Heartbreak and the Girl from Perham Hall

By Matt Benoit

John Stickney was an 18-year-old, six-foot-three, 180-pound high-school dropout with a slender build and straight, sandy hair. He lived with his parents near Seattle, on Mercer Island, and worked as a charge and powder man at a Monroe, Washington rock quarry. And on a Tuesday afternoon in December of 1979, he took a satchel filled with dynamite to the fifth floor of Washington State University’s Perham Hall and blew himself apart.

There was a reason, to be sure, in Stickney’s madness. There was a reason why three female students and two campus police officers were injured, why part of a dorm room door was blown 500 feet across Stadium Way onto the front lawn of a Presbyterian Church, and why his bone and tissue fragments lay covered by plastic in a dorm parking lot.

Her name was Lisa Clark.

The beginning of the end

John’s father, William Stickney, said in a newspaper article that John and Lisa had known each other since junior high. Meeting after Lisa’s family moved to Mercer Island in 1973, John became close friends with Lisa and then something more. They dated, on-and-off, for about three years. To his father’s knowledge, Lisa was only girl John ever dated.

Eventually, as with many young relationships, their paths in life began to diverge: John dropped out of high school and attended a Renton vocational school, then got a welding job and, eventually, found employment with the Industrial Rock Products Company in Monroe. Lisa graduated high school and enrolled at Washington State University, nearly 300 miles away from John.
and her home. According to a Lewiston Morning Tribune article after the bombing, John had wanted her to remain in the Seattle area and enroll at the University of Washington, but she decided otherwise.

It is not difficult to imagine what John might have felt after Lisa moved away: A profound, headache-inducing sense of loss and a near-constant, crushing longing to be with her; a lonely emptiness where there had once been her warmth and kindness, her beautiful eyes and bright smile, the touch of her hands; an emptiness manifesting itself in his stomach with seemingly-physical pain. Worse yet, it is possible he worried about her dating someone else, someone better than him. He might have thought, fearfully, about losing her forever.

John called Lisa often just to talk, frequently enough that Clark’s college roommate, Teri Gregory, complained to their floor’s resident adviser about never being able to use the phone. Mary Beth Johnson, the head resident adviser of Perham Hall, called John “the ultimate romantic” in an article published in WSU’s 1979-80 yearbook. Johnson said he really loved Lisa, often giving her gifts.

At the rock quarry, where John’s boss would later describe him in a newspaper interview as a “conservative kid who always maintained control of his temper,” he was well-liked. On Mercer Island, a neighbor of the Stickneys, Harmon Leonard, called John a “wonderful, caring individual” who was into athletics and caring to friends. John Hines, another neighbor, said he was a bit wild but incapable of hurting anyone. Even true crime author Ann Rule, who featured the story in her book “Empty Promises,” wrote that John’s likeability made him “the kind of boyfriend parents would want for their daughter.”

There was, however, another side to John Stickney.

A WSU freshman who knew John well said he wasn’t surprised to learn John was the bombing’s culprit. The student (who had
refused to reveal his identity for a published interview with WSU’s student newspaper) said John made pipe bombs capable of blowing down small trees in junior high, using gunpowder or compressed match heads for explosive charges. Once, John had bragged about setting off a bomb at a QFC supermarket on the south end of Mercer Island, the explosion reportedly making a large hole in the parking lot pavement. Both Mercer Island police and the QFC store manager couldn’t remember any damage being done; the manager could only recall a small pipe bomb being set off near the store.

Also not surprised was Sergeant Ken Miller of the Washington State Patrol, a close family friend. After the bombing, Miller told police John often got into trouble, prompting Miller to have long talks with him. In Miller’s eyes, John was “unstable.” Teri Gregory, Lisa’s roommate, said in a police statement that she’d once seen him douse a wrecked car in gasoline and set it ablaze. John could be violent when mad, she’d written, using threats against Lisa to get what he wanted. According to the police report, he’d once threatened Lisa with a rifle. A number of times during the semester, John had driven to Pullman unexpectedly to surprise Lisa, trying to reconcile their failing relationship. During one visit, he tried to physically force her into his car as she was walking to see a movie.

