

***CHASE
DARKNESS
WITH ME***

How One True-Crime Writer

Started Solving Murders

BILLY JENSEN

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To the victims

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FOREWORD

by *Karen Kilgariff*

LOOK, I DON'T WANT TO TELL YOU HOW TO READ THIS BOOK or anything, but if I were you, I'd skip to the last chapter and read that first. Now, I'd normally never tell anyone to do this. It's illogical and bizarre. How can you grasp the meaning of an ending if you don't know who the main character is or what they've gone through to get themselves there? How can you care?

But in this book, we have a unique situation because (a) it's not a novel, it's the story of a real crime journalist and (b) if you're any sort of consumer of true crime, you're already very familiar with the last chapter's inciting incident. It involves a case now so infamous that most Americans, even the ones who "don't like" true crime, know about it. I'm just saying, how can it be a spoiler if everybody already knows what's going to happen?

It's strange to think that I've only known Billy Jensen for about two years. It genuinely feels like twenty. So many huge, life-altering things have happened since we first met at a restaurant on Franklin Avenue.

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Georgia Hardstark and I were tucked into a corner table eating dinner after a live *My Favorite Murder* show at Upright Citizens Brigade next door, and, because I was sitting on the side that faced the room, I saw him approaching first. He was an extremely tall and serious-faced man wearing a black trench coat. *Was he wearing a trench coat?* That may be an embellishment. The point is, I got a bad feeling about him. He started talking to us from five feet away. And not in the usual, sorry-to-bother-you, let-me-introduce-myself way we do here in Los Angeles. He spoke like we'd already been talking, and he wasn't all that happy about it.

"Yeah, I worked on that case you guys just covered. I listened to it today."

Was he accusing us of something? Was he saying it was his case? Or that we shouldn't have done it? Who was this guy? I scanned the room to see if there was any type of security on duty.

"Did you hear the sheriff is going to release the original coroner's report?"

Just an FYI, that isn't literally what he said. I don't remember the real quote, but it was very detailed and specific, and it made me panic. I had no idea what he was talking about. We cover two cases a week on our true-crime podcast, but unlike actual journalists, we're much more, shall we say, casual about the details. I assumed we were being confronted by an expert about our lack of expertise. Check, please.

But Georgia did know what he was talking about and jumped right in. And when he landed at our table, I could see his eyes were sparkling with the enthusiasm of someone in a foreign land who'd found people who speak his language. It turned out he was not there to confront or correct us. He was excited to talk shop. And luckily, that conversation continues to this day.

Now that I'm thinking about it, you should probably read this book exactly the way Billy wrote it, with the ending at the end. He really knows his stuff. Take in his personal chronology. Learn about his background and his influences. Read about those early cold cases that weren't shocking,

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gory, or blond enough to earn mass media coverage and see how they changed him as a young reporter. See how he got fed up and came up with the idea to actually start solving murders himself. Do the legwork and get your facts straight so when you finally land at that magnificent, breathless final chapter, the author's internal fireworks display can be felt as your own.

Although, if I may say this: the end of this book isn't just the electric, live-to-laptop recounting of how a major cold case that he'd waded into waist-deep got solved. It's also the work of a seasoned crime reporter who, in the midst of the shock and unreality of such a watershed moment, had the presence of mind to write his own breaking story.

It's a movie plot come to life. After years of difficult, thankless work, a reporter obsessed with justice gets the rare satisfaction of seeing justice finally served. Who doesn't want to read that immediately?

Good crime journalists offer themselves as a bridge between the worst of humanity and those of us who want to know how bad it can actually be. And sometimes, if a crime story has no ending, then a reporter like Billy Jensen will take up the cause and dedicate their life to finding one. They'll visit old crime scenes, interview bereaved families, and walk dark neighborhoods searching for the truth. They do the rarely recognized service of filling in the blanks around these victims' identities, telling us who a person was before they became just another anonymous statistic. It's noble work. And this book is about a life dedicated to that work.

Because how can you grasp the meaning of an ending if you don't know who the main character is or what they've gone through to get there? How can you care?

