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People

weekly

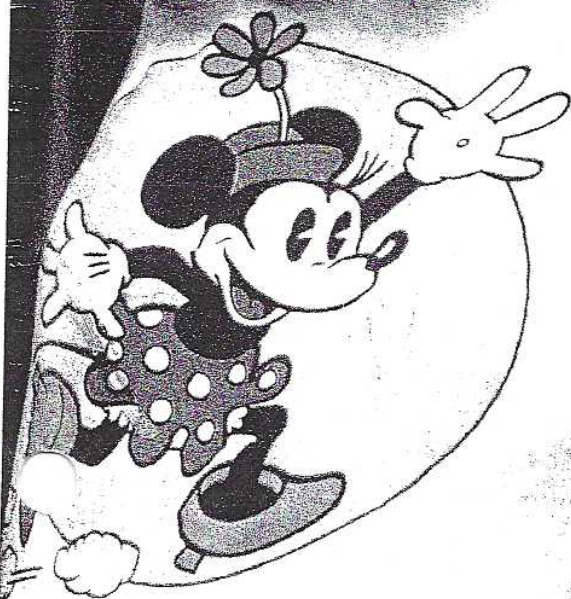
The littlest star of
'Close Encounters'

What's rising in
rock? **Freddie
Mercury of Queen**

**Begin & Sadat's
U.S. go-betweens**

It's Gilda Radner Live!

Everybody's
'Saturday Night'
date is nobody's
steady herself



UP FRONT

A SHADOWY CHILD KILLER CLAIMS FOUR VICTIMS AND HOLDS DETROIT'S SUBURBS IN A GRIP OF FEAR



Under hypnosis, witnesses who saw a man talking to one of the young victims helped police artists prepare this composite.

Police carry the body of Timothy King from a ditch. Although 300 cops formed a drag-net, the killer slipped through.



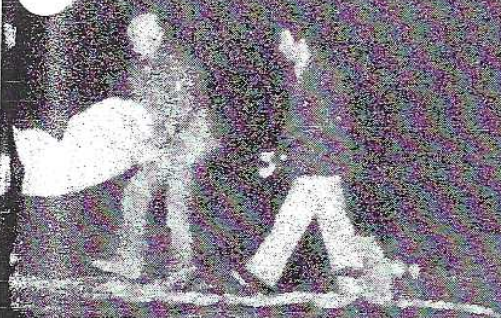
First victim Mark Stebbins, 12, of Ferndale was missing four days before his body was found on Feb. 19, 1976. He had been sexually assaulted.

Jill Robinson, 12, of Royal Oak was kidnapped 10 months later. Her body was found the day after Christmas 1976. She had been shot in the face.



A week after Jill's body was found, Kristine Mihelich, 10, was taken and held for 19 days before being smothered to death and buried in a snowbank.

Timothy King, 11, of Birmingham was abducted eight weeks later. He was missing six days before his body was found last March 22.



Oakland County, Mich. is a place of refuge—a suburban sanctuary from Detroit's urban sprawl. But in the past two winters four county children have been killed by an unidentified sex deviate who treats his victims with a perverse sort of kindness. Keeping the children from three days to nearly three weeks, he has bathed them, fed them and washed their clothes, then smothered them with the palm of his hand. (In one case, perhaps in panic, he finished the job with a shotgun.) Finally the killer has arranged the bodies in sleep-

ing position and left them where they were sure to be discovered, wrapping them when possible in a blanket of snow.

To combat the killer, who has so far struck only in winter, the county has taught its children to fear. In the schools, on milk cartons, bumper stickers and T-shirt iron-ons, and now in a recorded radio jingle, the warning is everywhere: "Don't Go with Strangers." In such an atmosphere, and with \$70,000 in rewards posted for information leading to an arrest, wives have turned in husbands.

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mothers have reported sons, and schools have been scrutinizing their teachers. "When the killer is caught," says one local social worker, "our children are going to have to be deprogrammed. Under normal circumstances, the fear we've taught would be unhealthy." For the present, tragically, it is justified. On the following pages, Assistant Editor Cheryl McCall of PEOPLE reports on the four known victims and their families, and on the continuing search for the murderer.

