

Case No. 05CR498:
from no one to someone.

“I want to take some pictures of you,” he said after he had made his way into Vicky Wegerlee’s home and was forcing her into the bedroom.

“You are sick ... you need help,” she protested.

Soon after, she was strangled to death by what the citizens of Wichita, Kansas and the whole of America knew of as the BTK killer, short for Bind, Torture, Kill. He had named himself in a letter to the local paper, the Wichita Eagle, which he eagerly corresponded with. It was part of the thrill.

The killer was also a family man, a father of two, faithfully married to the same woman for thirty years. He was a Boy Scout leader and the president of the local Christ Lutheran Church. Dennis Lynn Rader did not lose any sleep. But his daughter, Kerri, remained taunted by recurring nightmares. Something seemed to attack her at night. We don't know what she might have seen, growing up with Dennis, who was an eager practitioner of autoeroticism, self bondage, which would oftentimes make up for his urge to kill.

He would hang himself, sometimes in their home, or in his parents’ basement, or in the woods. Wrap up like a mummy for hours. He was fascinated with mummies and had been for years. Sometimes he would do it in front of the mirror. Other times, he found a way to photograph himself with a Polaroid camera. Numerous stacks of pictures were found, in what he called the Mother Lode of his tree house drawer, where he kept his journals, stories, slicks ads, clippings, drawings – and the overall story he was creating, “the story of BTK”, these are his own words, not mine – the chapters were lined up and entitled.

He was waiting for the grand finale, but was captured before it happened by a foolish “mistake.” In his correspondence with the police, he saw them as his comrades, his confidantes, as if they would or should admire his intelligence, genius, ability to get away with murder and the artfulness of his (s)kills, which he wanted all the credit for, he could get.

“A fire was burning in my head,” he wrote after his first kill. “It was unbearable, I could not make it stop.”

Click, click. adjustments, click. Flash, click. Pull her pants down...click. Once more. The faded colors of analogue Polaroid images, the sequential quality of the series. A little to the left, the pants down some more – I am photographing while they are still fresh, after I have just seen life leave their eyes. I stumble on her legs in corduroy pants, pull them down some more and take another. I have to get out of here. I enter my car, I drive away. The wind in my hair. The sweat on my upper lip. I look mean, how do I look? I don't blink. I need to get rid of everything. I can't bear it. It did not happen. I don't know who this is. This is so strong. Capable of anything. Everything. And wanting more. Trolling. Trolling. No, I need to get home. Surely they will be on to me now. I will be revealed. I don't know if you know anything about serial killers. I don't know if you tried strangling someone, but it's much harder than it seems to be on films.

Did it go something like this?

“Excuse me, where is the center?” I asked the Greyhound bus driver, as he was unloading the trunk with suitcases, bags and boxes.

I arrived from Kansas City an early August afternoon to downtown Wichita, eager to see, to really see the place, where I would be staying the next many weeks.

“This is the center, honey!”

“Ah.” I cleared my throat and dusted off my cardigan. Immediately I was struck with disappointment, as the bus drove away, people disappeared, and I stood there looking helpless; it was not what I had imagined, although I cannot tell you what I had in mind. I can’t remember any longer.

The streets were deserted, empty, no one was in sight. Instead there were bronze statues of people on corners, benches, outside shops. I would not be surprised if tumbleweed flew through the streets. As I checked in to my hotel, one of the few places I could find which was affordable and decent, a hospital hotel with refill decaf coffee and airy donuts for breakfast. Rhonda, a part Cherokee biker chick was working reception, and I quickly befriended her.

“Where is the old town?” I asked her.

“Oh it’s far, you cannot walk there!” she insisted, when I told her that I did not have a driver’s license – and that I planned to walk as much as I could in the beaming heat.

“Is it nice, the old town?” I asked hoping that I would be able to find places that seemed more cheery or at least a bit lively compared to my first impressions.

“I have never been there actually,” she said, having lived in Wichita for the past 25 years. “My grandma always told me, if you have no business there, don’t go there!”

I nodded.

It took me about fifteen minutes to walk into the old town, and I considered sending Rhonda a postcard but decided against it. I found gigantic thrift stores with mammoth remains; tusks and ancient pottery, diners, bars, hotels – it was pleasant but still deserted. I had my lunch in The Old Mill, a classy diner, which quickly became my favorite spot to go over material, eat burgers, homefries, cherry pies and drink refill coffee.

Dennis Lynn Rader committed ten murders in the 1970-1980s. He was caught in 2005. How he managed to stay on the streets leading the double life that he did for so many years seems unfathomable. When it finally happened after thirty years, he didn’t seem shocked to be caught. What did in fact shake him up was when he realized that no one thought he was cool – his self-image was shattered, and this devastated him more than anything. Were police just really inefficient or struck with bad luck? Or was he a scheming clever man, who was excellent at covering his tracks?

A lot of things had happened during those thirty years: From the discovery of DNA to the extinction of Polaroid film; the memories of a community had changed with the murders. The serial killer phenomenon may have been different then. For all we know, serial killers existed for many years; but did it somehow change with the emergence of cinema, the way we “see” them and the way they “see” themselves?