



High above the tallest building in Wesleyville, at the top of a steel-ribbed tower, is the shining red beacon of the Wesleyville Volunteer Fire Department. It is an eye that never closes, a sentry that never sleeps. It is the nerve center where all fire calls are received, the alarm system that alerts the every-ready firefighters of Firehouse 403.

In the 100-year history of the Wesleyville Fire Department, there have been many tales of glory, many instances of valor for the men who risk their lives constantly, who sacrifice their safety for the jewels and wristwatches they can jam in their pockets as they pull people from the fearful flames of certain death. Yet no other tale speaks as highly of their courage as the story of the Bewlay Brothers, Dave and Richard, who revolutionized firefighting to include the wearing of women's pantyhose.

Dave was the older, a stocky, muscular fellow with a fiery temper and a penchant for throwing stray dogs in front of snow removal equipment. His strength was legendary, it being told throughout local taverns that Dave had once carried a pregnant cow from a burning barn and delivered her calf in the flickering light as the structure collapsed beside him. All this while drinking a case of beer. He was a hero from North East to Harborcreek, a man feared and respected not only for his strength, but for his leadership and outspoken manner at local town meetings.

It was through Dave Bewlay's efforts that fire-retardant underwear became mandatory in all local rest homes. It was also he who won voter support to strike down a levy that would have allowed cheaper, generic firefighting equipment to erode the competency of his men.

"No way will we ride around in a white hook-and-ladder with the

words 'Fire Truck' written on the side!" he shouted at the Borough Hall. Applause rang out when he said that. It was a signal that he had won an important victory, not only against the bureaucratic minds of government officials, but a victory that won the hearts of his fellow firefighters as well. Dave Bewlay was made Fire Chief that same month, a position that enabled him to carry out the programs that had been a part of his vision since he had been a child.

Being the big-hearted man he was, women and children became his first concern. All youngsters traveling to school were urged to carry fire extinguishers with them and to be on the lookout for smoke inside the automobiles of older, high school peers. A follow-up team of special investigators and local narc squads soon fireproofed many students whose grades remarkably improved once the heat was off.

Dave also carried out a one-man, door-to-door campaign, usually during working hours, to educate local housewives on the hidden hot spots of their own homes. He single-handedly made sure every kitchen, den, and bedroom was fireproof, soundproof, and offered an easy route of escape in case an emergency arose. He was conscientious, thorough, and well-loved in the community.

Richard, his younger brother, joined the department in 1974, the same year I signed up. He had the slim build of a middleweight boxer, dark eyes, and dark, wavy hair that blew back whenever he rode atop the pumper as it screamed down Buffalo Road. He was dashing, perhaps even a bit of a show-off, but his enthusiasm got us all. Behind him we'd rush the flames, resuscitated victims, and relieved them of their personal possessions before they came to. He inspired us to challenge ourselves, to be more daring than we thought we could

be. Like his brother, Dave, Richard was a born leader. He became the unofficial captain of all our social activities, and it seemed only a matter of time before he'd succeed his brother as Fire Chief.

Richard's youth and vigor came second only to his generosity. I never met a kinder man. It was nothing for him to go to the hospital, night after night, remaining at the bedside of a recovering woman. In one year alone he must have saved 40 to 50 girls, performing mouth-to-mouth on them and staying with them through the painful stages of recovery. His sincerity was perceived by others, and it was a common occurrence for him to leave a softball game or poker hand, merely to tend the emotional wounds of a patient or a nurse who had called. I didn't enjoy it when he was my pinochle partner, but what could I do? He was popular.

But popular or not, courageous or not, we all got put to the test of the night of May 3rd. Fire broke out at the old Bailey place, a huge farmhouse off Reese Road. It was a six-company alarm, with Dave in his 4x4 getting there moments before the first truck screeched in. Yellow flames were licking out the windows, and a black cloud of smoke billowed from the roof and blotched out the moon above us. The heat blistered our faces, making us squint or shield ourselves with our forearms, but already Dave had loaded two stereo speakers in the back of his truck.

I saw the limp form of old Mr. Bailey on the ground beside the tool shed. I rushed over to check his pulse. "He's still alive!" I shouted, feeling the life-pump working in his throat.

"Got his Master Charge and a pretty decent Seiko," Dave called back, patting his pocket before putting on his mask. The smoke was thick as night.

Already Richard was in full gear, checking his tanks before

dashing through the front door. Others followed, not knowing if there was any chance of saving the structure. Water hissed and sizzled off the roof as the hoses poured forth. Glass shattered from the heat, and the vacuum sucked the flames from end to end in the downstairs rooms. When an axe blade broke an upstairs window, we knew the worst had happened. Richard and two others were trapped. The house was eating itself up, the searing flames licking skyward, the second floor about to collapse.

