

My Friday The 13th (1983)

Friday, May 13, 1983: 3:45 pm
Palos Verdes Peninsula, California

Scott Arntsen got up from his chair and met me at the corner of his desk to accept the clipboard/notebook I handed him. It was bulky and awkward, business and computer-related papers tucked in pockets front and back, and folded open to the clipboard with a pad of paper in the middle. It was the end of the week, time for him to sign-off on the hours I worked.

"I appreciate the time you're putting in for us," he said, reviewing my hours. "I know you have other clients."

Although he was young, in his twenties, Scott was the Controller for St. Ives, a growing company that produced soaps, shampoos, lotions and conditioners. He supervised the business office and was responsible for developing new computer systems to help the company grow as its sales increased. I worked at his direction through a sub-contracting arrangement, using my programming and system design skills to create the business systems St. Ives needed.



Photo of house 1983

Scott sat on the corner of his desk, dress-shirt sleeves rolled up, collar open and tie well-loosened. He held the folded-open clipboard as he spoke, reviewing the second page of the pad of paper in the clipboard-- my hours for the week. The first page was folded over the top of the notebook and he held it in the back.

"Looks good to me," he said, reaching for the pen in his shirt pocket. As he shifted his grip on the clipboard, the first page sprang back over the top of the notebook. Scott looked down at two columns of writing, not my hours, and swept that page back over the top and held it more firmly in place as he penned his initials by each date I worked, including that day, May 13, 1983. Then he held the notebook out to me, and that first page of paper, with two columns of writing, fell back into place on top of the clipboard pad.

"I'm glad to help," I said, taking the notebook and folding it closed. "We'll get the product-code problems resolved next week."

"Very good," Scott said as we shook hands. "Have a good weekend."

As I left Scott's office that day neither of us could know that in a few weeks an Orange County Sheriff's Homicide Investigator would tear that wayward first page from the pad of paper in my clipboard and proclaim that the two columns of writing on it were a list of murder victims spanning ten years, and that it had been hidden in a clandestine place, thus making it even more reliable as proof. Neither of us could have known that it would be cut up, pasted into a different form, and made into evidence to prove me guilty of sixteen murders and provide reason to put me to death.

I said goodbye to the office staff at St. Ives and wished them a good weekend. My car, a brown Toyota Celica, was parked just outside, and one of the office girls waved to me through a wall of windows as I tossed the binder/clipboard into the trunk. My job as an independent consultant demanded that I go from business to business, often three or four in one day, and the trunk of my car served as an on-the-go office. It held computer manuals, long program printouts, a business appointment calendar and odds and ends. I slammed the trunk closed and waved in reply.



The trunk of my car on the morning of May 14, 1983

Very soon my mobile office would be denounced by Orange County law enforcement as a "clandestine" hiding place, and six years later a judge would cite it as one reason to put me to death.

I was eager to get home that day, because several months previously I had taken out a second mortgage on our home and begun some remodeling which was still in progress. The last phase was underway, installing a spa in a new redwood deck, just outside new doors that had been cut into the bathroom and den. When that was done the rest would be easy. I was hoping it could be completed by the Fourth of July, two days after Jeff's birthday.

The work was being done by an independent contractor, Doug, and his buddy, Sam, both young guys, thirty-ish. Doug had built some cabinets for Grandma's Sugarplums, a candy store in Belmont Shore where Jeff worked, and they turned out very good. So with Jeff's recommendation, I contracted Doug and Sam to work on the house.

Being Friday, I had to talk with Doug about several things: the state of progress, any special problems holding up work, and whatever attention was needed from me before he returned on Monday. Recently I had been helping -- applying redwood stain to patio cover pieces before they were nailed in place. Also, I had run the PVC plumbing for the spa and hooked it up as the deck was built around it. If there was anything Doug needed me to do over the weekend, this was his time to tell me.

As I slid behind the steering wheel the Celica's interior was very hot from sitting in the sun, so I rolled the window down and opened the sunroof to air it out. I also opened the glove box and fished around for a Marshall Tucker cassette tape I wanted to hear. Instead, I got Cabaret... then Kenny Rogers. There was too much junk in the glove box: souvenir buttons from a Portland oyster bar, a spray-bottle of cologne my niece left when she car-sat for me, political material, pill bottles, papers, a broken belt buckle and much more. I really needed to clean it out.

I should have. Five years later an Orange County prosecutor would be allowed to enter every item from the glove box into my trial as evidence he claimed proved me guilty of murder even though it was not connected or related to any murder victim.

