

A True Christmas Story

By

Edna Buchanan

I worked on holidays. I didn't mind. Married colleagues with families deserve those special times off. Fewer of my editors and top police brass work then, and a reporter can accomplish far more without them. I like to write holiday stories, to report on how the rest of Miami celebrates. There is always news: big families get together. Some turn on each other, and the shooting starts. On the Fourth of July and New Year's Eve they celebrate with guns and fireworks. Somebody always gets hurt. On Memorial Day and Labor Day they get drunk and careen around in high-powered speedboats and jet skis. Kids race out of the house early to try out new skates and bicycles. Still shaky on their new wheels, some cross paths with motorists hung over from the night before.

Some people never make it home from Christmas parties. Holidays bring despair to some, rage to others. Sometimes there are stories of hope and renewal.

Sometimes, but not often.

Even though I work on those special days, I am old-fashioned and cling to tradition. I like turkey on Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve candlelight services, but one year I missed both. The day before that Thanksgiving I checked the Miami Herald employee cafeteria. They were already serving turkey, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie - - the works, so I waited. Obviously they'd serve turkey on Thanksgiving, even if it was just leftovers.

Wrong again. The Herald cafeteria was open, as promised, but on Thanksgiving Day all they served was leftover macaroni and cheese, scorched in the reheating. The joke was on me. So I dined on burned leftover mac and cheese for Thanksgiving.

That was festive compared to Christmas Eve.

John Patrick O'Neill could no longer live with his secret. Alone and jobless, O'Neill, fifty, shared his home with four stray cats, his only friends. They all lived together under the East Bridge of the MacArthur Causeway. From the gloom beneath the bridge, as traffic rumbled by overhead, they could see the city skyline, holiday lights and the multi-million-dollar Star Island homes of the rich and famous. On Christmas Eve, the animals lost their friend and protector.

At dark, as motorists speeded by, O'Neill trudged more than a mile to Miami Beach police headquarters. It was Christmas Eve, and he wanted to confess. He had killed a man, he said, and buried the corpse beneath the bridge where he lived.

O'Neill had a reason. The man he killed, who was also homeless, had hurled his beloved

(over)

cats, all four of them into Biscayne Bay to drown. The thrashing, panicky animals could not climb the sheer concrete embankment. O'Neill jumped into the water, rescued them, then turned to confront the man who tried to drown them.

The man, Daniel Francis Kelly, 58, pulled a knife and lunged at him, O'Neill said. O'Neill punched and stomped Kelly until he was dead, then dug a shallow grave with his hands and a piece of board.

That was on Friday, December 19. Now, on Christmas Eve, he wanted to clear his conscience.

Police were doubtful, but detectives Nick Lluy and Robert Hanlon listened. "He wasn't drunk," Hanlon said later. "It sounds plausible."

Everybody hoped it was not true. Everybody wanted to go home. The detectives went out to the East Bridge and descended into the darkness beneath. They scanned with flashlights, probed the ground and found a suspicious mound that emitted an even more suspicious odor.

A fire truck with high-intensity lights arrived to illuminate the area, directly across from the Miami Beach Coast Guard base. The detectives sent for shovels and generators and began to dig.

About to leave the Herald for Christmas Eve services, I heard something was afoot and called police headquarters. Detective Anthony Sabatino had just bought O'Neill a double hamburger, microwaved at a 7-Eleven. "This is a heckuva way to spend Christmas," the detective said.

He was right.

Instead of church I went out to the scene to learn what they would find. The underside of the bridge is a haven to street people. A number of urban Bedouins had camped there from time to time. There were couches and chaise lounges, even a tiny Christmas tree with tinsel.

Police spokesman Howard Zeifman cautioned that it all might be a hoax. "People have lived under here for years," he said. "It smells of rotten food, human waste and cats."

It did.

But the story was no hoax. Cops, a prosecutor, a medical examiner and firefighters labored through the night, watched by a cautious full-grown calico and a curious, half-grown black cat with a white bib. By Christmas morning the shallow

grave had yielded the dead man's remains and O'Neill was charged with second-degree murder.

