Sunday Telegraph Magazine **3 February 2002**

DEATH ON THE LONELY HIGHWAY
Claire Scobie investigates

Last summer the British tourist Peter Falconio was shot dead in the Australian outback. His girlfriend, Joanne Lees, survived the brutal attack, only to find herself the target of malicious rumour. Six months on Falconio's body is still missing, and the mysterious gunman remains on the loose.

THE STUART HIGHWAY IS a lonely road. Little traffic, few settlements; nothing but the burning red desert of central Australia. I stop the car eight miles north of Barrow Creek.Eagles circle above, and a goanna crosses the highway. Within a few yards of the road there is dense scrub. The intense silence is punctuated by the sound of police ribbons flapping in the wind. These fluorescent ribbons are the only reminder of the terrible events that befell a British couple, Peter Falconio and Joanne Lees, last July. Rain has washed away the bloodstain that once marked the spot where Falconio is believed to have been shot dead by a white 'bushman' within yards of his terrified girlfriend. All evidence - just like Peter Falconio - has vanished.

Seven months later, the police are no closer to finding Peter Falconio, 28, or the gunman. The only witness to the crime, 28-year-old Joanne Lees, who escaped from the gunman's van, refuses to talk publicly. Back in Britain since the end of November, this slim, fragile woman is in hiding. To avoid harassment from the media, she stays with friends rather than with her family in Almondsbury, West Yorkshire. And there would be harassment: for Lees, despite the horror she has undergone, is viewed by many with suspicion. In the aftermath of that July night a section of both the Australian and the British public - not to mention some of the press - jumped to the conclusion Lees was guilty.

Dianna Kenny, Associate Professor of Psychology at Sydney University, puts the problem in a nutshell: 'On the face of it, it's an extraordinary tale. No body, no criminal and an English girl in the Australian outback appears to outsmart a bushman.' It's a brutal summary, but one that only too accurately conveys a widespread perception. Those who know Lees personally - including the Falconio family, the Australian police and the strangers who met her the night she stumbled out of the bush - believe her utterly. They are angry and hurt that she has become such a target.

It all happened on 14 July 2001, the night of the Rugby Union match between the Australian Wallabies and the British Lions in Sydney. More than a thousand miles west, Joanne Lees and Peter Falconio were driving north in their orange VW Kombi van on the Stuart Highway. They had left Alice Springs in the late afternoon after watching the annual Camel Cup races, and had then stopped to refuel and watch a glorious sunset at Ti Tree, about 100 miles from Alice.

Then they ate what was to be their last meal together, toasted sandwiches, and drove on. It was twilight, about 7pm, when they got north of Barrow Creek. A white four-wheel-drive pick-up, its open back covered with tarpaulin pulled alongside. The driver, a man, shouted out that sparks were coming out of the back of their van. Lees later said that she had a bad feeling about stopping but Falconio pulled over. The swift executionof what she says happened next suggests that the vicious attack was pre-meditated and well-planned. The stranger and Falconio walked round to the back of the Kombi: it was to be the last time Lees saw her boyfriend of six years. Falconio called to Lees to rev the engine. She heard a bang - only later did she think it was a gunshot. Suddenly the unknown driver re-appeared, punched her, put a handgun to her head and tied her up – with her hands at the front - before dragging her into his vehicle.

That's the last Lees knows for certain. The gunman left her, presumably to deal with Falconio's body; Lees wriggled to the back of the pick-up, past a dog, and ran 40 or so yards into the bush and hid in the darkness.

And although the man looked for her with his dog and a torch - and came within yards – she stayed hidden and he eventually abandoned his search and vanished into the night. Lees, barefoot, wearing shorts and a sleeveless vest, remained for several hours in the freezing desert.

