

BLIND INJUSTICE

Bruce Curtis sits in a New Jersey jail counting down a twenty year sentence for a crime he says was an accident...

BY DAVID OLIE
IF YOU'RE TAKING SCIENCES AT Dalhousie, there's someone you should know. You should know him because everyone says he's a hell of a nice guy; a bit quiet, perhaps, but bright, well-spoken, friendly, and a damn fine writer to boot. He's tall, dark-haired and clean shaven and wears plastic-rimmed glasses. Just an ordinary person, much like anyone else.

You should know him, but you don't. His name is Bruce Curtis, and he is currently serving his third year of a 20 year prison sentence in a New Jersey jail.

Bruce was accepted for admission into the Dal science programme in 1982, after graduating from King's-Edgehill school in Windsor. He never got there. Instead, he was plunged into a tragedy in July of that year, a tragedy from which he has not yet emerged.

BRUCE CURTIS GREW UP ON HIS PARENT'S 300 HECTARE farm on Mt. Hanley, outside the town of Middleton in the Annapolis Valley. His father, Jim Curtis, is a captain in the armed forces. Though gifted academically, Bruce was socially awkward; he preferred to spend his time studying nature in the woods around his home and writing in his journal. His friend, Scott Franz, would later call him a "deadbeat".

Realizing his potential, Curtis' parents managed to put together the money to send him to King's-Edgehill. There Bruce met and became a friend of Scott Franz, a young man from Loch Arbour, New Jersey. Few could understand what brought them together, apart from interests in games and computers, because otherwise the two were very different.

The key to the difference lay in Franz's home. He had grown up there with his mother, Rosemary, ten older brothers and sisters, and his stepfather, Alfred Podgis. And Alfred Podgis, a letter carrier, was a man completely out of control.

He was an avid collector of baseball cards, over \$20,000 worth. He also collected guns, at least a dozen. Podgis was known to the police and the community as an extremely violent man. Over the years local police logged 147 visits to the Podgis home to act on complaints. The ramshackle house was pock-marked with bullet holes from Alf Podgis' shooting sprees. He had assaulted two of Scott's sisters with heavy objects, attacks which put each of them in hospital. But the worst was reserved for his wife, Rosemary. He broke her arms on two separate occasions, and once pushed her down a flight of stairs, breaking her back. All the children left this house of horrors as early as they could.

Rosemary Podgis didn't leave. But in an effort to spare her youngest son, Scott, from the constant abuse of his stepfather, Rosemary saved every cent she could from her clerical job to send him to King's-Edgehill. He gained a reprieve, but nothing changed at the Podgis home.

