

# The Pulitzer Prizes



honoring  
excellence  
in journalism  
and the arts  
since 1917

1998 — Feature Writing

St. Petersburg Times

## Angels and Demons

### Sunset - Chapter 1

By: Thomas French

# Angels & Demons

## Sunset

One year had gone by since the murders, and then another, and now the investigators were deep into a third. They were working day and night, working weekends, putting off vacations, losing weight, gaining weight, growing pale and pasty and haggard, waking at 3 a.m. with a jolt and scratching notes on pads beside their beds. Their sergeant did not know if they would ever find the answer. As far as he was concerned, the case was not even in their hands.

Ultimately, he believed, it was up to God whether they made an arrest.

A born-again Christian, the sergeant carried a Bible in his briefcase. He had no doubt that both heaven and hell were real. He saw good and evil not as theoretical or philosophical concepts, but as absolute realities walking upright through the world. He believed in the forces of light and darkness. He believed in demonic possession. He took it as a matter of fact that Satan and his cohorts currently reigned over the Earth.

"I believe there are demons all around us," he would say, "just as I believe there are angels all around us."

And when he looked at the evidence from the case before them now, studied the photos of the bodies and the ropes and the concrete blocks, the sergeant had no doubt that he and the other investigators were pursuing someone driven by Satanic forces.

Of course demons were real. They were hunting one now.

\* \* \* \* \*

They were on their way to the Magic Kingdom.

The highways were filled with them. Couples in subcompacts, debating the wisdom of stopping at Stuckey's for a pecan log. Tour groups in tour buses,



Joan Rogers



Michelle Rogers



fleeing their companions at gin rummy and keeping an eye on their driver in case he nodded off. Myriad configurations of moms and dads and stepmoms and stepdads and napping toddlers and whining third-graders and sprawling teenagers in full sulk and mothers-in-law with pursed lips and embittered outlooks, all struggling for peaceful coexistence inside the air-conditioned confines of their minivans.



Christe Rogers

They were pilgrims, embarked on the same passage so many millions had made before. From every corner of the country they came, descending through the lengths of Alabama and Georgia until at last they reached the threshold of their destination.

Even then, they were not merely crossing state lines. They were slipping over to the other side, entering the isle of eternal youth, dominion of the sun, temple of the mouse who devoured the world, paradise of glistening beaches and murmuring waves and hallucinatory sunsets and oranges dripping with ambrosia and alligators smiling jagged smiles and snowy-haired seniors who play shuffleboard as they wait cheerfully for their collect call from God and intrepid astronauts who climb aboard gleaming spaceships, launched with a roar into a heavenly blue sky.

The '86 Oldsmobile Calais, pointed south on Interstate 75, was the color of that sky.

Inside the car, Jo Rogers and her daughters were making their escape. They were leaving the farm, leaving the sheriff's deputies and the counselors and the lawyers, searching for someplace warm and safe where they could hide and forget and find a way back to themselves.

They had one week.

"We'll be back," Jo had told her husband.



It's easy to picture her and the girls that first day. To see their two-door sedan climbing into the hills of southern Ohio, to hear the drone of the tires on the pavement, to sink into the quilted dark blue fabric of their bucket seats and gaze down the highway to the edge of the Earth, dropping off over the horizon.

Jo, tired as usual but glad to finally be off, was at the wheel, at least in the beginning; this much has been confirmed. Michelle, 17, the quiet one with the constellation of rings on her left hand, was probably up front as well, in the passenger seat. Christe, 14, the baby of the family, her father's favorite, the cheerleader, the one with the mane of mall hair and the trio of

friendship bracelets on her wrist, most likely would have been in the back.

They had a road atlas, and as they drove, they must have studied it closely, plotting their path straight through the heart of the country. They had a long way to go.

It was the afternoon of Friday, May 26, 1989. A few hours earlier, Jo and the girls had started out from their 300-acre dairy farm in Van Wert County, in the northwestern corner of Ohio. The night before, Jo had worked her usual midnight shift -- she drove a forklift and worked the assembly line at Peyton's Northern, a distribution center for health and beauty products on the other side of the Indiana state line -- and had come home around dawn to their double-wide mobile home and grabbed a few hours of sleep while Michelle and Christe finished packing. Finally, around 1 p.m., the three of them got into the Calais, and Jo backed it up to the milk house to say goodbye to her husband.

