

who wants to marry **this** millionaire?

Three hours into a recitation about her doomed eight-year marriage, Norma Schuholz reaches behind her saffron sofa pillow and pulls out a gun. It sags inside a plastic freezer bag. She explains that she couldn't be sure I was the reporter



I claimed to be. She was prepared to defend herself.

Murder may be a reasonable fear if you are Norma Schuholz. Her husband Al has confessed to hiring a hit man to gut her and her sister "like hogs" and "cut their throats." He's now in a Missouri prison, but Norma doesn't believe his lethal ambition is at rest. After all, she is convinced he had his former wife killed 19 years ago in Sharonville. And that time, it seems possible he may have gotten away with murder. By ANNE MICHAUD

norma met Albert J. Schuhholz Jr. in 1992 at the Greyhound Grille, a favorite of Ft. Mitchell power lunchers. Norma, a successful real estate agent with RE/MAX, had a client who was looking for land. Al owned some house lots in Crittenden. His agent had arranged the meeting.

Al was lunching at the Greyhound with his girlfriend and her mother, and they were talking about taking a trip to the Carolinas. His guests left, and he joined Norma and the other agent for iced tea. Norma quickly decided she was not interested in his house lots, but she listened to be polite. They made small talk about his upcoming vacation. Norma said she liked to travel. Then he followed the agents back to their

norma's story

office and proceeded to pitch the land to whomever would listen.

"I had to get out of there, I couldn't listen to him any more," Norma

says of the overly persistent landowner.

She had made an impression on him. It's easy to see why: Sitting in her living room this Saturday afternoon with her sister, Martha Schomaker, Norma is an attractive woman now in her mid-50s. She's slim, petite, with short blond hair framing even features. From time to time, she tugs wandering bangs back into place over her forehead. Her lipstick matches a red sweater tucked into tailored black pants. When she met Al, she says she was making more than \$100,000 a year as an agent. She was divorced and dating. But mostly she worked, often seven days a week.

More than a month after their first meeting, Norma's pager went off. "My pager said 'Albert Schuhholz,' and I thought, Who is that?" she recalls. She returned the call and tried to fake it. "He asked me if I still liked to travel, and I thought, Who is this?"

He asked her for a date, and they agreed to meet at a restaurant by the Ohio River. She was worried that she might not recall his face, and sure enough, she had trouble picking him out. For the special evening, he had dyed his hair dark brown, covering the gray. It was spring, and after dinner he drove Norma down Route 8 in his convertible sports car, playing a CD he had chosen. He ran the heater because the evening was slightly cool. Norma thought he was "cute" and considerate to go to all this trouble for her. Then he told her he was interested in getting married.

"I said, You're a nice person, I'm sure a lot of women would be interested in you," Norma remembers. He said he wanted to marry her, and she told him she didn't even know him. "He said, How many times would you have to go out with me to know me?"

Al began dropping by Norma's office daily. He was jovial, joking, friendly. He would leave her sweet greeting cards and take her to lunch when she was free. Al was 61 then. He had an annual physical and brought the results to Norma. She thought he was open and refreshing, that he was someone who didn't play games. "Now I know he told me everything he did because that is the picture he wanted me to see before I found out the real picture," she says.

He'd been married three times before. His second wife,



At this Newport law office, Al Schuhholz tried to hire a hit man to murder his wife and sister-in-law.

Marie, who also had been a successful real estate agent, had been murdered in 1981 in the apartment she was sharing with friend Starla Burns after Al and Marie had separated. The two women had been brutally

the couple were married in September 1992, five months after they began dating. Selling her house in Cold Spring, Norma moved with Al into the Willow Glen subdivision in Crittenden, the site he'd been trying to sell Norma months ago at the Greyhound Grille. Norma says she knew he was well off when they married; by 1996, according to his later court testimony, he was worth \$3 million.

The newlyweds had some good times. They began spending Sundays with Norma's only sister, Martha Schomaker, and her husband, Randy. The men played pool, and soon Randy considered Al his best friend.

