

Crime Beat

True Stories of Cops and Killers

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Extract

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The Call

LAUDERDALE HOMICIDE

Mayhem and ennui set the tone for a week spent in the forefront of the battle against a city's murders.

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It has been four days since anybody has heard from or seen Walter Moody and people are thinking that something is wrong. The tenants at the South Andrews Avenue apartment building he manages say he hasn't answered his door since Thursday. His parents can't get him on the phone. And he didn't call his boss Saturday when he didn't show up for his part-time truck-driving job.

This is not like Walter, everyone agrees.

It is now 1:40 p.m., Monday, June 29. The happenstance of concern from so many places for Walter Moody results in two Fort Lauderdale police officers and a locksmith coming to his apartment door. There is a small crowd of tenants watching closely.

The three-story apartment building has a Spanish castle motif: white walls, red barrel-tile roof, round turret with small arched windows at the corner. It is a U-shaped building with a neatly kept center courtyard dominated by a shade tree reaching all the way to the roof. There are small bushes and shrubs about the courtyard, all trimmed and cared for by the manager, Walter Moody. The tenants sit on a bench beneath the shade tree and look up to the second-floor walkway where the locksmith has just opened the door to Walter's apartment. The officers go in and find the place ransacked and the door to the master bedroom locked. They call for the locksmith to open it. And after a few moments inside, they call for the homicide squad.

George Hurt has gone home early. His sinuses are acting up and the last few days have been slow. He figures he can take the break. He is sitting on the couch and has the afternoon paper in his hands when he gets The Call.

It's another murder. An apartment manager. No smoking gun. No such luck.

He is told where. He is told when. The how is not yet known. It is Detective Vicki Russo telling him this. She's rolling on it, she says. And so are the others – they being all available members of the homicide squad. George Hurt, sergeant in charge of the squad, says he's rolling too. A routine week in homicide has begun. Hurt hangs up and curses to himself. This is number 38.

Murder in Fort Lauderdale comes in all ways, times, places and circumstances. It is a crime unclassifiable in any way other than by its final result, the taking of life. For George Hurt and the homicide squad the only sure bet is that it comes and comes. This is Monday, June 29, and already there have been 38 homicides this year. There were 42 in all of 1986. The most ever was 52, back in 1981. At this rate, George Hurt is thinking he is going to need another case chart for the wall in the squad room. There could be 60 to 70 murders in Fort Lauderdale this year. That's kind of scary. And that's why he curses each time he gets The Call.

It is hard to account for the numbers. Economics, drugs, heat, full moons, whatever. Hurt's squad has investigated three people shot to death in a fast-food restaurant during a Saturday morning robbery; a high-profile divorce lawyer murdered a few steps from his office elevator; a rock-and-roll singer beaten to death because he was gay. More than a dozen times the victim was either the buyer or seller of drugs when things went wrong. There have been the quiet cases that rated only a few paragraphs in the newspapers, and the big cases that drew the TV trucks with the microwave dishes.

It all adds up to 37 times in six-months that the squad has assembled at a scene that defied common sensibilities, the Norman Rockwell portrait of life. And now it is time to gather again. Number 38, Walter Moody, lies cold in bed, his blood four days old on the sheets and pillows, waiting for the homicide squad.

'Smell that?' says George Hurt. 'They just rolled the body over in there.'

Capt. Al Van Zandt, a supervisor of the detective division, puffs on his cigar so the smell of tobacco will overcome the sickly smell of death.

The two of them are standing outside the door to Walter Moody's apartment. Hurt didn't have to be inside to know what the smell is; he has had years of experience with it. Going back to his stint as head of the department's forensic unit before coming to homicide, and even back 20 years to Vietnam, he says that it seems much of his life has been spent rolling bodies over.

This time he stays mostly outside the apartment with Van Zandt, content to let the forensic investigators and the assistant medical examiner do the work inside.

There are five homicide detectives working the first hours of the Walter Moody case. One of the first to arrive was Phil Mundy, the squad's senior detective. But after surveying the murder scene and discerning that it was a 'whodunit' as opposed to a 'smoking gun' case, Mundy returned to the bureau to run record searches on Moody and to coordinate requests that would come from detectives at the scene. His partner, Pete Melwid, is still at the apartment building questioning tenants. So are detectives Mike Walley, Gary Ciani and Vicki Russo. Russo's partner, Kevin Allen, is on the way, called in from a day off. When was Walter last seen? Who were his friends? Who were his enemies? These are the questions the detectives are asking. In the early stages of a case, information is the only available tool.

