**The Truth, Revealed by Bugs: The Case of Brookey Lee West**

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

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When Brookey Lee West’s mother, Christine Smith, disappeared from her Las Vegas apartment in 1998, Ms. West had a convincing explanation: She had sent Ms. Smith to stay with her son, Ms. West’s brother, in California. The story seemed to hold up at first, but by February 2001, when the police found Ms. Smith’s body stuffed into a garbage can in a Las Vegas storage unit, the situation smelled undeniably foul.



Brookey Lee West killed her mother.

The authorities suspected Ms. West of killing her alcoholic mother, with whom she had frequently sparred since childhood. Nevertheless, it seemed that time was on Ms. West’s side. So many months had passed that a medical examiner testified that he was unable to determine how Ms. Smith died. Ms. West said that her mother had died peacefully of natural causes, and that she had panicked and crammed the decaying remains into the garbage can.

That might have been the end of it, if not for the testimony of Neal Haskell, a [forensic](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/f/forensic_science/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) entomologist at St. Joseph’s College in Rensselaer, Ind. Dr. Haskell determined that blow flies, insects that usually appear on corpses right after death, were nowhere to be seen on Ms. Smith’s body. Instead, most of the larvae Dr. Haskell found came from scuttle flies, or “coffin flies,” insects that cannibalize dead bodies after they have undergone initial decomposition. “We knew it was a long time since Mom had been seen, and I thought, ‘If we have the blow flies, we can tell what season she went missing,’ ” Dr. Haskell said. “When I got the insect specimens, I was really disappointed.”

But then Dr. Haskell realized the significance of the blow flies’ absence: Ms. Smith had to have been put into the garbage can either directly after she died or while she was still alive, barring the blow flies’ access to the corpse. (Coffin flies, on the other hand, could have gotten to the body because they often tunnel through tiny nooks and crannies.) “That showed me that West had to have lied about what she did with her mother,” Dr. Haskell said. After only two hours of deliberation, a jury pronounced Ms. West guilty of her mother’s murder. Ms. West is serving a life sentence at a prison in southern Nevada.