He touched Martha's heart. She recalls him saying, "I love you Maudy, I love you. I never had a sister or a close family."

But slowly, occasionally, Al Schuhholz's warm-and-gentle persona began to chill. That first winter, Norma discovered that their new home had no real heater; Al had rigged up a half-barrel in the basement that burned firewood, and she had to dress for bed as if she were sleeping in the snow. Neither did the house have air conditioning. The shoddy construction, however, wasn't confined to Al's and Norma's house; the whole housing development was riddled with problems, drawing the notice of city officials. In November 1992, according to *The Grant County Express*, a judge ordered Al to stop selling or renting the homes until the state

building inspector was satisfied.

At this time, Al asked Norma to quit her job so they could retire together, and she began cutting back, intending to travel with him. At the same time, she took over management of all-but-deserted Willow Glen. She ran some ads and helped people arrange financing. Within two years, she says, all the houses in the subdivision were sold.

But the Schuholzes' private life wasn't in such good shape. The couple's home had always been neat, but now papers began piling up—papers related to court battles with the city, with homeowners, with business associates—mountains of papers defining paths through the house. Al alternately forbade Norma to touch the papers then demanded that she put them in order. The detritus of wrecked cars and broken toilets began showing up in the yard—Al's strange collection.

More frightening than the odd collecting and the business problems was the temper Al began to show. One night, the night before Norma was scheduled to have exploratory surgery, she witnessed his first rage. "He started talking, and I couldn't understand what he was talking about. The veins in his neck would pop," she says. "At about 2 am, he told me, You better not try to leave here." But by the next morning, he was driving her to the hospital and joking with the nurses as if nothing had happened.

Then in early 1996, Al had a heart attack. He thought it was severe heartburn, but Norma insisted he go to the hospital. The attack turned out to be what doctors call a "widow-maker," and they told Norma she had saved Al's life.

After the heart attack, his strange behavior grew worse. He forbade Norma to read the morning newspaper or to talk on the telephone while he was watching TV. He designated one chair she could use and identified a small section of the kitchen table as hers. Today, she knows that she should have challenged him, but she didn't. "It was mental and emotional battering," Norma says now. "When you're hit, you know you've been hit. With this, you get in too deep. I thought I was helping him have a better life."

It was her own life, in fact, that she had to worry about.

a year after the heart attack, in 1997, Al and Norma set out in a motor home for a month in California with Norma's mother and stepfather. They were traveling west when Martha telephoned, excited. She was watching Channel 12 in Cincinnati, which was airing a regular feature on local mysteries. This time, the program probed the 1981 slaying of Starla Burns and Marie Schuholz—and there was Al Schuholz on the screen. "I couldn't believe all this stuff on the news about Al," Martha says. "There was a tape of Al talking. I was shocked."

Norma asked Al what he thought, but he said nothing. Then two days later, when the family had reached Las Vegas, Al jumped out of bed at 2 am and announced they were leaving immediately. He drove 22 hours nonstop to Yellowstone National Park, where he wanted to spend the night in a remote campground. Norma insisted they stay in a cabin, and

anatomy of a contract hit

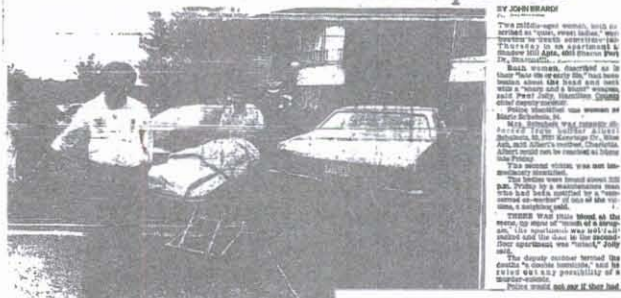
May 19, 1965: Albert Schuholz Jr. marries Marie Wright, a second marriage for both.



Al and Marie lived in this Blue Ash house during their 16-year marriage.

