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magazine

OUT THERE



Third Bo Hunted Morro Bay

Searchers have been unable to locate the body of a Kern County probation department officer, believed drowned when a 28-foot cabin cruiser capsized offshore of Morro Bay Saturday morning, claiming the lives of two other Bakersfield men.

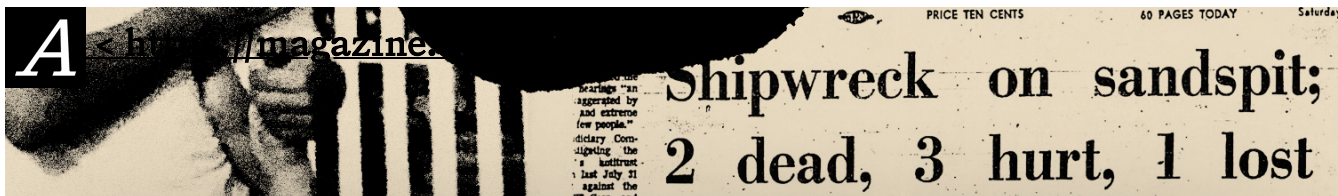
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*A FATHER'S
DISAPPEARANCE,
DARK FAMILY
SECRETS, AND THE
HUNT FOR BIGFOOT.*

BY KATYA CENDEL

The *Atavist* Magazine, No. 145

CREDITS

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Bruce Champagne stood in a small clearing next to a stump. It was mid-November 2022, and snow was already visible on the nearby mountains. All around Bruce were stands of reeds known as phragmites, some so tall they reached well over his head. Just a short walk away, through a swampy area, was the western edge of Utah Lake.

Bruce, a retired cop in his sixties, had come to this no-man's-land to research a mysterious sighting. A few years back, an elderly couple living in a house on a nearby bluff saw something they couldn't explain. The couple refused to recount their experience over the phone, so Bruce visited them at their home in Saratoga Springs, about 30 miles south of Salt Lake City. They told him that they went into the backyard one day because their dog was barking. Not far away, near a stump in the field behind the house, they saw a figure. A creature.

It appeared to be six or seven feet tall. It was dark, hairy, and humanlike. The creature stood up, paused, then walked away, disappearing into the reeds. The whole thing lasted three or four seconds.

After he heard the couple's account, Bruce measured the distance between the backyard and the stump. It was 60 yards, a range at which, Bruce knew, the couple would have been able to see the contrasting shades of clothing or skin. But they said that the creature was uniform in color. Bruce also noted that it was May when the sighting happened, which is when carp spawn in Utah Lake. Perhaps the animal, whatever it was, had been feeding.

Now Bruce was weighing whether it was worth placing game cameras in the area. He'd installed them at dozens of sites over the previous decade; a blue dot marked each location on a map on his computer. He

Ald me that retrieving data from the cameras, usually after 30 days or <https://magazine.atavist.com/>, felt like Christmas morning. Except in this metaphor, Bruce's gifts always turned out to be socks and underwear. He spent a lot of time watching footage of deer and squirrels, because the cameras never caught what he was looking for: the relict hominoid Sasquatch, popularly known as Bigfoot.

Bruce considers himself a cryptozoologist, someone who searches for and studies animals whose very existence is disputed. Unlike some of the more eccentric types in the field, Bruce is organized and methodical. He has published papers every bit as dry as those in other areas of study—they just happen to be about relict hominoids, sea serpents, and lake monsters.

His specific obsession with Bigfoot began when he was a kid, more than 50 years ago. In fact, it was right around the time his father disappeared. Bruce is reluctant to allow that the two things might be connected, but it's hard to see it any other way.

Bruce hasn't looked for the truth about what happened with his father nearly as hard as he's looked for Bigfoot. Still, the truth keeps finding him and his family. Over the past five decades, revelations about a man who left home one day and never came back have taken Bruce and the rest of the Champagnes by surprise—again and again and again.

1.

Bruce's parents met in the Navy. Alan Champagne, the oldest of five from an East Coast family, joined up right out of high school. Lynn Marie Brown enlisted after a brief stint in college studying art. An eccentric young woman who loved science fiction, especially Ray Bradbury, Lynn was 19 when the couple married. After several more years in the Navy, including a posting in

<https://magazine.atavist.com/>
Alan and Lynn settled in Bakersfield, California, a sprawling city of oil wells and orchards populated by the descendants of dust bowl migrants. It was where Lynn had grown up.

Alan found work in the communications sector and then as a probation officer. He attended and graduated from college while working. Lynn took care of the children. There were four boys—Bruce, Brad, Brian, and Barry—and one girl, Deirdre, whom everyone called DeeDee. The boys all had the same middle name: Alan.

Bruce was the oldest. His dad took him shooting, and Bruce used his father's Winchester 12-gauge. Once when they went fishing at a bass pond, Alan oared out in a rowboat to dislodge a fish his son had caught when it became tangled in some underwater weeds. He could have cut the line, but Alan wanted to make sure Bruce saw the fish he'd caught.

Alan also liked to fish in the ocean. Bruce didn't go on longer fishing trips, like the one his father scheduled in the late winter of 1972. On Friday, March 10, Alan drove two and a half hours from Bakersfield to Morro Bay, a small community about halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. He was meeting a group of friends who worked in law enforcement; they would be gone for the weekend.

Morro Bay got its name from the 576-foot volcanic plug sitting at the mouth of the narrow channel connecting the bay to the Pacific—*morro* means “snout” in Spanish. The harbor, completed in the 1940s, was a popular launch point for recreational fishing and boating. But there were times, especially in winter, when big swells made navigating the foggy channel treacherous.

According to the Morro Bay Harbor Patrol logbook, word that Alan's fishing trip was in trouble reached shore at 8:30 a.m. on Saturday. Someone reported that they'd heard a voice calling out for help from a sandspit stretching like a spindly finger up the bay's western edge. The voice belonged to 15-year-old Steven Stranathan. The boat he was on that morning had capsized.

