



# The Mysterious Death of the Somerton Man

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Stacy Conradt

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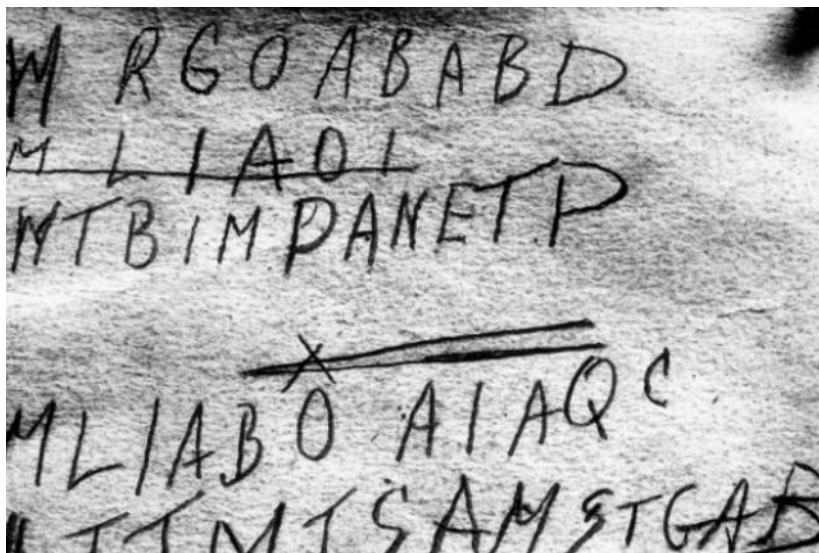


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On Tuesday, November 30, 1948, John Lyons and his wife were [walking](#) along Somerton Beach in South Australia when they noticed a man, fully dressed in a suit, drunkenly (it seemed) attempting to smoke a cigarette. The next morning, Lyons went for a swim and saw the man was still there—but he wasn't moving. Sometime in the night, the man had died. His half-smoked cigarette still lay on the collar of his shirt.

As disturbing as the situation was, it wasn't entirely outside the realm of normalcy—until the body was taken to a local hospital.

First of all, the man carried no means of identification. There was no wallet, no ID badge, no money. Even the labels had been cut from his clothing. His pockets [contained](#) a used bus ticket, an unused train ticket, Juicy Fruit gum, an Army Club cigarette packet containing Kensitas brand cigarettes, and combs. And strangely, he wore dress shoes, but [no socks](#). When he was examined, a doctor determined that the man had died of heart failure sometime after 2 a.m., but did not believe the heart failure was due to natural causes. The mystery man, he [concluded](#), had been poisoned, with a fast-acting and fast-disappearing toxin—a fact which rendered the substance untraceable. A professor later deduced that there were only two poisons in the world that met both of those descriptions.



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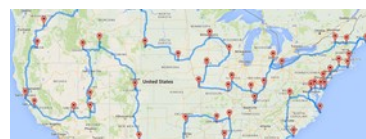


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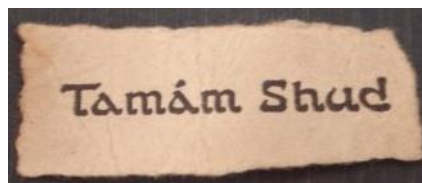
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For more than a month, police made no progress on identifying the man or his killer. Then, on January 12, detectives discovered the man's suitcase in storage at the Adelaide train station. Its contents were just as mundane as the contents of the man's pockets: A spool of orange thread that matched the stitching in his pocket, three pieces of clothing with name labels that said "Keane" or "Kean," a table knife, and a stencil kit typically used to write on cargo containers. None of these clues yielded any breaks in the case, and "Keane" did not appear to be the man's actual name—either the clothing was purchased second-hand or intentionally included a fake name.



In April 1949, a University of Adelaide professor was brought in to examine the body one more time. He found something that everyone else had managed to miss: A tiny pocket in the man's pants that contained a strip of paper bearing the words "Tamám Shud." The paper, it turned out, had been torn from a Persian book of poetry called the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. The words "Tamám Shud" were written near the book's conclusion; they meant "It is ended." (It was once transcribed incorrectly as "Taman Shud," which is how the case is often referred to now.)



After months of searching—with the help of citizens—police were able to find the copy of the book the phrase had been torn from and, thanks to a phone number scribbled on the back cover, quickly tracked down its owner. Nurse [Jessica Thomson](#) (who, for many years was referred to only as "Jestyn" for anonymity purposes), explained that she had given a copy of the book to a man she had known during the war—but the man she had gifted it to certainly wasn't their dead man on the beach. Her guy, Alfred Boxall, was alive and well. Police verified this fact, and even found that Boxall still had the copy Thomson had given him. When Thomson was

