Post-Mortem

Patricia Cornwell

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Extract

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It was raining in Richmond on Friday, June 6.

The relentless downpour, which began at dawn, beat the lilies to naked stalks, and blacktop and sidewalks were littered with leaves. There were small rivers in the streets, and newborn ponds on playing fields and lawns. I went to sleep to the sound of water drumming the slate roof, and was dreaming a terrible dream as night dissolved into the foggy first hours of Saturday morning.

I saw a white face beyond the rain-streaked glass, a face formless and inhuman like the faces of misshapen dolls made of nylon hose. My bedroom window was dark when suddenly the face was there, an evil intelligence looking in. I woke up and stared blindly into the dark. I did not know what had awakened me until the telephone rang again. I found the receiver without fumbling.

"Dr. Scarpetta?"

"Yes." I reached for the lamp and switched it on. It was 2:33 A.M. My heart was drilling through my ribs.

"Pete Marino here. We got us one at 5602 Berkley Avenue. Think you better come."

The victim's name, he went on to explain, was Lori Petersen, a white female, thirty years old. Her husband had found her body about half an hour earlier.

Details were unnecessary. The moment I picked up the receiver and recognized Sergeant Marino's voice, I knew. Maybe I knew the instant the telephone rang. People who believe in werewolves are afraid of a full moon. I'd begun to dread the hours between midnight and 3:00 A.M. when Friday becomes Saturday and the city is unconscious.

Ordinarily, the medical examiner on call is summoned to a death scene. But this wasn't ordinary. I had made it clear after the second case that no matter the hour, if there was another murder, I was to be called. Marino wasn't keen on the idea. Ever since I was appointed chief medical examiner for the Commonwealth of Virginia less than two years ago he'd been difficult. I wasn't sure if he didn't like women, or if he just didn't like me.

"Berkley's in Berkley Downs, Southside," he said condescendingly. "You know the way?"

Confessing I didn't, I scribbled the directions on the notepad I always kept by the phone. I hung up and my feet were already on the floor as adrenaline hit my nerves like espresso. The house was quiet. I grabbed my black medical bag, scuffed and worn from years of use.

The night air was like a cool sauna, and there were no lights in the windows of my neighbors' houses. As I

backed the navy station wagon out of the drive, I looked at the light burning over the porch, at the first-story window leading into the guest bedroom where my ten-year-old niece, Lucy, was asleep. This would be one more day in the child's life I would miss. I had picked her up at the airport Wednesday night. Our meals together, so far, had been few.

There was no traffic until I hit the Parkway. Minutes later I was speeding across the James River. Taillights far ahead were rubies, the downtown skyline ghostly in the rearview mirror. Fanning out on either side were plains of darkness with tiny necklaces of smudged light at the edges. Out there, somewhere, is a man, I thought. He could be anybody, walks upright, sleeps with a roof over his head, and has the usual number of fingers and toes. He is probably white and much younger than my forty years. He is ordinary by most standards, and probably doesn't drive a BMW or grace the bars in the Slip or the finer clothing stores along Main Street.

But, then again, he could. He could be anybody and he was nobody. Mr. Nobody. The kind of guy you don't remember after riding up twenty floors alone with him inside an elevator.

He had become the self-appointed dark ruler of the city, an obsession for thousands of people he had never seen, and an obsession of mine. Mr. Nobody.

Because the homicides began two months ago, he may have been recently released from prison or a mental hospital. This was the speculation last week, but the theories were constantly changing.

Mine had remained the same from the start. I strongly suspected he hadn't been in the city long, he'd done this before somewhere else, and he'd never spent a day behind the locked doors of a prison or a forensic unit. He wasn't disorganized, wasn't an amateur, and he most assuredly wasn't "crazy."

Wilshire was two lights down on the left, Berkley the first right after that.