An anguished mother warns other parents

A likable 12-year-old whose parents had separated when he was 5, Mark Stebbins wanted to be a Marine when he grew up. On Feb. 15, 1976 he went to a pool tournament, then started on the three-block walk to his home. When he hadn't shown up 10 hours later, his mother, Ruth, called police. "We haven't had any kidnappings in Ferndale in 10 years," officers told her reassuringly, but all that night she lay awake. "I kept hearing noises and

thinking it was Mark," she recalls, "and the next few days I set three places at the table in the hope that he'd come home."

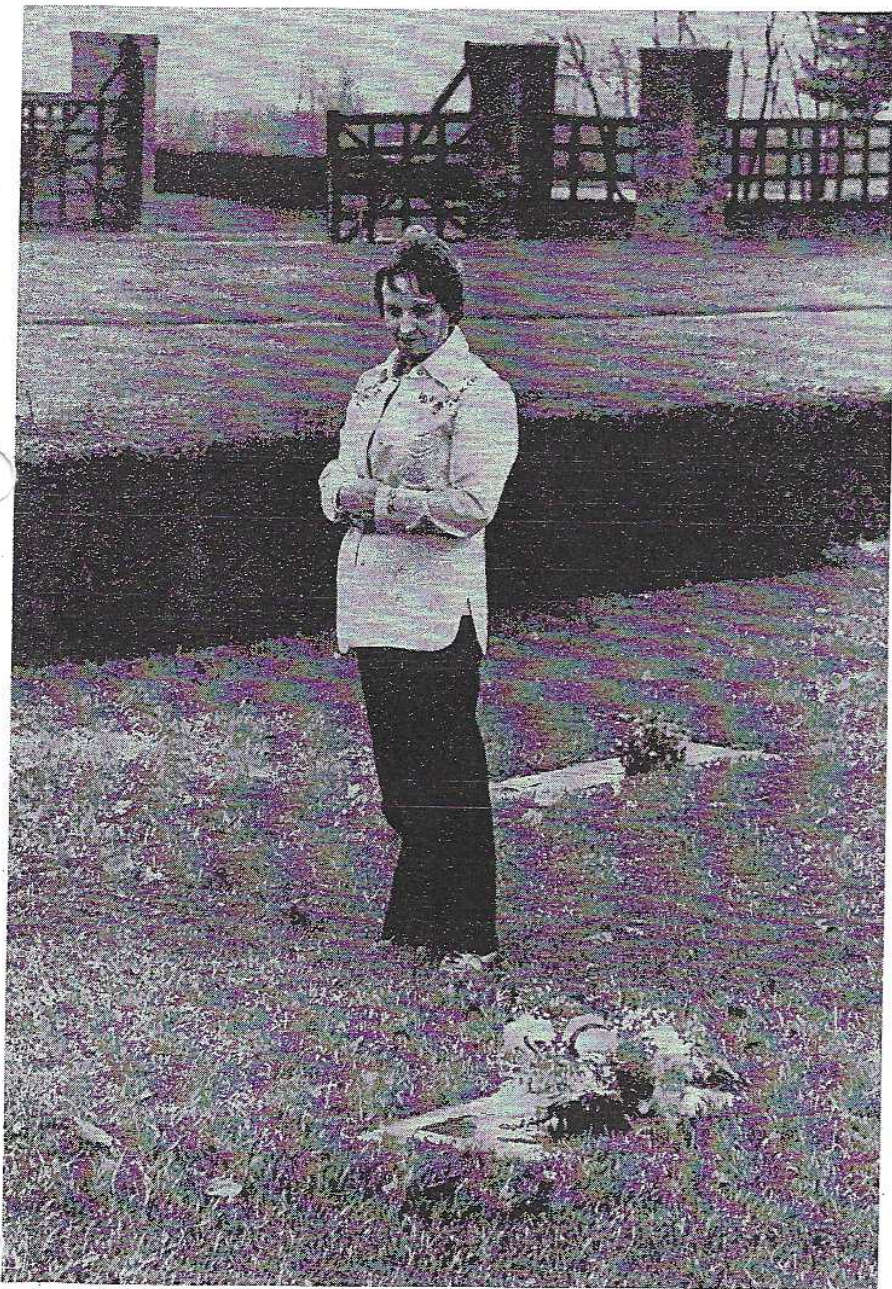
On the fourth day police found Mark's body in a parking lot two and a half miles from his home. Later, on the same spot, they found a commemorative card that had been given to visitors at the funeral home. "I didn't recognize everyone who came," says Mrs. Stebbins, 41. "I might even have shaken hands with the killer."

