

[Transcript] Casefile True Crime / 282: Case 239: Peggy Carr

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41-year-old Peggy Carr was employed as a waitress at the Nicholas Family restaurant in South Central Florida.

On October 23, 1988, she was working the Sunday morning shift when she started feeling unwell.

A strong pain seared in the middle of her chest.

At first, Peggy thought she might be having a heart attack.

But one of her regular customers assured her that couldn't be the case.

Peggy's breathing and pulse were both in the normal range, and the bright pink shade of her fingernails indicated she was receiving plenty of oxygen.

As the day wore on, Peggy continued to feel sick.

At lunchtime, her adult daughter Jelena arrived at the restaurant.

The two worked together and Jelena was scheduled to cover the lunch shift.

Jelena noticed something was wrong with her mother almost right away.

Peggy, who rarely complained and was never unwell, told Jelena that her hands were numb and her legs were aching.

Jelena touched her mother's hands.

They were ice cold.

She told Peggy to sit down and rest.

Peggy did so, but the pain continued.

Eventually, she decided to leave work early.

Just a nap at home would cure whatever was ailing her.

After that afternoon, Peggy's husband, Perriellon Carr, better known as Pie, returned home from a hunting trip.

He found Peggy sprawled on the living room sofa.

As she greeted him, she looked sick and her voice sounded weak.

The two had only been married for six months.

It was a remarriage for both of them, the result of a whirlwind courtship.

After the wedding, Peggy moved into Pie's home, a remote property surrounded by orange groves in the Florida town of Alturas.

She brought two of her grown children with her, her eldest Jelena, 17-year-old Dwayne, and Jelena's two-year-old daughter.

Peggy's other son, Alan, was stationed at a naval base in Tennessee.

Two of Pie's children also lived at the home, 18-year-old Tammy and 16-year-old Travis.

It was an adjustment as the large blended family got used to their new living arrangements, but Peggy and Pie did their best to make it work.

When Pie found Peggy sick on the couch, his first instinct was to call his sister, Carolyn, who was a nurse.

Carolyn came over right away, but quickly gave Peggy the all-clear.

All of her vitals seemed fine, although her blood pressure was slightly high.

Peggy's daughter Jelena wasn't so sure.

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When she got home at around nine o'clock that night, she found her mother lying in bed with her eyes tightly closed.
Peggy's skin was deathly white, and her lips were badly chapped.
She was so weak that she couldn't even get up to walk to the bathroom.
In a whisper, Peggy told her daughter,
You don't know how bad it hurts.
Do you hear what I'm saying?
I'm just hurting.
Jelena found her stepfather Pie in the kitchen.
She asked him to take her mother to the hospital.
Pie refused.
He said Peggy didn't want to go to a hospital and insisted she just had a virus.
Jelena pleaded and offered to drive Peggy herself, yet Pie didn't budge.
A little while later, he changed his mind.
He carried Peggy into his car and set out for Bartow Memorial Hospital, which was about 11 miles away.
Jelena followed behind in her own vehicle.
Once they reached the emergency room, a doctor performed a brief examination of Peggy.
Even having her arm touched was excruciating.
In describing her symptoms, Peggy stated,
I feel like I'm on fire.
The doctors were at a loss as to what was wrong.
Tests failed to uncover a diagnosis, prompting one doctor to suggest Peggy's symptoms might be psychosomatic, caused by a mental factor rather than a physical one.
This theory upset Peggy.
Whatever her illness was, she knew it hadn't been caused by stress or her imagination.
Peggy spent three days in hospital, and although no one could figure out what had made her sick, she soon began to improve.
She became well enough to sit up in bed, drink coffee, and even eat by herself.
When she complained about the quality of the hospital's food, her daughter Jelena knew she was getting better.
Peggy's signs of improvement prompted the doctors to send her home.
The next evening, Pie's sister Carolyn brought over fried chicken for the family.
She portioned it out and served it alongside glasses of Coca-Cola.
The next morning, 16-year-old Travis and 17-year-old Dwayne felt sick.
They figured it was likely a hangover, as they'd had a big night out with friends.
But when their feet began to tingle, it became clear they were suffering the same symptoms as Peggy.
Soon, the boys felt a burning sensation inside their bodies.
Peggy's symptoms also started worsening.
At 7.30 the following night, she was let away in an ambulance.
This time, Peggy was taken to Winterhaven Hospital, where she was examined by a neurologist named Dr. T. Richard Hossler.
Dr. Hossler asked Peggy to try to keep her eyes shut.

He then tried to open them.

Peggy couldn't resist, and her eyes opened easily.

This was unusual for a healthy adult.

