



Hunting for the Truth

*But something still didn't seem right. It was almost as if
Ethan knew too much—he was too close to the story.*

By Megan Michelson

Non-Fiction

Her name was Doris Jiménez. She had thick, black hair, dark eyes, and skin as creamy as chocolate milk. Born and raised in Nicaragua, she owned a boutique clothing shop in the sleepy surf town of San Juan del Sur. She was 25 years old on the day she was killed. She was raped, hogtied, and left for dead in the shop she owned. I know all of this is true because I checked to make sure.

For two years, I worked as a fact checker at a well-known national travel and outdoor magazine. Toward the end of my stint, I was assigned to check a story written by a well-known fiction writer who, for privacy's sake, I'll call Ethan Gabon. I knew from the start the article was going to be particularly tough.

It had all the components of a real thriller—a beautiful woman, her tragic death, a wrongfully accused murderer, all set to the backdrop of a stunning South American town. Those same components meant hell for a fact checker, whose job it is to verify every statement of truth, every quote, every description in order to provide accuracy and prevent the publication from being sued for libel or defamation. In other words, it was my job to call the murder victim's mother and make sure her daughter had thick, black hair, dark eyes, and skin as creamy as chocolate milk. It was my job to make sure it was true that her daughter had been raped, hogtied, and left for dead.

The magazine had originally sent Ethan to Nicaragua to write a travel narrative about the booming expatriate surf scene down south. He'd never published a work of non-fiction before, but was eager to take a stab at travel writing. Two weeks after his arrival, the girl had been found brutally murdered. Ethan just happened to be walking into town to buy beer when he stumbled across the murder site. He was the first journalist on the scene.

Fascinated by the case, Ethan quickly sent an email to his editor,

a bright young woman who I'll call Suzanne. "I think I've stumbled across something much bigger," he had written to her. As he described it, a local woman had been killed. The main suspect was her American ex-boyfriend, a young man who I'll call Cody Walker. He was a magazine publisher and climber and surfer who had a reputation for making local girls fall for him. Ethan said he felt the energy to write more ferociously than he had in a long time.

Suzanne responded eagerly, encouraging him to dig deeper. "Sounds interesting. Do you think he did it?" she asked. Eventually, Ethan proved so passionate about the story that Suzanne agreed to change his assignment. Instead of a short, amusing story about surfers, Ethan would pen a 10,000-word investigative piece about the murder of a Nicaraguan girl named Doris.

Ethan began speaking to local officials and townspeople about the night of November 21, about the case against Cody, and about Doris, who was so beautiful that even pictures of her body at the crime scene made her look stunning. For weeks, Ethan reported on the crime. He interviewed Doris's friends and family, police officers, and other witnesses. He spoke to Cody's friends and co-workers, who saw him the day of her murder two hours away in the town of Managua and swore he couldn't have been in San Juan del Sur at the time Doris was said to have been killed.

Cody's alibis continued to roll in—he spoke on the phone for a business call at roughly the time of Doris's death, and he had phone records to prove it. He'd had a haircut that day in Managua and rented a car. But there was evidence against Cody as well: Locals said he was jealous of Doris' new boyfriend and may have hired someone to harm her. And there were bruises on his shoulder, which looked fresh after Doris' death. Two local Nicaraguan guys known around town as Krusty and Rosita, who were spotted near the scene of the crime and had a history of violence, had also been named as suspects.

Ethan gathered information like a scavenger, taking it all in, writing notes on everything from the forensic labs to the sound of Doris's mother crying. He ran out of space in his notebook and quickly began to fill several spiral-bound school notebooks he bought from the local grocery.

The trial lasted only a few days. The prosecution called witnesses to the stand who put Cody's alibis into question—one man claimed he was told to say he saw Cody in Managua that day, when in fact he hadn't. Another man claimed he saw Cody in San Juan del Sur. The

defense used witnesses to place Cody far from the scene of the crime, bringing forward his co-worker who spoke to him on the phone that day. Cody took the stand and explained that the bruises on his shoulder were from carrying Doris' casket at her funeral. When the judge said the word guilty, Cody's face hung low, but he did not cry. He was sentenced to 30 years in prison.