'Can you imagine sitting there, f***ing petri-fied, panicking chronically? Every car that went past she thought was him, so she jumped out in front of us because she knew [from the sound] that it was a truck,' says Vincent Millar, who almost ran Lees over. 'I went to do a tyre check, looking for clothes, body parts - there's not much left of a kangaroo when they go under three trailers. Then I heard this voice, "Help, help", and she threw herself at me. I couldn't see her - it was pitch black. Then in the head- lights I saw that she had been bound with heavy-duty zip-ties for cables around both arms. There was silver pipe tape round her neck and on her feet, bits of blood and lots of scratches from the spinifex [desert grass].'

Vincent Millar drives road-trains - giant juggernauts - through the Northern Territory, and I catch up with him at 2am on his way through Alice Springs. Covered in black oil, he's bleary eyed after having been on the road for 24 hours. Rugged and sun-soaked, Millar is a brash, remar-kably laid-back man who swears continually. But at one point his macho persona crumbles, and he's close to tears.

'I felt for her,' he says simply. 'Here you've got some Sheila driving up the highway and her life just stops.It's f***ed isn't it? People are sceptic [sic]. I reckon she's genuine.'

Lees was, he says, 'totally amazed' that she'd been in the bush for five hours and frantically asked Millar to help find Peter. 'I cuts [sic] the trailers loose and started looking - that's when I saw the pool of blood on the road, it was a foot wide with dirt over it. All of a sudden she's talking about this gun and I said, "Let's get down to the cop-shop." We drove to the Barrow Creek Roadhouse.'

When I arrive at barrow creek it is 35ºc. in the three hours it takes

to drive the 175 miles from Alice Springs, I count the number of vehicles I see on one hand. The emptiness is eerie. The Northern Territory - 520,000 square miles with a population of 197,000 - has the highest homicide-rate per capita in Australia. It is a place where people go to lose their past.

I stop to refuel. On the garage door there is a missing poster, and Peter Falconio's tanned face smiles out at me. He looks happy. When Falconio was abducted, he and Lees were on the last leg of a dream holiday that Lees had arranged while working as a salesperson at Thomas Cook in Brighton, where Falconio - her 'soul mate' - was working as a building surveyor.

Friends say Falconio was planning to propose to Lees when they reached Hawaii. This very ordinary couple were devoted to each other. Both came from near Huddersfield, and had met locally. Peter, the third of four brothers, is described by his mother, Joan, 53, as 'kind and outgoing'; Joanne (known as Jo) is, Mrs Falconio has said, 'like her own daughter'. The pair kept in regular contact with their families during their travels - through Nepal, Cambodia and Thailand - and only two days before the desert ambush, Falconio had called home to say he was having the time of his life.

'All she kept saying was, "I need Peter,"' says Les Pilton, 51, the publican and owner of the Barrow Creek Roadhouse, who coaxed Joanne Lees into the bar at about 2am. 'You could see her injuries - lacerations on her elbows and knees, red marks on her wrists from the ties.'

What must Joanne Lees have felt like as she arrived at the eight-person settlement of Barrow Creek in the middle of the night? As I walk into the bar, everyone turns to stare. Fans circle lazily. A collection of bank notes from around the world, decaying clothes - including a black lace bra - and photos cover the walls. Cobwebs hang in the corners. A deadly brown snake sits pickled in a jar on a shelf. The day before, I am told, there was a death adder outside the kitchen door, and poisonous red-back spiders nest among the petrol pumps.

My interview with Les Pilton, an affable, idiosyncratic man with a barman's paunch, starts at 4pm and goes on until nearly 11pm; he is called away constantly to serve customers - truckies, travellers and, through a hatch, Aborigines. By mid-afternoon the Aborigines are slumped in the shade. Inside, a blonde woman with smeared red lipstick slides off her barstool after too many glasses of rum and Coke, and Rick, the ashen- faced cook, trembles from a hangover that lasts all day.

On the night Joanne Lees was brought in, the bar had been crowded with regulars watching the rugby match in Sydney, and a few stragglers were left. After phoning the police in both Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, 180 miles north, Pilton made Lees a cup of tea and lit the fire.

