A Quiet Evening, Waiting for the Next Angry Man

WASHINGTON

A couple of weeks ago, the chief of the little-known police force at the Pentagon warned some of his officers to be vigilant for an “active shooter” — the breath-catching term for an armed individual who appears from nowhere and attacks, with no interest in survival.

It just seemed to the chief, Richard Keevill, that these kinds of troubling incidents were increasing. The Army doctor who opened fire at Fort Hood. The man who flew a plane into the Internal Revenue Service offices in Austin. The professor who killed three colleagues in Alabama because she had been denied tenure.

“We’ve had so damned many of them,” Chief Keevill, of the Pentagon Force Protection Agency, said the other day. “It’s like the crime du jour. Someone becomes disgruntled with the government and decides to take it out with a gun.”

The chief delivered his heads-up and the days passed, melting finally into another late-winter Thursday at the Pentagon. The sun had dropped, the evening rush had waned, and, a few dozen yards from the entrance, a man lingered. Bearded and neatly dressed, he was concealing two handguns, many rounds of ammunition, and a consuming resentment.

Here was our next active shooter, mentally disturbed and with an anger that had metastasized into a justification to attack the Government, often the catch-all phrase for the oppressor, the deceiver, the denier of dreams. In this view, it seems, the Government is made of paper, concrete and whispers.

The arrows on the signs above him pointed this way and that, for the buses and trains that serve the region’s busiest transit hub, right beside the Pentagon. Instead he followed the arrows pointing to a Pentagon entrance, where Government police officers of flesh and
blood stood outside.

Here were Officer Marvin Carraway Jr. and Officer Colin Richards, standing behind portable bulletproof shields that were not as formidable as their official name — “ballistic barrier” — might suggest. Armed with Glock semiautomatic pistols, they had spent the last several hours checking the badges of Pentagon employees entering the complex.

A few yards away stood Officer Jeffrey Amos, an UMP-40 submachine gun in his hands. His right forefinger rested on the weapon’s trigger guard.

While the approaching man wore magazines of bullets under his collared shirt and blazer, these officers wore bulletproof vests under their dark uniforms. Each also wore the gold badge that distinguished them as guardians of the pentagonal mini-city that receives 25,000 people a day.

The growing complexity of our times is reflected in the history of the agency that employs these officers. Just 40 years ago, officers known as “special policemen” — glorified watchmen, really — protected the military nerve center of the world’s most powerful country. But as demonstrations and bomb threats increased, more serious law enforcement operations evolved.

Then a hijacked airplane pierced the Pentagon during the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, killing scores of people. Several months later, defense officials created the Pentagon Force Protection Agency, whose expanded mission is to provide “force protection against a full spectrum of potential threats.”

Consider, for a moment, the Pentagon. “This is a small city that happens to be a national icon,” Steven E. Calvery, the agency’s director, said. “And the national military command post while we wage two wars.”

Still, when not screening visitors, checking badges or patrolling the grounds, the agency’s 700 uniformed officers are constantly warding against the seduction of monotony — of glazing over badges and faces.

Now here came another unassuming man — a defense employee working late, perhaps, or a tourist — walking the dimly lighted sidewalk along the tan wall of the Pentagon.

Officer Carraway saw him first. They exchanged no words, though the veteran officer recognized in the man’s eyes a clear shout of intent: to do bodily harm.

Things happened fast and yet slow, at least in memory. The man, standing five feet away. Raising not a badge but a gun. Pointing at Officer Carraway’s face. Discharging.

Officer Carraway, 44, is a husband, a father, and a Pittsburgh Steelers fan who likes to fish. He spent several years seeing the world, including Kuwait City, thanks to the Marines and Operation Desert Storm. He has worked as a security officer at American University, as an information technology consultant and, for the last 15 months, as a P.F.P.A. officer.

All this was now fodder for a possible obituary, as Officer Carraway, also known as Marvin and Dad, heard bullets zip past his head. He took cover behind his ballistic barrier, thinking that he might have been hit, but thinking too: This man cannot succeed; he has to be stopped.

The active shooter continued toward the entrance to the Government. But Officer Carraway, the man the shooter had left for dead, drew his Glock and began firing.

Officer Richards, meanwhile, had tumbled out of the way. He is 29 and single; exuberantly unattached. He was sitting in a college classroom in Florida when the airplane hit the Pentagon, and now here he was, protecting the Pentagon, not quite believing what was happening, thinking about his parents — and about Marvin, his colleague.

He too began to fire his gun, as did another officer, who had been working inside a prescreening booth. Pop-pop-pop.

Officer Amos turned toward the gunfire and saw the armed shooter coming toward him.

Officer Amos, 46, is a husband, a father of three — the youngest a girl of 5 — and a product of the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. He served in Kuwait with the Air Force Reserves.