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PROLOGUE

IT STARTS WITH AN OVERHEAD SHOT—IN COLOR, BUT WITH no sound—of a man walking into a 7-Eleven. It's late, well past 2:00 a.m., but the scene is glowing, the streetlamps working with the store signs to give off a glimmer you don't usually see on the typical nighttime surveillance video. The nearby bars—Henry's, O'Callaghan's, Howl at the Moon, and Mother Hubbard's—are well beyond last call, and the street is a mix of those who don't want the night to end and those for whom the day is just beginning.

As bright as the street is, your eyes squint as the video quickly switches to the glaring whiteness of the store's interior. Inside, you see the back of a well-dressed man with close-cropped hair standing at the counter, purchasing what looks like a bag of chips from the store clerk. He motions to the customer to his left, and we see his face. He is handsome, but his eyes are tired, presumably from a long evening. He turns back to the clerk, completes the transaction, and walks out of the store and into the night.

The video then cuts to an overhead shot of the sidewalk, where a man wearing a green hoodie opens the door to the 7-Eleven. He is a big man, but you can't make out his face. He is barely inside the store when

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a security guard who was manning the door on the sidewalk comes up behind him, says something that gets his attention, and performs the universal take-a-hike gesture with his thumb. The Man in the Green Hoodie does an about-face and skulks back to the sidewalk.

Moments later, you see the customer with his newly purchased chips exit the store. In a minute, you'll learn the man's name, when a caption flashes at the bottom of the screen. He is Marques Gaines, a bartender at the Chicago Marriott on Michigan Avenue. As Marques exits the store, the Man in the Green Hoodie steps in front of him. For the first time, you can see his face, a menacing brow perched over angry eyes and an angrier scowl. You can see him yelling. He gets in Marques's face. He gets in the security guard's face. He gets back into Marques's face. Marques turns his palms up as if to say, "Why are you so mad?" then tries to walk away. The Man in the Green Hoodie follows him.

The video then cuts to a traffic camera across the street, and the images transform from a brilliantly lit close-up of animated humans to an overhead shot of grainy, pixelated ghouls. But you can still make out Marques and the Man in the Green Hoodie. You watch Marques walking quickly toward the crosswalk. Walking away from the confrontation, like everyone tells you to do. *Just. Walk. Away.*

But the Man in the Green Hoodie pursues him. Marques's walk turns into a run. He takes three strides and then for some reason turns back around to face the man. The Man in the Green Hoodie hits him in the head with a crushing right hook, sending his body backward into the crosswalk. Marques is crumpled and unconscious before he hits the ground. As he lies on the pavement, two figures run into the frame from the opposite end of the street.

"Thank God," you say to yourself as you watch the Good Samaritans kneel down next to Marques's motionless body. Your relief turns to horror and disbelief as they shove their hands into his pockets and strip

them of their contents before getting up and fleeing down an alleyway. To the right of the frame, the Man in the Green Hoodie stalks away into the night.

A few seconds later, two taxicabs, one in front of the other, make right turns onto the street where Marques lies unconscious. The first one drives to the right of Marques's motionless body, narrowly missing him. The next one drives directly on top of him, crushing his chest under two tons of automobile and killing him.

The rest of the video shows the aftermath. A close-up of people in the street. On the sidewalk, one man is in complete shock. Another takes out his phone, in all likelihood calling 911.

Marques Gaines's life ended in the gutter. No one helped him until it was too late. Until they had to instruct the taxi driver to back up his car, slowly removing the front tires from on top of his body.

By the time I saw the video, Marques Gaines had been dead for three months. It was 4:00 a.m., and I was in bed in my Los Angeles apartment. After seventeen years as a journalist writing about unsolved murders, stories with no endings tend to elbow their way into your dreamscape. They aren't nightmares, just strange situations. The images and settings and characters are always slightly off, always a little different from real life. Every now and then, they trade starring roles with my dad, who has somehow clawed his way out of his grave to come visit me. That one *is* a nightmare, because I always know in my dream that he has to go back. Either way, they don't lend themselves well to restful sleep.

