

MOTHER COURAGE

Beth Twitty, holding her daughter's dance-team outfit, in Birmingham, Alabama, on October 30.



A missing girl. A desperate family. A tropical island. The disappearance of beautiful, blonde teenager Natalee Holloway on Aruba last May has become America's most tragic reality show. But behind the cable-ratings bonanza is a war of wills and cultures, as Natalee's mother, Beth Twitty, alleging an official cover-up, has turned Aruba upside down to find out what happened to her daughter. Sorting fact from rumor, with new information from the police, **BRYAN BURROUGH** cuts to the heart of the case

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# MISSING WH



# THE FEMALE

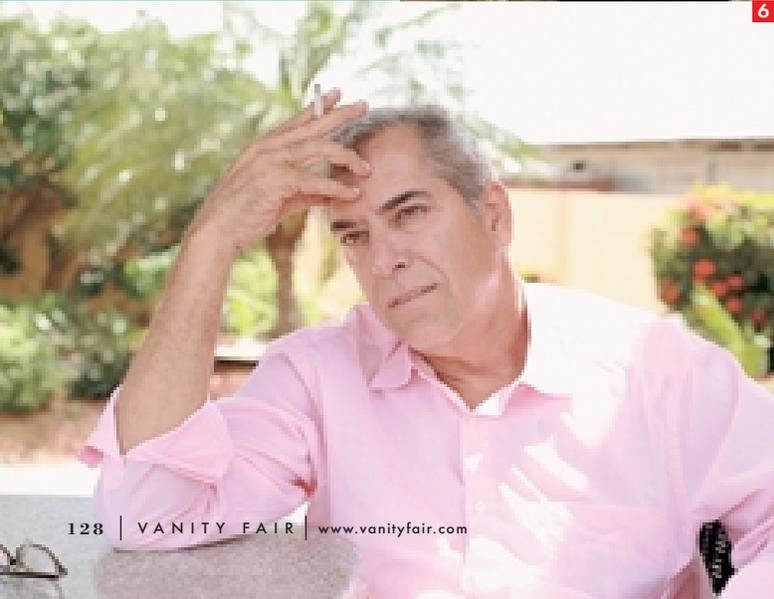
PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARRY BENSON

VANITY FAIR | 127



**RASHOMON**

(1) Aruba deputy police chief Gerold Dompig. (2) The beach where Natalee was reportedly last seen. (3) Beth and Jug Twitty in Aruba on July 8. (4) Beth and her support group of friends. (5) Joran van der Sloot, center, with Satish and Deepak Kalpoe at Carlos 'n Charlie's. (6) Aruban businessman Charles Croes. (7) *Aruba Today* reporter Angela Munzenhofer and editor Julia Renfro. (8) Natalee with the Dorian dance team in 2004.

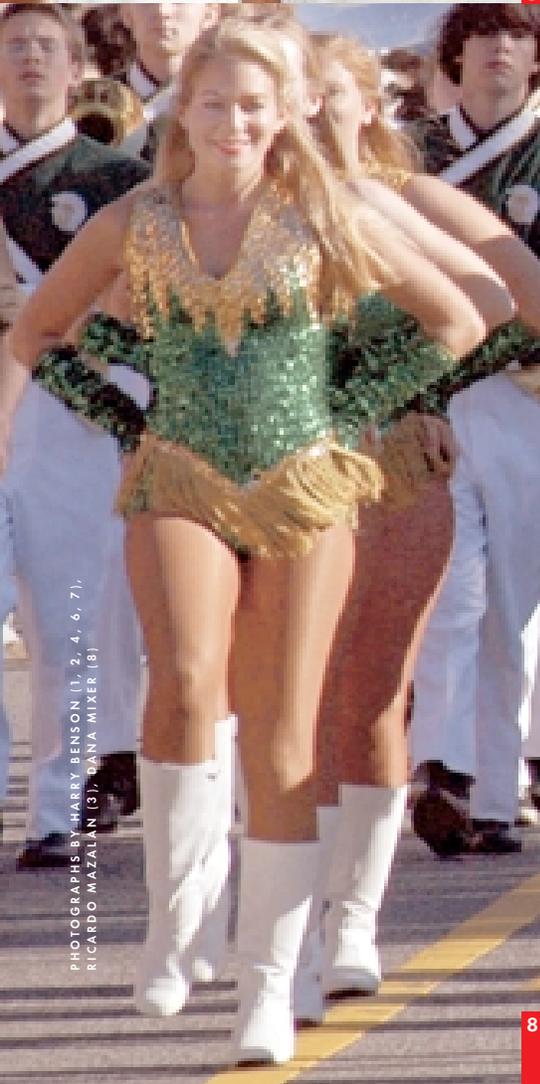




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PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARRY BENSON (1, 2, 4, 6, 7), RICARDO MAZALAN (3), DANA MIXER (8)

It had been a soccer mom’s dream weekend, just the three women lying around the lake house at Hot Springs, Arkansas, sunbathing, relaxing, and luxuriating in the fact that, for three entire days, they were free of teenagers, dirty laundry, and housework. Now, on Monday, May 30, they were driving home in Beth Twitty’s Chevy Tahoe, barreling east out of Memphis, looking to make it back to suburban Birmingham, Alabama, in time to get dinner on the table by nightfall.

A little after 11 A.M., Beth’s cell phone rang. “Hello, this is Beth,” she said in her soft southern accent. It was Jody Bearman, one of seven adults who had escorted a group of 124 students from Birmingham’s Mountain Brook High School on a senior trip to the Caribbean island of Aruba. Twitty’s 18-year-old daughter, Natalee, a hard-driving, straight-A student who was heading to the University of Alabama on a full scholarship, was on the trip. Beth’s brow furrowed as she tried to digest Bearman’s message: Natalee had not appeared in the Holiday Inn lobby for the return flight to Alabama.

No one, in fact, had seen her since the night before. Another mother might have surmised that her daughter was still out partying, maybe passed out in a hotel room. Not Beth Twitty. “I knew immediately that my daughter had been kidnapped in Aruba,” she says today. “Natalee has never been late in her life.”

Beth didn’t panic. She became, in her words, “extremely focused.” From her cell phone she called 911, telling the dispatcher her daughter had just been kidnapped and she was driving 110 miles an hour straight through Mississippi, and she wasn’t stopping for anything. She called her husband, Natalee’s stepfather, George “Jug” Twitty, and the F.B.I. By the time Beth reached Birmingham, a family friend had already arranged for a private jet. By five o’clock

she was on board, along with Jug, the general manager of a Birmingham metals-industry facility, and two of Jug’s longtime friends. They left a seat empty for the return trip—for Natalee. The jet landed at Aruba’s Queen Beatrix International Airport around 10 P.M.

