

Flowers on a Court Opinion

How the Trial of My Great-Grandmother's Murderer Changed Me, My Family, and the Law

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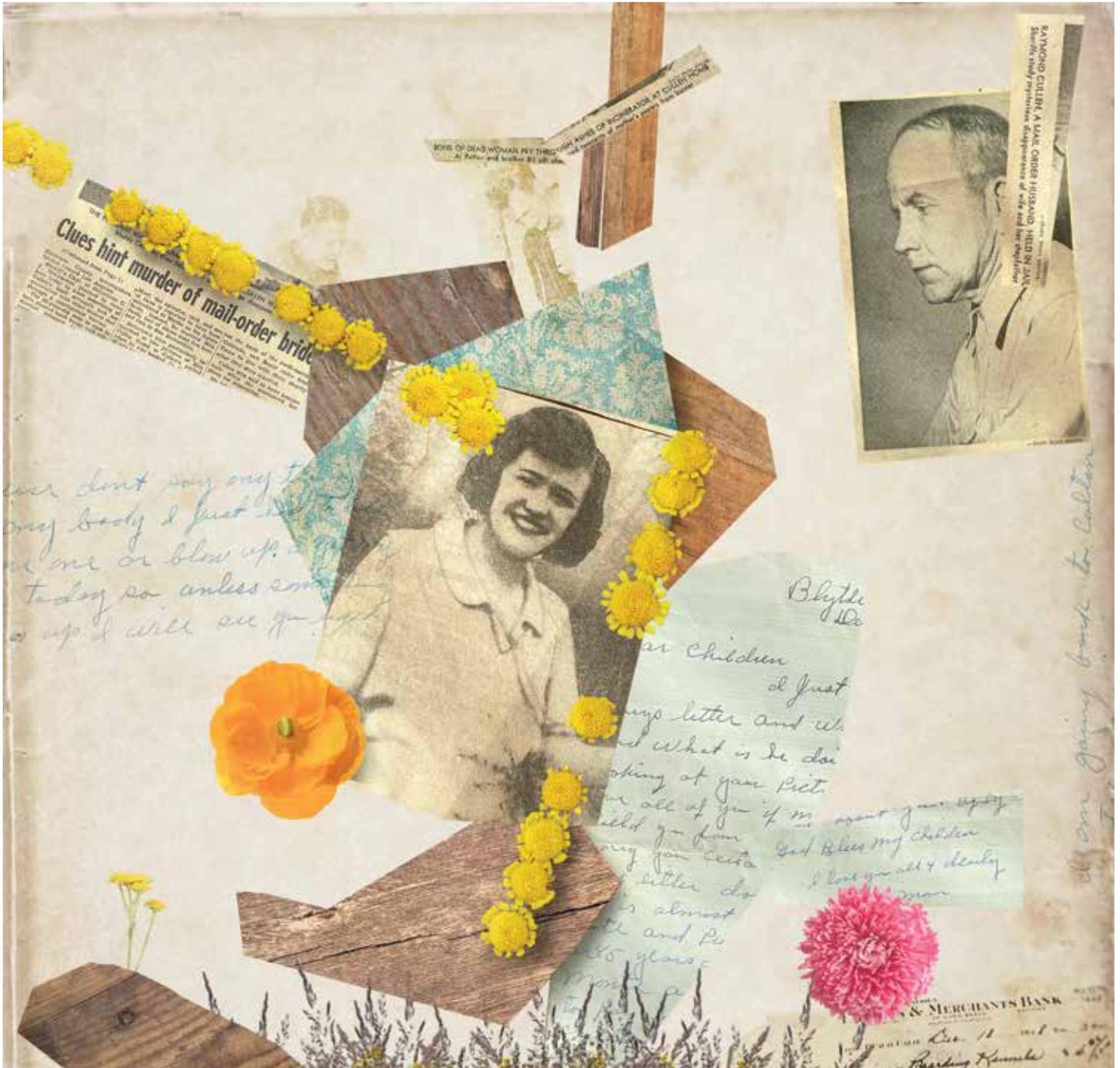
In 1949, my great-grandmother, Mary Sauls Patton, was murdered on the banks of the Colorado River. Her body was never found. Mary's killer was her fifth husband, an ex-convict named Ray Cullen. It was a double homicide. Cullen also killed Mary's frail stepfather, Daniel Boyer, at roughly the same time. Cullen claimed innocence and pushed a scattered but unyielding defense throughout the long trial and appeal. The story captivated the Southern California news media. Papers in Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties eagerly followed the case as it unfolded: the stymied police investigation, the killer's bizarre explanations of what happened, and the baffling disappearance of the bodies.

