

# P R O F I L E S

## COVERING THE COPS

IN the newsroom of the Miami *Herald*, there is some disagreement about which of Edna Buchanan's first paragraphs stands as the classic Edna lead. I line up with the fried-chicken faction. The fried-chicken story was about a rowdy ex-con named Gary Robinson, who late one Sunday night lurched drunkenly into a Church's outlet, shoved his way to the front of the line, and ordered a three-piece box of fried chicken. Persuaded to wait his turn, he reached the counter again five or ten minutes later, only to be told that Church's had run out of fried chicken. The young woman at the counter suggested that he might like chicken nuggets instead. Robinson responded to the suggestion by slugging her in the head. That set off a chain of events that ended with Robinson's being shot dead by a security guard. Edna Buchanan covered the murder for the *Herald*—there are policemen in Miami who say that it wouldn't be a murder without her—and her story began with what the fried-chicken faction still regards as the classic Edna lead: "Gary Robinson died hungry."

All connoisseurs would agree, I think, that the classic Edna lead would have to include one staple of crime reporting—the simple, matter-of-fact statement that registers with a jolt. The question is where the jolt should be. There's a lot to be said for starting right out with it. I'm rather partial to the Edna lead on a story last year about a woman about to go on trial for a murder conspiracy: "Bad things happen to the husbands of Widow Elkin." On the other hand, I can understand the preference that others have for the device of beginning a crime story with a more or less conventional sentence or two, then snapping the reader back in his chair with an abbreviated sentence that is used like a blunt instrument. One student of the form at the *Herald* refers to that device as the Miller Chop. The reference is to Gene Miller, now a *Herald* editor, who, in a



remarkable reporting career that concentrated on the felonious, won the Pulitzer Prize twice for stories that resulted in the release of people in prison for murder. Miller likes short sentences in general—it is sometimes said at the *Herald* that he writes as if he were paid by the period—and he particularly likes to use a short sentence after a couple of rather long ones. Some years ago, Gene Miller and Edna Buchanan did a story together on the murder of a high-living Miami lawyer who was shot to death on a day he had planned to while away on the golf course of La Gorce Country Club, and the lead said, "... he had his golf clubs in the trunk of his Cadillac. Wednesday looked like an easy day. He figured he might pick up a game later with Eddie Arcaro, the jockey. He didn't."

These days, Miller sometimes edits the longer pieces that Edna Buchanan does for the *Herald*, and she often uses the Miller Chop—as in a piece about a lovers' spat: "The man she loved slapped her face. Furious, she says she told him never, ever to do that again. 'What are you going to do, kill me?' he asked, and handed her a gun. 'Here, kill me,' he challenged. She did."

Now that I think of it, that may be the classic Edna lead.

THERE is no dispute about the classic Edna telephone call to a homicide detective or a desk sergeant she knows: "Hi. This is Edna. What's going on over there?" There are those at the *Herald* who like to think that Edna Buchanan knows every policeman and policewoman in the area—even though Dade County has twenty-seven separate police forces, with a total strength of more than forty-five hundred officers. "I asked her if by any chance she happened to know this sergeant," a *Herald* reporter once told me. "And she looked at her watch and said, 'Yeah, but he got off his shift twenty minutes ago.'" She does not in fact know all the police officers in the area, but they know her. If the desk sergeant who picks up the phone is someone Edna has never heard of, she gives her full name and the name of her paper. But even if she said, "This is Edna," there aren't many cops who would say, "Edna who?" In Miami, a few figures are regularly discussed by first name among people they have never actually met. One of them is Fidel. Another is Edna.

It's an old-fashioned name. Whoever picks up the phone at homicide when Edna Buchanan calls probably doesn't know any Ednas he might confuse her with. Edna is, as it happens, a rather old-fashioned person. "She should have been working in the twenties or thirties," a detective who has known her for years told me. "She'd have been happy if she had a little press card in her hat." She sometimes says the same sort of thing about herself. She laments the replacement of typewriters at the *Herald* with word processors. She would like to think of her clips stored in a place called a morgue rather than a place called an editorial reference library. She's nostalgic about old-fashioned criminals. As a girl growing up around Paterson, New Jersey, she used to read the New



York tabloids out loud to her grandmother—a Polish grandmother, who didn't read English—and she still likes to roll out the names of the memorable felons in those stories: names like George Metesky, the Mad Bomber, and Willie Sutton, the man who robbed banks because that's where the money was. She even has a period look about her—something that recalls the period around 1961. She is a very thin woman in her forties who tends to dress in slacks and silk shirts and high heels. She wears her hair in a heavy blond shoulder-length fall. Her eyes are wide, and her brow is often furrowed in concern. She seems almost permanently anxious about one thing or another. Did she neglect to try the one final approach that would have persuaded the suspect's mother to open the door and have a chat? Will a stray cat that she spotted in the neighborhood meet an unpleasant end? Did she forget to put a quarter in the meter? Despite many years spent among people who often find themselves resorting to rough language—hookers, cocaine cowboys, policemen, newspaper reporters—her own conversation tends to sound like that of a rather demure secretary circa 1952. Her own cats—she has five of them—have names like Misty Blue Eyes and Baby Dear. When she is particularly impressed by a bit of news, she is likely to describe it as “real neat.” When she discovers, say, a gruesome turn in a tale that might be pretty gruesome already, she may say, “That's interesting as heck!”

Among newspaper people, Edna's line of work is considered a bit old-fashioned. Daily police reporting—what is sometimes known in the trade as covering the cops—is still associated with that old-timer who had a desk in the station house and didn't have to be told by the sergeant in charge which part of the evening's activities to leave out of the story and thought of himself as more or less a member of the department. Covering the cops is often something a reporter does early in his career—an assignment that can provide him with enough war stories in six months to last him through years on the business page or the city desk. Even Gene Miller, a man with a fondness for illegalities of all kinds, turned rather quickly from covering the cops to doing longer pieces. The *Herald*, which regularly shows up on lists of the country's most distinguished dailies, does take a certain amount of pride in providing the sort

of crime coverage that is not typical of newspapers on such lists, but it does not have the sort of single-minded interest in juicy felonies that characterized the New York tabloids Edna used to read to her grandmother. When Edna Buchanan began covering the cops for the *Herald*, in 1973, there hadn't been anyone assigned full time to the beat in several years.

