

A person wearing a black suit jacket and trousers is shown from the waist down. Their hands are cuffed behind their back with silver metal handcuffs. The background is a dark, gradient grey.

STEVEN R BERGER

# INNOCENT BYSTANDER

An American Tragedy

sample chapters

**Innocent Bystander**  
*An American Tragedy*

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# Chapter 1

Pretending to be reaching for something under the front seat of his Ford Taurus, he watched with lascivious attention as Felicia Tafoya's long black hair swayed in syncopated opposition to her firm, round ass. "Oh, to bite that," he thought. It was bowling night, and now he was late. He would have to forego practice and limber up during the first few frames. He also needed to fib to his teammates, tell them he had to finish the monthly report for the paper supply house where he was comptroller.

Chuck Gray rarely lied. He worked at the same company for 19 years. He was still with his first wife, had a son and a daughter—both teenagers, and would have a dog if his wife wasn't allergic.

Felicia Tafoya was a co-worker who missed her bus, and would also miss her plane if Gray hadn't offered her a ride home to get her bags and catch a cab for the two- or three-mile ride to the terminal.

But, because his fellow bowlers, and fellow employees, would tease him about his "interest" in the chiquita, he was going to lie about where he had been, and what he had been doing. Especially since the division of labor at the giant wholesaler placed most whites in the office, and most Hispanics on the docks and in the warehouse, where a lot of young girls like Felicia worked. And there was June. He didn't want his wife of 22 years asking him where he had been and why.

Perhaps the only person he could confide in was Pete Winslow. They went back a long way. Chuck shared the grief of Pete's son's tragic death in a DUI car wreck two years ago. They played cards together with their wives. Reminiscenced about all the young girls they had before they were married—and an indiscretion or two that followed—and they bowled together on Wednesday nights.

Fortunately, Pete, Dave and Marty were in good form and carried Chuck until he warmed up. However, in the end, it still wasn't enough to beat Greg, Bill, James and Paul. Of course, it was the exercise and the camaraderie that mattered, not winning, or placing another trophy on the mantle in the rec room—though there was still time to make up for this one loss before the end of the current league season.

June was in the bathroom, leaning into the mirror and removing her makeup as Chuck entered the master bedroom. Bent at the hips, it gave him a perfect view of that little bulge beneath her navel, hips that had expanded some with the birth of two kids, and her derriere. Combined with her sensible medium-length light brown hairdo, she could never compete with the image that flooded the video screen of his mind with Felicia's perfect ass and long, black hair. Holding that thought, he gave June a soft and suggestive pat with his hand.

June smiled as she tilted her head down an inch while raising her eyebrows in a coquettish manner. "Didn't you get enough exercise tonight?" she teased as she wiggled her ass against his palm.

"There's always room for Jell-O," he replied.

"If that's what you think of my tush, then you can just go see what's in the fridge."

“Just kidding,” he conjured up Felicia’s round firmness and felt his penis grow into an erection for the second time that night.

\* \* \*

Charles Stewart Gray would never be chosen for the romantic lead in a movie. More likely his ordinariness would make him a prime candidate for the CIA. Mid-forties, graying, thinning hair and a paunch from a lack of exercise. Complementing the entirely mundane ensemble, Chuck was exactly average height.

What he lacked in physical prowess, Chuck made up for in tenderness and devotion. However, tonight he had images of Felicia Tafoya imprinted on his psyche. He and June fondled one another as they had hundreds of times before. He caressed her the way a coat of varnish envelops a rare wood carving. Then he penetrated her like a piston in a well-oiled cylinder. Then, on her command, pumped her like a steam engine, held her arms down as he fucked and fucked and fucked.

Thoroughly spent, she murmured something about how she might not be able to sit down tomorrow; while he envisioned a pretty, small, brown body bejeweled with pearl-white drops of his semen.

## Chapter 2

Sharleen Sicarian could always be counted on to add her assistance in any department at the paper supply warehouse. A liberal arts baccalaureate and an MBA combined with a strong sense of responsibility to make the administrative assistant a familiar face throughout the company. Hired as a secretary just three years earlier, it was now she who ensured that warehouse manager Jorgé Garcia had Felicia Tafoya's duties covered while she was on leave to visit her mother in Mexico. And, it was Sharleen who suggested Chuck Gray give the young woman a ride when she missed her bus.

It was also Sharleen who reviewed the numbers crunched by the comptroller and his staff before they were seen by company president, Bob Benton. She frequently screened Benton's appointments, proofread promotional materials for the company, approved decisions regarding policy, procedures and personnel made by the Human Resources Department, and even outlined content for the company newsletter. In fact, she was a more familiar presence in the company than Benton himself. Usually there when workers arrived in the morning, and frequently still at her desk as everyone left. So, it was no surprise that, when two plain-clothes police detectives arrived mid-morning on Thursday, they were shown to Sharleen Sicarian's modest, but central office.

"Good morning Ms. Sicarian," the first detective greeted her. "I'm Lieutenant Norman, and this is Sergeant Ives."

"It's Mrs.; nice to meet you both. Please sit down. How may I help you?"

"We're investigating a homicide that occurred early last night near the airport," Norman said without sitting. Reflexively he noted the neat stacks of paperwork on her desk, pictures of her children, a six- or seven-year-old in a frame from Graceland, an older sister in a frame from Disney World.

"That's terrible. What happened?"

"A young Hispanic woman."

