

Tread across a Cocoa Beach crossover during daylight and savor the sun while playing in the sand and the warm Atlantic Ocean. Or wait until after dark-if you have the nerve. One word of caution-don't go alone.

Crossover

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1

Excluding the victim, the killer, and three sand crabs scurrying for the safety of their holes, the first homicide failed to attract attention.

In thinking back on this particular murder, I've often wondered when the victim, an obviously unwilling participant, sensed his impending death. Could it have been the moment the killer pressed the man's face into seawater flowing across the sand at high tide—or maybe not until saltwater rushed into his lungs as he struggled for air? Although even then the man may have drawn on an inner strength and refused to accept the inevitable. If so, I wonder when recognition of his fate finally burst through the fear consuming him?

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Maybe as a rip current swept him out to sea, or maybe not until he witnessed the open maw of a ravenous carnivore, a creature straight from the pen of Melville, gliding towards him.

Since the first homicide victim is beyond answering, I guess I'll never know.

Seven days later, Monday, February 5th, 1990, at two-fifteen in the morning, the first homicide victim, or what remained of him after sea creatures had feasted for a week, bobbed to the surface and floated ashore at high tide.

The incoming tide positioned the lifeless body north of the Sixth Street South crossover, mere feet from the spot where he had uttered his failed pleas for mercy and whispered his final prayers for salvation. The Sixth Street South crossover is one of nearly four-dozen wooden walkways allowing Cocoa Beach residents and tourists to traverse the dunes without damaging the natural sand structures so important to the health of the beach.

And why exactly did the first homicide victim return to the scene of his execution?

It's a question I've asked myself many times—but a question I've never been able to answer with any degree of certainty.

Query local residents and they'll tell you that the prevailing winds and the Atlantic Ocean currents off Cocoa Beach refuse to follow predictable patterns. At times the currents flow north. Other times south. And still there are times the surf resembles a slippery saltwater floor filled with square dancers. Allemande left, allemande right, swing your partner, hold her tight, circle to the left, circle to the right, do-si-dos until broad daylight.

So I suppose any rational or logical person would conclude that Cocoa Beach's unpredictable winds and current flows allowed the first homicide victim to revisit the scene of his death.

But what of a person driven to a greater extent by the beliefs of his soul rather than his intellect? Such an individual would likely contend that a force, not of nature but of the universe, orchestrated the victim's revisit—and for a specific reason.

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Which argument might carry the day?

Similar to many other arguments across our polarized land, it depends on your personal beliefs.

And the first homicide victim?

What might he have believed?

Being quite dead – I can't imagine he cares either way.

2

Robert Anderson and his wife Betty chanced upon the corpse on one of their regular early morning beach walks, a stroll that began with feet-on-sand thirty minutes before sunrise each morning over the previous five years. Driven by punctuality, Robert had spent thirty years working his way to the top of the local pyramid—Postmaster in a medium-sized town south of Orlando while his wife labored seven days a week to raise a family of five children and an occasional mother or mother-in-law.

Both looked forward to retirement in Cocoa Beach, yet Betty wondered if she had truly retired. Spread around the country, three of their children had successful professional careers. Two, however,

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unable to stay employed or finish school, returned to the womb in Cocoa Beach after each failed attempt at independence. Currently the two slept in the Anderson's spare bedrooms. But two was a number greater than Betty desired, so she looked forward to the daily walks with Robert. She viewed these as precious moments that allowed the crash of the Atlantic and the calls of soaring and diving seabirds to provide a soothing addition to her solitude.

Robert and Betty walked from their modest home on Sunrise Drive to Fourth Street South and then east to the beach crossover. Normally Robert suggested they walk north to downtown Cocoa Beach and beyond, stopping for breakfast at the Cocoa Beach pier or any number of restaurants off the beach. This morning, however, Robert suggested they walk south. "We haven't walked by the Driftwood House lately. Let's head south," Robert said. Built in 1912, the Driftwood House was the oldest structure in Cocoa Beach.

"It's a beach shack. We've seen it many times," Betty said.

