

SCHOOL DAZE

By Rob Steele

I'm not too old to have forgotten how it was in school. The school board never seemed to understand about a few things. If my kid's school is any indication, they still don't. Every class has a certain criterion that they have to get across, otherwise they will not have fulfilled their function of teaching. That makes sense, to an extent. What they never seem to get is the whole "every class" part of that equation. For example, the history class may have essay homework every night, and that would be fine if there weren't physics experiments, foreign languages to learn and, most likely, copious amounts of math homework to go along with everything else.

When I was a kid, we got to spend a little time after school playing outside until your mom called you in for dinner and homework. I can still hear mine. "Cooper Devon Wright, you get in this house now!" When you got called by your full name, you know you had to get in the house now! Today, not so much playing outside. I know my kids come home from school around four and spend the next six to eight hours doing homework before they have to get something resembling sleep before they go back to school again. And they wonder why kids today are so stressed out.

But I think that that issue may have contributed to my crime scene today. School got out a couple weeks ago, but reports cards just got issued earlier this week. And now, I've got a dead math teacher. I'm not one to be that picky, but I would have hoped that if I ever got a dead teacher to investigate, it would be an elementary school one. Not to traumatize the kids, but to narrow down the list of potential suspects. I can't see too many 3rd graders attacking a teacher.

Unfortunately, this is a high school math teacher. Young, fairly cute, and struck down too soon – in her own living room, no less. Dr. Seong-ho Young, our coroner, has already done preliminary testing before I get there so he's able to tell me that she died about twenty-four hours ago. First glance? It was the math compass stuck in her neck that's the cause of death, but he says he'll get back to me for sure when he finishes the autopsy. At the moment, we can't even take the compass as evidence since it's wedged in there pretty good. But Doc Young is good at preserving evidence, so I'm looking forward to getting that back with some good lead-worthy material.

Regrettably, I already have a pretty good list of suspects. Detective Manny Vasquez is outside talking with the school principal, Owen Dunwoody. Mr. Dunwoody is the one who found her. They weren't doing anything illicit. Like I said, the report cards came out earlier this week and he'd received a hefty list of complaints about her grading.

One class of seniors, who walked last week, will have to come back for remedial math since she failed the entire class. All those college applications and student loan paperwork packets are pretty much nullified. Lives are pretty much ruined before they even finish high school. All because she failed all but three of her students. That's all her classes combined! Only three passed.

None of the students were aware of this either. Tawny Call, a local youth hero, has already created several patent worthy inventions in the medical field and *had* a 4-point-oh GPA before this. And she failed a pre-calculus class? The school quarterback who just got a scholarship to Alabama, he failed too.

The class president. Failed. And the list goes on. Manny's got the compilation and will be running down alibis on that end.

I get the fun part: tracking down her personal life. As I mentioned, Debbie Alvarez was young, 23 according to her license, and quite attractive. But her apartment was devoid of any personality. There were few photographs. Several posters, mostly for movies like "The Matrix" and "Star Wars," math geek stuff. Not much in the way of books, either. Her bedroom, is almost as spartan. One picture by the side of the bed, but it's of her graduating. No books. I look around again. No television either. I check the other rooms – no tv at all. That strikes me as odd. "What's buggin' ya, Coop?"

It was Mark Davis, one of the CSIs. Guess he saw my puzzled look. "She has no tv. How do you live in a house with no TV?"

Mark chuckled. "Lots of people today don't have one. They're expensive if you're just starting out and, if I'm honest, why bother? These things," he says, holding up her laptop in an evidence bag, "can show you all the channels anyway. Between local tv websites for local news, what else do you need besides *Netflix*?"

And I was just getting used to people not having an actual home phone. "Well, let me know what she watched, okay? Sometimes you can get a good lead that way." Mark nodded and continued looking for evidence to bag. There wasn't much. The laptop, of course, but there was no blood spatter. No signs of forced entry. No sign of a struggle. Mark showed me one other piece of evidence that didn't need full processing before it told us something, there was a box on a desk that contained some math tools – a pencil set, a calculator, a protractor – all with a grooved space for everything, only the compass was missing. Mark says the size and shape match the one in the victim's neck but he'd get back to me with measurements when Doc Young made it available.

I stepped outside to have a word with Mr. Dunwoody. He said that until today, there was only one complaint about her class, but it wasn't her fault. "You'd be surprised the number of parents who were upset because she didn't have books for the kids to take home."

If I heard that right, no, I wouldn't. "Let me get this straight, she taught pre-calculus, without a book?"

"Oh, she had one. And they could use one in the classroom. But the school board doesn't have the budget for everyone to have a book." He seemed to think that was a justifiable position to take. I look to Manny, who just shrugged and shook his head.

"Didn't your school just get a new several-million-dollar football stadium?"

"Of course," he replied proudly, "you can't have a school these days without one. Where would the students go if they didn't have football?"

"Couldn't the stadium do without a few of the bells and whistles so the kids could have books? I mean, isn't that what schools are for? Learning, right? Football is supposed to be a secondary thing."

"Oh, not anymore. That's how schools make money. We put everything into the football program so we can make more money for the school."

"Just not to buy books for the kids, apparently. Look. Don't leave town. Manny, you finish up with him." Manny nods and finishes Mr. Dunwoody's full statement. I had to leave that conversation. My

kids had the same issue at their school. I barely got through Algebra and don't use it enough to be helpful for my kids. I got one going into a pre-calc class next year. Thank god for Google. At least, I hope that works.