"How could anyone... was she raped? What happened?"

"The coroner hasn't given us the details yet," Norman said. "For now, we would like information about one of your employees who was seen in the area last night."

"Of course. But how do you know it was one of our employees?"

"We were given a description of the car, and a partial plate. DMV gave us his name. His insurance records show that he works here."

"That's pretty amazing," Sharleen said, she was already thinking the dead girl might have a nubile young body and long black hair, and the suspect probably drives a late model Ford. "And, who might that be?"

"Charles Gray. We just want to ask him a few questions."

"That's interesting, Lieutenant."

"Why do you say that Mrs. Sicarian?"

"Well, last night, he took one of our other employees home. Felicia Tafoya. And she lives in that neighborhood."

Sergeant Ives was taking down the whole conversation in a small, flip-up notebook.

"How do you know this?" Norman asked.

“She missed her bus and, naturally, came to me. A lot of the girls here think of me like a big sister. I asked Chuck to give her a ride. He bowls on Wednesdays and I figured it wouldn’t be too much out of his way. Also, he was the only one here besides me.”

“How come you didn’t give her a ride?” the sergeant interjected.

“Oh, I had too many things I needed to do here,” she gestured at one of the neat stacks of papers on her desk. “Is Chuck a suspect?”

“Not at this time,” the lieutenant said. “We just want to ask him a few questions. Maybe he saw something.”

“Let me show you to his office. And, please, let me know if there is anything else I can do to help.”

\* \* \*

It was not unusual for Chuck Gray to receive visitors in business suits. However, none of them had been escorted by the company president’s administrative assistant. And, no one could remember previous visitors wearing the plain black, utilitarian shoes of law enforcement.

“Chuck, this is Lieutenant Norman and Sergeant Ives,” Sharleen Sicarian ushered the detectives into Gray’s cluttered office. “They would like to ask you a few questions.” She let the officers pass in front of her, but it was only after a look from Detective Norman that she retreated from her vantage point in the doorway. Ives gently closed the door for privacy.

“Please sit down. How can I help you gentlemen?” Gray asked.

“Where were you last night between 6:45 and 7:30, Mr. Gray?” Norman asked.

“It was my bowling night. I usually just go there straight from work,” he tried to feel out what they were getting at, trying to employ tactics he had seen on television.

“But you didn’t stick to your usual routine last night, did you?”

“Oh, last night. I gave another employee a lift home. Felicia Tafoya. Is there any problem? Is she all right?” he fumbled like a wide receiver with greasy hands. Why had he tried to avoid mentioning the detour he took on the way to the bowling alley? They knew about him taking Felicia home or they wouldn’t be here. Sicarian must have confirmed that much.

“We don’t know yet. There was some trouble over near the airport,” Norman said as he watched for a reaction and noted the organized clutter of Gray’s office, and the family tableau in a discount store frame. “We were wondering if maybe you saw anything peculiar while you were in the neighborhood?”

“What do you mean by peculiar?” Gray asked.

“A car or something you didn’t think belonged there,” the sergeant filled in without looking up from his notes.

“Maybe gang activity,” Norman added, “or, you know, anything. Maybe even another late model car like the one you drive?”

“I know I didn’t see any gangs or anything. And, I wasn’t really paying any attention to the other cars,” Gray answered honestly, wondering what his wife would think if she found out about this. Wishing he had told her something last night so she wouldn’t think he lied to her—he just never mentioned the Tafoya girl. He just thought about her long hair, pert breasts and tight, little ass as he fucked his wife.

“Are you okay, Mr. Gray?” Ives looked up from his notebook for the first time.

“Oh yeah, sure. Thanks. Is there anything else?”

“Yeah,” Norman continued. “So, if I understand you, you didn’t see any other cars like yours, right?”

“Well, I can’t really say.”

“So maybe you were the only middle-aged, white guy with a young chicana and a newer car in that part of town last night?” Norman thought he had caught the scent. “And that no one would notice what was going on?”

“Wh... what was going on?”

“A girl was raped and murdered?”

“Oh God. You found her?”

“What do you mean by that, Mr. Gray?” Norman sunk his teeth into the question like a pit bull with a steak.

“Huh? I don’t understand.”

“What did you mean by ‘You found her?’” It was almost a growl.

“I meant, did you find her? Or did someone else find her? I wanted to know if you saw her? If it was Felicia?”

“You don’t know?”

“Know what? Who found her?”

“No,” the senior detective snapped. “You don’t know if it was Felicia Tafoya?”

“No. Honest. I don’t know who you found. If you were the one that found her.”

“Found who?” The detective didn’t like the way the questioning was going.

“The girl. Oh God. Whoever it was. Whoever found her. I don’t know. Why can’t you just tell me if it was Felicia?” Gray’s anguish seeped out under the door. It wormed its way between the molecules of glass separating his office from the bullpen of bookkeepers outside. And it found its way to where Sharleen Sicarian pretended to be reviewing some paperwork.

“We can’t tell you because no one can recognize the bruised face on the body. No one has found a relative with a strong enough stomach to ID the butt-fucked and bruised body,” the bluntly graphic description stung the administrative assistant.

“Jesus Christ. Oh God,” Gray held his head in his hands as his blasphemy became yet another dart piercing the sensibilities of Sharleen Sicarian. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“I think we better answer that question at the station, Mr. Gray.”

“Sergeant Ives, read him his rights.”

End of sample chapters.

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