

READ NAUGHT ABOUT IT

By Kieran Crowley

WE WERE TALKING the other day about the greatest stories never written, ones that never made the paper, and I immediately thought about The Gang That Couldn't Think Straight and another case, both of which involved guns, cars and police precincts.

I can't tell you the names, never mind the year and forget which boro. I was the 6 a.m. morning guy working out of the City Desk and dispatched to what seemed like a routine murder and body dumping on a city street. I was sent only because it was a good neighborhood and the body had been found a block from a police precinct.

By the time I arrived, the crime scene, the bullet-riddled body and the cops were all gone. The residents were friendly but they heard nothing, saw nothing and knew nothing. So far, so good.

Back then I had a hobby — looking for evidence in daylight that overworked Crime Scene detectives might have missed in the dark. It wasn't much of a hobby, but, over the years, by tracing bullet paths, I found more than a dozen shell casings and at least half a dozen bullets, including one from a major mob hit.

By tracing the escape routes of bad guys, I located the hidden, bloody coat of a gunman involved in a wild shootout with cops, and other evidence. Once, when I wasn't even looking, I found a live bullet outside a precinct that had fallen out of a patrolman's gunbelt.

Whenever I found something, I would always locate cops or investigators at the scene or call the precinct and report it to the detectives on the case, who would collect it. Then, of course, I would ask for their help.

Some detectives were amused, some were grateful and some were understandably cranky about a reporter finding evidence. Once they realized I was not out to embarrass them, we usually both benefited from the courtesy. They always agreed to call when they made an arrest and sometimes they actually did.

On that morning, I walked around the empty crime scene. I knew which way the getaway car had left the spot where the corpse had been dumped, marked now by a frozen patch of blood on the cold pavement. As I had done at many other crime scenes, I began walking the escape route, looking under parked cars, hoping the killer had tossed the murder weapon away. Halfway down the block I saw something under one car and crouched down for a closer look.

It looked like a gun.

"What are you looking for?" asked one friendly resident, whom I had already interviewed.

"Oh, just looking to see if the cops missed anything," I smiled, as I strode quickly away and across the street to the corner candy store. I called the nearby precinct and told a surprised detective that he should come back and get the gun. He said he would. Next, I dialed my office and asked the photo editor to send a photographer.

While I was on the phone, the man from the street burst into the store and rushed over to me, triumphantly waving something in his hand — a blood-spattered gun.

"Look. I found it under a car," he said.

A barnyard epithet crossed my mind but did not escape my lips.

"Yeah, I know. Why did you pick it up? I just called the cops," I said, as politely as I could.

"Police? Oh, no. You take it, you give it to them," he said, thrusting the bloody weapon at me.

"Wait," I said, pulling out a spare ballpoint pen, which I used to hook the triggerguard without touching the pistol, in my best Inspector Clouseau manner, something I had always wanted to do. I talked him into staying until the cops showed up, which was fast.

The detectives were not overjoyed to see a reporter and a member of the public with their murder weapon. I explained what had happened, especially the part where I did not pick it up. The detectives gave me very little information. Even though I had found the gun, they refused to wait for my photographer to arrive to take a picture of it. They promised to call when they got a break in the case, but I got the impression I'd better not hold my breath.

I then decided to try following the escape route further in my car, just in case the killer had littered the streets with any more evidence.

It took me about an hour, trying different possible streets, to find something else. In the street, near a parked car, I saw a big, bunched-up wool scarf that looked too new to be garbage. I pulled over and lifted the edge with the toe of my shoe. The underside of the scarf was wet and heavy, soaked with blood. I called the detectives once more and told them my latest discovery.

"You again?" asked the exasperated but amused detective. This time they were more friendly and I got a cup of coffee in the squadroom. I got some more information but not enough to make what seemed a routine rubout into much of a story. Again they promised I

would be the first one they called when they broke the case.

I filed a story but there were no pictures and no sexy lede. It didn't run.

A few weeks later, I did get a call from one of the detectives, who was true to his word. I wrote a story about the roundup of the killers, but the story, a follow-up to one we never ran, contained the dreaded phrase "drug-related killing," and once more ended up on an editor's spike.

