenue stop on the F train. There was already a solid flow of people through the turnstiles. After the turnstiles, you take a long escalator down. The F line is way down there; I don't know why, exactly. Most stations aren't so deep.

I got to the platform and waited. It was already pretty crowded when I got there. The platform rapidly began to fill up with people. I went to the front to make sure I got on the first train; that may have been a mistake. The escalator kept on dumping more and more people on the platform. We were cheek by jowl, now. Some short bearded guy in a business suit had his elbows in my ribs.

The train came. I tried to squeeze on, but I guess I'm not as aggressive as some folks. The hell with it. I waited for the next one.

The train had relieved the crowding for a moment, but people kept on coming down that escalator. Suddenly, I realized this was actively dangerous. The people at the top of the escalator had no idea how crowded it was down here. They just got on, and then got dumped on the platform. If this went on, people would soon be forced off the platform and onto the tracks.

I wondered what genius had designed this station. I guess he had never expected so quick and so massive a flux of passengers.

Another train came. This time, I was a little more desperate. I got on.

I thought commuting was bad. If 5 PM on the subway is sardines, we were anchovies. I was in the middle of the car and couldn't reach anything to hang onto; it didn't matter. The press of bodies was so tight that I doubt I could have fallen under any circumstances.

The train trundled forward. I think it was slower than normal. Overloaded, maybe. Rockefeller Center. Forty-Second Street. Thirty-Fourth. Finally.

Thirty-Fourth was as much of a madhouse. Getting out of the train in the teeth of the people who wanted in was like facing the Jets' line of scrimmage. I lost my briefcase somewhere in there. Hell with it; my credit cards were in my wallet, which I still had.

The PATH train, amazingly, wasn't so bad. I guess when people think of routes out of the city, they automatically think of commuter trains, cars, the airports. The PATH -- Port Authority Trans-Hudson line, the old Hudson-Manhattan Tube -- was really just a glorified subway. Except that it goes to Newark.

Newark ought to be out of the blast radius. And the Newark PATH station is also the Newark train station, smack on the northeast corridor. There'd be trains from Newark to Philadelphia.

I got on a Journal Square train. I'd have to change there for Newark. The train was jammed, God knows, but I didn't have any trouble getting on the first one that came.

I was lucky, I suppose. Or maybe not; maybe it was because I'd acted fast.

It was inevitable, when you think about it. Maybe as inevitable as the California quake. Everyone seems to think a nuke is a big deal; it isn't. I mean, they could build them in the 1940's, for God's sake. When they still had Packards. And television was just a blip on the horizon. When Roosevelt was President. This is archaic technology.

Building a nuke isn't tough. Hell, I could build one myself, given enough plutonium. That's the rub, of course; you can't just pick up the stuff at the corner store. But there are enough nuclear plants in some of the world's wackier countries . . . Sooner or later, some unpleasant group of crazies was bound to get one.

And where were they going to plant it? Tel Aviv, maybe, but Mossad is pretty sharp. (In contrast, I suspect, to the CIA.) And who wants to nuke London? Munich? Tokyo? A pretty inoffensive bunch of countries, really.

Nope, if you're a terrorist with a bomb, you've really only got two choices: New York and Washington.

If I'd thought it through, I'd have plugged for Washington. A city of slums, monuments, and bureaucrats. Nuking D.C. would probably be a net plus for the country. Bad for the tourist industry, maybe, but you can't have everything.

In Washington, you get the government; but in New York, you get the financial capital of the world, the nation's biggest city, the U.N., seven million people, and lots and lots of Jews. A consideration, for some terrorist groups.

The train scritchted around a curve. There was a Christmas tree in the tunnel. Some PATH employee put

it up every year. It was strange, watching the little red and green lights appear and disappear in the darkness of the tunnel.

The PATH runs on electrified track. I wondered what the electromagnetic pulse would do to it. There wasn't a lot of point in worrying.