In the dozen years since, Edna has herself broken the routine now and then to do a long crime piece or a series. But she invariably returns to the daily beat. She still dresses every morning to the sound of a police scanner. Unless she already has a story to do, she still drops by the Miami Beach department and the Miami municipal department and the Metro-Dade department on the way to work. She still flips through the previous night's crime reports and the log. She still calls police officers and says, “Hi. This is Edna. What's going on over there?”

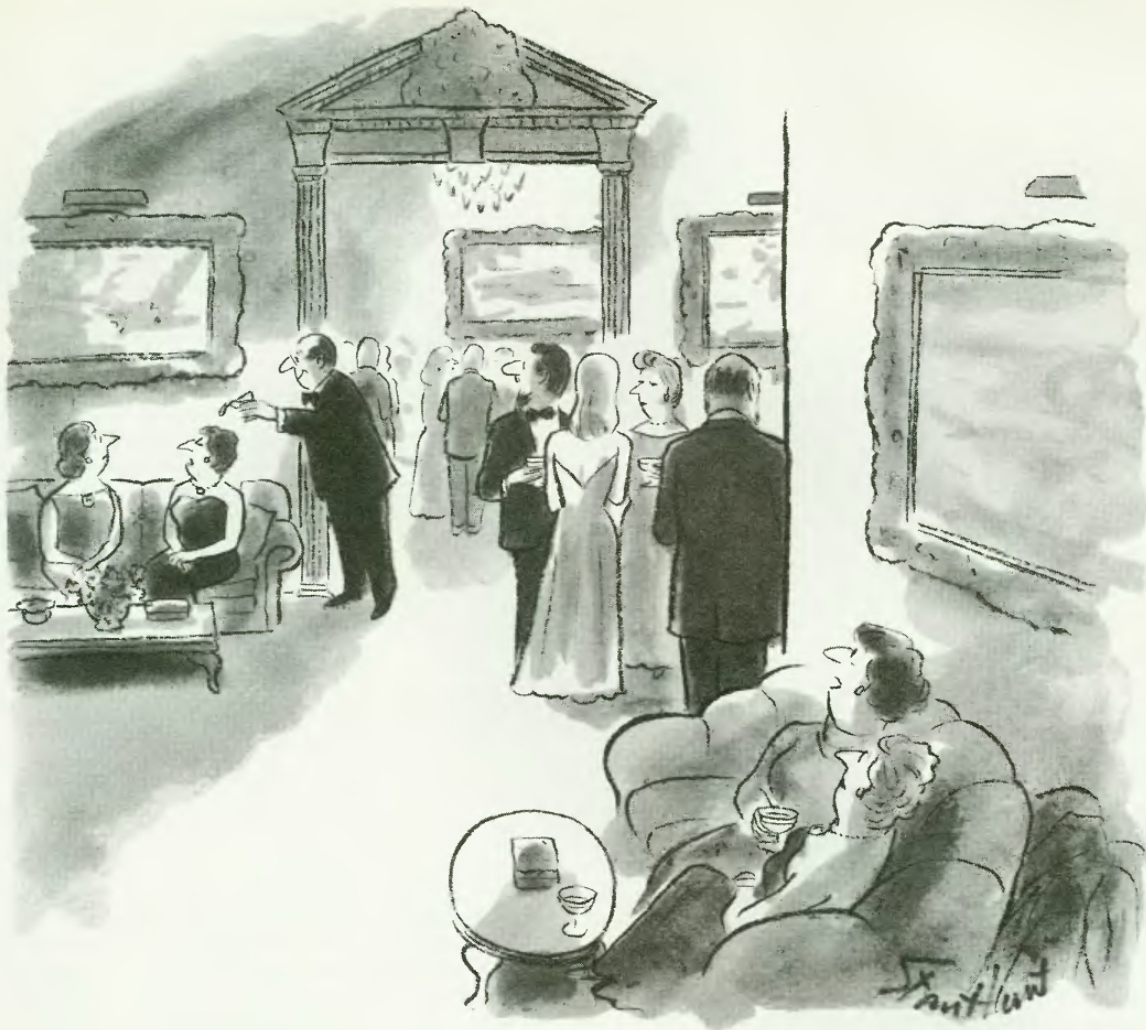
LIKE a lot of old-fashioned reporters, Edna Buchanan seems to operate on the assumption that there are always going to be any number of people who, for perverse and inexplicable reasons of their own, will try to impede her in gathering a story that is rightfully hers and delivering it to where God meant it to be—on the front page of the *Miami Herald*, and preferably the front page of the *Miami Herald* on a Sunday, when the circulation is at its highest. There are shy witnesses who insist that they don't want to get involved. There are lawyers who advise their clients to hang up if Edna Buchanan calls to ask whether they really did it. (It could be libellous for a newspaper to call someone a suspect, but the paper can get the same idea across by quoting his denial of guilt.) There are closemouthed policemen. There are television reporters who require equipment that gets in the way and who ask the sort of question

that makes Edna impatient. (In her view, television reporters on a murder story are concerned almost exclusively with whether they're going to be able to get a picture of the authorities removing the body from the premises, the only other question that truly engages them being whether they're going to get the picture in time for the six-o'clock news.) There are editors who want to cut a story even though it was virtually ordained to run at least sixteen inches. There are editors—often the same editors—who will try to take an interesting detail out of the story simply because the detail happens to horrify or appall them. “One of them kept saying that people read this paper at breakfast,” I was told by Edna, whose own idea of a successful lead is one that might cause a reader who is having breakfast with his wife to “spit out his coffee, clutch his chest, and say, ‘My God, Martha! Did you read this!’” When Edna went to Fort Lauderdale not long ago to talk about police reporting with some of the young reporters in the *Herald's* Broward County bureau, she said, “For sanity and survival, there are three cardinal rules in the newsroom: Never trust an editor, never trust an editor, and never trust an editor.”

