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THE ESCAPE ARTIST

When **Jody Arlington** was a teenager, her brother brutally murdered her parents and sister — a trauma that would have destroyed most people. For Arlington, it was a new beginning.

BY **Laura Wexler**

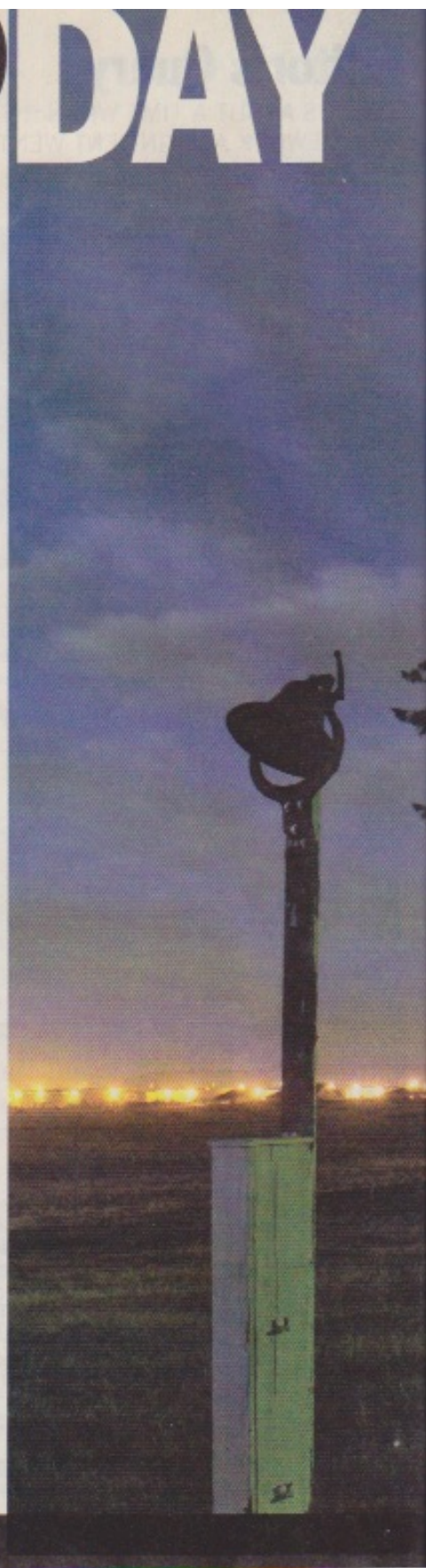
NIGHT AND DAY

Jody
Arlington's
childhood
was a
house of
horrors.
Then her
brother
went on a
murderous
rampage
with a
baseball
bat —
and
unlocked
the door
to her
future.

By

**LAURA
WEXLER**

PHOTOGRAPH BY
RANDAL LEE





Billy Gilley beat his parents and youngest sister to death with a baseball bat in this Medford, Ore., house in April 1984.

M

Y BROTHER BEAT MY MOM AND DAD AND SISTER TO DEATH WITH A BASEBALL BAT.

At approximately 3 a.m. on April 27, 1984, 16-year-old Jody Gilley spoke these words to a 911 operator in Jackson County, Ore. Two hours before, the overhead light had flickered on in the attic bedroom she occupied in her family's white clapboard house. Then the door to her bedroom opened, and her 18-year-old brother, Billy, walked in with their 11-year-old sister, Becky. He told Jody to keep Becky in the room; then he left again. But Jody was half-asleep and disoriented, and Becky soon followed Billy downstairs.

Within a few minutes, Jody was fully awake because Becky had started screaming. When the screams were replaced by a pounding sound,

somehow Jody knew Billy was hitting Becky with his baseball bat. And somehow she knew he'd already killed their parents.

Soon Billy came back into Jody's room, his bare chest and arms spattered with blood.

"We're free now," he said.

Then he told her they needed to leave the house. Terrified both by what Billy had done and what she feared he'd do to her, Jody pulled on clothes and walked downstairs, past the body of her sister and near the bodies of her mother and father, and followed her brother out into the night. They got into their parents' car and drove to a friend's home. When, at nearly 3 a.m., Billy left to get cigarettes, Jody finally told her friend and the friend's parents what had happened and then made her call to 911.

Within hours, her brother was arrested.

Within days, her parents and Becky were buried in a cemetery near their Medford, Ore., home. And within months, Jody had changed her last name and begun, as she would later call it, the story of her rebirth.



ON A BLUSTERY DAY IN FEBRUARY, 24 years later, 40-year-old Jody Arlington sits in a small glass conference room at the American Film Institute Silver Theatre in Silver Spring with the team behind the Silverdocs: AFI/Discovery Channel Documentary Film Festival, which opens this week. They are four women dressed stylishly in shades of black, white and gray, armed with BlackBerries and Mac laptops. They talk frenetically, interrupting one another, planning strategy. At one point, someone mentions there's a problem.

"What's going on?" Arlington says. "What do I need to fix?"

Someone needs to be called to get entree to someone else. Arlington is a communications strategist specializing in festival and entertainment public rela-

Within a few
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Jody wa
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Becky ha
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And some
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parent

A childhood photograph of Jody Arlington and her mother is the only memento she has of her family. Opposite: Billy Gilley is escorted back to jail in June 1984 after undergoing a psychiatric evaluation before his trial.



tions. She managed publicity for the Sundance Institute in 2006 and 2007 and has been Silverdocs' public relations manager since 2004. Her contacts in the documentary film world run deep. She types an e-mail on her BlackBerry and hits send. Problem solved.

Leaving the theater after the meeting, Arlington sets a pace so rapid that it borders on a run. "I feel like if I slow down, I'll lose my balance," she says. It's an observation that also applies to the way she's lived since she ended one self and determinedly set out to create another.

