

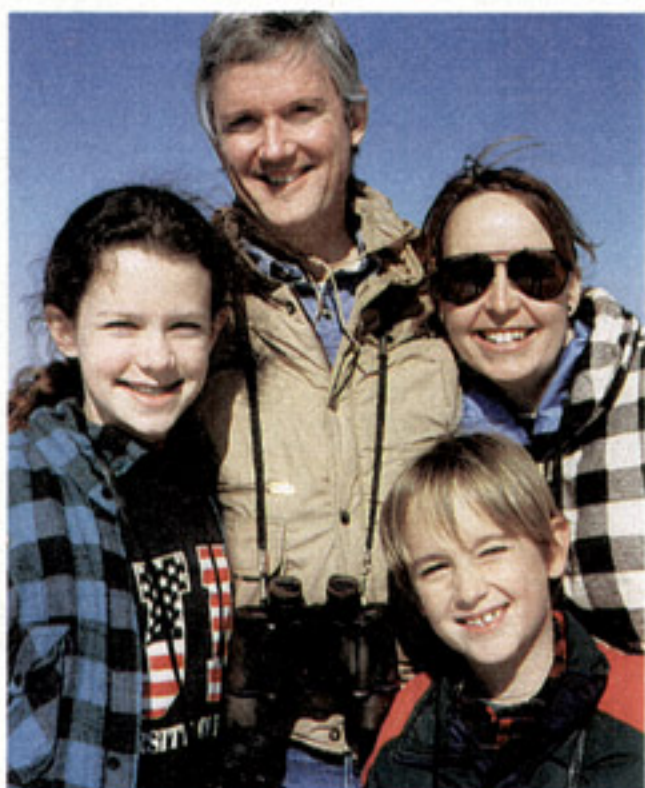
50 MILES OF MURDER



Girls keep vanishing from communities dotted along a stretch of Texas highway. While families mourn, police fear the area has become a haunt for vicious serial killers. Christine Toomey investigates. Photographs: Charles Ommannney







Page 53: a memorial to one of the victims, Laura Miller. This page, clockwise from top left: the Smither family in happier days. The Smithers with their daughter's portrait. Jared Stout and the photo he carries. Laura Smither's birthday countdown

The photograph is faded. But even now, more than two years after the murder, Chief Jared Stout carries the picture in his shirt pocket. The snapshot shows a smiling 12-year-old with braces on her teeth, innocent and on the point of transition from childhood to adolescence. Dressed in sneakers and jeans, Laura Smither rests her hand on her knee, casually allowing her painted nails to be captured by the camera.

"It was her first nail job and she was very proud of it," says the police chief of Friendswood, a small Texan town set amid fig and satsuma orchards 20 miles southwest of Houston. Founded by Quakers at the end of the 19th century, Friendswood was once voted by Family Circle magazine as one of the top 10 "great, safe" places to live in America — a reputation in which the chief took pride.

What happened to Laura on April 3, 1997, has changed that. Her murder still haunts Stout, a cultured man who never intended to become a police officer. His reaction to it looks set to change the way America polices the most abhorrent of crimes: stranger abductions and murder.

For three generations Stout's family had worked in newspapers. His grandfather was managing editor of The Kansas City Star and he was raised to follow in his footsteps. For a while he did, working as a reporter on the Washington Post. Then he decided he wanted "to do it, not write about it", and applied for a place at the police academy

in Virginia. "My grandmother's reaction was, 'Oh, Jared, it'll coarsen you so.' She thought I would become some sort of drugstore cowboy," says Stout. But the 61-year-old believes his journalistic background has given him a different approach to policing: "I was used to not knowing the answers to questions, but to knowing where to go looking for them."

So when Laura Smither disappeared while jogging near her home on the outskirts of Friendswood one Thursday morning, Stout asked neighbouring police departments if similar incidents had taken place in their area. As the reports from nine municipal police departments and two county sheriffs' offices came in, it gradually became clear that at least 27 girls and young women had either vanished or been murdered in a corridor of communities stretching for 50 miles along Interstate 45, running from Houston south to the Gulf Coast. None of the cases, some dating back to the early 1970s, had ever been solved. But because the I-45 passes through the jurisdiction of 11 police departments, the amazing trend had gone undetected.

