





# AN AMERICAN'S MOST WANTED?

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UNDERGROUND  
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BATTERED WOMEN  
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PHOTOGRAPHED  
BY MILES LADIN

Faye Yager takes a swallow of coffee and sets her Styro-foam cup down on the Dunkin' Donuts tray. "She was sittin' at that table right there," Yager says in her syrupy drawl, tilting her chin to indicate an empty booth nearby. "Nervous. Paranoid. She thought she'd been followed." She fixes me with a tight-jawed stare, her unsmiling blue eyes impassive. Behind her, a tableful of four chattering men have quieted down to listen. They know exactly who she is.

"She said he was relentless, that he'd stop at nothing," Yager continues, holding my gaze. "And she was absolutely right." Yager shakes her head at the memory of that meeting, of that woman. In full makeup and pearls, pausing every so often to demurely pat her auburn hair, Yager looks somewhat out of place among the plastic tables and greasy odors at this roadside Atlanta eatery. But her flinty gaze and loud, brash manner betray her as the self-proclaimed "bitch on wheels" she is, someone who says what's on her mind, no matter how inappropriate; someone who can put you in your place with a dose of her rapid-fire delivery. One look at the grim set of Yager's red-painted mouth and there's no mistaking that she is a woman of uncommon conviction. And so when Faye met with that jittery woman here in Dunkin' Donuts—where Yager interviews all her potential runaways—she knew better than to share the woman's fears. Yager had been in this line of work for more than 10 years, honey—she knew what she was talking about. She agreed to help the woman out of her jam. Two months later, Yager delivered on that promise: She turned the woman and her two daughters, ages five and seven, into fugitives.

This is Faye Yager's crusade, her sacred mission. She doesn't look the part of the renegade, to be sure: a ladylike woman of 50 with a penchant for floral dresses and a fondness for baking; the wife of a prominent Atlanta pediatrician; mother of five. But come to Yager with a tale of spousal or child ►



abuse, and she'll give you the tools to create a brand-new life for yourself and your children, and to insure that your old selves will never be found. She has been lauded and vilified, called a zealot and a saint and a criminal. Yager doesn't care. She has long laughed at her detractors, at the threats and lawsuits and even criminal charges that have tried, and failed, to stop her.

But then there was that woman, Ellen Dever, and her two daughters. Dever came to the Dunkin' Donuts in the spring of 1997 with the familiar stories of grief and abuse that Yager had heard a thousand times before, threats from scores of angry husbands, all demanding the return of their wives and children. And all of those husbands had backed off eventually, tails between their legs. However, shortly after helping Dever and the children escape, Yager realized that this particular disappearance wasn't going to follow the usual script. Ellen Dever was no unknown but a socialite from the tony Main Line suburbs of Philadelphia. The ex-husband she'd been so desperate to escape was a powerful banking executive named Bipin Shah, an electronics visionary who had made much of his fortune by pioneering the automatic teller machine, leaving him with millions of dollars at his disposal. And now he was swearing up and down that he'd use every last cent to bring his children home—and to crush Faye Yager.

Yager welcomed the challenge. She'd faced down men like this before, berating them publicly on *Geraldo* and in the pages of countless newspapers and magazines. Her bravado was famous; after years of trumpeting her cause, she had become a celebrity, with too much at stake to back down, even if she wanted to. This was old hat for Yager, or so it seemed.

Yager was almost cheerful about the prospect of squaring off with Bipin Shah. "I'm not afraid of Mr. ATM," she says breezily, with a dismissive wave of a manicured hand. "Darlin', anyone who thinks they can break Faye Yager's got another thing comin'."

She knows what it takes to escape. It takes the grit of a survivor, the desperate instincts of a cornered animal, a heart calloused enough that you can sever all ties with those you leave behind. Because if you don't have those things, Yager warns potential runaways with a hard, accusing glare, "You will get caught. And if you get caught, honey, you are goin' straight to jail. You will lose custody of your children." She studies their faces while they ponder her words and can tell, even before they speak, if they're what she calls "running material." If not, she sends them home. Yager can't risk her operation on a weak-willed woman who could blab to the FBI.

