

The Changing Rules of D.C. Pickup Basketball 14

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## Letters From an Arsonist

Thomas Sweatt torched  
Washington for decades.  
He killed more people  
than we thought. 20

By Dave Jamieson

Illustrations by Greg Houston

Photographs by Darrow Montgomery



Those demons are  
still in me

# Letters From an Arsonist

By Dave Jamieson

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*Illustrations by Greg Houston*  
*Photographs by Darrow Montgomery*

In the early morning hours of Jan. 11, 1985, Thomas Sweatt, a 30-year-old fry cook, finished his late shift at a Roy Rogers and stepped out onto Florida Avenue NE. A light snow dusted the streets. Sweatt, a bachelor, started his regular walk home alone in the cold after the restaurant closed. It was one of those moments that reminded Sweatt how oppressive wintertime in the city could be.

On the sidewalk, he spotted a stranger walking in the opposite direction. The man spoke as he passed, and Sweatt nodded hello back to him. The man looked to be in his 30s and attractive. Sweatt liked him immediately. As the man continued walking northwest on the thoroughfare, Sweatt turned and followed him. He wanted to meet him.

He tailed the stranger beneath the train overpass, over New York Avenue and North Capitol Street, and up to a brick rowhouse

on Quincy Place NW, where it abuts Florida Avenue. Sweatt watched the man walk inside the house, presumably to his family. Again he was alone on the street.

Sweatt turned to renew his walk home, which was even longer now. Still, he wanted to meet the stranger. He found himself walking faster and faster toward home, excited, telling himself he'd see the man at least one more time.

*But the only way would be thru fire,* Sweatt would later write.

At home Sweatt stripped off his Roy Rogers uniform and threw on casual clothes. He borrowed his sister's car and headed back toward the house at Florida and Quincy. There was just one stop to make—at the gas station, where he topped off an empty 2-liter soda bottle with gasoline, then threw it into his bag along with a towel.

He parked near Quincy Place and got out of the car with his bag. On the front porch, he poured the gasoline beneath the front door, held it there with the towel, and struck a match. The vapors ignited in the front hallway, and smoke started pouring out beneath the door. Sweatt hopped back into his sister's car as the terror began to unfold inside.

On the second floor of the house, a man woke to find his bedroom in flames. On the same floor were his wife, his daughter, and his stepdaughter, and in the basement were his son and stepson.

Sweatt circled the block in his car and came back to the house. On the front porch the man stood in nothing but his underwear.

*I was glad to see him again and wanted to help but the firetrucks were coming,* Sweatt would write.

The man had escaped through a window—but not before suffering asphyxia

## Letters From an Arsonist

I sat there a long time trying to get my nerves together because this was a huge house and wasn't quiet sure it would burn. Just like this house none of the fires were easy.

from the smoke as well as first-, second-, and third-degree burns over 60 percent of his body. He must have been too panicked to register his injuries: He was screaming that his wife was still inside. From the street Sweatt could hear one of the boys hollering for help at a basement window. He briefly considered getting out of his car to save the boy, but the fire engine was already barreling toward the blaze. He fled the scene.

It took 85 firefighters more than 45 minutes to get the fire under control, according to an article in the *Washington Post*. The boys escaped unharmed. The two girls emerged from the back of the house, each badly burned. The mother was nowhere to be found. Neighbors gathered in front of the house as officials sorted the wreckage, and they broke into sobs when the body was found inside the house around dawn. The medical examiner on the scene determined she'd died of burns and asphyxia.

In the official fire report, an investigator assigned a cause: "The fire started as a result of a carelessly dropped cigarette in the bedding of 2nd floor bedroom." It appeared to be just another sad, needless fire in a city that was accustomed to seeing thousands each year. When he saw the fire in the news, Sweatt learned the name of the man he'd just made a widower: Roy Picott. He also learned the name of the deceased: Bessie Mae Duncan.

Sweatt was saddened to learn of Duncan's death, but in his mind she was simply the collateral damage he had to incur in service to his fantasies. He would go on to torch Washington steadily for another 20 years, and he would claim more lives than Duncan's before his arrest in April 2005. A federal judge would eventually sentence him to two lifetimes plus 136 years for his crimes. Considering how long he got away with setting so many treacherous fires, investigators would come to place Sweatt among the most prolific and dangerous arsonists in American memory. His motivations fascinated them. "I still have a million questions for him," says Bob Lockett, a fire investigator who spent several days with Sweatt after his arrest. "My only regret is that I came across him when I was in my 50s, as opposed to my 20s. He was that unique to the world."

About a year and a half ago, I sent a letter to Sweatt at the federal prison in Terre Haute, Ind. I told him that I was a reporter who had written about his fires in early 2004, when he was still at large, and that I wanted to learn about his life as a firesetter. A few days later I received a brief, cordial note, in careful handwriting, that began, *I was pleased to get your letter and hope this could be the beginning of something good.* Apparently adjusted to his

new confines, he signed it, *Inmate "Tom," #38792037.*

Sweatt and I went on to trade letters for more than a year, often on a daily basis. He wrote thoughtfully about his large, supportive family and his faith in God, each note filled with the same soft-spoken kindness he'd shown to co-workers as well as to the agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) who'd captured him. Still, as much as he loved small talk, nothing brought out Sweatt's storytelling skills quite like the tale of an old fire.

*I kept up with all the news reports about my fires + others that they did not know about; I have a "diary of fires" that I put away elsewhere, for; I knew someday the ATF would ask for it. I still believe in my mind that the Lord God Almighty brought them (the ATF) people to me because it was time for all this to stop. 30 years of fires—it was like Come get me, I'm tired. Jail can't be any worse than the life I had then and believe it or not life is pretty much the same, it just I'm not free to go wherever I want to.*

The investigators who debriefed Sweatt after his arrest were floored by his recall of years-old blazes, which almost invariably squared with official reports and witness accounts. Indeed, the fire accounts in Sweatt's letters could run on for pages in detail, until they ended abruptly with something like, *OK, my thoughts are running wild again so I'll stop here.* Each fire had been important to him, and telling its story was one way for him to relive its excitement.

As he wrote more, he started to discuss his motives and share with me, as he put it, *the mind of an arsonist.* In his letters, Sweatt confessed to a number of fires for which he has never been held accountable, including the one that killed Duncan. (Under Sweatt's proffer with the government, investigators have been gagged from publicly discussing Sweatt's motives or certain fires he may have admitted to during questioning. Anything dealing with motive in this story comes directly from Sweatt's letters.)

