Prologue

Union, South Carolina. October 25, 1994.

Alex, the little guy, always went first. Susan Smith cradled her fourteen-month-old son tenderly in her arms, arranging tiny fists, untangling the child's merrily kicking legs. The shadows of early evening were deepening in the carport of the Smith family's red-brick house as the young mother reached into the rear of her burgundy sedan and buckled Alex carefully into his baby seat. Feeling the sturdy canvas straps pull tightly against his chest, the tike heard the reassuring "click" as the fastener yielded to the will of his mother's capable hands. The ritual of the car seat was as familiar to the tot as his mother's smiling face. To Alex Smith, nattily dressed in his red-and-white-striped jumpsuit and ready to go, the back seat of his family's 1990 Mazda Protege felt like the safest place in the world.

"Mama, where are we going?"

Michael, age three, was next. Though barely past babyhood himself, Alex's older brother was a remarkably quick and observant child. That should have come as no surprise, since Susan, twenty-three, was known around her hometown as being "smart as

a whip," and Michael was growing into her mirror image.

Already this evening, Michael had lit up his mother's world, Susan would say later, by declaring, "I love you so much, Mama!"—uncoached, for the very first time. Now, at the car, Michael's focus would shift to the little brother on whom he doted. He had to make sure Alex was strapped in to his seat, just right. The concern was only natural. The boys' father, David, twenty-four, recently had moved out of their home, this time apparently for good. Michael felt it was his duty to protect the baby. He was, after all, the man around the house.

Once Michael was securely in place, Susan mumbled something about going to Grandma's house. It had crossed Susan's mind to take the drive from her tiny dwelling to her mother's far plusher, split-level home in the upper-middle-class subdivision called Mt. Vernon Estates. Michael, in a blue-and-green shirt, white jogging pants, and stocking feet, was only dressed for a short excursion. He was accustomed to such trips, and would not complain. But before Susan could move the car out of idle to drive, Michael had one last, pressing concern.

"Lock the doors, Mama!"

Even in the tiny town of Union, where virtually every soul is either friend or kin, the nights can grow treacherously dark and creepy. As long as Michael Smith was in charge, no one would enter this car uninvited.

As she pulled out of the driveway, Susan's carefully glued-on expression quickly dissolved. The patient smile she kept on hand for her children contorted into something unrecognizable. The friendly mask she plastered on for the neighbors all but disappeared.

From the second the Mazda's wheels hit pavement, Susan knew her destination had radically changed.

"When I left home, I was going to ride around a little while and then go to my mom's," she later told authorities. But as the distance grew wider between the burgundy Mazda and Susan's tidy little home, the mother's darker emotions grabbed hold of the steering wheel. If Susan felt any concern for the two little boys, now falling into a trusting sleep directly behind her, she paid little mind. As the car plunged deeper into the growing darkness, Susan Smith gave in to the wave of self-pity and anger crashing inside her. The car became a vehicle for her bottomless rage.

"As I rode and rode and rode, I felt even more anxiety coming upon me about not wanting to live," she said. But what of the boys?

"I felt I couldn't be a good mom anymore, but I didn't want my children to grow up without a mom." It was a conundrum that had only one logical solution.

"I felt I had to end our lives."

Had someone watched Susan's hellish journey unfold, the sight of the young mother, on a drive with her two babies tucked in their car seats, would scarcely have raised an eyebrow. As it turned out, nobody saw. Zipping down the familiar roads of the only town she'd ever lived in, Susan was completely safe in her plan. She could carry out whatever fantasy haunted her tortured mind. And on this night, Susan had one fervent desire: to kill the pain racing through her mind.

Or eliminate the ones who caused it.

As she drove on, her captives dozing innocently, Susan passed landmarks of the major events in her limited life. There was the house in Union where Susan spent her early, pain-free childhood. And that other house, where her father went to live alone.

Until the day he put a rifle to his head, and pulled the trigger.

A few miles down a two-lane country road, and several rungs up the economic food chain, was the comfortable, split-level dwelling where her mother, after quickly remarrying, moved with Susan and her two older brothers. This was the payoff for successfully "marrying up." Here, Susan enjoyed all the riches a young girl could ask for—plentiful toys, a huge yard, and satellite TV. It also was the place where she twice attempted to take her life with a bottle-full of aspirin.

And it was the place where, Susan claimed in high school, she was sexually molested by her stepfather—a story she later recanted.

On this night, Susan knew the door would be open for her, regardless of the state she was in. But if she ever really meant to stop at her mother's place, she pressed on. Tonight, Susan did not seek the comfort of family. She preferred to wallow in her miserable self.

Passing through town, Susan could see Union High School, where she was known as something of a brain and got voted the "friendliest" girl in her senior class. It was here that she perfected the smile that would carry Susan through life, her inner self undetected. Where she learned so well to hide the demons raging within.

From the school, it's a quick spin to the huge Winn-Dixie supermarket. As a cashier in that store, Susan wooed and won the hand of the assistant store manager, David Smith, father of the two boys in the back seat. Later, it was in this store that Susan became convinced, with more than a little justification, that David had replaced his wife's affections with those of another cashier.

"I'm tired of this. I told you to stop cheating!"

Susan's angry words still seemed to reverberate from the store's aisles as she passed by. A week earlier, with Michael perched aboard a shopping cart, Alex in her arms, Susan had stormed into the Winn-Dixie to confront her estranged husband, before embarrassed co-workers, about his infidelities.

"This has got to stop!"

There was one last feature on the wild ride through Susan's pitiful life. The tour could not end properly without a vision of the one thing for which Susan would gladly have chucked everything—David, her children, Union itself.

Three-and-a-half miles from Main Street, along a gracefully curving, tree-lined road, sits an honest-to-goodness mansion. Sitting pretty on fifty privately owned acres, the sprawling, Tudor-style marvel puts to shame even the fine home of Susan's mother and stepfather. This is the estate owned by textile mogul J. Cary Findlay. A spread that's also known around these parts as "The Castle."

More importantly, at least to Susan, here lives Tom Findlay, heir to J. Cary Findlay's name and fortune. Twenty-seven, handsome, and single, Tom met Susan while she worked as secretary to his father. Young Findlay eagerly returned the sexual ardor of the youthful mother. But on October 18, Tom dumped her, explaining in a letter printed out on his office computer that he had no desire to become an instant father.

A few miles farther, another turn, and Susan would hit the spot where, just the night before, her precarious emotions got kicked into the ground. October 24, six days after Findlay said good-bye, Susan walked into Union's only bar and saw Tom sitting there, cracking jokes with friends. Susan plopped herself down three barstools away from her ex-lover. But Tom never spoke to her. The Catch got away.

* * *

Susan traveled ten miles out of town, down the dark, deserted reaches of a narrow, two-lane road named Highway 49. The journey was nearing an end. She had but one more turn to make.

By the time Susan veered off the pavement and steered down the path toward John D. Long Lake, Michael and Alex were fast asleep. It was approaching 9 P.M. The lake shore was deserted.

The moon, two-thirds full, cast a dull light as Susan positioned the Mazda on the cement-and-gravel boat ramp that slopes downward into the water. For a fleeting moment, she considered stepping on the accelerator, and going into the lake herself.

"I did go partway, but I stopped," she said. "I went again and stopped. I then got out of the car and stood by the car a nervous wreck."

After three hours alone in the dark with her thoughts, Susan had decided how her twisted life's journey was going to play out. And suicide was not on the program.

The Mazda was close to the water's edge when Susan abruptly popped open the electronic door locks, the ones Michael so adamantly insisted remain shut. With her sons still gripped in their car seats, Susan stepped out of the driver's seat, quickly slamming the car door behind her. From the shoreline, Susan saw the burgundy sedan roll down the boat ramp. Striking the water, the car floated off, for what seemed an eternity, along the lake's cold, still surface.

Slowly, the car filled with water. As the front end grew heavy with ballast, the Mazda rolled onto its back, and descended, upside-down, to the murky, catfish-laden bottom.

Susan Smith's life, as she knew it, was finally was over. Now, it could begin anew.

The wail pierced the darkness like a knife in the gut. It was the shriek of a woman, in agony.

Her screams sliced through the walls of a rural house sitting off Highway 49, and fell on the ears of Shirley and Rick McCloud and their son, Rick Jr., twenty-three. Opening the door, the McClouds found a young woman, wild-eyed and shaking.

"He's taken my kids in my car!" she blurted. "A black man has taken my kids and my car!"

At first, they could barely make out what the woman was saying.

As the young woman caught her breath, the family listened, spellbound. It was a horrific tale, spun by a girl they may have recognized from around town, but did not know personally.

"I was at a red light. This black man put a gun to my head and told me to drive. I asked him why he was doing this. He told me to shut up or he'd kill me."

The young woman said she drove around for miles with the gunman in the passenger seat, until he ordered her out of the car near the McCloud residence.

"Can I take my kids?" the mother told them she had pleaded.

"I don't have time to get them out of the car seats," was the man's curt reply.

By her account, the carjacker did, however, find time to promise that he wouldn't harm the children. As the man leaped into the driver's seat and sped off, Susan said, he left her standing along the highway, crying out to her lost boys.

"I love y'all!"

The harrowing 911 call, placed by Rick McCloud

Jr. at 9:15 P.M., didn't take long to fall on the ears of Union County's sheriff, Howard Wells. At forty-two, Wells was up to his eyeballs with open-container violations, drug busts, and domestic disputes. But a carjacking? And double kidnapping? In Union?

It was clear from the start that the case of the missing boys was big—far bigger than even the best little sheriff's department could handle. This case would require help from on high. State law-enforcement agents, certainly. The FBI, surely. But this case was even more monumental than that, and Union immediately sent out for the big artillery: The Media.

The carjacking story was put out in time for the local eleven o'clock newscasts, all of which dutifully reported the breaking story of two little boys kidnapped by a mysterious black man. By morning, the crime became eye-popping national, front-page news. And by October 26, sleepy Union, South Carolina, geared up for the onslaught of satellite trucks and correspondents, all of whom asked the same perplexing question: Where are they?

Over the next nine days, every flat surface in Union was plastered with artists' sketches of a black face topped by a knit cap—Susan Smith's description of the suspect. The drawings were posted alongside a growing carpet of yellow ribbons, each one a colorful prayer for the boys' safe return home.