She was also extremely sensitive to touch, and her mouth was filled with ulcerations.

Peggy told the doctor that her feet felt like they were on fire.

Dr. Hossler believed Peggy could have been poisoned by some kind of heavy metal.

Then he found out that two of the family's children were also starting to exhibit symptoms that strengthened his conviction.

He asked that Travis and Dwayne be brought in for observation as well.

According to Py, the family's property hadn't been sprayed with any insecticides recently, and there was no reason a heavy metal should have been present in their home.

Nonetheless, Dr. Hossler decided to have Peggy tested for lead, arsenic, and mercury poisoning.

These three heavy metals were the most common that people could encounter.

Dr. Hossler also decided to test for a fourth kind of poison, thallium.

Colourless, odourless, and tasteless, thallium was once widely used throughout the United States as a rat poison and pesticide.

But in 1972, the US banned its use due to safety concerns.

Thallium is so highly toxic that mild contact with skin alone can be extremely dangerous.

The fact that thallium was illegal made it rare, and therefore extremely unlikely that Peggy Carr could have encountered it in her home.

Yet, Dr. Hossler was intrigued by Peggy's description of feeling like she was burning to death.

One of his colleagues also noticed that Peggy's hair had started falling out.

Both of these symptoms fit perfectly with thallium poisoning.

Peggy's health deteriorated rapidly.

That evening, she was transferred to the intensive care unit where she lay in bed surrounded by machines.

Tubes were attached to her nose and mouth to enable her to breathe.

Peggy's wrists had been tied down so she couldn't pull the tubes out.

She lost the ability to speak and open her eyes.

But she was still conscious and aware of when she was being spoken to.

Both of Peggy's parents had been deaf and she had learnt sign language as a child.

Now incapacitated in hospital, she was able to use signing as a way to communicate.

Peggy's sister Shirley drove to Florida from her home in Alabama to see Peggy.

When she asked her now unrecognisable sister if she knew who Shirley was, Peggy signed, yes.

Peggy, how are you feeling? Shirley asked.

Peggy signed again.

I hurt.

The results of Peggy's tests came back quickly.

As Dr. Hossler had suspected, she tested positive for thallium.

In fact, the amount of thallium in her system exceeded the amount the lab could measure.

Dwayne and Travis tested positive for thallium too, but at much lower levels.

With the amount of thallium Peggy had in her body, doctors knew it would be impossible for her to recover.

The thallium was causing her nerves to waste away and die.

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Peggy's symptoms would soon progress to paralysis, coma and death.

In 1988, it was almost unheard of for someone to experience thallium poisoning in the United States. It simply wasn't a heavy metal that people could encounter in their day-to-day lives.

Dr. Hossler was certain that Peggy's poisoning wasn't a tragic accident.

It must be a deliberate and malicious act.

The doctor broke the news to Peggy's husband, Pye, who in turn told Peggy.

As she lay in a hospital bed with her eyes closed and machines breathing for her, Pye said, Peggy, do you know why you're here?

No, Peggy signed in reply.

Peggy, you've been poisoned, Pye told her.

All Peggy could do in response was sign the same word over and over.

Why? Why? Why?

Dr. Hossler informed Pye that he believed someone had tried to poison his family and that, quote, somehow you were spared.

Pye was silent for a moment. He then remarked,

I don't think anyone dislikes us enough to do that.

Dwayne and Travis continued to get sicker, while Peggy became completely unresponsive.

Three days after Peggy arrived at Winterhaven Hospital,

police attempted to interview her to see if she knew who might want to harm her.

But she was unable to do anything except squeeze her sister's hand.

The thallium eventually caused Peggy's muscles to become entirely paralyzed.

She lost the ability to close her eyes and simply stared up blankly.

Unable to blink, it was inevitable that ulcers would form on her corneas.

The doctors had to sew her eyes shut to protect them.

Within weeks, Peggy fell into a coma.

Weeks turned into months.

While Dwayne and Travis eventually made full recoveries,

Peggy's family came to accept that she would never get better.

They continued to visit and talk to her all the time.

On Friday, March 3, 1989, about four and a half months after Peggy first became sick, the decision was made to switch off her life support system.

Peggy's two eldest children, Jelena and Alan, had their own suspicions as to who would want to kill their mother.

When Peggy remarried, her children were initially pleased for her.

They felt she deserved some joy after her other relationships hadn't worked out and Pie seemed to make her happy.

But as the months went by, Peggy experienced some niggling doubts.

The couple's children had initially gotten along well,

but they soon started to fight with each other.

Pie was employed at a phosphate mine and worked incredibly long hours.

