

Lady's Man

Written by Terence Cantarella Photo illustration by Silvia Ros and Marcy Mock
January 2010

He didn't like drugs or gangs or violence -- he liked pretty girls, and that may have killed him



The days when Miami was awash in cocaine, cash, and bullet-riddled bodies are over. Today art gallery owners likely outnumber drug lords, and running gun battles are far less common than book fairs, art festivals, music conferences, and fashion shows. What was once the nation's murder capital is now a well-branded cultural Mecca.

So just over a year ago, when the body of 18-year-old high school senior Alex Tillman was found beside the FEC railway tracks in Wynwood, the killing seemed reminiscent of an earlier decade, when violent criminals and cartel hit men committed scores of equally brutal slayings.

At the time of Tillman's death, local news outlets made a point to mention that he had no criminal record and no involvement with drugs or gangs -- declarations made necessary, apparently, because he was from Overtown, where most murders are still drug-related.

Indeed Tillman didn't fit the profile of someone whose life was likely to end in criminal violence. His murder, friends and family suspect, was likely motivated by something else altogether -- jealousy.

"He was a pretty boy," says Tawana Fairell, his mother, who is still clearly distraught. "The girls loved him and he loved them. Girls were his only vice. He especially liked Hispanic girls." She wonders whether a frustrated female admirer, of which there were many, had someone take revenge on her son. Or perhaps an enraged boyfriend caught Alex with his girlfriend. "Maybe a girl's father caught them together and did something to him out of prejudice. I don't know," she sighs. "I'm thinking all kinds of things."

"He was definitely a lady's man," says Isaiah Bennet, Alex's closest friend and fellow senior at Booker T. Washington High School. "He had mood swings sometimes, but he didn't argue or

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fight. That wasn't his style. Both me and Alex preferred Hispanic girls. They treat you better. Black girls would hate on us sometimes and ask why we like Spanish girls, but I don't know anything about someone being jealous or upset with him."

"By all accounts, he had no enemies. This surprised many people," Miami Police Sgt. Armando Aguilar, Jr. told CBS4 News last year.

Yet the viciousness of the crime suggests otherwise. Alex's body had been burned. Police say that was likely an attempt to conceal his identity, and is not what killed him. They will not, however, reveal the cause of death.

Veteran Miami PD detective Nelson Andreu, who spent more than 20 years working homicide cases, explains that police often withhold the cause of death in murder cases so they can test a suspect's knowledge of a killing and determine the extent of their involvement. It also helps them to eliminate bogus tips. (Andreu, author of the crime novel *Dead Red*, retired from the Miami PD and is now a captain with the West Miami Police Department.)

Suffice to say, then, that Alex Tillman suffered a punishing end, inflicted by someone, or several people, with fury in their hearts.

"I believe someone hated him," his mother says. "I just don't know why."

Although more than a year has passed since her son's death, Tawana Fairell still can't sleep at night. She can't concentrate, can't shed her feelings of guilt, and trusts no



one. She's not the same person she used to be. She can't even look at Alex's picture anymore. She had to turn it around to face the wall. Not knowing why her child was killed is torture. Knowing that the killer, or killers, freely roam the same city streets where she and her family live haunts her like nothing else.

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Seated at a picnic table at Charles Hadley Park in the Model City neighborhood west of Little Haiti, the soft-spoken single mother of three boys speaks eloquently about her late son with a mixture of heartache and exhaustion: "Sometimes I think God sees how much I love my sons and is jealous and is looking for ways to get my attention away. Everyone tells me God doesn't work like that, but I just can't understand why my son isn't here right now. I picture the worst. I imagine him screaming and calling out for me and I wasn't there for him. I sleep with every light on in the house. I'm afraid he might come to me in the night with the burned side of his face. I get headaches every night on my left side and my left eye gets blurry. I feel like I'm going crazy."

The relationship she had with her son, she says, was wonderful. They'd go to the gym together. As a surgical assistant, she'd often have to work late, but she never worried about what was going on at home. And if Alex was the one to come home late, she'd call him on the phone and they'd talk until he reached the front door. If he made new friends and began spending time with them, she'd become envious.

Alex would help get his two younger brothers dressed in the morning and drive them to school. His mother hated driving, so if she needed to go somewhere, he'd drive her, too. Just a week before he died, he told Tawana he wanted to be a pediatrician.

