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THE BETRAYAL OF A FRIEND'S FALSE TESTIMONY

*Under pressure from interrogators, a teen-ager helped send three of his friends to prison for murder.
How could he ever make amends?*

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Illustration by Avinash Weerasekera

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Tyrone Woodruff started getting tattoos in the late nineteen-nineties. “To tell the story of my life,” he said. “You know how people get tattoos, ‘Oh,

I was drunk, so I put this on’? No. We’re not doing that. Everything has a meaning.” On his lower leg, he has portraits of three family members who have died: his father, his mother, and one of his two sons. A few years ago, he got a large tattoo across the front of his torso, inspired by four lines from the DJ Khaled song “Never Surrender”:

There’s a story in my life.

There’s a story in my pain.

There’s a story in my tears.

There’s a story in me.

The tattoo alludes to his role in a homicide prosecution that occurred fifty years ago. At the time, Woodruff, who is now sixty-seven, was seventeen. He rarely speaks about what happened, but twice last year he travelled to a federal courthouse in upstate New York to recount the story. It began in his home town of Buffalo, on January 11, 1976. That day and the next, detectives from the Buffalo Police Department questioned Woodruff in their headquarters about a recent murder. The choices he made then continue to haunt him. “It has nothing to do with feeling better or forgetting,” Woodruff said, reflecting on his decision to get the tattoo. “I’ll never forget. I’ll never feel better about what I’ve done.”

Woodruff grew up on Best Street, on the city’s East Side, three blocks from a boy named John Walker, Jr. Woodruff was known as Tony; Walker’s nickname was Boo-Boo. The two teens met in the summer of 1975, and Walker introduced Woodruff to three of his friends: Darryl Boyd, Darryn Gibson, and Floyd Martin. Soon, all five boys were hanging out together. On the night of January 2, 1976, they visited the Glenny Drive Apartments, a local housing project, where they gathered in the home of a friend’s girlfriend. At about eleven-thirty that evening, Woodruff and Walker took a cab back to Best

Street.

That same night, William Crawford, a sixty-two-year-old retiree living on the East Side, visited a bar where he was a regular: the Golden Nugget, on Fillmore Avenue, across the street from his house. People who saw him that night later said he had been flashing cash around; some thought he had just cashed a retirement check. A bartender estimated that he had about three hundred dollars. “He wanted to lay all his money on the bar, but I told him to put it back into his jacket,” she told police. “I thought it was a stupid thing to do.” She recalled serving him four shots of Seven Crown whiskey and a beer, and that he stumbled out the door at about 10:30 P.M., with another bar patron—his neighbor Larry Watson—escorting him home.

At about 1 A.M., Crawford’s wife peered out a window and saw her husband’s feet, according to a police report. Crawford, who was lying in the driveway, was later pronounced dead at a hospital. The police discovered that someone had hit him with a “blunt instrument” and that his wallet—along with all that cash—had disappeared. The Buffalo *Evening News* ran the story on its front page: “Victim of Robbery Beaten, Left to Die At Own Doorstep.” The police interviewed the bartender, who said that she suspected Watson, the neighbor, “of harming William Crawford.”

According to the homicide file, a tipster called the police on January 3rd and accused two other men—including one who had been at the bar that night—of being responsible. The file also contained a memo stating that the police received another tip, on January 7th; this caller said that Woodruff’s friend Darryn Gibson had “killed the man on Fillmore Avenue.” Gibson was sixteen and had a criminal record, including an arrest for stealing a car. Later on January 7th, he was brought to police headquarters, where he insisted that he

had an alibi: he had spent the night of January 2nd with his friends at the Glenny Drive Apartments.

During the next few days, the police also questioned Woodruff, Walker, Boyd, and Martin. The teen-agers, all of whom were Black, all told the same story of their whereabouts that evening. But, according to a memo in the homicide file, Woodruff changed his account on his second day of questioning after an anonymous tipster called the police and named him and his friends as the culprits—and the detectives allowed him to listen in on the call. The memo states that a detective asked Woodruff “if he could remember anything now about the crime,” and the teen-ager said that he had witnessed it.

Woodruff, however, is adamant that he never overheard a call from a tipster. He says that, instead, the detectives fed him details about the homicide and threatened him, telling him that, if he did not cooperate, one of his friends was ready to accuse him of the crime—and that he would be sent to prison for the rest of his life. “It scared the shit out of me,” he said. He recalled telling them, over and over, “I didn’t do it, don’t know what you’re talking about.” But the questions and the pressure continued. He said that he began bawling and, eventually, came to a realization: “I ain’t getting out of here until they get what they want.”