The family's suffering did not end with the funeral. After the murder Mark's embittered brother Michael, now 17, stopped studying, began drinking and using drugs, and was involved in a brush with the law. His mother, too distraught to work, has come to rely on welfare and, occasionally, Valium. She campaigns tirelessly to warn parents of the dangers confronting their children, but her exertions do not ease her grief. "Every time a child has been killed since Mark," she says, "it happens to me all over. I still think about it every day." □

A daughter's fear proved to be prophecy

During the year before she was murdered, 12-year-old Jill Robinson was haunted by an unexplainable fear. "I know it's crazy," she told her mother, Karol, "but it feels like someone's going to shoot me." She was taken to a child psychologist, but the anxiety persisted. One night last December Mrs. Robinson found Jill on the verge of tears. "I hugged her and held on to her and we both cried," recalls her mother.

Then three days before Christmas mother and daughter argued briefly. Jill left home on her bicycle, apparently to visit her father in nearby Birmingham. (The Robinsons had been separated for five years, divorced for two.) On the day after Christmas Jill was found beside Interstate 75, just a few miles from her mother's home, killed by a shotgun blast to the face. Tom Robinson, 40, head of the English department at Oakland Community College, is still angry over the way police at first treated the case. "They won't respond to what they consider a runaway for 48 hours," he explains. "But she wasn't a runaway. She was a kid who got angry and stomped out of the house and got picked up by a creep." The Robinsons have rallied to each other's support,



Ruth Stebbins visits her son Mark's grave. "The killer," says a psychiatrist, "enjoys seeing the parents suffer."

Photographs by Dale Wittner

but the memories they share can be treacherous. "It's the small things that get to you," says Karol, 36, a teacher in a court-reporting school. "The hardest thing is when someone asks how many children I have and I automatically say three. I can't believe that now it's only two." □

Kristine's murder means 'living in hell'

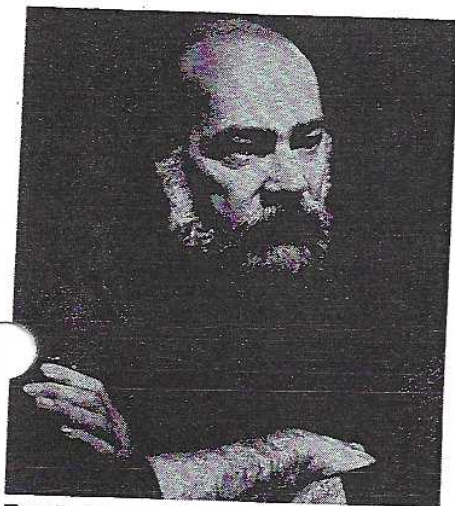
Seven days after Jill Robinson's body was found, 10-year-old Kristine Mihelich was kidnapped. Her mother, Deborah Ascroft, 29, relives that afternoon constantly. "Kris was bored, so she asked if she could go to the store

to get a magazine," Deborah recalls. "She wasn't usually allowed to cross Twelve Mile Road, but she had gone shopping for me earlier, so I gave in. I explained how to go, to wait for the light, and I told her to hurry. She promised she would."

Mrs. Ascroft, a twice-married divorcee, called police when Kris failed to return in half an hour, and for 19 days kept a round-the-clock vigil at her Berkeley home. She went on television to beg for her daughter's release and, eating compulsively, put on 30 pounds. Neighbors raised \$17,000 in hope of a ransom demand, and friends offered to mortgage their houses. Finally, a postman discovered Kristine's body buried in a snowbank six miles away.

Deborah still has not discussed Kristine's death with her three younger children ("I feel if they really want to know something, they'll ask"), and she has resisted seeing a psychiatrist. She has lost most of the weight she gained, has somehow kept working (as a waitress in a bowling alley) but feels that she is "living in hell." Her one consolation is strange comfort indeed. "Kris was really a joy," she says. "This is why whoever took her kept her so long. He was enjoying her company. At least this is what we have told ourselves, and I prefer not to think any differently." □

Kristine Mihelich's mother, Deborah, insists that sons Matt (rear) and Mark now walk to school with a group.



Tom Robinson (above) went into therapy after his daughter's death. Karol (with Jill's sisters, Heather, 7, and Alene, 10) says, "I hope we can go on living, remembering Jill, crying when we must."