I could see the blue and red lights flashing two blocks away. The street in front of 5602 Berkley was lit up like a disaster site. An ambulance, its engine rumbling loudly, was alongside two unmarked police units with grille lights flashing and three white cruisers with light bars going full tilt. The Channel 12 news crew had just pulled up. Lights had blinked on up and down the street, and several people in pajamas and housecoats had wandered out to their porches.

I parked behind the news van as a cameraman trotted across the street. Head bent, the collar of my khaki raincoat turned up around my ears, I briskly followed the brick walk to the front door. I have always had a special distaste for seeing myself on the evening news. Since the stranglings in Richmond began, my office had been inundated, the same reporters calling over and over again with the same insensitive questions.

"If it's a serial killer, Dr. Scarpetta, doesn't that indicate it's quite likely to happen again?"

As if they wanted it to happen again.

"Is it true you found bite marks on the last victim, Doc?"

It wasn't true, but no matter how I answered such a question I couldn't win. "No comment," and they assume it's true. "No," and the next edition reads, "Dr. Kay Scarpetta denies that bite marks have been found on the victims' bodies . . ." The killer, who's reading the papers like everybody else, gets a new idea.

Recent news accounts were florid and frighteningly detailed. They went far beyond serving the useful purpose of warning the city's citizens. Women, particularly those who lived alone, were terrified. The sale of handguns and deadbolt locks went up fifty percent the week after the third murder, and the SPCA ran out of dogs – a phenomenon which, of course, made the front page, too. Yesterday, the infamous and prize-winning police reporter Abby Turnbull had demonstrated her usual brass by coming to my office and clubbing my staff with the Freedom of Information Act in an unsuccessful attempt at getting copies of the autopsy records.

Crime reporting was aggressive in Richmond, an old Virginia city of 220,000, which last year was listed by the FBI as having the second-highest homicide rate per capita in the United States. It wasn't uncommon for forensic pathologists from the British Commonwealth to spend a month at my office to learn more about gunshot wounds. It wasn't uncommon for career cops like Pete Marino to leave the madness of New York or Chicago only to find Richmond was worse.

What was uncommon were these sex slayings. The average citizen can't relate to drug and domestic shootouts or one wino stabbing another over a bottle of

Mad Dog. But these murdered women were the colleagues you sit next to at work, the friends you invite to go shopping or to stop by for drinks, the acquaintances you chat with at parties, the people you stand in line with at the checkout counter. They were someone's neighbor, someone's sister, someone's daughter, someone's lover. They were in their own homes, sleeping in their own beds, when Mr. Nobody climbed through one of their windows.

Two uniformed men flanked the front door, which was open wide and barred by a yellow ribbon of tape, warning: CRIME SCENE – DO NOT CROSS.

"Doc." He could have been my son, this boy in blue who stepped aside at the top of the steps and lifted the tape to let me duck under.

The living room was immaculate, and attractively decorated in warm rose tones. A handsome cherry cabinet in a corner contained a small television and a compact disc player. Nearby a stand held sheet music and a violin. Beneath a curtained window overlooking the front lawn was a sectional sofa, and on the glass coffee table in front of it were half a dozen magazines neatly stacked. Among them were *Scientific American* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Across a Chinese dragon rug with a rose medallion against a field of cream stood a walnut bookcase. Tomes straight from a medical school's syllabi lined two shelves.

An open doorway led into a corridor running the length of the house. To my right appeared a series of rooms, to the left was the kitchen, where Marino and a

young officer were talking to a man I assumed was the husband.

I was vaguely aware of clean countertops, linoleum and appliances in the off-white that manufacturers call "almond," and the pale yellow of the wallpaper and curtains. But my attention was riveted to the table. On top of it lay a red nylon knapsack, the contents of which had been gone through by the police: a stethoscope, a penlight, a Tupperware container once packed with a meal or a snack, and recent editions of the *Annals of Surgery*, *Lancet* and the *Journal of Trauma*. By now I was thoroughly unsettled.

