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In the hours after he placed a 2:59 p.m. order for a Whopper, cheeseburger, medium fries and Coke last Aug. 24, Billy Smolinski vanished. To the family that has searched for him every day since, the reasons for Billy's disappearance remain as elusive as the now-faded print on the fast-food receipt, plucked from his trash.

At his Holly Street home in Waterbury, where Billy, 31, tinkered with cars in the cinder-block garage, he left behind his keys, wallet and white pickup truck. He left untouched his bank account. He left unattended Harley, his beloved German Sheppard, regularly seen trailing his handsome 6-foot, 200-pound master.

And in the wake of his disappearance 362 days ago today, Billy left his close-knit family in an emotional limbo so consuming that they struggle to move forward with their lives. Daily, their emotions ping-pong between hope and despair: Searching for Billy, missing him, wondering if he is dead.

About a half-hour after the Burger King order, Billy knocked on a neighbor's door. He was going up north for three days. Maybe to see about a car. Could the neighbor look after his dog? Billy said he'd leave a key to his Cape Cod-style home, which he had been prepping for a coat of paint. The next morning, the neighbor could not find the key.

Billy's family dutifully waited three days before going to police. It was uncharacteristic of Billy to be out-of-touch for more than a day or two. He usually consulted them on the rare occasions he planned to travel.

In the week before his disappearance, Billy had flown for the first time in about a decade. He had discussed the forthcoming trip to Florida with friends and family. He agonized, because of a longtime fear of flying. But he mapped attractions like the Jupiter Lighthouse, suppressed his fear and traveled to West Palm Beach with the woman he had been seeing for about a year. By the end of that week, she would become his ex-girlfriend.

Despite the break-up, Billy did not seem distraught to friends and family. In fact, he asked another woman to go to Six Flags amusement park with him that coming Saturday. The date was not kept. That was unusual for Billy, who reliably showed up at his two jobs, as a tow-truck driver and as an apprentice heating and air conditioning technician. Just before he disappeared Billy drew a slow-season layoff from the HVAC company. At Waterbury's Durable Towing, Billy's boss immediately offered him extra hours.

The odds: one in hundreds

In Waterbury, a city of 108,000, dozens of adults are reported missing every year. During the two most recent years for which Waterbury police had records available, 2002 and 2003, there were more unsolved (142) than solved (122) missing-adult cases. Police attribute this to families that fail to notify them after the loved one shows up, or, the families themselves move on.

In most cases, the FBI does not get involved. Exceptions are violations of federal law or when local police request help. Nationally, more than 48,100 active adult missing-person cases are listed in the National Crime Information Center database. Of those, most are men. But the ones Americans know are Chandra Levy. Laci Peterson. Natalee Holloway: pretty, young women who disappeared.

Billy's mother, Janice, an attractive housewife who looks younger than her 53 years, at once appreciates and resents the attention given those girls. If only she had an e-mail address for Holloway's mom. "I'd write her very nicely and say, 'You've got national attention. You've got world attention. I can't even get local attention.'"

The night Katie Couric interviewed runaway bride Jennifer Wilbanks, whose case of cold feet prompted a national manhunt, the Smolinskis' television remained off. "She makes me sick, that woman," said Billy's younger sister, Paula Bell, shaking her head.

Police often find those reported missing just show up later than expected. They also discover the "missing" person living happily someplace else. There is, they note, no law against grown men up and leaving.

But Billy's friends and family reject that possibility because he truly enjoyed his friends and was deeply invested in his family. He kept mementos. A shell from a walk on the beach; a dated cork from a bottle of wine. When a friend died in a motorcycle accident, Billy tattooed the man's name and a cross on his forearm.

An avid snowmobiler and fisherman, Billy seldom bothered with television. He had talked about becoming a cop. He liked dogs, and anything with a motor. He studied auto mechanics at Naugatuck Valley Community College, but left after a year. On weekends, he drove in demolition derbies. Janice would watch through her fingers as Billy tore around the Hartford Civic Center or New Haven Coliseum.