Thus began a long night’s search that brought the Twitty family face-to-face with the Dutch teenager they would come to believe was responsible for the disappearance of their daughter, a search that within days would captivate America, or at least that sizable part of it that watches the nightly “justice shows” on cable television. Soon Beth Twitty would become a recognizable media fixture, giving interviews or meeting with everyone from Greta Van Susteren to Diane Sawyer to Dr. Phil to Condoleezza Rice. She has never wavered in her search for Natalee or in her belief that a boy named Joran van der Sloot knows her daughter’s fate and that the corrupt police and government of Aruba have conspired to cover up the truth. The Twittys and others, including Bob Riley, the governor of Alabama, have called for American tourists to boycott the island.

Yet a deeper look at the investigation into Natalee Holloway’s disappearance suggests the case is more complicated than it might appear on television. The Twitty family’s obsessive quest has proved to be a national trauma for Aruba, a Dutch possession that has been repeatedly depicted in the U.S. media as overrun by drugs and crime. Stung by criticism they view as unwarranted, many Arubans, including a number who were once the Twittys’ closest allies, have turned on the family, depicting them as Ugly Americans.

“They’re killing Aruba,” says Aruban businessman Charles Croes, a former ally. “That girl, Natalee, I wish she’d stayed home. I hope she’s found alive there. Because no one would care. No one. The kid is just not worth all this trouble, this heartache. Is Natalee worth it? Is she?”

The Aruban police have reached a breaking point. In a wide-ranging interview, Gerold Dompig, the deputy police chief in charge of the case, says the biggest obstacle to solving it has been the Twitty family itself. Among other things, Dompig charges that pressure from the family sidetracked the investigation from the outset, forcing the premature arrests of the main suspects and destroying the best chance police had of gathering evidence to solve the case.

“They brought out their big guns on the

very first day, and they started shooting,” grouses Dompig, seated in a tiny office inside his neat, European-style police station. “They didn’t understand the way things are done in our system. They didn’t want to understand. They act like they came from a world where you can just crush people. It was very harmful to our investigation.”

Dompig traces these difficulties to the first hours of his probe, when he met with the Twittys to assure them that everything possible would be done to find Natalee. Instead of gratitude, he says, he was met with angry threats. “Jug and his Alabama friends, they basically came out and said they would bring hell to our island if Natalee wasn’t found—‘burn it down’ were the exact words. That’s when I knew we were in serious trouble.” (Jug Twitty denies this happened. “Where would he get that?” he asks. “We thought he was a nice guy.”)

**T**he Holloway case is now one of the most popular reality shows in America thanks to the hosts of cable television’s nightly justice shows, chiefly Greta Van Susteren on Fox News, Rita Cosby on MSNBC, and Nancy Grace on CNN Headline News. The story has all the elements the justice shows adore: an innocent victim, missing or murdered; avenging loved ones; and a handsome, white-male suspect. Throw in a gaggle of luckless cops and colorful minor characters, set it all in an island paradise, and you have the kind of real-life mystery that keeps Americans glued to their sets.

And make no mistake: Natalee Holloway has been very, very good for cable television. Van Susteren all but moved her show to Aruba this summer and saw her ratings jump nearly 60 percent. The case helped Rita Cosby leap to No. 1 at MSNBC. At CNN Headline News, Holloway served to introduce viewers to the frightening former prosecutor Nancy Grace. Not to mention the endless hours of programming by Bill O’Reilly of Fox, and Dan Abrams and Joe Scarborough of MSNBC.

But not without flak. The coverage has been assailed from all sides, for crowding out real news and for de-emphasizing the searches for other missing persons, especially blacks, Latinos, men, and the poor. In August, Bob Costas bowed out of a stint to be the guest host on *Larry King Live* rather than pore over the case’s details. On CNN, Anderson Cooper lambasted the coverage as overblown. The mainstream media have mostly demurred, sharpening the line between their definition of news and that of the justice

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“I’m putting together another strike against Aruba. . . . They should never have messed with me,” says Beth Twitty.



#### FULL FATHOM FIVE

Aerial view of the beach where Natalee was vacationing.



The pond that was drained.

The beach where Joran claimed he left Natalee.

The Marriott hotel.

The Holiday Inn tower where Natalee was staying.

The casino where Joran said he met Natalee.

as *Le Divorce*, with Hudson; *21 Grams*, with Penn and Benicio Del Toro; *Ned Kelly*, with Ledger; *I ♥ Huckabees*, with Jude Law; *We Don't Live Here Anymore*, with Mark Ruffalo and Laura Dern; *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*, with Penn; *Stay*, with Ewan McGregor; and now *King Kong*.

"I heard she is just magnificent in *King Kong*," Kidman says, "and I think it is going to be a whole different life for her in terms of everything she has ever wanted. And I think she is more than ready for it." Watts certainly feels ready, although she's bracing herself for the change. "The struggle is right there within me. It's not something I've forgotten. I know how to deal with it," she says. "All *this* stuff"—the global rollout, the raised expectations, the impossibility of privacy—

"is still unknown to me. I'm less familiar with it, and it's kind of frightening."

Rebecca Rigg isn't too worried. "I'm excited for her," she says. "You don't hammer away at it for 20 years without hoping there is something along these lines at the end. I mean, it's a dream and it's a game. You can't take it all too seriously. They hate your success and they hate your *lack* of success and, you know, it's a tough one."

If anybody can handle the excitement, along with the toughness, Watts can. As she tells me about her life, I notice a recurring pattern of sevens. She was 7 when her father died, 14 when she moved to Australia, 21 when she landed her first significant movie role (in *Flirting*), and 28 when she suffered her crisis

of confidence—only to emerge triumphant four years later with the release of *Mulholland Dr.* At 35 she had her career on track, but her relationship with Heath Ledger was collapsing. Now, at 37, she is two years into her latest seven-year stretch—about to become a household name and in love with a man who has her friends wondering whether they'll be bridesmaids in the near future.

For so long, she says, there was always something that needed fixing: "If it wasn't career, it was relationships." But now this gifted actress who banked everything on her talent is finally in the clear, with a reported \$6 million asking price. "I feel like I am entering into a stage where this whole journey of struggle had perfect meaning," she says. "It's all in the process of taking care of itself." □

## Aruba Mystery



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 130 shows, which don't hesitate to traffic in rumor and speculation.

How did we come to a moment when a single missing teenager draws as much television coverage as the war in Iraq? Matthew Felling, of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a Washington think tank, traces the Missing White Women boomlet not to the JonBenét Ramsey case of 1996, as some have, but to a set of murders three years later. In 1999 three women—Carole Sund, her daughter, and a family friend—were found gruesomely murdered in Yosemite National Park. In the wake of the killings, Sund's parents established a foundation in Modesto, California, to publicize the plight of missing persons and offer rewards for information leading to the arrest of violent criminals.

The foundation might have faded into obscurity but for the disappearance in May 2001 of former Washington intern Chandra Levy. The case initially attracted scant media attention outside of Levy's hometown, which happened to be Modesto. Brought into the case, the Sund/Carrington foundation mobilized a team of publicists who invented a new kind of grassroots effort: the missing-person campaign. Whereas JonBenét Ramsey's parents zealously avoided the press,

Chandra Levy's family, with the help of the Sund/Carrington publicists, appeared for regular press conferences in their driveway, furnished quotes with an eye toward media deadlines, and even doled out bits of home movies so that cable producers would always have new footage to air. Levy's murder was never solved—even though her body was found a year later—but the press coverage succeeded in entangling Congressman Gary Condit, and made the case headline news for much of 2001.

