

Eric Seiley

Burning Bridges As We go

October 2023

3, 465 Words

Death by Deli

They found the girl lying on her back in the alley behind Carmichael's Deli with a half empty bottle of whiskey in one hand and a wax paper wrapped dill pickle clutched in the other. Young girl, face up, clothing intact and (hopefully) no signs of attack. An actual mystery since there appeared no immediate or discernible reason why she would be dead. She even looked unnatural being dead – like any minute she might sit up, smile, and laugh how good her joke had been. “Fooled you,” she would've said. But she didn't. Because her motionless face, pale and devoid of blood, dead eyes wide open, mouth slightly ajar, were trapped looking off into the distance for someone who wouldn't be coming.

“Huh, will you look at that,” Detective Andy Forlaine commented. “She looks just like Crime Scene Charlie --“*Crime Scene Charlie*” being the popular chalk outline every CSI-watching Joe and Jane Public actually thought was drawn around the body at every crime scene with one arm up and one down in classic “swimmer's” pose. “You don't think someone's having a goof, do you? Posing the body that way. I ain't never seen anyone dead actually lying like that at a crime scene before.”

“No, it's just coincidental,” replied Detective David Scarpello, the lead detective who'd been assigned the case just a few hours earlier. “It happens on occasion. Plus Phillips knows what he's supposed to do and wouldn't mess around like that.”

Patrol Officer John Phillips from Dorchester C11 had been first on scene and knew better not to fuck up by tromping over everything looking for clues. Just throw tape across the front of the alley and shut it down till investigations showed up. No one in, no one out. Only Vito Bailey, the employee who walked through the alley every morning to open the sandwich shop, had been inside prior. But he called 911 immediately after and waited for the police. Nor did he seem like a likely suspect since he was currently puking his guts out, crying, and blowing snot bubbles from the back of Phillip's squad car, trying to apologize for never having seen a dead body before.

"Poor lass," sympathized Detective Scarpello standing over the girl in the alley, looking down and scowling. "Whaddya think the cause of death will be? Death by hoagie?"

"Could be," laughed Detective Forlaine, David's partner. "Man, I wish my pickle looked as big in her hand as that one does."

Humor was a big part of the job. For bonding and comradery, since only cops who faced the horrors of society daily understood the consequences of what it was like to face the horrors of society daily. And to dispel the tension, which could cloud the mind with fear if left to build up.

"Shame about wasting the whiskey though," Forlaine added. "That's Glen Fiddich 50 if I'm reading the label correctly. Pretty rare around these parts. Easily two fifty, maybe three a shot. They definitely don't stock that at McSorley's I can tell you that."

"Two dollars and fifty cents doesn't sound like too much for a shot of whiskey," David responded, "I know a few places around here'll charge you ten per."

"No, my friend. That's two HUNDRED and fifty dollars per shot. That's top shelf liquor she's holding right there. Around twelve hundred for the entire bottle."

“No kidding! Well then what’s this girl doing with such a thing? She’s what, maybe nineteen. Way too young to afford top shelf. Plus, I thought all they drank was Jägermeister at that age. Or peppermint schnapps or whatever.”

“They drink whatever comes their way. To them drunk is drunk no matter how you get there. Just put the drink in their hand. Still, that is some really good whiskey. What do you figure? We’ll have to empty the bottle to preserve the bottle for prints. And I figure since there’s not gonna be much evidentiary value to the liquid inside the bottle compared to the bottle itself, maybe we dispose of it the whiskey in a more organic way. It’d sure be nice to have a taste. No sense wasting it, right?. What do you say?”

“We’ll book them both. Every last drop too. You never know.”

“Spoil sport.”

“You take her for a local girl? Maybe a working girl?” David said, changing the subject before Andy got any further ideas. “Maybe got herself a high end client?”

“Naw. Not really. She’s too clean. And those clothes definitely don’t say working girl or townie. I mean who pairs purple pants with green sneakers and a brown sweatshirt around here? She’s gotta be Midwestern. My guess is she’s a visitor to our fair city who probably wandered a little too far from her tourist group.”

“Any chance she’s somebody? Or belongs to somebody whose family’ll be looking for her and giving us grief about?”

“Maybe. Her clothes aren’t expensive looking, but that wristwatch she’s wearing looks like it is. Another high end ticket for our gal. But it’s too big for her. See how it’s clasped close, but there’s still too much space between the band and her wrist.”

