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The dead man who sparked many tales

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HE sat on the sand, his back resting against the seawall near the Crippled Children's Home at Somerton. His head was slumped forward. At a glance, the man could have been asleep. At 6.30am on December 1, 1948, a local jeweller, Mr John Lyons, approached the man. To his horror, Mr Lyons discovered the man on the beach was dead. So began one of South Australia's most absorbing mysteries.

To this day, precisely 52 years later, the police file remains open but the trail is cold. Nobody has identified the man on the beach, discovered how he got there, where he came from or how he died.

The headstone at the West Terrace Cemetery tells almost everything known about the man. It reads: "Here lies the unknown man who was found at Somerton Beach 1st Dec. 1948". Beneath the stone is the man's embalmed body. Doctors estimated the man was about 40 years old. He was 180cm tall, strongly built, with fair hair, hazel eyes and clean-shaven. He was dressed in a grey and brown double-breasted coat - the fashion of the day - white shirt, red and blue tie, brown trousers, socks and shoes and a brown knitted pullover.

The pockets contained almost nothing. Train tickets, a few scraps of paper and no wallet. But perhaps the most baffling element of the find was that the brand labels of each piece of clothing had been neatly and deliberately cut away. It was assumed someone would come forward and identify the body. Nobody did. Police took photographs and issued a "death portrait" to newspapers.

Still nobody came forward. Fingerprints matched nothing on record in Australia. A post-mortem revealed no trace of injury or poison, no disease and the heart was healthy.

People came forward with various speculations. A woman was sure it was a relative from Perth. A Victorian woman briefly wondered if it was her missing son. A man thought it was a former Prospect identity. The leads were checked but yielded nothing. Two people suspected it was a missing Morgan woodcutter, Robert Walsh, but Walsh was 63, too old to match the man on the beach.

By the end of the second week, more than 20 people - some of them nothing more than ghouls - had viewed the body. Theories abounded. The man had strong leg muscles and may have been a Russian or even Bulgarian ballet dancer. Perhaps he was the heartbroken victim of a failed romance who had suicided using a mystery poison.

Then came a breakthrough. Clothing discovered in a suitcase at the Adelaide Railway Station contained a thread of cotton identical to the clothing on the body.

The clothing in the case carried the name "T. Keane". This was traced to a local sailor, Tom Keane. But shipmates said the body at the morgue was not Keane.

A coronial inquiry which began six months after the body was found produced nothing. Investigations spread to Britain, the United States, New Zealand and South Africa.

A SCRAP of paper in the man's pocket carried the words "Taman Shud", meaning "the end" or "the finish". They were the last words of Persian poet Omar Khayyam's The Rubaiyat. The book the page was torn from was found dumped in a doctor's car at Glenelg the day before the dead man was found. The embalmed body was finally buried. For years, nothing happened until flowers began appearing on the grave. Police caught a woman leaving the flowers but she was mourning another man.

Years later, room 21 at the Strathmore Hotel, North Terrace, entered the mystery. The hotel's receptionist at the time said she remembered a strange man who stayed at the hotel. She said there was a black medical case and what seemed like a hypodermic syringe in his room.

The next day, the man had checked out. It was the day before the body was found on the beach. The woman said she had not come forward when the body was found because she respected the privacy of her guests.

Today, 52 years later, the police file remains open, but they are no closer to solving the mystery of the **Somerton beach body**. But someone must know.

Caption: SUITCASE: Contents of a bag linked to the dead man.
 DEATH MASK: Who is he?

Illus: Dinkus: rex jory
 Photo: somerton body mystery - cast of head