For Sweatt, different fires grew out of different feelings—many out of a sense of powerlessness, others out of spite, some even out of love—but more than anything else, his decades-long rampage was about sexual fantasy:



Sweatt's apartment on Lebaum Street SE

*Why did I set the fires when I set them? That's an all too familiar question that can not be understood if you don't know the story. There were different reasons for most of the fires. It could be because of one feeling the need to have power about something or someone....I don't want you driving that car so the fire becomes a weapon to destroy it. Or in case of some house fires—I might like a particular style of a house and wish one day to own it (but it's only a dream). Fire is a tool to destroy and some house fires also becomes my phantasy of people scrambling to exit windows and sort-of feel like they need my help so I stay and watch. Then I'd masterbate over the fire while driving away from the schene.*

Southeast wasn't a bad place for a firebug to live. Sweatt had boarded in cheap rooms all over town before he settled there in 1992. For a few hundred bucks a month he rented an apartment in a two-story brick house on Lebaum Street SE, in a relatively poor neighborhood close to the gritty strip of liquor stores and check-cashing operations along Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue.

He was civic-minded but hardly sociable. He wasn't the type to knock on a neighbor's

door or start up a sidewalk conversation; instead, he enjoyed tending to his building's property, mowing the front lawn and clearing trash from the alley and sidewalk. When local drunks or homeless offered to pitch in, Sweatt would gladly accept the offer and reward them with a drink or a cigarette.

He was proud of his flair for interior design. *People would visit and say "Wow, this is a huge aptment and nicely decorated. I liked that, but no matter what good, nice things people said I never felt better. That depress feeling wouldn't go away. Instead, it'd make me want to go out and do evil stuff like setting something afire..."*

On days off from work he would read do-it-yourself books. He and his sister sidelined in home renovation.

*Then we both became masters of the trade and renovated apartments as well as houses. On my off days I would work at the apts. I did kitchens completely including floors, walls, cabinets and molding—we saved a lot of money too. And at the same time my thoughts would wonder a lot about the tenants only knew that I was the person responsible for many fires and that it was easy for them to have become a victims.*

*I felt like that was my world, he wrote of Lebaum Street. The people were friendly, not a lot of money in the neighborhood but everybody "happy-go-lucky" if you know what I mean. But that was the good part of "Tom" that people saw and only knew. Then when darkness fall it was the other person living inside of me...*

Once Sweatt moved to Lebaum Street, the neighborhood started burning. Vacant-building fires, home fires, store fires. He burned the garage that stood behind his apartment. He burned the neighborhood carryout and the neighborhood laundromat. When he was on the receiving end of a bad haircut at Kenny & Paul's Barber Shop, he came back later and torched the place. The barbershop rebounded, but when Sweatt tired of the addicts who took to hanging on the block, he torched it again.

*There were lots of barbershops and carryouts as well as Gas stations. I like barbershops because there were always attractive men there—crazy as it may sound, I had a fascination for barbers.*

Throughout the '80s and '90s, Sweatt lit scores of fires throughout the eastern side of the city. He never heard a knock on his door from a detective, probably because he rarely strayed from the city's poorer corners.

I still believe in my mind that the Lord God Almighty brought them (the ATF) people to me because it was time for all this to stop. 30 years of fires - it was like Come get me, I'm tired.

Though his unchecked terror doesn't speak well for D.C.'s arson investigators, they had their hands full. The city was classifying more than 200 fires per year as acts of arson as far back as the early '90s, compared with about a third of that number today.

After he bought a used Toyota in 2001, Sweatt started to venture beyond Southeast. He now had access to all the streets of Northeast, where he worked, as well as the cozy, tree-lined middle-class neighborhoods of Prince George's County, which became favorite stomping grounds.

*There was one fire at Southview Dr Md. side (a whole complex under construction) which damaged net 1 million dollars because a pipeline explosion. That was a huge fire that could be seen + heard mile away—It was amazing to watch. This was one of the fires I was never connected to...*

*After doing for so long it just became easier and easier but the fear of getting caught was always there. Each fire was like doing the first time and I'd always take deep breaths and ask the Lord to forgive me for what I'm about to do...*

*Each one was special in its own way...*

In the spring of 2003, Sweatt paid a price for his jurisdiction-hopping. A couple of fire officials from D.C. and Prince George's County were swapping notes at a promotional exam when they realized that a rash of suspicious fires had been set along their shared border. The fires had a number of features in common: The homes were mostly detached and single-family; the fires were set on porches or near doorways; and they were set in the early morning hours.

Forensic tests at an ATF lab determined that each fire was set with the same kind of device: some sort of plastic jug, perhaps a milk or juice container, that had been filled with gasoline and carried to the scene inside a plastic bag. The lab work linked four of the fires for certain, and another 15 recent fires were deemed similar-looking.

Victims appeared to have nothing to do with one another. Investigators created a floor-to-ceiling map showing the locations of all the arsonists' fires—a process known as geographic profiling—hoping the configuration might suggest something about

the arsonist's daily life. (A linear pattern, for instance, would tell you to look into local deliverymen with criminal pasts.) But the D.C. arsonist's fires were scattered; their locations suggested that the firesetter liked greenery near the homes he burned and that he preferred low-income and working-class neighborhoods. Most of the fires had been set near exits. The arsonist apparently hoped to kill or at least terrify the people inside.

By mid-July 2003, investigators were looking at about two dozen recent fires, including one that killed an 86-year-old Washington woman. The ATF and local law enforcement launched what would become an exhausting, nearly two-year manhunt for the arsonist.

To learn more about how these fires unfolded, agents re-created models of the arsonist's device with plastic jugs and cloth wicks, performing staged burns at the lab and out in the field on a home slated for demolition. They were surprised by what they found. When the wick was lit, a gallon jug filled with gasoline didn't ignite as one might suspect. Gasoline itself doesn't burn—its vapors do. The narrow opening at the top of a jug allowed only so many vapors to escape at a time. The gasoline itself acted as a coolant,

letting the device burn as slow and steady as a kerosene lamp. It could be 21 minutes before the jug's plastic melted, allowing the gasoline and its accompanying vapors to spread across the porch. Once it did, the fire would reach the wood or aluminum siding.