The Pentagon Force Protection Agency, shown at a roll call, was formed in the months after the Sept. 11 attacks.
The view from a prescreening booth outside the Pentagon where a gunman opened fire on police officers and then was shot and killed. Officers Marvin Carraway Jr., above left, Jeffery Amos and Colin Richards were on duty. Officers Carraway and Amos were injured.

during the first Gulf War, then worked for 11 years as a police officer in New Orleans, where he patrolled broken neighborhoods in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

His own house, in New Orleans East, took on five feet of water, while the homes of his relatives in the Lower Ninth Ward were destroyed. Aunty's house; gone. Gramma's house; gone.

Four years ago, Officer Amos and his family moved to the Washington area, where he landed a job a year ago as an officer with the P.F.P.A. Hair gone gray. Had never in his career fired a weapon in the line of duty. And now a bearded man with a look and a gun was coming his way.

At first Officer Amos did not have a clear shot, because right behind the armed shooter was his colleague, Officer Carraway, with whom he had just been planning a fishing trip out of Chesapeake Bay. But his would-be fishing partner moved out of the way, and Officer Amos fired his submachine gun.

The active shooter went down, knocking into a metal railing.

Shot in the head and arm, he would die hours later in a hospital. His name was John Patrick Bedell. He was 36, very much loved by his parents and siblings, and profoundly troubled. It is said that he believed the Government was behind the Sept. 11 attacks.

The incident lasted less than a minute. But the aftermath has lingered, with reports and interviews and assessments. Everyone agrees, though, that the officers responded impeccably. Their extensive training had paid off.

Officer Amos, who was bullet-grazed in the right shoulder and bicep, struggled to sleep that first night, though he slept like a baby the next. But Officer Carraway, who was nicked in the left thigh, found sleep more elusive.

“Every time I closed my eyes,” he said, “I’d see his face.”
Tony Hayward answered questions from House members, including Marsha Blackburn, Republican of Tennessee, and Mike Doyle, Democrat of Pennsylvania.

Looking for Answers, Finding One

At Hearing Before Congress, Not Much Is Heard From BP Chief

WASHINGTON — On the 58th day, an outraged nation summoned the man it holds responsible for one of the worst environmental disasters in American history. He walked through the oversize wooden doors, shed the protective cocoon of his dark-suited entourage and took his place at a long table.

“Hill dock awaited its guest. Then, shortly before 10, an unnerving hush announced Mr. Hayward’s arrival, a hush interrupted only by waves of repetitive camera clicks. All for a man of 53 who seems almost boyish, with his tousled dark hair, rosy cheeks and eyebrows forever arched, conveying a look somewhere between earnestness and amusement.

Mr. Hayward walked over to the one chair, reserved for him, then realized that he would have to wait. He turned his back on the shuttering cameras and stood with several aides in awkward silence, waiting. One aide whispered to another, “I told him not to come in so early.”

Here, then, was a moment to study the man. He has dedicated more than half his life to BP, working his way up as a geologist, exploration manager, and inner-circle executive. Though an American ear might hear aristocracy in his voice, his accent “reveals modest roots,” according to The Independent, a British newspaper. He is married, with children.

Yet when we see an oil-drenched gull, a docked shrimp boat, or the live-cam-

“I was not part of that decision-making process.”

Tony Hayward
era feed of oil spilling from the ocean floor, we think of Tony Hayward. Who wants his life back. Who thought this spill a drop in a vast ocean. Who is so tone deaf at times that it seems the oil-rig explosion affected his hearing.

The devastating spill, his spill, has sent clumps of oil washing onto shores from Louisiana to Capitol Hill. This week alone, several oil company chairmen stood in the Congressional dock; President Obama dedicated his first speech from the Oval Office to the disaster; and BP announced that it would create a $20 billion fund to cover claims arising from the spill, following a private meeting at the White House between a frustrated Mr. Obama and several BP officials, including Mr. Hayward.

Now Mr. Hayward was back, this time in a wide, red-carpeted room offering nowhere to hide. He took his seat, and, for several hours, sidestepped direct answers to pointed questions with a politeness that bordered on being impolite.

Representative Henry A. Waxman, the Democrat from California who is chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, set the mood. He first thanked Mr. Hayward for his appearance, then scored him for being an oblivious chief executive officer.

Mr. Waxman cited a subcommittee investigation that concluded that BP took
shortcuts in constructing the fatal well “to save a million dollars here and a few hours or days there,” and added there was no evidence that Mr. Hayward “paid even the slightest attention to the dangers at this well.”

In other words, Mr. Hayward: Welcome. And there is a pitcher of ice water in front of you, should your throat feel dry.

For the next hour, a Greek chorus of Democrats and Republican used their opening statements to express the anger of a nation. The elected officials recalled that BP has a troubled safety record, responsible for other disasters: a deadly refinery explosion in 2005; an oil spill in Alaska in 2006. One representative questioned the depth of Mr. Hayward’s sorrow. Another told him he had violated the public trust. Yet another wondered whether it was time for him to resign.

