



Autopsy.

“Shanann Watts”

[Part One. Introduction.]

Rural northern Colorado. Hilly and prairie-like. It's a state more popularly known for being the home of the beautiful and majestic Rockies. Yet most of the eastern side of the state is fairly flat. And that's where we find ourselves, on a remote oil-drilling site some ten to twenty miles north of the small community of Roggen, in Weld County. The work site doesn't contain much save for its large, twin oil tanks.

The rest of the surrounding area of the site is barren. It's nighttime, just after midnight on August 16th, 2018. The police have been led to this area in search of Mrs. Shanann Watts, 34-years-old, and her two daughters, Bella Watts, age 4, and sister Celeste Watts, age 3. Three days prior on the afternoon of August 13th, a friend of Shanann came to their house after not being able to get a hold of anyone by phone, including Shanann's husband, Chris Watts. Neither Shanann and her girls, nor Chris are home at this time. The friend had dropped Shanann off at the residence in the early AM this date after returning from a business trip and had not heard from her since, which was unusual. She contacts 911 with her suspicions. Chris arrives home later after police are already on scene, but his wife and daughters never show up. The following morning, August 14th, they are officially listed as missing and a full-scale investigation into their whereabouts is launched. Chris is brought in for routine questioning. He agrees to a polygraph test...and fails spectacularly. Eventually, he confesses to murder and gives the location of the bodies: this job site. Authorities immediately travel to the area, now late into the night. And some 100 yards from the work area, in a shallow grave, they make their first discovery: the body of Mrs. Shanann Watts.

Welcome to Part One of the Watts Family Murders. I'm Your Friendly Death Investigator. Let's do an autopsy.

[Part Two. External.]

External examination. “The body is received in a sealed body bag and clad in the following clothing items: a purple t-shirt, a pair of blue underwear, a black bra, a white metal piercing in the left naris. Paper bags over each hand.”

Bagging hands is fairly standard procedure for investigations, especially for suspected homicides. The idea being that any trace evidence needs to be preserved, whether it be DNA or tissue under fingernails, or other evidence such

as gunshot residue. Paper bags are used because paper breathes. Compared to plastic bags, which don't breathe, and can humidify to the point of possibly compromising evidence. Paper bags, of course, are not perfect. They can rip and tear far more easily, especially if they get wet. Still, they are the preferred way.

"The body is that of a well-developed, well-nourished although decomposing Caucasian female whose appearance is generally consistent with the reported age of 34 years. The body measures approximately 67-inches long and weighs 144 pounds. The body exhibits mild to moderate decomposition consisting of generalized discoloration, bloating and skin slippage."

Something we've gone over before, but for new listeners, when it comes to decomposition, what many might believe to be moderate or latter stages actually tends to be early stages. Here we have bloating and skin slippage of the body. Around this time is when the foul odor of decomposition really starts to escalate. It's still really all early stages, though. Mrs. Watts was found in a shallow grave after having been reported missing for approximately three days. The average temperature during this time in this part of Colorado had average highs in the upper 80s and average lows in the upper 50s with an overall average somewhere in the 70s. Keep in mind the more heat you have, the faster a body will decompose. The weather in Colorado never got to blistering temperatures, but it was consistently warm, and so the decomposition noted to Shannan's body is consistent. Approximately, anyway. Again, as noted before, gauging decomposition takes in many factors but, in the end, there is no way to precisely measure how long a body has been deceased.

"The sclerae are dull although white. There are no discernible scleral or conjunctival petechiae. The nose is midline although dried. It does not grate upon palpation. The oral cavity contains natural dentition in good repair. There are no discernible buccal mucosal petechiae. The lips exhibit mild drying artifact."

Petechiae. It's a term that is used over and over again in pathology. It denotes pinpoint-sized spots that are a result of tiny blood vessels bursting and hemorrhaging. They are associated with hypoxia, which is the deprivation of oxygen, and are usually described as red-ish, brown-ish, or purple-ish. Most often they are seen on the face, in the whites of the eyes, on the inside of the eyelids, or even the inside of the lips. They can arise other places, but these areas are the most common and are some of the first places pathologists check in suspected homicide cases. It is something that is checked for on nearly all, if not all, autopsies, suspected homicide or not. And while it could be corroborating evidence for a number of issues, including choking, most often it is associated... with strangulation.

In the case of Mrs. Watts, the pathologist checks all the normal areas...and finds nothing.

