

**DEADMONTON**



# **DEAD MONTON**

**CRIME STORIES FROM  
CANADA'S MURDER CITY**

**BY PAMELA ROTH**



**University of Regina Press**

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*This book is dedicated to the friends and families who've had loved ones taken away by murder. It is not meant to cause further pain or suffering, but instead to act as a collective memory of lives taken far too soon. It is also to serve as a reminder that many cases are still unsolved, and a single tip to police could change everything.*



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## INTRODUCTION

Five murders in one week. Two bodies found in a bullet-riddled SUV at a remote cemetery three months later. Then a desperate call for help to police from a man shot and stabbed several times, leaving another family torn apart by the sudden violent death of a loved one.

In 2011, Edmonton became the murder capital of Canada, when the tally of those killed reached forty-eight. There was no common pattern, single cause, or factor linking the slayings, so Edmonton police dubbed the high number of fatalities an anomaly. Still, it wasn't the first time the City of Champions had snagged the title no Canadian city wants to claim.

Alberta's capital also earned the same dubious distinction in 2005, when it recorded thirty-nine homicides, sparking a local newspaper to use the nickname for the city—Deadmonton—across its front page. Today, many of the killers still walk among the city's citizens, keeping their dark secrets to themselves.

Violence in Edmonton is nothing new. Even in 1938, the city had a higher per capita murder rate than Chicago. Dreams of striking it rich in the province's oil patch have lured all sorts of characters to the city from far and wide. Instead of finding wealth, some have found themselves locked up in the maximum-security prison northeast of

Edmonton that's also home to a women's institution, a psychiatric hospital, and the largest remand centre in Canada.

Housed in binders on a bookshelf at police headquarters are 190 unsolved homicides, the oldest dating back to February 11, 1938, when Fred Oliver was murdered at Dominion Motors. For twenty-nine of these cases, the police offer \$40,000 rewards for information leading to an arrest. These rewards have been on the books for several years.

Many of the unsolved murders are gangster slayings; witnesses won't talk for fear of retaliation. Others are innocent lives snuffed out in the blink of an eye at the hands of strangers. These killings are the most chilling.

Murder cases that go unsolved are an emotional roller-coaster for victims' families. They experience a plethora of emotions as they struggle to cope with the horrendous pain of suddenly losing a loved one because of another human being. Some deal with the pain by pushing their emotions aside and carrying on with the daily rituals of life. Others become consumed by sadness, finding it difficult to function in society.

This book takes a look at some of Edmonton's most notorious solved and unsolved murders and provides a glimpse into the lives of the detectives working tirelessly to bring closure to families, whose constant sorrow is carried on the detectives' shoulders, making them hungry to put killers behind bars.

This book also profiles people that have been missing for decades, such as twenty-three-year-old Gail McCarthy, who vanished on her way to work at the Misericordia Hospital in November 1971. She was three months pregnant and had been married for five months. Her sisters have gone through tremendous pain and suffering not

knowing what happened to Gail and will not rest until she is found.

These stories are not for the faint of heart. They are an eerie reminder of the horror humans are capable of inflicting upon each other. Told from the perspective of the victims' families, these accounts are shocking, gruesome, and filled with immense sadness and pain. Their common bond is the need for closure, no matter how much time has passed.

Thanks to advancements in DNA technology, some families have found closure long after they've lost hope for their loved ones' murders to be solved. Others continue to hope for some change, some new insight that will lead to some kind of conclusion—and they sometimes carry that hope with them to their graves.



## MARYANN PLETT

**W**hen Nelson Plett and his younger brother Lyndon went to bed at night, their loving mother often tucked them in, sending them off to sleep. But on the evening of September 15, 1971, Nelson's mother wasn't there to say good night. Nor was she around the next day to see him off to school. Little did Nelson know that when he gave his mother a kiss at breakfast that morning, it would be the last time he would ever see her smiling face. At eight years old, his world was about to be turned upside down.