"I know but I never tire of the history. Just imagine what it must have been like around here in 1900 when Roy Packard purchased one hundred and fifty feet of Cocoa Beach oceanfront property for fifteen dollars. He..."

"There was no Cocoa Beach in 1900. They called it Oceanus."

"That's not the point. Can you imagine the adventuresome spirit that man must have had to clear the land and a walking path to the Banana River by hand, and then live in a platform tent he constructed from driftwood?"

"Yes dear." Betty sighed. She had heard the story on more than a few occasions.

Robert pretended to ignore her. "And then to receive the blessings of our Lord as he did."

"Blessings? He scavenged mahogany logs from a ship wrecked in a storm. Where's the blessing for the men aboard who perished?"

"You know the old saying, 'one man's blessing is another man's misfortune.'"

"Robert!"

"I'm kidding, but you do have to admit it took fortitude and stamina for Roy to drag those logs to the Banana River, strap them

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together, float them to Merritt Island, and then haul them to a sawmill?"

"He used a chain-drive truck. You make it sound like he strapped the logs to his back. He wasn't Paul Revere."

"No he wasn't, but remember this was 1912 and he was an individual without modern equipment. That's what's wrong with this country today. We need more strong-willed and independent men like Roy Packard. We need..."

"We need to walk and have a pleasant conversation without you spouting your conservative views."

"I was just..."

"I know what you were just. Now, if you'll change subjects, we can walk south."

Two blocks into their walk, however, Betty regretted her acquiescence, oh how she regretted it after nearly stumbling over a dead and decaying body in the dim light of predawn, although the term body is a mite too encompassing. A scarred head and neck clung to a man's corpse by nothing more than ligament shards and muscle fragments. Both arms had been ripped and shredded from his shoulders. The left leg had suffered the same fate exposing nasty gashes on the remains of his hip socket. An unknown creature had severed his right leg above the knee. Except for a few shreds of material clinging to his lower torso and right thigh, the man's body remained free of clothes.

Robert escorted his screaming wife off the beach. He helped her sit at the end of the crossover. "I'll be right back, I promise," he said and sprinted through the parking lot to A1A. He flagged down a motorist. "We have a situation," Robert said in a voice calmed through extreme willpower. "We need the police. Tell them a man has washed up on the beach." Robert pointed to the crossover that held Betty, a woman sobbing and rocking as she attempted to shut out the mental image of a rotting corpse.

"Is he dead?" the unknown motorist asked in disbelief.

"Since he lacks arms and legs and his body is crawling with crabs—I'd say he's dead."

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Color drained from the man's face. He swallowed hard and turned away. A moment later he sped off without another word.

Robert returned to Betty, wrapped his right arm around her, and whispered, "Next time, don't agree so fast. Next time—insist we walk north."

Betty's backhand across his knee told him her recovery from their unexpected traumatic experience had begun.

Within eight minutes, Robert heard the wail of sirens approaching from the north at a speed well above the posted thirty-five miles per hour. Two police cars, one trailing the other, fishtailed off South Orlando Avenue onto Sixth, slowed as they crossed South Atlantic, and skidded to a stop in the crossover parking lot.

3

As dictated by their training, the first-on-the-scene uniformed patrol officers called for backup and a detective. They also taped off the perimeter of the potential crime scene. After their backup arrived they began the arduous task of interviewing the Anderson's and the curious looky-loo's, people drawn by the sounds of sirens and police activity. It fell to these two officers to determine who, how, what, why, when, and where.

Prior to completing their task, I arrived and assumed responsibility for the investigation. As an eighteen-year veteran of the Cocoa Beach Police Department I've devoted my career and my life to the safety and security of Cocoa Beach's citizens – well, most of

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my life. Being a fairly normal red-blooded male with life-partner aspirations, I allocate a small portion of my time to a personal pursuit of the first Mrs. Noah Swayne, a quest that has produced pleasure and pain in roughly equal servings during two serious but failed relationships.

"Who was first on scene?" I asked a patrolman who controlled access to the site. He held a clipboard and a crime scene logbook. The patrolman recorded the dates, times, and names of everyone who entered and exited the potential crime scene.

