

LITTLE LISA MARIE

By

Julie Showalter

What everybody seems to forget is that she was already dead. People act like I was a horrible mother, but my little girl was dead and that's what I had to deal with. Face facts and move on.

NBC-5 NEWS AT 10:00 - NOVEMBER 28, 1995

BRENT MARSHALL: Good evening, Tulsa. We have a breaking story to report tonight. Around 6:00 this evening, five-year old Lisa Marie Bennett disappeared from the Equestrian Estates Shopping Center. The girl's mother, Raeanne Martin, reports that she left the girl alone while she went into a dressing room to try on a blouse, and when she came out her daughter was gone. Lisa Marie is approximately 40" tall. She has shoulder-length brown hair and brown eyes. When last seen she was wearing jeans, a red and white tee shirt and a pink parka. There are no pictures of the girl available. Roberta?

ROBERTA MARTINEZ: Ironic that this should happen during this holiday season when our thoughts are turned to family and children.

BRENT: Yes, ironic. And on one of the busiest shopping days of the year, too.

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And another thing – it's not like I killed her. I mean, people are acting like I was the one that did it. The papers didn't make it out much better. They said I watched. Well, to me "watched" means you set out to see something, like you watch television. Yeah, I was in the room, and yeah, I saw what happened, but I didn't "watch." I just saw it.

After the accident, it took Dan and me a couple of days to figure what to do. The plan we settled on was, I'd go to the mall when it was real busy, tell the security guy she was missing, and go home. We had no idea it'd be such a big deal. I mean, it wasn't like she was a kid anybody noticed when she was around. But they kept me at the shopping center for two hours. Then they made me go to the police station and tell them everything I could remember about other shoppers in the store. I made up some stuff about a suspicious looking guy being in ladieswear just to give them something else to think about. Then I had to work on one of those composition drawings of someone I made up.

It was almost ten o'clock before I got home. Dan was worried to death and, on top of everything else, upset that he had to order Domino's for supper. When I told him everything that happened, he went kind of pale. He said, "That kid of yours can't stop being trouble."

I kept my mouth shut. Dan's a good man. He married me even though he didn't want a kid. You've got to respect him for that. Most men, we'd have a date or two, they'd meet Lisa, and it was goodbye Charlie.

Which is kind of funny considering I planned her so I could get a man.

I was never real popular in high school, kind of like two levels down from cheerleaders and such. It seemed to me I was prettier than any of them, and my hair flipped just like theirs and I wore the right clothes. But there was no getting into that group. All I could figure was they decided in kindergarten who was going to be in the in-crowd and it wasn't me.

Anyway, Lisa's father, Ronnie Bennett, was the most popular guy I ever dated. He got to start two games as quarterback when Lemmie Johnson got mono. I looked around and figured he was the best I was going to do – like I say, I face facts. His mother was real active in the right-to-lifers which meant he wouldn't make me go to the clinic – not with her picketing with a dead baby in a jar. So I quit taking my pills.

Ronnie wasn't happy about having to get married, but he liked being able to have sex all the time. He decided he'd like having a son, and started calling it Elvis. I figured things were going to be great once I got my figure back and he had his little football player.

So, first disappointment – no Elvis, it's Lisa Marie.

Second disappointment – they bring her in and – I know you're not supposed to say this. But they bring her in and she's ugly. She's bald and red and her head comes to a point. Ronnie took one look at her and said, "Damn, it's a pinhead." The nickname kind of stuck, even after her head rounded out. Even after Ronnie left.

Third disappointment – we get her home and she screams a blue streak. People said it was colic, but it seemed willful to me. On TV all the babies smile and goo when you pick them up, but she'd just arch back and scream louder. Like she didn't even want me touching her. She screamed till Ronnie couldn't stand it any more. One night he said just those words, "Raeanne, I can't stand it any more." He packed his stuff and moved back with his folks. You-know-who was left with the screamer.

