

“He Killed Her”

On July 3, 2003, I was at my wit’s end. My investigation was threatening to break up my marriage and drive me mad. I had developed yet one more nervous tick. Now I had a habit of bending my head down and running my fingers through my hair. I was looking to see if the mic was sticking out again—even when I wasn’t at work, even when I wasn’t recording.

The long Fourth of July weekend was here and I resented it. I resented the idea of three torturous days at home, unable to think about anything except finding out the truth about Alcor. I dreaded being away from the office. Now it was two days until the first anniversary of Ted Williams’s death. When would it end? I needed to take matters into my own hands and force the situation.

I wired myself up and marched into Joe Hovey’s office. He was one of the longest-serving Alcorians and seemed to know the entire history of the place. He also knew that people around the office were plotting and planning to oust him. Maybe these shifting sands would make him eager to have a friendly conversation with me.

I started off by telling Joe that Charles had mentioned Mike Darwin and the John Dentinger incident to me. I led him to believe I knew more than I actually did. Still, Joe wasn’t exactly keen at first to volunteer information about homicide.

So I changed tack and hoped to steer the conversation back to the subject of the suspicious deaths in a roundabout way. I asked Joe about Keith Henson, a former Alcor board member. Joe had spoken highly of Henson to me in the past and I figured this might loosen him up. I already knew that Keith Henson had been arrested in 2000 by the Riverside County sheriff's office for making terrorist threats against the Church of Scientology. Ultimately he was convicted on a charge of "interfering with a religion," but instead of appearing for sentencing he fled to Canada and sought political asylum, which I guess is where he was when I was at Alcor.

I knew that Joe Hovey approved of Keith Henson's hate campaign against Scientology. I had heard Joe in the past refer to the group as "the scum of the earth."

I had also heard talk around the office and read a few online articles claiming that Henson's first wife, in divorce documents, had accused him of the hideous act of child molestation with two of his own daughters, though she subsequently declined to testify against him. Everyone at Alcor felt that Henson had gotten away with this crime. Regardless—and this made me extremely uncomfortable—he was considered a hero by most Alcorians, including Joe Hovey, for his battles with Scientology. I got Joe talking about Henson to break the ice. This is the conversation that followed, transcribed from my recording:

JOE HOVEY: He [Keith Henson] was a great help during the Dora Kent affair when the county coroner in Riverside County, in California, really wanted to shut us down, wanted to destroy us completely. . . .

LARRY JOHNSON: . . . Now is that the one that Charles was telling me about that, um, the one that, um, that Mike Darwin helped along with. . .

JOE HOVEY: Yeah.

LARRY JOHNSON: . . . with potassium chloride . . .

JOE HOVEY: No. . .

LARRY JOHNSON: Or was that a different one?

JOE HOVEY: Oh, geez, did he tell you about that?

LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah.

JOE HOVEY: Oh, that was later. That was one of the main reasons why

we. . .

LARRY JOHNSON: Before Dora?

JOE HOVEY: It was after Dora.

LARRY JOHNSON: After Dora?

JOE HOVEY: Yeah.

LARRY JOHNSON: So what did he do? Did he just . . .

JOE HOVEY: He killed her.

He said it, just like that. He was completely casual about it. It made my skin crawl. But to Joe, it was no big deal.

LARRY JOHNSON: Really?

JOE HOVEY: Oh, no no, not, uh, not Dora Kent.

LARRY JOHNSON: The other lady?

JOE HOVEY: Yeah, it wasn't a lady, it was a guy. . . . I forget his name. It was in L.A. and it was in, I think it was in '92, late '92, something like that. I can't remember his name.

I believe Hovey had been speaking about Dora Kent, but then he realized I was asking about John Dentinger. He was thinking about one suspicious death while I was asking about another. How many were there?

LARRY JOHNSON: Well, see, Charles had told me that, um, I guess he [Darwin] gave him a loading dose of potassium chloride and he said what was the kicker to it was, I guess, was that Jerry Leaf, when he died, had a note or something in a safety deposit box saying . . .

JOE HOVEY: Oh yes.

LARRY JOHNSON: Mike Darwin's . . .

JOE HOVEY: Yeah.

LARRY JOHNSON: . . . you know, committed a homicide . . .

JOE HOVEY: Yeah.

LARRY JOHNSON: . . . or something really wild.

JOE HOVEY: Yeah. He, oh man, this could take all day . . . LARRY JOHNSON: Why would Mike Darwin do such a thing? I mean, he just got overzealous or . . .

