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he practice of law can drive you crazy sometimes: what starts out as logical can end up surreal. Objections, objections to objections, sidebars, interminable wrangling over the meaning of words: a voyage into tedium by way of monotony, broken occasionally by moments of sheer panic. Judges drone, lawyers groan, defendants moan, and at the end of the day you pack it all up and get ready to start again the next day, as justice grinds forward, exceedingly slow.

When it starts to get nuts, that's when you have to take a break—get out of your daytime skin to do something completely different. That was why, in the darkening hours of the last day of November 2001, a Friday evening, I was on the pool deck at Kent-Meridian High School, about twenty miles south of the city of Seattle, in the State of Washington, shouting encouragement to a six-lane pool full of teenaged boys, as they swam their way through a hard workout. When I put down my briefcase and picked up my stopwatch, I had transformed into Coach Prothero, of the Kentwood High School Conquerors swimming team. Once I hit poolside, the thrust and parry of the courtroom receded, and the craziness of the legal system assumed much more manageable proportions.

On this last day of November, the gray concrete roof over the pool served as a giant hollow echo chamber for the splashing; with the odor of chlorine permeating the atmosphere, I was about as far away from the formalized setting of a courtroom as I could get every afternoon. In a way, I could put one reality aside, exchanged for another, at least for a while.

The varsity, including my son, Sean, was kicking and pulling through the last of their series of 25-yard freestyle sprints, when my Other Life broke in. As I walked along the side of the steaming pool, my shirtsleeves rolled up, dripping with sweat, yelling to be heard, I saw someone near the door, waving at me and peering at me with a peculiar expression. It was Jon Morrow, the father of one of our team members.

“Did you hear the news?” Morrow asked me when I approached.

“No. What news?”

“They’ve arrested the Green River Killer.”

“No way!” I said, disbelieving. But I saw at once that Jon Morrow was serious.

The police had been trying for nearly twenty years to catch the most prolific serial killer in American history, suspected of murdering forty-nine women. At least until that day, they had repeatedly failed. Almost everyone had concluded long ago that the horrible case would never be solved.

“Yeah, it’s all over the news, the radio, TV,” Morrow told me. “He’s a truck painter from Auburn.”

My first reaction was that this had to be some sort of mistake, that it was some sort of weird rumor that had seeped out of the gossip mill, and from there onto the news waves. *Not now*, I thought: not after the two decades since the murders had first begun in 1982.

But my intuition told me it was true. It wasn’t like the news, or the police, to be so specific—not unless something real had happened. As far as I could recall, this was the first time in history that someone had actually been arrested in connection with the nationally notorious crimes, as compared to only questioned as “a person of interest,” as the phrase had it. And my next thought was this: if the police really had actually *arrested* someone for the murders, the chances were pretty good that he’d need a lawyer.

And then, almost at once, I found myself musing over two questions:

Where the hell has this supposed killer been all these years? And how is it that the cops have just now arrested him?

“Yeah, they said it was a DNA match,” Morrow told me. He gave me the look again. “You’ll probably get him, since you’re the DNA guy.”

The DNA guy. Jon had that right. The lawyer who often got the DNA cases assigned to our publicly funded criminal defense agency. Me. The one who had to explain what all those numbers and computer printouts and all those *peaks* and *stutters* cast up by the overhead projector meant. Evidence that the accused was (or was not) one in a quadrillion or some other astronomical number that the human brain couldn’t fathom. If the police really *had* arrested someone from Auburn, based on a *DNA match*, that meant I might be one of those called upon to try to save whoever it was from what would be an almost certain fate: execution by lethal injection—or possibly, even hanging.

To try to save whoever it was from the death penalty. Even if he *had* killed forty-nine women.



I’d grown up in south King County, in the State of Washington, near the Seattle suburb of Renton. As a criminal defense lawyer in the 1980s, I’d watched as authorities found skeleton after skeleton of young female murder victims in that decade, most of them strewn across the isolated, wooded hillsides of the rural southern portion of the county. The sheer number of victims was staggering: How could only one person—if it really *was* only one person—kill so many and not have been caught, sooner or later?

Or just as important was this: What *kind* of person could do this—kill again and again and again, with seeming impunity? For years, the speculation had been rampant. Various scenarios had it that the killer was an angry vice cop, hiding in plain sight; or a psychopathic security guard; or maybe a frustrated probation officer. In any event, someone with some sort of logical if emotional motive, however twisted, for killing troubled young women who had violated his sense of order. As a defense lawyer, I knew that people tended to look first for sensible reasons for the unexplainable. It’s human nature to seek the obvious answer to complicated problems.

