

Best Restaurants

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THINGS YOU
MUST TASTE
NOW!

BEST EGGS BENEDICT

BEST CHEAP LUNCH

BEST SUSHI

BEST SWEET TEA

BEST GOURMET BURGER

BEST ICE CREAM SUNDAE

BEST CHILE RELLENO

BEST WINE BISTRO

BEST FRIED GREEN TOMATOES

BEST VEGAN BAKERY

BEST CHICKEN SALAD

BEST BAKLAVA

BEST POWER BREAKFAST

BEST SOMMELIER

BEST PULLED PORK

BEST TURKEY MEATBALLS

BEST NEW RESTAURANT
Chef Julian Barsotti
of Nonna

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D A L

PLUS

THE
McKINNEY
MOTHER
MURDERED
BY HER EX

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RADIO
WARS:

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PERFECT
GIFT IDEAS
FROM TOP
DALLAS
SHOPS [P. 70]



MOMMA BEAR:
Denise Stephens
with her three daugh-
ters, who are now
being raised by their
grandmother.

Why Was This Woman Murdered?

Denise Stephens was beaten to death with a baseball bat by her ex-husband. The tragedy was that she saw it coming. But even after months of threats and harassment, the police couldn't protect her.

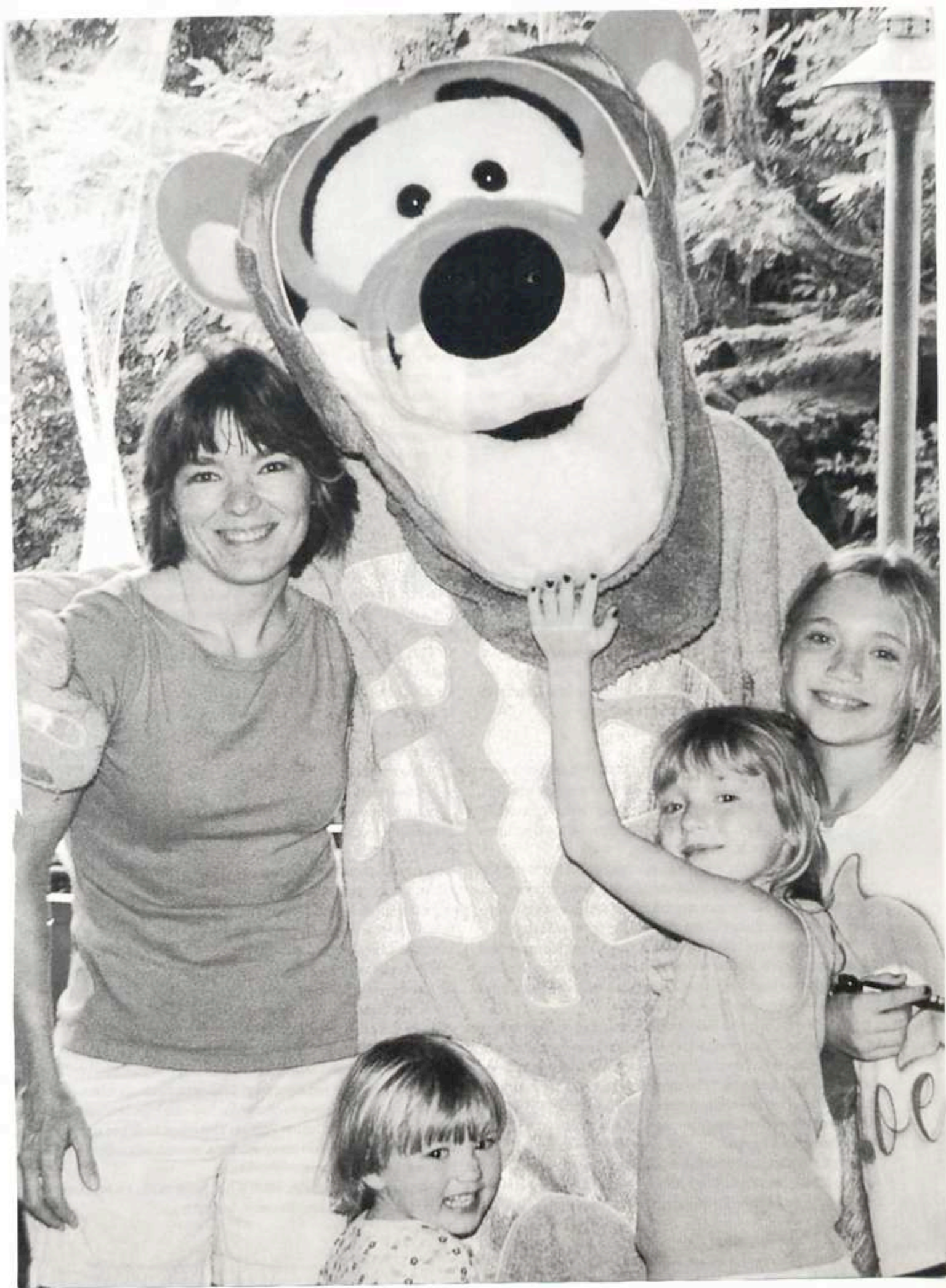
BY PAMELA GWYN KRIPKE

A **T THE TOP OF THE DRIVEWAY, THREE BICYCLES ARE THROWN OVER,** strewn on their sides like books on a slippery shelf. Pink, well-worn, they have the look of having been places. Of little girls testing independence. But at this house, the heap of wheels and handlebars is a wrenching image.

Inside, Betty Seymour makes her way to the door. The house is one of many just like it on this suburban block, at least from the exterior. Red brick, neat, mailboxes at the curb. You could be anywhere, really. This street has a happy name. Sunny Meadows.

Betty has been working hard this particular morning, taking care of two of her three granddaughters. The middle one is at a friend's house. The 10-year-old helps with the 3-year-old, she says. But, still, it is never easy.

She begins to talk about how she has found herself in McKinney, Texas, at 60, having moved from her Iowa farm just a year ago, widowed unexpectedly. With milkmaid skin and twinkly eyes, Betty is an image of fortitude and purpose. She came here for comfort,





but instead she was hurled into an unimaginable role.

"Daddy killed my mommy," the 3-year-old says plainly, her blonde bangs shifting side to side as she settles into Grammy's lap. Betty just hugs her. And the tears come.

