

# THE GIRL WHO CONNED THE IVY LEAGUE

BY SABRINA RUBIN ERDELY

HOW A HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT CREATED THE ULTIMATE FAKE ID, SCAMMED HER WAY INTO HARVARD AND COLUMBIA, AND BECAME THE TARGET OF A NATIONWIDE MANHUNT

**B**ROOKE HENSON KNEW SHE WAS IN trouble when she logged in to her e-mail account at Columbia University and found a message from the campus-security office. She stared at the computer screen, feeling that familiar anxiety rising. *You'll be fine*, she reassured herself. Think positive thoughts, just like her therapist had taught her. Surely she would get out of this scrape the same way she'd gotten out of all the other ones: with smooth talk and little lies. OK, big lies.

She dialed campus security. "Hi," she said, her voice controlled. "This is Brooke Henson."

The officer told her that he had gotten a curious call from police detectives in South Carolina who were trying to crack a missing-person case. "There's something I need to ask you," the officer continued. "Are you Brooke Henson?" The young woman who had disappeared from the rural South Carolina town of Travelers Rest seven years earlier? The girl whose grieving family had been searching for her ever since? The Brooke Henson who was presumed murdered?

"Yes," Brooke said into the phone. "That's me."

Her mind raced through her options. On the one hand, she had a purse full of proof that she was Brooke: her student ID, a Vermont driver's license, a U.S. passport, an Ohio identification card, a South Carolina birth certificate. She had a part-time job, a rented apartment not far from campus on New York's Upper West Side and a full course load at Columbia, all registered under the name Brooke Henson.

On the other hand, she wasn't Brooke Henson. She packed a suitcase hastily, grabbed her two Shih Tzus, hailed a cab and headed straight off the grid. By the time New York police came knocking with a DNA test, "Brooke Henson" was long gone.

Thus began an 18-month federal manhunt unusual in its scope and intensity. Investigators had never encountered anyone like this mysterious young woman, whom they discovered was not Brooke Henson at all but an imposter named Esther Reed: a criminal with an MO radically different from that of a typical identity thief. Rather than max out people's credit cards and move on, Esther would *become* them, spending years living under a succession of assumed names. Posing as various young women, she got her GED in Ohio, aced her SATs in California, gained admission to three





universities – including continuing-ed programs at Harvard and Columbia – and received \$100,000 in student loans. Along the way, she duped countless people from coast to coast, from DMV clerks to college professors to the West Point cadets she dated.

“She’s a criminal genius,” says Jon Campbell, the South Carolina police detective who eventually exposed her trail of deceit. “She was manipulative, controlling, brilliant. We didn’t know what to make of her.” With so many unanswered questions, authorities treated Esther Reed’s disappearance as an all-out emergency, suspecting her not only of fraud but of murder and international espionage. The tabloids had a field day with this brazen girl who had conned her way into the Ivy League; front-page headlines worried over her whereabouts and wondered what dangerous secrets she might be keeping.