Stout called in the FBI. Together with federal agents, he and neighbouring police departments "ponied up some people" to look for links between the killings and disappearances. "It was clear we had a major problem," says Stout, who still looks more like a newspaperman with his striped shirt and polished shoes, despite the 9mm Smith & Wesson tucked

into his waistband. Yet, two years later, not one crime has been solved. Six more teenage girls and young women have been abducted close to the I-45 since then; three have been found murdered, one escaped from her abductor, two are still missing. The FBI believes more than one serial killer is at work in the area.

Is this the most dangerous stretch of road in America? Nobody can answer this with any accuracy. For in this, the world's most powerful nation, possessed of technology to communicate with a space probe to Mars, the lack of communication between local law enforcement agencies is breathtaking. America's 18,769 municipal, city and county police departments and sheriffs' offices are under no legal obligation to report vital details about homicides and abductions carried out in their area, either to each other, or to a national violent crime prevention programme.

Signposts to Friendswood boast that its high school was voted "State Academic Champion for 1995, 1996 and 1997". This outstanding school record was one of the reasons the Smithers moved there from a rougher Houston suburb 10 years ago. Another was the town's reputation for a unique community spirit; until Friendswood became a dormitory community for commuters from Houston and Nasa employees in the late 1960s, fig and citrus groves were its economic backbone and "public displays of tobacco, liquor and dancing" were banned.

The Smither family lives in an old converted dairy on the outskirts of town, surrounded by pastures and a few other houses. Bob met his second wife, Gay, from Zimbabwe, when she was suggested as a temporary nanny for Laura, then 18 months old. The electrical engineering consultant had been left to raise Laura alone after his first wife died of breast cancer. Gay formally adopted Laura, "so she would always feel like the first-born child", after the couple married. Two years later they had a son, David.

Gay taught both children at home after Laura won a place at the Houston Ballet Academy, in order to fit school lessons around her dancing schedule. Laura was devoted to ballet. She was keen to build up her stamina with aerobic exercise and sometimes went jogging with her father. On the day she died she asked Gay if, for the first time, she could go for a short run on her own. "She said she would be back in time for breakfast. So I gave her permission... I'll have to live with that decision for the rest of my life," she says, tears rolling down her cheeks.

It was starting to rain lightly as Laura set off in shorts and a T-shirt. To keep her Walkman dry, she slipped it into the mailbox at the end of the drive. She would pick it up on the way back. She continued down Ware Dairy Road. A vet with a practice further along the road saw her jog by a few minutes later. This was the last time anyone has admitted seeing Laura alive. As her family was ready to sit



50 MILES OF MURDER

1. Brenda Jones, 14

Vanished walking to Galveston hospital, July 1, 1971. Body found in Galveston Bay, July 2

2. Debbie Ackerman, 15

Disappeared from Galveston mall with Maria Johnson, Nov 15, 1971. Found in bayou, Texas City, Nov 17

3. Maria Johnson, 15 As above

4. Gloria Gonzales, 19

Vanished in Houston, Oct 28, 1971. Found by Addicks reservoir, Nov 23

5. Colette Wilson, 13

Vanished at Alvin bus stop, June 17, 1971. Found, as above, Nov 26

6. Alison Craven, 12

Vanished at Alameda home, Nov 9, 1971. Found in Pearland field, Feb 25, 1972

7. Kimberly Pitchford, 16

Abducted from Pasadena school, Jan 3, 1973. Found in Angleton ditch, Jan 5

8. Brooks Bracewell, 12

Vanished with Georgia Geer at Dickinson store, Sept 6, 1974. Found in swampland near Alvin, April 3, 1981

9. Georgia Geer, 14 As above

10. Sandra Ramber, 14

Disappeared from Santa Fe home, Oct 25, 1983. Still missing

11. Heidi Fye, 23

Vanished at League City convenience store, Oct 10, 1983.