Peggy began to suspect that something else was going on.

One night, when Pie said he had to work late, Peggy and Jelena decided to investigate.

They got into Jelena's car and drove out to the mine.

Upon their arrival, there were only two cars in the parking lot.

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One was Pie's, the other belonged to a former girlfriend of his.
Pie was having an affair.
Peggy left the family home with her children and granddaughter.
She left a note for Pie that read,
I do love you very, very much.
Right now, I'm at the point that I don't really know how you feel.
I told you I could handle anything as long as I had you.
Now, I'm not sure.
I'm going to give you some time to think about us.
I can't live like we have been.
No respect from the kids, not talking, not caring.
I love you and want to be your wife.
Key word is wife.
I don't know if this is right or not, what I'm doing,
but I don't know what else to do.
I can't imagine living without you, but I can if you don't want me.
There's no question in my mind whether or not I want you and love you.
Is there a question in your mind?
I'll be okay if anyone is interested.
I love you with all my heart.

Peggy

A few days later on Thursday, October 20, the couple reconciled and Peggy moved back home.
That same day, Pie left for a previously scheduled hunting trip which would keep him away all weekend.
When he returned on Sunday, October 23, Peggy was sick on the couch. Jelena had been disturbed by Pie's initial reluctance to take her mother to the hospital. She immediately began to wonder if he was behind Peggy's illness. Jelena confided in a co-worker that she thought Pie and his sister Carolyn were poisoning her mother.
Alan soon came to share his sister's suspicions.
The siblings weren't alone.
Larry Doubly, who was Peggy's ex-husband and Dwayne's father, was spending time at the hospital with his sick son.
He overheard Pie being questioned about the poisoning by a police officer. Afterwards, he noticed that Pie was trembling all over.
On another occasion, Larry Doubly was outside the hospital room where both teenage boys were staying when he heard a commotion from inside. He rushed in and saw Pie and Carolyn standing there as Pie's son Travis screamed.
Larry, help me, they're trying to kill me.
Carolyn reassured him that they weren't trying to harm him.
But Larry had noticed how Carolyn brought food to the hospital for the teens and wondered about her motives.

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He claimed that Peggy had told him Pie had taken out life insurance policies for her and the boys.

80,000 for Peggy and 60,000 for each boy.

Larry Doubly mentioned another troubling story.

One day, several family members were gathered around discussing thallium.

One person speculated that it may have come from the phosphate mines.

Pie's ex-wife, who was present, faced Pie and said,

You've been working at Silver City Mines all these years.

They've got two chemist labs out there.

Do you all have any of that shit out there?

Do you know anything about this?

According to Larry, Pie told his ex-wife,

You shut your goddamn mouth.

Other people, including Dr. Hossler and the family's minister, told investigators that they didn't find Pie's car suspicious at all.

They saw how Pie spent weeks by Peggy's side,

talking to her constantly, even when she was unresponsive.

The entire car household was tested for thallium.

Everyone except Pie's daughter Tammy had traces of the heavy metal in their system.

Even Pie had enough in his body to make a smaller person unwell.

But due to his tall stature and larger frame,

Pie only experienced some slight aches and pains.

The fact that Pie had also absorbed thallium made detectives less inclined to suspect him.

The fastest way they could get to the bottom of the crime

was to figure out how and where the family had been exposed to thallium.

This would also help calm the residents of ordinarily sleepy Alturas, who were panicking after learning about the poisoning.

Just in case the exposure had been accidental,

environmental officials started testing the fields,

orange groves and water wells surrounding the car property.

These tests came up negative for thallium.

Investigators weren't surprised as the car's nearest neighbors drank from the same well as them and hadn't been sick at all.

Dwayne and Travis reported having seen a tractor spraying pesticides in the area.

It was tracked down and ruled out as well.

Pie's car's workplace was searched and a tin of rat poison was recovered.

It tested negative for thallium.

Detectives turned their attention to the car's home.

They performed multiple sweeps of the house,

carding off item after item to be sent off to a laboratory for testing.

Nothing resulted.

Then, during a final inspection of the house in November 1988,

one detective noticed some broken glass on the kitchen floor.

Kneeling down, he looked beneath a nearby counter.

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There was a rubbish bin underneath and behind that was a carton filled with glass bottles of Coca-Cola.

There were eight 16 ounce bottles in total.

Three of them were empty while four were full and unopened.

The final bottle had a broken neck, which was presumably where the broken glass had come from.

The Coke bottles were tested by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services.

Their laboratories found between half a gram and one gram of thallium in each of the full bottles. One gram was enough to kill an adult and a less was required to kill a child.

