The Scene of the Crime

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Abstract

It was shortly before rush hour on Monday afternoon, and a small crowd of spectators had gathered outside the grocery store at the corner of Main at 115th. The lights of a squad car parked out front were flashing and a young police officer was trying unsuccessfully to disperse the crowd...
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by

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It was shortly before rush hour on Monday afternoon, and a small crowd of spectators had gathered outside the grocery store at the corner of Main at 115th. The lights of a squad car parked out front were flashing and a young police officer was trying unsuccessfully to disperse the crowd. “There’s nothing to see here,” the policeman said. He approached three teenage boys who were standing in the front of the crowd with the best vantage point. “Come on, be on your way home,” he said as he pushed them along the sidewalk out of the way. They left reluctantly, but no sooner had they gone, than the rest of the crowd moved forward to fill the vacancy.

Across the intersection from the grocery store there was a savings and loan. The time of day was displayed by the light bulbs on the marquee . . . 4:52 . . . The street seemed lifeless despite the flurry of activity. People passed one another without interacting. They wore somber expressions as though they were displaying the customary sorrow for the death of some distant relative. The marquee of the savings and loan had changed to show the temperature . . . 24°f . . .

On the sidewalk across the street from the crowd, a shop owner came outside. He shook his head and kept his hands in his pockets as he watched the spectacle. A woman walked past him carrying some shopping bags in one arm and a young child in the other. She quickened her stride when she saw the commotion and made a conscious effort to look the other direction. The child twisted around in the woman’s arm so as to stare at the people in front of the store.

At five o’clock, the traffic began to pick up and the crowd grew larger. There was a bus terminal just three blocks down from the grocery store and various commuters had stopped along their way to have a ‘look see.’ There was a sense of excitement and suspense in the air. No one was immune from the intrigue inspired by the flashing red lights.

The young officer’s exasperation showed on his face and he had to shout in order to be heard. “Go on home, folks,” he
pleaded. "You can read about it in the papers tomorrow."

The crowd ignored him. The people stood on their tiptoes and strained their necks trying to see what was happening inside. All that could be seen from the street was a glimpse of another police officer standing in the back of the store, writing in a pocket sized note pad.

News of the incident had spread throughout the neighborhood and the crowd continued to grow. The entire width of the sidewalk was occupied by the spectators. It looked like a world premiere at a movie theater. There was a curious face looking down from out of the windows in the upstairs apartments across the street. A bus stopped for a red light at the intersection and the passengers gazed at the store like tourists in front of the home of a Hollywood movie star.

An old man came out of an alley two blocks down from the grocery store and ambled towards the crowd. He wore a wool cap with the front of it pulled down over his left eyebrow. His features seemed swollen. He had only one good eye which was partially obscured by the cap. His right eye was a gray haze, and it stared straight ahead as though it was locked in its socket. His nose and lips were tainted purple, and his face was unshaven.

It was difficult to determine his age. It could have been anywhere between forty-five and seventy. The overcoat he wore was dusty beige and it fit poorly. Only his fingertips reached the ends of the sleeves. He gathered the lapels of the coat closely around his neck so as to keep the wind out.

The mob's curiosity had given in to rumor. "What's happening?" one passerby asked.

"Can't be sure," a man in the back of the crowd answered. "Looks like a robbery."

The passerby joined the mob. A cigarette dangled from his mouth as he searched his pockets for a light. "Anybody hurt?"

"Don't know," the man replied as he lit the cigarette for the newcomer. The mob had acquired a certain intimacy. "There hasn't been any ambulance through."

"I heard two shots," screeched a woman in the middle of the mob. "I was right next door and I swear I heard two gun shots." The woman became an immediate celebrity. The focus of attention was now on her rather than the happenings inside the store.
"Who all was in there when it happened?" one of the voices rang out.

The woman blushed. "Well, now I can't be sure." She was quite pleased with her newly acquired prestige. "There was the clerk that runs the place. Harry, or maybe it's Henry something. Anyway, he's kind of an old man and his wife is there a lot, but I'm not sure if she was there this afternoon."

