

THE HONOR ROLL MURDER

The beating death of a promising student shatters the peace—and the stereotypes—of a privileged California town

By SALLY B. DONNELLY ORANGE

“IT IS AN ILLUSION THAT YOUTH IS happy,” said W. Somerset Maugham. “An illusion of those who have lost it.” That illusion has been fading especially fast in one of the most prosperous and conservative corners of the country, home to the fantasy capital of America, Disneyland, and to a host of quieter fantasies as well. For residents of Orange County, California, the most perishable myth would seem to be that honor students, computer geniuses and star athletes would make headlines only for their remarkable achievements, never for their ruthless crimes.

After police discovered the body of 17-year-old Stuart Tay, any assumptions the community held about its schools, its values and its safety could not survive the details that emerged over the next few days. In what is now being called the “Honor Roll Murder,” Tay was brutally beaten by five other teenagers before he finally choked to death: three of the suspects, like Tay, were Asian Americans who were viewed as model kids and top students. The alleged mastermind, Robert Chan, 18, is expected to plead not guilty to murder charges this week. The four other defendants, Abraham Acosta, 16, Kim Kim, 16, Mun Kang, 17, and Charles Choe, 17, have pleaded not guilty and will learn on Feb. 5 whether they, like Chan, will be tried as adults and eligible for life in prison. One father captured the feelings of the families. “Everything was going perfect,” Chih-Tung Chan, an engineer, told the *Orange County Register* of his son Robert, who was in the running for valedictorian at Sunny Hills High School. “He was a good boy. I don’t understand.”

The county, where the median family income is \$46,700 a year, is home to a successful Asian-American community of doctors, engineers, teachers and small businessmen. The Tays, Chinese immigrants from Singapore, used the profits from Dr. Alfred Tay’s medical practice to



Model lives gone wrong: Robert Chan, alleged mastermind of the murder; inset, Stuart Tay

custom-build their 8,000-sq.-ft. home in an exclusive section of the city of Orange and to provide costly luxuries for their son and daughter. Stuart was a former Boy Scout, an academic standout at Foot-hill High School, and a founder of an Asian-culture club who hoped to attend a top-ranked college next fall. Some of his friends add subtle shadings to the glowing picture, mentioning the “techno-punk” clothes he had begun wearing as a senior and his frequent conversations about dying young. But even their wildest speculations do not go very far toward explaining why that prediction came true.

According to police, the six young men—not one had a criminal record—concocted a plan to rob the home of a local man who had dealt computer parts to Tay for his small business in selling computer systems. On New Year’s Eve, Tay told his parents he was going to run a quick er-

rand, and wheeled his Christmas present, a cherry red Nissan 300ZX, out through the gates of the driveway. His “errand” was a meeting with the others from which he would never return.

Police say the five young men had come to suspect that Tay, whom they had only just met through mutual friends, was going to betray their robbery scheme and had thoroughly rehearsed their response. According to investigators, while Tay was

looking into a metal box (it supposedly contained a gun), Chan motioned to Acosta to pick up one of two baseball bats resting against the wall. Acosta struck Tay in the head, while Chan picked up the other bat and began beating Tay on the head and body. Kang and Choe, waiting in the next room, heard Tay scream and ask, “What did I do to you?” Chan, apparently angered that Tay was still alive, poured rubbing alcohol down his throat and forced his mouth shut with duct tape. Tay died within minutes from his own vomit.

Chan took Tay’s wallet and, according to police, the boys later divided the money among themselves. They buried the body in a shallow grave they had dug under a rubber tree in the backyard. Kim wore gloves to drive Tay’s car away from the house, and left it with the keys in the ignition in the largely working-class city of Compton, near Los Angeles. By 9 p.m., the Tays had begun to worry and called their son’s friends looking for him. Just an hour later police found his stripped car in an alley. By this time the teenagers had gone their separate ways; Acosta and Kang were said to have turned up at parties later that night. It took the police three days to track the sus-

pects down and arrest them.

Though the police and prosecutors are in the early stages of their investigations, they have dismissed theories that Chan was a member of the Chinese Mafia or that competition for a girlfriend led to the horrible crime. The death of Stuart Tay may come down to a case of distrust and “bad blood,” according to Deputy District Attorney Lewis Rosenblum. “What is clear is that Robert Chan did not like or trust Stuart Tay. Why that was so is still very unclear.” But Rosenblum is less concerned with the motivation of Chan and the others than with the events that took place on New Year’s Eve. It is merely the rest of Orange County that is still trying to figure out the why. ■