But should she deem you fit, she takes you under her wing. She advises you on books to read, instructs you how to change your identity through new social security numbers and fake passports, through dyeing your hair, through passing off your little girls as boys. Then Yager sends you home to pack and say a silent goodbye to your family and friends—because if all goes according to plan, you'll never speak to them again. From there you are shuttled into a series of safe houses, where you transform yourself. If you're lucky, you'll spend the rest of your life on the run.

Yager rationalizes her actions by citing the way the American legal system fails women, especially when predatory men are concerned. "The law is such that a woman is not free," she explains urgently during our meeting. "She can't get protection. She is the property of her man." But her underground operations have more personal roots. Faye Yager was born Billie Faye Wisen, the fourth of 11 children of a West Virginia coal miner. At age 17, she married Roger Jones, but their marriage—and Faye's world—fell apart when she caught him molesting their two-year-old daughter, Michelle. Faye became hysterical, and Jones tried to have her committed to a mental ward; Faye, in despair, tried hiding their daughter. In the end,

Jones was given custody of Michelle—even though he couldn't explain how his little girl had contracted gonorrhea.

Later, Faye married physician Howard Yager, and entered a life that could hardly have been more different than her previous one: living in the upscale Atlanta neighborhood of Sandy Springs in a Tudor mansion hung with oil paintings; mother of four lovely children; her schedule hectic with charity balls. But beginning in 1986, a sequence of nightmarish events would change everything. First, her daughter Michelle reemerged, saying that Jones had continued molesting her throughout her childhood. Then, Jones was charged with sexually molesting three children and later sentenced to 30 years in a Florida prison. (The FBI estimated that he had molested nearly 60 kids, enough to make Jones the first child molester on the FBI's Most Wanted list.) And Yager's fate was sealed when, less than a year later, she read a newspaper article about a Mississippi case that sounded so similar to her own ordeal—a woman who was thrown in jail for hiding her children from their allegedly abusive father. Something inside Yager snapped. She called her high-society friends and politely explained that she wouldn't be able to attend their galas anymore, because the FBI was going to be trailing her.

Since then, by her own proud estimate, Yager has aided the flight of some 7000 people (though law enforcement sources place that figure in the hundreds). From the start, Yager was public about her controversial work, granting interviews and appearing on TV talk shows to silence any opposition with her fiery tongue, denouncing the growing trail of vengeful fathers she left in her wake as "queers," "pedophiles" and even "satanists." Lawsuits bounced off her. Criminal charges didn't stick. Faye Yager seemed invincible.

Then she got that call from Ellen Dever Shah.

Blonde, slim and beautiful, Ellen Dever was a trophy wife worth having. When Bipin Shah first met her, Ellen worked as a computer programmer in the Philadelphia bank where he was a top executive. Born in India and raised in Myanmar, Shah was a self-made man who'd come to America as a teenager with just \$93. Before their 1985 wedding, when Bipin's friends worried that Ellen, 16 years his junior, might have ulterior motives, Bipin had laughed. "Then it's an even trade," he had answered gleefully. "She likes my money, I like her body."

Their marriage was seven years of mutual manipulation and misery, and when the couple divorced in 1993, all agreed it was for the best, particularly for their pretty young daughters, Sarah and Genevieve. However, Bipin and Ellen's postdivorce relationship proved even stormier than their marriage. She accused him of being too controlling, he accused her of being too greedy, and their conversations devolved into soap-opera-worthy screaming matches. They landed in court again and again, squabbling over visitation rights, money and, increasingly, over the abuse charges Ellen was filing against Bipin—charges that were either dismissed or dropped. It got so bad between them that they signed an agreement not to speak to or see each other, even when dropping the kids off at each others' homes.

When Bipin filed for sole custody of the children, it was the last straw for Ellen, and in June 1997 she showed up in Atlanta with the kids, a U-Haul and a half a million dollars cash to aid their flight. Though many have questioned whether Ellen was an appropriate choice for Yager's underground network—the abuses she'd alleged, after all, were never proven—Yager bristles at the suggestion, pointing out that filing and then withdrawing charges is typical battered-wife behavior. "Ellen was scared to death of him, she knew what he could do," says Yager. "I look at them as being like O.J. and Nicole. There was no way out for her, no peace."

