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## **New York: Hunting Son of Sam (1977)**

Excerpt from *NewsWalker – a Story for Sweeney* (ISBN 1-928928-03-X) by R. Thomas Collins.  
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EVERY STORY ASSIGNED, WRITTEN OR SUBMITTED is given a slug, or name. The word “slug” comes from the slug of metal that in the days of “hot type” identified a row of metal linotype to be fashioned into a page on the stone tables in the composing room. The words of the story were raised in reverse on the lines of lead type and stacked in neat rows on the composing stone so they could be organized. Once they were neatly locked into a page form, the stereographers made an impression. That became the form to create the curved metal plates that were attached to the printing presses. Now all this is electronic, but the words are still written by the reporter, edited by the city editor and a copy editor, and finally read by a news editor who judges the quality of the story and gives it length and space. The news editor is the ultimate arbiter of how big a story is to be played and where it will go in what is called “the book.” Throughout this process, everybody knows where the story is by keeping track of the slug.

The slug to a news story takes on a life of its own. The main story from City Hall, for instance, was called Hall. Sometimes Hall was two paragraphs, or graphs, on the inside; sometimes it was on Page 1. The first story about a shooting that day was called Shoot. If it was a robbery, the slug was Rob; a murder, Murder. If in the third edition—the Three Star—Shoot required a new lead paragraph to take into account a development uncovered by the night police reporter, the slug for that paragraph was Nu Lede Shoot. If the story must be rewritten, it was called Nu Shoot. Once the slug is assigned nobody called the story anything else. This kept straight the scores of stories and their revisions that moved through the editing process each edition. And in those days it was on paper handed by dozens of reporters, editors and craftsmen.

For about six months between April and August 1977, the first slug every reporter asked about upon arriving at work was Sam: What was happening with Sam, who had Sam today, anything new on Sam. Parents in Queens, Brooklyn and The Bronx cautioned their children about going out at night. Girls cut their hair. Lovers’ lanes became deserted. The conversation over cigars, coffee and beers in all the gathering places in the city was Sam. Reporters worked on their time off tracking down leads they received from family members and neighbors. Nervous readers called the News and said they suspected their husband or brother or coworker or neighbor. At that time, you

couldn't write enough about Sam, and every reporter wanted a piece. Sam was the biggest story anybody had ever seen.

The story that became Sam probably started out as Shoot, or maybe Donna, because what gave character to the first Sam story was the fact that the victim was an 18-year-old girl named Donna Lauria. She was shot and killed at 1 a.m. July 29, 1976, as she sat in a car with her boyfriend, Jody Valenti, 20, in front of her apartment house in the Pelham Bay Park section of the Bronx. The couple had just come back from a disco in New Rochelle and were having a last moment together before Donna went into her apartment. A lone man walked up to the car, stood in a military-like crouch, held the pistol with two hands and squeezed off several rounds. Donna was shot and killed, and Jody was wounded with a shot in the thigh.

That was all there was to it. Except for its random and vicious nature, to a night rewrite guy this episode was just another murder. Maybe a couple of graphs for a brief in the five-star, if they could get the details in time. More likely a memo left over for the Bronx desk to follow up the next day. Routine. Nobody knew yet about 'Son of Sam.'

Sam didn't emerge at the second shooting, either. That happened on Oct. 23, 1976, in Queens when Carl DeNaro, 20, and his girlfriend, 21-year-old Rosemary Keenan, the daughter of a cop, were fired on from behind as they sat in a car on a Flushing street. The shooter was a lone gunman using the same MO. Sam's young targets were lucky. DeNaro, though shot in the head and wounded, survived. Rosemary was not hit. Another routine story, called Shoot.

About a month later, on Nov. 27, Donna DiMasi, 17, and Joanne Lomino, 18, were sitting on the stoop outside Lomino's home in Bellerose, Queens, near the Nassau County line, at about 12:30 a.m. when a lone man wearing fatigues walked up to the two teenagers and fired five shots at them, point-blank. Donna was shot in the neck and wounded, Joanne shot in the spine and paralyzed. Vicious, random, ugly. But not yet Sam.

Then on Sunday, Jan. 30, 1977, a shooting occurred at 12:23 a.m. when a 26-year-old Wall Street secretary named Christine Freund was shot and killed while making out with her boyfriend, John Diel, 30, in a car on a Queens street near the Forest Hills subway station. A lone man walked up to the passenger side, assumed a military-like crouch

and fired three shots into the car, shattering the window and hitting the young woman in the face. Diel, who was not hit, ran through the streets screaming for help.

