

Fieldnotes To An Inquiry into the serial killings on Long Island

Oak Beach: In Her Shoes

Last week I went to a parking lot in Oak Beach to support Shannan Gilbert's family and to mark the one year anniversary of her disappearance. I expected more of a crowd and was surprised when it turned out that it was basically just family, a few close friends and several people like myself who had been following the case and wished to show their support and interest.

I learned shortly after I arrived that we would walk as a group through the Oak Beach Association's gated community and retrace Shannan's steps the night she was last seen. I had no idea this was going to take place. I'd become somewhat obsessed with this case and for a nobody like myself to have this surprisingly intimate tour with Shannan's family members, with a chance to get to know her better through them, and to elucidate the mystery of her disappearance by imagining the events of her ordeal through her eyes was a gift. But I was also a little uncomfortable; I'm not the press or law enforcement and had no real business being there. Then, before I could even process what was happening, I found myself in a prayer circle holding hands with the family of this missing girl while being filmed and photographed by almost every major news network. I don't belong here, I thought to myself.

It was after our prayers and the rapid-fire clicking of the cameras momentarily ceased that I first got introduced to Mari (pronounced Mary) Gilbert, Shannan's mother. And it's here that something happens and my perspective shifts. My own intrigue and discomfort is blotted out by the pain in her eyes. She's wearing sunglasses but the sun's so bright and the pain so real it comes through and strikes me like a blow to the chest. This isn't some sensational news story that we can't get enough of, it's not yet another Alex Cross thriller; this is human tragedy unfolding. This is real. Mari's eyes look directly into mine as if searching me out like only a mother can do, much less the mother of a daughter who's been missing for a year. She's totally present; she's hurting but she's tough and determined. I like her. She's on a mission. With a single look she seems to tell me if you're here for Shannan and the other girls then come aboard, we're grateful for the support... but the look tails on a moment longer and it also tells me she's gonna get to the bottom of this and pity on anyone who gets in her way.

The camera crews and reporters take turns with more shots of Mari and ask a few more questions. In one interview she tells the reporter that this is her daughter's legacy. Shannan's

strength was underestimated and it's because of her that the bodies of the other girls were found and the investigation is where it is today. With that she tells us it's time to enter the gated community and follow in Shannan's footsteps. Mari also informs us that she will literally be walking in her daughter's shoes, as she is wearing Shannan's pink and grey sneakers.

From the parking lot it's a short walk down a reed and brush-lined gravel path. I trail behind and let the family and their friends lead the way. Some are carrying prayerful signs, others, like Shannan's sister, Sherre, are pushing toddlers in strollers. There's only maybe a dozen or so of us, and probably just as many from the media. The gate to the community is meant to keep cars out. If you have a car you need to get buzzed in and have the arm lifted. The little unmanned gatehouse has a keypad and speaker phone for that. Attached to the gatehouse are two cameras. I pause to stare at them and try to read the angle where they're directed. A photographer with a press pass from one of the local newspapers around his neck notices my interest and says, "They record license plates. The tapes are missing from the night Shannan disappeared." I ask him who's in charge of the security and he smiles.

We enter the community. The streets are paved but sand swept. The houses are mostly typical beach houses. Some are larger and more well kept than others and are separated, and often hidden, by areas of tall reeds, gnarled brush and pine trees that grow in twisted and contorted shapes. A stern faced woman briskly pedals past us on a beach cruiser without even so much as a glance in our direction, as if groups of people walking with signs followed by camera crews are perfectly normal here. More aptly, she passes us by as if we don't exist. A sharp breeze comes up off the sea and I have to shake off a shiver that goes straight up my spine.

Joseph Brewer's wind worn, two story house stands out against the big blue sky and a surrounding starkness that a photographer might define as negative space. It's definitely a negative space. The vegetation, strangled by winter's cold and salty air, is devoid of color and life. A wood-framed swing set with a plastic slide sits out of place in the front yard amid sand and tufts of dead beach grass. I close my eyes and try to imagine the scene that Friday night one year ago. There are no street lights and I think how dark it must have been. Wait no, I checked and it would have been nearly a full moon that evening. I hear *Penumbra Moon* by Justin Hayward of the *Moody Blues* playing in my head and I can almost see Shannan getting out of Michael Pak's dark Suburban. She's wearing hoop earrings and has the collar of her short brown leather jacket turned up as she pulls her purse handles over her shoulder and shuts the SUV's door. She takes a final pull of her cigarette and then crushes it out with the toe of her calf-high leather boot, before tossing her hair back and walking over toward Brewer who's standing in his sand and pebble driveway waiting for her. He's got his hands in the pockets of his shorts as they make small talk and walk toward his front steps. But that's all I get... Suddenly I'm back in the bright sunlight. Mari Gilbert is crying and the cameras are swarming around her for this journalistic moment. I'm reminded again this isn't Hollywood where the crime scene gets magically recreated in the investigator's head, so I decide to focus on the facts as I know them through the media.

Shannan arrives at Brewer's around 2AM in the vehicle of her driver, Michael Pak. Shortly thereafter, she leaves the house with him in his vehicle for about fifteen minutes but does not leave Oak Beach. At 2:55 she calls a twenty-four hour CVS pharmacy. It's unclear to me if she calls CVS after she gets back to Brewer's house or before. According to Brewer, they do not have sex and Shannan spends some time in the bathroom and comes out acting weird. At some point, she demands money but Brewer refuses to pay her and asks her to leave. Shannan refuses to leave and makes several short phone calls to Pak. Brewer then goes outside to talk with Pak and to get him to get Shannan to leave. Once inside, Pak sees Shannan in the kitchen on her cell phone. It's 4:51 and she is on the line with police dispatch. Her voice is frantic and Pak and Brewer are heard in the background trying to calm her down. She tells the dispatcher, "he's trying to kill me" and "help me" several times. Pak thinks perhaps she's having a reaction to drugs and gives up and goes back outside to his vehicle. Shannan then runs out of the house, falling down the stairs as she goes. She continues to run and eventually ends up on seventy-five year old Gustav Coletti's doorstep. She screams and pounds on the door and he lets her in. He tells her he's calling 911. She begs him not to and runs away, once again falling down the steps. She hides under his boat and then disappears in the brush toward a jetty. At that point Pak drives up and explains to Coletti that things got out of hand at a party and that he's just looking for her. When Coletti tells Pak he called police, Pak responds he shouldn't have done that and that she could get in a lot of trouble.

In a CBS report an Oak Beach doctor is named as being the last person to see Shannan. It states that the doctor saw her running, looking sick and distressed. It also quotes him as saying, "These people need closure and we need to find this girl if she is alive." However, in later reports the doctor denies ever seeing her. Shannan's family has made claims that a day or so following her disappearance this doctor, or someone claiming to be this doctor, called them and said that Shannan had been in some kind of rehabilitative halfway house of his and that her driver had picked her up in the morning. I don't include his name here because law enforcement has not mentioned him and because he denies any and all involvement in the events. Gilbert's family, however, has stuck with its story and believes this doctor has avoided close scrutiny by law enforcement because of his past close association with them.

My hope of illuminating the mystery of her night flight is undermined by what I still don't know. A few questions that bounce around my brain the most are: Where did Brewer and Shannan go for fifteen minutes? Why the call to a twenty-four hour CVS? What was she doing in the bathroom? Why would the doctor call – or someone pretending to be the doctor call the Gilbert family? All these questions make me wonder what role, if any, drugs played. Brewer and Shannan's fifteen minutes could have been a drug run. Maybe the drugs would have been part of the bargaining or exchange. Maybe that's why Brewer didn't want to give her money. Is that connected to the CVS call? Was she hoping to call in a prescription? Or was she using drugs that she had gotten at Oak Beach and when she started to have a bad reaction did she call CVS for assistance? Of course, it could be anything. It's an incomplete paint-by-numbers; a half hidden constellation making its way across the Oak Beach night sky, ultimately moved by the darkest of black holes.

From Brewer's we continue our walk back the way we came to Gustav Coletti's house. It's five houses basically straight down the street. Here may be the last person to show some kindness to Shannan and I get the sense that Mari wants to thank him. She knocks on his door but this time no one answers. I see the boat in front of his house where Shannan hid. I wish he was home and we could ask him to show us exactly where he last saw her running. Watching the video of his interview after having been to his house it seems to me he's pointing in a south easterly direction. The way he explains it makes it sound as if after he talks to Pak, Shannan darts out from the brush where she is hiding and then runs east toward the gate and then south toward a drainage basin and the bay. But I can't be sure and I'm thinking again about those missing tapes from the security camera.