Mary's murder was by no means a secret in my family. I've known about it ever since I was old enough for it to be deemed appropriate for my ears. It was always just a vague story to me, a Patton family curiosity buried in what to a child seemed like the ancient past. Later, as an attorney, I had never considered this bizarre family tragedy from a trial lawyer's perspective, being busy with a commercial trial practice in Texas and having no particular interest in criminal law. That changed. A few years ago, I stumbled on a 1951 California Supreme Court case, *People v. Cullen*, upholding Cullen's conviction and discussing the trial in broad outlines. It was fascinating. I had known that Cullen died

in San Quentin in the 1950s, but I didn't know his case forged an important precedent that still stands today.

Out of both professional and personal curiosity, I recently exhumed 3,200 pages of trial transcripts from the California State Archives. It made for grim reading, but one thing surprised me. I learned that my grandfather, Bill Patton—Mary's youngest son and a man I was close to until his death in 2015—was the relentless force behind Cullen's conviction. Indeed, my grandfather was both the prosecution's star witness and the chief target of the defense's broadsides. I'd never seen this side of him before. Scrutinizing trial transcripts, I caught a glimpse of the 24-year-old Billy Patton, a man who faced his mother's killer in court, listened to his lies, waited for Cullen to crack, and hoped for the chance to give his mother a proper burial. Through his six days on the witness stand—including an extremely hostile cross-examination—I saw that even in grief, he was cool under fire and single-minded in his pursuit of justice.

My grandfather's resolve didn't move Cullen, but it moved the jury. Seventy-one years later, it moved me. It changed my view of the legal tribunals before which I regularly appear. Reading the transcripts of my grandfather's testimony was like taking a core sample from the psyche of people who find themselves enmeshed in our legal ecosystem. It opened my eyes to how these



tribunals can exact a toll on participants like Billy Patton, who find themselves tangled up involuntarily in a foreign world of judges, juries, lawyers, and, ultimately, state justice.

The Backstory

My great-grandmother Mary Patton's life spanned World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II. For most of it, Mary carried on a working-class existence. She married for the first time at age 19, and for the fifth (and last) time at age 58. My genetic link to Mary comes through her third husband, my great-grandfather

Will Patton, whom she married on Valentine's Day 1923. It was a yours-mine-and-ours type of marriage: two of Will's children, three of Mary's, and one son—my grandfather Billy—together. Will Patton worked as a movie theater projectionist in Los Angeles, a steady gig during the Great Depression, when movies offered a cheap escape from the day's realities. Mary and Will made it work for 18 years. They divorced in 1940 when my grandfather Billy was 14. Mary's next husband died in 1946. She found herself alone again, but it seemed Mary's hardscrabble days had ended. From her fourth husband, she inherited two properties outright, together with a comfortable nest egg in the bank.

Illustration by Dana Smith; elements used are from the author's personal collection

Then Mary met Ray Cullen. They met via a matrimonial agency—the post-war equivalent of Match.com. It was in early 1948. Cullen failed to mention he was an ex-con during their brief correspondence courtship. If Mary could have run a background check, she would have found Cullen’s three aliases (William Nabors, Alfred J. Hudson, Ray Seattle), four prison terms (San Quentin, McNeil Island, Folsom, Idaho Federal), and convictions for aggravated assault, counterfeiting, and multiple parole violations. Cullen had recently shuttered his boutique counterfeiting operation in Los Angeles and moved to Blythe, California.

Blythe was a sleepy desert afterthought in the late 1940s—a pit stop between Los Angeles and Phoenix on the west bank of the Colorado River, the current of which forms the state line between Arizona and California. The east bank of the Colorado River is in La Paz County, Arizona, where brown cactus scrub grows right down to the waterline. The Blythe side is in Riverside County, California, where a 40-mile strip of farmland clings to the state border. Blythe is a place defined by hard lines: the county line, the state line, the line where the Colorado cuts through a little green oasis—an island in the arid expanse of the southern Mojave Desert.

Blythe was an attractive place for Cullen: an obscure town, population 4,000, where no one knew about his criminal record. When he matched with Mary, Cullen already owned a bare little cabin on the riverbank—a quiet, concealed place where he tied up his flatbottom boat just a few steps from his front door. He was doing cleanup and maintenance at the Busy B coffee shop downtown.

