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The Tragedy of a Cambridge Feminist

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The Tragedy of a Cambridge Feminist

Abstract

Overview: Stephen Frug sits down at his computer desk on April 4th, 2011. His wife, Sarah, is in the kitchen trying to feed their three year old son and for once, all is quiet. He picks up his glasses and slides them on his face, then continues to log onto his online blog. He had started writing the blog in 2005 when he was still a 34 year old graduate student in the history department of Cornell University. Since then, he'd gotten his Ph.D. and started teaching history at Hobart and William Smith in Geneva, New York, an hour's drive away from his home in Ithaca.

Stephen reminisces as he clicks through some of his older blog posts. He smiles as he scrolls past the post about his son's birthday and another about the frustrations he had while trying to write his graphic novel. A few minutes later, he finds himself staring at a new, blank entry. He had, after all, logged onto this blog for a particular reason. Taking a big sigh, he finally begins to write. "Twenty years ago today my mother, Mary Joe Frug, was murdered about a block from our house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was early evening; she was out for a walk. No one was ever caught or charged; we have no idea, to this day, who killed her. It was less than a month after my twentieth birthday."

Author's Reflection: My name is Ellen Lapointe and I am currently a nursing major at St. John Fisher College. As my classes progress I am realizing that I love nursing and cannot wait to work in a hospital one day, but I also have a true passion for writing. Writing this paper, at least to me, was much different than any other paper I've written previously. Having a whole class centered on one final paper really made me very conscious about research as well as the editing process. It was also a different experience because I was writing about something that I was truly interested in, and I felt like a detective as I pried deeper into the lives of the victim and all of the people involved in the case. At first I stumbled upon some road blocks that put a temporary halt to my writing. As I tried to look up more information surrounding this 1991 murder mystery, I was having trouble finding information. With the help of the librarians, my professor, and some of my peers, I was able to find more clues that helped me write my paper. Although I put a lot of time and energy into writing and editing this paper, I now look back on it and I am genuinely proud of the effort I made, even if it's not perfect.

Keywords

MLA, Writing

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The Tragedy of a Cambridge Feminist

Stephen Frug sits down at his computer desk on April 4th, 2011. His wife, Sarah, is in the kitchen trying to feed their three year old son and for once, all is quiet. He picks up his glasses and slides them on his face, then continues to log onto his online blog. He had started writing the blog in 2005 when he was still a 34 year old graduate student in the history department of Cornell University. Since then, he'd gotten his Ph.D. and started teaching history at Hobart and William Smith in Geneva, New York, an hour's drive away from his home in Ithaca.

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Mary Joe Frug was born in St. Joseph, Missouri in 1941. She grew up to become a petite woman with large, dark, shoulder-length hair. She sometimes wore thin-rimmed glasses and was self-conscious about her appearance, quickly putting on makeup even if she needed to drive someplace at two in the morning when no one else would see her. She was a very social person,

often chatting with others that were standing in line behind her at the grocery store or quickly making conversation with complete strangers at cocktail parties. She loved to read, and felt it necessary to read at least a few pages before bed every night. Her sense of humor would light up a room and most times embarrass her children, but she didn't seem to care. Mary Joe also loved spending time with her family. She married Gerald Frug, a professor of law at Harvard Law School. They had two children together, Stephen and Emily (Frug, Stephen).

She had many passions during her lifetime, two of them being law and feminism. She graduated with a law degree from Columbia University in 1971 and then worked for three years “providing free legal services to people with low incomes in Washington D.C. and New York City” (Bobonich, 69). She then taught at Villanova Law School until 1981 when she accepted a teaching position at the New England School of Law. Frug quickly became known in the legal world for her advances in the legal postmodern feminist theory. She worked long days writing her book of essays titled *Postmodern Legal Feminism* (published in 1993, three years after her death) and authored the casebook *Women and the Law*, both of which secured Frug's spot on the list of prominent feminist legal scholars (Wikipedia, “Mary Joe Frug”).

Frug was known for her work with feminism and law, and many people admired her for it. However, in 1991, feminism was not nearly as accepted by the general public as it is today. At that time, feminism had a negative connotation, and many women did not want to be called feminists. Women associated the term “feminism” with “radical feminism” and wanted to stay clear away. A feminist organization called the National Organization for Women (NOW) had been portrayed as having radical views and responses to gender issues (The Radical Goals of the Feminists).

