

Remains of the Day

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BY DAVID HOLTHOUSE

Peering over the lid of a burbling Crockpot inside the Maricopa County Medical Examiner's Office, Dr. Laura Fulginiti appears for a moment as the housewife she never was, despite the skeleton earrings hanging from each of her lobes. Clutching a pair of metal tongs, Fulginiti tenderly fishes out a human skull decorated with remnants of decayed flesh. Steam swirls from the eye sockets, smelling faintly of burning hair.

"You can see where the bullet went in, right here," says Fulginiti, turning the skull to display a beveled cavity just behind its left temple. "No gun was found at the scene, so it looks like a murder, not a suicide."

The skull came to Fulginiti as one piece in a body-bagged parcel of decomposed remains recently found west of Phoenix, about five miles from the nearest convenience store.

As the county's forensic anthropologist, it's Fulginiti's job to determine if the remains are those of a homicide victim. Her first step this morning was to submerge the skull in the pot, fire up a hot plate and bring the water to a slow, rolling boil. Every 30 minutes or so she checks on the progress of boiling the skull clean for a full examination and photographs.

"You have to take your time with this part. Keep checking your temperature," she says, then offers a smile that brightens the morgue's windowless chamber. "It's like cooking a good stew."

Pray your head doesn't wind up in Dr. Fulginiti's Crockpot. Because if it does, or if she otherwise examines the fragments of your mortal shell, you probably died an untimely, untidy death. Murder, maybe, or suicide. Perhaps you got lost in the Superstitions, and it was years before your bleached skeleton was found, or the commercial airline flight you were on crashed and Fulginiti was called in to sort through the mess.

Experience has taught Fulginiti — who goes by "Fulgi" (pronounced "FULL-gee") — that charred airplane insulation is tough to distinguish from crushed, cremated bones. Also, after a decade on the job, she can look over a murder victim's skull and report not only that the person was killed with a hammer, but what *kind* of hammer.

"Your standard roofing hammer's pretty obvious," she says. "It just looks like they got hit in the head with a hammer. Whereas a tack hammer leaves a flat, rectangular shape. Drywall hammers create more of a square, wafflelike pattern. I never realized how many different types of hammers there are until I got into this line of work."

At 37, Fulginiti is a young lioness in her field, acclaimed by her peers and law enforcement agents nationwide as one of the most thorough, best-trained and credible forensic anthropologists money can hire.

"She's a natural," says Dr. Walter Birkby, former head of the University of Arizona's forensic anthropology department. Birkby's program was regarded as the best of its kind when Fulginiti got her doctorate there in the mid-'80s (the UofA discontinued the program when Birkby retired in 1996).

"There's a lot of people out there saying they're forensic anthropologists who don't know shit from Shinola, but [Fulginiti] now ranks with the best," Birkby continues. "This comes as no surprise to me. As a student, she was outstandingly bright, she understood the need to develop a morgue sense of humor, and she never, ever let the smell get to her."

One gem among Fulginiti's memory trove of anecdotes attests to her olfactory resilience: In 1994, she was hired to help identify the remains of victims of an airline crash in Guam. Unfortunately for her, the Boeing 747 had gone down minutes after a seafood dinner of squid and haddock was served.

"There were pieces of people everywhere, along with pieces of seafood, and they were all decomposing," she says. "Taken together as one stench, it smelled the same. So I was the person who picked each little bit up and sniffed and went, 'Squid.' 'Person.' 'Haddock.' 'Person.' 'Fish part.' 'Human part.'"

"I guess that was about as close as I've come to being completely disgusted."

Fulginiti came of age in Tucson. Her father was a well-respected doctor, but she wanted to be the next Jane Goodall. After high school, she enrolled in the anthropology program at Colorado College in Colorado Springs.

"I started out monkey-watching, and I hated it," she says. "My log was like: '10:03, monkey scratches butt. 10:18, monkey staring at other monkey. 10:25, other monkey scratches butt.' It was so boring."

So Fulginiti switched tracks from monkey-watching to skeletal biology, studying skeletal remains from archaeological sites. She got her first taste of forensic science near the end of her senior year.

One of the college's skeletal biology instructors moonlighted for the local medical examiner's office, and he asked Fulginiti to assist him on a fresh case.

