

## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MISSING: Donyelle Johnson

Hi, crime jankies. I'm your host Ashley Flowers.

And I'm Britt.

And the story I have for you today is about control and the length some people will go to when they're starting to lose it.

This is the story of Don Yell Johnson.

A lot of the stories we tell start with someone beginning to worry about a loved one.

Whether it's a parent, a sibling, friend, there's always that moment when someone realizes something's off, that moment when people's lives change forever. And this one is the same when Mac and Juanita Johnson's 21-year-old daughter Don Yell doesn't come home from her college class one April day in 1989.

Now, if this had happened in a different place and time of life, maybe not coming home right after class wouldn't be that weird.

But here now it is because things haven't exactly been smooth sailing for Don Yell lately. Her parents had just recently found out that she had been seeing this much older man, a 41-year-old married guy named Cleveland Hill Jr.

I don't love that.

And they don't either, especially because the whole situation has been spiraling out of control.

Now, they'd only found out about it in the first place when Don Yell showed up with this like \$22,000 car that Cleveland had purchased for her.

And her parents were like, oh, hell no.

Like, nothing good comes from a married guy gifting expensive things to a girl half his age.

So they told Don Yell that she had to give the car back.

And the car wasn't even the only thing.

Apparently, Cleveland had also been in the habit of giving her cash when they were together.

And I'm not talking about like 20 bucks here or there.

I'm talking like 600 a pop and usually twice a week.

So whatever this dynamic was, all Mac and Juanita saw were red flags for miles.

And so when she doesn't come home, they assume right away that he did something.

Yeah, and not just because of these gifts.

So in the days leading up to her disappearance,

Cleveland had actually shown up at the Johnson's house uninvited, as far as I can tell.

And he had gotten super confrontational with her dad, Mac, like full on threatening him.

When Mac told Cleveland to leave his daughter alone, according to reporting in the Tampa Bay Times,

from Mary Claire Merlois and Caroline Petrocoen, Cleveland responded, quote,

Well, you better enjoy your daughter because this may be the last time you see her.

Oh, hell no.

I know.

And Don Yell herself was definitely starting to have her eyes opened little by little too.

Around this same time, she told her dad that she actually was afraid of Cleveland because he told her that he can make people disappear.

In reporting by William Yellerton and Janet Leiser for the Tampa Tribune,

Mac explained, quote, she was scared out of her wits.

She knew this man didn't want to let her outside of his web, end quote.

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And to Mac's credit, he did his best to diffuse the entire situation.

He'd even gone to a little convenience store that Cleveland owns named Handy Corner later that night and tried to like reason with this guy.

But that conversation didn't go much better than the confrontation at the Johnson's house.

Cleveland just told him that he was in love with Don Yell.

And Mac had no doubt when he left the store that night that Cleveland had zero intention of backing down.

So between Cleveland saying he can make people disappear and then telling her dad this might be the last time you see her.

I mean, I can imagine those words are just playing over and over in Mac's head as he is sitting and waiting,

just staring at the door hoping his daughter comes home.

Well, and this is, I mean, 1989 you said, no cell phones.

I can't comprehend being a parent in the pre cell phone era.

Well, I mean, it's like pick your poison, right?

Like I want all the tech if something were to happen.

I want the surveillance footage.

I want GPS data.

But I mean, how often is tech the reason or the vehicle?

I should say for like bad things happening now that it really is a double edged sword.

Totally.

So they wait, but a whole day passes.

April 4 turns into the fifth.

And by the sixth, they're done waiting around.

They contact the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office to report Don Yell missing.

Have they been tracking Cleveland down in the meantime?

I mean, clearly that's where they think she is.

To be honest, I don't know.

But what I do know is that that same day they receive a strange letter.

Now, while I couldn't find what it said verbatim, according to that same reporting in the Tampa Tribune from Janet and William,

the writer claims to be Don Yell.

And the gist of this letter is that she has gotten involved with drugs

and she's moving to Orlando to stay with friends and to quote straighten out her life.

And how far away is Orlando?

Well, so they live in Largo, Florida.

So we're talking like a solid two, two and a half hour drive from there to Orlando.