He was adamant about family rituals. On Christmas mornings, breakfast came before presents. Memorial Days, Billy insisted the family watch Naugatuck's annual parade from a specific spot opposite the Fitzgerald-Zembruski Funeral Home. They sat there this year. Janice perhaps hoping Billy would show up, smiling broadly beneath his faint brown mustache.

He was dependable to a fault. If you were late or blew him off? Prepare for a berating, friends and family say. That's why Mary Ellen Noble, a former girlfriend who remained close to Billy, became so alarmed when Billy's neighbor called about the dog, Harley. "I knew, I just knew there had to be something wrong," said Noble. "Because he would never just take off."

The supernatural: hope is everywhere

The call from the psychic came at night. The woman told Linda Smolinski that her nephew, missing then for nearly two weeks, was at a hotel by the river, in Room 202.

Exhausted after a day of searching the banks of the Naugatuck River, from Watertown to Beacon Falls, the family bolted from their homes to the former Howard Johnson, near the Waterbury/Naugatuck line.

With police accompanying them that Labor Day evening, they searched Room 202. No Billy.

The psychic was called back, and her advice was revised. Not the HoJo, the Sheraton. "She said, 'I know it's closed, but you have to get in there,'" recalled Janice. Around midnight, the family and police caravan headed north to the deserted, under-renovation hotel, then being converted into the Connecticut Grand Hotel. But there was no Room 202. And, again, no Billy.

Months later, Billy's parents and sister chuckle while recounting that frenzied night. They don't know whether they really believe in psychics. But they do know that if a psychic were to call this minute with a tip on Billy's whereabouts, they would all barrel out the door as fast as the telephone could be cradled back on its receiver. "You have hope for everything," said Billy's father, William Smolinski, an aircraft machinist for Pratt & Whitney. On the good days, hope abounds. On others, despair prevails. "I don't even think he's with us anymore," Janice said one night in the quiet of her dining room.

A week later, standing in his garage, she nodded toward her son's dust-coated belongings. She spoke about the house, now occupied by tenants, awaiting Billy's return. The Smolinskis paid off his mortgage in January, borrowing \$75,000 against their own home in Cheshire.

"We all know his personality. If it wasn't foul play, then something is wrong with him," said Janice.

She seldom sleeps through the night. Her husband says he is no longer the same, outgoing, jovial person co-workers and friends once knew. And Paula Bell's doll-like face cringes and reddens, tears welling when she remembers the near-daily phone calls and visits with her brother. They grew up riding dirt bikes, snowmobiles and horses on the family's 10-acre Naugatuck farm. In April, the family attended a Brooks & Dunn concert, hoping to take their minds off their troubles. At the Oakdale Theater, none of them could applaud. It didn't feel right to cheer.

The search: every day a little agony

When a person vanishes, those left behind endure a distinct grief called ambiguous loss. "There is no closure," says Pauline Boss, a University of Minnesota family psychology professor. Without a body, families maintain hope. They mourn a loss, but also agonize about not knowing what happened. "They live with a paradox of absence and presence," says the author of "Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief." Families vacillate between believing their relative will return home and accepting that they might be dead.

Almost daily, a Smolinski family member covers miles of roads, stapling posters to utility poles promising \$15,000 for Billy's return or recovery. One early June evening, Billy's mother, father, sister, aunt and uncle pile into the family's Buick. Every few miles, a relative hops out. Five or six whacks of the staple gun, and they motor on, Billy's piercing blue eyes left to serve as haunting sentry over the roadway.

In Woodbridge and Seymour, where some posters have been slashed or torn down, the family strips shreds of old posters off poles and pins up new ones. Tearfully, they photograph posters scrawled with "Who Cares?" in black marker.

In Seymour, Billy's uncle, Bruce, parks in a cemetery. He jumps out, fliers in hand, and heads toward nearby utility poles. Janice stays behind. Around her, shadows from the setting sun lengthen.

