

WE'RE
HAVING
A HEAT
WAVE

Daniel Breeze

McNeil & Richards

Copyright © 2009 by Daniel Breeze

All rights reserved. Aside from fair use as permitted by law, no part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance between the characters, events and organizations in this book and actual people, events and organizations is purely coincidental.

ISBN 13 978-0-9825602-5-9
ISBN 0-9825602-5-7

Published by McNeil & Richards
USA

Contents

I	CHILI & LIGHTNING.....	1
II	THE FORECAST.....	21
III	WHO'S TURNING UP THE HEAT?	33
IV	PARADISE	77
V	STORM CLOUDS	123
VI	IN THE EYE OF THE STORM	175
VII	CLEANING UP	205

I

CHILI & LIGHTNING

1

MONDAY, DECEMBER 1

Handling the weather at our little television station, WWTT in Toledo, Ohio, is a little like shooting yourself in the foot every night at 6 P.M. and 11 P.M. There's no sane reason for doing it. In my case, I accepted the job because no one else would hire me as a weatherman. It was WWTT or unemployment.

There are days when I think I made the wrong choice.

At the time I am writing about, I had been the WWTT weatherman for three years. Over that span, I had learned a few things about the weather and a great deal about how management can drive a business into the ground. Pauley Sherman, our station manager, and Bengobar, the corporation that owned our little station, had proven very skillful in that aspect of business.

Pauley and I have what would be called—in more luxurious surroundings—"creative differences" about how the weather should be presented. I believe extensive weather coverage should dominate the local news. Pauley believes weathermen should act like clowns to bring in the crowds, then get out of the way so advertisers can sell their wares to them. Obviously there is a huge gap between our view-

points, and just as obviously I am right. (Let Pauley write his own book.)

The momentous events that changed both our lives began on a cool December evening when Pauley—a thirty-two-year-old wunderkind who had been hired six months earlier to turn things around at WWTT—slithered into my weather cubbyhole as I was tracking storms on my computer. Incidentally, I was four years younger than Pauley and much better looking.

“A word of advice,” he said. “Don’t chow down at lunch tomorrow. Save room for a bowl of free chili.”

I knew what was coming. I tried to head Pauley off before he bushwhacked me. “Forget it, Pauley. I’m not doing any more remotes from chili suppers, fish fries, county fairs, or your grandmother’s house.”

He ignored me. “It’s all set. Tuesday evening, you’ll do a remote from a charity chili supper in Ottawa Hills. Eric will drive the van over and handle the camerawork.”

I explained to Pauley for the umpteenth time that it was beneath the dignity of a weatherman to mess around at chili suppers and pancake breakfasts. Pauley disagreed.

“Willard Scott once delivered the weather for the ‘Today’ show dressed as Carmen Miranda,” he pointed out.

“Some weathermen do it,” I conceded, “but the National Meteorological Society frowns on that sort of thing.”

“You aren’t a member of the N.M.S.,” Pauley noted.

“That’s right. And do you know why? They won’t let me in because you force me to do remotes from chili suppers and fish fries. Wouldn’t you like to have a meteorologist who’s recognized by a national organization deliver the weather for you?”

“Then who would I send to the chili suppers and fish fries?”

"Nobody!" I said. "It's not worth it!"

"We've had this discussion before, Sheldon. You can fly off to cover hurricanes, tornadoes and plugged-up bathroom drains on your own time, but what you get paid for is reading the weather forecast and showing up at the chili suppers. The Niensens show our ratings go up when you do remotes! Look, if it would get higher ratings, I'd have you do the weather from the Kitty Kat Klub in your birthday suit."

Pauley worried me. With an attitude like that, he was network material.

"What I'm telling you, Sheldon, is that if you can't do things my way, I'm sure I could find a weatherman who will."

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 2

As I drove to Ottawa Hills the next afternoon for the chili supper, light rain splattered the windshield of my Buick Skylark. I had assured viewers it would not rain on Tuesday, but it was doing it just the same.

Ottawa Hills is a village of about 4,500 people on the west side of Toledo. (If you have ever been stranded in Toledo, you know that it's a city of about 290,000 in northwest Ohio on the western end of Lake Erie. If you cross the city limits on the north, you're in Michigan.)

As I drove, I was in a bad mood not only because of the rain but because I was frustrated by Pauley's Weatherman-As-Clown philosophy. My career hung in the balance because I balked at making a fool of myself at chili suppers and charity barbecues. A hero of mine—David Ludlum, one of the first television weathermen in Philadelphia—had been fired because he refused to croon a weather ditty. He later wrote several books on the weather and founded *Weather-wise* magazine. But if I were fired for refusing to do a chili

supper remote, my future was likely to be less rosy. It was quite possible no other station would hire me, and I had no idea what I would do if I were not a weatherman.

