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## In search of Kym's killer

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NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

The difference between life and death for Kym Morgan came down to one phone call.

On the sunny Sunday morning of April 28, 1985, she was almost out the door with her roommate, on their way to breakfast, when someone rang to ask about a classified ad she'd placed. The caller said he lived in Montecito and needed someone to watch his children.

Police believe his real motivation was to lure the tall, striking blonde to a horrible death.

Kym was last seen meeting a short, dark-skinned man at a Mesa shopping center. Four days later, a man known as "Hector the can collector" found one of her arms in a bush off East Camino Cielo. Other body parts were later discovered nearby.

Her brutal murder has never been solved. It holds an unbreakable grip on Kym's family and the detectives assigned to hunt down her killer.

Kym's case is one of 22 unsolved homicides in the city of Santa Barbara since 1961. All of these cases will be getting a fresh look by the Police Department's newly formed Cold Case Unit.

Detectives assigned to the unit have already contacted Kym's mother to let her know they'll be aggressively looking into her killing again. It's a case no one can forget.

"The method of disarticulation, or dismemberment, was so unusual that we felt this person had done this at least one other time in the past -- and that he would do it again," said retired Detective Neil Sharpe, of the Santa Barbara Police Department.

Crime scene photographs capture the macabre and savage nature of the killing. To this day, the images and details stir raw emotions in the detectives.

They are determined to find the person who butchered the beautiful Brooks Institute student who aspired to be a fashion photographer, attended the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York and worked as an assistant to famed photographer Irving Penn.

They dream about slapping cuffs on the killer of a 24-year-old woman who had the potential and the drive to succeed -- but who instead became the prey of a crafty, cunning murderer.

### LAST MOMENTS ALIVE

Nearly two decades later, Detective Sharpe can still recall, almost to the minute, the last moments of Kym's life.

Her fate was probably decided when the killer called her Valerio Street home that Sunday morning. He was responding to an ad she placed in the News-Press seeking a room in exchange for light chores. He offered one, in a beautiful Montecito house.

If Kym met him right away on the Mesa, she was told, she could also meet the kids at his mother-in-law's nearby house.

Police believe the killer waited for her in the parking lot of the Santa Cruz Market, now Lazy Acres, where a sweet hint of ocean air lingers from the morning fog.

Kym was seen with a man whose dark complexion stood out against a blue Hawaiian shirt and blue pants. A police bulletin and sketch identified him as possibly Italian, Indian or Portuguese. Two-inch elevator shoes brought his height to about 5 feet 6. He was in his early 30s.

At nearly 6 feet tall, witnesses later recalled, Kym towered over the short man as she shook his hand that morning.

He was seen getting out of a car with a white top and a blue body -- either a 1979 Buick Century or an early '80s Chevrolet Caprice or Impala. Shoppers recalled a gold license plate with dark blue letters, perhaps from Oregon.

Detectives are uncertain whether this man was the killer, or even the caller. But he may have been the last person to see her alive.

Police believe that within a short time, at the parking lot, the killer tricked Kym into trusting him. Or else she wouldn't have gotten into his car -- not after what happened to her five years earlier.

When Kym was 19, a man abducted her from a Los Angeles disco, beat and raped her, then left her for dead. The hospital listed Kym as a Jane Doe. She was beaten so badly, only her mother was able to recognize her. She identified the little freckle between her middle and ring fingers to police.

"She had amnesia," Evan Morgan said. "They didn't know if they'd ever bring her back."

Kym spent four months in the hospital learning to talk, walk and feed herself again. It took years for her to fully come back.

But five years later, she would become a victim again.

Somehow, the killer dispelled any suspicions Kym may have had that day on the Mesa and enticed her into his trap.

The next morning, Kym's landlord spotted her 1965 white Corvair abandoned in the market parking lot. He called police. And then he phoned John and Evan Morgan in Palm Springs to tell them their daughter was missing. Her father's first words: "Oh no. .... Not again."

### THE CAN MAN

Four days later, Thursday, May 2, a man looking for aluminum cans off East Camino Cielo found what he thought might be a body part.

"What he saw was an arm, hung up in the brush on the right side," said Mr. Sharpe, who recently stood nearby and pointed to a spot 50 feet down a steep embankment covered with foxtail and scrubby oak bushes.

Two hours later, detectives discovered her severed head farther down the hill and her dismembered leg hidden under another oak.