March 6, 1981: Marie Wright Schuholz is granted a divorce from Al, pending the outcome of a property dispute.

Two Women Found Murdered in Apartment



L. Schuholz removes the body of one of two children aged victims Friday evening from Apt. 14, 6 Sharonville.

May 8, 1981: The bodies of Marie Schuholz and her friend Starla Burns are found in Marie's Sharonville apartment (right). They had been brutally beaten and stabbed to death by an unknown assailant.

December 7, 1987: Albert Schuholz Jr. marries his third wife, Audrey Stevens. Five years later they divorce.



September 30, 1992: Albert Schuholz Jr. marries his fourth wife, Norma Kincaid, after a five-month courtship.

April 29, 1998: After Al threatens Norma and her sister, Martha Schomaker, a court issues a restraining order requiring Al to stay at least 1,000 feet away from the two women.

June 3, 1998: The court again orders Al to stay 1,000 feet from Norma after he threatens to shoot her.

July 8, 1998: Norma withdraws two certificates of deposit worth \$364,000, money she and Al were disputing.

July 14, 1998: Al Schuholz offers Craig Redleaf, an ex-employee of Martha Schomacher, \$5,000 and a getaway car in exchange for a Polaroid shot of Norma and Martha's dead bodies. Turning police informant, Redleaf wears a wire to record his conversation with Al. A murder scene is staged and photographed by police that evening.

the next day Al acted as though nothing had happened.

Shortly after the broadcast, the Sharonville Police Department re-opened the case.

During the next year, Al said little about the case to Norma. He was distant, she says, and his rages were more frequent. In March 1998, the two got into a fight about money. Norma says Al called her one morning and told her to pack her clothes and leave. In three hours, with her belongings stuffed into garbage bags, Norma was on her way to live with her sister. Al stopped at Martha's house that night, demanding to see Norma. "He was yelling and carrying on," Martha said. "He was a different person."

The couple continued to meet and talk, but the tension remained. In May, Al began divorce proceedings. (They have never been final; Norma and Al remain married. Norma wants it that way. Al's alibi for the Sharonville murders depends on Audrey Stevens, his third wife. Norma believes that Al would remarry Audrey to keep her from testifying against him.) Al filed first one, then what eventually became five lawsuits against Norma. In a 1999 lawsuit filed in Boone County, Al claimed that Norma and Martha had formed a sham corporation to siphon off his assets. Their theft, he said, eventually mounted to \$2.5 million.

IN 1997, AS SHARONVILLE POLICE BEGAN DIGGING INTO the 1981 murder case, a detective awoke Norma to the fact that she herself might be in danger. Shortly after Norma moved out of the couple's house, Sgt. Dale Dorning telephoned

her and asked her and Martha to meet him at a restaurant. Dorning said he'd found holes in Al's alibi. Al's then-girlfriend, Audrey Stevens, had vouched for his whereabouts, but Dorning told Norma that her story did not match Al's. He offered to show the sisters photos of the old crime scene.

On a Friday evening in early May 1981, police found two real estate agents described as "quiet, sweet ladies" lying dead in their apartment, according to newspaper reports. They had taken blows to the head, and their throats had been slashed. Marie Schuholz, 54 years old, was found on the dining room floor. Starla Burns, 57, in her nightclothes, was slumped against a dresser in a bedroom. There was no sign of forced entry. They died within moments of each other, police told the press, and there was no apparent struggle.

"This was the first time I had heard [Al] was a suspect" in that case, Norma says now, but then she hesitated . . . Al might be unpredictable, distant, even verbally abusive, she thought, but a murderer? She tried to shake off the implications of Dorning's words, but something in them began to gnaw at her. She went to the library and looked up old newspaper clippings about the murders.

The parallels were a shock.

Like Norma, Marie Schuholz had been a successful businesswoman. Like Norma and Al, Marie and Al were breaking up and arguing in court over money—about \$1 million in Marie's case, newspapers said. Marie's and Al's marriage had been stormy, too. Al's son, John, told reporters at the time that Marie and his father fought bit- [CONTINUED ON PAGE 135]

STAGED MURDER

Craig Redleaf, who Al tried to hire to kill Norma, had worked at this auto dealership once owned by her sister and brother-in-law.



