

Lost In The Dreamtime: The Baffling Disappearance Of Cathy Moulton.

BY GRANTLAND S. RICE.

AT 5:30 p.m. on September 24, 1971, Cathy Marie Moulton stepped down from the granite steps of Starbird Music, then on upper Forest Ave., into the dark chasm of the missing and lost. In a split second of eternity, carrying only a new pair of pantyhose and two tubes of toothpaste in a hand-tooled Mexican handbag, Cathy walked from the all-too-predictable and planned life of a 16-year-old high school student into oblivion. Although modern man likes to think of himself as fixed in time, located and firmly rooted on earth, there were no phone calls, no handwritten letters, not even a strand of light brown hair lying on the shoulder of a lonely road somewhere to testify to Cathy's passing. Like footprints in the sand, only unanswered questions and a sun-faded 1971 photograph were left behind to haunt friends and family with their implications.

The passengers' manifest to the realm of the missing goes back to

antiquity and reveals no secrets other than thousands of puzzling disappearances including persons, as historian Jay Robert Nash notes, "who vanish inside ship staterooms, while swimming underwater, [and] into a fog." Many disappear with circumstances which buoy up likely explanations; Michael Rockefeller was last seen making for the Papua New Guinean Coast grasping two five-gallon gasoline cans from his swamped canoe. Others vanish into a realm their personal history seems to have prepared for them, such as political professor and intriguer Thomas Riha who failed to show up for classes in 1969 amid rumors he was abducted by the CIA. But most intriguing are those persons who, like writer Ambrose Bierce, calmly and inexplicably step over the border of the known into nothingness.

Nothing in Cathy Moulton's abbreviated past seems to indicate she was tagged for the missing. Born in Portland on June 28, 1955, Cathy and her two younger sisters, Pamela and Kimberley, grew up with firm but compassionate parents in a white clapboard house down the street from Deering High School. Lyman Moulton, who owned Ray Moulton's Used Cars until he retired in 1978, describes his daughter as quiet and contemplative, who "trusted people and was a good student." Although she had few close friends, Cathy loved to swing, and when she wasn't babysitting or helping out around the house she attended dances held at the local 7-11 Club.

"She seemed to be interested in helping people," claims Claire Moulton, Cathy's mother. "She was down the street all the time sitting with a friend of the family who was paralyzed ... It was amazing how well they could communicate considering he had a speech impairment." Cathy also sat with some of the elderly in the neighborhood and with a friend who was bedridden by a car accident. "She felt if you were nice to other people they would be nice to you," reflects Claire, who had long chats with her daughter every day after school.

Like her father and sisters, Cathy often wrote poetry, and the only

suggestion of a furtive inner life is tenuously rooted in this passion. At the time of her disappearance Cathy admired teacher John Glynn, whom Lyman Moulton claims was "in tune with the Hippy generation" and whose classes focused on modern poets. Glynn gave readings at "The Gate," Portland's eclectic coffee-house, and Cathy sometimes stopped by in the afternoon to hear him and others take the podium. In the early 1970's poetry at The Gate echoed a growing disenchantment with the Establishment, with the Vietnam War; and for many the words spoke of a truth out "On The Road" with Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Ferlinghetti. It is easy to fictionalize an unhappy young girl, inspired by atonal lifestyles and romantic cities, hopping a freight west to discover America. But, unfortunately, there is no indication of such closure in the case of Cathy Moulton. Even Dean Moriarty left the East Coast with more than two tubes of toothpaste and a pair of pantyhose. And while the poetry Cathy left behind reveals a thoughtful and idealistic interior, there is nothing in her verse that even cryptically foreshadows her disappearance.