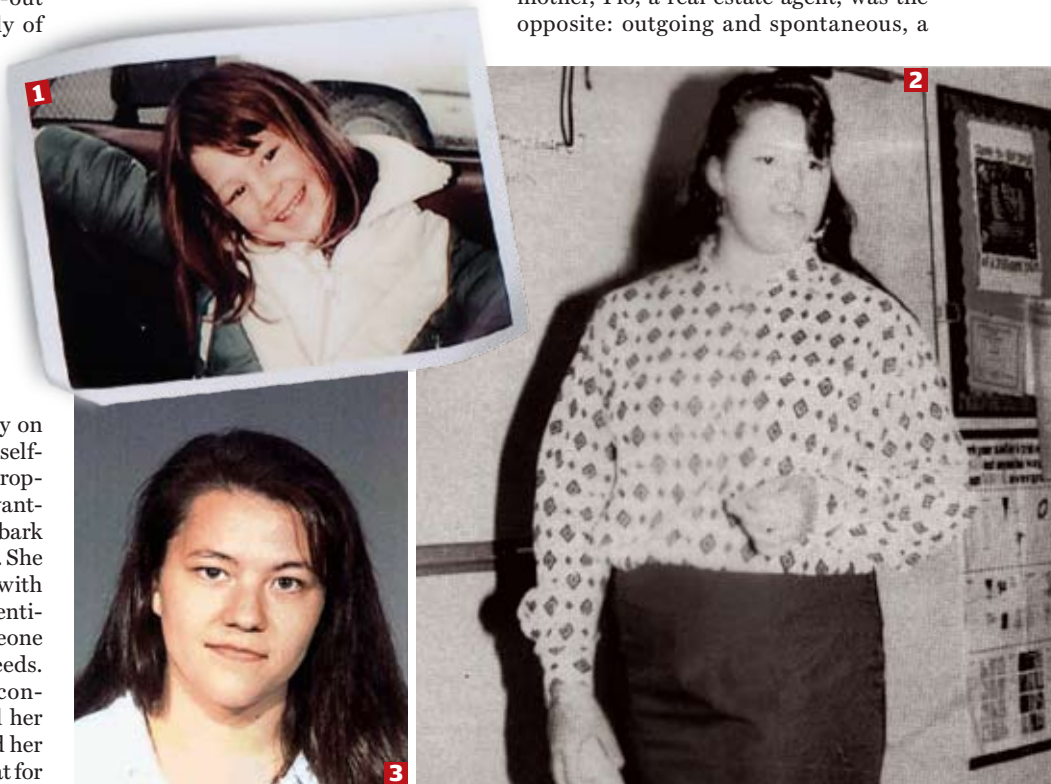
No one guessed the truth, which was simpler, and therefore stranger, than their wildest theories: that the scared young woman so hotly pursued by South Carolina police, the Secret Service, federal marshals and even the U.S. Army was actually on a bizarre and misguided journey of self-discovery. A 28-year-old high school dropout from Montana, Esther Reed just wanted to stop being Esther Reed and to embark on a new, better life of her own design. She was pursuing the American Dream, with a twist: Rather than forge a new identity from scratch, she would steal someone else’s and remake it to suit her own needs. Reed never imagined that her ill-conceived self-help program would land her on *America’s Most Wanted* and brand her as a threat to national security – or that for one brokenhearted family in South Carolina, the fulfillment of her hopes and dreams would mean the end of their own.

**T**WO GIRLS VANISHED IN 1999, one after the other. On the night of July 3rd, 20-year-old Brooke Henson threw an Independence Day party at her parents’ house in the faded foothills town of Travelers Rest, South Carolina. Brown-haired, slender and cheerful, Brooke was a free spirit who had quit school in the 10th grade and hadn’t done much since, other than hang out at Southern-rock festivals and fall in with a bad crowd. In the smoke-filled chaos of the party that night – her parents were at an Allman Brothers concert in Charlotte, North Carolina – Brooke got into a spat with her boyfriend, Ricky Shaun Shirley, surly-mouthed and

SABRINA RUBIN ERDELY wrote “Sex, Lies and Phys Ed” in RS 1070.

handsome with a fast-growing rap sheet. By the time her parents staggered home around two in the morning, the party was breaking up and Brooke was stalking out the door in a huff. She left a note for Shaun: “Follow me if you care.” She never came home.

On the opposite side of the country, in an outlying suburb of Seattle, 21-year-old Esther Reed was already two months gone. Her family’s last sighting of her, in May, had been outside the King County Courthouse, where Esther had just pleaded guilty to stealing a co-worker’s purse.



“You can’t live like this!” Esther’s older half sister Edna had screamed at her in the garage afterward. Edna had good reason to be upset: Her own purse was missing too, and she had recently discovered that Esther was forging checks in her name.

Esther stood there listening to her sister yell, her amber eyes set in an impassive stare. She was an athletic, oval-faced girl with a sharp chin, a broad forehead and a curtain of heavy dark hair. She was also a terrified young woman who had learned to mask her despair with a nonchalant expression. She felt like the loneliest person in the world. “I just needed to get away,” she would later recall.

Esther had an uncommonly sheltered childhood. She grew up off an unpaved forest road 15 miles outside tiny Townsend, Montana, the youngest of nine children from her mother’s three marriages. The nearest neighbor was a mile away; as a child, Esther wore homemade, poufy

dresses and attended a rural schoolhouse with four other kids. Compounding her isolation, Esther and her older brother, EJ, were brought up in a Southern Baptist church straight out of *Footloose*: Dancing, movies and music with a backbeat were all considered forms of devil worship. For fun, Esther and EJ played chess – until EJ got tired of being beaten by his baby sister and refused to play anymore. “To say we were socially stunted is an understatement,” says EJ.

Their father, Ernie, worked at the sawmill and was a shy, reclusive man. Their mother, Flo, a real estate agent, was the opposite: outgoing and spontaneous, a

and curious child glaringly out of step with the world – academically beyond her peers, but dressed for basketball practice in a frilly blouse and homemade shorts. Her outsider’s sensitivities sharpened in high school when her parents separated, with little warning. Esther went to live with Flo, while EJ stayed with Ernie. Without her big brother to protect her, Esther suddenly felt like a pincushion for her older siblings’ resentment – especially her sharp-tongued sister Edna. “I just listened to all of her criticisms and started to draw inside myself,” Esther wrote to me in an extensive correspondence from prison. “I began to believe that everyone was as critical and judgmental as she was.”

