

# **Not Knowing**

**By Nicholas Stillman**

A free sample

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Detective Fromstein left his car in a parking lot ten minutes away from the crime scene. He walked in the subzero wind to avoid another spectacle of rubbernecking along the roadside. The strip of congested road preceded a busier intersection, and he'd need some level of calm and casualness to think. Though futile, his revisit of the ditch where Mrs. Hebb had died helped him inhale the scene, absorb some cerebral clues even. Something from the return here would help with the case or at least matter—even the slamming realization of getting stumped.

But Fromstein never got stumped. Sure, he had one other case “unsolved,” but only because the murderer deserved to get away. Would Mrs. Hebb's killer escape justice too from some new breed of corruption? If the shooter deserved freedom, then yes. But if the culprit killed for sport, he'd probably fade into the mists of cold cases by outsmarting Halifax's best.

Fromstein took in the tang of smog and road salt. He heard the latter crunch and echo under a hundred rolling tires. The afternoon traffic had long since mashed up the killer's tire tracks. But some of the scene might still stir up an answer. It had to.

He stared at the spot in the ditch. The police had taken down the tape and left enough bootprints to suggest a mosh pit had killed Hebb. But Fromstein still saw the depression in the four-inch snow where she fell on her back. The body bag carriers had tramped on the imprint. Their feet took bites from the snowy outline, but enough of the curvature still held. No blood spilled on the snow from the gunshot. The victim's heavy winter coat soaked it up.

Fromstein's fingers tapped rapidly in his coat pockets, and not from the cold. He stopped resisting and whipped out the tablet like a pack of cigarettes. The addictiveness of these handhelds made him shudder sometimes—again, not from the cold—but he'd need one to solve, or even half-solve, this case.

Using the tablet felt too easy. Fromstein hated the new cyber-detective bullshit, but it worked because criminals grew painfully bored with their unproductiveness. The lazy assholes move their mouths too much between meals. They eventually bragged about experiences, even murder, on social media. It fed them a burst of fame, a shot glass of attention, before the data dissipated into number dust in a server somewhere.

The deadbeats hoped their confessions would fade there unseen. They thought wrong.

But Hebb's killer probably wouldn't join the turds pining their stink around cyberspace. He or she had learned to shoot too well and how to do it in a solo drive-by. Solo meant silence. And a bullet to a woman's heart meant discipline. The killer would only make that kind of noise again on the next killing or with his woodland target practice.

Fromstein made some rapid searches but found no confessions. He breathed sighs of winter mist onto the tablet screen. His motoring thumbs switched lanes to bring up the autopsy and forensic reports. As expected, rereading the data in the Canadian winter wasteland didn't give him any new

insights.

He may never learn why Mrs. Hebb wore a Hawaiian shirt and swimming trunks under her winter coat that morning. The shorts had oceanic blue artwork and almost matched the lively tropic green of ferns and foliage patterned on the buttoned-up T-shirt. She hadn't missed a button, either, not on the shirt's collar nor the winter coat's cuffs. With clean teeth, good physical health, properly tied bootlaces, and brushed hair only disheveled by the wind, the woman had dressed for a beach stroll in December. She'd done this and gone out after midnight in a sound frame of mind.

No drug use, illegal or pharmaceutical. No enemies or problems at work. No romantic relationships or signs of sexual abuse. The family all got along and made no prior news or ruckus with neighbors. No mental illness or noteworthy medical history. According to the tire tracks in the snow, the killer didn't stop and put the strange outfit on the body postmortem. He or she—Fromstein believed mostly in he's—didn't take anything from Hebb except her life. The man shot through Hebb's coat and sternum and kept driving up to the intersection at 3:38 that morning.

He took a left and left town without speeding, like a smart killer would on these shitty roads.

And Hebb lied in the snow, preserved and waiting to puzzle the police a few hours later. On her lonely night walk to nowhere, she had stopped and turned to face the road as the killer slowed his vehicle.

The 44-year-old woman, calves exposed under her long coat, stood and faced the shooter as if transformed into a target board. The killer had seconds to aim, as the victim stood stunned or waiting. The bullet did what good bullets do when shot by an expert eye. Mrs. Hebb's bootprints went no further, for she fell backwards into the ditch and died instantly.