From Coletti's house we head up over to the doctor's, which is a short walk up a foot path toward the bay. Almost as soon as we get there a man driving by in a pickup truck stops, rolls down his window and voices his disgust with our presence. He complains that we don't need to be there and even an introduction to the mother of this missing girl does little to assuage his intense anger. Now I can understand residents of this small community being upset by negative attention and media invasions, but this man's callousness toward a mother in her situation, I think, takes us all aback and has the effect of uniting both members of the media and Shannan's supporters into one group of disgusted head shakers. Eventually, the resident drives off and Mari Gilbert knocks on the doctor's door. Nobody answers but voices from inside are heard telling them to go away. A woman living across the street opens her door and yells for us to leave and tells us that we are on private property and that she's calling 911. Shannan's sister quickly quips back that, "911 doesn't work. It didn't work for Shannan," while her mother adds, "Yeah, it's gonna take forty-five minutes for 911 to get here." The police arrive a minute or so later and we leave without incident. This is our final stop inside the community. Once back out by the gatehouse, we light candles and Shannan's aunt reads verses from the bible.

By the end of the two hour tour I was both exhausted and exhilarated. And while perhaps more questions were raised than answered, I felt a strange sense of accomplishment. As a group I think we all left Oak Beach only more determined to uncover the truth about Shannan's disappearance, no matter how long it takes or who likes it or not. And any of the initial awkwardness I felt for being there was replaced by a genuine sense of kinship with Shannan, with her family, with the other victims and their families and anyone else else that wishes nothing more than to see an end to this nightmare. If anyone has any information that could help shed light on Shannan's disappearance, no matter how inconsequential it may seem, please visit **findshannangilbert.com** and leave a confidential tip.

God or the Devil?

CatFish Max is a restaurant bar in Seaford Harbor at the end of a dead end street that runs perpendicular to a canal. I went there on a warm afternoon in June and parked in its ship-rope side lot next to a shabby blue hearse with bumper stickers and a cat cooling its heels underneath.

Inside, the bar was immediately to my right and a dining area with booths and tables to the left. Beyond the bar and down a step was a small glass enclosed patio with more seating and an aluminum storm door that led out to the dock. The ceiling hung low and the flooring was creaky and uneven but the bar itself was solid mahogany and a comfortable height to its armed swivel stools.

I hung my camouflage shoulder bag over the back of my stool and ordered a Guinness on tap from a bartender who introduced herself as Mary.

"Whose hearse is that outside?" I asked curiously, as she set down my change.

"A hearse?" Mary said, sliding off her chained reading glasses.

"Yeah in the parking lot."

"I dunno," she said, laughing. "I hope it's not there for me."

I smiled slightly and shook my head. Long Island's really starting to creep me out lately, I thought to myself.

I was meeting my best friend Tom for lunch. Tom is a veteran NYPD street cop. He works a lot and has several kids and so we don't get to see each other all that often but we still try to get together at least once a month or so. When we were growing up he had long curly hair and started smoking and drinking before any of us. I can still see him riding in the backseat of my first car, my grandfather's old '77 Chevy Nova, with his headphones on and a Rubik's cube, or a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon, -or both in his lap. Now he rarely drinks anything stronger than ice water with a slice of lemon and his head is completely shaved and he looks like a shorter, Sicilian, tatted-up version of Kojak.

I was midway through my second Guinness when he arrived.

"Hey brother," he said, shaking my hand and eyeing the growing crowd of day drunks at the bar. "Wanna get a table?" he asked.

"Sure. Sit outside?"

"Yeah."

We headed out to the dock and sat at one of the rectangular picnic style tables with an umbrella to shade us from a sun that was high in a bright blue sky of near autumnal clarity. A waitress dropped off our menus and the two of us chatted for a while about kids, ex-wives, girlfriends and the job – the usual aspects of what I consider to be Tom's very complex, though always fascinating, life.

"So what's new with you? You find any work," he asked, taking a swig of his ice water.

"There's no work to be found, brother," I replied. "It's okay. I got enough in savings to last me through the summer. It'll give me a chance to do some writing anyway."

"I read your article about the Gilbert girl. I liked it."

"Yeah, I'm obsessed. It's really such a remarkable case. I mean you know me, I've been studying these types of cases for years and writing my mystery novel. And..."

"How's that novel coming anyway? Huh, huh? Been writin' it for a long time now, must be a heck of a book," he said mockingly in his Stewie to Brian *Family Guy* voice.

I ignored his jab and continued. "But this serial killer case is just so... dense and..."

"Layered," he added.

"Yeah, man," I replied. "It's layered with mystery on top of mystery. And watching it all unfold real time...I mean you got the four girls in Gilgo. You've got the two found in Manorville whose heads, hands and feet were also found in Gilgo. Then you've got Shannan Gilbert missing from Oak Beach and you have the four in Atlantic City."

"Don't forget about the Asian kid and the baby," Tom added.

"I can't even include them in my thinking right now..." I said. "God rest their souls."

"So okay let's take it layer by layer. Bring me up to speed," Tom said. "You've got the four in Gilgo."

"Four in Gilgo. All strangled. Found in burlap bags. No clothes or jewelry. No dismemberment. Almost exactly ¼ mile apart."

"The two in Manorville, when were they found?" Tom asked.

"2000 and 2003. The one from 2000 was found stuffed in trash bags and hasn't been identified. The 2003 one was Jessica Taylor."

"Was Taylor in a garbage bag?"

"No, her torso was found almost out in the open along a dirt road. She had a tattoo that said *Remy's Angel* which had been partially scraped off and that's how they were able to identify her."

"I read about the tattoo. I didn't know she was found out in the open like that," Tom said. "Why would you go through all that trouble to try to remove a tattoo, assuming you did it so police would have a hard time identifying her, but then leave the body out in plain site so easy for them to find?"

"Exactly. Doesn't make sense. I don't know. *Remy's Angel* almost sounds like a pimp's branding."

"Maybe that's what it was," Tom says. "Maybe it was meant to send a message. Competition between pimps. Fuck you, this what we do to the competition. Kill 'em and scrape off their branding."

"Could be," I said, nodding.

"Where was she from? Was she Suffolk?" Tom asked.

"No she was from Manhattan. Near the Port Authority. That's where she was last seen. But I think she'd just recently come up from AC."

"Atlantic City? Really?"

"Yeah, she'd been arrested there."

"Is that just a weird coincidence? When were the AC girls killed?"

"2006."

"Okay so that's three years before. Still interesting. And these AC girls, there were four behind a motel right?"

"Right. Four girls. All blondes. They're pretty much dressed, but are all barefoot- no shoes or socks. All face down in a couple inches of water along a drainage ditch behind a seedy motel, all lined up with their heads pointing east toward Atlantic City."

"All strangled?"

"One was, another was asphyxiated. The others they couldn't tell."

"When did those go missing? What month was it?"

"Not sure. It wasn't summer. Late fall, early winter maybe," I said, unbuckling my knapsack and taking out a yellow legal pad almost completely filled with notes from the case.

"Yeah I don't know," Tom said. "I think this guy has different issues. He's into the whole *feet thing*. And with lining the girls up with their faces all goin' in one direction. A little compulsive. Maybe a compulsive gambler with ritualistic obsessions."

I laughed. "Where the hell did you pull that one out of? I like it though."

"Okay, so let's go back and focus on the Gilgo four," he said. "At least it's safe to say they're definitely all connected."

"Alright," I said, flipping through the pad. "Well, Amber Lynn Costello was the last to go missing back on September 2nd of last year. That was the Thursday of the Labor Day weekend - Labor Day being Monday. She was 27. She spoke to a guy using her roommates' cell phone that they all kinda shared I guess for business purposes. She did a lot of in-house calls there as well. She spoke to the john a couple times over the course of that day and then later that night met him around the block in Babylon. And that's the last time she was seen."

"She was offered a lot of money right?" he asked.

I nodded. "\$1500."

Tom shook his head and said, "This guy thinks he's so smooth."

The waitress came to take our order. Tom ordered a seafood combo platter and I ordered another Guinness. Once she left I continued, "Okay, so working backwards, next was Megan Waterman on June 5th of last year - that's a Saturday, the weekend after Memorial Day. She's young, just twenty-two. She comes here from Maine with her boyfriend slash pimp. This pimp, Akeem, is originally from Brooklyn but Megan and him met in a club up there a year or so before and he convinced her she could make easy money being an escort. Apparently they made regular trips from Maine to NY for that purpose. She was a single mother and was struggling with two jobs before she met this piece of shit. And once she met him supposedly her whole personality changed. She gets arrested for stealing and for possession of drug paraphernalia. She even got busted in an undercover prostitution sting in Bethpage on one of their earlier Long Island trips. But it doesn't stop her. Akeem also sells crack which is why he's in

jail now. I'm guessing he got her hooked and that was a big part of it. So anyway, they got a room at the Holiday Inn Express in Hauppauge. He supposedly left her alone in the room that night and she was last seen by the hotel security tape walking away from it at 1:30 AM, possibly toward a nearby convenience store. I read somewhere that Akeem called her cell phone around that time but I'm not sure if that's confirmed. Umm...what else," I said, scanning my notes. "She left all her belongings, including wallet, I.D. and cell phone back in the room. Right now Akeem's locked up and being uncooperative - and the Feds have his computer.

