

Dying Alone

by Dennis Herrick

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TUESDAY MORNING

It was a murder. But I doubted many people would care much—if at all.

Joe, the security guard with a belly like a pillow at the Albuquerque Police Station, alerted me to the story. I knew right away, however, that my editors wouldn't be very interested.

I write stories on one or two murders every week as the police beat reporter for the *Albuquerque Sun* daily newspaper. But I never would have guessed how that one murder would eventually involve me.

On the day I would learn of the murder, I had driven as always into downtown, Albuquerque's buildings crowding me on one of the narrowest main drags of any big city. Murals of early New Mexico history in Diego Rivera style colored the walls of buildings overlooking parking lots, Indian souvenir shops, neon nightclubs, restaurants and offices. The city stirred from grayness as December's tardy sun cast light into dark corners and crept down alleys. I turned onto a side street toward the police station. Every weekday morning at seven, I went to work just like everyone else I knew.

Well, not everyone. I waved to a homeless man in layered clothes shambling along a sidewalk, a woolen hat pulled over his head and ears. These guys always reminded me of my brother Rick's last days. I kept dollar coins in my pocket to give to homeless people. I'd pull out more than one coin if they looked pitiful and hungry

enough. As a result, it wasn't long before many of them started to recognize me, knowing there was a sure buck in a greeting. Some, like this guy, would even chat me up a little when we met on sidewalks. With me driving by in a car this time, the man just waved back, a copy of the morning paper he had found somewhere flashing like a semaphore flag in his hand. I worked for the afternoon paper, which not even homeless people apparently read these days.

Shaking my head, I steered my car onto Fourth Street, suddenly aware of a ticking sound from the four-cylinder engine. When had I last checked the oil level? I parked beside the police station, a stuccoed monolith commanding a full block along Roma Avenue.

The station reminded me of a giant spider squatting along the street. Columns stood like legs three stories high on each end to support the overhanging top floor. At night the windows shone like rows of eyes watching the city.

My morning news-gathering always started there. I climbed from my car and stretched. I was still lean, but I wasn't as long anymore. I used to be five-ten, but the last doctor's measurement proved I'd shrunk an inch since I hit my fifties. It was hard to take. Almost as hard as closing in on sixty.

Toward the east, past the downtown buildings, I could see sunrise-tinged clouds as pink as cotton candy floating over the hazy Sandia Mountains. If I'd been on higher ground, I could have looked to the west and seen a ridge of five volcanoes. Outside Albuquerque, the Great American Desert rolled on for hundreds of miles. I drew a breath of the mile-high air. A breeze puffed cold as refrigerator air against my face, chilling me in my blue blazer.

I climbed the fourteen concrete steps to the main police entrance and pushed open the door to a small lobby. A pair of doors separated that area from the security booth, which blocked anyone from walking farther without permission from Joe the gatekeeper.

Joe couldn't get enough of the police force, where he'd earned ten hash marks on his sleeve for twenty years of service. After retiring, Joe hired on with Albuquerque City Security, whose guards manned the glassed-in security booth. Joe often remarked how he enjoyed running out his days to a second retirement by sitting behind bulletproof glass.

I walked through the entrance and reached into the security booth where Joe kept a small coffee maker tucked in a corner. I slid a quarter onto Joe's counter and poured a cup of the thickest, vilest coffee in Albuquerque. I needed to jump-start my brain when it was this early. This should do the trick, I thought, grimacing at the first swallow.

Joe looked up from his chair grinning. He had big ears, a big nose, a big belly, and a face darkened by a five o'clock shadow because he always shaved the night before instead of in the morning. Joe held out a mug with a year's worth of coffee stains and swung it with the traditional toasting motion toward me. He enjoyed a gulp of the same coffee that I half-choked on. "Ahh," he said, "put a little cheap wine in this for flavor, you know, and you'd be king of the hobos."

"You do remember that I wasn't actually homeless, right, Joe? When you met me, I was on assignment. I spent a week as a street person for a story."

Joe shrugged. This insight never interested him. Then his face brightened. "Hey, I've got something your rag might like." Joe pulled a crime report copy from under his counter. "This one came in about six hours ago and has a new development, you know." The report he handed me told of a beaten man found unconscious behind the Coronado

Bar. I marveled at how Joe often handed me copies of crime reports. He supposedly no longer had access as a security guard, but friends in the ranks will do favors forever.

Other reporters had ignored this incident because radio traffic on their scanners had labeled it an aggravated assault.

Joe showed me a telephone message only minutes old from New Mexico Hospital that upgraded the incident. “It’s not an aggravated assault any more, you know,” Joe said when I glanced up from the report at him. “The big boys ran out there a few minutes ago, you know, for a yellow-tape party.”

Reporting on any murder was my job. I’d write a story on this one, too, even though most of the *Sun*’s readers would shrug it off.