

[2023 Issues](#) [2022 Issues](#) [2021 Issues](#) [2020 Issues](#) [2019 Issues](#) [2018 Issues](#) [2017 Issues](#)

[2016 Issues](#) [2015 Issues](#) [About Us](#)

Walter B. Levis

## Lions in the Bronx

When former-president Barack Obama called Anthony Alverio's apartment—he didn't buy it.

"I love you, too, Sal," Alverio said. "What's up? And why the landline?"

His partner, Sal, did impressions. Or—former partner. A few months ago Sal made detective.

The phone was silent, a hesitant breath. "Hey, listen, Knicks are down three," Alverio went on. "Less than two minutes, call ya' right back. On my cell."

A throat-clear, phlegmy—didn't sound like Sal.

Alverio flashed on his buddy's recent life-changing event: a ten-block foot pursuit, man with a gun. The perp, male black, shot a Dominican drug dealer, jumped from a fire escape, then took off down Bruckner Boulevard, weaving through cars. Alverio froze—for a second. Or twenty seconds. Or was it a full two minutes? Fear. Paralyzing fear. Alverio froze with fear. Of course, he told nobody. A scared cop? Keep that to yourself.

But his partner Sal had been a track star at Kennedy High School. And what he pulled off was pure-Hollywood-cop-show police work. Earned him a "commander's day," a "cop-of-the-month" nomination, and, eventually, a "field promotion."

Alverio had just stood there, watching, frozen—but, finally, he did put the call over the radio.

And the two men never discussed it. Don't ask, don't tell.

“Sal, look, lemme—”

“Excuse me, this is, really, Barack Obama. Is this Mr. Alverio?”

“Hey, didn't know you did Obama. Sounds good—just like him.”

A natural-born actor, his brave and fleet-footed friend. Alverio wouldn't be surprised if Sal wound up combining his athletic and theatrical gifts and going big-time undercover. DEA, FBI, Counter Terrorism—hell, Sal might save the whole fucking country!

Another moment of silence, then a laugh. Warm, disarming. “I'm sorry to interrupt the game. This is, really, Barack Obama, and I'm calling to speak to your wife. You must be Anthony.”

The voice sounded slightly “black,” though not “Bronx-black.” Educated, confident, a bit like... But Alverio cut his thoughts short. He knew better: skin color has nothing to do with accent. Stop being racist. That's what his wife would tell him.

“Yeah,” he said, turning away from the television. “This is Anthony,” and noticed that he had destroyed his own name... losing all articulation, like a drunk man. *Anntunny*.

\* \* \*

Later, sitting on the edge of the bed, his wife tried to make sense of it all. She'd taken the phone from her husband, noting the glazed look of surprise in his eyes, then watched him turn off the television and take a swallow of beer.

Anna Alverio—a good Catholic girl. That would be her own description, rolling her eyes. Not a true believer as much as one who truly tried to be. Tried hard. Morning mass, confession, the fasting and abstinence, the receiving of the sacrament—that's the easy stuff, she'd always thought. What really mattered: organizing your life around the obligation to provide for the needs of others.

That's what now interested Barack Obama—and felt so bizarre. The former President of the United States knew all about her work as the Director of Community Service and Service Learning at Westchester Community College. And her career as a classroom teacher at a school in Harlem. The old Harlem, before gentrification. And he knew about the immigration program she'd run last summer

through a church in Yonkers, how it brought together almost fifty families—Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan. And her own family, that she was the oldest of nine—five sisters and three brothers, including her youngest brother Joseph, born with a brain tumor. How did the former president know—? And, yes, her father, forty-one years with Con Edison, right.

She half-expected Obama to know the old family story about daddy coming home from his hard day on the pole, his wife ready to fix him his “nightly bath.” And the punch-line: *That’s how you get nine kids*. Nod, wink, her father’s Adam’s apple protruding as he gulps red wine.

But this was about *her*. Obama wanted to have dinner with *her*. Not her father or mother or husband—*her*. She knew that she should feel good, proud, excited. But the truth...it frightened her. All of this felt... *dangerous*.

