

*Frank Bender
with some of his
busts from
the great beyond.*

Murder, He Sculpted

BY SABRINA RUBIN

When cases go "cold," the call goes to Frank Bender and the ace crime solvers of the Vidocq Society

Frank Bender is working late, as usual. He prefers the solitude the night brings, when the telephone is silent and the bill collectors stop coming. There are to be no distractions; tonight's task requires Bender's most grim concentration. His foot taps to the eerie gloom-rock of David Lynch's *Lost Highway* soundtrack, as he scribbles calculations on a legal pad. Then Bender turns his attention back to the human skull sitting unceremoniously on his desk.

"This young girl here," Bender yells over the rising swell of music, "she's about 23 years old. White. Her torso was found in a suitcase in Chester County. Her legs were in another township. That's about all we know." Bender falls silent as he measures her nasal cavity and makes a tiny pencil mark on either side. He is an impish, energetic man with a silver tooth and a white Vandyke that tapers to a sinister point beneath his chin. Blue tattoos from his Navy days peek out from the sleeves of his black T-shirt. Across Bender's cavernous

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studio/home—a converted meat market near the South Street Bridge—Frank's wife chews on an ear of corn at their kitchen table, all but oblivious to the thumping music and the grisly work under way.

It is in these late-night hours that Bender, a facial reconstructionist, exercises his uncanny ability: to visualize what a person looked like in life simply by studying her naked skull. He then constructs a mold and plaster bust of his vision, to be flashed on television and printed up on flyers, in the hopes of getting a positive ID. He has a success rate of 90 percent; when finally identified, the victims often resemble their plaster likenesses right down to the hairstyle.

Already Bender has filled this skull's eye sockets with balls of white clay and mounted it onto a pair of plaster shoulders. "I want her looking a little off to the side," Bender says, angling her clay neck to raise her chin slightly. "I don't know why yet." He gets to work smearing hunks of red clay over the bone. Although no leads have developed since this skull was found two years ago near Brandywine Creek, Bender is unfazed. He has worked on many such cases for state and local police, the U.S. Marshal Service, the FBI, Interpol, Scotland Yard and *America's Most Wanted*, including the pursuit of famed onetime Philadelphia guru and 16-year fugitive Ira Einhorn. However, perhaps Bender's proudest affiliation is with a group he helped found: the Vidocq Society, whose members help solve "cold," or old crimes. After keeping a low profile for the first six years of its existence, the Vidocq Society was discovered several months ago by Hollywood, and now a movie is in the works, for which Bender and two of his cronies received a seven-figure deal.

"The forensic team, we're the last ones to represent these people," Bender goes on, packing red clay around the skull's eyes, plugging up its nose. "There's nobody else left to stand up for them. So you have to give it your all." Much later in the process, after he has created a mold of this sculpted head, he will undo his handiwork, stripping the clay from the skull before returning it safely to the morgue. For now, however, the skull is Bender's canvas. He spreads clay over the exposed teeth, and suddenly it has become a rough-hewn face with pursed lips, staring at its sculptor with unseeing eyes. Bender stares back. The police delivered this head to him in an airtight bucket; he "defleshed" it himself, and has already felt compelled to paint a series of nightmarish watercolors for his

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own mental health. All around him, the plaster busts of past murder victims watch from their places on his shelves.

"I have to stop here," he says heavily, snapping off the desk lamp. "I have to be alone with her now."

Most homicides are solved within 72 hours," explains Vidocq Society commissioner Bill Fleisher, swirling horseradish into a jar of cocktail sauce at Seafood Unlimited. "If not, the chances of solving them go down exponentially. The evidence gets old. People's memories change. Bad guys get farther away."

For those reasons, the mission of the Vidocq ("Vee-DOCK") Society is a formidable challenge. Named for 18th-century criminal-turned-master-detective Eugene François Vidocq, and begun as a social club for criminologists, forensic experts and other law-enforcement types, Vidocq has evolved into a prestigious think tank made up of some of the best minds around, who unite to help solve crimes that have baffled everyone else. Membership is a privilege: According to its quirky bylaws, only 82 people can join (82 being the number of years Monsieur Vidocq lived). District Attorney Lynne Abraham is a member. Others include the FBI profiler who coined the term "serial killer," Interpol agents and the forensic dentist who testified in the Megan Kanka trial, as well as three people—the Montgomery County coroner, the polygraph expert and the defense attorney—currently involved in the murder case of Stefanie Rabinowitz. Every two months, all gather at the Downtown Club, where, over lunch, they come up with pro-bono advice for stumped investigators and bereaved families.