SHE CRIES OFTEN AND APPEARS SPENT FROM the physical labor required of a single adult-in-charge. More than that, though, is the responsibility for making sure her orphaned granddaughters emerge, somehow, okay.

In the spring of 2007, Betty and her husband Fred were getting ready to sell their farm in Marshalltown. Fred, who was 66, had retired from his job as a machinist for a factory that makes control valves, the Fisher Control Plant. Betty was still the office manager for the Scott Manufacturing Company, a furnace and insulation business. But the plan was, they would eventually move to McKinney to lend a hand to Denise, their only daughter, who had separated from her husband in 2005.

It was March, and the girls were visiting their grandparents in Iowa during their spring break vacation. They brought them back to Texas, and when they returned to the Midwest on Monday, Fred didn't feel well. "The doctors said it was some kind of blood disease, but they weren't sure," Betty says. "He died within five weeks. We did an autopsy because I needed to know. This was my husband for 42 years. But, still, I have no answer."

Betty took a leave of absence from Scott Manufacturing and went to McKinney. She sold off some of her land and began looking to buy a new house for Denise, the children, and herself. "I



was still going to go," she says. "He would have been with me if he could."

She left her job and made the permanent move in July. "It was a big salary to do away with, and I wasn't ready to retire, but I was going to stick with the plan," Betty says. "Life changes in a matter of an instant."

IN RETROSPECT, BETTY ARRIVED AT A GOOD TIME.

Eight months earlier, Denise had filed for divorce. The agreement was signed in September 2007, just two months after Betty came south. Denise had been married for 11 years to a man named Brent Douglas Stephens, whom she met when she was 18 and in junior college. She had a part-time job at an Arby's restaurant and Brent, who was 20, worked there as well. After a year, Denise followed him to Iowa City—where he was enrolled at the University of Iowa—and worked two jobs to support them both, as a receptionist at a hair salon and a dispatcher at an answering service.