"Then we've got Melissa Barthelemy, age 24. She's originally from Buffalo but moved to the Bronx in 2007 with a Cosmetology license. She started working at a few barbershops and salons and then at some point began stripping at clubs and eventually moved to doing escort work. She's last seen on July 12, 2009 -that's a late Saturday, early Sunday. Her boyfriend slash pimp, Terry, said she told him that she might be going to Long Island that night. Apparently she went there often and had some regular clients. On this night she had a date lined up for the price of \$1000. One of her old Craigslist ads that I came across advertised various services with prices and it stated that an overnight stay would cost \$1000. So that's I guess how they arrived at that number. Her boyfriend offered her a ride that night but she declined and acted somewhat secretive about her plans. Later, two calls made to her voicemail were traced back to Massapequa motels - one from the Budget Inn and another from the Best Western."

"That's the one whose sister got called, right?"

"Yeah, her little sister Amber, who was like fourteen at the time, got calls about once a week from Melissa's cell phone. All of the calls came between late July and late August of 2009. Supposedly sounded like an older white guy. He always called in the evening and spoke in a low tone. Called seven times all together. Called Amber a half breed - her father's black. Asked her if she's gonna be a whore like her sister. Then on the final call he said that he killed her. He never stayed on longer than three minutes but police were able to trace some of the calls to Times Square and Madison Square Garden. As if these calls weren't enough he also sent her a number of abusive texts. Around the same time Melissa's boyfriend, Terry, also got calls from someone that sounded white. The guy said to Terry '*You like to do some crazy stuff with Melissa, I know where you be at. Most of the time he seemed to be drunk. He knew who I was. He knew I had tattoos on my back. Maybe he felt [Melissa] was doing something he didn't like.*' Terry claims to have received around thirty calls like this over a period of eight months."

"Well, he definitely sounds racist. Half-breed? The whole *I know where you be at* also sounds like he's mocking ghetto slang," Tom said.

"It does, right? I mean it's a quote of a quote so it's hard to tell but yeah. It's funny because one of the things that all the girls have in common is that they all seem to have dated black guys and would meet with black clients, which supposedly isn't so common for white girls in the business. So that could actually make you think maybe it was a black guy. But everyone who's spoke to him has said he sounds white."

"Yeah, no this guy's white. And a racist. And what day was that again, when Melissa was last seen?" Tom asked.

"That was July 12th of '09. That's technically a Sunday but I think it's a Saturday night into the early hours of Sunday the 12th," I replied.

"Which would have made it the weekend after the Fourth of July?" he said.

"Yep. Right around another summer holiday. The next one was too. Maureen Brainard-Barnes went missing on July 9th of 2007, that was a Monday which would have made the Fourth of July on..."

"Wednesday," Tom answered.

"Yeah. That Wednesday before," I replied.

"That's gotta mean something. All right after those holidays. Maybe with his work schedule, or... when he earns extra money maybe. Something."

"Good point. What's a job where you'd make extra money around those holidays?" I asked.

"Ice cream man? ...Beach vendor...?" Tom said, thinking out loud.

"Those are popular fishing weekends. Maybe charter boat worker for fishing trips? They use burlap bags for clamming, right?" I said.

"Yeah. That works," he said. "Alright so what else we got on Maureen?"

"She was 25. She lived in Connecticut but came to the city by train with two acquaintances to meet clients on that Monday morning. She left her acquaintances and got a hotel room on 46th Street once she got to Manhattan. At some point later she calls a friend from the Port Authority and says that she's been robbed of all the money she'd made and needed a ride home. And that was the last anyone heard from her. In 2008, police traced a ping off of her cell phone just a couple miles from Gilgo. Someone was trying to access her voicemail. Also, cops went through her computer and one of the last people to contact her was an NYPD cop. But supposedly he's been cleared. With that and everything else you can kinda see how the whole NYPD cop theory could take shape. His knowledge of tracing phones. Some of the girls' last whereabouts. The calls made from the city... even his rotating work schedule works with that."

Tom didn't say anything for a moment. Then, "--it's not me, man!" he blurted out, as if that's what I was insinuating.

When his food came I went back inside to use the bathroom. The bar's uneven flooring combined with the sudden change in lighting made me feel more buzzed than I should have. I stopped to admire a number of prints of paintings by Juarez Machado hanging on the wall. They were all of strange looking people eating very brightly colored food. The food looked great but the people all looked like empty-eyed vampires. A young couple eating dessert at a table right next to where I was standing both turned their heads toward me as if bothered by my close proximity. They had numerous piercings and were dressed in all black with chains and other Gothic regalia and actually bore a striking resemblance to the folks in the painting. I was pretty sure right then I knew the kind of car they drove. I smiled at 'em like a Great White and walked away content to having solved at least one mystery for the day.

When I got back outside Tom was digging into his steaming plate of seafood with both hands.

"So where does the Gilbert girl fit in?" he asked, licking his fingers. "For a lot of reasons she fits right in but for other reasons she doesn't."

"I know. That's almost the heart of the mystery. It's like how can she not be connected. She gets her clients off of Craigslist just like the others, she disappears into literally thin air. The other girls are found right there – because of her. You've got cell phone pings from Maureen's phone coming from Gilgo. It's all happening right there! Even the strange phone call by the doctor to Shannan's family is similar. How can it not be related...? And you mean to tell me nobody knows nothing... All I can say is that if it's not related, then this would have to be one of the greatest coincidences in the annals of crime!

"I hear ya," Tom said. "But you have to admit some things with Shannan's case don't fit. The fact that she had a driver jumps out. She wasn't lured with a huge payout. She has yet to be found. Coincidences happen. The human brain has trouble accepting them sometimes but maybe it's just the web of chance and circumstance. Long Island's a relatively small web and you've got similar circumstances that by chance just happened to intersect."

I didn't buy it. And I realized that it's this indiscernible aspect of the case, this terrible riddle, so central to the overall puzzle, that fuels much of my obsession. In part, I think, because I can't help but see its insolubility as merely a failure of the imagination. And for a writer, there is nothing more frustrating- or enchanting.

"I read somewhere that coincidence is the crack that lets God or the Devil into the world," I said. "So maybe the only question then is... whether it was God... or the Devil."

When the waitress came back she asked me if I wanted my Guinness refilled, but I told her no. I'm only good for maybe three beers during the day. Any more and I'd have to take a nap or move on to something stronger to keep me going.

Tom hung out for a little longer then had to leave to pick up his kids and I was left sitting

alone with my notes. Fuck it I said, picking up the legal pad, let's start back at the beginning... Four in Gilgo, all almost exactly ¼ of a mile apart.

That road is so dark, I thought to myself, and it all looks the same. How did he manage to be so exact? And why...?

Sunday with Gus

On a sunny and warm late Sunday afternoon my friend Sandy and I decided to take a ride out to Oak Beach. I am an amateur writer and Sandy is an amateur photographer. We are both friends with Shannan Gilbert's family and came looking to find information on her disappearance. The last time we came together to Oak Beach was on the May 1st vigil that marked the one year anniversary of Shannan's disappearance.

Sandy is an amazing photographer and I enjoy watching her work her craft. She chews gum and smiles sheepishly as she leans in and rests her camera on her dashboard clicking away at things in the reeds in front of us which I do not see. Like all great photographers the third eye of her lens is able to capture and present that which too often escapes. And what I cannot see through her dusty windshield I know will most likely later be revealed as some poignant act of nature – a duckling struggling to take its first flight or perhaps some half hidden deer gnawing on a flower.

It's mid July and Oak Beach looks much different than it did that early spring. The blood has returned to the once pale, lifeless reeds which have now sprung into tall waves of magnificent green and purple. People are out and children are playing.

As we drive through this cloistered corn maze of a community toward Brewer's we discuss the case.

"So you really think the serial killer is someone in Oak Beach, huh?" she asks.

"I do," I say. "I think that the four bodies were kept in Oak Beach originally and then moved when the police started looking for Shannan in earnest toward the end of last year. At that point I think they were hastily put into burlap bags and moved to where they were found in Gilgo. That spot would have been too difficult to find and return to year after year. Besides, burlap is made to degrade. No chance it could have lasted from 2007 or even 2010."

"I think you're right," she says.

We get out of the truck and Sandy covers Brewer's from all angles. Looking over

her pictures later I would once again be impressed by her ability to capture the hidden essence of things. One picture in particular uses the sun's rays and our reflection in glass to create a neat optical illusion that is so indicative of a place and case where anything is possible and nothing is as it appears.