I clicked on the play button again, and my anger started to percolate. A few dark weeks ago, I was sitting in a bar in Boston, the dirt still on my shoes from a day of investigating the scene where a woman and

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three children were murdered, stuffed into two fifty-five-gallon drums, and dumped in the New Hampshire woods. I was two beers into the night when I absentmindedly looked at my Facebook messages and saw a note from a stranger. *Not sure if you heard. So very sorry*, the woman wrote, with a link to an article. I read the headline six or seven times, trying to wish the words away: MICHELLE MCNAMARA, WRITER AND WIFE OF PATTON OSWALT, DEAD AT 46.

Michelle was a partner in crimesolving. She died in the middle of her pursuit of a real-life monster in the closet, the Golden State Killer, leaving behind an unfinished manuscript about her obsession with the case. He had murdered at least twelve people and raped at least fifty women in their own homes. Michelle was driven, determined. Relentless. We would meet every month for lunch, and she would tell me about her quest. About how close she thought she was to finding him. To finding the monster.

What I had just witnessed was a monster in the street. But both were cut from the same cloth. They were masters of terror shouting in their actions “I am king here.” The Golden State Killer would rape a woman in her own home while her husband was forced to lie still, lest the dishes the criminal had laid on his back make any noise and provoke him further. He would make himself a sandwich, riffle through cabinets, and then go silent, making the victims think he might have left before announcing he was still there and the terror was not over. For those few hours, Michelle’s monster was the king of those people. He had their entire lives inside his palm, and he thrived on it. On the night that Marques Gaines died in Chicago, the Man in the Green Hoodie was the king of that street corner. He stalked the sidewalk, eyeing everyone in his path as prey, just waiting for someone to say something to him. Make eye contact with him. Walk down the street in a manner that just rubbed him the wrong way and be prepared for a world of hurt.

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Michelle had only sketches of her villain. Sketches of a man who wore a mask. A phantom. The Man in the Green Hoodie was fully formed, preserved forever on video.

Whenever people ask me why I only write about unsolved murders, I always say the same thing: because I hate the guy who got away with it. But after Michelle died, it was different. Now I hate the perpetrator for taking over the lives of the living just as much as taking the lives of the dead. The victim's families. The investigators. The volunteers. They all gave up giant chunks of their own lives to search for an answer that someone selfishly kept hidden away.

People die before getting the answer.

As a journalist focusing on cold cases, I opened letters every day from family members desperate for justice. Some wanted to know who killed their son. Some wanted to know where their daughter was buried. Some just wanted to talk. Because everyone else had stopped listening, they came to me. I tried to help each and every one of them. But every story I wrote—the DJ shot dead on New Year's Eve in his Miami apartment, the hippie girl gone missing in the marijuana fields of Northern California, the Swedish nanny found cut in half in a Boston dumpster—had one thing in common: they had no endings. The killers had gotten away. The missing stayed missing. The Villain with a Thousand Faces continued to grow stronger. And now, as I stared at my computer screen, the Man in the Green Hoodie was the newest face in the club.

I watched the video again and again, my anger building with each play. After the tenth viewing, I made up my mind. This time was going to be different. I was going to give Marques Gaines's story an ending.

I was going to solve the crime myself.

1.

BAM! POW! SCREEECH! ZAP!

Long Island, 1977

“THEY GOT HIM,” MY DAD SAID TO ME.

He had just come home from work, but he didn't head upstairs to wash off the paint and dust like he did every other day. No, this day was different. He unfurled the front page of *Newsday*, the tabloid that was delivered to most every house on Long Island in those days, and held it up to my face. On the cover of the paper was a pasty, passive-looking man in a dingy collared shirt, the majority of its buttons opened, revealing a white T-shirt underneath.

“This is him,” he said. “This is the .44 Caliber Killer.”

I studied the man's face for a couple of seconds, scrunched up my nose, and said, “He looks like a turkey.”

That was my first observation about a criminal: “He looks like a turkey.”

