

THE VOICE OF PHILADELPHIA IS STILLED

Shelby's heart sang as the cab sped along the expressway, passing the pretty, illuminated boat houses on the east side of the Schuylkill River and the statues and the 1876 Centennial building on the west side of the murky river.

The cab pulled into the patio driveway of WPHI's circular fortress on City Avenue. A half-dozen police cars, red and blue dome lights flashing, were strewn around the parking lot like toys abandoned by a capricious child.

"Where are you going?" demanded the security guard inside the front door.

It caught Shelby short. "I'm going to the newsroom. Fourth floor, right?"

"You can't go in without a pass," said the guard, who was as wrinkly as a poorly laid carpet.

"I'm Claude Shelby of the *Free Press*," he said, pulling out his press card

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and holding it up to the guard's face.

"I don't care who you are, you have to sign this sheet," the guard said, tapping a clipboard, "and be authorized to enter."

"Authorized? What do you mean 'authorized'? The last time I was here I just walked in. I'm a friend of Howard Scott."

"Sign here, please," said the unimpressed guard.

Shelby scribbled his name while the guard called WPHI's public relations director Ed Rohm, already on the scene, and told him the reporter was waiting.

The guard told Shelby he would be escorted to the newsroom.

"I have to be escorted?"

"Everybody has to be escorted," the guard said. "Company policy. I don't make the rules."

Big fucking deal, Shelby thought. Fucking escorts. Who the fuck do they think they are? I'm fucking press; do they think I'm going to walk off with one of their precious cameras? Electronic scumbags.

Rohm, a small, thin man with short blond hair and a plaid sports coat, appeared and introduced himself.

"It's been a few years since I've been out here," Shelby said, "but what's this policy where a reporter has to be escorted to the newsroom?"

"It's not just reporters, Mr. Shelby. It's everyone. And especially tonight. I'm sure you understand."

"Yeah, sure. Just call me Shelby, OK?"

"Sure. You remember, there were a couple of times when people stormed in here and tried to get on camera to make some kind of a political statement."

Shelby nodded. "Yeah. The last time I was here was after a bunch of guys from the Gay Raiders chained themselves to your news desk. It was pretty funny."

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Rohm frowned. “It may have been pretty funny to you, but it was pretty serious to us. We take the news seriously and we can’t have people marching in and taking over. We didn’t even know if they were armed.”

“Sure, I can see that—but I’m a reporter. Are you afraid I’m going to march in and chain myself to the set?”

“We’ve found, Shelby, it’s generally better to have the same policy for everyone. Then there are no questions about exceptions, no hurt feelings. I’m sure you agree.”

“I don’t, but that’s not what I’m here for, Mr. Rohm.”

“Just call me Ed,” Rohm replied with sarcasm.

Shelby got the message and smiled at Rohm, who smiled back. The two men understood each other. They didn’t like each other, but they understood each other.

“Why don’t you come to my office and I’ll give you a statement on the accident involving John Pearson,” he said.

“Accident?”

“Would you like the statement?”

“Oh, yes, but I also want to talk to the witnesses. There were people in the studio when Pearson had his ‘accident.’”

Rohm nodded. “The police are interviewing our staff right now. I’m afraid you can’t talk to them until the police are through. If you like, I’ll call the newsroom and tell them you want to talk with them before they leave. How’s that?”

“That sounds OK.”

The two men walked to Rohm’s office and the executive handed Shelby a single typed sheet.

Shelby glanced at the page that spoke of the station’s grief, its sense of loss, the unfortunate accident that had befallen John Pearson without mentioning

what happened or how it happened.

Outside, midnight traffic rolled past the station, headlights drawing cars toward the expressway.

“Is this the whole statement?”

Rohm nodded.

“It’s a little, mmm, sketchy.”

“It’s what we want to say.”

“What about the fact that John Pearson committed suicide?”

“That statement is what we want to say.”

“Are you telling me the station isn’t going to admit the guy killed himself?”

“I didn’t see it. Did you?”

“Yes. I did.”

“Oh,” Rohm said. He paused. “What did you see?”

