



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Frontline Writers Archive

Frontline Writers

2024

Check Welfare

Erich Hutton

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/frontline_writers_archive

Downloaded from

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/frontline_writers_archive/2

This Police Officers is brought to you for free and open access by the Frontline Writers at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Frontline Writers Archive by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

“Unit 479 copy a check welfare call at 1250 Haddonfield Ct. reference caller Michael Ernst wants PD to check on his 78yr. old father. Has not heard from him in several weeks. History of medical issues. Nothing further.”

I snap out of the trance brought on by the blacktop heat shimmer and dulcet radar tones of steady lunchtime traffic passing by. Hopefully I pull the “Dad just didn’t want to be bothered” card on this round. I turn down the FM radio just as Jimmy Buffett starts telling me how he likes his burger.

“Copy, enroute.”

I drop my cruiser into drive and kick up a little gravel as I rejoin the commute I was just observing. I didn’t catch who marked up to back me on the call, but I’ll find out soon enough.

A drab, one-story brick rancher sits in the cul-de-sac, nestled among more of the same. A rusted black pickup truck is in the driveway, almost touching the backyard privacy fence. Nothing about it screams that someone is home, but I’m not liking some of the other details I’m noticing. Based on my own lack of a green thumb, I’m giving a good estimate that it’s been at least two weeks since the grass has been cut. The mailbox is hemorrhaging envelopes and weekly circulars. I don’t need a closer look to see the little black specks in the windowsill are flies.

Before I can continue my assessment, another patrol car pulls in behind mine. I check my rear-view mirror.

Aw, come on. Him?

I hop out to find Officer Dan McNulty squatting near his car’s side mirror, smoothing his pencil-thin mustache, perfecting his look from behind dark aviator sunglasses. He is a used car salesman in a police uniform.

“Hey man, can you not? Neighborhood’s probably watching.”

“Look good, feel good, baby. Now let’s do some good.”

How is this guy almost old enough to be my dad yet *I’m* the adult here?

A quick knock at the front door and side door don't bring any results. I move to the right side of the house where I noticed the privacy fence door earlier. McNulty stays in the driveway, giving his attention to the truck.

Peeking through the warped boards I can see it's bolted shut. I fish a nearby milk crate out of a patch of weeds and step up for a better view. Just as my eyes clear the top, I catch the unmistakable sound of skittering dirt and a building growl. The fence lurches as a 50lb. fur missile collides with the other side. I take an awkward tumble backwards as I glance flashes of fangs and spittle through the cracks. The barking and scratching subside as I hop up and dust myself off.

"Oh, hey man, there's a dog back there," I hear offered from the other side of the house. Thanks for the heads up.

McNulty is still in the driveway, running a small comb through his hair before sticking it in his back pocket.

"You want to rock-paper-scissors for who gets to kick the door in? I don't have anything for a coin flip," McNulty offers through a shit-eating grin.

I respond with an icy glare before grabbing my shoulder mic.

"Chesterfield, can you contact our caller? See if they can help us out with a key to the residence?"

The dispatcher acknowledges and a few moments later she replies, "Son is enroute, ETA five minutes."

McNulty puts his hands on his hips. "Well damn, man. You're right around the corner, what are you calling us for?"

I welcome the next few minutes of silence before an older maroon sedan pulls up to the end of the driveway. I note the small blessing of not having to ruin someone's door as the keyholder makes his way up to us.

He's slow to greet us, his sunken eyes not rising to meet ours. His dirty blonde hair is unkempt, and his wrinkled polo shirt and jeans bear the resemblance of wardrobe tossed on in a hurry. I gently grab the key he offers me.

"Mr. Ernst, thanks for coming out to meet us. We didn't get an answer, so I wanted the easiest way to gain entry to check the house. Can you tell us a little about your dad? When was the last time you heard from him?"

His answer gets caught in his throat, but he's able to push it out.

"Yeah uh...I think it was three weeks ago. I called last night but didn't get an answer. He's had some heart issues in the past. He got a colon cancer diagnosis last winter. I don't know how much he's gone to the doctor since." The man's fists tighten. "I just wish he would have gone to the doc.." he trails off as he grabs his brow.

I offer a gentle pat on his shoulder. "Stubborn dad. I've been there. Mike, before we go in, are there any weapons in the house? Doggie door for our friend in the backyard?"

"No, the dog stays out back. He collected some antique weapons, but I don't think he has anything else. That key's for the side door to the kitchen."

"Did you want to come in-," McNulty starts before I interrupt with a sideways what-the-fuck death glare.