Norma and the police staged her "murder" with ketchup and fake blood, then had this photograph delivered to Al.

July 17, 1998: Al is arrested at a Blue Ash office (below) while attempting to withdraw \$400,000.



August 21, 1998: At his arraignment, Al pleads not guilty.

April 30, 1999: Al signs a confession that he did, indeed, hire a hit man.

November 12, 1999: Sharonville police indict Al in the 1981 murders of Schuholz and Burns.

Murder for hire

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 63

terly and often exchanged death threats. "One of them would call and say they've got a gun held up against the other's head," John Schuhholz told the *Cincinnati Post*. "After a while, you know, you just ignore it."

It was déjà vu. "It was exactly the same thing that had happened to me and exactly the same thing that was happening to me," Norma says, "and when I read beyond that, I knew what was going to happen to me." Then, as she studied the old news accounts, Norma came across an image that stopped her cold. The photograph on the front page of *The Cincinnati Enquirer* on May 9, 1981 showed two bodies on stretchers, covered in white sheets, being rolled from the Shadow Hill apartments. "When I saw that picture, I knew where I was headed," Norma says.

"Marie died and Starla died, but they saved my life," she says.

Suspicious—indeed scary—things began to happen. In April, Al waited for Martha to return from work one evening, Martha says, and ran after her shouting, laughing and snapping her photo. Martha took out a restraining order against him. Another time, at a stoplight, Martha said she thought she saw a man taking her picture; she believes now that Al wanted a photo to show to thugs-for-hire. One day, the sisters chased two menacing men away from their home. One, Craig Redleaf, was a man Martha had fired from her business, Kincaid Auto Sales in Newport. The other was a member of the Iron Horsemen motorcycle gang, who told Martha through the door that he was there to deliver papers from her attorney. When she asked the attorney's name, he didn't know it.

By this time, the sisters had alerted the Boone County Sheriff's department and Ft. Mitchell police. The investigators and the sisters began keeping in touch with anyone who knew Al, trying to track his moves. Deputy Todd Kenner of Boone County says that a federal magistrate and a retired federal agent warned him, when they heard who he was tracking, that he had better get his man—or he would have to look over his shoulder for the rest of his days.

In June 1998, Norma and Al met at an apartment building he owned in Park

Hills. He told her, "If you f--- with my money, I will f---ing shoot you," she later testified. He put his finger between her eyes, lowered his thumb and made a noise like a gun firing. Norma went to court then, and a judge ordered her husband to stay at least 1,000 feet away from her.

A month later, on July 8, Norma won \$364,000 from Al in a court decision. Afterward, the words "Someone in this office will die" were painted on the glass of the RE/MAX office where Norma had worked. The sisters installed an alarm system and kept in near-constant contact with the sheriff and police.

At about this time, Redleaf, Martha's former employee, dropped a bombshell. He called the sisters, who then called the police, to say he had been approached by Al to murder the women.

A trap was set. Redleaf agreed to meet with Al in the lobby of a Newport lawyer's office, and he went to the meeting wearing a wire. On the subsequent tape, Al was heard saying that he wanted Norma beaten up. Then he changed his mind. "Gut them like hogs," he said, "and cut their throats." He promised Redleaf \$5,000 in cash and a get-away car. In exchange, Redleaf was to produce a Polaroid of the dead women.

Boone County and Ft. Mitchell police brought the tape to the FBI. Because Al was traveling across state lines, the case could be bumped up to the federal court system, which can imprison suspects without bail who are deemed dangerous.

The murder was to take place on July 15, 1998. That night, Norma and Martha prepared for their part in the drama. "The police put blood on us"—a mess of ketchup, Worcestershire sauce and Halloween blood, Norma says. "We had to be like Al wanted us killed." Then they snapped the photo. Redleaf passed it along to his contact, who relayed the word to Al that the women had been killed. "Tell Al the two bitches are dead," he said.

