

# Something About Mary

By Todd Matthews

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**T**he guest in Room 214 was in trouble.

It wasn't that she was unruly. In fact, after checking into her room at Seattle's Hotel Vintage Park, she seemed quieter than cat paws on carpet. She never summoned room service. She made no phone calls. She placed a DO NOT DISTURB sign outside the door, secured the deadbolt, and bunkered herself away in the \$175-a-night "Superior Guestroom." While other hotel guests passed in and out of their rooms—en route to business meetings, shopping in the city, or drinks at Tulio's restaurant downstairs—the guest remained in her room.

When the guest failed to check out of her room on Friday morning, the clerks at the Vintage Park's front desk grew suspicious. Using their passkey, the hotel staff entered the room. The woman's miscellaneous belongings—velour outfits, shoes, slippers, black leather gloves, leather purse, Estée Lauder cosmetics, toothpaste, perfume, Metamucil, Crystal Light, pantyhose, a kitchen bowl, and an iron—were packed in several luggage bags. The room was tidy. The woman lay atop the bed. The bed sheets were stripped, and her head propped against a small stack of dark-print pillows. She wore black leggings and a black top. Her hair was neatly combed. Her nails were painted cream white. She wore makeup. A large black Bible lay open across the woman's chest.

Why hadn't the woman left her room for two days? And why hadn't she checked out of her room when she was supposed to? Furthermore, why didn't she stir when the hotel staff entered the room?

Simple. The woman was dead.

A glass tumbler with cyanide residue glistened on the nightstand.

The Seattle police were called.

The King County Medical Examiner's Office was notified.

Investigators found a note scribbled upon hotel stationery:

*To Whom It May Concern. I have decided to end my life, and no one is responsible for my death. Mary Anderson. P. S. I have no relatives. You can use my body as you choose.*

**J**erry Webster, Chief Investigator at the King County Medical Examiner's Office (KCMEO), knows Mary Anderson well.

He has the scars to prove it.

"This thing's got endless value," he says, half in jest and half in frustration. I meet him one Wednesday afternoon in early April. Webster is an affable man. He is thin and lanky, with short gray hair and a salt-and-pepper mustache. He has a bounce in his step, and his keys jangle noisily on his hip as he leads me down a narrow hallway in the basement of Harborview Medical Center. The office of the King County Medical Examiner is windowless, cramped, and dark—just as one would imagine it. There is an old couch, a television set, a row of lockers, and a computer. The place is somewhat cluttered, and Webster's office is no exception. Webster, shortly after retiring from the Kirkland Police Department, became bored and sought work that was both challenging and intriguing. "To be honest with you, it's absolutely fascinating. I wish I didn't like this work because I'd like to just go home and rest. But I'm excited about going to work every day. It's a pretty interesting thing because you never know what your challenges are going to be on any given day." I take a seat across from him, and he opens the file on Mary Anderson: "Here's our girl."

Webster places several large 8" x 10" photographs on the table. I scrutinize them. It's the first time I've *seen* Mary Anderson, and I'm overwhelmed by the lack of drama in the photos. Mary Anderson is dressed in black leggings and a black top. The sheets on the bed have been stripped, and she is lying with her hands at her side. Her feet are bare, and her head is propped against dark pillows. Her reddish-brown hair is neatly combed. Her face has been neatly applied with makeup. A Bible

is opened upon her chest, face down. Mary Anderson's eyes are closed, and if I gave these photos to a passerby on the street, they would most likely assume that they were photos of a woman taking a nap.

"That's just exactly how she was found," Webster says. "The Bible was opened to the Twenty-Third Psalm." After discovering her body, Webster ran an initial check of fingerprints through several agencies—Interpol, NCIC, AFIS, and the RCMP; he came up empty. He ran a check for dental records, which proved futile. Webster completed computer searches and missing-persons checks; they came up empty. Mary Anderson paid cash for her room when she checked into the Hotel Vintage Park. She left an address of 132 East Third Street, New York, NY 11103; the address does not exist. She left a phone number of (212) 569-5549; the phone number does not exist.

**W**ebster was stumped.

"This looked like a very easy case to solve," Webster says. "We had the lady's name, we had her address, we had the note, we had the cause of death. Basically, it appeared, on the surface—at the beginning of the investigation—that we had everything we needed in order to solve this very quickly. If this had been correct information, we would have had this solved within 20 minutes. And 20 minutes have now become a year-and-a-half."

Webster is *not* an inept or indifferent investigator. Still unidentified are 25 bodily remains in King County since 1982; at any given moment, the city of Los Angeles has more than 400. "We don't let go of them," Webster asserts. "You have to look at it from the standpoint that these people have family members out there—brothers or sisters or mothers or fathers or husbands or wives or whatever—and they have a right to know. You would hate to go through life thinking, 'I haven't seen my brother since 1982. Where the hell is he? Is he alive? Is he dead?' The family has a right to have that settled for them. That's why we work [these cases] so hard." Nor is Webster a rookie investigator. In the past year alone, he has investigated everything from Native American remains to the dead body of a full-term infant discovered in a restroom trash container.

On Sunday, July 27, 1997, fishermen in the clear waters of the Snoqualmie River discovered dozens of human bones—including an intact skull, arm and leg bones, several teeth, lower jaws, and parts of at least four skulls—belonging to 10 people. Police divers found a burlap potato sack on the river bottom. An anthropological examination revealed that the bones were dumped in the river only days before the fishermen discovered them. Webster and Forensic Anthropologist Kathy Taylor learned that the bones were at least two hundred years old and were the remains of at least one juvenile. Webster believes the bones were part of a private collection, in that at least three bones had been varnished or covered with shellac.