From Brewer's we head to Gus Coletti's. We've both seen him in interviews but we want to meet him in person and ask him a few questions ourselves. Sandy parks her truck in front of his house and by the time we get to the steps of his deck he is standing inside his front door. He comes out and we exchange pleasantries and explain that we are friends of Shannan's family. He is friendly and receives us without hesitation.

"So what did she do she just ran out? She was just..." Sandy asks.

"Well first off she comes banging on the door, yelling and screaming for help. I was shaving and gettin' ready to go upstate. So I come out and open the door and she came in. And she stands right here," he says, moving to the exact spot inside where she had stood. "That's as far as she got. She kept on yelling for help. And I kept on saying to her, 'What's the matter. Tell me what's the matter and I'll help ya.' And she just kept on yellin' 'help, help me'. And then she started to fall backwards. So I turned around, picked up the phone and called police right way. And I turned to her afterwards, hung up the phone and said 'I called the police. They're on the way here. Somebody will help ya'. As soon as I said that - out the door she went."

"Do you know Joseph Brewer?" asks Sandy.

"Do I know Joe Brewer? I know who he is. He's not one of my favorite people though," Coletti responds.

"Michael Pak, the driver, when he said to you that you shouldn't have called police because she's gonna get in a lot of trouble, did he seem to say that in a manner that was threatening to her?" I ask.

"No," Coletti responds. "And I said to him 'well, I'll tell you right now so are you if you don't stop right here. I called the police and I know who you are now'."

"Now where was she last seen?" I ask, leading him onto his deck. "I've seen you in a couple of interviews but it's always so hard to tell."

He comes outside and walks to his right along the deck and points to the reeds along the road of the Fairway. "She comes out here and tries to get in the reeds. But

she can't because they were higher then."

"And Michael Pak is where at this point?" I ask.

"I haven't seen him yet. And she runs to that house next door and bangin' on the door for help again. Then she turned around and came back in the road to right about there," he says pointing to the middle of the roadway, "and she stopped. And starts lookin' back and I'm wonderin' what she's lookin' at. And I'm standin' here waitin'. And she takes off here and ran around here," he says, with his arm out tracing her route from the middle of the roadway to across his front lawn and then behind his boat. "She went right underneath the edge of the boat."

"She was obviously afraid of someone wasn't she?" asks Sandy.

"Yes," replies Coletti. "And then I saw the car coming. And I said oh- this guy's after her. So I came here and ran down there," pointing to his steps and front yard. "And I stopped him right out there. And I asked him where he thought he was going. And that's when he says, 'oh well we had a party up at Brewer's house and one of the young girls got upset and left and I'm tryin' to find her to bring her back.' Well I've already called the police, that's what I told him and they're on the way' I said."

"That was a good thing," says Sandy.

"And he said 'oh, you shouldn't of done that. She's gonna get in a lot of trouble.' And I said 'so are you if you leave'," Coletti says.

"So you really tried to get him to stay," I say. "And then Shannan darted off to where?" I ask.

"And then all of a sudden," he continues, "out she came and went around that house," he says, pointing to the house directly across from his by the gate."

"Around that house right there?" I say, pointing.

"Yeah."

"Toward Anchor Way. That house right there?" I ask.

"Yeah but that house wasn't there then. There was a little bungalow," he says.

"And he took off after her. And did u ever see Brewer?" I ask.

"No."

"Anyone else after that? It was just him? An Asian guy," I ask.

"Yeah. So what I did I ran back up here and I told my wife..."

Here a car drives slowly by and Coletti stops talking.

"Anyone we should be concerned about?" asks Sandy.

"No, that's just the neighbors coming home from work," he says. "So I told my wife – she was downstairs here. I said stay here and watch for anyone else coming down the street. I'm going down to let the police in. And I waited for the police and I opened up the gate so they could get in and I told 'em the direction she went in."

"About how long was that after you last saw her?"

"About 45 minutes," he responds.

"Wow," I say.

"And that was the direction of Hackett's house wasn't it - over there that way?" asks Sandy.

"Yeah," responds Coletti.

"And you never saw Michael Pak's SUV again?" I ask.

"No," he responds.

"You know Mr. Hackett?" asks Sandy.

"Yes I do."

"Nice man?" asks Sandy.

"If I had a choice. He'd be living next door to me," he replies.

"Okay," Sandy says.

"There's very few people here in this community that don't get along," Coletti says.

"I have a question. Was she wearing a leather jacket?" I ask.

"Over her shoulder," he says.

"Wow, you remember everything," Sandy says.

"Oh yeah I do," he responds.

"Sandals or boots on," I ask.

"I don't know. I didn't look. I know that she had a tank top on. Not a halter."

"One earring or two?" I ask.

"I didn't..."

"Did she say she was frightened of...what did she..?" asks Sandy.

"No, she just kept yelling – help, help," he says.

"Oh god...we gotta find this woman," Sandy says.

"Do you have any theories yourself?" I ask.

"I sure do...I don't think she was murdered. I think she went in the water."

"Well, don't you think the body would have washed up eventually?" asks Sandy.

"Sure. If it was an incoming tide that morning. There's gotta be 35-40 little islands between here and Patchogue. No inhabitants on any one of 'em. She coulda washed up on one she'd be there forever. And that's more than likely where she is."

"Did they have the police dogs sniffing around?" Sandy asks.

"Right away or...?" he asks.

"Well, in December," says Sandy.

"December they did."

"All in the drainage and everything?" she asks.

"Yeah. January they were back again. Mike was here with the dog."

"Blue?" I ask.

"John Mallia?" Sandy asks.

"Yeah. I told him. I was talkin' to him. He left and came in and I told him we got it recorded. So he said they tell me it wasn't working. So I say that's right somebody wiped the camera clean."

"Someone did wipe the camera clean?" I ask.

"Yeah. Somebody in here," he says, using his thumb to point over his shoulder.

"Yeah, but wasn't Hackett in charge of the camera?" Sandy asks.

"No, he was not. Charlie Serota was."

"Charles Serota?"

"Hmm."

"When did he come over with Blue. How far after..."

"I don't know," says Coletti. "This is just what I was told. I didn't witness it. But the real thing that we keep when you come in here you punch your code in it records the time you come in."

"And it takes a snapshot of your license plate right?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says.

"That's on a hard drive. And the entire hard drive is wiped clean?" I ask.

"No, no. I turned that over to the police."

"Oh you did. So they have the hard drive?" Sandy says.

He nods.

"So ostensibly you would know..." I begin to say.

"But there was no car that came in or out of there in over a half hour," he says.

"So she's gotta be in this area," says Sandy. "Here some place."

"Yeah," he says.

At this point our interview is pretty much over and we sit down with him and his wife on lawn chairs on their deck and chat more casually. I light a much needed cigarette and try to process all that I heard. I was so focused on Coletti I didn't even realize that Sandy's camera was videotaping the entire interview. People have said a lot about Coletti. And I know they'll say more. Personally, I can only be grateful to him for calling 911 and for his candor and hospitality toward us. Is there more to the story that he's not telling? Perhaps. Is he protecting the doctor in some way? I can't say anything for sure. For now, I will leave that speculation to others. I can only tell of what he said and his demeanor. And I believe what he's said has brought us closer to Shannan. Or at least crystallized something in my mind. Something happened down on Anchor Way. Something terrible. Something that needed to be covered up. Wiped clean, as Coletti said.

But of course whatever happened down this path toward Shannan's martyrdom can never really be erased. And the longer the truth remains obscured, the longer the vacuum created by her disappearance becomes like an open wound in the fabric of space and time, not only for the family that is missing her, but for the community where she was last seen; only the truth can help knit this kind of fabric back together; only then can the healing process begin for anyone. I pray for all that it comes soon.

The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife

The August sun is glaring down on the parking lot of Oak Beach as I drain another bottled water in the futile hope of drowning my hangover. I toss the bottle in a garbage can and join our group consisting of myself, Mari Gilbert, her two friends - Michele and Jo, and two psychics named Joe and Cristina. We spent the previous evening holed up in a small and shabby motel room during a terrible thunderstorm trying to connect with Shannan's spirit. At some point I started feeling slightly claustrophobic and just plain old sad, so I slipped out into the rain alone and headed to a local tavern to chase down other kinds of spirits.

I'm skeptical of psychics. I believe some have the gift, but most are frauds. Of course, we're all willing to try anything in the hope of finding Shannan. And we've actually have been working with several mediums. Using more than one has been an interesting case study unto itself because you get to see where what they say overlaps. And there have been some slight aspects of congruity between them, though at this point it would not benefit the investigation to say much more.

Passing through the Oak Beach Association gate most of us instinctively walk to the right toward Brewer's. But Joe the psychic stops us. He tells us he wants to start in the opposite direction, toward where Shannan was last seen, because in a sense he's going to be looking back in time for her energy. We don't get far down Anchor Way when Joe pauses. He takes out a crystal pendulum and watches its movements as he lets its chain hang from between his index finger and thumb. This is called spiritual dowsing and can also be used to balance Chakras, or spiritual bodies, of the living, which Joe and his partner Cristina do as well.