I turned five that summer. In my ultrasuburban middle-class household, the fight for my family's attention was a tooth-and-nail affair between *Star Wars*, Reggie Jackson, and the New York Blackout. My two much older half sisters were charging into their teenage years, with Leif Garrett posters on their walls and starry eyes for the discos like Studio 54 they hoped to dance at one day. My dad was three years into owning his own house-painting business, and my mom was just trying to keep

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everyone together and get us to sit down at the dinner table to eat another creation from her McCall's cookbook.

But the shadow of the .44 Caliber Killer hung over everything. For the previous twelve months, the killer had been striking across the outer boroughs of the city, killing six and wounding seven with his trademark high-powered revolver. New York police were in the midst of their biggest manhunt in history. He was taunting them with letters. "I am the 'Monster'—'Beelzebub'—the 'Chubby Behemoth,'" he wrote. "I love to hunt. Prowling the streets looking for fair game—tasty meat." And yet they still couldn't catch him.

Girls were dyeing their hair blond (his female victims were almost all brunettes), and boys were warned not to take their girlfriends to lovers' lanes, which were his favorite hunting ground. My sisters weren't quite old enough to go to the discos, but I remember them being scared. I remember everyone being scared.

Our suburban bliss, nestled in a pocket of split-level homes adjacent to the famous Levitt subdivisions built for the GIs returning from WWII, was splintered. For the most part, I have only hazy memories of that time. Waiting by the screen door for my dad to come home from work. The action figure aisle at Toys "R" Us. "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" by Elton John and Kiki Dee playing on the tinny speakers of our light-blue VW bus. They are all fuzzy, faded, nebulous snapshots in my mind.

But I remember August 11, 1977, in technicolor—the day after they caught Son of Sam, the .44 Caliber Killer, David Berkowitz. I remember the front page of the newspaper, WE HAVE HIM in larger-than-life letters shouting across the top of the front page. *This* was the guy who was killing all those people. The guy who thought he could get away with it forever. And they got him.

What I remember most is the curious feeling of relief throughout my household, throughout my town, throughout the city. This wasn't

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the Muppets or superheroes. This was real. Chaos had been returned to order. Things had been set right in the world.

I liked that feeling.

My dad never shied away from telling me about anything. He seemed like he was ten feet tall, with forearms the size of footballs, intense pale-blue eyes, and a mustache that made everyone think he was a cop (and he really didn't like cops). He was a barrel-chested brawler who had run away from home when he was fifteen, did time for punching a detective in the face, and later acquired a heroin addiction but was able to pull himself from the abyss and transform himself into a hard-working family man.

I spent every afternoon after school alone in the basement, surrounded by Chewbacca, G. I. Joe, and the Six Million Dollar Man, waiting for Dad to come home. He would arrive around 5:00 p.m., covered in dust from sanding lead paint off the houses of rich people in Great Neck or Garden City, take a quick shower, open a Budweiser, maybe take a Darvon if his head was pounding from one of his migraines, fall into his recliner, and open that afternoon's *Newsday*. At 6:00 p.m., the channel was tuned to 7, ABC Eyewitness News. He read the newspaper cover to cover with the news in the background, pausing to look over the paper at our twenty-four-inch RCA if anchorman Roger Grimsby said something that caught his interest.

I sat on the carpet, acting out adventures with my action figures and Matchbox cars: *Screeeeeeech! Zap! Pow! Bam! Bam! Bam!*

My sound effects were louder than they needed to be. With each *Bam!* I would look up to see if my dad was looking down at me. Sometimes he was, but most of the time, he was deep into a story. Usually a crime

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story. When he would look at me, he would tell me little bits of information, crowbarring nonfiction victims and villains into my brain alongside Scooby-Doo and the Wonder Twins.

“Billy, look at this kid,” he said one day, showing me the photo of John Pius, a thirteen-year-old newspaper delivery boy who was found beaten to death in the woods behind Dogwood Elementary School in Smithtown. The autopsy discovered he had choked on pebbles that had been shoved down his throat.

“Look at these sick bastards,” he would say another day, showing me the five gunmen who crashed a party in Plainview, raped two women, urinated on guests, and made off with \$8,000 in cash and jewels before bashing their way into the Seacrest Diner on Glen Cove Road. There, they ordered patrons to strip and forced some to have sex with each other.

