

What about the defense attorney? For Repetto, the Solta case was his first felony trial. A young lawyer just setting up practice, he had been assigned the case by the judge when Solta said he had no money to hire an attorney. There would be no fee.

"I had long talks with him," Repetto recalls. "I tried to determine for myself what kind of a guy he was. He said he went to that house only to get some water for his car, and that he never went inside, and after I went all through that case, I believed him. I thought he was innocent."

To try to prove it, Repetto spent hours driving around Flower Hill, memorizing the area of the crime so that he could handle all details about it that might come up in court. He drove, over and over again, along the route Solta said he had taken from the Coopermans to his home to clock times and distances. When Solta told him that he had been in the Flower Hill area to look for a job, Repetto found the man to whom he had applied and persuaded him – "I pleaded with him" – to appear on the stand. Trying to get all the facts about car over-heating, he talked to auto mechanics. He checked all available public records on the Coopermans and on all witnesses – including his own character witnesses – to see if they had any criminal records that could be used for or against them when they took the stand.

"I dedicated myself to the defense of this fellow to the exclusion of all my other cases," Repetto recalls today. In court, his involvement was obvious. As he cross-examined Mrs. Cooperman, the judge had to caution him, "Relax. Just relax."

In his summation, Repetto's feelings spilled over. "With you," he told the jury, "sits the 13th juror. He is the presumption of innocence. The defendant is presumed innocent. If you have any valid reason in doubting his guilt, you must acquit him." Over and over again, he pounded at the doubts the jurors might have. How could the two women be sure the shadow Marsha saw inside the house wasn't just a shadow? How could they be sure the garage door hadn't been left open? How could they be sure that Solta wasn't just standing by that door and had never actually entered the house? The jury found the defendant guilty, but Repetto planned to appeal. "I still believed with all my heart that he was innocent," he recalled.

But then, something happened. On the day that Solta was sentenced, the day that his wife's mind "stopped" as she sat in the courtroom, Solta stopped for just a second as he was being led from the courtroom to prison. He leaned over and whispered something to Repetto. "Listen," he whispered. "So what if I was inside that house? Big deal."

"Yes," Repetto says today. "I guess you could say that case had an effect on me."

And what about the victims, Marsha and Eleanor Cooperman? Their glimpse of Solta inside their home was as flickering as a shadow, their conversation with him lasted no more than two minutes, their financial loss was small.

Criminologists talk about an "element of fear" that enters even the smallest crime when there is an actual confrontation between the criminal and the victim, an actual meeting face to face of the innocent and the person who is trying to do them harm. But, you wonder, will there be any fear in a case this small?

"Please don't ask my wife about it," Alex Cooperman says. "There had been an instance once before of prowlers in the house. And after the trial started, there were these phone calls. They would come in at midnight, at two in the morning, at four. A voice would say, 'We'll burn your house down,' or 'You'll be lying out in an alley someplace.' The police said it was cranks, but my wife"

Today, six years after she encountered Joey Solta on the lawn of her home, Mrs. Eleanor Cooperman won't go outside without locking all the doors behind her. The locks are big double locks and there is a chain lock on the Coopermans' bedroom door. Says her daughter: "Mother was always nervous and this case had made her more nervous ever since. She doesn't talk about it any more, but you can see it's in the back of her mind every time she walks into the house. To tell the truth, I think that no matter how long she lives, that case will always be with her."

The case began with a shadow. It lengthened somewhat.