



Autopsy.

“Elisa Lam”

[Part One. Introduction.]

Welcome to the Stay on Main Hotel, located at 640 South Main Street in Downtown Los Angeles, California. Its original structure is nearly one hundred years old currently, but has undergone recent renovations and, until 2011, was better known as its original name, The Cecil Hotel. Built in the late 1920s, it contained 19 floors and, at the time, 700 guest rooms. It was built with hopes of being a modest, comfortable stay for tourists and travelers. But just a handful of years after its completion, the Great Depression hit, and while those hopes were never completely snuffed out, they greatly dissipated over time. The Depression would bring with it, over a number of years, one of the largest homeless populated neighborhoods in the country, known as Skid Row, only a few blocks east of the Cecil Hotel.

As years past, the hotel would fall into the realm of “budget hotels” or what some might refer to as “extended stays.” The hotel would become most notable for its, quote/quote, “checkered past,” with numerous suicides and otherwise colorful clientele. But, if we’re being fair, extended stay hotels are a draw for such types no matter their locations or construction dates. Which is our way of saying, if you’re looking for sensationalism, this might not be your stop.

The year is 2013. The Cecil Hotel has been rebranded as The Stay on Main, but its outside structure still bears its original name. It is January 28th, and on this date a young, 21-year-old by the name of Elisa Lam checks in. Ms. Lam had been a student at The University of British Columbia and was a resident there in Vancouver, Canada. She had been traveling from her home there to what would have been her final destination of Santa Cruz, California. She flew into San Diego, and had arrived in Los Angeles on January 26th. She was traveling alone, using only public transportation. She had booked her room online and was to be sharing it with other residents on the fifth floor. After two days, however, her roommates complained of what has been nonspecifically deemed “odd behavior.” She was then moved to a new room on the same floor, now by herself, on January 30th. She was scheduled to check out on January 31st, but that doesn’t appear to have happened. And she also did not contact her parents. Her last known whereabouts were documented on the hotels security footage from an elevator on February 1st. Elisa can be seen eliciting what can, again, only be called “odd behavior” – hitting multiple buttons and then moving on and off multiple times when the doors don’t close. Sometimes appearing to be hiding, others appearing to be excited. Then she walks out of view of the camera... and is never seen alive again.

Unable to reach her, her parents eventually fly out to Los Angeles and on February 4th, a missing person's report is officially filed. The grounds in and around the hotel are swept through thoroughly. As she is considered a foreign national, the LAPD lends her search as many extra resources as can be reasonably afforded. And two long weeks pass.

The morning of February 19th. Some guests have been complaining about a severe lack of water pressure and a maintenance worker is sent to the roof to check out possible issues. The roof has been thoroughly searched as well already, save, of course, for the water tanks. Specifically, there are four 1000-gallon water tanks, each approximately 10 feet in height and 6 feet in diameter. The maintenance worker climbs up to the platform to access the tanks and notices the hatch to the main tank is open. And when he approaches to look inside, there floating face up in the tank in the nude, is the body of Ms. Elisa Lam.

I am Your Friendly Death Investigator. Let's do an autopsy.

[Part Two. External.]

“The body is identified by toe tags and is that of an unembalmed refrigerated, adult female Asian who is in moderate decomposition. She appears the given age of 21 years. The skin shows a 1 inch scar on the right knee and ¼ round abrasion on the left knee. Wrist scars are absent. Tattoos are not present. Rigor has been abolished. Livor mortis is not appreciated.”

To begin with, as mentioned, Ms. Lam's body was discovered in one of the hotel's water tanks. Water can have an odd effect on decomposition. As usual, warmer temperatures will always cause the body to decompose faster, but even if the water Ms. Lam was found in was cold, that doesn't necessarily mean it would be preserved. Now, for this case, the water temperature either wasn't taken or, at the very least, is not listed as part of the autopsy report. It's mostly irrelevant here, anyway. But just to finish the thought, if a body is discovered in cold water, at least while it is submerged, the water can have a preservation effect on the body. You cannot count on that to last after it is removed, however. Almost immediately, decomposition will begin almost as if it is playing catch-up. So just as a note, it's always a good idea once a body is removed to immediately get it en route to cold storage. With Ms. Lam, though, this was California - so though it was late January and into mid-February, average temperatures during this period were in the approximate 70s.

Otherwise, a minor abrasion and a scar were noted on her knees. The doctor then notes no scars to her wrists. This is a negative finding, something we've discussed before. Many of you can likely guess why he notes it here, but we'll come back to it later.

“Examination of the eyes reveals irides that appear to be brown in color and sclerae that are white. There are no petechial hemorrhages of the conjunctivae of the lids and/or sclera. The oronasal passages are unobstructed. The neck is unremarkable. There is no chest deformity. The abdomen is flat. The anus is edematous and shows pooling of blood in the subcutaneous tissues surrounding the orifice. The extremities show no edema, joint deformity, abnormal mobility, non-therapeutic punctures or needle tracks.”