Okay.

So away, but not super far.

But is any of that true?

And what about her car?

Is it even missing?

Yes, to the car.

Okay.

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Because remember, she was on her way to class at her junior college that day.

So it hasn't come back with her, basically.

But as far as whether any of this is true or even believable, I don't know.

Okay.

Why would she tell her parents all this in a letter?

Well, I think that's a great question.

Like, is this normal for her?

Do they automatically know it's like not real?

Whatever.

I don't know.

But the problem is I couldn't find anything about what Danielle's parents think of the letter.

To your point, like, does she even have friends in Orlando?

Is it possible that she has gotten into drugs?

I have no idea.

And just as a fair warning, there are actually going to be a lot of unanswered questions here.

Cool, cool, cool.

So I appreciate the warning, but you know, I'm going to ask the questions anyway.

So it's your job.

But first off, it sounds like she lives with her parents, right?

Yeah.

As far as I can tell, she does.

So what's her room like?

I mean, is anything missing or personal items, clothes?

I mean, other than like her school supplies, is there anything obviously not there?

No.

To your point, other than like the stuff she would have taken to school on a normal day, as far as I can tell, nothing else is missing.

Okay.

And this note, was it even Danielle who wrote it?

I mean, like, was it in her handwriting?

Was it typed out?

Was it disguised?

Like, what's going on with it?

So this is actually something I do know.

It is a handwritten note.

Okay.

And from everything I've been able to pull together, it seems like it is in Danielle's handwriting, which is why I think it must have probably thrown her parents off of it.

Again, they've never said what they thought exactly, but I mean, if I got a letter handwritten in my daughter's handwriting, it would throw me for a bit of a loop.

And I think this note throws investigators off too, because aside from taking the report that she's missing, they don't really seem to actually try and track her down.

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Can they not just go to the return address on the letter?

So this is one of the things I don't know about the letter.

I don't know if there was a return address.

Obviously, I'd be looking for a postmark from Orlando, right?

Or did someone just drop it off?

Or, you know, maybe if they're thinking it's her, she could have dropped it off on her way out of town.

But the thing is too, I don't even know if it was like in the mailbox when they got it.

Again, a lot of holes there.

But suffice to say, police aren't really taking Mack and Juanita's concerns to heart the way that they wish they were.

Which, let's be honest, is probably kind of why they didn't report Danielle missing sooner.

I mean, she's an adult, that fear of not being believed or taken seriously.

Right.

Now, from what I can tell, it's not until days or even weeks later that investigators start really giving the attention to the case that Danielle and her family deserve.

And this seems to start when they learn that a key piece of evidence in Danielle's case had been there in Pinellas County all along.

It turns out, Danielle's car was found abandoned the same day she went missing.

It was in a parking lot of a local fast food joint.

And I repeat, a local one, as in not one in Orlando, which obviously makes the story about her heading there, which was sketchy from the jump, sound a whole lot sketchier.

Okay, so it's Danielle's car, but is it the car, the car that Cleveland bought for her?

Another question I actually couldn't find the answer to, because I don't know if she actually gave it back like her parents wanted her to or not.

But actually, at the end of the day, I don't know if that part matters.

What matters is that it was the car that she was last seen in.

And it matters that it had been overlooked.

Now, what investigators are able to piece together is that basically someone called a tow service on the same day Danielle went missing.

So the car had been there on that day.

And they asked them to tow the car and repair it saying that it was disabled.

How did investigators miss this?

Well, you know, they didn't miss it because it didn't get reported to them.

Like this call only went to a tow service, not authorities.

Oh.

Though I can't help but wonder like if they had seriously started looking for Danielle, maybe they could have stumbled across this information sooner.

Right.

But from what I can tell from the research, when they do start looking for her, this information pretty much just like falls in their lap.

And the impression I get is that investigators just get this belated tip.

I think from the tow company, but full disclosure, I'm like, I'm guessing on that, that it comes from the tow company.

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And the car was, what they say, disabled, like broken down?

Sort of.

Sort of.

What was wrong with it?

I think that they said that the battery connection had just like loosened somehow.