Why? She deserved the praise, she told herself. She deserved it, damn it!

But she couldn't shake the feeling of fear. She sat there now in the quiet bedroom twisting her wedding ring, pulling it to her knuckle, then pushing the ring back down, over and over, twisting, pulling, pushing. Anthony snored softly beside her. He'd had too much to drink. After the call, in addition to his beer, he'd pulled the bourbon down from the top shelf near the extra cereal and poured both of them a shot, which, he said with a forced cheerfulness, was to “celebrate.”

She didn't drink hers. She just wet her lips and tried to smile. Recognition. Acclaim. Yes, cause for celebration. But the whole thing felt like an animal ready to pounce, a predator that could tear its victim into pieces.

Had Obama been stalking her? He explained about the award she'd be getting, the funder involved, the people who'd be attending the dinner.

“Yes, sir, yes...” was all Anna could think of to say. “I—well, of course, yes I'd be honored—“

And why did her mind go straight to a candle-lit restaurant with soft jazz? That's not what he was describing. Ridiculous. His voice—that was it, she thought, twisting her wedding ring harder now, faster, pushing and pulling, her finger starting to hurt. The former president's voice sounded so smooth and relaxed and, simultaneously, so firm and strong. That's what rattled her.

Of course it wasn't a one-on-one dinner in a romantic restaurant but a fund-raiser at a big house in

Riverdale, that exclusive Bronx neighborhood known for its private schools and palatial homes. Rich Jews, mostly. At least that's what she'd heard—it was a place Anna had never been. Obama explained that he'd send a car to pick her up and take her home.

“Thank you,” she kept saying, automatically, “thank you.”

During all this, Anthony had stood directly in front of her, leaning close, trying to listen. She noted—with some annoyance—her husband's familiar smell. A salty masculine odor. He wore one of his dark blue tee shirts and a pair of navy cargo-pants, and a small sweat stain in the shape of a half-moon peaked out from under his arm when he lifted his beer to his mouth. As if sensing her annoyance, he took a half-step back, nodding. *I know where Riverdale is*, he whispered, and took a quick gulp, the sweat stain winking into view.

Before dinner, he'd lifted weights, as usual. Like a lot of cops, Anthony lifted weights religiously. In fact, he took it even more seriously because of his size—five foot eight, an inch shorter than his wife. For years, the smell of sweaty metal and chalk dust perfumed their bedroom. The set now lived in their daughter's room, since she'd gone off to college this fall. SUNY Binghamton, a three-hour drive upstate, a million miles away,

Ah, the empty nest—is that what really haunted Anna right now? Why this bizarre phone call from Obama seemed so scary? Yes, having only one child—birth control, the stain on her soul. The Church frowned on contraception, of course, but she—well, it was simple: she'd sinned for the sake of her “career.” And this was the payoff: worldly success, recognition. Dinner with Barack Obama!

No wonder, then, that while standing there in the kitchen holding the phone, she'd experienced a sort of vision, a *religious* vision. It's possible, isn't it? She thought about it now. If God desires to communicate His message to a person, He can use whatever means He finds necessary—a missionary, an angel, a dream, or a *vision*. There is no limit to what God can do, right?

She wasn't sure she believed any of this.

All she knew is that while “yes sir-ing” Barack Obama, her father's swarthy face had risen before her. Harsh, square-shaped, a broad short forehead tapering to a wide, strong jaw. A blunt man, hard-working, determined. A dark frown creased her father's brow; disgust curled his lips. The vision felt so

real, the disapproval and judgment so immediate that Anna imagined her father's heavy hand pressed now on her shoulder.

But it was Anthony, leaning closer again to hear the famous man's voice.

"I'm so looking forward to meeting you," the former president said just then.

And how did Anna answer? What did she say back to him?

She couldn't remember. Sitting there tugging and twisting her wedding ring, her mind went blank. Had she simply said, "Thank you." Or "thank you, sir?" Or something more elaborate, like, "the privilege is mine..." ?