After being sworn in, Mr. Hayward began to read a written statement, only to be interrupted by a woman — a shrimper, it was said — who raised her oil-stained hands and shouted, “You need to be charged with a crime!” As officers wrestled her out, she repeated her assessment of the witness.

Mr. Hayward, who did not turn to watch the eruption, continued with his apology, advised that “it was simply too early to say what caused the incident” — and spent the next five hours saying little beyond that.

No matter how hard Mr. Waxman pushed him, or how sharply the subcommittee chairman, Representative Bart Stupak, the Michigan Democrat, spoke to him, or how many documents were cited to suggest that BP put profit before safety at the Deepwater Horizon rig, Mr. Hayward essentially provided one answer:

“I was not part of that decision-making process.”

Throughout, Mr. Hayward maintained that look of amused earnestness. He moved his cup of water an inch. He jotted an occasional note. Sometimes his gaze seemed not directed at the speaker but somewhere in the wood-paneled distance — as though the repeated suggestions that he resign might not be such a bad idea.

Well after 5 p.m., the gavel came down with an angry: enough! Mr. Hayward’s dark-suited entourage ushered their small, boyish boss to an awaiting S.U.V. In the seven hours since the hearing began, as many as 735,000 gallons of oil leaked into the gulf.

And Friday is the 59th day.
Luis Gomez, 24, a deckhand on the Miss Allison, pulled in the harvest from an oyster bed in Bayou Grand Caillou, La., for culling.

From an Oyster in the Gulf, a Domino Effect

BAYOU GRAND CAILLOU, La. In Gulf of Mexico waters deemed safe, at least for now, the two metal claws of a weather-beaten flatboat rake the muck below for those prehistoric chunks of desire, oysters. Then the captain and his two deckhands, their shirts flecked with the pewter mud of the sea, dump the dripping haul onto metal tables and begin the culling.

They hammer apart the clumps of attached oysters and toss back the empty shells and stray bits of Hurricane Katrina debris. They work quickly but carefully; a jagged oyster will slice your hand for not respecting its beautiful ugliness.

The men sweep their catch onto the boat’s floor, not far from a pile of burlap sacks. Their day will be measured by the number of full sacks their boat, the Miss Allison, carries to shore. Each 100-pound sack means $14 for the captain and $3 apiece for the deckhands.

The rocklike oyster and the burlap sack. As basic as it gets in the gulf, yet both are integral to a complex system of recycling and ingenuity, a system now threatened, along with most everything else, by the continuing oil-spill catastrophe in the gulf.

The disaster’s economic fallout had a sneaky domino effect, touching the lives of everyone from the French Quarter shuckers who turn oyster-opening into theater to the Minnesota businessman who grinds the shells for chicken-feed supplement. Some victims were unaware that they were even tiles in the game, so removed were they from the damaged waters.

Take the burlap sacks on this oyster boat, for example, bearing the markings of Brazilian, Costa Rican and Mexican coffee companies. They come from a simple business, Steve’s Burlap Sacks, run out of a hot warehouse in Waveland, Miss., 120 miles away. And if you were to go there today, you would find the warehouse quiet, and the work-hardened owner trying very hard to keep it together.

“I don’t think the Lord’s looking this way no more,” he says.

Before a distant and fatal oil-

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“You’re getting a real bite of the sea.”

MIKE VOISIN

One of two brothers who own Motivatit Seafoods, referring to the briny taste of a raw oyster. Motivatit, in Houma, La., is one of the gulf’s dominant oyster operations.

The Miss Allison, harvesting an oyster bed in Bayou Grand Caillou, La. The captain and his crew will measure their day by the number of full burlap sacks the boat carries to shore.

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rig explosion nearly three months ago, here is how the symbiotic sack-and-oyster system worked:

Coffee companies in Florida, Louisiana and Texas would unload the raw beans shipped from around the world, then sell their sacks in bulk to just about the only person who wanted them, a called former oysterman from Louisiana named Steve Airhart.

Burlap sacks have long seemed almost divinely designed to hold oysters. Resilient, ventilated, able to handle the wet, and when past their use, they even burn well enough to keep the docks free of the pesky bugs called no-see-ums. But two decades ago, when Mr. Airhart was still raking for oysters, he could never find enough sacks.

After a friend’s relative helped him get some sacks from a large coffee importer, Mr. Airhart sensed opportunity. Within a year, he was harvesting sacks rather than oysters, sorting and stacking them in his driveway and then reselling them to oyster operations. From Bayou La Batre, Ala., to Galveston, Tex., he became known as the burlap-sack guy.

He had to start all over after Hurricane Katrina, living in a tent for several months while building a new warehouse in Waveland. But soon his employees were unloading truckloads of sacks, then laying the undamaged ones into a baler, 500 to a bale, each a ragged postcard from some faraway place.

“Produce of Indonesia.”

“Produce de Cote D’Ivoire.”