John Stickney had both a dark side and a constant fixation with Lisa Clark, and when she started seeing another boy, David Hightower, she eventually had to be firm with John. According to a Daily Evergreen article, Lisa called John on Dec. 16 to finalize their break-up. Although the conversation is mostly unknown, John’s father recalled Lisa telling John that Hightower was like “a big brother” to her. Whatever the details were, Lisa’s words were likely as crushing to John as the heavy quarry rock he helped blast apart with explosives at his job. But unlike the explosives at his job, he did not handle Lisa’s words well.
That same evening, John called Lisa back to tell her he was planning a fatal workplace accident she would know to be intentional. John had previously attempted suicide in June with an overdose of valium, according to the police report. Lisa told John she didn’t believe he would kill himself, and John refused to let her get off the phone until she admitted belief. At some point following that conversation, John asked his father for permission to use the car and told his mother, Janice, that he might not be back the next day. He had something important to do, he told them. It involved Lisa.

The next morning, John called Lisa’s dorm to say good-bye. She wasn’t home, but her roommate Teri Gregory was. He told Gregory that, if he could only talk to Lisa one-on-one, he might convince her to quit school and come home to him. At 6:30 that evening, after John had put in an eight-hour shift at the rock quarry, he called Lisa to say he had re-thought his suicide. She told John not to call her again until she was home for Christmas break, which would begin the next week. John, however, would talk to her much sooner than that, for he was already on his way to Pullman.

Driving off into the night behind the wheel of a 1976 Dodge Colt, he left two clues to his intentions which would only later be discovered: One, at the rock quarry — where a man would find dynamite missing — and the second, in his bedroom closet, which contained 11 commercial electric blasting caps, one of which had most of its wiring missing.

Love is a many-splendored thing

I don’t remember the first time I saw her.

But I do remember the instant it all clicked, the gears of attraction turning into overdrive inside my head. How, over the course of a short summer in 2011, I fell in love with a tall, skinny,
brown-haired girl, just as I prepared to leave home for the first time and move to Pullman to attend WSU.

I remember how she told me, on the way back from a concert in Seattle, that we should just be friends, and when, two months later, she changed her mind about it. And I also remember a rainy, late July afternoon, volunteering at a charity golf tournament, when I held an umbrella over both of us and she told me we couldn’t date.

“There’s no spark between us,” she said. A few weeks later at a poetry reading, our mutual friend had to tell me they were a couple because she couldn’t tell me herself.

It was devastating, and while I told them I was okay with it since I was moving away, I really wasn’t. My feelings continued to grow, and it was making me emotionally and sometimes physically sick with heartache.

For the first time in my life I was truly attached to someone, and at the same time, I was leaving home for the first time, being ripped away from what I wanted and going to a place where I had no support group of friends to help me cope.

After I moved away, their relationship was a train wreck. They broke up and were friends, then got back together. They broke up a second time, yet somehow again reconciled. Meanwhile, I was the middle man, keeping in touch with both of them through Facebook, listening and giving advice to both of them, about each other, whenever they asked for it.

Shortly before Christmas, I found out they’d broken up again and seemed permanently done as a couple and as friends. In my chatting with each one, I found out their initial relationship had quickly turned sexual. I tried to accept it, but the news devastated me all the more. Still, with Christmas break in sight and my feelings for her still strong, I felt I’d finally have my chance to make a move and win her over.

It didn’t work out that way.
Back in town

Around 7:30 p.m. on Dec. 17, Lisa Clark received a phone call from Mercer Island. It was Henry Firchau, a mutual friend of hers and John. According to Lisa’s written police statement, they talked for roughly 15 minutes regarding the issues her and John had been having. Then Henry asked a question:

“Lisa, do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“More than you trust John?”

“Sometimes.”

Firchau told Lisa to promise she’d never tell John about their phone conversation. He then told her of a recent conversation he’d had with John, and that John was on his way to Pullman at that very moment. Lisa and her roommate, Firchau warned, might be better off absent when John arrived. Around the same time, head resident adviser Mary Beth Johnson was pulled from a staff Christmas party and told the news. She conferred with Jane Mackay — the fifth floor resident adviser — and with Lisa and her roommate, trying to decide their next move.

They decided to have Lisa call John’s mother, who confirmed her son was headed to Pullman, although she thought it might be because he’d bought an engagement ring. Lisa explained her concerns to Mrs. Stickney, who at one point checked John’s room for his rifle, finding it there. It was then decided that Lisa and her roommate be moved to a vacant room on the sixth floor to spend the night. Johnson then called police, and the four women and two officers talked things over in Johnson’s office.