"There's a learning curve like anything else," says Scott Fulkerson, an agent with ATF who served as one of the lead investigators on the case. "It required some experience with fires to get to that point, where he was comfortable. There was a level of education."

Despite its cleverness, the arsonist's method had an inherent flaw. His firesetting was based on convenience, and when it came to finding a wick, nothing was more convenient than a swatch from his own clothes. He didn't realize that every time he tied such an item to a jug, he ran the risk of implanting his DNA at the crime scene.

The firesetter's carelessness gave investigators their first break. At about 3 a.m. one day in September 2003, three brothers who'd been out partying for the night returned to their home on Anacostia Avenue NE. They saw a strange man sitting on their front porch. After a brief exchange, the man played like he was lost and walked off. He left behind a plastic shopping bag; in it was a gasoline-filled juice jug that had a piece of cloth tied to the handle. Investigators were called to the scene, and in the bottom of the bag, they discovered a single strand of hair.

The lab examined the hair and performed a DNA test, determining it probably belonged to a black male. If that man was their firesetter, investigators imagined he was lonesome, anxiety-ridden, and hobbled by a deep sense of failure. As far as psychological profiling goes, they were nearly spot-on.

Almost 20 years after working the late shift at Roy Rogers, Sweatt was still toiling in the fast-food business. He worked at the KFC at the corner of New York Avenue and Bladensburg Road in Northeast, where he'd come on board in 1993. He was known as one of the better KFC cooks in the metro area.

That fact didn't impress many people, but it meant a lot to Sweatt. His job was his life. In an industry with an astronomical turnover rate—the average fast-food worker quits or gets fired within four

months—Sweatt would devote a rather astonishing 12 years to the same KFC location, most of it spent hovering over the grill and grease fryers and struggling to keep the kitchen clean.

New employees at the KFC found a cook manning an immaculate station. Jermaine Bryant, who worked with Sweatt for more than a year, says he was serious about a career with KFC and viewed the cook as a mentor. Sweatt, he says, came off as the one guy who really had his life in order. "Everybody complains, but he didn't," says Bryant. "He'd be there at 6 a.m. every morning doing inventory. Everything he did was so neat—he knew where everything was... He'd bring in coffee and doughnuts for everyone in the morning. Just the sweetest guy." In all their hectic time together in the kitchen, Bryant recalls Sweatt raising his voice only once with a co-worker.

*The sad news is that KFC at 1444 Bladensburg Rd contribute to how my life ended, Sweatt wrote. The beginning years (1993-...) were bad because I had no real reason to excel fast—I just was content where + what I was doing... People saw the good in my work and that's how I climbed up the cooper ladder (so to speak). So from 1993-2005 I was promoted from Cook to allstar, to Shift Supervisor, Assistant Manger, Unit manager. KFC was very stressful and I had little time for anything else. When coming and leaving that restaurant, I put on a mask to hide the other person which took over after closing.*

The work was taxing. He humped long hours and holidays for an hourly wage that worked out to about \$1,700 a month. When the nearby school let out in the afternoon the kids would pile through the door and tear the place up, complicating things by ordering pizzas (it was a KFC-Pizza Hut hybrid). The restaurant sat along a busy yet particularly dreary stretch of highway, where there were plenty of gas stations but no semblance of a neighborhood. At some of the other restaurants in the area, workers stood behind bullet-resistant glass. Sweatt's was the KFC you stopped at if you were getting out of town on Route 50 East.

*Dave I lived one day at a time. People always (including family) said you work at a "chicken joint"—that ain't no real job and it use to hurt my feelings because it required so much of my time...*

*KFC had benefits for salaried employees only. I was 50 years old with about 15 years service. I just couldn't see myself trying to run a fast-food joint at 60-plus. It's too stressful + I'd have a heart attack. That has happened to a manager before. It was like, go to work (sometimes all day) come home, eat and go to sleep—wake up early hours in the a.m. and go hunting for a fire!...repeat that over + over again.*



The home on Quincy Place NW that burned in 1985

I'm glad to know God is a forgiving God and "there is no sin so great He will not forgive." Isn't that a wonderful thought?

Toiling away in the cellar of the service industry affirmed what he'd believed since childhood—that he was an oddball, the lone failure in an otherwise successful clan. Ever since his early years he knew he was wired differently.

As a child growing up I never did the "normal" thing like learning how to ride a bike, play sports, do boyish things. Instead I wanted to play house out in the woods making straw houses, pretending to be the lady next door and dare my brothers to enter my house without knocking!! It was funny, we use to call each other (one brother and I) Mrs. Lady. I always wanted to walk up town to McCory's Dime Store only to steal Doll babies (my brothers stole racing cars toys)—even look in white folks trash and find yeast bread just to taste it and bring it home....

I get aroused just the thought of big shoes + Big Patten Leather boots....From childhood all the way up to even now. I always wandered why I like to masturbate over my uncle's shoes, sleep with them in his bed when he's away—my father's shoes too. I always was glad to see darkness fall so that I could sneak outside and go behind the house where my fathers bedroom and peep thru the window only to see him lying on the bed reading the paper. I would masterbate over his big black shiny shoes! Crazy stuff! Right? But no one never found out these obsession I have. I kept them hid as you stated in your letter. When we had church meeting in our home, I can still picture this one member...standing outside in the backyard congregating with others. I could see him thru a bathroom window and have fantasies of him by ejecting off. His shoes were a orange brown colors but military style. I wonder if he still have those...

You asked were there any special relationships while living on Lebaum St? The answer is no. There were a few "one night stands" sort-to-speak but nothing to hold on too. I don't look to have a romantic relationship as a normal human being would—love, roses + red wine sort of thing. Mines was more of choosing the person for crazy reason, like "ooh he has a nice funky walk" or maybe enjoy their companionship but don't come by often. Most of these experiences ended violently. Some involved police and some I took matters in my own hand.

It really goes all the way back to childhood—never felt loved by family and even now I say I love them but its very hard to feel by my heart. Even during visits they pretend also I know because its all the expression on their faces



The KFC at New York Avenue and Bladensburg Road where Sweatt worked as a cook

that tells me so, and even on the phone. I never probably will learn the reason why...

