In every drink may be poison; in every coat, a pie

By Richard Ben Cramer
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NEW YORK — For an instant, the scene outside the criminal courts building here evoked the memory of those helpless, horrid seconds in Dallas, when Jack Ruby rushed Lee Harvey Oswald and shot him dead as the nation watched on television.

Frank Sturgis, convicted Watergate burglar, former comrade-in-arms to Cuban Premier Fidel Castro and the man lately accused of participating in a conspiracy that led to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, got out of a cab on Centre Street.

As Sturgis stepped out, a squat, sinister, mutachioed man with the hard glint of purpose in his eye led the rush of photographers toward Sturgis. The man had no camera. He was scrambling in his overcoat for a bulky secret weapon.

Reflexively, one of Sturgis' lawyers, Henry Rothblatt, lifted his briefcase like a shield. A strangled little cry escaped Rothblatt's lips. Frank Nelson, Sturgis' old friend, another former Cuban freedom fighter now 70 years old, tried to jump the onrushing man.

A brawl ensued. There were cries for police. The attacker's arms were pinioned at his sides. The police and courthouse guards ripped open the formless overcoat to reveal — a pie, banana cream, slightly worse for wear.

This was Aaron Kay, New York's premier pie thrower, the man who put the hit on Mayor Abraham D. Beame during a televised election debate two months ago.

Kay favors conspiracy figures as targets. E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy are among his previous victims. But this week, Kay was arrested twice in his attempts to "pie" Frank Sturgis.

Kay is discovering, to his dismay, that in the clammy, suspicious world through which Frank Sturgis walks, there is never the moment of trust on which the pie thrower relies.

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The world of Frank Sturgis is filled with perceived assassins. Any drink might be poisoned. Any telephone might be tapped.

It is a world peopled with specters and spies and plots of all kinds. His is a mind that leaves no event unexplained. The explanation always starts with "They."

Sturgis says he was in New York last week at the behest of his old friend, Marita Lorenz, whom he met as the mistress of Castro in the freedom-fighting days nearly 20 years ago. Miss Lorenz was troubled, and she summoned Sturgis, he said.

"They were telephoning threats to her, threatening to kill her children," he explained. "She was receiving a great deal of pressure."

When Sturgis arrived at Miss Lorenz' apartment Monday night, he was arrested by two detectives. Miss Lorenz had told police that Sturgis had threatened to kill her if she stuck to her story that he was involved in President Kennedy's assassination.

Sturgis branded her charges a lie, but he said he still could not blame Miss Lorenz. Again, he explains:

"There is something behind this mess. They are telling her to make these statements against me. Communist agents are putting pressure on her, maybe. I feel in my heart she is not doing this as a person."

The charges against Sturgis were dropped Friday. The prosecutors conceded that they had no case. But lawyers on both sides and New York's police commissioner, Michael J. Codd, still are wondering why detectives arrested Sturgis on the basis of Miss Lorenz' unverified complaint, which was never sworn in court.

To Sturgis, it is all part of a larger pattern. "They're using me as the scapegoat," he said. "What they're trying to do is to make the Cuban exiles in this country look bad."

Who are "they," the architects of plots that bedevil the life of this 52-year-old, worried, slightly paunchy man?

"Communist agents," he says at times, and "foreign elements" at oth-

ers. Sometimes he simply says, "It's the people who are against me and my Cubans." He said he did not know exactly who they were, although he knew that they are controlled from Havana and Moscow. But they are a palpable enemy, a force in his life, a force he must continually fight.

He will keep it up, he said, "until the day I am either crippled or I'm dead."

"I am an anti-Communist," Sturgis said. "And I am a fighter."

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He became a fighter early on, in Philadelphia's Germantown, where he lived at the High Street home of his grandfather, Joseph Bona.

Sturgis was Frank Fiorini then. He has used many names since he left Philadelphia. He was arrested for the Watergate burglary with a set of credentials that identified him as Edward J. Hamilton. Sturgis was the name of the man his mother married when he was 25.