Edna likes and admires a lot of policemen, but, listening to her talk about policemen, you can get the impression that they spend most of their energy trying to deny her access to information that she is meant to have. Police officers insist on roping off crime scenes. (“The police department has too much yellow rope—they want to rope off the world.”) Entire departments switch over to computerized crime reports, which don't accommodate the sort of detailed narrative that Edna used to comb through in the old written reports. Investigators sometimes decline to talk about the case they're working on. (Edna distinguishes degrees of reticence among policemen with remarks like “He wasn't quite as paranoid as the other guy.”) Some years ago, the man who was then chief of the Metro-Dade department blocked off the homicide squad with a buzzer-controlled entrance whose function was so apparent that it was commonly referred to as “the Edna Buchanan door.” Homicide investigators who arrive at a scene and spot Edna talking intently with someone assume that she has found an eyewitness, and they often snatch him away with cautioning words about the errors of talking to the press rather







*"I'm afraid alcohol doesn't always bring out the best in Waverly."*

than to the legally constituted authorities. Edna discusses the prevalence of witnessnapping among police detectives in the tone of voice a member of the Citizens Commission on Crime might reserve for talking about an alarming increase in multiple murders.

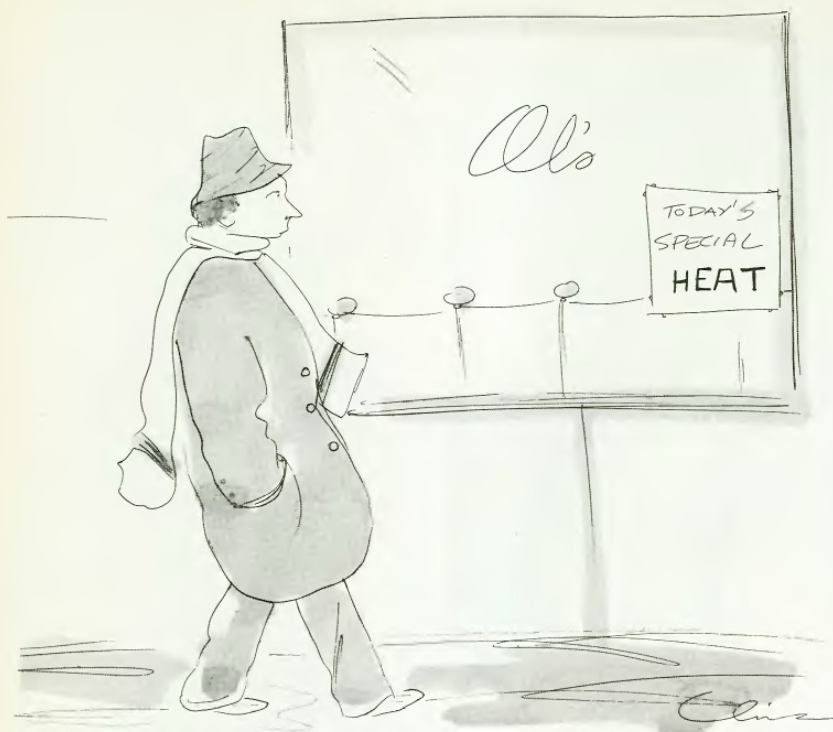
ONCE the police arrive at a crime scene in force, Edna often finds it more effective to return to the *Herald* and work by telephone. The alternative could be simply standing behind the yellow rope—an activity she considers fit for television reporters. She may try calling the snatched witness. With a cross-indexed directory, she can phone neighbors who might have seen what happened and then ducked back into their own house for a bol-

stering drink. She will try to phone the victim's next of kin. "I thought you'd like to say something," she'll say to someone's bereaved wife or daughter. "People care what he was like." Most reporters would sooner cover thirty weeks of water-board hearings than call a murder victim's next of kin, but Edna tries to look on the positive side. "For some people, it's like a catharsis," she told me one day. "They want to talk about what kind of person their husband was, or their father. Also, it's probably the only time his name is going to be in the paper. It's their last shot. They want to give him a good sendoff."

There are people, of course, who are willing to forgo the sendoff just to be left alone. Some of them respond to

Edna's call by shouting at her for having the gall to trouble them at such a time, and then slamming down the telephone. Edna has a standard procedure for dealing with that. She waits sixty seconds and then phones back. "This is Edna Buchanan at the *Miami Herald*," she says, using her full name and identification for civilians. "I think we were cut off." In sixty seconds, she figures, whoever answered the phone might reconsider. Someone else in the room might say, "You should have talked to that reporter." Someone else in the room might decide to spare the upset party the pain of answering the phone the next time it rings, and might be a person who is more willing to talk. A couple of years ago, Edna called the





home of a TV-repair-shop operator in his sixties who had been killed in a robbery attempt—a crime she had already managed to separate from the run-of-the-mill armed-robbery murder. (“On New Year’s Eve Charles Curzio stayed later than planned at his small TV repair shop to make sure customers would have their sets in time to watch the King Orange Jamboree Parade,” Edna’s lead began. “His kindness cost his life.”) One of Curzio’s sons answered, and, upon learning who it was, angrily hung up. “Boy, did I hate dialling the second time,” Edna told me. “But if I hadn’t I might have lost them for good.” This time, the phone was answered by another of Curzio’s sons, and he was willing to talk. He had some eloquent things to say about his father and about capital punishment. (“My father got no trial, no stay of execution, no Supreme Court hearing, nothing. Just some maniac who smashed his brains in with a rifle butt.”) If the second call hadn’t been productive, Edna told me, she would have given up: “The third call would be harassment.”