This was the first time the police suspected the four shootings might be linked. A lab technician found that the slug that killed Freund was a .44 caliber, an unusual bullet that had showed up before, beginning with Donna Lauria the previous July. Detectives in Queens, when they learned of this link, began to fear the worst. Capt. Joseph Borrelli, chief of Queens detectives, sent word to police brass downtown that a serial killer armed with a .44 caliber pistol might be stalking and shooting women at night on the city's streets.

Without fanfare, Borrelli assembled a task force to look into the links, but there was too much to look at. Where do you begin to link shootings in the Bronx and Queens, except through that .44 caliber pistol and the lone gunman's technique? In a metropolitan area of more than 10 million, where do you start?

The task force had only begun to sift through the possibilities when the .44 caliber killer hit in Queens again, not far from where Christine Freund had been murdered three months before. Virginia Voskerichian, a 20-year-old Barnard College student, was walking home from the Forest Hills subway station at 7:45 p.m. Saturday, March 6, 1977, when she was shot. Just after she turned down Dartmouth Street, a lone gunman walked up to her and aimed his pistol at her face. Voskerichian instinctively put her schoolbooks up to her face to protect herself—just as the .44 slug from the pistol struck her head. She was dead by the time her body fell to the sidewalk, police said later.

The murder was citywide news. One of the newspaper guys who worked the story was Daily News columnist Jimmy Breslin, who lived in Forest Hills and had joined the newspaper months before. Breslin and another respected columnist, Pete Hamill, had been brought to the News by editor Mike O'Neill, who was eager to extend the paper's reach into the mainstream of New York writers. Both Hamill and Breslin were well-known writers. Over the years they had worked for the New York Post, the Village Voice and New York magazine, and they were accomplished film and book writers.

They were both characters. Breslin, a portly dark-haired Queens native, had run for City Council president as a lark and was a liberal

gadfly. Hamill had a little of Hollywood to him, being the sometime boyfriend of actress Shirley MacLaine. Despite being genuine stars, they also were working stiffs who turned out three columns apiece every week.

Breslin covered the Voskerichian murder that occurred near his home. The day after the March killing, Breslin's column quoted a discussion he had had with Detective Tony Cama about whether the killings of Freund and Voskerichian might be connected. "They're checking down in the morgue now to see if the bullets are the same," Cama said. "If they are, we got a nut to put up with."

In fact, the police lab techs determined that the slugs did match, sending a jolt through law enforcement. Queens Detective Commander Richard Nicasastro quickly assigned more cops to the Borrelli task force. Mayor Beame and Commissioner Michael Codd were notified. Deputy Police Commissioner Frank McLoughlin, a former Daily News reporter, called assignment editors at the News and other news outlets and told them to attend a briefing in the second-floor auditorium at One Police Plaza. An hour later, the reporters and editors of New York City knew this was the story that most wait a lifetime for and never get. A serial murderer was stalking lovers' lanes and murdering women with a .44 caliber revolver. Five shootings so far—how many more before he was caught?

But the story was not Sam yet. It was still Serial or Shoot or any number of other slugs. Its character had changed, however. Now each shooting became a potential new hit by the .44 caliber killer. Each tip received was worked as hard as if it would be Page 1 in moments. Most important, the imagination of the people of New York came alive with speculation about who the killer might be and why. Perfectly respectable people began to wonder whether the shooter lived in the flat down the hall or was that in-law you never liked, or maybe your co-worker. Nightside reporters spent hours tracking down tips and suggestions from readers.

The task force knew the killer's .44 caliber pistol was one known as the Bulldog, manufactured by Charter Arms. Because of the military fashion in which the shooter fired, the betting was that he was a veteran or police officer. He struck at night, in middle-class neighborhoods, targeting women, often near nightclubs. The locations also

were frequently near highways, giving the shooter quick access to an escape. Based on the profile, the task force began staking out likely spots and on the night of April 17 was focusing on 200 locations across Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx.

