

**[Transcript] Casefile True Crime / 305: Case 261: Shari Smith & Debra May Helmick (Part 1)**

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Music

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Music

On the afternoon of Friday, May 31, 1985, Bob Smith sat in his home office.  
The father of three ran a business selling electronic scoreboards and signs,  
a job that provided the flexibility to work from home.  
The arrangement was particularly welcome on this unseasonably hot day  
as it allowed Bob to relax by the pool with his wife before sitting down to do some work.  
At around 3.30pm, Bob looked out the window.  
His office was on the second floor of his family's South Carolina home  
with the views over the expansive front yard of their large rural property.  
At the end of the 750-foot-long driveway, Bob saw the familiar side of his daughter's blue Chevy Chevette hatchback.  
The car belonged to 17-year-old Sharon Faye Smith or Shari as she preferred to be called.  
Shari was returning home from a pool party at the home of a classmate.  
As was her habit, she stopped at the end of the driveway to check the mailbox before heading down to the house.  
Bob got back to work, but after five minutes or so, the house was noticeably quiet.  
Shari usually burst in eager to say hello to her parents and tell them about her day.  
Bob looked outside and noticed that Shari's Chevette was still idling at the end of the driveway.  
He wondered if she had received a letter and was reading it in her car.  
Minutes passed and Shari's car didn't budge.  
Bob got a bad feeling.  
Shari had a rare disease called diabetes insipidus, commonly known as water diabetes.  
The condition was characterized by a hormone malfunction that prevented Shari's kidneys from retaining water,  
resulting in extreme thirst and frequent urination.  
Without her medication or large quantities of water, Shari was under the constant threat of severe and even fatal dehydration.  
Therefore, she never went anywhere without her medication.  
Bob considered whether Shari could have ducked behind a nearby bush to urinate.  
The Smith's driveway jutted off Platt Springs Road, a long stretch roughly 10 miles outside the town

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of Lexington.

It was a quiet spot surrounded by woodland and Shari could have easily relieved herself without anyone noticing.

Worst case scenario, she might have become dehydrated and disorientated or maybe even lost consciousness.

Not wanting to take any chances, Bob jumped into his own car and quickly drove to the end of the driveway.

The engine of Shari's car was still running.

The driver's side door was open and mail was scattered on the ground.

Bob got out of his car and peered inside of Shari's chivette.

The keys were still in the ignition and the damp towel she'd taken to the pool party lay across the driver's seat.

Beside it, on the passenger seat, sat Shari's handbag.

Her medication and wallet were inside.

The sandals she'd been wearing that day were sitting on the floor.

Bare footprints led from the car to the mailbox but they stopped there.

Shari herself was nowhere to be seen.

Officers from the Lexington County Sheriff's Department were called and quickly arrived on the scene.

Bob Smith and his wife Hilda assured the police that Shari had no reason to run off.

She was in the prime of her life, set to graduate from high school with honors in just a few days.

Shari was a talented singer and she'd been given the honor of singing the national anthem at the school's graduation ceremony.

She'd been looking forward to it immensely.

A born performer, Shari had been accepted to study music at Columbia College in South Carolina later that year.

In the meantime, she and her graduating classmates would be celebrating the end of their schooling with the crews to the Bahamas.

For her parents, the only explanation for Shari's disappearance was that something terrible had happened.

Shari was particularly close to her older sister, 21-year-old Dawn, who was already living away from home while studying.

The siblings shared a love for singing and often performed gospel favorites around Lexington.

Collectively known as the Smith Sisters, they aimed to carve a career for themselves in the Christian music industry.

As soon as Shari disappeared, an officer was summoned to collect Dawn from the nearby city of Charlotte and drive her back to Lexington.

Dawn admitted to police that her father was strict and that this could sometimes be a source of angst for Shari.

Shari had occasionally expressed a desire to go stay with Dawn, but never under any circumstances did Dawn think her little sister would take off on her own.

There's was a close-knit family and although Shari craved a bit more freedom, she knew her parents always had her best interest at heart.

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Even on the unlikely chance that Shari could have run away, she wouldn't leave her life-saving medication behind.

Police didn't believe the Smiths had anything to hide and they wasted no time in launching a full-scale missing persons investigation.

Within hours, hundreds of locals braved the sweltering heat to traverse the rugged terrain surrounding the Smith's Tanaka property.

Police looked for tire tracks, shoe prints or anything else that could provide a clue as to Shari's whereabouts.

They found nothing.

Had Shari become disorientated due to her medical condition, they didn't think she would have wandered far.

A member of the search party was checking Platt Springs Road about half a mile from the Smith's home when they found a red bandana.

It was believed to belong to Shari.

Police wondered whether she could have intentionally left it behind as some sort of clue.

As the hours passed with no sign of the teenager, police became steadfastly convinced that Shari's disappearance wasn't the result of her diabetes.

Someone had taken her against her will.

The last person to see Shari was her boyfriend, Richard Lawson.

The two had spent the morning in downtown Lexington organising travellers checks for Shari's upcoming cruise.