The empty bottles all had thallium residue at the base.

Six years earlier in 1982, seven people died in the Chicago metropolitan area after taking Tylenol capsules that had been laced with potassium cyanide and then sold on pharmacy shelves.

As covered in episode 118 of case file, the case became known as the Chicago Tylenol murders. The story made national headlines and had huge ripple effects throughout the U.S.

Investigators on the Peggy Car Case had to consider whether they were dealing with a similar crime. There were no obvious signs that the Coke bottles had been tampered with. There were no fingerprints, nor did the bottle caps have any scratches on them. In the full bottles, the liquid appeared to be the same color and consistency as a regular bottle of Coke.

Although there were no reports of anyone else suffering from thallium poisoning, investigators visited the nearest Coca-Cola bottling plant in Tampa, Florida.

After inspecting the way the plant's machinery operated and how the bottles were distributed, they concluded that it would have been impossible for anyone to place eight poisoned bottles on the assembly line and have them put in the same carton.

It appeared that the car family had been deliberately targeted with a carton that was tampered with after being bought at a store.

No one in the family knew where the bottles had come from.

They just appeared under the counter one day.

Although the family usually purchased Pepsi brand Coke instead of Coke, nobody thought anything of it. Pye recalled that when Peggy had first become sick, he'd made himself a whiskey and Coke from one of the bottles.

Pye's sister Caroline said she had poured a glass of Coke for Peggy after she returned from her first hospital visit.

Believing Peggy had some kind of virus, Caroline encouraged her to keep her fluids up. But all this had done was increase the levels of thallium in Peggy's body.

Caroline had also given Dwayne and Travis Cokes when they complained of feeling sick.

The bottles were sent to FBI experts. When they examined the bottle caps under

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an extremely powerful microscope, they detected tiny scratch marks on a diagonal angle. This indicated that someone had removed the caps with something like a screwdriver or can opener, put the thallium inside, then re-fastened the caps. Although the liquid in the full bottles looked like regular Coca-Cola, testing revealed it had lost some of its carbonation. Whoever had poisoned the bottles knew exactly what they were doing. There was no sign of tampering that would be visible to the human eye. It also would have taken some work for them to figure out the correct ratio of thallium to use to ensure the liquid didn't change color or overflow from the bottle.

While Peggy's two oldest children still suspected Pie and Caroline, detectives were less sure. They hadn't found any evidence of the supposed life insurance policies Pie had taken out on his wife, son and stepson. Nor did they find Pie or Caroline at all suspicious. They also found it extremely unlikely that Pie would have put his entire family at risk if he was looking to end his relationship with his new wife. Pie's daughter Tammy was the only member of the family who didn't test positive for traces of thallium. This led to her being questioned as a possible suspect as well. She told investigators that she only drank diet sodas which was why she hadn't consumed any of the coke. Detectives ruled out all of the family members as possible suspects. It seemed increasingly likely that someone outside of the household was responsible. Whoever it was had tampered with the bottles and somehow snuck them into the house when no one was home. Pie car found it hard to believe that anyone would want to harm his family in such a way. As far as he knew, they didn't have any enemies. But Peggy's sister surely told investigators something that immediately caught their attention.

Four months before the poisonings in June 1988, the car family had received a threatening letter. When Pie was asked about the letter, he said he'd forgotten all about it. However, at the detective's request, he managed to locate it. The envelope had been addressed to Pie car. Below was the family's address and inside was a yellow post-it note with a typed message.

You and all your so-called family have two weeks to move out of Florida forever or else you all die. This is no joke.

The family had all gathered together to study the note. The writer had misspelled Pie's first name as P-I-E instead of P-Y-E. Given that everyone who knew him knew the correct spelling, Pie and Peggy's children dismissed the letter as a sick joke. But Peggy took it seriously. She told her kids to be extra careful, saying, I want you to stay close to the house.

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Be nice to people. This could be real.

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In the spring of 1989 33-year-old Sherry Gwyn came across a newspaper advertisement for an intriguing event. It was a murder mystery weekend taking place at a hotel in Winterhaven. The event was being hosted by a couple who were leaders in the Polk County chapter of Mensa, an organization for people who possess an IQ in the top two percent of the population. Sherry typed a letter to one of the event's hosts whose name was George Trepal.

Dear George, this letter is to request further information on the upcoming Mensa murder weekend. As I am considering moving my home to this quiescent county, I am compelled to find some type of stimulating entertainment. Although I am acquainted with the renowned Mensa organization, never before have I been involved in a lifestyle that would permit such endeavors.

