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AMONG THE MANY MEMORIES PEOPLE HAVE of Polly Klaas, one poignant detail stands out: All her life, the little girl had been afraid of the dark. "We're talking about a 12-year-old who couldn't sleep in a dark room, who had to have a hall light on, a night light on," says her aunt Juliete Klaas-Puleo, a mother of two, sitting in a back room at the Polly Klaas center, surrounded by now-useless cartons of flyers announcing the child's abduction. "I can't stop thinking about that. She was afraid of the bogeyman, and the bogeyman got her."

In Polly's case the bogeyman was a bearded stranger with a knife who crept into her home in Petaluma, Calif., where she was having a slumber party with two girlfriends Oct. 1. As her mother and little sister slept soundly in the next room, the stranger bound and gagged the other girls, then carried Polly off into the night. Nine weeks later on Dec. 4, Richard Allen Davis, 39—an ex-con with a history of alcohol and drug abuse who was out on parole following a previous kidnapping—steered police to Polly's body in a wooded area near Cloverdale, some 50 miles north of Petaluma. "There's nothing that can prepare you for something like this," says Marc Klaas, Polly's father, his voice breaking. "The happiest day of my life was when Polly was born. And the worst was when they told me she was dead."

What makes Polly's story even more wrenching is the fact that she might have been saved. Less than two hours after Polly was snatched, Davis drove his white Ford Pinto into a ditch outside Santa Rosa, about 15 miles north of Petaluma. It is still not clear whether Polly was with him at that moment, or whether she was still alive, but two sheriff's deputies—responding to a call from a property owner nearby—searched Davis's car, found nothing and released him. It was around midnight at the time, but Davis told the deputies he had been "sightseeing."

Although a bulletin about Polly's abduction had already gone out over police radios, the two deputies were using a different frequency due to a heavy volume of radio calls that night. They said later they did not even know a kidnapping had occurred. And when they saw an early, inaccurate composite drawing of the suspect (eventually revised to look strikingly like Davis), the deputies concluded that the man they had stopped had nothing to do with the case. Sonoma County sheriff Mark Ihde defended his officers' actions. "[It] was a fairly routine type of call," he said. "My belief is they acted very appropriately."

Authorities had few leads until Nov. 28, when the Santa Rosa property owner again called the police. She said she had found some suspicious items, including a piece of fabric that turned out to match the cloth that had been used to tie up Polly's two friends. On Nov. 30 police arrested Davis on the Coyote Valley Indian Reservation near Ukiah, 70 miles from Petaluma, where he was staying with his sister and brother-in-law, Darlene and Dick Schwarm, and their four children. Investigators then matched Davis's palm print with one found in Polly's bedroom.

At his arraignment last week, Davis, his arms covered with tattoos, appeared at times defiant, at other times tearful as he stood before a packed courtroom. He was charged with murder, kidnapping and a string of related offenses; if convicted, he could receive the death penalty. Although full details of Polly's death are not yet known and her autopsy is not complete, the prosecution says that Davis admitted strangling the girl and insists he acted alone. According to Sonoma County public defender Marteen James Miller, who met with Davis the day of his arraignment, the suspect offered no explanation for his actions, but Miller says Davis was taking a "potpourri" of drugs that night. "He still doesn't know why he did it," says Miller.

Davis is the kind of repeat offender usually described as having slipped through the cracks in the criminal-justice system. He and his two brothers and two sisters were raised by an alcoholic father, Robert Davis, a retired longshoreman, in a trailer park in La Honda, a mountain community 45 miles south of San Francisco. After his parents divorced in 1965, Davis's contact with his mother, Evelyn, was limited. According to people who knew him then, Davis was clearly a troubled youth. He doused cats with gasoline and set them on fire, says neighbor Ruth Baron. And he used dogs as targets for knife-throwing practice. He also began to drink heavily as a teenager. "He thought he was a tough guy, but if you called his bluff, he was chicken," says logger Pat Fluharty, 45. "Most everybody in town kicked his ass at one time or another."

Davis's run-ins with the law began at age 12, when he was caught stealing checks from people's mailboxes, and~ at 19, he went to jail for being drunk and disorderly. In 1973, Marlene Voris, 18, a friend of Davis's, died mysteriously of a gunshot wound. Though at the time the police ruled it a suicide, they may reopen that case

to investigate Davis's possible involvement. In the two decades that followed, he accumulated a lengthy arrest record in Northern California, including numerous counts of burglary, charges of grand theft and escaping from jail, several counts of assault with a deadly weapon—and two counts of kidnapping. (Davis has never been convicted of a sex crime.) Psychiatric reports issued after his first kidnapping—of a young woman at a commuter train station near Oakland in 1976—disclose that Davis said he heard voices telling him to commit the crimes and sometimes felt a "glowing" afterward.