None of my other dates ever took to her. She stopped the screaming, but she still acted tacky. You try making up to a kid who acts cowed every time you come in the room. Hiding in the corner whimpering like some sick puppy. Behavior like that makes a man uncomfortable, and that makes him mad. I, for one, understand that point of view. Sometimes I'd shake her and say, "Stand up straight, smile, act like a happy kid." But it was a waste of breath talking to her. She wouldn't learn how to please a man.

That night after I got home from talking to the cops, I was standing in the kitchen eating the cold pizza and all of a sudden Dan starts yelling for me to come in the living room. There I was on TV coming out of the police station. Those actresses always claim the camera puts twenty pounds on you, and I'm here to tell you it's true. I looked fat as an old hog. And my hair! I knew I never should've let Olivia give me that perm.

NBC TODAY SHOW, 7:45 A.M., NOVEMBER 29, 1995

KATHY RICHARDSON: *A little girl has disappeared in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Little Lisa Marie Bennett was Christmas shopping with her mother when she suddenly vanished. Police are assuming the worst, that the child was abducted. These stories, which touch us all year, are especially poignant during the holiday season. We have joining us this morning, from Tulsa, the girl's mother and step-father, Raeanne and Dan Martin. Good morning to you both.*

DAN: *Good morning*

RAEANNE: *Good morning, Kathy.*

KATHY: *Mrs. Martin, I know this is a dreadful time for you, but could you tell us about your daughter's disappearance.*

RAEANNE: *Well, we were shopping for a dress for her to wear to her Christmas program. I was picking out dresses and holding them up for her. I found one she liked – it was pink velvet, pink's her best color – and I went to see if they had it in her size. When I came back she was gone.*

KATHY: *And how did you feel at that moment, experiencing every parent's worst nightmare?*

RAEANNE: *Well. Like you said. It was my worst nightmare.*

KATHY: *I see you are holding a teddy bear. Is that a special toy?*

RAEANNE: *Yes. It was Lisa's. It was little Lisa Marie's favorite toy. She slept with it every night. (BREAKS DOWN IN TEARS)*

KATHY: *I know this is hard. Mr. Martin, we have a report this morning that the police have a lead. A shopper arriving at the mall at about 6:30 yesterday evening has reported seeing a black man forcing a crying child into a pickup. The witness didn't see the child's face because she was wearing a hood, but she was approximately Lisa Marie's size and she was wearing a pink parka. Does this news give you hope?*

DAN: *Some black guy's had her for twelve hours? (SNORTS AND SHAKES HIS HEAD) Yeah, right.*

KATHY: *I see. (COUGHS, SHUFFLES PAPERS) Mrs. Martin, I understand that the reason you agreed to appear this morning was so that you could send a message to your daughter's abductor.*

RAEANNE: *Yes. Please, whoever you are. Take good care of my little girl. She's her mamma's angel. She's a good girl and never gave anyone a minute's trouble. And bring her back. I don't know if I can go on without her.*

KATHY: *Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Martin. Our prayers are with you and little Lisa Marie.*

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I think the Today Show interview went well, no matter what happened after. The teddy bear was a real good touch, and the talk about the pink velvet dress. I looked better than I had the night before. I'd put some mousse in my hair and done it up on top that way that makes me look like Heather Locklear, and I wore black – it's slimming. Yeah, I'd say I looked real good. We watched the interview when it was on – it plays an hour later in Tulsa – and we recorded it, so I got to watch it a lot.

I'll always be glad we did that interview, even if it did get us into trouble. First there was the part about the dress. I guess I'd said the day before that I was in Penney's womenswear when she disappeared, and on the interview I said girlsweat. It didn't make any difference that those departments are real close together. The police just worried that and worried it and wouldn't let it go.

Then there was the thing about me saying the bear was her favorite toy. They said I wouldn't use past tense unless I knew she was dead. Like I know anything about grammar. First time they mentioned that past tense thing to me, I said, "All I know about tense is you're making me tense." Dan thought that was pretty funny.