It wasn't the only time I had a close encounter with a gun and couldn't get it in the paper. Once, while waiting for a big story in front of a Queens station-house, I was chatting with WCBS-TV reporter Anthony Mason, when a car pulled up to the front door. I looked through the open passenger window and saw that the woman inside was grimacing in pain and holding her bloody right shoulder. She asked me for help and showed me the source of the blood — an oozing hole in her skin, between the shoulder blade and the heart.

"You were shot?" I asked, somewhat unnecessarily.

She just nodded her head yes and looked at the man at the wheel next to her. He motioned to her to get out and seemed in a big hurry to drive away. I ran inside the precinct and told the desk sergeant they had a woman shot. By the time I got back outside, a cop car had come down the street the wrong way, blocking the nervous driver, who could not move because more cars had come up the single lane street behind him.

I opened the door and leaned into the car to help the woman out. Before I could do anything, the fidgety driver looked around, shrugged and put the car in Park. He pulled something out of his jacket and held it out at me.

"Here," he said. It was a gun.

It was a silver, two-shot derringer and still had one live round in the chamber. It was pointed at me. A cold hand grabbed my stomach and I froze. It took me several seconds to realize that he had given up hope of escape and was trying to hand the pistol to me — not shoot me. He thought I was a cop. Fortunately, a real cop came up next to me to help.

"Wait a second," I told the gunman, ducking back out of the car. "'He's got something he wants to give to you. He's got a gun,'" I told the cop, who quickly grabbed the pistol.

That story never saw the light of day, either.

Sometime after the gun-under-the-car incident, a good source — not any of the detectives who promised to call — asked me if I wanted to know what really happened. I did.

"But you can't use it," he warned.

I groaned and agreed I would not do a story using him as a source until after



any trials. My source grinned and spilled the beans about the case for which I had found evidence: According to the confession of one of the killers, my source said, it was a drug rubout that took place "right in front of the bleeping precinct!"

While riding around in a cluttered car with foggy windows in the middle of a cold night, the source said, three cocaine entrepreneurs had some sort of a dispute with a fourth gentleman in the back seat, which they decided to settle out of court. While stopped at a traffic light, one of the men in the back seat and a colleague in the front passenger seat, whipped out pistols and blazed away at the victim at point-blank range, killing him.

One or more of those shots shattered the car window behind the murdered man, spraying glass into the street. When the smoke cleared, the killers had an unobstructed view through the hole in the window of a municipal building about a hundred feet away. They noticed that the building's entrance was flanked by two green lights, each emblazoned with the glowing words "POLICE."

Amazingly, there was no one on the street and the small caliber gunfire inside

the closed car did not reach anyone's ears inside the stationhouse. The driver floored the accelerator and sped away.

Committing a murder in front of a police station had made the gunmen a little nervous. They had a dead body, a smashed window and several guns in the car and decided it might be a good idea to get rid of some of those incriminating items.

Within a few hundred yards, the shooters stopped and ejected their lifeless victim into the gutter. Once he was out of the car, they sped away again. But in their haste, they made another mistake. As they raced down the block, one of the gunmen tossed his bloody gun out the shattered window and it skittered under a car. The gunman in the back seat then used a thick scarf to wipe blood off the seat and soon tossed that, too, out the window, apparently thinking that was that.

It wasn't.

At first, it looked like detectives had a killing without witnesses. But when they turned over the body of the murdered man, they found a few items of debris that had apparently been shoved out of the messy car with him — including a

parking ticket issued to a vehicle that turned out to be the murder car. Needless to say, the Gang That Couldn't Think Straight was rounded up.

The detectives were happy but I wasn't. I never did the story because I couldn't get an on-the-record source for the key part of the story, the part that located the shooting in front of the precinct. For some reason, no detective wanted to admit that a murder had been committed in front of their stationhouse.

Go figure.

It was very frustrating, almost as frustrating as another story that got away, the one about the unwitting celebrity and the suave Russian spy — but I still can't tell that.

Kieran Crowley of The Post has stopped collecting guns and murder evidence because he can't get it in the paper. His first non-fiction book, "Sleep My Little Dead, The True Story of the Zodiac Killer," will be published this year by St. Martin's Press.