

LONG ISLAND'S LOST GIRLS

PART 2 OF A 3 PART SERIES

DARK STAR, SHIP OF FOOLS

A FLOWER CHILD
FROM BALDWIN
DISAPPEARS IN
CALIFORNIA AND
THE POLICE
STAND STILL

BY BILL JENSEN

One night in 1994, Susan Wilmer went walking through the parking lot of Nassau Coliseum looking for Happiness.

The Grateful Dead was playing that night. Wilmer darted through the crowd, through the patchouli-scented bongo circles and enterprising merchants selling grilled-cheese sandwiches and nitrous-oxide balloons, asking anyone and everyone she saw if they knew Happiness.

"I went up to one guy and said 'I'm looking for Happiness,'" remembers Wilmer. "And he said with a big smile 'You've found it.'"

But while there was plenty of sunnyside

bliss being passed around that night, Wilmer had not found Happiness.

Happiness was a man, someone who might have had information about Wilmer's daughter, Jennifer, who had vanished in Northern California a year earlier.

Elsewhere in the lot, volunteers from the Baldwin Police Athletic League handed out flyers with Jennifer's picture. She had traded the frosted brown locks she sported as a senior at St. Mary's High School in Manhasset for dreadlocks, but the flyers gave everyone an idea of what the petite, blue-eyed girl looked like. Maybe somebody in this caravan had seen her. At the show in Chicago last

week. Or the one in Oakland a month before.

The police department in the small county where Jennifer had vanished had offered little help since day one. Susan was getting desperate.

She never found Happiness.

In the close to 10 years since her daughter's disappearance, Wilmer has become active in missing-persons organizations. She founded FOCUS, a support group for the families of missing children, and, with the help of then-congressman Rick Lazio, pushed through a bill called "Jennifer's Law" signed by Bill Clinton in March 2000. The law expanded the nation's missing-children

database by providing the states money to enter more complete data on each missing person's case.

But all her efforts have not found her daughter.

And now, nine years and \$20,000 in private investigator's fees later, Susan Wilmer has made it legal.

"I just had Jennifer declared dead," she says from her Baldwin home. "Two weeks ago. I did that for my children, for the rest of the family. The therapist said it was a good idea. [But] it's not changing anything in my mind."

Susan is in the process of preparing a

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memorial for Jennifer, something that would provide closure for her children.

"A lot of people in my situation live with hope," says Wilmer. "I can't tell people to give up hope. But hope, to me, it's not reality."

But she'll be damned if she leaves this Earth before finding out what happened.

Here Comes Sunshine

Jennifer liked to question authority. In grade school, she'd yell at the nuns when they picked on students who didn't know the answers.

In fifth grade, she asked her mother if she could have a Halloween party.

"Someone else in her class was having a party," Susan Wilmer remembers, "and Jennifer wanted to invite all the kids that weren't invited to the other party. That was Jennifer. She hated inequities."

So it's no surprise that the Camaro-infested, big-haired mainstream of late '80s Long Island drove the teenage Jennifer toward a counterculture. She would spin in the circles of the Deadheads.

At 20, she bolted for California, trying to, in her mother's words, "make it on her own." She left St. John's University (and the full scholarship she had earned while at St. Mary's) for the seaside town of Arcata, a haven for postmodern hippies 200 miles north of San Francisco. "She had a restless, adventurous spirit," remembers brother Fred Wilmer Jr., one of Jennifer's three siblings. Jennifer tried registering at the two-year College of the Redwoods, but was shut out of classes. She waitressed and lived on welfare for a spell, mainly hanging out in Arcata Plaza with the thousands of other street people who had made the pilgrimage to Arcata from all points east. "She was, in a sense, in a high-risk lifestyle," says interim Arcata Police Chief Randy Mendosa, who over the years has befriended the Wilmers. "She was definitely an urban traveler, which is pretty common [in Arcata]." Everybody around the Plaza had some type of nickname. Skinny Bob. Ragman Pete. Jennifer had come to be known as Jade.

But the city by the sea wasn't all pot and roses. Jennifer had bouts of depression, and had started to see a therapist. Then, toward the end of the summer, her roommate announced she had to bail the scene, and Jennifer was forced to vacate her apartment in Arcata.

Susan Wilmer says Jennifer was ready to come home. So much so that her mother had purchased a return plane ticket for her, which she could have picked up and activated at any

travel agency.

But Jennifer wasn't ready to give up on California. She called her mother and told her she had decided to go live with some friends "out in the country." "The country" meant Trinity County, 3,500 square miles of mountainous desolation and marijuana crops, with not a spotlight in sight.