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Bipin Shah (who steadfastly denies Ellen's abuse charges) was beside himself with sorrow and bewilderment. He hired investigators, spending \$700,000 on an intensive six-month search, only to find that his former socialite wife had vanished without a trace. Shah pulled out all the stops. He called a press conference in his suburban mansion and tearfully announced a \$2 million reward for his daughters' safe return.

A global hunt began. Overnight, legions of bounty hunters descended upon Atlanta, hoping to claim the reward. Yager found herself besieged. People called her house constantly, sometimes spitting curses and threats, sometimes cooing that she should come to her senses and help them, then split the prize money. Men followed her when she left the house, trailed her friends around town. Yager's electricity and gas were mysteriously shut off, as was the phone service in her daughter's downtown apartment. One afternoon, Howard Yager's office received a call saying he'd be gunned down when he left for home that day; police had to escort him from the building. The following day, Dr. Yager found a cervical collar lying in front of his office door.

One month following our meeting, I spoke to Yager over the telephone; she seemed perplexed by the intimidation and warned me that her phone might be tapped. "I have never been threatened before, not like this," she said. "All the anger he felt for Ellen is on me now. I mean, we're not dealing with someone normal here. He's straight out of a movie. Can you imagine living in a house with a man like that? Can you imagine?"

"She is a criminal," Bipin Shah told me during an interview in his antique-filled living room, overlooking his kidney-shaped pool. His home was a large, quiet stone house where his daughters' stick-figure drawings were still taped to the fridge, and whose *Barbie* magazines lay unopened in their pink-and-white rooms. Fidgeting beside Shah was his press agent, who had been hired for the duration of the search. "She has done a criminal act, not only with my children, but with other children," continued Shah. "She is going to pay for this."

Shah filed a \$100 million lawsuit against Yager. Before long, she was hit with an \$80 million suit as well, from another father—a suit financed by Shah. And with federal criminal charges pending against Ellen Dever—the FBI had issued a warrant for her arrest—Yager was being investigated for her role in Ellen's disappearance, about which she was eventually forced to testify before a grand jury. Meanwhile, the Yagers were reporting more than 100 harassing and threatening phone calls to the police and were fearful of leaving the house; Howard Yager was taking blood-pressure medication. Finally, needing relief from the unrelenting pressure, afraid for her family's safety, Faye Yager moved to the tiny mountain town of Brevard, NC, where she bought a little bed and breakfast. Her husband and children stayed behind in Atlanta for the time being, the family splintered as a result of Yager's efforts to keep *other* families apart. But Yager's attempt to disappear didn't help matters much, since the bounty hunters simply followed her.

And then, nearly two years after Ellen Dever's disappearance, the incredible happened. Bipin found Ellen. She had been living in Lucerne, Switzerland, under an assumed name;

her daughters, now seven and nine, attended a local Montessori school. On April 10, 1999, while the trio was on their way home after lunching at a cafe, they were approached by three men in sunglasses. The men grabbed the children, clapping hands over their screaming mouths, and threw them into a white van. Ellen later told reporters that she heard Bipin's voice from inside. Then she was alone in the street, clutching a note. "Ellen, I have the children," it read. "You are welcome to see them any time, but you must come home."

Ellen voluntarily returned to the United States a month later and was taken into federal custody upon arrival at the Philadelphia airport. But Bipin Shah had been vocal all along that he didn't want the mother of his children going to jail, and since her return the charges have been dropped. While the legal issues are being ironed out, Ellen is living with her parents by order of the court (the children live with Bipin). Shah hasn't revealed how he managed to locate Ellen in

Switzerland, though many speculate it was through the work of either the FBI or of Bipin's staff investigators, since the \$2 million reward was never paid. But Shah's public-relations flack suggested something most shocking to the media: The party who had actually tipped off investigators was none other than Faye Yager.