As a teenager, Frank Fiorni was a "pretty good" heavyweight boxer. His mother and his grandparents hoped that he would become a priest and so, for a while, did he.

But at age 17, in 1942, the "they" in his life were the Japanese; Frank Fiorini became a marine. For the next three years he fought all over the Pacific, was wounded twice and decorated often.

He loved that war, a good clean fight.

"That was my biggest fight," he recalled, "when I was 17 and joined the marines. But I won that fight. I won that war."

After the war, things weren't so simple.

He tried a stint with the Norfolk, Va., police, then ran a couple of nightclubs in Virginia Beach. But the peaceful life just didn't seem to fit.

In 1956, his uncle married a Cuban woman who was living in exile, banished by the government of Fulgencio Batista. That year, Sturgis met Fidel Castro in Miami. The next year, he took to the hills with Castro's guerrilla force.

He fought with Castro and smuggled in arms; he became Castro's air force security chief. While in Cuba, the Havana station chief of the CIA signed Sturgis up as an informant.

In 1959, as Castro came to power—reportedly with the help of the CIA—Sturgis continued his dual role as Cuban official and a CIA spy. That same year he recruited Miss Lorenz, then the mistress of the new Cuban premier, to provide him with information.

Sturgis was growing uneasy about Castro's loyalties. He says now that he warned his CIA controllers repeatedly that Castro was edging toward a Soviet alliance.

Finally, the break with Castro sent Sturgis home. He arranged for Miss Lorenz to be flown to the United States as well. Sturgis left Cuba a bitter man, determined to oust Castro or kill him.

Back in Miami, Sturgis' new home, he maintained contact with "my friends," a loose group of agents, former agents and Cuban exiles opposed to Castro. He and the former head of Castro's air force, Pedro Diaz-Lanz, fixed up an old Air Force bomber with CIA funds and flew it over Havana, dropping anti-Castro leaflets.

He lost touch with Marita Lorenz. She went off to adventures of her own. Her daughter, now 15, claims that her father is Perez Jimenez, the former dictator of Venezuela.

But Sturgis kept in touch with most of his former-agent friends. He got a job as a salesman, but never sold very well. He valued the work mostly for the traveling and the excellent cover it offered for clandestine operations.

In 1972, E. Howard Hunt needed men to staff his new White House "plumbers" force.

"A friend, an ex-CIA agent called me and told me I'd be approached," Sturgis recalls. "They said it was a national security mission."

They didn't have to ask twice.

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Last week, after two nights in jail, a weary Frank Sturgis squinted against the smoke in his lawyer's office and denied again that he had anything to do with the killing of John F. Kennedy.

"It's a lie and she knows it's a lie," Sturgis said, diving back into a tale of plots past and future. "I have a tape I made of her call . . ."

Sturgis did indeed have a tape, which he said he made unbeknownst to Marita Lorenz when she called him in Miami last week.

Unbeknownst to Sturgis, Miss Lorenz also taped the call.

To prove his point, Sturgis called his wife, Janet, to get her to play the tape for a reporter. Janet Sturgis excused herself for a minute during the call. She said she wanted to switch phones.

"Did she say she wanted to switch phones?" Sturgis asked as the reporter finished the call. "That means she was taping the call. She needed a minute to hook up."

Sometimes Sturgis talks as though if it might be better to drop out of his strange sub-world. "I'm going to be 53 next month," he mused over lunch one day. "I'm tired of being accused of things."

"These things keep popping up. It makes it hard to make a living."

Most of the time, he talks of his activities in the righteous rhetoric of the Cold War. He is "fighting for the flag" or "protecting the country against the people who would like to destroy America."

But when he is very tired, as he was last week, his big shoulders rise in a shrug and then sag. He thinks about who "they" are and how many "they" seem to be and he says:

"They haven't let up on met yet—not since I left Cuba . . . They use me for their own purposes, I guess."

Frank Sturgis