Esther, always shy, was seized by a fright she couldn’t shake, a paralyzing sense of self-consciousness and paranoia. She was sure the rest of the world had already written her off as a despicable loser, just as her family had: “Every interaction with people felt like an audition I was going to fail.” She became aloof and hostile, forever steeled against some forthcoming attack, and fin-

ished the ninth grade overweight, with a C-minus average and fellow outcasts for friends. “Esther was really struggling,” recalls Jim Therriault, her speech and English teacher. “I knew she was an intelligent person who was hiding her light under a bushel. But she was having a lot of psychological trauma.”

Life only got worse after Esther and her mother moved to Lynnwood, a rainy commuter town outside Seattle. Esther dropped out of high school, and three years later her mom died of colon cancer. “I shut down,” Esther says. She tried staying with Edna for a couple of months, then moved in with a boyfriend. She stopped showing up at her job as a nursing assistant, spending most of her time playing chess online, escaping into a world that felt orderly, sensible, within her control. Sometimes she stood in the kitchen and stared at the knives, fantasizing about ending it all. Then one day, Esther began flirting with the beginnings of an idea.

“I had massive amounts of anger and feelings of betrayal,” she says. “I couldn’t function, I couldn’t pay my rent, and no one would help me – so, fine, I’ll find a way to help myself.”

She started by helping herself to her co-worker’s purse. At her sentencing, Esther felt so disconnected that she didn’t even recognize Edna sitting in the courtroom. Afterward, as Edna berated her outside the courthouse, Esther simply tuned her out. In some ways, Esther Reed was already gone. “When I was 14, I learned how to lock myself up in a little box,” Esther wrote in a letter to her father. “And I couldn’t get out, and nothing could get in.” But now, she added, she was ready to climb out of the box. What she didn’t explain was her escape plan, via a Social Security number filched from her now ex-boyfriend’s sister.

Esther Reed did no such thing, but it helped deflect questions about why she was starting college at 24.

Her transformation from Natalie Fisher to Natalie Bowman had taken her across the country and back again. She got her first phony driver’s license under the name of

her ex-boyfriend’s sister at a DMV office in Philadelphia. When Esther walked in, she was panic-stricken at the sight of a security guard. “I thought he was going to tackle me on the way out,” she says. She calmed her nerves by retreating into “robot mode,” a kind of emotional distance she had been perfecting since childhood. “I have this practiced ability to not deal with whatever’s going on around me and just fake it,” Esther says. “I think that helped me when I was doing stuff I shouldn’t have been doing.”

Obtaining a new identity is one thing – deciding what to do with it is the hard part. Lacking a plan, Esther acted on a geeky fantasy by becoming a “debate groupie.” She hung out at college tournaments, eventually mustering the courage to participate in open competitions. Debating was a curious choice for a painfully shy person, but it exhilarated Esther to be able to speak her mind, to apply her brain to something tricky and to excel at it. Debate was also a controlled environment, one in which all speech is stripped of judgment or emotional weight, relying instead on preparation, intellect and skill – a safe, ultrarational atmosphere that suited Esther just fine.

But her larger goal was to erase all traces of her past, making it impossible for her family to track her down. To escape from herself and from her old life, she’d decided a simple name change wouldn’t be enough: She needed a new Social Security number. The only legitimate way to procure one, she knew, is to be a victim of domestic violence – a fact Esther found galling. What were nine arbitrary digits compared to her pursuit of happiness? “I believe everyone has the right to live free from judgment and emotional abuse,” she says. What she needed was someone who wouldn’t be affected by the misuse of their personal data, someone who wouldn’t – or couldn’t – blow the whistle on her. So Esther went looking for a missing person.

Missing-persons websites, she learned, provide a wealth of helpful information. Browsing site after site, she eventually found an identity that seemed a good fit. The real Natalie Bowman, from Tennessee, had a birth date roughly the same as Esther’s – and her Social Security number had been conveniently posted as well. Esther copied it down. No one would be hurt by the theft, she reasoned, as long as she was careful not to rack up debt. “I always thought, mistakenly, if there was no financial loss, there was no harm,” she says.