Around 11:30 p.m., John drove into Pullman with a determined mindset and the makings of a dynamite bomb. Though the hall doors were locked at 10 p.m., he somehow gained entrance to the building, maybe through an unlocked door, or maybe from another student letting him in. Regardless, he headed straight to
the fifth-floor and Lisa’s dorm once inside.

She was going to fully hear his side of things, he might have thought; he wasn’t going to lose her without some parting last words.

John encountered Mackay on the fifth floor, who explained that Lisa wasn’t home. Mackay also told him he wasn’t allowed in the building as a non-resident after-hours, and she and Johnson told him to leave. In a written statement, Johnson described his demeanor as calm, cooperative and casual.

“Well, I’ll just give them a call tomorrow,” he reportedly told them before leaving. John ventured off into the cold December night and, according to a police report, was seen driving aimlessly around campus shortly after midnight by a WSU police officer. Perhaps John was digesting his heartbreak, or perhaps he was plotting his next move. He retired to the Travel Lodge Motel for the night.

**Feels like the first time**

Love, it is said, is a powerful drug. And in reality, this is a surprisingly accurate statement. Dr. Laurie Smith-Nelson, WSU human sexuality instructor, says the intensity of romantic longings and feelings rely on the same neural pathways and biochemical experience that occurs with addiction.

“You literally get addicted to love,” she says.

While one may feel loved by parents, siblings and friends, the first real romantic relationship a person endures tends to be all-consuming. This is because it’s another layer of experience, both mentally and physically, Smith-Nelson says. When that relationship goes away, it’s a difficult adjustment.

“It’s that intensity, that…physical and emotional [rush]… that makes people do all kinds of really unhealthy things,” she says. “They don’t get enough sleep; they don’t go to class. They put…
chasing that physical and emotional experience of love [above everything else].”

Smith-Nelson says there are three primary attachment styles humans exhibit: secure, anxious and avoidant. Less than half of people have secure attachments, where relationships are important but do not define how a person thinks about themselves. Others are anxiously attached — wanting to be loved but fearing they won’t be. The anxiously-attached come across as clingy and needy, and when their needs aren’t met, they engage in what Smith-Nelson calls “protest behavior.”

“They text, call, demand more,” she says. “They do things to get the other person’s attention.”

The third kind, avoidant attachment, is often the trait of people who, having been hurt and disappointed so many times in attempting to connect, expect to be hurt and disappointed. As a result, says Smith-Nelson, they keep people at arm’s length. While secure or anxious people might expect intimacy to increase in a relationship over time, the inverse is often true of avoidant types.

“When you try to be securely attached to an avoidant person, you run up against this invisible brick wall,” she says. “They start to do things to distance [themselves]. All of a sudden they’re too busy, they’re working too much.”

Avoidant people are more likely to have affairs, she says, blocking attempts at true intimacy with distancing behaviors. When strong heartbreak is combined with an insecure attachment style, Smith-Nelson says things can get out of control and result in stalking behaviors.

“They are so fearful that no one else will want them,” she says, “and that they can never have what they had with that other person, that they’ll do seemingly bizarre things to stay in contact with that person to try and get that person to take them back.”

Smith-Nelson speculates that John Stickney was exhibiting an extreme form of anxious protest behavior.
There’s a common thread between anxiety and anger,” she says. “Most people would say blowing yourself up—taking explosives to your ex-girlfriend’s dorm, insisting on seeing her—that’s an angry act. But I would interpret that as a sort of off-the-chain version of anxiety.”

Although she notes suicide as uncommon among the normal population, Smith-Nelson says suicide rates go up exponentially with certain psychological diagnoses. Based on statistics and the fact relationship loss is a common suicide trigger for men, one could assume Stickney had a severe, potentially undiagnosed mental illness, she says.

“Literally, what he’s saying is…‘I don’t exist without you,’” she says. “And that’s pretty extreme mental illness.”

Not properly coping with feelings, says Smith-Nelson, creates a negative loop that becomes a person’s reality. The more a person focuses on the negativity, the more it overshadows anything positive. And pretty soon, she says, that’s all a person can have in their life.

“As human beings, we have limited conscious capacity,” she says. “So you need to be careful with what you fill it up with.”

“\textbf{I have a bomb}”

December 18th was 47-degree day in Pullman. There was no rain. Nationally, the NFL's regular season had just ended. Internationally, American hostages were being held in Iran and a Soviet army was ready to invade Afghanistan.

