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69-year-old Maria Yan adored volunteering at the East End Opportunity Shop.

The store was attached to the Living and Learning Centre, a community space that provided adult education and recreation programs in the regional Victorian town of Hillsville.

The upshop supported the centre financially by selling recycled clothes and household goods at affordable prices.

It also provided retail experience for those looking to expand to their career opportunities.

It was this community spirit that had drawn Maria to Hillsville in the first place.

Located in the Yarra Valley, less than an hour's drive northeast of Melbourne, the town was known for its lush greenery, charming main street and spectacular mountain views.

With a population of fewer than 7,000 residents, Hillsville had a village-like feel with a strong focus on community.

And the two things Maria cared about most in life were community and family.

Maria, who was widowed with three adult children, took her managerial position at the East End Opportunity Shop very seriously.

She went above and beyond to turn it into something special.

She put her co-workers' skills to good use, assigning them jobs that elevated the humble secondhand store into an attractive boutique.

Even when she wasn't working, the shop was never far from Maria's mind.

If donations came in that weren't in sellable condition, Maria took them home to wash and mend.

She did then give them to single mothers who were struggling to make ends meet.

Maria's family joked that her house smelled like a secondhand store, but Maria didn't mind.

From a young age, she'd always been drawn to helping those in need.

Having grown up in a large Italian family with little money, she knew what it was like to struggle.

But in early 2003, staff at the East End Opportunity Shop noticed an obvious shift in Maria's behaviour, saying she seemed on edge.

Any time a car pulled up outside, she appeared visibly nervous and asked them to see who it was.

According to her colleagues, Maria admitted to feeling terrified.

At one point, some customers said they overheard Maria arguing on the phone.

They said when she hung up, Maria told them the caller had just threatened to kill her.

On the morning of Tuesday, September 30, 2003, Matthew Clifton made his way up at Juliette Crescent.

Although the residential street was just a short drive from the centre of Hillsville, the sizeable properties that dotted either side of the road were surrounded by trees and hills, giving the neighbourhood a private, secluded feel.

At roughly 8.15am, Matthew arrived at the steep driveway that led to Maria Yann's home.

Maria had purchased the Adilic Single Story Bluestone property in 1997.

With three bedrooms and two large living areas, it provided all the space Maria needed to host her ever-growing extended family.

Maria's husband Ronald had passed away in 1984, and their three children had long since flown the nest, but family remained Maria's number one priority.

She cared for her four young grandchildren and loved to host the guests from all walks of life.

But with one and a half acres of both manicured gardens and native vegetation, the property on Juliette Crescent required a lot of upkeep.

Maria was a very house-proud woman, and she liked things to be immaculate.

To maintain her yard, she sought help from locals who needed extra cash.

Matthew Clifton had been working as Maria's gardener for the past two years, with a focus on attracting more birds to the property.

Maria often joined him in the garden, but when Matthew arrived on this occasion, Maria wasn't outside.

He tapped on the door to let Maria know he was there, then got to work.

But after 30 minutes, he needed her help.

Matthew had some new roses to plant, and he wasn't sure where Maria wanted them to go.

Matthew knocked on the front door.

There was no answer.

He turned the handle of the mesh security door and found that it was unlocked.

So was the main door.

Matthew took his boots off and let himself in, calling out Maria's name.

The entrance led to the open plan living and kitchen area.

Matthew noticed that Maria's wallet was lying on the floor near the kitchen bench with its contents scattered about.

The TV was on, but the volume had been turned all the way down.

That's when Matthew saw Maria.

She was sitting in a club lounge chair facing the television, her body slumped to one side. Matthew thought Maria must have fallen asleep, but as he got closer, he realized that her head was covered with blood.

Within hours, Juliet Crescent was teeming with police.

In total, Maria Yann had sustained 22 blows to the top of her head.

The repeated blunt force trauma had resulted in extensive cranial fractures, a severed ear lobe, and ultimately death.

The murder weapon was nowhere to be found and was difficult to narrow down.

Several items could have caused such injuries, including a plank of wood, an axe handle, or an iron bar.

Blood sputter dotted the living room and was smeared on Maria's purse.

It appeared that at least one credit card was missing.

However, nothing else appeared or have been stolen and the rest of the house was immaculate.

The beds were all made, the furniture was in place, and there were no signs of a struggle.

In fact, Maria didn't have a single defensive wound.

Similarly, there were no signs of forced entry.

Apart from the front door on the western side of the house, all of the doors and windows were locked.

A search for fingerprints and DNA came up dry.

Outside the living room window lay a bloodstained towel.

Other than that, the killer had left behind no clues.

Maria's three grown children, Jeff, Ronda, and Pauline, were beside themselves when they heard the news.

The Yanns were incredibly close-knit.

Maria and her husband had worked hard to give their children a joyful childhood, instilling in them a great appreciation for food, nature, culture, and family.

