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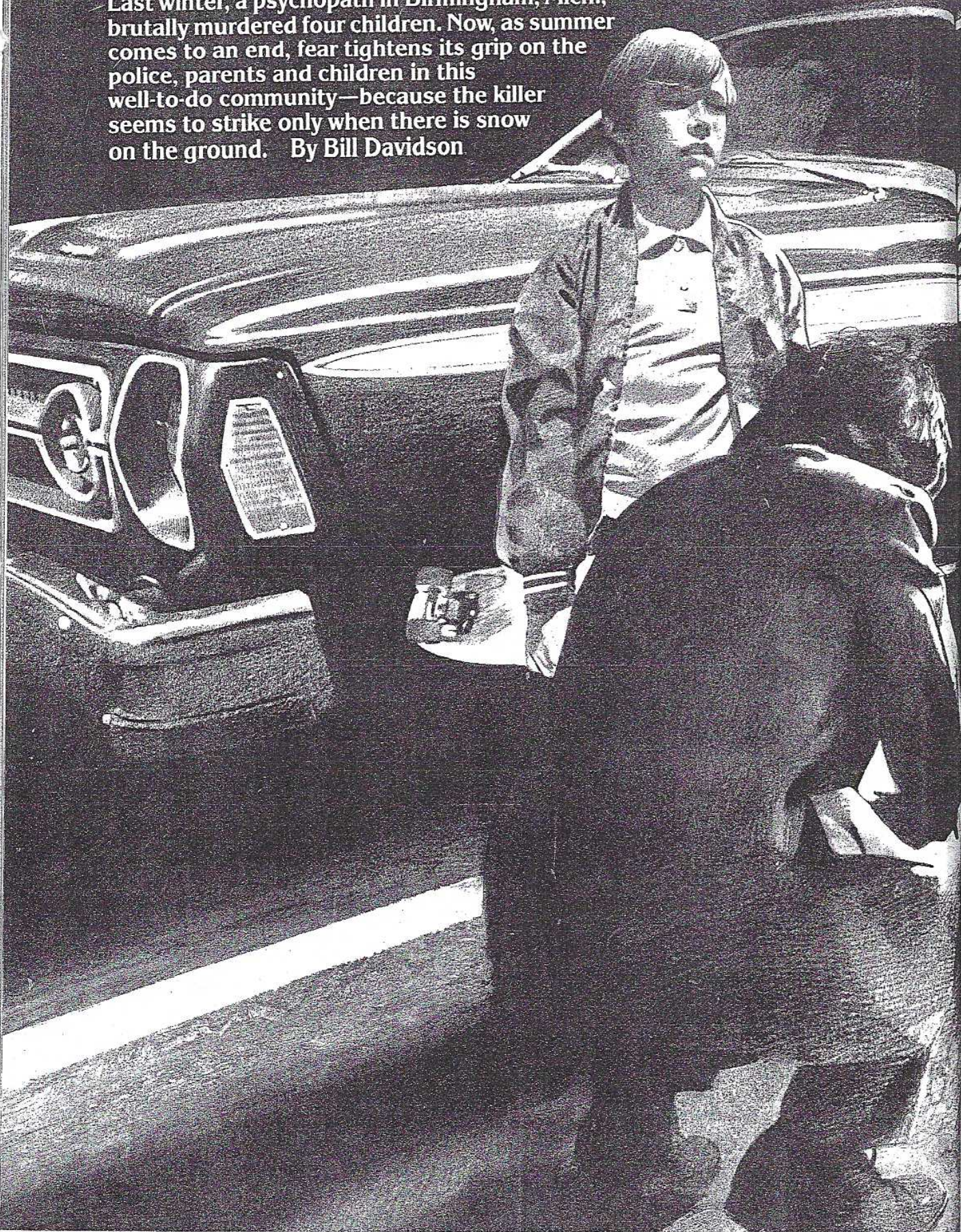
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The Town That Lives in Terror

Last winter, a psychopath in Birmingham, Mich., brutally murdered four children. Now, as summer comes to an end, fear tightens its grip on the police, parents and children in this well-to-do community—because the killer seems to strike only when there is snow on the ground. By Bill Davidson



You can almost smell the fear as you drive beyond the teeming slums of Detroit to the affluent suburbs to the north. The center of the fear is Birmingham, Mich. (population 28,000), with its smart brick-colonial boutiques, tree-lined residential streets, green manicured parks, and beautiful homes in the \$50,000 to \$100,000 price class.

