

# REQUIEM

# for Jennifer



*Jennifer Shaun at nine months with Santa.*





# The image is one Jean Cusworth will never forget.

**It's of her daughter Jennifer, crouched, cowering, while rage rains down on her, while she's being murdered. Jean never actually saw this happen, it came to her in a dream, a dream she had while sleeping in her daughter's bed the night she and her husband Terry flew into Kelowna to identify their dead child's body.**

Now, almost four years later following numerous appeals, television re-enactments of Jennifer's last hours and hundreds of tips phoned into police, the man in Jean's vision still has no face.

"But no matter how much time has passed we want her killer to know we have not forgotten, that we will not rest until he is caught and he will never have a day of rest as long as he's free," Jean says.

Still as time passes whoever is responsible for Cusworth's death must be taking comfort in the fact that memories of some are fading and police have nothing to date powerful enough to nail him down. Furthermore, residents of the community have begun to put the chilling reality of her murder behind them. They don't necessarily remember who Jennifer was, despite the countless posters bearing her face. Many have forgotten that Kelowna, with its small town values, is still big enough to contain and harbour the savage killer of a young woman.

Let us remind you.

October 17, 1993, was a day like any other for Wayne Risso of Swamp Road. The air was crisp, but not unpleasant, as he set out from his home at about 9:30 and strolled down the long laneway to pick up the Sunday newspaper from the box at the end of the drive. About 60 to 80 feet from the road, something in the ditch among the bullrushes caught his eye. He stopped to look.

Lying in what he describes as the recovery position was the clothed body of a woman. She was stretched out on her side, her face hidden in the weeds, but her midriff was slightly exposed.

"The skin was very pale, almost white. I didn't touch her, I knew she was dead."

The newspaper forgotten, he rushed back to the house to call police.

Risso recalls the scene with a kind of calm only time will allow. Finding someone murdered along his driveway was an unsettling experience for the pumpkin farmer.

"It took a long time to get over that for me. I can talk about it now."

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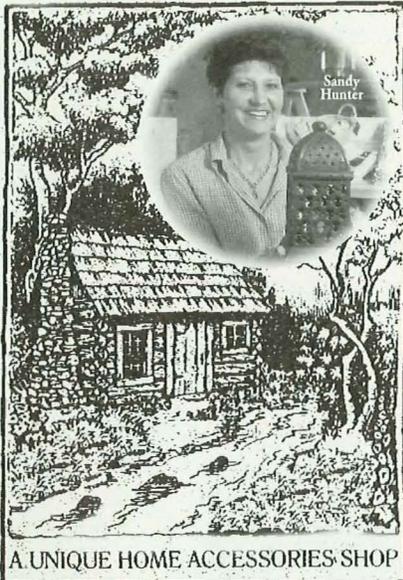


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*Jenn, a medal winner,  
in Blue River.*

But he, like so many others, is waiting for the day someone is brought to justice for the crime. Maybe then he'd find out why the killer chose to dump the body practically on his doorstep.

"That's something I just don't understand. It doesn't make sense. Why here, in my driveway, when there's so many other places he could have chosen?"

There are a lot of things about the case that seem odd, not the least of which is why anyone would want to kill Cusworth, a friendly, much-liked young woman seemingly without enemies. Was she simply a random victim or does this case go much deeper than that?

Jennifer Shaun Cusworth, petit, curly-haired with stunning blue eyes, was a relative newcomer to Kelowna when she met with her untimely death. Born in 100 Mile House on April 3, 1974, she attended school in Deka Lake, Blue River, Sointula, Princeton and Golden before graduating from high school in Nelson in June 1992. That fall she enrolled in Selkirk College, but dropped out a few months later. Her mother says because Cusworth was still living at home she found college a little too much like high school, the same faces, the same places.

"She wanted it to be different. It wasn't."

Cusworth worked for minimum wage for a few months and then announced she wanted to move to Kelowna and enroll in the Okanagan University College Human Service Worker program, an intensive 10-

month course training students to work with the mentally handicapped. She had expressed a desire to become a teacher, like her mother, but first wanted to pursue an education that would get her out in workforce quicker. The human service worker program made sense. Cusworth had the opportunity to work with mentally-challenged individuals through a high school course and although the behaviors of some threw her at first, she exhibited a kind of empathy few people possess.