That night, Channel 12 ran a report on its late news show that there was a warrant out for the arrest of Al Schuhholz. No mention was made that the women were dead; indeed, the news report was worded vaguely. Police had asked reporter Deborah Dixon to hold the story, fearing that Al would flee if he saw it. But Dixon figured the federal agents posted outside Al's lawyer's office in Newport to be a tip-off, and that the

broadcast couldn't hurt. In the end, "we got him arrested," she says today. In any case, the news report led a woman who saw it to call police, saying that Al had been at her Merrill Lynch office in Blue Ash, filling out paperwork to withdraw \$400,000. He was coming by on July 17 to pick it up, the woman said.

Instead, when he arrived, he was met by Sharonville police.

With his words on tape, there was no way for Schuhholz to charm his way out. In April 1999, he signed a confession saying he had tried to have his wife and sister-in-law killed. Last November, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Within days, he was indicted by Sharonville police for the murders of Starla Burns and Marie Schuhholz, 18 years after they died.

Al Schuhholz's story

It is hard to know the real Al Schuhholz. Much of what he told Norma was untrue, she has learned: "He tells people what they want to hear."

In his youth, he was handsome, with thick brown hair and a Roman nose. He remains physically strong and active, no couch potato. His father, Albert Sr., emigrated from Germany with nothing, friends say. He married Charlotte, an American, and together they bought apartment buildings and, with the rent they collected, bought more buildings throughout the city, especially in Walnut Hills. They purchased land in Mason on Fields-Ertel Road and opened the Al-Char swimming pool and fishing lakes. It was a good investment. Years later, they sold the land to commercial developers, and by the time they died, the two were worth \$25 million.

Al was their only child. He attended a military academy then studied engineering in college, but he didn't graduate. His parents were strict with him when he was home in Oakley, ordering him to clean gutters and shutter the windows, said a family friend who didn't want to be identified. Al served in the military during the Korean War.

When his father died, Al Jr. inherited half the family's money. But he handled it oddly. He ate at McDonald's almost every day, drinking a small cup of coffee, leaving with the cup only to take it for a free refill at another McDonald's later in the day. Where his parents had a knack for making money, he made bad loans and bad investments. When his children attended college, he bought a house for

them near the school. He sold it after they graduated, but the agent mistakenly sent the check for about \$35,000 to Al's son, John. John cashed it, the family friend said, and Al sued him.

Schuhholz has never had an uncomplicated life; there seems always to have existed an ambition for money that pushes him, sometimes too far. He has served time before: nine months in 1981 and 1982 for tax evasion. He has been married four times: to Helen, with whom he had three children, and who now lives in Wyoming; to Marie; to Audrey Stevens and to Norma. He has filed numerous lawsuits.

"He loves to sue," says Kenner, the deputy sheriff in Boone County who arranged to tape the damning conversation between Al and Craig Redleaf. "The people at the Grant County Courthouse told me he holds the all-time record for suing or being sued. Backgrounding this case was incredible. It read like a mystery novel, following his life through the press and the people I met."

Yet the facts of Al Schuhholz's life don't show who he really is, says Audrey Stevens, his third wife. He was living with her in West Chester after the breakup with Norma and until his arrest. Al had announced that he planned to marry Audrey again. "There's a lot more to the story," Audrey says. "You've seen his wife on TV. You've heard her side of the story. If he [tells his side], she's going to go to jail." Audrey would not say more, and Al declined a request for an interview.

But clues to their viewpoint can be found in testimony in the federal murder-for-hire case. In his only published testimony, Al told the court that he taped a conversation in April 1998 with Frances Dowd, the mother of Norma and Martha. "Are you aware that your daughters have stolen over two and a half million dollars from me?" he asked Mrs. Dowd on tape.

