

THE MURDER OF JESSICA LANG

There was nothing unusual about Perth on Thursday 24 September 1998, other than it was grey, wet and warm while waiting for the storm to arrive. Company Manager John Lang had tried to contact his 15 year old daughter Jessica but the phone went unanswered. He thought nothing of it as Jessica was not one to stay put and she only had four days of freedom left before starting her first full time job as an apprentice hairdresser. She did well at school but it was a bore and she wanted to experience life as an adult as quickly as possible. At first she wanted to be a model, then a beautician and now, after door knocking various hair dressers and leaving her CV, she had an encouraging future as a hair dresser.

John assumed Jessica had gone out with her friends. She liked to socialise and be with people; hating to be alone. Frequent weekends were spent stepping over teenage bodies she had invited home for a sleep over. There was not much sleeping done though as the girls stayed up late, eating pizza, laughing and chatting and watching videos when they weren't playing loud music. He did not know whether to get milk or not as he drove towards home.

John pulled into the driveway of their Bicton family home, an affluent and generally upper middle class suburb 10km south of Perth City and a few minutes drive from the Swan River, where dolphins and seals could be seen, and the beach. Bicton is one of the older more established suburbs with a population of just over 11,000 within the City of Melville (population 94,000 and the third largest in Western Australia) and little other than the occasional burglary report troubles the police.

While the area has a rich aboriginal history Bicton was named after an early property in the area which produced some of the Western Australia's first wine. Aboriginals from the Beelias tribe lived around the Swan and Canning Rivers and camped near Bull Creek, Alfred Cove and North Lake. Areas where more than a hundred years later John and his family went for walks and wave skiing; where the kids jumped from a jetty into the river.

John and Karen, his wife of 22 years, had worked hard and sacrificed their time together to build their double brick colonial four bedroom dream home. It had everything they wanted with sunken lounge, tasteful furniture, a spa bath and outdoor living area. It was where they shared many happy times as a family with their children Ryan, 20, and Jessica, 15.

Karen was in Europe on a bus tour that John should have been on but work got in the way. The company he worked for employed up to 30 people and as much as he wanted to go, he felt he could not take the time off. Karen wanted to be away for two months which was a month more than he had in holidays owing to him. Rather than both miss out on a holiday, Karen went alone - it was a chance in a lifetime and she could be her husband's eyes and ears, much like he would be her eyes and ears in Australia while she was away.

There are no words to describe what happened next. John knew immediately something was not right. There was blood and bits of flesh all over the carpeted floors and the walls. The ceiling was criss-crossed with blood and around the front door, there were large splashes of blood. It started at the front door and led into the kitchen where he could see Jessica slumped on the floor with blood soaked towels under her body. He reeled out the front door - catapulted backwards at a million kps an hour, then staggered across the front lawn to a neighbour's house. John had read enough murder mysteries to know about preserving a crime scene, and at the time was reading Patricia Cornwall's 'Body of Evidence'. Minutes later, when the police arrived, they found John collapsed on the lawn, already gutted and the shell of a man.

The police took John back to the Fremantle police station where they interviewed him over 5 hours and made him surrender his clothing. He was a suspect, everyone was a suspect, until the real murderer or murderers was found. Unable, and not allowed by the police, to return to his home he borrowed clothes from a relative. His presence would disturb whatever evidence there was and he understood why the police acted as they did. As it happened the detectives knew within themselves that he was not their man. A phone call to his work revealed he had been there all day and Jessica had been dead for some hours. People may not have been to a drama school but they can be convincing to the inexperienced and untrained investigator.

Karen was in Paris when asked to ring home. The tourist bus had just pulled up at the hotel when the guide gave her a slip of paper requesting she ring her brother Michael. She knew something was wrong and suspected the worst as her father was in ill health. She went into the hotel but it was her brother Paul who answered the phone in Perth. He quickly handed the phone over to Michael who asked was she with anyone. Her room mate Julie, a mother of two, was nearby. In seconds the weight of the Eiffel Tower closed in on her fast.

“There is no easy way to tell you this...”

