

# Wrong Place, Wrong Time, Wrong Tree

*by* Nathaniel Tower

I found him dead underneath a sycamore tree. I knew it was a sycamore tree because of all the acorns surrounding the body. My expertise in ornithology always helped in matters like these. Naturally, I did what any sensible human being would have done upon stumbling upon a dead body—I checked to ensure that the man was indeed dead. My clumsy hands fumbled around on his cold neck as I frantically searched for a pulse. Scattered about his neck were hundreds of tiny black whiskers that had seemingly given up on their attempt to penetrate the skin. They made the skin rough, and the rough skin scratched at my delicate fingertips. My fingertips had been designed for more refined things: playing piano, painting pictures, photographing scenic overlooks. I was not one to deal with the dead, but I knew enough to ascertain that this dead body was indeed a dead body.

It was the first dead body I had seen before, other than at funeral visitations, but those aren't really dead bodies; those are plaster frames with rubber skins pulled over them. No human being has ever looked like a body on display in a coffin. The appearance of this man was far less grotesque than that of a funeral body, but I suppose that would have been different had he a gash wound in his head or a slit in his throat. From just a glance and the little handling I had done, I had no way of knowing how this body came to be dead. Although I was curious, I decided it best not to investigate the cause of death. There were paid professionals who did that.

Before calling the proper authorities to come claim the body, I performed every test I knew to check for deadness. I didn't want to feel like a fool when the ambulances and police cars and fire trucks came just to tell me that the man was merely sleeping.

"Wake up man, wake up," I cried in his left ear. He stirred not.

"Wake up man, wake up," I bellowed in his right ear. There still was no stirring.

When he didn't respond to my verbal attempts, I decided that he might be deaf. Between my thumb and forefinger I pinched his legs repeatedly until I was sure he was not moving.

Perhaps he couldn't hear and couldn't feel. Since his eyes were closed, seeing wasn't an option, so I opted to stimulate his sense of smell. In my pocket I had a chocolate bar, so I broke it in half and smeared it right on the slouched man's stubbly face. After giving the scent a moment to permeate the nose hairs and seep into his smelling receptors, I determined the man either had no senses or truly was dead.

With a newfound sense of confidence, I dialed on my cellular phone the number I had learned in my childhood to dial immediately in case of emergency.

"Hello, what's your emergency?" an ironically friendly voice asked magically into my ear.

"Ummm, well, I'm not sure if it classifies as an *emergency*, but I believe I am standing near a dead man in the park," I told her calmly.

"What is your location?" the woman asked, no longer friendly.

"I'm standing by an old oak tree in a park. I mean a sycamore tree."

"Sir, you'll have to be more specific."

"Well, judging by the swaying of the branches, I would say that I am standing north of the tree."

"Sir, I need to know which park you are in." I could sense that the woman was becoming frustrated. Perhaps she was in the wrong line of work.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm in Pearburn Park."

"Okay, I am sending a unit there right away. Please stay on the line so I may record your information."

Record my information? Why did this woman need my information? Instinctively, I hung up the phone, hoping that she hadn't had enough time to trace my number. Within moments of

clicking the phone closed, a fierce vibration stung my hand. She had indeed traced my number, and there she was calling me again.

"Hello?" I answered tentatively.

"Sir, I need to know some information."

"I'm sorry, I don't give personal information over the phone."

"Sir, I am not going to use your information for anything other than a police file. This is standard procedure, and it makes things much easier. If you don't give it to me, I will find it another way." Her voice had become very authoritative. I missed the friendliness she had used before.

"You'll have to get the information on your own then," I replied politely. "Sorry for any convenience, but that is simply my policy."

I quickly hung up the phone and removed the battery. Seeing no reason to stay, for I had already completed my civic duty, I began to walk away from the scene when I heard the sirens approaching. Instinctively I increased the pace of my walk to match the rhythm of the howling sirens. I was at a near jog when I heard "Stop, police" shouted from behind me.

He's already stopped, was my first thought. He's dead, you idiots. That's why I called. "Stop or we'll shoot," the voice cried again.

At that moment, I realized that the request was being issued to me, not to the dead man, and it seemed more of a command than a request. I stopped.

"Put your hands where we can see them."

I raised my hands.

"Get down on your knees."

This request I found inconsiderate, so instead I turned, arms still raised, to plead with the men who had mistaken me for some common criminal.

"I said get down on your knees," the voice shouted. The slowly setting sun left me blind to the precise position of the voice.

"The dead man is over there," I pointed.

"Say another word and you'll be the dead man."

I thought his speech was highly irregular. In my head I began to write a letter to the police commissioner.

"Last time. Down on your knees." He paused after each word, accentuating each syllable like some deranged Neanderthal man—is it pronounced with a 'th' or just a 't' at the end? I've heard it both ways. Regardless, due to his lack of intelligence, I thought kneeling to now be the best option. I didn't need this ape-man to lose control of his finger.

"That's it, nice and slow, and keep the hands raised."

I did as he told, no desire to join the dead man by the tree.

"Jackson, what's the status of the dead man?" the officer bellowed at the other as he emerged from the glaring sunlight.

"He's dead," Jackson responded insightfully.

"No shit, Sherlock." I thought the man's name was Jackson.

"What do you reckon the cause of death is?"

"Well, he's got some little bruises all over his legs, but I don't reckon that killed him."

"Then that doesn't answer my question, now does it?"

I piped up. "I believe the cause of death was his heart stopped beating. I checked him. He had no pulse."

"Did I ask for your help, coroner?"

The man must have had some sort of identity crisis. Or identifying crisis.

"There is some congealed blood on the back of his head. Looks like someone slammed his head into the tree."

"Do you know anything about slamming heads into trees?" the angry officer asked me.

"That's a sycamore tree over there. I've studied ornithology," was all I could think to say.

"It's an oak tree, you dumb ass. Look at all the acorns. And ornithology is the study of birds, not trees."

"Oh." My ornithology had failed me.

"Hands behind your head."

I assumed he was talking to me, so I put my hands behind my head, but I didn't do it silently.

"What's this all about?"

"You're under arrest for murder."

"That's silly. I've never murdered anyone."

"Tell it to the judge."

"Where's the judge?" I asked.

"Huh? What the hell is your problem, wiseass? Open that mouth again and I'll break your teeth."

I mumbled my next sentence without allowing my lips to part. He couldn't tell what I said, and it wasn't really recognizable to me either. In what seemed like one motion, he cuffed me and dragged me to his car. Jackson followed. The dead man stayed where he was.

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"Your fingerprints were all over the body."

"Of course they were. I had to make sure he was dead."

"Your fingerprints were all over the pants corresponding with the bruise marks."

"Of course they were. I had to make sure he was dead."

"From the position of the fingerprints, it appears that you wrapped your hand around his neck."

"Of course I did. I had to make sure he was dead."

"Your saliva was found in his hair and ear."

"Of course it was. I had to make sure he was dead."

"There was chocolate smeared on his face and you had half of a chocolate bar in your pocket."

"Of course there was, and of course I did. I had to make sure he was dead."

"Why did you have to make sure he was dead?"

"So I could call the police."

"You mean you had to make sure he was dead before you called the police so that he couldn't tell them about you."

"How could he have told them about me? He was dead."

"Exactly." Pause. "How come you were fleeing the scene when the cops got there?"

"Because I had already made sure the man was dead."

At that moment, I realized where he was going with his questions. And I realized where I would be going. Ornithology had ruined me.