In response to a 1999 suit Norma filed alleging mental anguish, Al countersued, saying that Martha and Norma "conspired . . . to deprive the Defendant, Al Schuhholz, of his assets. It was part of the conspiracy that the plaintiff Norma Kincaid Schuhholz did marry the defendant after signing a prenuptial agreement limiting her marital assets and systematically depleted . . . the estate of the defendant . . . by fraud, misrepresentation, artifice and deceit."

Briefly, while Al, communicating

through Audrey Stevens, was considering being interviewed for this story, he directed me to newspaper accounts from the early 1970s about Harmony Loan Co. of Newport, Ky., where he had been an investor. The company went under and was charged with defrauding investors, charges that led to prison sentences for the two founders. Audrey says, "Al was the whistleblower on that." It is a source of pride.

AL'S ARREST IN JULY 1998 SHOOK loose some people who had information about the earlier murders of Marie Schuhholz and Starla Burns—and more than one person is now saying he was solicited as a hit man, according to Boone County's Deputy Kenner. Kenner says the informants had been too frightened of Al to come forward earlier. "When we got [Al], people came to us who were approached to do this back then," Kenner says. The similarity of method—the slit throats—has also made Sharonville police suspicious. Kenner says, "The case information I read from Sharonville and what we had going on here, it was just like a *déjà vu*."

One informant was Perry Baker, a retired business owner in Reading. "Al told me he would beat the [expletive] out of her and slit her throat," Mr. Baker, a former friend of the couple, told *The Cincinnati Enquirer* in July 1998. He said he warned Marie in December 1980, compelling her to move out of the Shuholzes' Blue Ash home and, for the fourth time, file for divorce.

Chillingly, there were at least two people willing to come forward more than 18 years ago. In July 1981, unnamed sources told the *Cincinnati Post* that Al had allegedly tried to hire at least two hit men to kill his wife in the 10 months before her death and that Sharonville police were talking to the men.

But there were never any indictments, never any arrests. So what happened back in 1981—or did not happen—that allowed the case to slip away, unsolved?

At the time, Sharonville police offered this explanation of why no charges were filed: Al had an alibi. No murder weapon was found. No physical evidence linked him to the killings. No witness placed him at the scene.

Today, Sharonville police will not talk about the case. "The only thing I can tell you is we do have an indictment against

Schuhholz, and that's all I can say now," says Sharonville Police Chief Mike Schappa, who was a detective involved in the 1981 investigation. The lead investigator, Sgt. Dorning, has telephoned people he plans to use as witnesses, including Norma, and asked them not to talk for this story. Clearly the Sharonville police are being careful in this, their second chance to catch the killer.

In the early 1980s, relatives of the murdered women were not content to let the case go unsolved. Cecil Hurd, Marie's brother and the executor of her estate, sued Al for trying to defraud her of half the couple's holdings, or \$500,000, by forging documents several months before her death. Hurd sued in a second case, claiming Al and two others falsified a separation agreement to give him the couple's home on Kenridge Drive. Hurd lost on both counts. Marie and Al had been granted a divorce pending settlement of financial affairs, but because the finances were still being litigated when Marie died, a judge ruled that she and Al were still married. Al received the money and the home, but had to make a payment to Marie's son from a previous marriage, James Wright.

James and his sister, Patricia Kammeyer, used the money to offer a \$20,000 reward to anyone who could tell them who killed their mother. That was three months after her death. The following March, which would have been Marie's 55th birthday, her children increased the reward to \$50,000.

Wright told the *Enquirer* that police knew who killed her, "but they need evidence"—evidence that clearly they did not have.

Al is in federal prison in Springfield, Missouri, undergoing a psychiatric evaluation. It will figure into his sentence for attempting to hire a man to murder his wife and sister-in-law. After that, he will face the charges in Sharonville. The trial for the murder of two women in 1981 could take place by late summer.

Meanwhile, Norma and Martha battle the after-effects of their ordeal. Both are being treated for post-traumatic stress disorder. Neither can work. They continue to live behind drawn blinds, a gun hidden under a sofa pillow. ♣

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