

Shot in the Dark

Three photographers on the graveyard shift shoot the Cities' dark side

By Burl Gilyard Wednesday, Dec 2 1998
The City Pages, Minneapolis, MN
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It's midnight on a Monday in mid-November: cloudy and crisp, but no snow. WCCO-TV overnight photographer Tony Knoss steers his unmarked white minivan out of downtown Minneapolis to check on a tip about eastbound 394 being shut down--suggesting, perhaps, an accident. He has been holed up at the television station for an hour, editing a piece about Vikings quarterback Brad Johnson's nascent country music singing career, so he's been away from the scanners in his van, which makes Knoss a little nervous that he may have missed a story. Nothing seems amiss with the freeway traffic. As he cloverleafs back toward downtown, it becomes clear what the story is about. Traffic is simply being rerouted around the Lowry Tunnel, which is closed--for cleaning. Another hot tip goes cold.

But out on the spin, he had detected officers sounding more agitated than usual on the Washington County sheriff's channel. He locks the scanner, mounted on his dash, into that frequency, while letting the one at his feet continue to roll. He gets onto I-35W northbound and heads for the suburban county, playing a hunch.

His instincts pay off. "Can you have an ambulance advise on a helicopter on that?" comes a voice over the channel.

"It's an accident," Knoss says. "It might be serious." What tipped him off is the variation in the usual clinical dispatcher chatter--the voices he had heard were loud and agitated. Still, through the fragments of information he has culled so far, it's hard to know just what might be out there. "There's no clue as to how bad it is at this point," he cautions. On he drives, into the night.

The 30-year-old Knoss steadies his nerves on a nightly regimen of Diet Coke, American Spirit cigarettes, and Ice Breakers gum. He wears wire-rimmed glasses and a small gold earring in his left ear. He's clearly feeling the adrenaline rush of the chase, the charge of pursuing the unknown, but is doing his best to obey the traffic laws. Four years on the job at Channel 4 has yielded just two tickets--only one

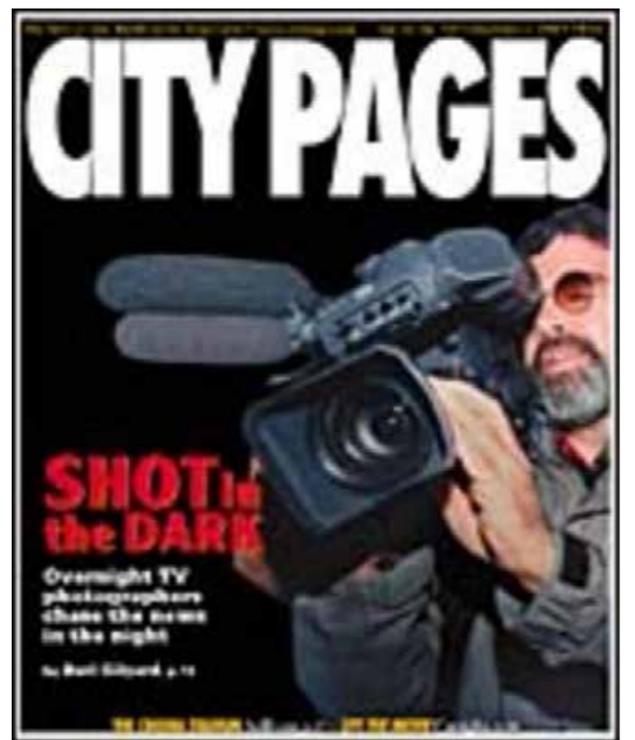
of them for speeding--hardly worth a mention, considering he puts 3,000-4,000 miles a month on the minivan.

At 12:39 a.m. Knoss hits the postcard-pretty downtown Stillwater along the St. Croix River, where the Christmas lights along Main Street illuminate a few falling flakes. He has the road to himself. "The drawback of coming out this far is if something happens downtown, we're screwed," he frets. "But I know nobody else is out this far. Shot in the dark. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't." "Nobody else" means no other overnight photographers from local competitors KSTP-TV (Channel 5) or KARE-TV (Channel 11).