"We'll be back out in a few minutes to let you know, Mr. Ernst."

McNulty removes his sunglasses and huddles with me on the stoop as I pause and unholster my firearm. He notices and does the same. While I'd like to avoid the tragic irony of shooting someone I came to make sure was alive and well, I'm also not going to casually stroll into someone else's home unannounced. I realize I forgot to ask Mike if his dad had any mental health concerns. I'm not taking a musket round or bayonet to the chest, Mr. Ernst, welfare checked or not.

The door swings in and I'm met with a blast of rotting fish and mothball gas. My stomach lurches as I focus on shouting, "Chesterfield Police!" as we enter. I wince from the smell and in anticipation of what putrefaction awaits.

I stop and McNulty bumps into me as we're standing in a linoleum kitchen straight out of a 1950's showroom. The checkered floor, stool seats at the tiny table in the corner-it's all immaculately clean. The only thing missing is a pair of teenagers sharing a root beer float. "Mr. Sandman" creeps its way into my head as we move through the kitchen. I glance over at the fridge and the record skips.

What the fuck?

Posted across its surface are magazine cutouts. I'm locking eyes with a series of blonde bombshells wearing various combinations of leather straps and chains. Some aren't wearing anything at all. One of the women sits on a saddle with a riding crop in her teeth. There are no horses to be found.

"The hell does this dude's got porn on his fridge for? Ain't it supposed to be grandkids or recipes on this thing?" McNulty asks as he continues his inspection of the women on the fridge. My eyes find a small red-and-white flag also taped to the door. Holy shit, is that a...

Swastika.

McNulty finds it too and the amusement drains from his face.

I nod to the doorway to keep moving. Tightening the grip on my gun, I continue to the hallway that opens into the living room. I continue to yell, "Chesterfield Police! Mr. Ernst!" met with only the tap-tap-buzz of the windowsill colonists. Dusty sunlight shoots onto the wood-paneled walls. A large wooden bookcase, packed to capacity, sits to our left by the front door. A single plaid recliner is in the middle of the room pointing to small TV adorned with knobs and antennae in the opposite corner. As I move to the chair and reach for it, I remember nothing good ever happened in horror movies when you had to find out who, or what, was sitting in a large chair facing away from you. I let out a small sigh as a quick turn revealed it to be empty. The room keeps the trend of intense tidiness except for a fine layer of dust that coats most of the surfaces. I turn to find McNulty at the bookcase.

"Man, what kind of barbarian bullshit is this?"

Scanning volume after volume of German God-knows-what, I follow his focus to a large metal knife displayed on a stand on the top shelf, its long dark blade ends in a handle adorned

with a series of spiked brass knuckles. Two white handkerchiefs embroidered with swastikas complete the presentation on either side of it.

Trench knife. My skin crawls as I started picturing its former owner.

“C’mon, Dan. Find the body, remember?” I turn back to the hallway.

“Yeah, but whose body? And how many?” McNulty weakly offers. “Better not be any booby traps or claymore mines set up for us.”

While I appreciate his brief attention to safety, my heart picks up the pace as my footsteps do the opposite. Even though we’ve only cleared the kitchen and living room, my mind is already imagining the final reveal. In one of these rooms, overturned dressers, blankets, and bed have formed the pillow fort from Hell. Through a narrow slit in the piled pillows and sheets stretches a German rifle. Just behind the metal sights I meet a pair of cold grey eyes ready for one last stand.

Focus. Flies. Gas. Quiet. This guy is dead.

I take the lead and spot the first open door to the left. Hallway carpet meets tile as I realize I’ve chosen rooms poorly.

The bathroom.

Experienced officers will tell you that with DOAs, you always find them one of three ways: naked, on the toilet, or a combination of the two. I slowly turn the corner. *Please no body. Please no body. Please no body.*

No one on the toilet. Thank God. But of course, the opaque white shower curtain is drawn shut. No water running, but I realize I’ve walked right into the camera-view from *Psycho*. With my free hand I grip the curtain and rip to reveal...

An empty tub.

“Bathroom’s clear!” I shout to McNulty as I backhand sweat from my brow, sweat that I know isn’t from the heat. I come back to the hallway and continue as McNulty emerges behind me from another open door. He shakes his head, letting me know we need to keep moving.

One last open door, to what I'm assuming is the bedroom. He's in there. The increased intensity of the smell almost confirms it. I know whatever I find in that room is going to be jarring, and it'll be another folder for the "what-the-fuckery" filing cabinet in my head. I step into the room and can't wrap my head around what I'm seeing on the bed.

