

# THE SMOKE ROOM

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE



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New York

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*The Smoke Room* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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BY EARL EMERSON

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*Into the Inferno*

*Pyro*

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*Fat Tuesday*

*Deviant Behavior*

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*The Vanishing Smile*

*The Million-Dollar Tattoo*

*Deception Pass*

*Catfish Café*

# THE SMOKE ROOM

What good is happiness? It can't buy money.

—HENNY YOUNGMAN,  
*comedian*

Be good and you will be lonesome.

—MARK TWAIN

# THE SMOKE ROOM





# HOWLING IN THE DEEP BLUE TWILIGHT

EXPERTS ESTIMATED THE pig fell just over 11,000 feet before it plunged through Iola Pederson's roof.

The lone witness had been snitching cherry tomatoes from a pot on his neighbor's front porch when he looked up and spotted the hog as it tumbled through the deep blue twilight. Whether the hog had been howling because he was delighted with the flight or because of the rapidly approaching earth, nobody ever knew. Ultimately the critter pierced Iola Pederson's roof with the sound of a man putting his foot through a rotten porch.

The pig's demise pretty much signaled the end of all my ambitions. My name is Jason Gum. Just call me Gum.

At the time, I was twenty-four years old and had been a Seattle firefighter just under two years but was already studying to take the lieutenant's examination in another year. I was aiming to be chief of the department. It was ambitious, I know, but the way I figured it, you need goals if you are going anywhere in life—goals and a straight and narrow pathway.

Engine 29 runs out of a sleepy little station in a residential district in West Seattle. Four people work off the rig: an officer, a driver, and two of us in back. On the day we got the call to check out Iola Pederson's roof, I was working a rare turn on B shift. Stanislow had less time in than I did, and I could tell she was looking to my lead as we raced toward the scene of what the radio report said was a rocket into a house. I knew not to get too worked up until we'd evaluated the scene ourselves.

"I wonder if it's an accidental firing from the submarine base across the water," said Stanislow. "Christ."

"It's probably nothing," I said.

As we sat in the back of the crew cab watching the streets unfold be-

hind us, Stanislaw and I slipped into our MSA harnesses. They'd also dispatched two more engines and two aerial ladders, a chief, a medic unit, and probably an aid car; yet even with all that manpower, Stanislaw and I would be first through the door. Life on the tailboard. Cash money couldn't get a better seat to every little bizarre extravagance of human behavior.

The address was on Hobart Avenue SW, a location drivers from stations outside our district were going to have a hard time finding.

Siren growling, Engine 29 moved through quiet, residential streets until we hit the apex of Bonair Drive, where we swooped down the hillside through a greenbelt that was mostly brown now—Seattle enjoying the driest August on record.

The slate-blue Puget Sound was spread out below us like a blanket. West over the Olympics the sunset was dead except for a few fat razor slashes of pink along the horizon. A hawk tipped his wings and bobbed on air currents over the hillside. Above us a small plane circled.

The house was the only single-family residence on a street of small apartment buildings. The lieutenant turned around and said, "Looks like smoke. I want you guys to lay a preconnect to the front door."

The driver placed the wheel blocks under the rear duals and started the pump, while I jumped down and grabbed the two-hundred-foot bundle of inch-and-three-quarters hose preconnected to an outlet on the rig and headed toward the house, dropping flakes of dry hose behind me. The officer busied himself on the radio, giving incoming units directions to our location. Because the driver on this shift was noted for filling the line with reckless speed, I moved quickly, not wanting the water pressure to knock me down the way it had Stanislaw at her first fire.

In front of the house a man with one of those ubiquitous white Hemingway beards you see on so many old guys sat cross-legged on the turf, covered in blood. Behind him, the living-room windows were broken out, pieces of plate glass littering the lawn like mirrors and reflecting distant city lights, a twilight sky. The roof had a hole in it the size of a duffel bag. All I could think was that the man on the lawn had been burned and wounded, possibly in an explosion.

"Anybody inside?" I asked.

"My daughter," he gasped. "My daughter's in there! I *think* she's in there. God. I'm confused."

Stanislow stooped beside the victim. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure. It might have been a bomb."

"A bomb," Stanislow said. "Did you hear that, Gum? What if there's another one?"

"You got any explosives in the house?" I asked.

"Just a few bullets. But *I* didn't do this. It came from up there." He pointed toward the sky.

Powdery material that might or might not have been smoke drifted out of the hole in the roof. Later we determined it was creosote dust being distributed by the kitchen fan. The broken window frames were draped in a wet substance that appeared remarkably similar to entrails.