At Booker T. Washington, where he spent his junior and senior years, he joined the 5000 Role Models of Excellence project, a mentoring program for minority boys at risk of dropping out of school. For a while, he worked as a dishwasher at Casablanca Seafood Bar & Grill, the popular restaurant on the Miami River not far from his home, and later at the Taco Bell on Biscayne Boulevard and 36th Street. If he had time, he'd tag along with his grandfather to weddings and funerals to assist him with his photography business.

"He was very respectful, very well-groomed, would never be caught with his jeans hanging off his butt," Tawana insists. "I had people tell me: 'Your kids are Oreos. You're trying to make them white' -- because Alex sometimes corrected people's speech if they used too much slang or really bad English. He didn't want his friends to know, but he loved movies about couples breaking up and getting back together. There were times he would come into my room, lay his head on my lap, and talk to me about girls. There were things he didn't tell me, though."

There were things, it seems, Alex didn't tell anyone. Or at the least, things none of his friends wish to divulge now. Of six acquaintances contacted for this story, only two returned calls and

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e-mails seeking comment. And whether it's a reluctance to snitch, a fear of reprisal, or an indication of something more sinister, only a very vague picture of Alex's final days has emerged.



On Sunday, November 2, 2008, two days before his body was found by a homeless man, Alex called his best friend Isaiah ("Zayy") around 1:30 a.m., after finishing the late shift at Taco Bell on the Boulevard. He said he'd met a girl. She had come to the restaurant earlier that night. He was heading home and planned to meet up with her later.

"He liked to brag," Zayy chuckles during a phone interview. "I was asleep on the couch when he called. He told me her name, but I was so sleepy I couldn't remember it the next day."

It's unclear whether Alex actually met with the mystery girl, but at 9:11 that morning security cameras at his Overtown apartment building recorded him strutting out the front door, dressed in dark designer jeans and a black T-shirt, a red cap tilted fashionably to one side. He was supposed to be heading to Opa-locka to meet his mother and place flowers on the grave of his recently deceased grandmother. But he made a detour, and when Tawana called around 11:00 a.m. to find out where he was, he said he was "at a friend's house" and would be late.

Which friend Alex was visiting is also unclear. "It couldn't have been a guy's house," Zayy asserts. "I would've known about it because we had the same friends."

Alex's steady girlfriend of a year and a half, Kayla, texted and called him several times later that Sunday, but he didn't answer his phone or return the messages.

When he didn't come home that night, Tawana began to worry. But Alex was eighteen, a legal adult, and she figured he had stayed at a relative's or friend's house. She tried to call him several times, but his phone kept going straight to voicemail and she assumed his cell battery

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had died or he'd forgotten to pay his phone bill.

When he didn't turn up at home or at school the next morning, though, she got scared. And then one of Alex's co-workers at Taco Bell called with news that would send her racing through the streets in a panic.

A young lady had called the Taco Bell. She was crying and said that Alex had been killed and badly burned. She called more than once, said her name was Crystal, and spoke to more than one person, telling the same story each time. When Taco Bell employees asked why she didn't call the police, she said her parents would kill her if she did.

"When they told me about that call," Tawana says, "I left my job and went straight to the police station. I didn't even wait for my ride. I just started running."

Miami police issued a countywide BOLO (Be on the Lookout) via radio dispatch and distributed a missing-person flyer. Tawana, meanwhile, went home and prayed, hoping that Alex would come strutting through the door at any minute. But another 24 hours would creep by with no news.

Police called the next day, around 2:30 p.m., and asked her to come back to the station to look at Alex's phone records to see if she could identify any of the numbers. But once she was there, they disclosed the real reason for calling her in.

They had found Alex.

"I lost it," Tawana recalls. "I never felt anything like that in my life." She begged to see her son's body, but the medical examiner wouldn't allow it. They told her they don't let family members view or identify bodies anymore. Eventually homicide detectives on the case admitted they instructed the medical examiner's office not to let her see Alex. "I'm glad they did that," she says, "because I probably would've thrown up right there in the office or pulled all of my hair out."