Woodruff signed a statement that incriminated himself and his four friends. He was promised immunity, and the police arrested his friends and took them into custody. When they went to pick up Gibson at his home, he refused to leave—until “he was talked to by his mother, who informed him that if she had to spend all the money in the world and sell her house she would get him out of this,” according to a police memo. The four boys, all of whom were sixteen, were taken to the Erie County Holding Center and then imprisoned. Woodruff was sent home.

A month later, with his friends still in jail, Woodruff was called to testify before a grand jury. Detectives spoke with him beforehand, and in their subsequent reports they claimed that he gave them new details about the crime. According to a detective's memo, Woodruff said that one of his friends had suggested they all go to Fillmore Avenue that night, because "maybe somebody in one of the bars has cashed a check," and that two of them went into the Golden Nugget, after which they told the others about "an old white dude at the bar with some money." The teen-agers allegedly "waited till the white man crossed Fillmore Avenue," and, when he did, Gibson "hit the man about the head and face with the piece of pipe he had up his sleeve."

When Woodruff was brought before the grand jury, he repeated some of those details. Timothy J. Drury, the lead prosecutor, was taking notes that day, and even he appears to have had doubts about the veracity of Woodruff's testimony. Drury's notes reveal that he was still considering two other suspects—Watson and another man. If they were culpable, that would mean, he wrote, using Woodruff's nickname, that "Tony is lying."

Walker and the other three friends could not understand why Woodruff was telling lies that could send them to prison for decades. In March of 1976, Walker wrote from jail to a friend that he did not know what was happening with Woodruff. Remembering that time, Walker recently told me, "We couldn't believe it. How could he do something like this?" The four would talk about what they "wanted to do to Tony, at the time, for what he was doing to us."

Woodruff has described himself at the time as "quiet and confused." He never confided in his parents about giving false testimony, because, he said, "I didn't know how to go about it. I didn't know how to communicate with them." He

told me that, before he testified, Drury shaped his story. When he tried to imagine details of the crime, the prosecutor would respond with guidance such as “It couldn’t happen like that. Well, maybe it happened like this.” (Drury has repeatedly denied any misconduct in the case.) Woodruff recalled thinking, about his predicament, “Man, I done dug myself into some bullshit that I don’t know how to get out of.” He added, “I should’ve just said, ‘You know what? I ain’t doing nothing. Y’all do what y’all got to do.’ ”

Instead, in 1977, he took the witness stand at four separate trials to testify against his four friends. Each time, he was presented as the only eyewitness to the crime. Defense attorneys pointed out inconsistencies in his statements and argued that he was lying, with Boyd’s lawyer saying that the judge should dismiss the indictment because Woodruff’s testimony was “uncorroborated” and “unbelievable.” Woodruff gave an incorrect time, date, and place for the murder, the lawyer noted; “he couldn’t identify the victim, he could not identify the house.” Drury told the jurors, “Look, if we had fed Woodruff stuff, you wouldn’t have that blithering idiot up there talking like he did. He would be a lot smoother.”

Drury added, “He is a ghetto kid. . . . He is a snook. You saw him—he is an idiot, a nitwit.” But, the prosecutor continued, “I am asking you to believe him.” Walker, Gibson, and Boyd were convicted of second-degree murder and sent into the state’s adult-prison system. Martin, who went on trial last, was acquitted. Martin’s lawyer later explained that a crime-scene photo that he had received had been crucial to the acquittal but that he did not know if the other defense attorneys had been given it. As he recalled, the photo showed a single set of footprints in the snow walking from the crime scene—evidence, he argued, that there had been only one assailant.



Tyrone Woodruff photographed on January 11, 2026.

After high school, Woodruff joined the Army. He was assigned to the 503rd Military Police Battalion, stationed at Fort Bragg, where he worked as a cook. But he did not last long in the Army. “My mind was in chains. I couldn’t really focus, so I requested to get out,” he told me. Soon after, he moved back in with his parents in Buffalo, but being in his home town was stressful—“I was afraid of the streets,” he said—and he went into what he described as survival mode. “I was Casper the Ghost. Now you see me, now you don’t,” he said. “That’s just how I taught myself to move—just trying to stay out of the way.”