Found in League City 'killing fields', April 4, 1984

12. Laura Miller, 16

Vanished, as above, Sept 10, 1984. Found, as above, Feb 3, 1986

13. 'Jane Doe' Found as above

14. Unidentified

Found at Waller County, March 10, 1987

15. Rene Richerson, 22

Vanished at Galveston hotel, Oct 7, 1988. Still missing

16. 'Janet Doe'

Found in League City 'killing fields', Sept 8, 1991

17. Maria Estrada, 21

Abducted near Houston home, April 16, 1992. Found same day in burger stand drive-through

18. Trellis Sykes, 16

Vanished May 13, 1994, walking through field to Redbud bus stop. Found there that night

19. Diana Rebollar, 9

Abducted Aug 7, 1994, walking to Houston store. Found in Houston same day

20. Dana Sanchez, 16

Vanished at Houston phone booth, July 6, 1995. Found in field near I-45, July 14

21. Lynette Bibbs, 14

Vanished with Tamara Fisher from Houston motel, Feb 1, 1996. Found at Cleveland, Feb 3

22. Tamara Fisher, 15 As above

23. Krystal Baker, 13

Last seen at Texas City shop, March 5, 1996. Found under bridge in Chambers County, 40 miles away, same day

24. Hillory Farias, 17

Died after slipped 'date rape' drug at La Porte nightclub, Aug 4, 1996. Died after lapsing into coma

25. Laura Smither, 12

Abducted near Friendswood home, April 3, 1997. Found at Pasadena retention pond, April 20

26. Sandra Sapaugh, 19

Abducted in car park, Webster, May 16, 1997. Survived

27. Erica Ann Garcia, 14

Last seen at Houston teen club, June 7, 1997. Found at vacant hospital, same day

28. Jessica Cain, 17

Vanished driving home, Aug 17, 1997. Still missing

29. Tina Flood, 23

Abducted from Webster nightclub car park, Nov 30, 1998. Died in hospital, Dec 2

30. Melissa Trotter, 19

Abducted on Montgomery College campus, Dec 8, 1998. Found in forest 50 miles away, Jan 2, 1999

31. Wanda May Pitts, 18

Vanished from Shenandoah motel lobby, Jan 17, 1999. Still missing

down to pancakes half an hour later, her father went outside to look for her. When he saw no trace of her, he quickly realised something was wrong and alerted the police, friends and neighbours. Within hours a search was under way.

As in the case of all missing or murdered children, Laura's parents came under close scrutiny from the police. Their full co-operation quickly put them above suspicion. For the next 17 days, volunteers from as far away as San Antonio trudged through scrub and marshland looking for Laura. As volunteers gathered in the auditorium of Friendswood High School on the night of April 20 for an update on the search, Chief Stout received a call on his mobile phone. A body had been found in the Pasadena retention pond close to the I-45, 40 miles northeast of Friendswood, by a man and his son out exercising their dog. The badly decomposed body of a girl, naked except for a pair of beige socks, had been in the water for more than two weeks. A ring on her middle finger bore the initials LKS.

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"Do you have a child?" Gay Smither asks. "Every parent should have one of these," she says, pressing into my hand a child identification kit sponsored by the Laura Recovery Center Foundation she and her husband set up to help bury their grief. Inside the yellow envelope is a sealed ink strip for taking a child's fingerprints and sterile swabs for taking saliva ➡➡

samples for DNA testing. Laura's body was so decomposed by the time she was found that retrieving fingerprints, which could have helped detectives track down her killer, was impossible.

Up to this point I realise I have only recorded the Smithers' anguish in my notebook. But as I study the contents of the yellow envelope, the thought of taking my young daughter's fingerprints, and guarding them in case she were one day to be abducted, gives me a sense of their desolation.

Since Laura's death the Smithers have not taken a vacation. They are unable to bear the thought of being away from the home that contains so many memories. Laura's bedroom has been left virtually as it was the day she disappeared. On a desk by the window a notice board bears her excited scribble: "Just 20 days until my birthday." While she was missing, before her body was found, her parents carried on counting down the number of days for her. The small numbers added to her scrawl end with the figure 2.

"She was so excited about becoming a teenager. She wasn't bothered about presents. But we had planned to do something special as a family," Gay says. "This is an old house and sometimes, when the wind blows hard, Laura's windows rattle. I open the door and still expect to see her sitting here on her bed.

"You ask, what we have learnt? It is that no child should ever be left alone."

Like most parents, this caring couple had believed their daughter knew the rules about strangers. But listening to Bob and Gay Smither, and the parents of other girls and young women murdered along the I-45, it becomes chillingly clear that warnings cannot protect. Six weeks after Laura was abducted, Sandra Sapaugh, 19, stopped off for a snack at the Waffle House in Webster, on the opposite side of the I-45 from Friendswood, on Nasa Road 1. As she walked back towards her car, she saw it had a flat tyre. When William Reece stepped forward to offer help, she had no idea it was he who had slashed her tyre. It is common, say criminal profilers, for sexual offenders to engineer situations where they appear gallant in order to win trust for the vital few minutes they need to take control of their victims.