The group has consulted on more than a hundred cases since its inception, but only the toughest are formally presented at its luncheons. The Cleveland torso murders, for instance, in which 32 hobos were killed from the 1920s through the '50s. Or the case of a Miami woman found with six bullets in her, whose death was curiously determined by police to have been a suicide. Or the suspicious 1987 death of a New Jersey man who Vidocq believed was actually alive and well in Puerto Rico. "All solvable crimes," says Fleisher, a rounded, easygoing guy with a graying beard and a head of jet-black hair. "They were just never solved." According to its commissioner, Vidocq has never *not* been able to provide some insight into a case. On about



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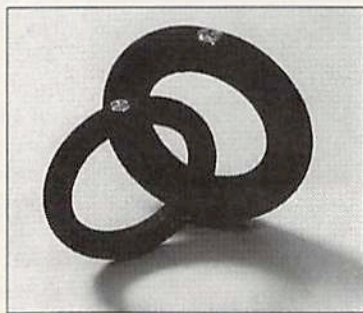
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30 occasions, Vidocq members have volunteered to actively join in investigations. Of those, two have resulted in convictions, and one ended in an innocent man's name being cleared.

Vidocq's quest is more crucial now than ever, since unsolved cases in the United States are at an all-time high—a consequence, suggests Fleisher, of rises in both the rates of stranger-on-stranger murders and the number of seriously disturbed individuals walking around. As murderers become increasingly random and deviant, Fleisher says, they exploit the limits of police departments that often fail to share information with one another until it's too late. "Lack of communication is law enforcement's downfall," reasons Fleisher. "Take Andrew Cunanan. You're trying to tell me he drove a red pickup truck down 95 from New Jersey to Florida and nobody spotted him?!"

Collaboration among all areas of law enforcement is a major emphasis of the Vidocq Society. Vidocq's trio of founding fathers exemplifies the group's range of expertise: polygraph analyst Fleisher, psychological profiler Richard Walter and Frank Bender. Of the three, Bender—part sculptor, part pathologist, part mystic—has attracted the most attention. He is featured in several true-crime books, and was the inspiration for a Nancy Drew mystery in which Nancy joins forces with the

Vidocq Society and the Hardy boys. He's the one who originally sent Hollywood swooning earlier this year, with Danny DeVito's Jersey Films ultimately outbidding Disney, Warner and Paramount for the Vidocq Society story. And rumor has it that someone else was fascinated with Bender: Many are convinced that Chris Carter, creator of *The X-Files*, based the main character of his show *Millennium*, "Frank Black," on Frank Bender. Though Carter denies, through a spokesperson, any connection, the similarities between the two Franks—men who, using psychic-like insights into the minds of killers and victims, help solve crimes on behalf of underground societies—are eerily similar.

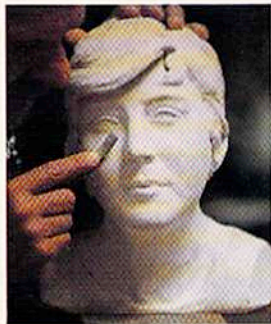
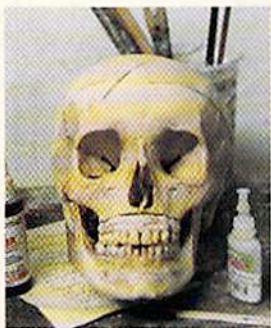
But for all the interest in what Bender does, no one knows quite how he does it. "Maybe he has messages beamed to him from outer space," cracks Fleisher. "Would you doubt it?" He laughs uproariously. "Frank works on instinct," he continues, serious now. "Maybe it's his artist's eye. Maybe it's his sixth sense. Whatever it is, it works. And that's all we care about."

