

Charles Patrick Ewing



FATAL FAMILIES

*The Dynamics of
Intrafamilial Homicide*

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FATAL FAMILIES

*For Sharon Harris-Ewing,
whose love and support
makes it all possible.*

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All in the Family

❖ Christine Lane, a single mother, and Aliza May Bush, her nearly 2-year-old daughter, were up early on Friday morning, February 2, 1990. Like many winter days in the rural area outside Ithaca, New York, home of Cornell University, it was cold, dark, and damp. Nearly a foot of snow covered the ground and woods outside their small, ground-floor apartment. Any groundhog who ventured forth that day would not have seen his shadow.

Mother and daughter bundled up in coats, mittens, and boots and took the garbage out at about 7:30. Walking back toward the apartment, Christine suddenly felt sick. Taking Aliza by the hand, she rushed into the apartment, hoping to make it to the toilet before it was too late.

Minutes later, when Christine emerged from the bathroom, feeling better, Aliza was gone. Christine quickly searched the entire apartment, but the child was nowhere to be found. Finally, the frantic mother stepped outside and spotted one of her daughter's tiny mittens at the end of the driveway. Moments later, she saw what looked like Aliza's footprints leading into the wooded swamp behind the apartment complex.

Assuming that Aliza had wandered into the snow-covered woods, Christine immediately called the police and reported her daughter's disappearance.

A lost child—every parent's nightmare—is one of the few things in life that consistently brings out the best in people. Christine Lane could not have hoped for a better response to her early morning call for help. Police officers hurried to the scene, and, within hours, as many as 400 volunteers were combing a half-mile radius around the apartment complex. While forest rangers, firefighters, and volunteers searched every inch of the woods on foot, police helicopters scanned the area from above. Right behind the foot patrol came specially trained tracking dogs and investigators armed with sophisticated heat-sensing devices. If Aliza was out there, the searchers were determined to find her, no matter how long it took.

Unfortunately, the search team's optimistic determination did not translate into results. After almost four days and nights of fruitless searching in snow, rain, fog, and freezing cold, the authorities and volunteers gave up and admitted everyone's worst fears. If Aliza was in the woods, she was dead and probably covered with snow. Her body would not likely be found until spring or at least until a major thaw.

That was Tuesday, February 6. By Wednesday, February 7, authorities were convinced that Aliza was neither in the woods nor dead. In Wednesday's mail, Christine Lane received an envelope containing Aliza's other mitten—the mate to the one she had found in the driveway the morning her daughter disappeared. Police officials concluded that Aliza had been abducted—perhaps impulsively—by a passerby who saw her wandering outside the apartment complex and could not resist snatching the attractive little girl.

The envelope containing the mitten put an entirely new spin on the case. Investigating officers speculated that sending the mitten might be the abductor's way of telling Christine that her baby was alive and well. They rushed the mitten and envelope, which bore a local postmark, to the FBI crime laboratory for analysis. They set up a special toll-free 800 telephone line to receive tips, anonymous or otherwise. Christine Lane appealed publicly for her daughter's safe return. And, in an unprecedented gesture, the District Attorney announced that if the child was returned safely within 48 hours he would recommend leniency for the kidnapper—possibly even probation.

On Wednesday, February 12, a week after the mitten arrived, the DA's 48-hour "leniency" period expired and Aliza was still missing. Although

no one came forth with the child, two people from the community did provide the police with valuable tips—information that would ultimately lead to both the victim and the perpetrator of this apparently sensational crime.

First, a local storekeeper called and said he had recently sold someone an envelope like the one that brought Aliza's mitten back to her mother. Then, another caller informed police that she had seen someone mailing something that could have been the same kind of envelope. The "someone" identified by both callers was Christine Lane.

On February 15, 13 days after Aliza was first reported missing and just hours after Christine made her final public appeal for the return of her daughter, police confronted her with these tips. Faced with a polygraph, Christine confessed that Aliza was dead.

