Miami

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THEY WERE PASSING AROUND A PHOTO OF A FACELESS MAN. SOME OF them, cameramen and sound guys, were laughing. Two days before, an old vagrant had been mangled by a drug-crazed lunatic on the MacArthur Causeway in Miami. A policeman had shot at the naked attacker—five times—until the guy stopped chewing on the old man's face and fell lifeless to the sidewalk. He had been high on "bath salts," synthetic cocaine, everyone suspected. He just "wasn't himself," his girlfriend later said.

After the savagery, the homeless man's face looked like a rotting Jell-O mold, with one lonely eyeball laid atop the wreckage. That was the photo making its way through the group of journalists gathered outside Jackson Memorial Hospital for a press conference. They laughed at the story as if it were some joke passed around the dining room table at Christmas, another ridiculous antic from a crazy uncle. *You won't believe what Miami's done now*. They all but elbowed each other in the ribs, cackling. To them, this was a good news day. Lots of papers picked up tomorrow. Lots of viewers at 6 o'clock.

Just out of college for the summer, I was only one day into a seven-week internship in South Florida, and I wasn't laughing. Miami had

just swallowed two lives whole. Her drugs killed one man, and nonsensical violence ruined the life of the other. The attacker's family was hurting, so reporters were calling to see how badly. The old man's family hadn't even known he was alive until he almost died and his mangled face started shooting around the internet. He had disappeared decades before and had lived under the bridge where he nearly died. He was just sitting in the shade listening to music when the naked man approached and started tearing him apart.

My stomach could hardly handle the story—let alone this vulture-like scavenge for juicy details. One of the television reporters, Sandra Peebles, noticed. She had been out all day looking for the guy who rode past the attack on his bicycle and called the police, screaming about a man eating another's face. (It's a wonder anyone came.) She looked at my expression, eyebrows furrowed, concentrating too much on the steno pad in my hands. Then she looked at the temporary press pass stuck to my shirt pocket.

"Are you an intern?" Sandra asked, and I nodded. It was my first stay working at The Miami Herald. "You might as well give up and go home," she said. "This is the biggest story you'll ever see. It's all downhill from here."

WHEN I GOT TO CAMPUS MY FRESHMAN YEAR, I HAD TROUBLE DECIDING between majoring in journalism or English. Law school was supposed to be the next step, so studying either one could have been practical. My parents told me I could do anything, which made nothing easier. I made the decision after realizing that journalism students were the ones who learned how to use commas and who'd one day keep presidents in line; I could read on my own time. Even though they did it for far less money than lawyers, journalists sought justice and called attention to all that was wrong. It was an endlessly romantic idea, something like a calling, that

made living on Ramen noodles and spending each day begging strangers to talk to me seem all right. I'd get to have my name in print almost daily. I'd tell people what was happening, show them what the world was and who was running it. People would actually read what I wrote. Even if the stories weren't the stories I'd most want to tell, it was beyond attractive.

So I memorized the AP Stylebook and wrote for my local newspaper over the summer. The stories were silly—about operating a ferry in an economic crisis and about Harry Potter fans readying themselves for a midnight movie premier—but they sometimes made the front page. I said nothing when my editor threw paper balls at me and said I needed to speak up on the phone because he couldn't hear me from across the newsroom, which meant the person on the other end of the line couldn't possibly hear me either. I paid my dues, walked up to people on the street to ask what plans they had for Father's Day. After that, I was told, I could begin slipping essays to the editors who could print them. They'd start to take me seriously after I had written a few dozen stories I cared nothing about.

The bug followed me across the ocean to Spain, had me sending dispatches from abroad to be published wherever there was space. I wrote about homesickness and Thanksgiving in Seville, about the beaches of Portugal and street performers. It was there that I applied for a grant to go to Miami, to write for the Herald's Spanish-language sister, El Nuevo Herald. I was desperately homesick when I sent in the application and wondered how I'd survive seven weeks alone in Miami if I was struggling through a semester away from home, surrounded at least by a group of American friends. South Florida, I was told, was a foreign country too.