And then there was Susan, now united with the boys' father, begging over the airwaves for someone, somewhere, whoever he was, to return her precious children.

"I can't even describe what I'm going through," the distraught-looking mother announced to the world. "I mean, my heart—it just aches so bad. I can't sleep. I can't eat. I can't do anything but think about them."

And in another, presumably heartfelt speech:

"I want to say to my babies that your mama loves you so much, and your daddy—this whole family loves you so much. And you guys have got to be strong . . . I just feel in my heart that you're OK, but you've got to take care of each other, and your mama and daddy are going to be right here waitin' on you when you get home. I love you so much."

If Susan was living a double life, Sheriff Wells was ripped in two. While the nation was captivated by the issue of city-style crime invading the rural heartland, breaking the heart of a young mother, the sheriff had more immediate worries: He knew her.

Sheriff Wells was a close friend of Susan's older brother, Scotty, thirty-two. Scotty had named Wells godfather of his two young sons. It may have seemed appropriate for a family friend to lead the investigation. Susan trusted Howard Wells.

But there was a problem. From the start, virtually from the moment Susan Smith spun her riveting tale of a gun-wielding black man pouncing at a deserted stop light, the story never added up. Even to Sheriff Wells, it just didn't make sense.

First of all, why would a desperate black man kidnap two white babies? Where did he expect to hide? And if he was running from a crime scene, as Susan suggested, why was no crime reported on the night of the carjacking? And where the heck was the car?

Authorities walked a dizzying tightrope around the young mother. Cops feared that if she knew where the children were, and detected their doubts, she might panic and harm the boys, or herself. But Susan held another, all-important card in her hand: The possibility that she was telling the truth. If law-enforcement failed to take her seriously, and the children wound up dead as a result, there would be

hell to pay, and worse. The sheriff was far from the only man in Union County who would never forgive himself.

And so, two investigations were launched. On the one hand, search parties combed the region, by air and by land. Divers plumbed the murky depths of John D. Long Lake. Tips poured in—a burgundy car was spotted in North Carolina, a little boy was found in Seattle. One by one, each lead ended in disappointment.

Meanwhile, authorities were gingerly tightening the noose around the woman who had become their prime suspect.

Complicating matters even more, all over the nation and points beyond, a worried public by this time had become thoroughly caught up in Susan Smith's plight. As if in reply, each day her public entreaties grew more anguished, more detailed—more newsworthy.

"The night that this happened," Susan said on November 1, "before I left my house that night, Michael did somethin' that he's never done before. He came up to me, and he put his arms around me, and he told me, 'I love you so much, Mama.' And he—he's always told me he loved me, but never before, not without me telling him first." Then, the prayers.

"I have put all my trust and faith in the Lord, that He's taking care of 'em, and that He will bring them home to us."

But if Susan Smith was beginning to believe her own carjacking fable, she could not convince the polygraph.

Do you know where the children are? Each time the question was asked, the machine was sure: Susan was lying.

Finally, as the days passed without a ransom

demand or credible lead, the little, nagging questions kicked up the largest doubts. Such as, How does a strange man jump into a car that is known to be kept locked by a vigilant three-year-old?

Susan's charade ended on the afternoon of November 3, at a point when the citizens of Union were losing hope that the children would ever be found alive.

It was dark out when Sheriff Wells approached the microphones set up before Union's tan brick courthouse—the same spot where, just days before, he had earnestly deflected rumors that Susan may be involved in the kids' disappearance.

"The vehicle, a 1990 Mazda driven by Smith, was located late Thursday afternoon in Lake John D. Long near Union," Wells began.

"Two bodies were found in the vehicle's back seat."

As the assembled crowd gasped, Wells announced that Susan Smith had been placed under arrest, and would soon be charged with two counts of first-degree murder. Then he strode away from the mike, refusing to answer a single question.

A deafening outcry tore through Union, and echoed across the nation. In a child's heartbeat, what began as a terrible tale of Stranger Danger faded into something worse. Suddenly, the biggest threat to the nation's children no longer appeared to be the unseen hand of a faceless outsider, but the familiar form of the mother next door.

"You murderer!"

Cries of rage replaced tears as Susan was ushered into the back door of the courthouse. As Union prepared to bury Michael and Alex, the collective outpouring of grief grew larger than the town could contain. A child-killer was hideous enough. But

Susan had toyed with their emotions for nine long days as she spun her web of lies. The people of Union believed in her. And she played them like saps.

Around town, yellow ribbons were swapped for blue or black. Folks talked loudly and angrily about the death penalty. And through long and sleepless nights, imaginations burned with nightmarish images of the last, horrible moments of life for Michael and Alex.

On and on, the hordes continued to descend on Union. First the media. Then came the average citizen—mothers and fathers, many toting little ones. All were drawn to the shores of John D. Long Lake, anxious to answer a single, burning question: Why?

Why would a mother kill her own children?

As a columnist for the *New York Post*, I traveled to Union to chronicle the wrenching saga of Susan Smith. Though the community was badly wounded by the ordeal, and the families involved—Susan's and David's—devastated, I was able, through interviews with numerous friends, family, and law-enforcement sources, to piece together a compelling tale of a woman who for twenty-three years walked among us, the picture of a well-adjusted neighbor, loving wife and daughter, and nurturing mother. Susan Smith. The name alone sounds so average. So *ordinary*.

That is precisely what makes this case so chilling.

Before reading on, be forewarned: The one thing this book—or anything else, for that matter—will not be able to answer with any degree of adequacy is "Why?" With this book, I do attempt, however, to answer a related question: "How?"

How did a young mother—pretty, smart, and

blessed with loving friends and a supportive family—turn into a monster?

And how many more Susan Smiths are out there?

1

Placid Surfaces

City of Hospitality? Ha! They should call this the City of Adultery.

—Resident of Union commenting on town's nickname, October 1994.

The weather itself is deceptive.

Deep into October, the merciless Southern sun pounds a beat along the woodsy underbelly of rural South Carolina, extending the summer to seemingly unnatural lengths. At the first clang of the school bell, long pants and dresses peel off en masse as children trot off to toss footballs in cutoffs and bare feet. From the dome-topped courthouse on Union's bucolic Main Street to the brick cottages that have housed generations of textile workers, front porches fill to capacity, awash with iced tea and talk. Neighbors wave from the parking lot of the shiny, new supermarket—

Union's one concession to progress. Down the road, the plant drones into the next of an endless series of uninterrupted shifts, each one indistinguishable from the last.

As the long, lazy morning melts into yet another featureless afternoon, the soothing sameness becomes unsettling to an outsider. It is but a short leap over the imagination's picket fence from this modern-day Mayberry into the realm of science fiction. Like a character in the movie *Groundhog Day*, one might easily become convinced he's trapped in a village where each new day is a repeat of the last. Only here, the calendar changes. Everything else appears exactly the same.

Union need not worry, though, because in these parts, outsiders are few. The town's remote geography makes sure of that. It would be easy for a motorist, driving thirty miles down Highway 176 from Spartanburg en route to Columbia, to cut right through town—maybe even stop and grab a burger at Union's roadside McDonald's—and be on his way without ever realizing he'd set foot in Union. Not that he would care. Union's lack of a movie theater, tony restaurant, or decent hotel and its dearth of well-paying jobs conspire to put off strangers. Union has always seemed to like it that way. Its secrets are safe.

When change does come, it arrives late at night. Creeping into town, like cold, disembodied fingers groping the sun-kissed landscape, autumn sneaks in through the back door. By late October, the steamy, summerlike midday heat is liable to drop ten, twenty, even thirty, degrees each time blackness overtakes the sparsely populated wilds of Union County. Traveling stealthily in the dark, the approaching season drops its calling card along the banks of John D.

Long Lake. By morning, the tranquil surface of the man-made pond casts a perfect reflection of the frost-touched pine trees. The smooth water is afire with shades of red, yellow, and purple.

The reflection is a mask.

Dip below the serene exterior. Reach beneath the calm surface. John D. Long Lake is not what you might expect. The temperature is far colder than the lake's superficial beauty might suggest. Invisible to the land dweller, catfish, that ugly staple of Southern cuisine, swim in large, hungry numbers.

Now, try to touch bottom. It escapes you. This water is unexpectedly deep, the lake bed exceptionally muddy. Just when you think you've hit the ground, a crevice digs even farther into the earth. Miss the hole, and you may never know where the lake ends.

But never mind. These secrets will remain hidden from view, for a very long time. For the town of Union, John D. Long Lake is the perfect mirror. Like Union, it takes care to conceal what lurks within.

Susan Leigh Vaughan was born as Union was in its death throes. It was 1971, and textiles, the lifeblood of Union County, its main reason for existence, were being manufactured far more cheaply through nonunion, low-wage labor in Mexico and Asia.

Rural South Carolina was in a state of economic collapse. It began in the 1960s, with the exodus of several key employers. Milliken closed two textile plants in Union County alone, throwing hundreds of workers into the wilderness.

The grand estates of the mill owners—many of them former cotton plantations that once thrived on slave labor—were going to seed. Bungalows that housed

descendants of Scotch-Irish millworkers, who settled the area in the late 1800s, lay vacant and forlorn.

Young people, many of whom can trace their family trees in Union over a century, led the massive out-migration, settling in South Carolina's capital city of Columbia, in Charlotte, North Carolina, and many points farther north. In the '70s, education was in. Skilled manual labor was out. Union, it seemed, might not survive.

But the Vaughans weren't going anywhere.

Susan's mother, Linda Sue, was a hometown girl. She grew up in the community of Buffalo, adjacent to the city of Union, where a giant, redbrick mill casts its shadow over virtually every porch, church, and general store in town. It may not be much, but it was home.

"She was a beautiful girl, everybody just loved her," remembers Linda's childhood friend, Lorene Vinson.

"Like her daughter, Susan, she was real smart in school."

Academic gifts notwithstanding, Linda was still a teenager when she married Harry Ray Vaughan, a strikingly handsome millworker and volunteer fireman. Linda dropped out of high school and the couple moved into a neat, little house in the town of Union. Teen brides were nothing unusual in these parts. Even today, Union County's recreation-starved residents are known to marry early, and often.

