



DON WAITT

Police Stories

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SHEETS

The first person I ever saw die was a ten-year-old boy who had been shot in the chest with a 12-gauge shotgun by his older brother.

I remember riding to the boys' house in the middle of the afternoon with two veteran detectives back when I was a police beat reporter for the local newspaper. Guys I graduated with were starting their new jobs and learning how to work the copy machine; my first week on the job I was watching a kid die.

The boys' house was one of those cookie-cutter ranch homes with a brick exterior, an open carport and a tiny front yard. When we arrived, the older brother was still sitting in the living room in shock. Across from him was a couch, covered in blood, the blood sprinkled with white stuffing from the cushions where the buckshot had blown through his brother's chest and shredded the couch.

The TV was on and Gilligan's Island was playing.

On the coffee table were two cans of soda and an open bag of potato chips. A lazy after-school snack and some TV watching had been suddenly and violently interrupted because one brother was playing with his father's shotgun, pointing it in the wrong direction, unaware that a shell was in the chamber. Accident or not, the detectives needed to confirm the chain of events and I rode with them, lights and siren blazing, to the emergency room to get a statement from the wounded brother. There were nods from the nurses and doctors who had seen the detectives many times before as we walked quickly through the waiting area and straight into the trauma room.

There were no doctors or nurses in the trauma room.

Which seemed a bit odd.

I could see the younger brother flat on his back on the operating table. I could see the blood pumping out of his chest, straight up into the air, just like those little flat water fountains that kids drink out of at the park.

No one else was in the room except the two detectives and I.

Then another door opened and a male nurse's aide walked in, stood next to the table, reached over the young boy, grabbed a sheet that was hanging almost to the floor on the other side and pulled the sheet up and over the boy's body. Then he grabbed a sheet on his side of the table and pulled it over the boy's body in the other direction, and he continued the process until a dozen sheets covered the boy like a mummy, and I can remember vividly how the deep crimson blood would soak through each of the bright white sheets as they were folded over, and as more and more sheets covered the boy, the red stain of blood would get smaller and smaller until at the end, the final sheet was pure white.

I touched the arm of one of the detectives and looked at him and I did not have to say a word, the question I wanted to ask so apparent on my face, and the detective just looked at me and shook his head, and we walked out of the trauma room and through the emergency room lobby and back out into the bright sunshine of that day, and I sat in the back of the detectives' car as we returned to the police station where they would take the older brother's statement, and I leaned my head against the window and I felt the coolness of the glass on my cheek, and the two detectives didn't say a word the whole drive back, and even now I thank them for that.

DICKHEAD

Say what you will about police officers, and I agree a fair share of them are Satan incarnate, but the vast majority are good men and women honestly interested in helping society. They see a side of humanity, or inhumanity, that regular citizens will never see or even comprehend.

In many ways they are the garbage men of our society.

I say that not to demean what they do, but instead to point out that every day they get their hands dirty handling human trash. Not humanity's trash. Human trash.

What all cops have in common, the good cops and the so-so cops, is that they really, truly dislike bad guys. It's a game to them. They are the Good Guy Team playing the Bad Guy Team. Many times we, the general public, don't even realize the game is being played, or that when it is, often neither side is playing by the rules.

My second month as a police beat reporter I wrote about some Dickhead who couldn't be happy staying home at night watching The Carol Burnett Show like everybody else in the city. By the way, that was a fucking funny show. The first time I ever got stoned I was fourteen years old and I came home and sat on the couch with the rest of my family to watch that show. I laughed and laughed and laughed at the craziness of Carol and Tim Conway and Harvey Korman. Unfortunately, I laughed just as hard during the commercials, which brought a raised eyebrow from my Dad and a little father-son chat in my bedroom after the show. But he waited until after the show before reaming me out. That's how funny it was.

Back to Dickhead.

He would dress all in black, slip on a dark ski mask, arm himself with rope, a flashlight and a handgun, and then drive to the largest public park in our city just after midnight. Slipping into the park's main parking lot with his lights off, he would wait in the back until there was only one car left in the park with a couple inside making out. He would creep on foot up to that lone car, jerk the car

door open, pistol whip the man, tie him up, rape the man's date, and then steal their wallet and purse. He was a busy little fucker, what with committing battery, rape and robbery all in one night's work. He had done this twice already over a three-week period.

Our crusty, take-no-prisoners police chief was not happy.

Twice was two times too many.

There would not be a third time.

