

A year and a half ago I was sitting at a desk in a tiny cubicle of the state police office on Wentworth. The windows didn't open, and the air smelled of stale cigars. I panted in the heat of the summer night,

information.

I remember one night I sat on the brown, greasy steps of the Harrison station on the west side, men lying in stagnant heaps around me—bleary-eyed, in shit-stained trousers, tongues hanging out, drooling spittle. The man from the Department of Human

Body Count



ILLUSTRATION/RALPH CREASMAN

A former City News foot soldier looks back on the battle.

waiting for my pager to beep.

I was a reporter for the soon-to-close City News Bureau, and until I quit last March I worked the police beat from 5 PM to 2 AM six days a week. Anytime there was a homicide, rape, fire, auto accident, or robbery deemed newsworthy by my office, I made the calls or drove my van to the crime scene, nagging the cops and dicks for all the grisly details, which would be put out on the wire to the local TV, radio, and print media.

"So Lois Lane, where's the doughnuts?" a cop once asked. A detective who gave me a tip on a murder case asked what flavor my lipstick was and would he get to find out later? At first I thought the bureau had a progressive hiring policy, given the large number of female reporters, though I soon realized we were bait. The cops still didn't trust us. They often insisted on anonymity for even the smallest bit of

Services who came to collect a few of the human heaps and take them to the shelter kicked their feet and shouted, "You Thompson?"

A man handcuffed in the hallway screamed and cried like a banshee lost in hallucinations. A prostitute, her wrinkled, grandmotherly face smeared with blue and red makeup, came stumbling out of lockup and asked me for a quarter for the phone.

Once a Grand Central sergeant with tinted glasses sucked on an unlit cigar, his cheeks hollowing in and out with each imagined puff. He flattened his hands on a newspaper that was oily with pizza stains and told me he couldn't wait to retire to someplace quiet like Montana, where there wouldn't be so many "brothers" around.

The late-night shift of blue shirts at the Harrison desk was a multicultural mix of stocky, matronly women who sipped Big Gulps and stacked reports as they

FIRST STRIKE

gossiped and laughed. Upstairs the dicks who typed up trophy confessions flattened their ears on receivers and mumbled to reporters, "It's pending investigation." Sometimes I looked at the cops' toned biceps, buzzed hair, and bulging holsters and imagined them going home to their wives and crying like babies.

Calloused tough-guy is a guise both reporter and cop adopt. One reporter, referring to the daily death count, said, "The way I see it, you die how you live." Another shrugged off the stress of the job with a matter-of-fact "You just can't take it home with you." But one night I dreamed the postman dismembered the little girl across the street.

An investigator at the medical examiner's office once fixed me a cup of coffee and ushered me into the freezer, where I involuntarily burped up caffeinated bile at the sight of rows of bodies stripped to the waist on metal beds. "Oh," he said, "you ain't used to the smell. That there is a death smell. I faced it in the war. You get used to it." I didn't.

I once told my sister I should be called "purger of despair" rather than reporter. I recorded the vomit of humanity so it could be splashed across the TV screen and the public could recoil in disgust.

Some days nearly buried you. A young, good-looking man was held on \$500,000 bond for pounding his five-year-old son to death. The prosecutor stated that the boy had died of blunt abdominal trauma sustained when the father repeatedly kicked and beat him because he kept crying for his mother. The father's face showed no expression.

Another night I waited for the corpse of a 21-year-old female, stabbed to death by her boyfriend, to be rolled out on a stretcher. The TV floodlights had transformed her family's suburban town house into a movie set, and the neighbors were waiting in nervous delight, hoping to get a glimpse.

In a city of this size, where crimes are a dime a dozen, only the more spectacular offenders and victims get play. Details make the story. When a disgruntled ex-girlfriend shot and killed a 17-year-old girl on prom night for stealing her boyfriend, the bureau's clients wanted to know: Did the blood spatter on her new silver pumps? Was her hair done? What color nail polish was she wearing? When a transvestite was pummeled to death by his lover for

being HIV positive he wanted to know: Was he in drag?