Mrs. Bailey and her daughter appeared, being shielded by Richard as he edged them to the window. We scrambled for the jumper's net, a circular disc of reinforced concrete, with a double-yellow line painted in the center.

"Jump!" we yelled. Mrs. Bailey hesitated, but when Richard stood back to let the flames ignite her nightie, she flew down like a flaming marshmallow someone was shaking from a stick. Her daughter followed too, but not before handing over her charm bracelet to Richard. We brought the ladder in close for him and his men to come down, just as the sound of cracking timbers split the night.

"Couldn't get to the silverware, but I think we got everyone out all right," Richard said. Sweat dropped from his matted hair and rolled off his brow when he removed his mask.

We froze when we heard the scream. Upstairs, from the back. "Holy God," Dave shouted. "Someone's still up there!" He dropped his Miller's and dashed for the door. The roof was crumbling in.

"You can't go in there!" Richard shouted. "Are you nuts? Forget her. That place is ready to go!" He turned to check our frozen stares. "I said forget her!" he yelled, running towards the house. We jumped him and tackled him to the ground.

"The silverware!" a voice shouted from inside the flames. Suddenly the second floor gave in. The roof collapsed next, sliding forward like an iceberg breaking off a glacier's edge. There was a thunderous shower of sparks and flying timbers. I took cover, pressing my face to the ground. When the roar had finished, I raised my head to see the sunken pile of embers that was all that remained of the Bailey place. There was no chance for Dave.

That night, back at the

"My Baby Knows Hegel, My Baby Knows Me"

On guard, Kerkegaard. Philoso-Mate, a dating service for frustrated philosophers, has caught the attention of many guys who want to get metaphysical.

"I think, therefore I'm yours," is the painted slogan outside Plato's Playpen, an existential singles' bar on the outskirts of conscious-heavy Duke University. The action inside is tailor-made for relative pleasures, for the man who's made his leap of faith, and wants to leap into something else.

"Camus for you!" the waitresses yell as they engage in a dialectic of swaying hips and soft, subtle charm. Sartre Tarts they're called, and it's rumored that they're part of a scheme to import entertainment for philosophers tired of traversing the Waste Land—at least alone.

"Call me an idealist, but I don't

firehouse, a somber mood pervaded the air. We all sat on our bunks, looking at the floor, unable to say anything. No one touched a beer. Even Sparky, our Dalmatian mascot, seemed to share the loss of a mutual friend. He lay with his chin between his paws, his eyes moist with the sorrow we all felt in that room.

Richard trudged up the steps, his feet heavy with weariness and the knowledge that it was he who'd have to carry on. A peninsula of sweat still clung to the front of his tee shirt, and his eyes were full of conviction as he spoke.

"Dave's gone, and there's nothing we can do about it," he said, his voice almost cracking with emotion. "But we can do something for his memory, for his spirit which keeps on living." He took out a plastic egg, opened it, and unraveled a pair of nylons.

"He kept it a secret, but Dave Bewlay wore pantyhose," Richard said. We listened attentively. Sparky cocked his head. "I don't know why," he went on, "but a man does what he does anyway. In honor of what he meant to us, I want every man in Firehouse 403 to wear nylons at every fire we go to from now on. As we put them on, we'll be reminded of a man who gave his life so that others may live."

I reached for a beer. It was a lot to consider, but if they voted yes, I sure wasn't going to buck the crowd. And they did vote yes, opting to shave their legs on the 3rd of every month, to commemorate the night Dave Bewlay died.

Pantyhose brought a new spirit to the men of 403. It replaced a grief that was unnecessary, a loss that should never be mourned. They were also fun to wear, and easier to take care of than the asbestos liners we were always drying out. Fighting fires became more fun, with all of us getting a chuckle when we watched the eleven o'clock news, knowing that we wore women's clothing while saving all of those lives. That was why Dave must have worn them in the first place, as a private monument to himself.

I'm not a firefighter anymore, but I still keep my pantyhose in my top dresser drawer. I'm also sure that if I ever stop by Firehouse 403, I'll see the rows of nylons beside the stacks of smoke masks and helmets. Dave Bewlay never died; he's close to every man who calls himself a Wesleyville fireman, tugging at his thighs as he climbs or chops his way to firefighting glory.

think we're doing anything wrong here," says Playpen owner Joe Morrison. "No hanky-panky, just meaningful discourse." Joe asserts that everything is on the metaphysical level, and that he even asked one philosopher to leave because "the guy said 'Spinoza my nosa' to a bartender. Heck, if a girl wants to say 'I Kant,' she can."

While the entertainment is existential, the prices are downright empirical. Sisyphus on the rocks will run your four bucks, something to make most patrons head for the No Exit door. Ethical or not, to pay or not to pay might be the question, although you are warned that a man who jested that out loud was tossed from the major premise, swearing all along that he was wondering whether or not to wear his hairpiece.