"He wanted to conceal what he did," said the veteran homicide detective. "This was not to be found. Who's going to go down there? Except for Hector the can collector -- the one factor he didn't count on."

The killer drove about two miles past the old Cielo store, up the narrow and winding mountain road, before he disposed of her head, arm and leg just past Knapp's Castle. He picked a scenic spot. Rancho Oso can be seen in the distance tucked at the base of the Santa Ynez Mountain range. To the south is a spectacular view of the city, the ocean and islands.

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Then the killer drove another mile or so to another obscure turnout where he placed her thighs three feet inside of a hidden culvert running under the road. Search-and-rescue crews found them a day after the first discovery. A tall, uniquely shaped boulder just to the left became the landmark for detectives as they returned to the scene dozens of times in search of clues. Now undisturbed, thick cobwebs hang eerily from the top of the culvert, while dried leaves line the bottom.

There was no blood at either of the scenes, indicating Kym was killed and dismembered at a different location, where each body part was drained of blood and then cleaned.

The parts were precisely sliced, suggesting the killer had skill cutting either human or animal bodies. The parts exhibited only very early stages of putrefaction. Detectives suspect the killer either held Kym captive for three days or kept her body refrigerated until he disposed of it. There were no ligature marks that would indicate she was bound or gagged. The killer's painstaking method reveals he was in a place where he had the privacy and the tools for such an undertaking -- perhaps a remote mountain cabin or even a house in the middle of a city neighborhood.

Crews scoured nearly 20 miles of East Camino Cielo, from Highway 154 to Gibraltar Road, rappelling down steep hillsides in search of Kym's remains.

Police interviewed hundreds. Brooks students distributed more than 10,000 copies of a suspect sketch. About 1,000 tips poured in. Detectives followed the leads from Santa Cruz to New York.

But no more of Kym's remains were discovered. No crime scene was ever found. No solid suspect was ever identified. The killer vanished without a trace.

Kym Morgan would have been 42 years old this year.

#### THE MOTHER

A forboding dream jolted Mrs. Morgan awake just days before her daughter was found dead.

"I saw her tied up and on a floor. She was in a cabin in the mountains near the Montecito area, and I don't know Montecito at all. But I saw the inside of this cabin and I saw the terrible situation she was in."

The dream was so vivid, Mrs. Morgan drew a sketch of the cabin and gave it to police.

Nothing ever came of it.

Shortly after, Kym's dismembered body was found -- a gold band she had worn for years still on her hand. Police gave it to her mother.

"When I first touched it, it was like white hot fire. I had to throw it down. I could not physically touch that ring because it had so much psychic power in it. I put it away for a year or two and then started testing it. I wear it quite often now. I even took it to a psychic one time and passed on her observations to the police."

But the psychic information didn't pan out. Nor did anything else, including a \$36,000 reward donated by Brooks authorities and the community.

Five months into the investigation, Mr. and Mrs. Morgan returned to Santa Barbara to film a public service announcement that Brooks students distributed to news stations here and in Los Angeles, Palm Springs and New York.

Still no substantial leads.

It began to sink in.

No more would Mrs. Morgan hear the sweet music Kym played on the piano, French horn and flute. Nor see her fashion sketches and photographs. Never again would she hear her laughter. Family vacations to Mexico and Hawaii became distant memories. Plans for the future disintegrated into broken dreams.

"The first year was so unbearable," Mrs. Morgan said. "There's crying and screaming. Ranting and raving. You do it in your car. Away from the other family members. You don't want to upset them. But they're going through exactly the same thing."

Mrs. Morgan stayed busy with her interior design work so she wouldn't completely fall apart.

About eight months after Kym was murdered, Mr. Morgan had coronary bypass surgery. He died in 1994.

"My husband was totally destroyed," said Mrs. Morgan. "I really believe his life came to an end much earlier because of what he went through. As the father, he saw himself as the protector of the family. But this made him feel totally helpless."

Throughout the years, Mrs. Morgan says she occasionally catches a scent of Kym's favorite gardenia perfume and believes her daughter is nearby.

"If I thought this was the only life, then I would still be ranting and raving," Mrs. Morgan said. "I think they're right here, but just on a different plane. One we can't see. A different level of life, of education, of growing."

The last time Mrs. Morgan saw her daughter was at their Palm Springs home just days before she was murdered.

"That last visit we hugged and kissed a lot," she recalled. "I remember her enveloping me in her arms when she was saying goodbye. It comes back very strongly. It's so strong, it's hard for me to talk about it."