“I saw Pearson take out a gun, point it at his head and pull the trigger. I saw him kill himself on your 11 o’clock news and it sure didn’t look like any accident to me.”

“Maybe. But maybe it was an accident.”

Shelby leaned forward. “Ed, I don’t want to get into a fight with you, but that’s bullshit.”

“Shelby, did you know that John Pearson was a Catholic?”

“No, I didn’t. Does it matter?”

“If he committed suicide, he can’t be buried in consecrated ground. It means he died with an unforgivable sin on his soul. It means he died outside the church.” Rohm fixed Shelby with a steady gaze.

“Go on,” Shelby said.

“Don’t you get it?”

Shelby shook his head and lit up a Lucky. He knew where Ed Rohm was trying to take him, but he didn’t want to go there.

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“If this is reported as a suicide, John Pearson can’t be buried by the church and his family will bear a terrible stigma. If it’s not reported as a suicide, he can be buried by the church and his family is spared tremendous heartache.”

Shelby knew all that. He just wanted to see if the man had the nerve to suggest that Shelby change the facts. Shelby thought for a few moments.

“Ed, how many people watch your 11 o’clock news?”

“Several hundred thousand households, half-a-million, maybe.”

“What do you think those people will think they saw? What are they going to think if they read in the *Freeep* tomorrow morning that John Pearson had an accident?”

“There are ways around that, aren’t there?”

“I don’t see how I can write a story that says this poor bastard had an accident when a half-million people saw him kill himself. Besides, no matter what I write won’t change the facts. That’s what the church is going to act on.”

Rohm got up and looked at a map of the Delaware Valley on his wall. He ran his hand over his bristly blond hair. “That’s not necessarily so. The church is made up of people. People tend to believe what they read in the paper. Your story is more important than you think. The church can make whatever decision it thinks is right as long as there is no published story rubbing their noses in the facts. I’m not telling you how to write the story,” Rohm said. “You’ll do what you have to do. But understand that this is where John Pearson worked. We liked John Pearson. We don’t want to hurt his memory or his family. That’s what I want you to understand.”

“Did you know Pearson personally?”

“Yes, of course. But I didn’t know him very well.”

“Was he despondent lately, bothered by anything?”

“Not as far as I know. But, as I say, I didn’t know him all that well.”

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“Who were some of his close friends at the station?”

“Everybody liked John. He had many friends.”

Shelby smiled. “I’m sure of that, but who was he especially close to?”

“He was close to George Molloy, of course, our general manager. He and Howard Scott were also close. Howard’s in the newsroom now.”

That’s a break, Shelby thought. “Will you tell him I want to talk to him?”

“I’ll do that, but, as I said, you’ll have to wait for the police to finish their interviews.”

Shelby nodded. “That’s OK. I’ll wait.”

Rohm called the newsroom and spoke to Howard Scott, who agreed to talk to Shelby. He also volunteered to tell the other staffers there was a reporter who wanted to talk to them. Professional courtesy. Shelby called Ed Jones to tell him he was on the story and would be in by 4 a.m. to write it.

“I’d like to see a tape of the show,” Shelby told Rohm, who picked up a phone, dialed master control and ordered a tape. He escorted Shelby to a small screening room where he slid the cassette into a machine and sank his hands into the pockets of his plaid jacket. “This is the first time I’ll be seeing this,” Rohm said.

He cued the tape to the precise moment John Pearson had deviated from the script to address his audience. The rotund Pearson was wearing a dark blue suit, a light blue shirt and a dark blue tie. Every white hair was in place and his manicured fingernails glistened in the bright TV lights.

Fascinated, Shelby concentrated on Pearson’s words, trying to catch something he didn’t hear the first time. Rohm stood, silently watching the screen. When the gun barked and Pearson’s head exploded, Rohm quickly turned away from the terrible TV screen.

“I need to see it again,” Shelby said.

Rohm reached out a trembling hand and hit a button to rewind the tape. He overshot the point and they had to watch part of a commercial and a news

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story that preceded John Pearson's deadly "accident." This time Rohm turned his back to the screen while Shelby concentrated on the image.