Just north of Stillwater, a dispatch over the state patrol frequency announces that the driver involved has six prior drinking-and-driving-related offenses. "Ooh! Yes! We have a story!" Knoss exclaims as he lights another cigarette. "That makes it worth coming out here. I just hope something's still there when we get there." An ambulance, with lights but no siren on, slowly motors by in the southbound lane--a signal that the accident may not be serious.

Knoss scans the dark country road, keeping an eye out for deer, watching his speed, and waiting to see flashing lights around the next corner. "Just keep going until we hit it," he says. "We should be able to see it a half-mile away." At 12:52, there it is: the road ahead ablaze with five Christmas trees' worth of red flashing lights. "Ta-da," deadpans Knoss. He pulls past the state trooper, a Washington County sheriff's car, and the fire engine, and parks on the shoulder.

What's left of the scene is a still-smoldering red Ford pickup. The gutted cab is as black as a charcoal briquette, and it smells of burning metal. Inside, the steering wheel looks like a wire; all that's left of the car seats are their metal frames. Smoke rises from under the dampened hood. It bears a striking likeness to the tangled wrecks on display at the State Fair as apocalyptic warnings against drunk driving, as if to say, "BEWARE! THIS COULD HAPPEN TO YOU!"



The truck has been hoisted out of the ditch where it crashed and burst into flames. Knoss shoulders a 30-pound camera and tripod and gets to work right away, shooting the vehicle from several angles as a tow-truck driver prepares to hoist the charred skeleton. Yellow-suited firefighters tramp around Knoss in an arm's-length dance familiar to overnight photographers. He is neither welcomed nor told to get lost. He passes among them, and they around him, with the mutual, tacit acknowledgment that everyone here has a job to do.

The official report on the accident will come later from the state patrol, but from the tidbits Knoss can glean at the scene, it sounds like the driver, by now en route to Regions Hospital in St. Paul, was able to get out of the truck and may have suffered only minor injuries. After some 15 fifteen minutes on site, Knoss gets one last shot, of the tow truck pulling away with the roasted pickup.

On the drive back, Knoss reflects on the gravity of the episode. "The only thing that makes this a story is the previous DWIs," he says. "There is a chance they won't run this thing in the morning because it doesn't have enough to it. But that's not my decision." Once back at the station, he'll punch the license number into the database to verify the prior offenses. From there, how the accident gets packaged and used is out of his hands.

Knoss, who says karma and the golden rule are his guiding principles, is convinced there's value in airing this kind of footage, if only as a reminder to viewers of the hazards of the road. He bucks the stereotypes attached to his job--that he and his kind are nothing more than calamity "vultures" swooping down on and sensationalizing photogenic tragedy. Rather, he says, the work "makes you appreciate life more. It can

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happen to anybody, anywhere, at any-time. If I was off tonight, this guy still would've crashed."

But Knoss was on tonight, so the single-car crash in Marine on St. Croix makes the morning news in a matter of hours.

Overnight TV photographers work alone in the dark. They make their own judgment calls on which stories to chase, and which to ignore. These days, they drive unmarked minivans, because stations have all decided that cruising around at night with a station's logo plastered to the door could turn photographers into moving targets. They sleep by day, and never enough. They carry cellular phones to stay in touch with whoever's sitting back at the station and keep the Hudson's street map book always within reach.

In theory, anything that happens under cover of darkness is fair game, but the grist is largely drawn from whatever comes over the scanners that scroll endlessly through the 250-odd police, sheriff, fire, state patrol, and other emergency channels in the metro area. Shootings, car accidents, and fires are staples of the trade, though even they must be of some magnitude: Simple cases of "shots fired," fender benders with no serious injuries, and garbage-can fires in an alley aren't going to cut it. But overnight photographers are also called upon to shoot more routine stuff, such as newsworthy weather or people studying the skies for meteor showers. While they may get used to rhythms of the job over time, they can never predict what a given shift will bring: A Friday can pass without the camera leaving the van, while a Monday night may find every station's night photographers racing from one scene to the next.