Steve had been excited to embark on his first fishing trip with a group he called “the guys.” It included Steve's stepdad, Jack Stranathan, 58, a deputy sheriff and veteran of the Navy and Coast Guard; Joseph

<https://magazine.atavist.com/>
Aoydstone, 64, a doctor at a Bakersfield jail; and Harry Morlan, 58, and Irlan Warren, 39, both probation officers like Alan, who at 32 was the youngest of the adults aboard.

Steve would later remember kneeling next to Alan just before the accident happened. They were on the cabin deck of a boxy, 28-foot leisure craft made by a company called Land N' Sea. It was part boat, part travel trailer. It belonged to Jack, who was down below steering. The vessel was more than a mile south of the entrance to Morro Bay and a few hundred yards from the sandspit. The seas were rough. As the boat battled the waves, Steve joked to Alan, "Well, if we go, at least we'll go laughing."

The next thing Steve knew it was dark. The boat had split in two and capsized, and he was in the water trying to swim. The cowboy boots his stepdad had mocked him for wearing on the boat were dragging him down. Steve kicked them off, then wriggled out of his Levi's, flannel shirt, and parka—everything but his underwear. He swam toward the surface. The water got brighter, then brighter still. Steve wondered if he'd make it. Just as he felt sure his lungs would explode, his head burst out of the water.

Steve saw his stepfather floating lifeless nearby. He also saw Harry Morlan clinging to the engines at the stern of the overturned hull. Steve and Harry managed to swim to the sandspit, where another body had washed up: It was Joseph Boydstone. Steve dragged him from the surf.

Soon a Harbor Patrol boat arrived. By 9 a.m. the Coast Guard cutter *Cape Hedge* was conducting a shoreline search of a five-mile area. Rescue personnel found debris from the boat: two fenders, a canopy. Irlan Warren was also found, alive. Irlan said that after being flung into the water, he swam to the surface. Sometime later, he was able to grab the boat's propeller shaft and wait for rescue.

The only man unaccounted for was Alan.

At 10:57, an Army helicopter was dispatched to the scene, followed by one from the Navy. By 11:05, a Coast Guard plane had arrived. The

A pilots made low passes along the ocean side of the sandspit but found nothing. <https://magazine.atavist.com/>

Meanwhile a dozen firefighters and harbor patrolmen headed toward the white and yellow hull, which by then had beached. Scattered among the driftwood and kelp on the sand were ripped sections of fiberglass, a yellow seat cushion, and a paper plate. Using axes, a crowbar, and a power saw, the men cut a hole in what Land N' Sea claimed was a "virtually unsinkable" boat. Someone reached into the boat's cabin and pulled out a leather sandal and a gray plastic box. The crew shone a flashlight inside but couldn't get a clear view. A rescuer was lowered headfirst into an opening, but if Alan's body was inside he couldn't see it.

The Navy tried to flip the hull upright. A rope was slipped under the bow and the other end was attached to a chopper. Three times an attempt was made to lift the wreckage, without success. Shovels came out, and men loosened the sand around the hull. On the fourth try, the helicopter was able to lift the hull and then slam it back down, right side up.

It was now 12:40. The tide was coming in, the ocean lapping at the men's ankles. From the hull they pulled a waterlogged suitcase, a pillow, and a dented teakettle. Scouring the beach once more, they found a sleeping bag and a tabletop. But there was no body.

There never would be. Which was strange.

"We do have probably a disproportionate amount of accidents out here just because the coast is rough," said Eric Endersby, who recently retired as director of the Morro Bay Harbor Patrol. Endersby didn't work the 1972 rescue, but he knows the history of the bay as well as anyone. He said that boating accidents resulting in death are rare. But what's even more unusual is someone disappearing after a wreck. "If somebody's lost in the surf, even if they sink, they eventually wash in just because all the wave energy pushes them," Eric said.

"In my thirty years," he continued, "we've never not recovered somebody."

*THERE WAS NO CASKET AT THE SERVICE,
BECAUSE THERE WAS NO BODY. SOMEONE AT
CHURCH TOLD BRUCE ABOUT CAVES AROUND
MORRO BAY—MAYBE ALAN MADE IT TO ONE OF
THOSE.*

Bruce was playing in the family’s backyard in Bakersfield when his mom came outside. “Your dad is missing,” Lynn said. Bruce had argued with his dad the day before. His father was tough with him, Bruce told me, “physical.” Bruce doesn’t remember what they fought about, but it stayed with him. “My memories are kind of built around that,” he said.

Bruce’s brother Brad remembered adults gathering in the family’s single-story house, and whatever they talked about seemed serious. Bruce’s sister, DeeDee, went to stay with a friend, where she heard whispers, chatter. It was about her dad.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Your father is dead.”

DeeDee started to cry. Someone told her not to.

The details of the accident were murky. About all anyone could agree on was that Jack Stranathan’s boat had capsized. Press coverage suggested that Alan was seen alive in the water, but Steve Stranathan could only remember his presence on deck before they went under. Irlan Warren told a newspaper reporter that there was “some confusion” about what happened after the accident. “I’d rather not comment on that portion,” he said. Harry Morlan also declined to comment.

A <https://magazine.atavist.com/> here was a memorial service for Alan. His mother flew in with two of his siblings. Alan's son Brad, who was six at the time, remembers "crying like a baby." In the days and weeks that followed, Lynn did a lot of crying too, usually alone, locked in her room. But she didn't talk about Alan, not with the kids anyway.

Reading the silence, the Champagne siblings learned not to mention their father. Barry recalled that the only time it seemed OK to bring him up was when the family drove past the communications tower where Alan once worked. Spotting the tall antenna on Mount Vernon Avenue, the kids would say, "That's Dad's tower." Lynn didn't seem to mind.

The children felt Alan's absence in different ways. A man from the church the Champagnes attended accompanied DeeDee to father-daughter dances so she wouldn't be left out. Brian was aware of only one other kid who didn't have a father, but that was because of a divorce—nobody else his age had a "dead dad." If Alan were alive, Brad supposed that he wouldn't be so terrible at Little League.

Barry was only three when Alan vanished, so he had no memories of his dad at all. Lynn once told him that before heading out of town for the fishing trip, Alan had said goodbye at the house when Lynn and Barry were the only ones home. That made Barry the last of the kids his father saw. Barry held on to what his mother told him—a memory that wasn't even his.