I trusted others judgements and decisions over mine. Or should I say, just easy to be persuaded?...I have trouble explaining why I do certain things. I look for answers to many questions but only left with more question marks. Why? Why? Why? Even here on my record it states personality disorder. I'll be your friend yet turn around and don't want anything else to do with you!! Crazy?!

When he sought companionship he cruised the city's gay underbelly near the Navy Yard clubs or along the Georgia Avenue NW corridor. He liked men with athletic builds, though sometimes he would find himself attracted to someone for an inexplicable reason, like the size of his feet (11 and 12 were favorites) or his unusual gait (pigeon toes made him swoon).

I was working at "Holly Farms" (Restaurant) off Georgia Ave + Decatur and I could walk home from work if necessary. I had a special friend, we use to go to clubs almost every night drinking and smoking. We had a nice time but there was always this need to be loved by young guys on the street. I wasn't a "Thug" but was attracted to street life. So, after leav-

ing the Clubs + bars he would take me home and ask if I needed the car for the next day. Of course I'd say yes. But that same night I went cruising up Georgia Ave and picked up this young guy named Tyrone.... We became best of friends until I became obsessed with him which drove me to set his house afire (actually his aunts house on Peabody + 3rd—She was slightly injured and the house was damaged just the basement where he lived. I was glad she didn't get hurt. Well Tyrone was a boxer and very handsome and he use to come over my apartment on Wednesday night to watch "Dynasty" TV Show together. The night before the fire I went inside the basement of the place he live and took all this clothes, tennis shoes (some of which I bought for him). He wore a size 12 shoes. That was attractive to me and I would actually go to bed with His shoes on my pillar and to smell the odor...

Sweatt set that fire back in the early '80s, when he was starting to see that he showed two faces to the world. One was that of a churchgoing working man who performed random works of charity and bid good afternoon to the neighbors. The other was that of a lonesome and violent obsessive who never shared his unspeakable urges with anyone. Trying to reconcile these two people would be the fundamental crisis of his life.

It's really something to think about knowing that as a child one grows up to be known as a serial arsonist. It's such a degrading name and I don't like to be recognized as such. But it is what it is and life goes on.

In June 2003, a raging two-alarm fire on Evarts Street NE claimed the life of 86-year-old Lou Edna Jones. Investigators had hoped the blaze was accidental. When forensic tests proved their arsonist was behind it, they found the fire deeply troubling. They had already linked another fire from the same night—set about two-and-a-half miles away, near RFK Stadium, just 50 minutes before the one on Evarts—which meant their arsonist had no problem lighting "doubles," as they call a pair of fires set one after another. "It shows there's nothing stopping him," says Fulkerson.

The home-design buff in Sweatt would have admired the tasteful white wood siding and teal windowpanes of the Jones house. When I visited the house one sunny afternoon last August, it was still charred, partially boarded up, and uninhabitable. The gate was closed and a placard warned against trespassing.

The family never returned to the house after it burned. The only sign that someone had lived in it within the last decade was a dilapidated sidewalk memorial to "Mama Lou" Jones, marking the years she lived, 1916–2003, and the pink and white plastic flowers still sitting in clusters outside the chain-link fence. In the more than three years since the fire, no neighbor had the heart to clear them out.

While I was there I took some photographs of the property and mailed them to Sweatt, asking him to tell me the story of the fire. (The Jones family never learned why the arsonist chose their home.) He wrote back:

The pictures were so clear and bright. It must have been a beautiful day for taking them. I was not surprise to learn that Lou Edna Jones house remained the same...

Someone has been cutting the grass, some weeds have grow up. The front porch is almost completely gone. I think about this house the most because its where a death occurred and that was not my intentions (but knew that all the fires there would be risky for human life). That fire occurred about 4:30 A.M. just as people were waking up or coming to work early morning hours such as, the Delivery Man for the papers, Metro Bus driver which is right in that area. I sat there a long time trying to get my nerves together because this was a huge house and wasn't quiet sure it would burn. Just like this house none of the fires were easy. Like the house on Anacostia Ave, I sat there so long that the occupants drove pass and saw me sitting on their porch. That was about 30–40 minutes. Way too long and way too early for a fire, 11:30 pm. What was I thinking!

But, Dave it's hard to think that for about 3 years or more that she's been dead and I often pray for forgiveness and ask God to help the victims families coped with their struggles.

Yesterday, my mother came to visit me here in Terre-Haute along with sisters and niece—I couldn't help but think of what it's like not to have a mother (no matter how old).

You're exactly right about Lou Edna Jones having a lot of grandchildren and it was her grandson that led me back to that house later that night only because I didn't know him personally but saw him get the mail out of the mailbox on the front porch and he was tall and has a muscular build and I wanted to meet him so I would live out my phantasy thru fire watching him jump out of the window for help and

Fire is  
a tool to destroy and some house fires also  
becomes my phantasy of people grab scrambling to  
exit windows and sort-of feel like they need  
my help so I stay and watch.

come running to me. I raced home to watch the news and was sadden about the fatality but was fascinated by this huge fire. Wow! I'll always remember this house.

Jones never made it out of her bedroom above the front porch. She'd been asphyxiated by smoke, her feet burned from trying to escape.

Investigators assumed the arsonist saw his fires in the news. If he followed the story of Evarts Street, then he knew that he'd killed somebody yet continued setting fires anyway. Investigators couldn't believe that Sweatt had set his first fire in March 2003 and then graduated to murder in June—now the timeline was blown wide open. "We started to figure we needed to go way back," says ATF agent Tom Daley. They visited firehouses in the arsonist's favorite neighborhoods and pored over old "run" books—desiccated logs that include a handwritten entry for every fire a truck has been called to. They looked for any suspicious-looking fires set on porches. "We were pulling log books from decades ago," says Daley.

Even more disheartening, catching the arsonist in the act seemed nearly impossible. One October morning in 2003, someone called 911 to report a fire on the front porch of a home on Otis Street NE. Investigators had been waiting for this moment: A task force agent was staked out with his radios nearby. He actually arrived on the scene before the firetruck did—this would be just a matter of minutes after the fire started—and investigators managed to shut down the surrounding blocks and canvass the area as the fire burned. Their man had already disappeared.