On November 20, 1997, a female employee of a Lake City Way Chevron convenience store discovered the dead body of a full-term infant in a restroom trash container. Webster investigated the incident and determined that the baby boy (nicknamed “Baby Boy Doe”) had been born alive—healthy and uninjured—two days before. A review of the store’s security cameras revealed a young, dark-haired woman entering the restroom on November 18, and it is believed that the unidentified woman was the baby’s mother. “This one just kind of pulled at everybody’s heartstrings,” Webster comments, reflecting on the incident. The Seattle Police Department and the KCMEO hosted a burial service, the Archdiocese of Seattle donated a gravesite, the Associated Catholic Cemeteries donated clothes and a teddy bear, and Flintoft’s Issaquah Funeral Home donated a small casket. Webster, referring to the donations, remarks, “It just seemed like the right thing to do for the little guy.”

On Saturday, July 6, 1996, a 13-year-old girl and her nine-year-old sister left the Crest Motel on Aurora Avenue to buy cigarettes for an older brother. On Tuesday, February 10, 1998, the girls’ remains were found buried in a field on an abandoned farm in Bothell. A transient living in the barn discovered the remains. Webster interviewed the girls’ mother for more than two hours. She told Webster that the girls were “independent,” and the family often traveled by bus; the girls were very familiar with the bus system. The mother and her daughters arrived in Seattle from the Tri-Cities area in 1995—the year the mother gave birth to her ninth child. “Neither girl had money,” the mother told Webster. “But they knew how to panhandle.” The family paid for the one-bedroom motel room with donations from a local charity. Webster concluded that the girls were victims of “homicidal violence” and, with the help of

Forensic Anthropologist Taylor, determined the girls died shortly after they disappeared. “The death certificate was signed, after we made the identification, as ‘a homicidal violence of undetermined etiology.’ The reason we were able to say it was a homicidal death was because we had nothing but bone fragments, and no other logical conclusion could be drawn. But nine- and 13-year-old girls do not die and then bury their own bodies.”

On Monday, February 23, 1998, a man was digging a garden in the backyard of his girlfriend’s University District home when he found a human skull. “I didn’t believe it at first,” he reported. “It looked like a gourd. I hit it with a pickax in the face, and the skull came rolling out, leaving a big hole in the dirt. I thought for sure it was a murder victim.” Webster’s team investigated the find and concluded that the sizes and shapes of the bones indicated that a man, woman, and child were buried at the site, possibly around the turn of the century.

Mary Anderson’s case seems simple compared to some of the others Webster has handled. Hers seems a basic case of suicide, yet it continues to baffle Webster. When the checks on fingerprints, dental records, and missing-persons rosters came up empty, Webster began to scramble. “We checked taxi companies, the YWCA, area restaurants, and Nordstrom. We checked the clothing manufacturers we could identify, including one in Canada and several in the United States.” When the autopsy was performed, examiners removed a copper intrauterine device from Mary Anderson’s corpse. “We explored the part number of the IUD. It came back. We found out it’s been sold thousands and thousands of times all over the continent. So that led nowhere. We even [tried to identify the] chemical composition [of the cyanide] so that we could go back to some of the scientific supply houses and see if they could identify it by a batch number. If they could identify it by a batch number, they could tell us what area it was sold in. Then, we could focus on that particular area. If we could have found out that this was a chemical that was only sold in, say, New Jersey, then we [would have had] a place to focus our investigation. But there were no records or anything like that.”

**N**ewspaper articles about Mary Anderson were soon published in the *Seattle Times* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. The case was aired nationally on *Hard Copy*.

More than 200 leads bombarded Webster's office. "The majority of them were really just more suggestive, you know, like a suggestion to do this or that," Webster explains, flipping through the file and reading off some of the leads. "For example, 'Well, she looks European. Look in Europe.' Rather broad. But we did get twelve [leads] back that had promise. One lead came from Pico Rivera, California, of a lady who appeared to be the same approximate age and so forth. However, the lady they believed it was had dentures, webbed toes, and a scar on her thigh; our lady did not. So, we cleared that one."

Several tipsters commented that Mary Anderson's handwriting "looked European." Webster thought this was interesting. "You know, she *does* look European. She also looks Greek. Though we *did* determine her race, there was no way *anthropologically* to determine ethnicity. Other than we know she's Caucasian and she's probably European. Just like you and me, is about what it boils down to." Webster scans more leads—one from a psychic in College Place, Washington ("The name came to me in a vision."). Another lead pointed to a woman who had had a hysterectomy; Mary Anderson had not. "This was a good one," Webster says, pulling a sheet from the file.

"Everything was in place on this [lead], but this woman was seen alive after [Mary Anderson died]." A man in California, recalling a classmate at Encinal Junior High School who resembled Mary Anderson, sent a choir photo from a 1962 yearbook to compare with the images of Mary Anderson's corpse. A man in Alaska contacted Webster and reported that he recalled a Mary Anderson who lived in Hillsboro, Oregon, during the 1950s. A Seattle-area antique collector contacted Webster to report that he remembered seeing a woman who resembled Mary Anderson working at an area flea market or antique store. All leads were pursued and, unfortunately, zero closure was placed on the Mary Anderson case.

"We have worked an endless number of hours on this case," Webster tells me, rubbing his eyes. "We've gone down different paths of investigative techniques, and they have all led nowhere. That's basically the long and short of Mary Anderson. After an intense investigation, we have no idea who this lady is."

If you want to know the *who* and *what* and *when* and *where* of Mary Anderson, it's pretty simple. No matter how deeply you dig, how far you research, or how hard you attempt to retrace her steps, your search will likely leave you frustrated and fascinated. You will soon discover that the facts, clues, and tips surrounding Mary Anderson's identity are everywhere and nowhere.

Why did she leave a Bible open on her chest? Simple: she was religious. But committing suicide seems sacrilegious. Moreover, most religious dogma forbids the self-slain body to rest in peace.

Why did she kill herself in Room 214 at the Hotel Vintage Park? Simple: she had been in that room before. However, investigators concluded that the room was randomly picked; Mary Anderson made no reservations, and the hotel staff picked the room.