As for Bruce, he was told that he was now the man of the house and needed to step up. He felt responsible for maintaining order, making sure things got done. He also felt that it was his job to protect his mother. "He was kind of jerky when we were kids," Barry recalled. Bruce imitated his dad: He got physical with his younger siblings. He thought that's what he was supposed to do.

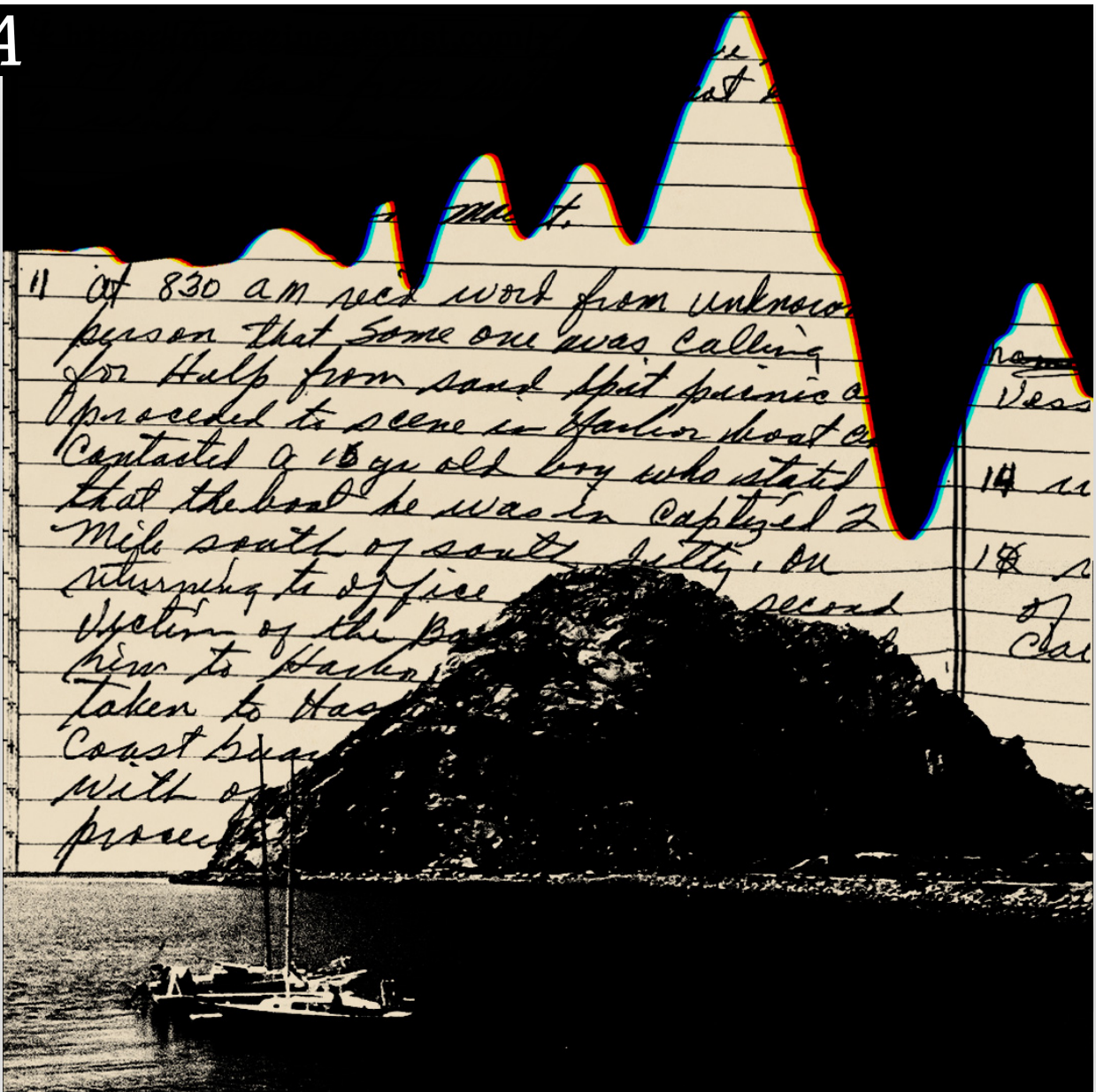
His father's accident wasn't the first time Bruce lost someone to Morro Bay. His best friend, Scott Keller, went fishing there one weekend in 1970, when they were in third grade. The Friday before the trip, Scott was super excited. On Monday, someone at school told Bruce that Scott wasn't coming back; the boat he'd been on had

<https://magazine.atavist.com/>
Apsized, and Scott drowned. At the funeral, Bruce saw his best friend lying in a coffin, a Cub Scouts ring on his finger.

Scott was clearly dead. With Alan things were more complicated. There was no casket at the service, because there was no body. Someone at church told him about caves around Morro Bay—maybe Alan made it to one of those. For a while, he held out hope.



A



Amid all the tragedy and uncertainty of his childhood, Bruce became a kid who liked myths. Except that isn't quite the right way to frame it. He liked learning about what most people dismissed as myths. He wasn't so sure they were myths at all.

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Bruce first encountered Bigfoot two years before his father disappeared, in a Bakersfield movie theater. He quickly forgot the feature he watched with his family that day, but not the footage that came on at intermission. Shot on 16-millimeter film by Roger Patterson and Bob Gimlin in Northern California in 1967, the silent, grainy sequence lasts less than a minute. A figure appears at the edge of a clearing, a massive apelike creature walking upright, its muscles rippling beneath a shiny black coat. The camera wobbles, dips, then rises again, capturing the figure as it moves beside a creek, its long arms swinging. It turns and looks back briefly before heading into the trees, out of sight.

The Patterson-Gimlin footage was a sensation, particularly in the western U.S. Plenty of people called it a hoax, but others considered it proof that Bigfoot existed. Bruce was one of them. In an era when the makeup used on the actors in *Planet of the Apes* was the pinnacle of special effects, he was sure that the Bigfoot he saw on that screen couldn't be fake. Its proportions weren't human, nor was its gait. It looked like it was gliding.