All she could remember: the faint smell of Anthony's sweat and the beads of moisture on the neck of his beer bottle. And suddenly she realized that she'd failed to ask Obama an obvious, glaring, direct question: *can my husband come with me?* Maybe it was assumed. *Bring your husband, of course.* But Obama didn't say that, did he?

Into this uncertainty came a crazy thought like a small quick blow to the chest. Anna felt her breath tighten, then a chill. She wanted to go alone. Without her husband.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Alverio clicked around a little on the internet and learned it was a common gimmick that started with Clinton. Cold call from a former president—who says no to an invite like that? Still, working a four-to-twelve that day, he told nobody. Couldn't see himself saying, "*Hey, Barack Obama called my house last night.*"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah—*wants to have dinner with my wife.*"

Some dick would fake-click a radio and squawk: *all units, be advised: EDP in the station house locker room, male, white, armed, dangerous, believes Barack Obama is after his wife.*

EDP. Emotionally Disturbed Person. Check that—"distressed."

Was he? Distressed, no, not exactly. Jealous. That's what he was: jealous. First Sal makes detective and then his wife—

Stop it, he told himself. Envy is one of the "seven deadly sins." In the Book of Genesis,

envy motivates Cain to murder his brother.

I can still make detective, Alverio thought. But then flashed again on his moment of hesitation the day of the foot pursuit. It wasn't simple cowardice that made him freeze. Not fear of injury. It was a darker, more complicated fear. It was the fear of making a mistake. A "bad shoot" or "excessive force" or any other number of possible fuck-ups. A white cop on patrol in the Bronx—he couldn't say this to any of this to his "brothers"—but, well, although he couldn't stand liberals he basically agreed with his "liberal wife" that this country's history of white supremacy cannot be denied. Therefore, in a way, white people—and American institutions overall—are racist until proven otherwise. Then, add to that, you know, the headlines: Michael Brown in Ferguson, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, and all the rest. Sure, of course, there's the cop side of it—12-year-old Rice was five foot seven and 195 pounds, and that pellet gun—no cop or civilian in the world could look at that gun and think it's a toy. And, of course, the media fails to blast that part of the story, but still—point is: Alverio was a good honest patrol cop with eleven years experience, but he went to work every day afraid he would make a mistake that would ruin his life.

So—should he ask for a desk job? Ride out the back nine of his career as a "house mouse?"

He could just imagine that conversation: "Yeah, Sarge—well, you see, I'm scared. I'm afraid I'm going to make a mistake out there. So I'm wondering if..."

\* \* \*

Anna never clarified the invitation. She offered to call the number Obama had given to her, but Anthony made clear he didn't want to "tag along." She didn't push it.

Instead, the afternoon of the big event, she left work early and drove to Ridge Hill Shopping Mall, where she went into Victoria's Secret and bought a lightly-lined wireless bra with a plunge neckline and cut-out sides. She also bought a pair of seamless elastic-free panties with a string-fit around the hips and mesh in back. At the checkout register, a college-age toothpick of a girl smiled and said this was her favorite style of "moderate coverage."

Anna paid cash and walked quickly to her car.

\* \* \*

The call came over a “10-66,” unusual incident. Alverio had been trying to forget about tonight and his wife’s big event with Obama. But reaching for the radio he glanced at his watch. She would be getting dressed about now.

“5-2 Adam 1,” the dispatcher said, “female complainant states there’s a lion in the garbage in front her building, 3-8-5-1 Grote. Be advised: that’s three blocks from the zoo.”

“A lion?” said Alverio’s new partner, eyes wide, both hands on the steering wheel. He was a twenty-two year old just out of the Army. Tall strong kid—he looked black but was Dominican.

“5-2 Adam 1,” Alverio said. “10-5 that 68.”

“Repeat: a lion in the garbage.”

Alverio felt himself trying not to smile.

“Central, have you got a call back?”