Being a weatherman was all I had ever wanted to do, and I threw myself into it enthusiastically. I could never be the kind of weather jockey who cracked a few jokes, cooked up fancy graphics and served up the same forecast any jerk could get by dialing the National Weather Service. I wanted to be out where the weather was happening. I wanted to be on the frontlines, not down in the shelters. Two months earlier, when devastating Hurricane Helga bore down on Florida, I flew to Miami to confront the hurricane. After Miami broadcasters headed for the shelters, I was still on the air, telling people back in Toledo about the hurricane. Miami was crumbling around me, but I was on the air!

Okay, so that wasn't one of my sanest moments. I did it for three reasons: I wanted to be where the action was, I wanted to tell people back in Toledo what was happening, and in the back of my mind was the notion that a Miami television station might hire me as their weatherman. They didn't go for the bait.

My point is this: going the extra mile—such as reporting from the middle of disasters—can help people. And so can accurate forecasts, by warning about approaching storms, and so can long-range forecasts, by saving businesses and farmers millions of dollars.

That's the kind of forecasting I wanted to do, but explaining it to Pauley Sherman was like trying to sell girlie magazines to the Pope. Give me some bucks, I told Pauley, and I can tell you if it's going to rain at three in the afternoon four months from now. Pauley's answer was (1) the station didn't have the bucks, and (2) he didn't care whether it would rain at three in the afternoon four months from now. According

to Pauley's theory of television station management, cheaper was always better.

Old Harley Carruthers, one of the instructors at the Toledo Weather College, had warned me that weather forecasting was a tough business. "You must learn about isobars, altocumulous clouds, squaw lines and ass kissing," he asserted. I couldn't figure out what squaw lines had to do with the weather. I thought that was what they called country line dancing when Indian women did it. Old Harley growled, "not squaws, you moron! Squalls!"

Nevertheless, I understood the point old Harley was making about ass kissing. I thought I would be able to stay above all that and wouldn't need to dirty my hands with station politics, but I was wrong. There are always Pauley Shermans who can fire you if you don't do things *their* way.

As I neared Ottawa Hills, the temperature hovered around 42 degrees and rain was still falling. I braced myself, because I knew that half of the people at the chili supper would blame me for the crummy weather. They forget that weathermen don't manufacture the weather, we merely forecast it. The other half would ridicule me for blowing the forecast.

"You blew it today, didn't you, Jer!"

I had never met the old geezer in the beret before he approached me at the chili supper, but when people see you night after night on television, they feel they know you.

"I sure did. I spend so many hours at chili suppers and charity rummage sales I don't have time to figure out what the weather's going to be."

He nodded knowingly. "I figured it was somethin' like that."

He wandered off in the general direction of the chili pots.

I glanced around the cavernous hall where three hundred or so people were chowing down and realized that in the distance Dexter Bentley and a crew from WORY were setting up to do a remote. I winced at the thought of having to put up with that buffoon and his jibes about "the kid forecaster at that other station". Dexter not only enjoyed doing remotes from chili suppers, he begged his boss to set them up. We're not talking about weather forecaster integrity here. We're talking about raw, unabashed showboating.

Eric Larkin, a young sandy-haired cameraman, arrived in one of the two WWTT remote vans five minutes after I did.

"Let's set up over here," I told him. "It's about as far from Dexter as I can get without leaving the building."

One of the ladies in charge of the occasion approached and insisted I sample the chili. I didn't want to taste the damn chili so I politely refused. She persisted.

"Come on, Jerry. You really must taste the chili. It's heavenly!"

"I can't right now," I said. "We're setting up for our remote, and I don't have time—"

She shoved a spoonful of chili in front of my mouth. "It will just take a moment. Please taste it!"

I took a mouthful. Immediately my throat burned like Hades. My eyes opened wide. I thought my brains were going to explode. No one told me it was red hot chili, the kind Texans use to pave roads when they run out of tar.

"Water!" I managed to gasp. "I need water!"

I swear I didn't know Dexter had come up behind me. When he tapped on my shoulder, I turned around and was so surprised to see him standing close to me that I opened my mouth and sprayed him with chili.

He seemed shocked and bewildered.

"What the hell did you do that for, kid?"

He had heard my name hundreds of time when he monitored our weathercasts. He just didn't want to remember it.

