



Autopsy.

“Kendrick Johnson”

[Part One. Introduction.]

A child wakes up in the morning and leaves for school. Just as he did yesterday, and the day before that. A familiar routine to most all of us. As is the expectation that at the end of the day, that child will return home. The probability that they won't return, in fact, is exceedingly low. But there is the rare occasion a child wakes up in their bed one morning, leaves for school, and the bed remains empty forever.... I don't phrase it this way to simply be ominous, I do it because there are parents and guardians out there who have experienced tragedy when their children did not return home one night. And the sudden, unexpected loss of a child tends to bring with it a grief that cuts so deeply that the wound never seems to fully heal.

The place is Valdosta, Georgia, a southern city barely 20 miles from the Georgia/Florida line. It's Thursday, January 10th, 2013. Technically winter, the sub-tropical climate of the region brings with it this date temperatures in the 70s that would actually top out at 79 degrees Fahrenheit.

The school in question is Lowndes High School. It is very much your average American public high school, home to some 2,000-plus students. And in this sea of adolescence, we find Kendrick Johnson. Age: 17 years old. Much like his school, Kendrick is your average American high school student. No longer a child, but not quite an adult -- and at least in the state of Georgia, still considered a juvenile. And from everything I've gathered, he was a good kid. Athletic -- a member of the school's basketball team, the Vikings. Your average kid at your average high school, on an average day. Or, what was otherwise an average day.

You see, Kendrick was expected back home that evening...and never arrived. There were no calls or messages that he would be late. No friends had heard from him. And so it doesn't take long for the family to begin to worry. And some time in the late hours of January 10th and early morning of January 11th, he is officially reported as missing. And the searching begins.

It's later into Friday morning now, approximately 10am. We're now back at Lowndes High School, in the building referred to as the Old Gymnasium, likely implying there is a new one, although this one is still very much in use at this time. Hardwood floors, bleachers; nothing out of the ordinary. In the southwest corner of this gym there are approximately 21 gym mats -- the kind normally rolled out for wrestling or cheerleading practice. Currently they are all rolled up and placed vertically on their sides, clustered and stored together. Around this

time is when several students show up and climb on top of the mats and begin walking along them, which, notably, tells us that the mats are pretty heavy duty. And while this seems to be something that students often did, it is unclear in my research if they climbed purposely searching for Kendrick, or if they were just up there randomly. Regardless, once atop the mats, they notice, oddly, sticking out from the center of one of them, what appears to be a sock. And when they move to look closer, they find what appears to be a body. Immediately, they notify the closest teacher, who begins pulling the mats down from their vertical standing, to lying horizontally on the floor. And when the teacher gets a closer look at the mat with the sock, he is finally able to confirm the unthinkable. It is, indeed, a deceased body. The body of Kendrick Lamar Johnson.

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

[Part Two. External.]

“The body is received in a body bag lying on and partially wrapped in a white sheet... The body shows congestive-decomposition changes of the head, neck, torso and bilateral upper extremities; purge fluid drains from the nose and mouth.”

Decomposition is nothing new for this program, but a curious thing about this case, at least, is the timeline. Kendrick was last seen alive via the school's security cameras that Thursday afternoon. Less than 24 hours later, he would be discovered deceased, the following Friday morning. The decomposition here is still very early, mind you, but still, considering he was found indoors, some might consider it be a little rapid. But there are factors to consider as well. Again, this is south Georgia, and temperatures this date had bordered on 80 degrees. And while he was technically indoors, this is an uninsulated gym, and heat, as we know, can very much speed up decomposition. More importantly, being upside down inside the mat, the blood and bodily fluids follow gravity. After death, they begin pooling. So combine the warm temperatures in a claustrophobic setting and all the fluids flowing down around the head, neck, chest and torso area, and there's really nothing surprising about this level of decomp. Purge fluid, we've also gone over before. It can appear blood-like, but it's fluid from the lungs -- fluid formed from the congestive decomposition. That it is emanating from the nose and mouth is also not surprising because, again, he was discovered upside down: the purge fluid is following gravity.