“Call back confirmed. Zoo security and animal control have failed to respond. Complainant has been waiting over an hour.”

“Sensitive site EDP?”

“Negative. She’s waiting in front of the building.”

“10-4. Adam 1 on our way.” And to his partner, he said, “Let’s go hunting.”

They drove in silence. No lights or siren. Traffic on Fordham Road was light. Alverio let his thoughts drift. His wife had seemed nervous in the morning, and he wished now he’d said more than “have fun tonight.” What kind of pointless thing is that to say?

Just then they drove past Fordham University’s football stadium. Such a clean clear open space—it rose into view like a vision of hope, opportunity, the thrill of victory. Alverio had once dreamed of playing in the NFL. With no chance, of course.

At Corona Avenue they caught a red light on a residential corner. A stack of water-stained crates leaned unevenly against a rust-pitted dumpster on the side of a building. A strange fluid leaked across the sidewalk, a thin yellow-green stream. Department of Sanitation violation, no doubt.

They drove further. Ah, the Bronx, Alverio thought—every turn, another world. Now the air smelled like cookies: La Prima Wholesale Bakery was known to occasionally hand out loaves of fresh-baked

bread in the wee hours of the morning to the homeless on East 187<sup>th</sup>.

“OK, buddy, what’s our plan?” Alverio asked, shaking his foggy feeling of distraction.

“Assess the situation,” the young cop said, promptly.

“Bingo. And do we have enough info?”

“Uhhhh…”

Alverio fingered the radio. “Adam 1 to Central, K…”

“Go ahead, 1.”

“Is that lion behaving viciously?”

“The complainant states lion is sniffing around the garbage.”

“10-4.” Alverio turned to his young partner. “Well…?”

“Maybe there’s something in the garbage?”

“Good thinking. Like what?”

“Hmmm,” the rookie frowned. The sincerity gave Alverio a pang of guilt.

“Uhh, they eat zebras, don’t they?”

“Damn, you’re right. They do eat zebras. Great idea.”

“Well, I saw it on a nature show.”

“No—no, wrong answer. Don’t undercut your abilities, kid. You’re gonna make detective. You’re a natural.”

Alverio pretended to activate the radio. “Adam 1 to Central—do we have any recent zebra homicides?”

\* \* \*

On the floor at her feet lay the bag of lingerie. Anna stood naked in front of the full-length mirror in the bedroom. She stared into her reflection. The shape of her face—square, with a short forehead, wide jaws, slightly rounded chin—it struck her right now as attractive. Growing up she’d yearned for the delicate prettiness of, say, a heart-shaped face, and she’d played with different ways of wearing her auburn hair to make her jawline appear to taper. But right now the strong blunt lines of her features suggested to her a strength and depth and beauty that was—well, could she use this word? Exotic. The



notion made her laugh. A good Catholic girl like her might get called lots of things, she thought, but “exotic” isn’t one of them. Not in the Bronx.

Leaning closer to the mirror, she cupped one breast, lifting slightly, then she lifted the other. Then she smoothed her stomach. Not flabby, though not exactly firm, and certainly not rippled with muscle, not anymore. In high school she’d been an athlete—point guard on the girl’s basketball team at St. Margaret’s. Her body—compact and muscular, but...well, she knew enough to know the shallowness of comparing herself to lingerie models. The “objectification brush.” She understood all that.

She ran her fingers down her thick thighs, then lightly through the curls of her pubic hair, and then she wondered for the millionth time why all this was happening. Barack Obama, the “event,” and now... lingerie? Once or twice, way back when, before their child had been born, she’d worn lingerie for Anthony. Ah, right, *for* Anthony. The word stuck now like something caught in her throat. Everything in her life always *for* others. *For* family, *for* community, *for* the church—*for* God...