“Cafes de Brasil.”

Mr. Airhart’s six employees — Ben, Clyde, Jessica, Paula, Tommy and Tyler — would work from 7 a.m. until whenever, breathing in the fine coffee dust, sweeping up the stray green beans, taking in the smell that was like wet dog, earning $13 a bale. Then a trucker would deliver the baled sacks to Misho’s Oyster Company, in San Leon, Tex., or to Crystal Seas Seafood, in Pass Christian, Miss., or to Motivatit Seafoods, in Houma, La.

Motivatit is owned by two brothers, Mike and Steve Voisin, whose family has dedicated several generations to the pursuit of a living thing in a forbidding shell; a thing that poses a faint risk when consumed raw, yet evokes the wildness of the ocean.

“You’re getting a real bite of the sea,” Mike Voisin says. Motivatit is one of the gulf’s dominant oyster operations. Before the spill, it managed 10,000 acres of oyster beds and processed 60,000 pounds of oysters a day. But to collect these craggy surprises of nature, the company hires boats like the Miss Allison.

Several times a week, the Miss Allison pulls away from a dock near a small place called Theriot, La., bound for where porpoises sometimes provide escort. Its captain, Santos Rodriguez, sun-baked and 44, has churned these waters for 26 years, long enough to wonder whether he’s raking up the same shells and bottles; long enough to measure a bag’s weight by hand rather than by

ONLINE: DISASTER’S REACH

More photos and a video of the effect of the spill on the oyster business.

nytimes.com/national
And yes, the captain eats oysters. Using a short knife, he pops the seal of a just-harvested oyster with safe cracker élan, makes a cut, and slurps the wild goop down.

But with the oil spill forcing the shutdown of oyster beds throughout the gulf — including about 60 percent of Motivatit’s acreage — he has never seen the catch so low. Yes, the price for a sack is up, but the total number of sacks is down. Normally, he and his crew will return to shore with about 60 sacks; now, a good day is 33.

His two muck-splattered deckhands, Luis Gomez, 24, and Cesar Badillo, 23, reflect the changed life, having recently moved to Houma after oyster beds elsewhere in Louisiana shut down. Mr. Gomez wears a cross around his neck, Mr. Badillo wears a burlap sack for an apron, and both wear gloves over their shell-scarred hands.

After a piece of machinery breaks, the Miss Allison turns around. By the time it reaches shore, to a dock paved with crushed oyster shells, the crew has 30 sacks filled and knotted — about $90 each for the deckhands, and about $420 for the captain, who has paid for the gas and food and must now fix the broken equipment.

Early the next morning, amid the din of the Motivatit plant in Houma, a stocky woman in a blue construction hat weighs these bags and others by hook. She then dumps their contents, which look like bits of construction debris, onto a conveyor belt to begin a process that involves tumblers, washers and dozens of employees. Wearing hairnets and aprons adorned with their first names and hand-drawn hearts, they shuck and shuck.

But because the oil spill has forced the shutdown of so many of Motivatit’s oyster beds — most of them out of precaution, some of them because of the presence of oil — these workers are processing about half the normal number of oysters. “With the lower amount of product, we’re having to cut most of the orders,” Mike Voisin says. “We’ve had to minimize.”

This means that Motivatit now employs about 80 workers, two dozen fewer than usual. The entire night shift has been suspended.

This means that the weekly deliveries to Los Angeles, by way of El Paso, Tucson and Phoenix, have stopped, as have the deliveries to Las Vegas, where clients prefer smaller oysters from beds that are now off limits.

This means that Warehouse Shell Sales, in Newport, Minn., may have to adjust. Several times a year, it has 1,500 tons of gulf oyster shells, including many from Motivatit, barged up the Mississippi River to be crushed and sold as poultry feed mix; chickens draw calcium from the oyster-shell bits sit ting in their gizzards, hardening the shells of the eggs they produce.

But the oil spill has the shell company’s owner, Gary Lund, worried about supply. He says he is now exploring other options.

Finally, this means disaster for the burlap-sack guy, Steve Airhart.

Four months ago, his hot and dusty warehouse in Waveland was humming, with loose sacks coming in and baled sacks going out: 135,000 sold in March, 139,000 in April, and the busy summer season coming up. Then it stopped.

Mr. Airhart, 49, did what he could for a few weeks, but finally he had to lay off Paula, Jessica and the others. “One of the hardest days of my life,” he says. “But they knew it was coming. They heard me on the phone, begging to make sales.”

Now the warehouse is mostly empty, save for the few stacks of bales no one wants, and a boat that Mr. Airhart suddenly had the time to finish. He says that BP, the oil company responsible for the spill, has paid him $20,000 so far for lost business, but that is nowhere near enough to cover the $320,000, plus sweat equity, that he has invested in the company.

The former oysterman is looking forward to sliding this boat he’s built into the damaged waters. He wants to help clean up what has broken so many fragile systems.

scale.

