

Need to Know

CRIME STORY

While his
victims
slept, he
slipped into
their
bedrooms.

Who Is the Ether Man?

For two decades, he targeted young women, drugging and sexually assaulting them during the night. Thanks to DNA evidence, a suspect has finally been caught.

By **Sandy M. Fernández**

It was like a nightmare, remembers Lisa (not her real name)—a foggy, disorienting, terrifying nightmare.

In the early morning of June 2, 1997, the University of New Mexico premed student, then 22, woke up in her bedroom in her house near campus in Albuquerque. Woozy and nauseous, she staggered to the bathroom and threw up. “I felt sick, like I had been drinking, although I hadn’t been,” she recalls.

In the mirror, she noticed raw, sunburnlike patches on her face. She was also bleeding from her nose and her vagina; her underwear was soaked with blood.

Alarmed and confused, she phoned her 22-year-old boyfriend, John (not his real name), who lived across town. Lisa tried to tell him about the blood, but her words came out jumbled. After he rushed over to check on her, the haze began to clear. She told John she thought someone had been in her home.

John called the police, and by the time they arrived, Lisa was able to recount more details: She had gone to bed around 1 a.m. then opened her eyes to the sight of a man with a flashlight. “Who are you?” she screamed. He pushed a moist towel over her face. “It smelled like alcohol or burnt plastic,” she says. “I tried to

scratch him, but instead, I began to pass out. I thought I was dying.”

When she came to, she was no longer wearing the boxers she’d put on before bed. That’s when she sensed vomit rising in her throat and stumbled to the bathroom.

Police checked the exterior of the one-story house. They found evidence of a break-in: A window had been forced open, and a screwdriver lay on the ground. Inside, near Lisa’s bed, they detected a strong odor, “similar to Wite-Out correction fluid,” an investigator wrote in a police report. Paramedics brought Lisa to the hospital, where an exam confirmed she had been sexually assaulted.

With these key details quickly established, Albuquerque police suspected Lisa had been the most recent victim of the Ether Man—a brazen, cunning predator whose

nickname stems from his signature MO: He almost always rendered women unconscious by holding a chemical-soaked rag to their face. Police had evidence to believe the Ether Man had preyed upon six other young women since 1991, most of whom lived near college campuses.

And Lisa’s attack wouldn’t be his last. The Ether Man allegedly went on to sexually assault at least four more victims in three states through the late ’90s and 2000s, frightening young women all over the Southwest. He left police baffled, with few leads as to who he was or where and when he was likely to strike next.

RAPING WOMEN IN THEIR BEDS

After Lisa’s rape, the Albuquerque police laid out what they knew about the Ether Man, a source close to the investigation told Cosmo. He usually committed his crimes past midnight. After entering through a window or door, he’d overpower his sleeping victim, anesthetizing her with the chemical-soaked cloth. Sometimes, he would perform oral sex; other times, vaginal intercourse. Then he’d disappear, leaving victims to come to with a stinging facial rash or facial blisters from the chemicals and a fuzzy memory of the assault.

Each crime had something else in common: The victims were all young and attractive, with slender, athletic builds. Serial rapists sometimes select a “type,” explains criminal profiler Brent Turvey, who has consulted on dozens of rape cases nationwide.

The scary nickname stems from his MO: He rendered women unconscious with a chemical-soaked rag.

“ You are a beautiful woman,” the Ether Man told one victim after viciously raping her, then kissed her head.

There were many unanswered questions, including what he looked like. A few victims were able to remember a large, muscular man. But police had no age range, hair color, or other identifying features.

Without additional facts, investigators couldn't produce a fleshed-out criminal profile. But one psychological detail stood out: Like many serial predators, the Ether Man seemed to want to connect with his victims. During his first assault in 1991, one of the only times he didn't knock out his victim, he rolled the 29-year-old on her stomach and viciously raped her before commenting, "You are a beautiful woman," and kissing her head. "He's living a fantasy that the women enjoy it, that he's doing them a favor and the sex is consensual," says Turvey.