There is a basic rule to murder investigation; as more time elapses in a case, the chances of solving it grow slimmer. So whenever possible, depending on constrictions of time, the overtime budget, fatigue and so on, Hurt puts all available hands on the initial stages of a case. 'It's called try-

ing to figure out what is what and going from there,' he says.

The squad has a rotation system for assigning cases to lead detectives. This time partners Russo and Allen are 'up.' They will be responsible for the case from start to finish. If it is not solved by the group effort in the next few hours, it will be theirs to work alone.

'I haven't had a smoking gun yet this year,' Russo says as she starts compiling information in a notebook. 'For once, I'd like a gimme – to come in and there would be a victim and over there would be the suspect.'

But it hasn't been that way for Russo or the rest of the squad for most of this year.

While the homicide detectives corral and question the tenants and the owner of the apartment building, three forensic investigators are inside the apartment looking for fingerprints, photographing and gathering evidence. Dr. Felipe Dominguez, assistant medical examiner, is in the bedroom with the body.

Moody lies faceup on his bed and almost looks as if he is asleep. Almost but not quite. There is a stab wound on his forearm, other cuts, but it is obvious that none were fatal. And there is blood on the sheets and pillow, but the odor of death is not noticeable to anyone without Hurt's nose for it. The killer had left on the air conditioner, slowing decomposition.

The phone in the apartment rings but the detectives don't answer it because there is blood on it and possible fingerprints. After several rings, a tape recording of Walter's voice comes on asking the caller to leave a message. He'll get back to them. The caller is Walter's mother. She is hysterical and wondering what is going on.

'Please, will someone call us as soon as you know what is happening,' she pleads after the beep. A detective borrows a phone in another apartment to call.

The detectives interviewing the tenants have come up with three potential avenues of investigation: Walter evicted people from the apartment. Walter was set to be a witness in an upcoming robbery trial. And Walter frequently allowed young men to stay in his apartment in exchange for work around the building.

Working from experience, the detectives pick the third version as the best place to start. And the tenants have provided a description of a young man named Troy who was seen around the apartment as late as Friday afternoon. Let's try to find this Troy, the detectives decide.

Dr. Dominguez is leaving the apartment now and tells Hurt the body is ready to be moved to the medical examiner's office for autopsy. Hurt wants to know the cause of death.

'Knife wound in the back, between the shoulder blades,' Dominguez says.

'Big knife? Little knife?'

'Big knife,' Dominguez says. 'Kitchen knife.'

Three men pull up to the apartment building in a white van and unload a stretcher. They are the body movers, from a company called Professional. All three are wearing suits and ties, the top buttons on their shirts fastened. They are easily the best-dressed people on the scene. They move in a solemn single file into Walter Moody's apartment to take him on his last trip out.

As they do this, the crime scene begins breaking up. The detectives are heading off in different directions;

Melwid to a fast-food restaurant to follow a lead on Troy, Ciani and Walley back to the bureau with three tenants who will help make a composite drawing of the suspect. Van Zandt also heads back. Hurt, Russo and Allen are tying up the last details at the scene before leaving. And inside the apartment, the crime scene technicians are going to take a dinner break. They will have to come back to the apartment later to begin a meticulous and long search into the night for evidence and clues.

When Walter Moody comes out of his apartment for the last time, one tenant is still standing under a shade tree, watching and sipping a beer. Moody is beneath a white sheet. Two of the Professionals – one now has blood on the sleeve and pants of his light blue suit – are straining under the weight of the stretcher, their heels shuffling on the concrete. Once down the stairs, the body is gently placed on a wheeled stretcher and covered with a green velvet blanket. It is then wheeled to the white van. One of the body movers has blue tears tattooed at the corners of his eyes. Somehow it seems appropriate. The people here can't let true sympathy get too much in the way of the work.

At 7 p.m. the yellow plastic barricade tape police had strung across the entrance of the apartment building is taken down. The white van pulls away. The last of the police officers leave the scene. On the walkway outside the murder victim's apartment, the cops have left five empty coffee cups behind. And there are 36 cigarette butts crushed on the cement or dropped in the wood chips spread around the shrubs that Walter Moody had once planted and cared for.

It is nearly 9 p.m. before the detectives are finished getting a composite of Troy from the witnesses and turning over the collected information to Russo and Allen, the case detectives.

Russo and Allen have several leads. First to check is a name that Mundy came up with on the police computer. It is a person being held in the county jail who gave Walter Moody's address as his own. It might be a former roommate and someone who may know Troy. As Hurt and the other detectives head home for the night, Russo and Allen decide to head to the jail to interview the prisoner. Russo first calls her daughter to say she won't be home until late.

