

Proof Of Life

By Katherine Tomlinson

It was 2:45 in the afternoon of a sleepy fall Friday and Michelle Martorelli was proofreading a report she'd taken nearly a week to write. It was meant to accompany a power point presentation on the same topic, but her boss was a Luddite who would never even click open the document, so she had to make sure he 'got it' from the hard copy.

It reassured him to see lots of pages; it made him think she was really doing her job.

He always wanted pie charts.

He would like this report, she thought. In addition to pie charts, it had clip art and bar graphs and tables of numbers, all of which lined up in a positive way. The narrative sections were cogent and precise, models of elegant prose, written with a sharp eye for detail and a knack for making complex information accessible. The message it conveyed was good news. The company, which was number two in a very competitive market, had unexpectedly profited when the CEO of their biggest competitor died in a skydiving accident. A notorious micro-manager and an all-around son of a bitch, he'd left the company without a clear heir and the resulting disarray was destroying it from within. Christmas bonuses at Ukacom would be good this year.

Michelle had been working for Ukacom (rhymes with *puke*, some of the younger employees joked) since graduating from college six years ago. She liked her job, though she never confused her work life with a social life. She was what other people dismissed as a 'numbers cruncher'. Or if they were being snarky, 'a bean counter'.

She didn't really care what other people thought.

Her office was on the west side of the building, where the mid-afternoon sun poured in and cast a mellow golden light into the offices. The light often annoyed her, creating a glare on her computer screen, so she kept her blinds more or less permanently closed. The light from her computer screen cast the only illumination in the room as she finished reading her document and pressed the key to send it to the printer. She was thinking about rewarding herself with a latte from the café on the first floor when the bomb planted in the base of a newly installed fountain in the lobby exploded.

The explosive had been shaped for maximum destructive force and it blew through the fourteen floors of the Ukacom office building like a knife slicing a layer cake.

Michelle's office was on the fifth floor, and she was still alive when it collapsed through the lower four floors. She was still trying to process what was happening when the nine floors above her pancaked at the bottom of the hole torn out of the foundation by the bomb.

People always say, "They never knew what hit them," but that wasn't really true for Michelle. Her next-to-last clear thought, as she was slipping and sliding on the tilting office floor, was *what's happening?* Her very last thought was simpler.

I'm dead.

She died fast but not quite without pain.

For awhile, people had held out hope that someone would be pulled from the rubble alive, but it was never likely from the start and after a week, when the search and

rescue dog team from California packed up and went home, the officials gave up hope. So the body count stood at 814, with 47 people missing.

They had enough body parts to account for 23 whole people, but what was left was more problematic. A shred of scalp, a shard of bone, a sliver of a fingernail. They found one intact hand still clutching the handle of a Prada purse. The hand wore a wedding set in diamonds and white gold. The hand belonged to Lisabeth Johnson, whose husband identified her by the rings and the close-bitten fingers on the hand.

What was left was unidentifiable, just so many pounds of fat-marbled meat. The investigators had worked car accidents and plane crashes, but only one - a National Guardsman who'd seen duty in Iraq - had ever seen the effects of an explosive device on human flesh. It's not something you forget and when he found himself scooping remains out with a shovel, he seriously began planning his exit strategy from his job.

In the aftermath, investigators asked the company for a list of all the employees who'd been working in the building on the day of the blast. The list the company gave the investigators was alphabetical. Michelle's name was 1038th on the list. The investigators also asked for a floor plan to be marked up with the locations of the missing employees' work stations. Then the investigators began questioning the survivors.

Five people on the fifth floor had survived but none of them, oddly, seemed to know who Michelle was. The office she had worked in had a door that was nearly always closed. Computer logs showed that she almost always came in early, almost always worked late, and didn't, so far as anyone knew, take lunch.

The office building explosion was not the only crime that happened that day. There was a home-invasion robbery, a missing person complaint and a rape reported. Police caught the crew behind the home invasion pretty quickly. The rape complaint was withdrawn. (Both parties had had a little too much to drink.) The missing person was a guy who'd left a bar with a woman and had only been gone 24 hours. The cops weren't too worried about him.

Identifying the 47 people who'd gone missing after the explosion strained the resources of the local police department. The Feds came in to help, but were soon pulled away by another crisis, this one an attempted mass poisoning at a luxury hotel in New York. The skeleton team that was left was over-worked and frustrated by the lack of leads and the dearth of credible information. And Michelle might as well have been a ghost.