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whether he’s raking up the same shells boats like the Miss Allison. and processed 60,000 pounds of oysters oyster operations. Before the spill, it ding shell; a thing that poses a faint risk to Crystal Seas Seafood, in Pass Christian, Miss., or to Motivateit Seafoods, in Houma, La., one of the gulf’s dominant oyster operations. The burlap sacks aboard the Miss Allison, right, come from Steve’s Burlap Sacks, run out of a hot warehouse in Waveland, Miss., 120 miles away and struggling to survive.

Mr. Airhart’s six employees — Ben, Mike and Steve Voisin, whose family has dedicated several generations to the pursuit of a living thing in a forbidden space. The former oysterman is looking for-...
Montgomery, Ala. You can never come back, ever. If you plead guilty to that long-ago murder in Oklahoma City, you will be released from prison, where you have spent most of the last 27 years on death row. But once you are free, you will be banished from Oklahoma.

O.K., said James Fisher, trading his black-and-white-striped prison top for a blue-and-white-striped dress shirt. Then, without shackles or escort, he stepped into the late afternoon of a state that once wanted him dead and now just wanted him gone.

First, though, Mr. Fisher’s lawyers and supporters thought that the end to his Hitchcockian case, a study in the cost of appalling legal representation, warranted at least dinner. So they took him to Earl’s Rib Palace for the celebratory opposite of a last meal.

With brown eyes wide behind large glasses and incarceration-gray hair cut close to the scalp, the ex-inmate dined on ribs, coleslaw, fried okra, and root beer. While he ate, a gospel singer from Georgia introduced herself, sang out a song of redemption, and handed him a $100 bill.

When dinner was over, he ordered a coffee, to go.

A trip to WalMart for the incidentals needed on the outside was aborted when word came that the district attorney expected Mr. Fisher to be already gone.

His lawyers promised an early start the next day, and he went to sleep in a hotel at the city’s edge.

In the morning, his latest defense lawyer, Perry Hudson, gave him a farewell gift, a portable MP3 player. Mr. Fisher had wanted a Walkman, a hot item back when he was last free, but Mr. Hudson explained that this was better.

Then Mr. Fisher got into the passenger seat of a small red rental car that soon blended into the southward flow of Interstate 35. As the radio played hip-hop, the exhausted, exhilarated man gazed through the car window at a different country from the one he remembered.

“It looked like the society outside had become cleaner, shinier.

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James Fisher with Charlotte Morrison, a senior lawyer for the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit group, in Montgomery, Ala.

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er,’’ he said.

What Mr. Fisher, 46, remembered included this: abandoned as a small child, fobbed off to relatives, returned to an abusive father and dumped at 13 on the doorstep of the New York State child-welfare system, which cut him loose at 16. In and out of the Navy in seven months, he bobbed through the drugs and street life of the South, until he found a bus ticket to Tulsa and drifted, finally, into Oklahoma City.

American, was arrested in upstate New York and returned to Oklahoma, where he pleaded not guilty to first-degree murder. He faced execution if convicted, a prospect that, records show, his well-respected lawyer did little to avoid.

The lawyer, E. Melvin Porter, a civil rights advocate and the first African-American elected to the Oklahoma State Senate, later said that at the time he considered homosexuals to be “among the worst people in the world,’’ and Mr. Fisher to be a “very hostile client.’’

Mr. Porter was shockingly ill-prepared for trial — “unwilling or unable to reveal evident holes in the state’s case,’’ a federal appellate court later noted, yet “remarkably successful in undermining his own client’s testimony.’’ He exhibited “actual doubt and hostility’’ about his client’s defense, the court said, and failed to present a closing argument, even though the state’s case “was hardly overwhelming.’’

When the time came at sentencing to plead for mercy, the court said, Mr. Porter uttered just nine words. Four were judicial pleasantries; the remaining five formed a lame objection to the prosecution’s closing argument. With that, James Fisher, 20, was sentenced to death.

Years passed and appeals were denied. He lived in the cave-like setting of the death-row unit, spending 23 hours a day in his cell, and was frequently relegated to one of the special disciplinary isolation cells. As his various emotional problems went largely untreated, he grew increasingly self-destructive, according to a comprehensive psychological assessment.

He became a notoriously difficult inmate, often disciplined for refusing to remove his hands from the cell-door slot through which his food trays were passed. With these hand gestures, Mr. Fisher shouted his frustration.

Finally, after 19 years, the federal Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit overturned Mr. Fisher’s conviction on the grounds of “ineffective assistance of counsel.’’ In 2005 he was tried again, only to relive his courtroom betrayal.

This time his lawyer was Johnny Albert, also well-regarded, who later admitted that at the time of the trial, he was drinking heavily, abusing cocaine and ne-
glecting cases. The two men fought so much that Mr. Albert once physically threatened Mr. Fisher, who then refused to attend his own trial.