This was long before police departments had SWAT teams or trained snipers. The chief sent word through the ranks that he wanted to know which of his officers were avid deer hunters, which ones owned their own .30-06 Remington hunting rifle with a high-powered scope, and, of those officers, which one was the best shot. Of the 200 police officers in his department, about 199 of them fit the bill, but he narrowed it down to one officer and said to him, "Son, how would you like to spend some time in the park?"

You probably already know how this story is going to end.

The department had several married couples where the husband and wife were both cops, so the chief chose the youngest of the couples. He had them put on street clothes and drive their personal car to the park just before midnight.

"When you get there, start snuggling," said the chief.

He positioned a half dozen detectives around the perimeter of the park who would communicate by walkie-talkie with the decoy couple.

The couple was armed, but trying to fire on an assailant from inside the tight confines of a car would be risky, which meant that, for the most part, they were just sitting ducks. So the police chief took his deer-hunting police officer and placed both he and his rifle on top of a hill that overlooked the park.

And they all waited.

On the second night of the stakeout, a car with its headlights off slipped into the back parking lot of the park. There was no movement from the car for twenty minutes. Then the car door quietly opened, and a dark figure slipped out and walked quickly toward the driver's side of the decoy car.

And when the man in black was thirty feet from the decoy car, the deer-hunting police officer proved that he was indeed the best shot in the department. From more than one hundred yards away, he fired one shot from his .30-06 Remington hunting rifle and blew the man in black's head clean off.

Dickhead never knew what hit him.

They found a handgun under his body and nylon rope in his back pocket. And probably a pre-rape erection that was rapidly shrinking.

What I love about that story is the black and white of it.

There was a problem.

And to solve that problem, our city didn't need defense attorneys and prosecutors, or a fat lazy judge, or hardworking people having to take time off to sit on a jury, or news stories about how Dickhead was only like that because he wasn't potty-trained properly and his mother didn't love him, or hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars to pay for a trial and multiple court appeals and prison incarceration.

One .30-06 bullet took care of the problem.

In a single night, while most of the city was sleeping.

CONCRETE

The police station where I spent most of my time had black patrolmen, and even black detectives. They also had a few female officers, but no female detectives. Don't be ridiculous. We're talking the Deep South in the 1970s.

On the evening shift there were two black detectives who were moderately friendly with the other white detectives but never engaged in their fraternity antics. They spent most of their time hanging out with each other. One was older, in his forties, and built like a middle linebacker. He had a huge scar on top of his bald head, courtesy of a minor race riot he waded into as a patrolman, and though he was always smiling and laughing, he was a tough motherfucker and had the respect of all the officers, black and white. "I can snatch a grown man clean out of his shoes" he said to me once, smiling the whole time.

The other black detective was younger, in his mid twenties, and couldn't have weighed more than a 140 pounds. He was a Vietnam vet and never smiled. It took over a year for him to warm up to me, which meant that after a year he would occasionally nod hello. I once wrote in an article that he had the look and the personality of a sharp knife.

As expected, the two black detectives mainly investigated crimes in the city's black community. I would ride with them every now and then on calls into a strange world of open beers in brown paper bags, alleyway dice games, and big-assed hookers in tight stretch pants. On one call we arrived at a dive bar to find that patrolmen already had five guys handcuffed and leaning against the outside wall of the bar. The suspects were actually standing a good three feet away from the wall with their hands cuffed behind their backs. The patrolmen had bent all of the suspects over at the waist facing the wall and then leaned them forward and turned their heads so just their cheeks were pressed hard against the rough concrete.

"That's a rather unusual position," I said to the older black detective.

“That’s how we roll down here.”

“Why?”

“Because if any one of them gets lippy, you just kick their feet out and their face slides all the way down the wall. Quiets ‘em down real quick.”

“Oh.”

He explained it as casually and as matter-of-factly as your local butcher would advise you on the best way to cook a rump roast.

The black cops had to be tough as nails in this Southern city. They caught it from both ends. Many of the department’s white officers were either full blown racists or still had remnants of generations of Deep South prejudice flowing through their veins. Shared blue blood notwithstanding, the black officers would still be called nigger behind their backs by some of the white officers. On the other side, many of the black citizens that they swore to serve and protect despised them for working for The Man. Shared black blood notwithstanding, some black citizens would call them the White Man’s nigger behind their backs. Jackie Robinson may have broken the color barrier in Major League Baseball in 1947, but try breaking barriers by being a black cop in a Southern town in the second half of the 20th Century, without the support of the world media.

“It ain’t easy, brother,” the older black detective said to me when I asked him about it.