JOE HOVEY: Yeah. Exactly. Mike is a loose cannon from the word go. He is a person who thinks his own needs, requirements will take precedence over all other institutions and all other individuals no matter what. At the same time, there's no question he's brilliant; he's very charismatic, he was president of Alcor, uh, he was very articulate, a great speaker, very effective presence on television.

To me, it sounded like Joe was describing David Koresh or Jim Jones.

LARRY JOHNSON: He just didn't have much patience when it came to waiting for somebody to die. JOE

HOVEY: Exactly. And other things as well. . . . Charles was the last guy trying to save him for being involved in cryonics somewhere. LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah. JOE HOVEY: And finally just Charles gave up on him. He just . . . LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah, that's what Charles was telling me. He just said that, uh, you know, that he had done that and apparently he said it upset Steve Harris enough to where he wanted I guess potassium chloride pulled out of the . . .

JOE HOVEY: Yeah.

LARRY JOHNSON: I don't know if it was potassium chloride or vecuro

nium, one of the two. JOE HOVEY: I don't know. LARRY JOHNSON: That's exactly what Charles told me. He just said that he just, uh, was very impatient. He actually did it I guess in front of a hospice nurse or something. JOE HOVEY: Uh, well, if you're talking about Dora Kent, I don't know. LARRY JOHNSON: No, he said it was somebody . . . JOE HOVEY: Now the other person was, uh, he did do it in front of, I don't know if it was a hospice nurse there or not, I don't think so, but I know it was another one of our members who was there who was engaged in the suspension. It was Tanya Jones.

LARRY JOHNSON: Oh.

JOE HOVEY: And he did it in front of her. And he asked her, “Do you want to help me in this?” And she looked at him, she says, “No, I can’t do that.” And he says, “Okay, I understand, I’ll take care of it.”

LARRY JOHNSON: She was smart. Yeah. JOE HOVEY: Well, yeah. But that’s when we decided—Alcor decided this guy’s just too dangerous to have around. LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah, that’s, I mean, that’s Dr. Kevorkian stuff. JOE HOVEY: You know, look, morally I’ve no objection to doing that sort of thing. I think Dr. Kevorkian is a great man, but we live in a real world. We just can’t do stuff like that. That would absolutely destroy us. That could kill us.

LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah.

JOE HOVEY: We’re pretty secure in all this stuff because even though a lot of people nowadays know about it, nobody can really prove anything and if it came down to a court issue, you know, who’s gonna say anything? Who’s gonna admit to anything?

LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah. JOE HOVEY: And it’s deniable.

Deniable? Not for long, Joe.

As the conversation continued, we spoke even more about Mike Darwin. He was last known to be somewhere close to where Charles lived, between Ash Fork and Flagstaff up in northern Arizona, pumping gas at a desert service station.

Joe said that although Darwin was brilliant, he had become too embarrassing and politically problematic to keep around. So this was the reason Joe gave for Darwin getting pushed out of Alcor—not because other company officers were upset that he had taken it upon himself to kill off Alcor members before their time, but because of company politics. Joe lifted his chin in the self-important way most Alcorians did and spoke of the CryoWars, saying that there had been “warfare between different factions within Alcor” for control of the company. Darwin had been a political liability for the opposing factions—one led by Saul Kent, the other by Carlos Mondragon. Neither camp could afford to have Darwin around with all his explosive secrets. He was drummed out before he could become an embarrassment to them all.

So Carlos Mondragon and Saul Kent were among the others who knew about Darwin prematurely ending Alcor members' lives?

Joe spoke further, about cryonicists being “mountain men” and “libertarians,” “hard-core” pioneers, marching into the future. They had to be strong enough to put up with “so much crap.” Keith Henson could do that, Joe gushed. Then Joe repeated his opinion that the Church of Scientology was the scum of the earth and spoke proudly about Keith Henson defying them.

We spoke a little more about the Dora Kent scandal. Joe referred to the Riverside authorities as “Keystone Cops,” gloated over the “stupid-ass coroner,” and finally said, incredibly, regarding the Dora Kent homicide investigation: “We were lucky.”

Joe was glowing, talking about the glory days of cryonics. At one point his mouth stretched into that creepy plastic smile of his and he said, “This whole thing would make a wonderful extended soap opera.”