Some of Frug's views were also considered radical by other feminists. For example, in *A Postmodern Feminist Legal Manifesto*, an essay from her book *Postmodern Legal Feminism*, she argues that there are three general claims that can explain the connection between feminism and law. The first claim is that "legal rules permit and sometimes mandate the *terrorization* of the female body" (Frug, 1049). She explains that legal rules often encourage women to "seek refuge against insecurity" and that some rules "inadequately protect women against physical abuse" (Frug, 1049). Her second claim is that "legal rules permit and sometimes mandate the *maternalization* of the female body" (Frug, 1050). She explains that this occurs through rules that deal with childbirth, such as abortion restrictions that pressure women into becoming mothers. Lastly, she claims that "legal rules permit and sometimes mandate the *sexualization* of the female body" (Frug, 1050). Frug explains that this occurs through the criminalization of prostitution and homosexuality.

Could her ideas about changing the legal system anger someone enough to want her dead? Could outspoken beliefs about feminism be what ultimately got her killed? Could her death be a result of the jealous rage of a student or a co-worker? Although these questions may never be answered, all I can do is dig up more clues about this 1991 murder mystery and see where it leads me.

April 4th, 1991 began as a normal day. It was slightly cloudy and about 54 °F, average for an April day in Massachusetts (Weather History for KBOS). The Frug family lived in Cambridge, a city in Massachusetts of about 107,289 people that is known for both the prestigious Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). It is a fairly safe city, much different from downtown Boston which is only a 3 miles across the Charles River. Annually, Cambridge has only a few violent crimes, and majority of the crimes committed

are robberies and thefts. This made Frug's gruesome murder even more mysterious. (City-data.com).

Frug was not working at the New England School of Law in 1991 because she took a sabbatical leave and was serving as a fellow at Radcliffe's Bunting Institute, an advanced study program that is a part of Harvard University. She often spent her time on the Harvard Campus and ate out with her husband when he wasn't teaching class. She and Gerald got home from work that day and found their daughter, Emily, sitting in her room doing her homework. Stephen, a sophomore at Harvard at the time, was not yet home. As the afternoon turned into evening, Mary Joe made a call to her friend Judi Greenberg. They confirmed a date for breakfast on the following Friday morning and continued to chat for a while. At about 8:30pm, Mary Joe hung up the phone and announced to her husband that she needed to go to a convenience store a few blocks away to pick up some things. With twenty dollars in her purse and dressed in a white top, black skirt and white pantyhose, she left her house for the last time (Brelis, "An Accomplished Life").

Frug walked about a block from her home and crossed Brattle Street. She was passing in front of the Armenian Holy Trinity Apostolic Church of greater Boston and she heard the voices of sixty people attending choir practice inside. Suddenly, she was attacked. Her attacker pinned her down and stabbed her four times with a seven inch long military-style knife. She was stabbed twice in the left side of her chest and twice in her inner thighs. Her attacker then ran away, taking the weapon and leaving Frug to die. No one inside the church had heard her screams over their choir practice (Law Professor's Murder).

A few minutes later, a motorist drove by. He was shocked when he noticed Frug's body lying in a pile of blood. Assuming she had been hit by a car, he ran inside the church and

frantically yelled to call the police. Confused, members of the choir ran outside to see what had happened. They gasped when they saw Frug struggling for breath on the sidewalk. Her purse lay beside her with her wallet still inside. A crowd began to form around her and neighbors from nearby houses began to run outside. One of the choir members named David Medzorian knelt down and held Frug's hand and asked if she could hear him. She said nothing. Another choir member, also a professor at Harvard, peeked through the crowd and immediately recognized Frug. Realizing that her house was nearby, she ran there to see if Gerald or the kids were home (Brelis, "An Accomplished Life").

Emily and Gerald ran to the scene when they heard what had happened. The crowd grew silent as Emily sank down to her knees and began to scream. Gerald, in shock, refused to believe it was his wife. The very same wife that he had waved goodbye to just a few minutes ago was now laying helpless on the sidewalk. At 8:57pm, the ambulance pulled up and quickly whisked Mary Joe to Mount Auburn hospital. She was pronounced dead shortly after 9:00pm (Brelis, "An Accomplished Life").

Four days later, the memorial service for Frug was held in Harvard's Memorial Church. It was a large church, but it was filled. Almost a thousand people had showed up. Friends, family, co-workers and students all filled the church to say goodbye to a woman they had loved and admired. Cat Stevens's song "Wild World" began to play and everyone in the church began to cry at once. Eight different speakers stood up in front of the crowd and shared their fondest memories of Frug and prayed that her death would be brought to justice (Frug, Stephen).