At around noon that day, Lisa Clark waited in the lobby of Perham Hall with her roommate, Jane Mackay and another student. The previous night, they had decided that confronting John Stickney en masse would be the best way for Lisa to get her point across to him. After an hour or so, they figured he would not come to the lobby, and disbanded. A second plan was hatched:
Lisa would wait for John to call and, once he did, tell him they could meet and talk in Mackay’s room. Around 2:30 p.m., John arrived on the fifth floor of Perham, trying to convince Lisa they should talk somewhere privately. According to the police report, Mackay told John they would not leave her alone with Lisa, and instead waited outside the dorm room door while the two spoke to each other.

Inside the room, John held Lisa’s hands. He was shaking. In her written statement, Lisa described John’s demeanor as “calm but disturbed.” He couldn’t believe she was doing this to him, he reportedly told her. He knew she wanted her freedom, he said, but she owed it to him to talk it over alone somewhere. At some point, Mackay entered the room to establish a five-minute time limit, saying she’d call the police if John didn’t leave after that. He responded by telling Lisa she’d feel the concussion coming from his car when he blew himself up.

“You can say what you want,” John reportedly said. “I do have [it] and it’s hidden.”

Lisa was unsure.

“I am saying what I want and I don’t believe you,” she responded. Later, Lisa wrote she felt mixed emotions—feeling sorry for him and wanting to speak alone, but knowing no one else would let it happen. Five minutes passed, and soon Mackay was escorting John to the elevator.

“You don’t like me much, do you Jane?” he asked her.

“It’s not that I don’t like you, John,” she replied, “it’s that I don’t like what you’re doing to Lisa.”

Lisa and John had agreed to continue talking via phone call after he was escorted out of Perham, but the call never happened. Instead, shortly before 3 p.m., John walked back into the building, carrying with him a yellow satchel with brown trim. He encountered Mary Beth Johnson in the elevator, who was also headed to the fifth floor. Arriving there, Johnson explained her
knowledge of the situation, telling him to wait while she talked to Lisa.

Instead, John followed her down the hallway and then agreed to wait outside Lisa’s front door. Johnson slipped inside the room and locked herself in with Lisa, Mackay and Teri Gregory. John began demanding to see her in a level but stern voice. “Lisa,” he reportedly said, “you’d better talk to me.”

When they told John there was nothing more to say, he began kicking in the door. On the other side, the four braced themselves against it in an effort to keep him out. Johnson called police. Shortly afterward, John spoke the words that would mark the beginning of his end: “Lisa, I’ve got a bomb here, and if you don’t come out a lot of innocent people are going to get hurt.”

In one hand, John held a D-cell flashlight battery; in the other, a wire.

The sequence of events which followed is not entirely clear, but according to Lisa Clark’s written statement, the girls eventually opened the door to Room 522.

“Everybody out,” John reportedly told the other three women. “Lisa’s coming with me.”

As the three women ran down the hall to help alert others to evacuate, Lisa Clark stood in the doorway of her dorm and looked at John Stickney for the last time. He stared back but did not move toward her. Then, she ran down the hall to where Jane Mackay waited, grabbing Mackay’s hand and heading for the elevator just as police entered the floor.

Two campus police officers—Corporal Dave Trimble and Lieutenant Mike Kenny—soon found themselves backing the satchel-carrying Stickney down an empty hallway. The officers, in written statements, recall John as being calm one moment and yelling the next. He asked Trimble: “Have you ever seen what dynamite does to someone?” At one point, as Kenny stood within two feet of him, John held the wire to within one inch of
“Do you want to die?” he reportedly asked Kenny.

Believing John would not give up peacefully, Trimble decided that getting the battery away from him would be the best—and perhaps only—way to disarm John without resorting to deadly force. Trimble got close to John and struck him on the hands with his flashlight, but failed to dislodge the battery from his grasp. At 3:05 p.m., John Stickney turned from the two officers and, with his back to them, began running down the hallway with Trimble right behind. The bomb exploded.

**Implosion**

Dec. 22, 2011 was a 40-degree day. There was no rain. In the U.S., the latest “Mission: Impossible” movie was number one at the box office. Internationally, a series of bombings in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad killed dozens of people.

That night, I was at a Bellingham improv theater, standing at the back of the audience after a not-so-great performance with the girl I was still in love with. People were on stage, but I wasn’t watching them. I was watching her, back together with him as they sat at a table and laughed. I pulled out my phone, deleted his number and then sent her a single text message: “We can’t be friends anymore.”

