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VOICE

THROUGH THE CRACKS

AFTER 20
YEARS, A BRONX
COLD CASE IS
SOLVED—AND A
FAMILY'S GRIEF
REKINDLED

BY JOSHUA KORS





For Phyllis Little, it's been 21 years of wondering, "What if?"

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THROUGH THE CRACKS

For 35 years, Phyllis Little has lived in a low-income apartment on East 174th Street, in the same complex where her granddaughter was raped and murdered. In February 1988, Phyllis returned from a weekend ski trip and found nine-year-old Joi Little and her mother, 26-year-old Selena Cooper, lying on the bed, strangled to death. Their hands and legs were tied behind their backs, their panties were at their knees, a look of panic still on their faces. Phyllis says she has wanted to leave that image behind her and move to New Jersey, but she vowed to her family that she would not leave her Bronx apartment complex until the murderer was found.

“My mom would always say, ‘Stay here. Don’t leave before it’s finished,’ ” Phyllis recalled recently, sitting in the living room where she helped raise young Joi.

Today, Phyllis and her fiancé are finally preparing to move. In February, the NYPD’s Cold Case Squad announced a breakthrough in the long-dormant investigation. They charged 46-year-old Robert Fleming, one of Cooper’s companions, with the two murders. At his arraignment, Phyllis saw the accused for the first time. “When I saw him, I felt sick,” she says. “If I had a gun with me, I would have shot him right there, without a trial.”

After 21 years of grief and frustration, the arrest and indictment of Fleming was supposed to bring peace to Cooper’s family. It hasn’t. For one thing, the family suspects that the crime was committed by more than one man. And the man police have arrested has pleaded not guilty to all charges and is steadfastly proclaiming his innocence.

“This was an absolutely awful crime, and I can’t even imagine how hurt and angry Selena’s family must be,” says Fleming. “I can understand why they would want to convict the first person put in front of them. But I’m not the guy. I didn’t do this.” Fleming says that to prove his innocence, he is prepared to go to trial.

That prospect concerns Cooper’s family. While a trial could lead to a conviction, it would also force them to pore over the details of her death and confront their own roles in the free fall of her life: from a loving home in suburban New Jersey, to low-income housing in the South Bronx, to crack addiction and death.

Though it has improved in recent years, the Bronx River area continues to be a breeding ground for violence and poverty, a place where kids hope to move up from the projects, across the river to the low-income housing of West Farms, and on to the safety and wealth of the New Jersey suburbs.

Cooper traveled that route in reverse. She grew up in the middle-class suburb of Englewood, moved to the 174th Street housing complex in the Bronx, and, after becoming addicted to crack, found herself across the bridge, in the Bronx River Projects, consorting with drug dealers and getting high.

Relatives remember Cooper as a little spitfire, a petite woman who used sharp words and knew exactly how to rile an opponent. “She had a feisty energy about her,” says her sister, Antonia Jones. Family and friends called her “the Mad Hatter” for her bold attitude and colorful clothing. “She’d wear bright-pink nail polish, big red hats, huge shades, and polished Italian cargo pants. She loved to dress.”

In retrospect, says Jones, nothing was going to keep her sister from the bright lights of the city. Englewood was safe, but it was staid, too, with family dinners every night and services three times a week at the Refuge Temple Church of God in Christ. Eventually, Cooper started hanging out at Bronx discos and mingling with city boys like Tyrone Little, a former Marine and small-time drug dealer.

At 17, Cooper gave birth to Tyrone’s daughter, Joi. Before long, she was living in the low-rent apartment complex in the West Farms section of the Bronx, where Tyrone’s mother, Phyllis Little, had lived for years. Cooper’s family says that while in New Jersey, Cooper never dabbled in drugs. Once in West Farms, however, she became a hard-core addict.

That’s where she met Fleming. Lee Little, Tyrone’s brother, says that he saw Cooper and Fleming together many times and that Fleming was a known drug dealer. He remembers Fleming hanging around the apartment complex, carrying a boombox and wearing the black clothes and silver jewelry of the Five Percenters, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam, which teaches that God is black and that only its members know His true nature.

In a locked room inside a Rikers Island prison, Fleming sits with calm eyes and recalls his time with Cooper. His jewelry is gone, and his black jacket has been replaced by a brown prison-issued jumpsuit.