At 3 a.m. Valentina Suriani, 18, and Alexander Esau, 20, were seated in a parked 1968 Mercury Montego on the Hutchinson Parkway service road, across from Valentina's apartment in Pelham Bay Park, the Bronx. They were just three blocks from where Donna Lauria was killed the previous June. Again, a lone man walked up to the car in which the young couple were seated, assumed the military-style crouch and fired. Valentina was hit twice and died instantly. Alexander was also hit twice, but died two hours later at Jacobi Hospital.

The lobster editor on duty in the seventh floor city room that night came alive. He called the photographers cruising the city in their cars and woke up the city editor and the police shack reporters. They went about their duties, but what they did not know was that the police combing the crime scene would find a letter this time, in an envelope addressed to Borrelli. It was a rambling piece, but among its key statements were:

*Dear Captain Joseph Borrelli,*

*I am deeply hurt by your calling me a woman hater. I am not. But I am a monster. I am the 'Son of Sam.' I am a little brat..*

*Police: let me haunt you with these words: I'll be back! I'll be back!*

*To be interpreted as-bang, bang, bang, bank, bang-ugh. Yours in Murder, Mr. Monster.*

Borrelli's investigative unit was expanded and put under the command of Deputy Inspector Timothy J. Dowd. Called Task Force Omega and headquartered at the 109th Precinct in Flushing, the group issued and reissued composite drawings of the killer and began coordinating mountains of information and lines of inquiry. Hundreds of people called the cops with tips. Psychics called with their special help, gleaned from their sense of the paranormal. People called the city desk every night, too, saying they suspected this person or that, that the drawing looked like some guy they knew. Women called about the husbands of their girlfriends. Some women called and said they thought the killer might be their husband. Others said a guy they knew down the street, a cop, was

the shooter. Every night, reporters would check out dozens of these tips, each one a possible break.

Meanwhile, the police were checking out all 28,000 Charter Arms Bulldogs they could find. Young women dyed their hair and cut it short. Parents refused to let their daughters out at night. The paper ran stories about the investigation, all anticipating the .44 caliber killer's next move.

Then the story entered a new phase. On June 2, Breslin received a handwritten letter at the News building on 42nd Street, signed by a guy who called himself "Son of Sam."

*Tell me Jim, what will you have for July 29? You can forget about me if you like because I don't care for publicity. However, you must not forget about Donna Lauria and you cannot let the people forget about her either. She was a very, very sweet girl, but Sam's a thirsty lad and he won't let me stop killing until he gets his fill of blood.*

Breslin took the letter to the second-floor offices of the 109th Precinct and sat down with Chief of Detectives John Keenan and Deputy Inspector Dowd, who were supervising Borrelli's investigation. In no time, the cops confirmed that the letter sent to Breslin was written by the same guy who left the letter to Borrelli at the Suriani/Esau shooting in the Bronx. The hand written letter chilled the blood of the men in the room. Now what? The police officials never even considered that Breslin keep this quiet. They looked at it as an opportunity. Use it in the column, Jimmy, they said. Maybe you can get him to write again, or get him to call, who knows. Show the handwriting, maybe somebody will recognize it.

Breslin thought about what he should write and asked the cops what they recommended. He called a police psychologist for advice. Finally, Breslin jumbled it all together in his mind and wrote what he thought right.

His column was published in the News on June 5. The story was a sensation. Son of Sam, with his cold-blooded words of a madman, was now as notorious as Jack the Ripper. Politicians called for police protection. Preachers called for God's judgment. Parents pleaded with their children to stay home. And every reporter who wasn't working on assignment was checking out his or her own pet theory about who it was and when he would strike again. The results of all this were print-

ed and broadcast on TV and radio day after day.

But nothing broke in the investigation for another three weeks. Then at about 3 a.m. June 26, a lone man wearing a stocking hat walked up to a Cadillac parked at the corner of 211th Street and 45th Road, a block away from Elephas Disco in Bayside, Queens, and fired four shots into the couple seated inside. Judy Placido, 18, was hit in the head, neck and back. Her companion, Sal Lupo, 20, was hit in the arm. Both would survive, as did the killer's luck that night.

Moments later, a man wearing a stocking hat was stopped by two detectives as he walked down Northern Boulevard a few blocks away. The detectives, staking out the disco neighborhood looking for the Son of Sam, asked the man for identification. Just then, their hand-held walkie-talkies came alive with police chatter about shots fired, two down...Hearing that the location was two blocks away, the detectives turned away from the pedestrian and drove to the scene.