I made peace with it eventually, sometime after the people at the Herald said they'd take me. Sitting down to dinner on the train ride to Florida, I told the old couple across from me that I would be writing for The Miami Herald. They *ooh*ed and *ahh*ed as we sawed into dry cuts of

beef, and their admiration reminded me why I thought it was so special to be a journalist.

I RENTED A ROOM FROM A GAY DOMINICANO NAMED FÁTIMO IN A SMALL apricot bungalow north of 79th Street. Someone at the paper found the place for me at the last minute. Normally, one of the reporters or editors would open his home to a summer intern, but in recent years the number of reporters and editors had been demolished. There were hardly any homes to be opened. Fátimo was a friend of a friend who had once worked in the Herald's advertising department, before he decided he wanted bigger commissions, moved to selling cable packages and ultimately realized he really didn't like working at all. The paper wasn't paying me, and just getting to Miami cost me a fortune. The room rate seemed reasonable, and so I gratefully accepted.

One of Fátimo's Chihuahuas, Princess, wouldn't let me pass through the living room without baring her teeth. "When you give her food, she become your best friend," Fátimo told me. "She loud, but she don't bite." The few times when the humidity broke and violent thunderstorms cooled the streets of Miami, I woke to find the dog sleeping between my legs. She had somehow nudged the door open and hopped up onto my bed. Princess growled at me when I tried to move her, and so began a half-hour game of shooing the little monster from my room. Once or twice when I clicked on the lights, I saw a cockroach—bigger and darker than the caramel-colored baby roaches that scurried down the shower drain each morning when I went into the bathroom. I also ran to the kitchen for a dustpan one afternoon when I spotted a tiny lizard scaling up the bedroom wall.

My room wasn't exactly a bedroom. It connected the front part of the house to the back, where Fátimo's roommate and ex-lover, Oscar, slept and did his laundry. I woke up each morning to the sound of Oscar

walking through my room and humming Céline Dion songs, dressed in a white robe. He was on his way to the kitchen, where he'd make some tasteless fried plantains or leave some Venezuelan creation I never identified boiling on the stove far longer than he should have.

But the heat is what I remember most about that summer in Miami. I made it to the beach only twice, and no amount of sun block kept me from burning. My car's air conditioner stopped working two weeks after I got there. Trips to and from work were almost unbearable in khakis, long sleeves and a necktie. I was embarrassed to show up for interviews after being stuck on the highway for 30 minutes—undershirt soaked through and the questions I had planned to ask sweated out of me.

THOSE MUST HAVE BEEN THE WORST SEVEN WEEKS OF MY LIFE. Thankfully, Sandra was right: No news story from that summer topped the cannibal attack I covered during the first few days. I spent the rest of my time there researching and trying to buy synthetic drugs (for a story) and scanning police briefs for front-page tragedies. The stories I finished and the hours I worked didn't affect the money I was given. I was supposed to consider myself lucky to have any money at all; the other interns didn't have grants to support them. And my friends at newspapers around the country were also begging for bylines. They were expected to do the same work as the other reporters on staff, to go the same places and to produce as much material. But no one considered paying them anything close to what the "real" reporters made. We were to be won over by the idea that we'd be more hirable later—ignoring the fact that the papers that would hire us were getting smaller each day. We wouldn't make money, but we wouldn't lose any either, we were told. My editors took us out to lunch sometimes. Their assistants brought me shots of Cuban coffee when I got in early or stayed there late.

Once I was sent to a swamp where the half-decayed corpses of two teenagers had been found. That same day, after a tip from a police source, I was sent to the home of the mother of one of the still-unidentified victims, not at all wanting to ask her the questions my editor insisted I ask. *How do you feel? What do you have to say about your son? Was he a good kid?* Both boys had been tripping on some kind of drug when their friends, panicked, left them there. He was known for dealing at a local high school. But we all knew how the mother would have answered those questions.