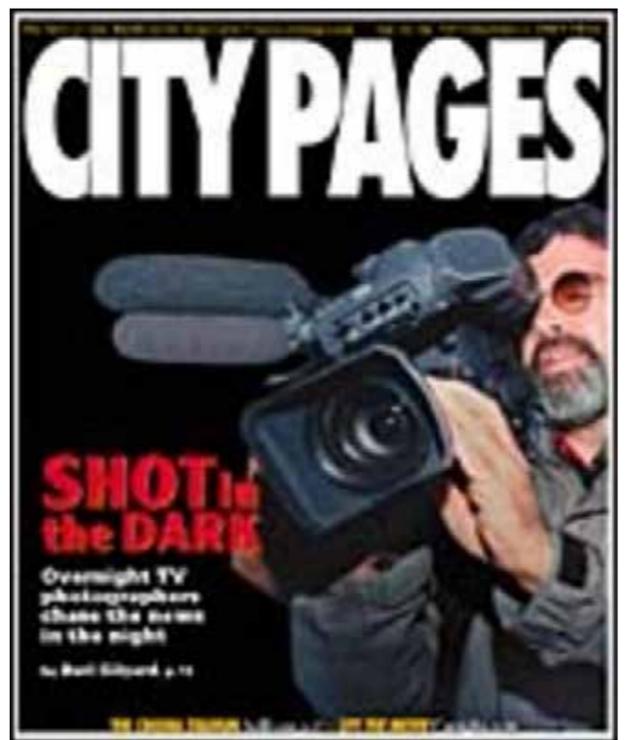
Local stations WCCO, KSTP, and KARE all have someone dedicated to working the overnight shift, supplemented by other staff, part-timers, or on-call photographers. (The fourth player in the market, KMSP (Channel 9), currently relies on on-call photographers, but will likely add an overnight position next year.) The trio forms a small, relatively collegial, club whose

members tend to look out for one another, even as they compete. Everyone works a slightly different shift. WCCO's Knoss works the 7 p.m. to 3 a.m.; KSTP's Brad Griffin the 11 p.m. to 7:30 a.m.; KARE's Mike Stern the 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. The early evening often finds Knoss gathering material for the 10 o'clock news; Stern and Griffin usually get busy on a live shot for the morning newscasts.

To do the job well, you have to master the scanners: listening to them, hearing what matters, making certain you get to the scene in case a dispatcher's alert turns into a big story. At first the dispatches might sound like an unceasing choir of mayhem and mishap, but the overnight guys all say 99 percent of the stuff that comes over the scanners isn't worth blinking at. Possible heart attacks. Diabetic reactions. Burglary alarms going off. Traffic stops. After a while on the job, the cryptic shorthand becomes a second language they understand almost subliminally: "PI" means personal injury, "RP" a reporting party, "DK" drunk. A "1054" is state-trooper talk for an accident with a fatality. While out on the roads, the overnights also learned where the cops park to cut their lights and wait--where the speed traps are.

In cities like New York and Los Angeles, the overnight-photography business more closely resembles a freelance cadre of paparazzi, chasing crime rather than celebrity. But Minneapolis and St. Paul have never been volatile news towns. Tom Lindner, news director at KARE, worked in Chicago for a few years and recalls that that city's news appetite demanded "heavy, heavy reliance on crime-spot news. Compared to here, it was just intense. They really had three stories in Chicago: crime, sports, and politics. And they kind of covered them the same way: who's alive, who's dead."