His face has been ravaged by vitiligo, a pigmentation disorder that has left large splotches of white skin on his nose and forehead.

“A mutual friend introduced us,” he says. “We were both into crack, so I’d go over to her place. There’d be a bunch of other people, and we’d smoke together.” Fleming, a lifelong addict and convicted crack dealer, grew up near the drug- and crime-infested Bronx River Projects. As an adult, he used to hang out there, just across the bridge from Cooper’s apartment complex. Less than half a mile separates the complex from the Projects, and soon, Cooper began walking that distance, leaving her West Farms apartment to smoke crack on the other side of the river.

While the neighborhood has always been blighted by violence, West Farms residents say that the late 1980s were especially rough. “I’ve been here all my life, and I’ll tell you, this place was a battleground,” says Sonny Lee, a longtime resident of the complex. “It was like Beirut.” Even so, says Lee, residents of the West Farms complex looked down on those from the even more troubled Bronx River Projects, calling them “River Rats.” “In those days,” he says, “the Projects were the center of the crack epidemic.”

Phyllis Little says that during this time, Cooper would drop by her apartment, leave Joi there, then disappear for days at a time. Family and friends suspected that Cooper was venturing off to the Projects, “but we never really asked,” says Phyllis.

Other times, Cooper would head out to party and leave Joi home alone. Beanna Jones, a friend and neighbor who lived downstairs from Cooper, remembers seeing Joi coming down the stairs at three in the morning, looking for her mother. “I said, ‘Where the hell are you going at this hour?’ ” says Jones. “I was pissed because Selena was out so late while Joi was at home—at three o’clock in the morning. I was more than mad.” Jones says that as Cooper started leaving the apartment more and more frequently, she became a frequent impromptu babysitter.

Phyllis grew frustrated with Cooper’s extended absences. She warned Cooper that if she left again and didn’t stop by to visit Joi, she would petition Children & Family Services for custody of her granddaughter. “She was neglecting her daughter. And I warned her I’d go to Child Welfare, but I wanted to give her a last chance,” says Phyllis. “I must >> p16

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have given her eight, nine, 10 last chances.” Eventually, Cooper relented and agreed to give Phyllis full custody.

Phyllis began raising Joi in her one-bedroom apartment, one building over from the child’s mother. The two had a close relationship to begin with, and their time together brought them even closer. Phyllis moved to the living room, to sleep on the pull-out couch, giving Joi the large bed in the only bedroom. “That was the queen’s room,” says Phyllis, pointing to the door, the memory returning with a warm smile. “You did not go in there and disturb her stuff.”

Phyllis says that in the evenings, Joi would dance around with the verve of her mother, talking a mile a minute and blaring about her passion for math. “I put a chalkboard in the living room, and she’d write up all these numbers and put them together. She’d say, ‘Granny, Granny, I can add them!’” When morning came, Phyllis would escort Joi to the bus stop, shielding her from the growing dangers of the neighborhood.

Fleming says that, like the neighborhood, he was hitting his own personal low in the late 1980s. “I’ve been a crack addict all my life, and back then I was really hitting bottom,” he says. Fleming had already been convicted of armed robbery. Now, he says, he was homeless and had

learned that he was infected with HIV.

Cooper invited Fleming to live with her in the apartment, where they would smoke crack and have unprotected sex. With a passion that rivals his denial of the charges, Fleming insists that he was not a freeloader. He paid Cooper for the housing, he says, with doses of crack and money he made working construction projects around Bronx River.

Phyllis says that during this time, she never met Fleming or saw Cooper with any man, and that she rarely visited Cooper’s residence. Though her apartment was in the same complex, Cooper lived on the fourth floor of her building, and Phyllis says that for an older woman without muscular legs, hiking up the four flights of stairs would have been a trying task. Today, she says, she regrets not dropping by more often.

Phyllis adds that she did not have the option of calling Cooper, since, like many residents in the complex, Cooper did not own a telephone. “If you wanted somebody, you’d go to the window and call out for people,” she says. “That’s how it was done in those days.”

Lee Little, Joi’s uncle, remembers returning home from Bethune-Cookman College, hanging out with Selena, and watching her smoke crack. He had taken a philosophy course at Bethune-Cookman about life’s tendency toward stasis.

