

CASE REPORT

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A Case of Suicidal Hanging Staged as Homicide

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ABSTRACT: Suicides staged as homicides are rarely encountered by crime scene investigators. The case of one such staged homicide is presented in which the victim used restraints during a hanging. No other cases of suicidal hangings staged as homicides could be found in the forensic literature. Similar cases should be reported so additional data can be gained from these deaths to help reveal indicators of suicide rather than homicide.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, disguised suicide, staged suicide, staged death, suicide, homicide

Suicidal hangings are uncommonly encountered by crime scene investigators. While evidence of a suicidal death is usually recognizable, there have been cases where the victim has attempted to disguise the suicide as a homicide. Although this behavior is rare, it poses some difficult challenges to the coroner/medical examiner and police. Most of the reported cases of staged homicide involve death by gunshot (1–3). Other authors have reported suicides staged as accidents by the use of a motor vehicle (4–6). Murphy (7,8) presents three cases of suicide by gunshot while driving an automobile. In one case the on-scene investigators did not initially find the weapon and presumed the death to be a traffic accident (7).

The following case involves a suicidal hanging in which the victim used restraints to stage the death as a homicide. Findings from the crime scene investigation and autopsy, which supported the manner of death as suicide, will be discussed. Staging of a suicidal hanging as a homicide may be rare as no other cases could be found in the forensic literature.

In May of 1998, a 38-year-old white male was found dead in his bedroom by his roommate. The victim was found partially suspended from his closet door with a white electrical extension cord which was attached around the victim's neck with a ring hitch knot (Fig. 1). The other end of the cord was fastened around the inside door knob of the closet (Fig. 2). The victim had a white athletic sock in his mouth which was secured in place with a red bandanna which was tied in a single overhand knot behind the head (Fig. 3).

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In addition, the victim's hands were restrained behind his back with a pair of stainless steel handcuffs (Fig. 4) and his legs were loosely bound with a black coaxial cable tied in a single overhand knot (Fig. 5). No suicide note was found.

At autopsy, the middle aged male showed injuries consistent with ligature hanging. These included a near circumferential ligature furrow about the neck which curved upward to a point of suspension at the back of the head, petechial hemorrhages of the palpebral and bulbar conjunctivae of the eyes as well as over the skin of the face and fractures of the greater cornua of the larynx including associated hemorrhage. Superficial abrasions were seen about the wrists and ankles in association with secured handcuffs and a loose ligature, respectively. No other evidence of acute injury, both externally and internally, were found. Healing incised wounds of the left wrist and forearm suggested previous suicidal activity (Fig. 6). A drug screen was remarkable only for the presence of ethanol (blood and vitreous levels 49 mg/dL and 60 mg/dL, respectively).

The investigation of the scene, victim, and witnesses revealed several interesting findings which supported the manner of death as a suicide. There was no forced entry into the apartment. The front door had been dead bolted from the inside upon the roommate's return from an evening at a girlfriends home. The relationship between the victim and roommate was one of casual friends. The victim's keys were in his room and his vehicle was parked outside. Despite a large amount of audio visual and musical equipment in the apartment, nothing was apparently stolen. One hundred forty dollars in cash was found in the living room.

A wooden chair was found in an upright position directly in front of the victim. There was no sign of a struggle and all of the restraints on the victim could be easily removed. A closer inspection of the handcuffs revealed a "quick release" lever on each cuff, which allowed opening of the restraints without a key (Fig. 7). These types of handcuffs are commonly used by magicians and are commercially available. Subsequent investigation revealed that the victim had purchased the handcuffs over a year prior and was quite familiar with their operation.

The height of the closet door was measured at 6'6" from the ground, while the height of the victim was 6'0". There was no significant stretching of the extension cord. The height of the victim, coupled with the positioning of the chair, should have allowed the victim to easily stand on his toes and relieve the tension in the ligature.

Additional information provided by the victim's ex-girlfriend revealed that the victim had spent approximately one hundred dollars on flowers the previous day in an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile the relationship. He had exhibited depression over their failed rela-

