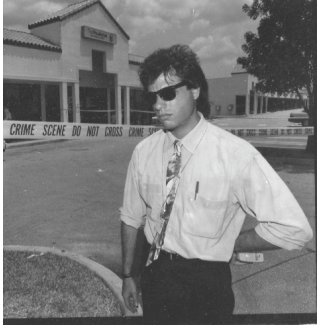


# The Perfect Murder Weapon

[Kevin Davis bio ↓](#) · July 28th, 2009 · filed under [Other](#), [rumpus original](#)

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“Hey, kid, what’s the perfect murder weapon?”

George Covaleski used to ask me this question every time I went to see him. No matter how hard I tried, I could never come up with the right answer.

George knew a lot about murder weapons and the many ways people could get killed. He was the chief investigator for the Broward County Medical Examiner’s Office in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. His job was to determine the cause of death for the hundreds of bodies that were delivered to his office every year. He spent his days reviewing autopsy reports, witness statements, photos and evidence from the scene where people died, and then issued rulings that would be used by homicide detectives, lawyers and life insurance companies.

Each time he posed the murder weapon question, I’d rub my chin and try to think of something clever. An exotic poison? A lethal virus? A homemade gun that you could disassemble and scatter in different locations?

“Nope,” he would say. “This one is perfect.”

I met George when I was a rookie crime reporter. Death was part of my beat, and my daily responsibilities included calling the medical examiner’s office to see if any bodies turned up that might be newsworthy.

When I called George for my routine checks, I was usually on deadline, and our conversations were quick and to the point. But over time, we became pals on the phone during my daily calls, a result of our regular contact. “Whaddya got today, George?” I would say.

He had a deep, gravelly voice, a sound that suggested years of unfiltered cigarettes, nasty crime scenes and too many late nights. He would say, “We got a floater. Looks like a suicide.” Floaters were just like they sounded – floating bodies, frequently grotesquely bloated with the gases of decomposition and usually found bobbing in canals or ponds. Or he would say, “multiple gunshot wound victim.” Sometimes he’d say “nothing but naturals today,” which meant that none of the deaths were of a suspicious nature.

One day when things were slow in the newsroom, I decided to drive to the Medical Examiner’s office to meet George in person for the first time. The office looked like one of those professional medical buildings, low slung, clean and quiet. But I felt nervous as I walked up to the entrance, thinking about how it was

filled with dead bodies lying in refrigerators or on tables where they were being sliced open. Being new on the job, I was just beginning to learn about a world that I knew little about, spending time at crimes scenes, police stations and inserting myself into other people's tragedies and personal grief. I felt weird, embarrassed, intrusive. My editors didn't care. They wanted the story.

Once I walked inside the medical examiner's office, the place didn't seem so bad. It was strangely calming. Unusually quiet. It reminded me of a hospital, with clean tile floors that sparkled and fluorescent lights that hummed from above. A couple of receptionists sat at desks with computer terminals, the clicking of their keyboards the only sound in the room. Men in blue surgical scrub outfits walked out of doorways, which I presumed led to the rooms where they cut open the bodies. There was a faint, antiseptic smell, slightly sweet, yet somehow foul.

George was smoking when I came into his office, a small room down the hall from the autopsy theaters. He was a man of tremendous girth, perhaps 300 pounds or more. His face was wide and folded with lines that radiated from his eyes and creased his cheeks. But it was a friendly face. He smiled and shook my hand.

Tacked on the wall behind him were police bulletins, pictures of missing persons, artists' renderings and clay sculptures of homicide victims whose faces had been destroyed by decomposition or shotgun blasts. Many of them looked like ghoulish cartoon characters. I wondered whether they would ever match real people with these hopeless looking reconstructions.

I sat down next to his desk, which was covered in papers, folders, color photographs of human bodies with all manner of wounds, holes, and slices.

“So kid,” he said, “What's the perfect murder weapon?”

I thought for a moment, but came up with nothing. We'd been playing this game on and off for months. He seemed delighted to stump me.

When I spoke with George, I learned of all the terrible ways people could die and the details of their injuries. Car accidents (steering wheel embedded in chest) construction mishaps (man impaled by rebar, man crushed by 2-ton slab of concrete wall), shootings, stabbings, bludgeonings (hammers, crowbars, baseball bats). Blunt force trauma to the head, cocaine intoxication, asphyxia, or myocardial infarction, which meant heart attack.



There were many horrible cases, and I had to write stories about them. One time a woman at commercial laundry was decapitated when a tightly wound coil of wire snapped on a machine, unraveled at blinding speed and sliced off her head. I wondered how they informed her family. Another time, there was an infant who was stomped to death by his father for defecating on the floor, a swimmer struck by lightning, a mechanic crushed when a car jack collapsed, a homeless man who fell into a canal and drowned while squatting to move his bowels. George said they figured that one out after police

discovered a pile of evidence on the bank of the canal, and linked it to the man who was found floating in the canal with his pants around his ankles. My first reaction was to think that was funny. George did not think that at all.

As a reporter, I instinctively became detached from the reality of this gruesomeness so that I could focus on my job. I adopted that kind of inside humor that cops and paramedics had, making light of the horrors we witness to block out our emotions, a sort of defense mechanism. I used to enjoy telling my colleagues in the newsroom about the bizarre cases, especially the one about the man squatting by the canal. Later, I felt ashamed for making light of it.