Once they were done, Shari left her chevette in the shopping centre car park and drove in Richard's car to their friend's pool party.

The couple spent a few hours there before Shari called her parents at around 2.30pm to say she was about to head home.

Shari and her younger brother, 15-year-old Robert, were expected to check in with their parents every now and then to keep them in the loop of their plans.

Police cast a suspicious eye on Richard Lawson, but Shari's family didn't think there was any chance he would cause her any harm.

Shari adored Richard. He was an upstanding young man and the two were head over heels in love. They'd both been accepted to Columbia College and were excited to be starting the next chapter of their lives together.

Regardless, police questioned Richard.

He said that after leaving the pool party, he dropped Shari back to her car in downtown Lexington. The two sat in her car talking for about 15 minutes.

After that, Richard said he kissed Shari goodbye and got back into his own car.

They shared the same route home, so Richard trailed behind Shari for a while before turning off in the direction of his own home.

According to Richard, he went straight home and didn't leave the house thereafter.

His alibi checked out.

This put Shari arriving home alone at around 3.30pm.

Some passers-by had seen her standing at her mailbox about to peer inside.

They hadn't noticed anything odd or suspicious, but they did recall seeing an unusual vehicle in the

neighbourhood around this time.

The car was described as a late model Oldsmobile or Pontiac in a cranberry colour.

One witness recalled glancing in their rearview mirror and seeing the vehicle stop in the Smith's driveway.

They caught a glimpse of the driver, describing him as a male aged in his 30s.

When they drove past again about 10 minutes later, Shari's car was still there, but Shari herself wasn't.

Given that the Smith's mail was scattered on the ground, police theorised that Shari's abductor had accosted her at the mailbox shortly after Bob Smith looked away from the window of his home office. The fact that Bob hadn't witnessed the incident was sheer bad luck.

By all accounts, Shari Smith was a popular, well-liked and vibrant young woman.

She was actively involved in her school community and had been recently voted wittiest girl by her senior class.

As a devoted member of Lexington's First Baptist Church, she took her faith very seriously and wasn't involved in drugs or any nefarious behaviour.

But to police, this didn't seem like an opportunistic attack.

If Shari hadn't been targeted by a known enemy, police speculated whether someone could have followed her home.

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed Shari was described as strikingly attractive.

Someone could have noticed her either before or after the pool party and been captivated by her physical appearance enough to covertly watch and trail her vehicle.

Or perhaps they'd been stalking Shari for a while.

Shari worked part-time at a local flea market.

Police learned that just two weeks prior, a male customer had been kicked out of the market for harassing Shari and other young women.

The Smiths were an influential family in Lexington.

Shari's father, Bob, volunteered as a chaplain for the sheriff's department as well as the county jail and youth correctional facilities.

He and his wife Hilda often sang hymns to those incarcerated, and they were sometimes joined by Shari and Dawn.

Police considered the possibility that a former inmate could have developed an obsession with Shari and tracked her down upon their release.

Alternatively, what if an inmate had it out for Bob Smith and targeted Shari as part of some deranged revenge plot?

Inquiries were made into former inmates who had crossed paths with Bob or Shari Smith, but there was no evidence to implicate any of them in the kidnapping.

With no obvious suspects emerging, police considered whether Shari's abduction could have been financially motivated.

The Smiths weren't particularly wealthy, but the income they earned through Bob's electronic sales and Hilda's part-time work as a substitute teacher afforded them a comfortable lifestyle with an impressively large house.

Although the family seemed like an unlikely choice to target, police had to consider what if Shari had been kidnapped for ransom?

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Later that night, as the search for Shari continued, the Smiths' home phone rang.

On the other line was an unknown mail.

I have Shari, he said.

I want money.

Anticipating a call of this nature, police had installed a phone tap which allowed them to trace the call to a phone booth in an undisclosed location.

The caller was identified as 27-year-old Edward Robertson, but any hopes that Shari would be returned were short-lived when the call was determined to be a hoax.

Robertson was hit with multiple charges, including extortion and obstruction of justice.

The bogus ransom was a huge waste of police resources for a case where time was well and truly of the essence.

Without Shari's medication, there was the very real possibility that she could become dehydrated enough to slip into a coma.

When there was no sign of Shari Smith by the following morning, planes equipped with infrared technology were sent down by the FBI.

Authorities from surrounding counties were brought in to assist, while a trailer was set up in front of the Smith family home to act as investigation headquarters.

Led by Lexington County Sheriff James Mattes, the search for the 17-year-old quickly became the largest manhunt in South Carolina's history.

A report came in that Shari had recently been threatened by some other students from her high school.

Police looked into these claims and questioned every other guest who'd attended the pool party with Shari the day before, but no further leads emerged.

By Sunday, the full weight of Shari's disappearance was felt as her high school graduation ceremony went ahead without her.

Classmates couldn't ignore the enormity of the situation as a chair reserved for Shari sat empty and the National Anthem was performed by another student.

A friend of Shari's told the state newspaper,

I won't believe I've graduated until they find her.

