

7. “The Morgue: Fifty Ways to Kill a Man”

A compilation of graphic newspaper reports on murders in Los Angeles that served as a backdrop to Molly’s story

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L.A. reporters in the fifties had a special fondness for very unlikely murders, those with existential plot twists. The more senseless, accidental – inexplicable – the better. Murder weapons were fired by mistake. Victims egged their murderers on. The literary style was unusually ripe, often comical, like crime melodrama on the radio; or perhaps the mood on the crime beat.

In 2001, while researching for *Bleeding Through*, I found thousands of homicides at a newspaper morgue downtown (circa 1900–1965). They sat eerily next to stories on Rose Parade floats. Everything was stored just as the reporters had left them. One manila folder really caught my eye. It featured 212 of someone’s favorite murders, stamped from 1959 to 1961. The tough guy humor was everywhere, truly a hardboiled style. Victims were “slugged,” or found “semi-nude,” as if at a strip joint. Gentle personal details were slipped in, to round out the existential irony. Anything to make the crime seem even more inexplicable. Often, tormented former GIs were featured, usually white Protestant, the guys who never quite got over it:

“Man Held in Slaying of Ex-Wife’s Mate”

Lee H. Beatty was an El Segundo plant security captain. His wife, Dorothy, had just left him, and remarried. Beatty was overwhelmed, es-

pecially after his attorney warned him “to use extreme care” with Arthur J. Myers, his wife’s new husband, because Myers “might go ‘berserk.’” After driving Dorothy and their ten-months-old son Eric to the airport, Beatty received a phone call from Myers, who was asking where his wife was. So Beatty invited Myers to his home at 304 16th Place, Manhattan Beach. There, the two men chatted on the couch. Beatty then pulled a 38 revolver that was hidden under the cushion.

“Murder: Girls’ Fondness for Beatnik Life Told”

Durella (Corky) Boyer was a seventeen-year-old waitress who had entered “the beatnik lifestyle.” Her murderer and occasional boyfriend, Timothy (Timmy Boy) Vance, had recently been held, then released, on suspicion of armed robbery. Before settling in L.A., Vance had served in the Air Force, but had taken to the beatnik lifestyle recently (what the writer meant by beatnik is never explained). Soon after he murdered Corky, Vance was spotted by her former boyfriend, Szendre. The two men chatted for a while. Vance returned the friendship ring that Szendre had given Corky because she apparently “had asked him to return it.”

The Black Dahlia murder (1947) clearly left a dark impression on reporters. They seemed on the lookout for stories involving decapitation. Elizabeth Short, known as the Black Dahlia, had been found with her neck severed almost completely. The murder was never solved. And often enough, these stories about dismemberment were strangely ironic.

“‘Head in Bag’ Victim Named”

“A ‘bowling bum’ sought in \$17,000 burglary Wednesday was identified as the man whose dismembered body was found in a mountain disposal pit... Mosser’s head and hands were encased in separate plastic bags.” Police also discovered “empty canvas money bags.” “Deputies speculated Mosser either was killed by an accomplice in the burglary or was taken by surprise by an acquaintance he caught in the act of robbing the safes and was killed to prevent him from identifying the burglar.” Mosser’s fellow workers accepted the latter theory. “He never had any money, he seemed

to live for bowling, and he spent all his time here, but he's never taken anything that didn't belong to him even though he had opportunities,' said Bob Cameron, manager of the bowling alley." "Mosser, an Air Force veteran, who came here from Ohio five years ago, had been working as a maintenance man," Don Godard, the owner of the bowling alley said.

"As far as I know, he did not have the combination to the safe,' he added. "Godard said Mosser was an expert mechanic but had been fired earlier from that job 'because he was always going to sleep on the job.'" "Two rings found on the murdered man's hands were traced to woman friends – one, Joan Neese, 25, 8311 North Harvard Boulevard, identified the silver friendship ring she gave him a year ago... The other, a high school class ring, belonged to a former sweetheart, friends said..."

"Working in Vegas Casino: Head Mystery Woman is Alive"

"After police found a severed head, a brother and neighbors of Mrs. Dorothy Hamilton (53) identified it as hers. But days later, Mrs. Hamilton was identified as living in a Las Vegas apartment with her husband, William, also known as William Bryan Brewster. "Detective Chief B.J. Maltn, of Las Vegas, said that Hamilton had been booked as a fugitive on a check warrant from Fresno." Both Garden Grove detectives and Las Vegas detectives were flummoxed. Detective Mike Winger said "Mrs. Hamilton was pretty emotional, so we didn't show her the picture of the head."

"Misfiring' Gun Kills Man in Marital Row"

"I honestly thought there were no bullets in the gun, it fired and mis-fired so often," said the tearful Mrs. Teresa Brill, wife and murderer of Frank Brill. The running quarrel began, she said, as they left their liquor store after attending a wedding. They had been married nineteen years, but he remained insanely jealous. "He treated me like chattel." "But I loved him. He was wonderful when he was sober..." So while the argument kept heating up, Teresa stood it for a while. Then Frank slapped her twice. She finally slapped him back. That somehow calmed Frank down, but the argument flared up yet again, as the couple drove home. Mrs. Brill happened to own a gun, a .32 caliber revolver given to her by Frank.

“When the quarrel started I put the gun to my temple and pulled the trigger. It misfired. Then Frank grabbed it from me and fired twice out the window... He tossed it back to me and shouted “you don’t have the nerve to use it.” I fired a shot through the floor of the car and he pulled over to the curb. ‘I pointed the gun at him and it went off.”

“Killer Rolls Auto Over His Victim” (apparently back and forth)

“Like any murder weapon, the car left identifiable traces. It has a broken tail light from hitting the fence, a cracked headlight from hitting the victim. And tire marks in nearby dirt.”

Just below one homicide section, there was a 100-word article; filler at the corner of the page. It reported the words that a florist had painted on the back of his truck. The sign in red warned drivers who were too close: “Be careful. The next load may be for you.” That surely gave the editor a laugh. Often, death has moments that are just funny, no matter how sobering. What this dark humor says about our true nature is anyone’s guess. The usual answer is that we are laughing in the dark at our own fumbling and loneliness. Homicides back in Molly’s day were often written as a kind of wake; by exhausted witnesses to crimes across the street; who needed to unload. Reporting crime made them wonder if any life can entirely add up.

I am reminded of one conversation that I had with Molly. According to one neighbor at least, Molly apparently murdered her second husband. But she never let on at all. One day, while sitting in her kitchen, filled with Depression era glassware, I asked if we could walk through her attic. I even silently wondered if I might find the telltale rope left by her second husband’s suicide. Molly just said, “Sure.” She was always the soul of kindness, or perhaps exhausted by her endless routine.

Her 1887 attic was huge but empty, except for a package wrapped in yellowed butcher paper. I asked Molly if I could open it. She said fine, adjusted her thick glasses. It turned out to be a package of Communist literature from the thirties.

“Oh, that would be my sister,” Molly said. “She was the reader in the family.” And with that additional plot twist, we left the attic.