"I knew he was the kind of guy you warn your daughter to stay away from," Betty says. "I remember when Denise was having her first child, we drove 12 hours straight and got there while she was still in labor. We walked into the hospital room and he was sitting there, eating Chinese food. She was in pain and nauseated, and he was eating Chinese food. She had to have seen something in him, or something she thought she could fix. She was not a quitter."

She never had been. Denise Ann Seymour played basketball for Central Iowa Christian Academy. Point guard. Nothing could get by her, despite her small frame. Her dad would take a half-day off from the factory for a home game, a full day if the team traveled. She was on the volleyball squad, too, and was a cheerleader and played piano and organ, sometimes at weddings. She could pick up anything by ear, even taught her own students when she was in junior high. In high school, she had two jobs, one making ice cream cones at a Tastee Freeze. The other took her around town, delivering balloon bouquets for a woman who ran a little business from her house.

"She could do anything. With a big, huge smile on her face, she'd look at me and say, 'I'm on it, Mom.'"

BEST FRIENDS: Miriam Standish (on the right in top photo) became like a sister to Denise. The two were pregnant at the same time, and Miriam helped Denise document the violent harassment of her ex-husband, Brent Stephens (above).

When the divorce papers were filed, Denise did not report any threat of violence. But after the decree was finalized, the situation became volatile, testing Denise's usual ability to manage whatever came her way.

Beginning in December, Brent flooded Denise's cell phone for months with obscene text messages, taunting her, using profanity to describe her, and threatening her with things like snakes in her dresser drawer and an early demise, even. When Denise asked about a check that was owed to her, for instance, Brent replied, "You'll get your precious money. Keep your foul-smelling panties on. God, you're such a bitch." Denise reported the incidents to the McKinney Police Department, who photographed the messages. She began keeping a written log of aberrant and harassing incidents, documented with dates and times. A detective called Brent to warn him to stop. He admitted that he wanted to make Denise miserable. Then one of her back tires was slashed with a knife while her car sat out front in the driveway. Then another was sliced open. On January 21, Denise wrote:

"My mother called me while I was at the gym at 7:20 AM and reported the back door to the house had been kicked in. I went with the officer through the house. A short time later I noticed my bike tires had been cut, and I had cigarette ashes on my bed pillow. The back door was kicked in by a block, so no foot print could be lifted. The officer did not print the house because they could not show he came in. Since I reported the additional information later, it was called 'circumstantial.'"

The next day, Denise told Brent not to come to the office where she worked. He did, anyway. She wrote: "He then leaves a voice mail on my phone stating he would hate for the girls to lose their mother so I had better not do anything stupid and keep my f---ing head down. Then, he leaves another message stating 'Never mind.' I can go off and be happy. I'm over my bipolar swing now."

That day, Denise alerted the school not to release the children to Brent, fearful that he would hurt them. She installed a motion-activated camera on the neighbor's roof, angled to photograph her home. "I have a video of him coming to the house on January 21 at 11:00 at night and trying to get into my trunk," she wrote.

The camera later caught Brent crashing his own car into the rear end of Denise's, while it was parked just a few steps from her front door.

On January 24, her attorney, Brad Nace, had the decree of divorce suspended, which prevented Brent from having any contact with the children. Previously, he was entitled to supervised visits. Even so, he arrived at their doorstep in early February demanding that the girls leave with him. Denise called the McKinney Police Department and was told that she would have

"I cannot replace Denise," says her mother Betty, "yet I am the mom figure in the house."



to release her children, or be arrested.

Denise knew the order was in place and trusted her instinct, despite the uniformed officers on her porch. Nace says, "You are seeking protection from the very people who are seeking to arrest you. The courts are not open 24 hours a day, so there is not much they can do for you at 6:30 PM. So much for 'protect and serve.' The tables got turned, but she knew not to let the kids go."