As I neared the doorway and the cotton-jacketed hose started to harden at my feet, I clipped my air hose to my face piece and began inhaling compressed air. Stanislow caught up with me but stopped near a gore-festooned window frame. "Jesus. Look at that."

I pushed the front door open with my boot.

"You think that's his daughter?" Stanislow asked. "You think that's her guts?"

"Only one way to find out."

"There's no telling how bad he's bleeding. I better stay out here and take care of him."

"Okay. I'll go in. You take care of him."

I picked up the nozzle and went through the front door, keeping low the way we'd been taught, not crawling but not standing, either. When I switched my helmet light on, hundreds of thousands of black motes wafted in the yellow beam. I could see maybe ten feet through the nebula.

It had been close to 90° Fahrenheit when we left the station, and experts estimated that under normal working conditions the microclimate inside our turnouts was nearly 150°. It was probably higher tonight, which kept me sweating profusely in the heavy, all-encapsulating turnout clothing.

It didn't occur to me until I entered the structure that I'd been listening to howling for some time now, the noise obscured by the roaring of

Engine 29's motor and pump. The noises might have been coming from an animal. More likely it was a second victim. Most of the ceiling in the main room was on the floor, plaster and broken boards underfoot. I moved through the blackness, at times forced to feel my way, dragging the hose even though there was no sign of heat or fire.

"It's okay," I said. "I'm here to help."

She was hunkered on the floor. The black ink in the air had settled on her like broken spiderwebs. The floor was gooey, and as I reached her I slipped to one knee. When I tipped her head up and peeked through the blood and the black residue covering her face, I was greeted by the most startling blue eyes I'd ever encountered.

"You all right?"

She blinked but did not move.

"What happened? Are you all right?"

"There's a head over there."

"What?"

"A head."

"How many people were here?"

"Just me and Daddy."

"So whose head is it?"

"I don't know. Maybe somebody came in the back. All I know is, he was huge."

The furniture had congealed into vague, elusive lumps swathed in plaster and rubble. On the floor in front of the kitchen sink I found a large animal's head. It took a moment to ascertain the head had belonged to a hog and the material surrounding it was an animal cadaver, half-empty, the entrails spewing this way and that like grotesque Halloween ornaments strung up by a lunatic.

"Am I going to die? Please don't tell me I'm going to die."

"You'll be okay." My Emergency Medical Technician training taught me to start with what we called the ABCs: airway, breathing, and circulation. She'd been making noise, so she had an airway and was breathing. As far as the circulation and bleeding went, she was covered in gore, so I had no way of knowing whether she was bleeding or not.

Speaking into my portable radio, I said, "Command from Engine Twenty-nine, team B. No sign of fire. There's light smoke in the structure. We've got a second victim inside. I'm bringing her out."

"What happened?" she asked, as I took her arm and stood her up. "Who did this?"

"I don't know. Let's get you out of here. Can you walk?"

Apparently not, I thought, as she sagged against me.

One arm under her shoulders, the other under her knees, I lugged her through the ravaged interior of the house. As it turned out, she was a full-grown adult, almost as tall as I was—five-eight—and while I wasn't the strongest firefighter in the department, I managed to get us out the doorway and onto the lawn without either of us falling on our butts.

Outside, Stanislaw and our earlier victim were gone.

I set my victim down on the lawn away from the broken glass and got my first good look at her in the twilight. In addition to the blood and guts, she was covered in soot. I took off my helmet, shut down my air supply, and removed my face piece.

"Oh, God," she said, holding her arms stiffly away from her body. "Can't you do something? Oh, my God. This is disgusting. Get it off me."

I yarded the hose line out of the house and cracked the nozzle until water poured out in a limp, silvery stream. "Here."

She cupped water in her hands and splashed it on her face, picking at her hair. "Oh, God. Just pour it over my head. It's all in my hair. It's everywhere."

"It's going to be cold."

"I don't give a damn. Get this off me."

I opened the nozzle on flush, giving her what amounted to a cold shower. Underneath the gore and soot she wore a T-shirt and jeans. The cold water emphasized the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra.

"Is Daddy all right?" she asked, after we'd sluiced the last of the blood and soot out of her hair. "Have you seen Daddy?"

"He's over by our engine. Anybody else in there?"

"Just that god-awful head."

As I turned the Task Force nozzle around and screwed up the pres-

sure to knock the crap off my rubber boots, she looked up at me, suddenly bashful. "I must look hideous."

