

The Heart Of A Tragedy

By Nikki Meredith

■ So God created little girls
With loving eyes and bouncy curls
With joyful hearts and feminine wiles
With cheerful voice and tearful smiles.

— a poem from Priscilla Phillips' scrapbook.

You look at a convicted murderess differently than you look at other people. You look for the clue, the move, the gesture, the something that everyone else missed. The missing piece of the puzzle that will help you make sense of it — will help you understand how this Marin County social worker, this block collector for the Leukemia Society, this P.T.A. mother who drives carloads of kids to Little League games, now sitting in her three-bedroom home with the orange front door and the matching orange kitchen cabinets, showing you pictures of her family — her children camping in the woods, running on the beach — how in God's name she could have slowly poisoned a beautiful adopted baby girl, mourned at her grave and then adopted another one, only to start the same thing all over again.

You notice how she seems different every time you look at her. The aggressiveness turns shy. The harshness softens. Just when you're convinced she's plain, almost frumpy, you look again, connect with her clear hazel eyes, notice the softness of her ash blonde hair, and she's, well, pretty. She seems too short for her energetic take-control personality, too overweight for her small bones. You notice the masculine sandals she wears, and then you notice the coral nail polish pecking through the leather straps. You notice her tie. You notice she looks older than her thirty-three years, and then you watch her talk to her husband and she seems more like a kid.

You sit there as she shows you pictures of little Tia at her birthday party surrounded by gifts; frail little Tia in the hospital with tubes in her nose and taped to her arms. And you try to imagine this mother sneaking teaspoons of baking soda into baby bottles or injecting sodium solutions into I.V. tubes. You try to imagine her cleaning up buckets of diarrhea and vomit thrown off by the little body strug-



Priscilla Phillips.

gling to reject huge amounts of sodium. You try to put it all together, and you get dizzy thinking about it. You get dizzy, and then you wonder if it's just possible someone has made a terrible mistake here. It is possible that the prosecutor was wrong, that the jury was wrong, that the people in the *People vs. Priscilla Phillips* case were wrong?

Priscilla sits in her attorney's office and talks about her past. Remembering back, back before the illnesses and the doctors and the police, Priscilla recalls always wanting a little girl.

"Maybe it's because my father died when I was eleven, and after that all I had was my mother and my sister. I guess I just felt more comfortable around girls."

She seemed destined, however, to be surrounded by males.

She met Steve while she was a student at Winthrop College in South Carolina. He followed her to Berkeley, where she attended graduate school. They married, and moved to Terra Linda — a Marin County suburb. And they had two boys: Eric and Jason.

Unlike her childhood environment, this left Priscilla in a house with a definite male flavor. Depending on their tolerance, neighbors alternately describe the boys as "roughnecks" or "all-American kids," and Steve looks and acts like a high school gym coach. Actually, he's a juvenile hall counselor, but the roles are close enough. He always seems ready to bark out orders or coerce unruly boys into structured activities. Steve doesn't wear a whistle around his neck or a baseball cap, but they would look right on him. It's easy to imagine him dressing down a smart-assed kid in front of his peers, but it's just as easy to imagine him spending

off-duty hours listening to the woes of a troubled youngster. There is a sweetness about him.

Sweetness notwithstanding, Priscilla wanted a girl. She had had a hysterectomy after Jason was born, so the Phillips decided on adoption.

It took two years to get her, but Hung Ha Ching was worth waiting for. She was beautiful. The little bedroom Priscilla and Steve had prepared for her reflected their anticipation. The walls were covered with bright wallpaper, and her crib was crammed with dolls and stuffed animals. This six-month-old baby, abandoned at birth and introduced to life in a Korean orphanage, was to be treated like royalty. They called her Tia.

All of this loveliness was marred only by Tia's poor health. There were diaper rashes and ear infections and bouts of diarrhea from the very beginning.

And then the episodes of diarrhea got serious. At times she would lose half her body weight in a series of "explosions," and would have to be rushed to nearby Kaiser Hospital to have fluids poured into her.

