



Lies. Jealousy. Rage. **MURDER.**

a spectator true crime story by jon wells

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scene setter:

Police search Bev and Sam Pirrera's old townhouse for evidence of murder. They find none, but Sam is eventually charged with murder in Bev's death as well as that of Maggie Karer. Then Sam agrees to plead guilty to two counts of second-degree murder. The court date is a few days away.

Story has graphic content

chapterthirteen

Scars

Saturday, Feb. 12, 2000
11:20 a.m.

Toronto East Detention Centre

The chemical snaked through the 32-year-old inmate's bloodstream, winding its way to his brain, binding to receptors.

Shortly after injecting heroin there is a surge of euphoria. A warm flush of the skin. Dry mouth. He reached for the piece of fruit left over from a snack, felt the smooth texture of the pear.

Heavy feeling in the arms and legs. Sleepy, then suddenly awake, and sleepy again. Mind clouding, can't think straight. Maybe a bit of nausea, itchy skin. Can't get air, the brain's signals to the lungs retarded, can't breathe, suffocating.

And — what? Bloody visions dwelling in his mind's eye fading to black? A kaleidoscope of people and places and love and hate? A sense of relief, or worse, sudden regret? Or none of that, simply a plain jail cell wall growing paler and paler, moving closer, covering him like a blanket.

It all wouldn't have taken more than several minutes. He lay still on the top bunk in Cell 4231.

The pear resting in Sam Pirrera's cold hand.

Saturday, 2 p.m.

"Pirrera is dead."

The words hit Detective Sergeant Peter Abi-Rashed like a hammer as he sat in his car. Could not believe what he was hearing on his cellphone from an officer at Central Station.

No. Can't be. Sam Pirrera was due in court in six days, expected to plead guilty to the second-degree murders of Maggie and Beverly, everyone ready, the victims' families, police, the Crown — and he's dead?

"What the — what happened?"

"Looks like an overdose."

"Overdose?"

"They found him dead in his cell at Toronto East Detention Centre."

"Overdose? What do you mean, overdose? How?" Abi-Rashed drove, emotions ripping through him. Anger. Shock. They were not getting their day in court. Why couldn't the bastard have waited a week before doing himself?

Abi-Rashed's slow drive along King Street was surreal, seemed to last forever, the lower city bathed in a golden glow from the sun. For a moment his instinctive skepticism kicked in. Maybe there had been a mixup, maybe it was a different Pirrera. And Toronto East Detention? What the hell was he doing there in the first place? Sam had been at

While the cause of death was obvious, it did not quite add up. No needle marks were found on Sam's body, and no syringe in his cell. Had Sam meant to kill himself? Was someone else involved?

Quinte Detention Centre, shouldn't Barton Street jail have been his next stop before his court date?

Abi-Rashed wondered later if, at the moment he heard the news, he felt hatred towards Sam Pirrera. If so that would be a first. You deal with nasty characters in Major Crime but Abi-Rashed did his job, he did not hate. He did feel ripped off. They had a deal.

All the teamwork on the investigation, the case all but closed: Sam had admitted to his estranged wife Danielle that he killed a woman in his home, Maggie Karer's body parts were found in his basement. For years Sam had covered up the fate of his missing first wife, Beverly, but told Danielle that he had killed her and dumped her body parts in a vat of molten steel at Dofasco.

Even though Abi-Rashed believed they could convict Sam of first-degree murder in Maggie's death, the beauty of Sam pleading guilty to second-degree murder in the deaths of both Maggie and Beverly was that it all ends, there is no drawn-out trial, no appeal. A win-win all around. Mission accomplished for the police, justice for the victims and the families — hell, even Sam gets closure. Owns up to what he did.

Sam had thumbed his nose at Abi-Rashed on the streets of north Hamilton back in his teens, had shut him down at the Quinte interview in June, turned his back on him. And now this.

"He did it to me again."



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on the top bunk in Cell 4231.

The pear resting in Sam Pirrera's cold hand.



On that final morning in Toronto East Detention Centre, a prison nurse came by Cell 4231 and saw Sam Pirrera lying in his bunk. He didn't respond to the breakfast call.

When any inmate dies in custody there is by law an autopsy and investigation.

Dr. Bruce Walker, a toxicologist with the Centre of Forensic Sciences in Toronto, examined fluid samples collected at the autopsy — femoral blood from his leg, blood from the heart. Urine. Stomach contents. Studied samples from the liver, hair.

The blood in the heart showed a concentration of morphine of 10,000 nanograms per millilitre. Morphine is the result of heroin metabolizing in the body. Death can occur with concentrations as low as 200 ng/ml. The amount in Sam's blood was the highest Walker had ever seen in his career, or in any of the literature. It was enough to kill several men.

Sam Pirrera had taken an overdose of either heroin or pure morphine — most likely heroin, Walker deduced.

"Death would have come rapidly." There could be no doubt that Sam took the drug in his Toronto cell.

He had been transported from Quinte to Toronto East Detention about 24 hours earlier, mid-morning on Friday, Feb. 11. It was to be a brief stopover before transport to Barton Street.

Heroin can be smoked, inhaled through the nose, taken orally or injected. Walker believed that Pirrera injected the drug. It would account for the high concentration found in the heart — five times more — in contrast to the lower amount in the leg. Injection brings death quickly. The heart pumps the drug to the brain, where it has its major impact.

Moreover, his examination of stomach contents showed no presence of fragments of capsules or tablets. Given the size of the overdose, had Sam taken it orally, he expected to find evidence of that.

And yet it did not quite add up. There were no needle marks evident on his body. And there was no syringe, needle or any drug paraphernalia found in his cell.

What did it all mean? Had Sam meant to commit suicide? Had he taken more drug than he intended? Was another person involved? Perhaps the inquest into his death would offer some answers.

In Peter Abi-Rashed's white homicide casebook labelled "Karer/Davidson" — packed with a day-by-day account of the investigation since Easter Weekend 1999 when human remains were discovered outside Sam's home — he had written notes on his meetings with the families, and triple-underlined Feb. 18, a reminder of the big court date.

Turn the page and — nothing. Not a word. Blank. The case was over for Abi-Rashed. Not case

Sam Pirrera died of a drug overdose at Toronto East Detention Centre. He was being held there temporarily en route from Quinte Detention Centre in Napanee to Hamilton, where he was scheduled to plead guilty a few days later to murdering Beverly Pirrera and Maggie Karer.