Her plan was to get a job in the social service field and work her way towards her teaching degree by taking university courses part-time. But there was another motive behind her decision to attend OUC.

"She always wanted to live in Kelowna. She loved it there," explains Jean during a telephone interview from her home in Victoria where she now works for the Ministry of Education.

Jean's brother Ted Morris and his wife Monique lived on Kennedy Street in Kelowna's Glenmore area and were willing to allow their niece to live with them while she attended school.

Everyone thought Cusworth's plan was a good one. But because she failed to complete her schooling at Selkirk her parents wanted to give her extra incentive. They agreed to pay for either her books or tuition. Cusworth would have to foot the rest.

In a display of motivation rare in someone so young, Cusworth made a presentation to Unemployment Insurance Commissioners convincing them to continue making payments to her while she was in school. She was one of only five students in the province UI agreed to finance that year.

Cusworth moved to Kelowna in August 1993 and started school shortly after. She immediately made many friends and proved to be extremely popular even among her older classmates. Cindy Yelland, a student 10 years Cusworth's senior and a member of her study group, describes a teenager "mature

beyond her years."

"She was so responsible, so smart and articulate. Sometimes we would forget she was just 19."

Because of the nature of the program, Yelland says the students got to know each well very quickly. There were classes where the students were required to talk openly about their lives, their fears, their desires and they were asked to keep journals. Yelland does not recall Cusworth ever mentioning a boyfriend or admirer in Kelowna, much less having a dispute with anyone, male or female.

"I can't imagine her ever making anybody angry enough to kill her. I don't think she had a nasty bone in her body. She was fun to be around, she had a great sense of humor, she was kind, compassionate. I can say honestly that we would have been life-long friends."

Yelland does remember Cusworth expressing concerns to the study group about a man hovering around her one day while out for coffee with friends, but no one thought much of it.

"She was a pretty girl. She was bound to attract attention," Yelland says. "But we did warn her to be careful and to never, ever get into a stranger's car. Because she was younger than the rest of us, we felt a bit protective towards her."

Her classmates aren't the only people who thought highly of Cusworth. Her younger friends outside of school describe her as easy going, always cheerful and very friendly.

"She was as nice a person as you would ever want to meet," says Erik Mikkelson, a 25-year-old electrician who met Cusworth through friends she knew from Nelson. He was one of the last people to see her alive.

The evening of October 15, 1993, Cusworth made plans for a night out. She wanted to blow off some steam before hunkering down with her books all weekend in preparation for two exams and an oral presentation the following week. She knew she'd be drinking and didn't want to drive her truck so she asked her uncle for a ride to Mikkelson's home, promising to babysit the next day. Ted Morris waved goodbye to his niece for the last time as she mounted the stairs of the house at 1791 Richter Street.

Cusworth's last night started out quietly. She, Mikkelson and his roommate sat around talking and having a few drinks.

"Our conversation that night was about anything and everything, stuff you'd never think you'd talk to a girl about, weird stuff. She was very open, we didn't have to worry about her freaking out," he says and then adds, "So if there was anything serious going on in her life, I think she'd have told us then."

Eventually the trio headed to a down-

town nightclub, Iggyz, now called Side FX, where they met up with friends. Mikkelson says he lost track of Cusworth at the bar as they spread out and mingled. He can't remember her talking to anyone specifically or running into any trouble. But Cusworth reportedly bought someone a drink or lent him some money. That person has never been identified, according to police.

At some point during the night Mikkelson's roommate came up with the idea of inviting people back to the house for a party. It was originally intended to be just a small gathering, but word spread among the patrons of the nightclub.

"Somehow it ended up being announced over the PA system. We knew then it was going to be big."

They remained at the bar until closing at 2 a.m. and then walked back to the house. By the time they arrived there was a line up at the door stretching down the steps to the sidewalk. Mikkelson and his roommate scrambled to put away valuables they feared might be stolen. Meanwhile, more and more people filed into the tiny two-bedroom house, most of whom were strangers.

"Before you knew it, it was shoulder to shoulder in there. I think the cops counted there were 200-some-odd people at that party throughout the night."

Despite the crowd, Mikkelson says he was amazed at how subdued the party was. There were no fights, nobody really got out of control. The only things stolen were a tube of toothpaste, a razor and a stick of deodorant. The only thing broken was the cover to the thermostat, which was knocked off the wall.