Intermittently, she would be all right, and Priscilla would take her shopping or down to the community pool with the other kids. On Sundays, she would dress her in frilly outfits and bring her to church.

Then, abruptly, Tia would get violently ill again.

Numerous tests and surgical procedures were performed by doctors searching for an explanation and desperately trying to control her symptoms. There were cutdowns and x-ray scans and blood tests and diet changes. Tubes were inserted into her nose and into her veins. She was transferred to other hospitals where more tests were performed.

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Sometimes lab tests would show very high levels of sodium throughout her system. Doctors worked on a theory that a tumor was causing the excessive sodium secretion, but nothing showed up on any of the x-rays. Finally, they decided to perform a laparotomy — a surgical procedure which involves opening up the area from the sternum to the pubic bone — in order to examine all of the body organs. They were reluctant to subject Tia's weak little body to the surgery, but felt her condition was serious enough to warrant the risk.

No tumor, no abnormality.

Throughout all of this, Priscilla was right there with Tia. She helped perform minor nursing chores, such as changing dressings and adjusting I.V. lines, and she would frequently feed her. Most of the staff admired Priscilla and were impressed by her involvement with her adopted daughter. She got to be good friends with some of the nurses and with Tia's pediatrician, Dr. Aimey Tanaguchi. Priscilla even kept a diary which included notations about Tia's condition:

Wednesday — I.V. continued, began small amounts of first pedalyte, neutranagen, one-half strength, weight approximately 7.5 kilos, extremely dehydrated.

Thursday — I.V. continued until 5:30 p.m., neutranagen continued, some diarrhea, appeared to be improving. More alert.

Friday — Neutranagen, rice cereal in p.m., to be discharged Saturday. Later p.m. diarrhea and vomiting again, screaming, cramping, fever 102.

Early in the morning of February 2, 1977, three months before Tia's second birthday, Priscilla found her in her crib covered with vomit and diarrhea. The baby was in shock; she was convulsing, and she was blue. Priscilla rushed her to the hospital, but by the next day it was clear that her brain was dead. Reverend Jim Hutchison, the Phillips' minister, was there when Tia was pulled from the respirator. "Priscilla asked to hold her. She took that little body in her arms and sobbed. Steve stood by and cried his heart out."

The Phillips agreed to an autopsy. But again, nothing was found. The report simply said that Tia died of "chronic massive secretory diarrhea, etiology unknown."

Right after Tia's death, the Phillips decided to adopt another little girl. "But this time," Priscilla says, "we specifically requested a healthy child."

On November 3, 1977, Sol Young Kim arrived from Korea. They called her Mindy.

On February 3, 1978, exactly one year after Tia died, Mindy was hospitalized with some of the same symptoms Tia had.

Not again. The doctors couldn't believe it. Friends couldn't believe it. The church couldn't believe it.

Dr. Tanaguchi was indeed baffled. "It was medically very unlikely that two unrelated children would have a similar unexplained

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form of diarrhea."

On February 22, after Mindy had been hospitalized for the second time, one of Dr. Tanaguchi's colleagues gave her an article from the latest issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* which described a little-known and rarely-reported mental disorder called "Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy."

Munchausen Syndrome itself is a well-known psychiatric condition. Patients afflicted with it wander from hospital to hospital where they manage to be admitted because of the dramatic stories they tell about being dangerously ill. They subject themselves to countless operations and investigations in search of non-existent illnesses. The syndrome is named after Baron Karl Friederich von Munchausen, a fictional eighteenth-century raconteur.

It's the "proxy" part that's relatively new and refers to parents who fake symptoms or actually cause illnesses in their children in order to gain attention for themselves.

The AMAJ article referred to a case in England of a baby who had recurrent illnesses associated with high concentrations of sodium in his blood. He would have "attacks," and then he would be all right. He underwent extensive tests which showed no abnormality between attacks. It was finally discovered that the mother had been secretly giving him salt through suppositories and feeding tubes.

Another case was recently reported in Houston, Texas in which a mother repeatedly injected her daughter with fecal bacteria. The physicians were puzzled by the weird blood samples turning up; but because of the close bond between the mother and child, they didn't suspect foul play until a nurse caught the mother tampering with I.V. equipment.