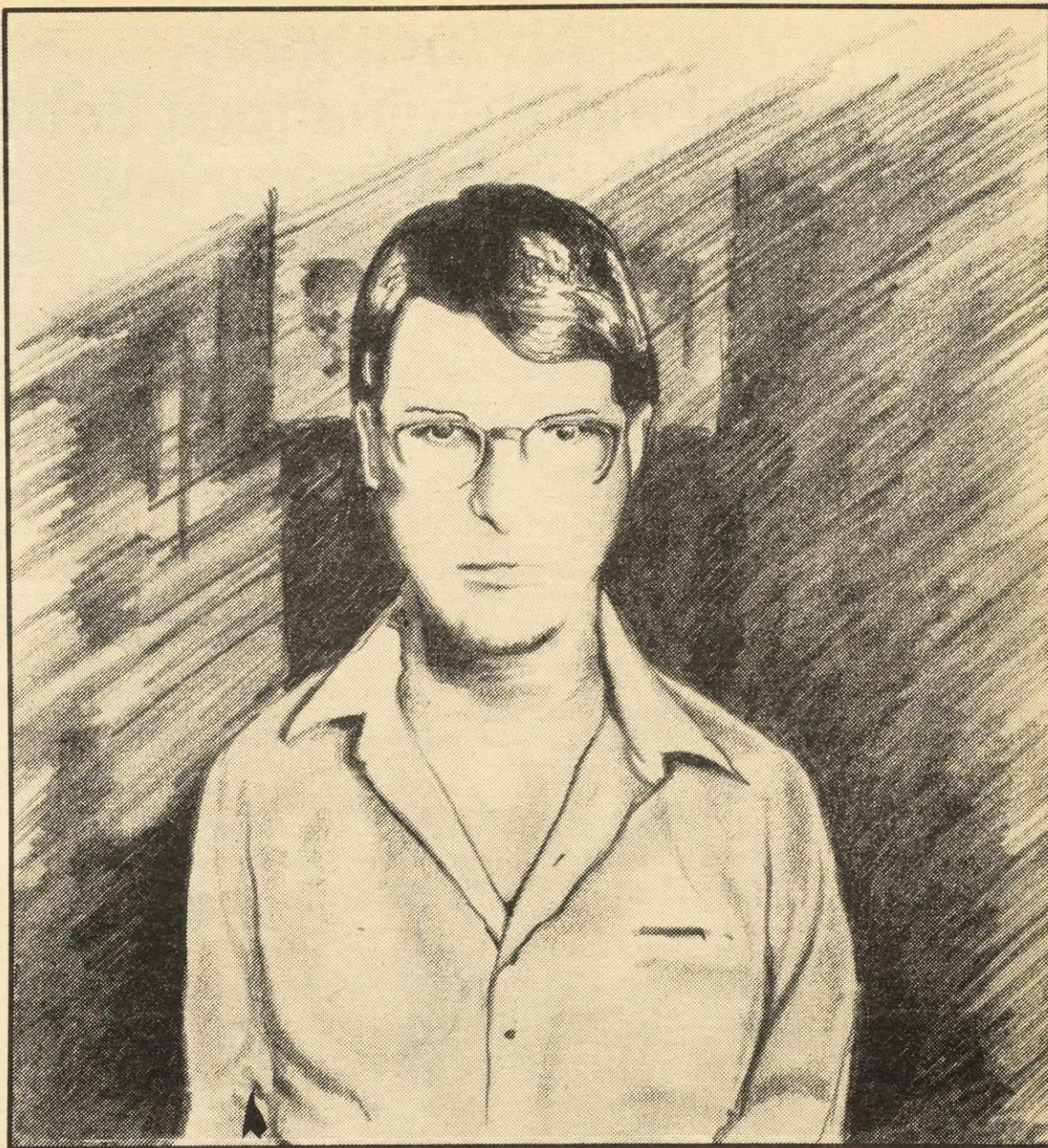


Illustration: Rick Janson

IT IS JUNE, 1982. BRUCE Curtis has just graduated near the top of his King's-Edgehill class. His parents, like most parents, want to give him some sort of present. But they don't know what it will be.

For months now, Scott Franz has been asking Bruce to visit him in New Jersey. Scott describes his home as an ocean-front mansion, with servants and Great Dane... Bruce has never travelled alone before, and decides he wants to go. His parents have some misgivings, but finally buy him a one-way plane ticket; Scott says he has plans to drive back to the Maritimes in early July and will bring Bruce back with him.

Bruce's plane arrives in Newark, New Jersey on June 29, two hours late. Alf Podgis is waiting with his step-son, and is in a towering rage; the delay has caused him to miss a meeting with a fellow baseball card enthusiast. His rage will continue all week, and the two young men live in constant fear.

They seldom come home, except to sleep. They especially avoid the upstairs, which is Alf's domain. When they come back to the house on the rainy night of July 3, they find the doors locked, and shelter in the porch as they listen to Alf Podgis beat his wife. She lets them in after he goes to bed.

The next morning Scott ventures upstairs to get some money. His stepfather fires a gun at him.

GIVEN THIS INSANE ENVIRONMENT, why didn't Bruce Curtis simply leave? Apart from his

understandable confusion and his lack of a return ticket, Bruce seems to have been motivated by a sincere desire to help his friend.

Bruce is like that. While home from school in the summer of 1981, Bruce met up with a young woman he knew from junior high school. She was deeply depressed, and hinted at committing suicide. He talked her out of it at the time, but he couldn't stop her months later when he was back in Windsor. The tragedy affected all of Middleton, but few so much as Bruce. He went into a depressed state, and wrote long, sombre passages in his journal.

In New Jersey he found another friend in trouble. He admits now that in staying he made "the greatest mistake of my life."

ON THE EVENING OF JULY 4, Scott Franz is still shaken up by the events of the morning. He decides he needs protection, so he buys a box of cartridges and loads two lever action carbines he finds in his stepfather's van, one for himself and one for Bruce. Bruce has never before handled firearms.

That night they slip into the house and sleep side-by-side on the living room sofa, the loaded and cocked guns between them. They plan to leave for the Maritimes the next day.

Around eight o'clock in the morning, while his mother is cooking breakfast, Scott heads upstairs, gun in hand, to take a shower. Bruce is still dozing on the sofa. He awakes to the sound of gunfire from upstairs; Scott

Franz has just shot Alfred Podgis to death. Bruce panics, grabs the gun beside him, and runs for the back door. In a hallway he nearly collides with another running figure. It is Rosemary Podgis. The gun discharges and Mrs. Podgis falls to the floor with a wound running from the right side of her abdomen to her left hip. She dies minutes later. Bruce goes into hysterics.

BRUCE CURTIS HAS STUCK by this story of the shootings since the day he was arrested. Scott Franz is another case. His original sworn statement was identical to Bruce's. Before he went to trial, however, Scott made a deal with prosecutor Paul Chaiet: if he would plead guilty to murder, change his story and testify against Bruce, he would get a reduced sentence. At Bruce's trial, therefore, Scott testified that Bruce deliberately shot and killed Mrs. Podgis. Since then he has gone back to his original version. Of course, Scott did not actually witness the shooting of his mother.

FRANZ, WHO HEARS THE shot and the screams downstairs, goes down to the hallway, still carrying his gun, and finds his mother dead. He later says he considered killing Curtis on the spot, but thought better of it. Instead, he enlists Bruce's help in cleaning up the house and removing the bodies. "It's not right to leave my mother lying there like that," he says. Bruce, by now beyond reason, agrees.

The bodies are loaded into the Continued on next page...