On February 14, Protective Orders were filed in Collin County District Court. They prohibited Brent from communicating directly or through another person with Denise and the children in a threatening or harassing manner, engaging in conduct that would "harass, annoy, alarm, abuse, torment, or embarrass" Denise and the children, coming within 500 feet of her residence or place of business, removing the children from their mother, and, finally, committing family violence as it is defined in section

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rounds out the menu. 2911 Routh St. 214-871-9991. \$5-\$55. *Y Oak Lawn/Uptown*

Ruth's Chris Steakhouse. With the exception of the spicy, Cajun-flavored cocktail sauce, the food at this New Orleans-based chain with 100 locations has gone mainstream. 17840 Dallas Pkwy. 972-250-2244; 813 Main St., Fort Worth. 817-348-0080. \$5-\$55. *Y Far North Dallas, Fort Worth*

Silver Fox. Reliably busy and comfortably dark, this beef joint between TCU and the Cultural District pleases hungry families and business diners with its rib-eyes and seared scallops as much as it does girlfriends stopping in for martinis and gossip after a rigorous day of shopping. 1651 S. University Dr. 817-332-9060. Multiple locations. \$5-\$55. *Y Fort Worth, Oak Lawn/Uptown, Grapevine, Richardson, Frisco*

Steve Fields' Steak & Lobster Lounge. This is where the fine folks of Plano go for a nice night on the town. The bar is often filled with revelers enjoying live piano music over cocktails. In the dining room, tables are filled with famished families, cute couples, and off-the-clock businessmen feasting on steaks, lobster dishes, and a small selection of seafood. 5013 W. Park Blvd., Plano. 972-596-7100. \$\$\$ *Y Plano*

Texas de Brazil. The "wow factor" is alive and well at this traditional Brazilian churrascaria. That goes for the overwhelming selection of vegetarian delights—imported cheeses, steamed asparagus, hearts of palm, portobello mushrooms—that crowd the salad bar and the (almost) nonstop parade of gaucho-clad servers wielding 2-foot skewers of seasoned meats. 2727 Cedar Springs Rd. 214-720-1414. Multiple locations. \$\$\$ *Y Oak Lawn/Uptown, Addison, Fort Worth*

Texas Land & Cattle Co. It's nice to see that Texas Land & Cattle doesn't have a \$35 filet on the menu. Most prices top out at \$21.99, and that includes a salad or soup and one side. 3130 Lemon Ave. 214-526-4664. Multiple locations. \$\$ *Y Oak Lawn/Uptown, Northwest Dallas, Arlington, Bedford, Frisco, Garland, Plano, Richardson*

III Forks. Steaks are good, but the standout here is the salad with greens, chopped pecans, apples, and crumbled blue cheese. Dinner only. 17776 Dallas Pkwy. 972-267-1776. \$\$\$ *Y Far North Dallas*

Y.O. Ranch Steakhouse. Y.O. is allied with a ranch in Kerrville. Game is the deal here, and most of it—the tender, red elk topped with cherry-molasses glaze and buffalo filet—is magnificent. West End, 702 Ross Ave. @ Market St. 214-744-3287. \$5-\$55. *Y Downtown/Deep Ellum*

| THAI |

Bangkok City. This is a charming dining room with gracious service and bargain lunch specials. The corn patties and coconut chicken soup are superb starters, and the fried whole fish with ginger is perfection on a plate. 4301 Bryan St. 214-824-6200. \$-\$\$ *Y East Dallas*

Bangkok Inn. Every neighborhood deserves some tasty Thai takeout, and for Lakewood denizens, that means Bangkok Inn. Savor crisp and sweet corn patties, plump pork-and-shrimp-filled dumplings, spicy Penang curry, and "unbelievably delicious" pad Thai. (Their words, not ours,

but we concur.) 6033 Oram St. 214-821-8979. \$-\$\$ *Yvon East Dallas*

Chan Thai. It's not the best or most ambitious Thai food in the city, but what Chan Thai does, it does well. The menu is a comforting blend of curries, noodle dishes, and stir-fry delights. The décor is refreshingly contemporary rather than an Asian cliché. 312 W. Seventh St. 214-948-9956. \$\$ *Y Oak Cliff*