"Something happened here," Joe says. "I'm picking up a whole lot of vibrations right here." Joe is of partial Native American descent and his manner of speaking, the intonation and cadence, has a certain indigenous quality to it that I enjoy.

I look around at the terrain. It's near the space in the reeds by the basketball court. There are no houses directly in sight yet.

I've noticed that listening to psychics speak of Shannan, whether what they say has any truth to it or not, always help stir my imagination and often moves me to view the scenario from a perspective of new possibilities. And standing in the middle of the roadway, fighting off the nausea of a hangover, I pause and take off my sunglasses to do just that. The late day sun's angle to the earth makes everything golden and I squint in its brilliance through swarming fritter flies toward the bend in the road. As I'm blinded by the sunlight I think how blinded by darkness anyone running or driving through this labyrinth must have been that night in May. Was Shannan struck down by a pursuing

vehicle while taking flight through this dark maze? Was her limp and near lifeless body then simply thrown in the vehicle and whisked off to be disposed of elsewhere? I just don't know. But it's a possibility I can suddenly very vividly imagine.

We continue down Anchor Way to where it intersects with the road named The Bayou. This is supposedly where Shannan's jacket was found. We look to Joe for what he's sensing.

He shakes his head. "I felt more back the other way," he says.

"Wanna go a little further down to the Doc's house?" I ask.

"Absolutely," he says.

We make our way to the doctor's house and when we get there we stand out in front of it. The sign over the car port reads, "Be Nice or Leave." Sounds reasonable enough, I say to Michele.

Joe the psychic begins using his pendulum again and moving his lips without speaking. After some time he appears frustrated and just says he would like to get a reading from inside the doctor's truck. Good luck with that, I think to myself. And I'm surprised none of the neighbors are yelling at us from out of their windows and doors for us to leave like they did the last time we attempted to call on the doctor.

Eventually, our group somehow begins to wander off further down the road. Michele is pointing out different species of birds and snapping pictures with her ever present camera, my hangover is nearly sweated out and even Mari seems more relaxed and at ease. I joke that, though far from it, we could probably pass ourselves off as a group of happy tourists. Mari laughs out loud and says that's going to be her new screen name on the LISK website -the happy tourist- to which we all laugh even harder. Mari's been through so much and hearing her laugh is a real good thing.

But soon enough it's back to business. We circle around back to the doctor's house and begin discussing the possibility of knocking on the door so Mari can once again try to ask the doctor some questions. So she can look him in the eyes and get a sense for herself what he has to say about her daughter's disappearance. As a mother she needs this and I would put more faith in her instincts than any psychic.

Michele and I are in mid-conversation when I see her eyes widen and she grabs hold of my shirt and says, "Behind you. It's the doctor!"

I spin around to look and sure enough it's him, the doctor, lumbering toward us from seemingly out of nowhere. He's wearing shorts and his prosthetic leg is visible. He's sweating almost as much as I am as he gives us an awkward smile.

“How ya doing Doc,” I say, with my own kind of smile.

He nods and says hello.

“This is Mari Gilbert,” I say. “Shannan Gilbert’s mother.”

The two shake hands in the middle of the road and the doctor tells us he was just at a memorial service at a neighbor’s house. To stand in one place seems something of a strain and he’s slightly out of breath.

The doctor tells Mari that he knows how she must feel, but Mari stops him and says that since he isn’t missing a daughter he has no idea how she feels. He then rephrases his statement.

Mari informs the doctor that she wants to know first hand what happened.

“I never saw her. I never met her,” is his reply.

“Yeah but this is my question,” Mari says. “You called me. And for over a year you denied it.”

“I didn’t deny it. I...” he says.

It’s been widely reported in the media that the doctor lied about having ever called Mari. But to be fair, I have yet to see any footage of this or even any quotes that provide context. All I have seen is footage of him denying ever seeing Shannan and saying that he hadn’t even heard her name until a week or so after the night she went missing.

“And when there was proof that you called me, you admitted it,” Mari adds.

“I had long since told the police that I called you. Because Alex (Shannan’s boyfriend) asked me to call you,” the doctor responds.

The doctor goes on to tell us that he gave Alex his card to give to Mari and everyone else.

“But you called me on the second not the sixth. Way before anyone knew Shannan was missing.”

It’s an important point because if he called her on the 2nd it could suggest that he

got the number from Shannan or from her phone, rather than from Alex. Though I personally have never seen the record that Mari cites.

“I didn’t call you on the second. How could I call you on the second?” he says, walking away a few steps in apparent aggravation.

“That’s what I wanna know...,” Mari states.

“Well, I don’t...no one has any proof of that,” he says, returning to us.

“The phone records are proof.”

“You’ll have to ...Show them to the police, please,” he says.

“They have them,” Mari replies.

The doctor goes on to tell us that all he did was meet Alex and the driver as they were coming down the street asking questions and that he invited them in to talk. He says he told them to contact Suffolk County police as well as the Jersey City police and that he also told them to check with Shannan’s family to make sure that her phone was turned on. He also says that he met Shannan’s sisters the following week when they came that Mother’s Day. And that he returned the phone calls that Alex asked him to make but that was it.

“All this stuff about a rehab or something,” he adds. “I don’t have any rehab. I don’t do rehab.”

“So why would you say that to me?” Mari asks.

“I didn’t,” he says.

Soon afterwards the doctor’s wife pulls into the driveway and comes over to join us. She is wearing a uniform shirt with slacks and tells us she is just getting home from work. Once introduced to Mari, she hugs her and asks if there is any new information on Shannan. Mari and her talk some and the mood seems to lighten up considerably. The doctor jokes about how much he hates being on camera and that when he is filmed it’s when his leg isn’t fitting right and that he’s usually caught stumbling around looking foolish. But he says that when he doesn’t talk to the press they just make things up.

He goes on to explain to Mari how he talked to her daughters when they came to

his house while he was having guests over for a barbeque. He asks Mari if she was there that day with them and she says that she was, but she stayed outside the gate. He tells Mari that he wishes she'd come in.

"Because they had said something about rehab," he says, "and I had said yes I said I mentioned that. Since she had been in rehab before that I was hoping that if she was in rehab, since rehabs don't usually tell you who they have there unless ya know you go and prove you're family, that maybe 28 days later you'd get some good news that she had come back out of rehab. And that's what I said."

The doctor's daughter comes out of the house and tells us that she just got home from being out west where she works as a Park Ranger and hasn't even seen her parents till this moment.

She's a slender girl and very lovely with a natural and low maintenance quality to her. With teary eyes and a soft voice she tells us how hard it's been being so far away and reading about it all. And that she's just glad to be home now.

Someone in our group mentions that they wish they'd brought some water. The doctor's wife immediately offers to get us some and then invites us all inside. Mari's whole body is shaking as she clasps my hand for support and our group enters into what our imaginations have long been running wild with.

We are led downstairs first. Here, we walk the length of a hallway to a far back room that's filled with paintings done by his daughter. She's genuinely talented and, judging by the sheer volume of her work, quite passionate.

From there we go upstairs to the kitchen-living room area where the doctor's wife gets us glasses of water with ice. And while she does, I head straight to a great floor-to-ceiling bookshelf in the living room. You can tell a lot about a man by his bookshelf. The first book I see is eye level and it's called "The Last Happy Hour." Sounds like a book I'd like to read - or maybe write, I think to myself. Its author has the same last name as the doctor so I ask his wife what the relation is and she tells me that it's the doctor's father and that it's a book about soldiers in World War II. The lower shelves contain a lot of books by popular mystery-detective writers like Kellerman and Patterson. All the way up, on the top shelf, is a collection of books by Hemingway. Many of Hemingway's fictional heroes are wounded men who survive and continue to live active lives despite their handicap and sufferings. And I can't help but wonder if Hemingway's code of maintaining hope despite such loss has been a source of inspiration for this doctor with the prosthetic leg.

The doctor's wife hands me a much needed glass of water and I ask her how she's holding up through all this. She says she's doing fine and that whenever she has a bad day she just has to think of what Mari must be going through. By the ease and speed of the words I can tell that this is her standard response and that she's said it before, but

it's still nice to hear.

She goes on to tell us that she knows it's been tough on her husband. She says he's a good man and that she would marry him again in a second and that people laughed at her for saying in an interview that the only thing he's ever done wrong is be late for dinner, but that it's true. Countless times, she tells us, he wouldn't make it home for dinner because he was out helping someone who needed assistance in one way or another. It's just the way he is, she says.