"Sometimes I start to think about the actual crime. But I can't. I get to a point where it's like hanging over a cliff and I have to pull back. I just can't go there."

#### THE BIG SISTER

Julie Morgan was in a modeling session when her mother called.

"They could hear my screams all through the studio," said Ms. Morgan, then 27. "It was just terrible."

She doesn't remember much of the next two years.

"It was so horrific -- I was just in some kind of dream world. .... For years, the pain was so bad I would just sit in a room and scream and cry. .... I was scared of how I felt, of her dying, of the killer coming after me."

Even at times now, the pain is nearly as raw as it was 17 years ago. In part, because the last time the sisters saw each other, they argued.

"She wanted me to leave this club and go home. I didn't want to. She dragged me home anyway. And then we had words. All sisters argue -- but then she died right after that. It was just horrible. I don't think I'll ever get over it."

Kym loved to dance, especially to the Rolling Stones.

"She'd march to the sound of her own drum and wear whatever she wanted," Ms. Morgan said. "She was so special. Sometimes I feel like the wrong one was left here -- because she still had so much to do. It's hard for me to describe how special she was because it's so emotional."

Kym frequently took photos of her model sister, in addition to her other portraits of people.

"She had really come into her own," Ms. Morgan said. "She had gotten over that horrific time when she was practically killed."

After the attack, it took Kym months to learn to play the flute again. But she pushed herself hard so she could play her dad's favorite song, "The Shadow of Your Smile," on his birthday.

Ms. Morgan talks about her little sister daily. Her e-mail address has Kym's name in it. Her photographs decorate her walls.

"I thought we would raise our kids together and grow old together. She was my best friend. I loved her so much."

Recently, Ms. Morgan randomly picked up a copy of "The Lovely Bones" by Alice Sebold, without knowing the book is about a 14-year-old girl who is lured into a fort by a neighbor, raped, murdered and chopped to pieces. The girl tells her story from heaven as she watches her family try to find the killer.

"Every line I read in that book is about my life," she said. "It's exactly how I was feeling and how I thought Kym would be feeling. I could just see her sitting in heaven and saying, 'How could you do this? How could you take me away?'"

Initially, Ms. Morgan didn't care about finding her sister's killer. It wouldn't bring her back.

"Now I want to find the guy," she said. "I know this book I'm reading is fiction, but I'm sure the guy who killed Kym killed others, too."

"It's not so that I can see that he gets the death penalty. I just want to look him in the eye and ask him how he could take my Kym. My little friend. My baby sister."

#### THE DETECTIVES

Detective Sharpe got the phone call at 8:30 p.m. Officers on scene confirmed it. Hector the can collector had found a dismembered body.

"When I first went down the embankment, I knew it was her," said Detective Sharpe. "I had seen fingernail polish earlier in her apartment. When I saw her hand, I noticed the same pink fingernail polish."

For the next eight weeks, half the department pulled 18-hour days.

Heavy media coverage and a suspect sketch drew more than 1,000 tips. Extra phone lines were installed.

"We may have even talked to the suspect," he said. "Most of the time within the first 24 hours you end up talking with him. But that's in a normal investigation. The one thing you have to keep in mind about Kym is that she was disposed of. We don't know the location of her death."

There's speculation the killer lived in Santa Barbara because of his apparent familiarity with East Camino Cielo and the hidden culvert --

especially at night. Perhaps he frequented the nearby shooting range. Or lived in a remote house on either end of the mountainous road. Maybe he lived on the Mesa near the mother-in-law he described to Kym.

"There was a considerable amount of time and effort put into it before Kym was even contacted," said Detective Sharpe. "She was lured to that location. .... He used a ruse to get her there and then some other ruse to get her into the car with him."

Detectives also suspect it was a planned murder because of the dismemberment. The killer had technical skills in human or animal anatomy and used a very sharp instrument, like a scalpel.

"Most disarticulations are very crass. They're done with an ax or chain saw. In this case, it was much more methodical and cleaner than that. The person took their time. The pathologist's best estimate is that it took 10 to 18 hours."

Local detectives followed serial killings nationwide and entered their case into an FBI database that links similar slayings. It produced a handful of phone calls, but the killer's method produced no matches.

A forensic psychologist who assisted in the case said a killer like this could be inactive for years.

"But eventually the killer would have to vent and would do it again," Detective Sharpe said. "Also, the sophistication the person used means they were practiced in their field. He could have been a surgeon or a meat cutter. But the person who did this has done something along these lines before that gave him the ability and wherewithal to do what he did to Kym."