WHEN Edna is looking for information, slamming down the phone must sometimes seem the only way of ending the conversation. She is

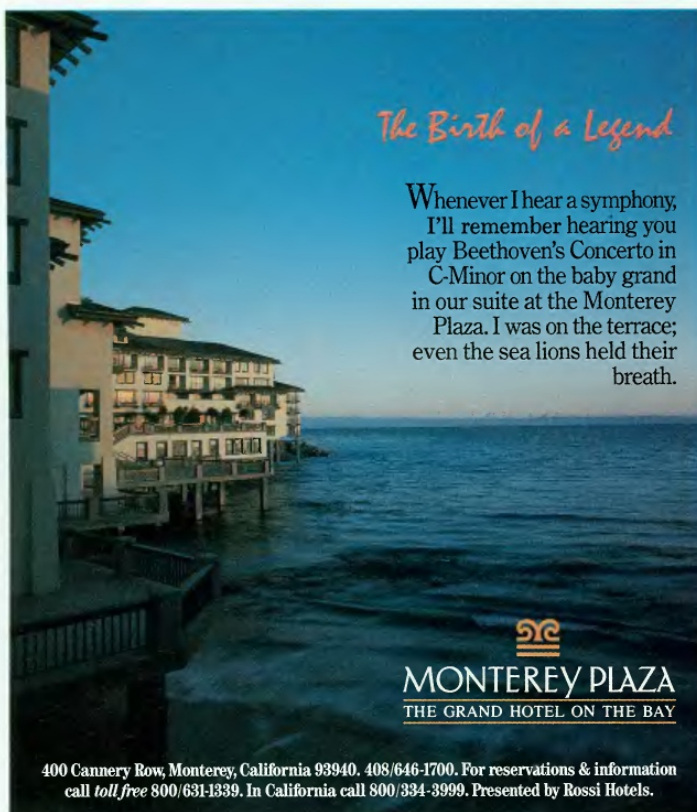
not an easy person to say goodbye to. Once she begins asking questions, she may pause occasionally, as if the interrogation were finally over, but then, in the sort of silence that in conventional conversations is ended with someone’s saying “Well, O.K.” or “Well, thanks for your help,” she asks another question. The questioning may not even concern a story she’s working on. I was once present when Edna began chatting with a Metro-Dade homicide detective about an old murder case that he had never managed to solve—the apparently motiveless shooting of a restaurant proprietor and his wife, both along in years, as they were about to enter their house. Edna would ask a question and the detective would shake his head, explaining that he had checked out that angle without result. Then, after a pause long enough to make me think that they were about to go on to another case, she would ask another question. Could it have been a mistake in the address? Did homicide check out the people who lived in the equivalent house on the next block? Did the restaurant have any connection with the mob? How about an ex-employee? What about a bad son-in-law? Over the years, Edna has come across any number of bad sons-in-law.

Earlier in the day, I had heard her use the same tone to question a young policewoman who was watching over the front desk at Miami Beach headquarters. “What do you think the rest of Bo’s secret is?” Edna said as she skimmed log notations about policemen being called to a loud party or to the scene of a robbery or to a vandalized garage. “Is Kimberly going to get an abortion?” At first, I thought the questions were about cases she was reminded of by the log reports. They turned out to be about “Days of Our Lives,” a soap opera that both Edna and the policewoman are devoted to. Fifteen minutes later, long after I thought the subject had been dropped, Edna was saying, “So is this new character going to be a friend of Jennifer’s—the one in the car wreck?”

Bob Swift, a *Herald* columnist who was once Edna’s editor at a paper called the *Miami Beach Sun*, told me that he arrived at the *Sun*’s office one day fuming about the fact that somebody had stolen his garbage cans. “I was really mad,” he said. “I was saying, ‘Who would want to steal two garbage cans!’ All of a sudden, I heard Edna say, in that breathless voice, ‘Were they empty or full?’”


“NOBODY loves a police reporter,” Edna sometimes says in speeches. She has been vilified and shouted at and threatened. Perhaps because a female police reporter was something of a rarity when she began, some policemen took pleasure in showing her, say, the corpse of someone who had met a particularly nasty end. (“Sometimes they try to gross you out, but when you’re really curious you don’t get grossed out. I’m always saying, ‘What’s this? What’s that?’”) When Edna was asked by David Finkel, who did a story about her for the *St. Petersburg Times*, why she endured the rigors of covering the cops, she replied, “It’s better than working in a coat factory in Paterson, New Jersey.” Working in the coat factory was one of several part-time jobs that she had as a schoolgirl to help her mother out. Aside from the pleasures Edna associates with reading crime stories to her Polish grandmother, she doesn’t have many happy memories of Paterson. Her other grandmother—her mother’s mother—was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution; Edna still has the membership certificate to prove it. That





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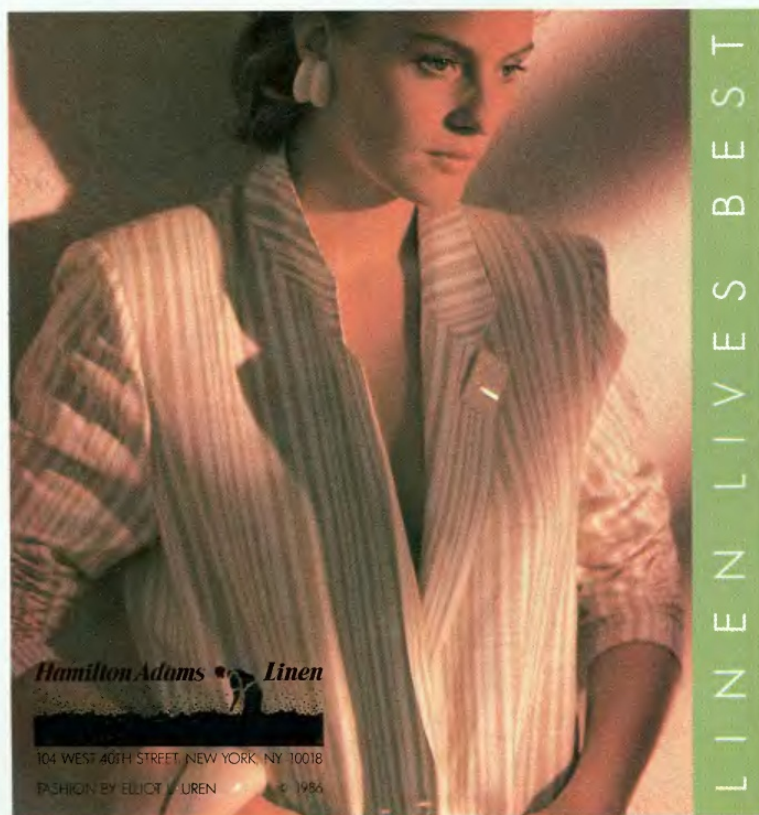
  
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grandmother, in the view of her D.A.R. family, married beneath her—her husband was a Paterson schoolteacher—and her own daughter, Edna's mother, did even worse. She married a Polish factory worker who apparently had some local renown as a drinker and carouser, and he walked out when Edna was seven. As soon as Edna finished high school, an institution she loathed, she joined her mother in wiring switchboards at the Western Electric plant. Eventually, she transferred to an office job at Western Electric—still hardly the career path that normally leads to a reporting job on the *Miami Herald*.