That dynamic fostered freelancers, or stringers, who made it their life's work to supply tape on demand. Lindner recalls a former cop who became something of a news-business legend. He cruised around Chicago at night in a souped-up Corvette, outfitted with a battery of dubbing decks behind the



front seat so he could run off copies of tapes while en route from crime scenes to the stations.

"There was an active stringer market, which doesn't really exist here," Lindner says. "I don't think the viewers have the appetite for that kind of stuff. I think if you did a Chicago-style crime-blotter newscast here, it would fail."

Knoss and Griffin both agree that business overall is slower than it was a few years back, when shootings were more rampant. That perception is borne out by some key statistics. Minneapolis still provides the lion's share of high-profile crime, with 58 homicides last year--down substantially from 86 in 1996 and the all-time high of 97 in 1995, when the city earned the ignominious nickname "Murderapolis." This year is roughly apace with 1997.

Even so, Minneapolis just isn't the kind of rat-a-tat-tat news town as is, say, Milwaukee--city of beer and bedlam. Mike Stern, who has worked the overnight shift for KARE-TV since July as a freelancer, spent four years shooting on the night shift there. "In Milwaukee, it wasn't a matter of something happening. It was, 'Which one do we go to?'" Stern says. By comparison, he adds, Minneapolis is a sleepy hollow and St. Paul is even more tranquil.

In Stern's seasoned estimation, the Twin Cities simply aren't prone to as many raging, out-of-control conflagrations as Milwaukee: "They just don't have the fires here, and when they do, it's unbelievable how fast they put it out. Not that I'm complaining, but it's unbelievable how fast they are." But you never know: "This is the time of year when people start throwing blankets over space heaters."

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That leaves nights with a lot of downtime in them. Stern usually camps in the parking lot at Dunwoody Institute directly across from the sculpture garden at the Walker Art Center, engine running, scanners humming. The station's home base in Golden Valley doesn't offer the central location he needs to make it to scenes in time to catch action. Which isn't as often as in the old days. He kills time the unglamorous way, sitting in the dark, nursing coffee, staring at a vacant parking lot, and stepping out for the occasional smoke break, with one ear glued to the scanners. Truth be known, between chasing down stories, the bulk of the job is spent listening closely for news to break.

Driving around doesn't make much sense to Stern, who notes that the chance of actually stumbling upon news in progress is remote. "You can drive yourself far away from a scene," Stern explains, so he stays put. The cab of his truck is illuminated only by the Bearcat scanners, which glow orange as an ember, and the green-lit buttons on his cell phone. The 41-year-old Stern wears a bulky jacket over a blue sweater; his rounded, tinted glasses reflect the lights in the cab as he listens to the scanner chatter and strokes his thick, black beard.

A steady stream of dispatches spills out of the scanners; some calls are serious, some oddly comic. A shooting in North Minneapolis: "They began shooting at the white male's feet..." Someone vomiting blood in Brooklyn Park. A harassed bartender: "Two females followed him home and won't leave"--reportedly yelling and screaming outside his front door. "We have a Hispanic male in the lobby. He appears agitated and doesn't speak English. He may be a robbery victim." A barking dog in Minnetonka. Down at the airport, a Continental Airlines flight making an unscheduled landing to dispense with "an unruly passenger who has been subdued." In South Minneapolis: "A neighbor is saying there's been a male ranting and raving for two hours."