She coughed hard and grabbed the bag and jerked it open and pulled on the new panties with such a burst of energy it felt like a discharge of anger. Then she stared again into the mirror. The silky delicacy of the fabric felt smooth and cool on her skin, and the high-cut diamond shapes of its angles made her legs seem longer, thinner. She put on the bra with its super-low neckline and cut-out sides, and gazed again into the mirror. Shifting her weight slowly from foot to foot, turning slightly, exaggerating the curve of one hip, then the other—she looked good, and she knew it. Then she thought about the dress she’d selected, an old one, something she’d worn a few times to weddings. Navy blue, long-sleeved, crew-necked, floor-length—it covered everything. But what a delicious feeling: the privacy underneath. She ran the tip of her finger along the thin string of the panties. Thrilling, empowering—what nobody would know.

She thought about her and Anthony—their sexual life. Just the two of them again made their two-bedroom apartment feel big! She had never thought that their daughter going to college would be such a change, but... they’d joked about getting kinky. Sex on the floor in the living room, that type of thing. But no—the quiet plink of silverware scraping the plate during dinner never seemed to get either of them “in the mood.” How long had it been? Several weeks? Or months? When was the last time they’d had sex?

She wasn't sure. Not since his partner Sal made detective, she thought. And wondered about that. What had really happened that day? She sensed something had happened.

And why didn't she want Anthony to accompany her tonight? Did she fear that he'd embarrass her? Say something off-color, drop a cop line critical of "liberal do-gooders?" Maybe that was it. But she sometimes said things herself mocking the smugness, the self-righteousness of liberals. No, it wasn't politics that concerned her. This event—her recognition—triggered something between her and Anthony that... a threat. Her achievement, her shining, her dinner with Barack Obama—it threatened to make her husband feel small. Was that it?

Small and—impotent?

The thought came to her with a surge of crazy emotions. Was Anthony avoiding her because—no, no, no. This was too much, she thought. And felt anger pulse in her chest and throat. Now she was supposed to worry about his feelings! Tonight, a night celebrating her good work—she was supposed to downplay her success because it made him feel like a failure? As if she existed only in relation to the role she played in his life? Fuck that, she thought, and her crassness surprised her. But it felt right: his insecurity is his problem, not hers.

\* \* \*

They turned the corner and rolled down the block.

"Have you ever apprehended a lion?" Alveria asked.

"What?"

"A lion."

"Apprehended?"

"You need an extra pair of cuffs. Front paws and back paws. You got extra cuffs?"

The rookie's jaw tensed. Then he cracked a small smile. "How about a chair and a whip? If we call for back-up, will ESU bring those?"

"What? You think this is some kind of fucking joke?" Alverio spoke in a low tone, tense with threat, with understated power, like in a movie, he thought, when the gangster's about to kill someone or commit a horrible act of cruelty and knows he can get away with it. The excellence of his performance surprised

him. He added a little more rasp to his voice, then said, “Do you know how dangerous a lion can be?”

Just then a large green dumpster came into view—the kind used for hauling trash from a construction site. Light beige fur and a thick gold mane stuck out over the top of the bin.

“Holy shit—I thought you were messin’ wi—“

“Stop here, but pull over so we don’t block the street.”

The rookie obeyed, jerking the wheel nervously, pulling the patrol car up close to a black van with tinted windows.

“Now stay here, and don’t touch the fuckin’ radio. You got that?”

“What about calling an 85—“

“No backup,” Alverio snapped. “Just wait here.”

Alverio got out of the car, then paused and made a show of adjusting his gun in its holster. Then he slammed the door shut so hard that the police car rocked slightly. And then, as he walked toward the dumpster, he somehow knew that he’d gone too far. The joke—it wouldn’t be funny.

He marched straight up to the dumpster and pulled out the life-size stuffed animal. They sold it in the zoo’s gift shop. Every few years, the NYPD tries talking to zoo officials, but... whatever. It’s a radio-run cops never forget.

\* \* \*

After the event, alone, back home, Anna sat in the kitchen in the dark. She didn’t want to go bed, didn’t want to get undressed, didn’t want to do anything. The night had been—well, what had she expected? Maybe a hundred people in a huge house, a dozen being “honored.” Speeches, long lists of names being thanked. At one point, during the strawberry shortcake desert, the former president, making the rounds, came by her table. She said hello, but he seemed to have forgotten her name. Obviously.