Why did she ingest cyanide? Simple: it is one of the quickest and most painless ways to die. The victim is dead in a matter of seconds, the result of sudden cardiac arrest. But cyanide is also a tough substance to obtain. It isn't sold over the counter; to obtain it, one would have to work at either a chemical laboratory or a mining supply company. Even then, detailed records are kept when the chemical is issued.

After researching Mary Anderson's case for several months, I had a gut feeling that Mary Anderson intended to baffle those who would find her body. Everything about her is false—her address and phone number are non-existent. Her name is phony. And any identification that *isn't* false simply does not exist.

The woman appears rootless.

"I have the distinct feeling that she left a clue in that room, and we missed it," Webster explains. "There may have been something there that, if it had been *understood* or *identified*, there may have been some sort of a clue there that might have helped us. But we didn't find anything." Webster pauses a moment. His gaze trails. He slowly continues, "There was...one thing...that concerned me. It seems like there was a copy of either *Seattle Weekly* or *The Stranger* there, and it was open, and there were three maple leaves on a page. I don't know what page it was open to. And we didn't do anything other than observe it. Not that it's to say that there may have been something there. It's just that when an investigation goes on this long, you start really drilling down to try and find the most obvious things."

Ironically, renowned Forensic Anthropologist William R. Maples, in his book *Dead Men Do Tell Tales: The Strange and Fascinating Cases of a Forensic Anthropologist*, observes that suicides such as Mary Anderson's are commonplace. "There is a type of suicide," Dr. Maples writes, "which may be called the fastidious suicide, involving a person who wishes to look beautiful in death, to die tidily, or to cause as little trouble as possible to the investigators afterward. Women will often put on a pretty nightgown and apply makeup before killing themselves. Many of the skeletons that come to my laboratory belong to suicide victims who behaved like shy hermits in their final hours. Usually, they are found in remote, out-of-the-way places. People often go to some hidden place to kill themselves, whether from a desire to act alone and unhindered or because they wish simply to disappear in solitude, spending their last moments in reflective silence."

The only way I knew to acquaint myself with Mary Anderson was to visit places she had been. I had to retrace her steps. The catch, though, was that I could only think of two places she had been: Room 214 at Hotel Vintage Park, where she lived for a day before taking her life, and Crown Hill Cemetery, where she is buried.

I assess my situation. Jerry Webster and his investigators had pursued hundreds of leads, conducted record checks in the United States and Canada, and pleaded their case on national television. As Webster explains to me, "There have been a horrendous number of hours put into this thing...[b]ut we can't say the one thing we need to know—who the hell is she?" Webster has the financial backing and investigative resources of the county. I have a PearlCorder, a notepad, some pens, and very little experience in investigation. My situation is not promising. I want to know as much as I can about a woman who is *very* mysterious and *very* dead.

I decide to pay a visit to the Hotel Vintage Park—a historic locale in downtown Seattle. In the late 1920s, the McNaught Mansion—the home of prominent Seattle attorney James McNaught, constructed in 1883 and later moved across the street in 1904 to make way for the public library—was razed for construction of the Kennedy Hotel and its ground-floor restaurant, The Gold Coin, which was a popular hangout for stockbrokers. In January 1992, San Francisco hotel magnate Bill Kimpton purchased the 10-story Kennedy Hotel for \$7 million. Kimpton owned a chain of hotels in Seattle (Alexis Hotel), Portland (Hotel Vintage Plaza, Fifth Avenue Suites,) San Francisco (Hotel Monaco, Prescott Hotel), and Los Angeles (Beverly Prescott



Hotel). The Kennedy Hotel's building delighted Kimpton. He commented, "[I] love the character of the building. [I] look for downtown historic-type hotels, then renovate them to bring back the old glory." The Kennedy Hotel shut down, and the building was gutted, renovated, and transformed into the Hotel Vintage Park. In August 1992, the Hotel Vintage Park opened to much fanfare. A *Seattle Times* reporter commented, "The wine flowed faster than the spring runoff at Wednesday night's grand opening reception for the Hotel Vintage Park." The hotel's 126 rooms were named after Washington vineyards and wineries. The hotel's grand suite—a sprawling room with a wood-burning fireplace, tiled spa bath, draped canopy bed, surround-sound stereo, and a multiple-jet shower—was named after Washington State's eponymous Chateau Ste. Michelle. Celebrities soon frequented the hotel and its ground-floor restaurant, Tulio's. One *Times* columnist cooed, "Actors Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward were in town, staying in the Chateau St. Michelle suite at the Hotel Vintage Park. [They] hosted a party for six friends at Tulio's [and] asked for their favorite table."

As far as the Hotel Vintage Park is concerned, Mary Anderson never checked into Room 214. The hotel, it seems, is in serious denial. "We went through some problems with the Hotel," Webster says. "They did not want the name of the hotel published. We never identified it as the Hotel Vintage Park, but anyone who can read an address can find that out. [And the address] is a matter of public record." Webster doesn't think the hotel is being unreasonable. He understands why they would want to keep Mary Anderson and the history of Room 214 under wraps. "Nobody would want that kind of publicity," he adds. "It's a commercial venture, and you certainly don't want to have that kind of information [public]. For instance, if you had a friend in your house who committed suicide, I don't think you'd want that to show up in the *Seattle Times*." Mary Anderson's death was not the first to occur in that building, either. On August 14, 1990, a 16-year-old girl staying at the Kennedy Hotel with her parents fell to her death on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor.

One Saturday afternoon, I enter the Hotel Vintage Park. Well-dressed tourists lounge on couches in the lobby and wait to be seated at Tulio's. I ride the elevator to the second floor and step into a narrow alcove lined with brass accents and tall mirrors. I follow a hallway down to Room 214, which, rather spookily, is the last suite before the fire exit. I stand outside the door, stare at the suite's door and, more

importantly, imagine what is beyond that door. I wonder if Mary Anderson had passed anyone in the hallway en route to her suite. Did they acknowledge her? Did they find her to be peculiar? Did she request assistance with her bags, and if so, did the bellhop strike up a pointless conversation about the weather?

