



DISAPPEARED
ON HONEYMOON



FOUND DEAD
ON HOLIDAY



TROUBLED WATERS

HIGH STAKES ON THE HIGH SEAS: WHEN DREAM

CRUISES TURN INTO NIGHTMARES

VANISHING PASSENGERS ARE AN INCREASING MYSTERY ON INTERNATIONAL CRUISE LINERS. BUT ARE THEY VICTIMS OF TRAGIC ACCIDENTS OR OF FOUL PLAY? WE INVESTIGATE THIS DEADLY NEW TREND



A tearful Jennifer Hagel-Smith listens to testimony surrounding her husband's disappearance. Left: the newlyweds enjoying their bridal waltz. Right: incriminating bloodstains on the ship's deck. Far right: George on the last day of his cruise during a shore trip to the Greek island of Mykonos.



Life couldn't have been any better for newlyweds George Allan Smith IV and Jennifer Hagel-Smith. After a fairytale romance and glittering wedding, the picture-perfect couple were enjoying the honeymoon of their dreams – a Mediterranean cruise onboard the luxurious *Brilliance of the Seas* liner. Young, beautiful, rich and deeply in love, the sporty Americans threw themselves into the party atmosphere of the aptly named cruise ship, embracing for holiday snaps by the pool, shopping in the onboard stores and dancing the night away. When the Royal Caribbean liner docked at the Greek island of Mykonos on July 4 last year, they soaked up the spectacular sights, but couldn't wait to get back to the ship's legendary night-life.

Over dinner that evening, the pair revelled in their blissful union: "We were toasting to the future, toasting to life, and kept saying, 'God, we are just two of the luckiest kids in the world,'" recalls Hagel-Smith. But this meal was to be their last together. At some time in the early hours of the next morning, her husband of only 10 days simply vanished, presumably drowned, and has never been seen since. The distraught 25-year-old primary school teacher could offer no clues to his disappearance, saying she suffered an alcohol-induced blackout after a heavy night of partying. Hagel-Smith's nightmare was just beginning. With no key witnesses, speculation and innuendo flourished and the honeymoon murder mystery became rich fodder for the tabloids, pushing the grief-stricken widow into the spotlight and sparking lurid headlines.

The ensuing months of media scrutiny – fuelled in the US by cable TV and radio shock jocks – heightened the conspiracy theories, and left an entranced American public begging for answers: did George Smith fall overboard or was he the victim of foul play?

Who were the mystery Russian-American boys the pair had befriended? Could Hagel-Smith have been drugged? Had the couple been fighting and involved in physical abuse? What was the FBI hiding?

It seemed the only established facts were that the doomed duo had become the latest victims of a shocking worldwide phenomenon – people disappearing or dying on cruise ships. Since 2003, a staggering 24 Americans alone have been reported missing at sea, presumed dead, and other horror stories abound on the "cruising grapevine" of sexual assault allegations, sick and dying passengers and untold alcohol-fuelled violence.

But, hopelessly in love and oblivious to everything but each other, the newlyweds were unaware of the disturbing statistics.

Strapping George Smith had met his bride-to-be three years earlier while on holiday in Newport, Rhode Island. Their relationship moved rapidly, with Jennifer quickly taking up residence in George's unit, and talk of marriage soon in the air. They even began telling friends they planned to have at least two children.

The handsome 26-year-old university graduate, who was in line to take over his family's successful liquor store in wealthy Cos Cob, Connecticut, was heavily involved in the wedding preparations and, not surprisingly, the affair went off without a hitch.

Looking resplendent in her strapless ivory gown, Hagel-Smith was every inch the beautiful bride as she took her vows with her fiancé on a Newport cliff top on June 25, 2005. "Everyone was so excited for us starting our life together," recounts Hagel-Smith. "It was just the perfect day. It was magical."

The magic continued when, four days later, they ran up the *Brilliance of the Seas* gangway in Barcelona, Spain, for the start of a 12-day cruise, and the honeymoon of a lifetime. Their first impression of the mammoth ship did not disappoint, with its numerous restaurants, dozen different passenger decks, casino and three swimming pools awaiting the leisurely pursuits of its 2500 passengers.

