

Did Fat Jokes Lead to His Murder?

By Bill Hewitt

When New York City Fire Marshal Doug Mercereau Was Found Shot to Death in His Home, the Police Investigation Zeroed in on His Wife, Janet

For the New York City Fire Department it is a solemn ritual: At funerals, the next of kin are customarily presented with the fallen firefighter's helmet. But when Janet Mercereau showed up on Dec. 7 to bury her husband, Doug, 38, a supervising fire marshal and a rising star in the department, his colleagues made sure she came away empty-handed. Five days before, Mercereau had been found shot to death at his home on Staten Island. Police quickly zeroed in on his wife, who emerged as the sole suspect. The possible motive, according to anonymously sourced press reports? That, among other abuses, he supposedly made fat jokes about her. "The funeral was a very awkward situation," says Anthony Falconite, a retired fire marshal who was close friends with Mercereau and has trouble picturing his widow as a killer. "You don't want to believe it to be true."

It is still far from clear how much, if any of it, is true. To begin with, Doug's friends insist they never heard him make disparaging remarks about his wife's weight, and that it would have been out of character for him to do so. Meanwhile, police investigators will only say that Janet Mercereau, 38, is a "person of interest" in the case. But the upshot, says her attorney, is that she is living under a cloud of suspicion that is as hurtful as it is unjustified. "She's trying to grieve and she's got all this going on," says lawyer Mario Gallucci. "She's doing as well as anyone else whose husband has just been killed."

Of course the circumstances of her husband's death were far from ordinary. On the morning of Dec. 2 Janet was at the couple's home. The night before, she said, she had taken a sleeping pill and had slept in the same bedroom as their two daughters, Renee, 7, and Melanie, 5. Her husband had spent the night in the master bedroom. As she told it, at around 8:30 a.m. she had gone into the bedroom and found him under the covers, shot in the head, with his department handgun nearby (as an arson investigator, Mercereau carried a weapon for his job). She said she summoned police immediately.

From the start, there were a number of odd aspects to the crime scene. There was, for instance, no sign of forced entry, and an autopsy put Mercereau's death, from three bullet wounds, at about 6 a.m. Janet maintained that she had not heard any shots fired, explaining that, as was her custom, she had worn earplugs to sleep the night before. Police also found blood under her fingernails and discovered a freshly dried load of laundry.

Janet's lawyer contends that the blood on his client's hands was her own menstrual blood (police have not released results of tests on the blood) and dismisses the laundry as a red herring. "I've heard [from police sources] that she showered, that she put the gun in the dishwasher and washed it on a couple of different cycles," says Gallucci. "She had no reason to do any of those things." As for the gap between the apparent time of Mercereau's death and his client's contacting the police, Gallucci insists there is an innocent explanation. "Even if he was killed at 3 o'clock in the morning, that doesn't mean she waited five hours to call 911," he says. "It means she discovered his body five hours later."

A source close to the case says investigators "have been led to believe" comments about Janet's weight may provide a motive, "but we don't know if that's true or not." Her lawyer insists that in the

past Doug "continuously belittled and berated Janet about her weight." In a written interview with PEOPLE, Janet, responding in third person, said her husband had "made frequent derogatory remarks about her body parts." It is clear that the couple, who had been college sweethearts, had serious marital problems. In April 2006 Janet, a teacher, had filed for divorce and gotten an order of protection, alleging that her husband had thrown her against a wall. "He never laid a finger on her," says Mercereau's longtime friend Kevin Carl. "He wouldn't touch a fly." Last June the couple reconciled and Doug had moved back in.

For the moment, Janet, who is now living with her sister Mary, finds herself in legal limbo, waiting for a possible indictment. Her daughters have been removed from her by city authorities, for reasons that have not been disclosed. The question of whether Janet could have done it keeps bubbling up in the minds of Doug's friends, with no clear answer. "I used to be a cop," sighs Falconite. "I stopped asking why people do things pretty quickly."

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