I was almost shaking when I knocked on her door. I had driven around the apartment complex for maybe 10 or 15 minutes, half searching for the right building number and half hoping it didn't exist. For once, I wanted to call my editors with a dead end. But Teresa Miranda's apartment building had been built. And based on the amount of family gathered behind her in silence when she opened the door, I knew one of the bodies found in that marsh had belonged to her son, Hector.

"Can I help you?" she asked. She would have known who I was right away, had I not tucked my notepad in my back pocket and stuck my press badge in the center console of my car.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Ms. Miranda," I said, mostly sorry that I was there to make things worse. "I am from El Nuevo Herald—"

"I don't have anything to say to you," she said. The door was closed before she finished the sentence.

I walked back to my car, but I didn't get inside. Instead, I sat on the parking stone in the empty space beside mine, wondering how long it would be before the woman could forgive me. She was drowning in grief, and I'd come by her house with pen and paper, hoping to capture whatever half-formed sentences she could manage to spit out. Editors cared about this sensational stuff because it had once sold newspapers. But now almost nothing inspired people to buy a hard copy from a newsstand when all of the same stories were available online, for free, immediately.

Even voyeurism couldn't save these sinking ships, so why was I there? It was difficult to imagine Woodward and Bernstein sweating under the Miami sun, almost crying, disgusted with themselves for what they were doing. Would they call this journalism? And should I?

My dream was dying. If being a journalist meant this Tuesday afternoon could be repeated next Thursday, I wanted nothing to do with it. Unlike those reporters at the press conference on the first day, I wasn't able to laugh at these things.

When I got back to the newsroom, they were still laughing—this time at my conscience and how it got the best of me. No one was surprised when the boy's mother showed up on television news the next day, giving interviews to people like Sandra Peebles. She was attractive and held a microphone and a tangible promise of telling a story to the world. There were several times that Sandra and her cameramen showed up on the scene a few minutes after I got there. She always walked away with more than I had.

"They've got the cameras," my editor, Teresa, said. "People love to talk to a camera."

Perhaps to punish me for losing the interview with the grieving mother, Teresa sent me to find a cult leader who had predicted the world's end. At first the plan was to send me to his church across town, but then we found out the man, whose followers called him Daddy, was living in Texas. The paper's executive editor, Manny García, asked me if I'd be comfortable flying out there. It was a Friday afternoon. I wouldn't have been old enough to rent a car when I got there, and I sure wasn't curious enough to track down a man who said the world was about to end and we were going to be transformed. Mightn't he think to take me with him? My editors wanted Daddy to be the next David Koresh, but I sure as hell didn't. This was a few weeks after I worked on a story about a man who shot his in-laws and then himself when he found out his wife was cheating. It was a week before I drove around the city hoping to talk to

family members of the guys who pulled off the biggest pharmaceutical heist in U.S. history. Everyone pretended not to know who I was talking about when I went by their houses.

By 11 a.m. each morning, I was dreaming of going home that night, microwaving chicken tenders, crawling into bed and watching two or three episodes of "Ally McBeal." I didn't want to think. As much as the humidity was draining me, I didn't want to sleep either.

WHEN I LEFT MIAMI, I THOUGHT AS I DROVE DOWN THE HIGHWAY THAT not much had changed. The heat was still unbearable. Princess, usually buried under a blanket on the sofa, still growled at me when I walked past her in the living room. Things never got better.