I place my hand on the door, run it along the smooth wood. I stare back down the carpeted hallway toward the elevator. Flowered wallpaper lines the hallway. I place my hand on the door handle and apply a little pressure.

The door is locked.

I step back, stare at the door. Mary Anderson is dogging me. The door to the hotel suite where she spent the last days of her life is locked. I am not allowed access. Later, in an e-mail to Webster at the KCMEQ, I describe my visit to Room 214. Webster replies, "I am glad you did not get into Room 214. Do you realize that it would be burglary? I guess you would have plenty of time to write if you were sitting in a jail cell! If you do get in the room, say Hi to Mary for me and see if you can get her address and phone number by chance."

Shortly after I visit Room 214, I contact the hotel's general manager via e-mail and pose a few questions:

*I am a freelance journalist presently writing an article about the October 9, 1996, suicide of "Mary Anderson" in Room 214 at the Hotel Vintage Park. I am hoping that you could take the time to answer a few questions regarding Ms. Anderson's death:*

*1. Do you think Ms. Anderson picked the Hotel Vintage Park for a specific reason or was the hotel chosen randomly?*

*2. Are there similar cases of mysterious deaths or suicides at the Hotel Vintage Park?*

*3. Do you have any ideas or theories as to the identity of Ms. Anderson?*

*Thank you for taking the time to consider my questions, and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.*

*Sincerely,*

*Todd Matthews*

The general manager never responds to my queries, and the hotel never comments to me about this case.

I don't envy any new investigator joining Webster's team.

It isn't because of the work. Investigators who work day in and day out at the KCMEO don't perceive corpses as spooky or repulsive. After a while, the bodies and blood become a four-letter word: Work. And to listen to Webster talk about his work and the number of hours he puts in (he works an average of 65 hours per week), the exhaustion is palpable—in his scratchy voice and the way he repeatedly removes his glasses to rub his tired eyes. Yet he finds excitement working as Chief Investigator at the KCMEO. One evening, I arrive at his office around 6:30 p.m. He is preparing a slide presentation and lecture for nursing students. His day started at 4:00 a.m., and before the presentation is done, it will approach 9:30 p.m.

Nor don't I envy any new KCMEO investigator because of their supervisor's character—quite the contrary. Webster is a friendly, compassionate man who is known to volunteer time with people living with AIDS in the last stages of the disease, who contact him requesting help on how to get their affairs in order before they pass away. Simply put, Webster excels at and loves his job. He could easily live on his police pension alone, but he's addicted to the challenges inherent in investigative work. "My job in many ways," Webster comments, "is to serve the living through the dead."

So, why don't I envy any new investigator joining Webster's team? Simple: Carkeek Park. "Many new investigators that start here get this book," Webster explains. He pulls a white, three-ring binder from a nearby bookshelf and places it on his desk. "This is the kid that lives next door to you. You know he's there, but you never paid any attention to him."

The "kid" Webster is talking about is an unidentified young man—approximately 18 to 26 years old—found hanging from a tree in Carkeek Park. The photographs are graphic. The young man—roughly 5' 11" and weighing approximately 180 pounds—is wearing a black leather jacket with a fur collar, a light purple pullover with red stripes, old blue jeans, and sneakers. He has black hair and an olive complexion, and his body hangs at least 10 feet in the air. The angle of the photograph is eerie. Sunlight creeps through the tree's leaves, and the thick nylon rope wraps around the young man's neck like a giant, calloused fist.

“This is the case that I started on in 1991,” Webster comments, referring to his days as a rookie investigator working under the direction of then-Chief Investigator Bill Haglund. Though the young man’s body was found on October 9, 1984, his identity remains a mystery. “I always felt, and still feel, that this case could be solved. Basically, I went back and pulled all the records that I could. And then I took all the investigative files they had up to date, stuffed them back in the folder, and started with the case report—investigator directed to a hill in the woods...closer examination...knot tied around his neck—lividity consistent—an obvious description of how he was found—something about the tree—and so forth. I went back through and, over a period of about three years, I completely *reinvestigated* this case without looking at what the other people had done, simply because I didn’t want to get put on a road and end up going down the same road they had been. Yet, I arrived at the same dead-end that they did.”

Carkeek Park, named after Morgan Carkeek (the city’s leading contractor at the turn of the century), has a somewhat notorious history of homicides, false drownings, missing persons, rapes, and suicides. Finding a dead body in or near Carkeek Park is not unusual.

On April 27, 1982, a 27-year-old bartender disappeared while hitchhiking on Aurora Avenue North. Her strangled body was found the same day in an alley near Carkeek Park.

On April 19, 1989, a 27-year-old man left his wife a note indicating he was going rafting at Carkeek Park. He never returned, and later that day, his raft was found along the shores of Puget Sound, about a mile north of the park. He was presumed dead. A memorial service was held in his hometown of Taylor Falls, Minnesota. His wife, distraught over her husband’s death, underwent counseling. Yet, in a truly bizarre twist, he was arrested three months later when he was found behind the wheel of a stolen pickup truck in Hood Falls, Oregon.

On June 20, 1989, after dinner and a walk in Carkeek Park, a substitute teacher at a nearby school raped a 16-year-old girl.

On June 5, 1992, the body of an 18- to 25-year-old man was found at the brink of a cliff just inside Carkeek Park. The young man had been shot in the head.

In early April 1993, a 35-year-old man was killed by a Burlington Northern freight train as he walked on tracks north of Carkeek Park. In a similar incident, a 30-year-

old man told a friend he was “having problems” and, a short time later, committed suicide by stepping in front of a moving Burlington Northern freight train on railroad tracks a half-mile north of Carkeek Park.

When investigators began looking into the 1984 hanging of the young man in Carkeek Park, they walked away mystified. “I went back,” Webster continues, flipping through the photos and paperwork on the Carkeek Park case, “and went through the medical on him. For instance, you can see some interesting things [in the photos]. Do *you* see some interesting things?”

