

SYMBOLIA



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TRUE CRIME

the BODY in the BLANKETS

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In the usual scheme of things, after a person dies, he or she is remembered, revered, commemorated. But when bodies are separated from their identities, the living are left in the lurch. The unidentified dead don't yield up any of the soothing coping rituals—dedications, obituaries, memorials, eulogies, reminiscences—we rely on in the wake of a death.

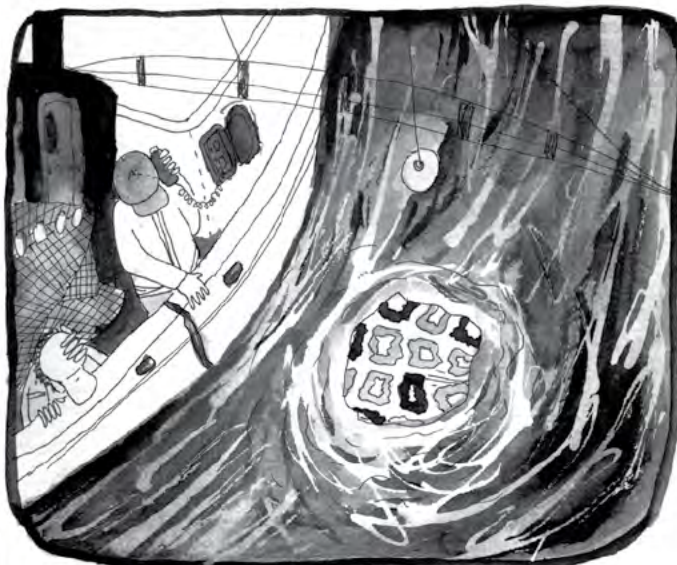
What's left are mournful names: Tent Girl, Somerton Man, Princess Doe, Saltair Sally, the Boy in the Box, the Belle in the Well, the Girl Who Danced Herself to Death.

JANE DOE

September 5, 1982, 1:30 p.m. Fishermen off Florida's Anna Maria Island spot something in the water.

The U.S. Coast Guard, accompanied by Manatee County sheriff's deputies, pulled a human body from the water twenty miles west of Egmont Key.

She was a young woman, dead perhaps a week, wrapped in a green bedspread and an afghan. A rope around her waist was cinched to a cement block. With no ID, the body recovered from the Gulf of Mexico became Jane Doe 401UFFL.



AN EERIE MUG SHOT

Jane Doe 401UFFL was far from alone in this identity limbo. These stories are common. In May 2010, I came across a story in *The Boston Globe* about a woman brutally murdered in Provincetown, MA, in 1974. She had died of a blow to the skull; her head had nearly been severed from her body. Her hands had been cut off and were missing. Her case was unsolved. The photo showed a woman with well-shaped eyebrows and a sensitive mouth. She had deep-set eyes and luxurious auburn hair swept back off her high forehead in a ponytail.

"SHE WAS KNOWN ONLY AS THE LADY OF THE DUNES. IT SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE THAT SHE HAD REMAINED NAMELESS SINCE SHE WAS DISCOVERED ON THAT BEACH IN 1974."

She looked familiar, like someone I might see running along the shoulder of my suburban street or waiting in line at Starbucks, but the colors in the picture struck me as garish and her expression eerily bland, as if she was posing for a Disney-esque mug shot. Then I realized what I was looking at wasn't a photograph at all.

It was a digital reconstruction of what the victim looked like before her face decomposed.

She was known only as the Lady of the Dunes. It seemed impossible that she had remained nameless since she was

discovered on that beach in 1974. Her plight led me to write a book about the stories behind hers and many other cases where ordinary citizens "adopted" the unidentified and used Internet tools to try to give people back their names.

What would it be like, I wondered, when so much revolves around identity, to have none?

AMY ROSE HEARST

Jeff Earley sounds sad and resigned when he talks about how, as a kid, he just "kind of dealt with" not knowing why his mother disappeared. In late 1981 or early 1982, when Jeff was eight and his sister Lisa was eleven, Jeff's mom, Amy Rose Hurst, was about to move from Michigan to New Port Richey, FL with her second husband, William Hurst.

Amy was 29. She worked as a cashier at Winn-Dixie. Her family and friends said she was fun-loving and always up on the latest styles...but different when Bill was around. Quieter. After moving, Amy wrote letters to her daughter and stayed in touch with relatives by phone.

When Amy didn't call to wish her mother a happy birthday in August 1982, her family knew something was wrong. Jeff hadn't seen his mother since the previous year.