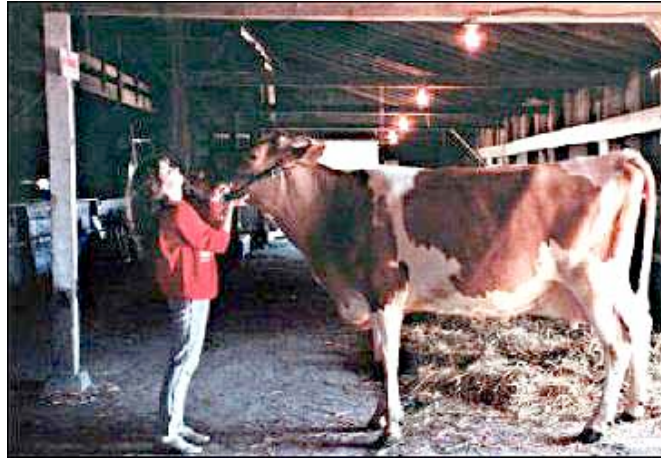
Hal Rogers was outside, unloading corn gluten feed, when Jo backed around. He stopped for a moment, and Jo leaned through the window and gave him a kiss.

"Have a good time," he said.

Hal had wanted to go with his wife and daughters. But the spring rains had been late that year, and there was still corn and wheat and soybeans that needed planting and 80 Holsteins waiting to be milked every day at 5:30 a.m. and again at 3 p.m., no exceptions. Somebody had to stay and keep it all going.

Jo and Michelle and Christe were determined to make the best of it, even without Hal. They had been buzzing about this trip for weeks, debating which theme parks to hit and which to avoid, logging sessions at a local tanning salon so they would have a good base of bronze to build on under the southern sun. They had good reason to be excited. This was the first family trip of their lives, the first time they had managed to free themselves from the daily rigors of the farm and get away together. Most years, the best they could hope for was a few days at the Van Wert County Fair.

\* \* \* \* \*



**COW KISS:** A guernsey nuzzles Michelle during a quiet moment at the Van Wert County Fair. She sometimes talked about staying on the farm and sometimes talked about getting away. *(Rogers family photo)*

"When you run a dairy farm," explains Colleen Etzler, Jo's sister-in-law, "you don't get a vacation."

Early on, when they were planning the trip, Jo and the girls had talked about visiting Gatlinburg or Gettysburg. But in the end they had decided to be more adventurous and make the thousand-mile journey to Florida.

The three of them wanted what every other tourist wants from the Sunshine State. They wanted to lie on the beach and shake Mickey's hand and throw away a few dollars on overpriced souvenirs. They wanted to let go, to be renewed, to lose themselves inside the myth.

So off they went. That afternoon, after saying goodbye to Hal, they turned left out of the driveway and drove into the village of Willshire, a mile or so away from the farm, where they stopped at the bank for some money. Then they were truly on their way.

Headed for the interstate, they turned down two-lane county roads that stretched as straight as a ruler for miles and miles. They drove past fields crowded with rows of young stalks -- the corn was only up to their ankles at that point -- past windmills and silos jutting into the Midwestern sky, past farms that had been owned by the same families for more than a century. They went past the Riverside Cemetery and its big, black wrought-iron gate and past the Tastee Twirl and past the grain elevator in the little town of Rockford, with its one and only stoplight, and through the even smaller towns of Mercer and Neptune until finally, almost 50 miles after they left the farm, they reached the broad ribbon of I-75.

From there, it was a straight shot all the way to Florida.

Despite the late start, they made good time that first day. Jo almost certainly did most of the driving - - Michelle, who had got her license just a few months before, was intimidated by highways -- and Jo was not known for her strict adherence to speed limits.

"I want to get there," Jo would tell her friends. Either way, by the time they stopped for the night, they'd made it clear through Kentucky and Tennessee and were just across the Georgia border.

The next day they rode I-75 all the way through Georgia and into Florida, then cut east on I-10 over to Jacksonville. They stayed there for the evening, then checked out of their motel the next morning and headed for the Jacksonville Zoo, apparently their first bona fide tourist destination.

There at the zoo, they gazed up into the face of a giraffe, saw monkeys hanging by their tails, watched lions napping in the sun. These facts and others would eventually be learned from rolls of film recovered with the family's belongings.

They had a camera, a Nikon One-Touch, and as they moved through these days -- days that, in retrospect, would become imbued with the intensity of a dream -- they took frame after frame, leaving behind a series of snapshots that investigators would eventually pore over, study, burn into memory.

After finishing at the zoo, they left Jacksonville and turned south again until they reached the attraction at Silver Springs, where they took one of the famed glass-bottom boat tours. A great deal of investigation would eventually be devoted to the question of how little experience the Rogers women had with boats and water. For the girls, at least, the ride at Silver Springs was one of the few times -- in Christie's case, perhaps the very first time -- they had ever set foot on a boat. Neither girl was a

confident swimmer, especially in water over their heads, and their mother could not swim at all. In fact, Jo was terrified of her face being covered by water or anything else.