Her re-creation has been successful. She has been a manager at public affairs firm Burson-Marsteller and a vice president at communications firm Fleishman-Hillard, as well as chief of staff of President Bill Clinton's National Campaign Against Youth Violence. She is now building a thriving entertainment division at communications firm Weber Merritt and is one of the founders, and the director, of the Impact Film Festival, which will, for the first time, present films dealing with key social issues to lawmakers, candidates and delegates at the Democratic and Republican national conventions this summer.

Arlington has also created a satisfying personal life in Washington. She is married to Franck Cordes, director of marketing and administration for the Foundation for the National Archives, and has a circle of loyal and loving friends who make up what she calls her "found family." On weekends, she wears her auburn hair in pigtails and knocks around Georgetown. She drinks Starbucks lattes, reads trashy novels as well as serious literature, watches movies in bed on a jumbo-size, flat-screen TV. She is both ambitious and goofy. She laughs often. She is, as she says, "shockingly normal."

But normalcy is a significant accomplishment for someone whose past contains one of the most abnormal acts imaginable, as the world will learn this week with the publication of *While They Slept: An Inquiry Into the Murder of a Family*, a nonfiction account of the Gilley family killings written by Kathryn Harrison. It is the story of a brother who claims he committed murder to protect his oldest sister; and it is also the story of that surviving sister, who views her brother as a tormentor — not a protector — and so must live as the recipient

of an unwanted "gift." In delving into murder, psychology and family dynamics, the book explores terrain similar to that of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. But, in *While They Slept*, the murderer and victims share the same blood, creating a tale at once gothic and Greek, Freudian and Shakespearean, taboo and tragic.

As much as Arlington wants the story to be told, and as much as she hopes some greater good will come of it, this is an unsettling moment for her. Within the pages of the book, she is reunited with Jody Gilley — her former self — and with Billy Gilley Jr., the brother she hasn't seen since she testified for the prosecution at his murder trial 24 years ago. She has also learned that Billy recently won the right to a resentencing hearing on the basis of ineffective counsel during the sentencing phase of his trial. In 1984, he was sentenced to 90 years in prison without parole: three consecutive life sentences for his three murdered family members. The resentencing hearing, which is expected to take place within a year or so, presents the possibility that he could be freed after serving 60 years, or 30 years, or even sooner, a possibility Arlington wills herself not to dwell upon. "With Billy out of prison," she says simply, "I wouldn't feel safe."

For nearly a quarter-century, Arlington has survived — has thrived — by racing toward a future of her own making. Now her past is racing toward the present.

IN THE WAKE OF THE MURDERS, people advised Jody Gilley to return to normal as quickly as possible, "but there wasn't a normal to go back to," she says. Nearly every trace of what had been her life was obliterated on that April night in 1984. And, too, life in her family had never been normal or happy or nurturing — it was nothing she wanted to return to.

Linda and Bill Gilley Sr. were high school dropouts and itinerant farm workers who married young and immediately began the pattern of frequent and frequently violent fights over Bill's drinking and infidelity that would characterize their entire marriage. After years of living hand-to-mouth, migrating between Oregon and California for seasonal work, the Gilleys settled in a rented house in Medford, then a

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Linda and Bill Sr. bullied their children, as well as each other, Arlington says. While Billy faced the brunt of his father's physical abuse — whipping, hitting, punches in the face — Jody fell prey to her mother's outbursts and bizarre punishments.



Arlington and her husband, Franck Cordes, in a park near their Georgetown apartment. Both endured difficult childhoods.

Ask Tom



After Catherine Seibert's husband ordered steak at the Hunter's Inn in Potomac last month, it showed up well done rather than medium rare, as he requested, so he returned the dish. "By the time his steak came back, appropriately cooked," writes Seibert, "I had finished my dinner, creating a situation where he's eating more quickly than he'd like to eat, and I'm alternately twiddling my thumbs and stealing his french fries. The bill came, and we were charged full cost for the drinks, appetizers and staggered entrees." The Bethesda reader wanted to know if her husband's experience merited "a price break, a free drink or a free dessert"—the industry standard—considering that he ultimately got and finished the entree he wanted.

In a subsequent phone conversation, Seibert couldn't recall how long the food delay was, but she did remember that no one apologized for the glitch. She also said that neither she nor her husband said anything to a person in charge. "I believe in hospitality," Fred Berman, the restaurant's co-owner, said when I called him. Berman said his practice is to offer guests free food or gift certificates, and even pick up entire checks, when things go wrong. "But it's hard to make up for mistakes if I don't know" about them.

Get a dining question? Send your thoughts, wishes and, yes, even gripes to asktom@washpost.com or to Ask Tom, The Washington Post Magazine, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071. Please include daytime telephone number.

nights. But both camps might agree that Indebled's pre-event, three-course menu for \$30 is a nice deal in this part of town. The entree choices include a twist on a common fish—salmon served as bars in a wispy potato crust.

I have a few food nits. The focaccia that replaced the wonderful rosemary naan ought to be improved or retired, and a few dishes could use some pruning: Coriander-crusted tuna topped with rings of pickled onion and a sauce of dates and olives is sensory overload. The best reason to order the ordinary duck breast is the chance to try its accompaniment: The Anaheim chili pepper stuffed with cashews and duck confit is a lovely meal all by itself.

It took a few tries, but Indebled is where it always should have been: closer to the top than to the bottom. **■**

To chat with Tom Sietsema online, go to washingtonpost.com on Wednesdays at 11 a.m.