Jeff stayed in Michigan with his older sister Lisa and, over the years, both siblings quizzed their aunts and, less frequently, their father, about their mom. No one knew anything, although among themselves they speculated endlessly, painfully.



Did she go off and start a new life? Did she run away? Did she have amnesia? They thought about her every day. Mother's Day and her birthday were especially sad.

"There was a little bit of contact, Jeff says. "Like letters and I can remember one phone call. Then...then all contact just stopped."

A FACEBOOK FOR THE DEAD

Lady of the Dunes, Jane Doe, John Doe: Googling any of these names will take you to places like the [Doe Network](#) and other websites populated with small cities of dead people who have never been identified. They are unsettling, these sites: a Facebook for the dead.

Some warn viewers that the photos within are disturbing and graphic. But nothing

prepares you for the endless collection of thumbnail-sized heads, a mix of artists' reconstructions, vivid color portraits that capture an inquisitive look in the eyes or a stubborn set to the mouth, crude pencil sketches, cartoon-like illustrations, and distorted clay dummies sporting wigs, like something out of a beautician's academy for the hopeless. Then there are the postmortem photos: waxen faces with unseeing eyes, some individuals sporting grievous, barely disguised injuries.

In 2004, the National Institute of Justice tallied thousands of sets of unidentified human remains and estimated the total is close to forty thousand—the population of Wilkes-Barre, PA; North Miami Beach, FL; or San Gabriel, CA. It's been called "the nation's silent mass disaster."

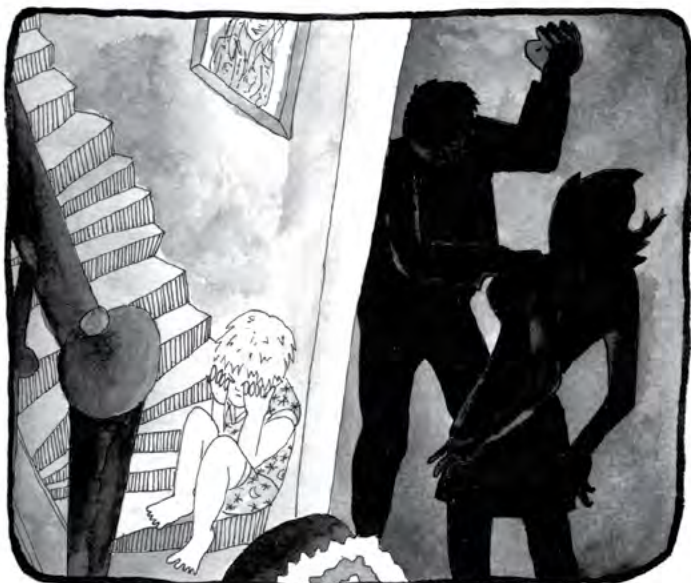
THE DOE NETWORK

In 1988, Todd Matthews, a high school kid in Livingston, TN, came across a story in *Master Detective* about a murder victim who had been wrapped in a carnival tent and abandoned by the side of a Kentucky road. She was called "Tent Girl." Even though her body had been found twenty years earlier, in 1968, no one knew her name.

Todd became obsessed. Who was she? How could no one miss her? Even after he got married, had a son, and worked night shifts in an auto parts factory, he searched for clues to her identity. Then in 1998, on one of the many message boards popping up on the early Internet, he came across a notice from a woman looking for her long-lost sister. Within months, thanks to Todd, Tent Girl had a name: Barbara Ann Hackmann Taylor.

Todd joined the creators of a new website called the Doe Network, and a handful of volunteers started populating the site with details on thousands of missing people and unidentified remains from around the US. Today, volunteers for the Doe Network and other sites are credited with solving sixty-six cold cases. Todd also works for the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System ([NamUs](#)), a database created by the National Institute of Justice to help solve missing persons and unidentified decedent cases.

Not all Doe Network and NamUs volunteers are searching for a relative. Some are motivated by the hope that they will provide closure to families, like Jeff's, that wait, and wonder.



Major Crimes Detective Lisa Schoneman, based in Pasco County, FL, investigated Amy's case. "It would boggle your mind how many people out there have been found and not identified," Schoneman says.

Scrolling past image after image is like walking into a morgue, pulling out drawers, and yanking sheets off body after body. What if you logged onto a site like this and came across a face you recognized?

But that's the point. Law enforcement and, in the case of the Doe Network, citizen volunteers, collect and post these images in the hope that someone will uncover something useful. Anyone can log into the Doe Network database and search for the missing among the ranks of the unidentified. If they find a potential match, other volunteers review it and forward it to law enforcement.