The bomb wouldn't take out that much of the city, really. The radio had said it was a hundred kiloton device. It would do a number on a chunk of Manhattan, but most of the rest of the city would just suffer fallout.

Of course, the blast would blow out a lot of windows. And there are a lot of windows in town. I envisioned midtown under six feet of broken glass. And there aren't any quake-resistant buildings in the city; no active faults around, you see. The blast would produce an earth tremor, of course. That would have interesting effects on the skyline.

I wondered if my house would survive. It's on the Hudson River floodplain on the Jersey side. Unreinforced brick masonry structure, Victorian in age. A major quake, hell, a minor quake would probably reduce it to rubble. And if the bomb actually went off in the Harbor, tsunamis would probably turn half of Hudson County back into the swamp it used to be.

Burn victims. Radiation sickness. Blindness. The hospitals would be swamped. A lot more people would survive than in a nuclear war, of course; the rest of the country would mobilize its medical resources. But still; a pretty grim prospect.

I hoped the government was stalling those bastards, whoever they were. Every minute meant more people out of range.

The train broke out of the tunnel and into daylight. The tracks run above ground after they pass through the Palisades. Next stop was Journal Square.

The Newark PATH runs from the World Trade Center, in downtown Manhattan, through Journal Square, to Newark. I had a hell of a time switching to the Newark train. When it pulled into Journal Square, it was already packed to the gills.

I figured the next trains wouldn't be any better. So I squeezed between two cars and stood on the metal platform there. You're not supposed to do that. It's dangerous. There were already two people between the cars where I was.

But I got to Newark.

I got in line to buy a ticket for the train to Philadelphia. I'd have gone straight to the track, but they didn't have any trains posted for some reason.

It was a mob scene at the ticket window. It took me a good fifteen minutes before I could get to the front. "One way to Philly," I screamed through the glass. I had to scream; the station was jammed and noisy.

"No trains south," the attendant yelled back.

What? "Why not?"

"All available rolling stock is evacuating people from New York," he yelled. "We aren't picking up passengers anywhere else on the line."

Damn. Damn! Now what? What was I going to do now?

I wandered away from the window in a daze. I'd been operating on momentum up to here. I'd had a plan: get to Newark, get on the train. And now, there was nothing, nothing . . . I pushed my way to the phones. They weren't as crowded as one might expect. I soon found out why.

I tried to call Debbie's parents collect: I couldn't get an operator. I tried calling the local MCI access number and using my credit card -- nothing but a busy signal. I tried calling direct, over AT&T long-lines, in the hope that I could plead some operator out of requiring me to stick in \$32 in small change -- no dice. The call just died.

Figures. The Eastern Seaboard must have been swamped with calls from desperate people.

My God, the terminal looked like something out of World War II: families with piles of possessions, bags and bags stacked on top of one another, one step ahead of the Nazi advance. Woebegone faces. And the Nazis are closing in, ma cherie, they say that Sedan has fallen . . .

Stuck in Newark. Stuck. Stuck. What was I going to do?

I could get on the Newark subway. But it doesn't go that far. And it heads mostly north -- I didn't want north. I wanted south and west.

A car! I could steal a car, and . . .

I could? The hell I could. Who did I think I was, Macgyver or something? I know about as much about automobiles as I do about Pluto. You turn the key, it goes. Hot-wiring was beyond my capacities.

Besides which, all routes south were probably bumper-to-bumper by now.

Some ill-shaven guy stopped me. "No trains, huh?" he shouted. I shook my head. "Guess that's okay," he said. "It's just a Hiroshima bomb. Newark should be all right." He turned away.

I thought I'd been so smart getting on the PATH. I should have gone to Penn Station, dammit. I could have gotten on a train there. He said they were picking up passengers in New York . . .

Maybe. I bet the place was mobbed.

That jerk thought we were okay here. Sure, pal, I thought. He might be right. But Newark isn't that far away. There was fallout to worry about, if nothing else. I wanted out of here . . .