The Rockpile—the old War Memorial Stadium, where the Buffalo Bills played until 1972—was a few blocks away from his parents’ house, across from where John Walker had lived. Sometimes Woodruff played basketball at a park next to the stadium, but he often took “the long way” there, he told me, in order to avoid seeing the Walkers’ house. “That used to kill me every time.” He often thought about the concept of karma. “I lost my brother in 1982. That crushed me. Was that my karma?” he said. In the fall of 1985, when he was twenty-seven, he decided to try to undo his mistakes. He told Walker’s father that he wanted to recant his previous testimony.

Soon afterward, Woodruff sat down with an attorney for Walker and gave a sworn deposition. The lawyer did most of the talking, and Woodruff often gave one-word answers confirming his statements, saying “Right” or “Correct.” He did explain that he had been “young” and “scared” in 1976 and 1977, and that he had given false testimony in order to save himself. The attorney filed a motion asking a judge to vacate Walker and Boyd’s convictions, but the judge ruled against them both. “Even though he contends that he lied to protect himself from being charged with the murder and robbery, Mr. Woodruff, nevertheless, fails to provide sufficient facts to substantiate this allegation,” the judge wrote, adding that “there is no form of proof so unreliable as recanting testimony.”

In those years, Woodruff's life seemed stalled. "I was selling weed, running the streets," he said. As he grew older, he had jobs "here and there," he recalled, and at one point he drove a cab, but mostly he was "just surviving." In the late nineties, he moved to Cleveland, where he worked in a warehouse; a few years later, he got hired by a freight company to drive a truck. "I couldn't keep living the life I was living," he recalled. "I said, 'You know what, I'm out of Buffalo. It's time to really grow up.'"

While in prison, John Walker earned a degree from a community college and studied in the law library, trying to overturn his conviction. In 1992, he was granted work release: he had a job at a manufacturing plant, and he stayed with a girlfriend five nights a week. But, three years later, Governor George Pataki ended work release for violent offenders, and Walker was sent back inside. He recalled one of his worst nights in prison: "We would go into the TV room at about ten o'clock to watch the local news, and this particular night I happened to see my father, my sister on TV, crying," he told me. Another sister—his favorite sibling, who always came to visit him—had been killed in a drive-by shooting. "I was like the protector of my family," he said, "and there was nothing I could do about it."

By the time Walker was released, he was thirty-eight years old; it had been more than twenty-two years since he was arrested for Crawford's murder. He was on parole, and he had to obey myriad rules, including a 9 P.M. curfew. When he complained to his parole officer—"I see everybody else getting off parole"—he recalled that she said something like "John, the only way you'll get off parole is if you die." The only way around this reality, he realized, was to get his and his friends' murder convictions overturned. Walker began holding regular demonstrations in front of the courthouse, trying to persuade the

district attorney to reinvestigate the case. Sometimes Boyd, who was released in 1996, would join him, but Boyd's parole officer kept sending him back to prison for violations—once, Boyd later recalled, for attending a barbecue in his own yard after curfew.

Walker worked as a janitor at Buffalo's Roswell Park Cancer Institute, waxing and shining the floors. But his primary job became trying to erase his conviction. To pull this off, he decided he needed to find Woodruff. During Walker's incarceration, his views on his former friend had shifted, and he had read the deposition Woodruff had given on his behalf. "I just came to the conclusion that he was a scared sixteen-, seventeen-year-old kid, and he was dealing with professional interrogators," he told me. "I started to realize that he didn't do it because he didn't like us. He did it because he was forced to."

One day, a woman called Woodruff's number in Cleveland, and, as Woodruff remembered it, she told him that she'd grown up on Best Street, too, across from his house. When she gave her name, however, Woodruff didn't recognize it. She started asking questions, and he began to suspect that Walker was somehow involved.

"Is Boo-Boo there?" he asked. "Let me speak to him."

When Walker got on the phone, Woodruff apologized. "He started telling me about how he didn't mean for it to happen that way," Walker recalled. Walker didn't let him go on too long. "I know you didn't really want to do this to us," he said. The two men spoke for a while, and when Walker explained to Woodruff that he was trying to overturn his conviction, Woodruff replied, "Anytime you need me, I'm there." Woodruff began travelling to Buffalo to speak at rallies and other events that Walker organized to call for reexamining

their case, and he continued to do so even after he moved to Atlanta, in 2005.

Not everyone who heard Woodruff speak was as forgiving as Walker.