It wasn't long before Harry and Linda Vaughan had a son, Michael. Thirteen months later, Scotty was born.

Nine years after Scotty's birth, on September 26, 1971, the Vaughans finally had the little girl they'd waited for. They named her Susan Leigh.

In the beginning, hers was a simple childhood.

Union in the early '70s was nearly oblivious to the

massive social, political, and sexual upheavals gripping minds and bodies across the nation. Cut off from the rest of creation, the community was almost entirely self-contained. It had to be. It would be another twenty years before the powers-that-be constructed the first four-lane road to ever pass through Union, Highway 176. It was another three years, in June 1994, before Union's first bar would open its doors.

The highway eventually did more to change the fabric of the close-knit region than anything in the previous two centuries. Overnight, travel time to the city of Spartanburg, and its airport, would be cut in half, to around forty-five minutes. For the first time in history, folks could catch a movie in Spartanburg on a Friday night—and still make it home in time for Letterman. In the highway's wake, progress would march on in the form of chains known everywhere but here: Pizza Hut, McDonald's, Winn-Dixie.

It is unlikely Susan Vaughan could have predicted any of this. The Union in which she learned to walk, talk, and ride a bike was virtually indistinguishable from the world of her grandmother. Aside from deer hunting and fishing, going to church remained Union's primary social focal point. And many were represented—Baptist, all brands of Protestant, even a tiny Catholic house of worship. In fact, when it was incorporated as a city two centuries earlier, Union took its name from the peaceful "union" that existed among the young village's many churches.

Later on, Union would also be dubbed the "City of Hospitality." Applying the moniker to this isolated burgh might strike the uninitiated as a little odd. "I've lived here twenty-five years," says Barbara Rippy, sixty-one, "and some people still see me as a newcomer."

Spend some time around the county, and you realize that Union's innate "hospitality" probably has

little to do with the welcome extended to its infrequent visitors.

As one lifelong resident put it:

"The City of Hospitality? Ha! They should call this the City of Adultery."

As folks in Union know, boredom has a way of finding its own relief.

Its peccadilloes are masked by a convincingly wholesome facade; a snapshot of Union, population 10,000, could be used to illustrate an encyclopedia listing for the term "family values." But scratch the surface, and some of the squeaky sheen wipes off on your hand. Even the tidiest shutters and friendliest smiles can disguise trouble.

Within the picture-perfect Vaughan home, turmoil raged.

Susan was not quite seven at the time and she may not have seen it coming. Her young life was about to undergo tremendous upheaval. It was a shock from which friends and family, with the benefit of hindsight, now believe she never recovered.

Harry Vaughan, Susan's handsome father, moved out of the snug house of his wife and children and rented his own place. On December 7, 1977, Harry and Linda officially divorced.

A month later, a rare carpet of snow covered the ground as Harry Vaughan, in a fit of despair over his demolished family, lifted a rifle to his temple and pulled the trigger.

In Union, a suicide makes news, and most townsfolk learned the details of Harry Vaughan's self-inflicted death from radio reports. Wherever Susan turned, the grisly truth was visible in the pitying eyes of neighbors.

Susan cried in school the day the news broke, remembers her pal, Stacy Hartley. This would be the

last time, for a very long while, that anyone can remember Susan letting her emotions show. From then on, no matter how abominable her grief, Susan learned to paint a brilliant smile over her pain.

Maybe she was born that way.

"It's typical of these people—Scotch-Irish, Protestant, ten-generations removed from those who came here to work in the textile industry," explains Mac Johnston, executive director of Union's Chamber of Commerce. "They don't show emotions much. They're very cautious people."

Even her brother, Scotty, who was fifteen when his father shot himself, had no clear idea that the event might have had a traumatic effect on his sister.

"Susan was very attached to him," Scotty says of his father.

"One would assume [the suicide] had a major effect on her. I wish we would have talked more about it."

A stoic exterior is an attribute that would always come in handy. Susan's self-possession, so common in these parts, would be used years later to help explain why, after she reported her children's disappearance, the young mother's eyes remained virtually free of tears.

Like her father, who hid his anguish until he could take it no longer, she fooled everyone.

The one childhood friend in whom Susan confided her sense of loss was Stacy Hartley, a frequent visitor to Susan's house. Locked in her room with her pal, Susan felt free to dwell on memories of her dad. Harry Vaughan, Stacy remembers, was the kind of guy who always bought candy for the children, no matter how tight money was. He always had time to spare for his little girl.

"She had an eight-by-ten picture of her father

that she kept in her bottom drawer, along with her coin collection," says Stacy.

"She would play this tape recording of him teaching her how to talk as a baby. We'd listen to the tape. We used to laugh. She was just a baby."

A short time after her ex-husband's death, Linda married a man named Beverly Russell. Bev Russell was tall and sturdy. And, in contrast to the blue-collar millworkers Linda knew from childhood, he had made a considerable living as a stockbroker and tax consultant, then opened a successful store, Bev's Appliances.

Politically active and ferociously connected, Russell was a member of the state Republican Executive Committee. Leaving no question as to how far right his political convictions tilted, Russell served on the advisory board of the Christian Coalition. Founded by the Rev. Pat Robertson, the ultra-conservative Coalition raises cash for office-seekers around the nation who, among other things, oppose abortion and favor the teaching of creationism in public school.

To Union, Beverly Russell was bona fide gentry. For Susan and her mother, he possessed the one magic ingredient the Vaughan family had never observed in quantity: Money.

After the wedding, the Vaughan children moved with their mother and stepfather into a spacious split-level home in Mt. Vernon Estates. The subdivision, carved into farmland, skirted by forest, boasts a collection of large, new homes—no two built in the same architectural style. For children, the area offers ample yard space, and hardly any traffic.

Glancing at the Russell house, though, something looks not altogether right. It takes a few moments to figure out what is wrong with this picture. Suddenly,

it hits you: The property is virtually barren of trees. In fact, the whole subdivision appears oddly bald.

It's as if, in their zeal to cut a swath through nature, Mt. Vernon's builders slashed and burned every living thing in sight, making certain that a visitor's eye will be drawn to the biggest objects in the frame—the houses. The gracious assortment of mismatched structures, one larger than the next, seem to compete for the approval of envious onlookers.

The house signified a giant improvement in the Vaughan family's circumstances. Still, a few things got lost. Stacy Hartley says she never felt as warm or as welcome as she did rocking with Susan in the hammock on the lawn of her friend's little house in Union.

For Susan Leigh Vaughan, however, the house in Mt. Vernon Estates represented her first taste of what real money can buy. Her sudden good fortune, coming so close on the heels of her father's suicide, carried a lesson Susan was unlikely to forget:

Death, even of someone you love, does not mean the end. Sometimes it leads to better things.

Ask anyone what Susan was like in high school, and the first word that inevitably flips off the tongue is "nice."

"She was a real nice girl, so sweet to everybody," says former classmate April Vinson, twenty-three, whose mother-in-law, Lorene, was a classmate of Susan's mother, Linda.

"She was smart as a whip," April adds.

"She was just a terrific person," echoes another classmate, Lisa White, twenty-four.

Flipping through the yearbook for Union County High School's class of 1989, Susan Vaughan appears

to be an exemplary leader. Her perky smile greets the reader on page after page.

She emerges as an energetic joiner—popular, civic-minded, scholarly. On one page, Susan, wearing eyeglasses and a conservative, calf-length skirt, accepts an academic award. In the next installment, she has tossed off the glasses and pouffed up her hair, proving she's capable of looking every bit as pretty as any gal who devotes her life to hair and makeup.

Not alluded to on any page, however, is another of Susan's preoccupations: suicide. Nor does the yearbook mention Susan's shocking allegation that the man who raised her, a pillar of local society, was molesting her.

Susan's first known suicide attempt came at age thirteen. Court documents filed by the prosecution in her murder case state that she swallowed a large amount of aspirin. Perhaps not the most lethal of drugs, but it was enough to qualify as an attempt on her life. Or, as others would suggest, a desperate cry for attention.

Though she was careful never to talk about what she was going through, word of Susan's attempts on her own life became a topic of chatter in the halls of Union High School. Some former classmates remember a period in which she disappeared for weeks. Yet in the best Deep South tradition, Susan's pals were too polite to confront their friend about her problems. They saved that topic for discussion behind Susan's back.

For a troubled girl, Susan had a way of throwing herself into each new activity as if her life depended on it. As an adolescent, she was uninterested in emulating the stereotypes beckoning the young girl coming of age in the Deep South: Texas Cheerleader.

Georgia Peach. Redneck. Belle. Good ol' Girl. Perhaps the small-town environment provided her with more down-to-earth role models. Or maybe Susan was just too brainy.

She would, however, embrace one typically Southern trait completely: Susan was the girl who aimed to please.

She was a member of the National Honor Society and joined Union High's Beta Club, whose membership was reserved to students maintaining academic averages of eighty-eight or better. She joined her school's Math and Spanish clubs, and participated in Red Cross. As a member of the Civitan Club, she worked tirelessly to make her hometown even more hospitable than it was cracked up to be.

Susan volunteered to work with the elderly, and helped raise money for Union's Special Olympics. While her talents leaned in the direction of books and good deeds rather than athletics or the arts, she did appear in one play, *Love is in the Air*. Its proceeds were donated to Children's Hospital in Columbia.

Susan fell in with a crowd of popular achievers like herself. No majorettes or football stars among them, they represented the best and brightest Union had to offer. The ones who, if only they cared to stay, would help oversee the town's eventual merger with the rest of the planet.

By most accounts, Susan was not precocious in terms of the opposite sex. Whether too shy, or simply otherwise involved, she went on what was considered a normal number of "dates," but had no lasting romances. For a brief while, her friend April Vinson remembers, Susan dated a black student. Just a few years later, interracial couples would stroll proudly along Main Street. But as recently as the late '80s,

this kind of liaison still carried a strong social stigma, and kids around school freely condemned even the most casual black-white pairing.

"A lot of people said they didn't like a white girl with a black guy," says April. "More than that—some just couldn't even picture a white girl and black guy together."

Susan's daring friendship ended when the young man moved, and she emerged from the episode unscathed. But she did gain a powerful insight, one that was bound to stick. Susan learned a great deal about what it takes to push people's buttons. It was knowledge that she would draw on in the future.