Marino eyed me coolly as I paused by the table, then introduced me to Matt Petersen, the husband. Petersen was slumped in a chair, his face destroyed by shock. He was exquisitely handsome, almost beautiful, his features flawlessly chiseled, his hair jet-black, his skin smooth and hinting of a tan. He was wide-shouldered with a lean but elegantly sculpted body casually clad in a white Izod shirt and faded blue jeans. His eyes were cast down, his hands stiffly in his lap.

"These are hers?" I had to know. The medical items might belong to the husband.

Marino's "Yeah" was a confirmation.

Petersen's eyes slowly lifted. Deep blue, bloodshot, they seemed relieved as they fixed on me. The doctor had arrived, a ray of hope where there was none.

He muttered in the truncated sentences of a mind fragmented, stunned, "I talked to her on the phone. Last night. She told me she'd be home around twelve-thirty,

home from VMC, the ER. I got here, found the lights out, thought she'd already gone to bed. Then I went in there." His voice rose, quivering, and he took a deep breath. "I went in there, in the bedroom." His eyes were desperate and welling, and he was pleading with me. "Please. I don't want people looking at her, seeing her like that. *Please.*"

I gently told him, "She has to be examined, Mr. Petersen."

A fist suddenly banged the top of the table in a startling outburst of rage. "I know!" His eyes were wild. "But all of them, the police and everybody!" His voice was shaking. "I know how it is! Reporters and everybody crawling all over the place. I don't want every son of a bitch and his brother staring at her!"

Marino didn't bat an eye. "Hey. I got a wife, too, Matt. I know where you're coming from, all right? You got my word she gets respect. The same respect I'd want if it was me sitting in your chair, okay?"

The sweet balm of lies.

The dead are defenseless, and the violation of this woman, like the others, had only begun. I knew it would not end until Lori Petersen was turned inside out, every inch of her photographed, and all of it on display for experts, the police, attorneys, judges and members of a jury to see. There would be thoughts, remarks about her physical attributes or lack of them. There would be sophomoric jokes and cynical asides as the victim, not the killer, went on trial, every aspect of her person and the way she lived, scrutinized, judged and, in some instances, degraded.

A violent death is a public event, and it was this facet of my profession that so rudely grated against my sensibilities. I did what I could to preserve the dignity of the victims. But there was little I could do after the person became a case number, a piece of evidence passed from hand to hand. Privacy is destroyed as completely as life.

Marino led me out of the kitchen, leaving the officer to continue questioning Petersen.

"Have you taken your pictures yet?" I asked.

"ID's in there now, dusting everything," he said, referring to the Identification section officers processing the scene. "I told 'em to give the body a wide berth."

We paused in the hallway.

On the walls were several nice watercolors and a collection of photographs depicting the husband's and the wife's respective graduating classes, and one artistic color shot of the young couple leaning against weathered piling before a backdrop of the beach, the legs of their trousers rolled up to their calves, the wind ruffling their hair, their faces ruddy from the sun. She was pretty in life, blond, with delicate features and an engaging smile. She went to Brown, then to Harvard for medical school. Her husband's undergraduate years were spent at Harvard. This was where they must have met, and apparently he was younger than she.

She. Lori Petersen. Brown. Harvard. Brilliant. Thirty years old. About to have it all realized, her dream. After eight grueling years, at least, of medical training. A physician. All of it destroyed in a few minutes of a stranger's aberrant pleasure.

Marino touched my elbow.

I turned away from the photographs as he directed my attention to the open doorway just ahead on the left.

"Here's how he got in," he said.

It was a small room with a white tile floor and walls papered in Williamsburg blue. There was a toilet and a lavatory, and a straw clothes hamper. The window above the toilet was open wide, a square of blackness through which cool, moist air seeped and stirred the starchy white curtains. Beyond, in the dark, dense trees, cicadas were tensely sawing.

"The screen's cut." Marino's face was expressionless as he glanced at me. "It's leaning against the back of the house. Right under the window's a picnic table bench. Appears he pulled it up so he could climb in."