While the family and friends of Frug continued to grieve, investigators quickly began working. The investigators assigned to the case first examined Frug's body for any clues. The nature of the stabbing lead officials to believe that the murder was filled with extreme hate.

Whether that hate was directed toward Frug herself, or whether it was a random attack, still remained unclear (Law Professor's Murder). After scanning the area surrounding the crime, investigators located a knife on the lawn of a residence on Appleton Street, a short distance from where the murder occurred. The knife was sent to the state laboratory for analysis and investigators hoped that a fingerprint would be found on the handle. However, the knife was not even stained with blood (Reid, "Cambridge Police"). Empty-handed, the Cambridge Police started to search for a motive.

Investigators began to interview hundreds of possible suspects. They started with close family members, then turned to the choir members that were practicing at the Church and nearby neighbors. A few neighbors noted that they had seen a man lurking in the bushes near the scene of the crime. The man was described as having brown hair and standing around six feet tall (Reid, "Cambridge Police"). Other than that, nobody had seen or heard anything.

As the investigation furthered, police began to question whether this attack was random or targeted. A few details about the crime seemed suspicious to investigators. First of all, Frug's purse was left at the crime with everything still inside. This did not point to a robbery, although some investigators still believed it could have been an unsuccessful robbery attempt. Could the assailant's intention have been to rob Frug, but they got caught up in the moment and killed her instead, forgetting about her purse? Other questions arose concerning the location of the crime. Cambridge was a fairly safe, affluent city. This made a random attack seem even more unlikely.

The FBI were soon called in and investigators continued to scramble through possible motives. They began to search through transcripts and academic records of hundreds of Frug's students. Could a student have been angry about a poor grade in her class? Could a colleague

have been threatened by her controversial views? Hundreds of interviews were conducted, but investigators once again came up empty-handed (Law Professor's Murder).

In a last desperate attempt, the police sent teletypes to other police departments around the country that described the murder and asked if any similar murders had been reported. They sent multiple teletypes describing a woman stabbed in a high affluent neighborhood with her purse left untouched. Police made sure to send the teletypes three to five times a day so different shifts would see it. When no response came, everyone began to lose hope (Law Professor's Murder).

A year passed without any lead. Frug's family, although still deeply affected by the loss, had been forced to continue with their lives and put the murder behind them. The police department put Frug's case on the backburner, and began to focus on other crimes. Although no one had forgotten about Frug, all hope for finding her murderer had significantly declined.

However, everything changed in late March of 1992 when Gerald was preparing a one year memorial for Mary Joe. He was still teaching at Harvard, and would become deeply saddened when he passed by the places where he used to eat lunch with Mary Joe. That day, he opened the door to his office and slowly sat down at his desk. With too much on his mind, he didn't notice the letter that was sitting on his desk until he stood up to leave. He silently opened it and began to read. It was an invitation to an annual gala banquet of the Harvard Law Review (Butterfield, "Parody puts Harvard"). The Harvard Law Review was, and still is, considered one of the nation's more prestigious legal journals that is edited by students of the law school (Butterfield, "Parody puts Harvard"). Gerald, who had attended the event in the past, sat back down at his desk and opened his calendar so he could mark down the date. He scanned the letter but stopped when he read that the gala would be held on April 4th, the exact date that Mary Joe

had been murdered a year before. He closed his calendar and instantly decided that he would be unable to attend. It was simply the date. Gerald threw the invitation in the trash on his way out.

If Gerald had gone to the gala, he would have arrived and been seated at a round table with a white table cloth. He would have sat down and picked up one of the programs placed on the table. Attached would be a copy of the Harvard Law Review, the same Review where Mary Joe's unfinished draft of "A Postmodern Feminist Legal Manifesto" was published just a few months before. Gerald, as well as some of Mary Joe's coworkers and students, had pushed to publish Mary Joe's draft in the Law Review in honor of her death. Also attached to the program would be a copy of the Harvard Law Revue, a spoof edition of the Harvard Law Review. In it would be an article titled "He-Manifesto of Post-Mortem Legal Feminism" written by "Mary Doe, Rigor-Mortis Professor of Law" (Harvard Parody Called Tasteless).