The mob spread out to give the woman room to explain.

"You see, I was next door at the hardware store. I'm a clerk there you know." She smiled and turned to see if everyone was listening. "Anyway, I seen a young lady in there doing her shopping about forty-five minutes ago. She had a little baby with her. There was another woman there too, I think . . . But I don't know if they were still in there when I heard the shots. Like I say, I was over to the hardware store."

The old man in the beige coat was standing outside the perimeter of the mob. His eye was focused first on the spectators, then on the squad car, then on the store front. It looked like it might snow.

A man from the mob tapped the woman on the shoulder. "Who did it? Did you see who did it?" His voice was quick and his eyes wide open.

"Well, no I didn't." She smiled at him and then turned to face the rest of the crowd. "But I could sure make a guess." She had everyone's undivided attention. "It was at four-thirty . . . I know it was four-thirty because that's when I take my coffee break . . . and this guy walks in the hardware store. Dark hair, dark eyes—real seedy looking. Anyway, he picks something up, looks at it, and then puts it down. Picks something else up, and then puts it down. He looks around for about three minutes, and then he leaves without buying anything." She looked around the crowd with a suspicious expression. "The next thing I know, BANG, BANG! And the cops show up."

The mob began to speculate about the details of the actual incident . . . who may have been shot . . . where the robber escaped . . . In the midst of the confusion, the old man in the beige coat made his way between the mob and the store front and tapped the policeman on the shoulder.

"I done the job," said the man in the beige coat.

"What?" the policeman shouted. Several of the nearest spectators had turned to listen.
"I done the job," replied the old man without looking at the officer. "I'm your man."

The police officer opened the door to the store and shouted for the other officer to come outside. Meanwhile he escorted the old man to the squad car.

News of the old man's confession spread throughout the mob, and he suddenly became the center of attention. Sensing her loss of credibility, the woman from the hardware store tried to regain her stature. "I don't think it was him," she said to anyone who would listen. "It couldn't have been him. No, I still think it was that young fellow in the dark glasses."

"I don't know," a man near the squad car disagreed. "It looks like he could cut you in two with that look in his eye."

"Look at him," a voice from within the mob added. "That's a face of someone who could shoot a woman and her baby if I've ever seen one."

That remark caught the attention of several more passers-by. It wasn't long before news had spread throughout the neighborhood that the old man in the beige coat had shot and killed two people at the grocery store on 115th and Main Ave.

By the time the second officer had come outside, the mob was even larger. He fought his way through the spectators to the squad car and got in.

"Frank here tells me you had something to do with the hold up," the second officer said as he turned to a new page in his note pad.

"That's right," the old man answered. He stared straight ahead. "I'm your man. I done the job."

"I see. What's your name, old timer?"

"Trovato. Ben Trovato." The officer wrote the name down.

Outside, the woman from the hardware store was giving her account to several spectators who had just arrived.

"I was right next door. I heard everything." She was quite enthusiastic. "There were at least two shots . . . maybe three. And then I saw that the both of them had been shot. Even the baby." The woman looked at the old man sitting in the back of the squad car and broke into tears. "He shot the baby too . . . ."

"Where do you work, Mr. Trovato?" the officer asked. The old man didn't answer. "Do you have a job?" The old man still said nothing. "Presently unemployed," the officer said as
he wrote in the note pad. "Where do you live, Mr. Trovato?"

The old man appeared nervous. He avoided looking directly at the police officer. "I just got in town. I haven't found a place."

"I see." The officer closed the note pad. "So, you turned yourself in." The old man nodded. "Smart thing to do. Tell me, what kind of gun did you use? What caliber was it, a .36?"

"Yes." The old man began to breathe heavily. "It was a .36."

"How many rounds did you fire?"
"Two. I fired twice."

"What did you do with the gun?"
"I . . . I . . ."

"What did you do with the gun?" the officer shouted.
"I threw it into the river."