How intoxicating that must have been for Sweatt, to manipulate investigators like that. Up to 55 agents were working the case at a given time. They were sent out into the streets on needle-in-the-haystack stake-outs that lasted all night long, eventually listening to as many as five different police and fire radios to cover all the jurisdictions Sweatt was hitting. Sweatt found a thrill in walking among the agents who were hunting him, his ego satisfied knowing he was always a step ahead. More than once he spotted a pair of exhausted-looking agents staked out at a 7-Eleven on Bladensburg Road NE. He walked right past their car. (Investigators have confirmed assigning agents at that location.)

*I liked the attention from setting fires; the Blue + red lights flashing from the firetrucks +*

police cars, the rushing of firefighters hooking up the hoses to put out the flames and people gathered to watch.... They were in arms length to arrest me. I recognized them at many locations, especially the fires in N.E. and PG County.

When Sweatt started venturing into new neighborhoods, investigators felt like they were being toyed with. Shortly before 5 one morning in November 2003, he lit a gallon jug of gasoline on fire at a house in Alexandria. Virginia officials called in members of the arson task force, who had never thought they'd need to travel west of the Potomac River in the course of the investigation. When they linked this new fire, they realized their case was now blown open in space as well as in time. They had been splurging all their manpower on one side of the District and part of Prince George's County. "We started to think, 'What if we're missing fires?'" says Daley.

There were different theories on Sweatt's travels. Some investigators believed he changed his game because he knew they'd gotten close to him, perhaps at the Otis Street fire, where he may have spotted agents as he was fleeing. In fact, there was a psychological element to the expansion. Over time, firesetting, like sex, can grow old within its conventions. Sweatt started branching out into new counties simply because he was getting bored.

As the holiday season arrived, he went on a tear. After two fires in November 2003, he set another just days before Christmas at a home in New Carrollton. Investigators visited nearby businesses hoping to find any video recordings that might offer clues to the fire. A nearby hotel gave them a tape that dumbfounded them. In the footage, a firetruck raced to the burning home; facing the other way was someone in a stopped car, flashing his lights at the oncoming engine. "Why would somebody do that?" Fulkerson remembers asking himself. Agents did everything they could to enhance the video, even sending it off to NASA, but the license plate and make of the car were hopelessly grainy. They wouldn't learn for another year-and-a-half that the man behind the wheel was Sweatt, gleefully taunting them.

On Feb. 6, 2004, Sweatt ventured to the Alexandria section of Fairfax County and set a fire at an apartment building. Then on Valentine's Day, he lit one of his devices



The convenience store where Sweatt shopped

on the stairwell of an apartment building on Blair Road just over the District line in Montgomery County, where investigators had never followed him. Because the fire started between the first and second floors, it blocked residents on the upper floors from coming down the stairs. A woman and her two daughters were forced to sprint through the flames to escape. Outside, Sweatt watched as an older woman hung from an upper-floor window, apparently gasping for air.

*I can still see her,* he wrote.

The Blair Road fire never fully destroyed its starting device—a shopping bag, a gallon-jug, and a swatch from a pair of black slacks. These items went to the Montgomery County crime lab, where a lab technician pulled off what her new colleagues at the ATF considered a feat of forensic science. Even though the cloth from the slacks had been burned and charred, the technician was able to extract a trace amount of DNA that, for some reason, never succumbed to the heat.

The DNA from the apartment fire matched the DNA taken from the attempted fire at the boys' house on Anacostia Avenue in D.C. At the task force headquarters there

was a brief spell of euphoria. "It gives you a great feeling for 24 hours," Daley says, "but then the next day, it's like, 'What's his name? I have no idea.'" What they had was DNA—not a suspect. To underscore just how far they still were from solving the case, an agent with a comic streak put a "wanted" poster up on a wall at headquarters: In place of a suspect's portrait was a double helix; in place of a suspect's name was a line of genetic code.

Without a name they had nothing but theories. Some entertained the idea that the arsonist was affiliated with law enforcement, firefighting, or the military. And in the strangest way, he was.

*My whole life has been a phantasy.*

If Sweatt could have been anything other than a fry cook, he would have been a Marine. People who knew him casually would have laughed at the thought, but it actually made sense. He believed in old-fashioned concepts like honor and heroism; all his life he felt a

desperate need to belong somewhere; and he appreciated order and cleanliness. He probably would have had the tidiest locker in the barracks.

Sweatt once tried to enlist in the Navy, in 1976, when he was 21 years old. He passed the aptitude test but failed the physical. He never forgot the rejection. At the same time, he never really accepted it.

He thought duty and courage were beautiful things, and nothing embodied those traits so crisply as a military uniform. The sight of young black men in Marine dress blues sent Sweatt into fits of lust. This happened often: The greater D.C. area offered plenty of bases and barracks for a military fetishist to visit when he needed to see the standing collar, light blue trousers, milk-white gloves, and leather shoes of a doughboy. The real world may have dismissed Sweatt as a soldier, but in his mind he made himself one.

*I always wanted to wear a military uniform,* he wrote.

In his time off from KFC, he would drive out of the city to military recruiter stations. He'd get there before the officers and watch them as they went into work. Sometimes he would film them from his car and later masturbate to the videos. If they left any

# Letters From an Arsonist



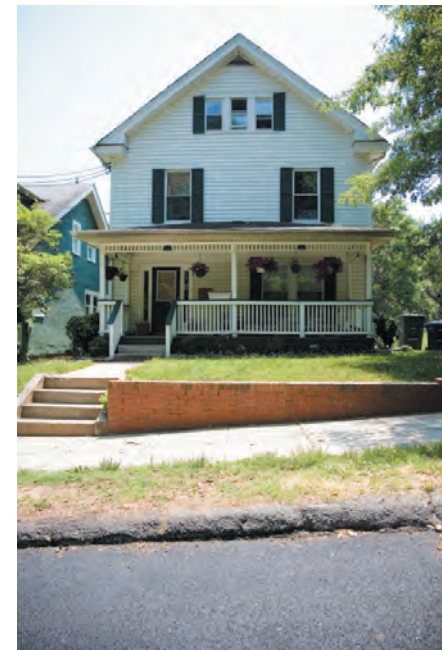
2505 Randolph St. NE



4920 North Capitol St. NW



2804 30th St. NE



1315 Otis St. NE

military-issued cars unlocked in the lot, he'd come back at night and collect whatever pieces of regalia they left behind until he'd assembled a complete uniform. Then he would order the matching leather shoes to go with it. At home he'd dress as a Marine and putter around the apartment, playing the role for no audience but himself. He never wore the uniform outside.

