

## CASE REPORT

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# Signature Murders: A Report of Several Related Cases

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**ABSTRACT:** Three female patrons of singles bars were murdered in separate events in Bellevue, Washington in 1990 within sixty-seven days of each other. An evaluation of those murders revealed that all the murders were linked by a distinct personal "signature" or "calling card" left by the killer. As reported in the literature, the *modus operandi* of a killer frequently changes from one murder to the next and is different from the killer's signature, which is a permanent psychological imprint at each scene. The murder cases reported here demonstrate an elaborate signature of one killer who engaged in a rare personalization of his necrophilic fantasies by posing, openly displaying, and sexually inserting foreign objects into each one of three victims' bodies.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, forensic psychology, serial murder, signature murder, criminal profiling

For purposes of linking murder cases, police investigators traditionally have searched for certain factors that were similar from one case to another, commonly called *Modus Operandi*, method of operation, or M.O. of the killer. The way a murder is committed (the M.O.) is controlled by the actions of the killer based, to some extent, on the victim's response to the situation. For example, if the slayer in one case easily controls the victim, the killer may not change his M.O. in the next case unless he/she has trouble controlling the victim. A killer may use strangulation in the first case and, in a subsequent case, to accommodate an overcoming resistance by the victim, use a firearm because the strangling method was unsuccessful. Therefore, the M.O. of the killer includes only those actions necessary to commit the murder and can change over time as the killer discovers that some things he/she does are more effective [1].

There are other crime-scene indicators that link murders even when the M.O. changes. Many sexually sadistic repetitive killers, for example, go beyond the actions necessary to commit a murder. They are not satisfied with just committing the murder, but have a compulsion to demonstrate a personal expression unique only to that particular slayer [2]. The killer's personal expression is commonly referred to as his/her "signature" or "calling card."

There is a small but growing literature in the criminal justice field that differentiates *modus operandi* and signature or trademark

[1-4]. Some of those works deal with highly selective elements of murder investigation, for example, the sexually sadistic killer or the killer who commits necrophilic acts [1,2,5].

Another source of information that highlights the differences between M.O. and signature is the case law on murder convictions. Although the M.O. and signature of a killer have not been studied empirically, they are a common source of appellate issues raised by those convicted of murder. The case law is replete with appeals that attack the efficacy of the signature aspects of murders. Frequently, they illustrate that the successful linkage of murder cases to the same person is dependent upon how clearly the elements of a killer's signature are found at the murder scenes and that the killer's core, or basic, signature never changes from one murder to another [6-8].

Unlike the characteristics of an offender's M.O., the signature remains constant. However, a signature may evolve over time. A necrophilic killer, for example, may perform more and more postmortem mutilation from one murder to the next. With experience, the elements of the original personal expression become more fully developed [1]. Unfortunately, a signature is not always recognized at the crime scene because of decomposition of the body or interruptions to the killer's routine, like the presence of unexpected witnesses.

The etiology of the signature has been described as the person's violent fantasies which are progressive in nature and contribute to thoughts of committing extremely violent behavior [5]. As a person dreams and thinks of his/her fantasies over time, he/she develops a need to express those violent fantasies. Most serial killers have lived with their fantasies for years before they finally bubble to the surface and become translated into deeds [5]. When the killer finally acts out, some aspect of the murder will demonstrate his/her unique personal expression that has been replayed in fantasies over and over again [5]. It's not enough just to consummate a murder; killers must often act out fantasies in some manner over and beyond inflicting death producing injuries [5]. For example, some lust killers have a need to bludgeon to the point of overkill, carve on the body, or leave messages written in blood. They may re-arrange the position of the victim, performing post-mortem activities which suit their own personal desires and, in essence, leave their psychopathological calling card. The following three murders exemplify the signature aspects of a serial killer.

## Background

The Bellevue and Kirkland vicinity of King County, Washington averaged only one murder per year for the ten-year period, 1981-

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1990. Within sixty-seven days, the locale experienced three separate atypical murders within a five mile radius of each other.

Prior to charging George W. Russell with three counts of first degree murder, deputy prosecutors from the King County Prosecutor's Office, Seattle, Washington, contacted this author and requested an analysis of the three murders. Their main question was: *were all three murders committed by the same person?* The analysis could not include any information about Mr. Russell or evidence about why he was connected to any one case. Although there was physical evidence that ultimately connected each case to George Russell, there was no physical evidence found, such as hairs and fibers, that connected one murder to another. The materials used for the analysis were police reports, crime scene diagrams, autopsy reports, and photographs.