"We really didn't comprehend what was going on. It was a case of, *where's Mom? What's going on?*" said Nelson about the night his mother never came home. "There's no question there was something not quite right."

MaryAnn Plett was a deeply religious woman with strong ties to her husband, Jake. One of the city's first female real estate agents, the twenty-nine-year-old was working hard, trying to sell an acreage near Looma, approximately thirty kilometres southeast of Edmonton. A man who called himself James Cooper seemed to be her best chance at selling the property. Cooper claimed to be based out of Winnipeg, representing a large American mud-pump company in the oil industry. He needed a property with a clearing to store heavy equipment, and he wanted the view of the clearing

to be blocked from the road for privacy. But Cooper didn't act like MaryAnn's usual clientele.

He pressed her for last-minute appointments at odd hours and was always late, even though he said he was in a big hurry. When he called her at her office at Graham Realty on Whyte Avenue, he wouldn't provide a return number or leave a message.

On the morning of September 15, 1971, Cooper arranged for MaryAnn to pick him up at the Bonnie Doon Shopping Centre at 11 a.m. By 5 p.m., when she didn't return to her office or home, her co-workers and husband thought something wasn't right. The police were called, and MaryAnn was reported missing.

"It was obvious that the complaint was legitimate. It wasn't just a missing person. There was more to it than just that," said eighty-year-old Al Gowler, who had been a detective with the Edmonton homicide unit for five years when MaryAnn disappeared. "As we got further into the investigation and started finding out different things, then it was pretty obvious that she had been taken against her will."

Nelson and his brother were used to an established routine. Normally, MaryAnn would come home around 5 p.m., and either she or Jake would make supper. When the realtors' office phoned the Plett residence looking for MaryAnn, Jake started to worry. He called places he thought she might be, but nobody had seen his five-foot-two, 120-pound wife anywhere.

A search of the Looma property that night also turned up nothing. The searchers had regrouped at the south-side Graham Realty office later that night when the unthinkable happened.

Jake was leaving the office around 11 p.m. when he saw a man slowly drive by in MaryAnn's green 1970 Pontiac

Laurentian. By the time he and MaryAnn's co-workers got to a vehicle to give chase, the car had already vanished.

Despite an exhaustive search of the city, it would be two days before a car attendant discovered the vehicle in the parking lot of Don Wheaton car sales, only a few blocks from MaryAnn's office.

There was damage to the front fender and a small gouge in a rear tire. Grass stalks were stuck in the front bumper and a two-foot-long tree branch was wedged in the undercarriage, indicating the car had been driven off-road. The contents of the glove compartment were missing, along with MaryAnn's purse and notebook. Blood matching her type was found on the rug in the trunk and along the trunk's latch. A wig she wore sometimes was also found inside the trunk. Police lifted a fingerprint from the driver's door, but it was unsuitable for comparison using the techniques of the day. The only other thing left behind was a pack of DuMaurier cigarettes and a pair of slip-over sunglasses. At this point, Al had little hope MaryAnn was still alive.

"We were very disappointed that the car hadn't been found earlier," he said. "Whether it would have done any good, I don't know. With the wig and some clothing and the blood and the trunk, it was quite obvious she was dead. There was nothing that belonged to this guy that you could get DNA material off for a sample. He was very, very careful. He went to great lengths to make sure that nobody else saw him except her. He never gave her a phone number; he never gave her an address. It was always a 'don't call me, I'll call you' type of thing.

"She remarked to somebody that he was always late, and yet here was a guy who said he was in a big hurry and he only had a short period of time to look at this," Al went

on. “So it doesn’t make sense that he was going to be late for an appointment. That tells me that he was sitting back, watching her and making sure that she was alone. He’s a predator. He set up things the way he wanted.”

Not long after MaryAnn’s disappearance, another female real estate agent received a call from a man with a deep gravelly voice who identified himself as Dave Cooper. He also claimed to be from the east and wanted to see an acreage property out of town, but the realtor was too busy to schedule the viewing.