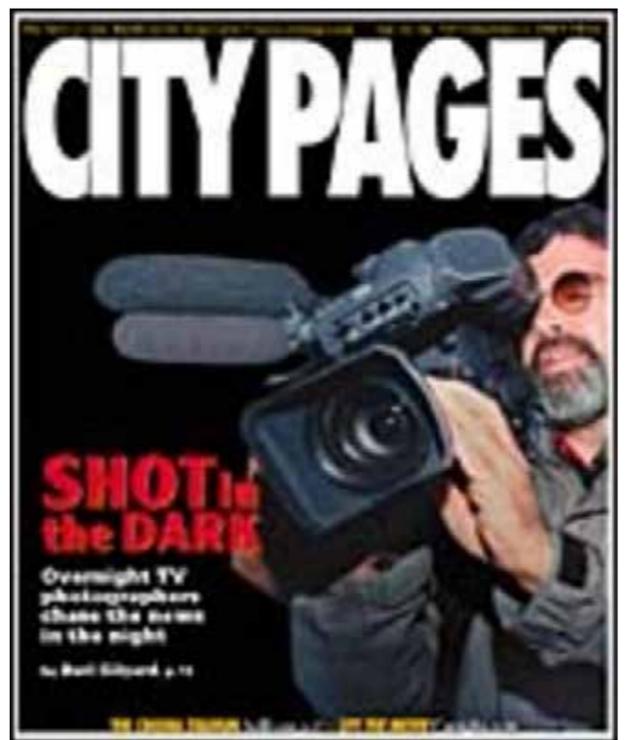
Absolutely none of it worth chasing.

At 12:40 a.m. Stern's cell phone rings. It's Knoss. "Hey, Tony," he says. "Are you sitting at the station? You must be bored." Stern and Knoss have forged a relationship based on friendly competition; they've taken to periodically calling each other during shifts just to shoot the breeze or rib each other. "It's not like when all three of us show up at a scene we get into fights," says Stern, of Knoss and Griffin.

But for all the time spent sitting in parking lots, there are nights when the big stories break while the town sleeps. Stern will never forget one night he spent working the graveyard shift in Milwaukee. "I came into work about midnight, and the overnight producer said she got this call from a guy who lived in an apartment building," Stern remembers. The caller had overheard police in the hall: "He said, 'You sick son of a bitch, you have a head in the freezer.' She asked me to check it out."

The building turned out to be a quick six blocks from the station. Stern says he was the first photographer on the scene. Immediately, it struck him how "weird" the normally officious police were acting. As Stern tells it, "There were cops everywhere and they just had these shocked looks on their faces." He approached one who had been helpful in the past, to find out what was going on. The officer told him, "I've been on the force for 30 years, I've been in Vietnam--I've never seen anything like this." Then he walked away without saying more.

The unfolding crime scene that Stern was covering would soon be international news: the guy with the head in his freezer turned out to be Jeffrey Dahmer. What did Stern shoot? "The containers full of evidence that were being brought out. Boxes of industrial-waste-type barrels. Freezer. Shots of the shocked faces of the neighbors. The smell was just horrifying. It was awful." Stern's footage was used internationally. "Yeah, all over the world. We had stations in Germany asking for video. It's just a gruesome subject--it's kind of hard to take much enjoyment in that. That was probably about the only one that's ever really bothered me."



Stern recalls covering another Milwaukee story one New Year's Day, when a gunman had holed up in a building and the police were setting up to tear gas him out. Stern noticed the fire department crew pack up suddenly and speed away from the scene. Instinct--as well as plumes of smoke on the horizon--told him to follow, but the reporter he was teamed with insisted that they not leave the scene of the story they'd been assigned to.

"I left my reporter there," says Stern, who followed the fire department to a nearby blaze: "Sure enough, it was an apartment building. People were jumping out of windows." He recalls seeing a firefighter running down an ice-covered alley, cradling a badly burned baby in his arms while trying to give the child mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. At the memory, Stern takes a drag off his cigarette and shakes his head. "That's one shot I'm glad I didn't get. That kid lost his life."

Around 2:30 a.m., Stern typically leaves his post to head back to the station, noting that he "hardly ever" picks anything up between then and 5 a.m., after which he often does a live shot for the morning news program. When he finally gets off at 7 in the morning, does he go home and crack a beer, while the nine-to-fivers slog into work? No, Stern laughs: "I go to sleep."