“The body is clothed in white socks, denim jeans which are unbuttoned and unzipped, a white with dark-colored striped cloth/material belt with a white metal buckle which is unbuckled, black sports shorts, blue-tone boxer underwear, a white t-shirt, a yellow-orange sleeveless t-shirt and a white sleeveless tank top; the front pockets of the jeans are partially pulled out; the clothing shows varying amounts of decomposition fluid/purge soiling

predominantly involving the shirts; no obvious foreign body material or acute damage is present. There is no evidence of medical intervention.”

Standard notes here. Unbuttoning and unzipping pants and pulling out the pockets is actually pretty typical for coroners to do when examining the body on scene. As a note, for most death scenes, jurisdiction is normally setup as law enforcement have jurisdiction of the scene, but the coroner or medical examiner’s office has jurisdiction of the body.

“The body is that of a well-developed and well-nourished black teenage male appearing compatible with the reported age. Congestive-decomposition changes are manifested by variable bloating, red-green-black skin discoloration with and without marbling... The head is normally formed and the nose and ears are not unusual; the left ear shows a bent-lobe position-artifact. The lips, gums and oral cavity are without obvious focal lesions.”

Beginning her documentation now of the body itself, the doctor is noting here that nothing particularly unusual is jumping out. The bent lobe of the left ear is noted as a positional artifact, the word artifact here is used in many autopsy reports and usually marks a postmortem change. Here it likely implies that the way his body was wedged in the gym mat, his ear wound up bent, and a fold developed after having been stuck in that position for quite a while. With decomposition, rigor has mostly passed, but the artifact has remained. Otherwise, there’s no noted trauma to the head or inside the mouth.

“The neck is without masses and the larynx is in the midline. The chest and back are well developed and symmetrical. The abdomen is bloated...”

Moving along to the neck, chest, and back. Externally, the doctor uses her hands to palpate the area, checking for lumps or other abnormalities, and finds nothing.

“The upper and lower extremities are well developed and symmetrical without absence of digits. Identifying marks and scars consist of a hypopigmented curvilinear scar of the right superior-medial knee and a hypopigmented patch of the right anterior-lateral distal thigh.”

The doctor here goes over the arms and legs and documents every little injury, including old scars, as well as:

“Evidence of injury: On the right posterior-medial wrist there is a 1/8 x 1/8 inch superficial abrasion. On the left distal 4th finger, involving the dorsal skin just proximal to the cuticle, there are two superficial abrasions measuring 1/8 x <1/8 inch and 3/16 x <1/8 inch. On the left distal 4th finger, involving the dorsal skin overlying the distal interphalangeal joint, there is a 5/16 inch superficial tear with no associated hemorrhage. No other injuries are identified.”

So here we have four superficial abrasions. One on the right wrist, and then three on the left 4th finger, that is the ring finger. All are on the back side of the hand, two close to the cuticle, the other closer to the knuckle. No hemorrhage around any of the areas. Now, we have gone over in the past the idea of defensive wounds manifesting on the hands. They normally show up as abrasions and cuts of the hands as well as broken nails, all with some degree of hemorrhage. That's not what we're seeing with Kendrick, however. I would even hazard to say that had Mr. Johnson not been found in such odd circumstances, these quote/quote "wounds" of the hand likely wouldn't have been documented at all. But, he was found in odd circumstances and, again, as far as the law is concerned, he's still a kid. So this reads as the pathologist being extra detailed in her exam for the sake of the family as well as a concerned public. Which is why she also did the following:

"A postmortem head x-ray is performed at autopsy and is negative for bony abnormalities/fractures or radio-opaque weaponry."

Not every case gets an x-ray during autopsy. Infants and toddlers usually receive them, and then any victim with suspected gunshot or stab wounds, or just anyone in general with suspected fractures. Kendrick received a head x-ray, and if I had to guess as to why, having been found upside down in the mat, the doctor likely wanted to check for any possible skull fractures. There are none. Nor are there any fractures to the face or jaw areas. And as far as the external examination goes, that's it. Aside from early decomposition, everything so far...is negative.

[Part Three. Internal.]

Internal examination. "The bilateral pleural and peritoneal cavities contain no significant fluid. No significant adhesions are present. All body organs are present and in their normal anatomical positions."

Your basic annotations here. Think of them as the notes being made immediately following the Y-incision and the chest plate removed. The doctor is observing the organs without any manipulation. She then checks for fluid in the chest and abdominal cavities and finds nothing significant.