My background consists of years of dedicated service to my perfidious mate who took his thriving career and moved upwards and onwards alone. A weekend filled with intrigue and intellect could be just what the doctor ordered.

Sincerely, Sharon Sherry Gwyn.

Shortly after sending the letter, Sherry received a registration form and a brochure about the event in the mail. On Friday, April 14, she arrived at the Winterhaven Holiday Inn to attend the murder mystery weekend.

At the registration desk, she met 39-year-old George Trepal, a small man with thinning hair and thick glasses.

He handed Sherry a pamphlet of information about the weekend.

For the murder mystery game, guests were assigned to different roles such as bystander, victim or murderer. At some point, the victims would pretend to be killed. Other attendees would have to observe the events that followed closely, looking for clues as to who the murderers were. Sherry Gwyn was given the role of bystander.

Over the course of the weekend, Sherry struck up a couple of conversations with the George Trepal. George spent his time organizing men's get-togethers, programming computers and working as a freelance technical writer. His wife and co-host, Diana, worked as a doctor. Sherry learned that the couple were thinking about selling their home. Her interest immediately peaked.

Sherry was in the process of divorcing her lawyer husband and would be able to buy a new place to live as part of the settlement.

George invited Sherry to come over and look at the house anytime that suited.

A few days later, Sherry headed out to George Trepal's property for a tour.

George lived in an isolated area of Alturus amongst some orange groves.

The house was decorated with 1970s decor, including yellow curtains and orange cabinets. It had a library crammed with books on scientific subjects. The main bedroom was also full of books

which were mostly detective novels by authors such as Agatha Christie. Another room, which George described as his junk room, was full of crystals, rocks and minerals. Visible through the junk room window was a small brownish yellow coloured building. George explained it was a garage his neighbours had converted into an apartment. George had reported them to the local building board for doing so as they hadn't obtained a proper permit. The incident had caused some bad blood between George and his neighbours who lived on the only other property in the immediate vicinity. George hadn't liked them, especially because one of them had constantly tried to sell him things like a pickup truck. George said the neighbours had moved out and were possibly trying to sell the property for way over its value. Finally, George took Sherry through his garage workshop. Inside were lots of tools and jugs of what appeared to be chemicals. Sherry Gwynne decided against buying the house, telling George it was too big for her. But she stayed in touch with George and the two built a friendship over the following months. They chatted on the phone and met up in person from time to time. George was sympathetic about Sherry's difficult divorce and her acrimonious relationship with her ex-husband, Richard. The fact that Richard was a lawyer didn't endear him to George, who hated lawyers. George offered ideas as to how Sherry could rid herself of Richard by getting him arrested. He suggested she write a letter accusing Richard of molesting a child. Another idea was to send a threatening note to then-president George Bush and sign it with Richard's name. He joked that Sherry should send him a poisoned flower delivery. In November of 1989, George Trepal and his wife Diana left their home in Alturas and moved nearly 40 miles southeast to the city of Sebring, Florida. With their out-tourist house now empty, George told Sherry she was welcome to move in. Sherry had been living in a condominium but wanted somewhere with more space. She agreed to rent a George and Diana's property temporarily. Sherry moved in on Tuesday, December 12, 1989. She didn't see George for over a month. Then, on Thursday, January 25, 1990, George received an urgent-sounding phone call from Sherry. She was in Sebring and needed to talk to him about something. Sherry asked George to meet her at a local McDonald's. A short time later, the pair sat down at an outdoor table. Sherry didn't waste any time in getting to the point. She explained that shortly after moving into George's home, she'd received a visit from a local sheriff's deputy who was living next door. Sherry's voice shook as she said,

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I think you neglected to tell me that something had happened in the neighborhood. George sounded calm and unbothered as he replied, oh yeah, somebody got poisoned next door.

George Trepal's al-Tourist property bordered the house where Pi and Peggy Ka had lived. It had been 15 months since Peggy Ka's poisoning and 10 months since her death.

Pi Ka and the rest of the family had moved out of the house within two months of Peggy first falling ill. George Trepal had never mentioned the unsolved murder to Sherry Gwynn in all the time they'd been friends. This was odd given his love for murder mysteries and detective novels indicated he had a strong interest in crime.

Sherry was struck by the matter-of-fact tone in which George discussed Peggy's poisoning. She told him, that might not be a lot to you but it's a lot to me.

George laughed and apologized.

Sherry asked if the poisoning was what prompted George and Diana to leave the neighborhood and if they were scared.

No, apparently it was some sort of personal vendetta, George said. I mean, it's not like they're running around poisoning everybody.

Sherry explained that some detectives had dropped by to speak with her. They'd asked about George and his whereabouts.