The enormous change in Edna's life came partly because a clotheshorse friend who wanted to take a course in millinery design persuaded her to come along to evening classes at Montclair State Teachers College. Edna, who had been interested in writing as a child, decided to take a course in creative writing. She remembers the instructor as a thin, poetic-looking man who travelled to New Jersey every week from Greenwich Village. He may have had a limp—a war wound, perhaps. She is much clearer about what happened when he handed back the first short stories the students had written. First, he described one he had particularly liked, and it was Edna's—a sort of psychological thriller about a young woman who thought she was being followed. Edna can still recall what the teacher said about the story—about what a rare pleasure it was for a teacher to come across such writing, about how one section reminded him of early Tennessee Williams. It was the one radiant New Jersey moment. The teacher told her about writers she should read. He told her about paragraphing; the first story she turned in was "just one long paragraph." She decided that she could be a writer. Years later, a novelist who had been hanging around with Edna for a while to learn about crime reporting recognized the teacher from Edna's description and provided his telephone number. She phoned him to tell him how much his encouragement had meant to her. He was pleasant enough, Edna told me, but he didn't remember her or her short story.

Not long after the writing course, Edna and her mother decided to take their vacation in Miami Beach, and Edna says that as she walked off the plane she knew she was not going to spend the rest of her life in Paterson,



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New Jersey. "The instant I breathed the air, it was like coming home," she told me. "I loved it. I absolutely loved it. I had been wandering around in a daze up there, like a displaced person. I was always a misfit." Edna and her mother tried to get jobs at the Western Electric plant in South Florida; when they couldn't arrange that, they moved anyway. While taking a course in writing, Edna heard that the Miami Beach *Sun* was looking for reporters. The *Sun*, which is now defunct, was the sort of newspaper that hired people without any reporting experience and gave them a lot of it quickly. Edna wrote society news and local political stories and crime stories and celebrity interviews and movie reviews and, on occasion, the letters to the editor.

Now, years later, Edna Buchanan may be the best-known newspaper reporter in Miami, but sometimes she still sounds as if she can't quite believe that she doesn't work in a factory and doesn't live in Paterson, New Jersey. "I've lived here more than twenty years," she said recently. "And every day I see the palm trees and the water and the beach, and I'm thrilled with how beautiful it is. I'm really lucky, coming from a place like Paterson, New Jersey. I live on a waterway. I have a house. I almost feel, My God, it's like I'm an impostor!"

When Edna says such things, she sounds grateful—a state that an old newspaper hand would tell you is about as common among reporters as a prolonged, religiously inspired commitment to the temperance movement. Edna can even sound grateful for the opportunity to work the police beat—although in the next sentence she may be talking about how tired she is of hearing policemen gripe or how irritated she gets at editors who live to pulverize her copy. She seems completely lacking in the black humor or irony that reporters often use to cope with even a short hitch covering the cops. When she says something is interesting as heck, she means that it is interesting as heck.

Some years ago, she almost went over to the enemy. A Miami television station offered her a hundred and thirty-seven dollars more a week than she was making at the *Herald*, and she had just about decided to take it. She had some ideas about how crime could be covered on television in a way that did not lean so heavily on pictures of the body being removed from the premises. At the last moment, though, she decided not to ac-



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cept the offer. One reason, she now says, is that she faced the fact that crime could never be covered on local television with the details and the subtleties possible in a newspaper story. Also, she couldn't quite bring herself to leave the *Herald*. "If I had been eighteen, maybe I would have done it," she says. "But the *Herald* is the only security I ever had."

**E**VEN before the appearance of "Miami Vice," Miami was the setting of choice for tales of flashy violence. Any number of people, some of them current or former *Herald* reporters, have portrayed Miami crime in mystery novels or television shows or Hollywood movies. Some of the show-business types might have been attracted mainly by the palm trees and the beach and the exotica of the Latin drug industry: the opening shots of each "Miami Vice" episode are so glamorous that some local tourist-development people have been quoted in the *Herald* as saying that the overall impact of the series is positive. But the volume and the variety of real crime in Miami have in fact been of an order to make any police reporter feel the way a stockbroker might feel at a medical convention: opportunities abound. Like most police reporters, Edna specializes in murder, and, as she might express it in a Miller Chop at the end of the first paragraph, so does Miami.

When Edna began as a reporter, a murder in Miami was an occasion. A woman who worked with Edna at the Miami Beach *Sun* in the days when it was sometimes known as "Bob Swift and his all-girl newspaper" has recalled the stir in the *Sun* newsroom when a body washed up on the beach: "I had a camera, because my husband had given it to me for Christmas. The managing editor said, 'Go take a picture of the body.' I said, 'I'm not taking a picture of a washed-up body!' Then I heard a voice from the other end of the room saying, 'I'll do it, I'll do it.' It was Edna."

In the late seventies, Miami, like other American cities, had a steady increase in the sort of murders that occur when, say, an armed man panics while he is robbing a convenience store. It also had some political bombings and some shooting between outfits that were, depending on your point of view, either running drugs to raise money for fighting Fidel or using the fight against Fidel as a cover for running drugs. At the end of the decade,



Dade County's murder rate took an astonishing upturn. Around that time, the Colombians who manufactured the drugs being distributed in Miami by Cubans decided to eliminate the middleman, and, given a peculiar viciousness in the way they customarily operated, that sometimes meant eliminating the middleman's wife and whoever else happened to be around. Within a couple of years after the Colombians began their campaign to reduce overhead, Miami was hit with the Marielboat-lift refugees. In 1977, there were two hundred and eleven murders in Dade County. By 1981, the high point of Dade murder, there were six hundred and twenty-one. That meant, according to one homicide detective I spoke to, that Miami experienced the greatest increase in murders per capita that any city had ever recorded. It also meant that Miami had the highest murder rate in the country. It also meant that a police reporter could drive to work in the morning knowing that there would almost certainly be at least one murder to write about.

