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Two of a Kind: The Death and Life of Patricia and Joan Miller

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TWO OF A KIND:
THE DEATH AND LIFE OF PATRICIA AND JOAN MILLER

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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Western Kentucky University
2013

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2013

ABSTRACT

Twin sisters, Patricia and Joan Miller, create an unusual story that few people know. In their youth, they had fairly successful singing and performing careers, but they became reclusive as they got older and continued their lives only with each other. No one knew much about or heard much from them for about 40 years. Then police found them dead in their South Lake Tahoe, Calif., home in February 2012. Autopsy reports showed they died within hours of each other several weeks before police found them.

I intend to investigate the lives of the two sisters and their devotion to each other. Most people spend years looking for someone to spend a lifetime with, but these women have a unique story. Their life together gives a new perspective to the search for soul mates, true love and happiness. My goal is to begin to tell their story in two or three chapters of what I hope to turn into a longer work.

Keywords: Creative nonfiction, Joan Miller, Patricia Miller, Journalism, California

Dedicated to

My parents, Stan and Cindy Spees, for letting me mix

Blake Edwards' "Pink Panther" movies with "Calvin and Hobbes"

and mystery books, movies and TV shows. The result was my imagination.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To everyone who heard me pontificate about all my thesis ideas one day and complain about how nothing was coming together the next, I owe you one.

Mac McKerral, you are the man. Long before I entertained the idea of a thesis, I knew I had found in you someone I could count on and keep in contact with for years after leaving Western Kentucky University. As an instructor, your classes weren't always easy, but they were always informative, which I guess is kind of the point and the mark of an exceptional teacher. As a person, your humor and practical outlook on pretty much everything proved to me that (thank goodness) not all journalists are equal.

Dr. David J. Bell, my time pursuing my undergraduate degree would have been a lot less interesting without you around. You offered me much more than a lot of practice and valuable skills in your creative writing classes. For instance, yours was the first class I had after returning from my grandpa's funeral one weekend, and I left Cherry Hall smiling. Your stories and insight showed me it's okay to have a sense of humor in anything, which helped a lot when writing about two dead women.

I count you both, Mac and Dr. Bell, forever not only as teachers, but also as friends. Knowing that you were both excited about this project made me want to do well. I hope I haven't disappointed you.

Debbie at Red Hut and Lauren at Primo's, I never got your last names when I was

in Lake Tahoe, but just know that you are two of the people who made Lake Tahoe more than just a research destination for me.

Deputy Matt Harwood, no doubt you thought I was some crazy girl when we first began corresponding, but I thank you for your time that I will likely ask you for again in the future.

And, Mom, you had the hardest job of anyone. I certainly haven't been the easiest person to deal with, but you've shown me that a girl will always need her mom, even when she thinks she's too grown up for that.

A multitude of people have encouraged me along my bumpy ride over the past year and a half with the thesis that looked like it was never going to happen. Consider this just a taste of what's to come in the story of “The Death and Life of Patricia and Joan Miller.”

VITA

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Minor Field: Creative Writing

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FOREWORD

It was March 2, 2012 when I first read about Joan and Patricia Miller. Thanks to a serendipitous combination of the news slider on AOL.com, my computer's homepage, and good timing as I waited for my shift to start at the College Heights Herald, Western Kentucky University's newspaper, I caught sight of the women's black and white photograph.

Having always had an affinity for things before my time—music, movies and photographs—the picture that I now have memorized immediately struck me. Two attractive women with neat, identical hair styles and off-the-shoulder dresses looked to their left, just past the photographer. One sat behind the other, her smile appearing slightly more frozen than that of the one in front. They both wore pearl necklaces and dangling earrings. Even in black and white, their dresses exuded a sheen of elegance and class.

Who were these women? The synopsis below the photo offered only a partial answer, "*Twin sisters found dead together in Tahoe home.*"

I would have to answer the rest.

As a journalism major, I am familiar with the tricks headlines can play: reel the readers in with buzzwords, but don't mislead them. Huffington Post had me hooked. I clicked on the article.

As I read it—no scanning, I didn't scan it, didn't want to miss a word—a few

sentences grabbed my attention.

“...the Miller sisters withdrew into their four-bedroom home in California’s South Lake Tahoe, where they were found dead last week at the age of 73.

“It was as if the two sisters, long each other’s only companion, could not live without each other...”

“The deaths have confused some residents in the resort town...the sisters’ reclusiveness had long inspired questions and concern

“In the past year, there were hints that something was amiss at the Miller home.

“There was no blood, no signs of struggle.

“...the sisters seemed disinterested in continuing the relationship [with a childhood friend].”

My journalist’s and my creative writer’s intuition connected like the lives of the sisters.

I copied and pasted the link into a document on my computer where I keep numerous other story ideas that I may or may not revisit. Like a creative purgatory. Perhaps someday I would return to the article and write a novel based on a snippet of a story.

But a few days later, AOL.com featured Huffington Post’s updated version of the story. Police, with the help of genealogists, had found some of the Millers’ relatives.

Everyone was happy. Case closed.

Closed for them, maybe.

I copied and pasted that link into the document too.

For months, I kept returning to the two articles. I reread them. I thought about

Joan and Patricia as I walked to class. I compared myself and my closest friends to them. I stared at that photo and tried to imagine what they saw in the photographer's studio that day and what they had said to each other right before the camera bulb flashed. I wondered how they had become so close. I'm not a twin, but I have a sister, and I can't imagine being so close to her that I would die with her.