All Bender was looking for, really, was a cheap anatomy lesson. It was 1976, and as always, money was tight. Frank Bender had endured his share of hard knocks—a North Philly childhood, a stint in the Navy in lieu of college—only to be eking out a living for his wife and two daughters as a commercial photographer, which he hated, while yearning to focus on his pastels and sculptures. At 34, Bender had decided to use his VA benefits to take some night classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. But no anatomy class was being offered. So when a friend at the Philadelphia Medical Examiner's Office invited Bender to the morgue for an anatomy lesson of sorts, Bender jumped at the chance.

He peered under the white sheets while his friend read off the corpses' names, ages and manners of death, until they reached one unidentified woman. Bender's friend explained that hers was a hopeless case: She had been found near the airport two years earlier, too decomposed for anyone to tell what she looked like, her flesh nothing but a messy sludge of black rot oozing off her yellowing skeleton.

"I know what she looked like," Bender said immediately.

COURTESY OF FRANK BENDER



Do you know this woman? Bender's task is to reconstruct murder victims who have decomposed to determine their identity. This woman was found near Brandywine Creek in July '95; call Chester County police with information (610-269-5355).

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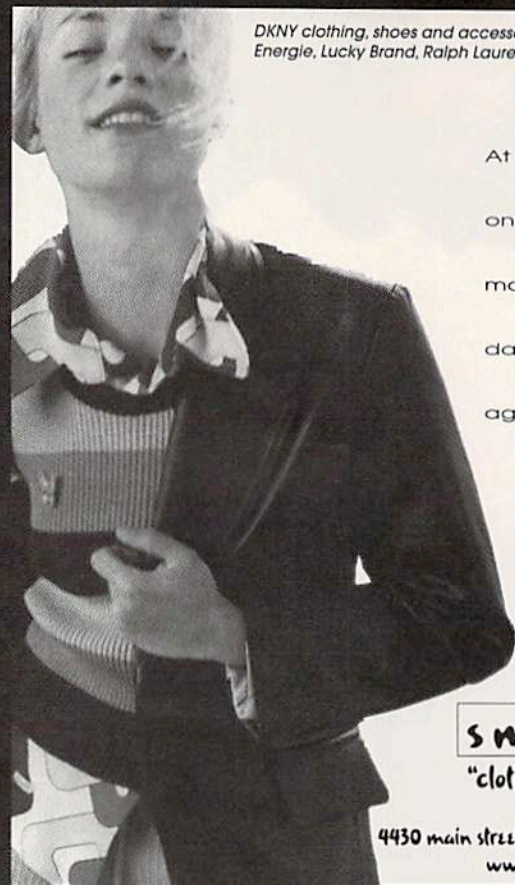
"How could you know?" his friend scoffed. But pathologist Dr. Halbert Fillinger overheard their conversation and asked Bender if he had any forensic experience. "I don't even know what that word means," Bender confessed. Even so, Fillinger encouraged him to reconstruct the woman. The resulting plaster bust was of a fleshy, thin-lipped face with a pointed nose. Photographs of the bust were printed on police flyers and distributed throughout the area; six months later, she was identified as a 62-year-old woman from Phoenix.

Everyone who came in contact with the case was blown away by the resemblance between Bender's bust and the actual victim. Bender wasn't. "I knew. I don't know how, I just did," he remembers now. "Certain psychics say that I'm psychic, but ..." He waves a dismissive hand. "I just pay close attention to the forms of the skull, and what they're saying." Dr. Fillinger began commissioning Bender to do other reconstructions, and his success was astonishing. He would use forensics as a starting point, referring, for example, to the standard chart of average tissue thickness. But then, as he'd bury his marks with clay, a mental picture would emerge. "That's where the science ends and the art begins," says Bender. "I follow the flow of the face. Whether a face is beautiful or ugly, there's always a harmony. Like in music: You change a note, and it goes sour. So if the eyes and the nose work, you make the mouth to go with the eyes and the nose."

