A Tale of Two Sisters

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She needed to get rid of her little sister.

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Nothing really happens in the small, sleepy town of Groton, Massachusetts. The 1992 film School Ties was shot in part at the prestigious Groton School, a prep school attended by both Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt; and in 2011, the 333-year-old Groton Stagecoach Inn (rumored to have been visited by Paul Revere, Ulysses S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, and William H. Taft) burned down—arsenic was suspected, but ultimately negated. The picturesque town features cute local boutiques, a plethora of farmland, three Dunkin Donuts, and even the remnants of a castle. It’s a good place to raise children or settle into retirement. It is safer than 91% of all US cities.¹ Nothing bad happens.

At least that’s what the bubble-like environment leads you to believe.

A young dancer would never expect her instructor to tell the story of a latent murder during ballet class. Yet it happened to me. My juvenile imagination was captivated by this tale—a murder…in Groton—but it floated to the back of my mind and was forgotten. Other than that night at dance class, I’d never heard of a murder that happened in my town. No one talked about it; I’d be willing to bet most of the town’s inhabitants don’t know it happened. Only recently was I reminded of the small town’s black mark. So I dug into the story in order to discover the unspoken truth.

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To make any semblance of sense from the Santerre murder, the sisters’ childhoods must be explored. Heather Santerre and her younger sister, Stephanie, were separated early on when their parents divorced in 1980. Heather, age three at the time, went to live with her father and grandparents in Townsend, while Stephanie, just a few months old, remained with her mother in Fitchburg. The sisters still saw one another on occasion and tried to remain close.

Mostly raised by her grandparents, Roy and Jeanne, Heather was a happy child. In an interview, Roy recalled, “Heather just loved McDonald's ever since she was a baby. Hamburgers and French fries were her favorite food. Even when she was a small kid she'd point to the golden arches.” She grew up to be a heavyset girl and was often teased about her weight.

Appositionally, Stephanie was slim, blonde, and blue-eyed. She was confident, whereas Heather felt insecure. But she did not have the same pleasant childhood that Heather did.

As Stephanie entered her early adolescence, she began to cause trouble. Local Groton dance instructor, Caitlin Brandt, who attended school with Stephanie said she was, “pretty messed up. One day Stephanie was sticking maxi pads to the wall of the school with liquid foundation to create a mural.” She didn’t adhere very well to rules; she stayed out late, skipped school, smoked on campus, attempted to run away, and was repeatedly suspended. Her mother, Carol Caisse, was unwilling and unable to control her daughter, so she called the state Department of Social Services (DSS). In March of 1992, Carol placed Stephanie in foster care.

For the next fifteen months, Stephanie was transferred to six different foster homes, one of which was the Perry household. The family claimed that her behavior improved when she lived with them. Foster sister Dawn Whitney recalled that Stephanie only acted out after visiting

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3 Brandt, Caitlin. Personal Interview. 4 April 2016.
Heather and her boyfriend, “She'd cause trouble when she came back from seeing them, but otherwise, she was doing great.” Yet according to the DSS, in December of 1994 Stephanie refused to remain in foster care any longer. Because her case was voluntary, Carol retained guardianship and the DSS couldn’t force Stephanie to stay in foster care. However, the Perrys believed that Stephanie didn’t want to return home. They claimed her DSS social worker was “single-minded” about returning Stephanie to her mother’s custody. The Perry family still blames the DSS, claiming that they “made two errors: returning 16-year-old Stephanie Santerre to her mother after a stable year in their home, and closing her case in September 1995 when the agency knew she was going to live with her older sister and her boyfriend.”

Willingly or not, Stephanie went home.

During this time, Heather met Paul Jones (who often went by his mother’s maiden name Reed). Lanky, hyperactive, and depressed, Paul was not the sort of boy her family approved of. He dropped out of Groton-Dunstable High School freshman year and worked as part-time mechanic for a brief period of time. While some thought of him as a normal, friendly teenager, his friends also classified Paul by his temper and anger management issues. To her grandfather’s dismay, Heather and Paul began to date; Roy said, “You know, Heather was always a model girl. She never had trouble until she met Paul.” In 1993, Heather believed herself to be pregnant and the couple became engaged. However, Roy refused to accept Paul into his home, so Heather decided to move out. She dropped out of North Middlesex High School and got a job at a Shop

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5 Grunwald
6 Grunwald
7 Roy Santerre (qtd. Jacobs)
’N Save supermarket. Though she later found out she was not pregnant, Heather still began to live in with Paul in his mother’s house on Fitch’s Bridge Road in Groton.

