

## The Heart of Darkness

When my sister, Arlene, was a teenage, my mom used to say she could tell a lot about the boys Arlene was going out with by asking the how they felt about their mothers. If the boy professed love and respect for his mother, that would probably reflect his relationships with other women in his life. If he thought of his mother as a bitch or whore or ball-buster, changes were pretty darn good he'd end up treating other women the same way.

From my experience, my mom's observation was right on the money. Ed Kemper cut a trail of destruction through Santa Cruz, California, before he finally worked up the nerve to kill the one woman he truly hated. Monte Rissell, who raped and murdered five women as a teenager in Alexandria, Virginia, told us that if he had been allowed to go with his father instead of his mother when their seriously troubled marriage broke up, he thought he'd be a lawyer now rather than a lifer at the Richmond Penitentiary, where we interviewed him.

With Monte Ralf Rissell, we were able to start piecing together more parts of the puzzle. At seven, Monte was the youngest of three children at the time of the divorce, and his mother uprooted them and moved to California, where she remarried and spent much of the time alone with her new husband, leaving the kids with little adult supervision. Monte started getting into trouble early – writing obscene graffiti at school, the drugs, then shooting a cousin with a BB gun after an argument. He claimed that his stepfather had given him the rifle and, after the impulsive shooting, smashed it apart and hit Monte repeatedly with the barrel.

When Monte was twelve, this second marriage broke apart and the family moved back to Virginia. Monte told us he thought he and his sister were responsible. From then on, his crime career escalated: driving without a license, burglary, car theft, then rape.

His transition to murder was very instructive. Still in high school, on probation and receiving psychiatric counseling as a provision of the probation, he receives a letter from his girlfriend. She's a year ahead of him in school and how away at college. The letter told Monte that their relationship was over. He probably gets in his car and drives up to the college where he spots the girl with a new boyfriend.

Rather than do anything overt or take his rage out on the person who caused it, he drives back home to Alexandria, fortifies himself with some beer and marijuana, and spends hours sitting in his car in the parking lot of his apartment complex ruminating.

Around two or three in the morning, he's still there when another car appears, driven by a single woman. On the spur of the moment, Rissell decides to get back what he's just lost. He goes up to the woman's car, pulls a handgun on her, and forces her to go with him to a secluded area near the complex.

Rissell was calm, deliberate, and precise as he recounted his actions to Bob Ressler and me. I'd checked his IQ beforehand, and it was above 120. I can't say I detected a lot of remorse or contrition – except for the rare offenders who turn themselves in or commit suicide, the removes is primarily over getting caught and going to jail. But he didn't try to minimize his crimes and I did feel he was giving us an accurate account. And the behavior he had just describe, and was about to describe, contained several key insights.

First of all, this incident takes place after a triggering event or incident – what we came to call a stressor. And we would see this pattern over and over again. Anything can be a triggering stressor; different things bother each of us. But the two most common ones, not surprisingly, are losing your job and losing your wife or girlfriend. (I use the feminine here because, as I've noted, virtually all of these killers are men, for reasons I'll speculate about later.)

As a result of studying people like Monte Rissell, we came to realize that these stressors are so much a part of the serial murder dynamic that when we see certain circumstances at a crime scene, we feel comfortable predicting exactly what the stressor was in the particular case. I Jud Ray's Alaskan murder case, which I mentioned in Chapter 4, the timing and details of the triple homicide of a woman and her two young daughters led Jud to predict the killer had lost his girlfriend *and* his job. Both of these traumas had taken place. In fact, the girlfriend had dumped the subject for his boss, who had then fired him to get him out of the picture.

So on the night that he sees his girl with a college man, Monte Rissell commits his first murder. This is significant

enough in itself. But exactly how and why it happens tells us even more.

It turns out by happenstance that Rissell's victim is a prostitute, which means two things: she's not going to have the same fear of sex with a stranger that someone outside the profession would; and though scared, she" probably have a pretty good survival instinct. So when he's got her all alone and it's clear he intends to rape her at gunpoint, she tried to diffuse the situation by hiking up her skirt and asking her attacker how he likes it and what position he wants her in.

"She asked which way I wanted I," he told us.

But rather than making him gentler or more sensitive, this behavior on her part only enrages him. "It's like this bitch is trying to control things." She apparently faked two or three orgasms to placate him, but his made things worse. If she could "enjoy" this rape, it reinforced his feeling that women are whores. She became depersonalized, and it was easy to think about killing her.

Yet he did let another victim go when she told him she was caring for her father, who was suffering from cancer. Rissell's brother had had cancer, so he identified with her. She had become personalized to him, just the opposite of this prostitute, or the young nurse Richard Speck had attacked as she lay bound and facedown on the couch.