"Stillwell, sir." He pointed to another officer fidgeting with his notebook.

"RP?"

"The reporting party was a Mr. Robert Anderson. Stillwell has the particulars."

"Any wits?"

"Not unless you consider sea creatures witnesses. I'm not an expert but I'd say the guy has been dead for awhile."

"Stick to facts you can support." I turned without waiting for any additional comments the patrolman might be inclined to offer. I approached Jan Stillwell, a patrolman hired during the previous year.

The young officer stood at attention as I approached. "We don't have much, sorry sir," he said.

"Give me what you have. But first relax. This isn't an inspection."

Jan Stillwell's shoulders drooped half an inch and a minimal smile spread from the corners of his mouth. "Thanks, sir. It's just that...well I'm a little nervous."

I ignored the comment and pointed towards the spiral notebook the patrolman held in his right hand. Stillwell had squeezed the notebook into an object more resembling a corkscrew.

Stillwell released his death grip and flattened the notebook into a semblance of its original shape. He flipped a few pages, cleared his throat. "A Mr. Robert Anderson and his wife, Betty, out for their daily morning walk stumbled across the deceased..." Jan glanced to his left where the corpse lay on the sand. Incoming waves gently

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rocked what remained of the body. The sight caused him to swallow hard three times. He turned his head. "Sorry sir."

"No need. Please continue," I said, although my reaction on seeing the corpse matched Jan's. I once held the belief that detectives in major metropolitan areas grew immune to gruesome deaths over time. This belief, crafted from nothing more than the fact these detectives dealt with violent crime on a daily or weekly basis, disappeared during an FBI class on crime scene analysis I attended the prior year. Over a two-week period I received outstanding training on evidence collection, ballistics, interrogation techniques, and other practical and proven methods of analyzing a crime scene. I also met and interacted with fellow detectives from around the country. To a man and woman, I learned that each violent crime scene remained as wrenching and heart rending as the first to these detectives. Each invaded and threatened to damage the most seasoned veteran's human spirit.

When I inquired of more than a few of my classmates, "How do you deal with the carnage you face on a weekly, if not daily basis?" I normally received a shrug, a slight smile, and a similar lie. "I go home and leave it at work." Some exercised. Others engaged in hobbies or buried themselves in family activities. And sadly, a few turned to drugs or alcohol in an attempt to smother their minds and deal with the stress. Each, however, returned the following day and waited for the next call.

Understanding how other detectives dealt with a violent crime, however, didn't help me deal with the scene before me.

Jan Stillwell watched my eyes glaze over and remain that way for the better part of thirty seconds. Growing concerned, he said, "Sir?"

I returned to the reality of the scene. "Sorry. Lost in thought. Please continue."

"A Mr. And Mrs. Anderson stumbled upon the body during a predawn walk. They used the Sixth Street South crossover and stopped a car on A1A. They asked the occupant, a Mr. Andrew Keskes to contact the police and report the death. Dispatch radioed Officer Franklin who had pulled over a speeder on Highway 520. I

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heard the call and the two of us responded immediately. We arrived on scene minutes later."

"Any idea who our victim might be?"

"None, sir. Mrs. Anderson is, as you can imagine, rather shaken. Mr. Anderson, however, appears calm. He denies any knowledge of the individual."

"Anything else?"

"Sorry, sir."

"Quit apologizing. You did fine."

4

Detective Roger Penthorpe, a five-year veteran of the force and a new detective, approached me as Jan Stillwell finished his report. "Nasty scene," Roger said. "I hope I die in my sleep and not as fish food."

"I'm not certain we get to choose. Besides, you'd be dead. Why would you care?"

"I...I guess. It's just that..."

"Leave this conversation for later, Roger. What do you have?"

Roger glanced at his detective's log. "Dispatch called at 7:01. I arrived at the scene at 7:35. Four patrol officers are present. All have checked in with Benjamin Adams, the control officer. Photographers

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are waiting for clearance to do their job. The ME is on his—or her way. Not sure who's responding." Roger produced an ancient 35-millimeter camera. "I used up two rolls of film."

"Good. Wouldn't want to miss anything."

