

## Mystery Meat 5: Code Word: Pizza King



“Paul Bunyan’s outside Pizzerias Rex so get badger-bound for B’Goshville,” I yammered into the CB radio.

My boy secretary, Jimmy Brisket, warbled across the citizen’s band, “Huh? What?”

Private investigators rarely relay sensitive material through conduits of mass communication. I had put together a simple glossary of code phrases for the kid: Paul Bunyan was The Logger (the first suspect in the Fox Valley restaurant murders), Pizzerias Rex was synonymous with Pizza King, and B’Goshville was the overall allusion for Oshkosh.

It was basic stuff; the Dick and Jane primer of P.I. verbiage. If I had wanted to confound the rube I would have told him “Spruce B. Nimble (lumberjack) is consorting with the Monarch of Flammkuchen (the royal German derivation of a flat-bread pie covered with meat and cheese) in Clawtown (a play on the Menomonee nomenclature for Chief Oshkosh).”

I turned off the radio and left Jimmy listening to the crackling static of dead air between his ears while he waited for his balls to drop.

Looming in the half-light of a take-out joint, The Logger wore a 1940s scarlet and black Pendleton jacket and dark stocking cap pulled low over his eyes. The arctic Wisconsin winter blew his breath overhead into empty cartoon thought-bubbles.

Pizza King is a small brick building with a counter, crew, kitchen, and not much else. Patrons enter the establishment, point to a demonstrative board delineating pie sizes, and exit with pizza. One can order their selection fresh or baked. The mode of payment is cash to keep the rates low. There is no stromboli calzone pita-pocket madness where breaded perversions on the theme are wedged with ingredients just so the diner can revel in pseudo-Sicilian variety. There is no distressing selection of cinnamon fingers, cheese-z stixx, or limp salads to be ordered out of guilt and left to wilt beside one's pizza. The formula is simple: dough, tomato sauce, cheese, and toppings.

A sign promises "Best Pizza in Town. Best Price Around." For ten dollars one can walk away with a 16" pizza and feed a family of four, fill a trio of roommates, stuff a pair of gluttons, or break the belt of a lone gourmand intent on aggravating his gout.

I wound my scarf to cover my nose and mouth, pulled a hood over my head, and filed in line behind The Logger. The spunky staff attempted to engage him in small talk, but he offered only grunts and nods. He ordered a medium pizza with Canadian bacon, onions, pineapple, and black olives. Profiling his toppings, I deduced this was a man with socialist leanings who lived without a woman. He had a taste for the exotic, and due to the vile selection of black olives, a possible pornographic streak.

I ordered basic cheese and pepperoni, an expression of my respect for simplicity and a standard-bearing selection of those in the peak of mental health.

Our orders came up simultaneously, we paid silently, and I followed him out to the parking lot. The Logger drove a ramshackle truck with a dragging muffler and road-kill grill. If a man wanted to obscure his actions in the most generic vehicle to roll off a fledgling Detroit assembly line, he could do no better than a '90 Ford F150. The color was confounding. A grayish beige brown with taupe undertones would be difficult to describe to law enforcement. His muddied plates and tinted windows had him riding in shade.

I kept three cars behind him as we wound through the snow-swept streets of Oshkosh, but towards the outskirts of town, traffic dropped away. His left headlight was broken and when I attempted to avoid the appearance of an aggressive tail by passing him on the two-lane country road, the truck made an ominous wink.

He slowed in front of a dilapidated farm house and turned down a dirt lane. I cut my lights and eased onto the gravelous shoulder. The brilliance of a brutal winter moon showed his figure in shadow loping the low rolling hills. In his right hand, he balanced a pizza box, in his left hand, he held an axe.

I opened up my own cardboard-encased dinner and a swirl of fragrant heat escaped. I've fielded fake marriage vows from bad men, suffered back-handed assurances from broke clients, and shrugged off the bestowal of the American Dream, but the promise of "the best pizza in town" was one of the first to come true.

A thin crust of well-tossed dough was ladled with a delicately spiced tomato sauce, sprinkled with white mozzarella, and topped with tangy pepperoni. For those who had to dig right into the pie, the hot cheese would string between slices and pool into a salty soup. For those who could wait a few minutes before gorging, everything would congeal into a thick, satisfying bubble gum texture. It was straightforward and it was delicious.

The Logger's property extended for miles in every direction. I wanted to explore his splintered barn for dead bodies. I wanted to rummage through his anonymous truck for hair, fibers, blood, the pencil stubs of slashed waitresses, and the spatulas of slain short-order cooks. The old investigatory handcuffs of right to privacy and probable cause kept me camped out in my car.

I picked up the CB to update Jimmy, "The Brawny man has left Italian Elvis and I'm hibernating for a while before I head back to Oshberg."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he asked with a note of exasperation.

I put the radio back in its cradle and reclined the seat for a long night of surveillance.

The Logger lit a lamp in his shack and sat down before the television. Lights flickered across his skin: blue, white, pale green, white, and blue again. He sat like this for hours, slowly moving pizza from box to mouth like any number of lonely men. Both of us reveled in the delight of our Pizza King offerings. We ate the same crust, cheese, and sauce. He watched a series of vapid shows and I watched a single channel of man, media, and meal for hours. A laugh track erupted, a laugh track died down.