Many of the guests that did attend the gala gasped as they scanned the parody article. The article mocked feminism, saying "postmodern feminism represents a diverse group of people. Some of us are intellectuals, many are politically complex. Most are disillusioned. Others are just plain horny" (Estes "Harvard Law Review"). It also made fun of Gerald Frug, saying that the only reason why Mary Joe got published in the Harvard Law Review was because of Gerald's tenure at Harvard. Worst of all, it made fun of Frug's death, saying "Here I was on my first day on Cloud 9 – I must say, these gowns have nothing on Chanel" (Estes, "Harvard Law Review").

Immediate uproar ensued. The parody, which was only intended to be circulated at the gala, was shared everywhere. The Harvard Crimson published an article about the parody just a few days later and the news quickly spread to larger news outlets such as the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune. When the police finally got their hands on a copy, they quickly searched for the authors of the articles. Making fun of Frug's murder seemed very suspicious,

and the police wondered if any of the authors could be linked to her murder. However, the president of the Review, Emily Schulman, and the two main authors of the parody article, Craig Coben and Kenneth Fenyo, quickly apologized and stated that what they did was in poor taste (Butterfield, "Parody puts Harvard"). The three of them were not linked to the murder in any way.

The parody article sparked another debate about sexism at Harvard. A number of female students and faculty, as well as a few male faculty members, suggested that Harvard had created an environment dominated by white men that encouraged incidents like the parody article (Butterfield, "Parody puts Harvard"). A third-year student named Andrea Brenneke said "The parody is symptomatic of the hostility toward women who are taking over positions of power traditionally held by white males. This was their fraternity-like response to getting back at women who fought to publish Mary Joe's article" (Butterfield, "Parody puts Harvard"). The parody led students and professors at Harvard to question why out of 59 tenured professors, only three were black and five were women. It also led to the debate about where to draw the line between free speech and potentially sexist and hateful remarks (Butterfield, "Parody puts Harvard").

When I first started researching this case, this parody article was an immediate red flag. How could these students be so heartless, and publish such a cruel article about someone who had died? Although the main authors did apologize, a group of other students that were involved in the parody article did not. I quickly started investigating the other students involved and found that all of them except one had graduated from Harvard to become highly successful lawyers. Robert Niewyk was the only one that had not. After hours of searching, I could barely even find personal information on Niewyk. Why had all the others achieved great success, and Niewyk had

simply vanished? Could he have been involved in the murder in some way, and wanted to cover his tracks? With the hypothesis that Niewyk had something to do with Frug's murder, I continued my search.

Although the parody letter was initially suspicious and highly inappropriate, I don't believe that any of the authors, including Robert Niewyk, were involved in her murder. There is simply no evidence that connects Niewyk to Frug. There is no evidence that Niewyk was in any of Frug's classes or that he even really knew her at all. The only connection the two of them shared was that Niewyk helped write the parody article. Although Niewyk and the students that published the parody article obviously disagreed with Frug's views, I do not believe they were filled with enough hate to stab her to death. The students were simply a few of many that disagreed with her radical views. Instead, I believe the murderer was someone more personally involved with Frug. Due to the gruesome details of the murder, I believe that the murderer had a deep hatred for Frug as a person and didn't simply disagree with her political views. Robert Niewyk just doesn't fit the description, therefore I can reject my hypothesis and continue searching for a motive.

However, although I personally don't believe that Niewyk was filled with enough murderous hate solely based on Frug's views, that idea is not completely unheard of. There are many cases where certain people or groups have killed others simply because of a hatred for their political, ethnic, religious or social beliefs. Recently on April 15th, 2013, two bombs hidden in backpacks exploded near the finish line of the 117th annual Boston Marathon (History.com Staff, "Boston Marathon"). Three spectators died and more than 260 others were wounded in this gruesome attack. An intense investigation quickly ensued and by searching through security cameras around the time of the attack, two men were connected to the bombing. The two men

believed to be involved were brothers Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and Tamerlan Tsarnaev. The brothers were Muslim and born in the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan. When investigators searched for a possible motive for the attack, they suggested that the brothers were motivated by extremist Islamic beliefs (History.com Staff, "Boston Marathon").

Right before Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was caught and detained, he scrawled a message on the wall of a boat he was hiding in. Although the message was not released to the public, an official stated that the message contained suggestions that the attack was orchestrated in response to U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Johnson, "Tsarnaev Note"). The Tsarnaev brothers did not bomb the Boston Marathon to kill a specific person or a few people that they hated, they simply did it as an attack on the U.S. and their foreign policy views. Many similar acts have been committed throughout history. Like the Boston Marathon, other attacks have been committed against many different countries in the world simply because of their views on politics, religion, or social issues. Could the attack on Mary Joe Frug fit into this category of crimes? This does suggest that it is possible that Frug's killer could have been someone fueled purely by hatred of her feminist ideals.