According to court records, Mr. Albert all but ignored the many boxes of defense material concerning Mr. Fisher’s case. The various other examples of his inept counsel included the failure to sufficiently challenge in the testimony of the state’s central witness, the juvenile, now a man with a violent criminal record.

Mr. Fisher was convicted and sentenced to death, again. And, again, his conviction was overturned on grounds of ineffective counsel — faster this time, and by the Court of Criminal Appeals of Oklahoma.

His new lawyer, Mr. Hudson, succeeded in finally gaining Mr. Fisher’s trust, but it was not easy. As the prospect of a third trial drew nearer, Mr. Fisher instructed his lawyer to seek a plea deal.

Last month the two sides ended the 28-year-old case. In addition to pleading guilty to first-degree murder, Mr. Fisher agreed to complete a comprehensive re-entry program in Montgomery, Ala., overseen by the Equal Justice Initiative, which helps indigent defendants and inmates who have been mistreated by the legal system. This nonprofit organization had long been familiar with Mr. Fisher’s case.

One other thing: Mr. Fisher also agreed to get the hell out of Oklahoma forever.

The small red car, driven by Sophia Bernhardt, a lawyer for the Equal Justice Initiative, continued south on the interstate. Packed inside were several goodbye gifts, including a set of inexpensive luggage from Janet Davis, a lawyer with the Oklahoma Indigent Defense System, who had worked for Mr. Fisher’s freedom for many years.

“He has certainly done his time,” she said later. “He deserves to be free in the world.”

Just short of the Texas border, Mr. Fisher and Ms. Bernhardt, who, at 31, was 5 when Mr. Fisher was first sentenced to death, stopped to eat at a Braum’s Ice Cream store, where two men stared and talked loudly about his release. They drove on. And when they finally left Oklahoma, Mr. Fisher had this thought: “The past is over with.”

At Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, Ms. Bernhardt, who had to rush off to another case, entrusted Mr. Fisher and the car to her colleague Stanley Washington. The two men bought some takeout at a diner, spent the night at a budget hotel and, at 6:45 the next morning began the 16-hour drive to Montgomery.

Early in the ride, Mr. Washington rolled down the car windows to allow the hot Texas air to rush in. “Here’s freedom blowing on you,” he said, and he knew what he was talking about.

Mr. Washington, 60, was once sentenced to life without parole for various nonviolent drug-related crimes; he served 14 years in the Alabama prison system before being released in January 2009. Now, gently, he began to suggest ways for Mr. Fisher to make the best of what was before him: small goals; a day at a time; it will be all right.

They stopped for food at gas stations along the way. Mr. Fisher savored the various brands of root beer. He talked about the pet he had on death row, a mouse called Jasper. He noticed how lush the landscape became once they hit Louisiana, and how there were so many cars on the road at night, all of them so sleek, and forming uniform lines that said America never sleeps.

Mr. Fisher vented for a while about his banishment from Oklahoma. He asked Mr. Washington why they would do that, but seemed satisfied by Mr. Washington’s answer of: Who cares?

It was 10:30 at night by the time the small red car pulled up to the Montgomery apartment where Mr. Fisher would start again. Home, Mr. Washington said, to which his passenger said something along the lines of, O.K.
Annie and Gloria

At the Fulton Fish Market, she was Shopping Cart Annie, who hustled cigarettes and told dirty jokes. But a mysterious pinup hinted at a life her South Street friends knew nothing about.

By DAN BARRY

THE fish men see her still, their Annie, in the hide-and-seek shadows of South Street. She’s telling her dirty jokes and doing anything for a buck: hustling newspapers, untaxed cigarettes, favors, those pairs of irregular socks she’d buy cheap on Canal. She’s submitting to the elements, calling out “Yoo-hoo” to the snow and the rain and her boys.

For several decades, Annie was the profane mother of the old Fulton Fish Market, that pungent Lower Manhattan place fast becoming a mirage of memory. Making her rounds, running errands, holding her own in the blue banter, she was as much a part of this...
Annie and Gloria

At 22, she biked to Alaska. Through her 80s, she worked the fish market. And, quietly, she gave away almost everything.

bathing suit, running barefoot against a glorious sky — was of Annie in her younger days, decades before her dark fish-market terminus. But some could not see the coffee-truck goddess in this bent woman at shadow’s edge, clutching the handle of the shopping cart she used to hold wares and provide balance, wearing a baseball cap, layers of sweaters, and men’s pants, navy blue, into which she had sewn deep, leg-long pockets to keep safe her hard-earned rolls of bills.

The supposed link between pinup and bag lady sounded too much like an O. Henry tale of Old New York, and begged too many questions. Who are you, really, Annie? How did you wind up here, at the fish market, receiving your boys, their taunts,

the slaps of the East River winds? Where does all your money go? What is the larger meaning of your life’s arc? Never asked; never answered. Annie was just there, always, as rooted to the market as the cobble-

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stones.