I remember that Fourth of July with great regret. Beverly and I barbecued some steaks and my dad came over after his wife, Mary Jane, fell asleep early. I was completely on edge. Bev and my dad talked while I was pretty much silent the entire time. My dad asked me what was wrong. “Nothing” was all I’d say. After dinner they sat down to watch fireworks on TV. I sat down at my computer, alone, with my headphones on, listening to Joe Hovey say, “He killed her,” over and over. The next thing I knew, my dad had gone home and Beverly was already asleep. In my obsession, I was blind to how terribly wrong it was of me to ignore and alienate the people who loved me. All I could think about was getting back to Alcor and recording more and more.

I started carrying my gun on me at work.

I walked in there the following Monday with the recorder hidden under my shirttail and my 9mm Beretta tucked deep into the back of my pants.

Anxious as I was, I constantly feared the gun or the recorder would go clattering onto the floor. However, I felt like I needed them both.

I approached Hugh Hixon, seeking corroboration regarding John Dentinger's suspicious death. I had learned a sort of whistle-blowing lesson from my recent recording of Joe Hovey: get these guys talking about something they're comfortable with, then ease into the darker issues. Hugh loved talking about Alcor's procedures, so I started off by getting him to talk about the vecuronium and other dangerous drugs stored all around Alcor.

HUGH HIXON: Our biggest problem [during the first stages of cryo- sus
pension] . . . was you get into the question of somebody reviving. . . . LARRY JOHNSON: Oh, okay. HUGH HIXON: So we
used a two-prong approach. A very long time ago
we used bars of potassium chloride, now we use . . . LARRY JOHNSON: Was that just to pretty much
to stifle the cardiac, um, the chances of coming back? HUGH HIXON: It was to kill them . . .

Oh my God.

LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah, pretty much. HUGH HIXON: . . . to put them down and make sure they stayed that way
rather than, "Hey, he's awake, get him back on the pump, guys!" LARRY JOHNSON: Oh, okay, I'm with ya. Yeah, I
remember . . . HUGH HIXON: We did not want anyone waking up and causing problems.

That was what Hugh called saving a person's life. That was what, as a paramedic, I had done for twenty-five years before coming to this place.

LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah, Joe was telling me the other day, about an incident involving Mike Darwin where I guess he kinda
helped somebody along a little bit.
HUGH HIXON: Yeah. LARRY JOHNSON: What, who was the patient? Was it . . . It had to happen a
long time ago.

HUGH HIXON: You'll excuse me if I don't name names. LARRY JOHNSON: That's okay. HUGH HIXON: We had a guy, in fact I was in charge of the fucking

transport. LARRY JOHNSON: Figures. HUGH HIXON: Anyway, his name escapes. . . . Couldn't set up in the guy's living room 'cause we couldn't get it [Alcor's MALSS cart—an operating table on wheels] past the fucking doorway without knocking down a wall, [laughter] so what we did was, we had this garage up the street and, and you know it was well ventilated, you could look up and see the sky through the roof. We . . . put plastic drop cloths and lightweight wood and a little bit of twine and we built ourselves a little operating suite in the garage. And anyway this guy didn't need hydrating and he was unconscious. And it got a little too close a little too fast, so we pumped another liter or so of IV solution in him and brought him back from that edge.

Hugh seemed to be saying that they had kept Dentinger alive temporarily because they weren't prepared yet for his suspension.

HUGH HIXON: (continuing) And we got set up there. When things started looking real tight, we got him downstairs. We had to carry him. I forget which end I had. I think he was on my back. Got him onto a gurney, took him up the street to the garage, and got him tucked in. And we waited. And we waited quite a while. He was not very far away from dying . . .

LARRY JOHNSON: So did Mike just get impatient and? . . .

HUGH HIXON: He got . . . well, it's a little hard to determine what the hell Mike's reasons were. You know, there's real reasons, then there's reasons he gave . . . plus there were other considerations too. Traffic was a problem.

So, in part, Mike Darwin wanted to kill John Dentinger in order to avoid traffic.

LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah. So was it in California, L.A. or something?

HUGH HIXON: Could have been.

Hugh continued being coy, not wanting to name names.

LARRY JOHNSON: Okay.

HUGH HIXON: . . . Anyway so, um, Mike asked Tanya Jones for some Metubine iodide [one brand name of metocurine iodide, a neuromuscular blocking agent used to induce skeletal muscle relaxation] . . .

She didn't know what it was for and a couple other people did notice and Mike gave it [injected it], and after about another seven or eight minutes he [John Dentinger] quit breathing, which was entirely to be expected.

