

# Murder in Ohiopyle

by Marci Lynn McGuinness

Solace is a funny thing. God will only allow you so much of it before throwing some action your way. I had hidden in my house all weekend with a few good books, taking naps and watching movies. On the way to the Post Office this Tuesday morning I thought my Jack Russell, Jack, was bothering the fellow on the bench. He was just ahead of me on Grant Street in Ohiopyle.

“Come on,” I summoned. He ignored me and sniffed the man further.

I did not have my glasses on, so I could not see more than 10 feet in front of me. I jogged over and started to smile at the man. His head was hanging a bit and I thought, at first, that he was sleeping. I realized it was Herman Cranker so I touched the Ohiopyle Councilman’s cap, then his shoulder, “Herman, are you okay?”

It was 7 AM, the day after Labor Day. Most years, this is my favorite day in Ohiopyle. The tourists and transient river workers are gone. It is exquisitely quiet. Herman did not respond. Nothing. I sat next to him and took his wrist. No pulse.

“Crap!”

Jack was dancing around and barking at me, at Herman. I said my good byes to a man I knew all my life. He was 89, had seemed 89 to me for 40 years. It was when I stood up that I realized blood was trickling out of his ear on the other side of his head. I have watched enough *Perry Mason*, *Matlock*, *Murder She Wrote* and *Law & Order* to know what that meant. Who would hurt the old man? I called 911 and then took pictures of Herman from several angles with my camera phone.

It was then that I realized that someone was angry with the grouchy, opinionated man at any given moment. This may be real difficult to figure out. He upset folks at the council meetings each month and wrote letters to the editor regularly, stirring things up. I also realized that if someone else came by and messed with him, that would be bad, too, so I stayed there and left a friend a message.

“Frank, someone killed old Herman Cranker from here in the borough. I found him on a bench and will send you photos as soon as I get off the phone. He is on the bench just past the dumpster at the corner of Grant and Lincoln, bleeding out of his ear. Looks like a gash from a rock. I don’t know how or why, but he is sure gone.”

Jack sat next to Herman’s leg, whining an almost imperceptible cry.

I shook my head while trying to catch my breath. I was dizzy, but knelt down and took a few very deep breaths, before looking around to see if there was anyone at all in the woods or the town watching me. I have always heard criminals love to do that.

There would be tons of people arriving very soon, so if I wanted to figure out anything from the scene, I thought I had better start paying close attention to detail. The dumpster next to him was not only overflowing, but garbage was stacked all around it on the ground and on top of it. I wanted to move Herman away from the filth and thanked God the bulk of the tourist season was over. A group of bicyclists and the Post Master showed up just before the Park Rangers, firemen, and then, the State Police.

Four men and a young girl and her mom on a bicycle built for two tried to gather around. They were shooed away. It was 68 degrees now. The wind was calm. It would be good to get him out of here before the flies and bees from the trash found him.

Sirens wailed and men in uniform could be seen coming our way from all directions. At this very place, just yesterday, parents watched their children play on the swings adjacent. People picnicked. They laughed and littered profusely from the bench. Now, this. Looking around, the sky was a gorgeous blue, a few bicycles passed us by, slowing and staring. I said a silent prayer for Herman and shook the Park Manager's hand.

"Hi, Cane. I found him like this maybe 20 seconds before I called you. Actually, Jack found him."

He smiled at Jack, who looks like a white wiener dog (don't tell him), sighed, and looked at me. "You okay, Mayor?"

"Not my usual morning, but yeah. Creepy to think someone cracked the old man in the head and ran." We shared a look, looked around.

A Pennsylvania State Policeman touched my elbow and I turned. "Ma'am," he nodded.

"Please don't call me Ma'am, Sir, uh, Officer, I mean," I grinned.

He and Cane shook hands, exchanged nods.

"This is Mayor Mitchum," Cane said, backing away.

He was a big handsome fellow who nodded with a smile. "I am Officer Paul Watkins. I believe you found the man and made the call."

I nodded agreement.

"Could you step over here and tell me what happened?"

I followed him the few steps noticing his fine physique. He was holding a writing pad and began.

"Why don't you start from the beginning and try to tell me every detail you can remember? Even a small thing that seems unimportant could turn out to be vital to the investigation."

I looked at the sky, but God was leaving this up to me. "I was walking pretty fast when I saw Jack..."

"Hi, Jack," he said to the little old dog who was wagging his tail at him.