“Now look at this frickin’ guy,” he said a few years after that, pointing to a wild-eyed Ricky Kasso. Nicknamed “the Acid King,” the seventeen-year-old stoner murdered his friend Gary Lauwers on a muggy June night in the woods of Northport. Kasso screamed, “Say you love Satan,” to Lauwers as he stabbed him. “I love my mother,” Lauwers whimpered back.

The tales unfolded each day—from the shock of the crime to the rush of the manhunt to the satisfaction of the arrest and the frustrations of the trial. And I sat on the carpet in between my dad and the television, riveted. Each was a cautionary tale. “Remember this,” my dad would say and show me a picture from the paper.

The lessons I learned:

- John Pius was attacked by four boys whom he had run across while they were stealing a frame for a minibike. They thought he was going to tell on them, so they attacked him, shoving the rocks down his throat to silence his screams. *My dad's lesson: “Mind*

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your business, but if you are going to say something, make sure no one can trace it back to you."

- The five gunmen who turned the diner into a twisted rape room all fled Long Island, only to sheepishly come back and give themselves up. Why? Because inside that diner, there were some family members of some men who were "connected." They learned the identities of the gunmen and sent a message to them via their friends and family: come back to Long Island, or your family will be dead. *My dad's lesson: "The mob can get you even if you run. Don't mess with the mob."*
- Ricky Kasso turned out not to be an obsessed Satanist but an acid dealer who killed Lauwers over a drug deal gone bad. *My dad's lesson: "Be careful who you hang out with...and don't take acid."*

I didn't have podcasts or documentaries telling me about the most horrific crimes of the era. I had Dad.

2.
—

THE BODY IN THE BARREL

New York, 1999

THE CALL CAME ON A SATURDAY MORNING. 7:00 A.M. THE voice on the other end was brisk.

“Are you working?”

Yes.

I was always working.

I needed money. Any money I could legally get my hands on. It had been sixteen months since my daughter was born. Fifteen months since my dad died. Twelve months since I had signed my life away to a thirty-year mortgage for a tiny house in a good school district. My first full year as an adult—1999. A desperate, no-safety-net adult who couldn’t afford to turn down any opportunity to make money.

“What do you got?” I answered, my eyes still closed.

“Syosset. A family just moved into a house,” said the voice. “They’re cleaning out some junk in a crawl space and find a fifty-five-gallon barrel. They opened it, and inside was a body.”

The voice was an editor from the *New York Times* metro desk. I had just started getting these calls. The *Times* was shorthanded on the weekends and needed stringers to go out and get details on breaking news. Newspapers hired us hacks to go out and do the legwork. We

didn't touch a keyboard. It was all in your notebook. Canvass the neighborhood, interview sources, get color for the story. And then you called the paper and asked for rewrite. On the other end was a veteran reporter who would take all the information and build a story. John Mancini, the editor at my day job, where I wrote about hockey fights, local punk bands, and Reiki workshops for the *Long Island Voice*, knew I needed money, and twenty bucks an hour bought a lot of diapers. He gave my number to a former colleague of his at the *Times* and unleashed me with three words of guidance/warning/don't-screw-this-up: "Accuracy, accuracy, accuracy."

I had covered stories for the *Times* before. A tornado on the North Fork. A monkey stolen from a pet store.

But on this Saturday morning, it was different. I got the call I had been hoping for. I was going to report on a murder. My first murder.

I knocked on the door of the split-level house in Syosset. When the door swung open, I could tell by the look on his face that Hamid Tafaghodi, the man who had just handed over \$455,000 for the American Dream on Forest Road, was not pleased with the unadvertised amenity in the crawl space.

He had been cleaning out a lot of the junk the previous owners had left behind—wire hangers, cardboard boxes, and a child's ride-on toy sat at the curb in front of the house. Then he spied a barrel under the family room. It was heavy. He told the seller of the house to remove it. Ronald Cohen had his movers roll it out to the street, but the garbage men wouldn't take it, saying there was a chance it could contain toxic waste. Unaware that the rejection was in all likelihood the start of a negotiation and a few twenty-dollar bills might have rid him of the problem, Cohen watched the garbage truck roll away. With his real estate agent next to him, he took a screwdriver and pried open the lid. Inside, he saw a shoe. Then he saw a hand. Then he called the police.