Karen dropped the phone and screamed. Julie picked up the phone and was told only that Karen’s daughter Jessica had been murdered. Julie ran from the room. Friends that Karen had made on the tour rushed to her room and called a doctor, who arrived two hours later. Karen tried to understand how her only daughter had died and rationalised that she must have been killed in a car accident. Then John rang her, it was near midnight in Perth and he had just left the police station, and revealed there had been no accident. Jessica had been murdered but he did not know who was responsible. Karen threw things and tried to make sense of what had happened. It had to be a home invasion gone wrong. The doctor arrived and gave her an injection. When she woke she hoped she had experienced a bad dream.

In Perth, John waited for their son Ryan to drive across town in the heavy rain. When he had not arrived within minutes he wrongly believed that Ryan too had been killed, this time in a car accident. He felt helpless and more vulnerable than ever. John wanted to protect his family and now he felt he had failed them all. After their first house had been burgled in the 1980s he ensured their dream home at Bicton was safe, installing a security alarm system on top of the window locks and steel security doors to the front and back.

Grief is universal and despite the language difficulties everyone understood her screams and tears, her sudden collapse. Karen had spoken to Jessica two days earlier, when she was in Italy; she was excited and talked of starting her new job in a week. Then of her new boyfriend, 19 year old Michael Bloom, or Myk as he was better known. Now Jessica was dead.

Karen wanted to be home but it would be another 60 hours before the plane touched down. Concerned for her health the doctor would not allow her to travel for another 24 hours. Friends from England went to Paris and travelled with her to Heathrow airport where they tried to get a direct flight to Perth. Instead they could only get one that stopped at Singapore then every major Australian city before finally landing in Perth. There she learned that John had dropped his mobile phone in the house and all the important numbers they needed were stored in it. They couldn't remember the names of people. Their aviary and cat needed to be fed; instead the police attended to them as they still couldn't go into their house. They had no change of clothes, no home and no daughter.

At the same age as Jessica, John was robbed of his father - killed in 1972 by a train he didn't see as he worked as part of a rail track gang in north central Victoria. Jessica was living a life that he could only partly experience as he had to be there to help his mother Audrey through the shock and the void. His teenage years were spent being the man of the house. Jessica was going to make up for what he had missed out on. She was everything a father could want in a daughter. She was beautiful, spirited and lived for the moment. One day she would marry and have children but that was too far down the track.

The police found a smashed window at the back of the house. Initially it seemed that was how the killer or killers gained entry. Detective Sergeant Allen Carter, the team leader and Senior Investigator of the Fremantle detectives, recalled the scene.

"It was graphic. There was a lot of blood strewn around the house. It was as if someone was in a frenzy, a rage; someone who had an intent to finish what they started."

As the murder had been discovered just before the evening news, radio and television brought what had happened in Yeovil Crescent, Bicton quickly to the public's attention. Detectives soon discounted theories of a gang committing a burglary or sexual assault that went wrong. Certain things just did not add up.

Friends and associates of Jessica contacted the police, with a number walking into Fremantle police station to tell what they knew. Or suspected. One name kept being mentioned –Kelly Renae Fuller, an 18 year old from Winthrop, a suburb of more than 13,000 people and also in the City of Melville. It was a more recent housing estate and even more upper middle class and crime free.

Remy Bridger rang detectives and told them she knew who killed Jessica. She had helped Fuller, her best friend, dispose of the murder weapon, a fishing knife, and knew what had happened. It was only after she had heard the publicity that she believed what she had been told. Fuller was known to lie and exaggerate and Bridger had not believed her until she saw the Lang house featured on the television news. Fuller had previously told of having a miscarriage and having broken up with boyfriends in the most fantastic of circumstances. One boyfriend had apparently been seriously injured in a car accident. None of it true.

Acting on her phone call detectives drove to Winthrop and to the home of Fuller at 2.00a.m. She was asked by her father Kevin, if what the police were alleging was true. He wanted to know and would stand by her regardless of the truth.

They took her back to Fremantle police station where she was interviewed in the presence of her mother (something they did not have to do as by law Fuller was an adult), on video tape. Fuller was matter of fact; calm and collected, even suspending the interview so she could comfort her distraught mother who broke down during the more gruesome aspects of the interview. When her mother regained her composure, Fuller resumed exactly where she had left off and as if nothing had happened.