"Again, please. Does it have a slow motion control?"

Rohm burned. "That's a man you are watching die over and over again. Doesn't that bother you?"

Shelby was annoyed. "It's my job, Ed. It's no big treat for me. But the man is dead, I didn't kill him and watching it happen doesn't change a thing. He's still dead and I'm just a reporter."

You're a ghoul, Rohm thought. He showed Shelby how to work the machine. "I'll wait out in the hall," he said.

Shelby pulled out his notebook and ran through the tape twice more to copy down Pearson's last words, then concentrated on how the words matched the actions on the screen. Then he went through it frame by frame. He had never seen television frame by frame before and was fascinated by it.

It was like watching a deck of flip cards he owned in childhood—a series of progressive still photographs that when flipped created the illusion of a motion picture. The tape demonstrated the television picture was not a stream of images, like water, but a series of bits, individual images that hit the retina in a fast enough blur to become a continuous picture in the mind's eye. If he pressed the frame-freeze button fast enough, he could nearly bring the picture up to the correct speed but without sound. He could read Pearson's lips as he clicked through the last moments of the insane news reader's life.

Shelby slowed as he approached the point at which Pearson reached under the news desk for the gun. Shelby saw the gun. Three frames later it was at Pearson's head. In the next frame, Pearson's head was a blur. He hadn't hesitated at all. A wave of blood and brain and gore splashed from the left side of his head. Blurry bits already were streaking off the TV screen, toward the weather map. In the next frame, Pearson was almost gone from the screen, replaced by a cloud of gunpowder. In the next frame the camera

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had begun its spin away from the horror. Shelby backed up to view the single frame of the shot's impact. Pearson's head was blurred, but everything else was so clear, so colorful.

It reminded him of the famous Zapruder film, filled with blur and graininess, that captured the bullet striking John F. Kennedy's head that sunny, awful November day in Dallas. This was much better than the Zapruder film. This was a full close-up of the victim. This was tape, not film, and tape has no grain. This was sickening in its perfection.

He flipped through it frame by frame again, watched it at normal speed, then decided he had seen all there was to see.

After the police finished taking statements, Rohm led Shelby to the strangely quiet newsroom. A few people remained, talking softly. Pearson's body had been removed. There was nothing left of the man but a chalk outline on the studio floor and gore on the weather map.

Howard Scott shook Shelby's hand in greeting.

"Rough night?" Shelby asked pointlessly.

"One of the worst," Scott said.

"What can you tell me?"

"I'll tell you what I know, but I'd rather not do it here," Scott whispered. "Spend a few minutes chatting with the others and I'll meet you on the outside. I've got some stuff for you, but I don't want them to see it coming from me."

"How about the Deadline Bar?"

"Sure," said Scott, who made his goodbyes and left.

Shelby interviewed the remaining staffers, who all had fine things to say about John Pearson as a person and as a colleague. The sense of shock and grief was very real. Not one of them used the word suicide, but several alluded to how Pearson had been acting strange lately. They told Shelby about his

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attempts to keep bad news off the air. He could hardly believe it. Even though he watched “The John Pearson News,” what Pearson was doing had not clicked. He was angry with himself for not being more alert.

He thanked the staffers and jumped in a cab to head for town, for the Deadline Bar, where he found Howard Scott waiting, nursing a vodka on the rocks. The bar was empty except for the white-haired Scott, the brown-skinned bartender and the multicolor Christmas lights hanging from the dark wood paneling.

Howard Scott was a couple of years older than Shelby. His hair had turned gray in his 30s, then snow white and the eye-catching mane had become his trademark. Everywhere he went, Philadelphians waved and yelled, “Yo, Howard,” and Howard beamed and waved back, “Hiya, my friend.” He basked in the recognition that television brought him, the money, the romantic opportunities. Scott was a happy man, content, at peace with himself.

“Hiya, my friend,” he called out to Shelby when the reporter entered the bar. “What can I get for you?”