Night and Day

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small, rural town in southwestern Oregon, in 1970, and Bill Sr. found work as a tree trimmer. That led to more financial stability—in 1976, the family bought the clapboard house at 1452 Ross Lane, where the murders would occur eight years later—but not to more emotional stability. The fights between Bill and Linda continued, now with an exacerbating factor: Billy Jr. By the time Billy was in second grade, as Harrison writes, he was having trouble in school and difficulty getting along with other kids. By age 10, he was the leader of a shoplifting ring. At 15, he was arrested for burglary and arson and described as a "very troubled young man" by a caseworker. At 16, he'd dropped out of high school.

In addition to the offenses Billy committed that were recognized publicly, there were others known only by Jody. Soon after the Gilleys moved into the Ross Lane house, 12-year-old Billy discovered a stash of prescription drugs left by the home's previous owners. Stocking his Hot Wheels miniature car case with the bottles of pills, Jody says, Billy planned to take the case to school and style himself as a drug dealer. When Jody discovered the case and hid it as a preface to telling their mother, Billy "chased me around the house and the yard, wrestling me down and sexually attacking me," she says. By attack, she means that he put his hand up her skirt and tried to shove his entire hand into her vagina. "I didn't tell my parents because I was too afraid of him."

She was 9 then. Soon afterward, she began waking up at night with the unsettling sense that she'd been touched while she was sleeping. "Eventually, I found Billy in my room in the middle of the night, and he'd have lame excuses, and I put two and two together," she says. "When I saw it was real, it was a relief." This time she did tell her mother. "But then my parents didn't believe me."

Linda and Bill Sr. bullied their children, as well as each other, Jody says. While Billy faced the brunt of his father's physical abuse—whipping, hitting, punches in the face, often accompanied by demeaning taunts—Jody fell prey to her mother's outbursts and bizarre punishments. Linda Gilley would sit on Jody and blow cigarette smoke in her face and limit her daughter's access to books, sometimes tearing them up in public if Jody brought them on family outings. She would ground Jody for months on end for small infractions. Her mother's behavior toward her was psychologically abusive, Arlington says. "There isn't really a way to convey the atmosphere, the unrelenting chaos and unpredictability and meanness."

But what devastated Jody most was that her mother didn't believe her when she told her parents that Billy was molesting her. And later, when Jody told her mother that her father had propositioned her—that, six months before the murders, she says, her father had offered her "all the money in his pocket if he could fool around with me"—her mother also did not believe her, at least not at first.

In Billy's mind, Harrison writes, their shared suffering

"I think I was instantly the most credible person in her life because I was detached," Thad Guyer, Arlington's former guardian, says. "I'm certain everyone else was asking, 'What happened?' ... I didn't try to comfort her. I just did lawyerly stuff."

at the hands of their parents made him and Jody allies. But because she felt victimized by Billy as well as by her parents, Jody says, she viewed him as a predator — not a defender or even a fellow prisoner. He was another threat she had to guard against, another reason to escape into a world of her own, when her mother allowed it. “My allies,” she says, “were the alternative realities in books.”

So, in the wake of the murders, there was no “normal” to return to. Instead there was shock, grief, worry and guilt — and also opportunity. Suddenly, orphanhood had freed Jody Gilley to re-create herself and her life. She chose a guru to help in that re-creation: Thad Guyer, her legal aid attorney, who would become her legal guardian.

ON THE DAY AFTER THE MURDERS, Guyer was in criminal court in Medford on other business when Billy Gilley’s arraignment came up. He remembers hearing the judge read the murder counts — ending each with the statement “by killing said person with a baseball bat” — but he didn’t think much of it. “For me, it was just another murder,” says Guyer. “I was back out at the office the next day, and I remember my receptionist coming in and saying: ‘Hey, you know those murders? Well, the sister who escaped is out in our waiting room, just walking around. She wants to see a lawyer right away.’”

Jody had come to the county legal aid office for help applying to be adopted by a neighboring family with whom she was staying. “She was obviously a very intelligent girl,” says Guyer, who was a 34-year-old Vietnam vet who had handled civil rights cases in the South before coming to Medford in 1982. “But you don’t go from ‘My parents were killed last night’ to ‘These people want to adopt me today.’ I counseled her that what she should let me do was a guardianship.”

A few days later, Jody asked Guyer to accompany her to the funeral for her parents and Becky. “If you’re a criminal lawyer and see all kinds of horrible things, you’re not affected by this situation,” he says. “I think I was instantly the most credible person in her life because I was detached. I’m certain everyone else was asking, ‘What happened?’ . . . I didn’t try to comfort her. I just did lawyerly stuff.”

Within a few months, Jody’s living arrangement at the neighbors’ soured, and Guyer worked to find other options. One was with the local victim’s assistance advocate, and two were with local families with children. “I said she had to pick,” says Guyer. “She said: ‘I don’t want to live with any of them. I want to live with you.’”

Guyer told her his marriage was on the rocks, and he wasn’t sure where he was going to be living. But Jody had identified him, she says, as “a rational, knowledgeable person who wanted to help me, treated me like an adult and provided counsel, while also being fun and cool, or trying to be cool. I was attracted to his level of insight and analysis,” she says. “It felt right, for whatever reason.”

Guyer relented, and soon Arlington was living with him — first in the house he shared with his wife and then in a house he shared with a roommate — flying to California in his private plane and attending rock concerts with him. It was on the way to a Billy Idol concert in Los Angeles in August 1984 that she chose her new name. In a few weeks, she would start 11th grade, and she knew that students whose last names started with the letters at the beginning of the alphabet got to enroll in classes first. So, she made a decision: The next street name she saw that began with A through F would be her new last name. Arlington Boulevard came into sight, and Jody Arlington was born.