"I was surprised at her lack of emotion. There was no show of remorse and she seemed really cold and that attitude continued right through to the trial. There was absolutely no show of emotion, remorse or anything..." said Detective Sergeant Carter, a man of 21 years experience investigating major crime including homicides.

The following morning John rang his wife in Paris to say that Fuller, an acquaintance of Jessica, had been charged with the murder. Karen knew immediately why and in her last phone call to Jessica told her to be careful, but Jessica was not concerned. Bloom had not dropped Fuller for her and he was not Jimmy, the one she really wanted to be with. Jimmy was indecisive and had yet to commit himself to Jessica. Karen would later find under Jessica's bed love letters in a shoe box that she had drafted to Jimmy telling him to make up his mind. She was not going to wait forever.

Fuller had damaged Myk's CD collection in retribution months earlier during an earlier separation. She was known as "being a bit loopy" or a "bit weird". A softball coach thought she was "strange".

The picture became clear that Fuller and Jessica were essentially opposites. While Jessica had a model's figure and was tall, sporting, popular and outgoing, Fuller was virtually the opposite. They had one thing in common though and that was Bloom. He was a part time disc jockey they knew from the Rolloways roller skating rink in O'Connor. It was a non alcoholic venue where the youth of Fremantle could meet, skate, dance and form friendships. It was also where Jessica worked 2-3 afternoons a week behind the snack bar and skate hire.

When Bloom could no longer put up with Fuller's obsessive and jealous ways he broke off their nine month on again-off again relationship. He had been her first lover and her emotional turmoil was heightened when she learned that within a month of their breakup he was seeing the younger and more attractive Jessica. In court Bloom admitted giving Jessica love bites on the neck, breasts and stomach and that they had a sexual relationship. Fuller already felt that Jessica had caused her to be excluded from the same circle of friends; they had been seeing movies without her. Bridger told detectives that Fuller told her she wanted to kill Jessica. Karinda Connell gave evidence that Fuller wanted Bloom back.

Fuller rang Jessica's home – phone records show a two second call – before her seven minute drive to Bicton, allegedly to see a girlfriend who had stayed overnight but had left for work. Fuller saw love bites on Jessica's neck and claimed Jessica "started going on about Myk. I didn't want to talk about it. What happened between her and Myk was none of my business. I was telling her to shut up."

When asked by the prosecutor why she just didn't leave the house, Fuller said she felt it rude to leave without saying goodbye. Karen felt John was about to have a heart attack as they listened to this part of her evidence.

"She was saying that he never really loved me. I was getting angry – it was really hurting me. I didn't want to hear it. I was getting wild," Fuller told the jury as she blamed Jessica for her own murder.

"She was like a magnet – she was drawing me to her...I could not control myself. She was controlling me. I didn't know what was happening."

Fuller went on to say she gave Jessica a towel, "she had blood everywhere...the knife was still in my hand. She was pulling the towel towards her. She would not let go of my hand. I felt I was in a daze. That is when I stepped back and realised she was dead."

Fuller returned home to shower and washed the steering wheel and door of her Nissan Pulsar; put her clothes and shoes in the washing machine and watched a video before disposing of the used gloves in a rubbish bin at Bull Creek and the knife, wrapped in a tea towel down a drain near home; she kept a physiotherapist appointment and bought a replacement pair of gloves for her mother; picked up her sister from school and took her to softball training. Then home for dinner and eventually, to bed.

The first week home after returning from Paris is a void for Karen. She recalls sleeping with one of Jessica's jumpers and feeling in limbo. It was a month before John and Karen moved back into their home. John could never go through the front door and kept it bolted, preferring to enter the house from the back. Professional cleaners had gone through the house and what they had missed had been cleaned by Karen's brothers. When they felt it was safe to return Karen found blood spots on the cherrywood furniture, blood under the leaves of pot plants and a bloodied texta pen. There was a body shaped stain on the tiled floor of the kitchen. Everywhere they looked they could see where Jessica had been. In the bedroom, the front door and the kitchen where her body had been found.