In retrospect, the constant swirl of activity in which Susan centered herself appears to be a ploy. Keeping occupied, every minute of every day, was Susan's method for shoving unpleasant feelings out of her consciousness, for keeping her demons at bay. Of course, it couldn't possibly work. And as the tension grew ever greater inside her, Susan found increasingly alarming outlets for relief.

During her senior year, Susan approached the school guidance counselor, Camille Stribling.

"My stepfather is molesting me," she proclaimed.

Despite Beverly Russell's standing in the community, the counselor dutifully reported the accusation to the office of then-Sheriff William Jolly.

But then, Susan had a long talk with her mother. Abruptly, she dropped her complaint. The sheriff, with no witness and not a shred of independent evidence that anything was amiss in the Russell household, abandoned the investigation in early 1989.

What exactly happened between Susan and her stepfather, if anything, may never be known. But given Susan's proven track record as a compelling storyteller, many in Union, hearing of the molestation

claim, today believe that Susan was more than capable of fabricating a tale of sexual abuse.

A year after she accused her stepfather of molesting her, in November 1989, Susan, then eighteen, swallowed another stash of aspirin. This suicide attempt, coming six months after high-school graduation, was serious enough to land her in the psychiatric ward of Spartanburg Regional Medical Center, according to court documents. She stayed in the facility for one week.

But in that spring of 1989, as Susan prepared to graduate, she exhibited not one outward clue about the drama to come. In fact, almost immediately after Susan made the sex-abuse complaint, came her crowning achievement.

Of all the honors bestowed upon seniors at Union High School, Susan won the title of "friendliest" girl in her class. This was no small distinction. In a part of the country where people place an extremely high premium on acting nice, Susan took the prize. That smile, it seemed, was going to take her places.

As Susan walked out of the doors of Union High School for the last time, nobody would have been surprised to learn that Susan Vaughan was the woman who would one day bring international fame to her hometown. What they never would have guessed is the manner in which she accomplished that feat.

2

Portrait of a Marriage

When I heard Michael's first cry, I just started crying with him.
I had given birth to the most beautiful baby boy in the world.

—From Susan Smith's album, "Baby's Milestones," October 1991.

Susan Vaughan didn't pay much attention to good-looking David Smith as they passed in the halls of Union High School. A year older than Susan, David, with his pale blue-green eyes and slim build, was judged "cute" by the girls in town. But that was where the impression ended.

In contrast to the whirl of activity on which Susan

thrived, David pretty much kept to himself. The 1988 Union High yearbook carries the snapshot of the clean-cut senior. Aside from that, the book bears not a single mention of a club or extra-curricular activity in which he participated or an honor he received. In every department—smarts, social skills, class—Susan left David in the dust.

Teenage David had no time for all that. He was a working man. After high school, he went straight to his job at Union's Winn-Dixie supermarket, working his way up from bag boy to department manager before earning his high-school diploma. David's grades were nothing to crow about, and his mother tried to discourage him from spending all his spare time bagging groceries and stocking shelves. But David was relentless in pursuit of extra cash. He saw this job as the ticket to the things he wanted most. A car and a house for starters. Then, maybe, bigger ones.

When he was about seventeen, David presented his steady girl at the time with a diamond ring and asked her to marry him. Unlike so many other kids his age, David Smith had no plans to leave Union, and no interest in attending college. He would marry his girlfriend, buy a house and settle down. His future was set. Or so he thought.

Later on, this intense interest in amassing things material was one trait that would draw Susan and David together. It may not have looked that way in the halls of Union High. But the pair had quite a bit in common.

David was born in Royal Oak, Michigan, the home state of his father, Charles David Smith. A trim ex-Navy man who also answers to the name David, the elder Smith joined the peacetime military of the 1960s, only to find himself in the thick of war in Vietnam.

Later, he would advise his son, with a characteristic sly grin, "Make sure to be a conscientious objector."

In 1968, while stationed in the San Francisco Bay Area, David Smith Sr., then twenty-two, married Barbara Martin. Though she was just twenty, Barbara, a native of Spartanburg, South Carolina, was divorced and raising a son, Billy. The young family soon moved to Michigan, to be close to David Smith's family.

The Smiths' first son, Daniel, was born in 1969. David, named after his father, came along a year later, on July 27. David was two when his parents decided to pull up stakes and try life down South, and they settled in the tiny city of Union, to be near Barbara's kin. The town, circa 1972, had almost nothing to offer twentysomethings in the way of entertainment. No bar. No movies. And, at the time, a pathetic selection of retail shopping opportunities.

"But we could leave the kids' toys outside at night and they'd still be there in the morning," Smith explains. The Detroit area had grown far too dangerous, they felt, for raising youngsters.

Of course, Union County presented its own set of hazards. Barbara remembers doing the wash with her husband and younger son one Sunday at a coin laundry in the community of Buffalo, when a dog came in and bit little David Jr., who was two at the time. The parents rushed little David to the hospital for stitches. As it turned out, the dog's owner was a local minister. But when the Smiths demanded that he pay for the boy's stitches, the parsimonious preacher replied, "It's your fault. You shouldn't have been washing your clothes on Sunday."

"There's a lot of hypocrisy in Union," Barbara says now. "But there also are some very nice people."

The elder David Smith embarked on a succession

of jobs. He worked as a carpenter for a few months, then landed a job at the Wamsutta textile plant. As the fabric-making industry underwent massive retrenchment, he was laid off. Smith went to work for the city of Union, first as a mechanic, then a meter-reader. Money was in sporadic supply, but that was fairly typical among rural families in those days. Neither high-flyers nor dirt-poor, the Smiths carved out lives as regular folks.

In 1975, the Smiths had their third and last child, a daughter. They named her Rebecka.

Union's Wal-Mart discount store opened its doors in 1984. In a short while, this branch of the huge retailing giant would eat up, PacMan-like, much of the business previously enjoyed by the smaller, individually owned department stores that long had dominated local shopping. The store represented Union's entry into the modern world. It also opened new opportunities for an underemployed father. In 1984, David Smith Sr. started work as a stockman at the new store, then was promoted to customer-service representative, and, ultimately, to the ranks of management. Retailing apparently ran in the Smith men's blood.

Just as this job represented a vast improvement in the family's financial picture, tragedy came calling. The Smiths were forced to confront the fact that their elder son, Danny, was seriously ill. At eleven, he was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, a chronic, painful and debilitating condition that attacks the lower intestinal tract. He may have inherited it from Barbara, who suffered from intestinal complaints.

In just a few years, Danny Smith turned from one of the tallest in class to the shortest student in his grade.

When Danny was eighteen, his mother began

sending him to a hospital in Atlanta for periodic treatments. But the boy grew lonely, and eventually decided to seek medical care in the relatively unsophisticated hospital in Spartanburg. Barbara blames this decision for what happened next. In February 1991, Danny underwent what was becoming routine surgery to ease the most devastating effects of his affliction. But complications arose, and he developed peritonitis. Daniel Smith died on March 4, 1991, a few weeks after his twenty-second birthday.

His death came eleven days before the marriage of his brother, David, to Susan Vaughan. Danny was to be best man.

Susan and David fell in love at Winn-Dixie. Susan came to work at the store as a cashier shortly after high school. David was dairy manager at the time. Their somewhat unlikely courtship blossomed among the aisles, even while David was still engaged to his high-school sweetheart.

David may have been a boy from the beaten side of the tracks, but in the professional milieu, he was a boss. At Winn-Dixie, for the first time in his life, David was in a superior position to this girl who grew up wanting for nothing. And Susan wanted him bad.

"He kept telling me she would talk to him on the breaks, say she could make him happy," says David's mother. "She worked on him that way.

"He always had that problem," Barbara adds. "He's been raised to have good manners. He's very polite. Girls like that."

Apparently, David enjoys those qualities in a woman, too.

Susan certainly had a lot more going for her than

a pretty face and friendly ways. She was, in social and financial terms, a cut above just about any of the girls in David's league. She lived in a fine home with a wealthy stepfather. She had the kinds of things David coveted.

Before he took up with Susan, David's typical Saturday night date might have entailed a shake at Hardee's, followed by a trip to the parking lot of the high school football stadium, to hang out with the rest of the gang. Being with Susan offered exciting new possibilities.

"He would say things like, 'Over at Susan's, they have a satellite dish,'" his mother says. "'You can see this and that. It was all probably very dazzling when he was nineteen years old.'"

Just as the Russell place must have appeared, all those years ago, to the eyes of young Linda Sue Vaughan.

Rumors flew around the store about dalliances Susan was said to have engaged in with other store employees. The idle talk was of some concern to David's mother. But it did not prevent David from being flattered no end that this comely, upper-crust lady should set her sights on him.

Eventually, even his wary mom got won over.

"I would always go on her line at the Winn-Dixie," Barbara confesses. "She was so friendly. She always smiled."

If Susan used her womanly wiles to snare her man, David Smith wasn't exactly unwilling prey. After just a short period of dating, everyone who knows him agrees, David Smith fell head-over-heels in love.

Susan was pregnant when the couple said "I do" on March 15, 1991. The ceremony was held at the Bogansville United Methodist Church, a few miles

outside the community of Buffalo. David wanted his brother to be near him. Just a few yards from the spot where the ceremony was held sits the small cemetery where Daniel, David's choice for best man, lay buried.

Susan's pregnancy was only two months along, so it is unlikely the wedding was arranged under the threat of a shotgun, as nosy neighbors later hypothesized. Susan wore an exquisite, form-fitting white satin gown, and carried a tremendous bouquet of pink roses. David was in a tux.

The bride was nineteen on her wedding day; David was four months shy of twenty-one. Ripe ages for a first marriage in this part of the country. Susan was so nervous during the ceremony, she placed David's ring on his right hand by mistake.

Afterward, the newlyweds, intending to save money for their own house, moved in with David's great-grandmother in Union. David, and Danny before him, had each spent time there as teens, escaping the stricter rules of their mother. But the living arrangements would create stress for new couple.

Unexpectedly, however, the first serious strain on their fledging union occurred two months after the nuptials. This emergency came on David's side of the family.