A trip for candy cost Tim King his life

Tim King was 11 years old, the youngest of four children, and he had never been left home alone. But one night last March his parents were dining with a client of his father's law firm, his two brothers were busy, and his sister had a special date. "Since he had sat for other children in the neighborhood," his mother Marion recalls, "we decided he could take care of himself. And we weren't going far or for very long." At about 7:30 Tim ventured out to a drugstore three blocks away for 30 cents' worth of candy. He never returned.

A ransom demand raised hope for his safety, but it turned out to be a hoax. His father, Barry, spoke to his son on TV

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A psychiatrist tries to shake up the murderer

Dr. Bruce Danto doesn't know *who* the murderer is, but probably *what* he is. The psychiatrist, who is also a deputy sheriff in neighboring St. Clair County, has worked on nearly 2,000 homicide cases (including the Jimmy Hoffa investigation), drawing up psychological profiles, hypnotizing witnesses to improve their recall and testifying as an expert witness himself. Consulted first in the Stebbins case, Danto, 50, has become the most vocal member of the task force—using TV to talk directly to the killer, cajoling him in open letters to the newspapers and setting himself up as a possible contact. "I'm in there to shake the apple tree," he says of his overtures to the killer, "to get him to blow his cool so that he will betray himself somehow—call me, write to me, take a shot at me, something."

For a man who lives in the killer's bailiwick—in a sprawling home in Birmingham, which he shares with his wife, Jean, 46, and their four children, ages 13 to 21—Danto's role as lightning rod may carry some risk. But he works for the police without fee and seems to relish the challenge. His most promising lead so far was a letter last spring from a man calling himself "Allen," who said he was the killer's roommate. Danto set a date by phone to meet him, but the man never appeared. Danto has since concluded that Allen either killed himself in a fever of guilt or was murdered for his indiscretion.

"The most frightening thing," he says, "is that while working on this case, I've developed a list of easily a thousand dangerous people. It's obvious we haven't found the right suspect yet, but there are so many really good candidates."

'He's a predator who knows what he's doing'

Composite descriptions of criminal suspects have a way of dissolving in the light of hard evidence. But witnesses in the King case have described a white male, about 5'9" and 160 pounds, with brown hair, mutton-chop sideburns and a husky build. The circumstances of the abductions indicate the killer has a flexible schedule and freedom of movement, that he knows Oakland County well, and that he may hold (or pretend to hold) a po-

An army of cops hunts the killer

In a rambling annex of Oakland County's exclusive Valley Woods School, a task force of 35 detectives works to find the killer before he strikes again. With \$671,000 in grants from the U.S. Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the force—which once numbered 300—represents an investigative enterprise rarely matched in the U.S. Detectives have been drawn from nine city police departments, the offices of the county sheriff and prosecutor, the state police and the FBI.

The search, however, has left police frustrated at every turn. Volunteers have logged some 13,500 phone and mail tips—and cross-indexed them all by computer. Detectives have cleared 7,400 suspects so far (administering 79 polygraph tests) and have traced some 3,000 blue Gremlins of the 8,000 registered in the state between 1973 and 1977. They have staked out local homosexual hangouts, screened scores of child-pornography films in a fruitless search for the victims, reviewed files on more than 10,000 known sex deviates and flushed out dozens of closet pederasts through come-on ads in sex magazines.

For all that, police have never come close to breaking the case. "With a normal kidnap, you've got something to work with," explains state police Sgt. Joseph Krease, who heads the investigation. "But here, when a kid disappears into thin air, you'd have to go into every house in the county to find him." Still, no one is willing to give up. "After all," says one investigator, "it took the FBI a year and a half to find Patty Hearst, and they knew who they were looking for." □



"Those things don't happen to me," thought Barry King (top, with family) when son Tim disappeared. Brothers Chris (left, above) and Mark were Tim's pallbearers.