“Well, I’m not an expert,” I reply, studying the autopsy photos. The young man is lying on a tray in the autopsy room. His head is turned to the side, his muscles having stiffened from being dead for several hours. “Are these bruises around his ankles?”

“Well, not so much,” Webster replies, correcting me. “A lot of this is darkening color as a result of him hanging in suspension. There are two things here—actually, three things here—that are very, very obvious that nobody ever saw before that has significance—.”

I study the photos a bit longer. I’m stumped.

“Look at the color of the arms,” Webster says, pointing at the young man’s tanned arms. Curiously enough, one arm is darker than the other arm. “Solar tanning. This is what you’d expect to see. *This* arm is darker than *that* arm because the guy probably drove with his arm out the window. I don’t know what the hell it means. And what’s this?”

“A tan line,” I answer. An untanned stripe marks the young man’s left wrist. “He had a watch on at some point.”

“But there was no watch,” Webster replies, clearly perplexed. These are all *new* clues that investigators hadn’t noticed in 1984, but they do nothing but convolute what little is known about the young man. “But he *did* wear a watch. The other thing is he’s clean—fairly clean-shaven—he’s got less than a 24-hour beard. And the rope was brand-new, an over-the-counter type.”

The Carkeek Park case is a mystery in the truest sense. Investigators believed the young man lived near the park because he was fairly well-kempt and hung himself with a rope that could have been purchased at several stores near the area.

The similarities between the Hotel Vintage Park and Carkeek Park cases are eerie. The young man hung himself on October 9, 1984—exactly 12 years from the day that Mary Anderson checked into Room 214 at the Hotel Vintage Park. Both appeared to be cut-and-dried suicide cases requiring no more than a few minutes of investigation: run some fingerprints, check for ID, and contact the families. Case closed. In the case of Carkeek Park, a few minutes have turned into 13 years.

“These kinds of things *eat on me*,” Webster says. He gestures to the Carkeek Park file. “Every time I look at this thing, something new shows up on it. And what I do is assign this to a new investigator. I’ll give them the two pages of the case report and say, ‘Go for it. Find out who this kid is.’”

**M**ary Anderson’s suicide may be one of life’s great mysteries, but when her corpse was brought to the KCMEO on October 11, 1996, it was business as usual. King County has a Medical Examiner’s system, an unbiased arm of the County Health Department. “We are not elected officials,” Webster says. “The coroner is an elected official that may be subjected to pressure, whereas our office is totally independent. We don’t represent law enforcement. We don’t represent the prosecutors. We don’t represent the families or the attorneys. We represent the dead person lying on the floor.” A Chief Medical Examiner, who is also a Board Certified Forensic Pathologist, administers the KCMEO. Dr. Donald Reay, the Chief Medical Examiner at the KCMEO, is one of the top Forensic Pathologists in the United States. Dr. Reay is internationally renowned for several specialties: asphyxial death (hangings) and positional asphyxia (police restraint). As a result, Dr. Reay often testifies in death penalty cases that involve hanging. When Wesley Allen Dodd and Charles Campbell were sentenced to a hanging death at Walla Walla State Penitentiary, Dr. Reay was consulted because of his expertise. Dr. Reay was also the Chief Medical Examiner when the autopsies were performed on the 13 victims of the 1983 Wah Mee Massacre in Seattle’s Chinatown-International District. Moreover, Dr. Reay has consulted on several high-profile cases.

Another valuable asset to the KCMEO team is Forensic Anthropologist Kathy Taylor. “I love my job,” Taylor explains. “Forensic anthropology is my passion. That’s what I went to school for all those many years to do. I could spend hours and hours

and hours at a table with bones, trying to figure out the mystery.” Taylor earned her master’s in forensics at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she worked at the Human Identification Lab, helping to investigate more than 100 cases yearly. She started working at the KCMEO in August 1996. Studying bones is the crux of Taylor’s work, so much so that she has given herself the nickname “Bones Person.” She measures, sifts, sorts, and creates inventories of bones discovered by Webster’s investigators.

The KCMEO’s two functions are to determine both the *cause* and *manner* of death—these may include accident, homicide, suicide, natural disease process, or “undetermined.” King County is the largest county in the state, and Webster has eleven investigators working around the clock. An average working day sees approximately 17 deaths reported to the KCMEO. Of these, four will come into Webster’s office; the others will be classified as “No Jurisdiction Assumed,” which include people who die in nursing homes and healthcare facilities with extensive medical histories and a private physician willing to sign the death certificate—essentially, natural deaths.

“It’s a pretty difficult place here, for the most part,” Webster comments, describing the nature of the work. “We never go out at three o’clock in the morning and knock on somebody’s door to bring them good news. We don’t go around telling them they won the lottery. We give them some of the most crushing and disturbing news they’ll probably ever get in their life. Obviously, that’s hard on the families, but it’s hard on us, too.”

Investigating deaths, conducting autopsies, informing people that their loved one has been killed—none of this seems glamorous, and one would think that Webster would be hard-pressed to put together a team of investigators. Yet, Webster has to turn applicants away. Indeed, one evening, I attend a lecture and slide-show Webster presents to a group of nursing students, many of whom ask him what they should study to work for the Medical Examiner. “I am fortunate,” Webster tells the students, “because we live in a fairly populated county. We have a lot of well-educated people with good backgrounds. Right now, I have a Ph.D. candidate as one of my investigators, and he has a degree in Forensic Anthropology. That’s a pretty upscale investigator. I require that my investigators have four years of college

experience in a health-related field and at least a year of experience in some investigative background. I have the cream of the crop right now.”

Indeed, the KCMEO’s investigators and doctors comprise a sharp team. Their teamwork, indeed familial closeness, results from the unique nature of their work and the long hours they spend working each day.