On February 25, after noticing that Mindy was excreting exorbitant amounts of sodium, Dr. Estol Carfe, a Kaiser pediatrician, discovered that a bottle of Mindy's in the hospital refrigerator contained twenty times more sodium than it should have. After testing to make sure that the batch of commercially prepared formula was not defective, he ordered Mindy placed in the ICU, restricted the Phillips' visiting privileges, and reported the case to Marin County Protective Services.

Priscilla said she didn't mix that bottle of formula. A couple of nurses said they heard her say she did.

The San Rafael Police investigated. FBI tests revealed that the added substance in

Mindy's formula had been sodium bicarbonate. The Phillips' home was searched. On the theory that the substance had been transported to the hospital, suitcases and purses were seized and analyzed for traces of sodium bicarbonate. Nothing. The only "proof" that turned up was a box of baking soda and a can of baking powder in the kitchen cabinet.

In the meantime, Mindy improved and was placed in a foster home. The Phillips petitioned the court to get her back, and they waited.

Priscilla was in a good mood when she got up to go to work on April 26, 1978. She hadn't heard anything from the police in a couple of months, and she was beginning to feel optimistic about getting Mindy back. Besides, it was spring. Blossoms were beginning to appear on the shrubs bordering the short stretch of Highway 101 between Terra Linda and the Marin County Civic Center, and the surrounding hills were fern green; unlike the year before when the drought left them patchy and brown.

The Welfare Department is on the second floor of the Civic Center building. They were waiting for her when she arrived.

Detective Ted Lindquist avoided the preliminaries: "We are here to arrest you for the murder of Tia Phillips." Flanked by two other officers from the San Rafael Police Department, he handcuffed her, led her past astonished co-workers, and whisked her away in a squad car.

"I couldn't believe it was happening," Priscilla recalls. "I felt like I was in the middle of a dream — a nightmare. It's so frightening to think that you can lead a normal life and end up living a nightmare."

Priscilla's nightmare really began when two medical experts, San Francisco Coroner Boyd Stevens and U. C. San Francisco pediatrician and "body fluid physiologist" Dr. Malcolm Holliday, examined Tia's records and concluded that she had been receiving exorbitant amounts of a sodium substance from an outside source. Dr. Holliday said that the pattern of sodium levels in her blood, stools and urine were such as to rule out any congenital disease. If he had seen her records at the time of her illnesses, he said, he would have recognized it. But no one at Kaiser had his expertise — and, besides, Kaiser doctors were not looking for an "external source" of sodium.

The police decided that Priscilla was the only "common denominator." There were too many hospitals for a Kaiser employee to have been responsible, and some of the episodes occurred at home. Steve was ruled out because he had not been with Tia prior to some of the "attacks."

But to make all of this circumstantial evidence against Priscilla believable, the prosecutor first had to develop a motive.

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Deputy District Attorney Josh Thomas employed the services of Dr. Martin Blinder, the psychiatrist whose reputation for exotic court testimony was firmly established when he provided the notorious "Twinkie defense" in the Dan White murder trial. Blinder familiarized himself with the literature on Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, and would explain in court that parents afflicted with this syndrome make their children ill in order to be at the center of a medical drama and to be viewed with sympathy and admiration by others. "On the surface," he told the court, "they are loving and caring parents . . . their outward appearance makes them the last to be suspected." Blinder could offer no opinion on Priscilla directly because her attorney, Edwin Caldwell, would not permit him to interview her.

Meanwhile, a small army of other psychiatric experts dissected Priscilla's psyche. Kentfield psychiatrist Bernard Bradman evaluated her when she was trying to get Mindy back. At the request of defense attorneys, Oakland psychologist Paul Berg interviewed her and gave her a battery of tests; San Francisco psychologist Lowell Copper reviewed Berg's test results; and San Francisco psychiatrist Joseph Satten spent over sixteen hours interviewing her and members of her family. (Later, a staff psychiatrist for the Department of Corrections also evaluated her.)