In August 1948, Mary left her grown sons in Los Angeles, married Cullen, and started a new life in Blythe. She brought a houseful of her own furniture with her. A few months later, her ailing, 82-year-old stepfather, Daniel Boyer, came from Texas to live with them. Mary was willing to care for him despite how cramped Cullen’s cabin was. Boyer was a Spanish-American War veteran, and he brought his monthly government pension check with him.

In just four months, the marriage soured. Mary quickly learned that Cullen was a morose, taciturn sort of man—a “pouter,” as one of many letters to her sons reported. Cullen refused to speak to her, sometimes for days. By late December, Mary began plotting to leave. All she needed was a new tire on her car. She wrote to her sons on Christmas Eve 1948:

I guess you’ll be surprised to learn that unless there is a change here I am going back to Colton in Feb. . . . I shant say a word I’ll just move. I got my tire today so unless something comes up I will see you right after new year. Please don’t say anything to any body. I had to tell some one or blow up.

Mary held out through Christmas. Then it was the new year. Mary packed her bags on January 2. On January 4, Cullen went

to the county sheriff’s office in Blythe and reported Mary and Boyer missing.

On the afternoon of January 4, Cullen called my grandfather, Billy, at work to tell him Mary had gone missing. At the time, Billy was only 24, but he was no stranger to responsibility. He and Fran (my grandmother) were newlyweds, just seven months married. Less than five years earlier, Billy saw death firsthand as an aircraft electrician aboard the USS *Bunker Hill*, when his carrier was struck by kamikaze planes near Okinawa. Settling in after the war, he worked as an electrician for the Associated Telephone Company in San Bernardino, California.

The Defendant’s Initial Story

After Cullen’s phone call, Billy and Fran dropped everything and set off on the four-hour drive to Blythe. They stopped first at the sheriff’s office. They arrived at Cullen’s cabin around 10 p.m. and were the first to see the state of the Cullen place on that frantic Tuesday night. As soon as Billy and Fran arrived, Cullen started spouting the earliest version of his conflicting stories on what had happened. He said Mary brought down two ducks from the shore with one pull on her little .410 shotgun. Cullen said Mary hollered to Boyer, not to Cullen himself, to get in the boat and help her retrieve the birds. The elderly Boyer “ran” down the precipitous riverbank and got in the boat with her. Off they went. Twenty minutes or so went by. Cullen heard the motor sputtering downriver, then silence. Cullen said he went down to inspect the boat landing, only to see Mary and Boyer rounding the riverbend. Their flatbottom boat later turned up a quarter mile downstream, with six inches of water and Boyer’s old hat in the bottom. Mary and her stepfather were gone.

That night, Billy and Fran also noticed several startling facts about Mary’s imminent departure. They saw the sad, packed suitcase that represented Mary’s last bid for freedom. Fran noticed glasses in cardboard boxes, and nothing fresh in the refrigerator. Billy found his mother’s 1936 Ford coupe in the driveway with a full tank of gas, new tires, the radiator topped off, and cardboard boxes in the trunk. And there was a gun. Billy had given it to his mother in San Bernardino—just a “varmint gun”—an over-and-under with a low-caliber .22 rifle barrel on top and a .410 shotgun barrel underneath. The shotgun was powerful enough to bring down a duck, but only at close range. Oddly enough, there was still a shotgun shell in the bottom chamber—but the .22 rifle chamber was empty.

Later that night, other family members started pulling into the driveway. There was Mary’s sister, Sophie, and her husband John. Billy’s brother, Al, came too. They stayed at the cabin into the wee hours of the morning, discussing the situation around the table. Cullen repeated his story, popping in and out several times to check the cabin’s oil heater. “He was nervous and he was crying,” Fran later reported.

Over the next few days, Billy and his brothers spent their daylight hours scouring the Colorado River in a small, three-person boat. Not to be outdone, my grandmother rented a small airplane from which she could scan the California-Arizona desert from above. Of all the new things I discovered about my family history in the trial transcripts, perhaps the strangest (to me, at least) is that my grandmother—not usually a private person—never told any of her descendants about her time flying over the desert in a small crop duster. Not even during her son’s (my dad’s) stellar career as a navy pilot did she mention her flying experience.

If Billy wanted a semblance of justice for his mother, he would have to walk into this minefield. And he did.