About a year after the boat accident, Bruce saw *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, a horror docudrama about a Bigfoot-like creature called the Fouke Monster believed to have terrorized people in Arkansas. When the creature reached through a window to grab someone, Bruce was frightened but also excited. To his younger siblings it was just a monster movie. To Bruce it rekindled the curiosity he felt watching the Patterson-Gimlin footage.

After that he spent hot summer afternoons in the library devouring books on Bigfoot and other creatures he had little or no chance of ever seeing in real life. He watched documentaries and clipped newspaper articles about mythical animals, filling scrapbooks. As he got older, Bruce took the obsession further, spending whole days and nights in the mountains outside Bakersfield, hoping to catch a glimpse of Bigfoot—even though he was hundreds of miles south of where the Patterson-Gimlin film was shot. He slept in trees to avoid scorpions and rattlesnakes.

Once, he went fishing with two friends, camping about 20 miles from a place called Painted Rock, famous for its ancient pictographic

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A paintings; one of the images, known as Hairy Man, depicts a tall two-legged creature with very long hair. On that trip, Bruce saw what looked like a footprint in the sand at the edge of a creek. The print was approximately 18 inches long. The sand was pockmarked with rain that had only just stopped, but there were no marks in the footprint. Whatever made the print had been there recently. Bruce looked at the dense woods nearby and saw branches that had been bent and broken seven or more feet off the ground.

To him it seemed like Bigfoot had just been there. And though he was always sure he'd pursue the creature if he saw it, now he was terrified.

"We have to leave," he said to his friends. "Now."

At home Bruce struggled. The authority he wielded over his siblings created rifts that would last decades. It got so bad that when Bruce was 15, his mom sent him to live with his Aunt Teddy in Hawaii. Teddy was Lynn's sister, younger by three years. Their parents had hoped for a boy and planned to name him Theodore. That's how Teddy got her full name, Theodora. Her nickname led to plenty of teasing when she was little. "But I soon began to accept it when they came out with that cute little piece of underwear, the teddy," she said.

Bruce lived with his aunt for a year, and during that time he heard about the discovery of a new species of shark off the coast of Oahu, the megamouth. It was monstrous, unlike any shark seen before. For Bruce it was further proof that the world was full of elusive truths waiting to be uncovered.

TEDDY CAST FURTIVE GLANCES AT THE MAN SHE FELT SURE WAS HER BROTHER-IN-LAW. HIS APPEARANCE HADN'T CHANGED MUCH. HE STILL WORE GLASSES.

At one point after the accident, Bruce heard a strange story from Teddy, about something she'd seen a few years earlier in California. Her first husband was driving them from Lake Tahoe to Bakersfield. Teddy glanced at another southbound vehicle and saw a familiar face.

"Look, look!" Teddy called out. "I think it's Alan!"

Alan who'd been lost at sea. Alan who was presumed dead.

Teddy watched the other car, saw it veer toward an exit. "Follow him," she told her husband. He did, all the way to a baseball field just off the highway, and then, on foot with Teddy, to the bleachers to watch a Little League game. Teddy cast furtive glances at the man she felt sure was her brother-in-law. His appearance hadn't changed much. He still wore glasses.

"I looked and looked, and he still looked like Alan to me," Teddy said.

For some reason, she didn't approach him. But the experience would haunt her, because to Teddy, Alan being alive made a lot of sense.

Right after Alan vanished, Teddy drove nearly 400 miles to be with her sister in Bakersfield. It was late at night when she finally heard the details of what had happened. The kids were asleep. Also at Lynn's house were one of the survivors from the accident—Teddy can't remember who—and Alan's close friend Woodrow White Jr., whom everyone called Woody. According to Teddy, the survivor reported seeing Alan in the water after the boat capsized. They both surfaced,

A <https://magazine.atavist.com/> When they came up again, they were farther apart. Another wave rolled by. After that Alan was gone.

“I suspect he escaped,” Teddy told the group. Later she would recall Lynn agreeing with her.

Alan was “a very, very strong swimmer,” Teddy told me. He grew up around water in New England, with a father who loved boats, and he served in the Navy. Alan knew to wear shoes without laces when he was out fishing, so he could kick them off if he went overboard.

A colleague once told Teddy how easy it was to disappear. All you had to do, they said, was move three times—different cities, different states—and no one would find you. In an age before the Internet, that was all it took. “I just thought he saw his chance,” Teddy said of Alan.

Lynn had been getting “fanatically religious,” Teddy explained, in the years leading up to Alan’s disappearance. The couple converted to Mormonism after they married, but Alan struggled with the faith’s dictates against smoking and drinking. As Lynn became more devout, Alan got more distracted. At least that’s how it looked to Teddy when she visited. After Alan bought a little green convertible, an MG, Teddy figured that there must be a woman somewhere. “But we never discovered that,” she acknowledged.

When Bruce learned that his aunt might have seen his dad on the highway, he was ambivalent. He no longer thought Alan might have made it to a cave on Morro Bay. He didn’t think Alan made it anywhere at all. He’d finally given up the last shred of hope that his dad was still alive. Hearing what Teddy had to say wasn’t helpful.

By then Bruce was focused on another theory: that his dad was eaten by a shark, possibly a great white. That’s what his paternal grandmother, Phyllis Champagne, believed—even though great whites were almost never spotted in Morro Bay back then, and shark season didn’t start until July, four months after Alan vanished.

When Bruce finished high school, he went to college to study marine biology. Specifically, he studied the feeding habits of great white sharks.

Bruce's sister, DeeDee, couldn't dismiss outright the idea that her dad might still be alive. Not after she learned about her parents' separation.

This painful fact tumbled into the open as the kids got older. Maybe the adults in their lives felt they no longer needed protecting. DeeDee married at 19—a young bride, like her mother. She thinks it was sometime after when she first learned that Alan had moved out of the house just prior to disappearing. To keep up appearances, he spent evenings with his family, leaving only after the kids were in bed. He made sure to be back in the morning before they got up.