Martha Reed’s house was not the sort of charming residence that Groton tends to advertise. It was small, old, and dirty. Her son Paul occupied the second floor while she and her other three children stayed downstairs. Thriving in dys-functionality, the second floor served as a haven for teenagers who didn’t conform to the traditional Groton lifestyle. Teenagers stayed and left as they pleased, crashing on floored mattresses. A heady mixture of disorder, sex, and rebellion lingered throughout the house. Three slightly permanent residents were Brad Pinkerton, Greg Michaud, and his girlfriend Patty McKinnon, who happened to be a long-time friend of Heather. And soon another resident would arrive.

After a few months of living at home again, Stephanie became a nuisance to her mother once again. Carol found that her daughter was as uncontrollable as ever and didn’t know what to do. To placate both her mother and sister, Heather suggested that Stephanie move in with her. Though Carol allegedly had doubts about her daughters living together, she felt she had no choice and gave Heather temporary guardianship over Stephanie so she could attend Groton-Dunstable High School, “I trusted my girls.”

The new living arrangements quickly became disastrous. Stephanie shamelessly flirted with all of the boys living at the house, especially Paul. Apparently the relationship began innocently enough with “stolen kisses and mock wrestling,“ but soon escalated to an affair. According to Brad, “Any time Heather went out, Paul and Stephanie were upstairs going at it.” Greg agreed, “Paul was playing those girls one off the other…When Heather would leave, he'd go upstairs with Stephanie. Then Heather would come home and he'd bring Heather upstairs and

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8 Carol Caisse (qtd. Jacobs)  
9 Jacobs  
10 Brad Pinkerton (qtd. Jacobs)
do the same thing.”"¹¹ It appeared that Paul was enticed by the power he had over the sisters. Though Paul initially denied accusations of a sexual relationship, saying that Stephanie was “obsessed with him,”¹² everyone knew what was really happening.

   Except for Heather.

   She did have her suspicions, however. In fact, both Patty and Heather believed that Stephanie was sleeping with their boyfriends.¹³ To uncover the truth, they sought out Stephanie’s diary, which she kept hidden under her mattress. The red spiral journal detailed exactly how obsessed Stephanie was. Her entries indicated that she “wanted Paul, she wanted to kill Heather and never wanted Heather and Paul to be together,”¹⁴ and that she “was in love with [Paul], that they were going to be together and [Heather] would be out of the way, and they'd be happy.”¹⁵ As she read the diary, her suspicions were confirmed. Resolved, she closed the journal and tossed it into the trash—never to be recovered—knowing what had to be done.

   She needed to get rid of her little sister.

   At this time, Heather argued with Paul at night, and with Stephanie during the day. The sisters’ relationship became increasingly tense. Their mother Carol said that Stephanie always called when she had a fight with Heather. When Carol found out that Stephanie was sleeping with Paul, she asked her to come home. But Stephanie refused, so sure that she and Paul were going to be together.

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¹¹ Greg Michaud (qtd. Jacobs)
¹² Jacobs
¹⁴ Jacobs
¹⁵ Commonwealth vs. Jones.
Allegedly, it started as a joke. Patty recalled that Heather mentioned “get[ting] rid of Stephanie because she didn't want her to get Paul,” but didn’t believe she would do that to her sister. Heather and Paul jokingly asked Patty to help them look for a hiding place for the body—she suggested the Ashby State Forest. “I never took her seriously,” Patty said. Yet things became more serious as the weeks passed:

On Friday, January 26, 1996, Santerre [Heather], the defendant [Paul], and McKinnon [Patty] went for a drive. The conversation in the car turned to planning the victim's death and looking for places to dispose of the body. They looked at several places, but did not find any ‘good spots.’ On the way back to McKinnon's house in Ashby, Santerre turned down a dirt road, and the defendant requested that Santerre stop the car. The defendant identified a place at the side of the road that he said was a “good spot” because there was a tree, the base of which was not visible from where he was standing. Heather asked Patty to help lure Greg away from the house, but she refused. She asked if they were actually going to go through with the murder. The couple said, “they weren't; that it was [Heather’s] sister, and they couldn't do it.”

But unbeknownst to Patty, that night Heather spoke to Paul about killing her Stephanie. Together they planned it out. They would do it Monday, they decided, when Martha “would be at work and the kids would be at school,” Heather said. However, on January 28, 1996 the house was surprisingly empty. It was Super Bowl Sunday; the Dallas Cowboys were playing the Pittsburg Steelers at the Sun Devil Stadium in Arizona. All of America watched to see which team would be the champion of Super Bowl XXX.

Well, almost all.

