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Stalking Case With Unusual Element

BY DAVID SNYDER

The call to Howard County police on April 16 was unusual: Marta Bradley reported she had found a silvery liquid on the seats, carpets and dashboard of her car parked outside her Laurel home.

Crime lab investigators who arrived to examine the vehicle immediately suspected that the substance was mercury, and later tests confirmed the presence of mercury in the car.

But police investigators suspected this was more than vandalism. They believed that someone was trying to harm Bradley, and she suggested one person who might have been involved.

By the time authorities arrested Bradley's former co-worker, Alan Bruce Chmurny, on June 1, the incident had transmuted into a case that criminal-poisoning experts say is unlike any other in the United States in the past 60 years.

Prosecutors say Chmurny, a PhD chemist who has held several high-ranking positions with area biotechnology firms, tried to poison Bradley with mercury vapor by pouring the element into the heating and air conditioning vents of her blue 1992 Ford Taurus.

Technicians from the Maryland Department of the Environment later found mercury vapor levels inside the car at 400 times the level considered safe for humans.

Police and prosecutors say the unusual attack is just the latest incident in Chmurny's three-year obsession with Bradley. Police charged him with harassment, stalking, assault and other offenses, and a Howard County grand jury is scheduled to consider the case this month.

"This man is obsessed," said Howard County Deputy State's Attorney I. Matthew Campbell during a bond hearing for Chmurny last month. "This man is a danger."

Other than the incidents involving Bradley, 32, and her husband, Scot, Chmurny, 56, has no criminal record. He lives in an affluent neighborhood in Frederick, Md., and is married to a fellow scientist seven years his senior. The recipient of a 1971 doctorate in organic chemistry from UCLA, he has 10 patents listed under his name with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

"They are a quiet couple," said Sandra Carter, who lives next door to Chmurny. "We couldn't ask for better neighbors. . . . This just seems out of character for him."

The two firms where Chmurny worked most recently, Oceanix Biosciences and Biospherics Inc., did not return multiple calls seeking comment.

Steven D. Kupferberg, Chmurny's attorney, called the charges "malarkey" and said he had "significant evidence to the contrary" of prosecutors' charges. Bradley and Chmurny declined through their attorneys to comment.

Experts call mercury an "insidious poison" because it can remain in a person's system for years and its symptoms can easily be mistaken for other illnesses, said Robert Swann, a technician with the Maryland Department of the Environment emergency response team.

"Once you get it into you, it hangs around for a while," Swann said. "If someone didn't want it to be noticed and wanted it to mimic the symptoms of other poisons, mercury is not all that bad a poison."

Liquid mercury, though poisonous, is not particularly harmful if ingested once or twice in small amounts, experts said.

But mercury vapor is odorless, colorless and deadly. If inhaled in sufficient quantities, it can quickly cause serious illness and death.

Liquid mercury begins to vaporize at temperatures cooler than normal room temperature, so even relatively small amounts in an enclosed space can cause serious health threats, according to Bruce Anderson, director of the Maryland Poison Center at the University of Maryland at Baltimore.

At temperatures just slightly higher than room temperature--such as near a car's engine--mercury vaporizes quickly, Anderson said.

Once mercury is inhaled, it enters the bloodstream and accumulates in the internal organs, subtly disrupting their normal function over a long period of time. A victim's liver and kidneys begin to break down over the years and ultimately may cease functioning, according to the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. Disorders such as memory loss, insomnia and depression can be followed by much more serious symptoms like hallucination and delirium.

In the 19th century, the psychiatric symptoms of mercury poisoning were known as "mad hatter's

disease," after hatmakers who were poisoned through years of exposure to mercury, which was used to process felt, experts said.

As disruptive a poison as mercury is, it has rarely been used by criminal poisoners, said John H. Trestrail Jr., director of the Regional Poison Center in Grand Rapids, Mich., and author of "Criminal Poisoning," a handbook for forensic chemists and police investigators. The most recent case on record in the United States was a 1933 Mississippi murder, Trestrail said.

John Smialek, Maryland's chief medical examiner, said there are no known cases of criminal mercury poisoning in the state.

Trestrail, who has compiled a database of more than 800 criminal poisonings worldwide, said: "The typical poisoner who is not very educated is not going to think of mercury as a poison. This is a sophisticated person at work."

Detective Glenn Case, the lead police investigator on the case, said, "I had never heard of anything like it in Howard County."

Because of the strange nature of the case, he and police officials decided to take an unusual step: Rather than tow away Marta Bradley's car, they left it where it was and set up night-vision cameras for six weeks to see whether anyone returned to check on it.

On three occasions, each late at night, police said, a man resembling Chmurny went to the car. One night, the man stole the Bradleys' garbage.