"I feel kind of sad for the guy," said Hanlon, a veteran detective. "If he didn't come in and tell us about it, there's a very good chance that we never would have found it. It must have been bothering him."

Identified through fingerprints, the dead man had a nineteen page arrest record, mostly for drunkenness, vagrancy and disorderly conduct. Police remembered him as a "nasty drunk." Hanlon himself had once arrested Kelly. A Christmas Day autopsy confirmed the death was caused by blows to the head.

In his jail cell, O'Neill worried about his friends. He called the calico the Bandit. The black with the bib was Smokey, Satchmo was a striped gray, and the Tiger was white with golden stripes. O'Neill was served a Christmas Day dinner of roast beef, but nobody fed them.

"I'm just sorry about my cats," he told Hanlon. The detective tried to catch them, to take to the Humane Society, but they scampered away and he had no time to spend in their pursuit.

My story appeared, and Herald readers who care about animals created a minor traffic jam on the causeway. One woman rescued three of the cats and took them home. She never found Satchmo. "They were very well taken care of," she said. "These were not stray cats."

John O'Neill pleaded not guilty, and we spoke after his arraignment. He said he was not a killer. "It was self-defense. I had five lives to protect. Four of them were my cats," the fifth, he said, was his own.

He said his cats were better friends than some people. He had found each of them in Miami Beach, lost, abandoned and hungry. He had rescued them, one by one, and taken them home, to his place under the bridge. It was home to him.

"I sure love the water," he said. "I feel free there. I like it, it's outside, no rent, no nothing. I always had cat food for them. I fed them 7 o'clock in the morning. When I left for the day, I always left a big bowl of water. I had vitamins for them too. When I came home at five or 6 o'clock, I would feed them again and give them fresh water."

His days were busy in Miami Beach, "picking up and recycling aluminum cans, so I could feed them and myself. I also got my beer and my smokes out of it. That was my daily routine, collecting cans and feeding my cats."

Kelly disrupted that routine the week before Christmas. Other homeless men often shared the space under the bridge, and he was one of them. He snatched up O'Neill's friends - - the Bandit, the Tiger, Smokey and Satchmo-- and hurled them into the Bay.

"They were clinging to the sea wall," O'Neill said. He saved them, then faced their attacker. "If you ever do that again, I'll break your jaw!" Kelly pulled a

butcher knife, he said and rushed him. O'Neill punched, kicked and stomped the man.

“What I did was for them. I just went on hitting him.” This was the first time such a thing had ever happened to him. He did like to drink and admitted his share of trouble, “but never violence.”

He had lived with the burden of his secret for five days and nights, then could stand the guilt no more. A practicing Catholic, “on and off,” he said, “I had to get it off my chest.” Jailed without bond, he would stand trial in the spring.

I asked if he wanted me to contact anyone. His mother still lived in Port Chester, New York, where he grew up along the coast of Long Island Sound, fourteen hundred miles north of Miami. She knew nothing of his trouble.

“I haven't written her,” he told me. “If it was something else, it would have been easy, but I don't know how to tell her this.”

At the office I heard from a shocked reader, a man who grew up with O'Neill in Port Chester, where he was known as Teedy O'Neill.

“He was the leader, the one you always chose first for a baseball team,” said the boyhood friend. “He was a tough, athletic kid, but never a bully.” Teedy O'Neill was a drifter and a loner even then, “an outdoorsy type guy who just drifted in and out of school. He was a hero, a good guy. He wouldn't hurt a soul. He wouldn't pick on anybody. Is he a bum? No, he is not a bum. It takes quite a man to confess when his conscience bothers him.”

My stories went out on the newswire, and letters of support came from animal lovers all over the country.

A jury deliberated for an hour that spring, then returned a not-guilty verdict. They believed it was self-defense. The kind woman who cared for Smokey, the Bandit and Tiger found O'Neill a place to stay and work at an auto dealership.

It was April in Miami. The temperature was 80.

But it finally felt like Christmas.

The End