In 1984, Davis kidnapped another woman at gunpoint from her apartment in Redwood City and forced her to withdraw $6,000 from a bank account. Sentenced to 16 years in prison, he was paroled for good behavior after eight years and released last June. He established his legal residence in Redwood City to comply with parole requirements, but in early November he requested a pass to visit relatives near Ukiah and never returned. At the Coyote Valley Reservation, according to one resident, the area had been blanketed with posters bearing Polly's picture and a drawing of her suspected abductor. One day, she says, they all suddenly vanished.

Last week, in response to widespread outrage that Davis had been freed on parole, California Gov. Pete Wilson called for mandatory life sentences for the worst repeat offenders. Polly's family, naturally, supports this measure. "Davis should never have been free to walk the streets of Petaluma, looking for an innocent child to kill," Polly's mother, Eve Nichol, said in a statement. And though both of Polly's parents feel that, for the most part, the police and FBI did an excellent job, her father is still troubled that police let Davis slip past them at a moment when Polly might have been alive. "Am I angry at the way they handled this?" asks Marc Klaas, who runs a Hertz franchise in San Francisco and was divorced from Nichol when Polly was 2½ "This is something these people will have to live with."

Residents of Polly's hometown of Petaluma—a city of 45,000 so peaceful and idyllic that Ronald Reagan's handlers chose to film his "Morning in America" campaign commercials there—are now struggling with profound feelings of shock and loss. "Polly has become more than a neighbor in Petaluma," said her father after her body was found. "She has become America's child."

Those who were close to her are holding fast to their memories of the bright-eyed little girl. She was a good student and a talented clarinet player, her friends say. She also did a mean rendition of Elvis singing "Hunka hunka burning love" and a hilarious imitation of a chihuahua in which, according to a school friend, "she'd slick out her tongue and move her eyes around." Jason Hafer, 12, who had planned to take her to the Winter Dance, knew this Polly as well. "When I first met her, she was shy," he says. "All of a sudden she blossomed into this hyper, fun person."

Polly spent a lot of time caring for others. "She had this maternal streak in her," says her aunt Juliete. "She worried about her parents. She felt emotionally responsible for grownups." Marc Klaas, who shared custody of his daughter and saw her about once a week, spoke to Polly the night she was abducted and remembers how excited she was about having friends sleep over. "She was very happy," he says. "She was really coming into her own. There was a real person there who was ready to explode on the world and just shine."

Grieving Petalumans are comforted by the thought that they did all they could to aid in the search for Polly. By the end, volunteers—most of whom had never met the child—numbered close to 4,000, and some 8 million flyers had been sent out worldwide. An impromptu shrine outside the Polly Klaas center in downtown Petaluma—with piles of teddy bears, balloons, notes and flowers covering the sidewalk—attests to the outpouring of emotion following Polly's death. "We ache. We grieve. We're angry. We're not done," reads a banner nearby. Peggy Dunn, Polly's third-grade teacher, a close family friend, begins to cry as she remembers her favorite student. "We have really been robbed of this light, this incredible beauty. It's gone," she says. Then she reconsiders. "No, it's not. A little part of Polly will live on in me."

Since the announcement of her death, Polly's friends and their parents have been gathering at night to talk about her. And many Petaluma students have consulted therapists who have volunteered their services. Some friends, like Hafer, keep returning to the volunteer center for solace. "The more I come here, the less I grieve," he explains.

Meanwhile, the community has been forced to educate itself about a new sort of crime. The only thing that might have saved Polly that night, says her aunt Juliete, is if she and her friends had screamed for help. "The idea that Polly was afraid her mother would get hurt [as the abductor had threatened]..." she says, her voice trailing of "Children need to learn to resist and scream no matter what." Some Petaluma parents have bought pager-size Body Alarms for their kids, and at least

one little girl says she now locks her windows at night "always."

If any good can come from this tragedy, it is that more Americans are taking the time to learn some basic rules to prevent children from being kidnapped—although it is not clear how most of these rules would have saved Polly. In this way, say her friends, the spirit of Polly Klaas will live forever. "She was one of those people who looked like she was going to make a difference," says Hafer. "I guess this was her way of doing it. Everyone loves her. I really love her. I know that she's in a good place."

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