The pair paid \$US10,000 (\$AUD14,000) for their slick stateroom, which included a sofa, built-in wardrobes and a comfortable double bed next to the balcony. They were so impressed that Smith wrote in an email to his parents: "We're having such a

good time. Don't call me unless somebody dies or it's the end of the world." By the fateful night of July 4, the Smiths had already befriended numerous passengers and had loosely planned to meet up with another couple after dinner. But instead, they made their way to the casino, where they gambled for several hours. Hagel-Smith opted for the blackjack table, while Smith sat at a craps table, teaching the game to a fellow passenger, 20-year-old Josh Askin.

When the casino closed at 2.30am, the trio – along with a casino croupier befriended

decks before reconvening back at the Smiths' balcony room. The party of five drinkers became so noisy that they disturbed a neighbour in the adjacent cabin, Clete Hyman, a deputy police chief from Redlands, California.

Hyman's detailed recollection of the events – including the final chilling sounds – have meant the facts surrounding Smith's last minutes have become embroiled in mystery. "We were awakened about 4am by loud yelling coming from the cabin," says Hyman. "It sounded like people cheering, like a drinking contest. This happened on two separate

occasions – the one that woke us up and then again about a minute later." He drifted back to sleep, only to be rudely roused some minutes later at 4.15am with an argument on the balcony involving three men, which was quickly followed by them saying "Good night". Hyman continued to hear a lone male voice and the sound of cupboards being searched and furniture being moved, including the noisy scraping of a chair on the balcony. At 4.25am, Hyman was shocked by a horrifying thud. Then, only eerie silence.

Around the same time, staff found Hagel-Smith asleep in a hallway at the other end of the ship. They transported her back to her room in a wheelchair and deposited her on the bed. They saw no sign of Smith or anything to cause alarm, so they left.

Later that morning, Hagel-Smith awoke to discover her husband was not lying next to her. Thinking he must be sleeping in a friend's cabin, as he had done once before, she hurried to the spa, where she had earlier booked a massage. But, while Hagel-Smith was enjoying the soothing touch of the masseuse, passengers two floors below the Smiths' berth noticed a ghastly bloodstain on the canopy of a lifeboat.

Experienced staffers immediately recognised the signs of an "overboard situation", and organised a head count. It took less than an hour to determine that Smith was the only passenger unaccounted for, and Hagel-Smith was delivered the bombshell – her husband was missing, suspected lost at sea.

"She was like a zombie," the ship's guest relations manager, Marie Breheret, later explained. "She was just desperate. We called in the doctor to make sure she was OK." ►

OTHER PASSENGERS SAY THEY WITNESSED THE VERY INTOXICATED NEWLYWEDS ENGAGE IN AN ARGUMENT

LOST AT SEA: MORE MISSING TOURISTS


January 5, 2006 Lynsey O'Brien, 15, of Ireland, fell overboard from the Costa Cruise Line's *Costa Magica*, off Mexico, after a bartender served her more than 10 alcoholic drinks.



December 10, 2005 Canadian Jill Begora, 59, was reported missing from Royal Caribbean's *Jewel of the Seas* while travelling to the Bahamas. The FBI are still investigating.




May 12, 2005 The belongings of Hue Pham, 71, and Hue Tran, 67, who were travelling on Carnival Cruises' *Carnival Destiny*, were found on deck. It is believed they fell overboard.




January 8, 2005 Victorian Andrew Gready, 24, was last seen in heavy seas near P&O's *Pacific Sky* off the Queensland coast. His family want an inquest.



December 5, 2004 Annette Mizener, 37, of Wisconsin, disappeared from Carnival Cruises' *Carnival Pride* near Mexico. A surveillance camera on deck had been covered.



November 23, 2004 Virginian Glenn Sheridan, 54, was reported missing from Carnival Cruises' *Celebration*, off the Florida coast. He was last seen at a Thanksgiving celebration.



August 28, 2004 Merrian Carver, 40, of Massachusetts, was last seen ordering food on Celebrity Cruises' *Mercury* en route to Alaska. Her absence was noted, but not reported.