I took this to mean that, along with Hugh, there were "a couple other people" present at the time who "did notice" exactly what Darwin was doing. I wondered who they had been.

LARRY JOHNSON: Oh, was it a paralytic like vecuronium or something like that?

HUGH HIXON: Yeah, that's the one we use. You can't get Metubine anymore. . . . And, uh, anyway so the guy quit breathing. Now he wasn't very far from quitting breathing but . . .

LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah.

HUGH HIXON: We don't like that kind of thing. . . . Mike Darwin's philosophy is situational consequentialism, which is to say if he can get away with it, he'll try it.

LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah. He seems like an interesting person. I mean, I've never met him but I've heard a lot of stories. HUGH HIXON: He's very smart but he has a tendency to leave chaos in his wake. He's just totally disruptive. LARRY JOHNSON: Well, I know Charles was telling me a story the other day about him and about that incident and he said, I guess, the other

guy, Jerry Leaf, I guess, apparently left a note or something about it when he passed away.

Charles had indeed told me about this during our drive back from Saul Kent's house, and I had recently recorded Joe Hovey talking about Leaf's note. I had also heard that Jerry Leaf was the Alcor officer who had experimented on Saul's dog, Dixie.

HUGH HIXON: That was actually something separate. Wait a minute . . . was that . . .

Now I could tell that Hugh was trying to remember which premature death Jerry Leaf had written about in his note. He was trying to straighten out the confusion among several different homicides!

LARRY JOHNSON: Well, Charles was telling me apparently . . .

HUGH HIXON: Jerry was gone by that time. Jerry had been suspended by that time.

LARRY JOHNSON: By the time . . .

HUGH HIXON: . . . so this case was not the issue.

LARRY JOHNSON: Oh, okay.

HUGH HIXON: It was an earlier one which . . .

LARRY JOHNSON: So it was after Jerry had died. So Jerry [Leaf] was referring to a totally different, different deal.

HUGH HIXON: Yeah.

This was incredible! How many suspicious deaths had there been?!

LARRY JOHNSON: It happened I guess way after the Dora Kent thing then, right—that was, when you were telling me the story the other day . . .

HUGH HIXON: Dora Kent was in '86, '87; this was in about . . . must've been '93. . .

LARRY JOHNSON: Around '93?

HUGH HIXON: Yeah. Anyway, so this is particularly annoying since Mike

Darwin was always vociferous about our people not being left in the room with patients alone and here he is, he pulls the exact fucking stunt and then he tells me about it, which leaves me with really no recourse but to. . .

LARRY JOHNSON: So what did you say? How'd you . . .

HUGH HIXON: I told Carlos Mondragon, who was the president at the time. And that is one of the other reasons that Mike Darwin quit working for us.

Hugh spoke next about Mike Darwin being unstable and about him “curling up in a ball” during the Dora Kent scandal. Then Hugh came back around to the death of John Dentinger:

HUGH HIXON: Anyway, so that's what, uh . . . It wasn't anything that wasn't gonna happen but . . . we did beat the traffic. LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah. HUGH HIXON: But it was . . . very irritating. I had noticed what was going on but I didn't realize what he'd asked her for was vecuronium.

Hugh was saying that he had seen Darwin make the injection but he hadn't known what drug was in the syringe until Darwin told him.

LARRY JOHNSON: Oh, he asked for vec or the other . . . HUGH HIXON: Excuse me, Metubine. LARRY JOHNSON: Metubine. Yeah . . . Yeah, for some reason I was think

ing, you know because, what even got me thinking about it was

Charles had told me this story awhile back . . . HUGH HIXON: You will find . . . LARRY JOHNSON: . . . and I found some drugs on an old drug list that just

was kind of wild and that kind of raised . . . HUGH HIXON: Well, Mike didn't use potassium chloride, he used Metubine. LARRY JOHNSON: Metubine . . . HUGH HIXON: The reason we used Metubine, ah, it was part of a—he actually had thought this out, talked around about it, fucker can't keep his mouth shut, he did it because it was part of our protocol, and

what it does, it would prevent shivering and while we're busy with cooldown, on life support . . .

LARRY JOHNSON: Yeah.

Improbably enough, Hugh was telling me that they gave the member Metubine because they didn't want him shivering while he was being frozen alive.

HUGH HIXON: So there's perfectly good reason to use it and it is impossible to tell whether it was administered before or after because the two events were pretty damn close.