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Everyone among Alex's circle of friends immediately fell under police suspicion, and rumors about who had committed the murder began to circulate. Some said a girl who was obsessed with Alex had him killed because he spurned her. Others blamed a gang. One friend told a bizarre tale about a violent drag queen, later killed in a gunfight with police, who would admire Alex through Taco Bell's windows while he was working. That story, however, could not be verified.

"There was a girl calling Alex's cell phone in the weeks before his murder," Tawana says. "She'd call and say, 'I'm watching you. I know what you got on.' And he'd be looking around like: 'Who is this? How do you know where I am?'"

Tawana thinks about that, and a hundred other details of Alex's last weeks alive, struggling to remember things and trying to come up with useful information. More than anything, she wants to know the identity of the girl who called the Taco Bell, and she wonders why police apparently have not been able to trace those calls.

But Alex's cell phone and wallet were missing when his body was discovered, so the girl's calls could have been placed from his stolen cell -- which would account for detectives' inability to identify the caller. As for Alex's phone records, it's unknown whether police have been able to establish a link between the Taco Bell caller, the mystery text messenger, and the unidentified girl Alex planned to meet the night before he disappeared.

Miami Det. Orlando Benitez, who leads the Alex Tillman homicide investigation, did not respond to repeated requests for comment. But during a recent interview with the *BT*, former Miami detective Nelson Andreu cited a lack of witness cooperation as the number-one hurdle in solving these kinds of cases: "People are afraid of retaliation. They don't want to get involved."

The "no-snitching" culture is also a major factor, especially in the small Overtown community, where many people know each other. Consequently, less than half of all Miami homicides typically result in an arrest.

Nationally, in fact, more people get away with murder now than in decades past. This despite

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advances in DNA technology and other crime-fighting tools. Last year the Associated Press reported that the national homicide "clearance rate" (the percentage of murders for which someone is arrested and charged) dropped from 91 percent in 1963 to 61 percent in 2007.

In the City of Miami, where the number of murders has plummeted over the past 25 years, the clearance rate has dropped from 75 percent to 48 percent. Those figures defy the logical expectation that fewer murders should mean higher clearance rates. But in addition to a lack of witness cooperation, experts point to today's larger urban populations; understaffed police departments; and drug, robbery, and gang-related crimes among strangers, which are harder to solve than "acquaintance homicides."

Regarding Miami's homicide clearance rate of 48 percent, Andreu says the problem often boils down to excessive workloads. "You want to solve a case before the next homicide comes in," he explains. "At that point,



you've got to put one down to pick up the next. So sometimes cases get put on the back burner through no fault of the detective. The problem is the sheer volume of cases."

Crime statistics and staffing shortages, however, are mute in describing Tawana Fairell's incurable grief over her son's death. She dwells endlessly on Alex's final moments, tormented by her imagination, drowning in fear, paranoia, nightmares, and depression. She peers nervously over her shoulder in public, expecting a faceless killer to appear at any moment, and she wonders, to the point of delirium, who is to blame and why her son was taken.

After Alex's murder, police told her not to go back to her Overtown apartment for the safety of her and her sons -- in case the killer decided to target them as well. She moved around from friend to relative to co-worker. When she finally did return to her apartment a few months later, she discovered that building management had removed and disposed of all her belongings for nonpayment of rent.

"I was seeing a psychiatrist," she recounts. "I wasn't in my right mind. I wasn't even able to remember that I had a place where I needed to pay rent. It took me about three months just to start eating properly again. I had suicidal thoughts -- because I wanted to be with Alex. The only thing that kept me here were my other sons."

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She has since found a new apartment, far from Overtown, but relocating has taken a financial toll, and she still has no furniture and shares an inflatable bed with her 11-year-old son, whom she refuses to let out of her sight.

Every evening after work she sits at the city park where he has football practice and waits for him to finish. His friends make fun of him, calling him a mama's boy because Tawana is always at his side. And if he doesn't have school, she takes him to work with her.

Her chronic paranoia is stifling. "I can't even take my boys to the movies at night because I'm scared someone is following me," she says. "That's how petrified I am until these people are caught. I told the cops, if you don't have leads, just tell me. But please don't keep me in the dark. I call and leave them information that I come up with about the case, but I always get voicemail. I know I'm not the only case they're working on, but I just want them to call me and tell me something -- anything. I want to do everything I can to find whoever did this. I want to sit across from them and ask them: 'Why? What could he have done to you?'"

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