Jennifer moved in with her boyfriend, a local named Tro Patterson, in a rented house in Hawkin's Bar, Calif., which he shared with a guy named Opie, another named Mingo and a girl named Rebecca. A friend told Jennifer of a farm up the road from the house. The friend said they weren't looking for any help at the moment, but Jennifer should still go down and introduce herself.

So at 7:30 in the morning on Monday, Sept. 13, Jennifer set out to hitchhike the nine miles into "town" along Rt. 299. She left a note to her roommates:

Bye everybody.

Went to my 1st day at the farm.

Wish me luck! Good luck to you, Mingo and see you in a few months. If someone could give food to the kitten as needed I'd appreciate it. Hopefully I'll see you folks later

♥ Jade

Local authorities would later come to

suggest that she had gone away intentionally. Evidence doesn't support that theory, however. Jennifer left all her identification at home. She left her clothes. Her address book. Her Bible. Her bankcard. But most importantly, Jennifer left her sleeping bag.

"No self-respecting hippie leaves her sleeping bag," says Susan Wilmer.

By September 19, Susan Wilmer had still not heard from her daughter. Jennifer's housemates had gone to visit the farm and realized she hadn't gotten there. Susan Wilmer got a phone call from Tro Patterson, Jennifer's boyfriend.

"I knew she wasn't alive," Wilmer says today. "I knew."

(By eerie coincidence, Tro Patterson's father, Jay Patterson, was the boss of Polly Klaas' mother. Polly would be abducted from her bedroom three hours south of Trinity just 18 days after Jennifer had gone missing.)

Frantic, Susan Wilmer called the county police. She Fed-Exed a picture of Jennifer. It sat in the sheriff's mail slot for days. The police wouldn't help.

"You have to understand that her adult daughter was a walkaway," says Martin Ryan, Chief of the California Bureau of Investigations. "There is no evidence of foul play, other than the time that's gone by." That was the attitude of the police from day one.

"Initially, I wasn't convinced that [there

was foul play] and I had my reasons," says Trinity County Under Sheriff David Laffranchini, alluding to Jennifer's counterculture lifestyle.

With seemingly no one looking for her missing daughter, Susan Wilmer felt helpless. She called her local congressman, who, at the time, was David Levy. His office called Trinity, and got the excuse that she was a runaway. Wilmer called the Nassau County Police Department, where Det. George Doherty checked the law enforcement database National Criminal Information Center. Jennifer's name was nowhere to be found. It was Doherty, 3000 miles away, who filed the missing persons report. (Laffranchini claims that Trinity had filed a report, and Wilmer filing another one left two reports with two different case numbers).

Smelling incompetence, Susan and husband Fred Wilmer made arrangements for their 14-year-old son to stay with a friend and caught a flight to California.

Looks Like Rain

The Wilmers were familiar with the kinds of people Jennifer traveled with.

A few years earlier, Jennifer had asked her mom if a bunch of Deadheads could sleep in the backyard while the band was playing a set of shows at Nassau Coliseum (Unlike at many arenas, Deadheads can't sleep out anywhere near the Coliseum). She agreed, and woke up the next day to a "street full of VW buses" and "wall-to-wall sleeping bags" in her yard.

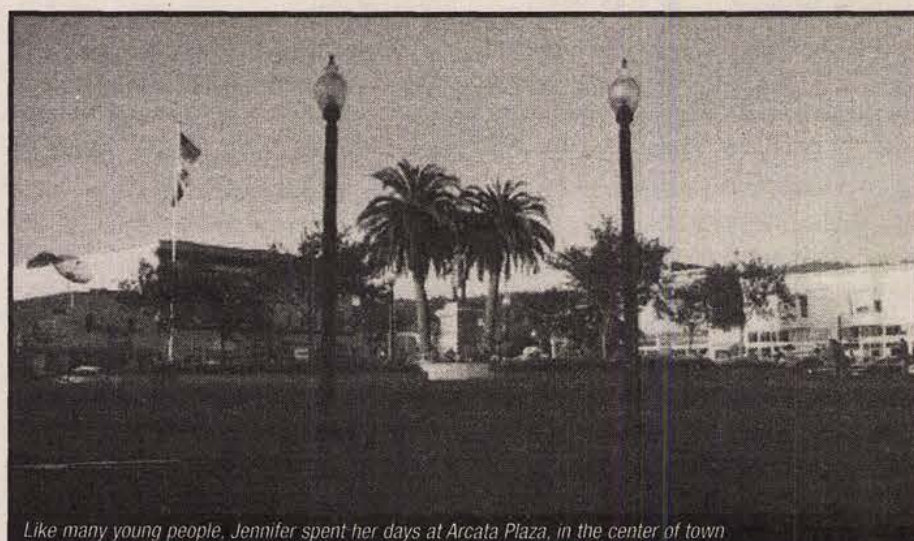
"They were so quiet," remembers Susan. "My neighbors didn't even know they were there. They were very sweet."