So, I mean, it was a really easy fix.

And where is the car now?

I don't know.

And there's so many gaps in the reporting on this case.

So, the thing is, you would think they have to, but I don't know that investigators ever got their hands on the car.

I know that they at least try to find the person who called the tow company and had the car towed, right?

Because like it's someone who knew that the car wasn't working or like tried to make the car work, right?

And I'm just like someone like, hey, this has been sitting here for a long time.

Right.

And it couldn't have been sitting there for a long time because it's there the day she goes missing.

Now, what they find out is that the caller said his name was Johnny Bailey.

But according to reporting by Veronica Beltran and Sarah Hollenbeck for ABC Action News, they're never able to track Johnny Bailey down.

No one's ever heard of this guy.

And what I can't help but wonder, and I'm pretty sure investigators are wondering this too, is if this Johnny Bailey guy is even real, or could he actually be Cleveland using a fake name?

I don't get it, though.

Why would he want her car to be found?

Well, if this theory is right, I mean, I'm thinking that he wanted the exact opposite.

He knew that if the car just sat in that parking lot, eventually someone would report it to authorities.

So I think he's wanting it.

Again, if this is him, I think he's wanting to get it out of there before that happened.

He called it in before it could be found.

Yes.

And I mean, if that's what happened, it seems to have worked.

Just played out for a minute.

Say her car was there, she went somewhere with Cleveland or met Cleveland.

He goes to move her car so no one sees it.

He can't get it started, calls the tow company, and then goes later and picks it up maybe after its fixed potential.

And it's a completely normal interaction for the tow company, so they have no reason to call it into the police.

Yeah.

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And again, I have no information about after it went to the tow company, who picked it up, was it still there when the tow company possibly notified authorities?

I have no idea, but say there's a world where he did take it.

They would explain why can't find any report of investigators processing.

Why is still a big question mark, right?

Yeah.

Well, I mean, I'm glad we're kind of back to Cleveland because have they even tracked him down yet?

What's he saying about his girlfriend being missing?

Well, so they do end up tracking him down.

And when investigators talk to him, he says pretty much exactly what Danielle wrote in her letter to her parents.

Although at first, he denies even being romantically involved with her.

He's not using the word girlfriend.

He says that he just befriended her is all.

It's like he's reading the to catch a predator cue cards, right?

And what he tells investigators about his friend, Danielle, is that she had gotten herself way too deep in the cocaine trafficking world.

And he doesn't know for sure where she is, but he says, you know, she might be in Orlando.

Orlando, you say?

How convenient for him to suggest that it's better.

I know.

I know.

You see, Cleveland's got this business trip.

He says to Orlando coming up.

So he's like, you know what?

I would be happy when I'm there to just like ask around about her and let you guys know what I can find.

I'm sorry.

In the wise words of my five year old daughter, no, thank you, sir.

Yeah.

I feel the same way.

And honestly, I had to take it a step further.

I'd have been like, yeah, by the way, don't go too far yourself.

I have a feeling we're going to be needing to talk to you again.

But they actually don't talk to him again, at least from the reporting that's been put out.

And that is where the investigation pretty much stalls out for over a year.

Back up.

There is at least one other avenue we need to go down.

What about Cleveland's wife?

You said dude was married.

What's her story?

So yes, he's married to this woman named Betty Jean.

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And just a side note, I've also seen her name reported as Betty Joe, but based on everything I've read, I'm pretty confident it's Betty Jean.

But either way, I'm not sure investigators have much interaction with her at this point in their investigation and whatever.

And it could be part of the reason that this all stalls out, but they will later.

Now every day, Mac and Juanita hope that their daughter will come back home or at least call, but she never does.

Things stay stagnant until June of 1990.

That's when a confidential informant contacts investigators and says that he knows of a guy who might be able to help them with Danielle's case.

That guy is a man named Joseph Crawford, who is currently incarcerated, although I don't know for what.

But Joseph used to be an employee of Cleveland's.

At that convenience store, what was it called, handy corners?

Yeah.

Not there.

No.

So Cleveland also had this like pretty successful business doing excavations and asphalt paving in Pinellas County for years.