### Victim Number 1

On June 23, 1990, just after 7:30 AM, the body of a murdered female was found in a refuge area behind a restaurant, which is in a heavily-frequented area of the city. The nude body was clearly posed and placed in an open, displayed manner as though her killer intentionally left her in that particular spot so she would be discovered quickly. While she was lying on her back, her left foot was crossed over the instep of her right ankle.

The victim's head was turned to the left with a snack food lid resting ominously on top of her right eye. Her arms were bent at the elbow and crossed over her abdomen with her hands gently touching, one inside the other. In her hand was a Douglas fir cone. Even though her corpse was found nude, the victim's gold metal watch was on her left wrist and her gold choker chain with a crescent shaped white pendant was around her neck.

The surface of the garbage area was a cement rectangle, bordered by the asphalt pavement of the parking lot and a wooden fence. The refuge area was uncommonly clean, having just been swept by someone. A pile of debris was within 3 feet of the victim's head. In front of the trash compactor, which was located inside and in the back of the fenced area, several blood stains and chips of fingernail polish from the victim were found. One could assume from this evidence that the killer had initially taken the victim further into the garbage area, which would have been more secluded, but instead, displayed the victim prominently back toward the entrance so she could be clearly seen.

It was determined at the scene that the victim had sustained wounds indicative of strangulation, severe blows to the right eye, nose and mouth, and abrasions, postmortem in nature, to the right arm, right breast, both hips, knees, and feet. The postmortem abrasions were likely produced when the killer dragged the victim about twenty feet along the parking lot surface to inside the dumpster's fence. Her antemortem abrasions were defense wounds.

The estimated time of death determined by the medical examiner was between 2:30 AM and 5:20 AM. A late night worker of the restaurant had dumped garbage at 3:15 AM, and the body was not there.

The autopsy examination revealed blunt impact injuries to the head resulting in a fracture to the right base of the cranium, and blunt injuries to the abdomen causing a laceration of the liver. The medical examiner found the victim's stomach empty, and her toxicological screen read a blood alcohol level of .14. Forcible rape had transpired as evidenced by the victim's anal canal being severely lacerated by a foreign object. Also, sperm were located in her vaginal vault.

Victim 1 was a white female, 27 years old, 5 feet 7 inches tall,

150 pounds, light brown shoulder-length slightly curly hair, and blue-gray eyes. She was last seen alive on Friday, June 22, 1990 at about 10 PM at a popular, trendy single's bar and dance spot. The bar is located about one mile northwest of the restaurant where the victim was found. In the bar's parking lot, the victim's 1984 Chevrolet Camaro was parked, undisturbed, with nothing removed from it. Her purse, which contained her car keys, was found later in the lost-and-found property at the bar.

Detectives surmised that the victim had met someone at the bar, left with that person after 10 PM, and intended to return and retrieve her purse and car. Sometime later, she was assaulted and murdered at an unknown location and placed behind the restaurant after 3:15 AM. They felt that the murder began with many of the typical characteristics of the common rape-murder, a sexual confrontation gone bad. The circumstances surrounding the victim's disappearance support the theory that the victim left the bar with a date, intending to return. Judging by the number of defense wounds and the blunt force injuries inflicted by the killer, she put up quite a struggle prior to death and left her mark on him. Undoubtedly, the killer had to wash her blood from himself.

The sexually sadistic rape-murderer, however, rarely gets sexual pleasure from the actual killing of the victim [2,7]. But in this case, and atypical of rape-murderers, the slayer derived his satisfaction from postmortem sexual activities. The killer spent time after death with the victim behind the restaurant, arranging and positioning her body for her final pose, even at the risk of being seen. The victim-offender contact degenerated into a demonstration of complete possessiveness and ultimate degradation. Victim 1, therefore, was not killed by some common rape-murderer because the signature of the crime belonged to someone fitting the hypothetical profile of a necrophilic killer likely to strike again [2,11,12].