Although he left DNA evidence at several crime scenes, it didn't match any genetic material in various databases. So police followed up other leads. A few victims had medical-related jobs. Could he be working in a doctor's office or hospital? Almost all belonged to a gym. Could he have singled out his victims there? Neither of these panned out, and with little else to go on, the trail cooled.

In the next few years, the Ether Man allegedly struck at least two more times in Albuquerque, becoming more violent and cocky—a characteristic of a serial rapist, who gets a thrill out of boosting his sense of control over a victim as well as the brutality of his crimes, says Turvey. In 1998, he allegedly raped a 36-year-old clothing designer vaginally and anally after duct-taping her eyes and binding her hands with zip ties. He also left a soaked rag behind. An analysis

showed that it was a mix of possible computer solvents, not ether.

The same year, a 34-year-old awoke to find the phone line to her house cut and a chilling note penciled on her kitchen wall: "I could have raped you again. Get smart. You are stupid." She'd been one of the Ether Man's victims six years earlier.

By 2000, police still had no real leads. Worse, the first cases linked to the Ether Man were approaching New Mexico's statute of limitations on sexual-assault and other charges, so the district attorney took an unusual step: He indicted a DNA profile and charged John Doe with nine sexual assaults on women ages 15 to 36. This would allow them to put a suspect on trial...if a suspect was ever found.

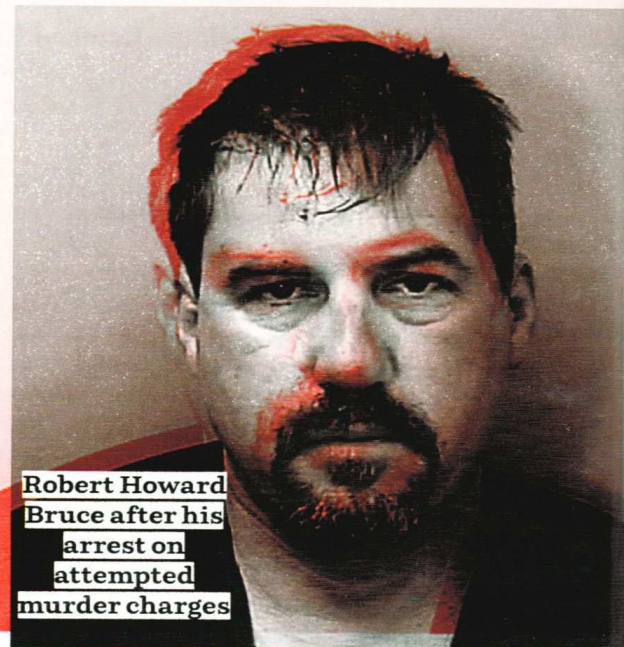
Weeks after the indictment, an Albuquerque man taking out his garbage at 1 a.m. was startled when a hysterical woman appeared. The 21-year-old student, who lived around the corner, said a man had burst into her bedroom brandishing a knife. DNA on a piece of rope found in her backyard belonged to the Ether Man. It would be the last case the police connected to him for six years.

SNARED IN HIS OWN TRAP

On the night of July 16, 2007, a 23-year-old receptionist living in a house near the Colorado State

University campus in Pueblo was lying in bed watching TV. She looked out the window and saw a man creeping along her backyard, she later told police. She dialed 911.

Police chased and caught a man who turned out to be Robert Howard Bruce, a then-45-year-old salesman of food-warming products who lived a few miles away. In 2001, Bruce had moved to Pueblo from Albuquerque, where he'd briefly owned a small computer-related company. Tall, broad, and relatively handsome—his second wife, Joy,



The Ether Man allegedly struck at least two more times in the next few years, becoming more violent and cocky, a trait of serial rapists.

told Cosmo that she was attracted to him because she thought he resembled Ben Affleck—he was known as a good dad and a hard worker, traveling all over the Southwest on business.