The other thing that started things against us was Dan's talk about the black man. It didn't seem to me that what he said was so awful. But all of a sudden after the interview we were racists. Those people are so sensitive, you can't say anything these days. First thing you know, you've got that Jesse Jackson making some rhyme about you and two hundred of those people carrying signs. They found the guy from the parking lot, and it was like he was some Black Superman. He's a high school teacher working on his master's degree at night, volunteers for a youth center. I told Dan he probably teaches AIDS babies to patty-cake in his spare time. The little girl was his three-year old daughter. How anyone could mistake a three-year old black girl for little Lisa Marie is beyond me, pink parka or no pink parka. The little girl was crying because she was tired and she fell, he says. I don't know about that. My guess is he gave her a smack because she wasn't walking fast enough.

You know, a funny thing happened during that interview and then later when I watched it all those times. I started to believe in that little girl – that Little Lisa Marie. We never called her Lisa Marie, just Lisa or Pinhead. But when I watched that interview, I started to believe in that little girl who was her mother's perfect angel, and looked good in pink, and needed a teddy bear to sleep with. I mean, that little girl was a little girl I could have dressed up and played with. Dan would have loved her. She would have sat on his knee and laughed and we'd all be a family.

But my Lisa wasn't anything like that. She always had a snotty nose. And pink eye – I'll bet she got it three times a year. There's nothing uglier than pink eye, unless it's those scabs she got from picking at her lip. I used to tell Olivia, "Lisa's got a face only a mother could love," but to tell you the truth, I really couldn't love her either.

FROM STATEMENT TO POLICE BY RAEANNE MILDRED MARTIN, 10 P.M.,
NOVEMBER 29, 1995. PRESENT: MARTIN, INVESTIGATING OFFICERS
BELSON AND RANDALL.

RAEANNE MARTIN: *I know my rights. I don't have to talk to you.*

DET. RANDALL: *That's right, Raeanne, you could even get a lawyer in here to do your talking for you. Some people do that, people who aren't good at talking for themselves.*

OFFICER BELSON: *The thing is, Dan's in a whole lot of trouble right now. He told us what happened, but it seems like the more he talks the worse trouble he gets himself into.*

RAEANNE MARTIN: *Dan didn't do anything wrong. He must not have explained it right.*

DET. RANDALL: *Why don't you explain it to us. Begin last Sunday night.*

RAEANNE MARTIN: *Well, Dan had kind of a bad day. His team lost and I guess he had some money on them. Anyway, by supper time, he's been sitting around all day watching football, and he's probably a little hungover, or maybe a little drunk, even. Like maybe he's not responsible for what he's doing?*

So, Lisa – she was sitting in the floor by the radiator. She had this cold, and she kept coughing. I could tell it was driving Dan crazy. This real phlegmy cough, kind that makes you gag to hear it. Well, I say, "Soup's on," and Lisa starts coughing up goobers, and Dan says, "How's a man supposed to eat with that going on?" And just then, he looks at Lisa and she looks up at him, and this big green bubble of snot comes out of her nose.

He slapped her. It didn't look that hard to me. He slapped her and her head snapped back into the radiator. You can't blame him for how her head snapped back. I mean, that was an accident, a freak accident. It could happen to anybody.

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Now, I'll admit that it sounded loud when her head hit the radiator. Louder than it should. But we didn't think anything of it. She just lay there like she does sometimes when she's sulking. She didn't come into supper, but we didn't think anything about that either. Anytime I fixed chili, Miss Finicky didn't eat.

So, we had a few beers with the chili, and after a while Dan got romantic and we went to bed. I guess I kind of forgot about her. But she liked to sleep by the radiator, and if she didn't, she knew where her bed was.