As Sandra walked with Reece towards his truck at the rear of the restaurant to get some tools, he pulled a knife and forced her into his vehicle. Speeding north on the I-45, Reece ordered his victim to undress. Instead, she opened the passenger door and jumped, severely injuring herself but saving her life.

Five months later Sandra Sapaugh picked Reece out of a police line-up. Reece had only been released from an Oklahoma jail a year before, after serving 10 years for a brutal sexual assault. He is now serving a 60-year jail sentence for aggravated kidnapping – it will be 30 years before he will be eligible for parole. Reece had already been questioned by police hunting for Laura Smither's killer.



Above: Jeannie Baker is still grief-stricken. Top right: investigator Willie Payne. Above: Laura Smither's killer remains at large

The bulldozer operator had been working on a building site near her home the morning she disappeared. He had been let off work shortly before 9am because of the bad weather. Reece shod horses in his spare time, and passed by Ware Dairy Road on his way to a nearby ranch about the time the 12-year-old was abducted. Reece denied ever having seen Laura. But he is the prime suspect in her killing.

The Smithers have launched a wrongful-death lawsuit against Reece, so convinced are they of his guilt. They fear, however, that a criminal prosecution will be compromised by the alleged mishandling of their daughter's body; the county medical examiner is accused of not washing the autopsy table between examinations. This could leave the way open for defence attorneys to argue contamination of evidence.

For the past two years Gay and her husband have dedicated themselves to running their foundation, which aims to educate youngsters about safety, and to pass on lessons learnt in the search for Laura. One of the most fundamental is the importance of acting immediately once a child goes missing; according to a government report, 44% of all children who are murdered by strangers are killed within an hour of being abducted.

The foundation also assists as much as possible in searches for other missing children. And just four months after their

daughter's body was discovered, Bob and Gay Smither were volunteering to help in the search for another teenager who had gone missing close to the I-45.

Jessica Cain was out celebrating at a cast party after finishing an amateur dramatics fundraising event on August 17, 1997. After a meal with friends at Bennigan's restaurant on Bay Area Boulevard, an I-45 slip road just south of Friendswood, the pretty 17-year-old set off just after 1am to drive south along the freeway to her home on Tiki Island, north of Galveston. When she had not arrived home by 2.30am her father drove back along the I-45 to look for her. He had gone just four miles when he saw the family's pick-up by the side of the road. The truck was locked. Jessica's purse lay on the passenger seat. There was no sign of a struggle. No sign of his daughter. A police search was launched immediately. Another member of the cast described how he had driven home shortly after Jessica and had seen the teenager standing by the side of the road talking, apparently calmly, to a man who appeared to have pulled over in a red van behind her. Thinking she was talking to a friend, he had driven on.

Worried that the police did not have the resources to carry out a thorough search for their daughter, the Cains employed the services of a private investigator. Willie Payne, a former



intelligence officer in Vietnam, was already working for the parents of a 22-year-old student who had disappeared close to the I-45. Rene Richerson had been helping to pay her way through college by working as a night clerk at a Galveston hotel when she disappeared early on the morning of October 7, 1988. Her handbag was found lying behind the counter, alongside one of her shoes. A guest reported hearing screams.

Payne believes one of the reasons the disappearances and killings have started to attract attention in recent years is that "what you might call a higher class of people is being murdered". He describes the victims as "all-American girls" who had everything going for them. There is no suggestion, he says, that any of the girls still missing have run away, although the first reaction of some police has been to dismiss parents' concerns on the grounds that their missing daughters will eventually return home. One father who was dismissed in this way was Tim Miller, whose 16-year-old daughter, Laura, disappeared on September 10, 1984.

Laura Miller was a troubled child. She was prone to depression. She suffered frequent seizures following measles and a high fever as a baby. She had attempted suicide several times, her father says. In the hope of giving her a fresh start, the family had moved to League City, a fast-growing town on the opposite side of the I-45, four miles from Friendswood, just days before she was abducted.