Arlington’s life with Guyer was far removed from anything she had ever experienced as a member of the Gilley family. Not only was she getting to fly in a private plane — she was soon learning how to fly one herself. But the most radical change Guyer offered was his belief in her. He told her she was smart and talented, a “quality person.” He had attended Georgetown University, and he said that, with strategy and determination, she could attend Georgetown, too. Guyer recognized that his arrangement with Arlington was unorthodox — a 34-year-old, soon-to-be-divorced man acting as the guardian for a teenage girl. But for him it made sense as both an extension of his work as a legal aid lawyer, and as a kind of karmic payback to two adults who’d helped him in his younger years. When Guyer was 17 and homeless in Miami, a family took him in, fed him and gave him mentoring. And when he was a student at Georgetown, his debate coach, James Unger, offered him a place in his home for a modest rent, along with several other debaters. “He made me believe in myself and what I could achieve, and I did the same thing, exactly, for Jody,” says Guyer, who continues to work part time for the legal aid office in Medford and also does employment and whistle-blower cases for his own law firm based out of Miami and Seattle.

For a while, Arlington floundered, skipping class and hanging out with “dead-end” kids. But by mid-semester of her junior year — less than a year after the murders — she had got-

“I had friends whose parents forbade them to be around me,” says Arlington. “I was the bogeyman for some people.” Rumors swirled that she was a nymphomaniac, that she ate babies, that she was a Satanist.

ten serious about her future. "The jewel had been placed in front of me," she says. "Once I had a goal, I stuffed the pain away and said I'd deal with it later."

Of course, she couldn't stuff it away completely. There were times in her last two years of high school when she'd listen to Pink Floyd — Roger Waters always made her feel better, she says, because he was so depressed — and drive by the cemetery where her parents and Becky were buried. Once she thought she glimpsed her mother in a store, and sometimes she'd catch herself wondering when her father would return home from work. Several times, she saw a beat-up car pull into a parking lot and feared it might be Billy. And whenever she'd see girls Becky's age, she'd cringe because her sister wasn't among them. During the nearly two years Arlington lived with Guyer, he heard her talk about the murders and saw her cry only a few times — and, when she did, it was almost always about Becky. Sometimes she would replay the time when the family was shopping at Kmart and Becky wanted to borrow \$10 to buy a pair of parachute pants. "I had been babysitting, and I had the money, but I wouldn't lend it to her, and I really regret that," says Arlington. "Without a doubt, I shed the most tears for Becky. I had grief for what had happened to my parents. But I also had grief for what I hadn't gotten from them." But mostly she did not grieve, and mostly she did not look back, because her grief — and her past — was too complicated for her, as a teenager, to understand.

It was difficult for many in Medford to understand, as well — a young man killing his entire family except for one sister? Since she'd been spared, she must be complicit, some assumed. "I had friends whose parents forbade them to be around me," says Arlington. "I was the bogeyman for some people." Rumors swirled that she was a nymphomaniac, that she ate babies, that she was a Satanist, as well as that school officials were taking bets on when she would crack up. "These things were hemusing — I was confident in myself and the truth, and the opinions of strangers were mostly irrelevant to me — but also very painful and infuriating. I was a teen who wanted acceptance and to fit in."

In the end, however, Arlington says she owes a debt of gratitude to those who

doubted her. "Their having written me off and being so callous was so infuriating, it was a magnificent inspiration to 'show them,'" she says.

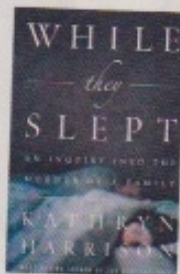
AFTER GRADUATING FROM HIGH SCHOOL

IN 1986, Arlington flew to Washington to begin an internship on Capitol Hill that Guyer had arranged, and, for the next few years, a succession of Washington's elite took her under their wings. First, it was renowned Democratic political consultant Robert Shrum, a former mentor of Guyer's, who gave her a job at his firm. Then, it was Shrum's now-wife, writer Marylouise Oates, who arranged an interview for Arlington for an internship at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. Then, it was TV and film producer and writer/director George Stevens Jr., and his wife, Liz, who offered Arlington a room in their Georgetown mansion and introduced her to social maven and event planner Carolyn Peachey, for whom she worked off and on for almost 20 years.

The access to power and wealth was exciting — how far Arlington was from Medford, how far from Jody Gilley's attic bedroom — but alienating. Arlington recalls Shrum once pointed at the TV and asked her if she recognized the man whose face was on the screen. When she said she didn't, he told her it was Henry Kissinger. Another time, she answered the phone at the Stevens' house to hear Vernon Jordan ask, "What's George's handicap?" Later, she said to George Stevens, "I didn't know you had a disability."

"It was very surreal. It was the exact opposite of what I'd grown up with," says Arlington. "I came to D.C. with a suitcase of polyester clothes I thought were professional, but were too old for me. It took me forever to learn how to dress. I had to memorize *Tiffany's Table Manners for Teenagers* because sometimes the Stevenses would take me to the Palm. I had social anxiety and shame, but also a sense of pride for surviving."

Five years after the murders, Arlington entered Georgetown University, and, from her first moment there, she decided she had to make up for the first 16 years of her life by reading and learning all she could. Rather than gravitate toward subjects she loved — theater, art or opera — she sought to understand more fully what had happened to her and what the effects would be. To give herself the latitude to do that, she designed her own major in interdisciplinary studies and history.



"There was something about the story I found completely compelling. It didn't let go of me," says Kathryn Harrison, author of *While They Slept*.