*I kinda like the old recruiter station in Silver Springs, Md because in the back of the office was a bathroom window where I could actually see inside the place, he wrote. That place was destroyed by fire and they move a few block down across the street from a fire station. Sometimes, a recruiter or recruiters would leave the company cars unlocked at night and I come back and sit inside and take a lot of stuff (papers, ID cards, uniforms and wear the jackets home).... The new station had a good view also—for I use to park on the parking lot during business hours and watch the traffic in and out—including video taping the recruiters going + coming. And then I drive across the street to the Fire Station and tape them also—mostly close-up (Not fat or out of shape workers, but built muscular and nice feet) this you can't understand because these are some of the phantasy.*

He set fire to recruiter stations as far away as Richmond. His fantasies encompassed all kinds of civil servants who wore uniforms: Police officers, firefighters, even bus drivers. He reported false fires on his block just to bring the engines out. He sometimes lingered at the scenes of fires he'd set himself, capturing footage with his camera. He became addicted to his homemade pornography.

Sweatt felt deeply conflicted over cops. He was physically attracted to them but resented their authority. That feeling may have stemmed from the minor brushes he'd had with them in the past. (In 1984, he was arrested for stealing some \$2,500 in jewelry out of the home of a man he'd picked up at a party, according to court records. After he agreed to complete a court-ordered diversion program, the government dropped its case). Or maybe he just never forgot the D.C. officers who mocked his soft voice when he took their orders at KFC.

Whatever it was that he loved and despised in cops, he saw it in their squad cars. Physical objects themselves had a way

of stirring his feelings, sometimes more than people. The sight of a cruiser could make him feel powerless and slighted, so he torched them around town.

*I burned police cruisers parked at the station and some that were at their residence. To me they seem to have power because of their badge + gun and I felt powerful thru fire when they lost their vehicles. Some of the burned cars would remain at the spot for many days and I'd drive back that night and just stare and smell the smoke. One of the station was on Penn. Ave + Minnesota Ave. SE; one of the police residence was Wheeler Rd + Miss. Ave. SE. Some people use guns, knives, etc. as weapons—I use fire as a source of weapon—Not afraid of fire at all; for it is my friend and I miss it. You mentioned small + safe fires. Well, that's correct about the small leading to big fires and I just needed more satisfaction and excitement...*

*I must have masturbated a hundred times a day!! That's all I wanted to do was make tapes and come home and watched them.*

He was aroused by the snug blue uniforms and caps of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. He would hang around the city bus depots and watch the drivers as they started their routes. At the Metro yard on Bladensburg Road NE, just past the railroad overpass, he could park on the side street beside the buses and shoot video of the workers. Many of the drivers parked their personal cars across the street in the parking lot outside a liquor store. Sweatt would arrive there before 7 a.m., when the operators were reporting for duty, and after they'd made their way to the buses on foot he would set his devices beneath their car undercarriages and light them. He would have made up his mind the previous day which cars he'd be torching. The sexier the car, the better for his fantasy.

*It was a 2004 Mustang (white) 5.0 that had been on the list of cars to burn for a long time. That morning it parked right beside me and the operator look at me, shut his door and walked away, (not knowing that's the last time he'd drive that pretty sorta hot rod like ride. I must have waited about 20 minutes for the lot to fill up with other cars so that no one would come back to mess up the plan. His car was destroyed along another sexy cars parked beside it as well as the top of the wall of the liquor store.*

That Mustang belonged to Wade Powell, a Metro instructor who still works out of the bus depot. "I know four other guys who had their cars burned," Powell says of his Metro colleagues. Gulzar Singh, the owner of the liquor store, Syd's Drive-In, says he often arrived to work only to find the smoldering carcasses of automobiles in his parking lot. "Sometimes when we opened up in the morning, the fire department would already be here," Singh says.

With the exception of home improvement, Sweatt's firesetting and voyeurism were the only activities that brought him any happiness. The diary and videotapes helped him preserve the fantasy of each fire, and he clipped relevant stories from the newspaper. As the manhunt unfolded he felt the excitement of seeing his story on television every week. He had emotional reactions to the newscasts, lashing out at residents who told reporters offhandedly that the arsonist needed mental help. (Fair warning to the man on the street who insults a serial arsonist on camera: *It's too bad I don't know where you live*, Sweatt told me he thought at such moments, *for you'd surly be on the list.*)

Sweatt knew well the faces of the fire and police departments, especially Ronald Blackwell, the task force spokesman, and then D.C. Fire Chief Adrian Thompson. It was an additional thrill when men like these donned their caps and medals, called a press conference, and announced that yet another fire was being added to the arsonist's list. What the officials didn't know at the time was that they stood before the cameras expressly because an admirer had summoned them.

During our correspondence, I sent Sweatt an envelope containing a series of photos I'd shot of some homes he'd burned in Northeast and Northwest. I'd visited dozens of buildings he'd torched during the course of the manhunt, and I wanted to understand what made him choose one home over another. On the surface there appeared to be no rationale at all, which is partly why his case was so difficult to break. Some homes were rowhouses, others were detached;

most bore aluminum siding, but others were brick; a few were large apartment buildings, others single-family. The victims didn't know one another.

The package I sent included photos of a two-story wood-paneled house on Randolph Street NE; a two-story brick rental on North Capitol Street NW, where Sweatt had set fire to the rear porch; a one-story white house with a brick-and-aluminum exterior on 30th Street NE; and a white house on Otis Street NE with aluminum siding and a front porch.

There was, in fact, a method to his choosing, albeit one as odd and idiosyncratic as Sweatt himself.