"I'm sorry, old man. I didn't know you were behind me." I gulped down the glass of water a kind soul had fetched. Then I started wiping chili off the apron Dexter had donned for the occasion. He pushed my hands away because he thought I was making it worse by smearing the chili into the fabric. And I was.

"I'll take care of it. I can't believe this! I go on the air in ten minutes and you splattered me with chili!"

I suppose I should have felt sorry for Dexter, but this was the same weatherman who once shot a duck out of the sky to prove it was a clear day, just as he had predicted.

"You're a menace," Dexter grumbled. "Why don't you go back to Florida. Maybe the next hurricane will blow your head off. . . . What were you doing down there anyway?"

"Every once in a while I like to be where the action is, Dexter. It reminds me there's more to the weather than chili suppers and fish fries. You ought to try it some time."

He shook his head. "All a TV weatherman needs to do is get the crowd into the tent. Then you give them the forecast, and everything else is frosting on the cake. Don't make a big deal out of it. All the fancy equipment you can buy won't give you a better forecast."

"Uh-huh. What are you using over at your station to forecast the weather this week—pig spleens or aching joints? Or maybe the old adage 'when the cow scratches its ear, it means a shower is near'?"

"Let's face it, kid. You didn't predict the rain tonight, the Weather Service didn't, and I didn't. You may feel like you're better than the rest of us, but your forecasts ain't any better."

He hurried away in a huff, still wiping chili off his apron.

"Stand by," ordered Barb Farley, the director back at the station. I heard her voice in my earpiece.

"How am I getting paid this week?" I asked. "In dollars—or chili beans?"

"Don't even joke about that," Barb said. "If Pauley thought he could get away with it, he *would* pay us in chili beans. . . .Three ... two ... one . . ."

I launched into my opening:

"WE'RE HERE IN OTTAWA HILLS AT THE JUNIOR BASKETBALL LEAGUE BENEFIT CHILI SUPPER, AND I BET YOU WISH YOU WERE HERE, FOLKS. MANY CELEBRITIES ARE IN THE CROWD. THE FIRE CHIEF IS OVER IN THE CORNER, OUT IN THE HALLWAY A BOY ACQUITTED OF MURDER IS BEATING UP HIS LITTLE BROTHER, AND ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE ROOM DEXTER BENTLEY IS MOPPING CHILI OFF HIS CLOTHES. SOME PEOPLE CAN'T HOLD THEIR CHILL. . . . WELL, LET'S GET RIGHT INTO TODAY'S WEATHER STATISTICS. THE HIGH IN TOLEDO WAS 45 . . ."

2

When I left the chili supper, I was still upset because my dignity as a weatherman had been compromised by yet another frivolous remote broadcast, and my mood was further dampened because not only had I failed to forecast the rain showers earlier in the evening, I had completely missed the thunderstorms that followed. Rain poured out of the heavens like booze on the day before Prohibition. Crashing thunder accompanied flashes of lightning. I was in one of those “I don’t need this kind of aggravation!” moods most of us get into at one time or another. I contemplated getting drunk, quitting my job, or leaving town—or perhaps all three.

By the time I arrived at the WWTT offices to prepare for the 11 P.M. newscast, I was drenched.

Toledo supports a slew of AM and FM radio stations and five television stations. WWTT is the smallest of the television stations. Our offices are housed in a two-story concrete building north of downtown Toledo on Alexis Road. The news operation is tucked away on the second floor.

As I hurried into the newsroom, co-anchor Brent Lassiter

commented, "Looks like some of those partly cloudy skies fell on you."

Brent had been hired twenty years earlier because he looked like an anchor should look—handsome, square-jawed, authoritative, friendly. He still considered himself handsome, but over the years his teeth had rotted, his hair had thinned out, and he had gained twenty pounds. The station didn't get rid of Brent because he was a Toledo institution. He was like a familiar old sofa that's falling apart. The owner hesitates to throw it away because it has sentimental value. Brent was WWTT's old sofa.

Fran Rosen, his streetwise co-anchor, remarked, "those chili suppers must be worse than I remember."

"They're brutal," I grumbled.

Fran, thirtyish and attractive, was a victim of the "Catch 22" of the broadcasting business: you can't get a better job without job experience, but if you work for WWTT nobody else wants to hire you.

Morty Greer told me, "I've seen guys who played in the Super Bowl come out lookin' better than you."