“I remember telling Selena, ‘I bet we’re going to be in the same place next year.’”

But Cooper’s circumstances did change, as her addiction grew and her health collapsed. Little remembers returning from college a second time to find a different Cooper. Her flamboyant wardrobe was gone, she looked gaunt, and she had begun twisting her lips to hide a missing bicuspid. “I said, ‘Damn, girl, what happened to you?’”

Cooper’s sister, Antonia Jones, says that while living in West Farms, Cooper took college courses at Hunter College—but the courses never resulted in a degree. She did not have a steady job, either. Friends and family say Cooper collected government assistance, money she used to purchase drugs.

“Selena’s place was crazy,” says Fleming. “There were always people there, smoking crack till all hours of the night.” Phyllis says that, true to her full custody arrangement, she never let Joi go to her mother’s apartment. Fleming says that wasn’t true: While he was living there, he says, Joi visited her mother’s residence several times. “She didn’t come a lot. In fact, she came so infrequently, I thought she was her niece,” he says.

Fleming says he never forged a strong bond with Joi, but she did know him well enough to call him by his Five Percenter nickname, Hakim.

Removed from Englewood, her life

awash in drugs, Cooper drifted out of her family's life. "We just didn't have that connection," says her sister, Antonia Jones. "We were like oil and water." Cooper's cousin, Penny Quashie, says that in November 1987, three months before Cooper's death, she tried one last time to reach out to her cousin. Quashie had just given birth to her third son, John, and asked Cooper to return to Englewood to see her baby. Cooper dismissed the invitation with a laugh.

In February 1988, Phyllis Little was working as a case manager for the Rockland Psychiatric Center. Her co-workers were going skiing for the weekend. "They begged me to come, and to the last minute, I didn't want to go," she says.

She relented, leaving Joi with Cooper. "I had no reason to be nervous," Phyllis recalls. "Selena was getting better. She was cleaning up her act."

Phyllis returned home on Sunday afternoon. She crossed over to Cooper's building, hiked up the four flights of stairs, and knocked on the door. Nobody home. She walked back to her apartment. The next morning, at 7 a.m., she climbed Cooper's stairs once again. The door was slightly ajar. She pushed it open, saw the bodies, screamed, and ran down the stairs. Sonny Lee, Cooper's friend, heard the screams and ran up to her apartment to see what was wrong. He was one of many residents to enter the room and view the bodies before the police arrived. "It was awful—absolutely awful," he says.

Joi's back was broken. And the two bodies were facing each other, so Cooper could watch her daughter being assaulted before she died.

Within the West Farms complex, the gruesome murders sparked panic.

"It shook the neighborhood," says Lee. For all the complex's problems, "This was still a family place. Everyone knew everyone. After this, women got scared, started looking at the men like we were crazy." He says that a lot of men who had no connection to the crime fled the neighborhood anyway, fearful they would be fingered nonetheless. "You get accused of something like that, with a child, you can't even survive in jail."

For Phyllis and Cooper's sister, Antonia Jones, the pain of that morning has lingered, kept fresh by the unanswered questions of who and why. Jones says she even came to West Farms, seeking information from her sister's friends and neighbors. People knew who did it, she says, but no one would talk to her. Phyllis made her own inquiries around the complex—her efforts were rebuffed as well. "People would say they didn't know, they didn't hear anything. But people knew. They knew," Phyllis says. "It made me angry."

Some of that anger found its way across the river, from the Bronx to Englewood. Cooper's family says that when it came time to bury her, Phyllis was flippant, saying, "Just stick her in a box. Bury her like she lived," a comment Phyllis says she does not remember making. Both families keep photos of the deceased mother and daughter and have been haunted by their memories on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the quadrennial Leap Day, the day of their deaths. With Joi, the link between the two families, now gone, Phyllis's family and Cooper's family no longer speak to each other.

Still, they know that they share a common pain, one they hope Fleming's trial will alleviate. "It could bring closure to a lot of unanswered questions," says Felecia Lucas, Cooper's cousin. "Their lives were taken like animals. Since then, it's been speculation. That's all we've had for 21 years."