"A PERSONAL question," one of the Broward-bureau reporters said after Edna had finished her talk in Fort Lauderdale. "I hope not to embarrass you, but I've always heard a rumor that you carried a gun. Is that true?"

"I don't carry a gun," Edna said. "I own a gun or two." She keeps one in the house and one in the car—which seems only sensible, she told the reporters, for someone who lives alone and is often driving through unpleasant neighborhoods late at night. It also seems only sensible to spend some time on the shooting range, which she happens to enjoy. ("They let me shoot an Uzi the other day," she once told me. "It was interesting as heck.") A lot of what Edna says about her life seems only sensible, but a lot of it turns out to have something to do with violence or crime, the stuff of an Edna story. Talking about her paternal grandfather, she'll say that he was supposed to have killed or maimed someone in a barroom brawl and that his children were so frightened of his drunken rages that the first sign of an eruption would send some of them leaping out of second-floor windows to escape. As an example of her nearsightedness, she'll mention some revelations in Paterson that seemed to indicate that she had been followed for months by a notorious sex criminal without realizing it. When Edna talks



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about places where she has lived in Miami, she is likely to identify neighbors with observations like "He lived right across the street from this big dope dealer" or "He was indicted for Medicare fraud but he beat it."

Edna's first marriage, to someone she met while she was working at the Miami Beach *Sun*, could provide any number of classic Edna leads. James Buchanan had some dealings with the anti-Castro community, and was close to Frank Sturgis, one of the Watergate burglars. Edna says that for some time she thought her husband was simply a reporter on the Fort Lauderdale *Sun-Sentinel* who seemed to be out of town more than absolutely necessary. The story she sometimes tells of how she discovered otherwise could be written with an Edna lead: "James Buchanan seemed to make a lot of unexplained trips. Yesterday, at the supermarket, his wife found out why. Mrs. Buchanan, accompanied by a bag boy who was carrying a large load of groceries, emerged from the supermarket and opened the trunk of her car. It was full of machine guns. 'Just put the groceries in the back seat,' she said."

Edna tried a cop the next time, but that didn't seem to have much effect

on the duration or quality of the marriage. Her second husband, Emmett Miller, was on the Miami Beach force for years, and was eventually appointed chief. By that time, though, he had another wife, his fifth—a wife who, it turned out, was part owner of what the *Herald* described as "an X-rated Biscayne Boulevard motel and a Beach restaurant alleged to be a center of illegal gambling." The appointment was approved by the Miami Beach City Commission anyway, although one commissioner, who stated that the police chief ought to be "above suspicion," did say, "I don't think we're putting our city in an enviable position when we overlook this."

Since the breakup of her marriage to Miller, Edna has almost never been seen at parties or *Herald* hangouts. "I love to be alone," she says. One of the people closest to her is still her mother, who lives not far from Edna and seems to produce ceramic animals even faster than she once turned out fully wired switchboards. Edna's house is a menagerie of ceramic animals. She also has ceramic planters and a ceramic umbrella holder and a ceramic light-house—not to speak of a watercolor and a sketch by Jack (Murph the Surf)

Murphy, the Miami beachboy who in 1964 helped steal the Star of India sapphire and the deLong Star Ruby from the American Museum of Natural History—but ceramic animals are the predominant design element. She has penguins and turtles and horses and seagulls and flamingos and swans and fish and a rabbit and a pelican. She has a ceramic dog that is nearly life-size. She has cats in practically every conceivable pose—a cat with nursing kittens, a cat carrying a kitten in its mouth, a curled-up cat. Edna is fond of some of the ceramic animals, but the fact that her mother's productivity seems to be increasing rather than waning with the passing of the years has given her pause.

All of Edna's live animals are strays. Besides the cats, she has a dog whose best trick is to fall to the floor when Edna points an imaginary gun at him and says, "Bang! You're dead!" Some colleagues at the *Herald* think that a stray animal is about the only thing that can distract Edna from her coverage of the cops. It is assumed at the *Herald* that she takes Mondays and Tuesdays off because the weekend is traditionally a high-crime period. (Edna says that the beaches are less

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crowded during the week, and that working weekends gives her a better chance at the Sunday paper.) Around the *Herald* newsroom, Edna is known for being fiercely proprietary about stories she considers hers—any number of *Herald* reporters, running into her at the scene of some multiple murder or major disaster, have been greeted with an icy “What are *you* doing here?”—and so combative about her copy that a few of the less resilient editors have been reduced almost to the state in which they would fall to the floor if Edna pointed an imaginary gun at them and said, “Bang! You’re dead!” Edna’s colleagues tend to speak of her not as a pal but as a phenomenon. Their Edna stories are likely to concern her tenacity or her superstitions or the remarkable intensity she maintains after all these years of covering a beat that quickly strikes many reporters as unbearably horrifying or depressing. They often mention the astonishing contrast between her apparent imperviousness to the grisly sights on the police beat and her overwhelming concern for animals. While I was in Miami, two or three *Herald* reporters suggested that I look up some articles in which, as they remem-