"I saw Jack sniffing a man on the bench there. Without my glasses, I can't see far, so I couldn't tell who it was until I got closer. I called to him, but he kept sniffing. Once I could see it was Herman Cranker, I thought he was sleeping. His head was nodded forward a little. He is old. It would not surprise me if an 89 year old man fell asleep on this otherwise peaceful bench."

"Yeah," he agreed.

"Anyway, Jack ignored me and kept whining and circling him. I tapped his cap. It was hard to see his face, leaned over with the cap hiding it. Then I touched his shoulder. He didn't respond. I sat down next to him and took his wrist, no pulse. I sat there for a few seconds, a little dizzy from the shock of finding a dead man who I have known all my life."

I breathed deeply, leaning with my hands on my knees.

"Take your time. You okay?" he asked.

I stood and continued breathing deeply, looking back at Herman. Yellow crime scene tape was going up. He would soon be moved. There were actually detectives there in suits...just like TV.

"They are quick," I thought aloud.

He nodded. "Then what happened?"

"Then, as I got up, I noticed blood trickling from his ear." I leaned down again, dizzy.

"I'm okay." I stood. "I looked closer and saw he had a gash. That's when I thought I would puke, but got it together and called 911."

"Did you see anyone?"

"There was no one around that I noticed. Um. A car passed us on our way here, though."

"Who?"

"Herman's next door neighbor, Ike Landing. They used to walk together until Ike's knees gave out."

We looked at each other.

"No way. He was probably sitting there complaining about the garbage, drinking coffee." I said.

"Anything else? Anything unusual?"

"Hmm. I don't always pay attention. There are normally a lot of people around so I ignore a lot. I need to let my mind settle." I rolled my shoulders and neck. Jack was jumping against my leg, yelping. I picked him up. Officer Watkins scratched his ears.

"I am thinking," I offered as we locked eyes. "I need a drink of water and a seat."

"I have water. Let's walk over to my car, Mayor."

He pointed to his unmarked car. He stepped aside so I could lead. We walked by the scene. I watched as they finished up with Herman and readied him to be moved. Jack whined when they removed the old man's John Deere® cap. I knew he had squabbles with people, but who would kill him out here? He was alone. He had no children. Could Ike really have done that? I knew he didn't have the strength or the will to kill his only real friend.

I could hear the Youghiogheny River and falls flowing by just a block and a half below us.

Ohiopyle is the scene of a murder, I thought. I tried to force myself to understand this was really going on. I had not run across any reported murders in the borough's history.

Growing up, "Mountain Justice" was implied if people were beat up or disappeared. It wasn't talked about. My mind wandered.

"Earth to, oh, I did not get your full name."

"Recca Mitchum." I watched his face. They always have some wise comment about my name. This would be interesting.

"Recca?" he asked, handing me a cold bottled water from his soft-pack cooler.

"Yes," I smiled. He got points for no sarcasm.

We watched as the men passed us, preparing to take Herman Cranker away from Ohiopyle forever. Everyone who knew him thought he would die in his neglected house long before anyone discovered him.

"No one liked him except his neighbor, Ike," I said matter-of-factly.

"How about you? How did you feel about him?"

"Do you suspect that I picked up a rock and slammed that old fart in the head with it before breakfast this morning?"

"No, I don't." he said.

"Lord! Okay. He was always very old to me. I paid little attention to him. He grunted at me all my life. I took that as a "Hello" and always spoke to him. He married a local girl who passed away in childbirth years ago. He used to work for the Western Maryland Railroad. I know little else about him except that he liked to fight with people on the town council. That is what he was known for-his strong opinions and non-compromising ways."

"How did you handle him as an unruly type councilman?"

"With very thick kid gloves."

"Oh. Anything else?"

“Yes, it makes me sick that anyone could get killed here. This is paradise. I’d like to crack that person in the head.” My gaze caught the dumpster. “And whoever is responsible for that!”

He looked at me flatly. “Don’t worry. I understand and won’t include that last statement in the report. Can you read and sign your statement? I will need your home address and phone number...unless there is more?”

I have dealt with a few cops in my life and local ones have rarely impressed me. I do however, love New York City cops, but he was waiting for an answer.

“I am starved. Come on Jack,” I said as I smiled, nodded and headed down the road toward home, hoping to escape the insanity the morning turned into (and the media).

There were more law enforcement cars gathered than I have ever seen in Ohiopyle altogether in my lifetime. Reporters and photographers were clamoring for a look. My friend, Frank, photographer for the local newspaper walked toward me, waving. “I got the shots. Are you alright?” he asked.

“Numb, dizzy. How are you? Do I need to tell the cops I sent those to you? I forgot about that.”