The news media eagerly contacted Yager, anxious for her response. But if reporters expected Yager to be her usual impassioned, quotable self, they were sorely disappointed, since she simply refused comment and hung up. After nearly 12 years of being a one-woman media circus, Faye Yager was through talking to the press.

"I just couldn't do it anymore." Yager's voice is quiet. "Not after what he put my family through, my children through."

It is now August 1999, four months after Ellen Dever has been found. Speaking over the phone from her North Carolina inn, Yager's voice is tentative, the voice of someone who knows she shouldn't be talking to me.

"Our lives were threatened, as you know," she says. "I wasn't taking any more chances. He's capable of just about anything."

The bounty hunters are gone. The lawsuits have been dropped. But Yager's yearlong scuffle with Bipin Shah has brought about something no other angry father could accomplish: It has put her out of business. She doesn't run the underground network anymore, she insists, nor does she intend to again.

"I feel sorry for Ellen," Yager says mournfully, "that poor thing." When I ask whether she had anything to do with Ellen's discovery, Yager is taken aback. "No," she says firmly. She begins to say more, then decides against it; after so many years of waging war, she now dares not fight back. It didn't take a jail sentence, as some had predicted, to end Yager's reign. It took a man with a will as stubborn and self-righteous as Yager's own, with a well-funded crusade (by his count, Shah spent \$3.2 million on his daughters' return). Ultimately, it had come down to a battle of wills—one which Faye Yager lost. And suddenly, her life is an ordinary one, devoid of the adventure, the notoriety and the sense of holy purpose that were an inseparable part of Yager's mission. One can only wonder what Yager thinks of the cause that defined her until so recently. ➤ 220



A NEW BEGINNING: FORMER ACTIVIST-VIGILANTE FAYE YAGER IN HER PRESENT INCARNATION AS BED-AND-BREAKFAST INNKEEPER.

## THE SAINT (continued from page 174)

level financial wizardry—about to bring Ford's Gucci and YSL into the same group, Ford's excitement makes him sound almost giddy. "I've referenced Saint Laurent my whole life," he says. "Saint Laurent is my dream idol as a designer. He's *it*." This past June, at a private reception in New York, Saint Laurent and Ford met for the first time. The admiration between the two men was mutual. "I think Tom Ford is an extraordinary man," says Saint Laurent. "Our meeting was very warming."

Betty Catroux, still blonde, elegant and boyish, accompanied Saint Laurent to New York again. "Yves had stopped traveling," she says, "but these four days in New York were a big stimulation for him." Returning to Paris, Saint Laurent designed his haute couture collection in record time. "I felt free and relaxed and completely in control of my craft," he says. "I was able to design the whole collection in a week." Pre-show, the front row was humming with anticipation. "Yves is *up!*" says Nan Kempner, who has worn Saint Laurent since the beginning. "And when he's up, you never know what's going to happen." Jean Paul Gaultier, a Saint Laurent worshiper who thanks him for inspiring him to become a designer in the first place, was also invited to sit front and center, confessing, "I'm in a dream! Like a kid again!"

"Perhaps you could call it a Proustian collection: Saint Laurent's great moments, recollected in his newfound tranquility. First out, a brown crocodile jacket and black pants—a button-pusher for anyone who knows Saint Laurent's story, and how, at the age of 24, he was fired for designing Beat croc motorcycle jackets for Christian Dior. After the jersey day dresses came a package of smokings, the best concealing a devastatingly erotic sheer black chiffon camisole trimmed with a provocative black satin bow. Then, a full-on piece of the magic he works: a multicolored ostrich-trimmed pink satin opera coat over a slim eau de nil gown, slashed to the waist and trimmed with a butterfly. And finally—a perfectly timed comeback for his powerful '76 Ballets Russes moment. For his youngest and prettiest fans, the little ones who crowd in to sit at the back, a sequence of delicious embroidered peasant blouses and long, full velvet skirts looked new, now, totally right. Some of those fans were already wearing market-stall drawstring blouses and gypsy skirts. How did Saint Laurent *know*? "He feels things so well," said Catroux. "He doesn't know a thing about politics or watch television or any of that. It's all his personal feeling. He's on a cloud, that's what's so divine about him."