My car left me stranded on Biscayne Boulevard one Sunday afternoon, and I had to leave it at an auto dealership until the next morning. When I called, the woman on the phone told me that she didn't know where my car was. "What kind of car is it again? A *Saab*?" It was there—right where I said it would be—when I showed up sometime after lunch, after walking ten blocks or so through post-parade foot traffic to search the car lot myself. I'd have to wait two or three weeks for parts, they told me after an afternoon-long inspection. It would cost about $1,000 to replace the broken belt and a worn pulley. I decide to pay $100 to have it towed to a garage in Fort Lauderdale. A man, a stranger working out of a rented warehouse, fixed the car overnight for less than a quarter of the dealership's estimate.

After I paid for the tow, I was out of cash and took a chance, riding back to Miami with the tow-truck driver. He told me about his kids until he got his next call. I hopped down out of the cab just off the interstate, Exit 7. He apologized, but I was grateful. The man told me to take the bus, but that meant walking a block farther from my destination and spending more money. I chose to walk mile or so through the worst

part of town. This was at least five weeks in, and the day's events hardly fazed me. As I passed by fly-by-night pawn and tire shops, I wondered what it would have been like to show up in the paper in the morning without a byline: CARLESS INTERN MUGGED OUTSIDE LIBRARY.

A few minutes later, just as it started to rain, Manny sped up beside me in his SUV and honked.

"Get in, man" he said. I had sent him a message to let him know I made it back to Miami and was walking home. "You shouldn't be out here alone."

I shouldn't have been there at all, I thought. This was not what I signed up for. I was more than 1,000 miles from the people I loved, writing about nothing that interested me, nothing that sounded like the journalism our professors were raving about at school. I wrote one feature story about a community for once-homeless families and got to cover some of the celebrations surrounding the Heat's NBA championship win. But for the most part, I was stuck with synthetic drugs and crazy crime, with a dash of local government stories. Besides a weekly burger at a fast food joint and walking to the park some weekends, I didn't get out. During the week, I didn't leave the office before 6 or 7 p.m. On the weekends, I watched my phone for calls and texts from my editors. For the first time, I spent the Fourth of July in the middle of a protest instead of a cook-out. I wore red, white and blue, as I always had, but an angry Cubana called me a communist, because of the press badge clipped to my belt. On the weekends, I stayed inside Fátimo's house, reading travel books, avoiding Princess and only sometimes venturing to a park down the street or to the grocery store a few blocks away. I counted down the days until my return home.

Every day, I could feel myself slipping out of the hands of journalism, falling harder each time to the ground littered with unread newspapers, shattering. My editor tried to hold on to me, tried to give me exciting stories or to at least pitch them excitedly. I appreciated that, but I

couldn't give him the enthusiasm he was looking for. It made me feel terrible. I couldn't look around the half-empty Miami Herald building, soon to be sold to a developer for a casino or a resort, and feel optimistic about a future here, doing this. I couldn't sit around and joke about a city losing its mind. I felt as if I'd walked in during the fourth act of a five-act play, and I was the only one who had seen Death waiting in the lobby outside the theater.

It was only somewhere along Interstate 95, Maryland bound with Miami safely behind me, that I began to laugh. I was headed for the Amtrak station in Orlando. With each mile marker passed, I knocked $5 off the amount I'd have to pay a tow truck when my car broke down. I was escaping America's outback, happy to leave a life living with drug runners and men fleeing from child support. Miami was much more than old Latina women who grew mangos in their front yards. It was hard to remember why I'd gone there in the first place—two college credits and some bylines. (They spelled my name right most of the time.)

I kept my eyes on the road, paid no attention to the swampland beside me that had seemed so beautiful on the way down. My sight was trained on the GPS suctioned to the windshield. It told me which turns to take and how long to follow the turnpike. I wished it could tell me more. I made it to the tracks without breaking down then ran inside the station as if it were some sanctuary.

"And where are you headed?" the old man behind the counter asked me.

Heading north, I wasn't laughing at the stories I had written but rather at the stories I'd be telling my parents and my friends when I got home. It wasn't what happened; the joke was how it had all happened to me. Laughing seemed better than crying. *You won't believe what Miami's done now.*