That was what intrigued me the most. These sisters died together.

They had no one. No one knew anything about them. No one knew they were dead. No one had known for weeks. How did the sisters come to this?

And so the waiting game began.

I was waiting for an opportunity to tell their story. My original plan had been to write a work of fiction based on the Millers that involved foul play, scandal and other dramatic or unsavory occurrences that could lead to such a death as theirs. But I realized throughout my months of pondering that whatever the Millers had to tell me about their lives through other sources would be much better than any complicated tale I could weave.

Perhaps if I waited until after I graduated college and got a real job, police and surviving family members would take me seriously if I told them I was a journalist wanting to write a book about Joan and Patricia. Surely no one would offer personal and inside information to a green-as-a-gourd college girl from Paducah, Ky., who appeared to have a lot of time on her hands.

But serendipitous circumstances repeated themselves.

As I started my last year of college, I grasped the reality that I still needed six credit hours within the Honors College in order to graduate as an Honors College student.

After coming this far, I'd be "derved" (as my mother would say) if I was going to let two classes keep me from getting something that was within my reach. The only way to attain an Honors College degree was with a thesis, a term that intimidated me since the first time I had heard it two weeks before my stint at WKU began back in 2009.

The thesis journey appeared so daunting that I considered forgoing the Honors College degree and accepting its lesser cousin, a degree acknowledging me as a participant in the Honors program. If that were the case, I would have to take two additional Honors courses instead of doing the thesis. But the thesis was worth six hours and did not involve any physical in-class time. And with no time left in my fall or spring schedules for additional classes because of my job at the paper and the importance of remaining classes, the thesis became my only choice.

I gathered the appropriate forms and information regarding the capstone experience/thesis project and set to work planning what I could accomplish in a few months. I wrote down three ideas, but the other two escape me at the moment. The one I kept staring at on the list was "creative nonfiction work about Joan and Patricia Miller." They had been lounging in their sateen dresses in the back of my mind long enough.

It was time to tell their story, but my leads were thin.

All I had was a detective's name in a couple news stories and a photograph of twin sisters who once sang, entertained, met Bing Crosby—and died together and alone. Their death and relationship were equally unusual.

The only way to understand these two women was to start where their story ended: South Lake Tahoe.

But first, I had to leave Paducah.

I remember my cupped hands straining against the increasing weight of quarters the drink machine spit out at Barkley Regional Airport. Eight dollars and twenty-five cents in change threatened to pop out of my fingers and onto the airport floor as I walked back to my seat that Sunday, my new bottle of water under my arm.

“You really didn’t have anything smaller than a ten?” I asked my mom, holding my hands out, hoping she’d relieve me of my slot machine-like return from the vending machine.

Instead of a response, all I got was the curly-haired back of her head. She was chattering away with our music minister’s wife, who was headed to Ohio. Of course, she wasn’t flying directly to Ohio. Paducah’s lone airport transported passengers to only one other airport: O’Hare in Chicago. There were three flights going out on this day.

“I’m sorry, sweetie, did you say something?” she asked as I dramatically struggled with the quarters.

“Uh...”

“Oh! Here, you give me those,” she said.

She held open her already bulging purse for me to deposit the 35 quarters.

As I sat up from dumping the quarters in, she returned to talking to the music minister’s wife. Even the back of her head seemed enthusiastic about their conversation. I checked my phone for any new text messages.

None.

I considered turning to a novel in my backpack, but it wasn’t really worth moving aside my laptop, Fujifilm camera, notebook and video camera. If I hadn’t become the epitome of the 21st century backpack journalist, I looked at least like a very intense

college student.

Then again, I was an intense college student.

With only a week of spring break to research in Lake Tahoe, I had to get serious about this thesis project. Two and a half months more of school and the entire summer working at an internship didn't afford me time to fool around about piecing my idea together. Joan and Patricia Miller had a story to tell, and I knew I wanted to be the one to tell it. As long as I got it mostly done by August. Which—I didn't know at the time—would turn into December. Then into February.

I had wasted enough time already, I knew. It had been more than a year since I saw the twins' picture on my AOL News homepage. Sure, it was intriguing, but I figured I could get to it after college. But when a more demanding job at the school newspaper pinched my time available for classes, I reasoned that doing a thesis project worth six credit hours rather than sacrificing six hours of work to be in class was a wise move.

The notion of the work ahead excited me, and I even romanticized it in my mind on occasion. I was investigating a bizarre double death of reclusive twin sisters. No one had heard anything from them in years, but I was working to start filling in the blanks of that missing time. If Deep Throat himself had approached me on some side road of Lake Tahoe and given me clues about the Millers' life history, I wouldn't have felt any more official than I already did.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are experiencing a slight delay due to mechanical issues,” said a woman's voice over the intercom of the only gate in the airport. I found the need for the intercom puzzling, considering almost none of the roughly 22 passengers were talking in the seating area that was about the size of a doublewide trailer.

I sighed.

At least we had a long layover in Chicago. Maybe we wouldn't miss our flight to Reno, Nev., where we had to pick up the rental car to drive to Lake Tahoe. At the very least, I sort of wished my mom would talk to me while we waited. It was a strange sensation, yearning for her attention. Usually I get enough that I don't have to ask for it. Maybe this was just the boredom talking.

Maybe it wasn't.

"Monica?"

I perked up at her beckoning, ready to thrust myself into conversation.