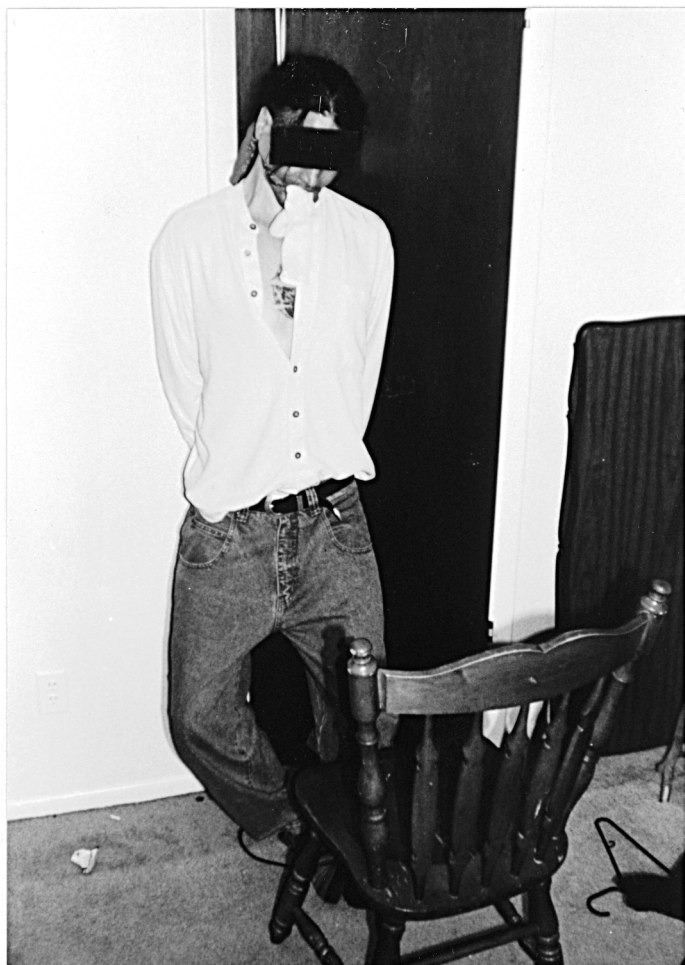


FIG. 1—Position of victim at discovery.



FIG. 2—Closet door with electrical cord fastened around inside knob.



FIG. 3—Red bandanna and sock in victim's mouth.



FIG. 4—Victim's wrists secured by handcuffs.



FIG. 5—Coaxial cable tied around victim's ankles.

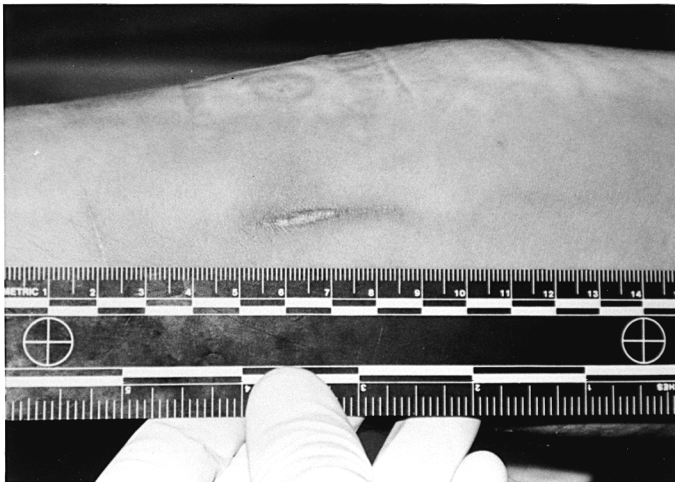


FIG. 6—Healing injury to victim's left forearm.

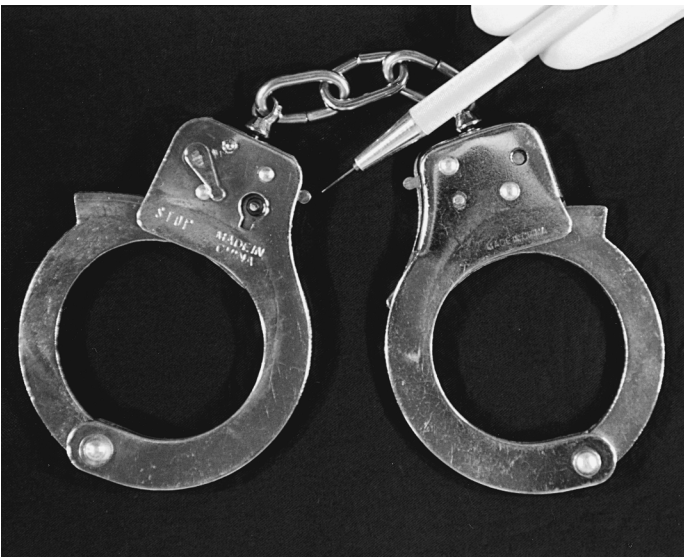


FIG. 7—Victim's handcuffs. Quick release lever indicated by pointer.

tionship and had made comments as to “just killing himself” as a result. The victim had also made statements to family members that his life was in danger from an unspecified motorcycle gang and to suspect foul play if he were to die. Investigators found no evidence to support this claim. No history of a clinical mental disorder could be found. Despite a thorough investigation, the victim's exact motive for staging his suicide as a homicide remains unclear.

Discussion

A variety of staged crimes scenes can be encountered by the death investigator. Suicides may be staged or even altered by family members or friends in an attempt to avoid embarrassment or for other personal, social, or religious reasons. Staging a suicide as a homicide, by the victim, may be a final effort by the victim to gain notoriety or exact revenge against friends or family. In addition, life insurance may be a factor. Although an exact motive could not be discerned in this case, we suspect that the victim intended to elicit sympathy and guilt from the ex-girlfriend over the failed relationship.

In most of the published case reports of suicides staged as homicides, the victim used a firearm. Although this may be a convenient and common method, it must be remembered that other methods such as hanging, motor vehicle accidents, poisoning, and even drowning may be employed. In the above mentioned case, there were a number of factors which indicated that the victim took his own life. The ineffectiveness of the restraints, the lack of defensive wounds or signs of a struggle, autopsy findings, and issues in the victim's personal life, all conflicted with a finding of homicide.

There was also evidence of a probable previous suicidal activity (a healing incised wrist wound). As described above, fractures of the greater cornua and associated hemorrhage were found at autopsy. While this injury is seen more often in homicidal situations (e.g., strangulations), such fractures have been described in suicidal hangings (9). At least in this particular case, the presence of laryngeal fractures does not offer discriminating evidence as to manner of death.

Despite the “scene” presented by the victim, careful crime scene investigation should help to determine when some sort of staging has taken place. Failure to recognize these clues may lead to unnecessarily protracted and expensive investigations.

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