"I would guess it's more dangerous than the average job, but I think the biggest danger is getting hit by a drunk," KSTP's Brad Griffin says as he drives east on University Avenue. A few minutes later, he finds his first drunk at the intersection of University and Washington by the University of Minnesota campus. A Cadillac Eldorado is straddling two lanes of traffic, idling in front of its second green light without moving.

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Griffin slips around it warily--"I hate to go around a drunk, because you never know what they're going to do"--but as it turns out, the driver is stone asleep behind the wheel, head cocked skyward, mouth agape in pickled ignorance.

The 49-year-old Griffin is the veteran of the current crop of overnight photographers; he has been at KSTP for 24 years, 19 of them on the overnight shift. "And you never get used to it," he says of the hours. As for a good day's sleep, "You never get eight hours." Still, Griffin eschews coffee, the stereotypical beverage of choice for third shifters: "I don't like the taste of it. If it gets below zero, I'll go to White Castle and get a hot chocolate." He is fairly quiet, and, by this point in his career, little seems to surprise him. "When I was younger, I liked the excitement. When you get older, you don't need that as much," he says.

After enough time on the job, Griffin knows how high the bar is for spot news overnight. "We'll go to a shooting, but if it's a leg wound or something, we'll blow it off," Griffin says. When it comes to fire footage, he goes on, "If you get there in time for flames, it'll probably be used. Or if people are injured." Still, Griffin's footage most likely to go national is that of atmospheric conditions: "I get more footage picked up by the Weather Channel than anything else."

Some shifts amount to one long goose chase. It's a Wednesday night in mid-November, and Griffin is running the road in search of a "fatal" in the western suburbs. After driving west for a half-hour, he makes one more turn, at just after midnight, and finds the telltale lights at the end of the block. Griffin parks at a good distance from the squad cars, grabs his camera and tripod from the hatch, and instinctively starts shooting the flashing lights before him. It's not immediately clear what the scene is. There's no accident in sight, just two Mound police cars and two Hennepin County sheriff's minivans--one the Crime Scene Unit, the other the county's Water Patrol with a small boat in tow.

Through a squad radio in one of the cars, someone announces, "Now the media's here."

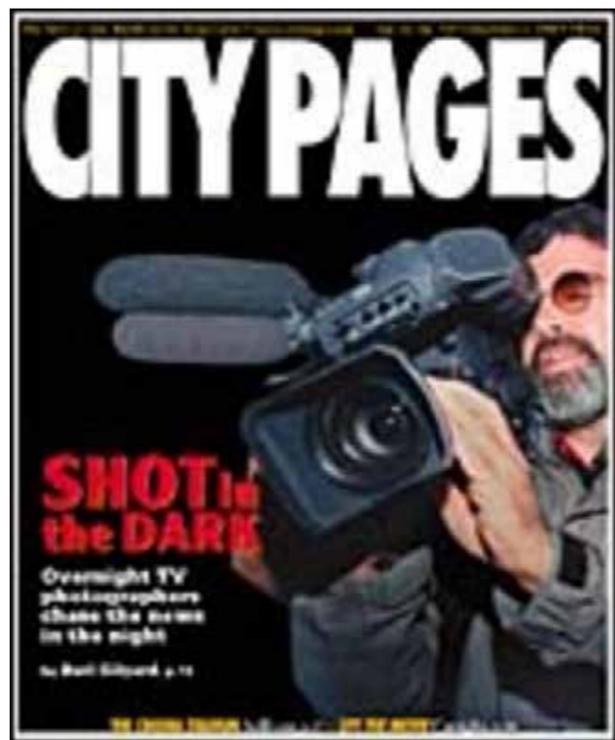
When Griffin tries to make sense of the scene by asking around about what's going on, things turn more confusing. An officer, who is firmly polite but seems a shade agitated by Griffin's presence, says, "There's no accident." When he presses further, the officer says he can't discuss it; Griffin will have to talk to a sergeant at the station for any comment.