He was asked to lecture to law-enforcement organizations about his techniques, and impressed the U.S. Marshal Service enough to be invited on a manhunt for mob hit man Hans Vorhauer and Robert Nauss, ex-president of the Warlock biker gang, who had escaped together from Graterford Prison. Vorhauer was a master of disguises with a genius I.Q., clever enough to have built an armoire in Graterford's woodshop and sell it to accomplices on the outside—with him and Nauss hidden in it. Bender enlisted the help of Bill Fleisher, then a U.S. Customs agent; from the leads Fleisher supplied, Bender predicted—correctly, of course—that the brown-haired Vorhauer would bleach his hair blond and that the bearded, scruffy Nauss would be a clean-shaven, short-haired suburbanite.

The marshals called on Bender again in their search for Alphonse Persico, the Colombo crime family underboss who had been on the lam for 12 years. Working from 14-year-old photos, Bender concocted a bust with an appearance radically dif-

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ferent from what the FBI had been looking for. Four months later, Persico was nabbed, causing some awkwardness for Bender with the Bureau's forensic staff, but further adding to his reputation.

Then, a few years later, Bender's bust of an aged Ira Einhorn helped lead authorities to the Stockholm lair of the '60s icon who'd been convicted in absentia of murdering girlfriend Holly Maddux and stuffing her remains in a trunk. Though they missed Einhorn by one day, the near-capture generated key breaks in the case that eventually led to his arrest in Champagne-Mouton, France, in June and an extradition hearing last month.

In 1987, Bender was contacted by a television producer who wanted to re-create the Vorhauer/Nauss case for the pilot episode of a show devoted to catching fugitives. *America's Most Wanted* was so pleased with Bender (because the show had little money to hire actors, Bender actually

It was Bender's bust of an aged Ira Einhorn that helped lead authorities to the Stockholm lair of the '60s icon.

played the part of Vorhauer) that he was soon tapped to work on another segment, this one on fugitive John List. In 1971, List had vanished after killing his family in their Westfield, New Jersey, home. *AMW* wanted Bender to create a bust of what List might look like 18 years later. Working with profiler Richard Walter, Bender aged List's face, adding a pair of heavy, dark-rimmed glasses because "it would be part of his facade to make him look more intelligent than he really was," Bender explains. The bust was featured on *AMW*, and the FBI caught List 11 days later—wearing dark-framed glasses, naturally. *America's Most Wanted's* ratings soared.

Bender was thrilled to be using his artistic skills for such a noble purpose, one that served justice and finally gave restless souls peace. But though his triumphs piled up, he continued to struggle financially. The plaster busts, each of which took a month to make, brought in only \$1,200 to \$1,700 apiece. In addition, the publicity generated by his unorthodox hobby had ended his career as a commercial photographer. With two kids to put through college, Bender tried his hand at a hodgepodge of odd jobs,

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from making bronze plaques for hospitals and schools to diving under tugboats in the Delaware to inspect them for damage. Never mind that Bender had no diving equipment; he would just put on a pair of coveralls and a face mask, hold his breath, and call upon his Navy training.

Of all the connections Bender made through his law enforcement adventures, none were as important to him as his friends Bill Fleisher and Richard Walter. But until 1990, the wisecracking Philadelphia polygraph expert and the deadly serious Michigan prison psychologist had never met. That's when Walter found himself in Philadelphia for a couple days, and Bender insisted the three of them get together over lunch. At Day By Day they batted around theories on the motivations of serial killers and the positioning of dead bodies. Before they knew it, the sky was growing dark. And they were struck by an idea.

"There's a relatively small group of people who are really in the know," says Walter. "The idea was to bring them all together, as a way to organize the casual information-sharing that goes on." The name "Sherlock Holmes Society" was floated, then nixed as being too cliché. Fleisher is the one who thought of Eugene Vidocq (the other two had never heard of him), and sent out exploratory letters to medical examiners, prosecutors, attorneys, detectives and special agents he knew. Almost all responded positively.

The cases presented at the Vidocq Society's first few meetings were simply meant as intellectual exercises. Fleisher would introduce the particulars of a murder case before the salad course, let members talk among themselves, then open the floor for discussion before the entree was served. By dessert, the group would be teasing out untried leads and overlooked clues. Not only was it fun, it was a great networking opportunity, and membership swelled. Before long, Vidocq had decided to use its collective skills to provide pro-bono advice. "A lot of departments can't afford experts, or don't know the right people, so their cases never get solved," Bender explains. "We became an organization that can give the police, for free, the best information there is."