A part of our family is missing.

When Lexington local Betty Harris, not her real name, saw the media coverage of Shari's disappearance, it sparked a memory.

On the afternoon of Friday, May 31, Betty had been driving down Platt Springs Road when she saw a young blonde woman walking towards her mailbox.

A man was approaching.

A couple of minutes later, Betty was continuing down the road when she saw the blonde from the mailbox in the passenger seat of a reddish colored car.

It was being driven by a male who looked to be between 35 and 40 years of age with a medium build and receding light colored hair.

The car overtook Betty before slowing down to a point that she was forced to bib her horn.

Betty could see that the man was distracted by his female passenger.

She didn't think much of it until she saw the news and realized that the young woman she'd seen was Shari Smith.

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The composite sketches of the man provided by Betty and other witnesses were notably different. However, their descriptions of his cranberry vehicle were all similar.

Instead of focusing on identifying the suspect by his appearance, police focused on identifying his car.

They collated a list of anyone Shari associated with who drove a similar vehicle, including attendees at her church.

But as the search rolled into its third fruitless day, grave concerns were held for Shari's welfare. Even if her kidnapper hadn't caused Shari any harm, they'd need to be giving her copious amounts of water to ensure her survival.

It had been an agonizing couple of days for the Smith family.

They gathered in their home, comforted by a passing procession of concerned friends and relatives who brought them meals and to join them in prayer.

A team of investigators stationed themselves on the property round the clock, ready to act the moment any potential lead came through.

The Lexington community was on edge.

Parents kept watchful eyes on their children, while young women avoided going out alone, fearful of the unknown.

Then, at 2.20 am on Monday, June 3rd, Shari's father Bob was awoken from a restless sleep by the ringing of the phone.

Bob answered.

The muffled, distorted voice of an unfamiliar man was on the other line.

He asked to speak to Mrs Smith.

Bob beckoned to his wife Hilda and she picked up the receiver.

It was the call they'd been waiting for.

The man claimed that he had Shari.

To prove this wasn't a hoax, he described in detail the outfit that Shari had been wearing at the time she went missing, right down to the black and yellow bikini she had on underneath.

The man assured Hilda that her daughter was fine.

She was eating and drinking plenty of water.

The man said he was going to release Shari.

The Smiths would be receiving more information in a letter from Shari that would arrive at 2 pm the following day.

In the meantime, the caller concluded.

They are looking in the wrong place, tell Sheriff Metz to get on channel 10 at 7 am and call off the search.

At the time, technology required a caller to be on the phone for 15 minutes before their location could be ascertained.

Given the call was short, an instant trace couldn't be established.

After some time, the call was traced to a phone booth outside of a grocery store approximately 12 miles from the Smiths home.

Officers rushed to the scene, but the booth was empty.

A dust for fingerprints revealed no discernible clues.

Investigators weren't entirely sure what to make of the call.

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The details about Shari's bikini hadn't been reported on, which added credibility to the caller's claims.

But beyond that, the alleged captor hadn't provided any concrete evidence to prove that he had Shari, or that she was indeed alive.

Furthermore, he hadn't made any ransom demands, which raised questions about the purpose of his call.

Regardless, the police were taking no chances.

The owner of the Lexington Post Office was alerted, and at 4 am, he was joined by two officers to collectively sift through every piece of mail addressed within the county.

It was a painstaking task.

The hours ticked by with no sign of the supposed letter, leading to doubts as to whether it existed at all.

Then, at 7 am, success.

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The White Legal-Sized Envelope was addressed to the Smith family home in Scrawling handwriting.

Inside was a two-page letter written on yellow legal paper signed by Shari Smith.

Dated June 1st at 3.10am, the title of the letter gave investigators pause.

Written in cursive at the top of the page were the words, last will and testament.

The letter began.

I love you, Mummy, Daddy, Robert, Dawn and Richard and everyone else.

I'll be with my father now, so please, please don't worry.

Just remember my witty personality and the great special times we all shared together.

Please don't ever let this ruin your lives. Just keep living one day at a time, the Jesus.

Some good will come out of this.

As the letter continued, Shari apologised for any disappointment she might have caused and urged someone else to take her place on the upcoming cruise.

She reiterated how proud she was of her family and how much she loved them all.

The letter concluded,

I know you all love me and will miss me very much, but if you'll stick together like we always did, you all can do it.

Please do not become hard or upset. Everything works out for the good for those that love the Lord. There was no return address.

When Bob Smith was shown the letter, a desperate helplessness washed over him.

He immediately recognised the handwriting as his daughter's.

The caller had been right. This was no hoax.

But it wasn't just the title of the letter or the final farewells it contained that escalated concerns about the abductor's intentions for Shari.

At the end of one paragraph, she'd written in parenthesis the haunting words.

A cursory examination of the letter revealed no fingerprints or any other identifying clues.

All investigators had to go by was the postage stamp, a commemorative duck decoy.

But this was of little help as the stamp was a relatively recent design and was currently in wide circulation.