By then cable producers had discovered that Missing White Women were ratings gold. The phenomenon is "now an established genre of news, much the way that the O. J. Simpson case enshrined the celebrity murder case as a whole genre," says Felling. "I don't think that's likely to change anytime soon." Today the reigning princess remains Natalee Holloway. For that, cable television can thank Beth Twitty, who has proved willing to do almost anything to find her daughter.

One afternoon I reach Beth on her cell phone. "I'm in Columbus, Ohio, on a secret mission," she says. "I'm putting together another strike against Aruba. I tell you, Bryan, those people down there, they'll never know what hit them. They should never have messed with me."

Beth must be very tired; one can only imagine the stress she is under. Back in Mountain Brook, the Twitty home, a modest brick split-level in Birmingham's most fashionable suburb, has been turned into a war room. Neat stacks of mail line the dining-room floor, most of it unsolicited letters of sympathy. The mail is sorted each morning in a friend's basement; every sender receives a response card Beth has drafted. One of her friends, Carol Standifer, walks me through the operation, our discussion interrupted only by the incessant ringing of the kitchen phone. A machine answers, allowing the

caller's message to echo through the house.

By and by Beth walks in, dressed in faded blue jeans, and takes a seat on the living-room floor. "Somebody said it's time to start cleaning it all up," she says, glancing into the dining room, "but I said, 'No, I don't think so. Not yet.'" She has lost count of how many interviews she has given—it's in the hundreds—and she has repeated the same things so many times her answers have an artificial quality. Until all this, the Twittys had led an unremarkable suburban life. Raised in Arkansas, Beth married a State Farm employee named Dave Holloway and, after a move to Jackson, Mississippi, was divorced in 1993. She raised Natalee and her brother, Matt, as a single mother until marrying Jug Twitty in 2000 and moving to Mountain Brook, where she is a special-education teacher in an elementary school. Beth became part of Jug's social group of hunting buddies and their wives, and today the Twittys' support network consists of seven couples who call themselves "the Fabulous Seven." Most have been to Aruba multiple times. All spend their off-hours sorting mail and returning calls.

According to her mother, Natalee was a typical American teenager, more driven than most, maybe, a fixture on Mountain Brook High's dance team who, Beth insists, never drank, never had a boyfriend, and never had sex. She is emphatic about this. Left unsaid is the assumption that this gave Natalee little experience in the kind of tequila-fueled revelry for which Aruba is famous. "Natalee was very smart, but," Beth acknowledges, "very naïve."

Still, Beth had no doubts about letting her daughter go on the Aruba trip. It was something of a tradition at Mountain Brook High School, and Jug's son, George, had been several years earlier. On Thursday, May 26, Beth dropped Natalee at a friend's house at four A.M. for the flight to Aruba. She

# Aruba Mystery

promised to pick her up at the airport the following Monday night. It was the last time she saw her daughter.

When the Twittys' private jet arrived in Aruba that first night, it was dark. The group piled into two vans driven by workers from Aruba's general-aviation office, a ramshackle trailer at the back of the airport. The vans wound their way through the quiet streets of the capital, Oranjestad, and made for the island's northwestern corner, where dozens of resorts sprawl along the white-sand beach.

While its main business is tourism—72 percent of visitors are American—Aruba is not a typical Third World Caribbean island. Eighteen miles off the coast of Venezuela, Aruba has a multi-racial population of 70,000. Its infrastructure is well developed, its streets are clean, and the culture has been thoroughly Americanized since Standard Oil built what was then one of the world's largest refineries, at the island's southeastern tip, in 1924. There are McDonald's, Pizza Huts, Taco Bells, and a Hooters. While palm trees have been planted in the tourist areas, the climate is arid, and pencil-like cacti line the inland roads.

At the Holiday Inn, Beth and Jug found another of the senior-trip escorts, a teacher named Paul Lilly, waiting with the only American official Lilly had found, a Drug Enforcement Administration agent. They had no news of Natalee's whereabouts. From all indications, she had never returned to her hotel the night before; her passport and luggage lay where she had placed them in preparation for the return flight to Alabama. She had last been seen, around midnight, at a bar and grill called Carlos 'n Charlie's. Some of her fellow students had noticed her talking with a tall Dutch teenager, and were under the impression she had left with him. The day before, Jug's nephew Thomas had played poker with the young man at the Holiday Inn's casino and thought his name was Joran something.

Beth took a hotel employee aside and described him. "She knew exactly who he was: Joran van der Sloot," Beth remembers. "And then she said—these were her exact words—'He tends to prey upon young female tourists.'"

Within minutes everyone headed to Carlos 'n Charlie's. Inside, the men fanned out and began asking questions. Beth showed around a photo of Natalee, but no one recognized her. Frustrated, the Americans returned to the Holiday Inn to regroup.

By now they had been joined by Charles Croes, a wealthy Aruban who owned a cellular-phone rental company on the island. According to Croes, who was summoned

to meet Beth in a darkened gas-station parking lot, Natalee had made a cell-phone call to an American number, and Beth was curious to know to whom. It turned out to have been an accidental call to a friend.

They decided to split up. The Twittys' friends wandered the beach behind the hotel, showing Natalee's photo to anyone they encountered. Beth and Jug headed upstairs; they wanted to see what Joran van der Sloot looked like, and the casino manager offered to find a video of his poker game the day before. When he did, Beth memorized everything about him: the close-cropped hair, the pimply face, the sloe eyes. Croes, meanwhile, drove north up the beach road and, just below the lighthouse, found a group of teenagers drinking cheap wine. They knew Joran, and two volunteered to lead Croes to his home, in the nearby town of Noord. Five minutes later Croes was at the modest ranch-style house, down an unpaved alley and behind a chest-high wall. One of the airport workers, sitting beside him, telephoned the Holiday Inn.

It was time to bring in the Aruban police. The main group of Twitty-family members and friends, now numbering a dozen, met Croes at the police station in Noord. Two uniformed officers agreed to accompany them to the van der Sloot residence. At the house, Beth waited in the van while the officers sounded the patrol car's siren. Across the neighborhood, lights blinked on. There was no movement inside the van der Sloot home. The officers sounded the siren once more. Staring blearily, people began emerging into their yards. After a few minutes, a man in his early 50s came outside. This was Paulus van der Sloot, Joran's father.

Beth watched as the officers spoke to him. She saw van der Sloot take a cellular phone from his front pocket and make a call. He then told police Joran was out gambling, at the Wyndham resort's casino. Van der Sloot climbed into the police car, and the group headed back into the night. At the Wyndham, just down from the Holiday Inn, the group again fanned out in search of Joran. Beth walked behind Paulus, watching him closely. There was no sign of his son. Van der Sloot flipped out his phone and made another call. When he hung up, he said, "He's at home now."

