

Stalking a Man Called 'Son of Sam,' the .44-Caliber Killer

By MOLLY IVINS

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By MOLLY IVINS

Tracking down a major killer is more like a chess game than the car chases, stakeouts and shootouts that characterize so many TV police series.

Twenty-two detectives, working out of a sunny, second-floor office in an obscure precinct in Queens, are engaged in developing moves and counter-moves against "Son of Sam," the killer who uses a '44-caliber pistol. He left a note at the site of his last two murders on April 17. In that note he referred to a father-figure called "Sam."

The police will try literally almost anything to get the man who has killed four young women and one young man and wounded three other women. All his women victims have had shoulder-length brown hair. The detectives are looking for clues everywhere from the Bible to the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The walls of Room 224 of the 109th Precinct station in Flushing are covered with maps showing the times, dates and places of the shootings. Pictures of the victims are on a bulletin board in the tiny office of Deputy Inspector Timothy Joseph Dowd, 61

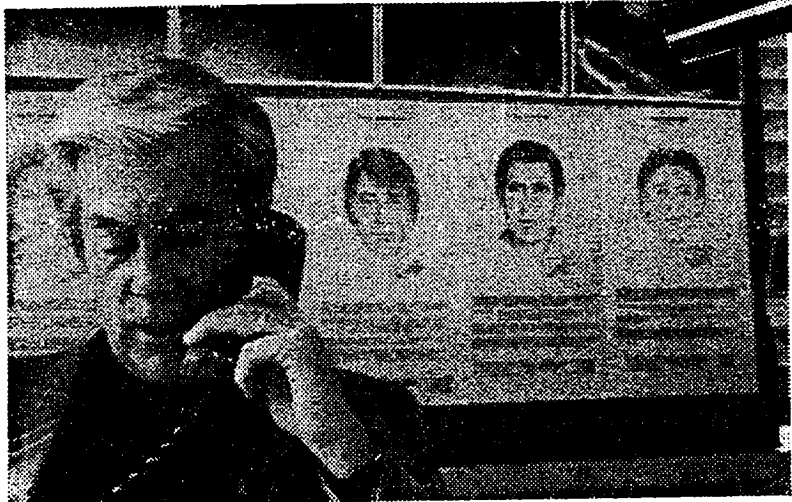
years old, who is in charge of the special unit.

Photographs of the weapon, a .44-caliber Charter Arms Bulldog pistol, dot the walls, as do composite sketches of the killer and photographs taken at the sites of the crimes. One of the women wounded by Son of Sam told the police that the killer reminded her of a boyfriend. There are two photos of the hapless boyfriend on the wall, with the notation that "perp reminds me of Spiro."

"Find me another word besides perpetrator," implored Inspector Dowd, who is much pained by the jargon of police reports. Because of an apparently ineradicable taste for bureaucratise, the police never catch criminals, they only "apprehend perpetrators," or "perps" for short. (In some sections of the city, this becomes "poyps.") The inspector rejected "miscreant" as "even worse." Evil-doer, baddie? He could not be satisfied.

"Oh, we're going to get this guy," said Inspector Dowd. "I'm very optimistic. We'll just spend as long as it

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The New York Times/Carl T. Gossett

In a second-floor office of the 109th Precinct in Queens, 22 detectives, including Lieut. John Power, left, are tracking a killer who calls himself "Son of Sam," and uses .44-caliber gun like one above.

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takes. There's no way we can close the file on it. How can you drop a case like this? It's a continuing homicide.

"I can't wait till the end of this case. I just want to see what kind of human being this is."

A new psychological profile of Son of Sam, released Friday, says there are religious aspects to the killer's thinking process and hints that he believes himself to be operating under demonic possession or compulsion. Although psychologists and psychiatrists disagree about his motivation, they believe him to be a paranoid schizophrenic.

The inspector has spent a good deal of time thinking about what kind of human being Son of Sam is. He is convinced the man is intelligent and fairly well-educated, and he even thinks he knows his religion.