Fleming says he does not know who committed the murders and that he was nowhere near the West Farms complex on the night of the crime. Cooper's late-night crack parties had become too loud and too frequent, he says, and he needed more sleep if he was to continue his construction job in Bronx River. After living with Cooper for six months, he decided, he says, to leave her apartment, four weeks before she was murdered.

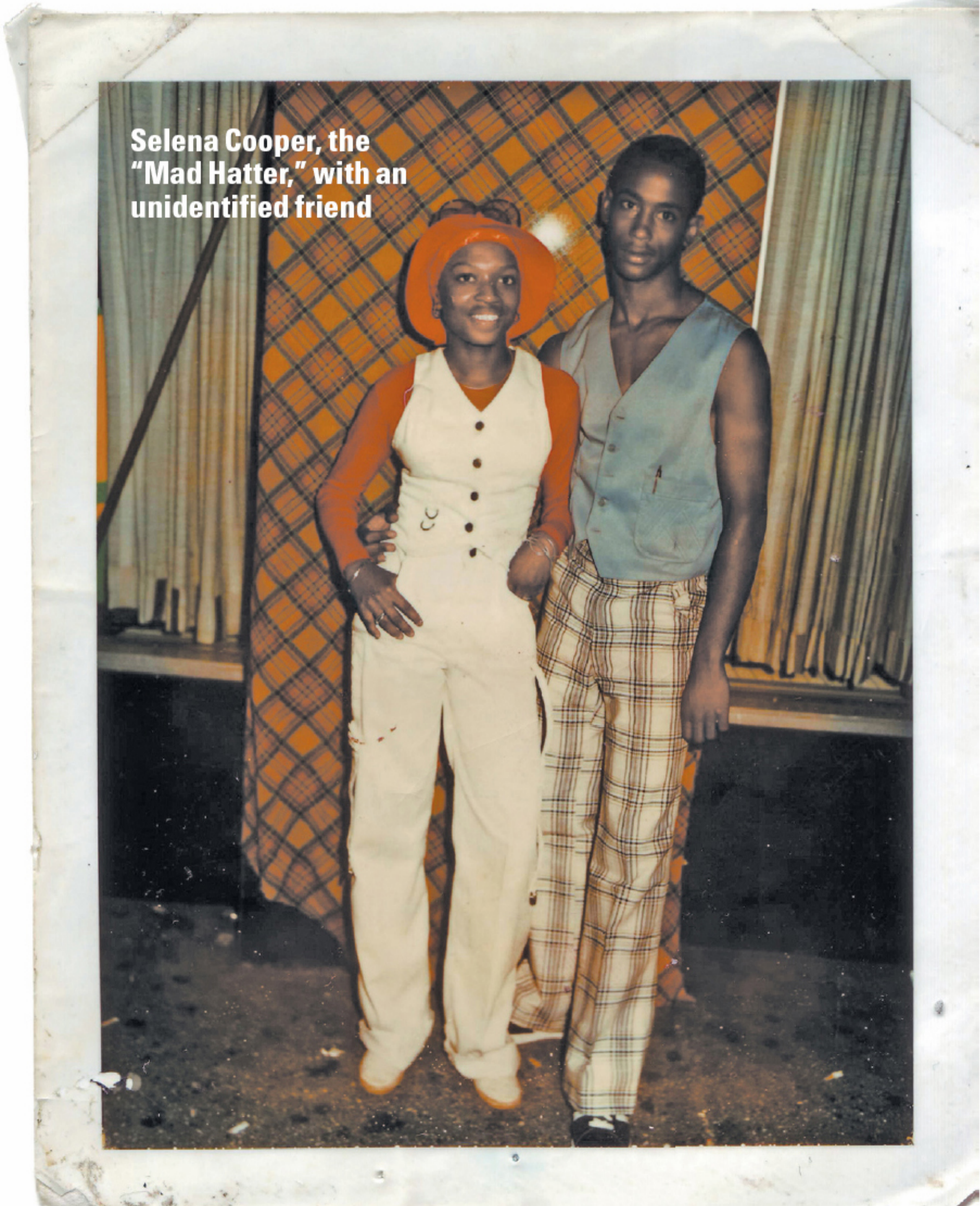
Fleming says he moved back across the bridge to Bronx River, where, homeless once again, he slept in an abandoned building near the needle exchange, occasionally dropping by his mother's apartment to sleep.