Around 5am armed police wearing bulletproof vests arrived, and road-blocks were set up across the state. Later that day, the empty Kombi was found abandoned in the bush, 200 yards from where the incident took place; Lees was told to brace herself for the worst about Falconio. She was too upset to call her parents in England. When her mother, 54-year-old Jennifer James, and stepfather, Vincent James, 58, heard on the news the

following day that an unnamed British couple had been ambushed in their Kombi, they knew instinctively that it was Joanne.

That afternoon, the police wanted Lees to return to Alice Springs for further questioning. Joanne was nervous about going alone, so Pilton suggested she stay at his parents' house in Alice. And as her clothes had been taken for forensic tests, she borrowed tracksuit trousers and a wind-cheater from Pilton's girlfriend, Helen Jones, a flamboyant ex-Irish dancer known as the 'queen of the outback', who also works at Barrow Creek.

Jones, 50, a kind, maternal woman, offered to accompany Lees until two of Lees's girlfriends flew out from Sydney three days later. Jones became Lees's confidante, chaperone and friend, buying her new clothes and sharing a bed with her. 'Joanne said, "You stay with me." She felt very insecure. She would have a couple of hours sleep and then have a natter about Peter - about how much they were enjoying themselves, about their plans to settle down when they returned to England.'

Traumatised and having barely slept, Lees was questioned intensely from 8am every morning. She went to the hospital for a medical examination - though not one for sexual assault, legal advice was given, and counselling was only offered several days later.

'A couple of times Joanne was annoyed with the police because they were going over the same thing again and again,' says Jones. There was also the media to deal with - journalists from all over Australia had arrived.

'Out of respect for the Falconio family, she was very anti talking to the press,' says Jones. 'She thought it would do more harm than good.' Still, to clarify the inaccuracies already being published, Jones, who used to work for a local newspaper in Alice, arranged for Lees to talk to Mark Wilton, chief of staff at the town's Centralian Advocate. The ten-minute interview, which Jones sat in on, was clearly an ordeal for Lees, who said the gunman 'would not have let me go... and must be captured.'

It is the only time Lees spoke to a journalist one-on-one, preferring to communicate with the press via intermediaries. In fact, says Frank Walker, chief reporter at the Sun Herald, she was horrified by the huge sums of money she was offered by the British tabloids and Australian television channels: 'Lees was disgusted at making money out of Peter's death. She's a very intelligent, sensitive woman who literally curled up in a ball.'

In the first week of the manhunt, 150 police searched the area on foot, motorbike and from the air. Except for Lees's sandals, no significant evidence was found, and Aborigine trackers were called in only after the police had done a shoulder-to-shoulder search around the crime scene. It was too late: the trackers found only evidence of where Lees had hidden and the tracks of 'big boots' - the policemen's boots.

An identikit picture of the assailant – with a drooping moustache and straggly hair – was released. It's a look sported by many of the itinerant workers who drift around the Northern Territory, and armed police sprang on several unsuspecting look-a-likes.

On 18 July Joanne Lees was brought to Barrow Creek for a gruelling re-enactment of her ordeal; the same day Peter Falconio's father, Luciano, and brother, Paul, 31, arrived in Alice Springs. It was only when Luciano, who recently retired as owner of a small village store in Yorkshire, saw the vastness of the Northern Territory that he could understand why nothing had been found. The devastated father made an emotional appeal for news of his son. When filmed holding a poster offering a £90,000 reward, he broke down.

For ten days Lees did not appear in public, and rumours began to circulate in Alice Springs. It was thought the police were keeping her because she was under suspicion, though she was in fact never under house arrest, nor was her passport ever withheld. But the story, says Paul Toohey, a journalist from the Australian, 'seemed unlikely to begin with and it became a fun thing to do - to speculate. And some people quickly made up their mind that they didn't believe Joanne Lees. People are illogical about this story. There's no reason to think that she would do it by herself, there would have had to be proof of accomplices. How would she have got rid of the body?'