When the Wilmers entered the house in Hawkins Bar, they were met by three kids, all with shaved heads from having ditched their dreadlocks. The place was dirty, but Jennifer's housemates, just like the Deadheads who had slept in her backyard in Baldwin, were "sweet" and pleasant.

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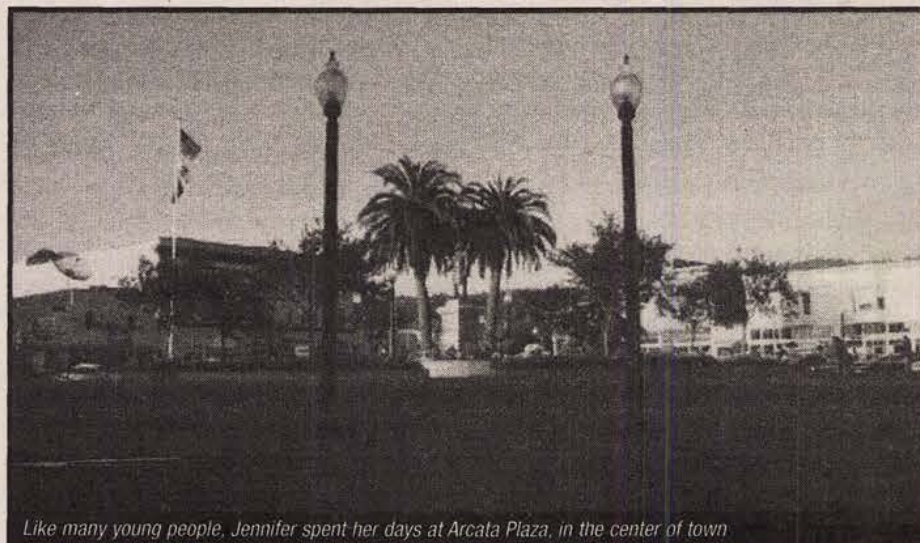
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people who were doing very little. She spied the manila envelope case file marked "Wilmer" in one of the detectives' hands. It was empty.

"I don't want to badmouth anyone, but they did mishandle some things," says John Mohon, a private investigator in neighboring Humboldt County hired by the Wilmers.

Susan Wilmer is more to the point.

"He's an idiot," she says of Under Sheriff Laffranchini.

Perhaps because of the lax initial investigation, no answers were found. Months, then years, passed. Susan Wilmer didn't give up.

She kept pressing. She got loud.

"I almost felt a little disloyal to my mom," son Fred Jr. says of Susan when she would get emotional with the investigators. "I would defend her, saying, 'You have to understand, she's upset.' [But] in retrospect, she was 99.9 percent right."

Susan Wilmer started a letter-writing campaign, with seemingly the whole town of Baldwin sending thousands of letters to anyone who would listen. They got the ear of Ryan at the California Justice Department.

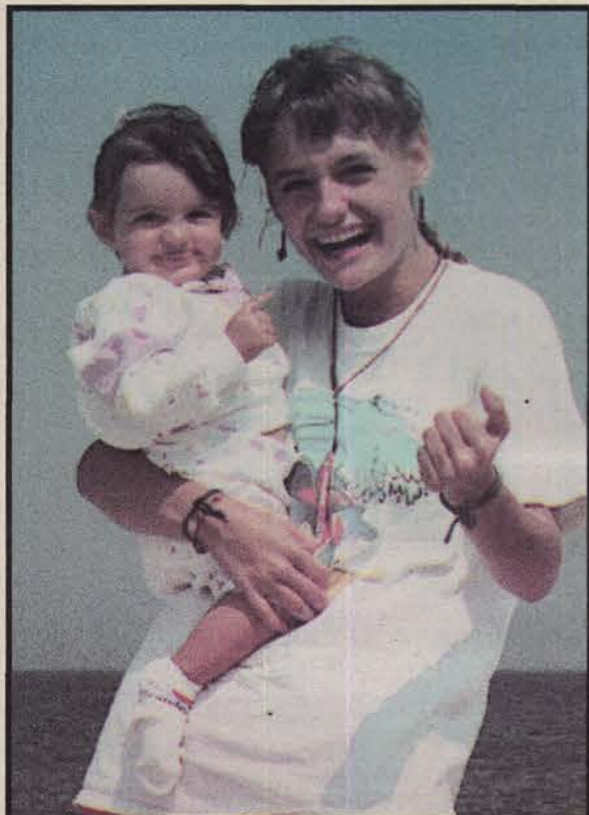
It was far, far too late.