We predict a wave of the '70s Russian feeling very soon. Chiffon scarf-necked blouses under tuxedos are already out there, designed by Elbaz in the YSL ready-to-wear collection, as well as by other designers too young to remember the cataclysmic impact of the '66 original. Meanwhile, an outbreak of Saint Laurent's '68 safari look is in the air for next summer. It will go on. With Saint Laurent back in the spotlight, the far-reaching, underlying influence he's exerted on fashion over the past 40 years is about to go above ground. America, by no coincidence, will be feeling the effect first, says Bergé. "We are completely free to expand in the United States. We have very good department stores and intend to acquire many boutiques. Gucci is good at that." Bergé and Saint Laurent will reportedly retain veto rights over the couture, perfume and advertising, but the Gucci alliance promises a lot of action in the things women want—shoes, boots, bags, belts. "Gucci is very strong in accessories, and we're not, and I'm ready to speak to them about what we can do," says Bergé.

"From the financial point of view, Rawsthorn is one of those closely watching the fortunes of the YSL brand as it

passes into the hands of a triumvirate of the canniest luxury-goods businessmen in the world: Francois Pinault, Gucci's Domenico de Sole and Bergé. Rawsthorn's assessment: "If all goes smoothly, and YSL is rejuvenated, when Pierre Bergé retires in the next few years, he could go down in history as the smartest fashion operator *ever*."

Meanwhile, the ripples on the waters of the Saint Laurent gene pool are about to spread to another generation. In January YSL's extraordinary archive, stored lovingly in vaults under climate-controlled conditions, will open as a resource for researchers and student designers to immerse themselves in. Saint Laurent says he has never been there. "I remember everything," he says, tapping his forehead and looking serenely happy—a man who has absolutely nothing left to prove. ■

## INTO THE WOODS (continued from page 203)

Cary says, "Emily is the most remarkable woman I've ever met in my life, and I mean that in a way other than just as a husband or a lover. She's got an unusually confident artistic sensibility, combined with a moral compass that is unshakable." Still, their marriage had comedic overtones that both seem amused to recall. Even if in the end they couldn't live together, the fact that two such opposite souls got together in the first place provides them with a laugh. One such amusement was that Woods' ultramini-mal aesthetic and her taste for control was forever challenged by her then-husband's frat-boy ways and his penchant for inviting the guys over for beer and sports on television.

"Cary shouts and Emily is noise-sensitive. Both are so opposite," says Cynthia Pett-Dante, manager of Brad Pitt and Courteney Cox, among others. "And yet the two of them always had this respect for each other. She let him do his thing, he hers. At some point, they will have a sitcom based on them. When I heard they were double-dating, I said, 'Cary, the two of you have lost it!'"

With her love of design and furniture as well as her marketing sensibility, Woods is now contemplating a home collection for J. Crew, to bring her vision to her customers. She's thinking about starting with a sleek bed-and-bath collection, with thoughts toward designing furniture in the future. She wants her customers to be comfortable in their surroundings as well as in their J. Crew chinos.

"Streamlining just means cleaner," she says as she finishes the tour of her living space. "Less is better, because what's left has more impact." Her meticulousness is evident as she glides her hand across the poured-concrete windowsills and notices a smudge. "I'm having Japanese place mats made for these," she says. "Until then, no red wine or blueberries at parties." ■

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As if in answer, Yager, simmering over my last question, lashes out. "Let me tell you somethin'," she growls; in a flash, the old hellcat has returned. "Bipin thinks he's won," she says fiercely. "But Ellen should know, children grow up. She'll have them back then; they'll come back to her. Because when they grow up, they'll never forgive him. Never." Her call-waiting clicks. "There's my other line," Yager says reluctantly. The old Faye is gone again, replaced by the wilted new Faye, who must now inject meaning into her life by preparing breakfast for guests each morning, or squabbling with the neighbors over rights to a shared alleyway, rather than the adventure, the danger of her old life. But will she really be able to leave her fierce crusade behind? Perhaps that's why Yager's voice breaks as she whispers her parting words: "Tell Ellen that I love her." ■