Chow Thai. Start with a Chow Thai sampler: an orgy of crunchy fried delights, including triangular crab cakes and vegetable tempura, plus satisfying skewers of chicken and spicy sweet beef satay. Stay for the crispy sea bass with Thai basil chile sauce. Finish with the sticky rice with mango. 5290 Belt Line Rd. @ Montfort Dr., Ste. 144. 972-960-2999. \$\$ *Y Addison*

D BEST • Chow Thai Pacific Rim. Sample fresh shrimp and mango summer rolls in the main dining room where tea-smoked sea bass and a spicy beef salad await. 3309 Dallas Pkwy., Ste. 401, Plano. 972-608-1883. \$5-\$55. *Y Plano*

Mango. Playful proportions and offbeat hues color Mango California-cool. Mango sea bass comes with a side of fried rice. Pad Thai is appropriately sweet and crunchy with peanuts. 4701 W. Park Blvd., Ste. 104, Plano. 972-599-0289; 4448 Lovers Ln. 214-265-9996. \$\$ *Y Plano, Park Cities*

Pad Thai. The setting is nothing fancy, but the lunch buffet wows, not only for its breadth and value but also for its quality. A dinner must-have: whole striped bass. 3311 W. Walnut Hill Ln., Irving. 972-252-1718. \$ *Yvon Irving/Las Colinas*

D BEST • Royal Thai. While other Asian restaurants are fusing and confusing palates with Oriental ingredients, Royal Thai remains dedicated to preparing straightforward Thai cuisine spiced with plenty of fresh herbs and peppers. If you order a dish "Thai style," you'd better be ready for it. 5500 Greenville Ave., Ste. 608. 214-691-3555. \$-\$\$ *Y Northeast Dallas*

D BEST • Samui Thai. The menu features traditional Thai, such as spicy beef and basil, lemon grass soup with scallops and mussels, and all things curry. But it's the imaginative entrées with Asian touches that command the attention of your taste buds. 906 W. McDermott Dr., Allen. 972-747-7452; 5700 Legacy Dr., Ste. A1, Plano. 972-398-3178. \$\$ *Y Allen, Plano*

Thai Chili. This shopping center spot—a chip off the block of Thai Chili in Irving—serves pristine food. Garlic chicken with rice and romaine lettuce is the top seller. Southlake Town Square, 215 Grand Ave., Southlake. 817-251-6674; 397 E. Las Colinas Blvd., Irving. 972-831-0797. \$-\$\$ *Y (Southlake location only) Southlake, Irving/Las Colinas*

Thai Garden. An easy spot to stop in with a bottle of wine, but the food runs high and low. There are definite Chinese undertones, with dishes such as sesame chicken alongside the curries and coconut soups you'd expect at a Thai place. The secret here is that they use fresh vegetables. 6090 Campbell Rd., No. 124. 972-248-8861. \$\$ *Yvon Far North Dallas*

Thai Noodle & Rice. Don't be fooled by the linoleum floor and Formica tables, because the food can stand up to any white-tablecloth Thai restaurant in town. 2634 N. Fitzhugh Ave. 214-827-5828. \$ *Yvon East Dallas*

MURDER

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71.004 of the Texas Family Code.

Still, Brent persisted. "He walked all over the order," Nace says, "showing up at school, at the kids' extracurricular activities, at street corners."

He sat one row behind Denise on the bleachers at a volleyball game, leaning forward and talking into her ear. "She left the game and waited in the parking lot with the two younger girls," Betty says. "He continued to sit right behind me, and I turned around and snapped his picture to prove he was there, but it did no good."

At other times while the order was in place, he'd linger in front of the house. "We couldn't let the girls go out and play," Betty says. "Our dog, Lucie, would bark at night and hide in the closet, cowering. I still remember, Denise told the police officer, 'What does he have to do? Kill me before you do anything?'"