One or two of the people they questioned about her seemed apologetic, as if they were embarrassed not to have known the woman who had so suddenly vanished from their midst.

No one came forward to ask about a body. Or remains. In an attempt to put a name to the remaining remains, the investigators went to Human Resources and asked for addresses on all the missing. At their homes, they talked to loved ones who offered them soiled pillowcases and used toothbrushes and sweaty socks from the laundry hamper. And these were used to distill DNA, the essence of the dead person's life and so, one by one, the fragments of bone and the bits of flesh were gathered up, put into boxes and burned or buried according to custom.

There was no one at Michelle's apartment, no roommate, no lover, no cats, not even a potted plant. The investigators had to track down the management company (an out-of-town group of doctors and lawyers who owned rental property all over the state).

The owners' lawyer came over with a set of keys and let the investigators in. They fanned out over the apartment and found...absolutely nothing.

They started with Michelle's bedroom, which contained a bed, a bedside table and a chest of drawers. There were fingerprints on the snooze button of the clock radio, but since Michelle had never been fingerprinted and since what was left of her no longer had fingers, the prints were of little use.

Her sheets had just been changed and the old ones were found in the dryer of the little washer/dryer combo tucked away in her kitchen. There were no dirty dishes or utensils. She had stacked a bowl and a spoon and a coffee cup in the drainer after washing them. (She'd used rubber gloves) There was a large, serrated bread knife in the drainer too, and investigators found a round loaf of unsliced sour dough in a bread bin on the counter, next to a toaster with slots wide enough to accommodate bagels, toaster pastries and odd-shaped slices of bread. There was a mostly full box of oatmeal in the cupboard.

The bathroom was completely antiseptic. The toilet was clean enough to drink from, the faucets and mirror sparkling, the sink gleaming as if polished. The towels were freshly laid out. (Clean towels were in the dryer with the clean sheets. The investigators concluded she must have done laundry right after her morning shower.)

There wasn't even a plug of hair in the drain of the bathtub, or a clot of that black ick that gathers in bathroom sinks.

Her bathroom cabinet contained no prescription medicines, no birth control pills, no over-the-counter nostrums of any kind. There was a bottle of baby aspirin (half used) and some eye drops. There was a pump bottle of anti-bacterial soap. There was a small bottle of generic mouthwash. There was no makeup anywhere, which puzzled the investigator searching the bathroom whose girlfriend fills every single inch of their shared bathroom with her cosmetic clutter.

There wasn't even a toothbrush in her bathroom, which the investigator found odd until a colleague suggested that she probably took it to work so she could brush her teeth after lunch. (Michelle actually did take lunch, but she usually brown-bagged it. And her office had a tiny 'executive' bathroom, so she never frequented the ladies room.)

There was no hair in her hairbrush, which was found soaking, along with her comb, in a container of some sort of antiseptic. The investigator looked into the trash can in the bathroom, hoping to find a used tissue or a used tampon or loose hair stripped from the brush, but it was empty. He paid a visit to the dumpster outside the apartment building, but the garbage had been emptied the morning of the explosion and by now was moldering under a foot of new garbage on the local landfill.

There was no clutter anywhere in the home, not even mail. Later, one of the computer techs at the field office hacked into her computer and discovered that she paid all her bills online. He looked at her e-mail and found no names in her address book. He discovered she bought and sold vintage clothes on Ebay and had 100% positive feedback on over 600 transactions, and that her user name was MIMAR. All of the feedbacks were impersonal, which he knew from his own experience selling comic books, was unusual. If you had any personality at all, your buyers usually mentioned it.

There weren't any photographs in the apartment, no magnets on the fridge holding cartoons ripped from the paper or recipes or coupons for pizza delivery. She

didn't have a land line, but she'd had a cell phone. Presumably it been in her purse and had been destroyed in the explosion.

The investigator had gone through her underwear drawer. There were no cobwebby lace bras, no silken tap pants, no thongs. Just no-nonsense, no-name cotton briefs, high cut. She'd been a small woman, slim-hipped, with tiny breasts.

Her closet was full of Payless shoes, all more or less the same style - conservative low-cut heels for work, a pair of ratty generic brand tennis shoes, recently washed. They were not able to extract DNA from the shoes. Michelle's feet apparently didn't sweat very much. The dresses hanging in her closet were vintage; mostly 30s and 40s, and tests on the cloth came back inconclusive. Too many people had worn them over the years.