After the trial, Ethan got media privileges to interview Cody in prison. He sat with a tape recorder between them, talking about Doris, about how life in prison was going to feel. "I didn't do it," Cody told him somberly. "There's been a terrible mistake." Ethan wanted to believe him—he wanted to find out that someone else had broken into Doris' shop that day and stumbled across Doris. That it had been an accident, a random occurrence. But something about the way she was killed, the way the crime photos looked, told Ethan that whoever killed her, must have known her. She was raped and killed, but then was redressed, as if the killer didn't want her to be found in an exposed manner.

Ethan returned to New York and started writing. The story came to him like a flood, fast and furious. He filed the first draft of the story to Suzanne and she shared it with me. We were stunned by how powerful, how personal, it was. She asked him dozens of questions about the case and about the structure of his story; he wrote a second draft. The story was of epic proportions—three times the length of the magazine's normal features. It would be a massive step in Ethan's career. She knew that; he knew that, too. The story had to be right; it had to be perfect. And in the background of this incredible tale, all the facts had to add up.

The story he penned was brilliantly written, his prose poetic and his tone fierce. He researched it as if he'd been a crime scene reporter at the *Washington Post* for two decades. He wrote it as if he was a poet. His thesis: an innocent man is in prison. Soon after his draft was filed with my editor, I started digging into the facts. I spoke to Nicaraguan lawyers, local surf bums and bartenders, Doris' family, and random witnesses who barely spoke English. I called everyone mentioned in the story and dozens of people behind the scenes who weren't even referenced in the final draft.

I asked the same tough questions Ethan had to ask before me: How was she killed? Who do you think did it? Why? I spent about two weeks learning everything I could about the case, checking criminal backgrounds, speaking through a Spanish translator, and correspond-

ing with my publication's lawyer, in case anything seemed libelous.

Throughout the process, Ethan and I e-mailed back and forth, sometimes several times a day. I'd have a question or two, or he'd check up on how the fact-checking was going. He was always helpful and attentive. Almost too helpful. He sent me packages of notebooks he'd filled out while traveling. And forwarded me e-mail exchanges he'd had with witnesses. Anytime a fact didn't seem to hold up, he had the evidence to prove it.

But something still didn't seem right. It was almost as if Ethan knew too much; he was too close to the story. He became friends with some of his sources and spent a lot of time obsessing over what other people would think of his story. Would they like it, he asked me. Would they believe it?

Late one night, just days before the story was to be shipped to the printer, Ethan sent me an e-mail:

*To: Megan Michelson
From: Ethan Gabon
Subject: Fact Check*

It's 3 a.m. and I'm drunk...I'm glad that most of my facts held up. That story really happened down there. It feels unreal to me already, but it all really happened. I wish we could paint Rosita and Krusty as nasty as they really are. They killed that girl. For no good reason. You'll never see the crime scene photos. Be glad. I'll never get them out of my mind. Why? Why? "Very Pretty Doris." I'll never get that song out of my head. Not to mention the fact that I recorded it and can listen to it whenever. And I do. And I do. And Cody himself, while innocent, is kind of a prick. But what's most awful is that I see so much of myself in him, the narcissism, the self-promoting. It only takes a murder to spin the spotlight on you. And then all your shitty realities become: Could I have done it?

Reading it, my mind spun. My eyes focused on words like *painted*. *And I do. And I do. I see myself in him. Could I have done it?* My first question was why was this writer sending me drunk e-mails? I had never even met the guy. But then, my curiosity became more serious. Why was he so haunted by Doris? And what of himself does he see in the guy charged with her murder?