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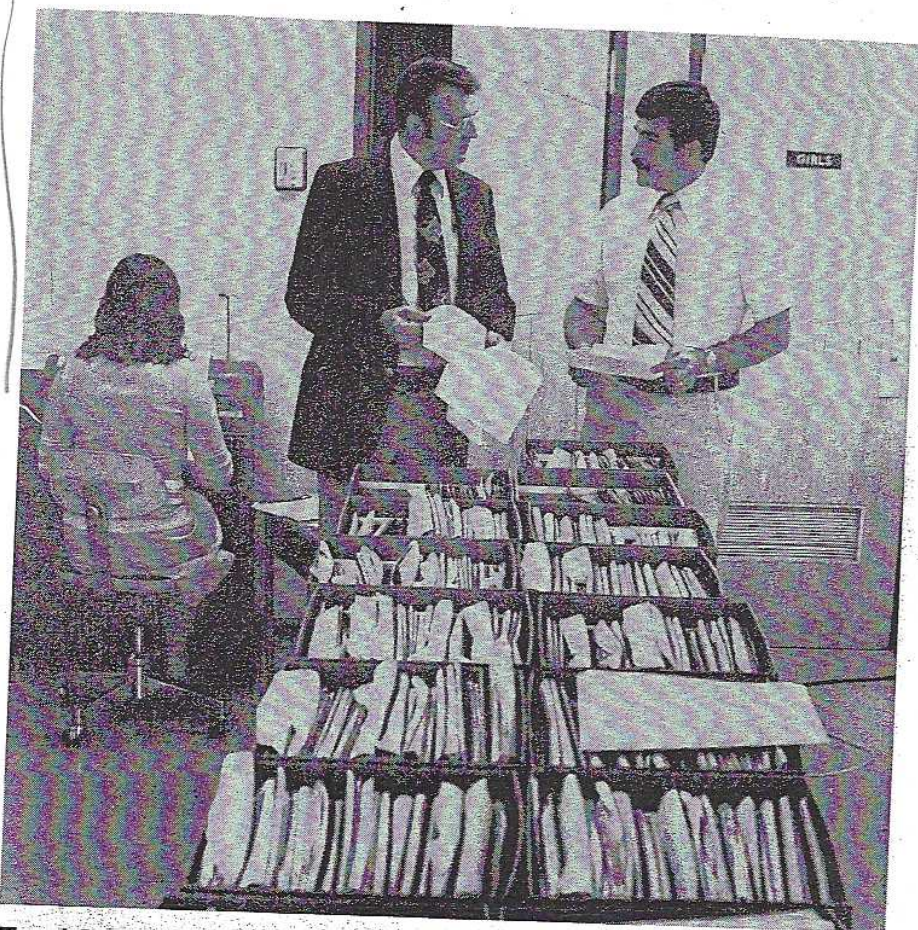
("We love you. If you miss Little League tryouts tomorrow, Mr. Rider said you could try out next week"), and Mrs. King wrote an open letter to the killer on the front page of the *Detroit News*. But six days after his abduction the parents' worst fear was confirmed: Tim's body was found in a shallow ditch 11 miles from their Birmingham home. The King case, however, gave police their first lead: under hypnosis, two witnesses described a mutton-chopped young man they had seen talking to Tim by a blue Gremlin in the drugstore's parking lot.

Since all the other victims' parents were divorced (before their children's deaths), rumors have spread that the Kings will soon separate. "They are totally false," she says. "It seems to me that people are just trying to make us seem different from themselves, so they can believe this could never happen to them. That's a very dangerous assumption." □

sition of authority in the community.

The psychological profile is more complex. The killer, says Dr. Danto, is a bisexual pedophile, anally retentive and obsessive-compulsive, with a paranoid, egocentric personality and a defectively integrated ego. Freely translated, that means he is a fanatical neat child molester who cares only for his own gratification and is condemned to repeat his own sexually traumatized history. "He is evening the score," says Danto, "for an abandonment experience somewhere in his early years. He is depriving the parent of a child the way he was deprived of a parent. He's a hunter, a predator. He picks kids who are alone, he knows what he's doing, and he's very, very careful not to leave clues."

Danto also gives credence to "Allen," who claims the killer is an embittered Vietnam veteran aching for revenge against the rich and the privileged. Other investigators, however, take a more fundamental view. "Look, a guy robs a bank not because he hates his mother or because his grandmother pushed nickels up his nose," says Sergeant Krease. "He robs banks because he wants money. Well, it's the same here. This guy kidnaps because he likes kids. And I think he kills them to avoid getting caught. Period." □



Though Sgt. Joseph Krease (above, left) and his task force have compiled cartons full of leads, none has led to the killer.

Psychiatrist Bruce Danto (below) has tried in vain to draw the murderer into the open where he might leave a clue.