Within minutes, the police broadcast a Code 44 over their emergency radios. Instantly the highway lanes leading to tollbooths at the Triborough Bridge were funneled into one lane. The driver with the .44 caliber Charter Arms Bulldog, contained in a brown paper bag next to him on the front seat, was waved through the checkpoint without question by the two women detectives eyeballing the drivers.

The city talked of nothing else. Son of Sam was Topic No. 1 in every office, over every lunch, at every dinner table, in the newspapers and on TV. Every reporter wanted a piece of the story. Each dreamed, as I did, that we'd be the one to track the lead that cracked the case. At the time, I was working with the reporters, doing quickie rewrites, some light editing, and otherwise learning the tasks associated with the city desk. I came in shortly before 5 p.m. that night, as usual, and sat down at the assignment editor's chair across from Sam Roberts, the city editor. Roberts' face was ashen.

"What?" I asked.

"Sam wrote again," he said, holding up a sheet of clear plastic containing a sheet of white letter paper.

"Christ," I said, looking at it. "Anything?"

"Borrelli is on his way over now."

Roberts had opened the letter to Breslin earlier and immediately recognized the writing and content. Careful not to leave fingerprints,

he called Borrelli, who gave instructions on how to turn it over to the police. The only caveat was that the News wanted to make a copy, which was accomplished without further ado. I looked it over and saw the meticulous handwriting of the letter, as if Son of Sam was accomplished in mechanical drawing.

I am still here, like a spirit roaming the night. Thirsty, hungry, seldom stopping to rest. I love my work. Now, the void has been filled.

God, this guy was spooky. In a few moments, Borrelli and another detective came up to the city desk and stood next to Roberts. Borrelli wore a suit you'd find on Wall Street, a white shirt and businessman's tie. He was lean and, with his hands on his hips, leaned over the letter and carefully considered what he saw. With no small talk, one of the detectives picked up the plastic sheet and, with a nod of the head, they were gone.

The story slugged Sam was now at the top of the city desk assignment sheet every day. Because Son of Sam had mentioned July 29 as the anniversary of Donna Lauria's shooting, news editors all over the city anticipated the event. On July 10, Breslin wrote in his column that Mayor Beame was grandstanding in front of TV cameras when he went to the 109th Precinct for a briefing and came out to tell reporters that because the anniversary was coming up, he had ordered more cops onto the task force. Breslin wrote that this was a bogus publicity stunt:

He (Son of Sam) suggests that I write a column on July 29 in memory of the late Donna Lauria. I think you have to strain to see a boast that he's going to step out on July 29, a Friday night this year, and strike again as an anniversary present. The .44 killer needs no meaningful occasions to kill innocent people. He has done it at 7:30 p.m. of a random weekday and at 3:30 a.m. of a random Sunday morning. He is a deranged killer who says he walks the nights and seldom rests. He has shot two people since writing the letter in which he mentions July 29. He is, therefore, just as dangerous to a young woman in this city on the day before July 29 or the day after.

Despite, the cliché, there is no other way to say it: On July 29, the Donna Lauria anniversary, there was a media frenzy in New York City: TV news crews wandering the streets of Queens, as if to find the killer, broadcasting live from lovers' lanes during the late news. Columnist

Steve Dunleavy, from the rival New York Post, brazenly injected himself and his tabloid into the fray with open letters to Son of Sam, urging the psycho to write the Post. At the time, I thought Dunleavy was way out of line, like a party crasher at the private reception. But on reflection, his sin was one of degree. He was just too openly hungry for the story. Though other reporters were more restrained, every one felt the same way.

Ironically, cops working the investigation had never specified July 29 as the day Son of Sam would strike again. July 29, 1976, had been a Saturday, and July 29, on this year, 1977, a Friday. All of Sam's attacks occurred late Saturday night or early Sunday. Cops in the wise figured the date would be either Saturday, July 30, or Sunday, July 31—which is just what happened. The 120-point type on Page 1 Monday, Aug. 1, read: "44-Cal. Killer Shoots 2 More." The subhead read: "wounds couple in B'klyn car despite heavy cop dragnet."

Robert Violante and Stacy Moskowitz, both 20, were parked in a lovers' lane at Bay 17th Street and Shore Road, off the Shore Parkway in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, when they became the 12th and 13th victims of Son of Sam. At about 2:30 a.m. Sunday, July 31, the two lovebirds were struck by .44 caliber bullets fired into the car they had parked to watch the full moon over Gravesend Bay. Stacy died later that day. Violante, shot in the eyes, lost sight in one and was legally blinded in the other.

