

Case of the Missing Tenants a Real Whodunit

VIEWPOINTS

Suddenly, while walking along West 35th Street in Manhattan yesterday, the eye riveted on this plaque on the building at number 454.

"On this site stood the elegant brownstone of the corpulent private detective Nero Wolfe with his able assistant Archie Goodwin. Mr. Wolfe raised orchids, and dined well, while solving over 70 perplexing cases recorded by the novelist Rex Stout from 1934 to 1975."

I went into the building, figuring I'd find some old genius of crime sitting in splendor. The building inside had a fine lobby and it turned out to be the Clinton Housing Development, with 49 single-room occupants, four families and a director.

I was here because I was following the names and addresses and right directions and wrong directions that go with the great case in New York now, the Case of the Missing Tenants.

In all the great cases of Nero Wolfe, and memory of police in real life, there has been no case as mystifying as this one. Almost always, major crimes are solved in the most uneventful manner, by a phone call, or a parking ticket. This one is different. The lieutenant of detectives in charge of the case, James Drouin, says, "This is the first real Whodunit. Maybe ever."

Camden Sylvia, 36, and Michael Sullivan, 54, disappeared on Nov. 7. They had just rented a film, "Addicted to Love," and somebody said they also had bought flowers. They lived on the third floor of 76 Pearl St., which once was a building in a night-lonely area of New York, right in the financial district, but now was one of the new desirables.

The couple paid rent of \$300 a month for a place that, if they moved, would go for many, many times more. They also were withholding their rent because their landlord had not given any heat.

Nobody can say for sure if they got back to their apartment after renting the video or not. The two disappeared and have not been heard from since.



**Jimmy
Breslin**

The landlord and the owner of a locksmith store on the first floor, Bob Rodriguez, 56, lived in Orange County. He had little problems up there, including an arson, house, of which all authorities say he was the perpetrator. But the insurance company paid, and that is the heart and soul of burning down a building to get money. If you don't get paid, you are nothing but a cheap pyromaniac. Also, he once had taken on a cop in Orange County.

Some people say he was berserk over the withheld rent. But Ben Moran, who owns the fashionable restaurant next door, Beckett's, says that Rodriguez wasn't worried about rent. He knew that his building, which had cost only \$230,000, was now worth a ton of money.

Rodriguez would not allow police to search his home in Orange County. Now with his tenants missing, Rodriguez made a date to see police at the 1st Precinct early Sunday morning, Nov. 16. He left Orange County at 11 p.m. His car was left in a Kinney underground parking lot at 2:37 a.m. on Sunday.

It then came up that seven years ago, Rodriguez was a co-defendant with a man named David King in a suit saying that they had robbed a company's files. King, who lived on Veronica Court in the center of Flatbush, disappeared on July 17, 1991. He wasn't reported absent for five months. He has not been reported present for six years.

The lawsuit against Rodriguez and King was settled for less than had been anticipated, probably because of King's absence.

And I was here at this Nero Wolfe plaque on West 35th Street for a reason that was either good or worthless. That is how each step of it goes when you have a true mystery.

I had been around the block at 408 W. 34th St., an old apartment building that sits between a diner on the corner and St. Michael's Catholic church. Graham Rayman of Newsday spent long hours checking property records in the old Surrogates' Court building, 31 Chambers St., and found that Frederick Armellino and his wife, Margaret, of 408 W. 34th St, loaned \$205,000 in 1993 to the landlord and locksmith Rodriguez. Records showed Armellino living in apartment 2C. There was no an-

swer. It is fair comment to say that if you shook down the whole five-story building, you would not be able to get \$250,000 on a loan.

The superintendent came out and said that Armellino had died a year ago. He thought he had worked as a bartender.

Immediately, you thought of a man who had been a front for a loan shark.

Upstairs in apartment 2B, next door to the Armellos, was a Dr. Ruggiero. He was a 92-year-old man who stood in the doorway in an elegant black silk robe. He said Mrs. Armellino usually went around to West 35th Street to her sister's house.

That was, I discovered, at 544 W. 35th St. I was on the way to that building when I saw the Nero Wolfe plaque.

The building at 544 was a narrow five-story brick tenement. There was no answer.

The police checked the organized crime records and Armellino did not show. His will in Surrogate's Court showed that he had left \$400,000 and that his wife owned the building on West 35th Street.

So that took time and led exactly nowhere.

Then as the bright cold day turned into cold afternoon shadows, here was the Kinney parking lot on 235 W. 22nd St., between Seventh and Eighth. It is underground. The place is between buildings and doesn't catch the eye. I think you'd have to be familiar with the block before using it. Records show that Rodriguez's mother lived in the neighborhood, but she was now out on Long Island.

The attendant was a chunky man with short hair. He acted precisely as you would expect him to act when questions deal with what could be a slight case of murder or so.

"I come in here Monday, and they told me the police came and took a car away. That's all I know."

"Fine. Can you give me your name?"

"Sure."

He held up his hand. That was his first name and his last name.

And now the shadows lengthened, and it was time to go to a machine and type out this small part of what looks like a legitimate Whodunit. More anon.