"It was one of the best parties I've ever been to in terms of people behaving and all," Mikkelson recalls with irony.

Cusworth appeared to be enjoying herself during those early morning hours. After returning to the house, she resumed drinking from a bottle of Sambuca she'd brought with her that evening, Mikkelson says. And although intoxicated, appeared coherent as she mingled among the crowd. At no point did he see anyone harass or take a special interest in her. Cusworth was quite a social person, he says, willing to talk to just about everybody and most people warmed up to her quickly. But he also remembers her as a good judge of character and assertive enough to stand up for herself.

"I wouldn't say she was overly aggressive, but she certainly was no wallflower. She was



*Jenn's first communion.*

feisty, especially when she was drinking. She wouldn't take anything from anybody."

The police showed up at the door at about 4 a.m., but nothing about the party seemed to concern them. They left without so much as a warning, Mikkelson says.

An hour later, Cusworth walked up to Mikkelson and friend Faith Vorsard and told them she wanted to go home. She said she wasn't feeling well and asked them to arrange a ride for her.

"We told her to wait just a minute, but by the time we turned back around she was gone."

Vorsard and Mikkelson looked for Cusworth but she was nowhere to be found. They figured she must have gone outside to get some fresh air and decided to start walking home. That was not unusual for Cusworth, Mikkelson says. She often walked home to Glenmore, despite the distance.

"That was just Jennifer. She liked to walk. I know at five in the morning it's not too smart to do that, but I wouldn't put it past Jennifer saying 'I'm sick and tired of waiting, I'm walking.'"

Nonetheless, Vorsard was concerned enough to call a cabby friend, Paul Trumble, who worked for Checkmate Cabs. She asked him to look out for Cusworth while running his fares.

About 15 minutes later Mikkelson decided he'd had enough of the party himself and took off in his roommate's car — a Volkswagen GT — to visit a friend in



*Jenn, Wendell  
Nelson, June '92*

Rutland. He says he returned about an hour and a half later and shoed the remaining partygoers from the house. He fell into bed as the sun was rising.

Why didn't he offer his friend a ride home when she came looking for one? He says he wasn't planning to go anywhere at the time and when he did decide to leave, he simply didn't think of going to look for Cusworth. However, his departure from the party would end up looking rather suspicious to police when they began searching for her killer.

Cusworth in the meantime was making her way slowly home, walking along Bernard Avenue between Richter and Ethel when cabby Trumble spotted her the first time. He had someone in his car so he decided to drop his fare off before returning to look for her. It was about 5:15 a.m. when he caught up to her at the corner of Ethel and Bernard. Trumble told police he stopped and offered her a free ride home, saying he was a friend of Vorsard's. But Cusworth ignored him.

"She refused to come to the car and talk to me or even respond to me at all," Trumble reported.

Given Cusworth's friendly personality, her response strikes her friends as odd.

"It doesn't make sense. She may have wanted to walk home, but I think she would say something to him. She wasn't the kind of person to ignore someone," Yelland says.

Mikkelson agrees. He's not surprised she refused the cab ride, he thinks she probably

needed the fresh air. But not acknowledging the cabby seems out of character for Cusworth. In his opinion, she was still coherent enough to know what was going on around her.

"I think something scared her before that. It's just a feeling."

Mikkelson doesn't believe anything happened at the party, but curiously Cusworth left behind her purse, which she always carried with her. It was found days later in the roommate's bedroom, where she had stashed it for safe keeping during the party. Mikkelson believes she simply forgot it, but most women will tell you their purse is like a second arm, they wouldn't forget it unless they were in an awful hurry.

As the cabby drove away, he says he saw a car pull up along side her and someone yelled or honked the horn at her. That was the last sighting of Jennifer Cusworth. About 28 hours later her body was discovered by Risso.

Whoever was driving the car the cabby spotted has never come forward and so police are interested in locating the person or people in the car. Trumble says there may have been more than one individual.

He describes the car as an older model sports car, perhaps late 60s, early 70s, and because of the distinct tail lights he's sure it was a Mustang. He looked at the licence plate and noted that a couple of the letters or numbers rhymed in some way. He recalls the numbers as sequential, such as 123.