LARRY JOHNSON: Close, yeah, so it's hard to detect. HUGH HIXON: Well it isn't hard to detect but you cannot tell when it was administered.

So the real reason Darwin specifically used Metubine iodide was that even with an autopsy, experts could not tell if it had been administered before or after clinical death. Darwin had "thought this out" beforehand and even "talked around about it." It was completely premeditated. Unbelievable.

LARRY JOHNSON: So I guess what's her name . . . what is her name, um, Tanya Jones. So she was there, but she just wasn't comfortable there, didn't really . . .

HUGH HIXON: Well, she, she was doing what Mike asked her to. LARRY JOHNSON: I think if I'd have been her I'd have . . .

HUGH HIXON: Mike was doing what he damn well pleased. LARRY JOHNSON: If I had been her, I think I would've left the room. HUGH HIXON: Mike was one of the surgeons and I was the other. We did

the shutdown, the bypass shutdown right there [in the garage] and washout and I don't remember how the hell it went. . . . Took us ninety minutes to get in 'cause Darwin was trying to play surgeon and not do any damage, so we were, we got tangled down here [Hugh indicated his groin area, where the femoral artery is]. I didn't know as much as I do now about the situation there. This is before we started getting better on our surgery, so anyway . . .

Our conversation continued for another ten minutes or so about the surgery, the drugs they used, and the letter Jerry Leaf allegedly left in the safety-deposit box describing Darwin making the lethal injection that ended Dora Kent's life.

I sort of tuned out, though. As soon as Hugh said they used potassium chloride "to kill them . . . to put them down and make sure they stayed that way," it became harder and harder for me to stay in the room. But then when he said, "We did not want anyone waking up and causing problems," I knew I had to stifle my revulsion and keep digging, trying to get him to be even more specific about the case of John Dentinger. And he had obliged.

Hugh had come right out and said Darwin gave Dentinger the injection that ended his life. Apparently, Hugh had been present during the entire incident and even told me there were a couple other people in the room who "did know about it." At the moment he witnessed the injection, Hugh didn't know exactly what was in the syringe until Darwin told him later that it was Metubine.

Hugh had also said that Darwin didn't want any Alcorians left alone with patients but then "he pulls the exact fucking stunt," which seemed to mean either killing members like this was something they had had experience with in the past or that it was something other Alcorians were willing to do.

It was all very scary and shocking to listen to, especially the casual way that Hugh spoke about it. Joe Hovey had been just as casual when he had said a few days earlier, "He killed her." Killing off Alcor members was nothing new to these guys. Joe had preferred talking about Keith Henson, and Hugh had preferred chatting about the drugs. To Joe and Hugh, the apparent homicides were trivial, mentioned only in passing.

Like his colleagues, Hugh wanted me on his side in the CryoWars. I believed he was telling me the truth, at least as well as he remembered it. He had nothing to gain by lying to me about all this, so many years after the fact. Darwin wasn't around anymore; it wasn't as if Hugh would gain some advantage by setting me against Darwin. No, in my opinion, Hugh had let his guard down and simply took me deeper and deeper into his confidence in the course of this conversation. By tending to Hugh's health problems early in my tenure at Alcor, I believe I had gained his trust. We had had frequent discussions about Alcor's procedures. During all those talks I only ever found Hugh to be straightforward with me. This time it felt the same way.

I left work early that day. Beverly was surprised to see me. I couldn't tell her what I had heard. I was afraid of the effect this information would have on her, so I evaded her questions and basically kept quiet. I couldn't even look her in the eye. Hell, I think I was in shock, but my silence was one more brick in the wall I was building between us.

Bev shook her head at me. "Look at you. You're a wreck. Is this worth it? Larry, what do you think they'll do to you if they find out what you're doing?" she asked.

"Bev," I said, "I can't stop now."

She went into the bedroom and shut the door.

I did tell John Heer. He was floored.

"That's it, Larry," John said over the phone. "We have what we need."

But I wasn't convinced I should leave yet. I wanted more. I didn't realize then that this is a typical pattern for people who go undercover—in law enforcement and other settings, the covert operator often refuses to shut down his investigation. Sometimes an agent will even go rogue and refuse to come in from the cold. There was a lot about living this undercover life that I didn't know then.

John Heer told me he needed to contact the Los Angeles police. As an officer of the court, he explained, it was his duty to alert the police when he was made privy to evidence of a serious crime. The recordings I had seemed to implicate Alcor officials in the North Hollywood death of John Dentinger.

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