For the police department to arrest Brent for violating the protective order, an officer would have to witness the actual offense. In other words, if Denise called 911 when Brent was three feet behind her on the bleachers, and if he didn't leave before the police arrived, then he could be picked up and charged.

"Just because someone can be arrested for certain things, these things have to be committed within our presence for an arrest," McKinney Police Lieutenant Scott Brewer says. "We feel that people need to contact the PD in a timely manner."

For the offenses committed in December and January, Brent was charged five months later with five counts of criminal mischief, harassment, and criminal trespass, for which he was fined \$1,500, required to perform 125 hours of community service, and ordered to pay \$1,795 in damages to Denise. He was placed on Adult Community Supervision, which permits offenders to live among law-abiding citizens, "support their families, and receive rehabilitation," according to the Collin County Community Supervision and Corrections Department. "This alternative to incarceration," the department's website says, "applies only to those who can be safely monitored ... ultimately helping to reduce crime." Judge Greg Willis of the Collin County Court at Law Number 6

issued these orders for Brent Stephens on May 2, 10 days before he murdered his ex-wife.

Clearly, Denise Stephens put all available measures in place to guard herself and her children from a dangerous and brazen man, short of packing up and escaping to Montana with a new identity. She was advised to have a handgun at the ready, but could not accept the consequences of that choice. "You have to ask yourself," Nace says, "Am I able to take somebody's life, if I am threatened?" It is easy to arm yourself; it's what comes after that is critical."

So, how does a community and a justice system reconcile that, despite doing all it says it can do, Daddy can still kill Mommy? We can recite the familiar argument that if somebody is determined enough, he cannot be stopped. If you hide in your basement, he will come through a tunnel. If you surround yourself with 300-pound bodyguards, he will make them stumble. Or strike when they are sleeping.

But this theory isn't good enough, particularly in a case that had a well-documented and lengthy progression of deviant and illegal activity. At some point in the chain, say Betty, Nace, and the others mourning this single mother's death, some effort could have cut off a link. "We need a thorough cleaning of that system," says Betty, who now has custody of the three girls. Their father, who is in prison serving a life sentence, has relinquished all parental rights. His parents can visit the children only if Betty agrees. "A protective order exists in name only," Betty says. "There are too many loopholes for these people. He was in a psychiatric hospital two or three times, and released. Probation? The police went to his house to tell him to 'stop it'? Why couldn't they just pick him up? Laws have to change, and judges have to be removed. Something has to make a difference for people crying out for help and not getting it."

Here, there was an existing psychiatric history and unarguable evidence of aggressive stalking. "An ankle bracelet could have monitored his whereabouts," says Nace, adding that police departments need to know how to better recognize serious threats of violence. "How much more difficult would it be for departments to get more training for their officers?"

Meantime, Betty and the girls go to grief counseling, at the same church where

she went when she was grieving over her husband Fred's death. "Denise saw I was depressed and not coming out of my bedroom much, so she insisted I go. She took such good care of everyone," she says, her voice cracking. "When I had to tell them what happened to their mother, I said, 'You know what I told you about Grandpa. Mommy's up with Grandpa. She couldn't live here anymore.'"

WHEN DENISE WAS IN GRADE school, her family took in foster kids, most of whom were abused. "They were beaten, burned with cigarettes," Betty remembers, "and always thought it was their fault. They'd try to integrate back into their homes, but their homes never improved."

Denise saw the kids come and go. When she was about 8, she asked her mom a question. "When do I have to leave?" she asked.

"She didn't understand," Betty says. "So we stopped taking the kids in."

Betty and Denise were as close as any mother and daughter could be. Like any parent, Betty dreamed huge dreams for Denise, who showed promise and pluck and uncommon generosity.

"If you happen to say, 'I like that cross-stitch pattern,' a week later it would be in your mailbox," Betty says.

After moving with Brent to Iowa City, Denise found a woman who would become an unusual friend and confidante. "I just met my sister," says Miriam Standish, now 40, who worked part-time at the answering service while attending college. For 20 years, the two friends had an enduring relationship, visiting yearly and talking every day on the phone. They were in each other's weddings and were even pregnant at the same time, Denise in Texas, Miriam in Chicago.