The first thing that strikes you about Birmingham is the eerie absence of children. There are no kids in the lovely park behind the police station. No bikes are lined up outside the Hunter-Maple Pharmacy, the sub-teen hangout.

At the Adams Elementary School, children who ordinarily walk the few blocks to their homes are being delivered and picked up, morning and afternoon, by a traffic-choking procession of station wagons driven by mothers. Because I was a stranger, the mothers regarded me with hostile suspicion one afternoon, even though I was standing with school principal Robert Jones and obviously authorized to be there.

It was not difficult to overhear disturbing fragments of conversation among the mothers: "I'm so terrified I don't trust *anyone* any more. . . ." "I sit at the window all day watching even my neighbors through binoculars. . . ." "This isn't supposed to happen here; it's supposed to happen in Detroit. . . ."

What happened?

It began nearly a year and a half ago with the first of seven bizarre and baffling murders of children from Birmingham and surrounding Oakland County communities. The all-pervading terror peaked last March 16 with a series of occurrences just two blocks from the Adams Elementary School.

It *continued on page 250*

Police believe one deranged man is responsible for the deaths of these four children: (top) Timmy King, 12, and Kristine Mihelich, 10; (bottom) Mark Stebbins, 12, and Jill Robinson, 12. Above is an artist's rendition of the last time Timmy King was seen alive. He had been talking to a man in the parking lot behind the local pharmacy where the youngster had just purchased some candy.

Photographs by Wide World
Illustration by Alan Reingold



THE TOWN THAT LIVES IN TERROR

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was a beautiful springlike day, the first since the devastating winter blizzards, and at 8:15 that evening, 12-year-old Timothy King, the son of Barry King, a prominent attorney, decided to celebrate with a candy-buying binge. Timmy had no money and his parents were out. So he begged his 17-year-old sister Kathy to lend him 30 cents. Kathy was due to baby-sit for a neighbor and she and Timmy left the pleasant, stone-faced King home on Yorkshire Street at about the same time. Timmy, an avid athlete as well as a good sixth-grade student, never went anywhere without his precious orange skateboard. On this occasion, too, he took his skateboard.

At about 8:30, Timmy purchased three candy bars from Amy Walters, a clerk at the Hunter-Maple Pharmacy, five blocks away on Maple Road, the main cross street of the town. Miss Walters watched him depart through the rear

door of the store, which opens onto a partially covered parking lot serving the pharmacy, the Englander Triangle and other adjoining shops.

Later, two different witnesses (independently of each other) reported seeing Timmy talking to a young man in the semidark parking lot. The young man was standing next to a late-model blue Gremlin with white sidewall tires and was described as being about 30, white, tall, husky, with shag-cut, long brown hair, mutton chop sideburns and very well dressed in a rust-colored sport jacket and dark slacks.

Timmy King did not return home that night.

By morning, the police had begun a dragnet search involving more than 300 local, county and state officers. Timmy was officially listed as a kidnap victim. The search went on for six days, during which some citizens also organized vigilante patrols and there were threatened lynchings when blue Gremlins and muttonchop sideburns appeared in the area.

On Friday, March 18, Timmy's father Barry made an impassioned TV plea to the abductor, saying, "I don't know if you have children or want to, but please treat him like you would your own. Talk to him. He's a gregarious kid and he talks and listens. I don't know if you have a brother, but Kathy and Chris and Mark say to treat him like a brother. We all want him back. Please send him."

On Tuesday, March 22, Timmy's mother Marian tearfully asked the man in the blue Gremlin to let Timmy come home so she could cook him his favorite meal of fried chicken.