The group returned to the van der Sloot home. Joran and a friend, a young Surinamese man named Deepak Kalpoe, were waiting in the driveway. The two policemen took the two of them aside. Jug Twitty and his two friends stood by as Joran answered questions. At first he denied any knowledge of Natalee, insisting he didn't even know the name. Twitty began to grow impatient. "Don't say you don't know who she is," Jug said. "We have eyewitnesses who saw you both in the car."

"Just tell us where she is," one of the Alabama men snapped.

"Don't be so rude," Paulus van der Sloot responded. "This is not America. You can't act like that."

Sensing the increasing tension, Croes decided to try to mediate. "So I went over to the father and the police and I said, 'Is it O.K. if I talk to him?'" he says. "[The policemen said,] 'Sure, we're not even a part of this yet. She can't be considered missing for 48 hours.'"

Looking Joran in the eyes, Croes lowered his voice. "You know you're in a whale of shit if you don't tell the truth here," he said.

"I am telling the truth," Joran said.

"Why don't you tell me what happened?" Croes said.

Joran considered this for a moment, then began talking. He said he had met Natalee in the Holiday Inn's casino Sunday afternoon. In the early evening she asked him to join her later at Carlos 'n Charlie's. He declined, saying it would be dead on a Sunday. A little before 11 he headed home with his father, who had picked him up at a McDonald's. At home, Joran said, he had second thoughts. He called Deepak Kalpoe, who drove over with his younger brother, Satish, to get him.

"So I snuck out of my house and went over to see her," he said. "She came on to me huge. Dancing suggestively. Like a slut. I did belly shots on her, on the bar. [Eventually she said,] 'Could you take me home?' So we left." When they piled into Deepak Kalpoe's silver Nissan, Joran said, Natalee seemed nonplussed to find the two Kalpoe brothers, who are black, sitting in the front.

"What are these guys, your slaves?" she supposedly asked Joran. By all accounts, Natalee was very drunk.

"What happened then?" Croes asked.

"We took her back to the Holiday Inn, to the front door. When she got out of the car, she stumbled and fell. I went to help her, but she got up and walked on through the lobby." It was the last time, Joran insisted, that he had seen Natalee.

"O.K.," Croes said. "Is that the truth?"

"Yes."

"That's the truth? Look, Joran, you need to be truthful with me. You need to tell me everything. Where'd you go?"

Croes could see Joran's mind working. Finally, he said, "We didn't go directly to the Holiday Inn. She wanted us to drive around. The girl was crazy. She was just crazy." According to Croes, Joran said Natalee then told him three things as they drove north past the Holiday Inn: that her mother was "like Hitler," that she was a virgin, and that she was a lesbian. She begged him to take her to a beach where she had heard she could see sharks, but Joran told

her that was a local myth. She told him she wanted to have sex.

“Did you have sex with her?” Croes asked.

“Yeah,” Joran said. “She gave me a blow job.”

“Where’d that happen?”

“In the backseat of the car.”

“So where’d you take her?”

“I took her to the lighthouse. For a while. We didn’t get out.”

According to Croes, Joran said that Deepak was increasingly uncomfortable at the lighthouse, fearful that Natalee would “make a mess” in the car, presumably by vomiting. Croes could feel Joran opening up; he appeared to be on the verge of an admission. Then, from the driveway, the voice of one of the Alabama men rose: “Well, you Aruban assholes better get your act together, and now!” (Jug Twitty, while acknowledging his group’s impatience, denies the word “asshole” was used.)

Joran’s head turned. “That’s it,” Paulus said. “This is no good.” The decision was made that the entire group would return to the Holiday Inn, where Joran promised he would point out a security guard who had helped Natalee. Once there, however, he was unable to do so. The atmosphere again grew heated, as Jug Twitty demanded to know what happened to his stepdaughter. “Don’t tell them anything,” Deepak Kalpoe told Joran. “You don’t have to tell them anything.”

By now it was almost five o’clock in the morning. The policemen told Beth to wait at her hotel. A detective would come by and see her at eight. Detective Dennis Jacobs arrived at 8:15, took down Natalee’s description, and led Beth to the police station. Beth sat in the lobby for three hours until Jacobs spoke to her again. She rose, eager to pour out everything she had learned. Suddenly, Jacobs said, “We won’t be needing you.” Beth stood there, stunned, uncertain what to do. After a moment she walked outside, where she ran into the first of the hundreds of television crews she would soon encounter. “That was the moment,” she says today, “that I realized we were in serious trouble.”

Relations between the desperate Twittys and the Aruban police had gotten off to an atrocious start and never recovered. When Beth and Jug returned to the police station the next morning, they found Officer Jacobs’s behavior cavalier in the extreme. “Wait, I haven’t had my Frosted Flakes, and I haven’t shaved yet,” he said as they were about to give him their statement. What the Twittys didn’t yet understand was that missing tourists are hardly unusual in Aruba. Barely a week goes by without an American failing to return to his or her cruise ship, or deciding to stay a little longer in paradise. Almost all turn up within days.

When a tourist goes missing, the last thing the police expect is a murder.

The Twittys, in turn, struck the Aruban police as rude, arrogant, and demanding. “I didn’t really know who I was dealing with; I thought it was just a regular American family,” recalls Dompig, an F.B.I.-trained veteran who worked as a police officer for 10 years in the Netherlands. When he promised to mobilize every available resource to find Natalee, “Beth was wonderful, really understanding,” Dompig says. “She asked us to do everything possible, as any mother would. But Jug and the other guys, they started saying they didn’t trust us, because we’re not capable, and they’ve been here 48 hours! You know, ‘What kind of show are you running here?’ These are the words they used to try and scare me. They were trying to intimidate me.”

In those tumultuous first days, Beth’s most valuable allies were Julia Renfro, the 37-year-old American-born editor of an English-language daily, *Aruba Today*, and one of her reporters, Angela Munzenhofer, a tough-talking American whose family runs one of the island’s popular restaurants. When Beth walked into the paper’s office the day after she arrived, Renfro, a statuesque blonde, stopped the presses to run a front-page photograph of Natalee. Renfro and Munzenhofer both have children, and they identified with Beth’s desperation; the three women became inseparable. The first flyers posted around the island carried two numbers people could call with tips: Renfro’s and Munzenhofer’s cell phones. “At the beginning, I was the one Beth trusted,” says Munzenhofer. “She called me her angel. We were with them day and night. We weren’t reporters. We were family. Beth told us that.”

Wednesday morning, as Beth gave her statement to police, Renfro and Munzenhofer met in the Holiday Inn’s lobby to organize the first search teams. After a series of radio announcements, a hundred tourists showed up, along with a smattering of Arubans and policemen. Jan van der Straaten, the crusty Dutch police superintendent who would end up working the case, was not happy. “Van der Straaten walks up and tells me, ‘You can’t do this,’” Renfro recalls. “I said, ‘Yes I can. I’m going to find this girl.’ He told me she wasn’t even considered ‘missing’ for 48 hours. In fact, he told me just to go to Ladies’ Night at Carlos ’n Charlie’s that night, that she would probably show up there. Anyway, he talked to the group. And his message was, he asked us not to cause any traffic problems. I just wanted to fall out of my pants I was so mad.”