David Smith Sr. had grown increasingly despondent over the premature death of his older son, and his depression was throwing his already shaky marriage into a critical state. One weekend, Barbara took off to stay with her family in Spartanburg. Frantic with grief and despair, the elder David Smith called his son at work and threatened to shoot himself.

It was Susan, four months pregnant, who arrived at the house to comfort her father-in-law. No stranger to dramatic gestures, Susan talked him out of hurting himself.

Shortly after this incident, David Smith Sr. left Barbara, and remarried. His new wife was named Susan, like the wife of his son.

If their difficult family histories cast a pall over the lives of David and Susan, their sadness seemed obliterated by joy upon the birth of their first son. At 5:50 P.M. on October 10, 1991, two weeks after Susan's twentieth birthday, Michael Daniel Smith came into the world.

Michael was born at Mary Black Hospital in Spartanburg, weighing in at a hardy eight pounds. He inherited his mother's bright, brown eyes and jolly disposition. In early photographs, David appears enraptured by the sight of his little boy; Susan is the picture of motherly contentment. The new parents gave Michael the middle name, Daniel, in memory of David's beloved brother. Finally, they were a family.

The day after Michael was born, David's sister Rebecka gave birth to a daughter, Kailly. Though just sixteen, Becky was already married a year to Wallace Tucker, a black man. Some believe his sister's choice of husband bothered the appearance-conscious David, but he kept any apprehensions to himself. The births of Michael and Kailly had a salving effect on the bruised families. Hard times never seemed so remote.

Susan positively glowed, and she sought an outlet to express her feelings. Using ballpoint pen, the new mother recorded her delight in her new creation in one of those mass-produced baby albums, whose cover bears the printed title, "Baby's Milestones." In neat, schoolgirl's print, she gushed over Michael in a series of warm and fuzzy personal recollections.

The diary opens:

"I've been waiting a long time to see you, precious Michael.

"It was truly the most wonderful experience. When I heard Michael's first cry, I just started crying with him. I had given birth to the most beautiful baby boy in the world.

"He was having a little trouble breathing, so I wasn't able to hold him until about 10:00 that night. It was well worth the wait.

"When he was put into my arms for the very first time, I forgot about all my pain. He really lifted my spirits and touched my heart."

The word *heart* is represented not by the letters *h-e-a-r-t*, but by a little doodle of a heart. Susan was in the habit of drawing pictures of hearts on every bit of writing in which she referred to her children. Those innocent-looking cartoonish hearts would appear again three years later, when Susan again grabbed a pen to write about her babies—this time, confessing to their murder.

With Michael's arrival, baby made four—the couple still lived with David's great-grandmother. Between the duties of motherhood and the lack of privacy, Susan grew deeply frustrated. After less than a year of marriage, she moved out of the house, taking Michael with her. Susan told David, by way of explanation, that she needed time "to think."

It's unclear who was the first to be unfaithful. In divorce papers, Susan accused David of straying. Polite and soft-spoken to the point of being passive-aggressive, David never contested anything coming out of his wife's mouth. But when Susan walked out the door that first time, David was floored.

"He was so upset," his mother remembers. "He was in such a state."

David lost his trademark reserve, and took to moping. For the ordinarily levelheaded young man, such displays of emotion were highly unusual.

Susan had stern complaints about her young husband. "She told me he treated her with mental cruelty, like I said David's father treated me," Barbara says.

She attributed this to her son's relative immaturity.

"Maybe it was just that he joked too much. He didn't take her feelings into consideration."

David grew contrite. And jealous. Once, David spotted her car at the home of another man, a pal of his. Susan claimed they were just friends. David didn't believe it.

It took a little work, but he won her back. Groveling was the ticket.

"I promise if you come back," David told Susan, "I will never, ever take you for granted again." It seemed to do the trick.

The Smiths reunited. This time, they decided they'd be happier, and the marriage would grow stronger, if they moved into a house of their own.

Number 407 Toney Road is a stunning descent from Mt. Vernon Estates. Built of brick, it is a small, square, one-story dwelling in the town of Union, built for convenience, not for comfort. It does have one pleasant feature, however: a generous yard, spacious enough for a houseful of kids to romp in. It wasn't much, but it was home.

The mortgage payments, $344 a month, put a dent in their salaries, and tight finances would be yet another source of discord in the marriage. It wasn't long after they moved in that it was David's turn to move out. He moved back into his great-grandmother's.

To coin a phrase—What's sauce for the goose is

sauce for the gander. David started dating other women. Susan, now saddled with a kid, felt herself rapidly losing control of a situation she once seemed to command. Jealousy was one emotion even Susan had difficulty fitting behind a smile. She was enraged.

Susan began storming into Winn-Dixie unannounced, looking for her husband, who had risen to the position of assistant manager. As David emerged from the back room, he was confronted by the sight of his estranged wife, her face contorted with anger.

"You better stop this, going behind my back!" Susan wailed to a sheepish David.

"I know we're separated, but I'm getting tired of all this. I'm getting tired of all this.

"Every time I come here, you're somewhere else in the store with someone. This has got to stop!"

Without another word, she turned on her heel and walked out, leaving David silent in the wake of his public humiliation.

April Vinson, Susan's friend from high school, watched these outbursts from her post in Winn-Dixie's deli department. At their height, the screaming matches exploded two to three times a week. Whether the couple lived together or apart seemed to have no effect on their frequency.

Everyone in the store knew David had affairs. But it became clear that saving his marriage became a priority.

"Finally, he did stop cheating," says April.

It didn't seem to help. Susan continued berating him over his philanderings, real or imagined.

For Michael's sake, as well as their own, Susan and David gave one more stab at reconciliation. A short time later, they found good reason to try and make it work: Susan was pregnant again.

Alexander Tyler was born in Spartanburg on

August 5, 1993. A strapping, jolly baby, Alex's parents found they had stiff competition for the baby's love: Alex was the light of his older brother's life. Just two himself, Michael enjoyed bathing the baby and helping him dress. He talked to him and wheeled little Alex around the living room in toy cars. Michael seemed happier playing with the infant than with anyone else.

Susan set out to be the perfect mother. It was an arena, like high school, for which she had extraordinary talent. The boys, sparkling clean and laughing, were always turned out in the latest kiddie fashions. They frolicked on the lawn with neighborhood playmates, and never seemed to lack for the newest and best toys. All the Union matrons clucked their approval. Susan made motherhood look effortless.

The situation was not all it seemed.

Between working full-time and raising two children, Susan was forced to drop the courses she was taking as a part-time student at the University of South Carolina's Union campus. She never kicked up a fuss, but those closest to Susan knew the shrinking of her horizons, never that wide to begin with, bothered her. No one was alarmed, though. After all, all young mothers have pressures, don't they?

David seemed aware of his wife's growing dissatisfaction. In March 1994, David presented Susan with a card for their third anniversary. It contained a sweet plea to save their precarious marriage. The printed portion of the car read:

Time may change a lot of things in our lives,
but one thing it can never change
is the way I feel about you.

David underlined the word *never* with ink. He followed the canned sentiment with these hand-penned words:

"Hang in there, sugar-booger. You mean everything to me. God, I love you!—David."

At twenty-two, Susan Smith had two children and a dead-end job. But she had a husband who loved her, family she could turn to, and a host of friends more than willing to help ease her burden by baby-sitting. She was not alone.

3
The Catch

They had one thing in common, they were good in bed,
He said, "Faster, faster, the lights are turning red."

—From the Eagles' song, "Life in the Fast Lane," played on a supermarket music system.

Alex was tiny when Susan traded her Winn-Dixie apron for a power suit and took a better-paying job at the offices of Conso Products. The huge plant, sitting virtually next door to the supermarket where David still worked, manufactures tassels and assorted cloth doodads used to finish such household items as curtains, pillows, and upholstery. An enormous sign at the Union plant proclaims Conso "The World's Largest Manufacturer of Decorative Trim."

She was just a $17,000-a-year secretary. But

Susan had hit the big time—she reported directly to the company's owner, J. Cary Findlay.

Findlay was a multimillionaire from Montgomery, Alabama, who made his fortune as a corporate raider. About six years before Susan's arrival, he bought the twenty-year-old Conso plant. Overnight, he turned it into the biggest textile concern in Union County. Employing more than 530 people, Conso was leading the depressed region toward a modest reversal of fortune.

By the mid-1980s, the county had hit rock-bottom. Findlay had the good business sense to see that there was nowhere else to go but up. Raw cloth, once the area's staple product, was still being turned out apace overseas. But fabric companies were looking to the more highly skilled American work force to produce fancy, high-end dyed and printed textiles. Union was a natural place to go.

Smelling opportunity, the town got its act together, and started working to woo new business. Union was aided by the arrival of Highway 176, which first zapped through the countryside in 1991. At long last, geography was not so great an obstacle.

Union had another selling point: Cheap labor. While South Carolina workers command higher salaries than many of their Asian and Mexican counterparts, experienced Southern millworkers can still be scooped up for something like six-dollars-and-change per hour—a fraction of the wages demanded by workers in the industrial North. That kind of paycheck goes much farther down South.

The jobs couldn't have been more welcome. In 1989, thirty-eight percent of Union County residents fell below the federal poverty line. The median value of a house was just $38,000, but even that was out of reach for so many scratching out a hand-to-mouth

existence. For Union residents, making tassels was far more lucrative than flipping burgers at minimum wage. Labor for Conso would never be scarce.

To the entire region, the massive tassel-maker's success marked the beginning of a slow revival of a fragile economy. To Findlay, it meant a gold mine.

Findlay further pumped cash into Union County by buying a white elephant everyone called "The Castle"—the lavish, old Nicholson mansion that sits on fifty acres of wooded land. And why not? Conso's sales for 1994 alone were projected at some $52 million. And land here is cheap.

Lord of the manor in a way even rich Bev Russell could only dream, Findlay took up residence on the estate with his wife and son, Tom. Young Tom Findlay went to work as graphics director of his old man's company. And he moved into the guest house of his father's estate. The young heir to the family fortune soon developed a particular fondness for The Castle's hot tub, a whirlpool big enough to hold a crowd.

Ensconced in Conso's inner sanctum, Susan had a clear view of the what she'd missed for so long. Someday, she vowed, I'll make all this mine.