None of these doctors found a mental disorder; or, as Dr. Satten would say, "all of her psychiatric and psychological examinations are consistent with essential mental health."

On May 26, 1979, after a two-and-a-half month trial with testimony from forty-nine witnesses filling more than 4,000 pages of transcript, the jury of four men and eight women found Priscilla guilty of second-degree murder in the death of Tia and guilty of endangering the life of Mindy.

Priscilla's screams could be heard three courtrooms away.

"I didn't do it. God, I didn't do it," she sobbed. "God, why did you let this happen?"

One of the jurors, San Francisco fireman Jerome Polizzi, says Priscilla's screams "hurt down deep. I don't believe she meant to kill that baby." He says the jury was convinced by the medical evidence, in spite of the fact that it was all circumstantial. "If I'm seen in front of a liquor store twelve times and the front window is broken all twelve times, you would know I had broken it even if no one actually saw me do it."

On June 29, Priscilla was sent to the California Institute for Women at Frontera, where she served five months of a six-year term before she was released, pending the outcome of an appeal.

The people in Terra Linda who know Priscilla are divided over the question of her innocence. But her loyal supporters are the most vocal.

"Anger and disbelief — that's the best way to describe how I feel," says Jan Doudiet, a registered nurse and one of Priscilla's closest friends. Referring to the damning medical testimony, Doudiet says, "From my work in medicine, I know that medical facts are not black and white, but, rather, shades of gray."

Marilyn Hansen, a social worker who shared a

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desk with Priscilla for three years, is also convinced of her innocence. "I keep flashing back to a week when Priscilla and Steve got permission to take Tia out of the hospital, and our two families drove to Mendocino." She recalls, "Tia loved to play in the sand, and Priscilla watched her with such delight in her face. There was so much love there."

Dr. Satten also believes that neither the murder nor the motive are consistent with Priscilla's personality. He says that unlike Priscilla, other mothers who have Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy tend to be mentally-disturbed women with low self-esteem and weak attachments to their husbands and families. "Priscilla is not a lonely, isolated woman who needs to create situations in order to have contact with people."

Another vote for Priscilla's innocence comes from Mindy's new parents, Pat and Harry Wrigley. They say Mindy (they call her Sarah) had bouts of diarrhea for months after she first came to live with them in Vallejo — far from the reach of Priscilla's alleged sodium bicarbonate.

But there are those on the other side.

Cindy Tibbetts, a woman who managed an apartment building where the Phillips once lived, says she always felt Priscilla had a peculiar reaction to illness. "She seemed to enjoy getting sick. She was always coming down with something — some kind of virus or an asthma attack or kidney infection." She also says Priscilla made a "big deal" over the boys' medical problems, no matter how small — "I even heard her exaggerate her children's symptoms over the phone to doctors."

Reverend Hutchison, the minister at Aldersgate Methodist Church of Terra Linda, has known Priscilla for about nine years. He believes the evidence against her "stands on its merit." But he also says he would have "given anything" for proof of her innocence.

In looking back on Priscilla's relationship with her children, Reverend Hutchison believes Priscilla had an excessive need to have her children depend on her. "She needed to maintain the intensity of that bond — especially with Tia."

Reverend Hutchison believes that supporting Priscilla after her conviction would be "reinforcing an act of denial." The Phillips have withdrawn from Aldersgate, and have joined another church.

It's a big football day at the Phillips' house. Priscilla lingers at church to avoid the blaring television. She hates television. She hates football. The "boys" once again set the tone. She misses Tia.

"It's very hard for me to be around little girls who are the age Tia would be if she had lived," she says, her eyes filling with tears.

Priscilla says all the brave things — "Life must go on," "I still have my boys," "One day at a time" — but the words don't mask her depression. The house has to be sold to pay for legal fees, and, because of the conviction, she can no longer work as a social worker. And, of course, she still faces a prison term.

At half-time, ten-year-old Erik takes time out to sit next to his mother. He leans on her and strokes her hair. She's only been home for a couple of months. For him, life is almost back to normal. □