"Tell me, Mr. Trovato," the officer's voice was quick and intense, "why didn't you take any money?"

"I was . . . I . . ."

"Why didn't you take any money, Mr. Trovato? I mean, you walk into a grocery store and shoot it up, and then you don't take any money. Why?"

The old man wiped some perspiration from his brow.
"I . . . I don't know. I guess I panicked."

"Why don't you just go on your way, Mr. Trovato?" The officer was now calm and relaxed. "If we have any more questions, we'll look you up."

"I done the job!" the old man protested. "I'm telling you, I done the job!"

The two police officers got out of the car. "He didn't do it," the older officer said. "Send him on his way."

"How can you be so sure?" the younger policeman asked. The officer smiled. "It doesn't make any sense. He said he didn't take any money because he panicked."

"That makes sense enough to me."

"Sure it does. But there was $112 missing from the cash register." The older officer laughed to himself. "And the old man said he used a .36." He pointed to the store window where the clerk was standing with an ice pack on his head. "There was no gun. He was clobbered with a wine bottle."

"Then why did he confess?"

The older officer shrugged his shoulders. "To get a meal or two. And a warm place to sleep. I don't know." He went
back inside the store while the other officer got the old man out of the car.

"I'm your man. I tell you, I done the job."

"Sure you did, Mac. Just go on home." The officer escorted him a little ways down the sidewalk and then let him go.

"But I'm your man. I . . . I . . ." The officer ignored him.

"You can't let him go!" the woman from the hardware store shouted hysterically. "He killed that innocent baby."

It had begun to snow and the old man in the beige coat gathered the lapels more closely around his neck.

"What are you doing?" the woman shouted at the young police officer. "You surely aren't letting him go?"

"Just let us take care of it ma'am," he said nonchalantly as he returned to the mob. "Everything is under control."

Exasperated, the woman ran down the street after the old man. "Where are you going? Where do you think you're going?" she screamed. "They aren't letting you go, are they?"

The old man ignored her. "They can't just let you go Scott free after you shoot two people."

The old man stopped and stared at her. "Two?" He held up all the fingers on his left hand. "Five. Count 'em, five."

The woman gasped. "Oh my God. Why aren't they putting you in jail? For God's sake, why are they letting you walk away?"

Ben Trovato began to laugh. "It was a clean job. I didn't leave any witnesses."

"No witnesses." In her imagination, the woman pictured the old man standing in the midst of the five victims with a smoldering revolver in his hand. "But what about me? I saw it—I saw the whole thing." The woman realized the importance of what she had said, and rushed back to the mob.

She was slightly out of breath as she approached the police officer. "I'm a witness. I saw him do it." Her face was flushed and her voice was urgent.

"Saw him do what?" the policeman asked.

"Shoot those five people, of course. Those five innocent people."

"What people?" the officer asked in an annoyed tone.

"The five people in the store," she screamed. The entire mob crowded around the woman to hear everything she had to
say, while Ben Trovato stood at a distance, listening with his arms folded in front of him. “Well, I only saw him actually shoot two of them,” she admitted, “but I know he's responsible for all five of them.”

Just then, the second policeman came out of the store, followed by the store clerk. The clerk had a small bandage on his forehead and he closed the door and locked it. The two police officers got into the squad car and drove away.

The mob began to disperse when it became evident that the episode was over. Some of the people were annoyed. All of them were disappointed.

The woman, humiliated and alone, returned to the mundaneness of the hardware store. It was already seventeen minutes after closing.

And Ben Trovato turned back towards the alley up the street. He too was alone. But he had a clear conscience, a smile in his eye, and $112 in his pocket.

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**The Unwelcome**

*by*

Jim Kastner

*Engl 5*

It is dark
and insects
dance the dumb
neon fire-ritual
to tom-tom
chirping crickets.
Tonight the natives
prance to a frenzy.
I fumble to fix
my window screen.

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*Photograph*

*by*

Kitty Cavanaugh

*SOC 3*