“Drink while I’m working? That’s a firing offense.” Shelby grinned. “I’ll have a gin and tonic.” Scott waved Leroy over and gave him the order.

“What can you tell me?”

“Keep my name out of it,” Scott cautioned. “Pearson was off his nut. Have you heard about him rewriting the news?”

“A little.”

“He was doing it a lot. We knew he was doing it, but we didn’t know why. Until tonight. Tonight we found out he was doing it because he got the idea he was responsible for the news, that things happened only after he read them on the air. He believed that if he didn’t read it, it wouldn’t happen. So he tried—”

“Did I hear you right?”

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“You heard me. Like I said, it all fell into place tonight. John Pearson somehow picked up the notion that if he didn’t read a story, it wouldn’t happen, and if he did read a story, then it would happen. And only then. So he started dropping all the negative stuff from the script and sometimes substituted some happy stuff that didn’t happen.”

“How could he? How could he get away with it?”

“I’m telling you—he was crackers. This didn’t happen all at once. This has been brewing for weeks, maybe months.”

“Months?”

Scott nodded. “Several weeks back he even got his producer transferred from the 11 to the morning news. The producer had been screaming about what Pearson was doing, but Molloy—he’s the general manager—chickened out and stuck it to the producer.”

“Who’s the producer and how do I reach him?”

“His name’s Leslie Raoul and he starts work at 3, so he’ll be at the station in a couple of hours to work on this morning’s show. Don’t tell him I told you about this.”

“I never tell anybody anything.”

“This Catholic thing has a lot of people upset,” Scott said.

“That’s what Ed Rohm told me.”

“The thing is, I think there’s a way around this mess. I’m not Catholic, but I think there’s a loophole. If the suicide was a raving Looney Tune at the time, it doesn’t count. It’s not a rational act and therefore can’t be held against him. The cops even have a death-report line to the effect of a self-inflicted gunshot wound while delirious or under extreme mental duress or something like that. The point is, John Pearson was crazy. He really was. I’m not telling you this just to get his family off the hook. I talked with him several times recently and while he appeared to be rational—he could argue very convincingly—he was off his rocker. He had to be. And he was.”

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“Howard, you’re pushing me pretty hard on this angle.”

“I am, Shelby, but it’s the truth. I’ve got nothing to gain one way or the other. But he was off his rocker. No question. No question at all.”

Shelby returned to the office and worked on the story until 3 a.m. when he called Leslie Raoul, who had no love for John Pearson, nutso or not. Raoul gave him a gold mine of detail, along with the news director’s home telephone number. Shelby took special delight in waking Sloan Wilson at 3:30 a.m. After all, Wilson was management.

By 4 a.m., Shelby had finished all the interviewing and organized the notes that were now spread out on his desk. Ed Jones wandered over to ask how the story was coming. Shelby assured him he’d have a hot number in 45 minutes.

He lit a Lucky, fed a yellow typing book into his typewriter and wrote:

The Voice of Philadelphia, John Pearson, was permanently silenced last night at 11:28, near the close of WPHI’s 11 o’clock news. The 58-year-old newsman was killed—on-camera—by a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Pearson’s friends at the station said he was delirious and suffering from extreme mental duress.

For the past several months Pearson had been rocked by delusions that he was responsible for the news that he read on the air, station sources said. A guilt-stricken Pearson claimed personal responsibility for the news during last night’s telecast and said, “I can no longer bear the pain and suffering of millions of people. It must be brought to an end, and now.”

Live and in dying color, Pearson reached under the news desk, pulled out a silver-plated revolver, pointed it at his right temple and pulled the trigger. The newscast was witnessed by “several hundred thousand households in the Delaware Valley,” a station spokesman said.

The bullet blew out the left side of Pearson’s head, scattering bits of bone, tissue and brain around the studio and on the weather map to Pearson’s left.

Viewers saw Pearson flop off his chair and the camera spin away from the desk toward the weather map. There were shouts and cries in the studio for several seconds before a “please stand by” card came up on the screen.

The shooting followed Pearson thanking his viewers for loyalty and support over the years. “You have been my family and my friends,” he

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said. "Everything I am I owe to you. And now, because I love you, I will free you from the catastrophes I have caused."