At the bar, as the older detective questioned the men leaning with their faces against the wall, the younger detective talked to a middle-aged man sitting in the front seat of his car in the parking lot. I was standing on the passenger side of the car, and through the open window I could see the butt of a gun sticking out from under a newspaper on the passenger seat. I tried to get the attention of the detective on the other side of the car to warn him. He knew I was motioning to him, but he just ignored me.

The man in the car answered the detective’s questions, then started his car, backed up and drove off.

I started to open my mouth and the young detective said, “I know. The gun.”

“But ...”

“We know him. He owns a store. He carries the gun for protection. He’s no problem.”

“Oh.”

The thin detective smiled. First time ever that I saw.

“What do you think I am,” he said, “a fucking rookie?”

When we left the scene the two detectives talked in the front seat. The young detective told his partner about my alarm at seeing the gun in the car. He laughed when he finished. I felt a little embarrassed.

Until the older detective caught my eye in the rear view mirror.

And gave me a wink.

STOP, POLICE!

Sometimes news stories don't tell the whole story.

Like when a detective told me about the two black guys, with guns, who were robbing convenience stores.

In the white part of town.

A big no-no.

Most of the black residents in our Southern city in the 1970s lived in The Bottoms, a flatland area along the banks of a huge river that cut through the middle of the city. As long as the black residents kept their extracurricular activities of robbing, raping and killing confined to The Bottoms, the mostly-white police force and completely-white city fathers did not get too alarmed. Those black-on-black crimes were investigated and arrests were made, but they were rarely mentioned in the newspaper. The Bottoms was another world that the white residents of the city knew existed, but knew nothing about in real detail. By choice.

Until two young bucks from The Bottoms realized that the cash registers at convenience stores in the nearby affluent white communities held more money than the cash registers at the stores in The Bottoms. There had been three robberies by the Bad Black Boys over a two-week period. None of those robberies had been mentioned in the newspaper because it just wouldn't do to get the white folk all riled up.

The police chief assigned teams of detectives to stake out a half dozen convenience stores that they thought were the next most likely targets for the robbers. He put two detectives armed with shotguns into the walk-in coolers at each of the six stores.

And they waited.

Nothing happened for three days.

On the fourth day at midnight, the Bad Black Boys strolled into one of the stores, pulled out handguns and politely ordered the cashier to, "Open the register, bitch, or we'll blow your fucking head off."

At which point two detectives stepped out of the cooler and

shot both robbers dead.

And as the two robbers lay on the floor, their lifeless bodies riddled with buckshot from multiple blasts from the two shotguns, one of the detectives shouted, "Stop, police!"

When the detective finished the story, I told him he had the order of events wrong and he meant to say that the detectives had shouted "Stop, police" and then opened fire.

"No, I told it to you right."

DARKNESS

If you want to skip ahead, I understand. I won't hold it against you. Some people just don't want to know.

Three incidents from my time as a police beat reporter have always stood out, and given a new meaning to the word dark for me.

The first involved Polaroids.

One of the investigators in the detective offices greeted my question of, "So what's been happening tonight?," with an innocent smile and a stack of Polaroids when I walked into the police station late one winter night. The room was filled with a half dozen detectives who watched as I set my notebook and walkie-talkie down on the counter and began looking through the brightly colored photos, casually leaning back against the counter and shuffling through the thick photographs like a stack of cards.

The first photo was of a cute little girl, about two years old, standing up in a crib and gripping the handrails with her chubby fingers. She wore a white flannel nightgown with yellow flowers on it and she had a big smile on her round face, a face with sparkling blue eyes, framed by ringlets of curly blonde hair.

The second photo threw me.

I couldn't make out what it was, a vivid vertical slash of red surrounded by pink.

The third and fourth photos, similar to the second photo, didn't help either, and it wasn't until the next half dozen photos, when the detective taking them had moved further back from his subject, that the child's spread legs came into view and I realized I was seeing close up, in excruciating detail, the aftermath of a child rape.

And the room started to spin.

Oh my God, it was so hot all of a sudden in my heavy winter coat. The fluorescent lights in the crowded room were so bright. The nervous laughs of a few of the detectives competed with a thunderous buzzing sound in my head. And the grotesque grin coming from the face of the detective who had handed me the

photos seemed to get bigger and bigger. I felt my legs begin to buckle as I dropped the photos on the desk and walked quickly to the police station's main doors, rushing outside into the winter night where I sat on a curb and sucked in deep gulps of the chilly air.

Bam, bam, bam, those photos kept cycling through my head, always in sequence, starting with the embodiment of goodness and purity and ending with vivid photographic proof that evil had taken on a new definition for me, that my understanding of true evil had, in just a few brief seconds, made a horrifying leap from assumption to reality.