He was there, he says, at his mother's apartment, on the night of the murders.

Fleming says that in March 1988, shortly after Cooper and Joi's deaths, the police picked him up and questioned him for two hours about the murders. "They showed me terrible photos of Selena and Joi, tied up and everything," he says. "It was ugly." Fleming says that he told police he was at his mother's on the night of the murder, and that they spoke with his mother and confirmed his alibi, then let him go.

For 21 years, he says, he has been drifting around New York City, working as a drug counselor in Brooklyn and bouncing in and out of the penal system. The 46-year-old has served 18 years in prison. When police charged him with the double murder, he was already incarcerated at Rikers Island, busted in October for selling crack.

Lee Little, Joi's uncle, says the last time he saw Fleming was in 1987, well before the murders. After that, says Little, "he just disappeared." But Jones and Little say they have spoken with detectives from the police's Cold Case Squad



Selena Cooper, the
"Mad Hatter," with an
unidentified friend

Courtesy Phyllis Little

WHILE A TRIAL COULD LEAD TO A CONVICTION,
IT WOULD ALSO FORCE FAMILY MEMBERS TO
CONFRONT THEIR OWN ROLES IN THE FREE FALL
OF SELENA COOPER'S LIFE.



PHYLLIS LITTLE SAYS A TRIAL COULD MEAN JUSTICE FOR HER GRANDDAUGHTER, JOI, BUT SHE KNOWS THAT EVEN A CONVICTION WON'T SILENCE THE QUESTIONS THAT HAVE HAUNTED HER FOR 21 YEARS.

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who say they have a firm case against Fleming, centered on DNA evidence.

Fleming says he is angered by the notion that DNA found at Cooper's apartment could be used to convict him. "Of course they're going to find my DNA in the apartment," he says. "I lived there for six months. And I was having sex with Selena."

Dr. Lawrence Kobilinsky, chairman of the department of forensic science at John Jay College and an expert in DNA evidence, says that the strength of the state's case depends on where the DNA sample came from: "DNA is a pretty resistant molecule, and if it's left undisturbed, it might stay there, on a coffee cup or a fork he used," says Kobilinsky. "If that's the DNA they found, that doesn't make him a murderer." But, says Kobilinsky, DNA taken from semen—from an oral, vaginal, or anal swab—would be "pretty damning evidence" against a suspect who claims he last saw Cooper four weeks before her murder.

Sperm die rapidly in a woman's vagina, he says. "Twenty-four hours after intercourse, the vast majority of sperm are gone. After seven days, they're all gone," says Kobilinsky. "If this guy says he hadn't been with her in four weeks and they find his DNA on a vaginal swab, he can say he's innocent up the wazoo. That's not going to help."

The police have not returned multiple phone calls seeking comment. But an official with knowledge of the investigation says that Fleming's DNA was drawn

from semen in Cooper's vagina and that semen was also extracted from Joi's vagina. Its DNA also matches Fleming's.

Phyllis and Jones both intend to be in court for every day of Fleming's trial. Jones says she knows that the trial will spotlight the sour details of her sister's life. "But I hope people will see that she wasn't a bad person," Jones says. "She did not deserve to die. Not like this."

Phyllis says the trial could mean justice for Joi, but she knows that even a conviction won't silence the questions that have haunted her for 21 years: What if she hadn't gone skiing? What if she hadn't given Joi back to her mother? What if? "I do wonder," Phyllis says, "but I really didn't think I had anything to worry about. It's not like Joi ever said to me, 'Granny, I don't want to go over there.' Joi had a mouth on her, and she never mentioned men over there, or that someone was mistreating her."

Jones acknowledges that for years, her family has been angry at Phyllis for letting Joi return to her mother's apartment. But she also speaks of reconciliation between the two families—a potential outcome of the trial, at which Joi's grandmother, aunts, and cousins will be seated near each other, every day, in the courtroom gallery. "I know that Phyllis loved Joi and was good to her," Jones says. "For the rest of her life, she's going to have to live with the fact that she let her granddaughter go back there. That's a terrible thing to live with. I wouldn't wish that on anyone." ■