That revelation changed the way DeeDee remembered her dad. She picked apart everything she thought she knew. Memories took on a different meaning. Her father was an intelligent man, someone who'd skipped grades in school. He had survival skills; he'd been in the Navy. It didn't make sense that he would die in a boat accident, of all things. Maybe Teddy really had seen Alan on the highway.

DeeDee later recalled hearing somewhere that her father had been reading or talking about a book on how to change one's identity. Who said that? Did she imagine it? Surely she didn't imagine that one of the survivors of the accident said that he saw Alan alive in the water, so it was at least *possible* he'd swum away. DeeDee also remembered one of the survivors reporting that Alan said "Well, that's the shits" or "This is the shit" before vanishing forever.

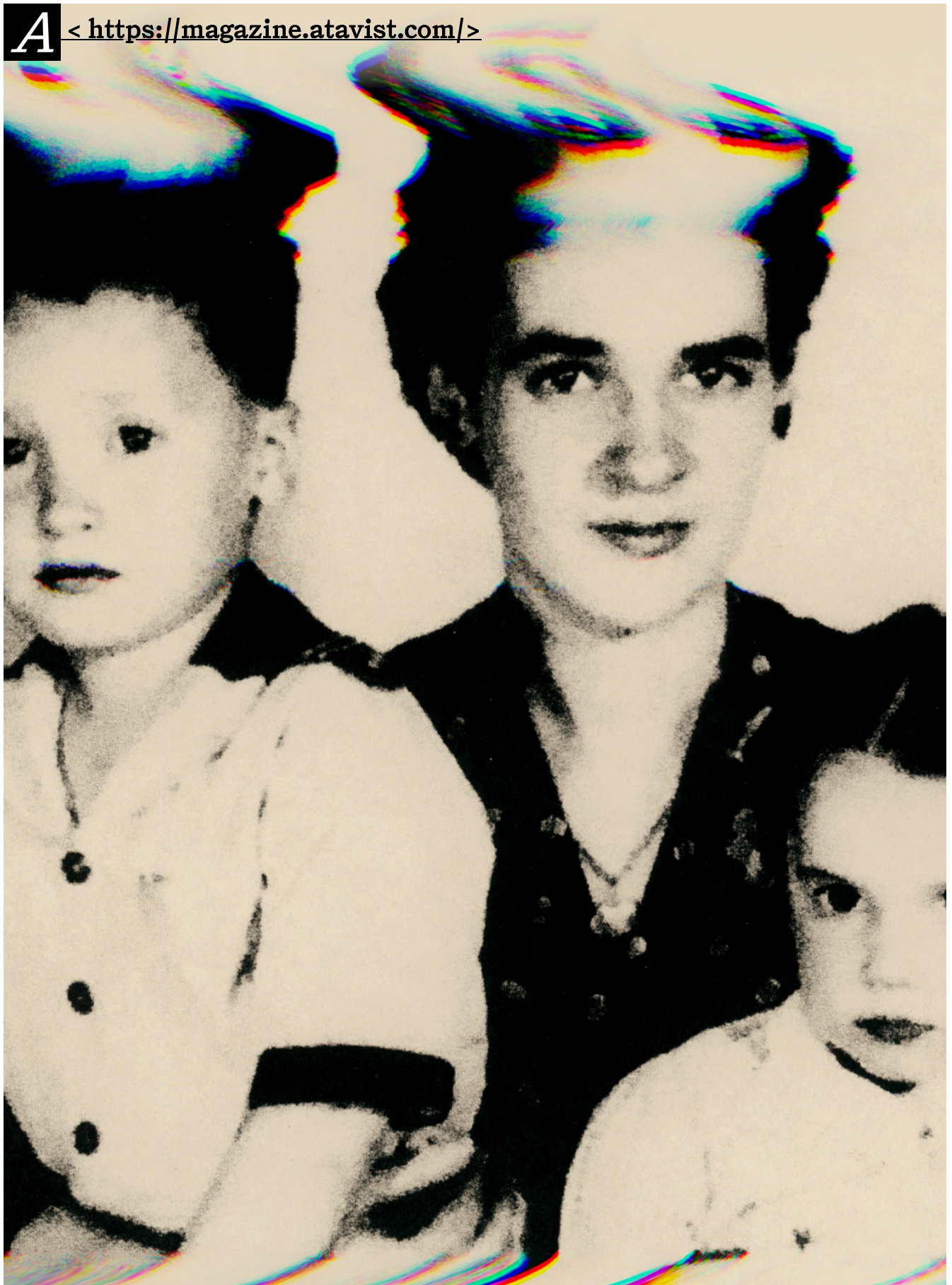
But it was Woody White who tipped the balance for DeeDee. The Champagne children didn't recall seeing Woody much before the accident. He was a librarian, a hippie-looking guy. He and Alan had met in college and were both huge sports fans; they especially liked ice hockey. After Alan disappeared, Woody was around a lot more. He'd take Barry to professional hockey games in Los Angeles. At Christmas, he visited the Champagnes' house and asked the kids questions about their lives. When one by one the siblings got married, Woody was there taking photos.

A Maybe Woody was trying to be there for a family that had suffered a devastating tragedy. But once DeeDee learned about her parents' separation, and that Teddy believed she'd seen Alan in the flesh, she wondered: What if her dad was alive and Woody knew it? What if he'd been giving updates about the kids to Alan, wherever he was?

In 1991, DeeDee wrote a letter to the TV show *Unsolved Mysteries*. "My name is Deirdre Hahs, DeeDee to my friends and family," it read. "I am married and have two beautiful little girls. I am so very proud of my family and the things we have accomplished in our life, yet there is still one element missing, my father Alan. I 'lost' him when I was 8 years old and have since missed out on all those things a father can give to a daughter." DeeDee described the accident, how Alan was the only one never found, and Woody's sudden visits. She claimed to have asked Woody more than once whether he was reporting back to Alan, and that he hadn't given her a straight answer.

She asked the show's producers to help her find Alan; they declined. Left unsaid in DeeDee's request was a more complicated question: What kind of man would abandon his family by pretending to be dead?