Oh, no.

Yeah.

So I think this guy, Joseph worked for him doing that.

So what this informant says, according to that reporting I mentioned earlier from the Tampa Tribune, is that Joseph will be able to tell them, quote, where the bodies are buried.

I'm sorry.

What?

Did you say bodies?

Like plural bodies, because rumor has it that Danielle isn't the first woman involved with Cleveland to go missing.

Or for that matter, she's not even the second.

According to whispers around town, there were two women before her.

Well, not to make my dad a suspect, but he was also in excavating and paving in the 80s and 90s.

I know that business.

That business is literally digging holes in the ground and then like potentially paving over them.

Right.

Not a good look.

And when you've got three women now connected to you who are missing, it makes them sketchier.

Yeah.

How are we just now talking about this?

Yeah.

This is the problem with this story, right?

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I don't have any answers.

I have like a lot of speculation because I don't know if police talk to other people in his life before this.

I don't know if this was town gossip.

The town gossip ever make it to police.

I think about the Tara Grinstead case, right?

Once they figured out who did that in this case that had been cold for like decades.

Everybody started falling.

Yeah.

And everyone's like, oh yeah, I heard that.

I heard that.

I assume police now.

I assume.

So it could have been one of those scenarios.

And this could be very well the first time police are hearing about this.

But to that point, you would think, because like, again, if I'm comparing it to the Tara Grinstead case, those people weren't really on police's radar.

Cleveland was very much on their radar.

Yeah.

He's the only person on their radar.

Yeah.

So you would have hoped that if they would have done like a thorough deep dive into him, question him thoroughly, looked into him thoroughly.

Hooked around a little.

Yeah.

Like two other missing women should have popped up.

But well, and I feel like this isn't stuff that you really have to hunt for it to find this about him.

I agree.

But it's, you know, it's not a Google search in 1989 when she goes missing or even 1990.

But here we are now a year later when they're getting this tip from the informant.

Okay.

So who are these two other women?

Well, I don't even know if they know at this point when they are like getting this tip.

All they know is that they need to go find this Joseph guy and see what's up.

But problem is when they go interview him in prison, dude is obviously terrified.

He tells them that Cleveland can and will get to basically anyone, anywhere.

And he's worried that if he talks, something is going to happen not to him, but to his kids.

Oh, so people were definitely afraid of talking before.

Yeah.

Which maybe is another reason that none of this came up sooner.

Maybe they did actually look into him, but nobody was willing to say anything because they're scared of this guy.

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Now they push a little bit on Joseph because this is the best lead they've had and they get him to talk a little bit.  
And all he's willing to say is that he saw Cleveland digging this giant hole before sunrise one morning.  
One morning when exactly?  
That's a problem.  
He won't say.  
And he also won't say where this hole was dug.  
But needless to say that detail about him digging this hole before the sun came up carries this kind of sinister implication both for Joseph and for investigators.  
But beyond that, that like super vague, he's digging a hole somewhere, Joseph won't tell them anything else.  
Not even about these other women that he's rumored to have buried?  
No, dude is scared.  
So again, maybe this is why these names have never come up before.  
Okay, but we have this information now.  
Let's go digging.  
Yeah, I would.  
The crime junkies would, but that's not what really happens here because it is not much to work with.  
I don't know what avenues they tried exploring.  
Maybe everyone was afraid.  
But even with this tip, the case kind of goes cold after this interview.  
Not for me.  
Where has this guy lived?  
Who's gone missing around there?  
I mean, I've got a shovel.  
My dad has the equipment.  
Let's go.  
You just start like a whole separate business where you just like go do recovery efforts with your dad's excavating equipment.  
I would be like, I'm very interested in starting this.  
I would be fully on board.  
Don't tempt me.  
Shrock excavating has whole new meaning now.  
Truly.  
But again, that's not what happens.  
They're not the crime junkies that we are.  
They also have like minimal resources.  
Also we can't actually do this.  
Though even though they don't go looking for the people or the bodies or whatever, that's not to say that Cleveland disappears from their minds because dude isn't even keeping a low profile.  
It turns out that potential disappearing girlfriends isn't the only shady thing that

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he might be involved with.

