



Autopsy.

“Bella & Celeste Watts”

[Part One. Introduction.]

A single barrel of crude oil holds approximately 42 gallons. Crude oil itself varies in consistency and viscosity depending on where it is found and what other elements it is found near. And so without any proper assessment, one can never be quite sure what all elements they're dealing with, other than the oil itself and likely some varying amounts of water. And to most of us, it simply appears as a deeply dark sludge.

Once again we are back at Anadarko work site, Cervi 319 in rural Weld County, Colorado. The deceased body of Shanann Watts has been discovered in a shallow grave approximately one hundred yards from the work site. She is pronounced dead on scene five minutes after midnight on August 16th, 2018.

But search crews are only getting started. They have been tipped off to this location by husband Chris Watts, and Mrs. Watts is the easy find in this case. Her daughters, Bella and Celeste Watts, though close by, will require more substantial measures for extraction.

Cervi 319 contains two large crude oil storage tanks, approximately twenty feet in height, and each able to hold approximately 400 barrels, or 16,800 gallons of the dark sludge. At the top of each tank there is a round hatch approximately eight inches in diameter. On the date the search has begun, Mr. Watts has admitted to stuffing the deceased bodies of Bella, age 4, into one tank, and Celeste, age 3, into the other. And so efforts are now underway to drain both tanks and recover the bodies, and most of the day is spent working towards this goal. Younger sister Celeste will be the first to be removed and she is officially pronounced dead on scene at 3:40PM on August 16th. Two hours later, older sister Bella is finally extracted and is pronounced at 5:50PM.

Mr. Watts maintains at this point that he did not murder his daughters, that it was Mrs. Watts who did it out of defiance of their failing marriage and, in a rage, Mr. Watts then murdered her. But as we learned previously, he has proven himself to be highly unreliable.

And now the conclusion of the Watts Family Murders. I'm Your Friendly Death Investigator. Let's do some autopsies.

[Part Two. External.]

For Bella and Celeste, we're going to do things a little differently. With few exceptions, the examinations of both girls are largely the same. No surprise given how they were both discovered in near identical circumstances. As always, we'll begin with the external examination and first go over the ways in which the girls' exams are similar. Then we'll move onto how they differ. And likewise we'll continue this with the internal portion as well....

But first, if you'll indulge... a moment of levity.

“District Attorney Disclaimer: At 1010 hours on August 17, 2018 the representative from the District Attorney's Office read a portion of an email which he received from the Public Defender's Office. In this email the Public Defender has requested that we swab the necks of the children for residual trace DNA. According to him and his expert DNA witness, they anticipate trace DNA being preserved on the neck structures of the children despite being confined in a container of oil, water and associated sludge matter over the course of four days.”

This is something you rarely see in an autopsy report and, at least in my opinion, is a master class in how to professionally throw shade. Essentially, during the time the pathologist was performing his duty, the District Attorney received an email from the public defender, that is Chris Watts' lawyer, requesting the pathologist swab the necks of both girls for residual trace DNA during autopsy, which the defender claims an expert DNA witness can use, likely to try and refute possible allegations. And if you want to know what the pathologist thinks about the validity of such a claim, well, I'll read you the last sentence one more time:

“According to him and his expert DNA witness, they anticipate trace DNA being preserved on the neck structures of the children despite being confined in a container of oil, water and associated sludge matter over the course of four days.”

If I'm reading between the lines correctly, and I'm quite certain that I am, this essentially equates to, “I'm being asked to do a thing, and I'm doing it, but I'm only doing it because I'm being asked, not because I believe in this utter nonsense.” And, because the man is a professional, he does as he is asked and takes the swabs. So hats off to you, Doc. And to you folks listening, when you finish this episode, if you ever go back and listen again, hopefully you'll find it just as amusing as I did. It's rare but always welcome to get little pieces of gold like this in a report.

Thank you for indulging me. Now back to the girls.

Bella's exam begins first at 1:30PM on August 17th. Celeste's begins at 5:30PM the same date. Both girls are clad in their pajamas. The bodies and clothing are

still soaked in oil. The bodies are carefully washed and both are noted as decomposing with bloating, marbling of the skin, as well as skin slippage.

Their faces present essentially the same findings. We mentioned in mother Shanann's case about how doctors search for petechiae, and also how none was found during her exam. The same goes for Bella and Celeste, with no petechiae findings in or around the eyes or mouth. However, older sister Bella does have significant findings in her mouth, which we'll get to in just a bit.

We have mostly negative findings. No markings on either of their necks. Nothing on their chests, abdomens, or backs. Decomposition could be a contributing factor for this. Both girls are small but keep in mind their bodies were forced through fairly small hatches, which could have left possible superficial abrasions. Those sort of things can fade fairly quickly with decomposition, which takes in many factors. Shanann was in a shallow grave, exposed to more general elements. But the girls being left in tanks of crude oil mixed with who knows what else, it's a whole other set of factors.

Which leads us to the first of the girls differing findings. While both had a fair amount of skin slippage, younger sister Celeste's hands were, quote, "sloughed off during the recovery process," unquote. This is something that could also be referred to as de-gloving. When you think of skin slippage, the term is very on the nose. It is quite literally the top layer of skin slipping off almost as if shedding, and sometimes when it comes to the hands of a victim, it all comes off...like a glove. This "glove" is, as mentioned, the top layer of skin, which usually includes the fingerprints and, in this case, the fingernails as well. And this seems to be what the doctor is referring to in this case.