“Sure, they’ll want to have them. I am going to need your story before all these hounds get to you. If you think you want to have lunch, I’ll be around here a while.”

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“I am starved.” I said as Jack and I turned back to find Officer Watkins.

I caught his eye and pointed for him to meet me over on a rock I had every intention of sitting on. Jack jumped into my lap as he approached us. At this point adrenaline had me wrapped so tight I could barely think. The dizziness wasn’t letting up.

“I forgot,” I said as I opened the photos on my phone.

His eyes popped. I grinned at him. “Took them before anyone else touched him, ya know?”

“Wise. I’ll have to take your phone as evidence.”

I looked at him a moment, enjoying the scenery of his well-crafted face, before having to delve into a subject that may upset him. Mad policemen are no one’s favorite people.

“I had already sent the photos to Frank before meeting you.” I pointed in his direction.

Officer Watkins flagged Frank our way while frowning at me.

“Publishing the photos may help in some way,” I suggested.

I believe cops need help sometimes and I wasn’t personally comfortable leaving everything up to them. I worried they would just let it go after a while, unsolved, or put their own political spin on it. I was not young and have seen some games played.

The daily paper hit our porch at 6 AM . I was nervous while unfolding it to see the front page. The headline jumped out at me. “Ohiopyle Councilman Murdered.” Jack popped his head up when I gasped. Seeing that in print knocked the air out of me. I thought I was getting my emotions settled after a pretty good night’s sleep, but I was whirling again. Jack got up, stretched and came out on the porch, growling.

“What is it?” I asked as I followed his gaze.

What looked like a bloody energy drink can sat in the rocking chair. It rocked as Jake grabbed the can. He tried to bite me when I wrestled it out of his mouth. If this was evidence, it sure is compromised now was all I could think when Officer Watkins pulled up in his unmarked car.

“Good Morning. What do you have there?” He got out of the car as she held it out.

“I just came out to get the paper.”

He glared at me. "That was why I stopped by. I was afraid for you."

"Well, Jack growled and I turned and saw this can on the rocking chair. It looks like there may be blood on it. Jack sure acts like it is. Before I could stop him, he snatched it up. I wrestled it from him. It also could just be litter. It is everywhere here especially after a holiday weekend."

He brought a plastic bag from his pocket and had me drop it gently into it.

"Is there a note?"

"A note?"

"With the can. Was there a note left?"

"That would be just a bit too handy, wouldn't it?"

He shrugged and went over the area. Now my porch is a crime scene, I thought.

"I suppose this makes me look even guiltier. You better get this guy before I do or he is going to be crying for his mother."

"Do not interfere with this, Recca. Besides the legalities, you could easily get hurt or get others hurt. Do you understand?"

"Of course I understand." I took Jack in the house and washed my hands. He was still there when I returned, so I just sat on the swing and let out a sigh. "Go ahead and say what you came to say, before the can incident."

"This is not a game. A killer is free to roam. Free to kill. You are a target in case you do not get the message he or she is sending you."

"I said that I understand."

We stared at each other. Someone not only killed Herman, but thinks they can waltz onto our porch and leave bloody threats. I understood alright. The words "God help him" rolled through my mind.

"I understand you are wasting precious time sitting here staring at me."

"I have a feeling I can't leave you without your doing something foolish."

"I am starved," I said as I walked into the house with the newspaper and waved good bye.

He smiled as I closed the door.

He knocked on the door. I opened it.

"I need your cooperation. I do not want to have to stop you from proceeding with your own investigation."

"You assume a lot. I just got up. I had a particularly tough day yesterday and this day is not looking good thus far. Go investigate and get back to me real quick cause I want to meet this coward."

"I will be keeping in touch."

"I don't suppose you can tell me what Ike had to say?"

He shook his head back and forth.

I smiled, closed the door, sat on the floor and cried. Jack licked my face, after licking his butt I am sure, and curled up in my lap. I started to settle down and breathed deeply. I sat up, stretched, looked out at the old wicker rocker, swore profusely and went to the kitchen.

After a huge breakfast of home fries, scrambled eggs and spinach, coffee and toast, I put Jack on the leash and ran to Herman's bench. This is what people were already calling it. Herman's Bench. I stepped over the yellow tape and sat where I had sat next to the old man the day before. I looked around at every detail of the woods, the people. I wondered if this person was watching me. In case, I stood and flipped him off in all directions. I smiled at the people who saw me. I have lived here all my life and decided that this person probably knows this and may follow me. They didn't, but I took a great hike that did me a lot of good.