"I took courses in memory and amnesia. I did an independent study in orphans," she says. "I really wanted to know, to the degree that it's knowable, what the signs of health and un-health are. I didn't want to get stuck. I didn't want to be depressed and limited by my issues." When she read *All Quiet on the Western Front*, she recognized herself in Erich Maria Remarque's descriptions of suffering in battle. "We see men living

with their skulls blown open," he wrote. "We see soldiers run with their two feet cut off, they stagger on their splintered stumps into the next shell-hole."

"I felt like I was running on emotional stumps, like the foundation had been cut out from under me," says Arlington. "I obsessively collected quotes and passages from literature. When I got down, I would focus on the memorized quotes and lift myself out of it." Though she saw a therapist intermittently for several years at Georgetown, she says the therapy was far less instrumental in her healing than the comfort, understanding and inspiration she found in literature, particularly Holocaust literature.

She immersed herself in the works of Primo Levi, Bruno Bettelheim and Elie Wiesel. "I was trying to understand the human psyche in extreme situations," she says. "I saw that, given the right environment, we are all capable of terrible acts, but also great acts of courage and humanity." While the Holocaust represented an especially bleak moment in history, "how the survivors dealt with that darkness and turned away from the void and found hope and meaning was inspirational that I could, too." Through her Holocaust studies, Arlington also

encountered a kind of cold comfort that what she'd suffered had in no way equaled history's worst suffering. "I had not been raped, mutilated, tortured, starved," she says.

She also looked to the writers of Holocaust literature for insight into survivor guilt. She felt guilty because her anger at her parents on the day of the murders — a day when she'd skipped school and they'd found out and threatened to punish her — may have given Billy the impetus to carry out the killings. She felt guilty for not knowing to keep Becky in her bedroom that night. And she felt guilty because her life was better — not worse — after the murders than before. "There were all these wonderful experiences, and I thought, 'How can I enjoy this bounty?'" she says.

Like many survivors, Arlington felt a powerful need to testify about what she'd experienced. At first, she published personal essays under various pseudonyms in Georgetown's literary magazine. Then, as a senior, she decided to write her thesis about the murder of her family. Her initial plan was to write a straight memoir, but when she tried to begin, she felt paralyzed. So, instead, she wrote an odd and chilling document called "Death Faces" that nar-

rates the murders in her brother's voice. In its amoral view of violence, "Death Faces" echoes Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*; in the way Arlington comments about herself through the character of Billy, it echoes Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* — except that Arlington uses the technique of indirection not to enhance her greatness, as Stein does, but to excoriate herself. At one point in "Death Faces," the Billy character says, "Jody Arlington, the sister of a sociopathic killer who made it all possible, metamorphosed on the graves of her parents into an academically polished, richly cultured, well-traveled social climber." At another, he says, "I suspect Jody will never allow herself to give me my share of the credit for having blasted her free of the imprisoning gravity of that family which was already dead when I uncthered its members from the rotting corpse." In "Death Faces," Arlington has Billy express her own worst fears about herself: that she is morally culpable for her family's deaths and morally reprehensible for benefiting from them.

When Arlington circulated her thesis to literary agents after she graduated in 1993, all reacted similarly: She had to write the story in her own voice if

» Key to Last Week's Second Glance

(June 8)

1. Lost his head
2. Lighter lens
3. Antenna-free
4. Beefed-up security
5. Sign of change
6. Turned blue
7. Spectrum switch
8. Light's out
9. Smoothed over
10. Gear gone
11. Longer lens
12. In the pink



it were to have a chance of being published. Some also suggested that she needed to visit Billy in prison for the story to succeed. But she wasn't sure she could write a memoir and had no desire to visit Billy, and so she put "Death Faces" away. She moved to Spain, where she helped a friend launch a cycling tour, then lived in New York City, where she joined Equality Now, an international human rights organization working to end violence and discrimination against girls and women, before returning to Washington in the 1990s. In 2000, she says, she began a three-year attempt to recast "Death Faces" as a memoir, trying "every trick in the writer's handbook," and even working with several ghostwriters. "It was my Sisyphean task, and I couldn't do it," she says. "It was too painful. Whenever I would sit down to write it, I would fracture."

KATHRYN HARRISON FIRST HEARD ARLINGTON'S NAME 13 YEARS AGO during a phone conversation with her literary agent, Amanda "Binky" Urban. Urban told her she'd just met with a woman whose brother had killed their parents and younger sister and who wanted to write a memoir about it. "There was something about the story I found completely compelling. It didn't let go of me, and I kept thinking about it, and I really wanted to know why and explore it," says Harrison. "Every year or so afterward, I'd ask my agent whatever happened with that book, because I wanted to read it."

It came up again in early 2005, while Harrison was in a meeting with Urban and an editor at Random House in New York. "I said again, 'So, whatever happened to that book?' Binky said, 'Jody is never going to write that book.'"

"I'll write it," Harrison said.

On March 20, 2005, she sent Arlington an e-mail, explaining her interest. "Were I to consider your life and what came to pass during that life, it would not be my appropriating your story. No one can do that," Harrison wrote. "I'm just trying, as you may be yourself, to understand, to get some kind of hold on what happened to you, and how it is that you continue in your life, when that life was violently interrupted and had to be begun again." Harrison ended with, "I can't tell you how your story has preyed on me — but I'll try."

When Arlington received the e-mail, she was immediately, if cautiously, interested. Harrison is the author of six novels and five nonfiction books, most notably the controversial 1997 memoir *The Kiss*, which chronicles the four-year sexual affair she had with her father starting at age 20. Arlington had read *The Kiss* and admired Harrison's "fearlessness and

her willingness to go places I wouldn't go," she says. "I was intrigued with the idea of the story getting written by someone with such writerly gifts, who could crack the puzzle I could not."