Morty was our forty-three-year-old sports anchor. Six-foot-four and lean, he looked as though he could still play semi-pro basketball. Morty floated through life in a stupor. He loved Toledo, he adored his job, and he was crazy about all of Toledo's sports teams. He didn't know who was president, and he couldn't figure out what kept space shuttles from falling out of the sky, but he could tell you that George Mikan averaged 28.3 points per game playing for Minneapolis in 1949.

I was ticked off by my colleagues' remarks and I'm afraid I took it out on Morty. "Why don't you cover the basketball games and shuffleboard tournaments and stop buttin' in where you don't belong?" I grumbled.

Morty looked as though he had been slapped. As I stomped off to the weather cubbyhole, Morty asked, "What's the matter with him?"

"Jerry blew the forecast again," Brent said.

In my cubbyhole, I slipped off my dripping wet sport coat and draped it over a bust of Thomas Jefferson. I kept Jefferson around because he had been something of a weatherman himself, recording detailed observations about atmospheric conditions.

Anxious to put the annoyances of the evening behind me, I fired up the Cloudchaser computer and browsed through the latest National Weather Service data. Raw data and weather charts would enable me to create sophisticated weather graphics that would clearly illustrate where the storm fronts were. Thanks to animation, I could give viewers a "fly-over" showing how cloud formations and weather conditions would look if you were flying above them. It was a far cry from the hand-drawn maps and stick-on symbols employed by television weathercasters in the '40s and '50s.

As I worked, I was only faintly aware of the thunder outside, and I had completely forgotten the manufacturer's warning about exercising caution when using the computer during lightning storms. I was on deadline and had no time to worry about such details.

I recall mumbling something about the incompetence of Dexter Bentley and wondering aloud why God had humiliated me by opening the spigots of heaven when I hadn't forecast it. Then I launched into a one-sided conversation with Him.

"The weather is a mess!" I grumbled. "I'm tired of getting all the blame for it and having none of the responsibility, none of the control. . . . You've got a lot of other things to do—let *me* handle the weather!"

I was plotting the path of a low pressure area through the Southwest when suddenly an incredibly bright light flashed across the computer monitor. Electricity flowed from the keyboard into my body. My fingertips smoked, my hair frizzled, and my eyes opened wide. The same thing had happened the last time I tasted my fiancé's lasagna, but this time Laura's cooking was not to blame. Lightning had struck the power lines, power surged into the computer, and then it surged into me!

The newsroom crew heard my outcry—Fran later described it as the “wail of a wounded moose”—and someone had the presence of mind to pick up a phone and dial 411.

That's right. They didn't dial 911, the emergency number, they called local information. Thus, the ambulance was delayed an extra four minutes in arriving at the station and my brain baked four minutes longer than would otherwise have been necessary.

3

Because my mind had been temporarily short-circuited, my memories of the ensuing few hours are rather disconnected and downright weird. I vaguely recall the ambulance driver complaining that I had sustained such an electrical charge I was interfering with his radio transmission. I mumbled an apology. When ambulance attendants carted me into the emergency room at St. Vincent Medical Center, television sets went haywire. The nurse who took my pulse complained that I had given her an electrical shock.

As a doctor gave me a handful of painkillers to swallow, he suggested I was lucky. "It could have been a lot worse. Lightning kills about a hundred Americans each year."

I wondered how many of them had been under his care. He then proceeded to relate an amusing little anecdote about a bolt of lightning that hit a home in 1977, melting the refrigerator and cooking a five-pound ham. (When I received his bill two or three weeks later, I noted he had charged me \$185 for relating that bit of information.)

After examining me off and on for about two hours, he concluded I had a few burns on my body and my fingers were unusually red. A brain scan revealed nothing, but an impromptu experiment showed that when I touched a television set, it could receive thirty-five channels without being hooked up to cable.

As I waited in the ER to be admitted to the hospital for an overnight stay, I listened to the late-evening WWTT news. Brent Lassiter reported I would not be delivering the weather because I had been incapacitated by a lightning-induced power surge. Fran suggested that was impossible . . . there couldn't have been any lightning because I hadn't forecast it. Then Brent, Fran and Morty Greer all had a good laugh. Our newsroom crew had never been very good at engaging in Happy Talk.

Laura Matthews, my fiancé, came to visit me and I remained in the hospital overnight.

