



Autopsy.

“Marisa Lee Bell”

[Part One. Introduction.]

Robbins Butte Wildlife Area is a piece of desert approximating 1600 plus acres of land, located some 10-20 miles west/southwest of the city of Phoenix, Arizona. Regulated and maintained by the state’s fish and game department, the wildlife area, though beautiful, isn’t much beyond a simple, quiet place, allotting few recreations. Fishing, hiking, and hunting. But then, that’s likely part of its charm: peaceful and mostly untouched. A place to get away from the city and nearby suburbs. Secluded.

It’s Wednesday April 10th, 2019. The area temperature for this month, and the previous, ranged from the upper 60s, to the mid-70s and 80s, though a few dates did reach temperatures in the 90s. On this date, however, the temp never rises above 73 degrees Fahrenheit, making it a truly beautiful day to enjoy Robbins Butte.

And so it is no surprise then that a family traveling west towards California would decide to stop and take their dogs for a walk. Robbins Butte, in fact, rests on either side of a major highway in the area and is easily accessible.

There is no definitive way to say exactly how many people had visited this area in recent months. How many had hiked its 25-mile-long trail, fished in its lake, hunted its grounds, or, like this family, simply stopped off for an otherwise nice, peaceful day. All passing and moving along...without noticing. Also unknown, at least by me, is who made the discovery first: the family, or the dogs.

What is known, though, is that it was this family on this date who discovered the body. In a shallow grave with no clothes. The body of a then-unidentified female, in a moderate stage of decomposition.

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

[Part Two. External.]

External examination. “The body is that of an unembalmed well-developed, well-nourished female measuring 62 inches in height and weighing 68 pounds and appears consistent with the reported age of 37 years. Rigor mortis has passed. Livor mortis is indeterminate due to changes of decomposition.”

Quite a bit to go over in just this little piece. As mentioned, when the body was discovered, there were no clothes nor was there any identification. Without having been there or having seen photos, it's hard to say if the body was decomposed beyond being able to make any facial recognition. Of course, often times with decomposed bodies, even if authorities or families are comfortable with a facial ID, pathologists still prefer some form of scientific method: DNA, fingerprints, dental comparison, et cetera.

I bring this up because many people might read this report and insinuate that while identification appears to be made on or before the time the autopsy was performed, that's not necessarily true. The body in this case was identified via fingerprints, but also keep in mind the body was also moderately decomposed, which can often make pulling latent prints more time consuming. Also note the weight: only 68 pounds... there wasn't much left of the decedent. The overall point here is that autopsy reports typically don't account for this kind of busy work, which becomes oh so important when properly coordinating between agencies.

Also, briefly, the term "livor mortis" has come up a few times in the series now so it's as good a time as any to go over it. It refers to the pooling of blood in the body due to gravity. So if someone passed away on their back, externally you would be able to see, at least on a fresh body, a reddish/pinkish/sometimes purpleish color on the backside. Noting this can sometimes be helpful to determine if a body has been moved based on how it was found. This body, however, is decomposed far beyond being able to make those determinations.

Finally, before we go any further, as the body was identified, we can start referring to her by her name...Ms. Marisa Lee Bell: 37-year-old Caucasian female....

"The scalp has brown hair with a significant portion of the hair sloughed off and arriving in a separate plastic evidence bag. The irides are indeterminate due to changes of decomposition. The sclerae are tan-brown. The nose has no identified acute injuries, and no blood is identified in the external nares. The nasal septum appears free of perforation. The external ears have no acute injuries and no blood is identified in the patent auditory canals."

Here the doctor begins her meticulous documentation of Ms. Bell. So far, there is nothing unusual. We can infer she is searching for trauma, but finding none.

"The oral cavity contains maggots. The oral and palatal mucosa has no visible lesions. The native upper and lower dentition is in moderate repair."

Insect and maggot activity is also nothing unique with decomposed bodies. Of note: maggots do tend to swarm towards areas of trauma, so anywhere there are

open wounds or blood, and also mucosal areas such as the eyes, mouth, and vulva. So far, at least...no definitive hemorrhage.

“The anterior neck, chest, and abdomen are symmetrical and normally formed. Red-brown discoloration of the dermis is identified on the lateral aspects of the neck and central upper chest in a semi-circular distribution. Definitive trauma is not identified.”

Again, she is searching for trauma and is finding possible markings on the neck and chest...but unfortunately, due to decomposition, those findings are far from compelling.

“Bilateral upper extremities are normally formed. Bilateral hands have artificial nails with yellow-green polish. The left hand is missing the artificial nails of the 2nd and 5th digits. The right hand is missing the artificial nail of the 2nd digit, and the artificial nail of the 3rd digit is broken.”

Now this could be compelling evidence. We’ve gone over before the idea of defensive wounds manifesting into broken or otherwise disrupted fingernails and/or artificial nails like we have here. They’re in no way conclusive or definitive, however. But we’ll touch on them more later.

“A skin disruption is present on the central upper back. A skin disruption is present on the left lower back. Definitive trauma is not identified.”