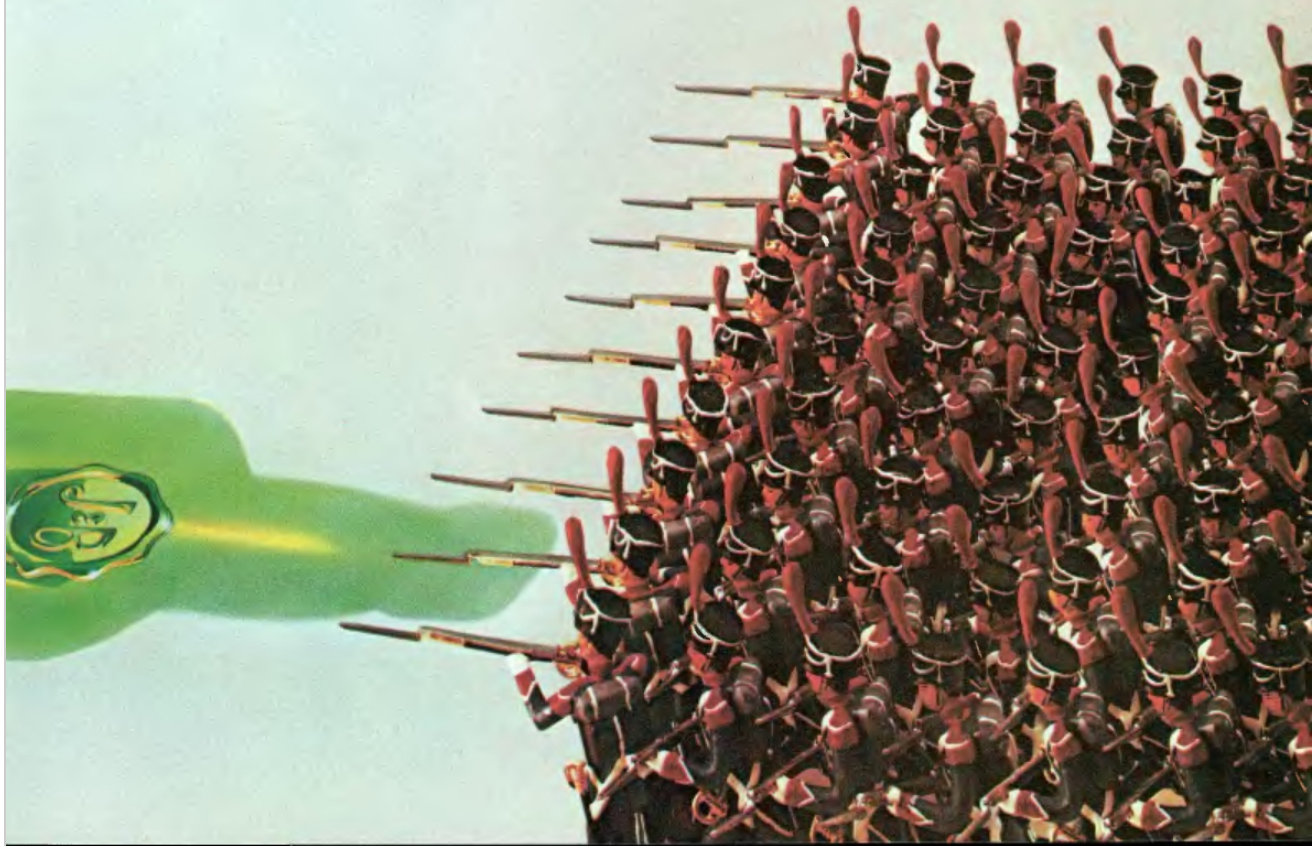
bered it, Edna hammered away so intensely at a retired French-Canadian priest who had put to death some stray cats that the poor man was run out of the country. When I later told one of the reporters that I had read the *Herald*’s coverage of the incident and that almost none of it had been done by Edna, he said, “I’m not surprised. Probably didn’t trust herself. Too emotionally involved.”

**POLICEMEN**, Edna told the young reporters in Fort Lauderdale, have an instinctive mistrust of outsiders—“an ‘us-and-them’ attitude.” Edna can never be certain which category she’s in. Any police reporter these days is likely to have a less comfortable relationship with the police than the one enjoyed by the old-fashioned station-house reporter who could be counted on to be looking the other way if the suspect met with an accident while he was being taken into custody. Since Watergate, reporters all over the country have been under pressure to cast a more suspicious eye on any institution they cover. Partly because of the availability of staggering amounts of drug money, both the Miami and the Metro-Dade departments

have had serious scandals in recent years, making them particularly sensitive to inspection by critical outsiders. The *Herald* has covered police misconduct prominently, and it has used Florida’s public-records act aggressively in court to gain access to police documents—even documents involved in Internal Affairs investigations. A lot of policemen regard the *Herald* as their adversary and see Edna Buchanan as the embodiment of the *Herald*.

Edna says that she makes every effort to portray cops as human beings—writing about a police officer who has been charged with misconduct, she usually manages to find some past commendations to mention—but it has never occurred to anybody that she might look the other way. Edna broke the story of an attempted coverup involving a black insurance man named Arthur McDuffie, who died as a result of injuries suffered in an encounter with some Metro-Dade policemen—policemen whose acquittal on manslaughter charges some months later touched off three nights of rioting in Miami’s black community. There are moments when Edna seems to be “us” and “them” at the same time. Keeping

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the picture and the press release sent when someone is named Officer of the Month may give Edna one extra positive sentence to write about a policeman the next time she mentions him; also, as it happens, it is difficult to come by a picture of a cop who gets in trouble, and over the years Edna has found that a cop who gets in trouble and a cop who was named Officer of the Month are often the same person.

"There's a love-hate relationship between the police and the press,"

Mike Gonzalez, one of Edna's best friends on the Miami municipal force, says. A case that Edna covers prominently is likely to get a lot of attention in the department, which means that someone whose name is attached to it might become a hero or might, as one detective I spoke to put it, "end up in the complaint room of the property bureau." Edna says that the way a reporter is received at police headquarters can depend on "what you wrote the day before—or their perception of what you wrote the day before."

Some police officers in Dade County won't talk to Edna Buchanan about the case they're working on. Some of those who do give her tips—not just on their own cases but on cases being handled by other people, or even other departments—won't admit it. (According to Dr. Joseph Davis, the medical examiner of Dade County, "Every police agency thinks she has a direct pipeline into someone else's agency.") Cops who become known as friends and sources of Edna's are likely to be accused by other cops of showboating or of trying to further their careers through the newspaper. When I mentioned Mike Gonzalez to a Metro-Dade lieutenant I was talking to in Miami, he said, "What Howard Cosell did for Cassius Clay, Edna Buchanan did for Mike Gonzalez."