Because in September of that same year, local investigators working in conjunction with the FBI actually arrest him on drug trafficking charges.

And this is just a smidge off topic, but Britt, tell me if you've ever heard this one before.

So they get him on a controlled buy, which is whatever.

That's standard tactic.

But instead of taking, you know, money for the drugs that he was to traffic, the Tampa Bay Times reported in 1992 that Cleveland wanted to be paid in cases of bootleg Coca-Cola.

I wish you guys could see my face.

Bootleg Coca-Cola.

My first thought is, yeah, is he my 15 year old son?

Like getting paid in pop?

Also, what the fuck is bootleg Coca-Cola?

It's literally just Coca-Cola that you didn't pay for.

Like it's been stolen or illegally obtained.

Okay.

And it actually does make a little more sense when you have like all the context.

Context is so key.

I'm just imagining this in like crates in his garage and he's just like cracking one open when he's there.

Sipping a cold one.

That's not what's going down.

Got it.

So I guess one of Cleveland's drug associates runs a vending machine company or something.

So they plan to sell the Coca-Cola for profit.

Which is like laundering on a whole nother level.

Yeah.

I don't know the details, but I think you're onto something because when you say selling it for profit, is it just to his buddy's vending machine company?

Which again, it would all be profit, but like you could also again make money through just drugs.

But this way, if you have Coca-Cola and you sell it in the vending machine and get coins, it's like covering it up.

You're making the money clean.

Yeah.

So because of this, in October of 1992, Cleveland is sentenced to 19 years on a federal drug trafficking conviction.

You know, I gotta be honest, it seems super coincidental that Cleveland was telling people that Don Yell was into drug trafficking, then he gets busted for drug trafficking.

I actually thought the same thing.

I don't know.

I'm not sure what it's indicative of.

You know what I mean?

Like it's weird.

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It's weird, but what does it mean?

Nothing?

Something?

Who knows?

If he's involved, it might just be the world that he knows.

If he had something to do with that letter, but I go back to it was written in her handwriting.

Right.

But did she know what he was involved?

I don't know any of it.

I don't know any of the answers.

But anyway, once the feds have Cleveland safely put away on those drug trafficking charges, an FBI agent approaches the homicide investigators working on Don Yell's case and tells them about a tip that they had gotten from an informant while they were working this drug investigation. Now it's not the same informant as the one before, I don't think, but this one told the FBI agent that sometime between December of 1988, hashtag her birthday, and January of 1989, so this is just a few months before Don Yell went missing.

This informant heard Cleveland tell someone something very damning.

He told this person to quote, get rid of the bitch just like before.

Okay, no, this is the second mention of there being other women he stated that have disappeared.

And it won't be the last, because it's not too long after receiving this tip that investigators with PCSO get a call from the Clearwater Police Department.

And just so you can picture it, Largo and Clearwater are both in Pinellas County and

I don't 100% understand like the jurisdictional lines between the two agencies.

Basically Clearwater tells them that they've got this missing persons case from 1974 that involves everyone's favorite sketchy Coca-Cola drug trafficker, Cleveland.

This missing person is Margaret Dash, and she had gone missing all the way back in 1974, back when she tried to end the affair that she was having with a young preacher in their church in Largo.

A preacher?

Amen, sister.

So this guy is a convenience store owner, a land excavator, an asphalt paver, a drug trafficker, a Coca-Cola connoisseur or smuggler, again, still kind of confused about the whole pot ploy thing, but now a preacher?

A true Renaissance man, this one.

Basically what they tell the department is that Cleveland and Margaret had this affair back in like 1973 to like 1974, and at some point, Margaret's husband Leon had become aware of the affair.

But Margaret told Leon that she actually wanted to end it, but she was scared to because when she tried to break things off with Cleveland, he had threatened to kill her.

So cut to one summer day in June of 1974, 38-year-old Margaret leaves her house to run to the grocery

store, but then she just never made it home.

Now immediately, Leon knew in his gut that something was wrong, so he spent that whole night driving around looking for any sign of her or the old mobile that she was driving.