The doctor doesn’t go into much detail over these “disruptions.” Decomposition doesn’t mask everything, but it does make details less compelling. Which is to say it’s not as easy to differentiate between an abrasion or laceration or contusion, et cetera. And so the best she can do is document it as a “disruption” and move on.

“The anogenital region shows skin disruption and extensive insect/possible animal activity of the vaginal orifice and anal orifice. Obvious hemorrhage is not identified in the region.”

As mentioned, Ms. Bell was found in a shallow grave in a wildlife area. Animal activity is to be expected, especially if she had been there for a prolonged length of time, which as we’ll later learn, she was. Otherwise, the doctor was able to definitively denote two contusions, that is, bruising, on Ms. Bell’s right leg. A definitive finding that, unfortunately, doesn’t provide definitive information into Marisa’s death.

[Part Three. Internal.]

Internal examination. “The heart has the normal configuration. The coronary arteries arise and distribute normally with minimal atherosclerosis. The

coronary ostia are normally located and patent. The chambers and atrial appendages are unremarkable.”

Atherosclerosis is the buildup of plaque on the inner walls of the arteries of the heart. This normally occurs over time but can be exacerbated by poor eating habits along with poor health choices such as lack of exercise. Of course, genetics also plays a key role. Ms. Bell has minimal atherosclerosis, which isn't uncommon for her age. Overall her heart and cardiovascular system is in good health.

“The trachea, bronchi, and bronchioles are patent and lined by red sloughing mucosa. No foreign material is identified within the bronchial tree. The pulmonary arterial tree is free of emboli and thrombi.”

Moving onto the lungs, which are also in good shape. The red sloughing is simply another result of decomposition. The doctor additionally checks the bronchial airways for anything that could obstruct breathing and finds nothing. She also checks for embolisms and thromboembolisms and, again, all is clear.

“The esophagus shows a tan-brown to green, sloughing mucosa. The stomach is lined by brown-green, flattened, sloughing mucosa without evidence of ulceration or neoplasm and contains decomposition gas. No pills or other foreign material are identified.”

Again, more decomp-related findings for the stomach and esophagus but otherwise nothing significant. Stomach contents are also checked for undigested pills and anything else out of the ordinary and nothing is noted. Now, something else that the report goes into that I'll briefly detail here. The gastrointestinal tract, of course, leads all the way down to the colon, and then anus. This area, along with the vaginal walls, and partly up into the bladder, had noted insect activity. There's no specific noting, but likely: maggots. Slightly odd finding, though, that they've made their way inside the body, which is not something you typically see, but then we have to remember she had been left in a wildlife area for some time and the report does note unspecified possible animal activity, which could contribute to such a finding. Still, the report goes onto to note that the presence of antemortem trauma is indeterminate. The remaining abdominal organs are checked -- the liver, kidneys, adrenals, spleen, all yield no significant findings.

“The dura and leptomeninges are smooth, tan-gray, and unremarkable without evidence of trauma. Externally, the brain appears normally configured and symmetric. The parenchyma is tan-gray to tan-green, partially liquefied, and shows loss of the normal architecture, due to changes of decomposition. No significant hemolytic staining is identified.”

Going all the way back to the second episode, we mentioned then that decomposed brains can be...mushy. Their normal gelatin-like state breaks down fairly quickly, so when the doctor states "loss of normal architecture" we can take that to mean that what we visualize in our minds as a normal shape and structure of what a brain should look like is...collapsing. "Hemolytic staining" is a term not often used and I'm not exactly sure what the doctor is getting at here as the term comes up again in just a bit. Hemolysis is the break down of red blood cells and thus hemolytic staining would be the "stains" that that breakdown leaves behind. Meaning it's simply a note of decomposition. Just something to keep in mind as we now get to:

"The musculature of the neck is maroon and shows hemolytic staining. No definitive hemorrhage is identified. The hyoid bone is intact. The thyroid cartilage is intact and without abnormality. The larynx is patent with a smooth, red sloughing mucosa and absent of foreign material. The epiglottis, laryngeal mucosa, and thyroid capsule show no obvious evidence of hemorrhage."

Finally, we move to the neck. Again, I'm not sure what the significance of hemolytic staining is taken to mean. My feeling is that it is the doctor's way of saying that she checked for trauma and found nothing conclusive, though she did see this kind of staining. Could be blood. Could be decomposition. In that context, it's more a CYA type of phrase -- as in "yes, I saw red staining around the neck area, but I'm unsure if it was actual hemorrhage." This would also make sense going back to the brain where she specifically noted such stains weren't found at all, letting the reader know there's likely no evidence of brain hemorrhage. I'm giving her the benefit of the doubt here because it honestly reads as something she put in, assuming that one day a not-so-friendly death investigator might try and question her findings. Otherwise, the hyoid bone, larynx, and thyroid cartilage are all intact and no hemorrhage is found in the surrounding tissue.