*I'll give my thoughts briefly about the ones you sent.*

*First, 2505 Randolph St NE. I regret this fire because it was an elder man reside there. But there was a bike on the porch that attracted me to that house, plus the location, very quiet and trees on the other side so it was easy to escape—the media had this one all wrong—there was no man riding a bike past—for my car was only 3 houses down. And you're right Dave why would they paint that house purple!?*

*Second, 4920 N Capitol St NW. It looks the very same front + back—the fire was set at the back on the second level. That particular early morning I was desperate to set a fire and search most of morning looking for a place where it was safe to get a way fast. I kinda like the alley and how I was able to walk up on the back porch and sit at the wooden door (for I knew it was the kitchen) and it would burned. This was a good fire because the guy who lived there was handsome and a college student. I wanted to meet him (but that would only happen thru fire. The owners must not had insurance for this building remains the same.*

*I preferred aluminum sidings over brick because it burn faster—a brick house was only if its was convience or other...*

*3rd, the house 2804 30th St NE. I kinda like the side of house and the old model cars that seem to have racing car tires and that appeal to me that a mechanic or a real man who needed a helping hand from someone and perhaps lived with His mother or relative. Sort of like the same feeling at Everts St. I parked exactly in front of this house and watched—when firetrucks came I moved around and just watched afar off. So you*

Each fire was like doing the first time and I'd always take deep breaths and ask the Lord for forgive me for what I'm about to do.

see, it doesn't always had to be the type of house but the cars + trucks parked in the driveway can become a phantasy. This was a good fire and still see the funky old cars parked on the side.

Lastly, the house 1315 Otis St N.E. This fire was on the side of house and burned a little. I was glad no one got hurt for this was not a good fire—the Lady + her child were safe. As you noticed it was again aluminum...

Well Dave, I hope I've tickal your mind a little! But, it's like I'm feeling really upbeat and excited to write about the past (for there is no future)! And, glad to hear these stories are of interest to you.

Investigators knew from the bags left behind at the fire scenes that the arsonist shopped at convenience stores. There were dozens of 7-Elevens and scores of other corner stores in the area, but a spate of four fires within a week of one another in late 2004 helped them narrow it down considerably. From the wreckage of a Northeast car fire investigators pulled the remnants of a black plastic bag. It read: "MADE IN CHINA FOR CORNELIUS SHOP—." The rest of the letters had been destroyed in the fire.

The remnants of a fire set days later let them piece together the entire line: "MADE IN CHINA FOR CORNELIUS SHOPPING BAG COMPANY," a bag outfit in Richmond. The company supplied their black bags to just two shops in the D.C. area. They were Circle 7 convenience stores: One on Kenilworth Avenue NE, the other on Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue SE, just a short walk from the old Kenny & Paul's Barber Shop. Investigators

put cameras in both stores and started what they called the "Black Bag Operation." The idea was to preemptively put damning evidence into the arsonist's hands.

"There was no model for this," Daley says. "It came about by slamming your head against the wall wondering what the hell do we do next."

With the cooperation of the owner of the two Circle 7 stores, agents affixed thumb-nail-size stainless steel chips to the bottom of every bag in both stores. Each chip was marked according to alphanumeric code, going in order through the stack. If one of the bags were to be involved in a fire, the chip would survive. And because agents went to the stores daily to track which bags had been used, they would be able to go to the video to see which customer had purchased the bag from the fire.

On Dec. 5, 2004, a strange clue turned up a block away from the scene of an Arlington house fire: a Marine Corps cap and dress pants. The lab determined that DNA from the pants matched the DNA found at the other fire scenes. Investigators started to think their arsonist was a jarhead. Agents from the Naval Criminal Investigative Services (NCIS) couldn't offer them DNA profiles of current Marines, but they did have a couple of leads on old barracks-related car fires. A car captured on video leaving the scene of a fire had been traced back to a man who lived right around the corner from the Circle 7 store on Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue. His name was Thomas Anthony Sweatt.

Investigators started surveillance on Sweatt. He appeared to be an average working schlub, a loyal KFC employee with only

minor, long-ago brushes with the law. And yet something seemed off about him—his meticulousness. As Fulkerson staked him out at the KFC one day, he watched from his unmarked car as Sweatt walked outside the restaurant, got down on his knees, and started scraping stale gum from the cracks in the sidewalk.

After not seeing any activity that would tie Sweatt to the fires, Fulkerson and a D.C. detective walked into the KFC to interview him. Fulkerson told the cook he was looking for help in the serial arson case. He wanted to know if Sweatt had seen anything. Finally, he asked him point blank: "Did you set the fires?"

Sweatt answered with a question of his own: "Why would I set those beautiful homes on fire when I'm trying to become a homeowner myself?"

Fulkerson asked Sweatt to submit to a DNA test, and he agreed.

When Sweatt went home he destroyed his diary of fires. The swab of saliva went off to the lab, and days later the crime tech had her results. She called Fulkerson and gave him what he'd been waiting nearly two years for—a name.

"It's Thomas Sweatt," she said.

*God has been merciful and kind—I want to obey and keep His will. For, I'm no longer worried about this life but the life afterwards. There's still hope for us all no matter where we are—This old mortal body will soon be no more but the soul will go to heaven or hail. I'm glad to know God is a forgiven God and "there is no*

*sin so great He will not forgive." Isn't that a wonderful thought?*

Sweatt was arrested the morning of April 27, 2005, as he left a regional meeting for KFC employees held in District Heights.

He maintained his innocence for an hour-and-a-half of questioning before breaking down and admitting to the fires. As a stipulation of any plea agreement that might be offered, the government insisted that investigators be able to interview Sweatt about his motives. They wanted to seize the rare opportunity to profile the mind of an extraordinary firesetter. "It was his time to finally be honest with himself and recognize who he was," says Fulkerson. "He'd been living this separate life for 30 years. He was absolutely exhausted. You'd think we were exhausted, but he looked worse."

At times Sweatt choked up and cried. He admitted to killing not only Lou Edna Jones but another elderly woman named Annie Brown, 89, who'd died of smoke inhalation in a February 2002 fire in Northeast. Sweatt hadn't been considered a suspect in that fire until investigators discovered a news clip about the blaze in his apartment.

One of Sweatt's only requests was to meet Blackwell, the task force spokesman who had addressed Sweatt through the media. Sweatt told Blackwell he was "sorry for all the headaches." Blackwell told him it was OK—the whole thing was over now. A shackled Sweatt shook his hand.



Lou Edna Jones' house on Evarts Street NE



Sweatt after his arrest

I would masturbate over his big black shiny shoes! Crazy stuff! right? But no none never found out these obsession I have. I kept them hid as you stated in your letter.