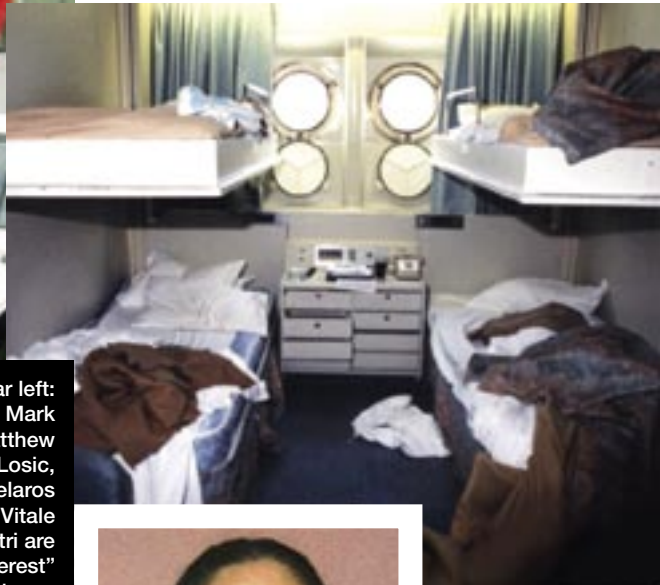


July 23, 2004 Chris Caldwell, 37, of Virginia, disappeared from Carnival Cruises' *Fascination*, off the Florida coast, after a night of drinking.





Clockwise from far left: Ryan Kuchel, Mark Wilhelm, Matthew Slade, Dragan Losic, Petar Pantic, Sakelaros Kambouris, Luigi Vitale and Letterio Silvestri are "persons of interest" in the case of Dianne Brimble's death. Above right: the cabin where Dianne (right) died.



With the Smiths' cabin sealed off and declared a crime scene by the investigating police, detectives took the bride onshore when the ship docked in Turkey. After a day gathering evidence and interviewing witnesses (though, surprisingly, not the Russians, who were the last to see Smith alive), police advised they had no reason to hold Hagel-Smith or anyone else, and returned her to the cruise liner, where the newlywed found her belongings waiting dockside.

"I saw my bags. I saw George's suitcases and I just froze," she said later in a TV interview. "I'm looking at all our suitcases and bags and one thing sticks out. It was George's sneakers ... He ran every day. And it just hit me that he will never wear those sneakers again."

She telephoned her parents in Connecticut to break the unthinkable news and then flew home alone, heartbroken and distraught.

Back in the US, the FBI took over the investigation. Grieving deeply, Hagel-Smith and the Smith family avoided the media, but a rift began to develop between the widow and her mystified in-laws, as she resolutely maintained she had no memory of that fateful night. Soon no-one was talking, as all involved in the case – Hagel-Smith, the Smith family,

She also revealed that bloodstains were found in the cabin, as well as a bloody handprint on the side of the ship, pointing to "criminal involvement".

The mystery deepened, ignited by such headlines as: "Widow breaks silence in cruise disappearance"; "Frenzy builds over missing husband"; and "Family seeks answers". The plot thickened further when it was revealed that Kofman and the two Russians were also questioned by Italian police in connection with the reported rape of a female passenger.

Tensions reached breaking point, with Smith's father publicly accusing Hagel-Smith of withholding information. He wasn't alone – her calm demeanour and lack of recall also drew criticism from news commentators and average Americans. In fact, the media frenzy escalated to such an extent that on January 18, Hagel-Smith appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to defend herself. She told Oprah her memory loss was "extremely haunting" and said an FBI lie-detector test confirmed she remembered nothing. "Why I was unconscious, I don't know," she said. "I just want to know what happened to my husband. I just lost George. Why do I care what the world thinks about me? This is about George."

LESS THAN 24 HOURS AFTER EMBARKING ON HER LONG-AWAITED HOLIDAY, DIANNE WOULD BE DEAD

the Rozenberg brothers, Rusty Kofman and Josh Askin – were gagged by lawyers.

Then everything changed in December last year, when the Smith family started a lawsuit against the owners of the liner. Three days later, Hagel-Smith declared she would also sue and offered a \$100,000 (\$AUD136,000) reward for information leading to any arrests.

Hagel-Smith accused Royal Caribbean of covering up evidence, and claimed the company cruelly abandoned her in Turkey (most of which was later shown to be unfounded).

To keep up the pressure on the investigation, the young widow launched the newly formed International Cruise Victims Association, lobbying the American Congress for improved "safety, security and transparency on cruise ships", and offering support to other victims of cruise crime.

It will be months, or possibly years, before results of any investigations are revealed, small comfort for Hagel-Smith. "George was the centre of my universe. What does my world revolve around now?" she says, sadly.

HORROR ON LOCAL SHORES

It should have been the trip of a lifetime. But when Dianne Brimble boarded P&O's *Pacific Sky* cruise liner, she had no idea that it would be the last trip she'd ever make.

For two years, the 42-year-old Queensland mother of three had scrimped and saved so that she and her 12-year-old daughter, Tahlia, could take their dream holiday on the high seas. It was September 23, 2002, and the pair were looking forward to 10 sun-soaked days ahead, cruising to Noumea and Vanuatu.