They lived in the coastal suburb of Frankston before Maria and Ronald retired to a hobby farm in the regional town of Akkaran.

Maria loved the land and took pride in growing her own produce, but after Ronald suffered a fatal heart attack, the farm was too difficult to maintain on her own.

She moved to Healesville to be closer to her family.

The three siblings adored their mother and couldn't understand how such a generous and caring woman could meet such a violent hand.

As Jeff later told Sky News, it sounds a bit corny, but Mum was one of the good ones.

Maria's oldest daughter, Ronda, found the news particularly hard to process.

Maria had called Ronda the previous evening at around 7.40pm.

The two had spoken for just under half an hour and it had been a completely normal conversation.

At no point did it sound like Maria had company, nor did she mention that she was expecting anyone.

Just after eight o'clock, Maria said she had to go.

The ABC television show Australian Story had just started and was covering a story about journalist Mike Munro that Maria was eager to see.

Monday nights were considered Maria's chill-out night and watching Australian Story was part of her usual routine.

Based on this information, investigators started to piece together Maria's final moments.

A pathologist determined that she had died between 9pm on Monday, September 29 and 3am on Tuesday, September 30.

The evidence indicated it was on the earlier end of that timeline.

When Maria's body was found, the living room curtains were open and a single lamp was on.

Maria was wearing pants and a jumper and hadn't yet dressed for bed.

The muted TV was still switched to ABC, the channel she had been watching at 8pm.

One of Maria's sisters had tried to call her at around 11.15pm, but there was no answer.

This was unusual and indicated that Maria was likely already dead when the call came through.

For Maria's children, there was another detail that gave them pause.

Maria had been killed while sitting in the club lounge chair that sat directly opposite her television.

When Maria watched TV, she always sat in her favourite recliner chair.

She only sat in the club lounge when talking to guests.

Investigators quickly made a key assumption.

This wasn't a robbery gone wrong.

Maria Yan likely knew her killer and had willingly invited them inside.

The question was, who would want to kill this innocent grandmother?

By all accounts, Maria Yan was a pillar of the community.

Her volunteer work went far beyond the op shop.

She also helped people experiencing homelessness and individuals overcoming addictions, either by offering them work or giving them a place to stay.

Her compassion knew no bounds.

Even on Christmas day, when Maria was always busy hosting her large extended family, she took the time to deliver extra meals to people who were doing it tough or had no one else to celebrate with.

Investigators considered whether Maria's good deeds could have played a role in her demise.

Investigators friends and family said she trusted people implicitly.

Some of those she'd helped were individuals trying to get back on their feet after serving prison time.

Several disadvantaged members of the community who had recent dealings with Maria were looked into but each was able to provide a solid alibi for the night of Monday, September 29.

Hillsville's residents struggled to come to terms with Maria's murder.

One outraged local told reporters, it was a cowardly act for anybody to walk into somebody's house at night while they're sitting down by the fire watching television and beat them to death and I hope they catch the mongrel.

Investigators obtained Maria's will which stipulated that her entire estate be divided equally among her three children.

Investigators were immediately cast on Maria's son, Jeff Yan, who lived roughly 80 kilometres

south of Hillsville.

He seemed to know the most about her movements and habits.

Investigators were aware that the perpetrators of violent crimes are often those closest to the victim.

But not only did Jeff have a solid alibi, it quickly became clear that he was a doting son who considered himself his mother's protector.

At Maria's trusting nature, Jeff disputed that she would open her door to just anyone.

He told police that she always locked both the security door and the main door and would only open them to people she knew, especially at night.

The entrance to Maria's property was secured by a set of steel automatic gates.

Jeff said that if Maria wasn't expecting visitors, she kept these locked while also keeping all external lights off to conserve power.

September nights in Hillsville could be bitterly cold, but according to Jeff, Maria only lit the fire if she had guests over and wanted to make them comfortable.

If a guest wasn't welcome or Maria hoped to keep the visit brief, she wouldn't light the fire.

On the night of her murder, the fireplace in Maria's living room had been set up but not lit.

On the day Maria was killed, she'd visited her sister Carmella, who also lived in Hillsville.

Maria confided in Carmella that she had just been to see a counsellor.

It had been an eye-opening experience.

According to Carmella, Maria explained that she'd discussed everything from her childhood to her personal grievances and was feeling empowered.

She said she was no longer going to be a passive observer who put up with poor treatment.

Carmella suspected she knew exactly what Maria was referring to.

Over the past few months, there had been one situation in particular that had been troubling Maria.

It related to the marriage of her youngest daughter, Pauline.

Pauline had met a man named James Unamaru in 1982 and the two quickly commenced the romantic relationship.

Maria adored James from the moment she met him.

He was a Nigerian immigrant who'd moved to Australia on his own in the 1970s.

Realising James had no family down under, Maria embraced him with open arms.

She loved the new culture that he brought to her already diverse family and quickly became his biggest supporter.

In the years that followed, Maria became like a mother to her new son-in-law.