When we get back outside Joe the psychic and the doctor are missing. Turns out Joe wanted to get back to the parking lot to check on his kids and the doctor offered to give him a ride in his truck. I laugh to myself and picture Joe and that crystal pendulum of his dowsing away as the doctor drives along making small talk about whatever. While we're waiting for them to return, I turn to the doctor's wife and ask about the security videotape being "wiped clean" by someone. She responds that it runs on a two week loop and gets taped over automatically. That's all it is. Nothing more, she says. Eventually the doctor returns and he gives us his business card and tells us if we have any more questions to call him - day or night. I nod and shake his hand. It's a firm grip with some good strength behind it.

And then as we turn away from the doctor's home, Mari is suddenly overcome. Tears stream down her face and she sobs. It's emotional overload. I hug her and try to find the right words but of course there aren't any.

And so the search continues...

People disappear every day. Often times their sudden absence to those who knew them is an afterthought and never acted upon. They go missing without ever being looked for, without ever being missed. Others leave behind loved ones who will never stop looking for answers. They simply need to know. The empty space in their heart demands it. Like a force of nature. And maybe even a force of the supernatural. For it is out of this that the missing, all the missing, dead or alive, named and unnamed, are told that they matter and have worth, are made whole, resurrected and given a voice. I think it's best that we stop what we're doing and listen. Because it's only then that we'll realize these voices form a beautiful chorus, clear as crystal as they rise up through the cracks from which they fell, the very same cracks under our own feet, and under our children's feet; amplified by the walls that once shut them out, their songs now ring forth toward the heavens with meaning and purpose. And I have a funny feeling if we listen to them long enough...they might just guide us home.

Hugh Auslander

I'm delivering pizza and my shift is almost over when I get a text from Hugh Auslander. He lets me know he's in town and has some time if I'd like to meet up. I say sure and offer to buy him lunch if he'll come to where I work. He says that he will.

It's early fall (2012) and the Long Island case appears to have gone completely cold. Locating Shannan hasn't brought us any closer to solving the impossible crime that took her life, nor has it revealed any relation or clues to the Ocean Parkway murders. I've lived through so many of these investigations in my mind by way of books and whatnot that I know how long they can often drag on without progress. But this case feels different. Something stinks.

The Atlantic City case is just as cold and whether or not the two are connected is still anyone's guess. I generally write for those who are, at least, fairly familiar with both the Long Island and Atlantic City serial killer cases. But for readers who are not familiar with the Atlantic City one and Hugh Auslander's relation to it, let me briefly bring you up to speed.

Four women were found murdered behind Atlantic City's Golden Key Motel on November 20th 2006. They ranged in ages from 42 to 20 years old. All four women were believed to be involved in prostitution. One was strangled, another suffocated, and two others were too decomposed to tell the cause of death. All the women were found clothed, but shoeless with their heads turned facing east toward Atlantic City and the ocean. Their names were Kim Raffo, Tracy Ann Roberts, Barbara Breidor and Molly Jean Dilts.

Hugh Auslander was Kim Raffo's husband of sixteen years. I've read a couple of his interviews in the papers and we've communicated over the internet on several occasions, but this is the first time I'll be meeting him in person.

As with any active serial killer investigation of this kind, with so much complexity to sort through, and so much at stake, the events leading up to and surrounding each homicide cannot be told enough times. In my mind, everything's in play; the smallest detail and most minor occurrence, however slight or seemingly insignificant, have their place in contributing to the crime's construction - or reconstruction. And there is no telling what

singular fact lurking in the background, when flushed out and held for examination, will reveal a secret snapshot that helps piece together more of those fragmentary scenes. Or at least one can hope.

So like an obsessed killer who takes souvenirs to relive his crimes, our side must collect facts. I'm hoping Hugh is willing to share with me some of the details of his relationship with Kim and their tumultuous life leading up to its tragic ending, so we can add more data to the spreadsheets, and more columns to collate.

I greet him out front in the parking lot. He's wearing a white tank top, blue jeans and black sneakers with white soles and a Velcro strap across the tongue. A long homemade chain of key rings and clips hangs from his belt loop into his front pocket. His sunglasses are on top of his head and his hair is medium to long in length. He shakes my hand and gives me a friendly smile through some obvious agitation.

He tells me he made the trip up from Florida to visit family and to try and see his kids who are in permanent foster care. But, he says, he's been getting the runaround.

We go inside the restaurant to a secluded corner table. I offer him up some drink choices and he says iced tea is fine. When I get back with the beverage he's talking on his cell phone to someone about not being able to see his kids. I leave the drink and finish up some work duties before clocking out. When I return Hugh's gone and the iced tea is untouched. I soon find him outside smoking a cigarette at one of the sidewalk tables, still talking on the phone.

I sit across from him, light a cigar and try not to feel awkward while listening to his conversation. As he wraps up the call, I empty myself and prepare to descend down the dark well of this case.

The first thing I'm interested in hearing Hugh recall is how Kim went from being a very normal mother and middle class housewife to becoming a crack addict who used prostitution to feed her habit.

Hugh tells me that they were doing great in Florida. The housing boom was in full effect and his construction business was successful enough for them to own a home and for Kim not to have to work. But when the industry there dried up, Kim took some cooking classes so she could join the workforce doing what she had always loved doing for her family. While she was doing this, Hugh found work in New Jersey and was sending money back home. It was during this time period that Kim met a man named Ken and

began having an affair.

HA: Kim was my best friend. She was my soul mate. I knew that from day one. We spent everyday together. There was not one day we went to sleep angry with each other. Until I left. to find work in Jersey. She was a great mom. Always cooking. Always cleaning twenty four seven. All the family was always at our house. Christmas, Thanksgiving, every birthday. Neighbors kids running through the house non-stop with their dogs. It was crazy. Everybody had pools. Jumping in this pool, jumping in that pool. Life was good. Damn good life. Miss it like hell. But when work dried up that just killed us.

I came back from Jersey in June (2002), and, you know, I kind of felt something was going on. But I just I think no, no, no. And I see in my mother-in-law's eyes and she just couldn't tell me. You know, and I have to go back up to work the next day. So I really didn't have time to really check things out. So anyway, I went back to Jersey and then I wanted to come home for the Fourth of July weekend and she said, no, no, no, no, no. And I'm like what's up with that? You know, and that's when I got the phone call from my mother-in-law stating, Huey, get home, something's going on. Why? Mom, what's going on? What do you mean? You know everything should be fine. She's like, 'No, it's not fine. You need to fix this right now.' So I dropped everything drove eighteen straight hours, got there at 3 o'clock in the morning and threw it all at her. 'What's going on? What's this? What's that? Where's Kenny?' And she said, 'No, no, no, no. That's not true. No, no.' She's lying and denying all the way through.

But Kim and Ken's relationship was tough to deny when Hugh saw Kim and Ken driving Hugh's unregistered van through a crack ridden part of town.

HA: So I'm running around and doing some errands. Going to pay my auto insurance and I ran into them. And they're driving the van. I'm like oh, my god. So I'm driving to see where they're going. And they drive right in the hood to find their crack. I stop right there on Miramar and 441. Walked up to the van. Scared the living daylights out of 'em. 'Get the fuck out of the van.' And he sees it's me and tries to get at me with a kitchen knife to cut and stab me through the window. So tally ho, I'm like fuck this. I went back to my car. I'm looking for like tools, anything to protect me. I see my son's mitt and baseball bat in the back seat. I grab that. I turn around. He's coming at me with the knife. Bam, right into his elbow. The knife goes flying out on 441, you know, and I'm like, 'You're going to get it.' And I'm going around the van like this and I would smack it and... 'I'm going to fucking kill you, you mother fucker.' And I'm like, 'Kim, get in the van, take it home now.' She came up grabbed me by my arm and I'm like don't you touch me, don't you dare touch me!' So anyway, the light turned green, everybody was honking their horns, 'Move the car.' I jumped in the car and I took it into the gas station and I kind of forced Kim to drive into the gas station too. So he's like drop the bat pussy and I'm like...klink. Come on.' So he comes flying at me. I jumped up in the air and did a flying drop kick on his chest. Then right in his jaw. Bam! Mother fucker how dare you come into my fucking life like that!

Hugh believes Ken had to be high on drugs because no matter how many times he said that he hit him, Ken would get back up and come after him, even after he punched him in the face and broke his jaw and punched out several of his teeth. But eventually Hugh knocked him out cold. Hugh left after that, but later learned that the cops had come and Ken had pressed charges against him.

HA: So anyway, I wound up going back up to Jersey with my kids. Put my house up for sale and sold it. I gave her \$10,000 to start a new life. And that's when she called me up saying, 'You know, you're wanted for attempted murder in Florida for trying to kill Kenny.' I said, 'No, no. I fought him in self-defense.' And I was like, 'I know you seen that.' It wound up being downgraded to aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. I didn't believe any of it. I'm like, 'You're full of shit.' So anyway, later on in the year she wound up crying to me, 'Oh, I miss the kids, please, please, please.' I bought her a plane ticket flew her back up. She was high as a kite, ended up spending ten thousand dollars in three weeks. Her lips were all broken and her fingers all messed up from crack. She was sleeping all day and up all nite. Poppin' Xanax. I'm like look, you can't be around my kids like this. I drove her to the airport and I said, 'Call me when you're sober.'