Pieces of liver were used for toxicology because there was no blood. Testing revealed the presence of amphetamines, methamphetamines, and acetone. Many might be familiar with acetone as an ingredient of fingernail polish remover and paint thinner, and while large amounts can certainly be lethal, it must also be noted that the body can actually produce acetone on its own. If your body has ever been in ketoacidosis as a result of either fasting or diabetes, you've produced it as well. And, unfortunately, it can also be a production made during decomposition. The amphetamines found in her tox were in non-lethal levels. The methamphetamine at 16,000 ng/g, however, actually could be lethal levels...for some people, at least. Also the fact that both were found in her liver at all suggests they had been consumed and circulated in her system long enough to actually start metabolizing. But it's still hard to say exactly how long they could've been in her system beyond a few hours.

This may all sound very frustrating, and it certainly can be for pathologists. Prolonged decomposition destroys evidence and often there is nothing that can be done. And if this was all the pathologist had to work with and nothing ever came up, it would be my personal guess that the doctor likely would've listed the manner of death as homicide, as being found in a shallow grave is pretty explicit evidence that there was foul play in the works. But the cause of death would've likely been left as "undetermined" due to lack of compelling evidence. The potentially lethal levels of meth might have been considered for the cause if the body was found in less suspicious circumstances... But, something did, in fact, come up...

[Part Four. Opinion.]

To put everything in perspective, let's form a broad timeline: the body was found on April 10th, 2019. It was then unidentified. During, or sometime immediately following the autopsy, fingerprints were taken to identify the body as Marisa Bell. The pathologist knew the body was found in a shallow grave and thus had suspicions. Save for the broken and missing fingernails, the autopsy itself was negative. One month later, on May 10th, the toxicology report was completed and found amphetamines, methamphetamines, and acetone. Meth levels were within range to be lethal. By this point, the manner of death was very likely already considered a homicide, but the cause of death still lingered. Certainly, a meth overdose could've been considered, but there were too many loose ends for any confidence to simply let it lie as such. A body found in suspicious circumstances, but too decomposed for any conclusive results. A tox report that is simultaneously helpful, and not so helpful.

The autopsy report is marked as "amended" and I can personally only speculate the meaning behind that. Again, giving the doc the benefit of the doubt, I assume she went ahead and signed the case out to the best of the information she had. Perhaps listing cause and manner as undetermined. Perhaps listing the manner as homicide and just the cause as undetermined. Or I could be misreading this completely and she simply let it stay open. Often times, though, cases must be closed out, especially if there's a prolonged length of time of no new evidence following the autopsy. Regardless, the medical examiner case rested without any new information... for an entire year.

May 12th, 2020, police located a suspect based on cellphone data, an arrest was made and the suspect confessed to strangling Ms. Bell to death. Before we get into that, we must consider the uniqueness of this kind of ME case. The manner of homicide has always been on the table, but the pathologist had no conclusive evidence that anyone had strangled Marisa Bell. Yet a suspect has now admitted to doing just that. And so here we have a rare circumstance where a doctor is using a confession to sign out their cause of death, when it otherwise could not have been done. The confession is still evidence, though, and it fits the

circumstances more comfortably than a drug overdose. Also of note: asphyxia deaths, as we've seen in the past, can often leave no evidentiary findings, so it is also likely the doctor may have been considering strangulation but just did not have enough overall findings and/or compelling information to rule it as such. With the confession, however, it's enough for everything to now fit together and, just like that, the case was officially closed out.

Cause of death: asphyxia by manual strangulation. Manner: homicide. Report date: August 19th, 2020. Signed, Dr. Caroline L. Cross, MD.

[Part Five. Postmortem.]

Marisa Lee Bell was a native of Nevada. Reportedly, a missing person's report had been filed for her in the city of Fallon, but information on when that report was made, exactly, was something that I could not locate for this report. Not to speak too ill of the dead, but research into who Ms. Bell was in life seems to suggest she had...a certain reputation, we'll say, and was, per her own tox report, an illicit drug abuser. But regardless of that, per her cell phone records, she was last known alive on the night of March 4th, 2019. These records include text messages between herself, and a man named Joshua Escotos-Cisneros. They had arranged a meeting at a hotel for paid sex.

The meeting did not go well. Per online resources, Mr. Escotos stated that during their meeting, Marisa had given him a disgusted look. He became enraged, and then strangled her to death in the hotel.

What he did next could conservatively be considered... bizarre. He placed her body in the trunk of his car, and quickly dumped her clothing and personal effects -- also later found and retained by law enforcement. But he then kept Marisa stored in his trunk for approximately one week while he continued to drive the vehicle around. Then, finally, he drove to Robbin's Butte Wildlife Area, dumping the body in a shallow grave. This would likely fall around the middle or so of March. And the body would remain there, undiscovered, until April 10th.... Mr. Escotos was booked in Maricopa County jail and currently awaits his court date.

Cases involving prostitution that leads to murder are not uncommon. Prostitution itself, at least in the realm of criminal justice, is considered a victimless crime. There are various arguments in either direction of why it should or should not be considered illegal. Oddly enough, both sides of the argument claim that their way would cut down on crimes such Ms. Bell's. But that's a different argument for a different kind of discussion.

How the case plays out in court using the suspects confession versus actual physical findings will be interesting to observe as well. For us, at least, on a

medical examiner level, we've found as much as there is to find -- and the doctor did as much as she reasonably could...

She did 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.