Untethered from her old life, Esther began to shed her layers of self-protection. In becoming someone else, she felt like the person she was meant to be. “There was no reinvention,” she insists. “More of a re-emergence of a girl who had been hidden away.” There was even a physical compo-

**THE AUTHORITIES TREATED ESTHER REED’S DISAPPEARANCE AS AN ALL-OUT EMERGENCY, SUSPECTING HER NOT ONLY OF FRAUD BUT OF MURDER AND INTERNATIONAL ESPIONAGE.**

**Girl, Interrupted**

**(1) Esther in Montana; she was the youngest of nine children. (2) In high school, devastated by her mother’s death, she became depressed and overweight. (3) Her 1999 mug shot; she disappeared soon after the arrest, leaving her old life behind.**

PREVIOUS SPREAD: COMPOSITE PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL PIRROCCO; PHOTOS OF ESTHER REED, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF TRAVELERS REST POLICE DEPARTMENT; COURTESY OF THE REED FAMILY; COURTESY OF TRAVELERS REST POLICE DEPARTMENT; COURTESY OF TINKLE PARK POLICE DEPARTMENT; COURTESY OF U.S. SECRET SERVICE; COURTESY OF KING COUNTY SHERIFF’S OFFICE; COURTESY OF BROADWATER HIGH SCHOOL.

woman who would finish off a family water fight by dragging the garden hose into the house. And then there was the mass of far-older half-siblings, like a crowd of stand-in parents, all intent on keeping the youngest two in line. Esther, her mother’s favorite, was a special target for their abuse. “It was tough on her to always be told, ‘You can’t do that’ or ‘You’re not doing this well enough,’” says EJ. “It kind of caused a stubborn streak: ‘I want to, so I will, and I’ll find a way to do it.’”

When Esther finally entered public school in the fifth grade, she was a bright



ment to her transformation. Esther became an avid runner, losing so much weight that she had a breast job to excise the sagging skin and tissue. She splurged on a pair of implants while she was at it, even though she could scarcely afford it. Investigators would later speculate that Esther was making money by shoplifting and then "returning" the items for cash. Still, she was so broke that at one point a boyfriend who was living in Germany wired her \$80 just to help her out.

Cal State Fullerton presented itself as a natural next step. Esther was pleased to find she could enroll as a non-degree-seeking student – sparing her the inconvenience of an admissions process – and be virtually anonymous among 40,000 other students. There had been a brief moment of tension when, while filling out her application, she blanked on her new Social Security number and got a couple of digits wrong. But "Natalie Bowman" was accepted without a hitch. The school hadn't bothered to verify the number; it was evidently nothing more than a filing tool and raised no red flags.

But before the semester was through, Esther was ready to move on; the debate program wasn't enough to satisfy her ferocious intelligence. "Esther was more like, 'I want to be smarter than everybody else,'" says Brusckie. And even more pressing, Esther had just discovered that someone was collecting earnings on "her" Social Security number: The real Natalie Bowman was still out there somewhere, living her life. Maybe she had run off to start anew, like Esther herself. Badly spooked, Esther realized she needed another identity – one that no one was using.

**I**N THE TRAVELERS REST POLICE barracks, Investigator Jon Campbell reviewed the Brooke Henson file yet again, hoping some new angle would reveal itself. It seemed impossible that in this washed-out town of 4,000 souls, no one had any information about Brooke's disappearance. And yet four years after Brooke vanished, Campbell wasn't any closer to finding her.

The Henson investigation had been a disaster from the start. When Brooke's parents tried to report their daughter missing, police didn't take it very seriously. Martin and Cathy Henson were known around town for their good-time ways, and their small, two-story house was a magnet for folks of all stripes who would gather for the family's boozy fish fries and never really

leave. The Hensons rented to a basement boarder who hid his marijuana plants behind a rebel flag.

Brooke's own bad-news boyfriend, Shaun Shirley, slept over whenever he pleased. In and out of jail for drug violations and assaults, he refused to talk to detectives during the investigation. His friends clammed up too. After Brooke stomped out of her own party in the wee hours, she was last seen at a lakeside party in nearby River Falls, a thickly wooded region in the foothills

a body turned up, Cathy had collapsed in his arms. The Hensons, desperate to keep the case open, held an annual vigil, every July 4th. A psychic was consulted. A family friend started a website listing every detail about Brooke and her disappearance, in the hopes that someone – anyone – would see it.



**The Imposter**

(1) In 2003, Reed assumed the identity of Brooke Henson, a South Carolina girl who vanished in 1999. (2) The next year, she began classes at Columbia and went to the West Point formal with boyfriend Kyle Brengel. As Brooke, she started enjoying things – like hiking Mount Washington (3) – that had always seemed unattainable as Esther.

of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Rumor had it there had been a foul-smelling barbecue in that area not long afterward.