I was scanning the floor, the sink, the top of the toilet. I didn't see dirt or smudges or footprints, but it was hard to tell from where I was standing, and I had no intention of running the risk of contaminating anything.

"Was this window locked?" I asked.

"Don't look like it. All the other windows are locked. Already checked. Seems like she would've gone to a lot of trouble to make sure this one was. Of all the windows, it's the most vulnerable, close to the ground, in back where no one can see what's going on. Better than coming in through the bedroom window because if the guy's quiet, she's not going to hear him cutting the screen and climbing in this far down the hall."

"And the doors? Were they locked when the husband got home?"

"He says so."

"Then the killer went out the same way he came in," I decided.

"Looks that way. Tidy squirrel, don't you think?" He was holding on to the door frame, leaning forward without stepping inside. "Don't see nothing in here, like maybe he wiped up after himself to make sure he didn't leave footprints on the john or floor. It's been raining all day." His eyes were flat as they fixed on me. "His feet should've been wet, maybe muddy."

I wondered where Marino was going with this. He was hard to read, and I'd never decided if he was a good poker player or simply slow. He was exactly the sort of detective I avoided when given a choice – a cock of the walk and absolutely unreachable. He was pushing fifty, with a face life had chewed on, and long wisps of graying hair parted low on one side and combed over his balding pate. At least six feet tall, he was bay-windowed from decades of bourbon or beer. His unfashionably wide red-and-blue-striped tie was oily around the neck from summers of sweat. Marino was the stuff of tough-guy flicks – a crude, crass gumshoe who probably had a foul-mouthed parrot for a pet and a coffee table littered with *Hustler* magazines.

I went the length of the hallway and stopped outside the master bedroom. I felt myself go hollow inside.

An ID officer was busy coating every surface with black dusting powder; a second officer was capturing everything on videotape.

Lori Petersen was on top of the bed, the blue-and-

white spread hanging off the foot of the bed. The top sheet was kicked down and bunched beneath her feet, the cover sheet pulled free of the top corners, exposing the mattress, the pillows shoved to the right side of her head. The bed was the vortex of a violent storm, surrounded by the undisturbed civility of middle-class bedroom furnishings of polished oak.

She was nude. On the colorful rag rug to the right of the bed was her pale yellow cotton gown. It was slit from collar to hem, and this was consistent with the three previous cases. On the night stand nearest the door was a telephone, the cord ripped out of the wall. The two lamps on either side of the bed were out, the electrical cords severed from them. One cord bound her wrists, which were pinioned at the small of her back. The other cord was tied in a diabolically creative pattern also consistent with the first three cases. Looped once around her neck, it was threaded behind her through the cord around her wrists and tightly lashed around her ankles. As long as her knees were bent, the loop around her neck remained loose. When she straightened her legs, either in a reflex to pain or because of the assailant's weight on top of her, the ligature around her neck tightened like a noose.

Death by asphyxiation takes only several minutes. That's a very long time when every cell in your body is screaming for air.

"You can come on in, Doc," the officer with the video camera was saying. "I've got all this on film."

Watching where I walked, I approached the bed, set

my bag on the floor and got out a pair of surgical gloves. Next I got out my camera and took several photographs of the body *in situ*. Her face was grotesque, swollen beyond recognition and a dark bluish purple from the suffusion of blood caused by the tight ligature around her neck. Bloody fluid had leaked from her nose and mouth, staining the sheet. Her straw-blond hair was in disarray. She was moderately tall, no less than five foot seven, and considerably fleshier than the younger version captured in the photographs down the hall.

Her physical appearance was important because the absence of a pattern was becoming a pattern. The four strangling victims seemed to have had no physical characteristics in common, not even race. The third victim was black and very slender. The first victim was a redhead and plump, the second a brunette and petite. They had different professions: a schoolteacher, a freelance writer, a receptionist, and now a physician. They lived in different areas of the city.