"A young woman's body had been found chopped up in a field," she says. "We got her out on the table, and I took one look at all these nice, even pieces, and said, 'I think somebody chopped her up so they could put her in a trunk.'"

Her instructor was incredulous.

"He looked at me like, 'What planet are you from?' Then he pointed to all the dirt and hay that arrived on the bones, and the precision of the cuts. Then he said, 'It was a hay thresher. It was going through the fields, and it ran her over.' He was right, I was wrong, but I was immediately fascinated. I realized I could take everything I'd already learned in a research and archaeological setting and apply it to solving crimes, or at least ruling them out.

"I decided to find out where I could go to learn how to do it forever. That brought me back to Arizona."

Fulginiti moved to Phoenix after she graduated from the UofA. While in graduate school, she married Dan Martin, who's now an administrative law judge for the State of Arizona. The couple has an 8-year-old son.

"It's normal to him what I do," Fulginiti says of her boy. "When he was 3 years old, we were at Thanksgiving dinner and I got called to a body recovery and had to leave in a hurry. Some of the other guests asked him, 'Where's mommy?' and he said, 'Digging some guy out of the sand.'"

Recently, Fulginiti says, she and her son found a squirrel drowned in the family pool and turned the rodent into a show-and-tell project.

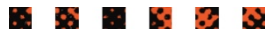
"We buried it and dug it up a couple of months later and glued the skeleton together and he took it into his first-grade class. The other kids thought that was pretty cool. He tells his friends his mommy works with dead people, and they think that's pretty cool, too. He gets upset I won't let him come in here and look at the bodies."

The bulk of her work is for Maricopa County, so Fulginiti works primarily out of the Medical Examiner's Office in downtown Phoenix. As an independent contractor, however, she also works for practically every other law enforcement agency in Arizona, as well as the National Park Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Disaster Medical System's D-MORT (Disaster Mortuary Team).

Her office in the county morgue has an impressive view, if not a coveted one. A narrow window stretching the length of one 10-foot wall looks out upon an autopsy room, where corpses are dissected in full view while Fulginiti checks her voice mail.

"There's no doubt this job has changed my perception of death," she says. "At first, just witnessing the randomness of it, I was in a questioning phase: Why, why, why, why? But when you see wholesale death, day after day, you get very numb, even to that question.

"I think my anthropology background helps me, because I'm able to think in terms of evolutionary time. It may sound terrible, but my attitude has become: Everybody dies. Next gurney, please."



Laura Fulginiti takes the stage of a packed Arizona Science Center auditorium. She's the featured speaker for the Science Center's nighttime lecture series. After a brief self-introduction, Fulginiti asks for the lights to be dimmed, and begins a slide presentation. The first image is a close-up of a deranged-looking cocker spaniel on an easy chair.

"Does this look like a happy dog?" Fulginiti asks.

"Nooooo," answers a scattered chorus from the audience.

"That's because this dog has just eaten its owner's face," says Fulginiti.

"Ewwwww," goes the chorus.

Gross, but true: Fulginiti has worked several cases where dogs, trapped in a house with a dead owner, have feasted on the hand that fed them, not to mention the lips and larynx that called their name.

"Basically, I go in to find out whether the dog erased evidence of an injury, or if it's a case where the guy died naturally, and the dog just got hungry.

"One interesting theme I've noticed, though, is that all the dogs that eat their owners are little yappy dogs."

Fulginiti tells the Science Center crowd that she's never had a case where a "real dog" ate its owner, although she's read case studies where large dogs starved to death in a house containing a corpse.

"So, I've developed this theory that real dogs will lay down beside their owners and die, but little yappy dogs just start scarfing. I think it has something to do with their metabolism."

Fulginiti pauses.

"Now, how many of you own cats?"

Three or four dozen hands tentatively rise.

"Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night to find your cat staring you in the face?"

Three or four dozen heads tentatively nod.

"They're checking to see if you're still breathing."

The crowd titters, and Fulginiti grins in response, though, as usual, she's only half-joking.

Like many homicide detectives and emergency-room doctors, Fulginiti has developed a finely attuned sense of gallows humor. It's what cleanses her psyche's palate of the aftertaste of evil, tragedy, despair.