At dusk the searchers returned to their hotel rooms, having found no sign of Natalee. Then, early the next evening, Munzenhofer took an urgent call from a source, who

said Natalee was staying in a downtown house with certain unnamed “friends” who wanted to “protect” her. But, the source went on, her friends had agreed to turn her over to the family for \$4,000—a quasi-ransom. Renfro relayed the message to Beth, and within an hour everyone had met at the Bucaneer, the restaurant Munzenhofer’s family owns. Jug had a thousand dollars, and the Munzenhofers volunteered to donate the other \$3,000 from the cash register.

By now more of “the Fabulous Seven” had arrived. Eight men were in the group, and Munzenhofer’s husband took them to scout the downtown house where Natalee was supposed to be. It turned out to be what Arubans call a *choller* house—a crack house. When the men returned, everyone headed downtown to stake it out. “We were scared—scared to death,” Renfro recalls. “We didn’t know these people, how dangerous they were, whether they had guns and knives. So we called the cops. It took them 45 minutes to come a quarter-mile. They went in and looked around.” Natalee wasn’t there. The group spent the rest of the evening searching the neighborhood, and by midnight Renfro realized she had missed all her deadlines. “The print guys—I don’t know what happened—they decided to print the previous day’s paper again,” she remembers.

At 10 o’clock the next morning and every morning for the next two weeks Renfro and Munzenhofer organized search parties. They traipsed through cactus-strewn vacant lots and windswept beaches from the Holiday Inn, north past the Marriott, all the way to the lighthouse at the island’s northwestern tip. One morning Munzenhofer took Jug Twitty to the island’s Dutch military base to request help from the Dutch Marines, who joined the search with helicopters and four-wheel-drive vehicles. Another day the justice minister gave all Aruban government employees the day off to join the search. But no one returned with anything other than sunburn.

The first American cable crew—MSNBC—arrived on Friday, following the first correspondent to the island, from the syndicated show *A Current Affair*. That night Renfro was working late when she received a call from a source—a former policeman—who had just heard on police radio that an American girl matching Natalee’s description had been seen stepping into a Kia sedan outside an ATM in Oranjestad. Immediately the newspaper office emptied; at least 10 cars, packed with staffers and Alabamans, fanned out across the downtown area, looking for the car. When it was sighted, Renfro used cell phones to orchestrate a covert pursuit. A half-dozen cars followed the Kia for 15 minutes until it parked outside a house just blocks from the news-

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paper office. Renfro could just make out a man and two women, one of them blonde, inside the car.

They watched the car for 15 minutes before one of Renfro's friends, a volunteer named Carlos, took the initiative, walked to the car, and exchanged words with the driver, who was puffing on a marijuana cigarette. "Carlos came back and said, 'I don't think it's her; she was too happy,'" Renfro recalls. "We said, 'Come on! She's on drugs! Of course she's happy.' [He said,] 'No, she's too heavy.' [We said,] 'Maybe she gained weight!' [He said,] 'But there's a baby in the car.'"

As they discussed what to do, the Kia drove off. The *Aruba Today* caravan followed it to another house, where the three of them remained in the car. Forty minutes went by. Police were called. Finally, another volunteer, named O.J., pulled his Bronco in front of the car. When he got out, the driver emerged with what appeared to be a baseball bat and took a swing at O.J., who dived into his car and drove off. One of the women ran inside the house with the infant, but the Kia continued on, eventually stopping at a convenience store.

Soon the police appeared and took the driver and the other girl into custody. By the time the patrol car reached a nearby police station, a crowd of 100 onlookers, including camera crews from *A Current Affair* and MSNBC, were waiting. Renfro's spirits rose when, listening to the police radio, she heard an officer say he was "98 percent" sure the blonde girl was Natalee.

Beth and Jug were called. One of the Alabamans emerged from the crowd, gave Renfro a bear hug, and shoved \$10,000 in reward money at her. Renfro declined it. In minutes the Twittys appeared and entered the station. When they returned outside, their faces were impassive. The girl turned out to be an American woman on extended vacation. "It was the saddest moment of my life," Renfro says.

Two days later the first arrests were made.

When the police first questioned Joran and the Kalpoe brothers, they told of dropping Natalee off at the Holiday Inn. They mentioned seeing a security guard approach her, so that Sunday the police detained two local men who were former hotel security guards. Beth, who had focused on Joran and the Kalpoes from the outset, angrily told the police they were arresting the wrong men. The deputy chief, Gerold Dompig, insists today that police considered the three teenagers suspects from the outset; in fact, he hints that the boys' phones were tapped as part of a surveillance as early as that first weekend.

When Beth began giving television interviews the following week, she suggested that the police were protecting the van der Sloots because they were a prominent family. They are hardly that. Paulus has been a minor official in the Aruban justice department; he has trained to be a judge, but isn't one yet. Joran was a high-school soccer star and an honor student; he was planning to attend Saint Leo University, near Tampa, Florida, in the fall. By Wednesday, June 8, hints of a cover-up had grown so widespread that the Aruban prime minister, Nelson Oduber, released a statement denying it.

Dutch criminal investigations differ from American ones in small but important ways. By and large, Dutch detectives do not speak to journalists, on or off the record. In the Holloway case, this created an information vacuum that not only irritated an already suspicious American press but also led to rumor and speculation on the justice shows. Moreover, plea bargaining does not exist under the Dutch system. Whereas an American detective might arrest all three teenagers and cut a deal with one to squeal on the others, this isn't an option in Aruba.

Aruban investigations tend to move at what can seem a leisurely pace. "First, we investigate around [suspects]. We try to establish the facts, look at their backgrounds," says Dompig. "We want to keep them on the outside, where we can watch them, listen

to their calls, see what they're saying to each other. If we have to pick them up, we can't look at them, other than in a cell."

But the pressure to make an arrest—any arrest—was overwhelming. "The pressure was so . . . so . . . just, you could feel it on a daily basis: 'What is the press saying today? What is Beth saying today?'" says Dompig. "The Aruban government is very image-conscious. America is basically our bread and butter. The government, well, everyone was on our case. They wanted the case solved as soon as possible. And then you had the Aruban Hotel [and Tourism] Association, which is a very powerful group, that started putting pressure. 'Guys, what about the tourism! The jobs in the hotels! Imagine how a law-enforcement team functions with all this. Imagine that pressure! We got calls all the way up to the White House! They called the prime minister!'"

Reluctantly, Dompig gave the go-ahead for the arrest of Joran and the Kalpoe brothers on Thursday, June 9. Joran emerged from his house with a blue-and-green towel wrapped around his head. After initial questioning, he was taken into custody. Today, Dompig says pressure from the Twittys, the media, and his own government forced police to prematurely make the arrest. "Yes, yes, yes," he says. "Under normal circumstances, we would have taken much more time to monitor them. We would have had much more evidence had we waited."