At 11 o'clock that night, Timmy's body was found in a ditch alongside a rural road in Livonia, about ten miles away. The boy had been gently laid out in funeral fashion in a snowbank (it had snowed again over the weekend). His red jacket and blue pants were as neat and clean as if they had just come from a laundry. The orange skateboard was carefully placed about 15 feet from the body. There were no signs of violence except for rope marks which indicated

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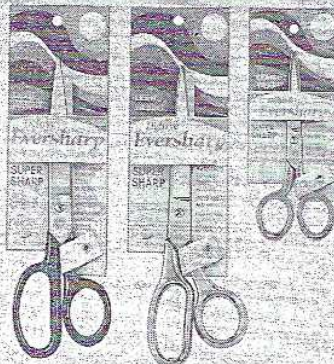
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that he previously had been bound hand and foot.

An autopsy was performed by Detroit's coroner Dr. Werner Spitz. The cause of death was suffocation—either with a pillow or a plastic bag—just a short time before the body was discovered. The boy had been sodomized; there was severe bruising and semen in the rectal passage.

And—in one final act of hideous cruelty—Timmy had been fed fried chicken just an hour or so after his mother had revealed on television that that was his favorite dish.

The King family understandably went into shock. So did the town of Birmingham, along with all the neighboring well-to-do bedroom communities. The six previous child murders had caused unease and apprehension. But now there was unquestioned evidence that the Timmy King killing was linked by method and circumstance to three others—and undoubtedly had been committed by the same psychopath, still walking unknown and unfettered in their midst.

The previous cases:

On February 15, 1976, 12-year-old Mark Stebbins had left the American Legion Hall in Ferndale, six miles south of Birmingham, announcing he was going home to watch TV. Six days later, his body was found in a parking lot, neat, clean, carefully laid out in the snow. There were rope burns on his hands and feet. Like Timmy King, he had been sodomized and then smothered to death.

On January 2, 1977, 10-year-old Kristine Mihelich left her home in Berkley, three miles from Birmingham, and went to a "party store" to buy a teenage magazine about her idol, Donny Osmond. The store is only three blocks away but she never got home. Nineteen days later, after intensive search operations by the police, her body was found, neat, clean, carefully laid out in a snowbank in Franklin Village. She had not been sexually molested but had been smothered like the Stebbins and King boys.

On December 22, 1975, 12-year-old Jill Robinson, after an argument with her mother in their home in Royal Oak, the town just southeast of Birmingham, stormed out and was last seen in a hobby store on Woodward Avenue. Four days later, she was found—neat, clean and laid out in the snow like the others. There were no rope burns, no sign of sexual molestation—as in the case of the other girl, Kristine Mihelich. There was one grisly difference from the other three victims, however. Jill had been murdered, not by suffocation, but with a single shotgun blast in the head.

It was this one difference, perhaps, which originally obscured the similarities in the first three killings. But after the Timmy King murder, a Federally funded task force of 50 top homicide detectives quickly associated all four child-murders (and excluded three others) as the work of a single deranged individual.

"We know he was a homosexual man," Birmingham Police Chief Rollin G. Tobin told me, "because he had raped the boys and not the girls, and the

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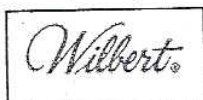
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coroner had found definite evidence of semen. We knew he had a cleanliness fetish because of the spotless condition of the children's bodies and clothing. We sensed some religious fanaticism in the man because all four abductions took place when it was snowing or when snow had been forecast, and in some religions, snow is supposed to have a cleansing and purifying effect."

Handsome young Chief Tobin is typical of the new breed of sociopsychologically oriented cop (he's completing his Master's degree in criminal justice at the University of Detroit). The strain of the multiple tragedies shows on his face. "When I was on the Detroit police force," he said, "I handled adult homicides and organized crime, but this is the most distressing case I've ever worked on. It devastates me when I have to deal face-to-face with the parents of the victims. It upsets me when I realize how much misinformation is getting out and causing panic in a population that's panicky enough already. Take the cleansing-snow theory, for example. We discarded that one early on. But hundreds of kids won't go out in the snow—or even in the rain—because they say, 'That's when the killer strikes.'"