Five years ago, when the city pried the 175-year-old fish market from Lower Manhattan and moved it to Hunts Point in the Bronx, Annie came with it, at first, often paying for a ride from her home, somewhere in Manhattan. She was in her 80s by then, and she struggled to find warmth in the new market’s chilled air. The men would sometimes see her in a corner, huddled against herself, sleeping.

So maybe it was for the best when the city regulators at Hunts Point told Annie she could no longer hawk her best seller, her untaxed cigarettes — an order that would have been laughable in the old market’s wide-open days. Soon the raucous market chorus, of curses and price calls and forklift beeps, was missing the occasional, punctuating “Yoo-hoo.”

Then again, maybe the market was her life’s oxygen. A few weeks ago, word spread among the fishmongers: South Street Annie, also known as Shopper that would have been laughable in her life’s arc was this: Life is a wondrous gray.

W

HEN someone dies, the rest of us cobble together old photographs, faint remembrances and snippets of things once said to make sense of the life lived. It is folly, but it is what we do. So here is Annie, incomplete, partially hidden still in the market’s eternal dust cast by the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Drive above.

According to one of her two daughters, Barbara Fleck, Gloria Wasserman’s parents were Polish immigrants who tried to make a living as egg farmers in rural New Jersey before settling in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. The father, Pincus, found work as a tailor; the mother, Sadie, was a homemaker. Together they fretted over their only daughter.

“She was almost too beautiful, which caused her to — well,” Ms. Fleck said. “She had a lively spirit, which was almost frightening for these poor Jewish immigrants. Very beautiful and very spunky.”

A portrait from the mid-1940s shows Ms. Wasserman in pearls, her dark hair swept up and sculpted, her expression that of a confident starlet waiting to be discovered. “I think in her heart she would have wanted to have been an actress,” Ms. Fleck said. “She didn’t make it to the screen, but she acted in real life.”

While working in Manhattan’s jewelry district, Ms. Wasserman met an ex-soldier named Fred Fleck, who planned to bicycle to Alaska, where he would attend college on the G.I. Bill. He suggested that she accompany him. “And she did,” Ms. Fleck said. “A free-spirited boy.”


“Clad in clean white duck slacks, faded colored wool shirts and moccasins, the young couple, deeply tanned, looked as though they had been on an afternoon’s jaunt. Gloria’s nut-brown shoulder-length hair glistened in the sun. . . . Glowing with enthusiasm, Gloria left her job as a manufacturer’s model and amateur entertainer, bought a bicycle, and came along. She plans to get a job in Fairbanks, possibly as an entertainer.”

She was 22.

After that, details get blurry. Ms. Wasserman married Mr. Fleck, gave birth to Barbara in 1950, and broke up with Mr. Fleck. She lived a bicoastal life, it seems, working in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest — running a bar, then a record store — but returning to New York often to visit and provide financial support for her widowed mother, who by now was raising Barbara.

“She had a knock,” Ms. Fleck said. “She could make money.”

Ms. Wasserman married a second time, to a man named Grinols, and gave birth to two sons. Then, after this marriage broke down, she had a relationship that produced another daughter, Robin, in 1964. During these years, and in the many that followed, Ms. Fleck often had no idea what her mother did for a living.

“I don’t know how you could put it nicely,” said Ms. Fleck, who lives in Los Angeles. “But she had a flamboyant life.”

At some point, Ms. Wasserman returned to New York for good. And, at some point, she assumed the role of Annie and began appearing at the Fulton Fish Market, selling her wares and, her close friends at the market gently say, herself. Exactly when is lost to time, but far enough in the past that it seemed as though she was as permanent as the skyscrapers, as permanent as the river, calling out to the late-night fishmongers and early morning Wall Street suits. When Frank Minio, an erudite, reflective man, joined the market in 1978, she was already a fixture.

No matter the weather, he said, “She was always there.”

W

hat a brutal way to live. She cleaned the market’s offices and locker rooms and sold her merchandise. She collected the men’s “fish clothes” on Friday and had them washed and ready for Monday. She ran errands for Mr. DeLuca, known as Stevie Coffee Truck, hustling to Chinatown to pick up, say, some ginseng tea. She accepted the early morning delivery of bagels. She tried to anticipate the men’s needs — towels, bandannas, candy — and had these items available for sale.

“If the Brooklyn Bridge could fit in her shopping cart, she would have sold it,” Ms. Fleck said.

Since all this hustling meant carrying around a lot of cash, she tucked away wads of bills in those deep-pocketed pants and other hiding places, including her brassiere. “She tried to look shabby so people wouldn’t give her a hard time” when she left the market, recalled one of her protectors, Joe Centrone, better known as Joe Tuna. “But she was regularly robbed.”