She supported the couple financially by selling them her home in Frankston at a low cost on the proviso that they pay her back over time.

She also provided James with emotional support, which, according to those close to her, was no easy task.

From the outset, Pauline and James had a turbulent relationship, marred by fighting and multiple separations.

According to Pauline, James was a very possessive husband.

Pauline claimed that while he wasn't physically abusive, he had a volatile temper.

This prompted her to take out two intervention orders against him over the course of their marriage.

Maria's son, Jeff, initially had a great relationship with his brother-in-law, until he accompanied James on a trip to his home country of Nigeria.

There, Jeff claimed to have witnessed James cheat on Pauline.

When they returned to Australia, their friendship was fractured beyond repair.

During a period of separation between him and Pauline, James began a casual relationship with another woman.

He and Pauline reconciled soon after, but unbeknownst to Pauline, James had become a father within that time.

He kept his child a secret from Pauline for several years.

When she found out, she was devastated.

James and Pauline had been unsuccessfully trying to have a child together for years.

Pauline had one pregnancy that tragically resulted in stillbirth.

Regardless of how painful this development was, she took James back.

Maria had raised her children to believe that marriages should be worked on when times get tough.

She often played the role of peacemaker in James and Pauline's marriage, acting as a filter for all their ongoing issues.

Over time, this took a toll.

As the relationship continued to deteriorate, Maria felt like she was being dragged into a constant emotional tug of war.

By the start of 2003, Maria told friends and family that she felt James was becoming increasingly deceitful and obsessive about maintaining control over Pauline.

She couldn't handle it anymore.

For the first time, Maria encouraged Pauline to leave the relationship, and Pauline began taking steps to do so.

In mid-April 2003, Maria went to Pauline's house to help her pack some of her things.

According to her son Jeff, Maria told him that James became furious, grabbing Maria roughly and throwing her from the house.

Maria was shaken.

According to Jeff, Maria said she thought James Unamadu was a bad man, but she'd continue to support him for as long as Pauline wanted to remain in the marriage.

That all changed on April 21, 2003.

That day, Jeff's phone rang, and Maria was on the other line.

According to Jeff, Maria requested that he get to James and Pauline's house in Frankston as quickly as possible.

There had been an altercation between the couple, and Maria said she was concerned for Pauline's safety.

When Jeff arrived, he claimed he found the couple standing in the kitchen.

He approached James and said,

There's nothing I can do about you and Pauline, but you don't ever manhandle mum.

Jeff later reported to police that James suddenly pulled out a large skilleting knife and tried to grab him by the throat.

Jeff said he managed to scramble away and grab a shovel that was lying outside. Pauline intervened by locking herself inside with James. Jeff called the police who visited the property, but no further action was taken. According to Jeff, James caught him afterwards with a threat. If Jeff ever came to his house again, James would kill him. James' brother had recently passed away, and Pauline was doing her best to support him through his grief, but she'd had enough. She officially began divorce proceedings. According to an intervention order she submitted, James issued her with a warning. I'll kill you if you leave me, but don't worry, I'll make it quick, and you won't suffer. The breakdown of her daughter's marriage caused Maria Yan a great deal of stress. Some around her claimed she became increasingly scared of James Unamaru and started jumping any time a car arrived at the op shop. Friends said Maria told them that James had called her at work, threatening to kill her. After that, she took an extended leave of absence. She went into state and tried to recover from what some described as an emotional breakdown. Upon her return, Maria focused on helping Pauline leave the relationship for good. Pauline moved into a rental unit, keeping the address a secret from James. But, according to Pauline, he started following her, and it didn't take long for him to figure out where she was living. Maria agreed to store some of Pauline's personal belongings in her shed. Among them were the ashes of Pauline and James' stillborn baby. Jeff said he was concerned that James would come looking for the ashes and bought a large padlock for the shed. Maria promised to keep it locked. One day after this, a friend said that Maria told them about an incident in which she was burning off some vegetation in her paddock. When she returned to her house, she was shocked to find James inside. After that, she told friends and family she was convinced that he was trying to steal the ashes. Maria's sister Dorothy remembered receiving a call from Maria at 11 o'clock one night. Maria was frightened. She said she could hear a shuffling noise outside and didn't know what it was. Dorothy told her to go out and investigate while she stayed on the line. According to Dorothy, Maria returned to the phone, saying it was James Unamadu. According to an affidavit signed by Maria and filed in the family law court, James showed up to her house on July 24, 2003. He'd become increasingly concerned that Pauline was seeing someone else. James appeared groggy and weak and collapsed onto the couch. Maria was worried, claiming in the affidavit that James had recently threatened suicide multiple times. James told Maria that he'd taken something which she believed to be sleeping pills. Maria called an ambulance, but the attending paramedics determined that James hadn't