The deaths of junkies, gangbangers, and street people were usually deemed "cheap" by editors, meaning they weren't newsworthy. But one homeless man made it into the papers because he died while defecating over the third rail.

Suicides didn't make the five o'clock news unless they were tearing down Lake Street on fire or doing a swan dive off a skyscraper. Of course notoriety helped. When I went through the list of dead people we got each morning from the coroner's office my editors would ask, "Was he anybody?" "To whom?" was my standard reply. And so the judge's son got a write-up after he clenched a lit stick of dynamite between his teeth.

Any subtext that couldn't be reduced to tiny quotes or sound bites was edited out. There were heaps of tears and rage on the cutting-room floor.

A 13-year-old boy was killed by a stray bullet a week before his graduation. I described a memorial his friends dedicated to him: a pile of stuffed animals, flowers, candles, and a six-pack of his favorite drink, diet Pepsi. Eight preteen kids stood somberly before the memorial. One kid told me that the victim was his best friend, that he was tired of all his friends dying, that he hoped he'd make it to his 16th birthday. As the sun set, another kid said flatly to no one in particular, "I don't read the Bible much, but I know it says that when there's a red sun it means it's the end of the world." The others squinted at the sky, then lowered their eyes again to the memorial. I called the story in from a pay phone. A rewrite reporter cut the anecdote, telling me it wasn't relevant, and promptly hung up.

Whether you're a cop, a crusader, or a reporter, sooner or later you realize the futility of your mission. One night in the station, while a thunderstorm raged outside, an officer confided, "Sure, I'm tired of the predictability of it all. I can take one look at a person and tell if they're a bad guy or a good guy. And I'm tired of being the good guy."

Some reporters fought the feeling that the city was a war zone, full of anonymous threats, misery, and silently smoldering souls. Some didn't fight it and instead developed a warped sense of humor. "Hey Guthrie, have you seen your first crispy critter?"



Meaning fatal fire victim.

Whatever the strategy, the dangerous, unconscious aim was to survive. I'd been sliding into detachment until one day in the 14th District when I wasn't being streetwise. I didn't even see the couple until they'd cornered me. "Give it over, bitch," they cursed and then robbed me. For a curious few moments I remained an outside observer, calmly recording the details of the gold ring in the woman's nose, the way the man's jaw was open and grinding like he was chewing gum, the words they spat at me—"bitch," "cunt," "ho." Then I saw and felt the cold, slender silver pistol shoved beneath my ribs. I was immediately jolted back into my body, as, in a rushed blur, they yanked my battered briefcase away, pushed me hard, and fled.

Through my mind flashed a City News bulletin: Deirdre Guthrie, 26 years old, resident of Wicker Park, Chicago, expired due to gunshot to the abdomen at approximately 19:20 hours, according to Grand Central detectives. A cheap death, except for the irony of my being a crime-beat reporter. I sat there for a while, pondering the banality of what had just happened to me.

The following day the bureau assigned me a "soft feature," sending me to the suburban home of a Middle-Eastern family, where hundreds of people had flocked to see the miracle of the Virgin Mary outlined in condensation on a bay window. I squeezed my way through the crowd of hushed worshipers. There was a boom box playing Arabic religious music, icons of saints lining the walls, and lawn furniture for the spiritually overcome to recline upon in the front yard.

On the porch, members of the family stood beaming in their Sunday best next to an altar with flowers and candles placed before the window itself. As I entered the home, I inhaled the musky scent of incense burning and was suddenly overcome by the desire to see a vision, a miracle.

The woman wailing in front of me collapsed to her knees in prayer. I blinked, squinted, crooked my neck sideways, then sighed.

"You see?" the woman of the house called to me.

I managed a noncommittal nod.

Outside, a sobbing Polish girl spoke into my microphone, saying that the Virgin had appeared to warn us all to embrace peace and "stop hurting each other."

I copied her words into my official CNB notebook. ■