Vidocq's most recent success was a tough case involving a young Philadelphia named Roger Scott Dunn, who moved to Lubbock, Texas, and disappeared shortly thereafter, in 1991. Despite evidence of foul play—a large, irregular-shaped section of carpet in Dunn's apart-



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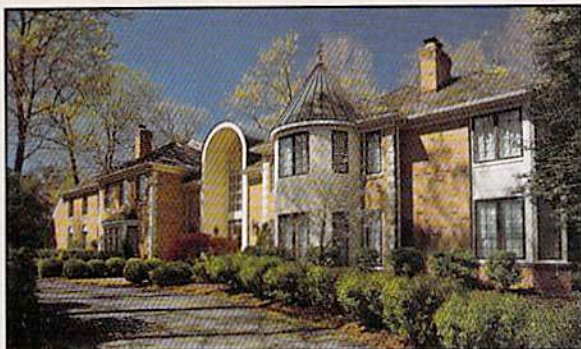
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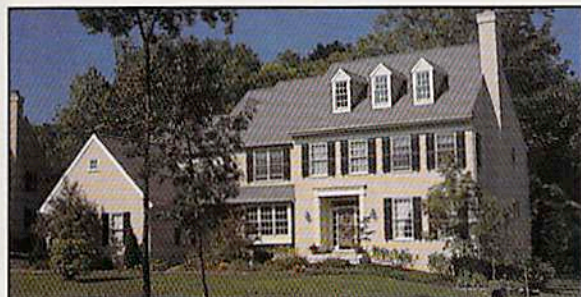
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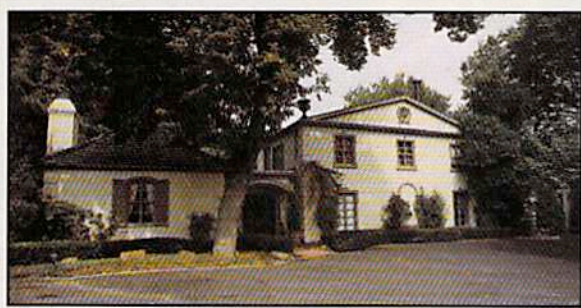
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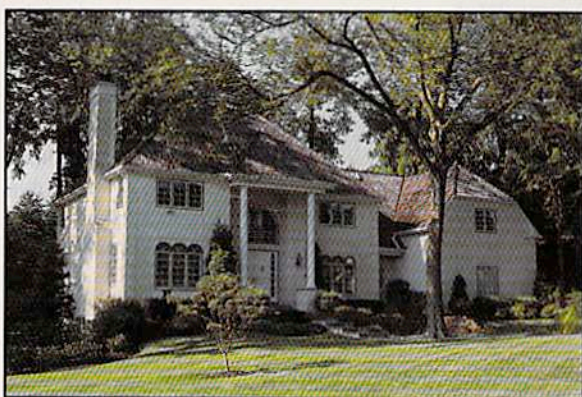
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Mysteries

ment had been replaced, and the floor underneath was stained with his blood—Dunn was officially listed as “missing” until Vidocq got on the case. The investigators determined that the blood loss must have been staggering to soak clear through the carpet; splatter marks on the walls and ceiling were other telltale signs of a severed artery. Walter called friends at Scotland Yard, who confirmed the team’s diagnosis: There was no way Dunn could have survived the crime scene. And incredibly, though his body has never been found, Dunn’s girlfriend was convicted of his murder last May. Her alleged accomplice goes to trial next month.

But Vidocq cases don’t always have such neat endings. After its experts offer advice, police and prosecutors sometimes choose not to follow it. For example, there was the 1991 shooting death of a Toms River, New Jersey, woman, ruled a suicide, which the Vidocq Society concluded was actually a murder. It even fingered the woman’s boyfriend as the prime suspect. But after Vidocq issued its finding, the Ocean County prosecutor’s office decided that the case was closed. “The buck stops with the prosecutor, because the prosecutor wants to get reelected!” Frank Bender fumes. “It’s all about politics. That’s the reason why some crimes are solved and others aren’t. That’s the part you never see in movies.”