### Analysis of Victim 1's Case

Victim 1's murder was compared against the data base of the Washington State Attorney General's Homicide Investigation and Tracking System (HITS).<sup>2</sup> Her murder case contained many distinctive query features for the HITS computer to match for similar factors [9,10]. The murder had three unique and significant characteristics which, when taken collectively, did not appear in any of the 2000 murders in the HITS data base up to that time. First, posing a murder victim's body was very rare. The analysis of murder victims revealed that there were only six instances of posing a victim's body or, in other words, only two-tenths of one percent of the total cases. The act of deliberate posing involves positioning the body parts, like posing a person for a photograph. In one case of posing, a deranged killer repositioned mutilated and amputated body parts back in their correct anatomical positions. Posing is not to be confused with staging, because staging refers to manipulation of the scene around the body as well as positioning of the body. For example, a convicted murderer brutally assaulted and killed his wife. To cover up her murder, he then placed her body behind the steering wheel of their motorhome and pushed it over an embankment, staging a murder to look like an accident. Both staging and posing requires that the killer spend extensive time after death re-arranging the scene and positioning the body in a certain way, going beyond the actions necessary to perpetrate the murder.

The second unique component of Victim 1's murder was the

<sup>2</sup> HITS is a murder and sexual assault investigation system that collects, collates, and analyzes the salient characteristics of all murders and predatory sexual offenses in Washington State.

disposal of her body. In the research that formed the HITS data base, there were three notable methods found that were used by a killer to dispose of a victim's body. The *most common* method, fifty-eight percent of the time, was when the killer left the body in a position where he was unconcerned about whether the body was found. That usually occurred in domestic violence and argument murders when the body was left in its position immediately after having fallen from the death-producing injuries. A *second* method of disposal, ten percent of the time, was when the killer deliberately concealed or hid the body from discovery. That method of disposal was exemplified by burying the body, putting leaves or branches over the body in the woods, or placing the body in a crawl space of a house. Leaving the body in a specific location where the body was guaranteed to be found was the *third* method of disposal, commonly referred to as open and displayed. The third method had only occurred in ten percent of the murder cases examined.

The third significant characteristic of murder in Victim 1's case was sexual insertion of a foreign object. A HITS analysis revealed that there were 19 murders in which a foreign object had been inserted for sexual purposes, but the object was unknown and not found. Likewise, there were 6 sexual insertions of a foreign object, and the object was found inserted into a body cavity. Examples in the HITS data base were a zucchini was found in the anus of one victim and dildo was found in the vagina of another victim. Only one percent of 2000 murders, which occurred in the previous ten year period, had any evidence of sexual insertion of foreign objects.

The most extraordinary finding about the characteristics of posing, sexual insertion of a foreign object, and open-display of the body was that, through June 1990, there were no murder victims which had all three present simultaneously except for Victim 1.

### Victim Number 2

On August 9, 1990, a relative of Victim 2 found her body in the bedroom of her ranch-style, one-story house, forty-seven days after Victim 1's body was discovered. Her home was located in a typical middle-class suburban bedroom community and bordered on each side by neighboring houses.

Victim 2 was the single mother of two daughters, ages 9 and 13, who were asleep in their shared bedroom about 40 feet from the entrance of Victim 2's bedroom. Victim 2 was a white female, 5 feet 2 inches, 108 pounds with collar-length light blond hair. She was last seen entering her residence alone at 2:30 AM on August 9, 1990, by a neighbor who was out walking by himself in the warm summer night. Victim 2 had been visiting a bartender at another one of Bellevue's trendy singles' hangout, before going home. Within the city limits of Bellevue, Victim 2's residence was situated less than 2 miles from the restaurant where Victim 1 was found murdered.

Victim 2 was carefully positioned, in open display on top of her bed, a place where anyone would look that was trying to find her. Victim 2 was naked, lying on her back with her legs in the 'spread-eagle' position, and wearing a pair of red high-heel shoes. She was splayed completely with her genitals facing the door of the bedroom. Inserted in her vagina was the barrel of an over and under, rifle-shotgun combination with its stock resting across her shoes. The weapon belonged to the victim. Beneath a pillow covering the victim's face, detectives found her head wrapped in a plastic dry cleaning bag. The bag was placed on the victim after she died.