Campbell, a baby-faced 40-year-old had chased down every lead, searching ponds, wells and forests with cadaver dogs. But he knew he was out of his depth: Aside from a long stint in the Coast Guard, his whole law-enforcement career had consisted of writing traffic tickets and responding to trailer-park brawls. By 2003, he had given up on finding Brooke alive. When he asked her parents for DNA samples in case



**E**STHER REED MADE HER PUBLIC debut as Brooke Henson at a West Point formal banquet in January 2004. Amid the swarm of uniformed cadets and their civilian dates, Esther looked utterly unlike the scared, overweight teen she had once been. She was dressed in an elegant black sheath, dangly earrings, a lipsticked smile and sparkly, elbow-length gloves – a detail that struck some attendees as over-the-top, like she was trying too hard. Her new boyfriend, West Point junior Kyle Brengel, already knew that beneath her assertive personality "Brooke" was acutely self-conscious. "I don't know if she overcompensated for her anxiety problems by being a little more aggressive," Brengel says. "But she was definitely very confident at times, and other times very unsure of herself." It was one reason he never offered to play chess against her,

even though she claimed to have played professionally; she had already told him it would destroy her confidence if she were beaten by an amateur. "I never thought to question it," he says.

As Brooke Henson, Esther was coming into her own. She was taking classes at Harvard's Extension School. She lived in Boston with five housemates and had an actual social life, spending her weekends clubbing, skiing in New York or hiking in New Hampshire. She honed her mushy Montana accent into a crisp East Coast one and she set her sights on the very epicenter of ambition and fresh starts: Manhattan. Esther saw New York City as the best place to fulfill her twin aspirations: to achieve and, at the same time, to be invisible. "When you have anxiety, you want to be able to walk down the street and have nobody look at you," she says. "New York is as close as you're gonna get to that."

Getting there required finesse, but nothing Esther couldn't handle by now. She already had much of the necessary paperwork. Months earlier, after acquiring Brooke Henson's Social Security number online, she had gotten an Ohio state ID in

ful fusion of two lives – the kernel of truth adorned with lies – is precisely what made Esther so convincing in her day-to-day role as Brooke. Esther herself, however, needed no convincing.

"I know it's hard for people to understand, but in my mind, I never changed my identity," she says. "My identity change was in name only. I didn't create a back story; I have a back story." All that was needed were "minor changes to explain small things." As she saw it, the person Esther Reed presented to the world, and to Columbia University, was a reflection of her true self.

Accepted immediately, she got right to work applying for more than \$100,000 in student loans and hunting for an apartment in New York. Esther was so busy making arrangements, in fact, that when Kyle broke up with her after six months of dating, she barely seemed to notice. That summer, Esther arrived at her new apartment on 108th and Columbus ready to enjoy the grandest chapter of her new life.

But maintaining her fictions proved to be stressful; one slip-up and her carefully crafted universe could come crashing down. It made Esther fearful of getting too

onslaughts, Esther put on her familiar mask of haughty confidence and switched on her emotional autopilot, mimicking social interactions while feeling nothing.

It didn't help that at the same time her own sense of self was crumbling. Esther was working to shore up her stolen identity, so she could continue being Brooke forever. She had already memorized Brooke's vital info from the missing-person website: date and place of birth, Social Security number, mother's maiden name, even the names of Brooke's family and friends. Now Esther used that info to gain her last coveted bits of ID. First, a birth certificate, procured with a call to South Carolina's health department, then picked up at a mailbox she rented at a UPS store in Northampton, Massachusetts. Next, a driver's license, which she got in Vermont. And for her final trick, Esther used all those IDs to achieve the holy grail: a U.S. passport, issued in the name of Brooke Henson.

Despite those accomplishments, Esther felt no better. She had lapsed back into that terrified, alienated little girl, as though she had never escaped that emotional box in the first place. It never occurred to her that the farther she tried to run from herself, the more she was sealing herself into that box. She was suffocating in there.

By her second year at Columbia, Esther spent most of her days holed up in her apartment with her two Shih Tzu puppies, Poochin and Odie, soaking up their unconditional love. She stopped going to class and to her work-study job at the Columbia alumni office, or even outside to take out the trash. Her transcript was littered with withdrawn classes. Her adviser suggested Esther see a shrink.

And so it was that in the spring of 2006, an identity thief began taking steps toward integrating her new and old selves, with the help of a cognitive-behavioral therapist. Esther began to leave her apartment to do small tasks, like going to the basement to do her laundry – a feat that took her four weeks to complete. She learned techniques to quell her fears, using logic – that safe and comforting tool – to examine the reality of each situation. Soon she was making it back to her classes, including the one in Hamilton Hall, whose sticky door handle terrified her so much. She ended the semester with good grades in all four of her courses – a women's-studies class and three in psych – and a part-time job at a legal-staffing firm. Esther was wrung out from the effort, but floating on her sense of achievement.