Perhaps the most ironic aspect of Cathy's history was the fact that her life was seemingly just opening up. In the summer of 1971 Lyman took time off from his business and the Moultons travelled for 81 days throughout the United States and Mexico. It was the first time Cathy had travelled extensively outside of Maine. When she returned to Deering High School in the fall, Cathy was excited enough for Nancy Barlow, one of Cathy's girlfriends, to comment that she thought Cathy seemed happier than she had in the past. During the trip Cathy turned 16, and for her birthday the Moultons promised Cathy a gift from wherever she saw something she liked. And it was in Mexico that Cathy picked out the distinctive leather handbag that was to accompany her into the unknown.

Friday, September 24th, after a study hall at school, Cathy rushed home and asked her father to give her a ride into town so she could go shopping. "She'd had a run in her pantyhose and wanted to get a new



pair to wear to the YMCA dance," explains Claire Moulton. Mrs. Moulton gave Cathy money and asked her to get two tubes of toothpaste while she was out. She also gave Cathy several coins for the bus home. Cathy put what could only have amounted to two or three dollars in her leather handbag, along with a key to the house, and went out the front door with her father. Left behind were her clothes, makeup, and, on a polished dresser upstairs, money Cathy had made babysitting. And left behind draped from the back of a chair in her room was the new skirt Cathy had made to wear to the dance that evening.

Lyman Moulton dropped his daughter off in front of the New England Telephone and Telegraph office on the corner of Cumberland and Forest Avenues at 1:15 p.m. and saw her start up towards Congress Street. Cathy was wearing a navy short-sleeve wool dress, a navy gabardine double-breasted box coat with brass buttons, and carried only her reversible Mexican handbag. A little over two hours later, after shopping, Cathy stopped by Starbird Music to talk with classmate Carol Starbird. She told Carol that she was hurrying home to take a shower before the dance and that, as she had spent her bus fare, she was walking. They parted saying they'd see each other that night, and, slinging her handbag to her shoulder, Cathy stepped out onto Forest Avenue.

But most of the reports suggested Cathy disappeared south. The mother of Alvin Drake, then a young man who was often Cathy's partner at local dances, reported to police that the general talk around school was that Cathy went, or was on her way, to Boston. And Nancy Barlow remembered a girl in Cathy's study hall telling a story about going to Boston and having a good time. She said Cathy "appeared interested."

WHEN Cathy failed to show up by dinner, Mrs. Moulton began to worry. "In our family we always called when we were going to be late." At 6:30 p.m. Claire called the police and explained that her daughter had never gone anywhere without notifying them before and that she wanted to file a missing persons report.

"They laughed at me," she remembers, and the dispatcher told Mrs. Moulton they'd have to wait 72 hours — three days — before the police could take action. After checking with hospitals and friends, Lyman Moulton drove down to the

police station, where he was "explained the facts of life" by the desk sergeant. But Moulton was persistent, and, "to shut me up," they let him file a missing persons form.

In those tense moments in 1971 the Moultons initiated a vigilance that was to last nearly two years. At no time was the front door bolted or the telephone out of earshot in the event Cathy reappeared or someone called with information. Schedules were rearranged, and Mr. and Mrs. Moulton rarely left the house together. Cathy's room was left untouched in expectation of her return.

Oddly enough, the story brought little publicity. In the first 10 days of October the Portland Press Herald and the Maine Sunday Telegram each ran a picture in what, with the exception of an article in an Old Port newsletter, was to be the only newspaper coverage of Cathy's disappearance. Soon afterwards the Moultons got in touch with the director of Portland's FBI office, and although he couldn't start an official investigation without evidence of abduction, he managed to get Cathy's picture to appear at the end of several television episodes of "The FBI" starring Ephrem Zimbalist, Jr. Investigators at the Portland Police Department, who in 1971 had no funds specifically allocated for missing persons and who were seeing a rash of youngsters — almost 200 a year — leaving home, seemed certain Cathy was a runaway and, after interviewing family and friends, filed her report with hundreds of other missing Portland teenagers. And, in the weeks that followed, the Moultons discovered they were largely on their own search for their daughter.

"I don't agree with the way they [the police] handled things, but I understand they weren't picking on us," claims Lyman Moulton who says he would have acted more aggressively had he known then what he knows now. "This was a whole new ball game for us. We'd had no real problems to think about. Then something like this happens. You don't know what to do."