"People who are not in our field don't understand why we make utterly irreverent, horrible jokes about people when they're lying dead in front of us," she says. "The reason is you simply cannot allow yourself to focus on the fact that this person was at one time alive, with people who loved them. Because if we admitted that what happened to this person could possibly happen to us or someone we loved, we couldn't do our jobs effectively. In fact, we'd probably be screaming-meemies in a padded room."

Steve Mascher, head of the Yavapai County Sheriff's criminal investigation division, who has worked with Fulginiti on "more than 10" body recoveries, describes her as "hard-core."

"You know, working a body, if you show any weakness around cops, you're crucified," says the detective. "It's just better for her to be grosser and louder than we are."

Fulginiti is self-aware to the point of discomfort, and she admits that two things and two things only have ever truly shaken her up.

The first is working with the bodies of children who have been abused. She doesn't talk about this further.

The second is plane crashes (most recently, Fulginiti sifted through the sodden wreckage of Alaska Airlines Flight 91, which crashed into the Pacific Ocean in February, killing all aboard).

"I have developed a slight fear of flying," she says. "What happens is you sit in your chair before takeoff, and you look at the overhead bins and think about what they look like charred and

mangled. You check out the safety cards in the seat pocket in front of you and think of how they look embedded in a torso. You see the metal bar in front of your legs and you feel the seat back hitting your neck and the seat belt tight around your waist and you think about what happens when all those shearing forces are at work simultaneously, which is your body separated into at least three pieces.

"Working plane crashes, you're not looking for bodies. You're looking for a hip bone, so you can determine age and sex."

The first plane crash Fulginiti worked traumatized her. She was 24, still in graduate school, and guest-teaching at her alma mater in Colorado Springs when a commuter plane from Kansas carrying 25 people crashed on approach.

"I remember thinking it was so random, like a giant hand just swept through the sky and knocked this plane to the earth. What got to me about that crash was things like finding a hand, just a hand, holding a pen, like the guy had been writing a memo as the plane came in for landing.

"I kept finding such normal stuff in such a horrific context that my brain took a little vacation."

A five-year vacation.

Though she got her doctorate and launched her career, Fulginiti says her internalized personality was virtually flatlined following the Colorado crash.

"I couldn't talk about it, wouldn't deal with it until one day I sat down and wrote about it," she says.

This is what she wrote:

It isn't so much the crash and its aftermath that needs to be addressed as the way it affected me, the way it changed my perspective, the way my excitement and naivete were rudely smashed into realism and the discovery that much of what I do is mine alone and can't be shared. . . . The work was endless. They kept bringing body bag after body bag and we had to sort through the hamburger trying to make sense of it. I remember I became the "Queen of the Penis" because for whatever reason that was the one organ I kept finding. I remember trying to sort out clothing and seeing a blue blazer like the one Dad always used to wear. . . . I remember being terrified that I had to fly and wishing it wouldn't happen. I remember walking into the lab [back in Tucson, three days after the crash] and hugging Mike [a fellow UofA grad student who'd also worked the crash] with both of us crying and crying and knowing that our lives were forever changed.

"It was basically just a stream-of-consciousness diatribe, but it worked," Fulginiti says today of her cathartic screed. "Simply jotting down my feelings and how I handled them, or how I had avoided handling them, finally snapped me back into myself.

"That was the moment I put all the ghosts to bed."



Mystery novels are Fulginiti's brain candy. She favors Dick Francis and Ed McBain.

She read a McBain title on her off time recently in which the murderer flayed a victim near the end. "I thought at the time, 'That'd be a cool case to work,'" she says. "It struck me about a week later that was pretty horrific."

Fulginiti likes mystery novels in part because she always gets to know the ending. Unlike the cases she works in real life.

"I'm constantly frustrated that I'm not in charge of every single case I'm involved in," she says. "Often I'm only working with one piece of the puzzle, and I never know where or if it fits. It's like watching *The Sixth Sense* without ever finding out the guy's dead."

There's no mystery, then, as to why Fulginiti's most gratifying cases are the ones she solves, or at least plays an integral role in solving.

Prompted, she comes up with her two favorites, one high-profile, one not.