The first I know there's trouble is the next morning. I get up and go in the living room and she's still lying there and Dan's sitting across from her in his underwear crying like a baby. It takes a minute for it all to sink in, but when it does, I go over to Dan and put my arms around him. A lot of women are turned off when they see a man cry, but I say there's nothing stronger than a man who'll let you see the little boy inside. I say, "Just leave it to Mama. It'll be OK." Dan says, "What are we going to do?" and I say, "We don't have to decide anything right now."

We put her in one of those suit bags, the kind you get at nice stores? The people who lived in the apartment before us left it. Some people don't know the value of anything, just throw

away something good like that suit bag. Well, Dan put her in the bag – I couldn't stand to touch her – and we put her in the closet and we both went to work and figured we'd work it out when we got home.

OFFICER RANDALL: *Does that seem a normal way for a mother to act?*

MARTIN: *What? She was dead. Crying and carrying on wouldn't help her. Nothing would help her. But she could get Dan in big trouble. That's what I had to worry about now. And the way I look at it, technically I wasn't a mother anymore. But I was a wife. I had a legal and a moral duty to love and cherish and protect Dan.*

OFFICER RANDALL: *So you watched your husband kill her and then you were actively complicit in the coverup?*

MARTIN: *Are you inferring I did something wrong? You get me a lawyer and get some of those TV cameras in here. Let's just show them how you treat a grieving mother.*

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So, after two days Dan took her out to the forest preserve and buried her, and the next night I went to the mall.

You know what's funny? We talked a lot those two days while she was in the closet about whether anybody would notice she was gone. Maybe we could just get rid of her and never say a thing. Dan was kind of leaning toward that idea, but I didn't want to always be worrying that somebody was going to come up and ask where's your daughter. I wanted to get it all out in the open and over with.

I'd go to the mall and say "Oh, oh, my darlin' little girl's gone," and everybody would feel sorry for me and that would be that. She'd never be found and I'd be one of those people with a tragic past, and maybe be on "Oprah" sometime with other tragic mothers.

It didn't quite work out like that.

All things considered, I don't think I was such a bad mother. For instance, when she was four I bought her a baton and a sequin leotard, and took her down to have her picture taken for the Little Miss Princess contest. Everybody thinks it's so awful that in her whole life she never had her picture taken – well, she could have had it taken then.

The prize was \$500. I explained to her how we needed the money and she said she'd do it. I showed her how to pose with a baton – I studied twirling in eighth grade – and she wasn't half bad. I worked and worked on her hair – probably used a can of spray to get her curls up high. Brought out her cheekbones with a little blush and highlighted her brows and lashes with mascara. After I put on my lipstick, I put just a touch on her. I looked at us both in the mirror, and for the first time I could kind of see some of myself in her. "You and me, Lisa," I said, "we're gonna make it." I went to that picture session real hopeful.

So we get there, and there's 40 Little Miss Princesses in line ahead of us. Lisa starts to whine that she's hungry. Then someone opens the door and she's cold. Then her nose starts running. By the time we're at the front of the line, she's cried off all the make-up and her hair's a stringy, sticky mess. I stand there smiling like a fool even though anyone can tell there's not a chance in hell that we'll win. But the worst was when we got up to the little platform where she was supposed to get her picture taken. She starts screaming and holding onto my leg and wouldn't even go up there.

A half day off work, I don't know how much spent on the costume and cosmetics, and I didn't even get a damned picture out of it.

I've been thinking about that Little Lisa Marie and how things would've been with her. You know, I'll only be 35 when I get out of here – 32 if I show proper rehabilitation. There'll still be time to have a baby. Maybe when I get out I could go see Dan on one of those conjugal visits or they could ship me some of his sperm or something.

I can just see that little baby. She'll be a girl and she'll coo and laugh at her mama like the baby in the Pampers commercial. She'll smell good and she'll never cry, just like Little Lisa Marie. I won't call her that, though. People would think it's weird. But I'd think it -- my own precious Lisa Marie.