Although the envelope did confirm one helpful detail, it was postmarked June 1 from the city of Columbia, just 13 miles east of Lexington.

Wherever Shari had been taken, it couldn't be too far.

The letter was immediately sent for detailed forensic testing, a process that could take weeks.

In the meantime, Bob and Hilda Smith made an impassioned plea on television, with Bob urging, Whoever it is that has our daughter Shari, we want her back. We miss her. We love her. Please send her back home where she belongs.

Hilda added, She is so important to us. Nothing in the world is more important.

Right now, all we ask is just whoever you are, send Shari back home.

A \$15,000 reward for information was announced, with one officer declaring, The search is not going to stop as long as there is hope.

Anticipating that Shari's abductor would call again, investigators set up a recording device on the Smith family's home phone.

If he did make contact, the Smiths were advised to keep him on the line for as long as possible.

At 3.08pm that same Monday, the phone rang. Shari's sister Dawn answered,

It was the same male caller from earlier. He asked to speak to her mother.

Have you received the mail today?

Yes, I have.

Do you believe me now?

Well, I'm not really sure I believe you because I haven't had any words from Shari, and I need to know that Shari is well.

I don't know and it's two or three days.

Why two or three days?

Call the search office.

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The call was soon traced to a pay phone at a pharmacy in Lexington. There was no sign of the caller or any discernible clues.

However, the location itself was of particular interest.

The pharmacy was part of the same shopping centre where Shari had parked her car while attending the pool party on Friday.

This added weight to the theory that Shari's abductor might have spotted her that day and followed her home.

The Smith family didn't know what to make of this turn of events.

While the contents of Shari's letter were deeply troubling, they refused to give up hope that she could still be found alive.

Maybe her harrowing words were meant as some kind of code.

At 8.07 that same night, the phone rang again.

When Dawn answered, she immediately recognised the voice of her sister's kidnapper.

He asked Dawn if she had come down from Charlotte.

Dawn said yes and asked who she was speaking to.

The caller ignored her and said,

I need to speak to your mother. Tell her to hurry.

Hilda picked up.

The caller asked, did you receive the letter today?

Hilda responded that she had.

To prove it, the caller asked her to tell him one thing that the letter said.

Shari had drawn a love heart with a combination of hers and her boyfriend Richard's names in it.

Hilda told the caller this, confirming that the two-page letter was written on yellow legal paper.

The caller stated,

Okay, so you know now that this is not a hoax call.

He then asked why his request for Sheriff Metz to call off the search hadn't been met, saying,

I'm trying to do everything possible to answer some of your prayers, so please, in the name of God, work with us here.

Hilda spoke kindly to the man, asking if he could just tell her whether Shari was okay without her medicine.

The caller said that Shari was drinking two gallons of water per hour and going to the bathroom afterwards.

He told Hilda he had to hurry as he knew the calls were being traced.

This has gone too far, he said.

Please forgive me.

The caller told Hilda to have an ambulance ready at their home.

He claimed that if anything happened to Shari in addition to her request for a closed casket, she wanted to have her hands crossed over her chest as though in prayer.

Listen to us, please, the caller implored.

Forget Lexington County, look in Saluda County, do you understand?

Shari Faye requests no strangers when we give the location.

Hilda reassured the caller that nobody was going to cause any harm, she just wanted to know whether Shari was with him.

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The caller said he couldn't tell Hilda that, but quote,  
I want to tell you one other thing.  
Shari is now part of me, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually.  
Our souls are one now.  
Hilda begged the caller to tell Shari how much her family loved her and that they'd do anything to make her happy.  
Again, the caller repeated his demands to have an ambulance ready.  
Hilda urged him to call back again later that night, saying,  
God bless you for taking care of my baby.  
The caller continued,  
I got to go now, listen, listen.  
Please, please, please forgive me for this, it just got out of hand.  
Shari is protected now, she's part of me now, and God look after all of us now.  
Good night.  
The cryptic phone call left investigators scrambling for answers.  
The kidnap us still hadn't provided any proof of life, and it remained unclear whether Shari had been harmed or not.  
The call was traced to a gas station just off the Interstate 20 highway, approximately eight miles from the Smith's home.  
But again, the caller had left behind no evidence.  
Although the information gained thus far did allow renowned FBI criminal profiler John Douglas to put together a 22-point profile of the perpetrator.  
According to Douglas, Shari's abductor was a white male, most likely in his mid to late 20s, but possibly in his early 30s.  
He was single, but had probably been married in the past or had a history of failed relationships.  
If he had a child of his own, that child would no longer be in his custody.  
He would either live alone or with parents or older relatives.  
This wouldn't be the perpetrator's first crime.  
He likely had a criminal record that included anything from making obscene phone calls and peeping and prying to full-blown sexual assault.  
He'd keep trophies taken from his victims.  
He'd have a penchant for pornography, with a particular lust for bondage and a sadomasochism.  
The evidence indicated that Shari Smith had been taken by force, likely at knife or gunpoint.  
This indicated that the perpetrator wasn't particularly charming or attractive, as he knew he wouldn't be able to lure Shari into his car through any other means.  
He was likely overweight and suffered from low self-esteem.  
His crimes would be motivated by his prevailing fantasy of exerting power over unattainable women.  
He likely picked female victims that he had no chance of a relationship with in his daily life, therefore forging a sense of power and control.  
Those victims would likely be children or young girls, as he'd find adult women too intimidating.  
Investigators determined that the perpetrator was using a variable speed control device to alter the sound of his voice.  
This indicated a knowledge of electronics that suggested the perpetrator likely worked in electrical

contracting, a job that provided flexible hours and the freedom to move around.