A few weeks later, Arlington met Harrison at Sake Club on Connecticut Avenue NW. Sitting in the restaurant that evening, the two must have appeared to be sisters — slight women with long hair who talked about the most intimate things. Indeed, Harrison says, she felt a strong kinship with Arlington from the beginning. As Harrison sees it, both have pasts marked by a taboo so powerful that it sets them apart; both, as she writes in *While They Slept*, "had a previous self who no longer exists."

When Arlington decided to cede her story to Harrison, she felt a huge sense of relief, a lightening of her psychic load. "I don't think there is anyone who would be as interested and engaged in the material as she would be," says Arlington. "She was willing to become obsessed with it."

On an evening this spring, Arlington and her husband, Cordes, are holed up in their cozy Georgetown apartment, eating takeout Asian food and laughing as they speculate about a movie version of Harrison's book. "In my fantasy," says Arlington, "Sofia Coppola directs, and Dakota Fanning plays me."

Arlington rented this apartment when she returned to Washington and furnished it in one fell swoop out of the Ballard Designs catalogue. "I literally looked at a picture of an entryway in their catalogue and ordered everything and set it up just like the picture," she says. When Cordes moved in in 2004, he immediately said Arlington's "dentist office art" had to go. It's been replaced with several pieces the couple has collected, the most striking of which is "Easy Bake Bear" by Ana Bagayan. In the painting, everything is awry: A mouse ignores a hunk of cheese; a rabbit is blind to a carrot within easy grabbing distance; and a little girl has just baked the dismembered head of a teddy bear in her Easy-Bake Oven. "I love this painting because everyone in it is at war with themselves," says Arlington.

The apartment is devoid of Gilley family mementos save one — a tiny, framed photograph that sits on an end table in the living room. In it, Arlington is 5 or 6 years old, wearing a princess costume and holding a stuffed horse. Her mother is behind her. The few other artifacts she'd once had from her life as Jody Gilley — including the journals she'd written in almost daily since high school — are gone. "After 9/11, I was just struck by all of the paper floating from the sky, and all of a sudden those

Arlington
felt guilty
for not
knowing
to keep
Becky in her
bedroom
that night.
And she
felt guilty
because her
life was
better —
not worse
— after the
murders
than before.
"There were
all these
wonderful
experiences,
and I
thought,
'How can
I enjoy this
bounty?'"

Arlington refused to validate Billy's characterization of himself as her protector. "Some of the most threatening letters he sent from prison said, 'You have to tell them how I protected you and Becky,'" she says. "He never once did."

boxes in my closet seemed burdensome," she says. "I needed to get rid of them." One day she carried the boxes out to the curb for the garbage collectors to haul away.

The second bedroom in the apartment houses artifacts from the couple's college days — Arlington collected Batman figures, Cordes collected pirate toys — and their ongoing collection of graphic novels. It also serves as a studio for Cordes, an artist and musician. There he is working on drawings to accompany a story Arlington wants to create as a graphic novel, one her mother often told her when she was younger. "It's about a time when I was little and pre-verbal, and Billy and I were playing out front of our house, and our parents were inside," she says. "All of a sudden, my parents heard me screaming. They run outside and find me completely covered in [excrement]. I had fallen into an open septic tank hole. Billy had no trace . . . on him — he hadn't pulled me out of the hole. He said an angel pulled me out." Amid the chaos and horror of Arlington's family history, the story represents a miraculous moment, and a rare flight into fantasy for someone who describes herself as practical and "utilitarian to a fault." It's also a moment that predates Arlington's fear of her brother.

Cordes and Arlington met at a 2004 gala for the National Archives that she helped plan, and within a year, they'd eloped. "It sounds cheesy, but when Jody told me her story, immediately there was this common link that we got through our difficult childhoods," says Cordes, 38. He says his own past includes being separated from his mother at age 5 and suffering three months of sexual abuse while on a sailing trip at age 13.

At first, Cordes reacted more hesitantly than Arlington to Harrison's interest in writing a book about the murders. As an artist himself, he understood that Harrison would write from her own point of view. But he ultimately supported the idea because he knew his wife wanted the story to be told and because he saw her relief at shedding the responsibility to tell it herself.

The relief Arlington felt, however, was soon tempered by the actual process of collaborating on the book. Not only did she have to spend more time than she'd anticipated talking about her past to communicate her version of the events that led to the murders, she also had to directly confront Billy's version — which is not only different from hers, but based on what she calls several "pathological lies."

Billy crafted some of these stories in the direct aftermath of the murders to spread the guilt, Arlington says. And some, she says, he crafted

years later to support his appeal for a new trial, in which he argued that the murder was a classic parricide case — that he'd killed their parents (and, inadvertently, Becky) as a direct result of their abuse of him and Jody. Billy denies that he molested Jody, claiming instead that their father raped her — and that he tried in vain to protect her. This Arlington adamantly refutes, saying, "Why would I deny my father raping me when I admit that he propositioned me and that my brother molested me?"

In 1999, at the request of a federal public defender working on Billy's appeal for a new trial, Arlington completed an affidavit in which she corroborated Billy's account of physical and emotional abuse inflicted by their parents. She refused, however, to validate his characterization of himself as her protector. "Some of the most threatening letters he sent from prison said, 'You have to tell them how I protected you and Becky,'" says Arlington. "He never once did." In one letter Harrison quotes in *While They Slept*, Billy writes, "If you refuse to help me I will still get out, but it may take longer and cost you your freedom."

But the points at which Billy's and Jody's stories clash most powerfully are in his claims that on the evening of the murders he told her he was going to kill their parents and that she signaled her approval. She counters that, while she and Billy had occasionally fantasized about the deaths of their parents, she was neither aware of his plan that night nor in support of it. In Billy's version, Jody is complicit, if not in acting with him, then in not acting against him. In Jody's version, she is unknowing — as shocked by the murders as the victims themselves.