“That’s because it’s not her watch.”

“How do you figure?”

“Most young people don’t wear watches anymore. They use their cellphones. Or if they do have a watch, it’s one of them independent thinking, digital, Dick Tracy watches paired to their iPhone to keep them company when they go jogging or to the store or sit on the crapper or whatever. That watch is old school analog and not even designed for a woman to wear. More like it was designed for some white collar guy who wants everyone to know he has money but doesn’t want to be flashy about it. Given as a gift for a birthday or anniversary by the doting wife. That sorta thing. So if this girl’s wearing it, my guess is, it’s sentimental. Like maybe a father or older brother sentimental. I’ll even bet there’s an inscription on the underside with initials and a brief message.”

“Or maybe it belonged to a boyfriend or sugar daddy.”

“Maybe, but she doesn’t look the type who’d have a sugar daddy. Just an assumption though. Look at her fingernails. They’re short, not fancy. And her haircut says practical, not dressy. And her clothes fit but aren’t low cut or form fitting to accent any special features.”

“Well, with her still wearing the watch, at least we can rule out robbery as motive.”

“True.”

“Whaddya make the time of death for? There’s lividity with rigor, but she’s not too stiff. About four hours?”

“Eh, maybe. Don’t need to say. We’ll let the Coroner call that one. What really interests me is why does she have a death grip on a freshly wrapped pickle from Carmichael’s? Do you see a sandwich bag or anything else around? Here, take a look around. And check her mouth. I’ll check the trash over here.”

“Will do. Nope, no sandwich or sandwich bag.”

"You see any obstruction?"

"No. Her airway looks clear. No bulges to the throat that I can detect either. She does have braces with some food traces in the wire. Which meant she didn't brush after. Bad girl! You shouldn't neglect your dental hygiene."

"The trash is clean too. Looks like it was recently picked up. Today's Saturday, right? Do they pick up Friday's in this neighborhood?"

"Don't know. I'll make a note to check."

"Strange how she's still holding the pickle and whiskey though? Seems off."

"No one ever eats the pickle. You still don't think this was staged?"

"No. She fell right where she's lying. No drag marks. But you can see the scuff mark on the front of her right shoe and the dirt stains at her knees? That matches the scuff marks over here on the ground. Looks like she might've tripped over her own feet and fallen. Maybe when she fell, she hit her head."

"Holding a bottle of whiskey? It would've shattered."

"Maybe not. Maybe, when she fell, and because she was holding the whiskey and pickle, she didn't use her hands to brace her fall. Maybe she turned to avoid contact and ended up hitting her head on the pavement first before flopping over onto her back keeping the bottle and pickle safe. That might explain the death grip. Muscles seizing at the trauma of impact."

"Possible. You think she was being chased?"

"I don't see any signs of that. But it wouldn't hurt to check the block for cameras and such."

“So if she fell and rolled over, that still don’t explain how she died. I don’t see any bumps to the head or head wounds.”

“True. But cranial impact can be tricky to detect without autopsy.”

“Maybe she passed out and froze to death?”

“With her eyes still open? Lying in the middle of the alley? I don’t think so. Plus, it wasn’t that cold last night. Maybe in the 50’s.”

“Maybe alcohol poisoning? Half the bottle’s missing.”

“Maybe. More like she drunkenly fell and hit her head.”

“Well, how about the guy who found her? Vito something or other. He might provide a few details.”

“Sure, why not. Call him over. Let’s shake the tree a little.”

Phillips walked Vito over and left him with the detectives to go pull tape from a couple of alley security cameras Detective Scarpello noticed minutes earlier.

“You know this girl?” Detective Scarpello asked Vito.

“No sir. Never saw her before this morning.”

“You sure? She didn’t come into your shop last night?”

“I work the morning shift from six till noon. Just general morning prep stuff, prep the counters, take deliveries, take care of the early bird customers, and leave. My cousin Vinnie and his wife own the shop. They come in around noon and stay till close at ten. And a neighbor boy, Tony, comes in just before closing to mop up and all. But he leaves when they do.”

“You got Vinnie’s number?”

“Yeah, of course. But you should go talk to the principal over at Moultrie’s across the street first.”

“Why’d we do that?”

“Cause that girl’s wearing school colors. And they had a big basketball game there last night against Brooklyn Tech over in the gym. The place was packed. Lots of their kids running around. And you know Brooklyn showed up in force.”