Four weeks went by. While the Riverside County detectives kept up the investigation, Billy and his brothers did too. They spent days out on river boats and searching the banks on foot for any sign of their mother. They did turn up some clues. On January 27, my great-uncle, Al Patton, found fresh footprints leading off into the brush near the cabin. One of Blythe’s rare desert rains had preserved them in the mud. About 150 yards from the cabin, they saw the soil had been disturbed. To Al, it looked like two three-foot holes were dug and afterward filled in. Al followed the trail of footprints where they led: directly back to the cabin. Al didn’t tell Cullen about it. Instead, he came back two days later with his brothers—Billy, John, and Frank—and a Lieutenant Lee Hickey from the sheriff’s office. Together the five of them dug out the depressions in the ground, but all they found were twigs and leaves.

The Arrest

Deputy Sheriff Ray Seeley finally took Cullen into custody on February 11. Detectives had tailed him for weeks. It was bodies the detectives and the family were looking for, but there were other charges they could bring against Cullen. After the murders, Cullen had the audacity to forge Boyer’s signature on one of his Spanish-American War veteran checks and cash it. Seeley stopped by the Busy B during Cullen’s shift and asked him to come down

to the sheriff’s office; there were some men who wanted to talk to him about a pension check. Cullen went without protest. He denied the forgery, but Seeley arrested him and locked him up.

After Cullen’s arrest, the Blythe sheriff called in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) to investigate the forensic evidence. LAPD chemist Ray Pinker trekked out to Blythe, where he found what he believed were traces of human blood all over the cabin: on the living room wall, on a davenport sofa, on the kitchen linoleum and the back kitchen doorframe, and between the cracks in the wooden living room floor. Similar traces showed up on Cullen’s flannel shirt, blue jeans, and cotton gloves. Pinker’s blood analysis wasn’t beyond dispute; this wasn’t the DNA era. Pinker was also sure that someone had meticulously cleaned up these locations. The wallpaper was scrubbed and eroded. Pinker said the samples he took back to his lab reacted as if there were blood on them anyway. Someone had cleaned up the kitchen, and, on the bare living room floor, someone went so far as to use sandpaper on the floorboards.

The Defendant’s Second Story

Then, on March 13, Cullen—still housed in the Blythe jail—announced to Seeley that he had a different explanation for what happened to Mary and Boyer: “The story I have been telling you fellows was all wrong.” He said, “I want to tell the truth, and I might as well tell all.” Cullen’s new version of the truth was more fantastical than his first. He claimed he had been outside chopping wood on January 3 when he heard a gunshot inside the cabin. He rushed to the back door and looked into the little kitchen. There was Boyer, dead on the floor. Then, said Cullen, he heard another shot. He “jumped back a little,” thinking somebody was shooting at him. Cullen said he heard a body fall. Rushing inside, he saw Mary lying on the bathroom floor, dying from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. According to Cullen’s second version, Mary had killed her stepfather in a deranged murder-suicide. Cullen then told Seeley something that seemed to come straight out of Will Patton’s movie reels:

[Cullen said] he went to her and she wasn’t dead yet, and he put his arm behind her and raised her up a little bit. She says, “Quick, Ray, baptize me.” He said he thought she had been baptized before, [but] she wasn’t sure it was right or something, and he went and got some water and baptized her through some Catholic way so that she would be saved. He said he was holding her in his arms and she died, and he said he then came back to Dad and that he got his pulse; there was no pulse, and he knew, he said, that Dad and Mary was dead, and he got a rag and started mopping up some of the blood, and the more he thought about it, the more he was going to get in trouble if he made a report, and he was afraid to come up to the office

and tell what had happened, because of his record. He said he knew we would feel he did it.

Sophie Patton and Bessie Hart, Mary's sisters, visited Cullen many times while he was in jail. They listened patiently to his bizarre ramblings, hoping he'd drop some clue that might lead to the bodies. After about 20 minutes of conversation, Cullen made a dramatic pronouncement to Bessie: "Mary, I have got a secret that I might take to my grave." Bessie responded: "Ray, I'm not Mary. My name is Bessie." Cullen begged her pardon; then, unaccountably, he went on to repeat the drowning story more or less verbatim, but he asked Bessie to visit him again the next day, a Sunday. Only in the afternoon, Cullen specified, so he could shave first and get a haircut.