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A decorative header at the top of the page features a black square on the left containing a white letter 'A'. To the right of the square is the URL <https://magazine.atavist.com/>. The background of the header is a light beige color with a colorful, wavy, abstract pattern in shades of blue, green, yellow, and red.

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2.

Alan's mother was sure her son was dead, because she never heard from him. The insurance company had asked Phyllis Champagne about this specifically: After Alan disappeared, did she receive any strange messages or gifts? A bouquet perhaps, sent with an unsigned postcard or note? No, she said, never. "He would have contacted me, there would have been something if he was still alive," she told her daughter Lisa. "I've never gotten anything."

According to Lisa, Alan was the golden boy of the family, the sibling no one fought with, the man they all admired. Lisa was the youngest of five, and the only one still living at home in Rhode Island when her father suffered a major heart attack. Alan, married with kids, flew home from California to help out. When he discovered that Lisa, who was eight at the time, had never learned to tie her shoes, he showed her how. He took her to see *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, picking her up at school for the occasion. To this day, every time she hears the song "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head," which is featured in the film, she thinks of her brother.

The summer after she finished sixth grade, Lisa and her mother visited Alan in California. Lisa stepped off the airplane in her elementary school graduation dress, sunglasses perched on her nose.

Aer his brother took one look and nicknamed her “Hollywood.” He took everyone to Disneyland and Knott’s Berry Farm in a Rambler station wagon.

The last time Lisa visited Alan, he was driving the little green convertible, the one that made Teddy speculate he was cheating on Lynn. Lisa said that her parents didn’t like the sports car either—they found it “frivolous” for a father of five. Lisa had no such qualms, and loved riding with the top down. “If you come out here to college,” Alan told her, “you can drive this car.”

A year later he was gone.

Lisa’s sister-in-law Pat, now 75, has fond memories of Alan, too. She was married to Kenny, one of his brothers. Alan persuaded the couple to move from Rhode Island to California; Pat arrived on the West Coast five months pregnant. Kenny was in the Coast Guard Reserve, and when he was away Alan checked in on Pat. Once, when she was really homesick, he put her on a plane back to Rhode Island to visit her family. It was the first time she’d ever flown.

After Alan disappeared, Pat wanted to believe that he’d survived and would eventually be found safe. “I waited every day to see him walk down my driveway,” she told me from her home in Connecticut. But that was just the grief talking. She knew deep down that he was dead. “I can’t ever imagine Alan leaving his kids, no matter what,” Pat said.

That was what Lisa said, and Phyllis, too. It’s what Alan’s kids heard from their paternal relatives whenever they raised doubts about their dad’s fate—a supposed certainty that became harder to believe when another family secret bubbled to the surface.





As an adult, Barry Champagne worked in the education field. He was an assistant principal at Bakersfield Adult School, where he also taught night classes, when the phone call came to his home in the early 2000s. Yvette, his wife, answered it in the kitchen. The woman on the other end stumbled over her words. “I’m from your husband’s past,” she finally managed to say.

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A vette had to sit down. She feared she was about to learn that Barry had been unfaithful. Instead, the woman said that her name was Denise and that she was Barry's sister. She'd tracked him down online.

When Yvette told Barry about the call, he remembered something his maternal grandmother once said. He'd lived with her for a while when he was a teenager, well after Alan vanished, and one day she mentioned that Alan had fathered a child before he married Lynn. Barry never told his brothers or his sister or discussed what Phyllis told him with his mom. That's how he was raised: to keep quiet about things that might cause a stir. But now, decades later, a woman claiming to be that long-lost half-sibling was on the phone. Barry called Lynn.

"Mom, this lady called me and said she's our sister," he said.

"Oh... Denise," Lynn replied. Barry hadn't yet told her the woman's name.

So Lynn knew. Except that Alan, she said, had always denied paternity, and she'd believed him. Lynn never told the kids about Denise, because she didn't think there was anything to tell.

Barry broke the news to his siblings. For DeeDee, it was more confirmation that "there's just a lot we didn't know." In April 2005, Denise Ferraro came to Bakersfield armed with photo albums. One look at her baby pictures and Barry knew that a DNA test wasn't necessary, although they did one anyway. It came back as expected: Denise was their half-sister.

Denise was a teenager when she realized that the man who'd raised her wasn't her biological father. She found letters her mother wrote while pregnant. Denise then retrieved a court document showing that a man named Alan Champagne had denied being her father. There was also a court order mandating that he pay her mother a small amount of money each month.

Denise approached her mom, Leslie Wallace, with questions. Leslie told Denise what she could. "You want to know who your parents are—

A good, bad, or ugly?" Leslie, who is now 80, told me.
<https://magazine.atavist.com/>

Leslie was 16 when she met Alan. A sophomore in high school, she liked swimming and sunbathing in Mission Beach, San Diego, where she lived with her parents in a tiny apartment. "I didn't have but one friend," she said, a girl named Sherry who lived in the apartment upstairs.

Sherry wasn't with Leslie the day Alan and two other young men approached her on the beach. They were friendly and funny. They hung out with Leslie for an hour. A few days later Alan reappeared, alone this time. Leslie knew that he was in the Navy. He would have been 20 at the time. He told her that his family lived in New England. He asked if she'd like to go out.

He took her to a drive-in. She introduced him to her parents. He even went to her uncle's wedding. Alan was her first real boyfriend.

According to Leslie, the relationship lasted "until I showed up pregnant." She went to where Alan's ship was docked and asked for him. She waited. Then a man came out and told her that Alan wouldn't be coming to see her. "Well, I'm pregnant, what am I supposed to do?" she asked. The man said that was her problem.

Her father didn't have any luck either when he contacted the Navy and demanded that Alan do right by Leslie. Her parents' apartment was too cramped for a baby, so she dropped out of school and drove herself to a Salvation Army home for unwed mothers in Los Angeles. There were chores to do and church services to attend. After she gave birth to Denise, a guy she was seeing asked her to marry him. She said yes. "He rescued me and Denise," Leslie said. Her husband, Harold, raised Denise as his own.