"It took me a long time to have my son, for various medical reasons, and Denise researched it all," Miriam says. "I'd call and say, 'These are the levels, here is the bloodwork,' and she knew exactly what I was talking about. So that she would understand what I was going through, she went and tapped into the knowledge. She just knew what everybody needed."

Denise left Iowa in 1995 to be married in Texas, where Brent grew up. As friends do, Miriam supported Denise's decision. "She

was excited about moving down there. She had a great outlook and rose to a challenge if there was one. And she did share with me that there were challenges, and a lot of issues in the marriage."

Brent tested positive for drugs and alcohol, lost job after job, and abused Denise verbally for years. He spent money excessively, racked up credit card debt and bank charges for overdrafts. They spoke with a marriage counselor and Brent saw a psychiatrist. Like Miriam, Betty and Fred stood by Denise in her efforts to craft a peaceful family life, "to make it work like you and Dad did," she remembers. They tolerated him because he was their grandchildren's father, and on better days, could even be personable and smart. "When we'd come down from Iowa, he made sure we were comfortable, then go out all night," Betty says. "He'd be decent to us, [but he was] just worthless."

Denise did not reveal the extent of her suffering until a few years before filing for divorce in 2005, and then, it seems, only to Miriam. "She hadn't loved him for a long time, yet she continued to try and make the marriage work," Miriam says. "Then, finally, she did feel that she was in something that even she could not manage."

In 2006, while separated, Brent slashed both of his wrists and spent five weeks in a mental hospital. He wrote two suicide letters, one to his parents, one to Denise.

"My life has been misery," Brent wrote. "I've dug a hole that I can't climb out of. My brain is messed up, but I'm so tired of fighting it. How long does it have to go on? I just can't do it anymore. I ruin everything I touch. ... Get on with your life. I am no good. I'm a failure at everything. Please remember, you did not do this. I was broken when and before we met. It was probably inevitable that it would come to this. You tried your best, and I thank you for that. I love you and always have. I'll see you on the other side, if there is one."

Despite what Denise was coping with, the news of the divorce was surprising for her employer, who had known her for seven years at that time. Denise managed the office of Edgar Nace, M.D., a psychiatrist who is known for his work in forensic psychiatry. Dr. Nace is the father of Brad Nace, to whom he referred Denise in 2005.

"As I look back, if she were afraid of Brent, I wish she would have been more open about it," the elder Nace says. "She

never let on that she was really scared, or felt her life was threatened, and seemed to feel that she was doing everything she could with the police." She even wrote a letter to Brent's father, hoping that he might be able to quell some of his son's aggression. "You don't ignore behaviors, but address them as they unfold, and she took appropriate steps."

Following the signing of the divorce papers, when Brent turned from dejected and self-loathing to hostile, Miriam helped Denise document the violent incidents, with dates and descriptions, evidence that would be helpful at a trial. "We worked on that together. She did a beautiful job," Miriam says. But Miriam was worried. "She told me that Brent said, 'If I can't have you, no one will. I remember feeling so fearful. You read about abusers and that statement, what a powerful statement that is.'"

Then he went to Florida for three months, and everyone thought the drama would subside.

ON MAY 12, WHILE DENISE WAS driving to work, she chatted with Miriam on her cell phone. It was the Monday after Mother's Day. Miriam was due to visit on Wednesday. They were talking about what they would do when she arrived. They always went to the Cheesecake Factory, which they loved, and the bookstore. They enjoyed the same authors and sometimes read the same book at the same time. As always, Miriam would be bringing *The Scrapbook*, the ongoing collection of stories and images that the two friends had kept for years.

"When something happens that is so important, we write it down in that scrapbook," Miriam says. "We work on it together, and one day, we'll have it for our kids."