So I started my own investigation, this time looking into Ethan's background. I had one other spotlight into Ethan's head: his journals.

There were mainly travel notes and interview transcripts, but scattered in between were personal diary entries scribbled into the pages of children's school notebooks. I devoured them with a guilty conscience, reading about the women he'd slept with en route to Nicaragua, the way he compared his writing to Ernest Hemingway, the depression he was battling. Ethan was a poet and a fiction writer. And his prose—even in his travel journals—stung like salt water, grinding into my memory. Even when I'd leave work, with piles of Nicaraguan facts scattered around my desk, I couldn't leave Ethan and his words.

I e-mailed some of my sources in the town of San Juan del Sur, but this time, I wasn't asking them about Doris and her murder, or the guys accused of the crime. This time, I asked about Ethan, the reporter on the scene. Had he met Doris? What was he like around women? Was he friends with Cody? Most of their responses didn't help me. Ethan had made friends with a few people in town, but nobody seemed suspicious of him. After all, he was a journalist. And journalists are to be trusted. Aren't they?

Late the next night when I was still in the office, it hit me: What if Ethan killed Doris? I couldn't get the girl with the thick, black hair, dark eyes, and skin as creamy as chocolate milk out of my mind. My imagination went wild and I created an entire scenario: Ethan met Doris, became obsessed with her, killed her out of rage or jealousy, and framed Cody so that he'd have a story that would make his career. For about 24-hours, I was convinced that this was true. I filled in details—his late-night emails, his use of the word *painted* in creating his story. He was an artist—and a fine one at that—and if my theory was right, he was about to pull off the greatest con of his lifetime.

I broke down and told my conspiracy theory to Suzanne, his editor. She listened intently as I rambled on, explaining how the writer she'd assigned to cover a story could actually be a murderer. When I finished, she smiled and patted me on the back.

"Go home," she said patiently. "You need some rest."

The story was published soon after and it was a huge success. Television stations interviewed Ethan as the expert on this unsolved murder mystery in an exotic city. Reviews of the magazine piece were universally flattering. Deep down, I knew Ethan wasn't involved. I knew he was a writer—a good, honest one—and he had told a brilliant story. But still, I was left feeling unresolved, confused.

Months later, I decided to confront Ethan. I don't know why, exactly. But I needed some kind of resolution. And I figured our rela-

tionship—one built entirely through e-mails about random facts in a foreign country—was candid and raw enough that he just might understand. And subconsciously, I wanted to thank him. He had revealed a creative side of me that, through the brutal reality of full-time fact-checking, had become lost. I drafted an email, and hit send:

From: Megan Michelson
To: Ethan Gabon
Subject: The Facts

Late one night while fact checking your story, I developed a crazy (tired-induced) conspiracy theory about you: I thought wouldn't it be crazy if you were actually the one who killed Doris. And I created this whole scenario where you met and fell in love with Doris, then framed Cody, so that you'd have a great magazine story. Although I knew, of course, it wasn't true, it got me thinking creatively for the first time in a long time (fact checking usually sucks away all my creative juices) and I decided that this would make a brilliant story of my own.

His response was kind. And oddly enough, agreeable. Especially considering I'd just told him that I imagined him capable of murder.

To: Megan Michelson
From: Ethan Gabon
Subject: Creative Writing

The idea of it crossed my mind a couple times down there because the story was so weird. I thought at times 'Nobody will believe this, they are going to think I killed her.' It's still really bizarre and creepy to me that Doris was alive in that town for a whole week while I was walking around in it, that Rosita and Krusty were there. I'm sure I saw them all.

I put the fantasy to rest. Ethan wasn't a bad guy, it turned it. Just a good writer. After that, I picked up a pen of my own and started crafting a story. One about a girl with thick, black hair, dark eyes, and skin as creamy as chocolate milk. And a writer who would kill for a good story.

Editor's note: Megan eventually graduated from fact-checking and is now an associate editor at SKIING Magazine.