“One of the ways we get through this is there’s a lot of humor here,” Webster admits. “We get along well. We scream, yell, fight, and do crazy things in here—but never, ever do we direct any comments or criticisms to the people who come through our office through the back door. The reason is that there’s not one of us here who may not be up in the cooler in an hour. It could be you or your family or your children. We never lose sight of that. One of the things I try to get through to these investigators here is that we are the last people on the face of the earth who can speak for these dead people, so we better damned well listen to what they have to tell us.”

**W**ebster and his team of investigators do a lot of “listening.” In 1997, approximately 13,000 people died in King County; the KCMEO investigated 49 percent of those deaths. Firearms are the “weapon of choice” in King County. They account for most of the county’s homicides and suicides. King County is unique, too, in that its 2,130 square miles feature an unusually diverse range of rural, urban, ethnic, social, and religious groups. In addition, the area features an extraordinarily diverse topography: saltwater lakes, freshwater lakes, mountains, rivers, ponds, and puddles.

All of this makes for a broad sample of deaths that Webster and his team investigate. In one breath, Webster tells the story of a man who drowned in the shower; in the next breath, he relates a story about a small religious group that only permitted the deceased’s eldest brother to touch the corpse; this eldest brother ultimately acted as Webster’s hands. Webster also relates a fascinating story about a small Southeast Asian tribe called the Hmong; every few years, a Hmong young man, typically between 19 and 23 years of age, is found dead in bed with no anatomical or pathological cause of death. “This is only specific to the Hmong,” Webster comments. “What a study has shown is that these young men may have



nightmares that are so terrifying that they are scaring themselves to death in their sleep. Those are some of the types of cases that come in here. Every morning when I come into the office, I say, 'I think I've seen it all.' And then I see the four or five that came in the night before, and I say, 'Well, I've seen it all except for these four or five.' I see some of the most fascinating things people will ever see in their lives."

Webster and his team have also had some personal close calls. Like the time one of his investigators was kidnapped at gunpoint while trying to serve a death notice. Or the time someone pulled a gun on Webster while he was trying to load a body into a van. "I was working graveyard on New Year's Eve," he explains. "The first call I get is one at Yesler and Boren. A dead Cuban-American male—his name was José—was lying in the middle of the floor. He had been dead for about twelve hours. All of his buddies are sitting around the room—all drunk and raising hell. They think José is sound asleep. Well, José is *not* sound asleep—he's stone-cold dead. The cops leave, and I start to pick José up and put him on a stretcher, and one of the guys says, 'You're not taking José!' He reaches under a mattress and pulls out an old, hefty .38. Fortunately, the guy was so drunk that I was able to grab it from him."

While King County's population has steadily increased since 1983 (now reaching 1.6 million), the KCMEO's caseload has deviated little. "People are living longer," Webster explains. "The numbers of different *types* of deaths have changed. In 1996, we had 216 suicides; last year, we had 238. In 1996, we had 110 homicides; last year, we only had 88. So we have a shift there, which is kind of interesting. It balanced them out again, so we have the same number of deaths." Another interesting note is that 10 years ago, there were approximately 450 to 500 traffic fatalities in King County; last year, there were barely 200. "Everybody collapses and says, 'God, this is just wonderful,'" Webster observes. "We've got seatbelt laws, we've got three-point restraint, we've got airbags, we've got stiffer vehicles, we've got better-designed vehicles, we've got lower speed limits, and we've got helmet laws.' The problem is that it *is* saving people's lives, but the people with devastating irreversible injuries are now in what we call 'persisting vegetative states.' They've got these devastating head injuries. They haven't had a thought. So that's kind of an interesting twist."

After a while, Webster asks, "Do you want to look around upstairs?" The autopsy room and coolers are located upstairs.

“Sure,” I reply. We head upstairs. I follow him down narrow hallways and small flights of stairs that weave, twist, and turn deep within the basement of the Harborview Medical Center. Webster used to give tours of the KCMEO facility to medical students, but too many bodies came through his office with infectious diseases posing a health hazard.

The KCMEO’s doctors and investigators don’t start working when the bodies arrive at their offices. Instead, their investigation begins at the scene of the incident, and their investigation is intense. All bases are covered, and measures are taken to ensure that the cause and manner of death are precisely determined. Webster runs a tight ship, and he needs to. “Our doctors and investigators take the case from the scene to the trial,” Webster comments. “They know it’s going to have an impact on them.” At the scene of the death, extensive photographs are taken—of the body and various points of concern. The hands are bagged, an ankle tagged, and the contents of the pockets emptied and collected. The body is then wrapped in a nylon bag and brought into the KCMEO office.

The floor of the receiving area is unpainted concrete and has the look and feel of a grocery store backroom. It was here, in this area, that Mary Anderson’s corpse was first marked and weighed when brought to the KCMEO.

“When the bodies are brought in,” Webster says, pointing to a security monitor in the corner of the room, “they are moved into the elevator and brought up here.” The security monitor depicts a circular driveway where the KCMEO vans unload bodies. It is in this area that the body is weighed and identified. The corpse is numbered with a black felt marker, fingerprinted, and logged. After the body is weighed and tagged, it is moved onto a “tray” with wheels and moved into the autopsy room.

The autopsy room is sprawling and immaculate. On the afternoon of my visit, no autopsies are being performed and the room feels vacant and spare. Workstations with stainless steel sinks, surgical instruments, and miscellaneous tools are positioned around the autopsy room. The autopsy room is heavily shadowed—the lights are turned down. And the room is incredibly clean—no weird stains or blood-soaked sheets. “The bodies are brought here,” Webster says, standing a few feet from the center of the room. The corpses are photographed just as they are brought in—in most cases, fully clothed. Then, the bodies are stripped, cleaned, and photographed nude.

Afterward, the autopsy is performed. “When we do an autopsy, the first thing we do is open the chest and the abdomen with a big wide incision. We remove the breastplate, which exposes the lungs, heart, intestines, liver, kidneys, and so forth. The organs come out, and the doctor performs the dissections. After each organ is dissected, they go into a bucket lined with a plastic bag. While the organs are being removed and dissected, another autopsy technician opens the head and removes the brain, which is also examined, dissected, and placed in the bucket. When all that is finished, the body is thoroughly washed—inside and out. The plastic bag in the bucket containing the organs is closed and returned to the abdominal area. The body is sewn shut, and the skull is replaced.”