Christine told the officers that she found Aliza dead in her crib—tangled in her blankets—on the morning of February 2. Fearing she would be accused of harming the child, she dressed her in winter clothes, wrapped her in two plastic trash bags, and buried her under heavy brush half a mile from the apartment. Then, in an effort to keep police from finding the child's body, she mailed the mitten to herself.

After confessing, Christine led investigators to the burial site, where they uncovered the toddler's body. After completing an autopsy, forensic pathologists ruled Aliza's death a homicide, and Christine Lane was charged with murder.

At trial, the prosecution was unable to establish any motive for the killing, but one witness testified that Christine Lane became angry when Aliza would not go to sleep. Although the jury rejected the state's charge of murder, they found Christine guilty of second-degree manslaughter, the reckless killing of another human being.

On January 16, 1991, almost one year after she killed her daughter, Christine Lane was sentenced to the maximum term allowed by New York law: prison for no less than 5 and no more than 15 years. ❖

❖ On October 24, 1989, anyone in the United States who read a newspaper, listened to a radio newscast, or watched network news learned that the night before, in inner-city Boston, a Black man robbed and shot Charles Stuart and his pregnant wife, Carol—a young, upper-middle-class White couple from the suburbs.

In a tragedy almost made for the electronic media, Boston police recorded a desperate 13-minute telephone conversation in which Chuck Stuart used a cellular car phone to help police locate him and his wife.

When officers finally found the Stuarts' car—listening to Chuck's call while using the sounds of sirens in the background to pinpoint the location—they found both Carol and Chuck seriously wounded. Carol had been shot in the head, Chuck in the abdomen.

Following surgery, including a cesarean section that delivered a premature baby boy, Carol died. The baby died 17 days later. Chuck also required life-threatening surgery but survived and told police what had happened.

According to Chuck's chilling account, he and Carol had just left a childbirth class at a Boston hospital when a Black man armed with a gun forced his way into their Toyota Cressida. The man, according to Chuck's extremely detailed description, was between 28 and 34 years old, stood about 5 feet–10 inches tall, weighed 150 to 160 pounds, wore a short Afro hairstyle, had shaggy facial hair, and was wearing a baseball cap and a black jogging suit with red stripes on the sleeves. Chuck was even able to describe the gunman's voice.

By Chuck Stuart's account, the gunman made him drive to a location near a public housing development in an unfamiliar, inner-city neighborhood. There the man robbed the couple, shot them both, and fled on foot with Carol's purse, her diamond ring, and \$100 in cash.

The attack on the Stuarts struck both terror and outrage in a city already burdened with more than its share of street violence and racial tension. State legislators responded with a renewed call for restoration of the death penalty in Massachusetts. A Boston radio station set up a telephone hot line to take anonymous tips. A local business offered a \$10,000 reward for any information leading to Carol Stuart's killer. And, day after day, the city's two newspapers romanticized the Stuarts and decried their victimization as just another awful example of the growing problem of street crime in Boston.

In the immediate aftermath of the Stuart shootings, Boston's mayor, Ray Flynn, ordered city police to give the case their highest priority. Police scoured the city's Mission Hill area, especially the public housing projects, for weeks, stopping and frisking hundreds of Black men. Finally, 19 days after the shootings, they arrested a suspect, Willie Bennett, a 39-year-old Black man who had allegedly bragged to friends that he shot the Stuarts. Chuck Stuart could not positively identify Bennett in a lineup but told police that Bennett looked most like the person who robbed and shot him.

Over the next couple of months, as Chuck Stuart recuperated and authorities searched for further evidence implicating Willie Bennett, the real story behind Carol Stuart's murder gradually emerged. Police received

numerous phone calls passing along tips and rumors that Chuck Stuart was not the innocent victim he appeared to be.

Most of these tips turned out to be dead ends, but on January 3, 1990, Chuck Stuart's brother, Matthew, revealed that on the night of the killing he met Chuck near the scene of the crime. He told the police that Chuck had handed him Carol's purse, her diamond ring, and a .38 caliber revolver.