Away from the market, Annie lived as Gloria Wasserman, in the East Village, in a city-owned apartment building that later became part of the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association. She found joy in her family — a grandson, Travis, in California, and a granddaughter, Chelsea, in New Hampshire — but also sorrow. One of her sons, Kenneth Grinols, died in a fire while squatting in a building in the city. The other, Karl Grinols, struggling with drugs, moved into her apartment at one point, while she slept in a room at the market — “between the mackerel and the salmon,” Ms. Fleck said. But he died young, too, hit by a car in the East Village.

All the while, Annie kept working, rarely missing a day, and gave nearly everything she had to others. Barbara Grinols, Karl’s ex-wife, who lives in New Hampshire, said that Ms. Wasserman often sent as much as $4,000 a month, usually through money orders, to her relations on both coasts. She also routinely sent along boxes of used clothing that she had culled from places like the Catholic Worker’s Mary House, on East Third Street, where she was known as that rare visitor who searched for items that fit others, and who had a gift for using humor and kindness to deflate the tensions arising from hardship.

“She became like a grandmother to dozens of women on the street who had nobody,” said Felton Davis, a full-time Catholic Worker volunteer. Sensing the lack of esteem in a woman beside her, he said, “She would say: I have just the shirt that you need. I’ll get it for you.”

Meanwhile, up in New Hampshire, the clothes kept coming. “The boxes would be opened, and it would be like: Who wants this T-shirt? Who wants this sweatshirt?” Ms. Grinols recalled.

“So many people in this area got gifts from her.”

In 1999, Ms. Wasserman decided to
W ith the money she earned by working in all weather, in the hours when the rest of us slept, Annie bought Chelsea a used Toyota Tercel. She paid for Chelsea’s tuition at the University of New Hampshire, and provided financial support to a ballet school in Los Angeles. Whatever money she took in, she sent out, while owning little more than a bed and a radio. Her relatives, in turn, regularly visited her in New York, where she would always tell them, “If we see anyone, I’m Annie.” They called her often, sent her gifts that she probably gave away, and constantly begged her to retire from a job whose parameters were left vague, but whose pull for her was undeniable. “She would always say, ‘We’ll see,’” Chelsea recalled. “She never wanted to leave New York and stop doing what she was doing.”

About 10 years ago, Joe Tuna and Stevie Coffee Truck heard that Annie had been hospitalized. They went to New York Downtown Hospital and asked to see — actually, they didn’t know whom to ask for. “Annie?” they volunteered. “Shopping Cart Annie?”

“Gloria Wasserman,” the clerk said, and directed them to her room, where their tough, tough Annie now seemed so vulnerable.

“That was the first time I ever saw her with her hair down,” Joe Tuna said. “You could see the remnants of a beautiful woman.”

Then Annie got out of the hospital, and went back to work. She continued to flash her breasts, more for the shock and a laugh than for anything else. She sold her goods, ripped into those who owed her money, accepted a hot cup of coffee when offered, and slipped away now and then to read from one of the books she always carried, like a stage actress resting between scenes.

She also continued her other life, as Gloria Wasserman, traveling to New Hampshire to attend Chelsea’s wedding, in 2006. There she is in the photographs, smiling with the bride and groom, a proud, beloved grandmother.

For the last year of her life, the reluctantly retired Gloria Wasserman spent her days charming the East Village and her nights sharing dinner at Mary House. In spirit, she remained defiantly independent. In truth, she needed help: with her hygiene, with her apartment, with climbing the stairs.

She suffered a stroke in the brutal August heat and was admitted to Bellevue Hospital Center, where Mr. Davis, from the Catholic Worker, visited nearly every day. She was released after a month, spent a couple of weeks in New Hampshire, and then a couple more in California, with her daughter Barbara. But she refused to eat or to take her medication, and died in her sleep, 2,800 miles from the fish market.

“New York was her life,” her daughter said. “Work was her life.”

Word of Annie’s death gave pause to the fish men. Mr. Minio reflected on that space between black and white where all of us reside. And Joe Tuna has discovered that whenever someone in a crowd calls out, “Yoo-hoo,” his head jerks up and he is instantly back on South Street, amid the beds of glassine ice, and the dead-eyed fish, and here she comes.

The impressions and old photographs that Ms. Wasserman left behind are, in the end, only impressions and old photographs. In fact, whenever reporters, including this one, referred to her in a news story, she would always complain that they had failed to capture her “essence” — which may, again, be true.

Retire as Annie, telling the men at the fish market that she had health problems — circulation problems in her legs, Ms. Fleck said, related to years of working in the wet and cold. Joe Tuna and Stevie Coffee Truck raised $3,000 for her by hitting up all the hardened fishmongers. Off she went, to live with her daughter Robin in California, and then with Ms. Grinols and Chelsea in New Hampshire. After nine months in the country, though, Annie was back at the market, calling yoo-hoo and forcing Joe Tuna and Stevie Coffee Truck to do some explaining.

COURTESY OF JOE TUNA CENTRONE

ON THE JOB Annie at work at the fish market.