Gonzalez is aware of such talk, and doesn't show much sign of caring about it. He thinks most policemen are nervous about the press because they aren't confident that they can reveal precisely what they find it useful to reveal and no more. Edna's admirers among police investigators—people like Gonzalez and Lloyd Hough, a Metro-Dade homicide detective—tend to admire her for her skill and independence as an investigator. "I'd take her any time as a partner," Hough told me. "Let's put it like this: If I had

done something, I wouldn't want Edna investigating me. Internal Affairs I don't care about, but Edna . . ." They also admire her persistence, maddening as it may sometimes be. Hough nearly had her arrested once when she persisted in coming under the yellow rope into a crime scene. "She knows when she's pushed you to the limit, and she'll do that often," Hough told me. "And I say that with the greatest admiration."



A police detective and a police reporter may sound alike as they stand around talking about past cases—recalling the airline pilot who killed the other airline pilot over the stewardess, or exchanging anecdotes about the aggrieved bag boy who cleared a Publix supermarket in a hurry by

holding a revolver to the head of the manager—but their interests in a murder case are not necessarily the same. If an armed robber kills a convenience-store clerk, the police are interested in catching him; Edna is interested in distinguishing what happened from other killings of other convenience-store clerks. To write about any murder, Edna is likely to need details that wouldn't help an investigator close the case. "I want to know what movie they saw before they got gunned down," she has said. "What were they wearing? What did they have in their pockets? What was cooking on the stove? What song was playing on the jukebox?" Mike Gonzalez just sighs when he talks about Edna's appetite for irrelevant detail. "It infuriates Mike," Edna says. "I always ask what the dog's name is, what the cat's name is." Edna told me that Gonzalez now advises rookie detectives that they might as well gather such details, because otherwise "you're just going to feel stupid when Edna asks you."

**T**HERE are times when Edna finds herself longing for simpler times on the police beat. When she began, the murders she covered tended to be conventional love triangles or armed robberies. She was often dealing with "an up-front person who happened to have bludgeoned his wife to death." These days, the murders are likely to be Latin drug murders, and a lot fewer of them produce a suspect. Trying to gather information from Cubans and Central Americans, Edna has a problem that goes beyond the language barrier. "They have a Latin

love of intrigue," she says. "I had a Cuban informant, and I found that he would sometimes lie to me just to make it more interesting." It is also true that even for a police reporter there can be too many murders. Edna says that she was "a little shell-shocked" four or five years ago, when Dade murders hit their peak. She found that she barely had time to make her rounds in a thorough way. "I used to like to stop at the jail," she has said. "I used to like to browse in the morgue. To make sure who's there."

Edna found that the sheer number of murders overwhelmed each individual murder as the big story. "Dade's murder rate hit new heights this week as a wave of unrelated violence left 14 people dead and five critically hurt within five days," a story bylined Edna Buchanan began in June of 1980. After a couple of paragraphs comparing the current murder figures with those of previous years, the story went on, "In the latest wave of violence, a teenager's throat was cut and her body dumped in a canal. A former airline stewardess was garroted and left with a pair of scissors stuck between her shoulder blades. Four innocent bystanders were shot in a barroom gun battle. An 80-year-old man surprised a burglar who battered him fatally with a hammer. An angry young woman who 'felt used' beat her date to death with the dumbbells he used to keep fit. And an apparent robbery victim was shot dead as he ran away from the robbers." The murder rate has levelled off since 1981, but Edna still sometimes writes what amount to murder-roundup stories. "I feel bad, and even a little guilty, that a murder no longer gets a story, just a paragraph," she says. "It dehumanizes it." A paragraph in a roundup piece is not Edna's idea of a sendoff.

On a day I was making the rounds with Edna, there was a police report saying that two Marielitos had begun arguing on the street and the argument had ended with one shooting the other dead. That sounded like a paragraph at most. But Edna had a tip that the victim and the killer had known each other in Cuba and the shooting was actually the settling of an old prison score. That sounded to me more like a murder that stood out a bit from the crowd. Edna thought so, too, but her enthusiasm was limited. "We've already had a couple of those," she told me. Edna has covered a few thousand murders by now, and she's seen a couple of most things. She



has done stories about a man who was stabbed to death because he stepped on somebody's toes on his way to a seat in a movie theatre and about a two-year-old somebody tried to frame for the murder of a playmate and about an eighty-nine-year-old man who was arrested for beating his former wife to death and about a little boy killed by a crocodile. She has done stories about a woman who committed suicide because she couldn't get her leaky roof fixed and about a newspaper deliveryman who committed suicide because during a petroleum shortage he couldn't get enough gasoline. She has done stories about a man who managed to commit suicide by stabbing himself in the heart *twice* and about a man who threw a severed head at a police officer twice. She has done a story about two brothers who killed a third brother because he interrupted a checkers game. ("I thought I had the best-raised children in the world," their mother said.) She has done a story about a father being killed at the surprise birthday party given for him by his thirty children. She has done a story about a man who died because fourteen of the eighty-two double-wrapped condom packages of cocaine he tried to carry into the country inside his stomach began to leak. ("His last meal was worth \$30,000 and it killed him.") She has done any number of stories about bodies being discovered in the bay by beachcombers or fishermen or University of Miami scientists doing marine research. ("It's kind of a nuisance when you plan your day to do research on the reef," fumed Professor Peter Glynn, of the university's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science.") Talking to Edna one day about murder cases they had worked on, a Metro-Dade homicide detective said, "In Dade County, there are no surprises left."

Edna would agree that surprises are harder to find in Dade County these days. Still, she finds them. Flipping through page after page of routine police logs, talking to her sources on the telephone, chatting with a homicide detective, she'll come across, say, a shopping-mall murder that might have been done against the background of a new kind of high-school gang, or a murderer who seemed to have been imprisoned with his victim for a time by a sophisticated burglar-gate system. Then, a look of concern still on her face, she'll say, "That's interesting as heck."

—CALVIN TRILLIN



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