The Crime Scene Unit pulls away. The obvious question hangs in the air: Has there been a homicide in the house at the corner? The officer reappears, his demeanor changed. He leads Griffin down the road to the edge of a hill overlooking Lake Minnetonka, the wind off the water slicing the air.

Twenty-five feet below, at the bottom of the steep embankment, a white station wagon juts out of the lake at a 60-degree angle. No accident? But what is this? Griffin reflexively sets up his tripod, flicks the light above his camera on, and tries for a good shot of the car, but he's having trouble getting his lens above the bushes while two officers stand watch. On his way back out, he catches a shot of the tire tracks in the dirt, where they disappear over the embankment.

At other scenes like this, Griffin would simply have officials fax the station a press release about the incident, but the officers' tonight are insistent that he accompany them to the station. "When they send out the crime lab, it's usually pretty serious," Griffin muses while following a police car over. He still can't figure out what it is he has just shot.

Waiting outside police headquarters, Griffin wonders about the diminishing returns of this particular story: "I'm sure they're going to use it, but it's not a big story unless Jesse was drunk and drove his car into the drink." The explanation, which finally arrives in the form of a neatly typed press release, offers nothing quite so newsworthy: Mound Police stopped a Chevrolet Caprice station wagon for a traffic violation at 10:53 p.m. The vehicle sped off, and a 1.5-mile chase ensued before the



car ran off the dead-end street, down the embankment, and into the moon-eyed waters of Lake Minnetonka. From there, the driver escaped and disappeared.

"This is turning into a big waste of time," Griffin laments.

On the drive back into the city, he is clearly disappointed. "What makes it worse, I couldn't get a clean shot of the car in the water," he says. "So, not much of a story, and I didn't get the video I wanted, and we're a long-ways from town." Outside, early Christmas decorations light up the empty road through Mound. "I hope it's usable as a quickie."

Still, Griffin says he doesn't find himself wishing for tragedy. "I thought we were going to a fatal back there, but I don't want anyone to die," he explains. "But some people do things to get themselves killed. There's not much I can do about that."

Noise blasts out of the scanner: sirens, officers yelling, more sirens. "Must be a high-speed chase," Stern figures. The calamity keeps spilling out in short, chaotic bursts: "Southbound on 10th Street." The chase continues.

Then: "He's running southbound through the yard; the K-9s are out, the K-9s are out."

Stern winces: "Ouch." Then comes a report from the St. Paul police about handling traffic control: "We're going to be here for quite a while." The static scene offers something to shoot rather than a moving target.

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The situation in St. Paul isn't the end of the chase, but sounds like the location of its greatest impact, with a collision of some kind between a squad car and another vehicle.

"He started out in Lake Elmo and ended up in Newport, somehow by way of east St. Paul," Stern says. "I don't know what I'm going to find when I get there." He exits I-94 at White Bear Avenue and pulls up behind a white minivan on the off-ramp. "It's Tony!" he says as he recognizes Knoss in the vehicle ahead. A few turns into east St. Paul, and flashing red, yellow, and blue lights fill the sky at the corner of Hazel and Minnehaha. All four streets leading to the intersection are blocked off. Stern sets up next to Knoss, and each edge his lens out over the police tape strung down the block from stop signs and trees. Griffin is staked out across the street.

A Washington County sheriff's car is spun around up on the curb, its front fender a ribbon of metal. Behind it, a red vehicle of indiscernible make sits upside down against the garage of a house. At the feet of state troopers and firefighters, shattered glass glitters like a patch of fresh hail on the ground.

The flag in the front yard of the house is illuminated by the lights of some 20 emergency vehicles. Neighbors mill around, talking and gawking. "All I seen was this 'poof!'" says one guy. The car's passengers have already been ferried to the hospital.