It was a period of hope and heartbreak. Early in November officials at Deering High School cleaned out

Cathy's locker and found a phone number scrawled on a scrap of paper. Theories raced through the usually calm Moulton household, but the clue only led back to a mystery. The seven digits rang a phone at Moulton's own Used Car lot. Several weeks later the Moultons received an overdue notice, addressed to Cathy, for a high school textbook. The school followed up with an apology saying they'd found the book. Mrs. Moulton spent much of her time seated beside her upstairs window where she could watch up and down the street for her daughter, dressed in Navy wool, walking home.

Meanwhile flotsam from all points on the compass washed up on the Moultons' doorstep and in Cathy's police file. Mr. Pinkham from the Giant Store in Brunswick picked up a boy and a girl with an unusual-looking handbag and gave them a ride into Brunswick center. A caller reported that they had seen a girl fitting Cathy's description hitchhiking on Route 88 in Falmouth. And a week before Cathy vanished, Harvey Brown, a worker for the Parks Department, saw a black male, about 20 years old, in a 1965 or 1966 Pontiac with a damaged left fender, Massachusetts license plate, approach a girl with glasses and long hair. She got into the car and they drove off.

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The most haunting clue came from Westbrook psychic Alex Tanous, who Lyman Moulton describes as "very dedicated" and who offered his services free of charge. "I'm not saying I do or don't believe," Moulton explains, "but you've got to try these things." One evening Tanous and Moulton went out for a drive around Portland. "He [Tanous] felt vibrations, or wha-

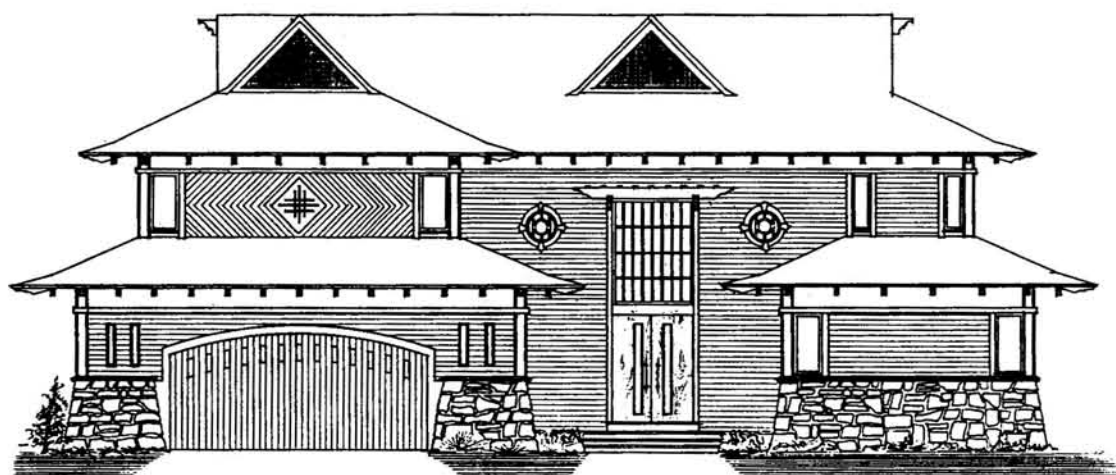
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tever you want to call them ... in the Munjoy Hill area. We came down Congress to Forest and down Forest — the way we figured Cathy would have walked home — to the corner of Forest and Park Street, across from the post office. Here he [Tanous] received "a sense" that Cathy got into a car and drove straight out Forest. When the car got to either Coyle or Lincoln Street, he wasn't sure which; the car turned left on one of those two streets and headed south ... towards Boston. Then he [Tanous] lost the vibrations."