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By the time I got there, the homeowner was past being shaken but was weary and not talking. Needing quotes for the story, I started questioning the neighbors.

“Did you know the people who lived in the house before?”

“Had you ever had any dealings with them?”

“Did you ever suspect something like this would happen on your street?”

I collected lukewarm memories from freaked-out residents.

“I just can’t understand how this can be undetected for so long,” one said. “Wasn’t someone declared missing? Wouldn’t it smell?”

I found a pay phone, dialed the Nassau County Police Department, and three transfers later was talking to the detective in charge of the case. He told me the barrel had been found in a crawl space underneath the family room. The body in the barrel was a young woman. And the body was well-preserved. Apart from the woman’s belongings—including a faux leopard coat and an address book—there were also pellets of a dye that police had learned were used in the manufacturing of plastic flowers. The pellets filled up the empty air pockets in the barrel. Coupled with the tight seal, her body was mummified.

“Is there any idea of how she died?” I asked.

“Nothing we’re ready to say,” he told me. “I might have more for you later.”

My notebook half-full, I called up the *Times* and asked for rewrite. But this time, there was no one available.

“Um, well.” I hesitated, then asked the editor, “Can I write it?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “We need it by three.”

I raced the eight miles to my mom’s house in Westbury and sat down in my dad’s chair inside the cramped office he had built in the garage. Sales contracts to houses he never got to paint hung on the corkboard behind me. They were in his handwriting, and my mother couldn’t bear to take them down.

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I had the property record and phone numbers of the last three people who had previously owned the home with the dead body in the crawl space. I picked up my father's old-school beige touch-tone and dialed the number of the first family on the list. A woman answered. "I'm sorry, I can't talk right now," she said after I told her why I was calling. "The police are here."

On to the next one.

I dialed the number of the next name on my list. No answer.

On to the next one.

The last number was for the original owners. They had bought the house in 1957, when it was brand new, when Long Island had graduated from the tract housing of the Levitt homes to split-levels: a garage and a family room on the bottom level; kitchen, living, and dining rooms on the middle floor; and sleeping quarters at the top. This family had lived in the house for fifteen years, moving out in 1972.

The area code was for Boca Raton, Florida. I dialed, and a man answered.

"Hello," I said. "Can I speak to Mr. Howard Elkins?"

"Speaking."

"This is Bill Jensen from the *New York Times*."

"Yes?"

"Hi. Ah, the reason I'm calling is someone just purchased your old house in Syosset, on Long Island."

"Yes?"

"And while they were cleaning it out, they found a barrel. And they opened it, and inside they found a body."

"You're kidding," he said, drawing out the last word. "You're kiiiiiding."

"No," I said.

I read him the details I had gotten from the detective. "The body was that of a woman with long, black hair. She was four foot nine and fifty-nine pounds but had shrunk over time, with the lab later surmising that in life the woman was four foot eleven and ninety-five pounds."

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I paused for him to say something. He didn't. I kept going.

"She was wearing a skirt, a button-down sweater, high socks, and a midheel shoe. A leopard-skin coat was stuffed next to her body in the drum, which also held residue of coloring dye that was used to make artificial flowers."

I paused and waited for him to say something. He didn't. I kept going.

"And there was a locket around her neck, with the inscription 'To Patrice, love Uncle Phil.' And she wore a wedding band with the inscription M. H. R. XII 59."

I paused for the last time.

"Do any of those details mean anything to you?" I asked.

"No," he said.

"Where was the crawl space?" I asked, steering the conversation to the house, trying to get him to say anything more than a one-word answer.

"We built a room off the kitchen to the back of the house," he explained. "A big den with a fireplace. It was built up to the level of the living room and the kitchen, so there was a crawl space."

"Unbelievable," he added. He stretched out the middle of the word. "Unbelieeeeeevable."

"When was this?" he asked. "When did this happen?"