If it’s up to Bender, though, it will appear in movies. His own movie.

For years, Bender has had a kind of cult following in certain star circles. Robert De Niro is a fan, and when Bender gave a talk at De Niro’s Manhattan screening room a few years back, he was approached by a friend of Michael Douglas who said Douglas was dying to play Bender in a movie. By early this year, New York agent Jody Hotchkiss was calling to tell Bender he’d be the perfect subject for a feature film. Bender couldn’t believe his luck; he was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. But he had an even better idea.

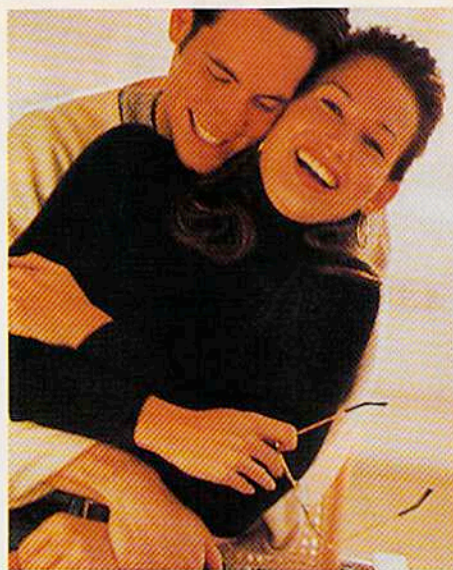
“You should come check out my friends at the Vidocq Society,” Bender told Hotchkiss. “Now *there’s* a movie.”

Hotchkiss showed up at the February ’97 Vidocq meeting and was floored. When the next Vidocq luncheon rolled around in April, Bender arrived at the Downtown Club flanked by a baker’s dozen of studio reps and producers. After the meeting, they all hustled back to Bender’s house to start the bidding. Danny DeVito’s Jersey Films bought Bender’s, Fleisher’s and Walter’s life rights for seven figures.

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recounts happily. "We split the money between the three of us and Vidocq. So now the Vidocq Society has money. And I can pay my back taxes."

Back in Frank Bender's studio, the radio is tuned to an oldies station. "Heat waaave," Bender absently sings along with Martha and the Vandellas as he sculpts a pair of crescent-shaped eyelids between his fingers. The dead woman's head is looking more and more lifelike every day. Over the course of two weeks, Bender has slowly given her a long, heart-shaped face, a tapered nose and prominent cheekbones. "That might change before I'm done. I might flatten those cheekbones out a little," he says, surveying his work critically. "I just have to let it happen naturally, till I exhaust myself. Then I regroup, and think it out again, and boom, it hits again."

It's late afternoon, rather early in the day for this sort of work, but Bender wants to get some time in before he and his wife meet the Fleishers for dinner at Opus 251 to officially celebrate their movie contract. He's trying to keep from becoming too absorbed in his work, and failing: A little change to her eye gives way to new insight into the ridge of her brow. "Lou-ay Lou-aay," he breathes along with the music. Quickly he fashions an ear; as he does, something catches his eye, and his hand shoots over to her nose and adds a smidgen onto its tip.

And then Bender leans back. He's through for the day. "I need to think things over. This is too important to rush," he declares. He fondly rests a hand on top of her head—a habit he's developed as he's gotten closer to her. "This is a lot of responsibility. I don't want to let anybody down by not doing my best." He gives her a rub. "Especially her."

Three weeks later, the plaster bust is complete. She has been transformed into a young woman with softly rounded features, a straight nose, slightly uneven brown eyes and short, dark hair. She has a distracted look about her, as if she is gazing at something in the distance. The person who killed her and sawed her in half is still on the loose, but that's out of Frank Bender's hands now. All he can do is wait. For the next few weeks or months or even years, Bender will see her face—his creation—on flyers handed out on sidewalks, taped up in store windows and tucked under windshield wipers in supermarket parking lots. He will see it displayed in shopping malls and on the evening news. And he will pray for someone to recognize her. ■