Then December comes rollin' around and Christmas and, you know, a mutual friend of ours calls me up and says, 'Look Huey, she's been clean for two weeks. She's been staying with me. She's no longer with Kenny. She really wants to see the kids. Can you help here?' I'm like, 'All right. I'll send one more ticket. But if she comes up high like that again --'you know, I don't want nothing to do with this.' So she came back up. She looked good. She got her weight back. Christmas came. Everything was good, you know, kind of almost like a family. But there's still a separation between me and Kim. I didn't trust her at this point.

So anyway, I started seeing like hints of things going on like, you know, she was trying to get the kids away from me. And I'm like why do you want to do that? I mean why -- she wanted to go to her cousin's house with the kids for no apparent reason. And I was like, 'All right, I'll drive.' 'No, no, no, I got it.' I'm like, 'What? No. They ain't going. Plain and simple.' Then I found out, Kenny had moved to Atlantic City and he was waiting there and she's trying to get the kids away...to get me arrested, to get me out of the way. So she can get the kids!

So I beat them to punch. On January 1st 2003, I walked into the police station with my kids. And I gave myself up in Atlantic City. I told 'em 'I'm supposedly wanted for something. I don't know what.' They looked it up and they said, 'Oh, yeah, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon.' I was like, 'Well, look, all right, I want nobody taking these kids. I want these kids in foster care. I don't trust anybody. I don't know who's who right now and I need help from the State. And I've asked for the help.' And they took it all against me.

When Hugh was arrested, Kim went down to the police station to pick the children up, but it turned out she too had an outstanding warrant in Florida. So Hugh and Kim were both extradited to Florida – on the same plane. Hugh ended up doing three months in jail and their children ended up in foster care, where they remain to this day.

HA: We both got extradited. Same plane. Flew together and they tried to stop us from talking together. And like, 'Well, do you know she's my wife?' 'But you don't have the same last names?' 'Well, that's my wife.' And I told the cop what happened. He says, 'Wow...well, maybe it's better if you don't talk to her.' I'm like, 'Yeah, you're right. But, you know, we have kids here and that's a very key element here. I want her to know what's going on with that.'

So she wound up getting out of jail first, took my income tax check, \$3000 and took off back to

Atlantic City and hid in the bowels of Atlantic City for two years until I found her again in 2004. And then, she was like, you know, 'Oh, I want to see the kids.' And I'm like, 'Well, straighten out. Look at you, you're smoking crack again. You're living in this fucking shanty shack. I mean do you think the kids want to see this? Honestly? I mean what kind of life can you give the kids?'

So when I got out of jail I went back up to Ocean City, packed up all my belongings. I had two cars, two vehicles at that time. I had a Rodeo. I packed that up with all my stuff and I left my little Paseo in the lockup in Margate Township. I drove back, flew back up, got the car and drove back and on the way back the Paseo, the engine blew up. So I lost that car. Sold it for \$400, whatever. So I still had the Rodeo. So with that I was traveling back to New Jersey every two months for family court for two years. Every court date I was there, present, pushing everything. Everything they gave me. They were like, 'We want you to do anger management.' I came back with the diploma the next time. 'Okay, now we want you in parenting counseling.' Came back with a diploma the next time. I'm like, 'Alright, come on, let's get this done.' They dragged it out for two years - so they could put them in permanent foster care. They were out for my kids. Without a doubt. And my lawyer I had...should be shot. They had such an easy slam dunk case. I was going twice a week for drug testing. I was also getting drug tested through probation. And I had no drug charges at all. I mean like Ken was the drug addict but I'm the one who's paying the penance.

Anyway, they're like, 'You know that eighty percent of the guys won't get their kids back,' right to my face in the courtroom. And I'm like, 'Really, why is this?' 'Cause they're deadbeat dads. You're a deadbeat dad.' I'm like, 'Really? You don't even know why I'm there and you're already judging who I am?' I mean what kinda system is this? And yet, if Kim went to try to get the kids. Being a crack addict and everything. They would have given her the kids. Put her through special programs. They got all kinds of reach out programs for moms like that. And I was so upset, but there was nothing I could do.

I learned to bite my tongue. Every time I open my mouth I get in trouble. There are no advocacy groups for fathers. Nothing out there for us. So that last court date, January 19th or something, just happened to coincide with a court date I had in Florida. And I could not delay that court date in Florida because I was coming to a closure with it. But I was also coming to a closure with the family court in New Jersey. So I tried to postpone it. I told my lawyer in Jersey to postpone it. He didn't. He went on without me. He signed them into permanent foster care without me even being there. The only court date I missed.

In September of 2006, Kim was homeless on the streets of Atlantic City. According to Hugh, Kim's mother asked him to find her and get her out of Atlantic City and away from the drugs. So Hugh picked her up from Atlantic City and took her to Long Island. Here, the couple stayed for five weeks while Kim wrestled with her addiction. Still unable to see her kids, the pain was too much for Kim to handle and she made the fateful decision to return to Atlantic city and its world of drugs and prostitution. She was last seen alive on Sunday, November 19th at around 2:30 AM, getting into the Black Nissan Maxima of an unknown man. Her body and the bodies of the other women were discovered on Monday at around 3PM.

HA: It wasn't easy. Those five weeks -- the first two weeks were really, really dull, you know. She was climbing the walls. I mean, I know she was going behind my back to every scumbag that

she could find asking them for drugs. We were staying at that motel. Where was it?... Westbury. Westbury Inn. Something like that. It was a real sleazy dive. Some crack head came up to me and sold me these swords for like twenty bucks. And she immediately ran to that guy and asked if he was getting anything. I'm like, 'Hey get over here. Don't even talk to him. Then I told him, 'If you see her you better not come near her. Stay the fuck away from her.' Kim left Long Island on the 11th of October. I believe I must have left on Friday the 24th. My last days working with my friend, then he told me about a Florida project on Las Olas.

Hugh spent six months in Atlantic City looking for answers about Kim's murder. He was convinced the killer kept her phone because he called it as soon as he found out what happened to her and someone picked up.

HA: After Kim got killed, I was literally in the bowels of Atlantic City trying to find out the who, what and where for like six months, draining every penny that I had. Wound up losing my job because of it. I just went all out trying to find out what happened.

When it happened they called Kim's mom who in turn called me and ended up telling me. I didn't believe it. I immediately called Kim's phone. They answered the phone call and, you know, they had the Boost Mobile Connects or Nextel. When you press it and it goes through – there'd be a chirp, click and you'll hear it, it initiates. And if it's busy or shut off, it'll be chirp, buzz and then it'll be a busy tone. And then when I tried it again, it was off. So somebody had that phone. So as soon as I got to Atlantic City, I'm like, 'Trace that phone. It's active.' And they were, 'Oh, don't worry, we got this.' Nothing. They didn't even go to the pawn shop. I went to every pawn shop and asked if the detectives have come here yet looking for this phone? They're like, 'No.' 'Oh, well they should be.' And then I went back again. 'Nope.' They still didn't go. I was running into them at every other place like, you know, there's a guy named Ish (Charles Ismail Coles) that she was staying with. They thought that he was initially the one. He's Islamic. They said it was like an Islamic killing type thing and all this other shit. Because they were all facing east barefoot.

Mark Hessee, a minister who stayed at a nearby motel who was rumored to have had a foot fetish and Terry Oleson, a handy man at the Golden Key Motel, who was discovered to be secretly recording his girlfriend's daughter in the bathroom, made the headlines as possible suspects.

HA: Then there was the foot fetish thing. I went to go interview at the Fox Motel - Mark Hessee. He was a nut job for sure. All hell bent on Jesus saying he is trying to help the women. But he was so wacky I didn't bother listening to much more of what he said. All about Jesus. Scary. The foot fetish thing I think is a side step. I don't think it really has much to do with it. Why would a killer take away someone's shoes? Shoes walk in places and pick up fibers. If they found shoes they could find fibers from the carpet of a hotel and could be matched.

Anyway, then Terry Oleson came into the spotlight. Pam Covelli – she stayed with him for a couple of days at the Golden Key Motel - and she supposedly went through his things and found a drawer full of sex toys with a rope in there and a whole lotta cell phones and jewelry. Now I gave Kim a wedding band cause she ended up losing the original so I gave her a new one but it was never recovered. And Pam Covelli said, 'He was very rough during sex and he strangled me. And it scared me.' He ended up getting arrested. Then she was saying this other crazy

story that she was part of a party and Kim and Barbara were dead on the bed. That was on the Dark Minds episode. Pam Covelli's a little whacked. She's lost. She couldn't keep a conversation. I tried but...she's just lost.