He looked in her jewelry box, which contained a pair of pearl studs, a pair of gold loops the size of a dime and a pair of what looked like diamond earrings but turned out to be cubic zirconium. He also found a rose gold wedding ring, which excited him for awhile. The investigator thought perhaps he would be able to track down an ex-husband somewhere, someone who would claim her for his own, at least in death.

But the ring turned out to have belonged to her mother, long dead and buried alongside Michelle's father, who had apparently died when she was just a teenager.

The investigator looked in her refrigerator and found a carton of fat-free milk, a carton of four-percent cottage cheese, a carton of leftover Chinese food (moo goo gai pan, which the investigator privately thought of as baby food).

He also found a partial bottle of Hypnotiq, that blue liqueur he knew was a trendy quaff du jour. That discovery almost made him weep because it was the first sign of personality he'd found in the place, the first proof that someone had actually lived and breathed in the apartment. But he had to go back to the field office and tell his boss that there was no chance of identifying Michelle from the things she left behind. The unclaimed remains were put into storage against the day someone might be able to identify them. The investigator moved on to other cases, but he remained just a little bit haunted by the elusive Michelle.

The owners hired a cleaning crew to ready the apartment for another tenant. Their lawyer told the head of the crew to box everything up and take it to storage, but instead he sold all her clothes to a consignment shop, gave the shoes to his wife, who had dainty feet even though she was pushing 200 pounds, and threw out the food in the fridge. He drank some of the Hypnotiq, but it tasted like cough syrup to him, so he poured it down the drain. He felt kind of a pang throwing out the empty bottle. It was such a beautiful blue.

He gave the pearl studs to his mother, the gold loops to his daughter and the cubic zirconium studs - which he thought were diamonds - to Lucia, the new girl on his crew who could barely speak English and had the sweetest body he'd ever seen without clothes.

She was very grateful.

The owners put an ad for the apartment in the paper, charging \$100 more for the one-bedroom, one-bath unit than they'd charged Michelle. A young woman who'd recently graduated from college moved in, oblivious to the fate of the previous tenant. It was a building with a lot of transients. No one had ever met Michelle. No one came forward to offer friendship to the new tenant either. She hardly noticed. Her new job

absorbed her and she had an attentive boyfriend and an active social life that kept her busy.

Two months after she moved in, the new tenant was taking a shower when she noticed an uneven place in the bathroom floor. Curious, she pulled up the loose section. And found herself looking at the severed head of a 25-year-old man named John Henderson. His friends had called him Johnny. His roommate had reported him missing on the morning the office building had been bombed. His family (mother, father, two brothers and a sister) had made the local cops' lives miserable for not looking harder for him. (They didn't want to hear that the police resources had been badly stretched by the office building explosion.) They'd come forward with photographs and videos of the missing man, and would buttonhole cops with anecdotes about him, wanting desperately to convince the cops that their son/brother/friend was someone worthy of their time.

Investigators had only one lead. Johnny had left the bar the night he disappeared in the company of a woman. Witnesses said she'd been small, with slim hips and tiny breasts. But no one remembered seeing her face. They couldn't remember the color of her hair or the shape of her smile.

So what was left of Johnny was returned to his family in the worst possible way.

Investigators tried to link up Johnny Henderson with Michelle Martorelli, but just couldn't do it. The Feds weren't looking for a crime scene when they checked out her apartment, searching for some trace of Michelle they could link to the remains in the office building wreckage. Later, the investigator who saw the bread knife in the kitchen drainer would realize it was probably the murder weapon, but by then, it had disappeared.

The murder of Johnny Henderson remains an open case.

The owners re-rented the apartment where his head was found. The cost of the rental is now \$200 more than Michelle paid. (It's in a good neighborhood, close to the subway and bus lines.) The owners didn't mention the new bathroom flooring in their classified ad. The new tenant was happy to have the place.

Ukacom's annual report had a special 'in memoriam' section to list the employees who died in the bombing. There were 860 names on the list. Michelle Martorelli would have been 861 but in view of the ongoing investigation into the murder of Johnny Henderson, the man in charge (Michelle's pie-chart loving boss) decided it would be inappropriate to include her.

No one noticed the exclusion.

No one ever really notices the bean counters.

Katherine Tomlinson reads for both pleasure and business as a story consultant in Los Angeles. She is writing her first novel.