Denise had a tough life. Like her mom, she dropped out of high school. She married twice, once to a man who wound up doing time. She got her GED and battled methamphetamine addiction. She had kids. Her middle child, Tracy Craig, left home as a teenager but finished school and became a nurse. "I think there's a trickle effect," Tracy said. "This whole idea of generational trauma is very real in our family."

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Aventually, Denise started looking for Alan, unaware of what had happened in Morro Bay. Like DeeDee, she contacted a TV show for help. When she found Barry online and learned about Alan's disappearance, Denise didn't believe that he was dead. Leslie had her own doubts. "He ran away from one responsibility," she said. Why not another?

HE LOOKED FOR RUNAWAYS, ELDERLY PEOPLE WITH FALTERING MINDS WHO WANDERED OFF, PEOPLE WHO VANISHED FOR NO APPARENT REASON. "THAT HAPPENS A LOT MORE THAN PEOPLE KNOW," BRUCE SAID.

Learning what Alan had done to Leslie and Denise disturbed his other five children. Still, Bruce tried to cut his dad some slack. "Maybe he was like everybody else, just doing the best he could," he said.

Bruce's career in marine biology didn't last as long as he'd hoped it would. For a while, he sold exotic fish and animals for an import company, which transferred him to Utah. He had a family by then, a wife and several kids to support. When the company fell on hard times, he looked for a different job. A neighbor who was a sheriff offered him work, and he later enrolled in a police academy. In time he became a detective.

Bruce worked a lot of missing person cases, including one that involved a woman who police believed was killed by her husband and dumped in Utah Lake. Bruce didn't find her body in the water; he didn't find it anywhere. And without a body, it was difficult for her loved ones to get closure. Bruce knew what that was like.

He looked for runaways, elderly people with faltering minds who wandered off, people who vanished for no apparent reason. "That

A happens a lot more than people know,” Bruce said. He was thinking specifically of a 12-year-old Boy Scout named Garrett Bardsley, who went fishing with his dad at a pond in the rugged Uinta Mountains in August 2004. Garrett had gotten his clothes wet, so his dad told him to walk the quarter-mile path back to their camp to change. The boy was never seen again.

Hundreds of people searched for Garrett. Bruce was part of a 24-man SWAT team called in to help. They didn’t find any evidence of an animal attack, and there were no leads on a possible kidnapping. It was as if Garret had evaporated.

In his free time, Bruce gravitated toward other mysteries. Over two decades as a cop, he pursued cryptozoology as a hobby, a serious one. He read a lot, connected with other enthusiasts, visited sites where people claimed to have seen mythical creatures. He developed a point system for rating the plausibility of these sightings, based on criteria such as how detailed the report was, how many witnesses there were, and how long the sighting lasted. If an incident didn’t score high enough—at least five points—he didn’t consider it data. It was a rumor, in his book, nothing more.

Bruce’s daughter Brittany said that, growing up, life at home was never dull. The family had pet snakes, lizards, and fish. And once, her brothers thought they saw an alien. Brittany was around ten at the time; her brothers, Alan and Sawyer, were a few years younger. Alan got up in the middle of the night, terrified, and told his father that something had been standing on his bed. Sawyer claimed to have seen it as well. Bruce separated the boys and had them draw pictures of what they’d seen. The drawings were eerily similar.

Brittany thought there was excitement on her father’s face when he saw how the images matched up. But Bruce remembers thinking that if an alien really had gotten into the house, he’d failed as a dad—failed to protect his family, including the boy named after his missing father. “I wasn’t there for him,” Bruce said.

3.

If initially Lynn thought that her husband might have faked his death, as her sister Teddy claimed, with time she managed to push the notion from her mind. Lynn took comfort in her Mormon faith. For a while she wrote to a man behind bars, as part of a program through her church. She even took the kids to visit him. After he was released they dated. According to her kids the man stole the silver coins Lynn had bought with the life insurance money she got after Alan's disappearance. Later she married a man named Earl. They were still together when Lynn died of breast cancer in 2009.

Bruce ended up with a lot of his mom's personal documents. Among them was a short newspaper article about Alan's graduation from California State University at Fresno with a degree in political science. Bruce had read the piece before but somehow missed one detail. The reporter listed two reasons Alan's achievement was exceptional: He'd served nine years in the Navy before starting college, and "he worked fulltime while going to college, supporting his wife and seven children."

Seven children. If it hadn't been for Denise, Bruce probably would have written that number off as a typo. Now he couldn't. Even counting Denise, there were only six kids. Bruce wondered: Is there someone else out there? He told his siblings and exchanged updates with DeeDee about matches on a consumer DNA network they both joined.

It was while doing genealogical research, looking for family documents in online archives, that Bruce found out that his parents hadn't merely been separated. Alan had filed divorce papers with the local court on March 9, 1972—the day before he left for Morro Bay. The

A papers said that the children were to remain with Lynn, and that spousal support should not be awarded. <https://magazine.atavist.com/>

Once again the Champagne siblings were faced with a confounding possibility: Their father may never have intended to return from the fishing trip. “How can you just say, ‘I’m done?’” Barry wondered. As a husband and father himself, he couldn’t fathom it.

The siblings could recall their mom implying that, had Alan come back from that trip, their separation wouldn’t have lasted, that reconciliation was inevitable. Maybe she lied for her kids’ benefit; maybe it was wishful thinking on her part. In personal notes Lynn kept before Alan’s disappearance, which the kids have since read, she described Alan walking her through paying the monthly household bills. She seemed to think he was just being helpful, showing her something everyone should know how to do. A half-century later, with the divorce papers in hand, her kids wondered if Alan was preparing Lynn for life without him.

WOODY DOESN’T DISMISS THE POSSIBILITY THAT HIS FRIEND MADE IT OUT OF MORRO BAY. “I STILL TO THIS DAY DON’T KNOW,” HE SAID.

The kids don’t think Lynn was ever served with the divorce papers, but they can’t say for sure, and they can’t ask Lynn. She’s just one of several people in this story who are no longer alive.

Alan’s parents are dead. His siblings too, save for his sister Lisa. Two of the survivors of the accident, Irlan Warren and Harry Morlan, died in 1998. Even Denise is gone, killed in a traffic accident in 2019. At her funeral, Bruce asked Leslie if she thought Alan was a good man. Leslie said yes, but she knew it was a lie.