Fulkerson and Lockett spent an additional four days driving Sweatt around to old D.C. fire scenes and listening to his stories. In the car Fulkerson and Lockett noticed something odd about Sweatt's demeanor. Usually, the post-arrest ride-along engenders shame in a perp; it's a plea condition to be endured. Instead, Sweatt appeared to relish the ride-along, as if a weight was being lifted. He was finally in the company of men who knew his secrets and, in their capacity as fire investigators, perhaps even understood them. In his letters to me from prison, Sweatt often would ask how "Scott" and "Bob" were doing, expressing nothing but respect and gratitude toward the investigators who had put him away.

Sweatt signed a secret guilty plea within two weeks of his arrest. "The fastest we'd ever seen," says Fulkerson. "He just wanted it over with." With Sweatt's help investigators closed out 353 fires—apparently all he could remember—stretching back into the '80s. Never before had a detective questioned Sweatt about any of them.

After sentencing, Sweatt was quickly sent to the United States Penitentiary at Terre Haute, the famously rough prison where Timothy McVeigh was put to death. Barring a transfer, Sweatt will spend the rest of his life there.

He still thinks often of fire, and his mind tends to drift back to old blazes, stirring feelings of exhilaration and shame. *Of course I see Evert St each and every night*, he wrote, in reference to the fire that killed Jones. His fantasies now are the same as they were on the outside, the only difference being that fire now lies beyond his reach. For that he seems thankful:

*My sister in Ohio sent pictures of her house (I never seen) and her yard is beautiful. She has real grass that looks like carpet and flowers are really pretty. Her neighborhood reminded me of the Birchwood Community off Livingston Rd in Oxson Hill Md. My mind started to think of evil thing to do in that neighborhood. That's so sad.*

*Those demons are still in me.*

For more than two decades, the survivors of the fire at Quincy Place never knew that Sweatt was responsible for it. Sweatt admitted to setting that fire and killing Bessie Mae Duncan in a letter to me late last year. His account took some time to verify; the only victim's name he offered in the letter, I later realized, was spelled phonetically: "Roy Peacock." Aside from the misspelled name, the details in the *Post* report matched perfectly with Sweatt's telling: An early-morning fire in the winter of 1984-85,



a rowhouse just off Florida Avenue NW, a 30-something man in his underwear on the front porch, a young man shouting from the basement, and a wife who never made it outside.

(I hoped to clarify the name misspelling with Sweatt, but our correspondence was cut off this past winter, when prison administrators began returning my letters with notices stating that the inmate was on "restricted correspondence." Sweatt declined through a prison official to meet with me in person.)

I was unable to locate a Roy Picott, but I found a Rodney Picott, 40, and his sister, Cheryl Legros (formerly Cheryl Picott), 41, living near Nyack, N.Y.

Both of them had been in the house during the fire.

When I spoke on the phone with Rodney, he seemed unsettled by the fact that a reporter had questions about a 22-year-old fire. And yet it was clear he had never managed to answer his own questions. "I wasn't really pleased with that report," he said, almost immediately, in reference to the carelessly dropped cigarette. "It's amazing that I remember that phrase... It's etched in my memory." That report suggested recklessness on the Picotts' part, which never sat well with Rodney. I agreed to meet with him and Cheryl the following afternoon at a coffee shop in the bustling Palisades Mall in Nyack.

The life of the Picott family had just two chapters: Before the fire and after. When I shook Cheryl's hand, I realized she couldn't have forgotten it if she tried—she still bore the burn marks on her forearms. "You know girls when they're 19—on top of the world," she said. "It was rough. But I got through it." She said she still keeps the withered *Post* report that detailed the blaze. "I think that was all I ever talked about for years. That's not the way that fire started. They put that in the paper and just dropped the investigation. That was the end of it."

The official fire report on the Picott blaze was dubious on its face. It's dated the same day as the fire, even though much of the house was destroyed. What could possibly be determined with confidence in a gutted house in a matter of just a few hours? The Picott children told me there's an even simpler reason they considered the official line nonsense: Nobody in the house smoked cigarettes.

"We couldn't figure out where it started," Cheryl said. "We kept running over and over in our head, 'What could have happened?'"

About a year ago, a D.C.-area detective had reached out to Rodney. The detective told him that they'd locked up a man who was responsible for a number of fires in D.C. in the mid-'80s, and that they believed this man had set the Quincy Place fire. That was all Rodney knew—the detective never told him

the full story. (If the detective was elliptical with Rodney, perhaps it was because he had to be. Investigators have not been allowed to discuss Sweatt or the Quincy Place fire publicly, because Sweatt apparently confessed to it after he'd arranged a proffer.)

I told Rodney and Cheryl about Sweatt and my pen-pal relationship with him, then showed them the letter with Sweatt's account of the "Roy Peacock" fire. The more Rodney read, the more assured he was that Sweatt was the man the detective had told him about. "He's right about too much," Rodney said—like the fact that the house remained a shell for years. (Rodney knew this as well as Sweatt did, since he visited the vacant house whenever he was in D.C.) And there was another detail that Sweatt offered independent of the *Post* report—the funeral for Bessie Mae Duncan, which Sweatt claimed was at McGuire Funeral Service on Georgia Avenue, near the Maryland line. Rodney couldn't remember the name of the home, so he made some calls to family members.

After he hung up, he said, "It was at [McGuire's]."

Rodney said he took comfort in knowing Sweatt was serving a double life sentence. "It's not like he's walking around," he said. "I don't want to know why he did it, because I could care less."

I gave them a copy of the letter and left. Cheryl took some time to digest the news. She later said, "Now when I look at my body, I see it differently. It wasn't an accident. There's no more guessing. [There's no cigarette] left burning. Some lunatic did it."

The cause of the fire may have been settled, but the letter held a separate mystery. In it Sweatt wrote that he went to the funeral for Bessie Mae Duncan. He never explained why. Was it just another voyeuristic impulse he was acting on? Was it the hope of seeing Roy Picott again? Or was it the guilt of a young man, then just 30, who had to know he'd cause more heartache before the fires stopped? No matter—he never went inside McGuire's. He just stood outside, alone in the rain, missing his chance to pay his respects to the dead.

*There was only 1 death*, he wrote, *so I left it at that.*

Sweatt may have followed the aftermath of his fires diligently, but in that last matter he was mistaken. The newspaper account of the fire revealed that Roy Picott was in critical condition, having sustained burns over 60 percent of his body. Unbeknownst to Sweatt, Picott underwent a series of surgeries at Washington Hospital Center in a vain effort to save him. He died on March 5, 1985, less than two months after his wife. **CP**