"For the first time ever, I was functioning!" she recalls. "It was exciting and awesome. I had done it!" This, at long last, was the life she deserved, the life she was meant for. Esther was finally ready to take on the world – to be the [Cont. on 122]

**"IN MY MIND, I NEVER CHANGED MY IDENTITY," REED SAYS. "MY IDENTITY CHANGE WAS IN NAME ONLY. BUT I WAS ALWAYS HOLDING BACK, KNOWING EVERYTHING COULD FALL APART."**

Brooke's name, then sat for the GED exam. She had also gotten college recommendations from her Cal State philosophy professor, Mitch Avila, as well as from Shirley Fleischmann, an engineering professor at Grand Valley State University in Michigan and mother to Ian Fleischmann – the first of two West Point cadets Esther dated. Although both instructors had known Esther as "Natalie," they agreed to write their recommendations in the name of Brooke Henson. Esther had explained to them that her father was stalking her – threatening to kill her, actually – and so, as a victim of domestic violence, she was being assigned a new identity.

Now 26-year-old "Brooke Henson" took her SATs and scored a 1400, more than enough to get her into Columbia University's School of General Studies. In her application essay, she wrote about how chess had helped her to cope with the loss of her mother, carefully replacing any mention of her childhood in Montana and Washington with "South Carolina." That skill-

close to anyone. "There was always a holding back, a knowing that everything could fall apart," she says. Like all those times she'd realized a beat too late that someone had been calling "her" name while she stared off into space, not responding to "Brooke." Or the time that Ian Fleischmann's father quizzed her about why, if she was a chess champ, her name wasn't listed with the U.S. Chess Federation. Esther had managed to concoct an explanation on the spot, but the incident had served as a reminder that she always had to be on her guard.

That vigilance came with a price. Esther's old anxieties had never really gone away, but she had managed to keep them in check. Now her fears overwhelmed her. At Columbia, she was sure that everyone who laid eyes on her was judging her harshly. A professor calling on her in class became cause for panic. A visit to the computer room was a terrifying exercise – what if there were no free terminals, and everyone looked up at her? To survive these daily

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF TRAVELERS REST POLICE DEPARTMENT; 2, COURTESY OF THE HENSON FAMILY



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## CON GIRL

[Cont. from 101] best Brooke Henson she could be. And then she got an e-mail from campus security, and that lovely life came to an abrupt end.

**J**ON CAMPBELL TRIED TO BREAK the news gently to Brooke Henson's aunt. "There's a girl in New York saying she's Brooke Henson," he said.

On her end of the phone, Lisa Henson felt her breath catch. "What does she look like?" Lisa demanded.

"She has dark hair and dark eyes. She's kinda thin. And" - here Campbell paused uncertainly - "she's going to Columbia University. It could be identity theft."

Campbell explained the situation to Lisa: Up in New York, a co-worker of "Brooke's" had Googled her name and discovered the Brooke Henson missing-persons website. When the co-worker called South Carolina authorities, Campbell brought the NYPD into the loop. Wondering how a high school dropout like Brooke could have gotten into Columbia, he asked Lisa to come up with some questions that only Brooke would know the answers to. She obliged: "What is your brother's best friend's name? What is your late uncle's name?" Campbell sent the list to New York detectives and waited.

A day or so later, he got a stunning call: The young woman had answered nearly all of the questions correctly. The New York cops believed they had found the real Brooke Henson.

Had Campbell not known the case so well, or come to care so much, the Brooke Henson missing-person case might have been closed right then, enabling Esther to go on living the rest of her life as Brooke Henson. Not only had she answered most of the questions correctly, but she claimed to be an abuse survivor who had run away from her family: Thanks to a domestic-violence privacy shield she had requested for her Columbia file, police were unable to access her records. Other than student loans and a little credit-card debt - mostly bills from a psychiatrist's office - her finances were in order. It made no sense that she *wasn't* Brooke. Why would someone go to all the trouble to steal an identity and not milk it for every dollar possible?

Even so, Campbell couldn't accept it. He was positive that the real Brooke Henson was dead. "I want DNA!" he snapped at the New York detective. He wasn't surprised when, days later, he learned "Brooke" had skipped town. He decided to continue working the case, to try and find the identity thief who had victimized Brooke.