taken a lethal dose and didn't require any treatment.
According to Maria, after they left, James swallowed more pills.
Maria said she stayed up all night, keeping a panic die on him.
The next day, James returned home.
But Maria said in her affidavit that a few days later, she received a phone call from one of his neighbors, saying that James was trying to hang himself.
She stated that she and Pauline spent the night at the couple's house trying to console him, during which time James confiscated Maria's car keys to prevent them from leaving.
Following this incident, Pauline went to stay with Maria for the weekend.
She later told police that the two made a pact.
Pauline would leave James for good, and Maria would do everything she could to support her and make sure the separation worked this time.
According to a mutual friend, Pauline said that she and her mother discussed plans to sell their homes and buy a property they could live in together.
Pauline claimed that when she returned to her rental unit, she noticed something wasn't right.
On the outside, everything appeared to be in place.
There were no signs of forced entry or any damage, but once inside, Pauline quickly noticed that several items were missing, including large items of furniture.
A picture frame she'd hidden beneath some clothes was sitting out in the open.
The photo inside it, which had featured Pauline's boss, had been stolen.
Pauline immediately suspected her husband was responsible.
According to Pauline, James had become increasingly fixated on the idea that she and her boss were having an affair.
She also suspected that James had the means to let himself into her flat.
When Pauline and Maria consoled James after his latest suicide attempt, he ducked out briefly saying he needed to buy groceries.
Pauline and Maria both said they suspected he'd taken her keys to get copied.
When Maria found out about the break-in, she was furious.
As detailed in her affidavit, she believed that James Unimadu was responsible.
Maria didn't think that James had acted alone.
Maria claimed he'd likely had assistance from his nephew, whom she suspected had recently entered Australia using a false passport.
Enraged, Maria reportedly called the police and named James's nephew as an illegal immigrant.
She then gave James a piece of her mind, telling him what she'd done and urging him to accept that his marriage was over.
According to Maria's affidavit, James drove her to Pauline's place so that she could mediate a meeting between the two.
As they drove, he started rambling about his suspicion that Pauline was involved with her boss, Dominic, the man whose picture had been taken from Pauline's house.
Maria said she assured James this wasn't true, even though friends later confirmed that the two had in fact commenced a romantic relationship.
According to Maria, James suddenly handed her his mobile phone and told her to listen.
A man on the other line introduced himself as Baba.

He explained that he was a witch doctor from Nigeria.

Baba allegedly told Maria that James had sent him a photo of Dominic and he and his family had put a voodoo curse on it.

Baba said that Dominic was going to die.

He urged Maria to encourage Pauline to work on her marriage with James.

As Maria later told her sister, Baba warned that if she didn't comply, something bad would happen within seven days.

Maria claimed she hung up in disgust and told James he was being ridiculous.

She said James told her this was all part of his heritage.

In Nigerian culture, a witch doctor is a type of healer who works outside of conventional medicine.

Many believe that witch doctors have a connection with the spirit world and that they can help protect against evil forces.

According to Maria Zaffa David, James told her that if Dominic didn't die in the next few weeks as Baba predicted, he'd slit Dominic's throat himself.

James apparently stated,

I've lost everything.

I have got nothing to lose.

I don't care if I end up in jail.

She is going to win out of this one.

Case file will be back shortly.

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By supporting our sponsors, you support case file to continue to deliver quality content. Maria was a spiritual person and she told people that the conversation with the witch doctor had left her shaken.

Now that she'd seen a side of James Unamaru she didn't like, she felt responsible for letting him remain in their family.

She believed if it hadn't been for her, then Pauline would have left him 10 years earlier. By the start of September 2003, friends and family observed that Maria was increasingly exhausted by the ongoing phone calls and visits from James, pleading for her help with his marriage.

Several friends said that Maria told them she was afraid of what James might do.

She feared he would either kill himself, Pauline, or her.

To make matters worse, James placed a caveat on the Frankston property to prevent Pauline from selling it.

It was at this point that Maria submitted her official affidavit to the family court, outlining her allegations about all of James' recent erratic and controlling behavior.

She stated that he and Pauline still owed her \$40,000 for the purchase of the property, and supported Pauline's claim to a larger percentage of the estate.

After the affidavit was filed, James appeared to accept that his marriage to Pauline was over.

He started putting wheels in motion to sell the Frankston house, and told Pauline he was thinking about moving into state.

He asked Pauline to go with him, but she reiterated that there was no chance of the two of them getting back together.

She had one priority, and that was to take care of her mother.

On Monday, September 29, Maria apparently told her sister Carmella that she was fed up.

According to Carmella, Pauline had told her she still loved James.

Maria said she was tired of people walking all over her, and she intended to start standing up for herself.

Carmella fully supported her sister, and encouraged her new attitude.

As later, Maria was dead.

To investigators, it seemed entirely plausible that James Unamadou could have arrived at Maria's home unannounced as she settled down to watch TV for the night.

They theorized that she might have invited him in and sat down in the club lounge to have a conversation.

Without warning, Unamadou could have struck her from behind, beating her to death before rifling through her purse to make it look like a robbery.