"Yesterday," I said.

I told him that a man had moved into the house, found the barrel, and told the previous owner to get rid of it. I told him that the seller and the real estate agent opened the barrel and saw a hand and a shoe.

"Unbelievable," he repeated.

"Do you have any idea how that might have gotten there?"

"No," he said.

"Did you ever go into the crawl space?" I asked.

"What for?" he said.

This answer made me pause, but not long enough. I had yet to learn

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the power of uncomfortable silence. As a person, you're conditioned to fill in those gaps in conversation. As a reporter, you let the last word linger. Hang in the air, weaponized and out there all alone. Waiting for the truth to meet it. I should have let it linger, but at that point, I didn't know what the hell I was doing.

"Who could have gone into that crawl space?" I asked.

"Outside of the gardeners and landscapers and the contractor who built the addition, I can't think of anyone else who had access to the house," he said. "We did have maids on and off over the years."

I thanked him for his time, hung up the phone, and opened my clunky brick of a laptop to write up the story. I was ready to send to the *Times* when I got a call from the detective.

"The woman was almost full-term pregnant," he told me.

This was now a double murder.

A missing pregnant woman would have been the lead story on the six o'clock news. Had anyone ever looked for her?

I dialed Elkins again. He didn't answer.

I furiously typed up the new details of the story, noting that the barrel was made in 1963, "and originally contained pigments used to tint plastic and paints, which were no longer made after 1972 or 1973." That at least gave the murder timeline an end date.

I emailed the story to the desk editor and called him to confirm.

"You have it," I said before adding: "Also, I know on my checks it says William Jensen, but I write under Bill Jensen."

"We don't give bylines to stringers," he told me. He apologized. The byline would read "By the *New York Times*."

My name wouldn't be on it, but I had just written my first murder story.

I swung my father's chair around and stared up at his contracts pinned to the wall. Every day since he died, something would happen that made me want to pick up the phone and tell him about it. That day,

CHASE DARKNESS WITH ME

I felt it more than ever. I could practically hear him bragging about my story to all the guys on his crew.

The next day, I bought five copies of the *Times*. It was Sunday, and I had to cradle them with two hands.

The headline read **NEW HOMEOWNER FINDS BODY OF PREGNANT WOMAN IN A BARREL.**

Six days after the story ran, Howard Elkins entered a friend's garage carrying a newly purchased shotgun. He crawled into an SUV and blew his head off.

My phone call had sent his thirty-year secret crashing down on top of him. Five days after my story ran, Nassau County homicide detectives paid him a visit at his Boca Raton retirement condominium community. They asked him about the plastic flower pellets. About his house. About the barrel. He said he didn't know it was there. They asked him if he ever had an affair. He finally admitted to having one.

"Who was the affair with?" they inquired. Elkins said he couldn't remember her name. "What did she look like?" they pressed. He couldn't remember. They asked him why his phone number had been in the address book found alongside the woman's body. He said he had no idea. They asked for a DNA sample to compare it with the fetus in the barrel. He refused to be swabbed. They left without arresting him. They told him they would be in touch.

My call was when Elkins began digging his grave. The visit from the detectives drove the final nail into his coffin.

The murder tale unfolded in the weeks that followed. The fifty-five-gallon drum had been manufactured in Linden, New Jersey, in March 1963 to October 1972. Writing on the drum showed that it had been delivered to the synthetic flower company Melrose Plastics, a company of which Howard Elkins had been part owner.

The crime lab then focused on the address book found with the body. Using an infrared light that could decipher indentations or faded characters

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on the page, they discovered a series of numbers that had been written on the first page. Those numbers corresponded to alien registration green card, which a search revealed had belonged to an El Salvadoran immigrant named Reyna Angélica Marroquín, who worked at Melrose Plastics in 1969.

Written in the book were also faded words that the lab technicians couldn't make out, as well as a phone number for a woman named Kathy Andrade. The detectives located Andrade, and she spilled the whole story. Her friend Reyna was having an affair with her boss, a man named Howard Elkins. One day, Reyna called Andrade and said she was scared. Reyna said she had told Elkins's wife about the affair and that Elkins was angry. After that phone call, Andrade never heard from Reyna again.