Wait a minute.

I plunged after the guy, jostling past a black family. "Hey!" I shouted. "Hey buddy!"

He turned. "Whaddaya want," he said, a little suspiciously.

"Want to sell me your clothes?" He was dressed in dungarees and a heavy shirt.

"What?" he said.

"I'll swap clothes with you," I shouted over the crowd. We weren't that far apart in size. "And I'll throw in fifty bucks."

"Deal," he said, and began stripping right there. Several bystanders gave us a dirty look.

Well, what the hell.

It was a good deal. For him. I was wearing a Brooks Brothers suit.

Ever wander the streets of downtown Newark after dark in a Brooks Brothers suit? Neither have I. I don't advise it.

It was cold out. Must have been low forties. Getting on toward dusk. Night comes around 5 o'clock in late November. I walked briskly down Market, westward and away from the station. Market was pretty busy. It's what passes for a shopping street in Newark.

What was I going to do? Walk to Philadelphia?

If that's what it took. Every step I took was a step farther way from New York. Every hour was three miles distance -- four, if I pushed it. Three miles could make all the difference in the world . . .

I heard the tinkle of broken glass. A little later, a Puerto Rican guy ran past me with a VCR and a big grin. To be expected, I suppose; the authorities had bigger problems to worry about than a little looting.

And there, on Market Street, heading west, I saw this store. Downtown Cycles. I stopped in front of it. I stood there for a full minute, peering in.

There were lots of other people on the street -- but -- none of them looked like a cop.

The store was closed. The last vestiges of sunlight were dissipating. And I debated morality. For fifteen seconds, or so, anyway. Then, I found a brick and heaved it through the plate glass.

Sorry bastard didn't even have a metal grate on his store. Wrong neighborhood to be trusting.

Did I want a mountain cycle? A touring cycle? What the hell did I know from bikes? I grabbed one, yanked it through the broken glass, perched on it, and pedaled madly away.

There must have been twenty witnesses. But who cares? I bet the store was cleaned out within the hour.

I had no real idea where I was going, but I knew that the setting sun was roughly south and west. I'm no astronomer, but I can find the Big Dipper -- and it was getting on toward winter. Orion would be in the sky. I could recognize Orion. From either the Dipper or Orion, I could find the North star.

I pedaled fast, trying to keep warm. Also trying to avoid trouble. This was not exactly Forest Hills. Nobody in his right mind would nuke Newark. If someone did, he'd probably get a medal. Or an urban renewal grant.

Burnt-out buildings. Empty lots. Surly-looking black guys standing around on the stoops of decrepit brownstones. What was left of the housing stock looked good. Anywhere else, the neighborhood would have been a gentrifier's heaven. But not in Newark.

They stared at me as I cycled madly past, but nobody stopped me. I was glad I wasn't wearing a suit.

Did I want to get on a highway? Sure, why not? It would probably be bumper-to-bumper, but a bicycle ought to get through.

Then, I thought: maybe not. I envisioned some desperate bastard with a handgun in his glove compartment, spotting me on the cycle and murdering me for it. It didn't seem worth the risk.

Backroads, that was the ticket. There probably wouldn't be much traffic.

Of course, my knowledge of New Jersey's road net was limited to the Turnpike and the Garden State. I'd probably get hopelessly lost. But as long as I kept on south and west, I should be all right.

The street split. The southern branch was named South Orange Avenue. In Jersey, they often name streets after nearby towns. South Orange is west of Newark. It looked promising, so I took it.

Damn, it was cold.

In South Orange, I passed a bar. I went it, partly to get warm, but mostly to use the payphone. I had to get through to Debbie's parents. When she got to Philly, she'd be desperate about me. They needed to know . . .

No luck.

I called again from a gas station in Short Hills . . .

I called in Summit, in Murray Hill, in Watchung . . .

EHNNT, EHNNT, EHNNT . . . I got awfully tired of that busy signal.