Supposedly they have DNA evidence. But they won't say what they have. Terry Oleson offered them DNA and I think that they took it and tested it because right after that Oleson's lawyer came in and said, 'Oh, you should let him go because you took his DNA and you never gave us any results.' And they ended up letting him out. But he was videotaping his girlfriend's daughter undressing in the bathroom. Something sick.

Hugh told investigators about some unsavory characters Kim and him ran into in Queens during their stay on Long Island in the weeks leading up to her murder. The police will not comment on the degree to which they were looked into.

HA: The people from Queens I don't know if they were ever really followed up on. Because that scared me. Because when we were on Long Island she was like, 'Well, I know some people. Let's stop in there. I just want to see how they're doing.' All right. So we stopped somewhere in Queens and it was not too far from Howard Beach. It was close to Lenny's Clam Bar, but it wasn't right there - just in that neighborhood. So anyway, we went to that place and I didn't like the way they were talking to Kim or just, you know, treating Kim. And I seen everything and I'm like come on we're out of here right now. It was a house. I was like taking her out of there. And they're like, 'Oh, who the fuck are you.' And I'm like, 'I'm her fucking husband so show some fuckin' respect. I started getting crazy, and they're like, 'Whoa, calm down there buddy. We're all friends here. It's okay.' They were doing drugs. And that's what she wanted to do. That's why I started flipping out. That's why I grabbed her out of there before anything happened. And I'm like, 'let's go.' Boom...and we got out of there fast. And she was a little upset with me at first. I'm like, look, do you want to go back to that shit hole or do want to go and see your kids? Tell me which is more important to you right now? And eventually she chose her kids. I didn't know the exact address and I didn't know their names. So... couldn't really follow up. They came to Atlantic city frequently. And they knew Kim from the streets.

The detectives told me nothing. Kept me in the dark. I thought at first they thought I was a suspect. After talking to them for twenty minutes, I told them everything. But, you know, I was in Florida. I went and stopped in to see them this past week on my way up. I spoke to Fred Spano. He was one of the first cops on the scene. He's like, 'Honestly, it's out of this office right now. It's more or less up to the prosecutor to take care of everything.'

The fact that the case is now officially cold hangs heavy between us. Hugh looks beat and I apologize for having him dredge it all up again. I look at my watch and realize we've been talking for nearly an hour and a half. We both got so lost in conversation that the idea of lunch was forgotten. I offer Hugh some good New York pizza but he says he wants to get on the road and begin the long drive back to Florida.

We shake hands and make plans to meet again. He's partnering up with some people and opening a bar in New York City and tells me maybe we can talk some more over drinks when he comes back in a month for business. I tell him that sounds great.

Before he leaves, I remember one last question I want to ask him, "What was the deal with that Philadelphia crack dealer who was staying with Kim?"

He shakes his head and says that he doesn't know anything about it.

"It's probably nothing," I say, "but I read in one of the articles that she had a crack dealer from Philadelphia staying with her. ¹ And I read in another article that Molly Dilts was always obsessed about moving back to Philadelphia and that she had a lot of friends there." ²

Hugh's face lights up and says it might be something worth looking into, especially since Molly was the first one to be killed. "It all started with her," he says.

I nod and I think we both kinda smile at the realization that no case is really cold as long as questions are being asked, even if just by a pizza delivery man.

1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/23/nyregion/23slay.html?pagewanted=all>
2. <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/local/uncategorized/the-girl-in-the-ditch-470650/>

The Missing and Unidentified

I've always enjoyed researching and writing about crime, but if there's one thing this case has sparked in me is an interest in missing persons. While following this investigation and writing my narrative inquiries here, as well as posting on [Websleuths](#), I've become fairly familiar with some exceptional tools on the web that are available for anyone to use to help find the missing. It's the armchair detective's dream.

NamUs or the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (<https://identifyus.org/en>) is a federally funded clearinghouse that contains two databases. One is for missing persons and the other is for unidentified remains. Anybody can use both of these search engines to help locate the missing or match them to their unidentified remains. This system is the first of its kind in the hands of the public. Is it perfect? No. Like any new search engine model, it can use some tweaking to become more user-friendly, as well as slightly more intuitive. But it's the best there is right now and it's also the one law enforcement uses. And that makes it the most important database to get missing persons entered into.

Only registered users on NamUs can enter new missing person cases and only registered medical examiners/coroners can enter cases of the unidentified. But again, anyone can use its search tools. I highly recommend anyone wanting to give it a try to watch the six minute video on the site's home page to get a better grasp of how it works. (Or, for more comprehensive instructions, download its user manual here:

<http://www.nij.gov/nij/funding/2011/namus-academies-guide.pdf>)

Now, one problem I've learned through my research, and maybe it's because it's fairly new (2009), is many older cases have NOT been entered into NamUs. And if law enforcement is relying mostly on this database, then that leaves gaps.

Regarding the LISK case, I can't help but wonder if it's these gaps between databases that's keeping some of the recovered victims from being identified. With this in mind, I continue to comb through other public databases to find possible matches for the unidentified.

Below are a few results I've come across by going through the [The Charley Project](#) for possible matches. As you can see, some have been entered into NamUS, some have not.

Possible JD 6 victim (<https://identifyus.org/cases/9680>) matches:

Lisa Ann Pierce



Jane Doe 6



http://www.charleyproject.org/cases/p/pierce_lisa.html

-entered into NamUS ([MP #4490](#))

Maribel Valdez



http://charleyproject.org/cases/v/valdez_maribel.html

-NOT in NamUs

Possible JD 9 victim (<https://identifyus.org/en/cases/9098>) match:

Amber Rae Sage **Jane Doe 9**



http://charleyproject.org/cases/s/sage_amber.html

-NOT in NamUs

Possible Asian John Doe victim (<https://identifyus.org/en/cases/9355>) matches:

Mo Zhang

John Doe



http://charleyproject.org/cases/z/zhang_mo.html

-entered into NamUs ([MP #3851](#))

Binh “Ben” Ta



http://charleyproject.org/cases/t/ta_ben.html

-entered into NamUs ([MP #6707](#))

Possible Child victim (<https://identifyus.org/en/cases/9704>) matches:

Dawn Koranteng



http://charleyproject.org/cases/k/koranteng_dawn.html

-NOT in NamUs

Devishi Nandanoore



http://charleyproject.org/cases/n/nandanoore_devishi.html

-NOT in NamUs

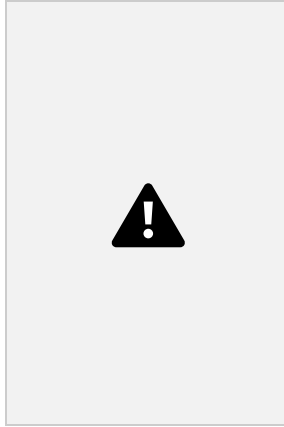
Kristina Kay Nguyen



http://charleyproject.org/cases/n/nguyen_kristina.html

-entered into NamUs ([MP #6449](#))

Aleida Carmina *Barragan*-Panduro



http://charleyproject.org/cases/b/barragan-panduro_aleida.html

-NOT in NamUs

Hemangini Kulshreshtha



http://www.charleyproject.org/cases/k/kulshreshtha_hemangini.html

-NOT in NamUs

Caroline Victoria Teague



http://charleyproject.org/cases/t/teague_caroline.html

-entered into NamUs ([MP #1502](#))

Possible Mamaroneck victim (<http://doenetwork.org/cases/605ufny.html>) match:

Esther Lisette Skoda



http://charleyproject.org/cases/s/skoda_esther.html

-NOT in NamUs

I will continue to explore other missing persons databases throughout the web (<http://www.nampn.org/mp.html>, <http://www.ncmissingpersons.org/>, <http://z13.invisionfree.com/PorchlightUSA/index.php>, <http://www.doenetwork.org/>, <http://americasmissingadults.com/>, <http://www.unidentified-persons.org/pg8.html>, <http://www.missingkids.com/home>) not just in relation to the LISK case, but with the many, many other missing and unidentified cases across the country. I invite you to do the same.

I'd also like to ask everyone to support the Help Find the Missing Act *Billy's Law* HR 1300 / SR 702 which will strengthen NamUs and help close the gaps within these systems.

"*Billy's Law* would link two existing databases maintained by the Department of Justice: the FBI's [National Crime Information Center \(NCIC\)](#) and the Department of Justice's [National Missing Person and Unidentified Persons System \(NamUs\)](#). It would also create a grant program to help local law enforcement and medical examiners report missing persons and unidentified remains to NCIC, NamUs, and the [National DNA Index System \(NDIS\)](#)." **See more at:** <http://helpfindthemissingact.blogspot.com/#sthash.03ZWEzl7.dpuf>