

Skidmore, Missouri: woman carves fetus from a mother's womb

A brutal act in a desperate society

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As is so often the case in America, unspeakable crimes take place in the most unremarkable places. So it was last Thursday, when the body of 23-year-old Bobbie Jo Stinnett was found strangled and unconscious in her home in Skidmore, Missouri, her eight-month-old fetus cut from her womb. She was expecting her first child.

A day later, police authorities found the infant snatched from the mother-to-be in Melvern, Kansas, in the custody of Lisa M. Montgomery. The FBI said that Montgomery, 36, had posed on the Internet as a potential customer for Stinnett's dog-breeding business, entered her home, and then brutally killed her for her baby. Stinnett was found by her mother, who told the sheriff's dispatcher it looked as though her daughter's stomach had exploded.

Both poor, rural American heartland communities were shocked by the events, which shot them into the national headlines. Median household income in Skidmore, population 334, is just above \$30,000. Bobbie Jo Stinnett and her husband ran Happy Haven Farms, a small rat terrier breeding business. Ms. Stinnett also worked at the Kawasaki Motors engine factory 12 miles away in Maryville, Missouri.

Melvorn, Kansas, some three hours away by car, is another rural town like so many in America: population 435, median household income \$32,321. Only 10 percent of the town's working residents are employed in manufacturing, with the rest finding work in education, construction and service industries. Generally, a tragedy, scandal or miracle is required to make such locales worthy of notice. And then, local authorities and the media can rarely be counted on to make any sense of the shocking events. This case is no

different.

Lisa Montgomery had reportedly told her husband Kevin that she was expecting a child, due December 12. After carving Bobbie Jo Stinnett's baby from her body, she drove back to Melvern, phoned her husband to say she had gone into labor at a nearby shopping mall and had given birth at a Topeka, Kansas, birthing center. Kevin Montgomery drove with the couple's two teenaged sons to meet his wife and baby in the parking lot of a local fast food restaurant. Later they dropped by to introduce their new baby girl "Abigail" to their pastor and his wife.

All of this was a horrific hoax, and the child's real mother was the tragic victim. Another "senseless" crime...or was it? Without more information on the Montgomery family and their personal circumstances, it is only possible to make some observations on what such a violent crime says more generally about American society.

While we cannot at present look into this disturbed woman's mind, we can ask some questions: Why would she concoct a pregnancy and, parenthetically, how was it possible to conceal the charade from her husband? Why would a woman resort to such a brutal crime to get a baby? And, more generally: Have others been driven to similar measures, and in what numbers?

Reports that Lisa Montgomery had recently miscarried a six-month-old fetus have not been confirmed. But her most recent "pregnancy" was well known in close-knit Melvern. Rev. Mike Wheatly, the Montgomerys' pastor, speculated that Kevin Montgomery may have fallen for his wife's phony pregnancy because—like many parents today—"they probably didn't see each other very much." He drove

to Kansas City every day for work, a 170-mile round trip. The day-to-day struggle to earn a living places enormous pressure on working parents, who are forced to take jobs requiring long commutes, or who work different shifts to cut down on child-care costs.

But if a woman is, for whatever reason, unable to carry a child to term, wouldn't adoption be the reasonable and logical solution? Putting aside the desire by some parents to bring "their own" biological child into the world, those parents who would consider adoption face enormous obstacles—bureaucratic, but most importantly financial. Adoption of a healthy infant can cost upwards of tens of thousands of dollars. Such an option would most likely have been unaffordable for a couple like the Montgomerys.

While these factors, in themselves, still cannot adequately explain why a woman would then be driven to the type of barbaric action as the one committed by Lisa Montgomery, such an examination is far more valuable than describing it as a senseless crime. Moreover, is it astonishing in a society so dominated by violence and militarism—first and foremost the violence committed by the government itself—that when faced with a personal crisis, the most desperate and vulnerable individuals will lash out in a similar fashion?

While those cases in which a fetus is cut from the mother are rare—ranging from as many as 18 in 1987 to as few as 3 in 2002—less violent abductions of infants in the US are far more common. A 2003 analysis by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children found that most of these abductions are carried out by women, who have often feigned pregnancy and are attempting to bolster a relationship with a husband or boyfriend that they feel is threatened.

It would not be too much of a simplification to say that most child abductions—even those in which one parent seizes a child from the other parent—are motivated by desperation and loneliness, human emotions all too common in contemporary society.

One feels tremendous sympathy for victims such as Bobbie Jo Stinnett, and her surviving husband. Remarkably, the infant, now named Victoria Jo, was tracked down at the Montgomery home in Melvern by the FBI, who traced the e-mail correspondence between the two women. She has been returned in apparent good health to Zeb Stinnett in Skidmore. But calls for the

death penalty for Lisa Montgomery will do nothing to bring back Victoria Jo's mother or provide solace to her surviving husband.

This, however, will not stop the predictable calls for retribution on the part of local prosecutors and the national media. Typical is a December 20 column by Andrea Peyser in Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post*, who writes that "there is no punishment severe enough for her crime." Burning at the stake, hanging and quartering? What does Peyser have in mind? Referring to the recent death penalty conviction in the murder of Laci Peterson and her unborn son, she adds: "Don't hog that lethal injection needle, Scott Peterson. Pass it on down to Lisa Montgomery when you're done."

Such sadistic filth permeates the political establishment today and in turn works to cultivate violence in so many aspects of American society.



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