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When he didn't find her or her car by the next day, he reported her missing to the Clear Water Police Department.

But Clear Water PD was, shall we say, less than enthused about investigating Margaret's disappearance?

I mean, they did bring Leon into the station the following week to take a polygraph, so they're doing something, but you know, he passed.

And then within about two weeks of Margaret's disappearance, Clear Water PD washed their hands of the whole thing.

They like literally closed their investigation.

Closed after two weeks?

Mm-hmm.

And I don't even think that changed when the old mobile Margaret was driving that day was found abandoned in a parking lot in St. Petersburg about a month later.

Just like Danielle's.

Yep.

Now there's no indication Clear Water PD ever picked that investigation back up.

Not until 1992, when Leon, by now a respected member of the Clear Water Neighborhood Watch Program, approached the Clear Water Chief of Police.

And he tells the chief that he had been tipped off about possible burial sites of Cleveland's two vacant lots in the Baskin neighborhood of Largo.

Can we make Leon the chief of police since he's been able to gather a huge investigative lead that two separate police agencies failed to uncover?

I mean, at least get him paid to do their job.

He would have my vote for sure, right?

Like this was closed.

Nobody was even like looking at this.

But obviously he never forgot about Margaret.

And I don't know if this is what led to the tip in 1992 or what happened after or whatever, but I do know that Leon had hired private investigators to look at his wife's disappearance at some point over the years.

But Janet and William reported in the Tampa Tribune that they'd even tailed Cleveland for a whole month at one point.

Again, basically doing the work police should have been doing this whole time.

Pretty much.

Yes.

How did Margaret even get involved with Cleveland in the first place?

Well, church.

What Clear Water PD explains to PCSO investigators is that they'd met through church in 1973, and according to that same reporting in the Tampa Tribune, Cleveland, quote, found religion during a prison furlough and became a preacher.

So what was he in for before the furlough?

I'm going to take you on a little bit of a rabbit hole here, but I should explain it really fast because I do think it provides a little bit of relevant context.

So in 1968, Cleveland had been convicted on a couple of aggravated assault charges.

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He only got like a five-year probation sentence, but he was sent to prison when he violated probation.

And you might notice a pattern here because his 68 conviction arose out of a disturbing incident that occurred just a few days after his wife, Betty Jean, filed for divorce.

Hmm.

It's almost like this guy doesn't cope well with women trying to leave him.

You think?

He forced both Betty Jean and her mom, Josephine, into Josephine's bathroom at gunpoint. At first, he said that he was going to go lock Josephine in the bathroom and then kidnap Betty Jean.

But then he changed his mind about that plan real fast and decided that he'd better not leave any witnesses.

So he shot Josephine four times, including once in the head and then turned the gun on Betty Jean.

Now miraculously, thankfully, somehow both women survived this attack, but the whole ordeal seems to have spawned a belief in Cleveland.

Oh, he saw the light that the autonomy of women is sacred and must be treated with honor and respect.

Fingers crossed.

Girl, no, that is not what he learned.

More like when you decide to get rid of someone, make sure you finish the job.

So he went to prison and a judge granted Betty Jean's divorce in 1968.

And at this time, she made some harrowing abuse allegations in those divorce proceedings, allegations of Cleveland beating her regularly, allegations of Cleveland forbidding her from leaving the house and then daring her to try.

But I also want to flag that Betty Jean was around 18 years old when they got divorced.

So if you can do the math on how old she was when they got married in 1965 and they're divorced in 68, she was a child, exactly.

Now Cleveland wasn't much older, maybe 17 or 18 when they got married, but still old enough to be in a position of power over her, which yeah, I think partly played into the next thing that happened.

When Cleveland was paroled in 1971, he and Betty Jean got remarried, which is heartbreaking, but unfortunately not completely unheard of.

I mean, how many stories have we told about victims of domestic violence going back to their abusers because of the amount of control that their abusers have over them?

According to Women Against Crime, the psychology of survivorship is really complicated.

And the National Domestic Violence Hotline reports that survivors of abuse return to their abusive partners on average seven times before they're able to leave for good.