Nevertheless journalists and editors found loopholes in Lees's story and asked difficult questions. Some were unfounded - such as, did Lees have a history of mental illness? Others were more reasonable - why, for instance, didn't the dog find her? Kathy Moylan, a local vet, has an answer to that: 'It's perfectly possible that the dog may have smelt Lees but if the dog isn't trained, then it wouldn't sniff her out.'

Still, suspicions continued to be aired, and a nervous Lees was forced to brave the cameras. It was not a success. Stage-managed in a hall in Alice, with only one journalist allowed to ask three questions - which were all to do with the press coverage and not with what happened - Lees came across poorly and spoke with little emotion.

'It's a natural progression for a victim to make a public appeal. A week later there was only this strange controlled appearance,' says Frank Walker of the Sydney Morning Herald. 'We're used to a crying victim on cue and Joanne wasn't playing the part.'

Nor did the police help Joanne's case when they bungled the handling of a video they had seized on 22 July from the Shell truck-stop in Alice. Taken at 2am on 15 July, a few hours the and a vehicle closely resembling Lees's descriptions. With no other leads and no evidence that a third person was involved, it was crucial in substantiating Lees's story - indeed she told police that she thought the man in the video was her attacker. But it was nearly three weeks before the video was released publicly. The delay, say the police, was due to the poor quality of the original image which had to be sent interstate to be enhanced; the police also emphasise that there is no proof that the man in the footage was the offender.

But, says Val Prior, manager of the Shell garage, 'I don't think the image was changed from the time when it was taken to when it was released.'

by mid-august the investigation had stalled, and an emotionally shattered Joanne Lees flew back to Sydney. Desperate for anonymity and for a break from the police and media, she returned to her job as a sales

assistant at Dymocks bookshop, in the heart of Sydney, where she had worked for four months before she and Peter Falconio had set off on their fateful journey. But how could Lees lead a normal life when photographers were crowding around the shop window trying to take her photo and some customers would even ask for her autograph?

'On the outside, she was putting on a brave face,' says Gary Sullivan, Dymocks's manager. 'But as time passed and people from the press started bothering her, she seemed worse. She kept saying, "I'm not going to be interviewed on television just so people can see me cry." Maybe that was a personal thing, but she didn't want to seem to have that sort of weakness.'

Softly spoken, with penetrating blue eyes, Sullivan is evidently very fond of 'Jo' Lees, who had pestered him for a job when she and Falconio had first arrived in Sydney in February last year. 'Jo was fun to be around,' he says. 'She was very good towards the customers and got on well with all the staff'; they, in turn, would tease her about her strong Yorkshire accent. Lees and Falconio were, he says, inseparable: 'In one sense she was a bit immature because she'd had Peter for nearly seven years and would rely on him.'

Every night Falconio - who had found employment at an office furniture company - would religiously pick Lees up after work. Sometimes, with friends, they would go for drinks at St Patrick's Poker Machine Lounge, before going dancing at a nightclub in the Kings Cross district.

'Jo's the sort of girl that any father would be proud of - I don't how she got through what's happened to her. She obviously has a deep inner strength,' Sullivan tells me in his tiny office. Above him is a photo-collage of the leaving party he and his colleagues threw for Lees before her nightmare began; their goodbye present was a pendant. With her raven-black hair, deep purple shades and shocking pink top, Lees is startlingly beautiful. In every photo she is smiling. There is another picture of her with Amanda Weallins - together known as 'the angels' - in a pink glitter frame below. Weallins, taller, with platinum blonde hair, is a loyal friend of Lees, and Sullivan arranged for her to fly to Alice once the dreadful news of her plight reached Sydney. Like all her colleagues, Weallins refused to talk to me out of respect for Lees's wishes: 'It wouldn't be worth losing a friend,' she told me.