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Some of the people connected in one way or another to Alan's disappearance are old enough to be losing their grasp on the past. Soon they will be gone, too. Others don't have much to add. Woody White, now 76, told me that he'd fielded various questions from Alan's children over the years, including DeeDee's suspicion that her dad wasn't dead. He did his best to answer them. "It's just a difficult situation," he said. "Especially when there's no body. That opens it up to all sorts of speculation."

He insisted that he was "absolutely not" relaying information back to Alan. "I had no indication he was still alive," he said. "I would have certainly said something about that."

Yet Woody doesn't dismiss the possibility that his friend made it out of Morro Bay. "I still to this day don't know," he said.

Steve Stranathan, who was next to Alan when the boat capsized, is 67, a Navy veteran, and a retired medic. He wears hearing aids and likes to go on motorcycle trips. He lives with the memory of seeing his stepfather, Jack, floating dead in the water with blood on his face. Steve knows that the mind can play tricks on the bereaved. "There's been a couple of times I thought I saw Jack," he said. "I believe that if you miss somebody so much—I mean, there are triggers. Somebody's hair, the way they walk at a distance. We've all seen people that look like people that have passed on."

These days the sandspit where Steve yelled for help back in 1972 is a popular spot for walkers, kayakers, and paddleboarders, almost all of whom carry cell phones. It would be hard for a person to swim to shore from a boat, capsized or not, and walk away from their life without anyone noticing. But in the 1970s, that wasn't the case. The sandspit was all but deserted most of the time. Before the rescue crews arrived on March 11, there might have been a window. "You could have snuck off into the dunes," said Eric Endersby of the Morro Bay Harbor Patrol, "and been unaccounted for probably pretty easily."

Steve doesn't know what to say about that possibility. He knows what happened to Jack. He has carried the weight of that trauma for more than 50 years. That's enough for him. Alan's disappearance isn't his burden to bear, or his mystery to solve.

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What becomes of a person when a mystery is lodged in the very heart of their existence?

This story is one of painful probabilities and possibilities. A husband, father, son, and brother either died in a horrific accident or used that accident to flee the life he was living.

Although he would probably no longer be alive today. His family is never left with pieces of a puzzle that can't be made whole. The shapes that fit together over time weren't always pretty. The gaps may be uglier still.

Brian is still learning how to talk about what happened. For the 50th anniversary of his father's disappearance, he decided to turn his family's story into [a TV news segment < https://www.kget.com/news/50-years-after-his-father-was-lost-at-sea-a-former-kget-journalist-returns-to-morro-bay/>](https://www.kget.com/news/50-years-after-his-father-was-lost-at-sea-a-former-kget-journalist-returns-to-morro-bay/). He spent his career working as a cameraman and journalist and now teaches the craft. "I lived so long with third-hand accounts of what happened to my dad," he wrote to me. "The camera helps me get closer." It had been a useful tool for telling other people's stories; now it could help him tell his own.

Brian and his son drove to Morro Bay and shot footage of the surf and the sandspit. In the segment, which ran on the Bakersfield station KGET, Brian notes that no one in the family went to therapy after Alan's disappearance—that wasn't what people did back then. The Champagnes barely knew how to talk to one another about their loss. "There is that human side," Brian says on screen. "Maybe starting this week, I'll start sharing that more."

Sharing is the reason the Champagne siblings agreed to talk to me. They don't think it will lead to long-awaited answers or provide closure. "That's a big word," Brian said. As a journalist, he covered homicides and missing person cases. He believes closure isn't something most people who've suffered tragedy ever get. Only DeeDee thinks differently on this point. "I feel like you are hopefully going to sum it all up for us," she said. "And we're going to take a look, and we're gonna go, *boom*, there it is."

It's a flattering notion, of course, but unlikely to happen; I said as much to DeeDee. In sharing their story, with the world and with each other, what the Champagnes might get is clarity—not about Alan's disappearance, but about how it has affected their lives.

DeeDee hates not knowing more about her father, especially what kind of man he was, what he cared about, what he believed in. But

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All those questions have led her to be open with her own family. “I want my children and my grandchildren to remember something about me, at the very least that they were important to me,” DeeDee said.

Sharing has also been a way of mending troubled ties. A few years ago, Barry, Brian, Brad, and DeeDee started doing a remote trivia night together. They didn’t involve Bruce—he went to bed too early, or at least that’s what his siblings told themselves. In truth, Bruce’s relationship with some of them had been strained since childhood, because of how he acted after their dad vanished. Recently, though, Bruce joined the trivia night. Now all the siblings are on a text chain together. There, Bruce has been sharing memories of their dad—of father-son fishing trips and other excursions; of books Alan gave him; of things that only Bruce, as the eldest kid, could ever know.

Bruce believes that his father died that day at sea. He leaves it to others to prove him wrong, if that’s even possible. He prefers to focus his energies on finding Bigfoot.

Recently, Bruce chose some new locations to set up game cameras. After placing two near an old Utah mining village, he headed in his Jeep to a spot not far from where he’d cast footprints with his kids when they were young—prints he thinks may have been left by a relict hominoid. Bruce parked and switched off his dash camera, installed after a possible drive-by sighting. Then he walked a few hundred feet up a gravel road and began searching for a tree that wasn’t too bushy; he didn’t want to risk leaves or branches blocking the lens.

He found a suitable tree and secured a camera to it. Then from his backpack he removed a container labeled “Sasquatch pheromone, strong odor.” Inside was a bright orange plastic badge, about the size of a dog tag, bathed in a mix of human and chimpanzee pheromones. Using plastic bags as gloves, Bruce pulled the badge out of the container. It smelled musky, like old urine. He tied the fetid object to a

A w tree branch in view of the camera, then scattered grapes and apple slices on the ground around it. <https://magazine.atavist.com/>

He would return in 30 days to retrieve the footage and see what ate the fruit. He admitted that to outsiders his work can seem tedious, even silly. Not to him.

So there's hope? I asked. "Always," he said.

Bruce returned to the Jeep, switched on his dash camera—just in case—and started for home.

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