On May 31--Chmurny's 56th birthday--a neighbor spotted a man tampering with Marta Bradley's car about 2 a.m., police said. The neighbor picked Chmurny's photograph among several others as the man she had seen at the car. Police arrested him two days later.

Authorities believe that Chmurny poured as much as three ounces of mercury into the car's air conditioning system.

When police later searched Chmurny's home, they found keys to Bradley's house and car, and notes about Bradley. One described rape and mutilation, and another said, "You are dead," officials said.

Before the bomb threats, the slashed tires and the "I love you" notes etched into her car's windows, Marta Bradley felt sorry for Chmurny, she wrote in a letter to a judge.

"He often told me that he didn't know how he could continue living," Bradley wrote to Circuit Court Judge E. Allen Shepherd in Prince George's County, where she lived previously. "I tried to listen to his problems, because he told me he did not have anyone to talk to."

"Mr. Chmurny continually told me stories which made me feel sorry for him," Bradley stated in

her April 27, 1999, letter. "He told me his wife was cheating on him, he was dying of cancer, his new girlfriend (which I now believe never really existed) was killed in an automobile accident."

She also told the judge that she had found a note in her car referring to a motion-detector bomb and that the words "I love you" had been scratched into the car windows.

In late 1996, Bradley wrote, she decided that "something was really wrong with" Chmurny. Back then, he was vice president of Oceanix Biosciences, and Bradley was a low-level administrative employee at the same firm.

She stopped talking to him. The trouble began soon afterward, she later told the judge.

Chmurny was arrested May 5, 1997, and charged with the theft of jewelry and underwear that Bradley had reported stolen from her home on at least two weekends in April, according to records in Prince George's Circuit Court.

Bradley told police that Chmurny returned the jewelry and brassieres to her at work late the same month.

"These are yours," she recalled him saying.

In early June, the first-degree burglary charge was placed on the court's "stet" docket--a mechanism used to prepare for ultimate dismissal of a charge if the suspect accumulates no additional criminal charges.

But by the end of the month, Bradley said, Chmurny had begun bothering her again.

In August 1997, Chmurny was charged with harassing her. In February 1998, he entered an Alford plea--admitting no guilt but acknowledging that authorities had enough evidence to convict him--to the harassment charge. In August 1998, he received probation before judgment (a mechanism by which a charge can be expunged if all terms of the probation are met) and was ordered to stay away from Bradley and her husband.

Three months later, Chmurny had an altercation with Scot Bradley, a professional trumpet player, in a parking lot near the Baltimore Lyric Opera, where Marta Bradley--a part-time bassist--was playing in a performance. According to documents filed in Baltimore District Court, she had asked her husband and a friend to watch her car because she thought it might have been tampered with on two previous evenings.

While they were watching the car, Chmurny showed up. Baltimore police charged Chmurny with assault.

On March 22, 1999, Chmurny was acquitted of assault by Baltimore District Court Judge Alan J. Karlin. Three days later, he admitted violating a provision in his probation that stipulated that he

have no contact with Bradley, according to state Division of Parole and Probation records.

Then events took an even stranger turn.

Chmurny began complaining to police that the Bradleys were harassing him. He called Frederick police at 4:15 a.m. on April 2 to say that the Bradleys had called him. Three days later, the Bradleys told Chmurny's probation officer that he had contacted them again.

On July 17, 1999, Chmurny filed complaints in Frederick County against the Bradleys. He told police who investigated his complaint that the Bradleys had threatened to "to blow me away along with my wife, my dog and my property," court documents show.

Frederick County prosecutors decided not to pursue Chmurny's charges, said Assistant State's Attorney Kirsten Daggett, who reviewed the case, because there was not sufficient evidence that the Bradleys had harassed Chmurny.

"It seemed more like he was harassing her," Daggett said in a recent interview. "He [Chmurny] just did not seem stable to me."

In October 1999, Shepherd extended Chmurny's probation to three years, including two under his supervision. This time, the judge also ordered that Chmurny undergo psychiatric treatment.

For months, according to court records, there were no incidents.

Then Marta Bradley went to her car April 16.

Prosecutors said experts had determined that she didn't breathe enough of the mercury vapor to make her seriously ill. She left the state for an undisclosed location soon after Chmurny's arrest.

At a pretrial hearing for Chmurny, his attorneys suggested that an unnamed co-worker of Chmurny had told him that the Bradleys were bent on his destruction.

Prosecutors sought to have Chmurny detained pending trial. On June 9, Howard County District Court Judge Neil E. Axel set a \$50,000 bond, which Chmurny posted. Axel put him on on home detention, ordering him not to leave home except for court appearances, medical emergencies or meetings with his attorney or to look for a job.

Axel ordered Chmurny not to go within a mile of Marta or Scot Bradley. ■

Staff writer Jamie Stockwell and staff researcher Bobbye Pratt contributed to this report.

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