But Bruce had a dark side. Joy said he was “controlling,” and his first wife had called the police to report domestic violence. He also racked up a misdemeanor charge for shoplifting, according to police.

The officer who stopped him, Nathan Pruce, sensed that he might be dangerous—he noticed that Bruce was acting strangely “euphoric” in the dead of night in a residential neighborhood that wasn’t his own. “When I cornered him, I asked him what he was doing,” Pruce later testified. “He smiled and said he was watching a girl use a vibrator.”

Pruce arrested Bruce on a Peeping Tom charge. Because it was a sex offense, if Bruce was found guilty, he’d have to give the court a DNA sample. Bruce was released and assigned a court date, which he kept postponing for the next two years by firing his attorney and failing to appear.

Back in Albuquerque, however, the cold trail left by the Ether Man was heating up. A 2006 sexual assault of a college student in Austin, Texas, had just been linked to him via DNA. With fresh evidence at hand, detectives later reopened the case—reinterviewing victims, testing DNA, and sharing information with other Southwestern cities. DNA left behind on a piece of rope from a 1997 case where an Albuquerque woman escaped a burglary by jumping out her bedroom window was tested. It matched the Ether Man profile. The victim was reinterviewed, and she gave a description that led to a sketch of the Ether Man.

In September 2009, the *Albuquerque Journal* ran a front-page story titled “Cops Back on Trail of ‘Ether Man’ Rapist.” Joy Bruce saw the article and showed it to her husband. “There are some sick people in the

world,” she recalled him responding. Yet the article made a bigger impression on Bruce than Joy would know at the time.

On October 6, 2009, someone rigged a propane tank to explode in Officer Pruce’s garage. Pruce noticed the tank before it went off, but cops suspected Bruce, as it was found on the morning he was scheduled to finally answer the Peeping Tom charge. They arrested him for failing to show up in court then obtained DNA samples to see if it matched DNA that would potentially be found on the tank or from unsolved cases in the system. It matched that of the Ether Man. The Peeping Tom they had in custody was the long sought-after serial rapist.


A MONSTER BROUGHT TO JUSTICE

On November 2, 2009, Bruce was charged with nine sexual assaults in Albuquerque as well as a host of other felony charges. He was also indicted for attempted murder for rigging the propane tank in Officer Pruce’s garage and for a sexual assault in Pueblo. Last January, he was charged with burglary with the intent to commit sexual assault in Austin.

Questioned by police about her husband, Joy replied that he was often away from home for weeks at a time, that she’d once found a knife and ski mask in his car...and that after reading the *Albuquerque Journal* article, she suspected Bruce might be the Ether Man, but the police sketch didn’t resemble him.

Last August, Bruce was sentenced to 64 years in prison for the attempted murder of Officer Pruce and his wife. Then in October, a week before a jury trial was to begin for the Pueblo sexual assault, he pleaded guilty to attempted sexual assault and burglary and is in the

His weapon of choice rendered women helpless.



An analysis of the rag left behind showed that it was infused with a potent mix of solvents.

preliminary stages of possibly cooperating with other agencies for the other charges. His next sentencing is set for this month, and he could receive up to 24 years, helping to ensure he spends the rest of his life in prison.

Jurisdictions all over the Southwest are currently testing Bruce’s DNA to see if it matches any cold cases. Police have contacted officials in Europe and Asia, since Bruce traveled there on business. “It’s likely that Bruce assaulted more women, who have no memory of the attack or were too unsure of what had happened to report it,” said an investigator close to the case.

Bruce’s capture can be attributed to a number of factors. If he hadn’t tried to kill Officer Pruce, if the Albuquerque police hadn’t revived the case, and if Bruce hadn’t been so careless and cocky when it came to leaving DNA evidence behind, the Ether Man might still be free. “Serial rapists can keep offending their entire lives,” says Turvey. “They keep seeking power and control.” ■