Although the device distorted the caller's voice, it couldn't disguise his slight southern accent.

In his first phone call, the perpetrator had told Hilda Smith to expect a letter from Shari at 2pm. 2 o'clock was their usual mail delivery time.

This, in addition to the perpetrator's knowledge of the surrounding counties and his use of various payphones, gave John Douglas no doubt that the offender lived locally, or was at the very least familiar with the area.

The perpetrator knew that Dawn Smith had travelled down from Charlotte.

He'd also used Shari's middle name, Faye.

Did this mean he knew the Smith family on a personal level?

The payphone locations also suggested something else of note.

Each call had come from a different location, and each area had been wiped clean.

The fact that the offender knew his calls were being traced, coupled with his use of a voice-altering device, indicated a knowledge of forensic proceedings.

Whoever he was, investigators were dealing with someone of above-average intelligence.

John Douglas determined that the perpetrator was meticulous and obsessive in his daily habits.

He likely had everything planned out, with the tone of his voice hinting that he was reading from a script.

He was a rigid thinker who probably had an unsuccessful previous career in the military.

Sheriff James Metz told reporters,

I feel we're looking for an extremely sharp individual in one regard, and an extremely psychotic individual in another regard.

He seems to be almost schizophrenic, one who thinks clearly and acts irrationally.

By Tuesday, June 4, the investigation into Shari Smith's disappearance rolled into its fourth day.

Convinced that the perpetrator was following the story in the media, the Smith family made another television appeal for Shari's safe return, with Dawn telling her sister,

We're not a family without you.

Hilda added, Shari, we love you so much. We're just not going to give up on finding you. I know you're being taken care of.

We just feel such assurances from the Lord that you will be with us again.

Empathetic of their plight, the community continued to rally behind the Smiths, with volunteers distributing over 10,000 missing person posters around town.

Concerned citizens contributed to the reward pool, increasing the amount to \$25,000.

Still, nothing led to the identity of Shari's kidnapper.

By 9 o'clock on Tuesday night, over 24 hours had passed since the offender last made contact.

The Smith family sat on edge, unable to sleep as they awaited further instructions that they weren't even sure would come.

Then, at 9.45 p.m., the phone finally rang.

Dawn answered it. It was Shari's abductor.

He asked Dawn to put Hilda on the other line and to grab a pencil and paper.

This is Shari's own words, he said. So listen carefully. Say nothing unless you're asked.

I know these calls are taped and traced, but that's irrelevant now.

There's no money demanded, so here's Shari Faye's last request.

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On the fifth day to put the family at rest, Shari Faye being freed.  
Remember, we are one soul now. When located, you'll locate both of us together.  
We are one. God has chosen us. Respect all past and present requests.  
The caller told the women to jot down the actual times and events.  
He said the kidnapping happened at 3.28 p.m. on Friday, May 31, and that Shari, quote, had the fear of God in her.  
At 3.10 a.m. on Saturday, June 1, she wrote her last will and testament.  
At 4.58 a.m., the two, quote, became one soul.  
Hilda asked the caller what he meant by that.  
He continued, no questions now, and instructed them to have an ambulance ready between 4 and 7 o'clock the following evening.  
Prayers and relief coming soon, he said. Please learn to enjoy life. Forgive. God protects the chosen.  
Again, he ordered a sheriff Mets to call off the search, adding,  
Blessings are near. You will receive last instructions where to find us.  
Hilda pleaded with the man not to kill her daughter. He ignored her, concluding,  
We love and miss you all. Get good rest tonight. Goodbye.  
The call was traced to a payphone at a convenience store at Lake Murray, 9 miles from the Smith's home.  
Again, no fingerprints or other evidence had been left behind.  
Officers established roadblocks in the area, but nothing brought them closer to identifying the perpetrator or finding Shari.  
Based on the caller's instructions, police feared that they could be dealing with a murder suicide.  
However, behavioral profiler John Douglas believed that the perpetrator was, quote, too full of himself and his perceived power to take his own life.  
Based on his pattern of promising and withholding information, Douglas thought it was more likely that the kidnapper had already killed Shari,  
but didn't want to reveal the location of her body because he was continuously returning to visit her corpse.  
Whatever the case, investigators needed to be ready for when the next call came the following day.  
They came up with a plan. They deactivate a majority of payphones in the area and keep a covert eye on the few they left in order.  
This would hopefully force the perpetrator to one of the phones that was under surveillance.  
The selected payphones were set to go down just after midday on Wednesday, June 5th.  
At 11.45am, 15 minutes before the scheduled shutdown, the phone rang at the Smith family's home.  
Hilda answered,  
Hello?  
Listen carefully. Take highway 378 West to traffic circle.  
Take prosperity exit. Go one and a half miles. Turn right at sign.  
Loose large number 103. Go one quarter mile. Turn left at white frame building.  
Go to backyard. Six feet beyond. We're waiting. God chose us.  
Case file will be back shortly. Thank you for supporting us by listening to this episode's sponsors.  
During the 50th anniversary of Hip-Hop, I am absolutely honored to partner with Budweiser to celebrate the legacy of one of the greatest to ever do it, Notorious B.I.G.