“Everywhere we went and he was with me, there was people angry and emotional about what he did,” Walker told me. “They didn’t see the whole picture. They only saw that he was the one that put us in jail, basically. And so they would holler and say things to him.” Walker would defend Woodruff, insisting that Woodruff was forced into testifying. “You might think that you could never go and do nothing like that,” Walker would tell people, “but you would be surprised how much interrogators can make you do.”

In 2012, a lawyer for Walker and for Boyd filed motions to overturn their convictions. Walker and the lawyer had unearthed new information from police memos and witness statements—which, they alleged, prosecutors had failed to provide to defense attorneys at trial. “I thought I knew a lot about my case, but I realized I didn’t know half as much as I thought,” Walker told me. Studying the police documents, he was stunned to discover that the bartender working at the Golden Nugget that night had told the police that she’d suspected Larry Watson, the victim’s neighbor who had been drinking with him and then walked him home. Walker also learned that a pair of keys had been found with the victim’s body even though he did not typically carry keys when out drinking. Watson’s wife, it turned out, had called the bar later that night because *her* husband had lost his keys, and she wondered if anyone had found them.

Despite this evidence, a judge again denied Walker’s and Boyd’s motions to vacate their convictions. Drury, the prosecutor, was now a state Supreme Court judge, and he had submitted an affidavit stating that he did not tell Woodruff “to fabricate or tailor his testimony in any way” and that he stood by his earlier claim that he had turned over “all the P-73s”—internal police memos—“to the defense.” The judge found that the allegation that the prosecution withheld

information from the defense “has not been substantiated.”

Community members in Buffalo rallied around Walker’s and Boyd’s cause, dubbing the friends the Buffalo Five—a name that included Woodruff. But, of the five teen-agers who had been implicated in Crawford’s murder, only three were still alive. Gibson had been released from prison in 2008, but he died of a heart attack less than a year later. Martin, who had been acquitted at trial, died in 2015.

In 2019, the Buffalo Police Department decided to reinvestigate the case. One day in December, two homicide detectives tracked down Watson, Crawford’s former neighbor, in a nursing home. By then, he was seventy-six and suffering from Alzheimer’s; the detectives spoke with him in a quiet part of the community room. One detective brought up Crawford’s homicide and mentioned that the men who were convicted of the crime were out of prison and had “told everyone that they did not commit the murder.” According to a police memo, Watson at first was silent, but “after a couple of minutes, Watson whispered, “They didn’t do it.’ ” The detective asked “if he knew who killed Crawford,” the memo states. “Watson was unresponsive.” Watson refused to speak to investigators again. He died four months later.

In 2020, Walker and Boyd once again attempted to overturn their convictions. This time, they filed a motion focussed on the question of whether prosecutors had given Floyd Martin’s attorney crime-scene photographs that the other defense attorneys had not received, including the photo that purportedly showed only one set of footprints leaving the crime scene. Martin’s lawyer, who was now a retired city-court judge, testified on behalf of Walker and Boyd. He recalled that, at Martin’s trial, he had used the photo to argue that the footprints “led directly to the home of the last individual seen with Mr.

Crawford”—Larry Watson. Nobody could locate a transcript from Martin’s trial or the exact photograph. The prosecutors had said “that if they had any ‘exculpatory’ information or photographs they would have been turned over,” the judge noted in his decision, but he determined that “the scales tip ever so slightly in favor of the defendants” and vacated their convictions.

Afterward, Walker and Boyd filed civil lawsuits against both the city of Buffalo and Erie County in federal court, and, last March, Walker’s case against the county went to trial in Rochester. The trial lasted three weeks, and Walker sat near the front of the courtroom alongside four members of his legal team—including Joel Rudin, the veteran civil-rights attorney, and Ross Firszenbaum, a partner at WilmerHale—while another seven or eight sat behind them. It was a stark contrast with Walker’s trial in 1977, when he was represented by a lone court-appointed attorney.

On the third day of the trial, Woodruff testified. In some ways, the moment was a replay of 1977, but this time Woodruff looked directly at Walker, instead of averting his eyes. Woodruff explained how the police had coerced him into testifying falsely and how he and Walker had since reconciled. One of Walker’s lawyers asked Woodruff when the two men had last spoken, and he replied, “Not too long ago.” He explained that, three weeks earlier, Boyd had died of pancreatic cancer, and Walker had called to tell him. On the witness stand, Woodruff began to cry. Across the room, so did Walker. After a pause, the lawyer asked Woodruff how he had reconciled with Walker. Woodruff replied, “I constantly apologized, and, you know, he forgave me.”