James Unamadou agreed to provide a witness statement to the police, in which he explained that Maria Yann had been an ongoing supporter of his marriage to Pauline.

Unamadou said the two spoke often, and that he occasionally visited Maria to help with odd jobs.

But the last time he'd stopped by was four weeks prior to her death.

On the Monday that Maria was killed, Unamadou had the day off from his job working a production line for a packaging company.

He said he'd spent most of the day cleaning the Frankston property in preparation for

it being sold.

He'd hired a three cubic meter skip bin to help with the process.

He claimed he was home all day, save for a couple of hours between three and five o'clock.

At around five, ten p.m., he came inside to soak some white clothing in bleach in the bathtub because he didn't have a washing machine.

He then made dinner and sat down to watch Australian Story.

He didn't typically watch the show, but said he was interested in the story about Mike Munro.

Unamadou said that after this, he rinsed out his laundry, unsuccessfully tried to call Pauline a couple of times, and then went to bed.

Unamadou denied ever threatening or intimidating Maria Yen.

He said he considered her like his own mother.

But investigators were suspicious about some of his answers.

Australian Story was an ABC program, yet in his statement, James Unamadou said he had watched the show on Channel 9 before switching the TV over to the ABC.

His comment that the last time he'd visited Maria was four weeks prior was also contradicted by others.

Maria's sister Dorothy said she had dropped by for a visit exactly one week before Maria was killed.

Dorothy claimed that James Unamadou was inside when she arrived, arguing with Maria. She said when Unamadou saw her, he became fidgety.

Visiting Maria on a Monday evening was a weekly routine for Dorothy, but she told Maria this was the last time she'd be doing so, as she had just accepted a new commitment.

If Unamadou had been there as well, he'd likely overheard this, meaning there was a strong chance he knew Maria would be home alone on the night she was killed.

Because Unamadou lived alone, he didn't have an alibi for the crucial window between 6 and 11pm on Monday, September 29.

These factors, along with the concerning statements that continued to roll in from Maria's friends and family, officially propelled James Unamadou to the position of prime suspect in the murder of Maria Yen.

Unamadou told police he was unaware that he owed Maria any money.

He only learned of this four weeks prior, when his lawyer told him about the affidavit Maria had submitted to the family court.

Unamadou claimed he never saw the affidavit.

He also said that money wasn't an issue, and that he would have happily paid Maria the outstanding debt.

He denied ever threatening Jeff Yan with a knife, saying he'd only held up a stick.

While he acknowledged the breakdown of his marriage, he insisted it was amicable, and that he and Pauline remained friends who were working towards a reconciliation.

He rejected allegations that he was responsible for the break-in at Pauline's unit.

He also denied having a dispute with Maria about the property stored in her shed, or attempting to break into it.

As for the suggestion that he'd attempted suicide under Maria's watch, Unamadou insisted that he'd simply been tired.

When asked about the alleged conversation Maria had with the witch doctor, Unamadou firmly denied that such a call ever took place.

He said that as a Christian, he didn't believe in witch doctors.

He also claimed to have no idea that his nephew was in the country illegally, nor had Maria ever said she'd report him to immigration.

As far as Unamadou was concerned, he'd never threatened Maria, and she had no reason to be frightened of him.

He refused to believe that Maria would ever say such a thing to anyone else, and firmly denied having anything to do with her death.

According to Unamadou, Maria was his pillar.

Six days later, police obtained a search warrant for Unamadou's Frankston home.

In a manhole in the laundry, they found a black bag.

Inside were various personal documents, including court papers, intervention orders, various servitude debts, and a photo of Pauline's boss, Dominic.

Unamadou's vehicle, a white Mitsubishi Express van that he used for contract cleaning jobs, was also examined.

When police had first questioned Unamadou, an officer had noted that the van's exterior and interior were filthy.

The dash was covered in a thick layer of dust, and the rear carpet was torn and stained.

What got it about inside were cleaning products, rubbish, and cigarette butts.

This time, the exterior was unchanged, but the interior was markedly different.

The majority of the rubbish had been cleaned up, and it appeared that new carpet had been fitted to the rear.

According to Pauline, this was unusual.

She said that in the year Unamadou had owned the van, he'd only ever cleaned it once.

James Unamadou told police that on the night of Maria's murder, his van was parked outside his house under the carport.

However, at that time, the three cubic metres skip bin had been sitting under the carport, and at 500 kilograms, it couldn't be moved by hand.

The skip was no longer on the property, but, based on its size, investigators determined it was impossible for Unamadou's van to be parked in the carport as well.

They spoke to a neighbour who could not recall seeing the van parked in the street on the night of Monday, September 29.

In a bid to establish whether James Unamadou was indeed home that night as he claimed, police obtained his phone records.

He had previously told them that he was out between three o'clock and to just after five, but records showed a dial-up internet connection from his home computer at 4.15pm.

