

# Thumbprint on Cigarette Carton Cracks a 48-Year-Old California Murder Case

A young mother told friends that she'd be "back in 10 minutes." She never returned, and the police in San Jose have now charged a man in her death.



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Jeannette Ralston, 24, was a mother and resident of San Mateo, Calif., when she was found strangled in her car in early 1977.

Allen Ralston



By Adeel Hassan

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Jeannette Ralston was at the Lion's Den bar in San Jose, Calif., when she told her friends that she would be "back in 10 minutes."

She never returned.

The next morning, on Feb. 1, 1977, police officers found the 24-year-old woman strangled with the long sleeve of a red women's dress shirt and squeezed into the back seat of her Volkswagen Beetle in a parking lot a few minutes away from the bar.

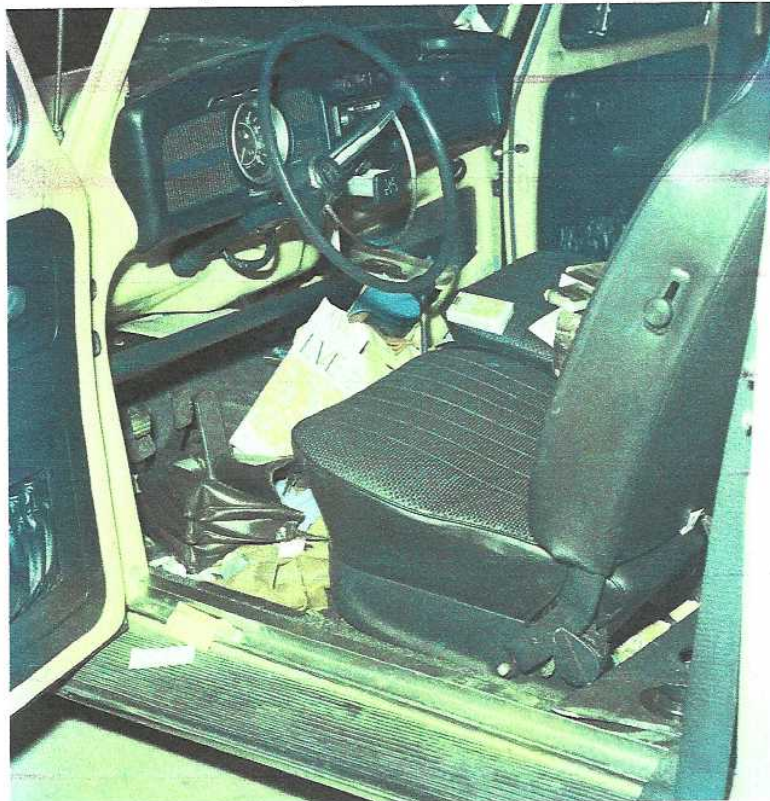
Almost 50 years later, the authorities believe that they know who strangled her.

Willie Eugene Sims, 69, of Jefferson, Ohio, was arraigned on Friday on a charge of murder in San Jose, Calif., and held without bail, after his extradition from Ohio.

He did not enter a plea and his next court date was set for August. It was unclear if Mr. Sims had a lawyer.

The investigation into the killing of Ms. Ralston, a mother and resident of San Mateo, Calif., went cold after no credible leads were initially developed.

The police found a carton of Eve cigarettes, a popular brand for women in the 1970s, and the shirt that she was strangled with. They also had a sketch drawn of an unidentified man that her friends saw her leave the bar with the night before she was found.



The victim's Volkswagen Beetle on the day that her body was discovered. The suspect's thumbprint was found on the carton of cigarettes and matched decades later. Santa Clara County District Attorney

“This was really an old-school solve in many respects,” said Rob Baker, a deputy district attorney who leads the cold case unit of the Santa Clara County District Attorney Office. “This case was solved by the original investigators in 1977 when they lifted that print.”

Though the original investigators had collected many fingerprints in the case, none of them matched those in the F.B.I.'s fingerprint database, despite several tries.

“We never give up,” Mr. Baker said in an interview on Saturday.

“Last year, we threw a Hail Mary by running all of the prints from the crime scene through the F.B.I. database one last time,” he said. “The big break happened last summer when the San Jose police fingerprint examiners told us we had a match that led our investigators to a small town in Ohio six months later.”

He said that the difference this time was the F.B.I.'s upgrade of its fingerprint search algorithm, which happened in 2018.

The police in San Jose identified Mr. Sims' thumbprint on the cigarette carton. In 1977, he was a 21-year-old Army private assigned to Fort Ord, about 70 miles away from San Jose in Monterey County, Calif. The base closed in 1994.

Mr. Sims had been convicted of assault to commit murder and robbery using a knife in Monterey County one year after Ms. Ralston's killing. He spent four years in state prison, Mr. Baker said.

He had no criminal record after that, and he moved out of California before his DNA could be entered into CODIS, the federal DNA database that is administered by the F.B.I.

Armed with a search warrant, investigators went to Ohio to collect Mr. Sims' DNA, and used it to match DNA found on Ms. Ralston's fingernails and the long sleeve that was used to kill her.

In addition, the old sketch of the person sought in Ms. Ralston's killing "showed a striking similarity" to Mr. Sims' booking photo in his 1977 attempted murder and robbery case, investigators said.

Mr. Baker said that the Ashtabula County Sheriff's Office and the prosecutor in Ohio "were indispensable partners in getting justice for Jeanette."

Ms. Ralston's only child, Allen Ralston, was six at the time of her death.

He said in an interview on Saturday that he had not been aware that the authorities were still working on his mother's case. He said that in May 2024, for his birthday, his father had given him photos of his mother that he had never seen before, including a photograph of her on the phone.

Mr. Ralston said that months later a detective called to tell him that they were close to making an arrest.

“How do you thank somebody for something like that?” he said. “A lot of these people, like the first detectives that were on the scene, who collected the evidence, have passed away.”

It's not the oldest of the more than 30 cold cases that Mr. Baker's unit, which was created in 2011, has solved. One dates to 1969.

Mr. Baker said that the day Mr. Sims was arrested was emotional for the Santa Clara County district attorney, Jeff Rosen, and for the entire cold case unit.

Mr. Ralston said he was at a loss for words to describe his gratitude.

“I mean what a great Mother's Day gift and birthday present rolled into one,” he said, only days away from his 55th birthday. “You know, my whole life I've never understood what Mother's Day even means.”

Sheelagh McNeill contributed research.

**Adeel Hassan**, a New York-based reporter for The Times, covers breaking news and other topics.