"Yeah?"

She pulled a handful of the quarters from the earlier incident out of her purse.

"Would you mind getting me a water too?" she asked.

"Uh..."

"Oh, it's fine if you don't want to get up," she said. "I'll get it."

"No, no," I insisted, falsely eager to please in order to mask my disappointment.

"I don't mind."

"Oh, thank you, sweetie. Do you want one, Beth?" she asked the music minister's wife.

I looked at Beth with what I hoped wasn't a grimace.

"I'm actually fine, but thank you anyway," she responded.

My mom's hands mimicked a funnel stuck down in a gas tank and let the quarters slide onto my fingers.

"Get yourself another one if you want," she said, smiling.

“I think one will be plenty,” I said.

I heard the two of them commenting on how sweet I was as I trudged back to the devilish drink machine. *Gosh*, I thought sullenly, *is journalism always this glamorous?* Maybe it is when you investigate a story with your mom in tow. I briefly wondered if Woodward ever had to combat drink machines for Bernstein.

Trying to focus on how much my mom appreciated little things like this, I gingerly deposited the first quarter into the coin slot.

She did appreciate me, and I appreciated her. She sometimes irritated me, and I no doubt irritated her. Much like I’m sure Joan and Patricia did over 73 years. I began to realize that the Millers’ relationship had a hold on me because the ins and outs of others’ relationships interested me.

And theirs was unique.

The oddity piqued my journalistic and creative appetites, but these women had become more to me than just a good story. I had spent months wanting to get to know them, and now I could do that. They were private people, but they had something special. They had something that people should know about because other people could learn from it. Joan and Patricia have something to offer, even though they never appear to have offered it themselves. Although I can’t entirely explain how I knew it from the first time I read the story about their death, I knew these women were exceptional, and that’s important for others to know. Something brought them to a sheltered and odd end. Not everyone dies of natural causes within a few hours of each other.

What made their relationship spectacular? What made it damning?

And one more thing. Since March 2, 2012, one more question remained wedged

in my psyche, wearing that same posed smile in the Miller twins photo. If I live to be old
and die in my home, will it be weeks before anyone finds me?

*-Monica R. Spees
Aug. 18, 2013
Bowling Green, Ky.*

CHAPTER 1

WRITER'S INTENT

The brevity of this thesis has left some baffled, and I am not surprised. I confess that I was quite selfish with Joan and Patricia Miller's story. The goal is that someday this story, in its full form, will be for everyone.

But this thesis was for me.

That may seem fairly conceited, so I'll explain. I knew from the beginning that the Millers' story would primarily be what filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock referred to as a maguffin, meaning a device whose primary purpose is to perpetuate the plot (such as the money Marion Crane stole in *Psycho*). Following the Millers' story, while fascinating and one that I fully intend to complete in the future, was a journey for me as I prepared for the transition from student journalist to real-world journalist. Knowing that Joan and Patricia were recluses and receiving news from Deputy Matt Harwood that the family members didn't wish to speak to me, I realized that completing their story in one semester (which was my original time limit for this project) would likely be impossible. My goal, then, was to put research skills I had learned during four years of college to use.

Turning the research methods I had learned into a reality wasn't all I had in mind. By going out and doing research in another state around people I didn't know in an area I wasn't familiar with, I also hoped to learn about conducting research and interacting with others in a journalistic way that perhaps I hadn't encountered as an undergraduate

student.

My thought was that if I could gain experience as a journalist that I hadn't been offered as a student or an intern, my writing and journalistic methods would improve. My improvement, as I have always hoped, would make a better story for readers.

This thesis is the result of my efforts. It can only get better from here.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Part of my work for *Two of a Kind* was done before I ever left Kentucky for California in March 2013. A journalist from the Huffington Post had already constructed a story with the basic information.

The only problem was that two of the people mentioned in the story were dead, so calling them up and asking them anything was out of the question.

The first and most logical place I started was with the detective mentioned in the article, Matt Harwood. I Googled the El Dorado County Sheriff's Office California (which is much more obscure than you might think) and found two different phone numbers to call. After the first number connected me to a branch of the sheriff's office that Harwood didn't work at, I called the second one, which yielded me a cell phone number for Harwood from a slightly confused receptionist. After a game of phone tag that lasted a few weeks, during which , I finally communicated to Harwood that I would be in his county in March.

Unfortunately, Harwood was not able to obtain permission from his captain to speak with me before my five-day stay in Lake Tahoe, Calif., was up. But I was able to gather other information while I was there, such as how much the Millers' estate was worth and who lives in their house now. Back in Kentucky, I interviewed Harwood over

the phone and was able to finally draw all my information together to form a narrative.

Throughout the trip, I made brief notes of things I saw and did each day. Part of those notes constituted a large part of what became the foreword of this project. The second chapter comes mostly from time spent researching information about the year the Millers were born and an interview conducted with Bill Pfohl a few weeks before I traveled to California.

After many hours, many miles and countless strokes on a keyboard and clicks of a computer mouse, I finally had what I needed.

CHAPTER 3

CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS AND STRATEGIES

This project presented many unique and unexpected challenges in the months I worked on it. At times, I felt like Michael Corleone in *The Godfather Part III*, in that just when I thought I was out, I felt like I kept getting pulled back in to a thesis I thought was done with me. Some of those challenges could have been prevented with better planning. Others were beyond my control.