When Lees was in Alice Springs, she depended on Peter's brother, Paul Falconio, who has similar looks but more chiselled features, to speak to the media. They returned to Sydney together, and at first stayed with friends outside the city before Lees moved in with Amanda Weallins. Paul continued to offer his unwavering support, saying, 'I'm trying to help Jo as best I can to get through. [But] she finds it hard to talk to me about what happened.' To make sure she wasn't bothered, he would collect Lees most nights after work.

'It's only natural that Paul would be supporting her,' says the reporter Frank Walker. 'He's the brother of her dead boyfriend, after all.' 'At the end I think he had to leave,' says Gary Sullivan. 'I think Paul thought Jo might have been relying on him too much.' As time passed and no fresh news emerged, Lees became increasingly despondent, and in late September, when she turned

28, had a miserable birthday, sharing a take-away with a friend. 'I tried to get her to have counselling,' says Sullivan, clearly upset, 'and she went to see a couple of counsellors but stopped because she said it wasn't help ing. She said that she wasn't interested whether or not they found the guy who did it, only that they find Pete.

Then she'd cry and say, "I know they aren't going to find him." She was just clinging to a little bit of hope.' 'in the last month before jo returned to England,' says Chief Superintendent Kate Vanderlaan in Alice Springs, 'she was very down and feeling quite lonely.' Not surprisingly: for despite the 'good DNA profile' of a man taken from Lees's shirt, a team of 14 working full-time on the investigation and more than 5,000 enquiries, the police are no closer to finding
a prime suspect.

When I go to meet Vanderlaan in the police station, there is a sinewy man with a mop of messy hair hanging around the waiting-room; he's a white 'bushie' who, I learn later, is keen to go up to Barrow Creek to look for Falconio's body in the hope of reaping a reward. I'm taken upstairs to meet Chief Superintendent

Vanderlaan, an earnest woman with a slightly quizzical statement, in her spartan office. She's wearing a fuchsia pink blouse and heavy black shoes and she appears a little nervous at first, saying that up until now she's been 'spared' talking to the press. Although she is used to dealing with violent local crime - usually alcohol-related - this is her biggest investigation to date. She
thinks the motivation for the attack was possibly sexual assault or 'that it was a thrill thing'.

Vanderlaan is desperately keen to solve the case - not just for Jo and the Falconios, but also for the reputation of the Northern Territory police force, which
has taken a battering at the hands of some Australian journalists. In short - with the perceived ineptitude over the handling of the video and accusations that police had, at times, given out misinformation - the force has been accused of contributing to the demonisation of Joanne Lees.

'It's crap,' says Vanderlaan's superior, John Daulby, who is the Assistant Chief Commissioner of the Northern Territory police force. 'We are not a backward bush-type of organisation.'

Vanderlaan maintains regular contact with Lees and is hoping for the day she can give her news - any news, even if it isn't good. But her own hypothesis is
a bleak one: during the 'awfully long time' Lees was hiding in the bush, says Vanderlaan 'the person left the Territory. Travelling from Barrow Creek to South
Australia would take about three hours so there was that window of opportunity. There's a lot of places you could hide a vehicle and hole up for a period of time.'

But where's the body? Later that day, I meet the bushie who had been loitering in the police station. He lives out in the wild for months at a time with only a knife, matches, a cooking-pot and his dog for company. He tells me there are plenty of men like him who can exist on goanna, kangaroo, snake and even witchetty grubs - white worms with a milky taste. 'People,' the bushie continues, 'go to the Northern Territory to disappear. It's a big place to hide a body. With a dead kangaroo, after a month there would only be clean bones left.'

It's not the sort of story that Joanne Lees would want to hear. And as I hear it, I recall the Barrow Creek publican Les Pilton's parting words to me about the Australian outback: 'Life is in the raw here,' he had said. 'You see death here. You can't expect a crime to be solved in a 30-minute TV show. Truth is always stranger than fiction.'

Ends