She’d expected Anthony to be home by now, a little after midnight. Just then she heard the front door opening. Although she’d had only one glass of wine, suddenly she felt light-headed as an idea came to her. With the kitchen light off, Anthony would think she was in the bedroom, so she crept to the side of the refrigerator and pulled her dress over the top of her head. A chill goose-bumped her legs and arms, but she dropped the dress and ran her hands all over her body, stopping to feel the delicious fabric

of the lingerie.

Then the kitchen light came on.

“What the—“

“You should’ve come, Anthony. I wish you’d been there with me.”

“Anna, are you drunk? What’s with the—”

“No—no, I...”

“You wore that?”

“I—I bought this... I—I want to make love with you, now.” She grabbed him by the elbow.

“Come...”

As she led him into the bedroom, Anthony wanted to ask her to explain, to tell him about the dinner and meeting Obama and everything—but there was no stopping her. She positioned their bodies in front of the bed and pulled his tee shirt up over his head, kissing his bare chest, and then she dropped to her knees and started to unbuckle his pants.

He looked down at her, then closed his eyes and didn’t understand anything. His thoughts swirled back to the lion in the dumpster, how some poor fearful woman had called the cops, and then he’d taken her fear and mocked it, distorted it, used it to amuse himself, the frightened woman’s fear resulting in more fear, a rookie’s fear, dumb cop prank, and his fear—the fear of making a mistake, of ruining his life...

Anna pulled down his underwear, and he felt the cool air on his genitals, then the warm wetness of her mouth. But he couldn’t slow his thoughts—fragments, swirling, crazy pictures in his mind of lions, monkeys, dogs, beasts, three-headed flaming monsters, angry black faces, white cops, brown cops, white shirts, brief-cased men, frowning, groaning, low voices, news reports, in a last minute development studies show experts worry radios crackle shots fired-shots-fired all units be advised shots fired a new study reveals shots fired disturbing questions arise that cops afraid to do their job—

He slipped his hands onto Anna’s face and gently pushed her away.

When Anna felt the tips of his fingers touch the side of her face, she didn’t expect—no. This—to be pushed away. It frightened her. What was happening? Why? She leaned back, then raised herself

from her knees and sat on the edge of the bed. Her heart pounded.

Anthony pulled up his underwear and zipped his pants and sat next to her.

Finally, Anna whispered, “Anthony, what’s wrong?”

He shook his head.

“Are you mad that I went alone tonight?”

“No,” he whispered back. “I’m proud of you.”

“I’m just trying to—I don’t know—own myself,” she said.

They sat there in silence until a strange sound came from somewhere outside—like a deep moan, but deeper, more guttural, and it seemed to echo, vibrate, shudder with power. The roar of an engine? A generator? Con Edison was working on the power lines in the neighborhood—was that it?

“You hear that?” Anna asked.

“Yeah,” Anthony answered.

“What is it? Strange. It sounds like—I don’t know what...”

A thought jumped into Anthony’s mind. It’s a lion roaring, he thought. And he took his wife’s hand and squeezed tightly, and when she squeezed back, he said, “I gotta talk to you, Anna.”

And he brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her fingers. Slowly, tenderly, with real feeling.

THE END

*\*Walter B. Levis, a former crime reporter, now teaches and works freelance. His nonfiction has appeared in newspapers and magazines including The New York Daily News, The National Law Journal, The Chicago Reporter, The New Republic, and The New Yorker, among many others. He is author of the novel Moments of Doubt (2003). His short fiction, which includes a Henfield Prize and Pushcart nomination, has appeared widely. Complete info [www.walterlevis.com](http://www.walterlevis.com)*

[Privacy Policy](#) [Privacy Tools](#)

© 2019 BoomerLitMag. All Rights Reserved. [WordPress](#).

[Candour Theme](#). Powered by

---