“There is a linear array of variably sized, purple-black, circular defects which extend from the inferior aspect of the chin, along the jawline, up the left aspect of the face, towards the left temporal area.”

An interesting denotation here. The doctor chooses the term “defects” to describe a linear pattern of discoloration along the chin and jawline. Though it is not stated at this specific point, if we go back to the “Evidence of Injury” section of the report, the doctor does mark this as, quote, “possible patterned abrasions,” unquote. So “defect” here seems to be a generic term for abnormal discoloration with no specific cause or value given. And yet, it is still noted because it is not an otherwise normal finding. It is evidence, but decomposition unfortunately deteriorates it, leaving it not as compelling as it could be.

“The upper extremities are well-developed and symmetrical with all digits present. The fingernails are long and in good repair although markedly dirty with sand and debris from the gravesite. The fingernails are pulled and retained as evidence by law enforcement. The lower extremities are well-developed and symmetrical with all digits present. The toenails are short and in good repair with the exception of abundant sandy debris from the gravesite. The back and sacrum are unremarkable.”

Getting back to the hands now which, again, were bagged. There is no notable evidence. No broken fingernails, nothing that appears blood or tissue-like under the nails. Still, the nails are clipped and retained as evidence, which is fairly standard procedure for many homicides of this nature. Otherwise, Mrs. Watts has no noted trauma to the rest of her external body. Her arms, legs, abdomen, and back side are all noted to be unremarkable.

But there is one other remarkable finding, externally, however...

“The external genitalia are largely normal adult female, however the internal genitalia are protruding through the vaginal vault. This likely represents prolapse of the uterus due to pregnancy and postmortem artifact. Adjacent to the probable uterus is a largely degraded portion of tissue which is unfortunately covered in sandy debris from the gravesite. Upon further examination of this tissue, it is revealed to be a largely decomposed fetus.”

As mentioned, Mrs. Watts had two daughters. And at the time of her death, she was pregnant with her third child, in her second trimester. The doctor does not note the fetus’ gender as it is too decomposed for him to accurately dictate. According to personal documents from Shanann and Chris, it was a male, a baby brother for their girls. His remains were measured and retained for genetic analysis by the Colorado Bureau of Investigation...

[Part Three. Internal.]

Internal examination. “There are no abnormal fluid accumulations or adhesions in any of the body cavities. The epicardial surface is unremarkable. The coronary ostia are patent. The coronary arteries follow a right dominant distribution. Sectioning reveals no significant narrowing by atherosclerosis. There is no acute thrombosis. The endocardial surface and papillary muscles are unremarkable.

“The aorta has a normal smooth yellow intimal surface. There is minimal atherosclerotic streaking noted. The major branches, including the celiac, superior and inferior mesenteric, and renal arteries are widely patent. The inferior vena cava is unremarkable.”

We’re starting with the cardiovascular system which...is...normal. In fact, most of the internal examination reveals otherwise normal findings. As we’ve seen in previous episodes, noting negative evidence is just as important as positive findings. It lets us know the pathologists are checking everything thoroughly on their cases. And again, regardless of case type, ruling out foul play is part of every autopsy exam and thus negative findings are quite essential.

Thus, briefly, the lungs and respiratory system are fine. The spleen, liver, pancreas, intestines, stomach, kidneys, are all normal. The spine, skull, and brain are free of injury and unremarkable. All of this adds up to Mrs. Watts being in good health and having no natural, discernable reason for death.

Which brings us, finally, to the internal examination of her neck...

“The anterior musculature is smooth and dull. The epiglottis and hypopharynx are unremarkable. The hyoid bone and thyroid cartilage are intact. The laryngeal mucosa is unremarkable. There are no masses or aspirated material. The thyroid gland has symmetrical lobes and appears unremarkable.”

Yes. Even more negative findings. Now we actually will get to significant neck evidence and findings momentarily, but again, the negatives must also be noted. And something else that, while not completely relevant here, will definitely come up again in future episodes. The hyoid bone. It exists in the center part of the front of the neck and, while fairly pliable, is often susceptible to injury. Specifically when there is strangulation. But not always. As we see here, it is very much intact with not noted injury. There are, in fact, many strangulations where the hyoid remains intact. And there are also cases where the hyoid is injured or fractured that aren’t strangulations at all. I bring this up because often times, people see hyoid injuries and immediately believe a strangulation has occurred. Yes, it can be very compelling corroborating evidence of strangulation, but not always. And there are a significant number of cases, such as with Mrs. Watts, where there are negative findings for the hyoid. And the broader point of this is simply never think in absolutes. Because if you believe that a fractured hyoid always means strangulation, then you leave yourself open to the reverse being

always true – that is, no injured hyoid must mean there is no strangulation. As we'll now see, that isn't true at all...