The first was the 1991 murder of Denise Huber, 23, who disappeared on the way home from a concert in Orange County, California. Huber's car, which had a flat tire, was found on the Corona del Mar Freeway. Her nude, dismembered body was found three years later in a meat freezer inside a Ryder truck parked outside the Dewey, Arizona, home of house painter John Joseph Famalaro.

"[Famalaro] lived next door to his mother in an upscale neighborhood, like Prescott Country Club Estates, and he has this Ryder truck sitting there with an electrical cord coming out the back and over the fence to his mom's yard, so he was running off her electricity," says Fulginiti.

"Well, this doesn't go over too well with his upscale neighbors, who eventually called to complain about this eyesore, and some local deputies went to investigate. Well, they see the truck and right away they're thinking meth lab, so they call in the Criminal Investigative Division. The CID guys go into the truck and open up the freezer, and something doesn't smell right, and there's all these plastic bags, and they're thinking elk hunter until they open up one of the bags and there's an arm with a handcuff attached."

The freezer was transported to Phoenix, and Fulginiti was called in to assist in the autopsy.

"The problem was, this woman's body was frozen, so we had to wait for her to thaw a little before we could do anything. Except it was touch-and-go, because she was sort of decomposing as she was thawing, so we had to time things right.

"The first thing I did was take all the cranial fragments and glue them together, and it was clear she'd been hit a minimum of 30 times. The way you could tell was to look at the pattern of fracture and actually count the impact points. There were also about seven scuff marks where it looked like he'd just tapped her, maybe to knock her out so he could control her in the storage locker where we believe he raped and killed her."

Fulginiti grows more animated in the story's telling, the scientist in her fully emerging, free of any natural, and distracting, abhorrence for the terror Huber must have suffered at the hands of her killer.

"The *coolest* part about that case, though, was that caught in the fractures were these little pieces of white plastic. This puzzled me, until I asked the forensic assistant if the body's head had anything over it when it was brought in. Well, when I said this, her eyes bugged out and she said yes, the victim had a white bag that had been wrapped around the head."

Fulginiti's discovery locked the case against Famalaro into a first-degree murder charge, since it proved he put the bag over Huber's head before he struck her repeatedly. Fulginiti also helped sew up the case by matching a hammer and a tire iron found in Famalaro's house (inside a box marked "Christmas") to the wounds on Huber's skull.

"Establishing those as the murder weapons was easy," she says. "You could actually fit the tire iron perfectly into a curved mark of impact."

Investigators found evidence that Famalaro murdered Huber inside a storage locker in California, then transported her body to Arizona. Based on Fulginiti's evidence, a California jury found Famalaro guilty of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to death and awaits execution.

The Huber case was big news, here and in Southern California. The second case Fulginiti recalls never made the papers.

It began in 1996, when she received a letter forwarded from the City of Mesa. The letter had a return address in Canada. It was addressed simply to "Office of the Coroner, Mesa, Arizona."

Inside was a letter from a mother who explained that 15 years before, her troubled son had left Canada to explore the United States. He became involved with a cult in Florida, and the last his

family heard from him was when he phoned home that same year, 1981, to say he had moved to Arizona. The mother wrote that her son had been in his early 20s, and had brown, curly hair.

Fulginiti checked the files in the Medical Examiner's Office for unidentified bodies in 1981.

"There was only one file for that year," she says. "I pull it out and here's this brown curly haired kid who had hung himself out by one of those big electrical transformer boxes in the middle of the desert."

She wrote the mother back, and asked her to send a picture. The mother did, and the pictures matched.

"I called the Sheriff's Office and we went out to pauper's field and dug him up. He'd been buried wearing the same earring in the photo his mother sent. I got the dental records from Canada and they matched, so we sent him home."

After the reburial, the mother and other members of the dead man's family flew to Phoenix to thank Fulginiti in person. They also wanted to see the photographs from the scene of his suicide.

"I had selected a few of the less graphic images, but they said, 'No, we want to see everything,' so I showed it to them. They looked through all the pictures and thanked me again and said I had no idea how much it helped. I don't get that kind of immediate feedback very often. It felt good.

"Most people don't have death as a mind mate. They don't smell it or taste or even think about it when it visits unexpectedly. I live it, every day, all day. But I am not the neighborhood entertainment or ghoul. Each victim I work on takes a piece of me to the grave with them."