I walked out of the theater without a word to anyone and got into my car. And then I felt it. The anger, frustration, and then, something else: pure, unrelenting rage. It had been bottled up for months, building up like volcanic pressure and then suddenly erupting out of me. I pounded the steering wheel, swearing loudly and not caring if anyone saw me. I drove off towards a local park, at least 20 mph over the speed limit, feeling helpless and unhinged. I wanted to cry but couldn’t.

After a few minutes calming down at the park, I spent the next
hour driving around with no particular destination. I drove all around town, even past my childhood home, where my parents’ marriage had fallen apart when I was just old enough to remember it. Eventually, I went to a brewery, drank a beer and ate a bowl of chowder. And then I went home and cried.

Explosion

Those who heard it said it sounded like a sonic boom. On the fifth floor of Perham Hall, windows shattered in domino-like succession, the explosion propelling broken glass and debris out into the streets below. Doors were blown off hinges and sent flying through window frames. On the south side of the floor, interior walls were obliterated and the personal belongings of many college-aged women were scattered throughout the floor.

Books, mattresses, plants, and other items were thrown about or blown out of windows. In one room, the only undisturbed item was a digital clock radio which continued to display the correct time. In Lisa Clark’s dorm room, the damaged walls and door were spattered with John Stickney’s blood, and neatly-wrapped Christmas presents lay strewn about the room.

Trimble, who along with Kenny was mere feet from John when the bomb detonated, received first and second-degree burns to his hands and face, ruptured ear drums, smoke-irritated lungs, and a ruptured small intestine. He was transported to Sacred Heart Hospital in Spokane, where he remained for several days after undergoing surgery for the ruptured intestine. Kenny was treated at Pullman Memorial Hospital for superficial cuts and leg wounds, bruises and ear drum damage, and was released two days later.

Three other students received minor injuries. The dorm was evacuated and police quickly sealed off the area. By 8:30 p.m., police decided to act on the possibility that Stickney had placed
two additional bombs—one wired into his own vehicle and another wired into a car belonging to David Hightower—in a parking lot between Streit Hall and a gymnasium. Streit, Perham, and Regents Hill dorms were evacuated, and would remain empty for three to four hours. Some female residents mistakenly believed the evacuations would be short, and left their rooms wearing only shorts or bathrobes.

Bomb squad experts from Spokane and federal agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms were called in to help. An eventual search of both cars revealed no explosives. By 10:30 that evening, most Perham residents were back in their dorms. Those in Streit and Regents were still waiting approval to return to their dorms, but it would soon come. Forty-five women from Perham’s fifth floor were relocated to other dorms, sororities and outside homes.

The next day, police and bomb squad experts combed the rubble searching for clues, finding traces of lead wire from the electronic detonator of Stickney’s bomb. Police began investigating the possibility that he was also involved in a non-injury bombing in Bellevue within the prior three months.

Stickney’s remains were eventually transferred to Mercer Island for funeral arrangements. It is unknown, at least by this author, whether Lisa attended his funeral.

Scattered pieces

Today, the girl I was once in love with is still my friend, as is the other guy involved. The story is just another part of my past, and I no longer feel its pain. John Stickney, on the other hand, lies buried in a Seattle-area cemetery. Lisa Clark continued at WSU but gave no interviews about her ordeal. Her current whereabouts are unknown.

Today, there is virtually no evidence that the bombing on
the fifth floor of Perham Hall ever took place. The dull-looking industrial gray structure, riddled with six floors of hexagonal windows, stands looming over Stadium Way as it has since it opened in 1962. On the fifth floor, white hallway walls and wooden dorm doors are covered with colorful decorations, name tags and WSU logos. The door to Room 522 stands intact. Young women go about their college lives, some of them having heard this tragic tale of college-age heartbreak.

Thirty-three years later, it is unknown whether John really set off his bomb intentionally, whether he meant to hurt himself and Lisa, or whether a different outcome could have resulted if he’d just been allowed to speak to Lisa alone.

“I think he went to Pullman to act out a play,” said John’s father in an interview after his death, “but reality got in the way.”

The answers to what went on in the mind of John Stickney — a man who was really still a boy; a boy who was conflicted, angry, heartbroken and beyond rational thought — will never truly be known.

What does seem clearer, though, is the meaning of one final item, a curiosity found amid the rubble after the blast, inside the blood-splattered room of Lisa Clark: A framed picture of Lisa and John, during happier times, tilted but still pinned to the remains of her dorm room wall.