For Karen the kitchen was like a mortuary. Everywhere she looked there was something to remind her of the last minutes of her daughter's life. She spent hours digging into the grouting of the tiled floor trying to erase the staining that the cleaner had missed. If it was not blood it was the purple forensic dye that kept re appearing in this hub of the household.

They put up with it for as long as they could but eventually they sold up, losing thousands of dollars in the process. No one wants to buy a house where someone was murdered. They moved to another suburb out of Fremantle, not as up market as their dream home in Bicton but one that had no reminders of how their daughter had been taken from them.

In January 1999 the police handed over the brief of evidence to the Director of Public Prosecutions, but it was a long drawn out process before the trial. The Lang family was never consulted by the DPP about court dates. Without the police keeping them informed they would have been unaware of the Preliminary Hearing, the Status Conference and Continuancy Hearing. They wanted to know – it was important to travel this journey for Jessica as much as they could. It mattered not to them that they were losing income from going to court. They just had to see it through from start to finish.

“It was very important for us to attend these hearings as really, it was our only opportunity to keep track of what was happening...at one stage, when we missed a hearing, John hit the roof and made a very terse call to the DPP. After that things improved somewhat. It seemed as if the DPP had the view that the small hearings were unimportant and could not see any problem for us not being present. What they needed to understand was that it was our daughter who had been murdered. We had to follow the whole procedure from beginning to end. Even the small Continuancy Hearings gave us the opportunity to feel like we had some involvement; however small,” said Karen.

At the trial a demure and innocent looking Fuller pleaded not guilty to murder. The Lang family learned for the first time that their daughter Jessica had been stabbed 47 times in the neck and her jugular vein had been “shredded into ribbons” and completely severed in the process.

Fuller gave evidence in her own defence, making a plea of passion claiming Jessica had taunted her over Bloom and this caused her to snap. She had gone to the house not intending to kill her. The family could not understand, if this was the case, why she carried a 20cm long fishing knife and wore white gloves to kill Jessica. They also could not understand how Jessica, after being repeatedly stabbed would continue to taunt Fuller about “getting on” with Bloom behind her back, when she was known to be frightened of blood and would run at the sight of a needle.

Fuller explained that her employer, the Mosman Park Vet Clinic, was short on knives so she took a knife from home to cut up meat to feed the sick animals. This was rubbish and her work colleagues had seen the knife under the driver’s seat of her car and then in a door pocket wrapped in a red and white tea towel. A work colleague told police she was like the girl in the film ‘Single White Female’.

The Langs wanted an explanation as to why Fuller attacked and stabbed Jessica on three separate occasions during the ordeal; in three different areas of their home and then why she later returned to smash the back window with a brick, to make it look like the act of an unknown intruder.

The judge disallowed evidence of Fuller buying Ratsak 15 minutes prior to the murder, intent on poisoning the dog that she had given Bloom during their relationship. According to Bridger she did not follow through with this plan because she ran out of time.

Prosecutor Kevin Tavener believed it showed that Fuller intended to kill Jessica and then the dog.

“It quite clearly shows her state of mind – not someone who was outraged by the actions of the deceased at the house but rather someone who takes a knife to the house and deliberately kills a person she intended to kill.”

However Justice White ruled, “The evidence of the purchase of Ratsak to kill the dog is irrelevant. It is evidence of an intention to commit another crime.”

Robert Mazza, who represented Fuller and has appeared for the defence in up to 300 trials over the past 19 years, believed there was no logical connection between Jessica and the dog “who belonged to someone else.”

Evidence from Bloom that he dropped Fuller because of her “obsessive behaviour” was also ruled inadmissible. Colour photographs of the murder scene were disallowed in the belief that they would unduly influence the jury. It was preferred that they see the sanitised sketch plan instead. Why was the jury being given a sanitised version of the truth?

“Rarely are colour photographs put in...they don’t tell you anything. They show a lot of blood which is consistent with a stab scene and this evidence was already available from the police and forensic. They were not shown as the prejudicial value outweighs the prohibitive value,” said Robert Mazza.