Dompig expected the arrests would please the Twittys. They didn't. Beth and Jug were intent on keeping the pressure on. "It was like nothing could satisfy them—nothing," Dompig gripes. "Basically, Jug wanted us to come over and beat a confession out of these boys. We couldn't do that. These guys are hardheaded, especially Joran. We couldn't get a confession."

Under questioning, however, Joran did change his story. Instead of leaving Natalee at the Holiday Inn, he now said, the Kalpoes had dropped him and Natalee off at the beach beside the Marriott, a half-mile north of the Holiday Inn; the area is a lovers' lane of sorts. He said Natalee was so drunk she

## MORPHOLUTION

ON THE ROAD AHEAD, A PATH TO BE AVOIDED



Karl Rove: is this guy falling? . . .



. . . Chicken Little: is the sky falling?

PHOTO COMPOSITES BY JACQUES DEL CONTE

was drifting in and out of consciousness. Joran said he left her at the beach and walked home. During weeks of questioning, the Kalpoes backed up his new story.

As the Twittys' desperation grew, *On the Record*, Greta Van Susteren's show, became the preferred outlet for their frustrations. Beth's nightly appearances, however, created tension among her new friends. "Everything changed when Greta came," says Angela Munzenhofer. "All you heard [Beth say] was Greta, Greta, Greta."

"The way Beth talked to us, the local press, was totally different—you know: 'We're getting so much help,' how wonderful everyone was being, how helpful," says another *Aruba Today* reporter, Dilma Arends, "but at night, on television, we would hear a totally different person, how no one was helping her at all."

"She was saying a lot of this on Fox, on Greta, and most of the island doesn't get Fox," says Julia Renfro. "But I got DVDs sent to me from friends in the States, and I saw her there. She was totally different."

"That's how she is," says Arends. "She's a two-faced woman."

"We tried to avoid going on those shows," says Renfro.

"Because they wanted lies," says Munzenhofer.

"Theories," explains Arends. "What is your take? What is your take? We're reporters. We're not going to talk about theories."

The tensions came to a head in the wake of an appearance Renfro made on the Van Susteren show. "Nobody knows this, but the family were the ones determining who goes on the shows," she says. "It was all them." That night, when Van Susteren asked about Joran, Renfro described the teenager as an excellent student with a good reputation and "an idol for the younger kids" at school. The next day Renfro was in the Marriott lobby, holding her baby daughter, when she saw Beth and Jug.

When she went to give Beth a hug, "Jug attacked me, verbally and physically," Renfro recalls. "He pushed me! I'm holding a sleeping baby. He just starts screaming and yelling. Words you can't print. 'Fuck you! Get the fuck away from my wife! I never want to see you again.' I was just so stunned. I had put my heart and soul into finding their girl." Afterward, a Fox producer explained that the Twittys were furious over her comments on the Van Susteren show. Renfro was so shaken she filed a complaint with the police against Jug Twitty. (Jug acknowledges losing his temper and cursing at Renfro, but denies pushing her.)

Renfro attempted a reconciliation with Beth, going as far as suggesting that the Twittys were trying to "protect" her from local criticism by pushing her away. "Beth said, 'That's the blondest thing I've ever heard,'"

says Renfro, a blonde. "After that, I just said, 'I can't deal with this person anymore.'"

Beth says she doesn't recall any pushing incident. Of Renfro, Beth says only, "She's a witch."

Both Charles Croes and Angela Munzenhofer say they broke with the Twittys after angry confrontations with Jug. They, and many other Arubans, have since turned on the family, and viciously. The *Aruba Today* staff, once the Twittys' most fervent supporters, has morphed into the unofficial clearinghouse for everything anti-Twitty.

"We met Beth that first day, and Beth was like glue to us for about a month," Munzenhofer says. "But then we just had to let her go, because I did not agree with what she was saying. She was lying. She got caught in too many lies. I understand it. She's a grieving mother. I'm not against Beth. But, come on, her girl's not a virgin. The girl's an alcoholic. She was drinking. . . . I have personally talked to people who say Natalee bought drugs. I've seen the photo of that girl chugging from a bottle of 151 [rum]. . . . Beth, I told her, you have to look at different answers. Drug dealers. Taxi drivers. Ex-boyfriends. But she looked at one place only: Joran."

It's true that some of Beth's stories don't hold up. Before I went to Aruba, she told me that the Kalpoe family had been embroiled in the odd death of a former maid, and that Mrs. Kalpoe had been detained; it turned out the case had involved another family. She also told me that a person on the island had fathered an illegitimate child with a friend's wife, and that the friend had committed suicide. That, too, does not appear to be true.

"People understand what Beth is going through; they do," Julia Renfro told me. "But it's no excuse for misconstruing all the facts. She's hurt a lot of people down here. A lot of people."

By the end of June, with both Joran and the Kalpoe brothers in custody for three weeks, it appeared the case was nearing a climax. Rumors flew that charges were imminent. On Friday, July 1, the government spokesman Ruben Trapenberg said they could come as early as Monday. On Sunday, police were seen walking with Joran on the beach north of the Marriott as he guided them through what he said happened that night. Expectations were soaring Monday morning when a clerk stepped outside the courthouse in Oranjestad and read an announcement to American reporters and cameramen. A gasp shot through the crowd when she came to the point: Not only were none of the three teenagers being charged, the two brothers were being released, indicating that the judge had found insufficient evidence to justify their further detention.

Joran was ordered held without charges another 60 days.

The Twittys were outraged. Beth tearfully denounced the judge's decision as a travesty, terming the Kalpoe brothers "criminals." She called on the nations of the world to reject any efforts they might make to flee the country. All over television, the cable hosts piled on, endlessly castigating the Aruban justice system. For many Arubans, this was the last straw. The next afternoon a former government minister named John Merryweather helped organize a demonstration in front of the courthouse to protest the media's depiction of Aruba.

One of the Kalpoes' attorneys, meanwhile, attacked Beth's statements as "prejudicial, inflammatory, libelous, and totally outrageous." Caught off guard, Beth went back before the cameras at the end of the week and apologized "to the Aruban people and to the Aruban authorities if I or my family have offended you in any way."

But the damage was done. "That woman needs help," an angry John Merryweather told me as we sat on his terrace. "This is just a concerted attack on Aruba. A terrorist attack. Why blame the whole island, a whole country, for something that is out of our control? She attacks our justice system? What about yours? JonBenét. Was that ever solved? Michael Jackson—he gets off. O.J. That's American justice, and the woman is criticizing us?"

By mid-July, with Joran still languishing in the San Nicolas jail, undergoing daily questioning by Aruban, Dutch, and F.B.I. officials, a motley crowd of television producers, search teams, private eyes, and beach bums each determined to solve the case. One was Arthur Wood, a retired Secret Service agent who lives outside Ocala, Florida, and who spent his evenings glued to the Holloway coverage. In mid-June, Wood e-mailed some thoughts to Jossy Mansur, managing editor of the Aruban newspaper *El Diario*, who had latched onto the Twitty bandwagon as part of his own feud with the Aruban government. Eager to develop leads, Mansur invited Wood to Aruba, and put him on his payroll.