I couldn't find the Marshall Tucker tape (Was it in the trunk?), but my rummaging around caused two prescription medicine bottles to fall onto the floor. One bounced under the passenger seat, and I contorted myself around to retrieve it. I had transferred several bottles of medicine from the house to the glove box a week before because of an incident that occurred with the house remodeling: new tile on the wall behind the tub and toilet had been horribly mislaid. The tiles were not straight. Grout lines waved and leaned in a dizzying fashion, as though the wall had been struck by an earthquake. I found a professional tile contractor in the Yellow Pages and paid him \$25 to stop by and give me his opinion-- the work was laughable, he said, and no customer should have to accept it.

After he left I sat in the bathroom with my wall of wavy tile. It almost made me sea-sick to look at it. A photograph I had seen years earlier came to mind: a spider web spun by a spider given LSD. I knew Doug and Sam both smoked marijuana, but I did not know if either of them used other drugs. That night I collected what medications we had in the house, seven or eight bottles, and transferred them to the car, safely away from the house. The next morning Doug agreed that the tile work was unacceptable and agreed they would redo it.

Little did I know that soon the presence of those medications in the glove box would be labeled a "murder kit" by an Orange County prosecutor and used years later to persuade a jury of my guilt, even though the specific medications had not caused anyone's death.

I stopped at the corner market a few blocks from home and bought two six-packs of Moosehead beer. That was the brand Doug and Sam liked, and it was Friday, the end of the week.

"Thanks," Doug said as I handed him a beer. He looked over the construction and commented. "The rest is going to come together pretty fast. You'll be surprised."

Sam rushed up. "Can't stay," he said, a plaid shirt slung over his shoulder. "Gotta run. Date tonight, but I'll take a couple of these," he said, pulling two beers from a six-pack. "Bye!" he said, and took off down the driveway.

"Have a good one," I called after him.

"I can't stay long either," Doug said. We talked for a while about the work underway, and when Doug finished his beer, he left.

I went into the house and walked out onto the new redwood deck through the new French doors in the den wall. Our dog, Max, followed, sniffing all the newness and looking up at me balefully as though he wasn't sure if he approved.

I got a folding patio chair and sat down to take it all in. It was a nice afternoon, about 4:30 pm, and warm sunlight filtered through the new deck roof that now shielded the back of the house from a two-story apartment next door. (Ahhh, finally some privacy!) Sawdust and pieces of wood littered the deck. The brick-red spa was in place, but it wasn't hooked up

yet. I had completed the plumbing the day before, but the electrical remained to be done. It lay empty except for some litter from the construction.

Max poked around. He sneezed after sniffing some sawdust, and then lay down next to my chair, sighing deeply and looking up at me with his eyes, not moving his head.

"Oh, Max", I said. "It won't be long, now, with a little luck this should all be ready in time for Jeff's birthday." Not that the construction was any secret, but I already had begun laying the groundwork for a Deck-Warming/Open House/Birthday Party to properly inaugurate the renovations. I had dropped hints to Jeff that we had spent so much on the construction that we probably couldn't afford anything until Christmas. That wasn't true. It was just the beginning of a surprise celebration. I liked surprising him.

I sat there and let my mind wander, imagining what it would be like when it was finally done. I envisioned people all around, eating, drinking, talking and laughing. I envisioned them in the spa, jets of water bubbling and steam rising. I could almost hear the hubbub, nearly feel the closeness of friends and family. Everyone was there. Everything was going very, very well for me, better than ever before in my life. Years of hard work were about to show real results.

And then I realized something. I could not see myself in the scenes I envisioned. I looked again, but I felt somehow estranged, cutoff from what would be, as though I would never enjoy all that was coming together. That was an odd feeling for me, the perennial optimist, and I shook it off. Then I felt something physical, a sort of nearly imperceptible wrinkle passing over me, followed by a small chill. A single, small bark escaped from Max as though it had slipped out unintentionally, surprising him.

"You feel that too?" I asked Max. He was up on his front paws, looking here and there, apparently trying to find where it was, whatever it was. I looked again to what might be, but there was no change so I let it go and got up to leave.

"Come on, Max" I said, bending down to pat his head and rub his ear. "That was weird, wasn't it, buddy?" I went back inside, waiting for Max at the doors. He was giving one last look around, testing the air, alert. Then he snorted at nothing in particular and sauntered by me into the house.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

Nothing.