She vanished while walking home alone from a local convenience store one afternoon. She had gone to use the phone – their own had not yet been connected. When her father reported her missing, police told him: "She is 16 years old" ➡ 57

JESSICA'S PURSE LAY ON THE PASSENGER SEAT. THERE WAS NO SIGN OF A STRUGGLE

and that is the age children normally run away." "I said I was kinda concerned because I had heard that a girl's body had been found some months before near the spot where Laura disappeared... But they told me to go home and wait for my daughter to return."

Seventeen months later, Laura's remains were found within 20 yards of the spot near a disused oil well where the other body had been discovered. The remains of an unidentified female were also discovered close by. Five years later, the remains of another unidentified female were found by a boy and his dog less than 100 yards from the same site. Beside them, police found a belt, which they believe was used to bind the young woman to a tree while she was sexually assaulted. This place has since become known as the "League City killing fields".

Like the Smithers, Miller's grief has been exacerbated by the way his daughter's remains were handled by the medical examiner's office; two different offices carried out these autopsies. Nearly 10 years after Laura Miller was buried, her father had her exhumed. He was worried that some of her body parts had been used for scientific research without his consent. Forensic tests revealed that the exhumed remains were from two different women — the second unidentified — mixed together with small pieces of an animal carcass. Miller is suing the medical examiner's office for negligence, and says that this carelessness and the attitude of the police have, in some ways, been more difficult to deal with than his daughter's death.

Miller has since asked Willie Payne to investigate her murder. But Payne, a tall, lugubrious figure, says he is unable to do so until the Cain and Richerson disappearances are solved; he believes he has some vital leads in the latter. He sympathises with the frustration of the parents of the missing and murdered girls. Though he says most police "are doin' the best they can, there's some I wouldn't give you the gunpowder to blow up... There's not a lot of co-ordination between these cases going on".

Detective Carla Costello is more frank in her analysis. She puts the problem down to "testosterone poisoning". "Police agencies are known for not talking to each other, particularly in Texas, where there is the 'Bubba' mentality. Men are more macho and believe they can sort things out on their own," she says. Costello believes that use of the national Violent Criminals Apprehension Program (Vicap) — a national computer program that collates and cross-references details about violent crime — should be made mandatory. At present, police officers are under no obligation to enter details of cases they are working on. "Most can't be bothered with the paperwork involved," says Costello. "But I feel very strongly that, had it been compulsory, some of these killings could have been prevented."

Costello works for the Texas City Police Department, which is investigating

WHILE AGENT YOUNG AND OTHER OFFICERS THEORISE, THE KILLINGS CONTINUE

the murder of another teenager picked up while hitchhiking close to the I-45 after having a row with her grandmother about smoking. Krystal Baker, 13, was found sexually abused and strangled later the same day, sprawled under a bridge about 40 miles to the north, in Chambers County. Her body was not identified for a fortnight owing to a lack of co-ordination between the police departments in the neighbouring counties.

Brian Goetschius, a thoughtful detective with quotes from Nietzsche and the Bible on his office wall, works with Costello. He admits that mistakes were made. After listening to Krystal's mother, Jeannie, sobbing in the darkened living room of her bungalow about the way the police have handled the investigation into her daughter's death, Goetschius picks his way through the makeshift shrines to Krystal in Jeannie Baker's garden and slumps behind the wheel of his car. "There's no excuse for how it happened," he says, staring into the distance. "What can I tell her? 'Hell, Jeannie, I wish we'd done it different?'"

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆
Special Agent Don Clark is an ambitious man. Plaques on his office wall attest to his outstanding achievements. The head of Houston's FBI division is also a keen runner. He runs in the early morning — it's what he calls his "quiet time".

Sitting in his plush new steel and glass office overlooking downtown Houston, Clark talks about Attorney General Janet Reno's particular concern with tackling crimes against children. He mentions, too, that the FBI's director, Louis Freeh, has designated child abductions and serial killings among the most serious crimes facing America. He talks of how, in recent years, there has been a move to involve the FBI more in the fight against violent crime.

He goes on to explain how, within this political context, he became involved in what he calls "the very unusual situation" that has developed along the I-45. "The Laura Smith case had a profound effect on me personally," says Clark. "It was the first of these cases that the FBI really took the initiative in working with the police department and joined with them to stay in for the long haul in the investigation... Since then we have committed the resources to work with other local departments."

"I can't find another area that has the same number of similar types of crimes as this I-45 corridor. It is very possible and plausible that we have one person who has committed several of these murders, and in all likelihood we have multiple abductors and killers in this area," he admits.