The detectives are constantly bouncing ideas off one another. Son of Sam, Son of Sam, has anyone checked the Book of Samuel to see how many sons he had? Should we go through all the Samsons in Queens and the Bronx, where the killings took place?

A Plan Is Frustrated

At one point, Detectives John Beccone and Richard Ward had what they thought was a good idea. They assumed—and still assume—that the killer has a car. They would get the Department of Motor Vehicles to break out all the registrations by white males, from the ages of 20 to 30, in the last couple of years in Queens and the Bronx. Then they could go through the registrations to check the handwriting against the note Son of Sam left at the scene of his last killings.

But it turns out that the motor-vehicles agency cannot do that: The registrations are in alphabetical order, and there are 253,000 for Queens alone. Not even Detectives Beccone and Ward were ready to go through

253,000 applications by hand.

Next Inspector Dowd was on the phone with the deputy police commissioner for legal matters over the question of whether the police could get a court order to compel the Department Mental Health to produce psychiatric records.

What the police want is names of white, male psychotics between 20 and 30 whose disorders match the killer's. No, they couldn't get a court order because it would have to be specific—that's the whole point of a court order—and the police can't be specific.

"This right of privacy thing is a real pain," said Inspector Dowd. "That and the doctor-patient relationship. We're not asking for diagnoses, or anything, we'd just like to know if anyone's treated this guy. But it's invasion of the right of privacy. I tell you frankly, if the police got everything they wanted to make their job easy, everyone would have a number tattooed on his arm and there'd be no freedom at all. But sometimes . . ."

Another Frustration

The police have hit a similar problem with juvenile records. "Say the killer is now 20," said Inspector Dowd, "and three years ago he got arrested for molesting girls in a pattern like this. We can't get those records."

Inspector Dowd, who graduated from City University with a B.A. in English and Latin (which he says accounts for his pickiness about police reports: "Believe me, they could use some improvement"), also has a master's degree in public administration from Bernard M. Baruch College.

Inspector Dowd was born in Ireland, grew up in Boston and went to South Boston High School, "the one that's so famous you keep reading about it." He has the air of an athletic, but meticulous, schoolteacher. He has three grown sons and a 13-year-old daughter.

He has worked on, among other cases, the 1964 Kitty Genovese case—

the fatal stabbing of a woman in Kew Gardens, Queens, while 38 people looked on and did nothing—and the case in which Police Officer Philip W. Cardillo was murdered in a Harlem Muslim mosque in 1972. The accused man was acquitted earlier this year after his second trial.

Inspector Dowd took charge of the Son of Sam investigation just after April 17, when Valentina Suriani, 18, and her boyfriend Alexander Esau, 20, were shot to death in the Bronx. The idea was to coordinate the work being done separately by detectives in the Bronx and in Queens. In addition, Inspector Dowd brought in some experienced detectives from Manhattan.

The other day, he got a call from a female graphologist who was eager to see and analyze the note from Son of Sam. "ESP?" he asked. "I am sure there are such things in the heavens and the earth, ma'am, but I don't think we're ready to try it just yet."

The police have shown the letter to a psycholinguist, a man who makes deductions about the personality of a writer from the way he or she uses words.

A brother officer, one of several who called with suggestions in the course of a day, is assured that his idea has already been acted on.

Where do you put your patrols, when? Do you check hospitals or gun shops first? "You're dealing with about 60,000 strands," said the inspector.

The strands range from getting enough telephones, walkie-talkies, good detectives to staff the special unit, to artists' sketches and "nut calls."

Lieut. John Powers stopped in to chat about the killings, horses' feet, farming on the islands off Ireland and the killings.

Toward the end of the day, the inspector said, "There's no doubt in my mind that we'll get this guy. All we need is a direction. All these things are going to seem so simple when we solve it. We'll wonder why we didn't see it at once."