**[Transcript] Casefile True Crime / 305: Case 261: Shari Smith & Debra May Helmick (Part 1)**

They've created a limited edition run of Word Up Magazine in his honor where you'll find an article by yours truly, B.I.G. Martinez.

And there's going to be so much great stuff in there that you can check out. The issue drops September 13th in New York City.

Quantities will be limited so make sure that you follow at Budweiser USA for details. This bud's for you, B.I.G.

And you're responsibly.

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The location that Sherry Smith's abductor described was in Saluda County, roughly 17 miles west from the Smith family home.

By this point, Sherry had been missing for five days and investigators feared the worst.

They ordered Sherry's family to stay home while they followed the caller's instructions, taking extra precautions in anticipation for what they may find.

But the family remained tirelessly optimistic that Sherry would be found alive, with her mother healed up preparing an overnight bag in anticipation of a hospital stay.

A helicopter was dispatched to the Masonic Lodge, a white two-story building surrounded by dense woodland.

With their aerial view, those on board could see something through the trees, roughly 50 feet behind the lodge, about eight feet into the woods.

It was the unmistakable side of a human body.

A team of officers quickly converged on the scene.

17-year-old Sherry Smith was lying face up on her back, barefoot, and dressed in the same clothes she'd been wearing on the day she went missing.

Her shirt was pulled over her body in a manner one investigator described as, like a shroud.

All of the jewellery Sherry had been wearing at the time of her abduction was missing, except for a gold necklace given to her by her boyfriend Richard and a single gold stud earring.

It was immediately clear that Sherry had been deceased for several days.

The recent heatwave had caused rapid decomposition, making it impossible to readily determine the cause or time of her death.

However, investigators were fairly certain they knew exactly what time Sherry had passed away.

During his June 4 phone call to Hilda and Dawn Smith, the perpetrator said that he and Sherry had become one soul at 4.58am on June 1.

This was likely the time she had died.

If this was accurate, it meant Sherry had passed away just 12 hours after she'd been kidnapped.

While this would have been enough time for Sherry to fall sick as a result of her diabetes, it wouldn't have been life-threatening.

It was therefore unlikely that she'd died from her medical condition.

But Sherry's body showed no signs of physical violence such as a gunshot or stab wounds and no evidence of sexual assault.

The only identifiable clue as to her cause of death was residue from duct tape that was found on her face, which indicated the possibility that Sherry had been suffocated.

The killer had also cut a significant chunk of hair from Sherry's head, likely to remove duct tape that

had gotten stark.

Regardless of the exact cause of death, a pathologist determined that whoever had kidnapped Sherry was directly responsible.

Her death would therefore be treated as a homicide, no matter what.

A thorough examination of the surrounding woods failed to provide any further evidence.

However, a line of saplings leading to Sherry's body had been flattened down, indicating that Sherry's killer had likely driven to the back of the Masonic Lodge and then dragged her body about eight feet into the woods.

The sheer accuracy of the directions provided by the caller strengthened the investigator's belief that he had indeed been returning to visit Sherry's corpse.

However, they didn't think that was the reason he'd delayed revealing the location.

It was more likely that the killer was buying time, knowing that the longer Sherry's body lay undiscovered, the less chance there would be of recovering crucial forensic evidence.

If this was the case, it bolstered the theory that the killer was familiar with criminal proceedings.

The location of the crime scene also strengthened the belief that the killer lived locally.

The Masonic Lodge was in a remote area with no foot traffic, not the type of place you'd stumble upon by accident.

Sherry's family were anxiously sitting at home holding a silent prayer when they saw a patrol car heading down their driveway.

They immediately knew that Sherry was dead.

As Dawn later described to TV series Eyewitness, Hilda immediately fell apart, sobbing, not my Sherry, not my baby.

Dawn recalled,

I'd never heard crying like that until that moment.

When the news reached the Lexington community, an outpouring of grief was accompanied by an increasing sense of fear.

If Sherry's killer wasn't identified, what would stop him from striking again?

Friends of Sherry's feared they could be targeted next.

Her co-workers from the flea market grew increasingly afraid that the strange man who had harassed Sherry was responsible and would set his sights on them.

On the afternoon of Thursday June 6, Sheriff Metz held a press conference appealing to the perpetrator directly.