If X-rays are needed, the corpses are wheeled into a room with state-of-the-art equipment. “We do our own laundry, for obvious reasons,” Webster says, chuckling slightly. He points to a set of washers and dryers in a hallway adjoining the autopsy room to the X-ray room. “Do dead bodies bother you?” Webster asks.

I have absolutely no idea. I’ve never seen a dead body. “Um, no,” I lie. “Not at all.”

There are two coolers at the King County morgue. Both are heavily secured. Webster punches a numeric code and unlocks a large steel door like those found in the security vaults at banks. We look inside the first cooler, and bodies fill the room as far as the eye can see. The bodies are covered—most zipped up in white nylon body bags and lying on trays. The cooler is extremely noisy—overhead fans hum and whirl. The first cooler is reserved for bodies whose autopsies have yet to be fully completed. Some are waiting for identification or dental records. More than a dozen bodies crowd this cooler, and though most are covered, one body is not—that of an older man weighing close to 400 pounds. He wears blue jeans, red suspenders, socks, and no shirt. His gut is massive, more akin to a medicine ball than a human belly. The man’s head is wrapped in a white towel.

“Did the man drown?” I ask, studying the corpse’s gray cheeks, seemingly waxy skin, and water-filled belly.

“No,” Webster replies, explaining that the man had cirrhosis of the liver.

Directly across from the fat man’s corpse is a tray covered with a white sheet, yet there is no body. Webster lifts the sheet and reveals a cluster of bones and dirt. He explains that this is a homicide victim whose killer buried her in a shallow grave.

When the killer was caught, his victim's body was exhumed—some nine months after being buried—and brought into the KCMEO. These are the victim's remains.

The second cooler is *attached* to the first cooler and located at the rear. Webster unlocks another security door; the eggy, ripe smell of dead bodies overwhelms me. The second cooler is where bodies are stored after autopsies are completed. They are simply waiting to be claimed, identified, or shipped out to a funeral home. "Some of these bodies are here for several weeks," Webster comments, "which would explain the smell."

When Mary Anderson was brought to the morgue, her corpse was fingerprinted and tagged, and an autopsy was performed. A rib bone determined her approximate age. An IUD was removed, and its part number was explored. Since investigators were unable to determine her identity, the corpse remained in the morgue's coolers for more than eight months.

We head downstairs, back to Webster's office. He sits down at his computer and scans several e-mail messages. I ask a few more questions about the case. How are other indigent cases handled? What happens if the KCMEO can *never* determine the cause of death or identify the body?

"We don't issue a death certificate until we know who it is or determine a cause of death," Webster explains. "We identify them as a category—a category of unidentified. We still have some of the Green River girls here. Some of Bundy's victims are still here. They still have evidentiary value. During the Bundy and Green River days, DNA testing was unheard of. Now, we have DNA testing, which may be helpful. So now we're trying to think five or 10 years down the line, 'What might be out there that we should be trying to capture today?' Even though we have no use for it, or need for it, or understanding of it, maybe there's something we should have today that might be of value 10 or 15 years down the line."

**W**hile writing this article, I familiarized various acquaintances with Mary Anderson's story. Some felt she was a woman scorned. Heartbroken and distraught after a failed marriage, Mary Anderson returns to the room where she honeymooned. As a sort of 'religious cleansing' and plea for forgiveness, she opens the Bible and takes her own life. Others suggested that Mary Anderson didn't

commit suicide but, instead, was murdered. During one of my visits to the KCMEQ, Webster and I discussed Mary Anderson's case with a staff physician. A visiting attorney had mentioned Mary Anderson's suicide to him and posed a rather Tom-Clancy-esque theory that Mary Anderson was a Ukrainian spy; when the Kremlin didn't need her anymore, they disposed of her identification and poisoned her.

Whatever the case, one simple fact remains: Mary Anderson was very deliberate and detailed in her suicide. Dr. Maples, when discussing suicide in his book, comments, "Most suicides are far better thought out than most pregnancies. A tremendous deliberation, a dreadful persistence mark some of the self-inflicted deaths I have seen. In such cases, the will to die can be as strong—even far stronger—than the will to live."

I explain to Webster that I believe Mary Anderson was an attention-monger—a 'drama queen,' if you will. She checks into a posh hotel, dolls herself up, opens the Bible, and goes out in a grand exit. I tell Webster I think Mary Anderson was bitter. She was wronged. I ask, "Do you think she wanted to challenge some people? Maybe she was thinking, 'Try to find me.'"

Webster disagrees. "I think what she wanted to do was she wanted to take her own life. She wanted to appear good and decent, and that was about it," he explains. "I think she just basically wanted to appear well to whoever found her body. She's got lipstick on. She was clean. Her hair was combed. She just wanted to look nice when she was found and didn't want to cause anybody any trouble."

"But she caused *you* a lot of trouble," I counter. "I mean, you spent a lot of time trying to solve this thing, right?"

"If she were trying to challenge people," Webster reasons, "she wouldn't have left a note. Only 20 percent of the people who commit suicide leave a note."

I ask Webster what kind of a person he thinks Mary Anderson was.

"She just appears to be a very nice lady," Webster comments. "The lady who lived next door to you; you knew she was there, but you didn't know anything about her. I think she's from out of town. I think she's got family. She may have brothers and sisters. I don't have a feeling one way or the other about whether she was married or divorced. I'm guessing she was married and later divorced. I don't think she was a vagabond simply because of the quality of her clothing, the type of clothing, the way she traveled, and so forth. I don't think a street person would plop down \$450 in

cash in a high-class hotel. I think if they were going to [commit suicide], they would have probably gone to a park to do it, or gone someplace out of public view. In all probability, she was a Christian. You know, she may have taken that path at the time she decided to take her life. She made a choice to take her life—which I don't find any objection to. I think that's her right. She didn't want to cause any problems. She didn't want to be spectacular." Webster pauses. "You know, you can just speculate hour after hour after hour."