Also of note, back to negative findings. Both girls hands and fingernails were checked for possible defensive wounds and none were found. Fingernails were intact and, though dirty, in otherwise good condition.

And now the most significant deviation of findings. For older sister Bella...

"The oral cavity contains natural dentition in good repair. The frenulum is markedly disrupted and there are adjacent pink-purple bruises of the buccal mucosa present. There are also teeth impressions and superficial bite marks on the mucosal surface of the tongue."

And here, Constant Listeners, is what we will call a jackpot of evidence of smothering. The frenulum is that small piece of skin in the center of your mouth that connects your inner lips to your gum lines. It can be torn, or as it is noted here, "disrupted" by blunt force trauma, and likely in this case by a fair amount of pressure against the face and mouth area. This is corroborated by the bruising on the buccal mucosa, which itself, is the inner lip. There also has to be some level of resistance from the victim, who isn't simply allowing themselves to be

smothered. And young Bella resisted. The teeth and bite marks on her tongue corroborate that as well.

[Part Three. Internal.]

The internal examinations for Bella and Celeste are almost identical in terms of findings. Bella had noted tardieu spots on her inner scalp, which is just an artifact of decomposition, not any kind of trauma. Celeste's stomach is noted as empty, while Bella's contains approximately 75 milliliters of dark fluid that is likely crude oil sludge.

Otherwise, both girls present identical negative findings. No trauma to the brains, their necks are free of injury; heart and lungs are in good working order. The same goes for the spleens and livers and kidneys and... everything else.

Two perfectly fine and healthy little girls...

[Part Four. Opinion.]

As noted, both girls' autopsies showed very similar findings, with Bella's being most significant in terms of evidence. Celeste, in actuality, had complete negative findings. No trauma externally or internally. I mention this because both girls will have the same cause and manner of death, and so the question might get asked, if Celeste had no significant findings, how can she scientifically be given a specific cause and manner?

We mention negative findings because they can be just as important as positive ones. We mentioned back in Russell Dermond's examination about the confidence a pathologist must sometimes use when following their evidence. The same applies here to not just evidence, or lack thereof, but also circumstance. The girls are only a year apart in age, and their height and weight is roughly the same. They have no underlying illnesses or issues. And their bodies were disposed of in identical ways. So while Bella does show positive signs of smothering and Celeste does not, Celeste also does not have any other evidence that could suggest another form of death. Which is to say, there is no reason to believe she didn't suffer the same fate. Of course, in his opinion section for cause and manner for Celeste, unlike Bella, the doctor uses the qualifying term "likely"....

Cause of death for Bella Watts: asphyxiation due to smothering. Manner: homicide.

Likely cause of death for Celeste Watts: asphyxiation due to smothering. Manner: homicide.

Report date for both cases: September 27th, 2018. Signed, Michael A. Burson, M.D.

[Part Five. Postmortem.]

Going back to August 16th of 2018, the date that all of the bodies were found. At this point during the investigation, father Chris has only admitted to murdering wife Shanann. And this admission only came after multiple denials and fledgling stories logically fell apart. He claimed he murdered Shanann out of rage and alleges she was the one who killed the girls. Nobody truly buys the story, though, but Chris sits on this version for three months. At some point a conversation between Chris and authorities occurs where it is laid on the line: if Chris maintains his innocence of killing the girls but is found guilty in court, he could face the death penalty. If, however, he admits guilt, the death penalty goes away. And for their part, the family of Shanann Watts never sought the death penalty in the prosecution. But whether it was a conversation or an actual plea deal, Chris changes his story for the final time.

Whether or not you choose to believe his current account of events is surely up to you. Regardless, it goes as such:

The morning after Shanann arrived home from her business trip, Chris tells her that the marriage isn't working anymore. They argue. And it escalates. And Chris strangles Shanann to death... He wraps her in a sheet and loads up her body in the backseat floorboard of his truck. He puts Bella and Celeste, both still alive, on the backseat. He then makes the drive to Cervi 319. The trip is a minimum of 45 minutes.

When they arrive at the location, he smothers Celeste first with a blanket. Then, finally, Bella. Per Chris Watts' admission, "Daddy, no," are Bella's last words to her father...

On November 6th, 2018, Chris Watts pled guilty to the murders of Shanann, Bella, and Celeste, and on November 19th, he was sentenced and given five life sentences without the possibility of parole. And an additional 48 years for the unlawful termination of Shanann's pregnancy. And another 36 years for tampering with deceased bodies. He currently resides in a maximum security prison in Wisconsin.

And, I believe, here marks the first episode (or episodes, rather) where a case actually has a finite resolution, with almost no lingering questions or elusive suspects. Mr. Watts admits to premeditation of the murders, though his handling of it all appears, at best, half-baked.

But as always, we're not here to go over pathology of the mind. This is pathology of the body. And, though tragic, there is some comfort in knowing that justice has been served in a case such as this.

Thanks in no small part... to an autopsy.

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.

P.S.

Every episode of Autopsy contains research, usually culled from various articles and documents online, where publicly available. For these episodes of The Watts Family, special acknowledgement is made to the documentary, *American Murder: The Family Next Door*, produced and available from Netflix. Among other things, the film does a great job when presenting Chris Watts' various confessions, which is to say, minimal cutting and dramatization. It was exceptionally useful in writing these episodes. Autopsy is an addendum podcast to many true crime cases, so if you want more information about the Watts Murders, please check out the film.

The End.