16 Jacobs
17 Patricia McKinnon (qtd. Jacobs)
18 Patricia McKinnon (qtd. Jacobs)
19 Commonwealth vs. Jones
20 Patricia McKinnon (qtd. Commonwealth vs. Jones)
21 Heather Santerre (qtd. Jacobs)
Plans changed. That morning Paul called Patty and said, “Today is the day. We're going to do it.” Later on, Heather got Greg out of the house by going for a ride in her gray 1985 Monte Carlo. They picked up Patty on the way home. According to Patty:

After Santerre drove into the defendant's driveway she sounded the horn. Santerre got out of the car, and exchanged words with the defendant who was at a window on the second floor. The defendant “shook his head ‘yes,’” and Santerre returned to the car. Santerre, McKinnon and Michaud drove to a grocery store, returned to the house approximately ten minutes later, and Santerre honked the horn again. The defendant came to the window, “shook his head ‘yes,’” and Santerre went into the house. Santerre returned to the car approximately five minutes later, and told McKinnon to take a drive with Michaud.23

When Patty and Greg returned, Paul and Heather were putting away groceries with Martha in the kitchen. Patty went up to their room to get a sweatshirt; Paul followed her. She saw a small pipe on the floor. Paul said to her, “She's dead,” and began to detail the murder.

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After Heather and Greg left, Paul and Stephanie were alone together in the house. Paul recalled that she began to scream at him, “‘Why don't you love me?’ She accused me of cheating on her with Heather. She began to call Heather names. . . . I was getting madder and madder. I punched the column.” Paul went to his basement and grabbed a bike chain. When he returned, he lured her into his room by saying that “they were going to have sex.” Stephanie “tried to kiss me and grab me in a sexual way,” Paul recounted. But when she tried to grab the chain, Paul said, “I grabbed her with my hands. I was holding her by the throat over my head…She

22 Patricia McKinnon (qtd. Commonwealth vs. Jones)
23 Commonwealth vs. Jones
24 Patricia McKinnon (qtd. Commonwealth vs. Jones)
25 Paul Jones (qtd. Jacobs)
26 Patricia Jones (qtd. Commonwealth vs. Jones)
27 Paul Jones (qtd. Jacobs)
started to cry so I dropped her on the floor. She started in on me again.”28 Stephanie punched him. Paul saw red; he “taped her arms to her legs, blindfolded and gagged her.”29 “I put the chain up to her neck. She was on the floor. I was on the bed.” And as he gradually drew the chain tight, he whispered, “Do you still trust me, Steph?”30

Heather returned home and as she got closer to the room, Paul yelled, “Don't come in here. You're not going to like this.”31 But still she watched from the doorway for “three full minutes”32 as he strangled her sister. Paul “pulled the chain to get her to stop breathing. Every time that he loosened the chain the victim would gasp for a breath. The defendant's hands began to hurt, so he picked up the piece of pipe and used it to pull the chain.”33 He didn’t stop until the last breath left her.

Heather entered the room and pinched her sister’s leg. Nothing. She lifted her Stephanie's white T-shirt and laid her ear upon chest to listen for a heartbeat or a breath. Nothing.

She was finally gone.

Heather got a “big 33-gallon”34 green trash bag, but Stephanie’s body didn’t fit. So she brought a large trash can up from the garage. They folded her body in half to fit her in. As they carried her to the garage, Stephanie “had gotten a heartbeat back on the way down.”35 So they stopped and Paul pulled the bike chain tightly and snapped her neck. Dead. This time for sure.

They brought her to the garage and covered her with trash.

28 Paul Jones (qtd. Jacobs)
29 Commonwealth vs. Jones
30 John McEvoy (qtd. Jacobs)
31 Heather Santerre (qtd. Jacobs)
32 Jacobs
33 Commonwealth vs. Jones
34 Jacobs
35 Paul Jones (qtd. Commonwealth vs. Jones)
Later that night Paul allegedly returned to the garage and whispered, “I'm sorry,”\(^{36}\) to Stephanie’s corpse.

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Paul showed Patty the “red marks on his hand from the chain”\(^{37}\) as he told her the story. She was shocked. Apparently, “[Paul] told [Patty] not to say anything to anybody, and that if she did, [Paul] would ‘get [her], too.’”\(^{38}\) When they went back to the kitchen, Patty said Heather was “dancing around” saying that she was “finally dead and out of her life.”\(^{39}\) Before she left, Paul reminded Patty her not to divulge their secret. “What could I do?” she later said in an interview, “I was afraid.”\(^{40}\) She never believed that Heather and Paul would go through with their plan.