Campbell could tell from the get-go this was no ordinary case. The first clue was a call from Kyle Brengel, the West Point cadet who had Googled his ex's name and been shocked to find a bulletin about the Columbia identity thief. Brengel steered Campbell to Ian Fleischmann, the other cadet she

had dated. When Campbell called Fleischmann's family in Michigan, he discovered that Ian's father, Fred, had always been suspicious of his son's peculiar girlfriend: her unsubstantiated claim about being a chess champ, her request for a college recommendation in a different name, the fact that she always paid for things in cash. For a brief period, she had shared a cellphone plan with Ian, and when the bills came, Fred noticed that she had been calling all across the country. Suspicious, Fleischmann went through her purse, where he found an ID from Washington State calling her "Esther Reed" as well as a wire-transfer receipt from Germany. Putting two and two together, he concluded she was a drug mule.

Using Fleischmann's information - including the cellphone records - Campbell uncovered her pre-Cal State identity, "Natalie Fisher." He also ran the name "Esther Reed" through the National Crime Information Center database and discovered that she was listed as a missing person. Campbell sent a photo of "Brooke Henson" to Washington police, who showed it to the Reed family. They confirmed it was Esther. It was their first indication in seven years that she was still alive.

Campbell struggled to make sense of the facts. What could Esther Reed's motivation possibly be? Was she a drug courier, as Fleischmann suggested? Or, just maybe, could she have murdered Brooke Henson and the other girls she impersonated? "I thought, 'Man, she might be a serial killer,'" recalls Campbell. Then one day, while reading the hundreds of pages of instant messages that Kyle Brengel had turned over, his eyes lit on a passage in which Esther expressed keen curiosity about a term paper the cadet was writing about tactical troop movements. In another exchange, she told Kyle that she'd love to be James Bond - that being a spy would be her dream job.

Of course, Campbell concluded: Esther Reed was a spy.

If Campbell had learned anything from his time in the Coast Guard, it was that threats lurk everywhere. Everything started falling into place: the military boyfriends, the plastic surgery, the wire transfer from Europe, the false passport. Campbell could see now that Esther had been infiltrating military intelligence at its roots, by seducing young cadets at West Point who would become tomorrow's military leaders.

"It's Cold War spy stuff, the same thing the Soviet Union did to us for 50 years!" says Campbell, still excited by his theory. "They'd have some girl go in, have sex with them. Did you ever see the movie *The Good Shepherd*? It's exactly like that. Ten years from now, the guy is going up for his first star as a general, and he's on the Joint Chiefs of Staff or something. The guy gets a package, it has a movie in it, and it's 'You work for us now.' That's classic espionage."

Campbell notified the Secret Service and the Army. The manhunt was on.

**E**STHER REED FLIPPED ON THE light in Room 317 at the Sleep Inn in Tinley Park, Illinois. She blinked at the tropical-print bedspread: another cheap motel. It was February 2nd, 2008 - nearly two years since she had received the e-mail at Columbia that destroyed her life as Brooke Henson. Safe in the hotel room, Esther got herself and her Shih Tzus settled. She was dressed in a green turtleneck and a huge pair of jeans; since she had been on the lam, her runner's body had ballooned to 250 pounds. Her weight gain had been intentional at first, to better disguise herself, but then it had taken on a life of its own. "Depression hit hard," she says. Esther didn't know she was wanted as a threat to national security. She just wanted it all - the lies, the running - to stop.

She was "Jen Myers" now. The name was fictitious, but her Iowa driver's license was real, as was the registration for her green '93 Subaru Legacy parked in the lot outside. Esther had created the new identity soon after leaving New York with the help of a fake Kentucky birth certificate, a fake Nevada marriage certificate and a Social Security number she had made up, having gambled that the Iowa DMV wouldn't bother to check it. As it happened, the number she chose was real and belonged to someone else - a crime in itself. But Esther

never used the number for financial purposes. These days she was living on money from a new scheme: In her rolling suitcase she carried two laptops, a stack of rewritable discs, 500 blank plastic ID cards and rolls of blank register-receipt tape - some with a forged JC Penney logo. According to prosecutors, they were all tools for a meticulous scam in which she would "return" shoplifted merchandise for cash.

It was too painful to contemplate just how disastrously her self-improvement plan had backfired. "I made poor choices, and those choices hurt other people, and I desperately regret that," she says. She had deceived a hope-starved family in South Carolina that their daughter was alive and well. She had hurt the people she befriended along the way. And then there was her own family. Esther was still grateful to have left the lot of them behind - except for her father and her brother EJ, whom she missed acutely. She could hardly guess at what she had put them through these past nine years: the guilt and the grief, the birthdays and Christmases gone by without her, her family's shock when a body turned up in Auburn, Washington - possibly a victim of the Green River serial killer - and her dad underwent a DNA cheek swab in 2004, preparing himself for the worst.