Sherry handed the detective's business cards over to George.

He suddenly felt quiet. He told Sherry that he and Diana had already spoken to the investigators twice.

He couldn't understand why they would be looking for him now or why they would be talking to Sherry about it.

I hope I'm not a prime suspect, George added.

That could be messy.

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George Cripal and his wife Diana had problems with the car family that dated back years, long before Peggy Carr ever lived on the property.

The two households had never been friendly. George and Diana prided themselves on their more intellectual pursuits, while Pi and his family were more salt-of-the-earth types. Back around 1984, when Pi still lived with his ex-wife, he was given a Rhodesian ridgeback dog.

The dog sometimes jumped the property's fence and chased after George's cats. Pi had seen George throwing sticks at the dog in response.

One day, the young healthy dog suddenly started losing weight and died.

Pi had always suspected it had been poisoned but didn't know who would do such a thing.

After Pi divorced his wife and married Peggy, things only got worse between the neighbors. George and Diana thought the car property was too noisy. In retaliation, George disconnected the water supply for the well that the cars used.

George was also unhappy about the way Peggy and Pi's teenage sons rode their motorcycles through the area, sometimes onto his property. There was a lake beside George's house and he'd added some sand to the area to create a little beach.

Pi's son Travis had once ridden his motorbike on the beach, messing up the sand. An upset George had reported the incident to Pi, who replied, kids will be kids.

In October 1988, George and Diana made several complaints about how loud the car's sons were playing their radio when hanging out in the garage.

While Pi was away on his hunting trip, Diana came over to complain and a verbal altercation broke out between her and Peggy.

The next day, Peggy fell ill from the poisoning that eventually ended her life.

When the detectives investigating Peggy's homicide learned that a threatening letter had been sent to the family months before Peggy's death, warning them to, quote, move out of Florida or else you all die, they initially wondered whether Pi car himself could have written it.

It seemed unbelievable that he'd forgotten to mention it.

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They asked Pi if he knew of anyone who would want to harm his family. Pi drew a blank. The only people he'd had any trouble with were their neighbors, George Trepal and his wife, Diana.

This was a major breakthrough for detectives.

They were fairly confident that the car family had been targeted by an outsider instead of from within. But the remote location of their property meant it would have been incredibly difficult for someone to sneak in a poisoned carton of Coca-Cola without being seen.

Someone was almost always at home and they would have noticed if any strange cars were in the area. Whoever had committed the crime had to have struck when the house was empty. The only house with a view of the car residence was George Trepal's.

In the past, Pi's teenage daughter Tammy had received obscene phone calls when she was home alone. The caller, who sounded like an educated white male, often called right after Tammy's mother left the house.

He would describe exactly what Tammy was wearing.

Two days before Peggy got sick, there had been a window of time when no one was home. That same day, Dwayne and Travis had gone into the kitchen to get a Coke from an 8-pack they'd noticed under a counter earlier. But it wasn't there. The teenagers searched several rooms but couldn't find it.

The carton mysteriously reappeared beneath the counter a short time later.

The back door to the car property didn't always latch properly and could sometimes be opened when it appeared to be locked.

Around the time Peggy and the two teenagers had been admitted to hospital, Pi found the back door open.

A profile of Peggy's poisoner had been built by an agent from the FBI's Behavioral Sciences Unit. The agent said that most people who choose poison as their murder weapon were intelligent individuals who liked to solve problems without direct confrontation.

The agent also believed that the culprit would be an educated white man in his mid-thirties. He would see himself as intellectually superior to others. George Treepow fit the profile almost to a T.

Some digging revealed that George had a criminal record.

In September 1975, he was arrested by a federal agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration. He had been operating a large illegal methamphetamine lab in North Carolina and was involved in manufacturing the drug himself. The agent described to George Treepow as quote, probably the smartest chemist that I've ever known.

To make the methamphetamine, George used a chemical known as P2P.

Although this could be bought legally, federal drug agents kept records of people who purchased it. To get around to this problem,

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George sometimes brewed his own P2P. Homemade P2P was sometimes made using the heavy metal thallium.

After being convicted of running an illicit drug lab, George Treepow was sentenced to three years in federal prison.

He was a model inmate and prison officials soon recommended him for parole. It was the night.

George found himself frustrated by his fellow inmates.

In particular, he hated how loudly some of them played their radios.

He even sent a lengthy memo to prison officials complaining about the matter.

Not long after it was determined that Peggy Carr had been poisoned, detectives visited George Treepow at home.

George sounded slightly nervous and hesitant and didn't express any sorrow for what the cars were going through. He said he didn't know his neighbors well but they would wave and say hello when they saw each other.