Metz stated,

We are concerned that this person may take his own life if he doesn't turn himself in.

We don't want him to do that.

I want to reassure him that we have no intentions of killing anyone.

All we want to do is take this person into custody.

We're trying to get this person to surrender.

He needs help and we want him to get it.

If he's having fun jerking us around, he can continue.

The investigation is going full blast and we are not stopping until we catch him.

I promise.

Charlie Keyes was a well-known investigative reporter with local Columbia news station WIS.

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Two and a half hours after the press conference, Charlie was in his office when he received a phone call from an unfamiliar male who explained that the call was regarding Sherry Faye Smith.

He said that he wanted to use Charlie as a medium, ordering,  
Listen carefully.

I can't live with myself, Charlie, and I need to turn myself in.  
I'm afraid.

The caller gave Charlie a set of instructions.

Once they ended their conversation, Charlie was to call Sheriff James Metz and let him know this was no hoax.

To prove that he was the one responsible for Sherry's abduction, the caller described Sherry's last will and testament in detail.

Charlie was to appear on the news that evening to broadcast Sheriff Metz home phone number as proof that the message had been received.

The following morning, Charlie was to go to the Sheriff's home along with the Sherry's priest.

The caller promised he would call them then and turn himself in.

He would then give Charlie an exclusive interview in which he'd reveal every detail about Sherry's abduction.

The caller explained,

It just went bad.

I know her family and, well, I just made a mistake.

It went too far.

All I wanted to do was to make love to her.

I didn't know she had the rare disease and it just got out of hand.

I got scared and I have to do the right thing.

All calls made to the news station were automatically recorded, so when Charlie got off the phone, he was able to notify investigators immediately.

When they heard the audio, they had no doubt that the voice belonged to Sherry's killer.

However, they were highly skeptical of the caller's claim that he was going to turn himself in.

He was getting far too much enjoyment from the power he wielded in this situation.

It had been an agonizing day for Sherry's loved ones as they came to terms with the reality that Sherry would never be coming home.

The Thursday evening news came and went without Charlie Key's fulfilling the killer's request to make a public television announcement.

Things were quiet at the Smith residence.

Bob was at the funeral home making arrangements for his daughter's burial while Hilda was in a sedated sleep.

At 8.57pm, the phone rang.

Sherry's aunt, Beverly, answered.

A telephone operator announced that she had a collect call for Dawn Smith.

Beverly responded that Dawn couldn't come to the phone.

A male voice then came on the line and asked to speak with Hilda or Bob Smith.

Realizing who she was talking to, Beverly went to find Dawn.

As soon as Dawn picked up the phone, she recognized the muffled voice of her sister's killer.

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The caller told Dawn that he would be turning himself in the following morning. He claimed that Sherry had requested he do so on the fifth day after her body was found. He explained that he would no longer be giving an exclusive interview to Charlie Key's. However, he had written a detailed letter describing exactly what happened to Sherry along with pictures and both Dawn and Charlie would be receiving a copy. Dawn urged the caller not to take his own life. She said she wanted to help him and that God would always forgive. The caller responded that he couldn't live with himself nor could he live in prison or face the electric chair. I'm sick, he said. This is the way it's going to have to be. The caller went on to explain that Sherry was very strong-willed and didn't cry once during her ordeal. She wasn't scared, he said. She knew that she was going to be an angel. He claimed that Sherry wanted her family to treasure her gold necklace and start earring. He then made a disturbing offer. Did Dawn want to know how her sister died? Dawn said yes. According to the caller, he gave Sherry the option. Did she want to be suffocated, shot, or given a drug overdose? She chose suffocation. Sherry then wrote her last will and testament at her own volition. The caller then, quote, made love to Sherry before tying her to the bedpost with electrical cord. He proceeded to cover her head with duct tape until she could no longer breathe. Dawn asked if Sherry had been afraid. The caller responded, she was not. She was at peace. She knew that God was with her. The call was traced to a truck stop roughly 50 miles from the Smith's home in the town of Great Falls. Yet again, the caller had left behind no evidence. But his latest phone call had been significantly longer than the others and provided investigators with some deeper insights. Like in his call to Charlie Keyes, the perpetrator had told Dawn that he was a friend of the family. But his claims that he didn't know Sherry had a rare medical condition disproved this assertion. Sherry's diabetes was a well-known fact among her in a circle, and if the perpetrator knew the Smiths, he would have been aware of this. Additionally, investigators highly doubted that he would have given Sherry the choice of how she died. As profiler John Douglas explained in his book *When a Killer Calls*, even if this was true, it was incredibly dubious that Sherry would have chosen suffocation. To Douglas, quote, He chose this means because it prolonged his sexual thrill at the power he had over her and the length of time he got to enjoy watching her die. But there was something else the caller said that had investigators on edge.