Roger turned to leave but hesitated. "Noah, who was the guy I saw you talking to shortly after you arrived?"

"You mean the guy with the goatee, gray ponytail, and Buddy Holly glasses?"

"Yeah, him. He seemed a little weird. He walks like he's got a corn cob stuck up his rear. And those mannerisms, the word pompous comes to mind."

I cracked a smile as I recalled numerous conversations with my next-door neighbor, the self-styled and self-named, 'The Illustrious Horatio Barrington'. These conversations usually involved infamous killers or unsolved murders that screamed across the nation's headlines during the last century.

Horatio and I live at the end of Surf Drive on a stub street given the name Wavecrest Drive by my father after a wave from an offshore hurricane crested thirty feet from our oceanfront deck. The resulting surge from the wave washed away our deck, my new Schwinn bicycle, a present on my fourteenth birthday, my dad's barbecue, and the neighbors' recent landscaping. It also inundated our living area and ruined my mother's collection of knockoff Persian rugs. To this day, I mentally catch the putrid reek of the soaked carpeting whenever I enter a house devoid of air conditioning. Florida's extreme humidity even during the fall and spring permeates any fabric material untreated with cool dry air.

The hurricane-induced wave, however, didn't wash away any lives or my parent's determination to rebuild a newer and more storm resistant house and deck—without knockoff Persian rugs.

I moved back into my parent's home a month after they died in a single-engine plane crash on their way to their thirtieth anniversary celebration in Key West. I loved my parents and their beach house and I never failed to remember them for their foresight in purchasing

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the property before Cocoa Beach beachfront prices escalated beyond the ability of a mid-level space worker, or a detective, to afford an oceanfront home.

"You haven't had the distinct pleasure of meeting Horatio?" I said to Roger.

"Horatio...?"

"Barrington. Horatio Barrington."

"No. Who is he?"

"A neighbor of mine for the last ten years. He's an eccentric true-crime author who had his last day in the sun almost twenty years ago."

"A has been?"

"That's a little strong. Horatio has published a few books since but none that provided the same degree of fame and notoriety as his first."

"Is he straight or...well you know. He seemed a little...you know. I swear I saw a hint of limp wrist."

"I have no idea. Never asked and don't care. Now let's get back to work."

Roger left without further comment while I recalled the short conversation I had conducted with my next-door neighbor.

5

“Ah, my good detective,” Horatio had said as he bent his lithe frame and stepped under the tape cordoning off the scene of the investigation. “A word, please.”

I turned. “Morning, Horatio. Up a little early aren’t you?”

“Sleep eluded me. I thought I’d work on a new true crime story I’m developing around the gruesome killings of three gorgeous young children last year in Idaho. You remember the case. The children were...”

“Horatio, I’m a little busy here. I’d love to discuss crime with you but not right now, so if you’ll excuse me.” I turned to leave. Horatio interrupted me.

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"I had my police scanner on as I wrote. Heard about the tragedy. Thought I might lend a hand, what with my extensive background as a recorder of crime."

"I appreciate the offer but you're not authorized to..."

"Have you identified the victim yet? If not, I might be able to provide some insight into her...or him as the case may be. As you are aware, I am familiar with a fair number of individuals around Cocoa Beach."

I paused and considered the offer. Finally, "We have an unknown male."

Horatio refused to wait for a formal invitation. He stepped past me and stood over the body. "Oh my, oh my. Mother Nature hasn't wasted much time returning this one to the essence of her womb."

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. Merely rambling." Horatio spent a few minutes viewing the remains and then stood back. "Sorry, never laid eyes on the gentleman."

"Thanks for trying. Now if you'll..."

"Any signs of foul play?"

"You know I can't share information while in the middle of an investigation. You'll know when John Q. Public knows."

"I just thought..."

"Thought what? Cocoa Beach hasn't had a murder in years. Don't look here for your next bestseller."

"I'd never dream of such a thing, even though Audrey Parsons, my new bitch-for-an-agent, is pushing me for another bestseller. She and my new publisher believe I can wave my magic wand and generate..."

"I'm busy here, Horatio. Save it for another time."

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