As news spread about MaryAnn’s mysterious disappearance, hundreds of tips about her whereabouts began pouring in to police, but most of them were outrageous. One of the tipsters was a man who claimed to know where MaryAnn was because he had held a ring on a piece of string over a map and it went to a certain area. Other psychics had similar far-fetched ideas about where she might be. Another search of the Looma area brought out nearly two hundred real estate agents, church members, relatives, and people with no connection to the Plett family, but once again there was no sign of MaryAnn.

Although he was just a child, Nelson felt the stress oozing from his father and relatives. For the first couple of days, he didn’t comprehend what was going on, but he felt hurt his mother hadn’t come home. Nelson describes those days as a blur, with a lot of people coming and going.

Since MaryAnn’s keys and personal items were missing, safety precautions were taken when Nelson and Lyndon went to school. Then the nightmares began, and the full gravity of the situation hit Nelson like a ton of bricks.

“My dad did his best to shelter us from certain details, but realistically, I was hip-deep in it because how do you not be? Your mom’s not around, you are surrounded by

strangers, you have to be picked up from school. None of that stuff was normal,” he said.

Seven months passed before MaryAnn’s remains were found in a wooded area one hundred kilometres northwest of Edmonton. In April 1972, two employees of the Pinto Creek Sawmill were digging a trench when they found the tattered remains of women’s clothing scattered along Goose Lake Road. Those clothes were taken to the police. A further search of the area by authorities found a watch given to MaryAnn by her mother, along with the top portion of a human skull and part of a femur. The remains were identified as being MaryAnn’s through dental records, but the cause of death remains a mystery. The contents of the glove compartment, MaryAnn’s purse, and her notebook have never been recovered.

Nelson remembers the moment his mother’s remains were found like it was yesterday. It was the missing piece of the puzzle everyone had been waiting for.

“Dad called us in the house. I remember seeing my grandmother coming to the house. I remember when they told us, just completely breaking down,” said Nelson. “It’s the finality of it. Deep down, I kind of suspected there was no chance that Mom was coming back, but when they finally told us and said, okay, this is literally what had happened, they found Mom’s body, then I suddenly went, okay.”

Working with the RCMP, Al spent months following up on various leads. His RCMP counterparts did everything imaginable to solve the case, but to this day the killer has yet to be found.

Given the remote location of the remains, Al believes the killer was familiar with Edmonton and the surrounding area and that it was possible he was a hunter or an outdoorsman.

The case puzzles Al to this day. Because so many questions remain unanswered, he doubts it will ever be solved.

“The simplest case can be the most baffling until it’s solved. It’s one of those things that you still think about. There is absolutely nothing to tie anybody in with this thing,” said Al, noting the file has been turned over to the RCMP. “It’s not a case that would be sitting on somebody’s desk, but it wouldn’t be closed, either. Whenever anything came up, the file would be brought back to light, and if there were something legitimate to follow up then it would be. Most cold cases, they are never closed. They are kept open and available.”



*Nelson Plett holds a picture of his mother, MaryAnn Plett, who went missing in the Looma area, thirty kilometres southeast of Edmonton, on September 15, 1971. (Photo by Darren Makowichuk / Courtesy of Sun Media)*

Jake went on with life as best he could, eventually remarrying, but he continued to work tirelessly on solving MaryAnn's murder. He penned a book about the case, titled *Valley of Shadows*, but no new significant information emerged as a result of its publication. Jake's quest to find the killer ended in 1978 when he and his wife, along with forty others, died in a plane crash in Cranbrook, B.C. Nelson misses his father every day. Some days are harder than others.

Nelson still speaks with the RCMP from time to time. In 2010 detectives took some blood samples from him and his brother, which, paired with new technology, might help solve the case. The nightmares have now tapered off, and Nelson has a family of his own in Calgary. Although it's been forty-one years since his mother's death, he still wants to see the killer put behind bars. The thought of having closure someday never goes away.