But I also knew that the killer most probably had no such official or even semiofficial occupation. Anyone in officialdom would almost certainly have been detected years earlier. Instead, it was far more plausible that the killer had been living an ordinary, unofficial life, unnoticed by his neighbors, his coworkers, and even his own family, if he

had one. How else had he managed to elude detection for so long, other than by appearing to be utterly, unremarkably normal? It was my guess that he probably seemed just like anyone—except for a hidden, dark streak, some quirk that only emerged from the shadows when in the company of women who worked as prostitutes—his prey of choice.

But now, there had finally been an arrest, and if Jon Morrow was right about “the DNA guy,” I might draw the biggest case of my career. Like anyone else in this situation, I wanted to know more.

As soon as swimming practice was over, I went to the nearby house of my friends Jan and Debbie, first to rehydrate myself with a beer, but mostly to see what the television people were saying about the arrest of this accused killer, this truck painter from Auburn, who’d been living and working right in our community for more than two decades.



As I suspected, the television news people were frantic with excitement, rolling videotape of the authorities’ announcement of the arrest, along with jumpy pictures of some suburban neighborhood where the alleged killer had been living for years. The television had tape of King County Sheriff’s Department deputies walking to and fro over property that was obviously being searched. Then the usual interviews with shocked neighbors. All of this was backstopped by file footage from twenty-year-old crime scenes: generally, green-jacketed cops wandering around in the woods with rakes and buckets, which had been used to pick up the bones of the dead years before, along with a by-now oft-played loop of the removal of a body from the sluggish current of the turgid, indifferent Green River.

The story of the arrest dominated the afternoon and evening broadcasts, even national broadcasts, which came as no surprise. The Green River murders were the largest unsolved serial murder case in the history of the country, so the coverage had a certain breathless quality that accompanied unique events. Since the summer of 1982, the discovery of skeleton after skeleton, combined with law enforcement’s failure to identify the elusive killer, had given the mysterious murderer near-mythic proportions. Gradually, the unknown fiend had become almost an evil Einstein in the public mind, for his propensity to kill, and kill, and kill again. Expert opinion—psychological profilers from the FBI and other mavens on serial murder—had opined that the deadly puzzle would never be solved; it was simply too old, too

complex, to ever result in an arrest. Many of the same experts had also suggested that the perpetrator was either dead or in prison for another, lesser crime and so was now beyond identification and apprehension. In other words, the case was at a definite dead end. So much for the expert opinion, I thought.

As I watched the television news roll on, I also realized that no one—at least no official—was saying that the arrested person was *the* Green River Killer, only that he'd been arrested in connection with *some* of the crimes.

Was there, in fact, only *one* person who'd committed all of the crimes? All forty-nine of them? This had never been clear, and in fact, I knew this had long been one of the central puzzles of the case: Which murders were the work of only one person, and which were coincidentally similar crimes, murders that had been erroneously attributed to the Green River Killer, thereby making the total number of deaths seem far larger?

And second, was someone else involved—perhaps another killer or killers acting independently of the first person, or perhaps, at least occasionally, in concert? This was unclear, and an arrest on only some of the murders shed no useful light on the critical, larger issue: arresting someone in connection with only *some* of the murders left open the possibility that there was, in fact, another killer, possibly someone far more predacious, still out there.

That evening, the face of the accused appeared on all the evening newscasts: a roundish, somewhat florid, middle-aged face, mustachioed, facing the camera dead-on, stoic of gaze from under a neatly trimmed helmet of dark hair. The man's eyes were slits, and his lips were grimly pursed. On the basis of the photograph alone, he looked almost as lifeless as the long-dead faces of those he was supposed to have murdered.

Could this really be the face of the long-sought Green River Killer?



The worst serial murder case in the country had first come to public awareness in the summer of 1982, when the bodies of five young women, all strangled, were found in or on the banks of the Green River, as the river passed through the city of Kent, a small farming community that by the early 1980s was being transformed into a bedroom suburb of Seattle. The discovery of the victims, including three on the same day, had at the time jolted the entire Pacific Northwest.

The river began high in the Cascade Mountains to the east, then meandered down to a valley flood plain running north to Elliott Bay, Seattle's front yard. By the time it reached Kent, twenty miles south of the big city, it was a medium-size stream about one hundred feet across. Its twenty-foot banks were covered with thick brambles of blackberry bushes, high grass, and other dense growth. The water level in the river varied; some months heavy rain in the mountains caused the stream to swell almost to its brim, while at other times, a flood control dam far upstream lowered the river to the size of a lazy creek.