The marriage was crumbling. Despite David's earnest promises to be a better husband, he and Susan could not get along. Jealous recriminations became part of everyday life.

Another insurmountable problem was the couple's unhealthy finances. For a pair who enjoyed the finer things in life, David brought in only $21,700 a year on top of Susan's $17,000. Growing up, David was accustomed to lean times. But Susan had never known poverty.

What she did know was that a spunky, young woman has one sure-fire escape route from a life of drudgery. It was the method she'd seen her mother succeed at nearly fifteen years before: Marry up.

Tom Findlay was unlike any of the Union lads Susan knew. He was educated and refined. And he knew it.

As Tom entered his late twenties—social middle-age in these parts—he felt no strong urge to settle down. Tom was known to squire a selection of the local fillies to a variety of functions. He was engaged for a time to a local girl, but the courtship didn't last. Tom was in no rush. For one thing, his father was preparing to open a new plant overseas, in London. Tom had no idea how long he'd be sticking around the rural South.

But he sure did know how to have a good time. Tom achieved a degree of notoriety—and envy—for the festive parties he frequently threw in the hot tub on the grounds of his home. His friends were ushered behind the locked and guarded gates of the estate, where old man Findlay employed groundskeepers and other domestic help. Most people in Union had never encountered such a rarefied atmosphere, and Tom enjoyed giving the simple girls of Union a taste of his family's awesome wealth and power.

The parties were, by all accounts, extremely well-attended.

From her desk at Conso's front office, Susan befriended the wealthy, young man whom everyone around town started calling "The Catch." She had a history of going after the man in power. For the first time since she caught the eye of her assistant manager at Winn-Dixie, Susan was smitten.

The romance, if it could be called that, between Susan and Tom was not a matter of wide public

knowledge. Most of Tom's friends who were aware of it considered the pairing more of a casual flirtation. For Tom, his dad's secretary seemed a safe choice. She was, after all, married. Commitment was not on his agenda. But Susan took the relationship seriously. Perhaps more so than Tom would have realized, had he bothered to pay attention.

When you're the richest guy in town, you develop radar for girls like Susan. Girls who look at your face and see dollar signs. Susan may not have known it, but she never really had a chance.

Tom was a regular customer at Hickory Nuts, Union's first and only bar. Actually a sports-themed restaurant and tavern, Hickory Nuts features a collection of pool tables, a wooden dance floor, and big-screen TV. When it opened its doors in June 1994, Hickory Nuts raised a few eyebrows among Union's most ardent churchgoers. But if Union wanted to continue attracting movers and shakers like the Findlays, town fathers knew, it needed to give them some place to have a good time. The bar was here to stay.

At Hickory Nuts, Tom befriended the bar manager, Lorinda Robins. Lorinda is thirty-four, blonde, good-humored—and quite married. Tom was a devoted customer and loyal pal.

In a wistful moment, Union's most eligible bachelor told Lorinda about his distaste for the gold-diggers lining up for his hand.

"I wish I could find somebody who would like me for what I am—not for my dad's money," he said.

Of course, that longing for Ms. Right did not stop Tom from taking up with Susan. Apparently, when it came to the young mother, Tom Findlay was motivated by organs other than his heart or his head.

* * *

It was David's roving eye that sounded the death knell for the Smiths' marriage. In the summer of 1994, David moved out of the house on Toney Road. This time, he didn't stop at his great-grandmother's. He rented his own place at the Lake View Garden Apartments complex.

Susan kicked David out after she became convinced he was having an affair with the cashier who replaced Susan when she went to work at Conso. David denied it at first. But workers at Winn-Dixie often saw their assistant manager spend his breaks smooching out back with the help. It didn't take long before word got back to Susan.

Maybe it was the Muzak, or perhaps David just had enough of his marriage, but that store had quite an effect on Union's sex life.

If Susan felt any guilt over her own extramarital relationship, those feelings were lost amid her anger over her husband's shenanigans. In the summer and early autumn, long after David moved out of their home, Susan continued her surprise visits to Winn-Dixie.

In her latest round of attack, Susan enlisted the help of her children. Carrying baby Alex in one arm, and pushing a shopping cart in which little Michael sat, Susan marched into the store to confront her cheating husband.

"This has got to stop!"

David, thoroughly chastised in the presence of his sons, customers, and colleagues, grew quiet after each episode, and returned to work.

Susan filed for divorce on September 22. She'd filed before, but this time she really seemed to mean it. On Susan's behalf, her lawyer requested custody of Michael and Alex, plus child support to the tune of $115 a week—a hefty bite out of an assistant

supermarket manager's paycheck. Susan would continue living at 407 Toney Road, and take over the house payments. David could see the kids as often as he pleased, provided he gave forty-eight hours' notice. As her grounds for seeking divorce, Susan minced no words. She listed it as adultery. David's.

David took his lumps without protest. He never hired a lawyer, and contested nothing. The children would go to their mother, and he would pay what she wanted. He even agreed to foot the bill for Susan's lawyer, another $290.

While their marriage may have been a horror show, Susan and David were the ideal separated couple. Although David was required under the separation agreement to give notice before coming around, Susan never enforced the proviso. David frequently dropped by to mow the lawn at Toney Road. He played with his children nearly every day. Michael and Alex were often seen toddling on the grass outside David's apartment, playing ball with their daddy.

Michael turned three on October 10, 1994, and the Smiths celebrated the event as a family. They gave their son a party at McDonald's, a little boy's dream.

As the couple's divorce drew closer to reality, Susan's world looked brighter. She was still young and pretty. Now, she set her sights on grabbing the gold ring. Susan planned to dig her hooks into the most desirable guy in town. Like her mother, she would marry up. And spend the rest of her days as Lady of the Castle.

The bubble burst with the force of a bomb blast. On October 18, 1994, Susan suffered a slight that shattered her self-image far worse than David's infidelities. Tom wanted out. This time, there was no chance for reconciliation, no grounds for appeal.

The awful news came in a "Dear John" letter. This was not a handwritten note or a typewritten missive. Tom coolly composed his words of dismissal on his office computer, then printed them out with the push of a button. He informed Susan he was breaking up with her.

Tom listed several reasons in his letter. But Susan only saw one: Her lover was not willing to raise Michael and Alex.

How could he do this to me?! Feelings of betrayal shot through Susan like electric shocks. Tom had had his jollies, and he was moving on.

Tom's abandonment left Susan more than just emotionally devastated. She was flat broke. Her monthly income, after taxes, totaled $1,096 a month. But Susan's mortgage and car payments, day-care fees, and household bills added up to $1,286. She still had unpaid medical bills left over from Alex's birth fourteen months before.

Now, Susan watched helplessly as her escape route shut in her face.

Susan could issue a magnificent tirade from Conso's roof, if she cared to. It wouldn't do any good. Tom Findlay had no desire for a ready-made family. He was gone. And he wasn't coming back.

Six days after he dumped Susan, on the evening of October 24, Tom was sitting on a barstool at Hickory Nuts, holding court, when Susan walked in with a girlfriend. It was around 8:30 P.M., and the seats on either side of Tom were filled. So Susan plunked herself on the spot nearest her lost love, three barstools away, and stared absently into a Bud Light.

"She looked a little down," remembers Lorinda Robins. The bar manager shrugged it off. Lots of

people come into Hickory Nuts to unwind after a stressful day at the office.

Tom didn't acknowledge Susan's arrival. He had come into the bar with the wife of a close friend, and the pair waited for the woman's husband to arrive. Over a draft beer, Tom joked with his companion and with Lorinda.

"He's late again!" Tom teased the woman about her tardy husband.

At one point, Tom said something to Lorinda, out loud, about the two of them running off and having an affair. They both guffawed at the suggestion.

"That was a joke!" says Lorinda. "There's nothing to it. We was all just cuttin' up, having a good time. My husband works here, too. We're all friends."

Susan wasn't in on the joke. She sat in silence, tormenting herself with the sight of her former lover. The breakup of her relationship with Tom had left Susan emotionally frayed. And here was Tom, cavorting like a school boy. Acting as if nothing at all had happened.

It was more than she could take.

Tom bought a round for everyone at the bar, Susan included. Heck, he could afford it. Susan sipped her free beer without a word of thanks. No one noticed what time Susan left. But Tom was still at the bar, laughing and drinking the night away.

As far as Susan was concerned, this man had destroyed her life. As it turned out, this night was the last time Susan would lay eyes on Tom Findlay. And he didn't say one, lousy word to her.

Tomorrow, Susan decided, things will change.

13
Mothers Who Kill

I know indeed what evil I intend to do,
but stronger than all my afterthoughts is my fury,
fury that brings upon mortals the greatest evils.

—Euripides' *Medea*, 431 B.C.

The act strikes us as unnatural. Mother—the giver of life—murders the child she carried inside her, fed and nurtured. She snuffs the breath from a helpless being who depends upon her for his every need. So alien is the crime to our way of thinking, we try to deny it even exists.

Not everyone has children, but we've all had mothers. So perhaps because of the threat such an act poses to our own security, we feel obligated to fall for every tear-drenched entreaty from a mom who claims her kid was snatched from a shopping mall the moment she turned her back. We give the benefit of

the doubt to each distraught young woman who cries that she "dropped" her bruised and battered baby.

And when the truth emerges—she strangled her infant, she broke his neck—we turn to a ready list of excuses that satisfy our need to believe the heinous crime was an aberration: The mother was suffering from postpartum depression. She was abused as a child. Her husband beat her. She was stressed-out; she snapped.

Western culture continues to romanticize motherhood, in spite of the wide number of family choices now available to women. Domestic violence is reserved for the occasional movie-of-the-week, while everyday films and situation comedies celebrate the career woman who jumps off the fast track in favor of fulfilling what we're told is everywoman's true nature: Maternity.

Dr. Lee Leifer, a psychiatrist who has treated many mothers who've killed, refers to this as the "American myth of what it takes to be a mother."

"We assume women are born with love for children, when they are not," says Leifer, assistant professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia University Medical School of Physicians and Surgeons in New York.

Killing one's baby, he says, "goes against the cultural norm—the need for men in our society to feel that women are care-giving and nurturing."

In reality, murderous acts committed by mothers, while uncommon, aren't nearly as rare as we'd like to believe. And that's been a fact of life since at least the beginning of recorded history.