The Son of Sam's eighth sneak attack came two days after the first anniversary of the first murder. All his victims were young, most were seated in parked cars with friends, and all were on quiet tree-lined streets at night. Tactics were the same each time: Son of Sam approached quickly, assumed the military crouch, gripped his Charter Arms .44 caliber Bulldog pistol with two hands and fired.

Every reporter I knew on the story was sick about it. This was simply too sad: Stacy Moskowitz was a nice Jewish kid from Brooklyn, and her parents loved her. She didn't deserve this. Violante was a Brooklyn boy on a date. But nobody in the news business figured it was either's fault. On the contrary, Son of Sam had to be caught, and the readers of the papers would do it. Of course, not everybody in the news game agreed. The New Yorker magazine, huffing about exploitation,

wrote a nasty column about Breslin, how he had taken part in whipping the city into hysteria about Son of Sam. The fact that Breslin and his pal, Dick Schaap, had just signed a cushy quickie book deal to write a paperback—one that would turn out to be quickly forgotten—somehow proved to a New Yorker essayist that journalists of lower orders, such as Breslin and the Daily News, were only in it for the money.

By transforming a person into a seemingly omnipotent monster, the press has not merely encouraged him, but perhaps driven him to strike again, and has created the kind of public and official hysteria that may cause the deaths of innocent suspects. As the first anniversary of the killer's first murder, July 29, approached, the News indulged in a frenzy of non-news that must have driven the Son of Sam to a frenzy of determination to deliver as expected, though not when expected. In the News the day before the anniversary, Jimmy Breslin's column was announced on the front page. Early in June of this year, Breslin received a letter from someone claiming to be the killer, who wrote that he was a fan of the columnist's. Another journalist might have kept the news to himself, but Breslin did not. Of course the letter to Breslin had said nothing about any intentions of killing again on the anniversary, and of course it was Breslin who saw fit to print the idea that the killer might go out the next night and 'find a victim.' Journalism schools could use these paragraphs as examples of journalistic irresponsibility.

In fact, whenever I saw Breslin hanging around the city desk after turning in his Son of Sam columns, he was morose, grumpy. He made an effort to work with the cops at Task Force Omega in Flushing, taking the entire matter very seriously.

"Say what you want," the night city editor, Steve Mathews, said as we edited copy that evening, "it is impossible to write too much about Sam. Every copy disappears, every story is read, and every paper is sold. There is no such thing as too much about Sam."

I was on night rewrite Wednesday, Aug. 10, when I got a call at about 10:45 p.m. from Al Devila, a Daily News reporter assigned to police headquarters.

"Tommy," said Al, "they got Sam!"

Within a half-hour, the city room was crowded with reporters who

had heard the news and now wanted a piece of the story slugged Sam. This story was a living, breathing being for the Daily News guys, who over the last year had all worked on the story one way or the other. The luck of the draw had it that I would do rewrite on the story slugged Bio, which was the second lead on Page 2 the following morning.

The Page 1 head Thursday, Aug. 11, read: “Nab Mailman as .44 Killer.” The subhead read: “Tells Cops ‘it’s end of trail’; recover gun, new death note.” The headline on the story I wrote on Page 2 read: “Glimpse of Polite Loner in Apt 7E.” I wasn’t at my best that night. Whatever spark I might have hoped for when I crafted the story never ignited my copy. The result of my rewrite was a routine and uninspired story. I felt like a ball player who’d made it to the World Series only to have his bat go cold.

Breslin, who had been roaming the streets in Queens that night to cover the police search, went to police headquarters and asked Detective Dowd about the name Sam. Breslin’s column the next day, which began on Page 1, answered the question on everyone’s mind: Sam was the name of the dog owned by the killer’s neighbor. The dog was telling him to kill.

The first News stories were based on slim information at that point but it would be enough to tell the story. This serial murderer turned out to be a chubby 24-year-old gun-loving mailman named David Berkowitz, a loner who lived in a darkened apartment at 35 Pine St. in a borderline neighborhood in Yonkers. During his reign of terror, he had killed six and wounded seven, including one left blinded, another in a wheelchair and another with a steel plate in his head. Getting Son of Sam was the greatest manhunt in New York history, involving a 300-man task force tracking down 7,000 suspects turned in by a frightened public who had come to suspect everybody. But what led to his capture was what all good cops knew would do the job: thorough police work and a break.