My first struggle came when I couldn't find a direct phone number for the El Dorado Sheriff's Office, much less for Deputy Matt Harwood, the man who I knew would be my initial contact. I had to keep calling different numbers until I finally got Harwood's direct line, and even then I had to leave a message and wait for him to call me back.

When I made contact with Harwood and told him when I would be in his town, he said he had to ask his captain's permission before he could talk to me. My days in Lake Tahoe were during WKU's spring break and non-negotiable, so when Harwood didn't get permission until the day I left, I had to change my plans and call him when I got back to Kentucky.

The phone interview didn't yield everything I had hoped it would. I asked Harwood to ask the Millers' family members if they would speak with me and find the phone number for the Millers' childhood friend whom he had found after Joan and

Patricia's deaths. When I didn't hear back from him for a couple weeks, I tried to call him again with no answer. I tried back a few weeks later and was able to reach him, only to have him tell me he had been on vacation for five weeks and wouldn't be in his office for another week.

After Harwood returned to his office, he called the family members as he'd said, but they didn't wish to speak to me. Unfortunately, Harwood couldn't find the Millers' childhood friend's contact information. By then, I was out of time and made a note to try to find her by other means in the future.

Without some of the information I had wanted, I had to include something else in my project that would give the readers an idea of who the Millers were. Although not ideal, I had information about when they were born and how twins normally behave. It wasn't exactly what I wanted, but it illustrated how Joan and Patricia likely grew up and why they became and remained close.

Because of these struggles I encountered, the date for my thesis defense kept changing, being postponed from August to November to January to March. I didn't address this issue as much as I stressed over it. I might have experienced high blood pressure, stress headaches and hyperventilating during the past year, but I suppose I accepted it as just part of the process.

I eventually calmed myself and convinced myself that everything would be okay. To address the large problem of scheduling and the stress associated with it, I had to address all the little struggles, which included spending time editing and seriously thinking about what I ultimately wanted to give and receive with this project. And that included the final analyses, such as this one.

I'm not sure what the "right" response to the challenges of a thesis is, but I know that addressing them wasn't for the faint of heart, so I take comfort in the knowledge that my heart isn't prone to swooning. Still, the challenges came, and sometimes they hit me pretty hard, but I feel confident that I have come out of this with some problem-solving skills, critical thinking and grit, if you will, that I may not have had before.

CHAPTER 4

INSPIRATION AND EQUIPMENT

After two and a half years of majoring in journalism and one semester in a creative nonfiction course, Joan and Patricia Miller's story had my attention from the first time I saw the headline on my computer's news page. My fascination with them took a few forms.

On the most basic level, I was interested. Like most humans, I find mysterious deaths intriguing. There doesn't have to be blood, gore and a perpetrator in a story to catch my eye. All I need to know is that someone's life ended under strange circumstances and that article, that movie or that television program has me. The Millers' story started that way for me. Two women were dead, had died alone with no friends or family, and no one could find their family. You got me.

But I read and reread the two nationally released articles about Joan and Patricia time after time. My interest moved from something I considered shallow to something more sympathetic. I began to question why the Millers died alone together. Through research, I started to realize it was something more than just strange circumstances that brought the two to their end. To have died the way they did, they had lived a certain way. The way they lived, reclusive as they were, was totally bizarre by anyone's standards, but that's what made it special. Anyone can die, but not everyone can live as the Millers lived, with a love for each other that few could understand.

And that was precisely the problem that I wanted to solve: no one understood the kind of love they had, and I wanted them to understand. *I* wanted to understand. Here was this ready-made story of an acceptance and affection practically everyone searches for, and if no one else was going to tell it, I wanted it to be me. Not for my own glory, but rather because it was a story that needed telling.

Setting out to tell the Millers' story required tangible and intangible tools and equipment. The tangible tools--my camera, notebook, pencil, video camera and laptop--all fit in the backpack I lugged on the plane to California. I had been taught and had learned in my journalism classes that each item should operate as an extra limb or electronic appendage and I should consider them just as valuable. I dutifully kept track of my research and daily activities in my notebook and on my laptop should any of the information become important later. I took dozens of pictures of the area and of the Millers' old house, doing my best to flex what few photography muscles I had. I used my video camera to record interviews with Bill Pfohl of WKU and two sets of twins, picking up on mannerisms and personality patterns that might help explain twin relationships, such as the Millers' relationship.

Each of these pieces of equipment played an essential role in weaving together Joan and Patricia's story, but that wasn't all it took to deliver as much of the story as I could find in less than a year.

From the first two weeks before I began my freshman year of college, I had heard about the CE/T project. Frankly, it petrified me. I spent three years letting it intimidate me until I got to my senior year and realized that doing a thesis was the best option for me as an Honors student. At that time, I recognized that my fear had come not necessarily

from the enormousness of the project, but from the commitment of my own skills to be used in a way I hadn't really used them before.

A thesis involves a lot of writing. Although writing is something I committed four years to as a journalism major and creative writing minor--and, therefore, my entire career and most of my life, if that was how things work out for me--the thought of finally *doing* it was sobering. Writing was a tool I'd dabbled with since fourth grade, but the thesis would be the first time I'd thrown in all my chips with it, so to speak.

Writing, however, was merely the vehicle that was going to carry other tools I had or would have to harness. Research coupled with imagination would also carry the Millers' story. Research and imagination seem an unlikely pair, but even nonfiction and journalistic writing has to have some imaginative flair if anyone is expected to read it. Obviously, "imaginative flair" doesn't mean "fabrication" in this case. Instead, I needed to be able to describe events from the present and the past to craft an interesting and engaging story. Research alone would cause the story to flat-line and imagination alone wouldn't be accurate or fair to Patricia and Joan.