“Horrible photos have been shown to jurors and I’ve seen them go white and become physically upset. The test is whether there is a prohibitive value in showing photos and understanding what happened. Sketches of the body showing stab wounds were clearer than the photographs. You had a lot of trouble discerning where one stab wound was from the other by viewing the photographs.”

What also bothered the Lang family was the lop sided justice - everything seemed geared to favour Fuller, the one charged with the murder of their daughter. Justice was meant to be swift but the trial was adjourned as Fuller's sister Stacey was sitting Year 12 exams but no one asked the Lang family if it mattered to them. They could not move on until the trial was over.

Fuller told police that she wore gloves at the house because it was cold; the DPP were able to rebut it with evidence from the Weather Bureau showing it was warm and building pending the arrival of the storm. But when the defence went on a character assassination spree of Jessica Lang, the girl with 47 stab wounds in her head and neck because as revealed by Remy Bridger in her evidence, "She said she kept stabbing her and she would not die", the DPP was silent, restrained by the rules of evidence.

They could not present evidence to rebut the allegations of promiscuity and poor character even though there were many prepared to give this evidence. Included in this were teachers from Iona Presentation College in Mosman Park, where Jessica had been a student. The college was now also tainted with having a third student murdered in recent years, two others believed to have been killed by the still at large Fremantle serial killer. Ironically one of Jessica's teachers was a mother of one of these murder victims.

The Lang family listened horrified and mystified at allegations of Jessica's provocative behaviour. It was as if these were reasons why she should be killed and an excuse for Fuller. Teachers, friends and family offered to give evidence to give balance and truth to the allegations but the DPP could not help. Fuller was on trial, not Jessica Lang. Yet that was not how it seemed. With evidence given by witnesses who could not read or refer to their statements made almost 18 months earlier it seemed ludicrous that they were expected to remember everything. Important pieces of evidence were lost due to memory lapses (though given in the earlier Committal Hearing the evidence could not be admitted at the trial). Had the trial started earlier maybe evidence would not have been lost from some witnesses.

The jury heard that Fuller came from a wealthy family, her father was a successful businessman and how good she was at school and sport. That

she came from a loving family environment. Nobody heard anything about Jessica's background or of her family. It was as if her life, her reputation and character was not important. All the jury knew from the prosecution about Jessica Lang was that she was dead and that Fuller was allegedly her killer. From the pathologist they heard her height and weight, positioning of the wounds etc but nothing more from the DPP. The Lang family were powerless to do anything and felt violated a second time; this time by the courts.

"Imagine what it is like to hear half truths and outright lies being told about your daughter, listening to her being crucified, as if it were all her fault; that she deserved to be killed. Having to listen to this day after day, while the legal system played its games," said Karen who considered taking a life size photograph and showing it to the jury and saying, "Here is Jessica. This is what she looked like."

But the jury did not see the life size photograph, nor learn anything of her family background.

Robert Mazza for Kelly Fuller did not believe Jessica's character had been blackened.

"The question of the relationship between Jessica Lang and Myk Bloom was very important. Myk Bloom had been in a relationship with Kelly Fuller; a sexual relationship, and she had a depth of feeling for him. When she learned that Jessica also had a sexual relationship with Bloom it unhinged her. What happened to Jessica was tragic and not deserved. No one could deserve that fate. It was a tragedy, just awful and to damn the sexual conduct of a murder victim is not tactically useful for the defence."

John Lang felt that not only had he failed to protect his daughter while she was alive, but he could do nothing to protect her in death. He had failed her in everything important to him as a father; despite taking her to netball games and being the coach; despite driving her to and from parties, night clubs and the homes of friends - despite her protests. There was a serial killer in Fremantle and taxi drivers were thought to be involved, so he could not let her go independently as she wanted.

It was not news that Jessica disliked school - few teenagers do enjoy

school. Jessica knew what she wanted and where she was going and was taller and more mature than most her age. Only her spend thrift ways and playing loudly the music of Madonna and the Backstreet Boys belied her true age. She was at the same time saving for a car so she could be more independent when she got her licence at 17.