Police are reluctant to narrow the search down to just Mustangs, saying it was possible Trumble was mistaken. So officially they are simply looking for an older "muscle car."

Ironically, Trumble, the last known person to see her alive, is now in a psychiatric hospital in Ontario. Police say they have ruled him out as a suspect.

Ted and Monique Morris were immediately concerned when their niece failed to return home in time to babysit her cousins while they attended a ball tournament Saturday morning. It was not like her not to call if she was going to be late. She was also a no show to her afternoon study group.

"She never missed one before and to miss one so important without calling to say she couldn't make it was strange," Yelland says.

The Morrises filed a missing person's report on Saturday night. The next day they showed up at Mikkelson's house and asked if he knew where Cusworth was.

"They said they hadn't seen her since

they dropped her off Friday night and I thought that was really strange because Jennifer was always one to call home," Mikkelson says.

He contacted a friend who was supposed to be with Cusworth at a birthday party that Sunday.

"I asked her if she knew where Jennifer was and she all of a sudden just got sick and said there was girl found this morning down on Swamp Road. I had no idea, I hadn't listened to the radio. My stomach sunk. You never expect your friends to be involved in anything like that. When it was finally confirmed to be her, I was stunned."

So now, four years later. What do the police know, what do they have?

Well, Cusworth had been bludgeoned to death by five blows to the head with a blunt object. She died early Saturday morning and her body was likely dumped around the same time, while it was still dark. Police are not saying what the murder weapon might be or whether or not it's been found. It could be anything from a tire iron, wrench or pipe to a heavy stick or rock, anything the killer might have had handy. Police are also not saying whether the blows were consecutive, where on her head they were inflicted and if Cusworth had any defensive wounds on her hands or arms.

There's the information about the car, if it was in fact involved in the murder. Where could it be? Older model Mustangs are not rare in the Okanagan, but are by no means prolific. And if Cusworth was killed or her body transported in a car, it's not unreasonable to presume there would be a significant amount of blood staining on the seats or in the trunk. Nonetheless, the car remains elusive. Does it even still exist, or has it been taken out of the area or demolished?

We know that since she refused a ride from the cabby, it's unlikely she would have willingly gotten into a stranger's car. Was it someone she knew? If not, was she forced and would there not have been some kind of commotion? Police have a report of a scream being heard by someone in an apartment block at Gordon and Bernard, but they can't be sure she even made it that far.

What about evidence collected at the scene where her body was found? None of it has been publicized. Swamp Road is lined with ditches and there's virtually no shoulder, so it's unlikely the killer parked his vehicle at the side of the road and carried the body up the driveway. So there must have been tire tracks in the laneway that didn't belong to Risso's vehicles. Perhaps there were boot or shoe prints. The unfortunate thing is police did not secure the scene immediately. According to Risso they drove over the area a couple of times first.

Was the killer local? That's a tough question because Kelowna is popular among

transients and tourists. So a stranger is not out of the question. But the fact is most killers know their victims and murder in their own backyards, says B.C. criminal profiler Keith Davidson. The distance between the spot Cusworth was last seen and where her body was found — not to mention the short window of opportunity before daylight arrived — suggests the killer knew his way around the area well enough. Swamp Road in east Kelowna would not be familiar to someone just passing through. And Davidson says people tend to gravitate towards places with which they are familiar.

Cusworth was discovered dressed in the same clothes she wore to the party, which included an unusual leopard-print blazer, black pants and halter top and a pair of distinctive brown suede boots with long fringes. However, she was not wearing any underwear. Still, the official police line is that Cusworth was not raped.

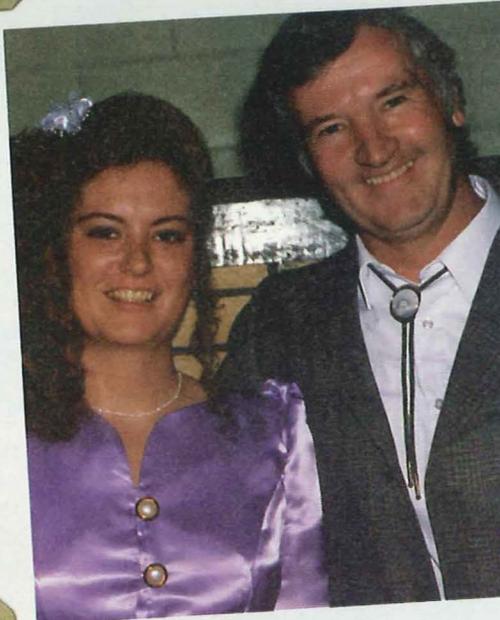
As for DNA evidence, Staff Sgt. Darryl Graves won't even say police has any, much less reveal what it is. He does admit investigators have asked individuals brought in for questioning to voluntarily provide a blood sample for DNA testing. DNA evidence could include skin under her fingernails, blood that is not hers or strands of hair. But if she was not sexually assaulted, then presumably there was no semen found.