Victim 2 was savagely beaten, to the point of overkill, with an unidentified blunt object that left "forked" or "Y" impressions all over her head. She had two defense wounds, one on each hand. It was determined that the foreign insertion and shoes were placed in and on the victim after death. There was no ransacking of the scene, although jewelry and cash were taken from her bedroom. The door to the victim's bedroom was closed and locked. The mode of entry and exit for her slayer was an open, sliding-glass door to her bedroom. The murder weapon was not found.

### Analysis of Victim 2's Case

Victim 2's murder, like Victim 1, was extremely unusual. HITS analysts found three striking consistencies between the Victim 1 and Victim 2 murders. First, the killer intentionally placed both bodies in locations where they would be readily found. Second, both had been sexually assaulted by the insertion of foreign objects into their body cavities. And third, both victims were obviously left posed by the killer in sexually degrading positions. Based on the extremely rare occurrence of those three factors in the same case and the fact that they occurred in two murders within fifty days of one another in Bellevue, Washington, the logical interpretation was that both murders were the work of the same person.

### Victim Number 3

The body of Victim 3 was discovered in her ground-level apartment in Kirkland, Washington on September 3, 1990, twenty-four days after the murder of Victim 2. Her apartment was within five miles to the north of the Bellevue restaurant where Victim 1's body was found.

Victim 3 was a white female, 24 years old, 5 feet 4 inches tall, 120 pounds, and with collar-length, dark red hair. She was last seen alive at a restaurant in Kirkland on August 30, 1990 around midnight. She was there with her friends. Like Victim 1 and Victim 2, Victim 3 was known to frequent trendy singles nightspots in the Bellevue area.

Victim 3's nude body was supine on top of her bed. A pillow covered her bloody cranium. Like Victim 1 and Victim 2, the killer clearly posed her. Her legs were spread, a dildo inserted in her mouth, and the book, *More Joy of Sex*, propped in her left arm. She had been bludgeoned about the head to the point of overkill. More than 230 small postmortem cutting type wounds were present over the entire surface of her body, including the bottoms of her feet. It appeared that all knives and a ring had been removed by the killer from the residence. Her pickup truck was parked in its normal spot. Again, the murder weapon was not located. There were no signs of forced entry to the apartment. The photo-like display and postmortem mutilation of Victim 3's body signified convincingly that a sexually deviate serial killer was on the loose in the Bellevue area.

### Discussion

The following discussion summarizes the author's testimony in the State of Washington v. George W. Russell. What were the distinctive aspects of the killer's imprint? First, all three victims were intentionally left so someone would find them. They were not concealed or hidden but were placed in locations where they would be discovered quickly. The killer left them openly displayed, knowing that whoever found them would be shocked, both physically and psychologically.

Secondly, they were posed in sexually degrading positions which

demonstrated their vulnerability after death. Moreover, only implements that the killer found at the scene were used. He did this consistently in all three murders. For example, he used a pine cone with Victim 1, red shoes with Victim 2, and a book about sex with Victim 3.

Thirdly, the killer used foreign objects in sexual orifices as part of his protocol. The actual object was absent in Victim 1's case. The act of sexually inserting foreign objects and leaving them in their cavities evolved from the first murder through the third. It became more of a need for the killer to demonstrate his personal expression by leaving a rifle in Victim 2 and a dildo in Victim 3's mouth.

Fourth, the sequence of all three relatively rare characteristics in each of the three murders exemplified a very extraordinary occurrence. Notwithstanding the fact that the murders were committed in a small geographical area, the chain of interactions between those unique characteristics was the fundamental aspect of the killer's signature.

Fifth, the defense each victim was allowed to put up decreased from the first murder through the third murder. Victim 1 had multiple defense wounds, Victim 2 had two small defense wounds, and Victim 3 did not have any defense wounds.

Sixth, the killer spent an increasing amount of time with each victim after death, re-arranging their bodies in their final death poses. Remaining any amount of time behind the restaurant and at that outdoor scene of Victim 1 was very risky since someone could come upon the scene and interrupt the killer. Therefore, based upon the medical examiner's opinion, very little time was spent arranging Victim 1's body. The killer was with Victim 2 arranging her body a longer period of time than he was with Victim 1. With Victim 2's bedroom door closed, the presence of her children asleep in the house posed no immediate threat of discovery to the killer. Victim 3's apartment was conducive to taking even more time since she lived alone. Assaulting Victim 3 with those fatal strokes, carefully cutting her over 230 times, and dutifully arranging her body took a considerable amount of time, at least more than it took to pose Victim 1 and Victim 2.