Howard Elkins murdered Reyna and stuffed her body in one of the hundreds of barrels he had access to at Melrose Plastics. Maybe he was thinking of taking it out on a boat and dumping it in the ocean. But it was far too heavy for one person to lift—when it was discovered, the barrel weighed close to 350 pounds, and it would have weighed even more right after Reyna's death. So Elkins chose to roll it under his house and leave the body beneath the family room. Then he and his family lived above Reyna's corpse for three years. He watched TV, read the paper, drank his coffee. He celebrated holidays and birthdays, all above the corpse of the woman he had an affair with, got pregnant, and murdered.

Elkins lived with that secret for thirty years. I thought of the blood that must have drained from his face and into his throat when I said those words: "They found a barrel. And they opened it, and inside they found a body."

Reyna's body was shipped back to El Salvador. The detectives continued to examine Reyna's address book, and the crime lab was finally able to decipher those faded words. They read "Don't be mad I told the truth."

A body was found one day. I spoke to the killer the next day, and he admitted his guilt within the week via a shotgun blast to the head.

It would never be that easy again.

Every weekend, I got to cover another crime for the *Times*: a stabbing at a high school football game. The Amadou Diallo cops coming home after their acquittal. I was on my way to becoming one of the crime beat reporters who my dad would read every day after work. And I was doing my job well enough that when an editor at the *New York Post* asked Mancini if there was anyone who could help out on nights and weekends, he offered me up again. I was going to work for the king of tabloid crime. The paper behind the relentless coverage of Bernie Goetz, the Robert Chambers murder, and the most famous headline in the history of crime: HEADLESS BODY IN TOPLESS BAR.

But my first assignment for the *Post* changed everything.

“We need you to go to Stony Brook Hospital,” said the voice on the phone. Two teenage girls had been driving around Suffolk County when they encountered a pair of closing railroad crossing signals. The girl behind the wheel decided to tempt fate and go around the gates. She didn’t make it, and the train smashed into their car. The girls were taken to the hospital in critical condition. The *Post* wanted their story.

I turned off my newly purchased cell phone, walked into the emergency waiting room, and immediately spotted the mother and father of one of the girls. They were the only ones who were weeping. I sat down for a minute, trying to think of what I was going to say to them. I finally walked over and knelt down next to the man.

“Hi,” I said just above a whisper. “I’m Bill Jensen from the *New York Post*,” I said. “I’m so sorry. Could I ask you a few questions?”

He raised his head and gave me the most shattered look anyone has ever given me. Then he shook his head.

I found a pay phone in the lobby and called the *Post*.

“The family doesn’t want to talk,” I said.

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The voice on the other end didn't hesitate.

"Go in and ask them again." *Click.*

I placed the receiver back on the cradle and walked around the hospital hallways for what seemed like days, trying to assemble enough courage to go back into that room. If hospitals had bars, I would have been drinking. After fifteen minutes, I approached the man and woman again.

"I'm sorry, but we are just trying to get some information. Do you think we could talk?"

The woman looked at the man, and the man gave me the same look as before. I waited a beat, then got out of there as quick as I could without running. I called the *Post* back.

"Hey, I'm sorry. They really don't want..."

He cut me off. "It's okay," the voice said. "We just got back the girl's rap sheet, and it's a mile long. It's fine." *Click.*

I hung up the phone and walked out of the hospital, earning the most shameful forty dollars I ever earned in my life. I don't even know if the girls survived the night. Limping home, something bubbled up from the pit of my churning stomach: This was not what I wanted. I was on course to be a crime beat reporter, writing rubbernecking articles about bad things that happened to people but not doing anything to help. At that moment, I was done. I wanted to write stories that actually helped change things. I wanted to try to solve murders. I wanted to get that feeling back. The feeling I got when I was a kid and my dad showed me the cover of paper with the headline WE HAVE HIM stamped over the .44 Caliber Killer's head. The feeling of solving the crime. I wanted to see some order given to this chaos.

I made the decision right then and there: I would only write about unsolved crimes.