The break came when two Brooklyn detectives again canvassed the Bay Ridge neighborhood where Stacy Moskowitz and Robert Violante were attacked. In rechecking four days after their shooting, Detectives Ed Blaise and Ed O’Sullivan of Brooklyn’s 10th Homicide Zone spoke again to Austrian native Cecile Davis, a 50-year-old

widow, who said she had been frightened by a man who came up to her face-to-face while she walked her dog shortly before the time of the shooting. She recalled that the man gripped something in his hand that he held to his side. When talked through the episode carefully, Davis recalled that she had seen a cream-colored car parked next to a fire hydrant with a parking ticket on its windshield. At first, the foot patrolman who worked the area that evening had told the Omega Task Force that he did not recall giving out any parking tickets.

But after their conversation with Davis, Blaise and O'Sullivan discovered a ticket had been given for parking at a fire hydrant to a cream-colored, late-model Ford Galaxy registered to David Berkowitz of 35 Pine St., Yonkers. The parking ticket had been written at 2:05 a.m.

Detectives Ed Zigo and John Longo of the 10th Homicide Zone went to the Pine Street address on the morning of Aug. 10. They saw the Ford Galaxy parked out front and looked inside. On the front seat, the cops saw the barrel of a machine gun sticking out of a slightly unzipped duffel bag stenciled with the name Berkowitz.

Zigo and Longo radioed the 10th Homicide Zone, in Coney Island, and were told to sit tight. The Omega Task Force in Queens got in touch with the Yonkers Police Department. By 7:30 p.m., cops from Queens, Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx were gathering at Yonkers police headquarters. A stakeout was set up outside 35 Pine. Berkowitz emerged from his apartment building at 10:30 that night and went to his car. As he got in, Longo, Zigo and another 10th Homicide Zone guy named John Falotico went over and aimed their .38s at his head.

"Well, you got me," Berkowitz said nonchalantly.

"Who?" said Zigo.

"Son of Sam. How come it took you so long?"

Berkowitz was placed under arrest and taken first to the Yonkers Police Department and then to New York Police Department headquarters. There he was grilled for a couple of hours by a group of 10th Homicide guys and a team from the Omega Task Force. He was then taken to the 84th Precinct in Brooklyn and booked for the murder of Moskowitz and the attempted murder of Violante. After the arrest, Deputy Police Commissioner McLoughlin, the former Daily News reporter, called Mayor Beame.

"We got Sam."

“Thank God,” the mayor said. “The city can sleep.”

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After two sanity trials, Berkowitz would eventually be found sane and plead guilty. He would receive six consecutive sentences of 25 years to life and be sentenced to spend the rest of his life in prison, either at Attica or Clinton, both in upstate New York.

The spring after Berkowitz’s capture, however, I was working on the city desk, doing editing, assignment work, rewrite and the occasional police brief. Since his arrest in August, Berkowitz had been staying in Kings County Hospital, where he was being evaluated by mental health experts and kept sedated in an 8-by-12-foot room. On Tuesday, May 23, 1978, the Page 1 head read: “Berkowitz Goes Wild in Court.” The subhead read: “ ‘I’ll kill them all’ he shouts.”

The story dealt with Berkowitz’s outburst while on his way to a hearing at Brooklyn Supreme Court. Still chubby with a baby face, he had broken from his guards and run toward the window, screaming all the way and intending to leap from the seventh-floor window and plunge onto Court Street below. I thought to myself that he’d have done everybody a favor if he’d succeeded. But the court guards had done their duty and saved him from harm.

I came to work at about 4:30 p.m. that warm spring day and was told to see Roberts, the city editor. We all knew the Sam story that day was the legal question as to whether Berkowitz would be found competent to be sentenced to the prison term we all believed he deserved. To get a window on this, reporters wanted to see transcripts of Berkowitz’s interviews with the shrinks. Roberts told me a rumor that someone at Kings County Hospital had leaked a transcript of the interviews, and a clerk wanted to sneak out a copy of the Son of Sam transcripts to the News.

“Tommy,” Roberts said, handing me a slip of paper with a phone number on it, “call this guy and see what he has.”

I made the call and found a nervous voice at the other end.

“You want the transcripts?” the voice said. This obviously was a young man of uncertain character.