Not Fade Away

Sometimes when David Laffranchini is driving across Route 299, he thinks to himself one simple question.

"If I was going to dump a body, where would I do it?"

Sometimes he gets out of his car, walks along the mountainous terrain, through the



A 19-year-old Jennifer with cousin Jessica on Long Island



Both the authorities and the Wilmer family believe Jennifer went missing somewhere along Rt.299

pull-off areas where the grass is worn out by impromptu piss breaks taken by weary travelers during the hour-long ride to the coast.

He is looking for any signs of Jennifer.

"This is the type of county where it would be easy to kill and dispose of a body," says Laffranchini, who now believes in his "gut" that Jennifer is dead.

There was some hope for answers in 1998. Wayne Ford, a truck driver from Arcata, wandered into the sheriff's department in neighboring Humboldt County and pulled a plastic baggie from his pocket containing a woman's severed breast. Though Ford did prey on hitchhikers, he confessed only to killing four women—one of whose breast he carried into the station that day—dating back only as far as 1997. He never confessed to Jennifer's murder and private investigator Mohon learned that Ford was in the Midwest during the time of Jennifer's disappearance.

Around the same time, a young woman entered an abortion clinic and signed her name as Jennifer Wilmer. The missing-person infrastructure was set in motion, only to find out that the woman was a 14-year-old girl who was trying to hide the pregnancy from her parents. She had seen Jennifer's missing poster

and chose the name as an alias.

Calls with possible sightings are less and less frequent. Two weeks ago, Laffranchini got a tip from someone saying they had seen Jennifer at a Dead show "a couple of years ago, and she was fine." Wilmer dismissed the call. She is more interested in the police following up on a jailhouse confession, in which one man said that Jennifer was buried in Blocksburg, Calif.

"That would be thirdhand hearsay," says Laffranchini, waving away the claim as bunk. "I sat down with the [man with the confession]. The first thing he said was 'I'll tell you some stuff if you can get a break on my charges'...It was all fabricated."

"Every prisoner with information is going to say that!" yells Wilmer.

The 20 grand the Wilmers have spent on private investigators has produced a few plausible scenarios:

Jennifer was hitchhiking to the farm. She got a ride, but in the car had second thoughts about going to the farm—they had said they weren't looking for any help right away. So she said to herself, "You know what, I'm gonna go to the coast and meet up with [boyfriend] Tro." Tro usually spent the weekends in Arcata, and would stay until Tuesday, to watch *Monday Night Football* in town. So Jennifer took the ride all the way down Route 299 to Arcata.

Once she got there, it's anybody's guess. Tro Patterson could not be located for this story. When contacted, his father, Jay Patterson, said, "He's up north. I was hoping

that we could get over this calamity, rather than open up a festering old wound." But the wound has never been closed. At the beginning, Jay Patterson was in constant contact with the Wilmers. But after Polly Klaas was found in December, Jay Patterson, now emotionally part of another heart-wrenching crime, stopped talking to the Wilmers, according to Susan.

Another theory relates to the search for Happiness back in the parking lot at the Coliseum. Happiness, it was thought, would provide the true identity of a Deadhead regular known as Cowboy Fred, an older guy who Wilmer says "was obsessed with" Jennifer. "He may well be who murdered her."

"Cowboy Fred was a dude Jennifer was scared of, for some reason; no one knew why," says Mohon, the private investigator. "He was an older guy and would follow her around Arcata plaza."

Or maybe "it could be totally innocent," says Arcata Chief Mendosa. "She could have stumbled into somebody's grow [marijuana farm], and they got threatened"—an interesting definition of "totally innocent."

Susan and husband Fred haven't been to Northern California in two years.

"Over the years, I started getting physically sick," says Susan. They spent their last two vacations at Hawaii and Disney. But they are planning a new trip out West, which will no doubt be punctuated by another confrontation with Laffranchini.

"This trip," says Susan, "I think I'm ready to ask the right questions." ❶