Laura was a shapely twenty-nine-year-old brunette divorcee who worked at Dillard's department store in the Westfield Franklin Park shopping mall. I had met her two years earlier. We had not set a date for our wedding. Although she had agreed to marry me in one of her weaker moments, when the moon was high, the fire was low and the wine was flowing, we had never agreed on when we would tie the knot. I had the definite feeling she wasn't sure she wanted to marry me. She reminded me of the magazine *Scientific American*, which for years published on its cover an illustration of a clock showing how close mankind was to nuclear war. Some years, the clock indicated we were within two or three "minutes" of Doomsday. Other years, when the international climate was less heated, the clock was set to maybe ten or fifteen minutes before twelve. Well, Laura had a clock

of her own, a marriage clock. Some months, we were within two or three minutes of Doomsday—I mean, our Wedding Day—and other months, we were several hours away from Doomsday. It all depended on how she felt about me at the time.

“What did you do this time?” she asked, implying that the power surge was somehow my fault.

I didn't feel like going into details. “I don't have any idea.”

“Well, don't do it again.”

“I don't plan on it.”

Other men, they wind up in the hospital, their women burst into tears. “Oh, darling! Are you all right? Did you get hurt?” What did I get? “Don't do it again.” Terrific. I felt like saying, “I could use a little sympathy here!” but I didn't want to whine. A few minutes later, I fell asleep.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 3

In the morning, doctors still couldn't find anything seriously amiss and they discharged me. Laura insisted on driving me to her house, where she could care for me a few days.

A hospital attendant wheeled me to the exit in a wheelchair and Laura and the attendant helped me into her red Saturn. Satisfied that I was comfortable in the seat on the passenger side next to her, Laura revved up the Saturn and took off like a bat out of hell. She always drove like that.

She parked the Saturn in the driveway in front of her two-story woodframe house in Sylvania and I managed to get out of the car, though I was limping more than I had when I was loaded into the car. I considered suggesting that she take me back to the hospital, but I feared another ride with her at the wheel would finish me off.

The house overflowed with Christmas decorations. Laura

and her nine-year-old daughter, Kathy, were very big on celebrating the holidays, and even though Christmas was more than three weeks away, they had already decorated the house from top to bottom. An eight-foot artificial blue fir Christmas tree graced the living room, and stockings hung on the fireplace—Laura's, then Kathy's, then Country Fried's, then mine. I preferred to think this did not mean that I was lower on the pecking order than Country Fried, their terrier, but it probably did. (Like most kids, Kathy loved junk food. When it came time to name the mutt, Country Fried was the first thing that sprang to mind.)

Laura took the day off from work and allowed Kathy to stay home from school. Laura apparently thought observing someone who had sustained a high-voltage lightning surge was more educational than studying math or science. I was placed in Kathy's room—the one with teddy bear wallpaper—and Kathy was assigned to sleep on the living room sofa. I looked forward to getting a little rest, but it was not to be.

Kathy thought it would be cute to stick light bulbs into my mouth to see if they lit up. They didn't.

She asked if my hair would always have those little singed ends. I told her I didn't think so. Laura was not amused when I observed that both Laura and I had hair with split ends.

Laura made a pot of chicken noodle soup to help me "convalesce". She seemed offended when I suggested a sirloin steak might do the job better.

After lunch, Kathy asked if I had brought her any more of that "neat water" from the Miami hurricane. Her question refreshed Laura's memory about an argument Laura and I had engaged in two months earlier. When I returned from the Miami hurricane Kathy asked what I had brought

her from Miami. I handed her a small plastic bottle. "Here, shrimpboat. This is genuine rain water from Hurricane Helga!"

Kathy was excited. After Kathy went to bed, Laura said it was thoughtful that in the middle of all the turmoil in Miami, I had taken the time to scoop up some water for Kathy. That's when I admitted I hadn't brought the water from Miami, I had filled the bottle with tap water out of the john at our station. "She'll never know the difference," I assured Laura. "I mean, what's the kid going to do—have it analyzed to see if it's Toledo water or Miami hurricane water?"

Well, Laura had a fit. Said it was a terrible thing to do. I responded that it was a harmless white lie, my intentions were good, and Kathy was thrilled with the water, but Laura wouldn't listen.

So, Kathy's mention of the water stirred all that up again in Laura's mind and it put a damper on things. After a few hours at Laura's house, I was going nuts. I announced my intention of returning to work immediately.

"After what you've been through—being struck by lightning!" Laura exclaimed. "The doctor said you should take two or three days off to see if there were any lingering effects."

"Aside from a craving for toasted marshmallows, I'm fine."

And so, over Laura's protests, I returned to WWTT that Wednesday afternoon. It was drizzling and cool. I tried to forget the ordeal I had been through by listening to the car radio. An AM station featured a couple of bands with a Toledo connection, We Are the Fury and Lollipop Lust Kill. That didn't do much for my fragile state of mind.

II

THE FORECAST