The gruesome murder took an emotional toll on the detectives.

"You do your best to bring the person who committed this crime to justice," Detective Sharpe said. "But as you're doing that you become involved with the family. There's an emotional level you're working on. You become one of the players in the tragedy."

The case sticks with him to this day. He knows the family won't move on until the killer is behind bars.

"Of all the homicide cases I've been involved in, this is the only one that wasn't solved," he said. "We just kept coming up with dead-ends -- it was so frustrating."

Yet, he maintains the case will be solved. And he plans to see it through by volunteering as a consultant with Detectives Tim Roberts and Greg Wilkins, who run the Cold Case Unit.

"Detectives Roberts and Wilkins will have the time and resources to commit new and continued energy to the case. They'll re-interview people and new leads may develop," Detective Sharpe said. "It's finding that key piece of evidence, that one bit of luck. Something will happen and it will break this case wide open."

The new detectives have one final message for the killer: "You'd better look out," said Detective Roberts. "Because we're coming -- and we're bringing @#!\*% with us, pal."

#### ABOUT THIS SERIES

There are 50 unsolved homicides in Santa Barbara County, including 22 in the city. But detectives hope advances in forensic technology will link killers still walking the streets to evidence once considered useless. The News-Press highlights four of these cold cases in a three-part series by crime reporter Dawn Hobbs in the hope that someone in the community holds the missing clues that can finally put those victims to rest.

#### Day 1:

Kym Morgan met a stranger who answered her classified ad on April 28, 1985. Four days later, her dismembered body was found off East Camino Cielo. ALSO: Police Chief Cam Sanchez formed a Cold Case Unit that combines fresh eyes and advanced forensic technology to crack slayings that stumped original investigators.

#### Day 2:

John Douglas, a former FBI agent who has interviewed hundreds of killers and helped pioneer criminal personality profiling, explains how to get inside a killer's mind; criminalists tell how analysis of blood spatters and ballistics can link a suspect to the crime. ALSO: The state's Cold Hits databank may help local law enforcement identify killers by DNA.

#### Day 3:

Lori Rosen, a 19-year-old SBCC student, was found strangled to death March 7, 1977, in her Montecito apartment. Detectives suspect the killer is someone she knew. ALSO: The stories of Frank Gomez, who was found stabbed to death in 1995 at the Santa Barbara Bowl, and Esther Taboada, a mother of two, who was stabbed in the Sears parking lot in 1992.

Visit [www.newspress.com](http://www.newspress.com) for more on these Cold Cases.

See Kym Morgan's artwork and read Lori Rosen's poetry. A photo gallery shows pictures of the victims, including Esther Taboada and Frank Gomez, from childhood until the time they were killed.

Read original news stories about these unsolved homicides. Maybe something will jog your memory and you can provide a missing clue that may finally solve one of these cases.

You can also talk with detectives from the Santa Barbara Police and County Sheriff's departments who are determined to hunt down these killers. The News-Press will host a public chat-room forum on Friday from 10 a.m. until noon. Crime reporter Dawn Hobbs will serve as moderator. Go to [www.newspress.com](http://www.newspress.com) and click on the Cold Case icon to access the chat room.

#### YOU CAN HELP

If you have information about any of these crimes, you can call the Santa Barbara Police Department's Cold Case Unit at 897-2320 or 897-2426. You can also call the unit's Anonymous Tipline at 569-COPS or e-mail [tipline@newspress.com](mailto:tipline@newspress.com).

#### BY THE NUMBERS

Santa Barbara Police Department Homicide Data 1990 to 2002

#### Cases:

45

#### Unsolved:

10

#### Weapons:

Firearm - 22

Knife - 13

Other - 4

Hands - 2

Cement block - 1

Club - 1

Rock - 1

Fire - 1

#### Youngest victim:

8 months old

#### Oldest victim:

89 years old

#### Youngest suspect:

16 years old

#### Oldest suspect:

82 years old

#### Relationship between victim and suspect :

Domestic - 9

Gang members - 7

Bar patrons - 2

Child abuse/Mother's boyfriend - 2

Personal associates/alcohol-related - 2

Neighbors - 2

Boyfriend/Girlfriend - 1

00000000/00000000 - 1

Business associate - 1

Homeless - 1

Hate crime - 1

Elder abuse - 1

Attempted robbery - 1

Robbery - 1

Unknown - 14

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