At home, George Hurt watches the first half of a New York Mets and St. Louis Cardinals baseball game on TV before falling asleep. But at 12:30 a.m. he is yanked out of it by the phone. The Call. Fifteen minutes later he is at 600 Southwest 12th Avenue, the corner of Riverside Park, looking at the facedown body of a man with a bullet hole in his back. Number 39.

Walley and Ciani are also there, the partners who are up on the rotation. Van Zandt is there, cigar in hand, as well as Dominguez and the crime scene detectives. Somebody asks if anybody knows if the Mets won. Somebody else starts an electric generator and a spotlight bathes the body in a harsh white light. Above the grim proceedings the detectives can see storm clouds forming. It will rain soon. They hurry.

The detectives begin talking to witnesses and the two men who had been with the dead man when he was alive just minutes before. They get an idea of what happened.

Michael Connable, 31, was walking with two friends down Sixth Street toward the Riverside Pub. It was mid-

night dark, and a second group of three men were approaching from the opposite way. As the two groups passed, one of the men from Group Two opened fire. The men of Group One began running. Fifty yards later Connable fell dead a few feet from the door of the Riverside Pub, his blood slowly seeping down an incline on the parking lot toward a storm drain.

Group One did not know Group Two. Group One did not say anything to Group Two. Group One consisted of three gay white men. Group Two consisted of three black men. What did it all mean? What was the motive? Was it random violence? Was it racial? Was it because the men in Group One were gay? In the silence and the darkness, how could the shooter even have known that?

By the time the body movers from Professional arrive – the same three who came for Walter Moody – the detectives know they have the kind of case that will take a lot of work on the street.

‘The only thing we can do is hope to find a snitch,’ says Walley.

In the last 12 hours, Hurt and his squad have gone zero for two. They’ve got two whodunits and few clues to the perpetrators. Hurt says he could sure use a smoking gun case. He could also use some sleep.

It starts to rain as Connable is put on the stretcher and carried to the waiting van. The detectives split up and go home. Connable’s blood starts to wash down the storm drain. And raindrops fall on the face of the body mover with the tattooed tears.

On the wall in George Hurt’s office is a sign that says, ‘Get off your ass and knock on doors.’ It might have been made with a salesman in mind, but the slogan is a creed for the homicide detective as well.

Outside his office, the squad room is a quiet place during the days following the Moody and Connable slayings. No murders occur, but the detectives are out on the street, knocking on doors.

Tuesday is autopsy day. But in these cases the autopsies will not provide information critical to solving the cases. So Walley and Ciani and Russo and Allen get the cause of death details on Connable and Moody by phone. There is no need to stand in the tiled room and watch the post-mortem procedures like they do on the TV cop shows.

What is needed is the almost always boring legwork they don't show on TV. Walley and Ciani spend their time during the rest of the week looking for witnesses in the Connable case, knocking on doors in the Riverside neighborhood, talking to regulars at the Riverside Pub, and checking out the few phone tips that have come in. They are getting nowhere.

The detectives are also working informants, putting the word out into the netherworld network of people who sell street information that this case will bring up to \$1,000 for the name of the shooter.

Working informants is one of the ironies of death investigation. Snitches are often criminals themselves; information is gathered on the street by those who work the street – drug dealers and thieves among them. Some wear beepers so they don't miss calls from either customers or the cops. Cops despise them and need them at the same time. But the trouble at the moment is that this time nobody is calling with any information on the Michael Connable case.

'So far, we have nothing,' says Walley, a large man who

seems more to hunker down over his desk in the squad room than to sit at it.

Russo and Allen are having similar difficulties. Their efforts to track down the missing Troy are getting them nowhere. The jail prisoner they talked to didn't know any Troy, was no help at all. The fast-food worker named Troy that Melwid came up with can't be located, and might not be the right one anyway. On his application form at the restaurant he put a phony address down. They have tips to three other men who might be their Troy but so far they've hit dead ends.

By Thursday, the only thing for sure about the week's two cases is that both are getting older and harder to solve.

George Hurt is sitting at his desk, shaking his head. He has the reading glasses he usually wears while doing paperwork off and the tip of one of the earpieces clenched in his teeth. The plastic tip is grooved from being clenched there often. It is that kind of job.

Hurt has to shake his head because he is mildly amused, confused and annoyed. In the wake of the week's two slayings he has sat back and watched and read about two occurrences that have left him perplexed. The Connable murder has resulted in a civic meeting between police officials and Riverside residents, and members of the gay community are airing fears that gays in the neighborhood are being targeted by gunmen. So far, the issue has played well in the newspapers and on TV, but the problem is that no one has checked with Hurt or the case detectives, Walley and Ciani, about it. And as far as they are concerned, such fears are unfounded.