Essentially all negative findings here. No petechiae noted on her face, though, mind you, she is decomposed. The doctor notes pooling of blood around the anus. It's a negative finding, really, but I bring it up because it might give someone pause if they came across that and were not super familiar with how a lot of this stuff works. It's simply blood settling in the area due to decomposition, and there is no noted trauma here.

“The body is in a state of moderate decomposition with greening of the body sparing the lower legs and feet. The scalp skin and hair easily sloughs with slight pulling. Skin slippage is present on the chest, back, arms and left lower leg. The skin shows marked wrinkling of the palms, fingers, soles of feet and toes. Evidence of external traumatic injury: none.”

Skin slippage is to be expected, of course, due to decomposition. And the wrinkling is due to being submerged in water. The legs and feet haven't fully decomposed yet, which is normal, they're usually some of the last areas to decompose. The abdomen area usually decomposes first because of the presence of certain bacteria not found in other areas of the body.

And, of course, the doctor confirms here that which we've already reviewed, but just to be extra clear: no external traumatic injuries. As near as anyone can tell, no one has laid a hand on Ms. Lam.

[Part Three. Internal.]

“The body cavities are entered through the standard coronal incision and the standard Y-shaped incision. No foreign material is present in the mouth, upper airway and trachea.”

Standard beginnings here for the internal examination. I pause here simply to note, again, the doctor noting more negative findings. Specifically with no foreign material in her airways. And always a good time for a reminder that often times, many negative findings don't always make it to the final report. But drownings can be a little different, though, and we'll go over that in a bit.

“No lesions are present nor is trauma of the gingiva, lips or oral mucosa demonstrated. There is no edema of the larynx. Both hyoid bone and larynx are intact. There is no evidence of gross hemorrhage in the areas. The thyroid cartilage is removed from the larynx and shows no evidence of trauma or fractures. No hemorrhage is present in the adjacent throat organs, investing fascia, strap muscles, visceral fascia. The tongue when sectioned shows no trauma.”

This is all in service of letting the reader know that the doctor did a thorough examination searching for any possible trauma in the vulnerable areas of the face and neck. And nothing is found.

“Both pleural cavities contain dark brown fluid; 300 cc on the right and 200 cc on the left.”

The pleural cavities here are where we find the lungs. These cavities in their normal, functioning state, should be clean and empty so that the lungs may properly inflate. Dark fluid is noted in Ms. Lam’s lungs, but it is nothing concerning. It is likely decompositional fluid, which can often accumulate in the lung cavities, amongst other places.

“No abnormalities of the bony framework or muscles are present.”

Aside from the main organs of the body, the doctor simply notes here that the overall body frame contains no significant findings. More negatives.

“The aorta is elastic and of even caliber throughout with vessels distributed normally from it. The abdominal aorta has no atherosclerosis. No aneurysm is present. The major branches of the aorta show no abnormality. There is no coronary atherosclerosis of the major coronary arteries. The blood within the heart and large blood vessels is liquid but only scant amount is present.”

Again, the doctor was exceptionally thorough with Ms. Lam. When you have a body found in odd circumstances, you of course want to check the routine places to rule out any foul play, such as the face and neck and head, but with pathology it is also more than that. Checking for heart disease or an aneurysm that could’ve ruptured in the aorta. Again, with suspected drownings, things are handled ever so slightly different, which we’ll get to in just a moment, but first, briefly to finish up:

The respiratory system and lungs are fine. The gastrointestinal area is negative – appendix is present and fine. The pancreas ok, as is the liver. The kidneys are fine and there is urine that can be taken for toxicology. The reproductive system is unremarkable and the hyoid is ok.

The head scalp is free of injuries. The dura mater surrounding the brain is unremarkable. No injuries or hemorrhages of any kind on the brain. The brain is dissected and is also unremarkable. Multiple samples are sent off for toxicology, including bile, heart blood, liver, stomach contents, spleen, and brain. No significant findings are found....

So now let's talk drownings. If you've listened to any of our other episodes, all of which are not drownings, you may or may not notice slight differences with this case. All of the cases up until this point have been homicides and the autopsy mostly focuses on the evidence found, such as stab wounds, blunt force trauma, injuries to the neck, et cetera. What you don't find a lot of in those reports are lots of extra notes about negative findings. The doctors likely check for a lot of the things that are noted in Ms. Lam's report, but they don't typically go into much detail about them. Investigating drownings on a forensic level, however, is essentially what we have here: a thorough accounting of negative findings. Because most drownings don't really have any positive evidence findings. Water in the lungs or the sphenoid sinus, which is connected to the nasal passage, can be corroborating evidence, but they don't have to be there for a case to still be a drowning. Especially when there's decomposition such as with Ms. Lam, and the body is already breaking down and producing more liquid such as what was found in the lung cavities.

This is important to note because many people get it in their heads that if water isn't found in a person's lungs, then they couldn't have drowned. We've talked previously on how thinking in absolutes can lead a person into one-way thinking and can hinder their ability to follow evidence and logic.

[Part Four. Opinion.]