Heather called the Groton police the next morning to report her sister missing. She told them that Stephanie had run away. Groton Police Chief, George D. Rider, reported that Heather “just said that they had a sibling-type argument and she had just walked off, and that happens.”\(^{41}\) The couple even went out to “search” for Stephanie. The girls’ father went with them, “They knew all along—that's the part that got me,”\(^{42}\) Gary said. Their mother Carol said, “Whenever they have an argument, Stephanie usually calls me right away because then she has somebody to cry to and she didn't. I knew as days went by, something was wrong.”\(^{43}\) Eventually Stephanie was found. “To tell you the truth, we didn't suspect foul play until yesterday, when things started

\(^{36}\) Paul Jones (qtd. Commonwealth vs. Jones)
\(^{37}\) Patricia McKinnon (qtd. Commonwealth vs. Jones)
\(^{38}\) Patricia McKinnon (qtd. Commonwealth vs. Jones)
\(^{39}\) Patricia McKinnon (qtd. Commonwealth vs. Jones)
\(^{40}\) Patricia McKinnon (qtd. Jacobs)
\(^{43}\) Carol Caisse (qtd. O’Brien)
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to come together,” Rider later told reporters, though at the time he refused to divulge what led them to Stephanie’s body.

On February 5th Patty broke. After a week of the heavy secret weighing her down, her mother called the police to say that Patty had information about Stephanie’s disappearance. She went with her mother to the station to be interviewed. She told police that she heard the Paul say “something about [Stephanie] and where she was.” Patty revealed that she was likely in the Willard Brook State Forest in Ashby. Two days later, Patty went to the police station again, and told police that “[Paul] had killed [Stephanie].”

Stephanie Santerre’s body was found on February 7, 1996. According to the facts detailed in the denial of Paul D. Jones’s 2003 appeal case, she was:

protruding from a trash bag with a bicycle chain around her neck. The victim's body was frozen to the ground. The ankles and wrists were bound with duct tape, and the hands were bound to the body. The victim's neck had an abrasion stained with black grease, in a pattern consistent with the bicycle chain. There was no grease on the victim's hands. The medical examiner opined that the cause of death was strangulation by ligature, and that the bicycle chain could have been the murder weapon. The victim's rectum contained sperm cells mixed with her blood, consistent with the victim's having anal intercourse before her death. The sperm cells were consistent with the defendant's DNA, but due to the mixture with the blood, the laboratory was unable to calculate the statistical probability of the DNA match. The police discovered fourteen fingerprints from the inside layers of the duct tape, thirteen of which matched the defendant's. The police were unable to identify the remaining print.

That night, Heather and Paul were taken to the police station. When Heather was told that her boyfriend was her sister’s suspected murderer she cried, “I can't live without Paul. I need Paul.” At 6:30 p.m., nineteen-year-old Paul D. Jones was charged with the murder of Stephanie

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44 George D. Rider (qtd. O’Brien)
45 Patricia McKinnon (qtd. Commonwealth vs. Jones)
46 Patricia McKinnon (qtd. Commonwealth vs. Jones)
47 Commonwealth vs. Jones
48 Heather Santerre (qtd. Jacobs)
Santerre, held without bail. Heather Santerre was charged with being an accessory, held with a bail of $100,000. Jealousy tore two sisters apart:

Why, State Police asked Heather, did she watch her boyfriend kill her sister?
“I wanted her dead,” Heather replied.
Why did she want her sister dead?
“Because she's a {expletive} lying son of a bitch,” Heather said, her voice rising.
What did Stephanie lie about?
“Everything,” Heather snapped.49

On April 11, 1997, Paul was convicted of murder in the first degree by reason of deliberate premeditation. He was sentenced to life in prison without parole. On June 16, 1997, Heather pleaded guilty to the charge in order to reduce her sentence. She was released from prison on May 25, 2012. Carol Caisse has reconciled with her daughter, but “but has not found peace with what happened.”50 Gary Santerre still holds animosity toward Paul, “he ain't gonna make it if he gets out. If Paul gets out, I'll kill him. You print that,”51 but has forgiven Heather.

It is impossible to understand how a man can come between sisters, but it’s clear that Paul Jones wielded a power over the two girls. In his closing statement, prosecutor John McEvoy, “Stephanie was the problem. She was going to get killed. [Paul] did it for himself and for Heather52.”

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From what I’ve discovered, I’m not surprised that I’d never heard the full story. Groton is a wonderful town, but as a resident, you feel a certain amount of pressure to appear perfect. Only the best is expected of you and divergence is reprehensible. For example: girls didn’t get pregnant at my school; or if they did, they transferred before anyone knew about it. A crime such

49 Heather Santerre (qtd. Jacobs)
50 Carol Caisse (qtd. Jack Minch)
51 Gary Santerre (qtd. Jacobs)
as the Santerre murder is a large blemish within the history of the town. But if I’ve learned anything from researching this occurrence, I’ve learned that family is more important than a lover and I’ve learned that buried under the façade of perfection, a sordid past exists—and it’s actually quite a relief.
Bibliography


Massachusetts Court Cases. Web.