Walker’s attorneys argued that prosecutors had failed to turn over a substantial amount of evidence that would have been favorable to him, including police documents pointing to other possible suspects. “They had evidence that

someone else did it,” Rudin said. “They had evidence that Tyrone Woodruff, their main witness, wasn’t present, did not even see the incident.” He added, “It’s tunnel vision, coming to a quick conclusion about guilt, and also trying to close cases to reassure the public, and then prosecuting the case to the end, regardless of the inconvenient evidence that comes up to cast doubt on guilt—and then all too frequently covering up that evidence.”

Drury—who was now eighty-four years old and retired from his position as a state Supreme Court judge—came to court to testify. He continued to defend his actions and his former office, but the jurors sided with Walker. They awarded him twenty-eight million dollars.

Walker said, “I felt like that was all my work, and this is what it came to—me sitting in this courtroom at the table with the lawyers.” He added, “So I felt like I had achieved something. I felt like I did what I set out to do.”

Nearly eight months later, Boyd’s civil lawsuit went to trial on behalf of his estate, with Boyd’s son in the courtroom. Woodruff and Walker both testified. Boyd’s lawyers told the jurors that, in addition to the two decades Boyd had spent in prison for his wrongful conviction, he’d ended up serving nearly eight additional years, for parole violations. The jurors awarded Boyd’s estate eighty million dollars. His lawyers later announced that it was the largest-ever jury award for an individual in a wrongful-conviction case.

Recently, I travelled to Atlanta to speak with Woodruff. Despite twice testifying recently in a federal court, he wanted privacy to tell his story, so we met at a local hotel. He showed up wearing a black baseball cap featuring “716” on the front, the area code for Buffalo. It was January 11, 2026—exactly fifty years since the police had first taken him in for questioning about the Crawford murder. But when he spoke about the interrogation, he sounded as though it had just occurred. “I wish I wouldn’t have gotten manipulated so

quickly,” he said.

Woodruff figured that the police and the prosecutors on the case had assumed that “this would never come back,” he said. “Their plan was to just get somebody” to testify and then “throw the trash away—I was the trash. . . . But I proved them wrong.” He went on, “I’m just glad I’m still here, that I could be part of what I started and straighten out what I messed up.”

Today, Woodruff lives with his wife. He has two children and nine grandchildren, and has held the same job for twenty-five years—driving an eighteen-wheeler. But he’s still plagued by shame and regret. “Every day I wake up, every day I go to sleep, I think about 41413,” he said, referring to the case by its indictment number. “I wish I would’ve taken the ride like they took the ride”—that he had gone to prison as his friends had. “Because, right now, I’m still just living in a mental prison, still to this day. My mind never frees.” He expects that, for the rest of his life, he will be tormented by what he did: “When I don’t think about it or feel no way about it, they’ll be kicking dirt on me or putting me in the ashes.”

He and Walker speak on the phone occasionally, and when Woodruff travels to Buffalo to visit family he stops by Walker’s house. They might discuss the Bills or play chess. Whenever they talk about what happened in 1976 and 1977, Walker urges him to move on, telling him: “There’s nothing else you can do, so you might as well stop worrying yourself.”

Walker said that, during his civil trial, he watched Woodruff testify and sensed a shift in him. “I feel like he was exhaling. Like, you know, he was letting some of the pain he was suffering—he was letting it out a little bit,” he told me. “And I was happy for him, because I don’t want to see him suffer no more.”

Walker, who is sixty-six, is in extremely poor health. He has survived lung cancer but is now being treated for brain cancer, and injuries to his neck and back have confined him to a wheelchair. When I asked him recently how he was feeling, he said, “Like I ain’t going to be here all that much longer.” The twenty-eight million dollars he was awarded has not yet come through; Erie County has filed motions to vacate his and Boyd’s awards, and the motions are still pending. If the county does not prevail, it is expected to appeal the jury’s ruling; the matter may not be resolved for years.

Woodruff will likely be the last surviving member of the Buffalo Five, with part of the group’s story written on his body. He has his friends’ indictment number tattooed on his left forearm and his torso. Walker remembered seeing the number on his arm. “He was kind of proud to show me that,” Walker said. “He was trying to tell me a story about how he felt so bad about it that this was his only way to try to do something about it, to tattoo himself. And I understood.” ♦