None of tools, neither the ones I held and controlled with my hands and the ones I controlled with my mind, could properly function without all the others. Perhaps I could have told the story without my camera, but my memories of the setting would have faded and eventually, any mental visitation back to the Millers' home would result in only novice descriptions. If I didn't use my imagination, I could have spouted straight, dull information, but how many people really want to read a straight, dull story?

And without research...well, without that the whole thing would have fallen apart no matter what.

Putting all these tools together wasn't easy. It took a long time (a lot longer than I expected), and sometimes it wasn't fun. No one ever told me what I wanted to do in life was always going to be fun, but I'm not entirely sure anyone ever told me it wouldn't be, either. Regardless, I used everything I thought I needed, and I think it got me where I needed to be.

CHAPTER 5

CHARACTERS

Patricia Miller - One of the Miller twins, likely the first one to die in the winter of 2012. Most of what is known about Patricia in her late adult life, regrettably, comes from sparse sightings from neighbors in Lake Tahoe and what authorities observed after the Millers' deaths.

Despite suffering from a heart condition known as atherosclerosis, Patricia had a responsibility to her sister, Joan. Patricia was her sister's keeper, refusing outsiders' help with Joan, who had memory problems. Patricia showed a devotion to and compassion for her twin that is usually only seen in aging spouses.

Patricia may have been more outgoing than Joan because the photo from Bing Crosby was addressed to her rather than to both of them, insinuating that she may have been more talkative at a young age than her sister. She may have had a more outgoing personality throughout her life.

Patricia likely died about two weeks before Joan. She went into cardiac arrest before she died.

Joan Miller - One of the Miller twins, likely the second one to die in the winter of 2012, though her quality of life might have been the worst of the two. Joan suffered from memory problems, probably dementia, and had to use a colostomy bag.

The information available on Joan, like Patricia, comes from the end of her life.

Therefore, her actions during her last few weeks are the most available determinants of her character.

Even in her confused state, Joan had insurmountable compassion for her sister. When Patricia's health began to fail during the Millers' last few weeks of life, Joan was not in a proper mental state to take care of the house, but evidence in the Millers' home suggests that she got in bed with Patricia, maybe to keep her company.

Seemingly the follower rather than the leader Patricia was, Joan was unable to fend for herself after her sister's death. Having been reduced to a childlike mindset with no knowledge of how to pay the utility bills, Joan succumbed to the elements inside the house.

Deputy Matt Harwood - A detective at the time the Millers' bodies were discovered, Harwood was called to help investigate the scene. He found the photo album that held the well-kept secret of the twins' past.

Harwood served as the media contact after the Millers' death, which led to genealogists across the country searching for living relatives for weeks. Harwood provided most of the information for this project.

Bill Pfohl - A psychology professor at Western Kentucky University, Pfohl provided information on how twins don't just grow close to each other throughout their lives, but how they share a special genetic bond from birth.

His explanations of twins' behavior give an indication of how and possibly why Joan and Patricia Miller were so close that they became reclusive during their last years alive.

CHAPTER 6

REFLECTION AND FUTURE

As I mentioned in the Writer's Intent, this thesis was all about the experience. Though my defense date has been postponed a few times, I believe that has actually been for the best, because now I can offer a salaried journalist's perspective on what pursuing the Millers' story taught me as a student journalist.

Having been out of college for almost a year, I have learned that a working journalist's life is vastly different from a student journalist's life. Going to California and gathering information on Joan and Patricia Miller, I think, was good preparation for the world in which I now find myself.

I work at the Bowling Green Daily News, where for the first sixth months of my employment I was the police beat reporter. During that time, I read countless police reports and spent a lot of time at the circuit clerk's office. Having a taste of performing tasks like looking through records while I was in Lake Tahoe, I believe, allowed me to have a bit of familiarity before going into an otherwise unfamiliar setting at a new job last August.

But working on this project was more valuable than just teaching me a few technical tasks. I learned that things don't always go as planned and you have to rearrange your carefully thought out itinerary. Sometimes you can't get that interview when you wanted it and you have to put on your best charm over the phone (or in a text

message) to schedule another interview as soon as possible. You wait around. A lot more than you expected. When you talk about death, not only is it acceptable to have a sense of humor, it's preferred.

While I cannot say that studying the Miller twins' deaths prepared me for everything I've encountered as a working journalist, it certainly gave me a glimpse into what I would face. Not that WKU didn't provide me with a good education, but I sought a different kind of hands-on learning. Therefore, I am thankful for the opportunity to do this thesis.

And what about the future? That's a question I ask myself daily. About a lot of things. But it is my hope that the fate of this thesis, the beginning of something larger, will occur within the next few years, after an even deeper search for additional information about these women I constantly want to know more about.

Maybe someday a publisher will take an interest in what will become the finished story of Patricia and Joan Miller. Maybe someone will want to read it. And maybe the Millers can show a reader a different level--their bizarre, unique level--of love.

But if not, I can still say I emerged from college, from this thesis, more prepared and more knowledgeable about my future occupation. And that has been worth every minute.

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTERS FROM NOVEL

Together Alone

Chapter 1

No one was answering.