"They found some bones," she exhales, the sound of passing cars echoing off the rows of nearby gravestones. She heard it on the news the night before. Human remains near a trail in Hamden's Sleeping Giant State Park.

Every time a body surfaces, Janice's stomach drops. Is it Billy? She wants to know, yet she doesn't.

Last September, the entire family stood by as police investigated a decomposing body beneath a Waterbury train trestle. It wasn't Billy. It was not their first whiff of death. Searching for Billy in the woods weeks earlier, an expert told Billy's dad: Sniff for rotting flesh. William smelled something, hope competing with nausea. A dead deer.

The Smolinskis' efforts do not stop at postering. They have spent thousands of dollars trying to find Billy. Private detectives. Lawyers. Advertising. Return address labels carry "MISSING" in bright red along with Billy's picture and Web site address. Janice spends hours online every week, posting messages, corresponding with other mothers who share her plight.

Saturdays at 1 p.m., the Smolinskis release a balloon with a letter to Billy attached. Billy, you are the love of our lives. It has been almost 10 months and still no word as to your whereabouts. Please my love, give us the sign we need to put you to rest. Our hearts are broken. The pain, anguish and sleepless nights day after day are just taking their toll.

On June 11, they released balloons for the first time: a red, smiley-faced one for Billy and another for a 23-year-old Arkansas man who disappeared a week before Billy. That man's remains were found earlier this summer.

In a moment of agonizing coincidence, Billy's balloon landed in the hands of another family named Smolinski, though unrelated, in Hebron in Tolland County. Maybe it is a sign, Janice says. Of what, she is not sure. They have not heard of another balloon recovered since.

The police: no signs of foul play

The National Center for Missing Adults wants law enforcement to adopt clear and consistent protocols in handling missing-adult cases.

"Literally town to town, it's handed differently," says Erin Bruno, the nonprofit's lead case manager.

The waiting period to file can range from hours to days. Some take a report upon first contact; others flatly refuse, deeming certain situations unworthy of opening a case.

It's different for children. Federal law requires police to immediately enter reports on juveniles into state and national databases because they are more likely to be at risk of harm or victimization.

In Waterbury, there is no set waiting period to report an adult missing. Rather, police response is based upon the circumstances, said Sgt. Christopher Corbett. Indications of foul play, medical problems or despondency usually elicit a swifter response than, for example, a person who habitually stays out for days. Connecticut state police take a similar approach.

Police believe that neither foul play nor medical issues are factors in Billy's disappearance. They noted his job loss and relationship difficulty. He had no criminal record or history of drug abuse. His Social Security number has not been used for a year.

"Obviously, it becomes more difficult as time goes on," said Corbett. "There's not a lot of information [in this case] to work with."

When the family began tacking posters up and down the Naugatuck Valley, Billy's ex-girlfriend admitted to tearing some down. She told Woodbridge police she felt harassed by their placement near her work and home. Police warned Janice: Stop putting posters near the school where the ex-girlfriend drives a bus. Hurt and puzzled, the family continued putting up posters, including one Janice replaced on a utility pole near the driveway of the Woodbridge school. In May, she was arrested for the first time in her 53 years. Woodbridge Police fingerprinted Janice. They snapped her mug shot. She left the police department that day facing charges of trespassing and disorderly conduct.

Waterbury police say the ex-girlfriend is not a suspect. Attempts to reach her in recent weeks by telephone, in person and through letters left at her home and work have gone unanswered.

On an early June morning, Janice's slight shoulders hunch forward on a bench in a busy New Haven Superior courtroom. Her periwinkle blouse, tucked neatly into cream-colored pants, matches her tired blue eyes.

For hours, the Bible-reading housewife watches accused criminals; some shackled hand and foot, parade before the judge. Morning turns to afternoon. Away from the bench, prosecutors chat with Janice. She explains that she is trying to find her son. The charges are dropped.

"It turned out to be a nice day," Janice says, descending the sun-washed courthouse steps.

Again, she can resume what has become the center of her existence: finding Billy.

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