

The Curious Case of the Chicken Bone

Based On A True Story

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Final Exam, Forensic Anthropology, Question 2.

Certain clues in the story should enable the reader to piece together the truth behind the Case of the Chicken Bone.

Note: All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

I was staring out the window of the station, watching as endless flakes fluttered down from the sky and coated the landscape in a thick white frosting. Then the phone rang, and I was jolted away from my reverie.

“Get it, please,” I gestured to my deputy, Justin. It was early Monday, and the coffee had yet to boil. If there were two certainties in life, other than death and taxes, they would be my Eight O’ Clock brew and Justin his Winston Blue smokes.

He picked up the phone and answered, “Cedarburg Police Department. This is Deputy Justin Charles speaking. How may I help you?” I watched his face intently. He always had this curious look on his face, so serious and determined, as if each call would lead us to the crime of the century. I couldn’t help but wonder if this attitude came from all those flashy cop dramas these damn Millennials grew up with. Who knows?

“Hold on a minute, ma’am. Your husband? We’ll be on our way. Please leave the scene as you found it.” He hung up and turned to me. “Sir, I got a 419. Mr. Jacobson. *That* Mr. Jacobson. I’ll go get my gear”

The news came as a surprise, but I’ll admit that I didn’t feel sorry in the least. All the guys knew Mr. Jacobson; we often received complaints from neighbors of possible domestic. Hell, I *know* that the drunken bastard beat on his poor wife regularly, but Eunice was always too timid to press charges. We could do little but glare at him menacingly and reply, “Oh, what will it be this time, she tripped on the stairs or she slipped on the rug?”

“Karma’s a bitch, ain’t it, boss?” said Justin as we put on our overcoats, boots, and gloves. I noticed that he didn’t have his gloves on, and directed him to take an extra pair from the equipment room. It was unlike him to be unorganized, but anything can happen on a Monday morning.

“Can’t go losing all my stuff, Justin! The mayor will have my hide when he sees the department bill.”

“Sorry, sir. Must have misplaced it over the weekend when I went ice fishing up in Winnebago. I’m sure they’ll turn up.”

Just before we left, I placed a call to the medical examiner’s office to send a forensic pathologist over. Standard protocol. It would take them a bit longer to get there, as the office was located downtown, and Milwaukee was notoriously slow in clearing its roads.

We walked outside to face the blistering cold. The streets were almost empty of cars and people, who no doubt still lay slumbering in their beds. I joked that it felt like winter here grew colder year after year, and that Mr. Gore should take a trip up North before he gave another one of his speeches on global warming.

The two of us got into the cruiser and we drove towards the crime scene, careful to follow the treads of the snow plows that had passed some hours before. I sat in the shotgun seat, sipping my coffee and staring at the gray sky, then the falling snow, and finally the slush that had gathered alongside the road.

“Hey, Justin, have you ever thought of how beautiful snow is, so clean and white and pure, and then it falls to the earth, mixes with the dirt and gasoline and our filth on the ground, and becomes an ugly mess that’s a pain-in-the-ass to shovel off the driveway?” I glanced over at him. He seemed lost in his own world, his gaze locked intently on the winding rural road ahead.

“Cheer up, kid. I know the feeling. The butterflies in your stomach, the shivers down your spine. I remember back when I was your age, when I tagged along with Officer Buntrock and saw my first dead body in the field...” I trailed off as he looked as if he didn’t hear a single word I said. Sighing to myself, I leaned over and switched on the radio. Mike and Mike filled the void of silence for the rest of the drive.

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I followed Justin out of the vehicle and up the walkway towards the front entrance. A flash of plastic caught my eyes, and I stopped to scoop up a pocket-sized box half-buried in the snow. Frowning, I turned it over in my hands. I glanced up to see my deputy knocking once, twice, three times on the door before it swung open with a creak. Eunice Jacobson’s face greeted us, easily recognizable apart from faint bruises, two puffy red eyes, and residual tears upon her cheeks. She beckoned us in, and I pocketed the object and reluctantly tailed Justin through the doorstep. It was almost as chilly indoors as outside, as if winter had crept inside after death had left his mark.

I’ve only worked on a few decedents over my thirty plus years in Cedarburg blue, but I’ve still never gotten used to the smell. That is, the faint whiff of urine and excrement masked by an overbearing stench of decomposition. It was the smell of death, and the air was rank with it.

“Deputy Charles, please assist Mrs. Jacobson to another room, and help her stay calm,” I ordered. Justin had been called here more than any of us over the past few months, and, to my knowledge, Justin was the best in the business at playing the protective-shining-knight role to comfort a grieving woman. Again, probably watched too much TV as a kid, I thought. But it was necessary. A person in distress sounds a lot like a crying toddler who doesn’t know how to form any words yet.

Leaving Eunice to cry on his shoulder, I made my way to the location of interest, letting my nose lead the way like a rat's would to a block of cheddar. What used to be Mr. Patrick Jacobson lay supine on the kitchen floor. His hands still clutched his throat, and the shocked expression on the death mask of his face led me to believe that asphyxiation was how he went. On the kitchen table were the remnants of his last meal. From the looks of it, some vegetables straight from the can and a few slices of stale bread, along with two of his favorite tablemates: Miller and Jack. And also a half-eaten rotisserie chicken that evidently had started to become an insect playground after Jacobson had eaten his fill. *Yuck*. I put on latex gloves and carefully dusted the area for hair follicles, blood, or prints. From my perspective, the crime scene appeared to be just the fat drunkard choking on his own food, but one can't be so sure nowadays. I was just about to bend down to examine the corpse more closely when I heard a knock on the door.