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At the start of the call, he'd mistakenly said that all he'd wanted to do was make love to Dawn. Dawn and Sherry looked strikingly similar, and they were sometimes mistaken for twins. Given that the perpetrator had specifically asked to speak with Dawn and appeared to be attempting to establish a bond between them, concerns were raised that he could be turning his focus on Dawn. If John Douglas' behavioural profile was anything to go by, the killer wouldn't stop with Sherry. What if Dawn was next?

The Smith family was warned of this possibility, but they had no choice but to persevere. Just as investigators suspected, the killer didn't turn himself in on Friday like he had promised. Saturday, June 8, was Sherry's funeral. Over 1,000 mourners gathered to farewell the 17-year-old at Lexington's First Baptist Church. Sherry's murder had a profound impact on the local community, and Lexington citizens tied pink ribbons to signposts and letterboxes between the church and cemetery as a sign of respect. Sherry's pastor urged those in attendance not to blame God, saying, God does not do what has been done here. It is because of the confusion and the sin and the depravity of men that we've come to an occasion like this. Investigators believed there was a high chance that Sherry's killer was among the attendees. They filmed the proceedings and were on high alert for anything out of the ordinary. At the cemetery, as the gravesite service wrapped up, a man in his 30s suddenly leapt from the crowd. I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, he shouted. Whoever is responsible for this, I believe you're here. I love you and I will not hurt you. Come forward right now. His sudden outburst caused such alarm that one of Sherry's friends fell to the ground screaming in terror. The man immediately became a suspect, even more so when it was revealed that he owned a car similar to the one seen near the Smith's driveway on the day Sherry was abducted. He was taken in for police questioning and had his voice compared to the audio of the killer, but it didn't match and there was nothing to link him to the crime. The shaken Smith family had only just returned home from the funeral when, at 2.21pm, the phone rang. Dawn answered, with the operator telling her it was a collect call from Sherry. After accepting the charges, Dawn was once again met by the voice of her sister's killer. He told her he'd been at the funeral and that a police officer had directed him into a parking space. For several minutes he ranted about his final interactions with Sherry, speaking as though the two of them had a close relationship and that Sherry viewed him as a confidant. Dawn asked the caller why he didn't turn himself in as promised. He responded, I didn't have the strength, I'm scared as hell. He refused to tell Dawn where he had killed Sherry, saying only that it happened in Lexington

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County.

However, he claimed he did want to reveal this information.

He promised to Dawn he'd call again the following Saturday with the exact location, concluding the call.

God bless us all.

The call was traced to a gas station in the neighboring state of Georgia, roughly 60 miles from the Smith's home.

Predictably, there was no sign of the killer, nor any clues left behind.

The days ticked by with no further word from him.

Investigators remained unconvinced that he could have taken his own life.

He was enjoying himself too much.

Sheriff Metz told the press,

I don't think he has the guts.

If he was going to do it, he'd have done it by now.

The manhunt intensified as the reward for information increased to \$30,000.

Investigators examined the footage from Sherry's funeral on the lookout for anyone even remotely suspicious.

A segment about Sherry's case was aired on the local Crime Stoppers TV program, with Sheriff Metz telling the public,

Somebody somewhere knows the killer.

We've got to find this person before he kills again.

Hundreds of tips came through to the police, but the days continued to go by with no arrests.

Gun sales rose around South Carolina, with several households reporting receiving threatening phone calls against their children.

Although the killer's silence was mystifying, investigators believed it was only a matter of time before the perpetrator made further contact with Dawn.

She was given instructions on how to behave if he called again.

Given his hunger for power, Dawn was told to be compassionate and understanding so that he would feel like the one in charge.

The longer she could keep him talking, the better their chances were at tracing the call.

But despite his promise to call the following Saturday, a week came and went with no further contact from the killer.

Concerns arose that he could have fled into a state where he could be on the hunt for his next victim. If experience had taught the investigative team anything, it was the killers of this nature didn't simply stop.

If he wasn't apprehended, there were no doubts that he would kill again.

Investigators wondered whether they could lure the killer out by using Dawn as a sort of pawn.

Shari's would-be 18th birthday was approaching.

Profiler John Douglas devised a plan.

What if they held a memorial service for Shari on her birthday and made sure it was covered by the media?

This just might reignite the killer's interest in Dawn.

Shari collected stuffed koalas.

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Dawn could lay one on Shari's grave in the hopes that the killer might be tempted to steal it as a memento.

Covert officers could lay in wait with around-the-clock surveillance ready to capture any suspicious activity.

Dawn was apprehensive about the plan, but she was prepared to go to any length to capture her sister's killer.

The memorial was scheduled to go ahead on Tuesday, June 25.

Three days prior, just after midnight on Saturday, June 22, the phone rang at the Smith family home. Dawn answered.

The operator told her it was a collect-core from Shari Faye Smith.

Dawn accepted.

Thank you, Dawn. You know this isn't a hoax, correct? came the all-too-familiar voice.

He continued.

You know, God wants you to join Shari Faye.

This month, next month, this year, next year.

You can't be protected all the time.

Have you heard about Deborah May Hamrick?

To be continued, next week.

Hey, you don't want to be taking shots for the rest of your life.

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