After Thanksgiving in 1971, the Moultons received word from the State Police that a girl resembling Cathy was living in Presque Isle. Lyman Moulton closed up his business, and he and Claire drove north. Arriving, Moulton discovered that the sheriff's department in Presque Isle knew nothing about Cathy's disappearance nor anything about the girl in the State Police report. "They weren't communicating with each other," sighs Moulton. At the time infuriated, Lyman organized a meeting at E.C. Jordan's Presque Isle office and handed out photographs and a description to the area's police and sheriff's departments. Moulton then went door-to-door, store-to-store, asking questions and handing out flyers, at one point even crossing into New Brunswick. The police eventually discovered that the girl they had thought might be Cathy was in fact a girl who had disappeared from her home in Connecticut. The girl returned home, and, after investigating rumors of a girl who had taken up with an Indian, the Moultons headed back to Portland.

Although Moulton has been sympathetic to the difficulties presented to the police, he spares no emotion explaining his frustration with the system. When Cathy vanished, both copies of her social security cards were found at home. On the chance she carried a handwritten copy with her, the Moultons wrote Sen. Margaret Chase Smith and asked her to help them trace any activity on Cathy's number to find out if she or anyone else were using it. The Moultons were told they could write a letter — which they did

— that would be forwarded to an employer if he reported Cathy's number. He, in turn, was urged to present it to whoever was using the identification. If Cathy were alive and never got the letter, were working under the table, or wouldn't respond, or if someone else were using her number, the Moultons would never know. And they haven't heard a word.

"I really feel somewhere, sometime, somebody has to do something about access to files — at least make them available to police. I understand families have fights and so on. But when there is a legitimate reason someone should know," offers Moulton, who feels the barrier is at least in part economic, "That's what gets me. A person is an important



thing. You are. I am. And Cathy is. If the government wanted to, they'd turn hell and high water over to locate somebody. Just try not paying your taxes. But when it comes to missing persons, the doors are closed. We just want to know what happened to our daughter."

Sixteen years have passed, and Cathy's body has yet to float to the surface of some reservoir. There have been no deathbed confessions of false identity nor has a young blue-eyed woman sat suddenly upright in a hospital ward after long years of amnesia, asking for her leather handbag.

"Maybe she's living happily ever after somewhere in Canada. That's where everyone was going in the early Seventies. Or maybe she's bur-

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ied in a grave somewhere in Maine or Massachusetts ... or a skeleton in a morgue," explains Detective William S. Deetjen of the Portland Police Department. "That's the sad thing. We just don't know."

On New Year's Day, 1988, Deetjen pulled Cathy's dog-eared folder from the bottom drawer of his crowded file cabinet and opened it for what may have been the first time in years. Deetjen, who has tracked runaways across the United States for the past four years, was unaware of Case No. 60 141 until a colleague mentioned he remembered taking a photograph to a Portland couple who hadn't seen their daughter since 1971. "We get runaways, five to 10 a week, but here was a missing person," says Deetjen, who claims actual missing persons are rare in Portland. The discovery nudged Deetjen, a 19-year veteran and father of four daughters, to reopen the case and give Cathy and her family what he modestly terms a "fair shake."

A fair shake for the busy Youth Aid detective who finds five to six juvenile cases on his desk each morning, one or two of them runaways, meant ringing the Moultons' doorbell and spending several hours sifting through the poems, letters, and belongings of a girl who, if she is alive, will be 33 in June. As Deetjen reveals, "I've got the best of both worlds. I'm a father and a policeman. I have a luxury in that if something were to happen to my family I can do something. I want to give them [the Moultons] that luxury."

Although Lyman and Claire Moulton have learned over the years not to get their hopes up, they are delighted someone has taken interest in their daughter. "You don't know how important it is to have anyone try to do something — after all these years. It's more than we ever hoped would happen," says Lyman Moulton. "The older you get, the faster time goes," Claire remarks with wet eyes. "We love Cathy, and if she's alive we'd like to have the family reunited. If not ... well, we'd like to know that, too. The hardest part is not knowing."

1986 Watson fellow Grantland S. Rice has just returned from a year in Australia and New Zealand.



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