'As far as we know at this point, sexual preference had

nothing to do with it,' Hurt is saying. 'We are looking at it as random violence. Some kid with a gun wanted to pop somebody. And he did.'

Hurt says the confusion on the case has been further compounded because the night before, one of the local TV news programs out of Miami showed a composite drawing of Troy from the Moody case and said it was the man police were seeking in the Connable shooting. Troy is a white man. The Connable suspect is black.

'Unbelievable, how it gets sometimes,' Hurt says.

Shortly before midnight on Thursday, July 2, Johnnie Eddines becomes number 40. Detectives Phil Mundy and Pete Melwid, along with Hurt, are called in from home.

But there is no murder scene to respond to this time. Eddines died in a hospital. He had been found in his car in the 600 block of Northwest 16th Avenue, bleeding from several bullet wounds. He was alive when medical rescuers got there and was transported to Broward General Medical Center. He made it no farther.

The case presents one more irony of homicide investigation. The effort to save Johnnie Eddines had been valiant, but in the end unsuccessful. And, as in most cases where such efforts are made, the crime scene has basically been destroyed, left unpreserved because of rescue efforts inside Eddines' car to save him. It means the effort to save someone may hurt the effort to charge those responsible for his death.

What it also means is that there is no need for the homicide detectives to gather at the scene. Melwid goes by the hospital to gather information on Eddines. Mundy makes a cursory stop at the scene and then goes on to the

detective bureau. Hurt heads there as well.

Patrol officers and a midnight shift detective have corralled witnesses to the shooting and are shuttling them to the police station. The victim's car is put on the back of a tow truck and pulled to the police station, too. By midnight, the investigation has begun.

All days should be like Friday. All weeks should end like this.

By 2 a.m., Mundy, Melwid and Hurt are wrapping up the Eddines murder, the first of the week's cases to be closed.

From the witnesses they had learned that they had what was basically a 'smoking gun' case; open and shut. Eddines had stolen jewelry from his sister and the man who had given it to her came after him – with two friends and a gun. The detectives spent the morning hours taking statements from the witnesses and preparing warrants for the three suspects. It will just be a matter of catching them. They go home with the case, for the most part, cleared.

The good luck doesn't end with the Eddines case. Vicki Russo comes in to work and gets a little bit of the wish she made outside Walter Moody's apartment four days earlier. The wish for a 'gimme.'

A friend of the long-sought-after Troy is on the phone saying that Troy wants to come in and talk about Moody. Russo says that's fine, she'll be waiting. A break is a break, even if it comes after a week of chasing dead ends.

When Troy comes in, Russo and Allen sit him down in one of the squad's interview rooms. It is just big enough for a suspect and two interviewers to sit around a table

with fluorescent lighting above. The only window, small, square and mirrored, is in the door.

The suspect, whose full name is Troy Tetreault, age 18, begins by saying he was there when Moody was murdered but he didn't do it. He ends by admitting he did it, but only because he was defending himself. Moody was attacking me, he says.

But all of the explanations Troy offers do not explain how someone defending himself would stab his attacker between the shoulder blades and then ransack and rob his home. Troy is charged with first-degree murder, and case number 38 is now counted as cleared.

What has been a bad week has turned out well for the homicide squad. Two out of three cases cleared. Moody's murder is the 31st cleared so far this year, a better than 75 percent rate.

In future weeks, Walley and Ciani would continue to work the Connable slaying but it would remain unsolved. The detectives would get no closer to the three men of Group Two than they were the night one of them opened fire on Group One. In mid-August, Ciani would leave the police department to join a private investigation firm. The file on Connable would remain open on Walley's desk, the detective waiting for a break, a name or a clue that would lead to the shooter. But it wouldn't come, and he would have other cases to follow.

The murder pace would continue in Fort Lauderdale, with the city surpassing the previous year's murder toll of 42 by the end of July and steadily heading toward the all-time high of 53. Two detectives would be temporarily assigned to the squad to help handle the case flow.

Sitting at his desk one day not long after the last week of June, George Hurt would ponder whether the pace was here to stay, whether three murders a week would no longer stand out as an aberration in Fort Lauderdale.

‘Believe me, I’ve been giving it a lot of thought,’ he says. ‘But you can’t really predict what will happen. I’ve been hoping that this is just an oddball year. It used to be that four or five homicides a month meant a very heavy month. Now that doesn’t look so bad to me.’

Whatever happens, Hurt says, the homicide squad is ready.

‘Whether there are 45 or 75 homicides, we are here,’ he says. ‘I could say that old saying about it being a dirty job but somebody has to do it, but I don’t look at it that way. I see it as being a dirty job but somebody has to know how to do it. We know how. We do good work here.’