*Okanagan Life*, however, has discovered that semen was indeed present.

Mikkelson was one of the first people police suspected in Cusworth's slaying. He says he was brought in for questioning eight or nine times and was asked pointedly on several occasions if he killed Cusworth.

"The officer said, 'It looks very suspicious you leaving just after she leaves and you come back an hour and a half later.' If I didn't have an alibi I'd be pissing my pants."

Mikkelson's alibi is his friend in Rutland and two others who were also there that morning. He says they will vouch for him. Police confirm that he is no longer being looked at in the case. They never requested a



*Jenn, Dad - Oct. '93.*

blood sample from him.

But during his interrogations police revealed some shocking information to Mikkelson.

"An officer asked me if I had consensual sex with Jennifer that night. I said no and then he asked if my roommate did and I said no. Then he asked if anybody had sex with her that night, anybody at the party. I said no, there wasn't time. She was at my house from late afternoon and with me the whole night until she left. Besides she wasn't that kind of girl.

"But the officer told me they had evidence Jennifer had sex with someone that night, but it wasn't rape."

If this is true, when did it happen and with whom? Was Cusworth seeing somebody nobody was aware of? Did she get picked up by somebody she knew, perhaps one thing led to another and then something went horribly wrong? And if she did have a lover who was not involved in her death, why has he not come forward?

On the other hand, how could the police rule out sexual assault? The presence of semen without trauma, doesn't necessarily mean she had consensual sex, according to medical experts. She could have been knocked unconscious and raped without it being physically apparent. What information do the police have to suggest she was not assaulted? Do they still believe this to be the case?

The last anniversary of Cusworth's murder was marked by her family with a private

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candle lighting ceremony, a gesture of memorial as well as hope that someday all the questions will be answered. More than 500 tips have been called into Crimestoppers to date and police have interviewed about 150 people. Graves says police are still pursuing some tips and have "individuals of interest" they are looking at.

Her parents' frustrations are understandably mounting as the months, years pass. While they believe the police truly want to catch this killer, Jean feels they are handicapped by a lack of resources.

Jean and Terry consulted psychic Gloria Brough, also an ordained minister, about their daughter's case and with the help of a photograph of the deceased teen, she visualized her last moments. She says the murder took place in a car and that the killer was somebody Cusworth knew casually.

"This was a frustrated individual about her age who I believed fancied her. Jennifer either did something or said something, some slight, that set him off. He became very angry and lost control. There was a great deal of rage," Brough says.

When he realized what he had done, Brough says the killer did not panic, in fact he was very much in control of his emotions as he went about disposing of her body. She described him as calculating, meticulous and not someone who would reveal his dark secret readily.

A sketch has been done from the description of the killer Brough has visualized, but to date has not been released publicly. Police fear it might send the investigation in the wrong direction. Graves says suspect sketches are not always reliable under the best of circumstances, citing the example of the Abbotsford killer, who did not resemble an artist's rendering done from the description of someone who actually saw him.

But if there is no break in the case by the fourth anniversary of Cusworth's murder in October, Jean says she and Terry may decide to circulate the sketch themselves.

Jean recalls the last time she saw her daughter with a voice choked by a painful lump that rises in her throat. It was at a wedding in Princeton the weekend before the murder. Cusworth was a bridesmaid.

"It was beautiful, she was beautiful," Jean says, obviously thinking about the fact her daughter will never get the chance of becoming a bride herself.

"We had a wonderful time together. It was like someone knew we needed this. When we parted Jenn didn't say goodbye, she was uncomfortable with the word. She always said 'See ya.' That's what she said."

Anyone with information on the Jennifer Cusworth case please contact Crimestoppers at 1-250-861-8477.

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