"Just pull the covers over her head," says Hal, "and you got a hell of a fight."

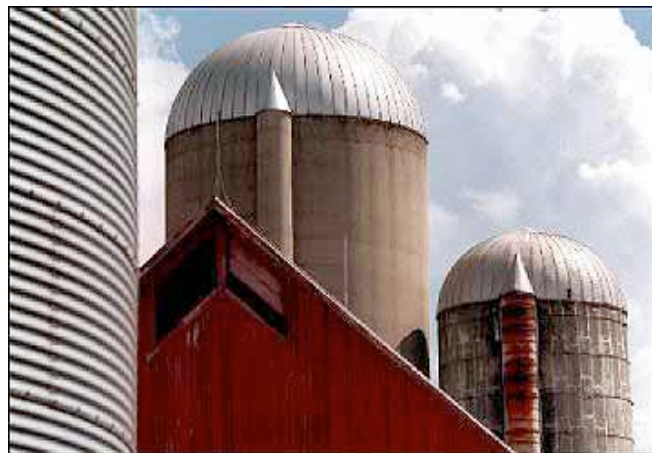
So what went through their minds that afternoon as they climbed into the glass-bottom boat? Were they nervous? Did one of them ask the guide if there were life jackets on board?

Or maybe they were calm. Maybe they surrendered to the hushed beauty of Silver Springs and to the realization that at long last they were truly on vacation. They were far away from everything and everyone who had hurt them. There was nothing in this place to be afraid of. Nothing for them to do at all, but sit in the boat and cast their eyes to the window at their feet and stare down through the clear, pale blue water to the thick carpet of grass, swaying hypnotically on the bottom.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **First, and always first, was that farm.**

Before you can understand anything about the Rogers family, start there. Start, if you can, by imagining what it would be like to get up on a black winter morning, hours before sunrise, when the wind is blowing and the thermometer is stuck somewhere south of zero and the Holsteins are waiting in the barn to be milked and fed and cleaned up after.



**SILOS AND SKY:** The pace was grueling, but the Rogers family made a decent living on the farm in northwest Ohio.

Picture crawling out from under the covers on a morning like that. Picture throwing something on, heading outside into the dark and the cold and trudging down the driveway, hands jammed in pockets, to put in another shift at the milking parlor. Located next to the barn, the milking parlor is not a parlor at all, but a concrete box of a room with one tiny window and a fluorescent light and a claustrophobic little rectangular pit cut into the center of the floor. For the next two or three hours, this pit will be your home. You will stand inside it so you can work the milking machines at eye-level with the udders. The cows will be above you, of course, clopping over from the barn to their stations on both sides of the pit, and while you work, hurrying from one end of the pit to the other, checking the flow of their milk into the milkers and dipping their teats in iodine and rubbing peppermint oil onto their skin, they will moo and complain and unceremoniously deposit manure onto the floor around you.

When you're finally done milking and cleaning the equipment and hosing out the pit and the floor above the pit, you walk outside into the first glow of dawn. By this point your arms and legs are aching, and cow smell has settled in your hair and on your skin, and the manure has splattered all over your boots and clothes. You want to hurry back up to the house and take a shower. But before you do, have a good long look at the landscape around you. Gaze out over the fields, acres of brown, brown and more brown, stretching in every direction like a giant, mud-soaked quilt, and at the scattered stands of black and naked trees, and up into the low-hanging bowl of gray that is the sky.

As you soak all this in, remind yourself that you'll have to go back into the pit, back with the cows and the smell and the manure, not just tomorrow morning but every morning and also every afternoon of every day of every year for as long as you can take it.

Now imagine what a week in Florida would look like from inside that kind of life.

Understand that, and you'll understand a little about Jo and Michelle and Christe.

"They were hard-working people, I'll tell you," says Ginny Etzler, Jo's mother. "They'd do what they had to do, and that was it."

It would be wrong to suggest that there were no rewards on the Rogers farm. Hal and Jo made a decent living and were proud of their self-sufficiency and of the care they showed the animals.

"You don't take no milk from 'em," Hal would say. "They give it to you, plain and simple."



**EARLY YEARS:** From left to right, Michelle, 3, and Christe, 6 months. Michelle in eighth grade and Christe in fifth. Christe celebrating her ninth birthday. Michelle, 4, wearing her Mickey Mouse ears and holding Easter candy.

[Chapter 2 >>](#)

© 1997, The St Petersburg Times

Index for: [Feature Writing 1998](#)