To Harrison, the clash is just one of many in the "Rashomon"-like saga. "I was working with a brother and a sister who had conflicting versions, and I wanted to remain faithful to both of their versions and yet also try to reveal whatever truth I could," she says. "There were only two people in the house that night, Jody and Billy, who can tell what happened. Those are the people who saw what happened and know what happened, and that's all we have left. And maybe they don't even know. Memory is so slippery."

Just as Arlington had predicted, Harrison became obsessed with the murders, immersing herself in what she came to call "Gilley-alia." She traced both sides of the family several generations back, tracked down records of Billy's numerous interactions with police and case-workers, interviewed friends and neighbors of the family, drew one timeline after another to chronicle the progression of events leading to the murders. And in November 2005, Harri-

son traveled to Snake River Correctional Institution in eastern Oregon to interview Billy, who was 40 years old and had served 21 years of his 90-year sentence.

"I had no idea who I was going to meet," says Harrison. "When you think of a murderer, you think of a hardened character. This is a man who is self-effacing, soft-spoken, thoughtful. I never had a sense that I could ask him a question that would rattle his equanimity. But I think that's because he's less honest than Jody. So much of his telling his story to himself has been coming up with a narrative that excuses his behavior. Because he's being punished by the world, he's in a position to justify himself."

Arlington "is out in the world, free, in the position to question herself," Harrison says. "She has a permanent inquisitory trial set up against herself in which she searches for moral culpability."

In fall 2006, Harrison sent Arlington the first draft of *While They Sleep*, expecting her to correct factual errors

and perhaps take issue with some of the book's conclusions. What Harrison got instead, she says, was a 27-page, single-spaced, e-mailed list of bulleted points from "someone who felt suddenly naked and terrified — and misjudged."

"Her first response was like an immune response — she had a really powerful negative response," recalls Harrison. "Billy is the problematic character. I mean, he bludgeoned his family with a baseball bat. My effort to humanize him, to make him a person, created a first draft that leaned more toward his telling of things. That was upsetting to her."

Harrison's first draft wasn't just upsetting, says Arlington — it was inaccurate. Harrison "wanted a 'he said/she said,'" says Arlington. "But to say it's a 'he said/she said' ignores the body of evidence presented by the state of Billy's previous criminal record and behavioral disorders. There was a record from a doctor saying Billy had a personality disorder and wouldn't learn from his mistakes.

It showed he had an ongoing personality disorder long before the murders occurred. That really sounded like the Billy I had grown up with."

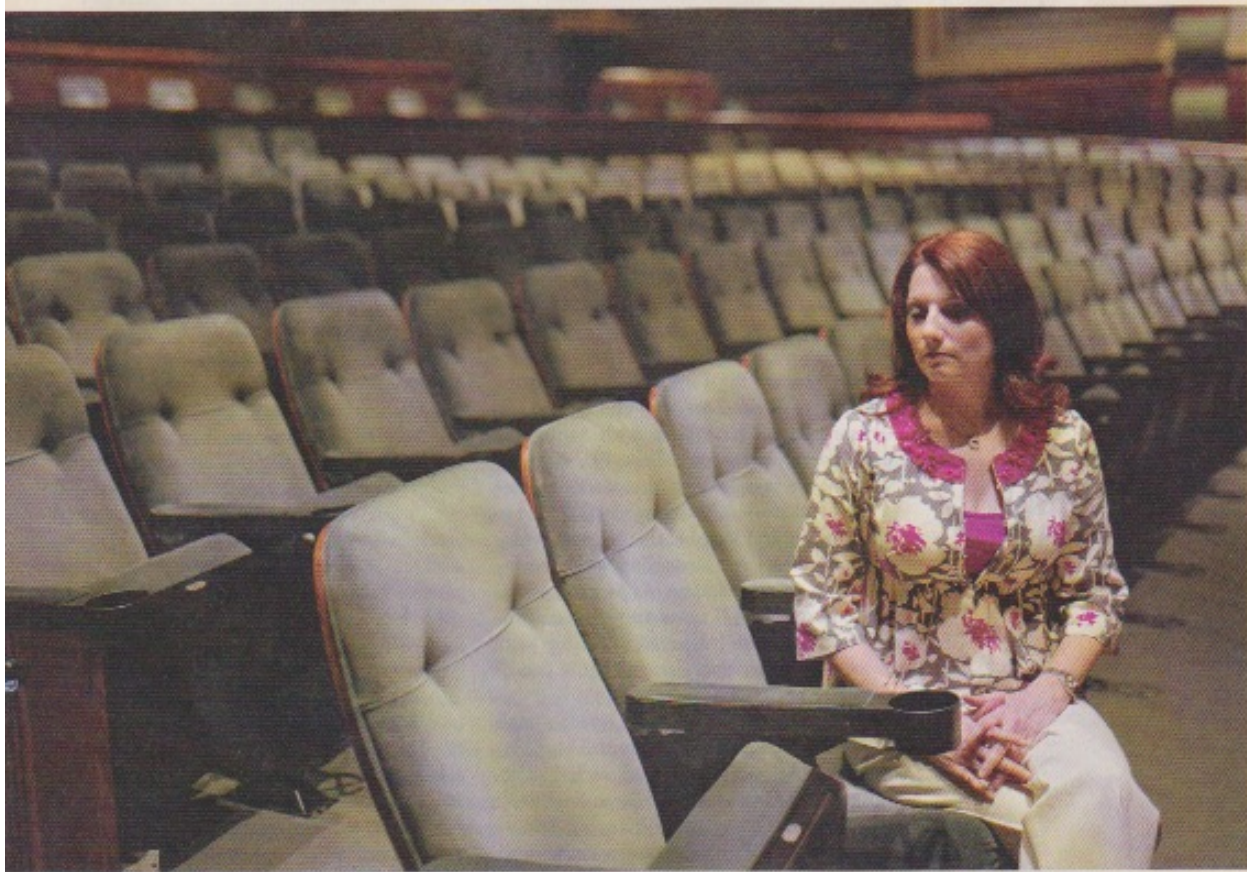
In a way, her feelings about Billy's mental instability echo something she said to the 911 operator 24 years ago.