But this does point out why it is so difficult to give general advice on what to do in a rap situation. Depending on the personality of the rapist and his motivation for the crime, either going along or trying to talk your way out of being assaulted may be the best course of action. Or it may make things worse. Resisting or struggling with the so-called "power reassurance rapist" might stop him in his tracks. Resisting the "anger excitation rapists," unless the victim's strong enough or quick enough to get away from him, could get a victim killed. Trying to make the act seem pleasurable because the rapist is sexually inadequate isn't necessarily the best strategy. These are crimes of anger and hostility and the assertion of power. The sex is only incidental.

After the rape of the woman abducted from the parking lot, as angry as he is, Rissell hasn't yet decided what to do with his victim. But at this point she does what many of us would perceive to be the logical thing: she tries to run away.

This makes him feel even more that she's controlling the situation, not him. As we quoted Rissell in an article on the study for the *American Journal of Psychiatry*: "She took off running down the ravine. That's when I grabbed her. I had her in an armlock. She was bigger than me. I started choking her . . . she stumbled . . . we rolled down the hill and into the water. I banged her head against the side of a rock and held her head underwater."

What we were learning was that the behavior of the victim is equally as important in analyzing the crime as the behavior of the subject. Was this a high- or low-risk victim? What did she say or do, and did that egg the subject on or pull him back? What was their encounter all about?

Rissell's victims of choice were merely close by – in and around his apartment complex. And once he had killed, that taboo was gone. He realized he could do it, enjoy it, and get away with it. If we'd been called into this case and were profiling an UNSUB, we would expect to see some experience in his background – some violent crime short of murder – which, in fact, there was. Quite frankly, what we probably would have gotten wrong, at least initially, was the age. At the time of his first kill, Rissell was barely nineteen. We would have expected a man in his mid- to late twenties.

But Rissell's case demonstrates that age is a relative concept in our work. In 1989, Gregg McCrary from my unit was called into a baffling series of prostitute murders in Rochester, New York. Working closely with Capt. Lynde Johnson and a first-rate police force, Gregg developed a detailed profile and suggested a strategy that ultimately led to the arrest and successful prosecution of Arthur Shawcross. When we reviewed the profile afterward, we found that Gregg had nailed him almost precisely – race, personality, type of job, home life, car, hobbies, familiarity with the area, relationship to the police; virtually everything except the age. Gregg had predicted man in his late twenties to about thirty with some already established comfort level for murder. In fact, Shawcross was forty-five. It turned out he'd been in prison for fifteen years for the murder of two young children (like prostitutes and the elderly, children are vulnerable targets), which had essentially put him on hold. Within months of his parole, he picked up where he'd left off.

Just as Arthur Shawcross was on parole at the time of his murders, so was Monte Rissell. And like Ed Kemper, he was

able to convince a psychiatrist he was making excellent progress while he was actually killing human beings. This is kind of a sick version of the old joke about how many psychiatrists it takes to change a light-bulb – the answer being just one, but only if the light bulb *wants* to change. Psychiatrists and mental health professionals are accustomed to using self-reporting on the part of the subject to track his progress, and this assumes the patient wants to get “well/” It has turned out to be incredibly easy to fool many psychiatrists, and most of the good ones will say that the only fairly reliable predictor of violence is a past history of violence. One of the things I hope we’ve accomplished with the criminal-personality study and our work since then is to make the mental health community aware of the limitations of self-reporting where criminal behavior is concerned. By his very nature, a serial killer or rapist is manipulative, narcissistic, and totally egocentric. He will tell a parole officer or prison psychiatrist whatever he or she wants to hear, whatever it will take to get out of prison or stay on the streets.

As Rissell described his subsequent kills to us, we saw a steady progression. He was annoyed by his second victim’s barraging him with questions: “She wanted to know why I wanted to do this’ why I picked her; didn’t I have a girlfriend; what was my problem; what was I going to do.”

She was driving the car at gunpoint, and like the first, she tried to escape. At that point, he realized he had to kill her, stabbing her repeatedly in the chest.

By the time of the third kill, it was all pretty easy. He’d learned from his previous experience and wouldn’t let this victim talk to him: he had to keep her depersonalized. “I was thinking . . . I’ve killed two. I might as well kill this one, too.”

At this point in the progression he released the woman caring for her father with cancer. But by the final two murders, his intention was well established. He drowned one and stabbed the other – between fifty and a hundred times by his own estimates.

Like virtually all the others, Rissell showed us that the fantasy was in place long before the actual rapes or murders began. We asked him where he’d gotten his ideas. They came from a number of places as it turned out, but one of them, he said, was reading about David Berkowitz.