When Bessie was admitted to the jail the next day, she found Cullen scrubbed and dressed in his Sunday best, this time with a different story to tell. It was close to what he'd already told Seeley.

"Bessie, I am going to tell you something that will make you happy," he said.

"What would make me happy is to know that we will find Dad and Mary's bodies," she responded.

Cullen told her, "Mary was prepared to die."

Bessie asked, "What do you mean by that?"

He said, "I baptized her. She was not satisfied with her baptism she had when a girl, and she asked me to baptize her. She was prepared to die Monday."

The Difficulties of Conviction

Despite the investigation's mounting circumstantial evidence, the path to Cullen's conviction faced several roadblocks. One seemed insurmountable: an intransigent common law doctrine, *corpus delicti*. Translated verbatim to the "body of the crime," this principle requires that for the prosecution in a homicide to make a *prima facie* case, it must show (1) that a death occurred and (2) that the death resulted from unlawful agency. Without that showing, the prosecution could not offer into evidence any of the defendant's out-of-court statements. *Corpus delicti* is a sound doctrine in many cases. It bars conviction when the only evidence before a court is the defendant's confession to the crime. In this instance, it risked offering a procedural loophole to a clever defendant.

Cullen knew of *corpus delicti* by name. Maybe he learned about it in prison. Maybe he picked it up from his previous attorneys, or from one of the pulp detective magazines he liked to read. Regardless, Cullen meant to exploit the doctrine, and to exploit Mary's family too, taunting the Patton family and the detectives with oblique references to it throughout the investigation. On one of the many occasions when Bessie Hart pressed Cullen to tell her what he had really done to her sister, Cullen

clammed up, saying, "I can't tell you any more . . . they have no *corpus delicti* and if I say anything more to you I am going to jeopardize my defense." Reading the principle too literally, Cullen insisted to his grave that, because Mary's body was never found, he could not be prosecuted.

Cullen fell prey to his own dime-store trope. *Corpus delicti* did not categorically require that the prosecution offer evidence of a dead body. As courts for centuries had pointed out, such an application of the principle would absolve all sorts of crimes in which a body simply could not be found; homicides at sea, for example.

By early 1950, the Riverside County prosecutor had developed a compelling evidentiary story, but without the victims' bodies, it was mostly circumstantial. This meant that Cullen's many "confessions" could not be used against him until enough evidence came in at trial to tie him to the crime. The prosecutors forged ahead nonetheless, knowing they would face a serious procedural hurdle. Ultimately, they prevailed.

The Trial

At trial, Cullen's defense strategy veered from orthodox to theatrical. His legal team tried to change the trial venue to Fresno. They challenged the jury panel as prejudiced. Cullen went on a hunger strike. The defense claimed he was tortured in custody. Cullen's public defender waived opening statement because, he said, the prosecution had no legal basis.

Cullen's overarching strategy was to mount a straightforward procedural defense under the *corpus delicti* bulwark. For the first several weeks of trial, the defense raised the same long-winded objection to virtually every other question by the prosecutor. It reads like a refrain: "We object to that on the ground that [the testimony] is incompetent, irrelevant and immaterial, for the reason that the *corpus delicti* has not been established, *prima facie* or otherwise."

When the issue finally came to a head, the trial judge, O.K. Morton, ruled that "the State has satisfied the requirements of the law about the degree of proof of the *corpus delicti* essential to warrant the introduction in evidence of the extrajudicial statements, admissions or confessions of the accused." The defense team persistently objected on grounds of *corpus delicti* even after the ruling. Mercifully, they reined in their incompetent-irrelevant-and-immaterial chant. From that point, witness examinations proceeded at a more familiar pace.

One of Cullen's main, and most cruel, factual defenses at trial was that my grandfather was in fact his own mother's killer. Ignoring that Billy was indisputably in San Bernardino at the time of Mary's death, Cullen's lawyers said (a) Billy hated Cullen, (b) Billy wanted to frame Cullen for the murder, and (c) Billy thought he could inherit his mother's property and cash in on her life insurance. For example, during an argument on whether the

defense could subpoena Billy’s bank records, Cullen’s lawyers argued that “these records themselves will show that the plaintiff’s principal witness, William Patton, had a greater and more direct motive for the murder of Mary Cullen than did this defendant.”