Armed with Matthew's confession, Boston police finally went after Chuck Stuart. But it was too late.

Police staked out Chuck's suburban home, but he never returned there. Apparently tipped off that the police were closing in on him, Chuck spent the night at a motel. The next morning—at the same time that prosecutors were presenting evidence against Willie Bennett to a grand jury—Chuck drove onto the highest bridge in Boston, got out of his brand-new Nissan Maxima, and jumped 145 feet into the Mystic River.

Not surprisingly, Chuck Stuart's suicide under these circumstances was widely regarded as confirmation that he had killed his wife and child. Although the full story may never be known, there is every reason to believe that Chuck Stuart killed to free himself from the responsibilities of marriage and impending fatherhood and to cash in on an estate (including life insurance) that eventually totaled nearly half a million dollars. ❖

❖ On August 20, 1989, José and Mary Menendez were found dead in their five-million-dollar Beverly Hills mansion. Their sons, Lyle, 22, and Erik, 19, told police they discovered their parents' bodies after returning from a movie theater and restaurant. Mr. and Mrs. Menendez had been repeatedly blasted at close range with a 12-gauge shotgun as they sat watching television. Police, responding to a desperate 911 call from one of the sons, found no indication of forced entry, no evidence of robbery, and no murder weapon.

José Menendez, a Cuban refugee who entered American business and rapidly became a multimillionaire, had recently taken over a major video distribution company. Police investigators initially believed the killings might be Mafia executions because they suspected the video company previously had ties to organized crime.

While police investigated this theory, Lyle and Erik, the sole beneficiaries of their parents' \$14 million estate, collected \$400,000 in life insurance and went their separate ways. Lyle bought a Porsche and a restaurant in New Jersey. Erik used his money to hire a coach and begin touring as a professional tennis player.

Meanwhile, as the Mafia theory led nowhere, police began to focus their suspicions on Lyle and Erik. Investigators spotted inconsistencies in the brothers' joint alibi. They found a spent shotgun shell in the pocket of Lyle's jacket. And they turned up a screenplay Erik had coauthored with a friend. The script told of a young heir who conspired to kill five people, including his own parents.

Still, it was not until seven months after the Menendez murders that authorities decided to charge the brothers with killing their parents. In March 1990, law enforcement officials seized tapes secretly recorded by a psychologist who had treated both Lyle and Erik. Based on alleged confessions contained in the tapes, police arrested both young men and charged them with capital murder. At their first trial several years later, Lyle and Erik admitted killing their parents, claiming they did so to protect themselves from abuse and/or death at the hands of their father.

Although the jury was unable to reach a verdict in the first trial, in 1996 jurors in a second trial convicted both Erik and Lyle of capital murder but spared the brothers the death penalty. ❖

At least some people suspected early on that Christine Lane, Chuck Stuart, and the Menendez brothers were all lying to authorities about the deaths of their family members. But no one really wanted to believe it.

In Christine's case, it was easier to believe that Aliza wandered off and was abducted by a stranger who just happened to be passing by. With the Stuarts, it was only too easy to believe that an affluent, young White couple driving in Boston's inner city would be kidnapped, robbed, and brutally shot by a crazed Black gunman. And in Lyle and Erik's case, it seemed at least plausible that their parents had been killed by a Mafia hit man.

People wanted to believe Christine Lane, Chuck Stuart, and the Menendez brothers because they could not believe or did not want to believe that a mother would kill her infant daughter, that a husband would murder his pregnant wife, or that two handsome, bright, and rich young men could brutally execute their parents. But, in fact, based on what we know about who kills whom in American society, Christine Lane, Chuck Stuart, Lyle Menendez, and Erik Menendez should all have been prime suspects right from the start.