On Monday, Feb. 27, 2012, it was the second time in two days that volunteers from the sheriff's office went to the two-story, wood paneled house on April Drive in South Lake Tahoe, Calif. The house was just one on the "volunteers' list" of homes that required a routine welfare check, the residence of Joan and Patricia Miller, 73-year-old twin sisters, who bought the home in 1976.

With no answer after two days, the volunteers called in someone with more authority to see if there was anything wrong. They called the volunteer coordinator, who also served as deputy sheriff of El Dorado County.

Eventually, a detective from the city of Lake Tahoe called Matt Harwood, a detective assigned to the coroner's division at the time with the El Dorado County Sheriff's Office.

"My entry was made just to maintain the integrity of the crime scene, because we honestly didn't know what we had," Harwood said.

When Harwood arrived, he saw that the other investigators had entered the house through the garage, situated to the right of the front door. Harwood parked and went in

the garage. From inside, he could go straight into the living room. The house seemed very cold, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary in the living room.

Harwood's eyes moved to the hallway. Two bare feet stuck out from just off of the living room.

The body on the floor was Joan Miller.

She wore no clothes, and traces of fecal matter were around her. Harwood and the others realized that Joan used a colostomy bag that had come unattached. They later found it inside the water-filled washer with her clothes.

Just beyond Joan's body on her right was a bedroom, one of two on the first floor. Joan's twin sister, Patricia, was on the floor inside. Harwood said the bed was a mess, and there were small amounts of blood or fecal matter on it and the floor.

But Patricia was not on the bed.

She showed approximately two more weeks of decomposition than Joan, and laid on the floor, covered with a blanket and her head resting on a pillow. Given the state of the bed, Harwood surmised that Joan shared Patricia's bed at some point, perhaps even before or after Patricia died.

Although the scene looked bizarre, Harwood found nothing suspicious or that indicated foul play.

"Both of the women had been down for such an extended period of time—such advanced stages of decomposition—that we wouldn't have been able to find any obvious signs of injury, that we wouldn't have been able to identify it until the pathologist had done her exam, even if we'd wanted to," Harwood said.

So Harwood's team continued looking around the house to see if they could

gather any answers to questions the search had raised. Nothing had been stolen and there was no obvious sign of forced entry.

“We were a little befuddled,” Harwood said.

There was a lot of food packaging, as if Joan and Patricia had been ordering food to be delivered to the house. Judging by the amount, this had gone on for several weeks at some point before the sisters passed away. Even with that, the house was, for the most part, orderly.

“They weren’t necessarily sloppy people by any means,” Harwood said, adding that an elderly person’s unkempt household is often an indicator of the resident’s suffering from dementia.

Then they found something that might explain Joan’s unclothed condition on the hallway floor: utility cutoff notices.

The papers dated back three and four weeks, which offered a time frame for about how long the sisters had been down. Because it was February in Lake Tahoe, where the temperature averages 42 degrees at that time of year, Joan’s partial cause of death was hypothermia. When suffering from hypothermia, victims often strip off clothing because the condition causes victims to feel like they are burning up. In reality, they are freezing to death. Joan’s body overheated in an effort to keep itself warm, so she wrongfully removed her clothes, making her condition worse.

Patricia died from cardiac arrest related to a heart condition. The medical term is severe coronary atherosclerosis¹.

¹Atherosclerosis is also called hardening of the arteries, according to the National Library of Medicine. This is a common disorder that results from fat, cholesterol and other substances build up in the walls of the arteries and form plaque. Ultimately, it can lead to heart attack or stroke. Older people often suffer from atherosclerosis, but young people can have it if their diet consists of a lot of fat, they drink alcohol

“Pragmatically speaking, when we go to a double death, it’s a murder-suicide... We were totally thrown for a loop when we started investigating the scene,” Harwood said. “The fact that we have both of these people pass of natural causes...it just was an unusual case.”

Harwood, who received his information from adult protective services, said that Joan suffered from memory problems² and had relied on her sister, her only friend, to take care of her. Although APS had offered several times to assist Patricia with Joan, Patricia refused each time, probably knowing that a nursing home would be her and Joan’s fate if she took the offer. So it was up to Patricia to change Joan’s colostomy bag, help her bathe and tell her when to eat. When Patricia passed, the state of the house suggested that Joan was unable to fend for herself. Harwood said Joan likely didn’t have the cognitive ability to understand that she should call an ambulance to come get her twin while she went into cardiac arrest or after she succumbed to the attack. Instead, Joan did the best she could manage with a pillow and a blanket.

“[Joan] recognized that her sister had died, but she couldn’t figure out what needed to be done...so she made her sister comfortable,” Harwood said.

In the weeks after Patricia’s death, Joan didn’t have the capability to deal with the utility cutoff. Her memory issues prevented her from knowing how to pay bills. Every day, the house grew colder and Joan went a little longer without food. In addition to the hypothermia, authorities later determined that malnutrition contributed to Joan’s death.

What the Tahoe Tribune later called a “mysterious double death” did not get any less mysterious upon Harwood’s canvass of the neighborhood to gain information on

excessively, are overweight or don’t exercise.

² Approximately 5.4 million Americans suffered from Alzheimer’s disease or other dementias in 2012, according to the Alzheimer’s Association.

Joan and Patricia Miller.

Most of the neighbors said they had only ever seen the Millers when the sisters took their trash out once every week. Some neighbors had referred the Millers to APS. It became clear to Harwood that neither Joan nor Patricia socialized or had any other friends outside their home.