George liked to tell jokes, but he never made light of the dead whose bodies passed through his office. It was a place of respect, he told me. The dead must be treated with dignity. Everyone had a family, someone who loved them. That became clear one afternoon while I was visiting George, and a family came in, apparently to identify a body. I heard a woman crying and wailing in the hallway, and I felt a chill. When families like that came to talk to George, he knew just what to do. He was comforting and professional. He treated them like a funeral director might.

“Hey, kid, what’s the perfect murder weapon,” George asked me again one afternoon when I stopped by to see him.

“Jesus George, I don’t know. I give up.”

“This one is absolutely perfect.”

I sat silent.

“All right, I’m going to tell you now,” he said, finally preparing to reveal the solution for me as if announcing the secret of the universe. He leaned forward, his eyes widened and eyebrows arched upward.

“An icicle,” he said in a low voice.



George’s enormous face held a wide grin as he waited for me to react. “A good sharp icicle,” he continued. “Stab the victim, and the evidence just melts away, never to be seen again,

completely changing form and then vaporizing into the sky.” He then waved his hands in the air while wiggling his fingers.

He was right. It was perfect.

I asked George if in all his years whether he knew of such a case. “No,” he said. “But then, again, how would I?”

George laughed so hard he began coughing from the deep recesses of his lungs, a booming hack of such respiratory rumbling that I thought I might have to run into the autopsy room for help. He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a cigarette, lit it, inhaled deeply and was calmed. George might have been carrying the perfect murder weapon in his shirt pocket all along.

Not long after that visit, I got a call in the newsroom. George was dead. I sat stunned. We had just been talking the other day. Everything seemed fine. I wondered whether they took his body to the Medical Examiner’s office. But that didn’t make sense. I found out he died at a hospital. Heart attack. He was only 61 years old. He would have classified his own death as “a natural.” “No story there,” he would say.

But there was a story, and my editor assigned me to write his obituary. It’s strange to write about the death of someone you know, though in many ways I hardly knew George. Like those who turned up on the autopsy tables, there were people who knew and loved George deeply, and would be hit hard by his death. I called some of his colleagues at the Medical Examiner’s Office to get some quotes and learn something more about my friend, George.

I learned he had four daughters and a son who died of cancer ten years earlier. He was born in Connecticut, served in the Marines and worked for years as a cop. He also had an interesting personal life, which he never told me about. George played drums with a polka band called Georgie K and His Orchestra. He used to wrestle as an amateur under the nickname of “The Crusher.”

One of the investigators at the office told me how much they loved George. “I can recall a lot of families thanking him as they walked out the door for his kindness and compassion,” he told me. Another investigator said, “he was like a father to us all.” These stories made me want to cry, but I was on deadline. I had a story to write.


I will always remember my friend George and his favorite riddle, which I have repeated many times to others, none of whom could come up with the right answer. But George was wrong about the perfect murder weapon. Time is the perfect murder weapon. It always works and it always gets away with it. If we don’t get in the way of a bullet, a speeding car, a 2-ton slab of concrete, fall into a canal or get sliced by an uncoiling piece of wire, something will get us eventually – cancer, heart disease or if we’re lucky, old age. It’s just a matter of time.

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[Kevin Davis](#) is an award-winning journalist, author and magazine writer based in Chicago. A former crime reporter for the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, his writing has appeared in USA Today, the Chicago Tribune, Chicago magazine, Utne Reader, In These Times, American Bar Association Journal, Reader’s Digest, USA Weekend, Encyclopaedia Britannica and many other publications. He is the author of two non-fiction books on the criminal justice system, *The Wrong Man*, and *Defending the Damned* (recently released in [paperback](#)). [More from this author →](#)


## 4 Responses to “The Perfect Murder Weapon”

1.  *Daryl* Says:  
[July 28th, 2009 at 6:57 am](#)


Excellent piece. Thanks for writing it.

2.  *Cristine* Says:  
[July 28th, 2009 at 6:19 pm](#)

I don't know why I decided to read this article, but I'm glad I did. I really enjoyed all the great descriptions and the answer to the question was very clever. I liked the time answer as well. Every day my dad picked up a copy of the Sun-Sentinel before dropping me off to school. I wonder if he read your column...

3.  *SAM* Says:  
[July 30th, 2009 at 12:51 pm](#)

THE FIRST PERSON I HEARD THE 'ICICLE' WEAPON THING FROM WAS ALFRED HITCHCOCK...MAKES FOR A GREAT TRIVIA QUESTION.GREAT STORY.

4.  *Kevin* Says:  
[July 31st, 2009 at 10:42 am](#)

Thanks to all for your kind words. Now don't get any sinister ideas and go out and murder someone. I absolve myself of responsibility for sharing the secret of the perfect murder weapon. (Anyway, it's summer. icicles may be hard to find, at least in the lower 49).

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The Rumpus is not worried about being the first to break the news. We care about good writing, and we'll publish essays just because the writing is good. And we won't run a well crafted meditation alongside an actor's opinion of the war in Iraq. ([more](#))

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