"Yet we now believe the snow is a coincidence—that the crimes take place in the heart of winter, when it's *expected* to snow, because there are dozens of lakes near here with hundreds of summer cottages. In the winter months they are unused and empty and totally isolated. How else to explain the killer's ability to hide these children for up to 19 days after he's abducted them? Anywhere else, someone would be bound to spot the children and report them.

"Also, the story got around that Jill Robinson was shot instead of being smothered because she had started menstruating and was unclear to the murderer until the snow cleansed her blood on a massive scale. That's nonsense. We know our murderer suffers from pedophilia, sexual attraction to children. When, in his eyes, Jill became a woman, it probably violated his pedophilia perversion and he disposed of her in an adult way."

According to Chief Tobin, the most important contributory factor to the fear now gripping his community was the release of its psychological profile of the killer. "I had to come right out with it," Tobin told me, "because our psychopath doesn't fit the prototype of the dirty old man handing out candy. We have a good educational program in the schools against this more common breed of child molester and the kids have learned the lesson well. But in *this* case the children are going along with the killer and not resisting. They *trust* him. They might even *know* him. He could be a public official, a teacher, a clergyman, a scoutmaster, a doctor, even a police officer."

Psychiatrist Dr. Bruce L. Danto, a police consultant, agrees. His principal frame of reference is the recent Cadbury case in England, similarly involving the murders of seven local children. It took 18 months after the last killing before Scotland Yard solved the monstrous

crime. The murderer of all the children turned out to be a staid businessman in the community.

Dr. Danto and the police attempted to get their message across without causing paranoia in Oakland County, but they did not succeed. "In a way, I don't feel too badly about that," Dr. Danto told me. "We teach children to be afraid of playing with fire and to stay away from the water when they can't swim. What's wrong with teaching them to be afraid of getting into a car alone with someone other than members of their own families? It's *survival* paranoia."

If that's the case, the community, pall of fear and all, is doing a good job. Twelve-year-old Ricky Taylor, for example, told me about the dramatic new lessons he's learning in school. "Police-men come around," he said, "and they show us movies about how you're not supposed to talk to strangers or even walk up to a car when a guy asks you directions. But then we rap afterwards and even the small kids ask good questions."

"The policeman tells us what to do in all kinds of situations. If a guy pulls a gun and orders you into his car, you're supposed to run as fast as you can and put something between you and him, like a tree. Or if you run to a house and there's no time to ring the doorbell, you're supposed to do anything to bring people out to help you—like even breaking a window."

The lessons are taught at home, too. Peggy Darge, the mother of three pre-teen boys, told me, "We have new house rules, based on the buddy system. The kids can only leave the house two at a time, and when they get to where they're going, they must phone in. The school bus picks them up right in front of the house, and all the schools have a procedure now where if a child hasn't arrived by 9 A.M., the principal's office immediately calls the parent."

Suzanne Emmons' 12-year-old-son is not even allowed to walk three blocks to Boy Scout meetings any more. "We parents take turns driving the neighborhood kids," Mrs. Emmons said, "and we all watch to make sure they're getting into the right car. My son is under strict orders to call me at work the minute he gets home from school. If I don't hear from him by 3:02, I begin phoning the neighbors."

Glen Watson, an Oakland County deputy sheriff, says, "My kids only ride with their mother and father now. No cops, no aunts, no uncles, no neighbors. They're told to just say thank you and walk on."

In the general aura of hysteria, such measures have caused problems. In the days following the Timmy King murder, the Royal Oak police responded en masse to a call that "a girl is being abducted." The girl turned out to be having an argument with her own father who had come to take her home from a hamburger stand he no longer wanted her to frequent. A near tragedy occurred when a mob surrounded a father who was trying to induce his reluctant son to get into the family car for an unwanted trip to the dentist.

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So the lessons have worked. But what have they done to the overall psyche of the community? One woman, who was too frightened to be quoted by name, told me, "We are a community living in absolute fear—almost under siege, waiting for the next attack and not knowing when, where or who."

Mrs. Lana Hall said, "Every time my 11-year-old boy walks out the door, I'm afraid. I wonder if I'm going to see him again." Mrs. Hall has organized 50 parents to stand on street corners in Royal Oak every morning and afternoon to watch the children as they walk to and from school.