Add in the fact that Betty Jean was literally a child when they got married, and I mean, it's no wonder that this happened.

Right, we know it's hard enough for adults to get out of domestic violence situations, right?

But being a teenager, I mean, she's just a kid in that situation.

It's not like he bettered himself in prison, like got out and then they mended their relationship

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and lived happily ever after.

I mean, they remarried within like two weeks of his release, and you know, I wasn't sure if I was going to like fully get into this today, but I'm going to hop on my soapbox for a sec because this isn't just like an outdated issue from like the days of yore.

When I saw that Betty Jean was only around 15 when she married Cleveland, I decided to do a little digging because surely there aren't a bunch of 15 year olds getting married today, but I was shook by what I found.

According to a nonprofit called Unchained at Last, child marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18, wasn't fully banned in a single U.S. state as of 2017.

What?

Not a single one.

And while that started to change in 2018 largely because of Unchained at Last advocacy work, today, in the year of our lord 2023, some form of child marriage remains legal.

Do you even want to guess, like the number of states?

If there's any, it's too many, but I'm afraid you're going to give me a very high number.

It's 41.

What?

Including Indiana.

No.

Yes.

Well, I think we have a new cause.

Certainly, and not to put too fine a point on this, but think about the practical implications of that.

In the vast majority of those states, a marriage certificate negates any otherwise applicable statutory rape laws.

So what would be considered a criminal offense against a minor in any other context?

What would land you on the sex offender registry in any other context suddenly becomes legal because that minor, that victim is legally bound to their abuser.

I mean, my eyes are open.

My mind is blown.

My jaw is on the ground.

I want to throw up.

I'm horrified.

How didn't I know any of this?

How did I miss this?

How did I not know any of this?

How does everyone not know of this?

I mean, but you know, this is how you find stuff out though, right?

You got to do more than listen.

And I hope that's what we're teaching you all the time here on Crime Junkie.

Ask the questions.

How could this happen?

Why is this happening?

Who allows it to happen and what can be done?

## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MISSING: Donyelle Johnson

We made a donation to Unchained at Last.

We're going to link out to their page so you guys can learn more about what's going on in your own state and what resources are available.

We'll also include information about the National Domestic Violence Hotline in our show notes as well.

But if I get off my soapbox and go back to our story, when Clearwater PD passes this tip from Leon along to PCSO investigators, they can't help but notice the parallels between Margaret's disappearance and then this other missing person's case of a 43-year-old woman named Rita Hires in 1982.

And let me guess, Rita was having an affair with Cleveland.

Well, she had had one previously, although as far as her husband Howard knew, she had ended it when they got married.

But fast forward about three months, this is now a few days after Christmas, Howard was out of town and Rita had told her daughter that she was going to go out and grab laundry detergent, but then she just never came home.

And then the next day, a letter appeared in their mailbox and it basically told Howard that she was going to leave him for Cleveland, that he should take care of their kids, that she was gone and he shouldn't look for her.

Obviously, this letter is like surprising, shocking even, but not totally outside the realm of possibility.

And so Howard actually went and approached Cleveland, because the thing is, they had been good friends according to that same article from Tampa Tribune.

But when he did, right away, things were off.

Cleveland said that he didn't know where Rita was, just that he knew she'd run off with some quote-unquote white guy.

And I think Howard is kind of like over the bullshit by that point, and he's like, okay, man, whatever you say, just tell her to call the kids and let them know she's okay.

But she never calls.

So Howard eventually files for divorce, accusing Rita of adultery, and Rita wasn't there to contest it.

I mean, Howard had a freaking letter from her straight up telling him she was leaving him for another dude, so the divorce is granted.

And then her car is found abandoned in a Clearwater parking lot about three months later.

And when that happens, no one seems to bat an eye.

So she wasn't even reported missing?

Of course they didn't connect that one.

There was really nothing to connect.

Yeah, to your point, I'm not sure if she ever was reported missing.

It sounds like no, but I don't have that 100% confirmed.

But they had to have known about her, right?

Like for her to be on their radar.