Wood began chatting up photographers, stringers, and reporters. The most intriguing lead, he decided, was a rumor that one of the Kalpoe brothers had confessed to killing Natalee—sort of—to a fellow prisoner while in the Aruban jail. The prisoner had heard that a relative's gardener, named Cumpa, had seen Joran and the Kalpoes burying Natalee's body in a vacant lot near the Marriott. When the Kalpoe brother was told the story, he supposedly went ashen and flipped over the dominoes they were playing with. Wood spent most of July tracking the elusive Cumpa. There were stories that he had

# Aruba Mystery

fled to Venezuela, that he had disappeared, that he might have been killed.

The Mansur “investigative team,” including Wood, Eduardo Mansur, and other Mansur employees and family friends, began holding nightly strategy sessions at the team’s de facto headquarters: Hooters. One night they were inside poring over rumors when a Mansur cousin’s teenage son suddenly blurted out, “I know Cumpa! He’s my uncle’s gardener!”

The boy hopped in Eduardo Mansur’s truck and led Wood to a large seaside home owned by Jossy Mansur’s cousin Eric Mansur, a wealthy importer. Wood found Cumpa, whose name turned out to be Carlos, in the yard. “He tells me that on that night, May 30, he couldn’t sleep,” Wood recalls. “It was 2:30 and it was so hot—he didn’t have air-conditioning—he said, ‘I got up, I told my wife I’m going to my boss’s house,’” which was air-conditioned.

According to Carlos, while driving to Eric Mansur’s home a little before three that morning, he took a shortcut, a dirt road through a vacant lot beside the Marriott. To his surprise, he found a car blocking the road. Beside the car were two large mounds of dirt. When he peered into the car, Carlos said, he recognized Joran and the Kalpoes. He said they covered their faces. He then drove on.

Carlos reluctantly climbed into Wood’s truck and allowed himself to be driven to police headquarters. He disappeared inside for four hours.

Three days later, a crowd of reporters gathered in the vacant lot by the Marriott to watch the police begin draining a pond near where the gardener, as he came to be known, claimed he had seen Joran and the Kalpoes digging. The effort quickly degenerated into farce. The first pumper truck, reportedly supplied by the Mansur family, bogged down and died. Then reporters, trying to get a better view of the pond, twice broke a water main. When the pond was empty, police found nothing at the bottom but trash. Gerold Dompig ended up discounting everything the gardener had said. “The garden-er[’s story],” he says, “was a concoction.”

The pond episode, however, gave Beth the cover she needed to begin a simultaneous excavation at a landfill behind the airport. The family had hired its own private investigator, an Atlanta man named T. J. Ward, who like Art Wood was soon a staple of the nightly talk shows; in fact, the two became rivals and began sniping at each other. Wood had been sent to interview a homeless man named Poom Poom, who was hounding police with a tale of seeing a woman’s body in the landfill. Beth wasn’t sure

whether to believe the story until T. J. Ward announced Poom Poom had passed a lie-detector test. “T.J. looked me in the face and said, ‘Beth, he’s telling the truth,’” Beth says. “That’s what sent all the people to the dump!” It took weeks for the search teams to decide there was no body there, though a team of Texas volunteers briefly renewed the search in late October.

The gardener and Poom Poom episodes were followed by the jogger—a story made the rounds in August that a late-night jogger had seen Joran and the Kalpoes digging near the same spot the gardener had identified. Police made a public appeal for the man to contact them, and he eventually did. Unfortunately, “the jogger had some problems,” Art Wood says, sighing. “He was a convicted sex offender. Apparently he was a murderer or rapist or something.” Gerold Dompig confirms this story. He says neither the jogger nor his story panned out in any way.

Every day in July and August seemed to bring a new dead end. One time a park ranger found on a beach a piece of duct tape attached to several human hairs; a test suggested the DNA from the hair wasn’t Natalee’s. Another day hundreds of tourists gathered behind the Marriott to watch volunteers drag out a barrel that had been seen in the ocean. It was empty. Nothing was too outlandish to investigate. The Dutch military brought in three F-16s that flew over the island using infra-red photography in an effort to identify a grave. They, too, came up with nothing.

Throughout the summerlong circus, the Twittys remained at the Holiday Inn and later at the Wyndham, whose owners gave them use of the hotel’s Presidential Suite. During the day they emerged to pass out prayer cards and photos of Natalee, and at night they sat for interviews. One afternoon Beth was walking through Noord, handing out prayer cards with Greta Van Susteren, when she realized she was near the van der Sloot home. She walked to the gate, thinking she would leave a card. That’s when she saw a pair of legs—it was Paulus—in the bushes. She called for him to come out. As he did, his wife, Anita, appeared at the front door, and the couple invited Beth inside for what became a tense 90-minute meeting.

In the first half-hour, Beth listened as Joran’s parents lavished praise on their son, though they eventually admitted they had been having trouble with him. According to Beth, the van der Sloots acknowledged that Joran had been seeing a psychiatrist. “Anita told me that,” Beth says. “She was saying they were beginning to have trouble with Joran [for a] defiant attitude. The father acknowledged they could not control him. He would sneak out, go gambling, in the pre-dawn hours. They had no control over him.”

At one point, Beth decided to press. “I

told Paulus van der Sloot that he was responsible for Aruba being trapped in hell; until he came forward, I told him, his country would continue to be trapped in perpetual hell,” she recalls. Paulus, while insisting he could remember almost nothing of the night Natalee disappeared, began to sweat profusely. “These beads of sweat were rolling down from his head onto the kitchen table,” Beth remembers. “Beginning in the last 30 minutes, Anita had to get up and go get a kitchen towel. The sweat was pooling on the table. She had to pat him down.” (The van der Sloots’ attorney didn’t return phone calls for comment.)

On August 8, Beth forced a similar confrontation on Deepak Kalpoe, who was working at a downtown Internet café. She entered with an Alabama friend and an MSNBC film crew. “I walked up to the counter and I just stood there for about 15 minutes and stared at him,” she says. “He did nothing. That head went right down. All I saw was his white scalp. Then I began speaking with Deepak. I began questioning him. ‘Were you a participant or did you help her?’ I was very graphic.

“And I think it just shocked him. I can’t even say what I said. He told me his attorney advised him not to talk. I told him repeatedly to hold his head up and look at me. I kept offering [him the choice of a] \$250,000 reward or life in prison. He said he didn’t need the money. Deepak finally looked up at the very end, and said, ‘The media hasn’t seen this side of you.’” Beth replied, “I’ve been saving it for you, Deepak.” Afterward, Kalpoe filed a complaint with the police over the incident.

By mid-August, as Beth continued her crusade, communication between the police and the family had broken down entirely. Beth characterizes this as evidence of the ongoing cover-up; Gerold Dompig says his men just got tired of being yelled at. Still, Beth slogged forward, meeting with Nelson Oduber, the Aruban prime minister, on August 20. As much as it irked the police, her campaign appeared to work when, on Friday, August 26, the Kalpoes were suddenly re-arrested.