While walking, I hoped to meet up with this person and feed him to the bears, but the chance did not arise.

On the way back home I tied Jack outside and went into Falls Market. The place was full of customers. I sat down with Ike and a couple other locals and ordered a big water and some chili cheese fries. I know I ate earlier, but I was starved.

One man thought that Herman must have fallen and hit his head just as Ike left him, then sat up on the bench to rest and died there. They didn't know about the bloody can and I didn't tell them. I figured this idiot was seeking attention and I was not priming the pump for him. Let him wander.

Ike looked at me intently and tapped my hand under the table. After he left to go home, I got Jack and followed him as I felt he wanted me to do. I went around to his back door. It was a well-kempt private yard and porch. That is where I found him.

"What is going on, Ike?"

He handed me a memory card.

"Do you know what this is?"

"It is a memory card. Maybe you need to tell me something the cops don't know about."

"I don't mean to hold out on 'em. I miss him already. Herman was my only friend."

"When I saw you yesterday morning, you must have just left him."

"Yes. He was dying when I got there. He put this in my hand. Squeezed it hard into it, said what I think was the word "news," and died. I got scared and went home, but I am not sure what he gave me. Is it important?"

I ran home to retrieve my laptop computer. We looked at the pictures and short videos of one litterbug after another. It seemed Herman was photographing them and by the looks on many of their faces, oftentimes, harassing them. There were parents, children, river workers, and people of all ages and walks of life throwing litter on the ground next to the playground dumpster in Ohio-pyle. There were hundreds of photos all taken since May this year. The last one was taken just minutes before either Ike or I saw Herman that morning.

My phone rang and brought us out of the shock we were in. "Are you onto this nut yet cause if they can just kill an old man in the middle of Ohio-pyle, they must be a freaking ghost or something," I said before Officer Watkins could speak.

"Calm down, now. I am coming to pick you up in 2 hours. Be there and packed."

He hung up before I could tell him to go leap over the falls in high water.

"Ike, can you hold on to this memory card a bit longer?" I handed it to him when I got it out of the computer.

I grabbed my truck keys and Jack and headed out the door.

Jack stood on my lap as we pulled around behind the house. He was so alert his vibes could have powered Ohio-pyle during peak season. Mine, too, I'm sure. I knew Jack would let me know if I did not hear or feel someone coming, so I tried to let my mind relax in order to come up with some answers. I wondered just what Herman intended doing with the photos. He often sent scenic Ohio-pyle photos to the newspaper, and they published many.

Was it a planned killing or did he get smart with the wrong person yesterday and get nailed? And why the bloody can on the rocker? Why would anyone want to scare me? I hadn't done anything but find him. The whole town knew his morning schedule and most everyone I knew had something against him at some point throughout their lives. I didn't. Neither did Ike.

Jack looked up and let out a low guttural growl the likes of which I had never heard. A coyote was on the steps outside the screened porch, a small turkey in its mouth. I took a deep breath and sprayed it in the eyes with the extremely hot pepper spray I brought along. It squealed and took off, but never dropped the turkey.

Jack was barking insanely when I turned around and she hit me in the temple with something I thought was a camera. I could hear Jack tearing at her and her swearing, but my head rang and I couldn't see for a minute. She was on me in the front seat of the old Ford, choking me when I got a grasp on the hammer.

I started hitting her body with it best I could but she strangled most of the strength out of me. She is not small, Mrs. Leafing. Jack must have nailed her a good one because I was able to finally catch a breath and swung with all my might. Blood exploded from her head just as I heard Officer Watkins' voice. I shoved her off of me onto the passenger side floor and kind of back flipped/rolled out onto the ground. Jack kept ripping into her. A young officer tried to get him off the council-woman.

Officer Watkins gently grabbed hold of me in a way I kind of liked.

"She could have killed you," he said.

I stared at him, sure blood was splattered over every inch of my face. A woman lay bleeding, but I swear he was about to kiss me when I turned to take Jack from the young officer who held him out trying to keep from getting bit.

I found out that the widow Leafing and old Herman were special friends for years until he saw her littering by that dumpster one day. According to what she had said while choking me, he would not forgive her. Evidence found in his home showed the dumpster became his obsession. He had planned to publish a book of all the litterbug photos to distribute free. He also had plans to air the videos online and had already posted dozens of the photos to several popular social web sites. It seems this really set Mrs. Leafing off.

Ike fought for custody of Herman's ashes and sprinkled them around his bench. Officer Watkins has been calling, but I let it go to voice mail. My father always warned me against kissing cops or lawyers. He was a county judge. He knew.