But where does that leave me on this case. One hundred-twenty-seven students failed, so they're suspects. Family members: suspects. Boy and/or girlfriends of students who failed: suspects. This would be a whole lot easier if it were a suicide. I head back to the office to cool down. Between this summer heat and the book issue, I'm getting overheated. It makes me rethink the *wear a suit to work* thing. I know I have to look presentable, but a coat of any kind in this heat is ridiculous.

That's when something hits me. I call back to the crime scene and ask Manny to check the thermostat in the apartment. I wasn't outside long enough to be this warm. Manny tells me that the air conditioning was off and all the windows were shut. "And no one noticed this before?"

"In all fairness boss," he replied, "you didn't either. Besides, I'm Puerto Rican. I'm used to warm weather." He had a point. A few years ago, we caught a case in a sauna where Manny said he felt a chill. But that means that the time of death could be off.

I start to put in a call to Doc Young, but he obviously felt a disturbance in the force because before I can press call on my phone, it rings. "I was playing a hunch and I was right. The compass was not the cause of death! You need to come see something, right away!"

When I arrive at the coroner's office, I suit up in a full "clean suit." I've had too many bloodstains from walking in at the wrong time or when Soeng-ho gets excited and something leaks, or sprays, or somehow escapes and I end up having to buy a new suit. As if I'm not warm enough. If they can make that "keeps-you-cool-underwear," why not one of these?

"I should have warned you," Doc Young begins as I enter, "you won't be needing one of those today." I look puzzled as I approach Doc and the body. He looks at me, smirks, grabs the compass from her neck and gently yanks it out. Reflexively, I wince, expecting some kind of geyser of blood... but there isn't one.

Doc interrupts before I can even start. "Complete exsanguination. The compass was put in as a way to hide the puncture wound. Someone drained her completely. I suspect she was drugged but I can't find enough blood left to test."

"That would explain why there was so little blood at the scene." I think for a moment. "But was that the scene? Was she moved from somewhere else?"

"Unlikely," he replied. "The lividity pretty much shows she died in her apartment."

"The A/C was off; would that throw off time of death?"

"Actually, just the opposite. If she still had blood, then yes, but the lack of it cancels out that effect."

I thank Seong-ho and call Manny again. They do have a surveillance system but only toward the entrance to the complex. I have Manny bring back the footage and I settle in for a long viewing of what is likely to be a very boring movie – but probably still better than *Battlefield Earth*.

Just after the alleged time of death, a van leaves with a company logo on the side. A crow with a vacuum cleaner? A quick check turns up a company and a slogan, "Call Call's Carpet Cleaning." Call-call, thus the crow. That's horrible, but memorable, I suppose. One catch, the apartment had hardwood floors.

I call the apartment manager and ask about the carpet cleaning and he tells me that Call's has the contract to clean some of the older apartments that still have carpet. The newer ones don't and he's really looking forward to the older tenants moving out so he can get rid of *all* the carpet.

But something about that name, Call. Tawny Call! She was one of the students that was failed by Ms. Alvarez. A quick call to Call's Carpets reveals that Mrs. Call, herself, was on duty at that time with that van, and before I can ask her to come in, she volunteers. Just in case, I have an escort follow her from her business. But she does not deviate and comes straight to the precinct. She is a fairly hefty but quite attractive woman. Soon, she is processed and in interrogation room one.

"I'll save you the trouble," she begins, with attitude. "I did that bitch in. Lord, help me, but she ruined my baby's life. She had a full-scholarship to Harvard. To Harvard! Do you know how hard it is for someone in my family to get a degree? She was going to be the first. The first, I tell you!

"Lord have mercy on me but I couldn't let her get away with it. I was just doing my job. Cleaning carpets. That's all anyone in my family does. Except Tawny. She was teaching me stuff about nursing and medical stuff. And when I saw that Ms. Smarmy Alvarez in that apartment...

"I was just gonna give her a good talkin' to. I took my supplies with me so it didn't look funny, but I had picked up Tawny's bag by mistake. I didn't even know she left it in the van until I was at the door. I got so mad at that woman, when she wasn't looking, I looked in that bag and found some chloroform. It worked even quicker than the movies. By then I was so mad I said, 'Eliza, she gonna send you to jail anyway. Better make her pay for your daughter's life with hers!' So, I took what I needed from Tawny's stuff and rigged it up with my cleaning supplies and drained that hateful woman of her life just like she drained my Tawny's. I even plugged her up with that, that, math thing, so she wouldn't leak." She sighed, or maybe just took a breath.

"I wasn't gonna turn myself in, Lord help me, unless you found me. I'm not gonna put up a fight so arrest me. Lord forgive me! I'm the one who did it."

Well, that was easy. We had her arrested. We also notified the family and, that is not going to be an easy fix there. But there was almost a bright spot. I got a call from Darryl Silverstone, CSI techie. He went over Ms. Alvarez's laptop and there were a lot of discrepancies. It turns out that her computer had been hacked and the grades were all reversed. It wasn't 127 failed to 3 passed. It was 127 passed to 3 failed. He didn't know who hacked the computer, yet, but he was tracking it down.

I suppose that's good news for the kids' futures. Except, what do I do about Tawny's family. Eliza Tawny killed someone over a practical joke gone horribly wrong. How do you get over something like that?