They were each other's social life and best friend.

"They never gave any indication that there was anyone else in their lives or in their family," Harwood said. "They were incredibly private people."

Even in death, the sisters planned to stick together. Although neither woman had a will, police found a handwritten note from Patricia in the April Drive home. The note essentially said, "In the event of my death, I leave everything to my sister, Joan." But because Joan, too, was deceased, Patricia's final wishes could not be fulfilled³.

This posed a problem for Harwood and the police.

Two women who always listed each other as their next of kin and never left the house didn't seem to have any other relatives. If they couldn't track anyone down, the public administrator, who was also the sheriff and coroner of El Dorado County, would have to handle the Millers' effects. In this case, everything the Millers owned would be auctioned off to the highest bidders.

But Harwood came across something that kept his closed investigation open: a photo album.

He hoped to find names of family and friends listed on the backs of photos or on a paper tucked inside. He found none.

³ Under normal circumstances, authorities could accept this note in lieu of a will as legitimate permission to transfer Patricia's property to Joan.

Instead he discovered a hint of the remarkable life the sisters once led.

There, in black and white, were young Joan and Patricia Miller, each with a hat propped on the left side of her head, a bow on the right. Holding one girl on each knee was Bing Crosby, a straw hat cocked to the left of his head and a pipe nestled between his top teeth and bottom lip on the right side of his mouth. At the bottom right of the photo was scrawled "*To my friend Patty -Bing Crosby.*"

In a few minutes of flipping through the album, Harwood recognized the sisters' talents and some insight into their youthful career as entertainers. Their past intrigued the detective, and Harwood didn't want to see that auctioned away.

"I felt that for them to have passed the way they did was, in my opinion, unnecessary, but somebody needed to know that they died," Harwood said. "Even if they didn't want to deal with the estate, somebody needed to know, because in their youth, these people were incredibly fantastic people."

Usually, the police release information about deaths after they have notified family, but who was there to notify? Harwood didn't know where to begin looking, but he knew others might. Harwood turned to the news media for help uncovering the past of Patricia and Joan Miller.⁴

⁴ When someone dies in a car crash or in some other unnatural way, authorities often send a press release to media outlets, omitting the name of the deceased unless the family has been notified. Authorities usually find the decedent's driver's license or other identification to locate family members. Joan and Patricia's case was unique because no family was immediately found. In their situation, Harwood had to do what the sheriff's office rarely does: send out the decedents' names before the family knew.

Chapter 2

“The Hoffman Hayride”⁵ was a variety show that ran out of Santa Monica. KTLA-TV was home to the musical show from 1948 to 1957. Its host, the alcoholic musician Spade Cooley, started the show after a successful growth from his radio show, “Spade Cooley Time” on KFVD in Los Angeles. “The Hoffman Hayride” often featured musical guests, some of whom went on to become quite successful, such as Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope and Tennessee Ernie Ford, according to TruTV.

But Cooley’s show also had a regular cast of talented entertainers. A violinist named Anita Aros, who also acted in a couple films, played for the show alongside the Spade Cooley Band. Young Cubby O’Brien, born in 1946, was a guest drummer for the show and later a member of “The Mickey Mouse Club,” and his final music credit was playing the drums in “Grease” (1978). Phil Gray, an actor, appeared in other television shows and movies after “The Hoffman Hayride” ended, including “Funny Lady” (1975), starring Barbra Streisand, and an episode of “The Man Show” (2001) entitled “Masturbation Tips.”⁶

Others, such as Kay Cee Jones and Les Chatter, never appeared in anything else after “The Hoffman Hayride.”

Two young girls, only 10 years old when the show first aired, also ceased their TV and film career after “The Hoffman Hayride.” They were twin sisters Joan and Patricia Miller.

Joan and Patricia were born to Fay Lang and Elmon Gordon “Bud” Miller,

⁵ The name Hoffman came from Hoffman Television, a manufacturing company that made television sets. The company was the show’s sponsor, according to trutv.com.

⁶ imdb.com

according to a March 9, 2012, Associated Press article in the Tahoe Daily Tribune. Miller, 43 when his twin girls were born, was originally from Bremen, Ky., a small city in Muhlenberg County⁷.

Miller and Lang had no other children.

The girls were born and raised in Portland, Ore, in 1938. They were born two years after the annual Portland Rose Festival officially added the event of the Junior Parade to the festival schedule. The Junior Parade was to become America's oldest and largest children's parade.⁸

But there was a lot happening outside Joan and Patricia's hometown that year that would likely affect their lives and the lives of all Americans for many more years.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt founded the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis on Jan. 3. The organization's mission was to fight polio, from which FDR suffered. NFIP was later called the March of Dimes.⁹

The National Society for the Legalization of Euthanasia formed on Jan. 16.¹⁰ The topics of euthanasia and assisted suicide would only become more controversial throughout the Millers' lifetime.

The same day that Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" opened on Broadway¹¹, Feb. 4, Adolf Hitler took over the German army¹². Eight days later, German troops entered Austria, Hitler's home country. Nazi Germany officially invaded Austria exactly one

⁷ Muhlenberg County is also home to another entertaining sibling duo: Don and Phil Everly, popularly known as the Everly Brothers. Traveling between Paducah and Bowling Green, I often take notice of the road sign that announces their monument in Central City. The Everly Brothers recorded a song called "Bowling Green" in 1967.

⁸ The Portland Rose Festival began in 1907, according to rosefestival.org.