Fetching a long chemical thermometer from my bag, I took the temperature of the room, then of her body. The air was 71 degrees, her body 93.5. Time of death is more elusive than most people think. It can't be pinned down exactly unless the death was witnessed or the victim's Timex stopped ticking. But Lori Petersen had been dead no more than three hours. Her body had been cooling between one and two degrees per hour, and rigor had started in the small muscles.

I looked for any obvious trace evidence that might not survive the trip to the morgue. There were no loose

hairs on the skin, but I found a multitude of fibers, most of which, no doubt, were from the bedcovers. With forceps I collected a sampling of them, minuscule whitish ones and several seeming to have come from a dark blue or black material. These I placed in small metal evidence buttons. The most obvious evidence was the musky smell, the patches of a residue, transparent and dried like glue, on the upper front and back of her legs.

Seminal fluid was present in all of the cases, yet it was of little serological value. The assailant was one of the twenty percent of the population who enjoyed the distinction of being a nonsecreter. This meant his blood-type antigens could not be found in his other body fluids, such as saliva or semen or sweat. Absent a blood sample, in other words, he couldn't be typed. He could have been A, B, AB or anything.

As recently as two years earlier, the killer's nonsecreter status would have been a crushing blow to the forensic investigation. But now there was DNA profiling, newly introduced and potentially significant enough to identify an assailant to the exclusion of all other human beings, provided the police caught him first and obtained biological samples and he didn't have an identical twin.

Marino was inside the bedroom right behind me.

"The bathroom window," he said, looking at the body. "Well, according to the husband in there," jerking a thumb in the direction of the kitchen, "the reason it was unlocked's because he unlocked it last weekend."

I just listened.

"He says that bathroom's hardly ever used, unless

they got company. Seems he was replacing the screen last weekend, says it's possible he forgot to relock the window when he finished. The bathroom's not used all week. She" – he glanced again at the body – "has no reason to give it a thought, just assumes it's locked." A pause. "Kind of interesting the only window the killer tried, it appears, was that window. The one unlocked. The screens to the rest of 'em aren't cut."

"How many windows are in the back of the house?" I asked.

"Three. In the kitchen, the half bath and the bathroom in here."

"And all of them have slide-up sashes with a latch lock at the top?"

"You got it."

"Meaning, if you shone a flashlight on the latch lock from the outside, you probably could see whether it's fastened or not?"

"Maybe." Those flat, unfriendly eyes again. "But only if you climbed up something to look. You couldn't see the lock from the ground."

"You mentioned a picnic bench," I reminded him.

"Problem with that's the backyard's soggy as hell. The legs of the bench should've left depressions in the lawn if the guy put it up against the other windows and stood on top of it to look. I got a couple men poking around out there now. No depressions under the other two windows. Don't look like the killer went near 'em. What it does look like is he went straight to the bathroom window down the hall."

"Is it possible it might have been open a crack, and that's why the killer went straight to it?"

Marino conceded, "Hey. Anything's possible. But if it was open a crack, maybe she would've noticed it, too, at some point during the week."

Maybe. Maybe not. It is easy to be observant retrospectively. But most people don't pay that much attention to every detail of their residences, especially to rooms scarcely used.

Beneath a curtained window overlooking the street was a desk containing other numbing reminders that Lori Petersen and I were of the same profession. Scattered over the blotter were several medical journals, the *Principles of Surgery* and Dorland's. Near the base of the brass gooseneck lamp were two computer diskettes. The labels were tersely dated "6/1" in felt-tip pen and numbered "I" and "II." They were generic double-density diskettes, IBM-compatible. Possibly they contained something Lori Petersen was working on at VMC, the medical college, where there were numerous computers at the disposal of the students and physicians. There didn't appear to be a personal computer inside the house.

On a wicker chair in the corner between the chests of drawers and the window clothes were neatly laid: a pair of white cotton slacks, a red-and-white-striped short-sleeved shirt and a brassiere. The garments were slightly wrinkled, as if worn and left on the chair at the end of the day, the way I sometimes do when I'm too tired to hang up my clothes.