

The lady of the dunes

By R. Marc Kantrowitz
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Composites over the years of the still-identified victim

“Unsolved” is a new column written on behalf of all victims of unsolved murders, all worthy of having their stories told, if for no other reason than to recognize that they have not been forgotten. There is also the hope, however slight, that through the advances of technology and DNA, as well as the reawakening of one’s guilty conscious, be it of the perpetrator or a witness, that the crime will be solved.

It’s late afternoon on Friday, July 26, 1974. A 13-year-old is frolicking with her dog in the empty dunes of Race Point Beach in Provincetown, a mile or so east of the ranger station.

The teen grows concerned when the beagle bounds away. Calling out, she soon hears him barking. As she approaches, she sees him sniffing a prone figure.

Perhaps thinking the dog has invaded the privacy of a sunbather, she edges closer. When the blurred sight comes into focus, she realizes what she’s seeing and gags at the dog’s discovery. Screaming, she turns and flees in terror.

Serial killer Hayden Clark confessed that when he spotted the victim, he thought her beautiful. Luring her into the dunes, he smashed her head with a surf casting pole, knocked her unconscious, and then killed her.

After removing her clothing, which he folded and placed under her head, he returned to his truck, retrieved a saw, and cut off her hands. Placing her now handless arms in the sand, he manipulated them to appear as if she were doing push-ups.

“Then I took her hands and put them in her purse, like a beach bag. I cut off a couple of her fingers and used them for fishing bait. I buried her hands in a different place. I didn’t bury her because I was making a statement. I don’t know why I was doing it; maybe if you were a trained psychologist you could tell me.”

There was just one problem with the ramblings: The confession from the man suffering from paranoia schizophrenia, like his many others, didn’t ring true.

The crime scene was as calm as the day. Little evidence existed; just a dead and decaying naked body with no hands, and a nearly severed head resting on a pair of neatly folded Wrangler blue jeans and a blue bandana. There was no sign of a struggle, and the woman lay on half the towel, as if she had been sharing it with a companion, according to a description of the scene. The surrounding sand was undisturbed.

With the left side of her skull crushed, the police later surmised that she had been killed 10 to 21 days earlier by a weapon similar to a military entrenching tool. She maybe knew her assailant or was assaulted as she slept. A guess of her age was set at from 20 to 40, or perhaps even older.

What little was known came from the obvious. She had an athletic build, at just over 5-foot-6 and 145 pounds. She had a 34-inch waist and 31-inch legs. Her hair was long, auburn or reddish-blond, and tied with an elastic-type band with gold-colored flecks. Her toenails were painted pink.

As for her facial features, they had been destroyed by the deadly combination of the passage of time, a blazing sun and ravenous vermin.

As the police searched for leads, few merged. Except one: her mouth. Several teeth had been removed. What remained bore signs of extensive and expensive dental work, complete with root canals and gum treatment and gold and porcelain crowns worth several thousands of dollars (which suggested her being closer to 40 than 20).

Further examination indicated that the work resembled that of those practicing in New York. Dentists there and here were contacted. Dental magazines were utilized in the hope that someone would come forward. Or perhaps someone would inquire about a missing daughter, a missing wife, a missing loved one. Calls came in, but none bore fruit.

Over the years, the case, unlike many unsolved murders, stood open and active. And given the lurid nature of the crime, it remained an oozing sore in need of attention. In 1980, 2000 and 2013, the body was exhumed for further testing. In 2010, the skull was used to generate facial images.

Leads as to who she was and who killed her continued to percolate. A strong premise emerged involving a missing 25-year-old convict, Rory Gene Kesinger, whose past included robbing banks and shooting a police officer during a drug bust. In 1974, Kesinger escaped the local prison and vanished. As Kesinger resembled what had been left of the victim, a test using the DNA of her mother and the corpse was conducted. No match.

Others have opined that, after viewing the “July 4th Crowd Arrives” scene in the frightening movie “Jaws,” filmed on the Cape, an extra wearing blue jeans and a blue bandana might have been the victim.

Aside from the ever-confessing Hayden Clark, other theories as to the killer included interesting side shows.

Some identified gangster James “Whitey” Bulger as the killer, given that he was believed to have been in the area at the time with someone similar in looks to the victim, and possessing a violent and similar method of murder and mayhem.

And what of the Canadian woman, who in 1987 implicated her father? It, too, was a lead that quickly grew cold.

The many questions, large and small, that arose in 1974 remain unanswered today. With each passing day, the odds not only of solving the case but of determining the identity of the victim grow fainter.

What is known is that, today, a woman whose family and friends wonder whatever became of her lies in a grave in Saint Peters Cemetery in the town where she was murdered. Her tombstone reads simply: “Unidentified Female Body Found Race Point Dunes July 26, 1974”

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