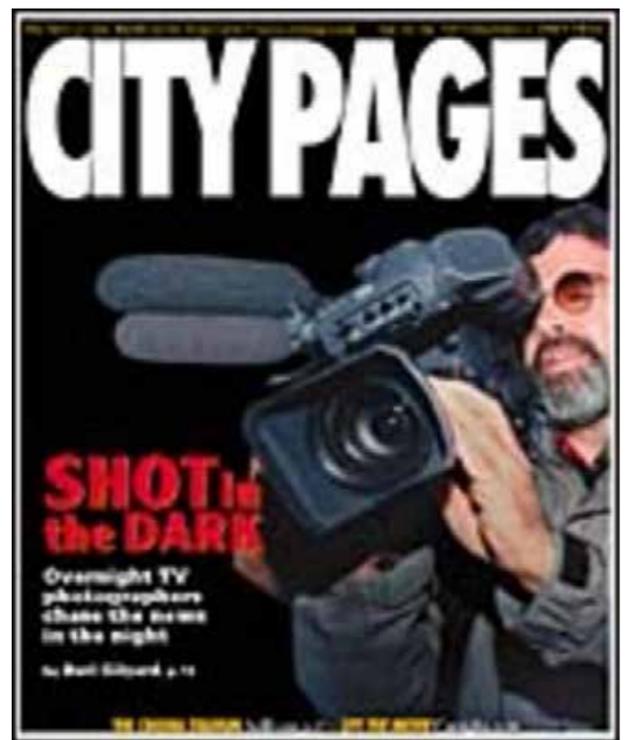
Later, Stern and Knoss position themselves in the middle of Hazel Street, north of the crash site, where no police tape is strung. Two state troopers walk directly, deliberately toward the pair of photographers. One says firmly, "You want to get out of the street? This is

part of our scene." A few more shots, and there's nothing left to shoot. Stern and Knoss both pack up their gear, leaving the streets full of neighbors and flashing lights.

It's another Monday night. Snow continues to fall in the western suburbs. Knoss has been busy collecting standard weather shots of a snowplow rumbling past, of folks brushing off their cars and tramping through slush in parking lots. He has edited that footage for the 10 o'clock news. He has shot a sport-utility rollover in Edina--the vehicle left the on-ramp, skidded down the embankment, and landed, driver's side down, on the shoulder of southbound Highway 100. Now Knoss is on a more personal mission: delivering a tire iron to a WCCO producer with a flat tire out on 394. After assisting for a while, Knoss crawls back into the cab to get out of the wind and snow. Minutes later, a report of a shooting in St. Paul comes over the scanner: Suspect and gun in custody, two victims at Ninth and Robert.

Owing to the road conditions, the drive takes a good 20 minutes. It's midnight in downtown St. Paul, and the streets are empty. The scene is one minute's walk from police headquarters. Robert Street is blocked at both ends by cop cars, with its east sidewalk cordoned off by tape stretched from one parking meter to the next.

As Knoss hauls his camera down the block, a passerby wonders aloud, "Hey, are you with the news? Are you trying to find out what happened, too? You will never find out--never."



Undaunted, Knoss makes the rounds. Stern is already here. It's not initially apparent where the victims were shot, but there's a knot of cops outside of a club called Jazzville. Knoss quizzes one officer, who explains that a suspect has already been arrested. He's no doctor, the officer adds, but judging from the blood on the sidewalk, things don't look good. Around five o'clock in the morning, one of the men shot--Luther Nelson--will die at Regions Hospital.

By now, all the bystanders have cleared out. The police go about the business of piecing together the crime scene; for what will turn out to be a homicide, it seems remarkably quiet. It's cold and raining, and Knoss has collected all the footage he'll need.

A guy who happens to be parked on the block climbs into his car and starts to drive away. But then he slows, rolls down his window, and bellows at Knoss: "What happened?" Knoss takes a just-the-facts approach: "Two people got shot."

The guy wants more detail. "Were they shooting at each other?"

"You'll have to ask police. Or wait for the news."