So maybe at some point there was, from her ex-husband Howard, from her kids, or whatever. Because there's something there that allows investigators to start connecting the dots by 1992 when Leon comes forward.

## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MISSING: Donyelle Johnson

Okay, so timeline-wise we're back in '92.

Yeah, we've come full circle.

And once all these different stories get connected, there is this glimmer of hope that all three women might be one step closer to justice.

Because on April 12th of 1993, investigators from both Clearwater PD and PCSO descend on one of the vacant lots and search for signs of disturbed soil, prepared to excavate any areas that appear to have been dug in before.

The first day, they dig up to 11 feet deep in one small spot.

And then they come back on April 13th, this time excavating a much larger area.

It's like 25 feet by 60 feet.

And then they're back again on the 14th.

But after three full days of tearing apart this land under the Florida sun, all they found is trash.

And by the time the search ends on April 14th, they are no closer to finding Margaret, Rita, or Danielle.

When Cleveland is released from a federal prison in Atlanta 15 years later, in 2008, the women's disappearances remain as much of a mystery as they were that April in 1993, when they were digging with no success.

Cleveland moves to Virginia after his release, and he never returns to Florida.

And when yet another decade later, investigators find out that Cleveland is in hospice care, dying from stage four prostate cancer, they know that this is their last chance to get answers straight from him.

So in January of 2018, they head to Virginia and they pull out all the stops.

At first, they appeal to his mortality, asking him if he's prepared to die with the women's disappearances on his conscience.

But Cleveland doesn't crack.

So then they get his son Tony on the phone.

They put him on speaker.

And according to that reporting in the Tampa Bay Times by Mary Claire Malloy and Caroline Petrokoan, Tony confronts his father directly, asking him, quote, do you know what happened to those women pops?

Though Cleveland again denies any knowledge, investigators there in the room with him can see tears welling up in his eyes.

But still, Cleveland goes to his grave later that year without ever revealing any of the women's fates.

Four years later in 2022, there's one more brief moment of possibility when investigators get a tip about the site of a Habitat for Humanity construction project.

The tip says basically that the property used to belong to Cleveland, that it might have been the burial site of at least one of the women.

So again, investigators spend days excavating and digging and drilling into a giant slab of concrete.

And once again, their efforts are fruitless.

When Dana Hires, Rita's daughter is interviewed by 10 Tampa Bay News as the excavation comes to a close, there's no denying the devastating emotional roller coaster that she and her

## [Transcript] Crime Junkie / MISSING: Donyelle Johnson

family, who all of the women's families really have been on for decades, a roller coaster that they never asked to get on, one that no family ever asked to get on.

Dana tells Tampa Bay News, quote, I'm done.

You know, it's taken so much from me.

It's draining me draining the family.

So I'm just, I'm done.

I can't go any further.

I can't.

I tried.

You know that a lot has haunted us for so many years.

It has haunted us.

So now I could peacefully ride by there and I don't have to worry about it anymore because I know she's not there.

She's not there.

So wherever she is, you know, I just pray she's at peace.

May she rest in peace because now I need peace, end quote.

I know we started this episode saying this was Danielle Johnson's story, but it's more than her story.

It's also the story of Margaret Dash and Rita Hires and all of their families.

And for all of them, this is where the case is left standing today, crime junkies, with three families who continue to this day to suffer in the purgatory of not knowing where their loved ones are, where they rest.

There are at least two agencies on these cases.

So in the show notes, you'll see exactly who to contact if you know anything about the cases we've talked about today.

But also, maybe there are cases police don't even know about yet.

So even if you have more information just on Cleveland himself and can help fill in some of the pieces where he was, what he had access to, stories he may have told or any other women in his life who you haven't seen, please reach out to one of the agencies listed.

And if you are a victim of domestic violence, know that there is help out there.

You can contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-7233 or text START to 88788.

You can find all the source material for this episode on our website, [crimejunkiepodcast.com](http://crimejunkiepodcast.com).

And be sure to follow us on Instagram at Crime Drinky Podcast.

We'll be back next week with a brand new episode.

Crimejunkie is an audio chuck production.

So what do you think Chuck?

Do you approve?