"The pericardial sac is free of significant fluid and adhesions. The coronary arteries arise normally, follow the usual distribution and are widely patent without evidence of abnormality or significant atherosclerosis. The aorta and its major branches arise normally, follow the usual distribution and are without significant atherosclerosis."

We start here with the heart, and everything is as it should be. No heart disease or abnormalities. Perfectly healthy, as a kid his age should be.

“A layered dissection of the anterior neck is performed. Examination of the soft tissues of the neck including strap muscles and large vessels reveals no abnormalities. The hyoid bone and laryngeal cartilages are intact. The larynx is clear. The lingual mucosa is intact; the underlying musculature is devoid of hemorrhage.”

Here again we see the doctor being exceptionally thorough. Layered neck dissections are normally reserved for hangings or when there appears to be evidence of strangulation. This dissection involves meticulous slicing into each individual muscle around the neck and throat area, searching for anything that could jump out as hemorrhage. The doctor is very much on her P's and Q's of this case. The neck muscles are free of injuries, no injuries or fractures to the hyoid or any other neck organs. All normal.

“The upper and lower airways are free of debris and foreign material; the surface mucosa is without focal lesion. The lungs are normally formed. The parenchyma of both lungs is without obvious consolidation or focal lesions. The pulmonary arteries are free of thrombi or emboli.”

The lungs are normal. No obstruction of the airways. No embolisms or thromboembolisms. Healthy and clear.

“The dura mater is intact and is unremarkable without focal lesions. The leptomeninges are thin and delicate without evidence of purulent infection. The vasculature at the base of the brain is normally formed and is intact without evidence of abnormality or significant atherosclerosis.”

The dura mater, that is the surrounding protective membrane of the brain, has no injuries. Nor does the brain itself. We also confirm what the x-ray showed us earlier: no fractures to the skull.

“The cerebral hemispheres are symmetrical and show a normal gyral pattern. Mild generalized edema is present without evidence of herniation... The brainstem and cerebellum are unremarkable.”

More documentation for the brain. Edema is essentially swelling via fluid build-up. It's noted as mild here, which isn't a surprise given, again, Kendrick being found upside down.

As far as the rest of the internal exam goes, everything else is negative. All other organs, including liver, stomach, pancreas, spleen, kidneys, and bladder are all negative. And if you've been a listener in the past, you may or may not expect this to be the end of the internal examination. But once again, the doctor provides further extra documentation and notes the following:

“The bony framework and supporting musculature/soft tissues are well developed and without focal lesions. Bilateral vertical incisions of the back are made for examination. A posterior neck dissection is performed at autopsy and is negative for injuries/abnormalities.”

Again, these are not routine, normal exercises for any old autopsy. The doctor has cut into Kendrick’s back to check for possible injuries below the surface of the skin. This kind of thing is normally reserved for cases where there is evidence that a person has been beat on. These cuts can reveal hemorrhages below the skin, on the muscles. But again, for Kendrick, there is nothing. The doctor further performs a posterior neck dissection. That is, cutting into the back of the neck. The front of the neck and jaw has been checked, but for complete thoroughness of the area, she is checking the back as well for any possible injuries to the muscle or, more importantly, to the spine. As with everything else so far, the results are negative.

“Sections of heart, lung, thymus, liver, spleen, pancreas, kidney, adrenal gland and brain are examined and show autolysis-decomposition changes; no obvious pathology is identified. Analysis of postmortem liver for drug screen testing is negative for cocaine/cocaine metabolites and common opioids. Analysis of postmortem liver for drug confirmation testing is negative for a comprehensive drug screen.”

The organ sections are sent off for what is known as histology. These sections are effectively processed to glass slides, where doctors can take closer looks under their microscopes. Also of note, Kendrick had apparently decomposed past the point of having blood that could be collected, and so a sample of his liver was used for toxicology. And again, being the thorough pathologist that she was, she requests a comprehensive drug screen from the tox department. And again, toxicology and histology samples return negative results.

[Part Four. Opinion.]

