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A TICKING TIME-BOMB

*Twenty-four years after being let off the hook,
a murderous woman goes on a rampage*



I was not on duty at the time of the incident, but I recall how frustrated the members of the department were over the release of Ms. Bishop...The release of Ms. Bishop did not sit well with the police officers and I can assure you that this would not happen in this day and age.

Braintree, Massachusetts police chief [Paul Frazier](#), commenting on his department's lackluster investigation, twenty-four years earlier, of the shooting death of Amy Bishop's brother.

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Chief Frazier's thoughts were echoed by current Norfolk County D.A. [William Keating](#). Minutes after "accidentally" killing her brother with a shotgun blast to the chest, Bishop burst into an auto body shop and at gunpoint ordered workers to give her a getaway car. They didn't. She then refused to surrender when police arrived (an officer who snuck up behind her finally got the shotgun away.) How could his predecessors have ignored that?

On Saturday morning, December 6, 1986, Amy Bishop was twenty-one and living with her parents and brother in Braintree, an affluent Boston suburb. After a dispute with her father she brought his shotgun to the kitchen, supposedly to get help unloading it. But when her brother stepped in to assist, Bishop swung the muzzle in his direction, discharging a round and fatally wounding him. She then fired another round into the ceiling and left. That, if one believes Bishop and her mother, would have been the young woman's third unintentional discharge of the day, as she had also just shot a hole in her bedroom wall.

Once she was at the police station Bishop clammed up, so some questions never got answered. Why did she need an escape vehicle? Why did she have a shotgun shell in her pocket? And since the shotgun was pump-action, requiring that users manually work the slide to expel an empty cartridge before firing again, how could she have *accidentally* discharged three rounds? Then an even bigger mystery arose. Word came from police chief [John Polio](#) to let her go.

In his [report](#) to prosecutors, the state trooper assigned to the case said that Bishop was released in part because of her “highly emotional state,” and in part because the shooting was already deemed accidental:

This officer therefore determined that due to the inability to further question the witnesses at that time as a result of their highly emotional state and their inability to recall specifically the facts relating to this occurrence, as well as the fact that [Bishop’s mother] stated that she had witnessed the entire affair and the discharge had been accidental in nature, it was determined that additional interviews would be conducted at a later time, allowing the witnesses a sufficient time to stabilize their emotions.

Or to get their stories straight. Either way, Bishop’s fingerprints would never make it into State or Federal databanks.

Eleven days later the trooper and two Braintree officers, a captain and a detective, went to the Bishop residence to interview the young woman and her parents, obviously not the way one would investigate a possible murder but understandable if the purpose was to tie a pretty ribbon around a package entitled “tragic accident.” As one might expect, Bishop and her parents insisted that’s exactly what it was, and their words were accepted at face value. Inexplicably, the trooper’s report made no mention of the body shop incident and subsequent stand-off. (It does state that Bishop said that she blanked out after the shooting and couldn’t remember anything until arriving at the police station.) The trooper and the Braintree cops (no pun intended) declared that the shooting had been accidental. Case closed.

Ex-Chief Polio now insists that he was never told about the events at the body shop and has “no regrets whatsoever” about what he did. One can only imagine how his comments were received at the University of Alabama at Huntsville, where Bishop, a biology professor, systematically gunned down six colleagues at a faculty meeting two Fridays ago. (Three are dead. Two are in critical condition and the sixth is recovering. True to form, Bishop again insists that she remembers nothing.)

Why did she do it? A Harvard Ph.D. with a reportedly bright future in biotech, Bishop had been denied tenure, a rare step that was probably influenced by her poor

reputation with students. Put off by her general weirdness and odd lecturing style – she read straight from the book and avoided eye contact – several dozen reportedly took the rare step of [petitioning the university](#) in writing. “When it came down to tests,” said a former student, “and people asked her what was the best way to study, she'd just tell you, ‘Read the book.’ When the test came, there were just ridiculous questions. No one even knew what she was asking.”

Well, there are plenty of odd ducks in academia. Yet few would go so far as to punch a fellow diner in the face just because she happened to get the last booster seat, as Bishop did at an International House of Pancakes in 2002. That time Bishop actually got arrested. A judge later turned down a prosecutor’s request that she be ordered to take anger management classes, and after six months all charges were dismissed.

A tragic “accident” and a slip-up do not a personality make, you say? Fair enough. So what is one to think of that 1993 incident where a Harvard professor who was involved in a dispute with then-graduate student Bishop [got two pipe bombs in the mail](#)? Bishop and her husband were interviewed by ATF. Although agents apparently suspected that the husband bought the pipe-bomb components, Federal prosecutors ultimately refused to charge the couple for lack of evidence. Curiously, Bishop’s husband has said that ATF had issued him and his wife a letter of clearance. (ATF doesn’t issue such things, as your blogger, a retired agent, knows. Challenged about the document, the husband now claims it was lost.)

One could go on about Bishop and her temper – former neighbors and associates [had lots to say](#) about that – but enough about her. Let’s turn to the fateful decision made by police and prosecutors in 1986. Why did they let Bishop go?

[Braintree](#), an upper-middle class Boston suburb of about 34,000, has one of the lowest crime rates in Massachusetts, if not the whole U.S. (it reported a total of two murders between 2000-2008.) Unaccustomed to serious violence, police were caught off-guard by a killing that intimately involved members of the town’s social elite (Bishop’s mother and the novelist John Irving are cousins.) Although patrol officers were upset, their more politically-attuned superiors and the state trooper seemed anxious to avoid getting caught up in a fight with a prominent couple that had lost a son and seemed ready to lose their daughter as well. But there was a niggling obstacle. “It was almost like they wanted to put it on the shelf and forget about it,” a former body shop employee said [during a recent interview](#). Armed with the shotgun, Bishop had screamed at him to raise his hands (he did). “[If it was] me I’d be wrapping up a long prison sentence. But with this, it seems like they just wanted it to go away.”

Is that why the trooper's report was incomplete? [John Kivlan](#), the supervisory prosecutor who handled the case, said that had he known about the body shop incident things would have turned out differently. In the end, whatever the reasons, an explosively violent young woman managed to avoid any consequences. She wasn't arrested or confined, didn't get mental treatment, and her behavior wasn't monitored. Bishop married, earned a prestigious Harvard degree and moved to Alabama, where no one was aware of her deep secret. U of A's background check turned up nothing.

Then the ticking time-bomb went off.