At 5.52pm, telephone records indicated that Unamadou used his mobile phone to call a plumber.

Data showed that his phone was in Frankston at the time of this call.

A phone call came through to Unamadou's mobile at 8.40pm, but he didn't answer it.

Therefore, no data had been recorded to ascertain the device's location.

There was no further activity on either line until 11.15pm, when Unamadou tried calling Pauline Yan from both his landline and mobile.

He claimed he'd wanted to discuss a letter from their bank regarding their mortgage.

This meant there was a window of five hours and 25 minutes where no data existed on Unamadou's phone, and his whereabouts couldn't be ascertained between 5.52 and 11.15pm.

Investigators wondered, did that leave enough time for James Unamadou to commit the crime?

The most direct route between Unamadou's home in Frankston and Maria's home in Hillsville was 81 kilometres.

Investigators travelled the route themselves, departing from Frankston at 5.52pm on a Monday evening.

They travelled the speed limit until they reached Juliette Crescent at 7.24pm.

Leaving Hillsville at 10pm, they arrived back in Frankston at 11.09pm.

Based on standard Monday evening traffic, they determined the minimum round trip was roughly 2 hours and 41 minutes.

James Unamadou would have had plenty of time.

Unamadou told police that nobody else had access to his mobile phone.

He also claimed he hadn't seen Maria for four weeks before her murder.

If that was the case, his phone data raised another significant question.

At 10.14pm on Wednesday September 24, five days before Maria's murder, Unamadou's phone had pinged off a tower in Hillsville.

According to various friends and members of the Yann family, Unamadou didn't know anyone in Hillsville other than Maria, and they knew of no reason for him to be in the area.

The case against James Unamadou looked to be stacking up.

He had a motive to kill Maria Yann and seemed to have been caught in a number of lies.

But after months of investigation, the case was still entirely circumstantial, with no evidence tying him to the crime.

According to a Yann family friend, Unamadou eventually admitted to Pauline that he was responsible for the break-in at her rental unit.

Pauline told police he had returned most of the items he'd taken, and she decided not to press charges.

In May 2004, Pauline Yann gave the police another statement.

Refuting her ex-husband's claim that he didn't believe in witch doctors, Pauline said it was actually an intrinsic part of his culture.

She said that Unamadou had admitted to her that during their separation he'd sought help from a witch doctor in the hopes that they'd get back together.

According to Pauline, he'd also told her about the call between Maria and Baba.

This was supported by phone records, which showed two calls to Nigeria from Unamadou's phone on the night Maria alleged the calls occurred.

Furthermore, Pauline insisted Unamadou was fully aware of the debt they owed Maria.

Pauline told police that Unamadou knew the significant role that Maria played in dictating Pauline's decisions about the future.

He knew exactly how close they were and that Maria's death would devastate her.

Pauline claimed that on a number of occasions during their marriage and separation Unamadou told her, you think this is hell, I'll show you hell.

Regardless, Pauline didn't think he was capable of murder.

He loved Maria and for all his shortcomings he would never have hurt her.

She told one friend that if Unamadou had killed her mother, she would have no choice but to

kill herself.

A close friend of Unamadou's was aware of the issues between the couple.

She claimed that Unamadou had told her all about the Nigerian witch doctor who would curse anyone who tried to separate him and Pauline.

She told police that when Pauline moved out of the matrimonial home, Unamadou had stated, it's all out war.

Months continued to pass but still police found no concrete evidence tying James Unamadou to Maria Yann's murder.

For her family, there could be no greater injustice than the case going cold.

For Maria's son, Jeff, his mother's murder had to be solved not just for her family but for her community.

Jeff told reporters, Mom was such a worker for the community and people like her should be looked after a bit better than that.

By February 2006, two and a half years had passed since Maria was killed and still there had been no arrests.

An inquest was held to go over all the available evidence.

Over two days, numerous witnesses testified about Maria's growing fear of James Unamadou and her rising belief that something bad was going to happen.

Unamadou didn't testify on the grounds that he could incriminate himself, but Pauline Yann disputed the claims against him.

She defended her ex-husband and criticized police handling of the case, saying they'd ignored persons of interest who didn't fit their theory of what happened.

In total, there had been 20 different persons of interest during the course of the investigation. The lead detective rejected Pauline's assertion, saying,

All of the people nominated have been eliminated and have alibis.

There is only one person in this inquiry who remained a suspect, and that's James Unamadou.

As the inquest wrapped up, investigators were approached by a woman named Andrea King. Andrea had previously told police she didn't know James Unamadou, but that was apparently a lie.

She now claimed the two had been casually dating around August 2003, during Unamadou's separation from Pauline, and she had something she needed to get off her chest.

Case file will be back shortly.

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According to Andrea King, Unamadou had been open and up front about the issues he was having with Pauline and Maria Yann.

Following the robbery of Pauline's unit, Andrea claimed she overheard Unamadou's side of a telephone conversation.