"Do you know why he [Billy] would do something like this?" the operator asked.

"I mean, there's been a lot . . . We have had a lot of, um, family problems," Jody Gilley replied. "But I never think anything bad enough to actually kill them."

That is yet another point of conflict between Billy Gilley's and Arlington's versions of the truth. In Billy's telling, their parents were villains, and the children were innocent victims. As Arlington sees it, her parents were certainly not loving or nurturing, but they were victims, too —

Arlington in the AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center in Silver Spring, where she is public relations manager for the Silverdocs film festival.



Even though she acknowledges a thirst for true crime and "pulpy accounts of murder," Harrison found the Gilley family's story harrowing. "You're always looking for redemption," she says. "There isn't much in this story."

victims of their own troubled upbringings, of extreme poverty, isolation, social alienation and lack of education. "People really do change. I've changed over the decades," she says. "I can't discount that they might have changed, too."

In many ways, Arlington's "immune response" to Harrison's first draft paralleled her reaction several years earlier to a play her friend Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa wrote based on her family's slayings. Arlington and Sacasa had met and become close at Georgetown — Sacasa proposed marriage to Arlington, even though he is gay. After college, he entered Yale University to study playwriting, and when he told Arlington that he wanted to write about the murder of her family, she was supportive. However, in his play "Ghost Children," which had its New York premiere at Second Stage Theatre in 2004, Sacasa changed the facts of the murders "to heighten the drama," he says. In his version, after "Ben Gilley" brings Becky up to "Abby Gilley's" bedroom, Becky asks to get into bed with Abby. Abby refuses and sends her back downstairs to her death.

When Arlington saw the play, she burst into tears, as Sacasa recalls. "I said to Roberto, 'That is the most critical thing in my life, and you made it a tawdry thing,'" says Arlington. "There's a million years of guilt in that."

Sacasa explained to Arlington that he'd only written a play — not the definitive story of her life. But he was rattled nonetheless. "To see her emotional response, it was kind of a shock. It was the first time I saw the deep wounds there," he says. "I was very scared when it happened, scared that our friendship would be irreparably damaged, scared that I had ruined the story for Jody." But the friendship survived, and "Ghost Children" continues to be performed around the country.

Sacasa, who also writes comic books and for the HBO series "Big Love," recently read the beginning of *While They Slept* and says he and Harrison share a fascination with Arlington's story. "I've always been a little like Kathryn Harrison," he says, "attracted to dark or crime stories, lurid stories, horror stories." And, too, at the time he and Jody became friends, he was still in the closet and struggling with wanting to become a writer despite his parents' wishes that he pursue law. "I never endured what she did," he says, "but I fostered a kinship with Jody as a fellow outsider." As Arlington says, "I am a muse to everyone."

After receiving Arlington's 27-page e-mail, "I think I went to bed for a month," says Harrison, only half-joking. Indeed, as it had for Arlington, the book turned out to be a more difficult collaboration than Harrison had expected. Even though Harrison acknowledges

a thirst for true crime and "pulpy accounts of murder," she found the Gilley family's story harrowing. "You're always looking for redemption," she says. "There isn't much in this story."

And interviewing Arlington was, she discovered, uncomfortable. "I'm not a journalist," says Harrison. "I'm not somebody who is used to hammering at people. I'm perfectly comfortable vivisectioning myself, but it's an entirely different thing to ask someone difficult questions again and again." Harrison found she needed to repeatedly ask Arlington for minute and painful details about her family's home life and the murders. "We would march over the same territory," she says. "Partly because the story is so shocking and disturbing, I had to have it told again and again in order to internalize it, the same way you go over anything disturbing."

As time went on, the process got easier, Harrison says. "She trusted me more, and I trusted myself more. I knew there'd be a time when I would ask a question that was painful — actually, most of the time — but they weren't questions intended to inflict pain," says Harrison. "I was doing it in service of a project we both believed in."

At first, Harrison says, she had the "romantic idea" that Jody and Billy might come together through her book. Instead, Harrison has become what she calls a "weird sort of liaison in that I have a relationship with the two of them and they don't have one with each other." Arlington has not seen her brother in 24 years, and has not had any contact with him in nearly 10 years — nor does she plan to. Harrison has continued to correspond with Billy since visiting him in prison.

In 2006 and 2007, Harrison sent Arlington four drafts of the book. "Every time a draft would land, I would dread having to read it," Arlington says. However, the later drafts were progressively less upsetting to her, she says, and the end result is a book she is satisfied with.

But Harrison's telling is an account of the murder of the Gilley family, not the survivor's tale Arlington first decided to write back at Georgetown. And, after wanting so badly to shed the burden, she now feels an even more powerful need to write that tale. Even if she risks fracturing her carefully constructed life, Jody Arlington may still, one day, give voice to her own story. □

Laura Wexler, a Baltimore writer, is the author of *Five in a Canoe: The Last Mass Lynching in America*. She can be reached at laura@laurawexler.com. She and Kathryn Harrison will be fielding questions and comments about this article Monday at noon at washingtonpost.com/liveonline.