The television-inspired stereotype of murder in America is that of the innocent victim shot, stabbed, strangled, or beaten to death by a total stranger—a rapist, robber, serial killer, or even mass murderer, who is drugged, deranged, sociopathic, or some combination of all three. In our

TABLE 1.1 Homicide Victims, by Relationship to Offender, 1977-1992

Year	<i>Estimated Number of Homicide Victims</i>					
	<i>Wife or Girlfriend</i>	<i>Husband or Boyfriend</i>	<i>Other Relatives</i>	<i>Other Known</i>	<i>Stranger</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
1977	1,396	1,185	1,683	7,113	2,562	5,162
1978	1,428	1,095	1,701	6,119	2,640	5,886
1979	1,438	1,137	1,674	6,909	2,682	7,574
1980	1,498	1,129	1,797	7,304	3,064	8,248
1981	1,486	1,149	1,869	7,837	3,491	6,666
1982	1,408	1,008	1,807	7,290	3,551	5,904
1983	1,487	1,043	1,796	6,681	2,897	5,445
1984	1,420	897	1,701	6,542	3,289	4,822
1985	1,480	835	1,708	7,099	2,752	5,106
1986	1,525	866	1,690	7,708	2,679	6,142
1987	1,508	824	1,729	7,377	2,653	5,950
1988	1,592	765	1,613	7,383	2,564	6,783
1989	1,441	817	1,741	7,568	2,817	7,117
1990	1,524	797	1,688	7,946	3,375	8,134
1991	1,528	714	1,703	7,567	3,716	9,472
1992	1,510	657	1,531	7,550	3,218	9,295
Total:	23,669	14,918	27,431	116,073	47,950	107,706

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Justice, *Violence Between Intimates*, 1994.

fears, murderers are nameless, faceless, hardened criminals lurking somewhere "out there," ready to strike and kill randomly. Thus, the way to avoid becoming a murder victim is to stay away from the wrong places, mainly "bad" neighborhoods in tough, blighted urban areas, where drugs, craziness, criminality, and the other ingredients for homicide flourish openly.

There is, of course, some basis in fact for these stereotypes. In some geographic areas, mainly decaying inner-city neighborhoods, life is cheap, death comes all too easy, and the risk of being randomly murdered by a total stranger cannot be dismissed lightly. But for most Americans—regardless of where they live but especially for those who make it a point not to frequent the inner city—the risk of being murdered is much greater in their own homes than on any mean street they are ever likely to traverse. And the risk of being slain by an acquaintance or family member far exceeds any risk of dying at the hands of a homicidal stranger.

Annually, nearly half of the 20,000-plus homicide victims in the United States are related to or acquainted with their killers. As indicated in Table 1.1,

TABLE 1.2 Relationship of Murderer to Murder Victim in the United States, 1994

<i>Victim</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Husband	1.56
Wife	3.73
Mother	0.54
Father	0.85
Daughter	0.96
Son	1.48
Brother	0.78
Sister	0.18
Other family member	1.76
Friend	3.32
Boyfriend	1.03
Girlfriend	2.38
Acquaintance	27.75
Neighbor	0.78
Stranger	13.08
Employee	0.03
Employer	0.06
Relationship unknown	39.72

SOURCE: Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States: Uniform Crime Reports*, 1995.

the number of Americans killed by family members has remained relatively stable over the past couple of decades. Between 1977 and 1992, there were 337,747 reported homicide victims in the United States, 66,018 of whom (19.5 percent) were killed by relatives, including "boyfriends" and "girlfriends." The only substantial year-to-year variation has been in the number of men killed by their wives and girlfriends, which dropped by nearly 50 percent between 1977 and 1992.

FBI data from 1994 illustrate the pattern of relationships found among victims and offenders in homicide both in and outside the family. As seen in Table 1.2, wives are the most common victims of intrafamilial killings, followed by husbands, sons, daughters, fathers, brothers, mothers, and sisters.

Among intrafamilial killings, the most common relationship between killer and victim is husband-wife. In a recent analysis of more than 8,603 homicides in the nation's 75 largest counties,¹ the U.S. Justice Department found that among the 16 percent that were intrafamilial, 40.9 percent