WPHI released a statement last night expressing shock and anguish over what it termed an "accident." A station spokesman insisted the shooting was accidental. The medical examiner is expected to release the cause of death later today.

Police questioned WPHI staffers who witnessed the shooting. "It happened so quickly, there was nothing anyone could do," said cameraman Mike Bellow. He was operating the camera that recorded the tragedy.

"I couldn't believe what I was watching until I heard the bang when he pulled the trigger. The noise caused me to yank the camera. I don't know what happened next because I ran over to John and got sick. There was just this mess all over."

Producer Will Fletcher was stunned. "It took a few seconds before we recovered enough to kill the picture and go to a 'stand by' board," he said. "There was pandemonium in here, people running all over the place and screaming.

"I don't know why John did it. It's senseless and it's tragic. We'll all miss him," he added.

"I guess he had been sick for some time," said morning news executive producer Leslie Raoul, who had been the producer of Pearson's 11 p.m. newscast until a few weeks ago. Raoul was transferred after a number of arguments with Pearson about fiddling with news scripts as he read them on the air.

"Pearson had been fine to work with for a long time," Raoul said, "but something had come over him lately. He wasn't the same man."

Pearson had been eliminating negative stories and negative elements in stories for some months, several station sources agreed. Pearson's rewriting of the news led to disputes with Raoul, news director Sloan Wilson and station general manager George Molloy, who could not be reached for comment last night.

In closing his final newscast last night, Pearson broke precedent by addressing the viewing audience directly.

"I know that you feel as I do," he said, "that there's too much misery in the world. I know that you feel there's too much bad news. In recent weeks I have tried to change that, by bringing you better news, happier news, but that isn't enough."

WPHI reporter Howard Scott said Pearson was well-liked by everyone at the station and that everyone was shocked by his death.

"We will all miss John terribly," he said. "He was a fine newsman and a wonderful friend. We are all convinced that John was not in his right

mind when this terrible tragedy occurred. He couldn't have been. This was not a rational act, and John Pearson was a very rational man.”

Pearson was Philadelphia's best-known, highest-rated and best-paid news reader. Born in Media, he was a lifelong resident of the Delaware Valley and bought a \$200,000 mansion in Villanova 10 years ago. His hobby was collecting exotic cars.

Pearson is survived by his wife, Betsy, and a son, Tom.

Shelby read through the story twice, once eliminating some of the more gory descriptions, the second time strengthening the passages that underscored Pearson's lunacy. Although he described the gun shot as “self-inflicted,” he avoided the word “suicide” in a decision of conscience, the first he'd made in a long time. Not long ago he would have made a special point of using “suicide” just to prove he couldn't be influenced by anyone, no matter how good the reason. It was different this time, he thought. Printing it didn't seem important as it once might. His bosses didn't appreciate his efforts anyway. Conscience, huh? His decision made him feel good.

He turned in the story, plus the overtime slip for five hours, to Ed Jones, who accepted both without comment. That morning's *Freeop* would be headlined:

Pearson Shot Dead On the Air

This one Shelby did leave his byline on. He felt good about the story, about the whole night, and still felt good when he flopped into bed after sunrise, exhausted.

Out of a sense of consideration he seldom showed, Phil Lewis didn't call Shelby at 8 a.m., when he saw the story in the paper. He knew the reporter hadn't left the paper until 5 a.m., so he let him sleep until noon before making the call.

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The ringing awakened Shelby with a start.

“This is Lewis,” the voice said.

Shelby’s fight response kicked in. He tensed, his blood pressure, respiration, heartbeat jumped. “Whaddaya want?”

“I want to talk to you about the Pearson story,” Lewis said. “I also want to tell you that you don’t have the whole fucking day off, so get your ass in here.”

“I’ll be there in an hour,” Shelby said.

“I know where you live,” Lewis grunted. “Make it a half-hour.”

Forty-five minutes later Shelby strolled into Lewis’ office, expecting the worst. He had no reason to expect anything else.