“Probable bruising on the anterior subcutaneous neck tissue. Bruising of the superior aspect of the right sternocleidomastoid muscle. Bruising of the soft tissue and fascial tissue of the surface of the right thyroid cartilage. Bruising of the soft tissue associated with the right horn of the thyroid bone, which is intact.”

So as mentioned in the past, anterior refers to the front of the body. So on the front of the neck, the subcutaneous tissue, which is the fatty tissue just below the skin, shows bruising. The bruising continues along the upper right sternocleidomastoid muscle. These are some of the outermost muscles in the neck, making them highly susceptible to injury. Keep in mind this is also the approximate area of the hyoid bone, which had no injuries. Then we have bruising on and around the right side of the thyroid cartilage, which is just below the hyoid bone.

Now is a good time to think back to the suspected patterned abrasions to the left side of Mrs. Watts neck and face. Whatever the injuries are, they are superficial, meaning the trauma does not run much deeper than what is on the surface. The internal exam shows injuries on the right, however. If we assume a strangulation scenario, the more superficial external injuries could be consistent with one hand forcing Shannan's head still while the other hand performs the more lethal injuries that resonate here below the surface.

It's only a theory, of course. It connects the dots but is by no means a definitive answer. And it's okay to theorize, as long as it's understood that that is all that it is.

[Part Four. Opinion.]

Due to Mrs. Watts decomposed state, proper blood specimens could not be obtained for toxicology. Instead, blood squeezed from the spleen was used. That's exactly how it sounds – there is no blood that can actually be drawn from the spleen, so the spleen itself is...squeezed. The organ, especially when decomposing, breaks down fairly easily. Think of it kind of like, say, an orange. You couldn't put a syringe in an orange and simply extract juice, but you can squeeze it and as it breaks down, orange juice is created. Essentially the same for spleen blood. This blood was positive for a blood alcohol concentration of 0.128. That may sound relevant, but in actuality, not so much. Aside from spleen blood not being a proper substitute for real blood, when the body begins to decompose, the chemical breakdown actually produces some ethanol. The doctor simply lists the findings here but has publicly stated that there is no relevance.

Cause of death: Asphyxiation due to manual strangulation. Manner: homicide.
Report date: September 26th, 2018. Signed, Michael A. Burson, M.D.

[Part Five. Postmortem.]

When Chris Watts was first brought in for questioning, he pled innocence and ignorance. But pieces of the story did not add up. Questions arose about possible rifts in the couples' marriage, which he shrugged off as nothing out of the ordinary, until a woman came forward during the investigation purporting to be Chris' girlfriend. Chris then admits his extramarital affair and retracts his story, but already other pieces have slipped as well. His truck caught on a neighbor's security footage is shown backed into his garage late into the night. More odd behavior. He now states he was planning a separation with Shanann. That there were issues, that he was seeing a different woman, and had been for nearly a month.

After his failed polygraph, he is pressed over and over again, and soon he is sat down one on one with his father. And during their conversation, for the first time, he admits to murdering his wife.

Many want to believe that Mrs. Watts would not have allowed herself to be strangled without a fight. Her husband states that she did not put up much resistance, and the evidence appears to corroborate this - the telltale signs of defensive wounds simply are not here. Still, it's not impossible and Mr. Watts' word at this point has proven unreliable.

But never mind the words for now, because what we do know is that Shanann Watts was strangled and buried in a shallow grave in almost the middle of nowhere. Nowhere here referred to officially as Cervi 319 by Anadarko, the company for whom Chris worked. Chris claims at this point that he did what he did out of rage, that he killed his wife, and only his wife, because of what he alleges she did to their two daughters... Yet another story that would eventually be retracted as well.

But for the moment, at least, we'll leave it right here where we began, and where there's still more yet to be discovered... At Cervi 319.

Autopsy is an educational program. All information is culled from actual autopsy reports, and read, as written, out of respect for both the deceased, and the living who speak for them. Opinions and interpretations of these reports are solely those of the reader.

The End.