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MET HER ON THE MOUNTAIN



THE MURDER OF NANCY MORGAN

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PROLOGUE

The first reports of the murder were vague. A young antipoverty worker had been kidnapped, raped, and murdered in the mountains of North Carolina, her body discovered on an abandoned logging road almost within sight of the Appalachian Trail. Although the brutal and sexually charged details were downplayed, they would come out soon enough.

The woman's college yearbook photo, her life and work, and the circumstances of her death were sketched out across the front page of the *Durham Sun* on June 18, 1970. And authorities had no suspects.

I read the article sitting at a pitted wooden desk in an office of the Duke University student newspaper, where I had spent—some might say squandered—much of my five years as an undergraduate. Paint peeled in patches on the room's gabled eaves; the desktop veneer was coming loose at the corners. Across from the desk sat a worn red sofa where exhausted staffers found sleep—or solace.

Much of my writing for the *Chronicle*, including a column called “The Readable Radical,” was typical of the time—alternately blazing with justified indignation and self-righteous moralizing. I was a Jew from the Jersey suburbs, swept up in the era's unfolding history. Duke was the place my political life formed in the late 1960s, when, like many others of my generation, I marched, demonstrated, made speeches on the quad, and drove to anti-Vietnam War protests in Washington, where I once got arrested. Since finishing my classwork the previous January, I had vague thoughts of a future journalism career of some kind.

By mid-June, the campus was finally quiet after days of rancorous upheaval. Protests in the wake of the National Guard killings of students at

Kent State University, the invasion of Cambodia six weeks earlier, and the shooting of African-American students at Jackson State University in Mississippi had ended the school year. With classes and exams canceled and the semester abruptly over, most of the students trickled home.

I learned from the *Durham Sun* that the murder victim was Nancy Dean Morgan, just twenty-four, a recent graduate of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, where she had majored in social welfare. A community organizer for the Volunteers in Service to America, she worked with children and helped set up a thrift shop that sold used clothing. Her service was to have lasted only a few more weeks, as she had planned to attend nursing school in New York in the fall. She'd be back, she had promised her friends—back with even more skills, to help and maybe to stay.

She had lived, though briefly, and died in Madison County, in the western mountains of the state. Madison was widely known by travelers for its beauty and less widely by historians for its Civil War violence. I took Nancy Morgan's death personally, feeling a palpable kinship.

In "Ohio," Neil Young's song about the Kent State killings, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young asked what each of us would have done had we found one of the shooting victims. I didn't know Nancy, and I didn't find her in that mountain glade, but I remember feeling as though I had. Politics and idealism ignited both of us. A gifted generational avatar shaped and transformed by the civil-rights and antiwar movements, feminism, and the fight against poverty, she had been drawn by, and killed in, my adopted state. I had friends serving elsewhere in VISTA, so maybe my connection to the killing was a throwback to the old Wobblies slogan, "An injury to one is an injury to all."

I reached across the desk, picked up a metal ruler, and used its edge to tear out the article. Grabbing a manila folder, I marked it "Morgan" and dropped the clipping into it. I wasn't sure what I would do with the file, but I held on to it.

That file grew—and reproduced—for more than forty years. When I had a spare weekend, I often visited friends in Madison County. I spent days in the library and the government records offices. I sought out anyone who might have known Nancy or who lived in the county at the time. I asked questions that many people did not want to hear. What unfolded was a tangled tale of rural noir.

But my search for Morgan's killer wasn't all work. Between interviews, I hiked the county's trails and mountaintop "balds" and rafted the French Broad River. I stayed in the historic inns, ate the food, listened to the bluegrass and traditional musicians, even entered a turkey shoot, and just watched the stars come out at night.

Based in Durham, I learned to work as a journalist—a true-crime journalist. I covered the case of Joan (pronounced Jo-Ann) Little, a young

black woman accused of murdering her white jailer in a small eastern North Carolina town. Supposedly, she had lured him into her cell with a promise of sex. Eventually, a racially integrated jury acquitted Little in less than ninety minutes. That led to other stories, none quite so dramatic, though many of them raised similar issues of race, class, and gender.