Four hours later I was in some damn place called Skillman, New Jersey. I was half frozen to death, exhausted, lost, and my ass hurt like hell. I don't think I'd been on a bike in fifteen years. And I was badly out of shape.

The road seemed to be going in more or less the right direction. I kept on hoping I'd pass someplace where I could steal a coat. But this was a country road. No shopping along here.

Aha! An Exxon station. It was after ten now. The station was closed. And there wasn't much traffic on the road . . .

I broke in, punching my way through the glass on the door.

They had maps! I stole one. Candy bars. Soda. Cigarettes . . . I even found a mechanic's jacket. It said "Randy" on the lapel. I guess I could be a Randy. It was tight, but I shrugged into it.

No point in hanging around the scene of a burglary. I took off down the road.

A quarter mile later, I wheeled the bike into the side of the woods and stood, sheltered from the highway. I was on a little rise, an overgrown meadow before me, probably grazeland at one time. I dined on my repast of Snickers and warm Coke, then lit a cigarette. I hadn't smoked in years, but cancer seemed pretty remote just then.

Funny how we were always afraid of the Russians. In retrospect, there probably never was much threat of a full-scale nuclear exchange. At least, not after Stalin died. You'd have to be nuts to fight a nuclear war.

But nuclear terrorism . . . that makes sense. With six-and-a-half million lives at stake, I'd bet the President would fold pretty quick. A hard line against terrorism is one thing, but this . . .

The wind was cold. I lit another cigarette off my old one. I cupped my hand around the tip; a cigarette doesn't put out enough heat to keep a deer tick warm, but somehow the little glowing coal is comforting.

There was a big motherfucking peal of thunder. I started.

There was a glow on the horizon to the north. North and east. It hung there for ten seconds -- twenty --

thirty . . . I must have missed the flash; it would have been below the horizon. I was looking at the mushroom cloud, miles above the city. A firestorm, the very air burning.

Dead people. Dying people. Probably made Auschwitz look like summer camp.

Should have nuked Washington. The fuckers.

The phones didn't even work after that. The EMP must have blown the crap out of something.

Dawn found me wearily cycling over the Benjamin Franklin Bridge. Commuter traffic was already beginning. Normal, everyday people driving to their normal, everyday Philadelphia jobs. As if nothing had happened. Terrorists blew up New York, Martha, pass the sugar. Oh, look, Oprah Winfrey's got a new boyfriend.

I found a payphone. Son of a bitch, the damn thing worked. Thank God for Pennsylvania Bell.

6:30 AM here, 5:30 in Chicago. I expected my in-laws to take a while to drag themselves out of bed. But this is how it was: Rrr . . . Snatch. "Hello?"

"Hi, Barb . . .?"

"Mike! My God! Are you all right?"

The phone didn't even get a chance to make a full ring. They'd been up all night, worrying.

Debbie was at the Mark Plaza. I called her. After the usual emotional exchange, she told me that everything had gone okay. The traffic had been bad, but she'd beaten the worst of it. The baby was okay, the insurance papers were gone . . . but what the hell.

"Mike?" she said.

"Yeah, sugar?"

"I couldn't find Trevor."

I chuckled. "Hell, Debbie," I said. "I'm sorry about the cat, but you're alive. I'm alive. The baby's alive. And I'll see you in a just a few minutes."

And for a while, I felt relieved. I was exhausted and cold and I might never be able to sit down again, but that was all over. The house might be gone, and my job, and our savings . . . but we'd survived . . .

Trevor. I pictured him, the house smashed down around his ears, his bedraggled corpse atop the splintered remains of the bookcase he liked to sit on, red brick dust across his fur -- wet from the Harbor tsunami, charred from the firestorm. Voices screaming, burn victims in agony, people buried alive in the wreckage . . .

But mostly, I pictured Trevor, dead in a fashion he could not begin to fathom, his protectors vanished forever . . .

And that's when I began to cry.

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