More than 2,400 years ago, a writer of Greek tragedy gave us Medea, that classical precursor to Susan Smith. Enraged after being spurned by her lover, Medea killed the two sons she bore. Euripides

didn't invent this character out of thin air. Medea certainly was not the first woman to go the baby-killing route; Susan Smith is not the last.

Nor is covering up the evidence with a tall tale a unique phenomenon. Just three days before Susan Smith reported hysterically that her sons were stolen, a strikingly similar child-snatching drama was playing out near Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Pauline Zile, twenty-four, told police that she was shopping with her seven-year-old daughter, Christina Holt, at the Swap Shop flea market west of the beach front community when her little girl disappeared from a stall in the women's rest room.

It was daytime, but there were no witnesses. Police had not one clue as to what happened to the child. For five days, Pauline pleaded tearfully on television, begging anyone in earshot to provide information that might help find Christina. As Pauline spoke to reporters, she ran her fingers tenderly through the hair of a doll she described as her daughter's favorite.

Police now believe the mother bought that doll to use as a TV prop.

On October 27, as the Susan Smith ordeal was cranking into high gear over in South Carolina, the gory truth emerged in Florida. From the start, police were troubled that Pauline referred to her little girl in the past tense the moment she was gone—"She *was* a nice girl." During a search of the mother's apartment, police found a bloody pair of jeans. Cornered, Pauline Zile dropped her kidnapping fable, and claimed her husband, John, had beaten the little girl to death.

John Zile led authorities to a five-foot-deep, hand-dug grave behind a nearby K-Mart discount store, where Christina was buried. The little girl was never at the Swap Shop.

According to police reports, six weeks earlier, John beat Christina savagely over the face and body as Pauline watched. John Zile later told cops that Pauline joined in the beating. When Christina started screaming, John shoved a towel into the little girl's mouth, and she choked and went into seizures. John tried performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation, but Christina died. For four days, the couple hid Christina's corpse in a closet, before they finally decided to bury her remains. John Zile was charged with the child's murder.

Pauline's attempt to throw the entire blame for Christina's death on her man didn't work. The announcement that Pauline Zile would also be charged with murder came just seventeen hours after Sheriff Howard Wells of Union announced that Susan Smith faced murder charges in South Carolina.

If two similar cases occurring virtually at the same time sounds like a bizarre coincidence, think again: During a three-month period before Christmas 1994, at least four children were slain by their mothers, fathers, or both in the state of Florida alone. One man stuffed his little girl under a waterbed mattress, alive. Whether motivated by greed, as suspected in the case of Susan Smith, or pure, blind rage, the result is the same: dead children. The only differences are the lengths to which the killers go to conceal their misdeeds.

If the public doesn't want to believe that parents kill children, authorities are forced to face the facts. Abductions by strangers, not mothers, are the aberration.

A prevailing myth that's taken hold of the American mind has earned the pithy label Stranger Danger. It suggests that the woods and shopping malls are jam-packed with perverts prepared to steal a child the second the mother turns away. Though

the risk can't be ignored, the threat posed by strangers is minimal compared to the hype the phenomenon has received.

In truth, such instances are so isolated, we remember the victims' names for a long time: Polly Klaas of California, Sarah Ann Wood of upstate New York, Etan Patz of Manhattan. To this day, the Lindbergh baby's kidnapping of the 1930s remains a mystery to be reckoned with. All this illustrates the fact that no evidence exists whatsoever that an army of strange men lurks in the shadows, hunting for children to sell into slavery, to remove their organs for shipping to Mexico, or to sacrifice them in black-magic rituals—all stories that have fallen upon the ears of officials in the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Arlington, Virginia. A combination think tank and clearinghouse for cases of stolen and abused kids, the private, nonprofit center is funded by a Justice Department grant, and its staffers work closely with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Take a close look at the carton next time you drink milk. Chances are, the missing child pictured on the side is the victim of what's called "custodial interference." That is, one parent hides a kid from the other, either to protect her from abuse or simply out of spite. Not a healthy way for a child to grow up, experts contend. But not necessarily lethal, either.

The most comprehensive study on the matter was conducted by three researchers: Dr. David Finkelhor of the University of New Hampshire, Dr. Gerald Hotaling of Lowell University, and Dr. Andrea Sedlak of Westat, Inc. They found that the number of children abducted by family members nationwide in 1988 totaled some 354,100—far higher than earlier estimates of 25,000 to 100,000.

The most unexpected statistic to emerge from their work, however, was the smallest. The researchers pegged the number of children snatched by strangers each year at a mere 200 to 300.

That number is disputed by Ruben Rodriguez, the senior analyst for the Center for Missing and Exploited Children—but not by much. Rodriguez believes the 200-to-300 estimate ignores cases in which a kidnapper takes a child in order to commit a far more serious crime, such as rape. The rape, he believes, absorbs the attention of authorities, who then fail to classify the crime as a stranger abduction.

Even so, Rodriguez pegs the number of stranger abductions at 500 to 600 annually—still considerably lower than the thousands of children many people believe are stolen off the streets of America each year.

On one thing researchers are in unanimous agreement: The vast majority of murdered children under the age of five are killed by parents. The FBI estimated that 662 children aged four and younger were slain in 1992—more than two-thirds of them by one or both parents. But that number only tells a fraction of the story. Another 1,100 children died from abuse or neglect during the same year, according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services statistics.

There are many who believe even that enhanced body count is low. Sometimes parents cover up murder by claiming a child died from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or accidents. Some researchers estimate that as many as half the parent-killers get away with murder.

Who's doing the killing?

Parents who kill span the spectrum of gender, race, and class. Rodriguez cites the case of a policeman in San Bernadino, California, who beat his two-

year-old daughter to death because she violated household rules by raiding the refrigerator after permissible hours. After killing his daughter, the father told fellow police officers that the girl vanished in a shopping mall the moment he turned his back.

"Dad cuts up the body, burns it, places it in concrete which he dries into cinder blocks that he disposes of throughout the county in different areas," Rodriguez says. After he was found out, the murderous cop committed suicide.

"I use this case in my training course to show it cuts across all social classes, all ethnicities. It runs the gamut of race, religion, and type. This kind of crime is not specific to any type or kind of individual."

Nor is child-killing a regional phenomenon. Parents commit murder in small towns and villages, in rural areas and major cities at about the same rate.

More fathers kill than mothers, but that trend reverses when the dead child is very young. "Under five years of age, Mother has total control of the child," explains Rodriguez. "The child is not in school, and not under the care of anybody else."

But when the parent tries to cover her tracks, the lies that are told tend to follow predictable patterns.

"The two biggest scenarios used to cover up a death are what we call the 'mall scenario' and the 'pick-up scenario,'" Rodriguez says breezily.

The lingo of the murdered-children experts may sound flip to the uninitiated, but it's no different from the shorthand spoken by doctors and nurses, reporters and cops—anyone who faces horrible death every day on the job. Rodriguez sees so much of this kind of thing, he's developed a nose for sniffing out rotten abduction cases with minimal information.

The case of Pauline Zile, who allegedly helped

kill her child, then blamed it on a stranger in the Swap Shop, fits the "classic mall scenario," he says:

"She says, 'I was in the bathroom stall when the child was abducted.' That's often how these stories go."

Susan Smith's tale, on the other hand, fits into the category of pick-up story. "It might go, 'I ran into the 7-Eleven for just a second, and my child was taken out of the car.' However you want to color it, the mother says, 'The children were taken from me.' It's a version of the pick-up story."

In spring 1994, a French-Canadian couple found their ten-week-old daughter dead in her crib. Afraid of being accused of killing her, the parents dumped her body in the woods 100 miles from home. Then they drove their pickup truck over the border and stopped in New York City, where they told police the baby disappeared in Central Park. For two days, helicopters, bloodhounds, and scuba divers searched the park, until the couple broke down and told the truth. Apparently, they believed the world would buy the fallacy that children get swallowed up every day by New York.

Pick-up story or mall scenario, the yarns have one common giveaway: No witnesses.

"My first question to the FBI is, 'When were the children last seen alive by someone else other than the mother?'" Rodriguez says.

When confronted with a child's body, experts can predict with relative certainty whether the killer was male or female, based on such things as the placement of the corpse. Women tend to place the body within three miles of home. "She'll wrap it in a blanket and put it in a shallow grave close to her," says Rodriguez. Or, like Susan Smith, she'll drown the children close to where she lives.

Men, on the other hand, might travel up to 350 miles, and mutilate or dismember a body to obscure evidence of the crime.

In addition, women tend to concoct more elaborate stories to explain a child's disappearance.

Back in 1965, people throughout New York City were traumatized when Alice Crimmons, forever referred to as a divorced, red-haired cocktail waitress from Queens, claimed someone broke into the window of her ground-floor apartment and killed her four-year-old daughter and five-year-old son. But authorities decided that Alice wanted her children out of the way so that she could take off with her boyfriend, a wealthy contractor, and alleged Alice Crimmons masterminded the break-in herself.

Alice was found guilty in the strangulation deaths of her children, although a manslaughter conviction in her son's killing was overturned on appeal. In 1977, Alice was freed on parole. In the end, she sailed off into the sunset on the yacht of her boyfriend, who stood by her throughout the entire twelve-year episode.

In another case with striking similarities to Susan Smith's, Diane Downs of Eugene, Oregon, in 1983 reported that a "shaggy-haired stranger" tried to commandeer her car on a dark, deserted road. When she said no, Diane claimed, the villain shot her three sleeping children. The mother could provide no reasonable explanation why the man let her escape unscathed. Police, however, had a clue. Like Susan Smith, Diane Downs had a boyfriend who didn't want to have anything to do with raising kids.

Cheryl Downs, age seven, died from her wounds, while four-year-old Danny was paralyzed. Eight-year-old Christy suffered a stroke. But she lived to testify that her mother was the one who pulled the trigger.

Based on Christy's heart-wrenching testimony, Diane Downs was convicted in the slayings and sentenced to life in prison. She escaped briefly in 1987. When she was caught, Diane claimed she was out looking for her children's attacker.

The fact that women feel comfortable inventing fantastic stories may stem from the public's reverence for motherhood, combined with the widely held myth that a woman isn't capable of killing her own child.