“Sure,” I said. “How’d you get them?”

“The girlfriend of a pal of mine is a nurse in the Kings County

psycho ward. She got a copy.” For reasons that weren’t clear, he wanted to give it to the News. Who knew why? Maybe he loved the paper. That wasn’t a question I wanted to look hard at just then.

“Meet me at Washington Square Park,” he said. “How do I recognize you?”

“I’ll be standing at the south end against the fence and have a coat draped over my right forearm.”

I told Roberts what I had in mind. He told the copy boy chief to have a copy boy drive me to Greenwich Village. The copy boy’s job was to keep out of sight but keep me in view and his walkie-talkie handy just in case my rendezvous went south.

I leaned up against the black wrought-iron fence at the edge of Washington Square Park. It was a crowded, busy, hot afternoon. Forget having my coat over my forearm—I was the only guy with a spare layer of clothing at hand. I scanned the pedestrians passing, at once attempting to catch the eye of my contact and to avoid others who might be cruising to make a pickup. Then a young man in his mid-twenties wearing sweatpants and a sleeveless sweatshirt walked over.

“You looking for somebody?” he said.

“Take a hike,” I said.

“No,” he said, eagerly looking me in the eye, “you’re looking for me.”

In a moment, I realized it was true—this was the guy who had called. He was a lean, wiry type, with curly, sandy brown hair. He didn’t shave properly, had a trace of acne and a few of his front teeth needed tending. Hinky, I figured. Either a speed shooter, or

“So,” I was saying, “where’s the report?”

“It’s this way,” he said, motioning me to following him across the park. As we began walking, I tried to engage him in conversation. He was nervous and wasn’t doing too well with his answers. I began to suspect he was a hoaxer, or worse. I hoped the copy boy had followed us and had me in sight. Midway through the park, I decided this guy was wrong.

“So,” I was saying now, “why do you want the News to have this report?”

“Oh,” he said, “I figure it’s worth something.”

This guy didn’t know that the News didn’t pay for news. “And

where exactly is the report?" I said, stopping at the north end of the park.

The kid, quite nervous now, pointed absently to an apartment building. "Up there," he said.

"Where?"

"At the top floor of that building."

Could this guy be trying to lure me up there? Why? If it had been nighttime and if the weather had been cooler, requiring layers of clothing, I might have been nervous. But it was broad daylight in a crowded Greenwich Village park. I wasn't going up any dark staircases with this guy. He didn't appear armed. So I just wasn't that nervous. I pulled the plug.

"You're going to have to do better than that," I said, wondering what he might do now. "I'm not going with you."

"Okay," he said, "you're right. It's there."

He pointed to the wire wastebasket in the middle of the sidewalk.

"You mean the report is in there," I said, still hoping this might be true. This version was a bit more plausible, but it still didn't ring right. "You go get it, and we can talk."

I looked at him and back at the wastebasket.

He said: "it's right there."

This seemed enough to handle. I walked over and leaned slightly over the top of the basket. It was half full of normal trash: pizza and hot dog papers, newspapers, soda cans and such. I focused to see any folder or envelope. Just as I reached down to move the debris for a better look, I thought: Wait a minute.

I pulled up with a jerk and turned around. The skinny guy in the sweats had disappeared. Hoax, I thought. Or perhaps a photographer for the rival New York Post had a photo now of a Daily News reporter leaning in a Greenwich Village trash can looking for a story. I couldn't believe this! Sure, put your head back in the garbage pail and rustle around some more amongst the needles and moist discards for, what? Chagrined, I began walking back across the park. The News copy boy came running up to me.

"Do you see where the guy went?" I asked.

"He just took off," the teenager said. "When you walked over to the wastebasket, he turned and just ran and disappeared."

On the way back I tried to shake a sense of shame. I couldn't. I

had done what a reporter should do, but those rules had led me to lean into a Greenwich Village wastebasket looking for a purloined transcript of the interview with Son of Sam. It felt wrong. But at the time, I couldn't admit that the rules might be wrong. When I got back to the city desk, I told Roberts what happened and joked that we ought to look for a shot of me in the next day's Post.

Roberts said, "I don't figure Murdoch wants to start that. I'm just glad it wasn't a bomb."

Only later did I consider taking Roberts' joking comment in a different light. I'd think about it again too, in nights to come, as well. I didn't tell Sun Oak, though.