Seventh, the number of injuries sustained by each victim increased from Victim 1's murder through Victim 3's murder. Victim 1 sustained just enough injuries to cause her death. Victim 2 was beaten severely, more than what was necessary to kill her. Victim 3 was also beaten to the point of overkill and cut extensively. The increasing number of injuries reflected the killer's need to impart more extensive harm in an effort to exercise absolute possession by creatively defiling their bodies.

The distinction between M.O. and signature is important, particularly in these cases where the M.O. varied substantially between the first and second murders. For example, the killer's approach in the case of Victim 1 was a typical tavern-date situation, and the victim was lured away from public view so the killer could privately attack. But in the cases of Victims 2 and 3, the medical examiner opined that they were murdered while in bed asleep. With that different approach, the killer changed his M.O. from the first case to the second.

Whether the killer chose to operate in an outdoor versus indoor arena was an additional characteristic of his M.O. The killer's first victim was posed outdoors and subsequent victims were left in their homes. He favored the indoor arena of Victim 2's bedroom, so he kept that M.O. in the third murder, and, therefore, his M.O. didn't change.

Another M.O. factor was whether or not the killer chose to transport his victims to another location. Transporting Victim 1

was not something the killer continued to do with subsequent victims. By attacking victims in their beds and leaving their bodies there, the killer avoided the uncomfortable and risky situation of transporting a victim's body to another location.

## Summary

In these sexually perverted murders, the killer's approach to victims and his selection of the location to leave his victims were preparatory, enabling the killer to carry out his highly personalized fantasies. Thus, evidence left as a direct result of carrying out his fantasy was far more revealing of the killer's nature than his M.O. An increasing number of injuries in each case, spending more and more time after death with each victim, and reducing the participation on the part of a live victim from the first case to the last—in conjunction with open display, posing, and sexual insertion of foreign objects—were the specific factors that identified the signature of the killer. These factors led to the conclusion that they were all killed by the same person.

Detective follow-up work and crime laboratory analyses further corroborated the opinion that the three murders were committed by the same person. First of all, George Russell's blood sample was positively linked by DNA profiles to semen found in the vagina of Victim 1. In addition, Victim 1's blood was found in a pickup truck Russell had borrowed from a friend the night of the murder. At the scene of Victim 2's murder, detectives discovered a pair of victim's panties that contained four head hairs similar in characteristics to the head hair of George Russell. In searching Russell's apartment, detectives found his gym bag which witnesses described he always carried. Crime laboratory personnel processed the bag and found that it contained one head hair microscopically indistinguishable from the head hair of Victim 3.

Additionally, the signature analyses contributed to the recognition that some items removed by the killer, if found, could connect the killer to two of the murders. Killers frequently remove items belonging to their victims as souvenirs or for monetary gain [1,13]. Both Victims 2 and 3 were missing rings that were very distinctive. Detectives pursued that information and located Victim 3's ring in Florida by tracing it through friends of Russell. Victim 2's ring was never recovered, but Russell showed what was believed to be her ring to an acquaintance shortly after her murder.

For the experienced homicide investigator, linking murder cases by distinguishing between a killer's M.O. and his/her signature or calling card should not be difficult. What is problematic is that the elements of a signature, at times, can be hidden due to decomposition of the remains and/or contamination of the crime scene. In the Russell murders, the victim's bodies were discovered soon enough after death so the killer's psychopathological imprints were present and not disturbed. Even more importantly, a highly competent forensic pathology staff in the King County Medical Examiner's Office recorded in detail and documented each and every injury to the three bodies, enabling a comprehensive signature analysis to take place. Conversely, in the cases of serial killer Theodore Robert Bundy in the Pacific Northwest, for example, investigators discovered only skeletal parts of seven of the eight suspected victims, making any signature analyses of the murders impossible, at best.

In summary, a killer's method of operation contains those actions that are necessary to commit the murder. They may change from one murder to the next as the killer gains experience and finds a more beneficial method of operation from murder to murder. Whatever the killer does beyond the murder, such as mutilating,

biting, posing, torturing, among other things, should be the major focus of investigators to determine if murders are committed by the same person. It is the signature that remains the same, whether it is the first offense or one committed ten years later. The ritual may evolve, but the theme persists [1].

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