“What and you think this girl was the victim of retaliation? Over a basketball game?”

“I ain’t saying that. That’s your guys’ job. I’m just the poor *schnook* who found her. God rest her soul.”

“Well, it’s not a bad idea. Thanks for the tip. You can leave your number and your cousin’s number with the patrol officer before you go. And, hey Vito, don’t go on vacation for a while, okay? We may want to talk to you again.”

“Whatever you say detective.”

After the Coroner’s Deputy arrived and took the girl, and the Crime Scene Unit finished processing the scene, the detectives walked over to Moultrie Technical Institute. Moultrie Tech – one of the most recent conversions of the old industrial warehouses lining the waterfront turned into higher education private colleges. Real progress according to the mayor. Real gentrification as far as David was concerned. His grandparents were two of the many Italian-Americans who worked in those industrial warehouses to make ends meet. And spent their entire living in a ten square block radius surrounding them. No longer though. They’d been priced out a decade ago when the area went condo.

As he and Detective Forlaine walked across the street, Detective Scarpello could see remnants of the old neighborhood in the bones of the current buildings. Moultrie Tech

had been Stagnaro's Piscary which always had a half dozen fishing trawlers docked on the water front side. And the gym had once been just a simple dirt lot where everyone parked their cars during shifts. Currently, Detective Scarpello could see all the gym doors at Moultrie Tech were thrown wide open and the janitorial staff busy cleaning up after last night's revelries.

"Looks like they had more than a basketball game," commented Forlaine. "Looks like it was a real carnival, what with all those White Claw cans dumped on the ground like empty grenades. You ever try one of them White Claws?"

"No. Not my cup of tea."

"Well, they aren't bad. Taste like juice. They claim the sugar alcohol is better, but that's bullshit. It's not a good liquor buzz either. More like a weird, nervous feeling after you drink ten or twelve of them. Sorta like when we had to take that Taser training a couple years ago and they zapped us. Remember that?"

"I remember you screamed like a little girl."

Forlaine laughed, "Fuck you if I did. I took my hit, just like the rest of you."

They crossed into the main building and walked down a short hallway to the offices. No one was in to be found, probably because it was Saturday, but at the back of the office, they could see an open door. There they found the Dean of Students, Paul Tulsan, sitting inside at his desk, head down. A bottle of Pepto Bismo and a bottle of aspirin open on the desk next to him.

"Excuse me," Detective Scarpello announced while knocking on the door frame. Tulsan sat up fast, like a puppet on a string, and started blinking the sleep from his eyes.

"Sorry to bother you, Dean Tulsan. Are you Dean Tulsan?"

Both could see Tulsan's hair was sticking up on the side. His suit coat off, his tie loosened and his oxford shirt, half unbuttoned and open at the collar, much wrinkled and sweat stained. He looked the epitome of an unshaven, down on his luck bum professor who'd slept in his clothes for a few days. Only with more expensive clothing than the average bum. Or Dean of Students at a small college.

"I'm Detective Scarpello and this is Detective Forlaine. Can we chat with you a moment? Is this a bad time?"

"No, no, not at all gentleman," Tulsan croaked, clearing the frog from his throat. "Hello gentlemen. No, of course not. Please come in. I saw all the commotion across the street earlier. Everything okay?"

"Do you know this girl?" Detective Scarpello asked showing Tulsan a cellphone pic of the deceased girl he had taken.

"Aww, no. Aww, no!"

"So you know her."

"I do," Dean Tulsan said dropping his head into his hands. "That's Cindy Byers. Uh, do you know what happened to her?"

"We're looking into it. But you know her," Detective Forlaine confirmed.

"Yes. She's a sophomore in our engineering program. We're a small school. She was working on our robotics project with Professor Dullard's group."

"When was the last time you saw Cindy?" Scarpello asked.

"Professor Dullard and his students were down in Boston on a field trip this past week. Came back last night. They were at MIT for a robotics seminar."

Both Scarpello and Forlaine noticed he didn't really answer the question. Or mention Cindy.

"You got a stomachache there Dean Tulsan?" Detective Forlaine asked.

"What? Why?"

"There's an empty bottle of Pepto in your waste basket here and you got a second one open on your desk."

"I get indigestion. It happens sometimes. You know, with age and all."