"My dad always said that, if and when this guy was ever caught, he would go and tell him that he forgave him. My brother and I both said, as difficult as it might be, if it was ever solved, we would try and honour dad's wishes," said Nelson, noting the tragedy brought his extended family closer together.

"We were very fortunate we were a very close family, and I was always surrounded by that family. You can't help but be scarred by what I've been through. You get to the point where you kind of go, *there's a reason for this*. You don't always understand the reason, and you hope some day you will, but you may not. It makes you who you are. You learn to value family and those that are close to you very, very deeply."

## KAREN EWANCIW

**A**pril 23, 1975, was a day that filled Shelley Campbell with so much fear that she's spent a lifetime hiding.

Shelley was only ten years old when she and her eleven-year-old friend, Karen Ewanciw, decided that instead of delivering their flyers after school, they would dump them in the river valley that bordered their quiet Forest Heights neighbourhood in southeast Edmonton. The densely wooded ravine wasn't a place the two inseparable best friends would usually go to play, but on this particular day they agreed it was where they would head after school and pretend to be partners in crime.

Shelley noticed some unusual things the moment the pair entered the ravine from the top of the hill by McNally High School. They came across a pornography magazine beside the footpath, then cotton balls that appeared to have blood on them. The two friends continued walking deeper into the woods and found a massive spruce tree with a beautiful upside down cross sitting at its base. Shelley immediately got a creepy feeling and warned Karen to leave the cross alone, but her friend was drawn toward it like a kid in a candy store.

"I told her not to touch it, begging her, almost to the point where I was in tears," said Shelley. "I just knew by the feeling that it was giving me that it was pure evil and

[I thought], don't touch this cross. She didn't listen to me. She picked it up and wanted to keep it."

Karen eventually put the cross back down and left it behind as the kids continued their adventure through the ravine. They came to a hill and decided to slide down. Karen went first, and she kept all her flyers in a bundle as she slid to the bottom. Shelley, however, tipped over, spilling her flyers all over the ground. While Shelley picked up her flyers, Karen walked off in a trance, despite her friend's repeated calls to wait.

"I cried out to her. Here we were being partners in crime, and all of a sudden she's walking away from me?" said Shelley. "I called to her a few times, and she wouldn't even turn around. She didn't acknowledge me; she didn't do anything. It was really bizarre."

Shelley last saw Karen walking toward the main path that runs through the ravine. Then she disappeared. A baffled Shelley quickly gathered her flyers and went looking for her friend, but she had no luck. With no trace of Karen anywhere, Shelley began to feel scared.

"By this time my hair was basically standing up and something was telling me this was really not good," she said. "How does your best friend disappear? Why would she walk away from me?"

It was eerily quiet. Not even the birds were chirping in the maze of spruce and poplar trees along the river. Suddenly, a rush of wind sent a frightened Shelley flying out of the ravine. At the top of the hill sitting on a bench was a classmate. Shelley asked if he had seen Karen, but he said no. Still in shock, she headed home, hoping to hear from her friend soon, but she never did.

Shelley went to school the next day, pretending everything was normal. She expected to see Karen in class,

but she never came to school. Police contacted Shelley's mother and pulled the young girl out of class. She was given the grim news that her best friend had been found, but not alive. The news of Karen's death didn't hit Shelley until she was watching the news that evening in her family's living room by herself.

"I still remember this—just watching [on the news] her being carried out on a stretcher," said Shelley, struggling to keep back tears. "That's when it was real to me. I was completely in shock."

Less than twenty-four hours after the two friends had wandered into the ravine, a jogger running through the area found Karen's five-foot-two, 85-pound body about fifteen metres from a well-used footpath. She was lying on her face in a small wooded area. Her clothing had been violently stripped from her body and hung on low-lying branches, indicating the assailant had chased her down



*Former Edmonton Police Detective Ron Johnson holds a picture of eleven-year-old murder victim Karen Ewanciw near the location where she was found in 1975. (Photo by Perry Mah / Courtesy of Sun Media)*