Try as Esther might, she couldn't get herself out of the elaborate jam she had created

for herself. All she could do was keep moving, staying one step ahead of the forces Campbell had unleashed. It wasn't so much a plan as it was a way of getting through each day. In her room at the Sleep Inn, Esther lay down for a late-day nap. She was exhausted. She didn't know how much longer she could keep this up.

In the parking lot outside, Officer Kevin Horbaczewski was sitting in his patrol car, his headlights beamed on Esther's vehicle. He could hardly believe it. Local police had been searching for this green Subaru for a week, ever since a cop had randomly run Esther's license plate at a stoplight, a routine check to see if the car was stolen. It turned out to be legit, so the officer had watched "Jen Myers" drive off, not realizing she was a federal fugitive until U.S. marshals called Tinley Park to find out why the hell the cops had let her get away. Turns out the feds had uncovered Esther's new alias by tracing one of her e-mail accounts and had been waiting for her to surface ever since. Now here was her car, parked innocently in the lot at the Sleep Inn. Officer Horbaczewski peeked inside the vehicle. It was filthy with fast-food trash.

Esther opened the door to his knock, her face puffy with sleep. Horbaczewski pretended to be investigating a noise complaint. She handed over her Jen Myers driver's license. He led her away in handcuffs.

123

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## CON GIRL

"Why am I being brought to the station?" Esther asked from the back of the patrol car. Horbaczewski was struck by how clear and confident her voice seemed. He looked at her in the rearview mirror.

"We'll work it all out when we get to the station," he told her.

She met his eyes in the mirror. "My name is Esther Reed," she said. As soon as the words left her lips, her expression dissolved into one of pure relief.

**I**KNEW INSTINCTIVELY UPON BEING arrested that *this* was the start of my life," Esther wrote, her printing rounded and legible. "I have always been very good at looking toward the future and somehow remaining optimistic. Now is no different."

After her arrest, it quickly became apparent to investigators that Esther Reed had nothing to do with Brooke Henson's disappearance, let alone with national security. She pleaded guilty to three counts of fraud and one count of identity theft. At her February sentencing in Greenville, South Carolina, Esther was led into the courtroom wearing an orange prison jumpsuit, her wrists shackled, her long hair pulled into a tight ponytail. She looked composed and almost casual, except when it was her turn

to speak. "I accept full responsibility," she told the judge, her voice quaking. Her lawyer tried suggesting that Esther's anxiety had compelled her to commit her crimes. "I've got to hand it to you, that's a creative argument," drawled Judge Henry Herlong. He gave Esther 51 months in prison, followed by three years of probation, and ordered her to pay \$125,916 in restitution. "That's a significant sentence for someone who's done what she's done," notes Walt Wilkins, the U.S. attorney for South Carolina, who prosecuted the case.

Esther sees prison as a way to regroup as she readies herself for a new beginning – this time, a real one. Now that she's forced to be Esther Reed again, she finds herself freed up in a whole new way, even though she's behind bars. "Regardless of where I am at this moment, I'm not in an emotional box anymore," she says. "It took this entire journey to open it up, but it's open. With any luck, I will never need a box again."

Jon Campbell still thinks she's a spy. "It's never really been fully investigated," he says, in a Greenville cafe after Esther's sentencing. Seeing Esther in cuffs should leave him exultant; after all, it was his dedication that broke the case. Instead, Campbell finds himself frustrated: The Reed case has been solved, but the Brooke Henson case may never be. It kills him to know that someone in Travelers Rest must know something

about Brooke's disappearance. "I think it's gonna be a deathbed confession that solves this thing," Campbell says.

To look around Brooke's hometown today – a once-proud textile town haunted by unemployment, methamphetamine and teen pregnancy – is to glimpse what her future might have held, had she not vanished. Despite the wildly divergent paths that Brooke and Esther took in life, it's striking how similarly they started out. Both were aimless small-town daughters, adrift and anonymous, members of the same lonesome sisterhood – girls who feel trapped by circumstance, bereft of choices, who long to discover their greater purpose and meaning; girls in search of identity. That forlorn sorority is perhaps the reason why, when Esther met a fellow inmate one day who happened to be a friend of Brooke's, the woman told Esther not to feel too badly. "If Brooke had known you were in need," the prisoner said, "she would have completely understood."

Esther – the girl who once felt so alone and misunderstood that she chose to cloak herself in another girl's life – burst into tears. Too late, she had finally found a friend.

Ten years ago, two girls went missing. Esther found her way back; Brooke didn't. And so the story of two lost girls narrows to one. 25

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