Following Laura's murder, Clark has formed a task force called Halt — the Homicide and Abduction Liaison Team — which he hopes will act as a pilot programme that will eventually be adopted nationwide. The key aims of the programme are to get local police departments to share information about evidence collected in similar cases, provide an analysis of the different cases and look for links between them.

While Clark travels the country explaining Halt to other FBI divisions and police departments, the painstaking task of cross-checking all available information about the I-45 killings and disappearances falls to Agent Mark Young, one of a small group of highly trained criminal profilers. "Welcome to my little shop of horrors," Young mutters, as he ushers me into his windowless office, where he has pinned up lines by Voltaire: "We owe respect to the living. To the dead we owe only the truth."

Getting at the truth of what has happened to the I-45 victims has so far eluded Young. He needs months to finish collating details of the many hundreds of murders and disappearances that have occurred in southeast Texas in the past 30 years — not just those linked to the I-45 corridor. Only then will he be able to get a clearer idea of what sort of serial killer, or killers, are at work in the area.

Young will only say with confidence that the League City killings are the work of one man. He goes on to outline the "homicidal triangle" of bed-wetting, cruelty to animals and arson that typifies the childhood of many serial killers, whose crimes are often sexually motivated. "As children they often experience some sort of eroticised violence. So while the rest of us dream about having our own families surrounded by a white picket fence, these killers fantasise about going out and getting duct tape and rope... While their crimes may essentially be crimes of opportunity, they will have been carefully anticipated and planned well in advance."

While Young and other law enforcers theorise, the killings continue. In the past eight months three more young women have disappeared, or been murdered, close to the I-45. On November 30, 23-year-old Tina Flood, 23, was abducted at a nightclub car park on Nasa Road 1. Someone saw it and police were alerted. When they stopped a vehicle that matched the description they had been given, they found her, fatally injured. The driver, Jonathan Drew, stands trial next month, charged with abduction and murder. He was questioned by police investigating some of the other I-45 killings — his address is Calder Road,

League City. But at 25, police believe he is too young to be connected with the remains found in the "killing fields". On December 8, on the I-45 heading north of Houston, Melissa Trotter, a 19-year-old student, was abducted from her college campus. Her body was found in forest 50 miles away a month later. A man has been charged with her murder. Police so far rule out a link with the other killings.

On January 17, Wanda May Pitts, 18, disappeared from the lobby of the Lodge Motel, on a slip road of the I-45 near Shenandoah, where she worked as a night clerk. Her pager and wages were found behind the counter. "She was a shy and sensible girl," says her mother, Kimberly. "She used to call me if she was worried about anyone behaving strangely around the place. But she didn't call that night."

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆
Driving back along the I-45 from Houston to Galveston, after days spent talking to police officers and victims' parents, the freeway no longer seemed a safe, anonymous stretch of road. Seen through the eyes of a predator, investigators warned me, it presents a killer with a unique hunting ground.

This corridor linking America's fourth largest city with the island of Galveston — widely marketed as "a place to party" — ensures a predator can abduct his victim and make a quick escape. The network of rivers, canals and bayous close to the I-45 provides ample opportunities for bodies to be disposed of. The heavy industry, ports and rapidly expanding communities along the route demand a steady flow of construction workers, and a government study reveals construction work and delivery services are the two jobs most often chosen by serial sexual offenders, since they provide an excuse for a perpetrator to move constantly from place to place in search of fresh victims.

Young women I talk to along the way in bars, shops and restaurants are nervous. The murders have forced them to change their habits, they say. "It's a rule now that bartenders have to walk waitresses to their cars at the end of our night shifts," says Dana Yovino, a 20-year-old working at Papa's Ice House, a busy bar close to the motel where Wanda May Pitts went missing.

"It scares me half to death," says Allison Russell, who works behind the counter in the Waffle House where Sandra Sapaugh was abducted. "I always park my car in a busy place. I don't come from around here and I don't have a good feeling about the people here now."

As I sit in Bennigan's restaurant, the last place Jessica Cain was seen alive, another diner keeps looking in my direction. When I pay and get up to leave, the man, in his mid-30s, pays and makes for the door too. Suddenly suspicious, I catch the eye of the waiter who served me and we stand talking by the door for a while, until I can see the man get into his car and leave the car park. It is not something I would have done before driving along the I-45 ■