Twitter Thread by James Felton



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The Phantom of Heilbronn (or how for 16 years the German police hunted a serial killer who didn't exist)

(Thread, non sweary version here: https://t.co/iDOIhaFgIT)

Between the years of 1993 and 2009, police in Heilbronn, Germany were tracking just about the most elusive serial killer since Ted Cruz.

Known as the Phantom of Heilbronn, or occasionally The Woman Without A Face, she was implicated in so many crimes that the police eventually put out a reward of €300,000 for any information leading to her arrest.

The case that brought her to the media's attention and earned her two ridiculously badass nicknames

(honestly, if you don't want people to do murders you're going to have to come up with less glamorous nicknames - what's wrong with Jack Shitshispants or the Zodiac Cuck)

took place in April 2007. 22-year-old police officer Michèle Kiesewetter and her partner were taking a lunch break when two unseen assailants climbed in the back and shot both of them from behind, killing Kiesewetter and injuring her colleague.

Nobody had gotten a look at the killers, and there was basically no evidence to go on - but for a tiny microscopic bit of DNA found on the dashboard and the back seat of the BMW.

When they ran the DNA, it opened up one of the biggest investigations in German history, spanning 15 years.

The DNA didn't just match to one crime scene, it matched all over the place. She appeared to be at every crime scene, killing folk or robbing some chump whilst spraying her DNA everywhere, rubbing herself against evidence in the way a dog rubs its ass on the carpet.

As well as scenes of theft across three countries, the Phantom's DNA was found at scenes of brutal murders, with no obvious MO or theme. No calling card, like a serial killer who only kills at twilight or a mugger who always leaves a mug.

Her DNA was found on a teacup at the brutal strangulation of a 62-year-old woman in May 1993 in Idar-Oberstein, on a car that had been used to ferry the bodies of three Georgians killed in January 2008 in Heppenheim, a heroin needle in October 2001 near Gerolstein.

You name it, there she was, rubbing her DNA on the crime scene like Baloo rubs his ass on a tree.

Then there were some insane curveballs to throw into the evidence box labelled "what the fuck is going on". Her DNA was on a toy pistol that was involved in a robbery, and several other crime scenes that involved accomplices. None of them would ever say they were with a woman.

"Even in jail, these people don't talk," one officer told the Guardian in 2008.

There was no real pattern to any of it. What they had appeared to be a woman - that much they knew thanks to the DNA - who was apparently tearing it across the country, committing crimes of desperation and also a few of what looked like mob hits to go into the mix.

Sometimes, the scant witnesses described her as a woman, sometimes a man, adding to the confusion.

In 2005, two brothers got into a domestic dispute and one brother fired on the other, and then the police *found her DNA on the bullet*.

She was either the most elusive serial killer of the century or... or she didn't exist.

In 2009, a new piece of evidence showed up: A burned cadaver was found in France, which was thought to be the body of an asylum seeker who disappeared 7 years prior. The police checked the man's fingerprints on his application and found.... The Phantom's DNA.

"Obviously that was impossible, as the asylum seeker was a man and the Phantom's DNA belonged to a woman," a spokesman for the Saarbrücken public prosecutor's office, told Der Spiegel.

Somewhat weirded out, they checked again. This time, there was no match. All of a sudden, 15 years of evidence crumbled into dust, was bagged and labelled "not fucking evidence".

What had happened was that during the manufacturing process of the swabs used to take DNA, some hapless employee at the swab factory had contaminated all the swabs.

Cotton swabs are sterilized prior to being used in a crime scene, but just occasionally - and spread over many crimes - it can survive the process, at which point it was put onto the crime scenes all over the place.

They had been tracking their own swabs, like Scoobie fucking Doo following his own footprints in the snow.

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