A mask of dark purple and shades of green stares back, although not technically staring since the eyes are swollen shut. A thin trickle of crimson runs from the slack mouth. His arms are curled up to his chest, almost in prayer, as he contorts in a roll from his stomach to his side. His midsection bulges, struggling to hold its contents with skin of thin, yellowed paper. The rest of him is concealed under rumpled sheets. The bedroom is neat and continues the trend of no photos or personal items.

"Ugh, fuck," McNulty mumbles from the hall as he puts his hand over his mouth and darts out of view. I quickly check the closet, officially bringing an end to our hunt for bodies.

I step outside, taking in the slowest, deepest breath of fresh air. The lack of decay is invigorating. I hear McNulty making himself useful for a change, radioing to dispatch that it's a confirmed DOA and to start a forensic unit. I see Michael Ernst where we left him, leaning uncomfortably against the trunk of his car. As I walk up, he questions me with his eyes, and I give him a solemn nod. He lets out a long exhale and, for the first time today, keeps his eyes on mine.

"Thank you, Officer. I've been...preparing for this. I just...how did it happen?"

"Honestly, we're still working on that, but I don't see any signs of struggle. It looks like he was alone at the time."

I ask if he needs a chaplain, and he politely declines. I do my best to walk him through what comes next with other department members on the way. I ask about the dog, and he lets me know he checked on him while we were inside.

"Dad left an open bag of food for Wolfgang by the back door. There's a big tub of water out there it looks like he's been drinking from but he's in rough shape. I'll take him to the vet as soon as I can."

Minutes later a forensics van rolls up and joins our police parade at the end of the street. Jim “Cal” Windham hops out, rolls open the side door, and adds a couple aerosol cans to his bag before starting up the driveway to me. The California transplant flashes me grin from underneath his ballcap that barely contains his bleached-blond hair. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had cans of surf wax in his supply kit, even though there’s no good waves for a hundred miles.

“Hey Cal, this one’s ripe just FYI. Also, this guy’s got some odd memorabilia.”

“No worries, dude. I brought supplies that should hopefully help with the smell. Just show me the way.”

We quickly make our way to the back bedroom.

“Oof. Vaya con Dios, amigo. Have you guys moved him around at all?” Cal asks as gloves up.

“Not yet. There might be some doctor’s information somewhere in the kitchen. Do you need any help with him?”

“Nah, I’m good. He might slosh around a little. Dude’s like a gnarly waterbed now. I’ll give you a shout if he pops.”

I stand by the kitchen door, making sure we don’t have any unauthorized visitors show up while we process the scene. The occasional beep and shutter click of Cam photographing the room is interrupted by a “Hey man, you’re going to want to see this!” tossed down the hall.

As I get to the doorway, Cal hold up a clear plastic evidence bag containing a pistol with a distinct long, thin barrel along with an empty magazine.

German P08. Excellent condition.

“Found it under the pillow when I rolled him over. I don’t see an exit wound out the back of his head, but the decomp is making it tough to tell. I don’t see any holes in the walls or ceiling. No other rounds in the mag.”

“Alright, I’ll give Investigations a call so they send a detective out.”

I walk out across the front yard to give McNulty the update. Michael is sitting in his car, on the phone, although I’m not sure there is much of a family phone tree to initiate.

“Aw, that sucks,” McNulty acknowledges unconvincingly. “Hey man, I can standby for Investigations if you want to clear up.” *Aka, I just stumbled upon two hours of hanging out and don’t mind if I do.*

I get back in my car and shut the door, bathing in the quiet for a moment. I glance over at Michael one more time before I drive off. He looks more confident now through his bloodshot eyes. He pauses whatever conversation he’s having and gives me one last “thank you” nod.

A few blocks later I pull over and grab my phone. I press one of the saved contacts towards the top of the screen and only have to wait one ring before I get a “Yello?”

“Hey Dad, it’s me. Just calling to see how you’re doing.”

“Hey bud. Yeah, I’m doing alright, these meds they’ve got me on making me piss every other hour it feels like, but at least the pain’s a lot less. I want to mow the lawn but it’s hotter than hell down here. You doing ok?”

“Yeah, I’m good. I know it’s been a few weeks, but I just had a weird call.”

“Weird how?”

“You started collecting any Nazi memorabilia lately?”

“What?!” He let out a loud guffaw.

I laughed with him. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll get a beer sometime and I’ll tell you all about it. Well, I’ll get the beer. You’ll just get a story. Love you, Dad.”

“Love you, too bud.”