No parent has an easy time with a determined teenager and nor does a brother. Jessica was always fighting with her brother Ryan. He left home earlier in the year, a move that, ironically, brought them closer. He took her out in his car, on trips that she thought was "cool".

A couple of months before her murder Jessica said she was going out to night clubs whether her parents liked it or not. She either went with their knowledge or she would lie - like others she knew. Jessica however could not lie, she was honest and direct - called a stone a stone.

Even getting drunk was not a secret from her parents. She told her mother how she felt; she hated it, and while Karen did not like what she heard she was comforted in knowing they had a relationship based on trust and respect. That trust was reaffirmed when the post mortem revealed there was no alcohol or drugs in Jessica's body.

Robert Mazza presented his client as a woman who had acted out of character. She was shy, reserved and immature; she was on anti depressants at the time of the murder. Since being in custody she had tried to suicide and had written to the judge saying in part, "I am just so sorry to everyone that has been affected by this. I wish I could bring Jessica back so her family need never go through the pain and suffering of losing such a vital part of their lives."

Justice White rejected the contents of her letter as did others who sat through the trial. It was at odds with how she presented herself while giving her evidence during the trial. She was seen to be shedding crocodile tears and seemed to be everything but genuine in her remorse. In February 2000 Fuller was convicted of murder, but not wilful murder. It was a huge shock to everyone who had followed the trial. It appeared that the jury accepted that the murder had been carried out at the spur of the moment rather than prepared and planned.

Detective Sergeant Carter rationalised that, "With a young victim and a young offender it seemed the jury did not want to destroy a second girls life."

Sentencing Fuller to life imprisonment with a minimum of 11 years to serve, Justice White in the Supreme Court of Western Australia said, "There is no explanation for what you did other than you were motivated by overwhelming jealousy."

John and Ryan continue to see a psychiatrist while Karen has been free of sedatives since early 2000. Keen movie goers, they no longer can tolerate films with gratuitous violence and have walked out on some that caught them unawares.

"Until you're personally involved and see the reality you're probably a bit detached and don't think of the impact. We didn't mind the Bruce Willis and Arnold Schwarzenegger films but can't see them now," said Karen.

Ryan stopped going to night clubs and drinking. He has his good and bad days while trying to take stock of his life. Karen gives lectures to law students impressing on them the need to be concerned for the victims of crime and to give thought to presenting the truth, rather than a sanitised version of the truth. She has joined the executive committee of the Homicide Victims Support Group and feels that her experience of the legal system has given her a reason for living.

In May 2000 John and Karen went to Ireland and England for a holiday, staying with friends. It was a holiday they took with mixed emotions. They needed the break but were worried about leaving their new home and having to cope with the change in routine. They worried about Ryan, something could happen to him too. They did not want to lose anything more.

They had lost not only their daughter but also their faith in the judicial system and what they believed was the truth. It seemed to them that the courts presented a version of the truth rather than the whole truth, and the jury heard only that version. Evidence was sanitised and they are particularly disturbed that the jury could not see colour photographs of the crime scene or the body of Jessica. It would have shown that Fuller lied about there being the one frenzied attack and that in fact there had been three separate stabbing attacks in their home. Nor could they hear all the circumstances leading up to her murder including Fuller's obsessive behaviour and intent to kill the dog she had given Bloom. Why have a jury system when it is shielded from all the facts – like an adult who can watch Neighbours but not an R rated movie.

The defence can say what they like about the deceased, but the prosecution walks on eggs when it comes to the accused. The Lang family believed in justice, truth and the law - but no more. They have more faith in the media than the judicial system which seems not to give a voice to the victim. The media on the other hand will generally take up the sword on their behalf, although it does play favourites. Karen and John knew of a mother whose murdered daughter was a prostitute but the media was not interested in her concerns.

In country Victoria, another world and time zone away from Perth, Audrey Lang watches over the rose bush she planted in memory of her grand daughter Jessica. She sees the rose buds bloom then fade away each year, reassured in the knowledge that they will bloom again. She never expected to bury her grandchild but parents and grandparents never do. Audrey sleeps with the doors and windows locked. For the first time in her life.

- Peter Haddow