

Billy Foley's Morning

It's just so peaceful in the morning. No one is out and about, and all I ever hear are the trains and factories running all night over on the west side, out Whitesboro Street. And in the winter, the swish of tire rims when a hack is pulled past by a weary horse. And, you know, me and Da need the money, so before school I run down to the Herald and get me a bag of papers and sign the slip to pay tomorrow and take the whole shebang up Genesee Street, selling the news to whoever will give me a couple of pennies for the paper. I bring home the coins to Da and he counts them out and gives me the money that'll go to the Herald next day. He always has me put it in the old teapot on the window sill for tomorrow.

It's been a cold winter and if Da didn't drag me out of bed in the morning, I wouldn't be out there slogging through the slush and snow, I can tell you. And, Jesus, I got a welt on the back of my shoulders from Brother Barnabas at the 'cademy, and he keeps hitting me there every time I fall asleep reading the catty-kism.

I most often sell all the papers by the time I get to the court house, so I don't always get up to Genesee Hill. But that morning it was freezing and not many people were on the streets. So I walked all the way to the fountain at Oneida Square, and by that time I could smell the smoke. Then all hell broke loose as the team of horses and men from the No. 1 fire company came pounding by me and headed up Genesee Street. Holy Cripes, a real fire engine! I threw down the rest of the papers and I ran like the dickens to catch up. By the time I got to the Genesee Flats, the people were trying to get off the front of the place from the balconies. Seven stories of apartments makes for a lot of people.

I'm thinkin' I wish I'd gone home instead. Nobody should ever have to see people dying like that. I still have dreams about it. Yeah, I know ... but that poor lady. I heard her head crack open. Sometimes when I'm dozing off in school, I'll hear that crack and my stomach will get queasy if it's just before lunch.

I'm a good reader, and I've read everything in the papers about the fire, at least in the Herald, because

that's the paper I sell. From what's in print, you'd think everyone in The Flats got called on by the management and politely told about the fire, and pretty please just get dressed and meet across the street for tea. But that's not what happened. Or if it did, it's only because nobody seemed to know whether they were dealing with a big fire or a small one. Not even the firemen.

When I came up to the building, all I saw were firemen in the lantern lights. They were scurrying around and they didn't look like nobody had told them the fire was right in front of them and they should be doing something about it. I didn't see any flames, not at first. But what I heard was awful, people screaming and crying and yelling for help. I think I got a little rattled, and wondered where the hell the voices were coming from. It was dark and there was smoke everywhere. For a second, I wondered if all the voices were up in the trees. Then a trunk of clothes crashed down and split open about ten feet from where I was standing. Just dropped right out of the sky! I looked up and saw coats and shoes and a lady's dress floating down at me. They must've been trying to save their belongings. And then, over at the far end, I saw a man dangling on what looked like a string of sheets or clothing. I had to laugh, thinking it was funny. I wanted to shout at the folks to go back inside. There weren't any flames. I thought this would be just a smoker ... like maybe someone's couch was burning and they'd haul it out in the snow in a few minutes, and everyone could have a good laugh and go back to bed.

It was getting lighter now, and people were still crawling down from the balconies like they were a circus troop. Some were wailing and shouting and trying to find each other. One lady kept grabbing me and asking if I'd seen her brother. She must've asked me ten times. It shook me, and made me afraid again. Oh, those poor people hanging from the windows and balconies.

The smoke was awful smelling, not like a campfire. And the crackling and popping seemed to come from a long way off, from the same direction as a lady's voice screaming for someone named Harry, I remember. And the moaning. I thought it came from a woman with no shoes standing near me, but it was the wind being sucked through the trees into the fire.

Two firemen ran up to me and started yelling about fire engines. I thought they wanted to tell me something, but they just happened to stop in front of

me. They were arguing about whether to call in more engines. One fellow said there was no need, and that he was going to the basement to make sure the fire was out. When he ran off, the other man asked me if I knew how to use the alarm box up the street on the corner. I said I guess you just pull it, and he told me how to break the glass and turn the crank. I must have looked like I wasn't sure I wanted to, because the man put his hand on my shoulder and said "you'll be saving lives, son."

When I got to the box, I was so worked up I couldn't break the glass with my mitten still on my hand. I found a stone and broke the little window. My finger still hurts from the cut I gave myself.

I turned back toward the building, and if I live to be 90 years old I will never forget what happened next. I was running and could see the firemen and people around the bottom of the building, neighbors coming out on their porches in their nightdress, folks still clinging to the balcony railings ... and I was beginning to hope no one would get hurt playing acrobat on the balconies, because this might not be a real bad fire when the whole place just went woooooosh! It broke out in flames. Brother Barnabas says the word is erupted. Well, that's what it did ... it erupted in flames. One huge sheet of flame shot up from the roof of the building and at the same time showers of sparks blew out the windows. Holy Mother Mary, I've never heard or seen anything like it!

All the voices hushed for a moment, and then a loud moan went up from the crowd, the firemen included. I stopped running and plopped down in the snow. But after a few seconds, I got up and kept going back toward the Flats. Oh, why didn't I go home?

That poor lady. She was coming down a string of sheets and towels like some others, and she was crying all the way. She wore a hat kinda like the one I used to see on my old mother ... God rest her soul as she walks with all the saints in Paradise ... and she was old. A man in his shirtsleeves up on the fifth floor had gotten her on the rope. He probably thought he was saving her life. I yelled up at her to hold on. I ran up to where she would land and I held out my arms. I'm a strong kid. I shouted up to her, "Just a little farther!" She was down to the third floor now, but then she just stopped and hung there. I knew she couldn't last long. "C'mon! Slide! I'll catch ya!" I shouted.

A fireman came out on a nearby third floor balcony and called to her to swing over to him, Maybe he had a plan to get her down the staircase, I don't know. But I can't see how she would've had the strength for it. All she had to do was slide down to me and she'd be safe.

She looked over at the fireman, and then looked down at me. She looked sick and tired. Brother Barnabas says the word is miserable. Well, miserable is how she looked.

"Over here!" the fireman shouted.

"Down here, lady!" I cried

It was like an auction. We both wanted her, but she was too scared to pick a winner, and she didn't have very good choices, anyway, now that I consider it. But, oh, how I wish I could forget what I said next.

"Let go and slide," I yelled. But she just let go altogether and she fell.

Right next to me. On the pavement. On her head.

She hit a railing on the second floor, bounced off and then banged down at my side. She came so fast! Honest! I tried, I had my hands up. She was past my arms and on the ground before I could catch her.

Now, I wish I'd just gone home when I got to Oneida Square that morning, taken my leftover papers and my coins and headed back down the hill to the 'cademy. Wish I'd only read about the fire in the paper.

Next day the Herald said that poor lady landed on her shoulder and broke it, not her head. Well, I've never before heard either a head or a shoulder break. But I have to tell ya. If you ever hear a head bust open, you'll be sure to know it. It sounds like nothing else in the whole world.

I don't feel so good.

David Griffin copyright 2009

The Press at Windswept Farm
Saugerties, NY www.windsweptpress.com

Billy Foley's Morning is from a novel being produced online by three authors who let the characters and the public push the story. See the workbook at www.windsweptpress.com/ogh1.htm