No explanation was given, leading to another spasm of speculation on cable and the Internet blogs dedicated to the case. Beth told me the brothers had been re-arrested because the gardener had crippled their alibis. In fact, Dompig says, this was not the case. The police decided to take a risk—a large one, as it turned out.

“Once we got a statement from Joran that [Natalee] passed out several times while he was sexually fondling her, we thought we had something,” Dompig says. Under Dutch law, this could be viewed as sex without consent; anyone who enabled the crime could be judged an accessory. “We tried Deepak and Satish with that point; someone passed out

in the back of your car, you're an accessory," Dompig says. "We were doing this to apply pressure. We felt Satish was the weakest link. We wanted to squeeze Satish. Deepak wants to protect Satish. But when we put that pressure on, it didn't work. Deepak is too strong."

The gambit blew up in Dompig's face. "Then the very same people who wanted us to solve the case—the family and the media—worked against us," he says. "There was all this criticism that we should never have released the [Kalpoes] in the first place. Unfortunately, the judge, you know, he heard this, and he didn't agree with us. So we lost the Kalpoes. When [they are] walking, Joran's lawyer says, 'Well, what about my client?' When that started rolling, that was the beginning of the end."

On Wednesday, August 31, the judge ordered Joran released; the next day the brothers were released as well. "It was all about Hurricane Katrina," Beth charges. Her anger is as fresh today as it was that day. "All the cameras were gone to New Orleans," she says. "So it was time to let the boys go under the curtain of Hurricane Katrina. Right there. There's your corruption and collusion."

Maybe. But a more likely explanation for the judge's decision is that the police had no body, no evidence of murder or any other crime. They had kept Joran in jail for nearly three months, and he hadn't cracked. Get some evidence, the judge said, or let the boy go.

Freed, Joran traveled with his father to the Netherlands, where he enrolled in college and was briefly accosted by a producer working for *A Current Affair*, to whom he repeated much of the story he had told Charles Croes in his driveway months before. The Kalpoes returned to their jobs. The Twittys retreated to Alabama for several weeks, but Beth returned to Aruba at Halloween as a new group of searchers began using sonar to hunt for the body off the northern beaches, only to quit in despair, citing a lack of cooperation from the Aruban authorities.

Since Joran's release, the only real news in the investigation has come from, of all places, the *Dr. Phil* show, which sent a team of investigators to Aruba. There, in a taped interview, a California lie-detector specialist named Jamie Skeeters seemed to get Deepak Kalpoe to admit to having had sex with Natalee. The tape is being examined by Dutch authorities, but Gerold Dompig, for one, finds it inconclusive.

"I'm skeptical," he says. "It seems like a big hoax."

In an effort to sort fact from fiction, Dompig agreed to discuss the case in detail for the first time. Surprisingly little is known of how Natalee spent her time on Aruba, he says. At least initially, Dompig says, Beth

asked investigators to refrain from debriefing the Alabama students. Not for weeks did the F.B.I. begin to interview them, and even now, Dompig says, police have not seen these statements. They have, however, taken statements from hotel managers.

"This group of students was a very—I don't want to demonize them—but the group really went far, very far, in terms of having a good time," Dompig says. "Wild partying, a lot of drinking, lots of room switching every night. We know the Holiday Inn told them they weren't welcome next year. Natalee, we know, she drank all day every day. We have statements she started every morning with cocktails—so much drinking that Natalee didn't show up for breakfast two mornings."

Despite reports to the contrary, Dompig feels certain Natalee didn't meet Joran until her final day on Aruba, Sunday. He confirms that there have been numerous reports that she may have been involved with other young men on the island. "We have taken two statements, from Julia Renfro and a Holiday Inn worker, that Beth told them she had gotten a call from her daughter, and that she was in love with a tall, blue-eyed Dutch teenager. So [Beth] had contact with her daughter. But she denies it. The question is why. If [the Twittys] don't level with us, how can they talk about a conspiracy? We need to know the truth. Joran did not have blue eyes. So who was this boy?" Beth denies making any such statements, or even having talked with Natalee while she was in Aruba.

The Twittys have accused Joran of changing his story more than 20 times. Dompig says that, while Joran has indeed made small changes in some of his more than 20 statements, he has given just three versions of what happened. The first, discarded in early June, ended with Natalee dropped off at the Holiday Inn. The second had Joran leaving her at the beach by the Marriott. In a third, given to police in August, Joran claimed Deepak had actually dropped him off near his home and disappeared with Natalee in his car.

"This latest story [came] when he saw the other guys, the Kalpoes, were kind of finger-pointing in his direction, and he wanted to screw them also, by saying he was dropped off," Dompig says. "But that story doesn't check out at all. He just wanted to screw Deepak. They had great arguments about this in front of the judge. Because their stories didn't match. This girl, she was from Alabama, she's not going to stay in the car with two black kids. We believe the second story, that they were dropped off by the Marriott. But then the time line [Joran has given] starts to get into trouble."

Aruban detectives have repeatedly inter-

viewed witnesses in an effort to establish that time line. It's been widely reported, for instance, that Joran returned to his home that morning around four. In fact, Dompig says, "nobody knows what time he got home." Nor is it clear how he got there. "He says he walked," Dompig continues, a distance of about two miles. "That is very unlikely."

The tennis shoes Joran wore that night have never been found, which police find suspicious. Another missing item involves a break-in that night at one of the low-slung fisherman's huts that line the beach north of the Marriott. Reported taken were a machete and perhaps a lobster trap. The police do not have a single witness who claims to have seen Joran that morning.

Moreover, Dompig says, this summer F.B.I. profilers completed a detailed psychological evaluation. "He struck us, and the F.B.I., as a guy who can make you believe he's God's gift to mothers-in-law," Dompig says. "But if you look at his actions, he's anything but. The F.B.I. profiled him as a person who never has been corrected by his parents. He's the boss of what happens in that house. He's the boss in the family. He is allowed to do anything. . . . If a person like that is in a position where a person says, 'No,' well, that person may change completely. Maybe he blew a fuse when she wouldn't have sex with him, and something happened."

Leaving aside Dompig's explanations and excuses, and ignoring some of the Twittys' behavior toward Arubans, one can't help but share Beth's outrage that the principal suspects in her daughter's disappearance are free. Yet, absent a body or any physical evidence, the situation is unlikely to change anytime soon. It's entirely possible, in fact, that the mystery may never be solved.

What do I think? I think Natalee died on the beach that night a couple of hundred yards north of the Marriott. Maybe she denied Joran sex and he strangled or drowned her in a fit of rage. Maybe it was alcohol poisoning. Maybe, as some have speculated, she was slipped a tablet of Ecstasy or some other drug, and she died from a lethal cocktail.

If her body had been buried on Aruba, it probably would have been found by now. If it had been dumped into the surf, it would have ended up back on the beach the following morning. But 200 yards offshore is a sandbar. It's a romantic rendezvous. Couples sometimes go there to make love, and the fishermen watch from their boats. On the other side of that sandbar the current shifts, running west. Anything placed in the water on the far side of the sandbar will drift away from the island, toward Panama. If Natalee was deposited there, her body is gone forever. □