They're not really our kind of people, George added.

When asked if he had any problems with Pie Carr and his family,

George became more animated. He complained that Pie had always tried to sell him things like a barbecue pit made from a 50-gallon drum.

The detectives asked to George what he knew about thallium.

He said he knew nothing at all except what he'd heard on news reports about the case.

Why would somebody want to poison the Carr family, one of the detectives asked.

It was the standard question they'd been asking everyone they spoke to in relation to the case. The details of the threatening letter had never been made public. Most people said they had no idea why or suggested the culprit must have hated the family.

But George's answer was unique.

He nodded his head towards the Carr property and said to get them to move like they did.

George Treepow was becoming an increasingly likely suspect but with no physical evidence linking him to the case it was decided that he should be put under surveillance.

Detectives recruited a colleague at the Polk County Sheriff's Office to help with the task. Susan Gorek was 33 years old and had previously worked undercover on a number of drug-related cases.

The investigation into George Treepow was dubbed Operation Pale Horse, a reference to an Agatha Christie novel in which the killer murders his victims with thallium.

Agent Gorek spent several weeks reading up on George Treepow and observing him as he went about his daily business.

She and a colleague also searched a dumpster outside of his office looking for incriminating evidence, ideally something linking him to a thallium supplier. But nothing was found.

After Peggy Carr died, detectives decided they needed to try a different

approach. They would assign an undercover agent to get close to George in the hopes he might confide his secrets. They thought a woman would be best as George would view her as non-threatening. Susan Gorek was given the task. She constructed her alter ego, a divorcee named Sherry Gwynn. Knowing that George Trepower hated lawyers, Agent Gorek decided her fictional ex-husband would be an abrasive attorney. She would flatter George and earn his sympathy by discussing her marital problems with him. A Mensa murder mystery weekend that George was hosting was Agent Gorek's inn and she sent him a letter posing as Sherry asking to attend. Over the course of that weekend, Agent Gorek looked for clues and took numerous photographs. She took particular note of a pamphlet George had written up for the weekend which was titled Voodoo for Fun and Prophet. The title was a nod to the theme of the murder mystery which centered about Voodoo practitioners. An excerpt of the pamphlet read, Few voodooists believe they can be killed by psychic means but no one doubts that he can be poisoned. When a death threat appears on the doorstep, prudent people throw out all their food and watch what they eat. Hardly anyone dies from magic. Most items on the doorstep are just the neighbor's way of saying I don't like you, move or else. To investigators, this appeared to be a not-so-subtle reference to the poisoned Coca-Cola bottles that appeared at the car home. Over the course of eight months, Agent Gorek built a friendship with the George. She complained to him about her fictional ex-husband hoping it might coax a confession out of him. The undercover operation was a long, slow process. Eventually, the higher-ups began complaining about the lack of results. Then, a breakthrough finally occurred when George and his wife moved to Sebring in November 1989. Agent Gorek would ask to rent their home in Alturas, giving her unfettered access to the property. Agent Gorek moved into George Tree Powell's home on Tuesday December 12, 1989. That evening, crime scene technicians descended on the property. They rubbed cotton balls dipped in nitric acid along surfaces throughout the house, looking for traces of thallium. Sinks, drains and the inside of cabinets were all swabbed. The garage workshop was also searched. George hadn't bothered to clear it out when he moved. Empty spray paint cans, scraps of wood and garden supplies were littered everywhere. The floor was covered with sawdust, nails and broken glass. There were also jugs filled with various liquids. A couple of small bottles were found on George's workbench. One was made of brown glass and had a white residue inside.

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These were packaged up to be examined at an FBI lab.

While investigators were waiting for the results to come back, Agent Gorek met with George, as Sherry, to tell him that she knew about the poisoning next door. She hoped that he might be shocked into giving something away. Although George seemed rattled, he didn't say anything incriminating.

In March 1990, one year after Peggy Carr's death, the results from the property search came back.

The brown bottle found in the garage workshop had tested positive thallium.

At 8am on Saturday, April 7, 1990, Agent Gorek dialed George Trepal's home number in Sebring from a mobile phone.

When George came to the phone, Agent Gorek said in a shaky voice, Hi George, it's Sherry. Those two investigators came to my house again this morning. They were asking about you again, something about chemicals. I don't know what they're talking about.

Do you?

George told Agent Gorek to calm down as she grew increasingly distraught.

The two chatted for a while, then Agent Gorek heard a disturbance on George's end. In a calm tone, George suddenly said,

Sherry, by coincidence, the police are here. You'll have to call back Monday.