In closing, the prosecutor, Ray Sullivan, leveled with the jury about the case they sat through for months, conceding that “the fundamental backbone of this case is circumstantial.” Sullivan laid out the evidence in detail. He first reminded the jury that they had heard testimony from the head chemist in the LAPD’s proto-*CSI* unit, which established that remnants of human blood had been found in Cullen’s kitchen and living room; on the living room carpet and couch; and on Cullen’s flannel shirt, blue jeans, and cotton gloves. He then pointed to the discovery of Mary Patton’s rings in the dirt outside the cabin as evidence of Cullen’s guilt, because, according to her family’s testimony, Mary wore them religiously. He walked the jury through the testimony about the human-sized holes dug (and later refilled) 150 yards from the cabin. He referenced Mary’s letters to Billy and others about her immediate intent to leave Blythe around the start of the new year.

I saw the reverberations of this traumatic event in my family over the years following the guilty verdict.

The prosecution’s main argument was not based on circumstantial evidence. Cullen’s actions and excuses in January 1949 were not those of an innocent man, Sullivan said. Cullen’s first story was that Mary and her stepfather rushed into the river to chase down two “mud hens” they had shot and that they had drowned when the sturdy boat they had launched capsized. Sullivan dispatched that story quickly: Boyer was a frail 80-year-old; to reach the boat landing, they had to descend a 20-foot ladder to a narrow embankment; and, in any event, the boat was locked with a key that Cullen kept with himself at all times.

Contrasting Cullen’s initial “story” with the actual facts in evidence, the prosecution explained how, on January 3, Cullen did not make his regular-as-clockwork 10:30 a.m. trip into Blythe to retrieve the day’s mail. The prosecution told the jury how, at 6:00 a.m. on January 4, Cullen showed up at the local gas station

with mud covering his shoes and pants; how he stopped at a realtor’s office later that morning to put his cabin up for sale; and how only after those two errands did Cullen proceed to the sheriff’s office to report his wife and father-in-law missing. Then the prosecutor reminded the jury that, after he was arrested, Cullen confessed in a signed statement that he had fabricated the boat story. Finally, the prosecution identified Cullen’s forged cashing of Boyer’s \$120 war pension check as “vital” because it established both motive and intent.

As expected, the defense closed by attacking the circumstantial nature of the prosecution’s case. It challenged the forensic findings of Ray Pinker—the expert LAPD chemist—by suggesting that the bloodstains he found in Cullen’s cabin came from a “few drops” that “you could cover with a quarter and have change coming.” The defense then tried to undermine the holes found by Al Patton near the cabin by suggesting that “[t]here would have been blood in those holes, and Ray Pinker [the LAPD chemist] wouldn’t have missed it.” The defense also pointed to the prosecution’s failure to meet its burden to prove that the rings found in the dirt outside the Cullen cabin were Mary’s. The defense’s main strategy in closing was to attack Billy Patton. Cullen’s lawyers told the jury that Billy’s testimony was influenced by his “bitterness, hatred, and jealousy” toward Cullen, which caused him to testify to facts about which “material particulars [are] false.” They accused Billy of being half-ready to believe Cullen guilty of murder as soon as he received the call from Cullen on January 4, 1949.

The Verdict

The jury began deliberations at 6:51 p.m. on July 21, 1950. Almost six hours later—at 12:30 a.m. on July 22—the jury convicted Cullen on both counts of first-degree murder. At his sentencing hearing three days later, Cullen stood before Judge Morton and continued to protest his innocence. He played the martyr, telling the judge that “[i]f I happen to be so unfortunate as to be denied a new trial by the High Courts, I can at least go to my death with the consolation of knowing that I am innocent of the charge, and to know that you and the jury are the real murderers.” Commending Cullen for “ably conceal[ing] much material evidence,” Judge Morton pronounced the death penalty, which, he said, “must convey you to the gas chamber and send your spirit into the presence of your Almighty Judge.”

Cullen, of course, immediately appealed the verdict. His lawyers predictably argued that the prosecution could not establish *corpus delicti* and that, setting aside Cullen’s extrajudicial statements, the remaining evidence could not support a guilty verdict. The California Supreme Court addressed Cullen’s simplistic, no-body-no-crime *corpus delicti* argument head-on: “It is not necessary in order to support the conviction

that the bodies actually be found.” The reason the court gave was self-evident:

[Because] “the worst crimes are naturally committed at chosen times, in darkness and secrecy[,] human tribunals must act upon such indications as the circumstances admit, [and] more often than not the attendant and surrounding facts remove all mystery and supply that degree of certainty men are daily accustomed to regard as sufficient in most important concerns of life.