"Forensics is here. I'll get it," I announced. I made my way back to the door and opened it to see the crazy chump himself, Medical Examiner Will Maples. We embraced and exchanged pleasantries.

"Still alive, you dirty old ragged dog?"

"Better than ever. You pregnant, or is it just growin' a tumor in your stomach?" he shot back.

We examined the body together, Will and I. He told me that it was his best guess that the post-mortem interval occurred sometime around the past twelve hours, given the livor mortis and present stiffness of the corpse.

"Of course," he explained in his labored, lazy way, "This damn cold makes timing difficult. It slows down the autolytic process until it's anyone's guess. Hell, Jim, why is it so cold in here? Feels like I'm in a meat freezer with stiffy here and Ms. Hen there on the table." I shrugged.

Will took out his camera and snapped a few artsy shots for the record. Then he instructed me to take the decedent's hands off his throat, so we could better glimpse what had caused the death. I had to pry the fingers off one by one, with each leaving a purple discoloration behind. That's how hard Jacobson was squeezing to dislodge the blockage in his final death throes.

"Well, I'll be, Jim...," said Will, a glimmer of surprise crossing his face. It was quite clear how Jacobson met his end. There was an obstruction bulging from the skin of his throat forming a grotesque 'U.' We looked at one another, then at the chicken that sat on the table.

"Do you think?" I asked.

He nodded. “Only one way to find out.” From his bag of medical accoutrements, he procured an intimidating-looking metal rod that ended in a small hook. “My special baby,” he said, smiling.

“This should be interesting,” I said.

Skillfully, almost surgically, he inserted the tool through Jacobson’s open mouth and prodded for the bone. He fished it out inside of a minute. “And just when you think you’ve seen everything,” he chuckled. The two of us stared at the wishbone together. Coated in blood and mucus and God knows what else, I wondered how anyone with half a brain could be that stupid.

“Rules out foul play, I guess,” I said as I bagged the bone for evidence.

“Yes, but not *fowl* play,” replied Will, forming his fingers into quotation marks. He appeared rather pleased with himself. “At any rate, I’m out of here. I have a possible 187 in Sussex I have to get to. In fact, I’m late already. Here, help me zip this guy up.” He snapped a few more photos and took out a body bag, and we hoisted Jacobson into it. As we loaded the cadaver into his vehicle, he said, “Give my condolences to the missus.” Then I watched as Will drove away into the distance.

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After Mrs. Jacobson had calmed down sufficiently, Justin managed to get the story from her in the time I had spent investigating the crime scene. She had returned after visiting her parents over the weekend to find the door partly ajar, which her husband often forgot to or was unable to close during one of his inebriated stupors. Entering the house, she him dead in the kitchen. After her initial shock and tears, she phoned CPD, and that’s where we came in. My deputy saw no reason to trouble her any further, so I instructed Eunice Jacobson to head to her parents’ place until the disposal unit could come to clean up the mess.

“Have you ever heard of anything like it?” I asked him as we climbed into the cruiser. “Choking to death on a chicken bone?”

“No sir. Maybe it’s just wishful thinking on my part, but I’m glad Mrs. Jacobson is finally rid of that brute,” he replied grimly. “She’ll soon realize just how much better she’ll be without him.”

“You mean *wishbone thinking*,” I replied, half-angry at myself. Whenever I worked with Will, I would be left with terrible jokes I just couldn’t keep to myself.

The car ride back was spent discussing the best fishing and hunting grounds up North. I asked him how his fishing trip went, and he sounded pleased with the experience even though the fish weren't biting that day. I was glad that Justin was in a pleasant mood, and we arrived back in good time, which wasn't easy with the blizzard-like conditions outside. Exiting the car quickly, Justin seemed eager to make it to the safe confines of the police station.

"Justin, wait up. I think you dropped this." I reached into my pocket and pulled out the object I had picked up from the snow. I held out the Winston cigarette pack in my outstretched hand, and right when his hand met mine to take them, I squeezed. Instinctively, his hands clasped mine in an impromptu handshake. His hands were ice cold, even through multiple layers of cardboard, nylon, and leather. But he had the strongest hand grip I had ever felt in my life.

"Whoa, there! You'll leave a mark, kid!"

"Thanks," he mumbled, and he turned from me and walked inside. I stood there by myself for a moment, admiring the scenery, lost in my thoughts. Then I followed in his footsteps, opened the door, and went in.

Behind me, the winter storm raged on. Within minutes, the snow would cover our tracks entirely, leaving no evidence that we had ever been there.

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The wishbone was taken into the evidence bay where it still remains. Later that day, I sent my samples over to the downtown forensic criminal lab for analysis, but no DNA or fingerprints other than those of Mr. and Mrs. Jacobson were ever lifted from the scene. Patrick Jacobson's body was cremated a few days after it arrived at the morgue; no one came forward to claim the remains. A week after Mr. Jacobson's death, I took my two sons ice fishing at Lake Superior for the opening day of the season.

Deputy Justin Charles never did end up finding his gloves.