Miriam was excited to see the new house and spend time with the girls. They hung up, and Denise pulled into the parking lot, a complex of two-story office buildings on the southeast corner of Hillcrest Avenue and Interstate 635. Meanwhile, Betty was driving the girls to school and passed Brent's parents' house, where he was living. She noticed that his truck was gone.

It was 8:30 when Denise made her way up the staircase and through the glass partition into the hallway where Dr. Nace had his office. Brent had been waiting for an hour.

He had parked his own car across the street, out of view. He had talked to people who worked in other offices on that hallway, saying hello to them, while he waited with an aluminum baseball bat hidden in his pants leg. When Denise stepped through the door, Brent ambushed her, pounding her repeatedly with the bat.

Hearing Denise's screams, people came out and saw the attack. One woman attempted to help but gave up when Brent turned toward her with the bat. After hitting Denise at least 20 times, crushing her skull and breaking her arms as she tried to defend herself, Brent ran out of the building and sped off in his pickup truck.

Dr. Nace arrived to find a cleaning crew trying to shampoo the carpet. Denise had been taken to Medical City.

Meanwhile, Betty had returned home with her youngest granddaughter. At 9:15, four McKinney police officers arrived at her door. One of them walked the child around to the side of the house, and the others told Betty that Brent had attacked Denise at her office. They told her to go to the school to alert the principal. A friend of Denise's drove Betty to the school and then to the hospital. They were 10 minutes away when Brad called on her cell phone.

"I don't know how to tell you," Betty remembers Brad saying. She looks up and closes her eyes. "He killed her. He killed her."

Dallas policemen met her at the emergency room. Doctors advised her not to go in and see Denise. "You won't know her. There are too many broken bones."

Later, when the girls were told what happened, they asked a simple question.

"Grammy, did my daddy do that?"

"Yes, he did."

"What did he have in his hand?"

"A baseball bat," Betty said.

"And he hit her, and hit her?"

They cried and cried and fell asleep.

The next day, one of them asked, "Why didn't they shoot him?"

"No one was there to do that," Betty said.

One hour after killing their mother, their father got out of his car on an overpass on the Bush Turnpike in Carrollton, looking as if he might jump. He was talked down, arrested, charged with murder, tried, and has been sentenced to life in prison.

Miriam kept her plane ticket to Dallas, using it to attend the funeral.

ON SUNNY MEADOWS, THERE IS a memory box in Grammy's room. Anything that reminds the girls of their mom can be placed inside. A picture. A piece of jewelry. There is a bookmark that says, "You're doing great," a bit of encouragement from Mom on a day someone needed the reminder. They have picked up her phrase, too. "I'm on it," they say.

"The younger one is not going to remember her, or know her," Betty says, "so we talk about her often."

Now, six months after the murder, Betty and her girls have struck a rhythm, with school routines and assorted activities defining their days. Betty is trying to "get a home made, finally." The girls wear their mom's t-shirts to bed. The 3-year-old goes to preschool, which gives Betty a few hours to herself.

"It is such a difficult change, and it is not fair. I used to do fun and indulgent things. Now, I have to make sure they dress properly and don't have sugar after dinner," she says. "I cannot replace Denise, yet I am the mom figure in the house."

But the goal is clear for this tough Midwestern woman. And despite its gravity, there is a sense that such tragedy won't prevent it from happening. "They should be level-headed, smart women," Betty says. "Women who won't let men do this to them. Women who will know exactly what happened, because they are the ones who are going to have to continue this to keep him locked up."

She is saving clippings for the girls to read when they are older. Miriam is continuing with the scrapbook. These are strong little women in the making. Or strong already.

"When you think about it," Betty says, "for me to have been placed here at this moment in time, I had to be able, financially and physically. These things had to come into play before she had to go. I don't know the reason—to keep the girls from him? To make others aware? Now God's got to keep me around until the youngest is 18. That's 15 years from now," she says, taking a breath. Her eyes water again.

But she's on it. **D**

Write to pamelakripke@sbcglobal.net.

To contribute to the Denise Stephens Memorial Fund, contact Amelia Saba, North Dallas Bank, 12900 Preston Road, Dallas, TX 75230.