"No. I think you look terrific."

Her name was Iola Pederson, she was maybe twenty years older than I was, and although I didn't know it then, she was the first nail in my coffin.

## 2 THE FIVE F'S

AS FIREFIGHTERS AND police investigators dissected the wreckage, the mechanics of the destruction were slowly unraveled. Contrary to expectations, we found no bombs, no exploded water heaters, no downed rockets, and no fallen airplane engines. Clear and simple: an animal had fallen out of the sky, later identified as a breed of hog known as a Chester White. The hog had penetrated the Pederson homestead, punching through the roof, the attic, and the second floor, and then had exploded against the concrete subfloor under the living-room rug.

Accompanied by his owner and his owner's brother, the animal, having just won two ribbons at a county fair on the Olympic Peninsula, had been returning home to Ellensburg, a small college/farming town east of the Cascades. The pig's owner had modified his Cessna 210 to transport livestock, altering the door, removing the last four seats, and jury-rigging a wooden pen in the rear of the plane. The floor of the pen was lined with straw, old blankets, corncobs, rutabagas, and stale doughnuts to keep the hog occupied during the flight. Despite the fact that their passenger tipped the scales at 947 pounds, total weight for the three of them was still under the allowable payload for the plane.

During the originating flight from Eastern Washington, the hog had become airsick and thrashed about in his pen, his movements tipping the plane from side to side. Fearing another bout of airsickness on the return flight, the pilot laced a bucket of apples with Stressnil and fed it to the creature. If he'd been paying attention, the pilot would have seen the hog spit out the tranquilizers, ingesting just enough to doze off after they prodded him into the plane, but not enough to keep him asleep.

Because he'd already weakened the slats of his pen on the initial flight, it took only a minute of thrashing about before he broke the enclosure.

Without hesitation the hog rushed forward and nuzzled the back of the pilot's seat in a desperately friendly move, thrusting the pilot up against the yoke. The weight shift sent the plane into a shallow dive, which prompted the pilot to shout at his brother, "Goddamn it. Help me here. I've got half a ton of pork crawling up my ass."

"I'm trying," said his brother, whose seat was also rammed up against the instrument panel. Despite their efforts to discourage the airsick hog, the plane's dive grew steeper.

"Open the door!" said the pilot.

"Are you kidding? He'll jump. You know how hard it was to get him in here."

"Okay, then you jump!"

"Are we crashing?"

"What do you think? Open the goddamned door!"

They plummeted almost 5,000 feet before the pilot's brother got the door open, before the cabin filled with cool air and scraps of flying straw, before the hog seized his opportunity and, with a snoring sound, heeled around and dove into the evening sky, all four legs splayed out, headed for Iola Pederson's roof.

It was one of those misadventures that got picked up by wire services around the country, the kind radio personalities wore out and schoolkids embellished and reenacted for one another on the playground.

WHAT OUR OFFICER had mistaken for smoke turned out to be creosote-impregnated soot that had accumulated in the attic over a period of thirty years and disgorged into the house when the pig went through the rooms and broke the conduit for the kitchen fan. On final impact in the living room, the animal exploded, plastering the main room of the house in animal matter.

Amateur psychologists talk about the fight-or-flight response, but it's not an either/or situation. Behaviorists have determined that when threatened, all mammals respond in five predictable patterns, the five F's: fight, flight, freeze, fidget, or faint.

The man we found sitting on the lawn, having gone for his gun before



staggering outside, had run through three of them: fight, flight, and fidget—the latter being just another name for confusion. Iola had limited herself to one reaction. Freeze.

Despite the media flurry over the event, Iola and Bernard Pederson declined all requests for interviews. Iola explained it to me weeks later when she turned up at the station with a plate of cookies.

“It’s not a question of being camera shy,” she said. “It’s a question of whether you want your worth defined by the fact that a pig destroyed your home. We’re not about to be painted by the media as the latest freak-accident victims.”

The flying pig was my first but not my last brush with celebrity. A firefighter who’s lucky gets one surefire story among the thousands in his career, a nugget of liquid gold he can spin at parties and bars and standing in the sunshine after church; a tale that entrances at the same time it hypnotizes; a yarn he can tell in his sleep and not screw up; one he can hand strangers the way a rich man pushes five-dollar bills at panhandlers to surprise and delight them; a story that is so certifiably unbelievable it simply has to be true.

The falling pig was the beginning of such a tale for me, yet in the end it was a tale I dared tell no one.