According to Andrea, he told the unknown person on the other line,

The stuff is safe and it is in storage.

If police ask you, you know nothing.

I had a gloves on.

Andrea said she warned Unamadou that he shouldn't be taking the law into his own hands.

He responded,

You wouldn't understand.

You don't know what I have been through.

According to Andrea, Unamadou repeatedly told her that Maria and Pauline were hassling him.

He couldn't understand why Maria was taking Pauline's side when Unamadou had been like a son to her.

He felt betrayed as though he'd been stabbed in the back and was convinced that Maria didn't think he was good enough for her daughter.

Unamadou had told police he didn't answer the 8.40pm phone call to his mobile on the night Maria was murdered because he thought it was a plumber chasing money.

In reality, the caller was Andrea King.

Andrea also spoke with Unamadou after police executed the search warrant of his home and vehicle.

She told police that she noticed him become edgy when the subject of the search came up and he started tapping his foot furiously.

Andrea said that Unamadou began asking how police could possibly know whether he was in Hillsville on the night of Maria's murder.

According to Andrea, she then overheard Unamadou's side of another phone conversation.

This time he spoke in a combination of English and a language that she didn't understand.

Andrea claimed to have heard Unamadou say,

◆The stuff's safe.

You know nothing.

If the police ask, you know nothing.

Don't say anything.◆

Andrea said that about 10 days after Maria's death, Unamadou arrived at her home unannounced.

According to Andrea, Unamadou was smiling as he told her,

◆I did this.

I killed her.◆

She said he then boasted that he wouldn't go to jail because the police had no proof he was responsible.

Andrea claimed to have cut him off, saying she didn't want to be involved.

She asked that he leave and stop contacting her.

Shortly after this alleged confession, Andrea moved house.

She said she didn't report Unamadou to police because she assumed they would have enough evidence to charge him.

Armed with Andrea's statement, investigators felt they didn't need to wait for the inquest findings to make their move.

On February 8, 2006, they arrested James Unamadou for the murder of Maria Yen.

Unamadou maintained his innocence, pleading not guilty at trial two years later in January 2008.

Almost four and a half years had passed since Maria's death and the case had long since faded from the headlines.

Although Pauline was now in a new relationship, she continued to believe in her ex-husband's. For other members of the Yen family, the long-awaited trial was their chance to finally see justice served.

But when the day came, they were disheartened to see that there was almost no media in attendance.

At the time, Melbourne's gangland killings were dominating the news cycle.

This disparity pained Jeff Yen.

He later told the Australian newspaper.

That white-trash mafia got more coverage than our dear old mum.

The prosecution's case was relatively straightforward.

James Unamadou, who is now 52, was a man embittered by his impending divorce and the withdrawal of Maria Yen's support.

He viewed Maria as standing in his way of reconciling with Pauline, and there were rising tensions about how the money would be split after the sale of the Frankston home.

Having gotten away with breaking into Pauline Yen's unit, he felt confident he could eliminate Maria.

According to the prosecution, circumstantial evidence pointed to a carefully planned, premeditated killing.

The defence cast doubt on the circumstantial case, pointing out, there's no forensic evidence, there's no fingerprints, there's no eyewitnesses.

They questioned why Unamadou would ever confess to Andrea King when he barely knew her.

They urged the jury to discredit the alleged confession entirely, suggesting that Andrea King was simply hoping to collect the \$100,000 reward that had been offered by police.

After two weeks of evidence, it took the jury just five hours of deliberation before reaching a verdict.

Not guilty.

Maria's loved ones sat in stunned silence.

This was something they'd been mentally preparing for.

Prior to the trial, the judge had deemed several items of evidence inadmissible.

The prosecution were prohibited from making any mention of the alleged call from the Nigerian witch doctor, or the alleged death threats Unamadou made to Maria and Pauline.

They were also forbidden from mentioning Unamadou's alleged manhandling of Maria, or his alleged knife attack against Jeff Yan.

Without Maria around to give first-hand evidence relating to these incidents, the evidence was deemed prejudicial hearsay.

James Unamadou was free to go.

Members of Maria's family struggled to understand why this evidence, which they viewed as highly compelling, couldn't be presented in court.

Jeff told the Herald's son,

The whole ordeal has been surreal for all of us.

It's been an incredible emotional journey.

We were just a normal family, good people.

But I think, as a family, we stand dignified.

With the James Unamadou declared not guilty, no further avenues were investigated and the case was filed away.

The Yan family did their best to move on, but the trauma of Maria's murder followed them. Angus swelled, not just because they were left with unanswered questions about the crime, but because of the expectation that they simply carry on with their lives as though nothing had ever happened.

Those who believed Unamadou was guilty, like Jeff Yan, struggled to comprehend that he was free to continue living in their community and that he could strike again.

Jeff's daughters, Esther and Bella, had been just seven and nine when their cherished nana was killed.

At the time, they didn't fully understand the weight of what had happened, but as they grew older, they carried scars from the ongoing experience.