⁹ The March of Dimes now focuses on premature birth and birth defects, according to marchofdimes.com.

¹⁰ The society was later renamed the Euthanasia Society of America, according to euthanasia.procon.org.

¹¹ Wilder won a Pulitzer for his play, according to thorntonwilder.com.

¹² jewishvirtuallibrary.org

month later¹³. Throughout the year, Nazi Germany would continue its sweep across Europe, devouring land and lives as it went. So began the setup for the horrific second world war.

On June 15, the Los Angeles Dodgers played the Cincinnati Reds in the first nighttime game with lights on the Dodgers' Ebbets Field. The Reds beat the Dodgers 6-0.¹⁴

The House Un-American Activities Committee formed on May 26, which would bring numerous suspected communists—including big-name celebrities—under fire as America's fear of and resistance against Communism escalated.

America found its first patriotic comic book hero in Superman on June 30 after creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster sold the idea to Detective Comics, Inc.¹⁵

The day before Halloween, Orson Welles' now-infamous "The War of the Worlds" news-like broadcast infiltrated households across the country, supposedly terrifying many people who failed to realize it was merely an entertaining show and not a legitimate alien invasion¹⁶.

At the end of the year, Pearl Buck won the Nobel Prize for literature for her novel "The Good Earth,"¹⁷ filming began for "The Wizard of Oz"¹⁸ and "Gone With the Wind" entered the casting stage of production¹⁹. Victor Fleming and George Cukor had a hand in directing both films that would go on to become classics and remain a part of popular

¹³ historyplace.com

¹⁴ The game was on a Wednesday, according to baseball-almanac.com.

¹⁵ "Superman turns 75: Man of Steel milestone puts spotlight on creators' Cleveland roots." *The Associated Press*, April 17, 2013.

¹⁶ Speculation in recent years has led some to believe that the widespread panic notion was false, according to entertainment.time.com.

¹⁷ nobelprize.org

¹⁸ thewizardefozmovie.com

¹⁹ Vivien Leigh was cast as Scarlett O'Hara in December, according to theatlantic.com.

culture almost 80 years after their premieres.

Joan and Patricia Miller were born into an exciting world, filled with larger-than-life pop culture icons and societal changes. But the world was also becoming an increasingly complicated place, especially for an America that had been doing its best to stay out of conflicts after World War One and had its own economic depression to deal with at home.

One of the worst wars the world had ever seen—and has ever seen to date—was brewing, and America was doing its best to stay afloat financially. Although not quite as isolationist as 1920s America, the Millers’ country struggled to close itself off from the outside world and contend quietly with its personal issues. The United States was doing what good Americans at the time knew America did best: pull itself up by the bootstraps and endure.

Getting too close to any European countries at the time would have been disadvantageous, because trouble was afoot, and war cost money; something the U.S. didn’t have. The time was not yet right for America to branch away from its home soil.

Amidst economic depression and political upheaval, Joan and Patricia grew, played and learned together.

Although little is known about the twins’ formative years, psychological studies on twins provide an idea of what the Millers’ young lives could possibly have been like.

Twins share most of the same DNA, according to William Pfohl, a psychology professor at WKU. A genetic bond often means a bond that is unique from other “normal” relationships.

“As young infants, if they’re identical twins, we find that they do develop a

language together,” Pfohl said.

Oftentimes, twins’ special way of communicating is strange to the parents, who can feel left out of that relationship, Pfohl said, beginning what could be a lifetime of excluding outsiders. The closeness continues into a young age and as twins are old enough to go to school.

“School becomes another issue because sometimes they want to stay in the same class, same teachers, same interests, and that will continue to go on,” Pfohl said.

Although Joan could have just as easily performed on “The Hoffman Hayride” without Patricia, and vice versa, she did not. Whether this was by the twins’ own choice (unlikely), or by Fay Lang and Bud Miller’s choosing (more likely), Joan and Patricia remained together.

Staying together in work and play in the early years of their lives could have potentially driven the sisters from each other or drawn them closer. As time went on, it was apparent that the latter had occurred. In the Millers’ case, it seemed they were close to a fault.

“If (twins are) really, really close, they really exclude people around them,” Pfohl said. “They just don’t let other people into their lives.”

Joan and Patricia stayed with “The Hoffman Hayride” until its end in 1957, when rock ‘n’ roll began to replace the western swing that the show specialized in. The show finished its final year without its host Cooley. His drinking had gotten so bad that the station became fed up with him and fired him.²⁰

²⁰ Cooley was convicted in 1961 of beating his wife, Ella Mae, to death after she admitted to him she’d had an affair with his friend Roy Rogers and intended to join a free-love cult, according to TruTV. Cooley, 51 and already in poor health, was sentenced to life in prison. After Ronald Reagan became governor of California, he pardoned Cooley, effective on the convicted murderer’s 60th birthday—Feb. 22, 1970. Before

The twins were 19 years old when “The Hoffman Hayride” went off the air, but remained a cute identical pair.

Even in the photo of the Millers with Crosby, when Joan and Patricia couldn't have been more than 9 years old, they're dressed sweetly alike, both with at least one tooth missing from their mouth. One should not judge a book by its cover, as the cliché suggests, but for twins like Joan and Patricia, perhaps it was their identical covers that determined the story of their lives from the beginning to the end.

his release, Cooley died while on a three-day furlough at a benefit concert in Oakland, Calif., on Nov. 23, 1969.