The court then explained that, although *corpus delicti* must still be established, the prosecution need not prove its *prima facie* case at trial before the jury is allowed to hear evidence of the defendant’s statements. In other words, “the order of proof [is] discretionary.” Thus, the court determined that “[t]he circumstances in evidence established a *prima facie* showing of the *corpus delicti* sufficient to allow the case, with the defendant’s admissions, to go to the jury” and that “[t]he circumstances also pointed to the defendant as the perpetrator and, together with the admissions, unquestionably supports the verdict.”

Justice moved quickly in the 1950s. Cullen was executed in late 1952, just over a year after the California Supreme Court decided his fate. Strapped to a chair in San Quentin, minutes from death, the warden in charge of the execution made one final plea: Would Cullen tell Billy and his brothers where he disposed of the bodies, “so these boys can bury their mother?” True to character to the end, Cullen’s last words were, “I ain’t telling ’em nothing.” The warden responded, “Then you’ll die that way,” and released the cyanide.

My grandfather never found his mother’s body. After the trial, he turned his focus to the more mundane challenges of everyday life: his three children and his telephone company job. When Bill Patton died in 2015, we held a memorial service for him with all of his children and grandchildren attending. Since then, we will sometimes visit his gravesite on Memorial Day to leave flowers.

The Case as Precedent

We can’t leave flowers for Mary because, even today, we don’t know where her body is. Still, Mary’s death has left a memorial of sorts for posterity. Over the 70 years since *People v. Cullen* was decided, courts across the country routinely have cited it as the seminal case on whether a murder conviction can be upheld if the victim’s body is never recovered. Although you can’t put flowers on a court opinion, the ongoing persuasive force of *People v. Cullen* does help ensure that Mary will not be forgotten.

I first learned the details of this trial almost 70 years after it happened. I was an established commercial trial lawyer by then. I spent my early associate years at a white-shoe New York law firm, then a decade ago I moved to Texas where I am now a

partner at a boutique trial firm. I try cases often. I appear in court regularly. I aggressively cross-examine the other side’s witnesses in depositions and at trial, and I prepare my own witnesses for similar attacks. I vigorously advocate for my clients’ positions. For the most part, I enjoy what I do.

As in any job, the nuts and bolts of litigation—taking depositions, appearing in court, cross-examining witnesses—can become rote and uninspiring. Some lawyers try to detach themselves from the personal travails of clients and witnesses, often as a survival mechanism. Even judges can become jaded. Their opinions often recite terse summaries about past events involving people who briefly materialize in the court’s consciousness, only to disappear just as quickly.

Of course, that’s not to say that the relationships a lawyer builds are unimportant or that personalities don’t matter to the practice of law. It’s just that even well-intentioned lawyers find themselves anesthetized drop by drop to the personal weight the legal process imposes on the people they challenge or defend. In a way, the seasoned courtroom advocate is like the dedicated oncologist. Each new patient is given the best possible defense against the cancer; each new patient is one of thousands facing the same threat. Meanwhile, from the individual patient’s perspective, life hangs in the balance.

After Billy Patton got the call from Cullen on January 4, 1949, that his mother was missing, I expect he felt like he was in over his head. He never went to college. He had never set foot in a courthouse. He had virtually no experience with the law. If Billy wanted a semblance of justice for his mother, he would have to walk into this minefield. And he did.

I wish I could have spoken to my grandfather about the trial before he died. I would have told him how much I admired him. I would have told him that my job gave me a unique perspective on what he went through. I also would have explained that the more I dug into the trial transcripts, the more his courtroom experience weighed on me. In those transcripts, I felt the terror and the stress he must have encountered on the witness stand. I felt the weight of his task of holding in the rage that simmered under the surface. I felt the dejection that descended on him after he suffered repeated blows at the hands of Cullen’s lawyers—public defenders who, by all accounts, were just doing their job. Worse still, I felt the indignity of my grandfather straining to serve justice, only to have Cullen accuse *him* of being his mother’s killer.

When I thought about this occurring at the outset of Billy’s adult life—at a time when most newlyweds are planning for a hopeful future—I not only felt an overwhelming empathy for a man I came to know 30 years later, but I saw the reverberations of this traumatic event in my family over the years following the guilty verdict. I was reminded that, no matter how familiar the courtroom has become to me, the people I deal with every day deserve a measure of that same compassion. ■