With Esther and Bella eventually pursued careers that involved helping victims of crime.

It was a legacy that Jeff was proud of, but Esther and Bella were haunted by the unfairness of it all.

They adored their nana and felt robbed that their memories of Maria were tarnished by the facts surrounding her murder.

Appearing on the podcast Australian True Crime, Esther said,

Love my family, we're super strong, but at the same time, it's done a lot of damage.

On a good day, we look normal and we're celebrating and we're happy, but on a bad day, it has left its mark.

In 2021, the Victorian police launched their cold case hub, an online portal where civilians can learn more about the state's unsolved homicides and help solve them.

Detective Inspector Tim Day appeared on radio station 3AW to promote the hub.

As the interview wrapped up, the presenter asked the day if there was one case in particular that he'd like to see solved.

Day didn't hesitate before answering the murder of Maria Yan.

Asked why?

Day responded.

I think that it's solvable.

When Maria's family heard about the radio appearance, they were ecstatic.

Detective Day had been one of the original investigators on Maria's murder, and if he still thought the case was solvable after 18 years, it gave them a glimmer of hope.

Since James Unamaru's trial, changes had also been made to Victoria's double jeopardy laws, which meant that a person could be charged with the same crime twice if new and compelling evidence emerged.

Jeff later explained to Sky News journalist Denim Hitchcock that up until that point,

the investigation only had a faint pulse.

After the radio segment, quote, it was like music to our ears.

All of a sudden, that slight pulse was a defined heartbeat, and it's just become stronger and stronger.

Following Detective Day's comments on 3AW in 2021, a review was ordered of Maria Yan's case.

A new league investigator was assigned to start looking at Maria's murder from scratch.

She made it clear that the new team would go into things with an open mind, reviewing all 20 persons of interest nominated during the original investigation.

They would not be clouded by tunnel vision.

The lead detective told the Australian, it is basically in our eyes an unsolved investigation.

We're not bound at all by what's happened in the past investigation, and in fact, we like to work freely from it.

As the 20-year anniversary of Maria's murder approached in May 2023, Victoria Police announced a \$1 million reward for information relating to Maria's case.

They also released crime scene photos in the hopes it might jog someone's memory.

A police spokesperson said,

Police have spoken to dozens of people as part of this investigation, however, there is always the possibility there is someone out there who is yet to speak to us.

Alternatively, it might be someone who has never felt ready to provide detectives with particular information, and for them, the time is now right.

Jeff Yan hoped that the significant sum would compel someone to come forward, telling reporters that he still carries a lot of anger.

Quote,

That's been one of the worst feelings that this person committed such a brutal and cowardly act has been walking freely in the community for 20 years.

He could be living next door to you.

As of late 2023, the renewed investigation into the murder of Maria Yan has not resulted in any charges.

If police have any new information, they are keeping their cards close to their chest.

Case file acknowledges James Unamaru's presumption of innocence.

In the eyes of the law, he has been acquitted of the crime, and he continues to deny any involvement.

Unamaru told the Australian newspaper,

For years I was persecuted of this vile murder I did not commit.

I spent two years of my life in remand while the police and family smeared my name.

On Google, my name remains as the suspect.

I am innocent, and the police needed to look elsewhere, but didn't.

When confronted by Denim Hitchcock for the 2023 documentary Who murdered Maria Yan, Unamaru

denied ever confessing to the crime and refused to comment any further.

According to the documentary, Pauline continues to believe in his innocence.

His family runs a Facebook group titled Help Maria Yan Catch Her Murderer, which includes all public updates relating to the case.

After all these years, Maria is never far from their minds.
Jeff Yan keeps a larger-than-life photo of Maria on his living room wall.
That's the first thing he sees when he walks in the door, and he talks to her every day.
Outside of the Healsville Living and Learning Centre, a garden bench sits in Maria's honour, offering a place where those touched by her life can sit and reflect.
Maria's sister, Deanne, avoids Healsville as much as she can.
The memory of what happened there is too painful, and Maria's mark on the community too strong.
For Deanne, Maria exists in the small things.
She told the star male.
Every day Maria's with me.
Every day.
She's in the wind.
She's in everything.
Nothing will bring her back, but nothing will take her memory from me until I'm no longer here.
Anyone with information relating to the murder of Maria Yan is encouraged to contact Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 00, or reported anonymously at [CrimeStoppersVec.com.au](https://www.crimestoppersvic.com.au).
That's the sound of Casey getting a random act of helpfulness.
We just told him the helpful SoCal Honda dealers will be replacing his old manual wheelchair with a brand new power wheelchair, and we paid him for sharing that story on the radio.
And we can help you too with a great deal on a reliable award-winning Honda, like the 2023 Accord.
To find the helpful SoCal Honda dealer near you, and to submit a random act of helpfulness for someone you know, visit [SoCalHondaDealers.com](https://www.socalhondadealers.com).
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