On July 15, 1982, the naked body of fifteen-year-old Wendy Coffield had been found in the river, hung up on a bridge piling just past Meeker Street, which was the main road into Kent from the west. She had been strangled, and her jeans had been tied tightly around her neck. A month later, on August 12, 1982, the body of twenty-two-year-old Debbie Bonner had also been found in the river, just about a half-mile south of where Wendy's body had been found the month before. Three days after that, on August 15, 1982, three *more* victims were found, and with those discoveries, the case had first become a public sensation. Two of the victims found on August 15, 1982, Marcia Chapman and Cynthia Hinds, were discovered under the water, weighted down and secured in place with heavy rocks; whereas the third, Opal Mills, had been found in the tall grass on the riverbank, not far away. As with Wendy Coffield, Opal's jeans had been tied around her neck.

Because of their close proximity and similar manner of murder, the authorities quickly announced that they were looking for a serial killer, and the appellation *Green River Killer*—a creation of the news media—followed almost immediately.

At the time, it was thought that the killer was using the river's waters to wash his victims of trace evidence, much as had happened in the Atlanta child murders of the previous year, 1981. The Green River channel had therefore become an early focal point in the investigation of the crimes. But over the next seven years, the remains of thirty-seven other young women, most of them just skeletons by the time they were found, had been discovered in isolated spots in the woods in a wide arc southeast of Seattle, miles away from the river's frequently sluggish course. These killings, too, had been attributed to the Green River Killer, although there were notable differences between the victims found in the woods and those found originally in the river. Another seven young women were eventually described as missing, presumed dead at the hands of the same killer.

Over the ensuing twenty years, a number of police task forces had been formed in sporadic efforts to identify the murderer. But like many such efforts that don't meet with immediate success, steadfast political support withered and eventually faded entirely. Despite the expenditure of millions of dollars and untold hours of investigation over the decades, despite having had hundreds if not thousands of potential suspects, as the new millennium began, the police seemed no closer to naming the deadly predator than they had in the summer of 1982.

This lack of progress was mostly due to the background of the victims. Many had been teenaged runaways living shadowy lives as casual prostitutes at the time they were last seen. The brutal fact was, many voting citizens were indifferent to the killings: being murdered was seen as an inevitable outcome of dangerous, even "immoral" conduct. The lesson was clear to the law-abiding: if you didn't want to run the risk of being murdered, all you had to do was not commit prostitution. Of course, it wasn't that simple. Most of those who had been killed were prostituting because they had other troubles: drug addictions, mental illness, bad family relationships, all sorts of self-destructive behavior that stemmed from deep-seated social dysfunctions. The real question wasn't whether the victims deserved to die—no one did—but whether the society as a whole would mobilize resources to stop it. And for a while, at least, the community's political leaders accepted the challenge.

But as the years elapsed without a resolution, the social concern about these kinds of crimes inevitably diminished. Eventually, police administrators, responding to political pressures, had insisted that as far as they could tell, the last murder had taken place in early 1984.

However, as we would all learn, this was far from the truth.



It turned out that Jon Morrow's late-afternoon hunch about "the DNA guy" was on the money. When I stopped in at my office later that evening, there was a message for me from Greg Girard, my supervisor at Associated Counsel for the Accused (ACA), one of four non-profit law firms that handled criminal defense for the poor in King County, and my employer.

"Hey, Mark. I'm heading down to the RJC," Greg had recorded, using our short form for the Regional Justice Center, located just a few blocks from our public defender office in Kent. "They arrested somebody for the Green River murders and he's asked for a lawyer. If you're

around, I'd appreciate it if you'd join me, because two heads are better than one. See you there." The message had been left just before 6 P.M.

I looked at my watch. It was just past seven. Greg's message meant that whoever had been arrested for the murders had probably been in police custody for several hours, possibly much of the afternoon, before Greg had been able to talk to him. That could be a problem: Who knew what the arrestee had told the police before Greg had been able to get there? There isn't a criminal defense lawyer in the country who wants to hear that his client, or even prospective client, has been talking to the police without him or her being present.

It isn't what you might expect—that the lawyer simply wants to get his client off, regardless of his guilt. The problem is, sometimes police make mistakes. They may arrest the wrong person. But once the police-prosecution bandwagon gets rolling, an innocent person who talks innocently may find his words used against him. The exonerations based on forensic DNA have clearly demonstrated that there have been many convictions, even death sentences, obtained on false confessions.