Finally, going all the way back to when the doctor mentioned finding no wrist scars. Elisa Lam had a history of mental issues and depression, but no documented suicidal ideations or attempts. This was likely communicated to the doctor, which is why he noted these specific negative findings. Wrist injuries can be seen, though not always, on people who are depressed or suicidal. Cutting ones wrists is a fairly well known way to commit suicide, and so checking the wrists makes perfect sense for Ms. Lam. Especially given her odd behavior and odd circumstance of where her body was found. Some might argue that that alone suggests suicidal behavior. There could be some truth to that, but also Ms. Lam could've just had a psychotic break of some sort and was not really thinking through her actions clearly. Either way, ruling a case a suicide usually takes more specific and/or compelling evidence, of which there is none for Ms. Lam.

And here, finally, the doctor lays out his final opinion.

“A complete autopsy examination showed no evidence of trauma and toxicology studies did not show acute drug or alcohol intoxication. Decedent had a history of bipolar disorder for which she was prescribed medication. Toxicology studies were performed for the presence of these drugs. However, quantitation in the blood was not performed due to limited sample availability. Therefore, interpretation is limited. Police investigation did not show evidence of foul play. A full review of the circumstances of the case and appropriate consultation do not support intent to harm oneself.”

Cause of death: drowning. Manner: accident. Report date: June 19th, 2013.
Signed, Jason P. Tovar, M.D., and Yulai Want, M.D.

[Part Five. Postmortem.]

There is no shortage of conspiracy theories online concerning the final days of Elisa. We're not really one for rabbit holes, but Ms. Lam's story is still a tragedy and at least to that degree, a little more information on who she was in life deserves to be mentioned.

Reportedly, she had been diagnosed and was on medication for bi-polar disorder and depression. Her toxicology report corroborates several of these medications in her system at the time of death. In 2010, she began a blog where, amongst other things, she documented her struggles with her mental issues. In January of 2012, she would mention in one of her posts about a relapse of her mental illness struggles and the negative effect she believed it was having on her academic career. It does not appear she was enrolled in college at the beginning of 2013, so it is unclear what her status and/or plans might have been. She had a history of depression but no known suicidal ideations or attempts. Though she was nude in the water tank, all of the clothes she was seen wearing in the elevator footage were in the water as well. Another thing that usually does not get mentioned: there does not seem to be a way to climb out of the tank once inside, no ladder or anything. One curious question that doesn't seem to be answered or, at the very least, we couldn't find the answer in any of the reports we researched. A fairly logical question in any drowning case... Did Ms. Lam know how to swim? And no, this doesn't make or break a case, but it is usually something an investigator would ask when someone is found in a suspected drowning. Regardless, even if she knew how to swim, there was no way out and she only had so much energy. That could account for why her clothes were off: stripping any and all extra weight while she struggled...that, of course, is only a theory.

According to reports, there are four ways to access the roof of the hotel. Three of them are via fire escapes. The fourth way is through an access door from the 14th floor. This is how the maintenance worker accessed the roof the day Elisa was found. But the access door has an alarm that has to be deactivated to enter - that was, in fact, deactivated by the maintenance worker, according to him, anyway,

when he made his way up as it was still, reportedly, in working order. Per hotel management, the alarm had not been activated at all in either January or February. There are, of course, a few sources online that state that the alarm was not actually functional. Regardless, once on the roof, the tanks themselves were slightly difficult, though certainly not impossible to access.

And, here at last, we come to a simple idea of which so many theories seem to struggle: What is and is not possible. Did Elisa Lam have a reason for being on that roof? Likely, no. But was it impossible for her to access? Not at all. A young woman with a detailed history of mental illness who had currently been witnessed performing erratic behavior finding her way to the roof of a building where she had been staying. I phrase it like this because a simple Google search of Ms. Lam's name can yield article after article with so many of them asking the seemingly innocent question of, "What Happened to Elisa Lam?" and even more stating that all these years later, there are no answers.

And yet, there very much are. They're right here, in fact. Odd circumstances to be sure, but nothing beyond the realm of possibility. If I may, let's consider the same exact circumstances. Same kind of behavior and everything, and the story leads the same way, all the way up to the top of an old hotel. Only instead of jumping into a water tank, let's say the person simply jumped off the roof to their death. I have a suspicion, that I obviously can't prove, that if that be the case, with the same erratic behavior and circumstance leading up, the case would have very likely faded into obscurity fairly quickly. With that in mind, now back to Ms. Lam, it seems the bridge too far for many is the fact that she wound up in the water tank. But, really, if your mental state can lead you all the way up to the top of a building, it honestly is not far-fetched at all to think that it could also lead you just ten feet higher.

No trauma to her body at all. No drugs in her system beyond her medications. And not a single reason to believe anybody did anything to hurt her. Again, the story of Elisa Lam is a tragedy. A young, otherwise kind woman whose struggle with mental illness put her down a pathway that ended on the roof of a building which, itself, had a history of its own struggles. Some answers are clearer than others, to be sure. And some answers might be a bit clearer if you just look a little closer. And that, of course, is why we do 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.

The End.