"With both Susan Smith and Pauline Zile, who does the camera gravitate to?" Rodriguez poses. "To the mama. She's the one crying. Dad is to the right or to the left, giving moral support. The camera's on her; she gets the sympathy."

Meanwhile, John Zile was perceived by many as what Rodriguez calls a "dirtball."

"Can you see this man going on camera saying, 'Help us find our baby?' The community wouldn't gravitate to him, it would gravitate to the mother." David Smith, while no dirtball, played second-string to Susan as a media star.

The stories fall apart, however, because the killings and cover-ups tend not to be carefully premeditated. "You're looking at desperation. In a lot of these cases they don't plan the killing, and they have to do everything on the fly."

In the Susan Smith case, Rodriguez worked closely with the FBI, watching tapes of Susan's public statements. He immediately focused on two things: With each successive press conference, David graduated from standing next to Susan to holding her hand to putting his arm around her; she seemed to demand an ever-increasing level of support in order to continue spinning her story. Another telling tidbit was that Susan studiously avoided making eye contact with the TV cameras.

When the unthinkable comes true, and a mother is revealed to be the killer, the public's tendency to protect her doesn't erase automatically.

"If Mom does it, there's sympathy for the mother. There may be other dynamics here, like postpartum depression. Society says she must be under a lot of pressure.

"If the father victimizes the child, it's much more heinous. Society says, 'Here's a strong man beating this two-year-old child to death.'"

Susan Smith may be heckled in the street, but her attorney is well aware of the possibilities for exploiting the public's compassionate nature. Since Susan's arrest, David Bruck uses words like "fragile" to describe his client, who always appears in court with her hair in a frilly bow.

But are baby-killers worthy of our compassion? What is it that makes them kill?

Psychologists have more success explaining why women murder their husbands than they do determining why women strangle, smother, or shoot the kids.

The literature is filled with cases of mothers who apparently harm or kill children to draw attention to themselves. Marybeth Tinning of Schenectady, New York, had all nine of her children die inexplicably between 1972 and 1985. She was convicted of the final child's murder in 1986.

When all five of Waneta Hoyt's children died mysteriously between 1965 and 1971, she chalked up the deaths to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome—or SIDS. More than two decades later, a local prosecutor, suspicious of that explanation, interrogated the mother, who confessed she suffocated the children with pillows, a towel, or her shoulder. Though she later recanted the confession, Waneta Hoyt was charged with five counts of murder.

The common psychological explanation for this is "Munchausen's syndrome by proxy." With Munchausen's syndrome, adults pretend they're sick, or actually make themselves ill in order to win attention. The "by proxy" addition implies the adult makes a child sick—or kills him—in a bid for sympathy. Susan Smith's behavior after she drowned her sons suggests spotlight-grabbing was one of her motives.

But what makes a woman turn out this way? At the Behavioral Science Unit at FBI headquarters in Quantico—also known as the "Silence of the Lambs Unit"—agents study personal and environmental factors that create killers.

"Generally you're talking about a woman with low self-esteem, emotionally immature, she's socially immature," says Rodriguez. "She's young, financially strapped, emotionally strapped.

"We see a lot of cases, the Smith case is one example, where the child becomes a hindrance in a relationship. The man says, 'No, thank you, I don't want a ready-made family.'

"She says, 'I'm living alone, I have an adulterous husband, I'm involved in relationships, too,'—all these dynamics are present for this woman to make her decision."

In other ways, Susan does not fit the mold of the typical killer. Experts point to a woman's isolation—her lack of a safety net of friends and family—as contributing to a woman's desperation. "She says, 'I've had enough. The only solution I can come up with is, I must eliminate those children.'" But in the case of Susan Smith, friends and family were in ample supply; she had many places to turn for monetary and emotional support.

Spousal abuse can be a factor, too, in making women accept, or participate in, violence against

children. In New York, Hedda Nussbaum was battered to a pulp for years by her lawyer-lover Joel Steinberg. She stood by, cowed and supportive, as Steinberg inflicted beatings that ultimately killed six-year-old Lisa, the couple's illegally adopted daughter.

But there was never as much as a hint that David hit Susan. Except for her unsubstantiated, and later recanted, claim of molestation by her stepfather, there is no evidence that Susan suffered abuse at the hands of any man.

Instead, Susan apparently was backed into a corner by the very loving network on which she depended. Their scrutiny prevented Susan from giving away her children to someone who might not have killed them.

"Union is a very small community," notes Rodriguez, "where everyone knows everybody else's business. If you sneeze, dammit, the sheriff lives two houses down.

"If everybody knows your business, do you want to deal with, 'Oh man, she gave up her children.'?"

Leaving the kids on the courthouse steps, as one neighbor suggested, was not an option. Neither was shipping them off to David. That is, not if Susan wanted a shot at snaring the man of her dreams.

Still, Susan's predicament was no different from that of thousands of stressed-out and lonely mothers who wouldn't dream of killing their children to make their lives easier. What separates the Susan Smiths from the rest of us?

Some therapists take a woman's word for it when she says her child would be better off with God than with her. One popular psychological term is "boundary confusion"—it suggests a woman starts out intending to kill herself. Unclear on where she ends and the kids begin, she winds up murdering the little ones.

The FBI researchers' position on all that is perfectly clear: These mothers are in denial.

Consider Susan's handwritten confession. It is riddled with attempts to rationalize or even excuse her crime.

"My children, Michael and Alex, are with our Heavenly Father now, and I know that they will never be hurt again."

"That's major denial," insists Rodriguez.

"I felt I couldn't be a good mom anymore, but I didn't want my children to grow up without a mom."

"I was an absolute mental case."

"What she's saying is, 'What I did was disgusting and heinous, but it wasn't me who did it. I was taken there by circumstances beyond my control. I wasn't myself. I was hurting. The person who did that wasn't the real Susan Smith.'

"These are the excuses and the denial."

In any case, many mothers who take that drastic, final step give out warning signals well ahead of time. Some complain about not being able to cope. Others express their stress in a physical manner. Many dead children first suffered beatings for years, and many of their parents had brushes with social-service agencies whose interventions fell short of saving the kids. But Susan Smith gave out no signals that she was having trouble. In fact, everyone in Union thought she was the perfect mother.

What is it that separates the Susan Smiths from the millions of mothers who find solutions to their problems other than murder? If we could identify that spark, that single ingredient that turned an average, normal, well-adjusted woman into a killer of innocent children, it might help society pick out potential killers before they take that final step.

Unfortunately, all the data in the FBI computer

and psychological literature combined is only useful in finding the murderer after the fact. The component that makes a woman kill remains the unfathomable mystery it was during the time of the Greeks.

Epilogue

By mid-January 1995, Prosecutor Tommy Pope arrived at the decision the entire nation had been waiting to hear: Pope said he'd seek to have Susan Smith put to death in South Carolina's electric chair if convicted.

In making the difficult call, Pope had help from none other than David Smith. After more than two months of grieving, David was finally ready to let go of his wife. David let it be known that he welcomed Susan's execution.

In December, David Smith made the seventy-mile drive to Columbia for a face-to-face meeting with his wife.

Susan Smith was led in chains into the visitor's room where David waited, and her bonds were removed. As guards stood by, the inmate took a seat across the table from her husband. Throughout their brief conversation, Susan was unable to meet David's steely gaze.

David stared emotionlessly into the face of the woman he loved, clad in her blue prison uniform, that

familiar ponytail on top of her head. Susan had lost weight. She was paler than before, and she wore no makeup. Otherwise, Susan hadn't changed one bit.

The meeting was restrained. Since she was taken off suicide watch, Susan was careful never to shed tears in the presence of guards, out of fear they would again deem her suicidal, confiscate her meager possessions, and put her back in that dreaded paper gown. David wasn't in any mood for high drama, either. He never really was the type who went in for that sort of thing.

With the court case pending, David understood that this was not the time to demand any explanations from Susan. Instead, he requested this meeting to discuss some business matters outstanding between two people undergoing a divorce. Such as—What should we do about the house? David wanted to keep the little nest on Toney Road, but it remained in his wife's legal possession.

They never did talk about Michael and Alex.

As of this writing, Susan Vaughan Smith, indicted on two counts of first-degree murder in the drowning deaths of her children, Michael Daniel Smith, age three, and Alexander Tyler Smith, fourteen months, has yet to stand trial. Her defense lawyer, David Bruck, has delayed announcing whether he will seek an insanity defense in South Carolina's most notorious murder case. Despite strenuous protests by Solicitor Tommy Pope, Bruck's move has guaranteed Susan Smith at least three months in jail without being compelled to undergo an examination by an independent psychiatrist.

Union County's finances, which could be strained beyond its limits by a lengthy murder trial, may get some relief from the massive publicity the case has

generated. With all the scorn heaped on Susan by the citizens of Union, Bruck is believed to have an excellent chance, if he so wishes, to secure a change of venue for a trial. The challenge will be finding any place where twelve men and women exist who have never heard the name Susan Smith.

Susan continues to spend twenty-three hours a day in a six-by-fourteen-foot cell, painted beige and brown, in the administrative segregation unit of the Women's Correctional Center in Columbia, South Carolina. For one hour a day, she is allowed to roam the sunlit confines of a tiny, cement-floored exercise yard. Susan's cell, furnished with a bunk, sink, and toilet, is located in a wing that sits just a few hundred feet from the state's electric chair. Susan was placed in the high-security unit for her own protection against those who wish her harm, who still number many. South Carolina has not executed a woman since 1947.

The inmate continues to receive weekly visits from her mother and stepfather, Linda and Beverly Russell. Her husband, David, has come to see her just once.

Michael and Alex Smith lie in peace in a family plot at the Bogansville United Methodist Church, outside the city of Union, next to David Smith's brother, Daniel. Since their murders, mothers and fathers around the nation have continued killing their own flesh and blood at more or less the same rate as before. However, officials at such child-saving organizations as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Arlington, Virginia, report that the Susan Smith case has caused a dramatic increase in awareness of the plight of the nation's most vulnerable citizens. In the end, the best thing that might come out of this senseless tragedy is that another young life will be spared because of it.

Mother Love, Deadly Love

THE SUSAN SMITH MURDERS

Andrea Peyser

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