Many other theories about what happened to Frug soon began to surface. Although some of these theories have very little evidence backing them up, they are worth looking into. Some theories suggest that Frug was murdered by a student that had developed a crush on her and became jealous. Elizabeth Spahn, a friend and colleague of Frug's at New England School of Law, said that most female professors had experienced a student crush. Spahn said that she knew that some students did in fact have a crush on Frug, but they all seemed to move on. Spahn also said that if a student was obsessed with Frug, she definitely would have told somebody (Police seek motive in slaying). Again, due to a lack of evidence, this possibility seems unlikely.

Another theory arose that had to do with Mary Joe's and Gerald's marriage. Rumors surfaced that Mary Joe and Gerald had an "open marriage" and that both the Frugs had taken lovers. Many of their friends adamantly denied this rumor, but some others agreed that it was possible (Warsh, "What the Stories"). While there is no solid evidence to back up this theory, it is still worth considering because in many cases, the spouse is the first suspect in a murder (Bailey, 7). Spouses are usually one of the closest people, emotionally and physically, to the victim. Therefore, they often have ample access to the victim, a motive, and will benefit somehow from the death of their spouse.

When it comes to intimate-partner homicide, the statistics are frighteningly high. Violence by an intimate partner accounts for approximately 21% of violent crime that is experienced by women. The FBI reports that 32% of female homicide victims are killed by their intimate partners (National Statistics). Could Mary Joe have been killed by Gerald, or possibly by a jealous lover? Although Gerald had an alibi for that night, could he have suddenly become angry about their supposed "open marriage" and found a way to have Mary Joe killed? She was, after all, killed extremely close to her house when she was stabbed. Gerald could have had enough time to sneak out of his house without Emily noticing, stabbed Mary Joe, and returned to the house before anyone knew he was missing. After all, how would the assailant have known that Mary Joe would leave house that night? Gerald and Emily were the only ones that could have known because Mary Joe announced that she was taking a trip to the convenience store.

It is estimated that 503,485 women are stalked by an intimate partner each year (National Statistics). If Mary Joe and Gerald did have an open relationship, is it possible that one of their lovers began to grow jealous and began to stalk Mary Joe? Police questioned a third-year law student at Harvard that was described as a close friend of Gerald. Apparently, this man was the

first person Gerald called when he heard about Mary Joe's death. Why would Gerald choose to call a student first? Wouldn't it seem more likely to call other family members, or Mary Joe's parents before calling a student? Months after the murder, Gerald was seen frequently accompanied by this same student. They reportedly took long walks together and the student claimed he wanted to console Gerald in his time of grief (Warsh, "What the Stories"). Could this student be Gerald's lover? Could he have grown jealous of Gerald and Mary Joe's relationship and killed Mary Joe? Is it possible that the student was the young man that neighbors had reportedly seen lurking in the bushes, stalking Mary Joe and waiting for the right moment to attack?

However, the one detail that makes this possibility seem unlikely is that Gerald Frug was never considered a main suspect in the case. I could find no information on whether the police questioned Gerald or not, but I do know that he was never considered a prime suspect. If the police did a thorough investigation, they should have interviewed Gerald and determined that he had or didn't have a motive for killing his wife. Since no record points to Gerald as a prime suspect, I can assume that he was determined innocent.

All these questions circulated in my head as I came to the end of my research. There are so many questions that remain unanswered, and so many possible explanations for this crime. As David Warsh wrote, "It would take the imagination of a novelist -- of several novelists -- to explore all the possibilities" (Warsh, "What the Stories"). Although I feel that I concluded my research on this topic with nothing more than a large amount of unanswered questions and multiple theories, I have learned quite a lot not only about research, but also about the nature of crimes. And as I sit here, writing this, I look up at the clock and realize ironically that it is now April 4th, 2015, exactly twenty-four years since Mary Joe Frug was stabbed to death on the

sidewalk in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I imagine Stephen Frug now sitting down at his computer and staring at his previous blog entry about his mother hardly believing that she has been gone for twenty-four years. I imagine Emily waking up and realizing today was the day that she lost one of the most influential women in her life. I imagine all the people that Mary Joe touched glancing at their calendars and for a fleeting moment, remembering the smiling face of Mary Joe Frug, a soul taken too soon.

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