Seattle University psychology Professor Steen Halling has his own take on Mary Anderson. "The one thing that is most profoundly associated with suicide is hopelessness," Halling explains. "The ritual of her death is probably not too different from how she lived her life. She is very careful and methodical. She goes to great lengths to hide how she dies, but none of us, no matter what we do, can disappear without a trace."

But Mary Anderson did virtually that. When Webster sent press releases to the local newspapers, requesting the public's help identifying Mary Anderson, he should have included one crucial detail. Mary Anderson's *elusiveness* is as much a characteristic as her height, weight, hair color, and other physical features.

After Mary Anderson's corpse was discovered at the Hotel Vintage Park, her body was kept in a cooler at the county morgue. Investigators spent nearly a year trying to determine her identity. Mary Anderson's body was finally sent to Wiggins & Sons Funeral Home, and she was buried at Crown Hill Cemetery in mid-June 1997.

**O**ne morning, I drive to Crown Hill Cemetery in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood. I called the previous day for directions and spoke with the cemetery's director. "She's the one who was found in that downtown hotel, right?" he asked, searching through records.

"Yes," I replied.

The director paused a moment. I could hear him flipping through pages. "Here it is. She was buried as 'Jane Doe.'" I asked where exactly she was buried at the cemetery. "She's at the east section of the property. Look for the dirt pile along the fence line. You're going to have a hard time finding where she's buried because there isn't a marker for her."

I drive north on Interstate 5 the following morning and take the 85th Street exit. I head west—crossing Greenwood Avenue—and pass a collection of small liquor stores, dilapidated taverns, and petite beauty parlors. I turn on 12th Avenue Northwest and weave through several side streets lined with small houses and broken vehicles sitting dead on front lawns. The 10-acre cemetery is tucked amid old houses and gravel side streets. It drizzles slightly, and the morning’s gray glow envelopes my car as I enter a narrow gravel driveway. Off to the right is a small building—the cemetery’s office; a tiny wooden sign, shaped like the open pages of a Bible, is off to the left. I find it ironic that this Bible-shaped sign—with the words Crown Hill Cemetery painted on it in black letters—identifies the property, especially since Mary Anderson’s body was discovered at the Hotel Vintage Park, a Bible opened across her chest to the Twenty-Third Psalm:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restored my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Ballard civic leaders founded Crown Hill Cemetery in 1903. In 1916, “Old Man Sharpnack” was buried upright, according to directions he left after committing suicide, sitting in his wheelchair, in the mausoleum he built for himself at the cemetery. Legend has it that, when things get real quiet at the cemetery, one can hear the cracking of Old Man Sharpnack’s wheelchair.

I dive slowly down the gravel road, small stones popping and shifting beneath the car’s tires. The cemetery feels more like a park than anything spooky. The property is dotted with rhododendron shrubs, giant cedars and firs, big-leaf maples, and hedges. I head toward the east end of the property and see a massive, building-sized pile of dirt. I park the car and get out. To the left are three cement, coffin-sized blocks used to core out the holes in the earth for burial sites.

I walk toward the dirt pile. A landscaper drives a lawnmower several yards away, making circles and leaving fresh clippings in his wake. The cemetery is filled with the sounds of the lawnmower buzzing and a few small birds chirping and shuffling in trees that dot the property. I snoop around the dirt pile and inspect the three cement blocks. I'm not sure exactly what I am looking for, but I feel I am *near* the spot where Mary Anderson is buried.

"Can I help you?" The man on the lawnmower drives to where I stand, the engine idling.

"I spoke to someone on the phone yesterday," I say, gesturing toward the office. "A woman named Mary Anderson was buried here last summer. At least Mary Anderson was her pseudonym. I'm looking for where she is buried."

The man turns off the lawnmower. He walks toward me, directing me to only a few feet from where I stand. "She was buried right about here," he says, pointing at the ground. He remembers the burial and knows that the body was of someone who died in a downtown hotel.

I stare at the spot where Mary Anderson is buried. The lawn is damp, and fresh clippings stick to my boots. It strikes me as sad that Mary Anderson is buried at the far end of the cemetery, away from the other graves, near a dirt pile, with no headstone. Wiggins & Sons Funeral Home designated the cemetery, the staff at Crown Hill carried out the burial, and the county picked up the tab. The whole thing was nothing more than a series of business transactions. I snap several photographs—the cemetery, the dirt pile, the patch of lawn where Mary Anderson is buried. There are very few people at the cemetery. A woman stands 50 yards away—clutching flowers, staring at the ground, and perhaps praying. Mary Anderson was an outcast. No one would ever visit her grave—no one, of course, except nosy journalists like me, enamored of the mystery of her anonymous death. It was as though Mary Anderson was being punished for what she had done—buried near a dirt pile as far away from the cemetery's entrance as possible.

I take a few more photographs and walk back to the car.

I climb inside, start the engine, and take one last look at Mary Anderson's "non-grave." I shift the car in DRIVE and leave Crown Hill Cemetery.

Strangely, Mary Anderson's absence is very much her presence. I unabashedly admit that the mystery surrounding Mary Anderson is why I'm even interested in her.



I am certain that, were I to discover Mary Anderson’s real identity, I would be somewhat disappointed. Take the mystery away and give this woman a childhood, siblings, career, and life experiences, and she threatens to become dull. But keep her in Room 214 with a phony address, a pseudonym, and no records of fingerprints, and the woman is fascinating. This sense of mystery makes Mary Anderson someone to think about; taking away that mystery makes her seem uninteresting.

No matter how often I grill Jerry Webster on the case, debate burglarizing Room 214, or visit Mary Anderson’s grave, this inherent sense of *unresolvedness* and *mystery* proves I knew this woman better than anyone else—a woman I’d never met.

(9,929 WORDS)

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