FINDING AMY

Years went by. William Hurst said Amy left him, and he didn't know where she was.

Amy wasn't one of those who'd managed to elude an abusive spouse. She had become a statistic of a different kind: One of the Jane and John Does stowed in unmarked graves and the back rooms of morgues across the U.S.

In February 2009, Jeff was working in the warehouse of the building material company. It struck him that his fiancée,

who worked for the State of Michigan, might be able to access information through the Internet that would be off-limits to ordinary citizens—maybe a law enforcement database for tracking missing people? Instead, she came across the Doe Network.

Jeff: "She just kind of pulled it up and then she called me back and asked me for information. Height, weight, stuff like that. She kind of keyed it in there and then it just popped up."

It was Amy.

WAR

In 1982, Jeff and Lisa lived with their mom and their stepfather, Bill. "You know, at first you didn't really know what it was," Jeff says.

"It'd be late at night and you'd hear it. You wouldn't get up and look."

When Jeff was a little older, he'd tiptoe through the house, huddling out of sight at the top or bottom of the stairs.

"I started getting up and watching and, you know, saw him do some of the stuff he did to her." He remembered sitting in the back seat of a car once when Bill, in the front, backhanded Amy across the face. He noticed how she'd try to cover up the black eyes, the bruises.

"It was just full-on war...he'd be throwing her around and hitting on her and you know she...she fought back. I mean, I think she would have to."

Every year, more than 3 million children witness domestic violence. Some lose contact with a victimized parent; the parent simply disappears. Some women, fearing for their lives, flee their pasts and start over under assumed names. The price they pay—separation from their family, friends and sometimes, their own children—is steep.

THE BLANKETS

Jeff's fiancée read the details of Jane Doe 401UFFL to him. She'd been found in a green bedspread and an afghan. Jeff remembered a green bedspread, rolled up every morning from where the kids slept in the living room. Lisa dug out a picture of herself as a child jumping on the bedspread.

He also thought that the afghan the body was wrapped in looked similar to ones his grandmother had made for Amy and her sister. He asked his aunt, Judy, to send him a photo of her afghan. They looked the same.

On July 19, 2011, Dr. Russell Vega of the Manatee Medical Examiner's Office based in Sarasota, FL, declared the remains found in the Gulf of Mexico, based on a match to Jeff's mitochondrial and nuclear DNA, were those of Amy Rose Hurst.

NOTHING STUCK

When Pasco County detectives questioned Hurst in 1982, they couldn't make a charge stick. Without a body, there wasn't a crime. But when Amy was identified, Detective Schoneman tracked him down in Kentucky, where he was living with his second family.



Soon afterward, he started talking to friends about something "really, really, really bad" that had happened thirty years ago. Hurst claimed Amy kicked at him, fell and hurt her head, died accidentally. He had to get rid of the body. A man who knew Hurst agreed to wear a wire and discuss what had happened.

"You know, there's no eye witnesses," Hurst said during their conversation. "I made sure of that."


"HURST CLAIMED AMY KICKED AT HIM, FELL AND HURT HER HEAD, DIED ACCIDENTALLY. HE HAD TO GET RID OF THE BODY."

In April 2013, thirty-one years after Amy Rose Hurst died, Hurst, 61, was convicted of her murder. A first-degree murder conviction comes with a mandatory life sentence, which the Pasco County judge imposed immediately following the verdict. The judge looked at Hurst. "You are a truly evil man," he said.

When Jeff saw Bill Hurst in the Florida courthouse, he knew that at one time, when he was ten years younger and more impulsive, he might have said something to Bill. He knows now it wouldn't have helped,

maybe would have made things worse. It didn't matter; Jeff never felt like the man had been any kind of father to him.

"The memories that I have of him is just the stuff I saw him do to her."

In 2011, the Tampa Bay Times reported that the family held a memorial service for Amy Rose at a lake where she spent summers playing with her sisters. Her family put her ashes in a box and placed it on the lake. Lisa and Jeff threw rose petals on the box and when the box sank, the petals floated on the surface. It was beautiful and peaceful, Lisa said. She kept some ashes and put them in a tiny, heart-shaped urn that fits in her palm. 

The Skeleton Crew, coming from Simon & Schuster in 2014, tells the stories of amateur sleuths who haunt Internet bulletin boards and law enforcement websites to help reunite the unidentified dead with their lost names. By solving decades-old cold cases and bringing closure to families and friends of the missing, this underground society manifests the power of crowd-sourcing and the generous human impulse to help a stranger.

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