To lay everything out so far: we have an otherwise healthy 17-year-old found in the odd circumstance of being upside down, down the center of a rolled up gym mat. He has some early decomposition. But externally and internally, he is negative for any findings. Now, some may believe that Kendrick being anywhere near the mats at all would be suspicious. However, it actually wasn’t uncommon for students to crawl up on the gym mats. Kids were, after all, comfortably walking on top of them when Kendrick was discovered. It was also common for kids to throw their regular shoes on top of them when changing to their gym shoes. I mention this because there is one piece of evidence noted on scene for Kendrick that seems quite relevant. He wasn’t just hanging upside down in the mat with both arms by his side. When he was found, one of his arms was outstretched above him as if he had been reaching for something. And right next

to what would've been the bottom of the gym mat after it was turned on its side by the teacher, was one of his sneakers. But before I elaborate on any of that, I'll let the doctor give her final summary:

"The decedent is a 17-year-old black teenage male who was found deceased, upside-down in the central-hole of a rolled-up gym mat, which was stored standing-on-end in a vertical position in the gym of his high school. Per investigative reports, the decedent was seen via video cameras entering the gym alone on the afternoon of 01/10/2013; the decedent was reported missing by his family the night/early morning of 01/10/2013-01/11/2013; the decedent was found the morning of 01/11/2013 by students walking on top of the rolled-up mats. Law enforcement investigative findings, crime scene investigator findings/report, coroner's findings, witness statements and scene photographs are received, reviewed and discussed."

Cause of death: positional asphyxia. Manner: accident. Report date: May 2nd, 2013. Signed, Dr. Maryanne Gaffney-Kraft, MD.

[Part Five. Postmortem.]

Positional asphyxia, by definition, occurs when one's position prevents them from breathing adequately. If you were to be suspended by your feet upside down -- if you stayed that way long enough, you would absolutely asphyxiate. Compound that with Kendrick's situation. Again, I cannot implore enough that there was no significant evidence of any kind of injury to any part of his body. So while he was otherwise a healthy kid, being upside down inside a rolled up gym mat, where there's no real room to move or squirm around, it is absolutely possible to quickly asphyxiate in such a position. Positional asphyxia as a cause of death is a bit like dealing with a drowning case -- such as we went over previously with Elisa Lam -- insomuch as the autopsy is going to be negative for physical findings. And in their absence, you look to circumstantial findings. And that is essentially what the doctor has done here: she has methodically eliminated all that is impossible and what remains here is the likelihood that Kendrick accidentally got himself into a situation he didn't realize was so potentially dangerous. And as noted, these gym mats were pretty heavy duty -- enough for kids to be able to walk on top of without issue. Meaning that if you were to find yourself stuck down the middle of one, there is a slim to none chance you'd be able to shake and rock back and forth to turn one over to escape. Especially when there are twenty other mats clustered around.

And so with all of that being said, there is a working theory. But as we always like to say, it is just a theory. It connects all relevant dots. But, of course, as there were no cameras on the mat area, there is no way to be 100% sure. Regardless, it goes as such:

Kendrick had likely tossed his sneakers on top of the mats, as many kids did. When he went to retrieve them, he crawled on top to find that one of the shoes had fallen down the center of one of the mats. He reached an arm down to get it and then accidentally slipped in after it and became wedged. And I would use the word “wedged” because he apparently stopped short of falling all the way through, hence his one, shoeless foot was still sticking out the top. And that was it.

I don't pretend to be an expert on how long it could've taken for him to asphyxiate. Unfortunately there is no way to know for sure how tightly wedged he was, either. But I can say that, as someone who is mildly claustrophobic, the idea of being alone, upside down, and stuck...is just frightening.

As far as the autopsy examination goes, the case is closed. The family's grief still lingers on, however. Every case so far on this program, once the autopsy has been completed and the deceased has been buried, that has been pretty much that. And up until now, I've held off bringing up any other curiosities and/or oddities with Kendrick's case. That's been a specific choice because, of everything you can research online, the one thing you can't find is anyone who can refute Dr. Kraft's original autopsy findings. For anyone not aware, after Kendrick's autopsy, he was, like most, buried. But only a few months later, the family decided that they wanted a second examination, and hired a private pathologist. Again, always remember that this is a family who lost a child. Hiring pathologists for a second autopsy isn't necessarily rare, it does occur on occasion. But in exhuming Kendrick's body, a hornet's nest was effectively kicked.

But all of that will have to wait for its own discussion, which is coming soon -- or is already available depending on when you listen to this.

Because for now at least, we've come to the conclusion... of the 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.