That first night, they enjoyed an early dinner with their extended group of travelling companions – Dianne's sister, Alma Wood, niece, Kari-Ann, and close friends, the Chard and Seeto families. Her friends knew Dianne loved to dance and, sure enough, she soon headed for the ship's Starlight Disco with 29-year-old Gamu Chard.

Before they left, Gamu's mother, Nancy, urged Dianne to stay with her son and be wary of predatory male passengers. "I did warn them to stick together," she later said, adding she didn't "like the look" of some men she'd spied earlier eyeing up female passengers.

But no-one knew just how chillingly prescient Nancy's words would prove to be. Less than 24 hours after embarking on her long-awaited holiday, Dianne would be found dead, her naked body face-down on the floor of a stranger's cabin. Allegedly the victim of a date-rape drug, she'd been subjected to degrading sexual acts with at least two men.



Dianne Brimble's de facto, David Mitchell (on left), and her former husband, Mark Brimble, leave Glebe Coroner's Court. Right: mourners at Dianne's funeral in Brisbane. Far right: newspaper reports of the new investigation into Dianne's death. Inset: the vivacious victim.



Now, with the opening of an inquest into Dianne's death in March this year at Sydney's Glebe Coroner's Court, a horrifying picture of her final hours and the events immediately following has unfolded.

The court heard that at the disco, Dianne and Gamu had been dancing, drinking and chatting to other passengers, including a group of eight Adelaide men. Just before the disco closed at 4am, Gamu left and, 20 minutes later, Dianne was spotted exiting the empty disco with some of the Adelaide men.

No-one knows for sure what happened in the following minutes, but what's certain is that fate was about to play a cruel hand to Dianne. It would be almost four years before any details would emerge at the Sydney inquest. There, Queensland sisters Lisa and Kellie Davis told how, in the early hours of the morning, they and their friends Natasha McCann and Tanya Power received a visit from four of the men, whose cabin was along the same corridor.

was drunk. "I presumed that she had been drinking like the rest of us and was passed out."

Later, though, when one of the men returned to the women's cabin with more photos of Dianne who, by then, had lost control of her bodily functions, the sisters remember someone saying, "That's a sign someone is dead."

Wilhelm attempted to revive Dianne but was unsuccessful. The men allegedly debated throwing her body overboard, before deciding against it as, with breakfast time approaching, there were now too many people around. Eventually, the ship's medical emergency number was called, and Dianne was pronounced dead at 9.03am on September 24, 2002, less than a day after she had boarded the *Pacific Sky*.

But it was far from the end of this deeply disturbing story. P&O notified NSW police and, two days later, detectives boarded the ship in Noumea. Before they arrived,

THE MEN ALLEGEDLY DEBATED THROWING DIANNE'S BODY OVERBOARD, BEFORE DECIDING AGAINST IT

According to Kellie, Mark Wilhelm, Dragan Losic, Ryan Kuchel and Petar Pantic offered her and her friends a pinkish liquid that they referred to as "fantasy". Kellie recounted how Wilhelm showed her photographs of him having sex with Dianne, and then took her to his cabin and showed her the woman lying on the floor on a sheet.

With, she says, no idea of the seriousness of the situation, Kellie admitted to having "a bit of a laugh" about Dianne, who she thought

however, the men were allowed to re-enter the crime scene and move their possessions to another cabin. The arrival of the police didn't significantly improve the situation, with detectives spending the first night on board dancing with key witnesses. Lisa Davis claimed she advised one that she and her sister had information. "I waltzed with the detective and said, 'I think you need to speak with us girls,'" she told the inquest. But the women weren't interviewed until four days later.

Finally, a post-mortem revealed that Dianne died as a result of a lethal dose of gamma-hydroxybutyrate (also known as GHB, fantasy and liquid ecstasy). Counsel assisting the coroner, Ron Hoenig, said she had been "preyed upon".

In the face of photographic evidence, Wilhelm admitted to having had sex with Dianne, but said it was consensual. Meanwhile, all eight have been named "persons of interest", and the coroner has sought to call them to give evidence when the inquest resumes this month.

In the meantime, NSW detectives have launched a fresh investigation into the case and P&O Cruises has made moves to improve security. However, it's too little too late for Dianne Brimble's loved ones, who are still waiting for closure – and for the chance to let her rest in peace.