Yet the number of people wrongfully convicted because they cooperated with the police still seems to be growing. Some in law enforcement seem more interested in getting someone, anyone, than getting to the truth. Every few months seems to bring out more cases, some of them involving the death penalty—as this one surely would—that are reversed because of shoddy police work that targeted the wrong person. Once an individual was charged, there often seemed to be no way to go backward. So I was anxious to see this person that the police were claiming was responsible for so many murders—well, some of the murders, if the television news people had it right—to see what, if anything, he had said to them upon his arrest. I immediately headed over to the jail at the RJC.



The jail is a large concrete box attached to the Regional Justice Center, which also houses fifteen superior courts, along with a number of courtrooms used for district court and juvenile cases. As the south county's population exploded over the previous twenty years, it had become imperative to bring more justice facilities to the population. And that included jail facilities. That's why the Regional Justice Center had been opened in 1997.

I arrived just after seven that night and went first to the front counter of the jail. As with most modern lockups, visitors were sepa-

rated from the jail staff by a large shatterproof glass window, with a metal speaker set in the middle. This civilian area was festooned with various announcements and rules, along with posters decrying domestic violence and drunken driving—by far the largest part of any modern jail’s clientele. By that time of the evening, and on a Friday night, there was only one person behind the counter, and she was not in a mood to be helpful. As soon as I asked her about the whereabouts of the person arrested in the Green River case, I could see she thought I was just another pesky news reporter. I told her that I was a lawyer who’d been asked to see the new prisoner.

“He’s not here,” she told me. “They’re taking him downtown.”

I realized I was going to have to do a little detective work of my own. I called Greg’s wife at home, with my cellular phone. She told me that she thought Greg was with the arrestee in the King County Sheriff’s detectives’ offices, which were nearby in the adjacent court building. I made my way there but found the door to the court building locked.

A long, lean, mustachioed man wearing jeans and a windbreaker was leaning against a wall, smoking a cigarette. He watched me trying to get in.

“Can I help you?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said, not at all sure who this jeans-wearing cigarette smoker was or whether he really could help me. “I’m Mark Prothero. I’m with ACA. They arrested someone, and I understand he asked for a lawyer.”

“You with Girard?”

“Yeah.”

“Just a second.” The man squashed his cigarette into cinders, then called on his own cellular phone. Pretty soon, someone came to the door and let us in.

“Follow me,” the tall jeans-wearing man told me, and I now realized he had to be a detective with the King County Sheriff’s Department. He wasn’t anyone I knew, though, and after almost two decades handling criminal cases in King County, I thought I knew just about every detective by face, if not by name.

I followed this unknown detective down several hallways, ever deeper into the county detectives’ secretive inner sanctum. Eventually, we came to a closed door. The blue-jeaned man knocked, opened the door, and ushered me in with an impassive nod. The interior of the room was stark—no window, nothing but concrete block walls painted slightly off-white, the usual fluorescent lighting on the ceiling. One

edge of a small, square table was pushed up against the wall. Three plastic chairs were arranged around the three other sides. I heard the door close behind me and the click of its lock.

My colleague, Greg Girard, had his back to me on the near side of the tiny table, and catty-corner from him, sideways to the door, was a very ordinary-looking, compactly built man in his early fifties, dressed in blue jeans and wearing a plaid shirt. He had a nearly full head of brown hair, just beginning to thin a bit on top, but not a tinge of gray. A small, neat mustache covered his upper lip. He wore tortoise-shell glasses that seemed a little too big for his face, which made him look gentle, harmless, and even a little nerdy. He seemed very calm—actually, quite detached. I saw his resemblance to the man whose photograph I had seen on television, but in the flesh he somehow looked different, almost benign, and certainly inoffensive.

“Mark,” said Greg, gesturing with his hand, “this is Gary Ridgway. Mr. Ridgway, this is Mark Prothero.”

“Hello, Mr. Ridgway,” I said, reaching out to shake his hand.

“Hi.” He nodded his head, almost shyly, and smiled politely. We shook hands.

This was not at all what I had been expecting. Not only did his physical appearance surprise me, but he also seemed extraordinarily, unusually polite. I looked for something, anything—anger, sadness, embarrassment, fear—but I could sense nothing.

They must have got it wrong, I thought, as I released his hand. This can't be *the Green River Killer*! He's too ordinary! He's too small. He's too calm. He's too polite! He can't possibly have murdered forty-nine women. They can't be serious! They must have screwed up!

I didn't realize it then, but I was right. Gary Ridgway hadn't killed forty-nine women. He'd killed even more than that.