I wanted to leave and go back to the newsroom, but I knew that if I did, then that asshole detective would have won. And I would lose the respect of the detectives who were friendly with me and helpful with news stories. After about five minutes I walked back into the detective offices.

The detective who had handed me the photos didn't apologize, didn't offer an explanation, didn't say a single word. He had made his point. He had taken a too-young, too-friendly, too-naive reporter and thrust him headfirst into the real answer to the question of, "So what's been happening tonight?"

He hadn't told me.

He had shown me.

And any attempt to soften that introduction with consoling or qualifying words would have cheapened his purpose. He had more respect for his work, for the child, and maybe even for me, to do that.

"She's alive," said one of the friendlier detectives, "and doing okay."

"The female vagina has an amazing capacity for stretching," said another detective in all seriousness, awe in his voice.

They handed me the police incident report which I scanned as they ran down the assault.

Mother finds infant daughter in small pool of blood, calls police, detectives question live-in boyfriend, boyfriend says child was crying so he checked on her, detectives find bloodstains on the bed on the side where the boyfriend slept with the mother and bloodstains inside the boyfriend's underwear, book him for rape, say for a little guy he was hung like a horse, say they enjoyed the look on his face when they told him what was going to happen to

him when he went to prison as a child rapist.

The detectives also enjoyed relaying the emergency room physician's assessment that the child's injuries would heal quickly and his prediction that since she was so young, she would not remember the incident. And after I left to file my story, I know they enjoyed talking about my reaction to the photos.

And though I could understand, I could also hate.

The boyfriend for doing it.

The cops for showing me.

And myself for pushing on that door for a glimpse of hell.

—

The second incident involved a black eye.

Actually two black eyes.

Both on the face of a seventy-year-old man.

He was sitting in a chair in the corner of the detective offices.

"What happened to him?" I asked one of the detectives.

"He was robbed."

"Oh."

"And raped."

"Say what?"

"He was raped."

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"No. Some muscle-bound steroid asshole broke into his apartment to steal his TV. He beat the shit out of that old guy and then raped him."

I looked over at the old man. He could not hear what the detective was saying, but he knew exactly what the detective was telling me. And the look of shame and pain in his eyes is as powerful to me today as it was thirty years ago. This was somebody's father, somebody's grandfather. He had lived through the Depression and two World Wars. He had spent seven decades on this often cruel planet and had earned the right to spend his last days in security and comfort. Not to be beaten to a pulp and fucked in the ass. That was so wrong, so unfair.

I looked over at the old man again. His eyes met mine, then he lowered his head and stared at the floor.

"We caught the fucker," said the detective. "Do you want

to see the incident report?”

“No.”

“You’re not going to write a story?”

“No.”

“Good.”

—

The third incident involved a three-ring binder.

The binder, almost four inches thick, was sitting on the counter in the detective offices.

“May I?” I asked the detective behind the counter.

“Knock yourself out.”

The first page explained that the binder was sent by the FBI to every police department in the country and contained brief reports of murders so detectives from coast to coast could see if the particulars of any of those cases were similar to cases in their jurisdictions.

Cool, maybe I’d find a news story for my city editor.

On the next page of the binder, there were two cases profiled.

The first case was about a blanket found spread out at a lakeside park one summer afternoon in Denver. On the blanket was a bottle of wine, a loaf of Italian bread and a plate of assorted cheeses. Some kids had found the picnic set-up but did not see any people near the blanket. Also on the blanket was a huge picnic basket. Being kids, they slowly peeled back the red and white checkered cloth that covered the top of the basket. Inside was the dismembered body of a young woman, her limbs and torso and head neatly arranged in the basket.

The second case on that page told of a woman realtor who had been missing for two days in Biloxi. Investigators obtained a list of houses she was representing and began to search them. They eventually found her body in the attic of one of the vacant houses she had listed for sale. She was naked and had been hung from one of the rafters in the attic. Her nipples had been cut off.

“This is some sick shit,” I said to the detective.

“No kidding.”

“Why don’t they mention any arrests?”

“Because they only list unsolved murders.”

The cases were printed on the front and back of each page in the binder. With two cases, sometimes three, per page. I flipped to the last page in the binder. The page number said 529.

“And guess what?” said the detective.

“What?”

“We get a new binder every month.”

Don Waitt was a crime reporter for newspapers in California and Louisiana where he won awards from the Associated Press and the Gannett News Service, writing about bank robbers and biker gangs. He is currently the publisher of several entertainment industry trade magazines. He is married with two children and lives in Tampa, Florida.

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**Cover photo by Lee Shively of bank robbery suspect Donald Morabito in police custody.