"Sure, I get it," Detective Forlaine commiserated. "You ever eat sandwiches from Carmichael's Deli across the street?"

"On occasion."

"When was the last time you ate there?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I had one of their sandwiches last night after the basketball game. Spicy Italian. Thus the indigestion, you know. The wife doesn't exactly like it when I eat that kind of food, so I only do so when I'm here late. They're very good."

"How many sandwiches you eat last night?"

"One. Why?"

"One? Just one?"

"Yeah one. Again, why?"

"Well," Detective Forlaine added, "I happened to glance down in your waste basket and noticed a bag from Carmichael's Deli in there too."

"I just said I ate sandwiches from there last evening. We had a basketball game last night and I stayed late to join my students to cheer on our team. Which means I didn't have time to go home for dinner."

Here Detective Forlaine removed the Carmichael's Deli bag from the bin.

"Don't you need a warrant to do that?" Tulsan squeaked.

"Not when it's in plain sight. You nervous all of a sudden?"

"Of course not."

"Then you don't mind if I look inside the bag."

"If you must. I don't know what that will accomplish."

"Well, let's see," Detective Forlaine replied opening the bag. "Interesting. I see the empty wrappers for two sandwiches. And one fresh pickle wrapped in wax paper from Carmichael's. But not the second pickle. What do you think about that, Mr. Tulsan?"

"Think about what? It's just trash. I already told you I ate sandwiches last night. Right here in my office."

"No. You said you only ate one sandwich. There are two empty sandwich wrappers here. And every sandwich from Carmichael's comes with a freshly wrapped pickle, don't they? I see two sandwiches here, but only one pickle. No one ever eats the pickle."

"I don't see what difference that makes."

"It's interesting is all," Detective Scarpello interjected. "You like to take a little drink every now and then with your sandwich too, Dean Tulsan? Sure you do. Everybody does right?"

"So?"

“Well, I noticed you’ve got two empty glasses on the shelf behind you with a little whiskey still in the bottom of one. Very nice glasses. Look expensive. Any chance that whiskey is Glen Fiddich? I can even see, what is that lipstick on the rim of that one? But I don’t see no bottle. You keep a bottle in your office there Dean Tulsan?”

“I, uh, no. I mean, I do, but I must have drunk the last of it and disposed of the bottle.”

“Sure, sure, I been known to do that to,” Detective Forlaine said, “but I don’t see the bottle in the trash.”

“You got the time there Dean Tulsan?” Detective Scarpello asked.

Both watched as Dean Tulsan instinctively lifted his left wrist to look at his wristwatch, but realized a little too late he no longer was wearing his watch. The tan line was easily noticeable though. Tulsan quickly dropped his arm back down onto the desk and covered his wrist with his opposite hand. Both Detective Scarpello and Detective Forlaine noticed the tan line and the lack of watch.

“Now see here officers!” Dean Tulsan re-asserted himself, “I don’t like what you gentlemen are doing. Or how you are speaking to me! I’m not accustomed to being questioned like this in my office. Or what you seem to be implying about...well, being questioned at all for that matter. I AM the dean of students at this institution you know. And my wife is a much respected lawyer with Goodwin Proctor Boston. I will be treated accordingly.”

“Well then, Dean,” Detective Forlaine replied, “you really won’t like this next question. Why do you have Cindy Byers school file open on your desk? She come to visit you in your office recently?”

“I think you gentlemen need to leave now.”

“No, I don’t believe we will just yet,” Detective Scarpello replied smiling. Because from all his years of experience, he knew when an interviewee progressed from person of interest to solid suspect. Like the click of a switch. Just like that. It might still be too soon to call the death of Cindy Byers a murder, but for sure Tulsan knew more than he was letting on about her. And what exactly happened in his office that made Cindy run off into the night clutching a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a wax paper wrapped pickle from Carmichael’s Deli in the other.

Detective Forlaine knew it happened this way too. They would fall into contact with a suspect before completing their initial investigation and gathering all the evidence. Which meant good investigative notes every step of the way were important. And you had to be able to roll with the case no matter which direction it went. Stay loose. Don’t expect everything to be set in stone. Although, under the present circumstances, a bird in the hand was also worth two in the bush, as the old saying went.

“Mr. Tulsan,” Detective Scarpello said, “I think you might need to come downtown and talk with us a little longer. We have a few more questions about your student, Cindy. And I have a feeling you are the right guy to speak to.”

The End.