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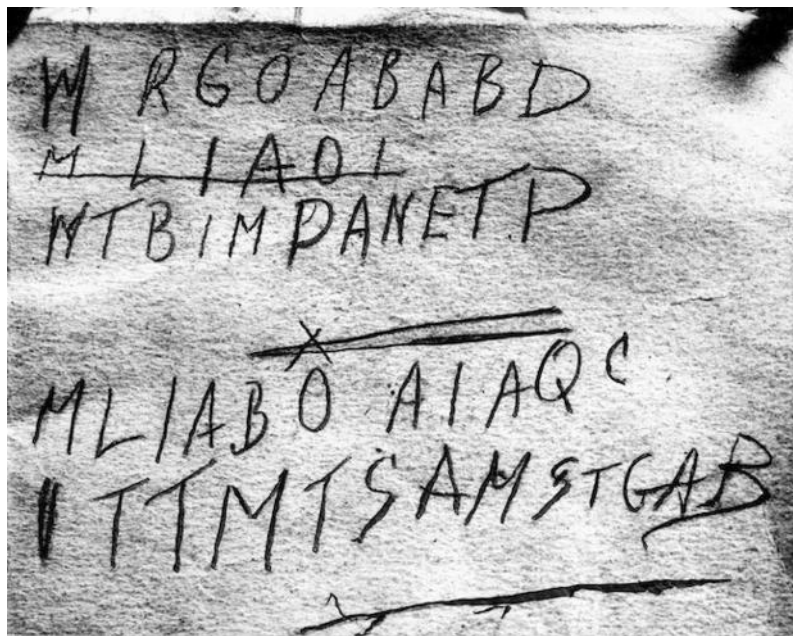


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shown a cast of the dead man's face, however, she seemed startled and nearly fainted—but maintained that she didn't recognize him.



In addition to the phone number, the impressions of a scrambled series of letters were detected on the back cover of the book. Though it appears to be a cipher of some sort, it has never been solved—not even by military experts.

If Thomson had answers, she took them to the grave with her when she [died](#) in 2007.

Thomson's daughter Kate says her mother once admitted that she knew exactly who the man was, but wasn't able to give away his identity, calling it a matter for powers much higher than local police. Of all of the theories floating around about Thomson, Kate subscribes to the one that says her mother may have been a Soviet spy. "She had a very strong dark side," she [told](#) Australia's *60 Minutes*, and recalled a time that her mother mentioned knowing how to speak Russian. When pressed about how she learned the language, Thomson's answer was, essentially, "That's for me to know."

Thomson's family [suspects](#) that their mother was having an affair with the Somerton Man—and that Robin Thomson, Jessica's son, is possibly the result of that affair. Professor Derek Abbott from the University of Adelaide has been researching the case for years, and says that Robin, now deceased, shares a couple of genetic rarities with the Somerton Man, one dental and one regarding ear shape, that [could](#) indicate they're related. Some Thomson family members, along with Professor Abbott, have [applied](#) to have the body exhumed to conduct DNA testing, but Attorney General John Rau has repeatedly [denied](#) the request, saying that there needs to be "public interest reasons that go well beyond public curiosity or broad scientific interest."

Professor Abbott, for his part, believes that some of the more bizarre aspects of the case may not be as strange as they appear to be. For instance, he isn't convinced that the Somerton Man was poisoned. "Pathologists of the time were trained in the Victorian era, and the tendency of the time was to suggest a poison if there was no apparent cause of death," he said in a [Reddit AMA](#). "Remember, no poison was detected. So we are on thin ground if we suggest it definitely was a poison." He speculates that alternative causes of death could have been positional asphyxia or the result of an illness—during the autopsy, the doctor found that the man's spleen was three times as large as it should have been, which could indicate cancer, and bacterial or viral infections, among other things.

Additionally, Abbott thinks the cipher may not really be a cipher, at least not one regarding espionage. "My guess is that the 'code' is just a memory aid for four lines that says something romantic," he [wrote](#) in the AMA. "I may be wrong though! It could simply be a list of items, like places he had been to, horse names for betting, or whatever. However, it is odd that it is constructed as a four line verse rather like the Rubaiyat itself. So that's why I put my bet on it being a bad attempt at something poetic or romantic."

Nor does Abbott believe Jessica Thomson was a Russian spy, despite her daughter's revelations. "I asked a close friend of Jestyn's about this, who said, 'she simply did not have the

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discipline to learn a language like Russian,” Abbott [wrote](#). She may have known a few words or phrases, but was almost certainly not fluent.

Despite Abbott's expertise, he too has developed his theories based on the limited information available. Was the Somerton Man a spy? Was he having an affair with Jessica Thomson? Or both? New leads are running thin—but there's still the possibility that DNA tests will eventually reveal something. Until then, the Somerton Man will remain as mysterious as he was when his body was discovered nearly 70 years ago.

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**Stacy Conradt**

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Stacy Conradt is a staff writer who's been contributing to *mental\_floss* since 2008. As an avid board game lover, she is especially fond of her work on Split Decision and Mixed Nuts. In her spare time (ha) she likes to run badly and visit roadside attractions that make most people cringe. She never met an Abe Lincoln tribute she didn't love. If you have one to suggest, let her know at [twitter.com/stacy\\_writes](https://twitter.com/stacy_writes).

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