During the years that followed, I bounced around the Southeast from courthouse to courthouse, often reporting on capital cases, spending more time in courtrooms than most lawyers. My specialty was investigating and writing about criminal cases that evolved into political causes. Many of the defendants became better known by city and number than by name: the Wilmington Ten, the Charlotte Three, and, in Georgia, the Dawson Five. These were crimes of a sort often called “Southern justice,” an ironic, jaundiced shorthand for lingering racial injustice and the political outrage the trials provoked. In a larger sense, my focus was on *justice*, or the lack of it, across the spectrum—racial, economic, political, and criminal. Sometimes, my reporting was credited with helping derail defendants on the fast track to death row.

However, as my proficiency in investigative and courtroom reporting skills developed, my subjects shifted from defendants who were poor, black, and often innocent to those who were more likely to be middle class, white, and guilty. In the spring of 1979, I found myself covering two sensational murder cases. The first involved cross-country serial killer Ted Bundy and the second Jeffrey MacDonald, the Green Beret doctor accused of murdering his pregnant wife and two young daughters at their Fort Bragg home. I had the disconcerting experience of conducting the first exclusive, face-to-face interview with Bundy since he was arrested for killing a twelve-year-old girl and two Florida State University sorority sisters.

One case had a personal connection. Beginning in November 1979, I reported on the Greensboro, North Carolina, shooting, funerals, and (the following year) trials growing out of a clash of antiracist communists versus Nazis and Klansmen from the mountains of western North Carolina. It was a clear breach of journalistic objectivity and detachment, since some of the five dead leftists and others gravely wounded in the shooting were friends and classmates from Duke.

In the process of all this freelance reporting, I got an ad hoc legal education. I learned how to sit for tedious hours reading through depositions and autopsy reports. I learned how to interview family members for overlooked details and how to examine crime scenes long after the yellow tape came down. At one point, I took a week-long course in blood-spatter and death-scene analysis with homicide detectives and coroner’s investigators. The quest was always for the one piece of evidence that might set an innocent person free.

Still, I always knew that nothing beat face-to-face interviews, even when, or maybe especially when, they were with individuals I'd rarely socialize with, in places I might never take my family.

True-crime and thriller writers tend to make dogged detectives—sworn officers and private investigators—their heroes, or at least their protagonists. But that's not how I began as a reporter, nor is it how I've ended up as a writer.

Often—but less frequently—journalists, too, solve murders in mystery novels, in movies, and on television. Yet as reporters who have covered cops and courts for any length of time will tell you, apart from DNA-related exonerations like those documented by Project Innocence, it rarely happens in real life.

Fiction and *CSI*-type shows notwithstanding, murders typically get solved when a guilt-stricken family member confesses or slips up before the lawyer arrives, or when someone snitches while trying to cut a deal. Police usually catch a murderer within forty-eight hours or not at all. The defendant makes a plea bargain or is convicted by a jury in a few hours, in a trial that lasts less than a week. A precious few cold cases are resolved with deathbed revelations that only family members may hear. Glamour is as scarce as drama, unless the victim or the accused is an attractive young white woman and the case becomes a cable-television sensation. Most killers are stupid, banal, closely linked to their victims, and obviously guilty. Unlike on the screen or page, few in real life are criminal masterminds. And they are rarely handsome, beautiful, or charming (Bundy and MacDonald being exceptions). And reporters rarely play a part in the process, beyond describing it.

Eventually, my professional focus took an unlikely turn from crime to religion (and a better class of felon, I used to joke) and from North Carolina to California and then Florida. But murder was always in the background. Nancy Morgan's murder. My files and clippings grew exponentially in the 1990s when my editors at the *Los Angeles Times* dragged me back to courts and cops—the crime beat.

And when in the upheaval of twenty-first-century journalism I found myself unemployed in 2008, I returned to Madison County to finally figure out who killed Nancy Morgan, and why.