While Agent Gorek had been talking to George, investigators had been making their way to his home armed with a warrant for his arrest.

George's wife Diana tried to refuse their entry and had to be pulled from the doorway to the front yard. Diana yelled and swore at the police, but George seemed relaxed as he met them at the top of the stairs, wearing only a pair of women's bikini briefs.

He got dressed and was then placed under arrest for the murder of Peggy Carr.

Meanwhile, investigators carried out a search of George's sebring residence.

Amongst his belongings, they found a loose-leaf binder filled with pages taken from scientific textbooks. George had written a title on the front,

General Poisoning Guides.

Inside, the binder featured information for law enforcement on identifying poisoning cases. Another book titled Poison Detection in Human Organs had a detailed paragraph on thallium.

A large amount of bondage equipment and toys were found in a closet.

In another room, a secret compartment behind a pegboard lined with tools revealed a tiny, sound-proofed room. It had black-paneled walls and no windows.

On the floor was a wooden platform the size of a bed

with manacles attached. It looked as though the room had only recently been

built and testing revealed nothing untoward, such as blood or other bodily fluids.

But it looked to detectives as though George had been making a torture chamber with the space to tie someone up.

News of George Tree Powell's arrest came as a shock to his fellow men's

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members. They told the media they couldn't believe that such a great guy would be capable of murder. To them, George was a friendly man who rescued stray cats. Peggy Carr's children were also in disbelief that their eccentric former neighbour could do such a thing, especially over something as minor as loud music. George Tree Powell pleaded not guilty and his trial began in January 1991. FBI scientists testified about the way Peggy had been poisoned and the bottles with traces of thallium found in George's home. Agent Susan Gorak was the state's star witness. The day after she testified about her undercover work on the case, George's wife Diana approached the agent outside the courtroom and screamed, I hope you know just what a bitch you are. George Tree Powell's defense team argued that the evidence against their client was entirely circumstantial. They pointed to other possible suspects whom they felt investigators hadn't considered, such as George's wife Diana. They also queried why detectives had been so quick to rule out Peggy Carr's husband, given that the couple had been having marital problems. They cited a Jack Daniels bottle that was found in the car's shed and was filled with some sort of pesticide. Health officials had never tested the pesticide, so couldn't say whether or not it had thallium in it. A search of the car's garage apartment had also revealed a trace of thallium beneath the sink. However, the state pointed out that this trace had been so minuscule that a second test of the sink found no thallium at all. It was possible the first test had been a false reading. The trial ran for four weeks. The jury ultimately found George Tree Powell guilty of 15 charges, including one count of first-degree murder and six counts of attempted first-degree murder. At the jury's recommendation, George was sentenced to death by lethal injection. 32 years later, George Tree Powell remains on death row. He is now 74 years old and maintains his innocence. All of his appeals have been unsuccessful. To this day, some people believe that George Tree Powell is innocent. His supporters point to the circumstantial nature of the case against him and maintain that detectives had tunnel vision from the start. They describe George as a gentle man they've never known to be violent. But investigators, including Agent Susan Gorak, who spent a year getting to know George Tree Powell, have no doubt that the man dubbed the Mensa murderer is guilty. In 1995, Agent Gorak co-wrote a book about the case with the journalist Jeffrey Good. Titled Poison Mind, the book details Agent Gorak's undercover work as Sherry Gwynn

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and examines the impact that the case had on Peggy Carr's family. Peggy's children drifted away from their stepfather Pie Carr and his kids. They all have mixed feelings about George Tree Powell's death sentence. Pie Carr told the Ledger newspaper that he's still waiting for the day when he can see the death sentence carried out.

Quote, I still want to be there when he's executed but I don't have anything to say to him. I don't think I could control myself if I was to talk to him.

Two of Peggy's children, Dwayne and Jelena, say they have forgiven George Tree Powell and don't believe he should be executed.

But Peggy's son Alan disagrees. He believes that George losing his life is the consequence he must suffer for his actions.

Alan, Jelena and Dwayne have all found their own ways to keep their mother's memory alive. Dwayne had to battle with physical trauma as well as emotional pain. The poisoning that took his mother's life also led to Dwayne losing half his body weight and spending three months in hospital. He had to use a wheelchair until he could walk again. Although he eventually made a full recovery he struggled in the aftermath. While going through some difficulties he found strength in writing a letter to Peggy.

Today he wishes his mother was still alive so she could meet his wife and see how he's turned his life around.

Alan thinks of Peggy anytime he sees a waitress whose apron pockets jingle with the sound of coins. Whenever Jelena wants to connect with her mother she says aloud,

Mama, I love you.
you