On the other hand, many parents are beginning to worry about what Mrs. Carol Jamieson calls "the long-term destructive effects of making your children afraid of everything and everybody." Alan Oblonsky adds, "It's like living in a police state. How do you keep a 10-year-old locked up in the house all day?"

The police are sympathetic to the parents but they can only assure them that such strict measures make it difficult if not impossible for the killer to attack again—at least in Oakland County. They issue their psychiatrists' advice: "Tell a child there are dangers in the world and he has to learn to avoid them. Tell it positively and in an assuring way so that the child isn't traumatized into becoming fearful of life in general."

According to Dr. Danto's disturbing psychiatric profile, the killer is really striking at his victims' parents in revenge against sexual and physical humiliation once inflicted on him by his own parents. He's also extremely intelligent and not likely to risk capture before his winter-sanctuary period comes around again. By that time, it is hoped, there will be no sanctuaries—only traps.

Birmingham's Chief Tobin actually sees some good developing out of the situation—"if you can find anything good in a tragedy of this magnitude." He says, "With the 50-man task force working under our \$667,000 Federal grant, we've actually sterilized this community. We've taken every child molester in the county out of action and we've found out

about a lot we've never heard of before.

"The day after the Timmy King murder, for example, a man was so terrified of being picked up by us that he turned himself in to Glen Eden Mental Hospital. He wasn't our man, but he was wanted on three other child-molestation warrants in other cities. We've got people turning in their own relatives and friends for the first time. We've uncovered potential child molesters and child abusers within families and in all levels of our society. It's a real preventive because they know we know—and they wouldn't dare to touch a child now."

The psychiatrists and psychologists also manage to offer some glimmers of hope. Dr. Bruce Danto finds residual benefits in the fact that the emergency has caused parents to take a much greater interest in their children. "Conversely," he said, "children are developing more respect for parents and parental authority, and they're once again turning to their fathers and mothers for protective support. That's a good thing."

"Another good thing is that neighbors are looking out for neighbors, reporting suspicious strangers in the area, getting concerned when Aunt Ethel hasn't come down to take in her milk in the morning. It's the healthy opposite of the Kitty Genovese situation in New York. In that case a couple of dozen people watched a young woman being killed and didn't do anything about it because they 'didn't want to get involved.'"

Child psychologist W. Alan Canty of the Detroit Guidance Center agrees. Dr. Canty told me, "Those Oakland County parents are really learning that even when it's not verbalized, they can transmit panic to their children. They've gotten much better since those first few weeks when I received hysterical calls from them in the middle of the night. Now they know that the child looks to them as a source of strength and is stricken when the protector is frightened. It has helped make them better fathers and mothers."

"Also, it has made them better people because they realize that white flight to the suburbs is not a passport to escape from the ills of the world. Actually, the wealthy kid is much more vulnerable to this kind of crime."

"The inner-city kid is more sophisticated. He lives with violence; he has a much more rigid protective shell. He's not about to trust anyone."

What about the lack of trust that is now epidemic among Oakland County's children? "It won't last," says Dr. William Nichols, who is president of the National Council on Family Relations. "I grew up with labor violence and bombings in Alabama and I came away with no residual effects. So did children in the Nazi concentration camps and in the Battle of Britain. It takes about two years of constant terror to form permanent scars in children. Only the youngsters with no parental guidance to begin with will be in trouble. Those with a good ego structure will weather it."

One can only hope so.

Mrs. Dee Dize of Family Focus (an anti-child-abuse agency) reports that when children cannot give voice to their fears, they often express them subconsciously in watercolors in their art classes. In a sixth-grade class she recently saw great splashes of blood red. She saw frame-to-frame paintings filled with ominous blue Gremlin automobiles. She saw representations of children being smothered by plastic bags pulled over their heads.

And then there's 13-year-old Carolyn, the daughter of a local executive. Her parents are divorced and she lives with her mother. Since the Timmy King murder, Carolyn rarely leaves the house. She is terrified of entering a room unless a light is on, and she cannot sleep if either her sister or her mother is not in the room with her.

And night after night she keeps phoning her father and saying, "Daddy, please come home and protect me." ♦

