

# Lizzie Borden



Copyright© 2000 by Jan Adkins

Work in Progress

**Y**ankee spinster, plain, quite ordinary in every way. Yet she is a symbol for a special evil: a hidden heat of anger that is pushed out of sight, growing and growing. It erupts in a sudden explosion of violence and blood — then disappears. Its fire burns everything. Not even the ashes of guilt are left.

Hidden evil is especially frightening. Could we be walking over a secret volcano every day? Tuesday, Wednesday, could it blast open under our feet? Surely we would know an explosion like that was coming! Or would we?

Looking back at Miss Elizabeth Borden, sifting the facts, we know quite a lot about her gray outer life. And we know nothing about the burning anger inside her.

In the late morning of August the fourth 1892, Lizzie was eating windfall pears, two or three of them, standing in the hayloft of her father's barn after trying to find some lead fishline sinkers. She was thinking about going fishing, something she hadn't done in many years. It was a very warm day in Fall River, Massachusetts. The pears and the sinkers and staring idly out of the loft windows took up a good part of the morning. This, at least, is what she told the police later that day.

We know she was the younger daughter of a wealthy family. Not so young, thirty-two, and not as wealthy as many other Bordens in Fall River. Her father, Andrew Jackson Borden, had gathered a comfortable fortune as a mortician. He was a hard working, pious, quiet man who avoided attention. He believed that fancy clothes, bright things and modern gimcracks were the Devil's tools. His house was large but drab, dim, filled with old dark furniture, and located near the famous Fall River cotton mills. Lizzie would have preferred to live up on the fashionable Hill near the other Bordens. But Andrew disapproved of many things and was not close to many people. Perhaps he was close to his wife Abby, Lizzie's stepmother, but no one knew for sure. Abby was a small, sour woman.

Lizzie had seen some of the world. She had been to Europe with her wealthy Borden cousins for a few months, had a decent education, and visited their bright parlors on the Hill. She and her older sister, Emma, invited no guests to their home, where there were no electric lights, no piano, no running water or flush toilets, no sparkle of any kind. Mr. Borden did not approve of spending money on entertainment

or silliness. He was quite content to live in near-silence with his wife and two unmarried – probably never-to-be-married – daughters. Every noon Mr. Borden came home from his funeral parlor and took a nap on the dark brown horsehair sofa before lunch. Lizzie seemed to be a perfectly respectful daughter to her father, though somewhat cool toward her stepmother. After living with her stepmother for twenty-five years, Lizzie still addressed her as “Mrs. Borden.”

Perhaps the quickening spirit of the times whispered to Lizzie. We don’t really know. But women were getting jobs as teachers, typists, and bookkeepers – while Lizzie and Emma had become little more than household servants. Her cousins and friends on the Hill were becoming part of a new age for women.

Pears and lead sinkers. Though she never found any sinkers.

Sister Emma was away, visiting cousins that warm Thursday.

Early in the afternoon a neighbor, Mrs. Adelaide Churchill, saw Lizzie sitting inside the back screen door on a stair. She sat quietly. The day before she had shared a premonition, that something bad would happen. Lizzie looked up and saw her neighbor watching. She called out, “Oh, Mrs. Churchill, do come over. Someone has killed father.”

Rushing through the door Mrs. Churchill asked, “Where is your father?”

“In the sitting room,” Lizzie replied.

Andrew Jackson Borden lay on the horsehair sofa with his face mostly gone. He had been struck while sleeping, ten times with something like a small hatchet. Blood was spattered everywhere. Upstairs, in the guest bedroom, Mrs. Borden lay between the bed and the wall with the back of her head struck open.

On Sunday, the day after the funeral, a friend of Lizzie’s visited to comfort her. Lizzie and Emma were burning a dress in the woodstove. Lizzie explained to her friend that it was “covered with paint.” Perhaps it was.

Lizzie was arrested for the murder of her father and stepmother. She was questioned over and over. Her answers were short and vague but seemed to satisfy her, if not the police.

At the trial she had three excellent lawyers. One was her father’s lawyer, another a famous trial lawyer from Boston, and the third a fatherly, white haired man who had been governor of Massachusetts three times. They attacked the police for believing that a respectable woman like Lizzie could have committed a crime so brutal. They insisted that women were gentle, sweet creatures who did not even think of violent things. Over and over they asked the jurors what possible motive she might have had.

Certainly she loved her father, as all daughters do. As for his fortune, why, women were not interested in money.

All the jurors were men; all three judges were men. The chief judge would not allow important evidence to be presented to the jury: Lizzie had been seen with a small hatchet; Lizzie had tried to buy prussic acid, a deadly poison, at Smith's Pharmacy on the morning of the murders; Lizzie may have hidden something in a pail in the basement which was never searched.

Lizzie sat at the defense table tightly controlled, dressed in black, silent, unmoving. She cried briefly only after the judge ruled out the incriminating evidence. After that she began to carry bouquets of flowers to court and purchased a new, very expensive black dress. She never testified.

After the half-hearted prosecution completed its case, the ex-governor droned on for half the day in a defense summation that praised "the fair sex" for its nurturing, graceful place in society. Then the chief justice gave the jury its guidelines for deciding the case. Against all rules, he discredited the prosecution witnesses and made it plain that he believed she was innocent. The jury retired to the jury room. Within a few minutes they voted "not guilty" but waited an hour to give the impression of serious study on the question.

It is possible that Lizzie Borden did not kill her father and stepmother. Looking back, all the facts insist that she was guilty, but the jury acquitted her immediately. Would you? But you are not from that far-off time of public sentiment and private anger, when women were expected to obey men without question. Did those twelve men, thinking on their wives and daughters and Irish servant girls, wonder if they walked over a secret volcano each day? Was preserving their illusion of "the fair sex" more important than seeing the facts?

Lizzie and her sister bought a splendid new home on the hill, which they named "Maplecroft." Lizzie changed her name to Lisbeth and bought a fine carriage. She was often seen in bright clothes. But very few people visited Maplecroft. There was a strangeness about Miss Borden that discouraged closeness. Emma moved away after the sisters argued about money. Miss Lisbeth Borden died in 1927 at the age of sixty-six, alone. She left most of Andrew Jackson Borden's carefully gathered fortune to the Animal Rescue League.



Evil gathers about this crime like cobwebs, and its eeriest aspect is the quiet. No passion, no shouting, no fuss.

Can someone as drab and quiet as Lizzie be a villain? No one knows what simmering anger and resentment that dim Borden house may have concealed. We can imagine polite words spoken with a hateful hiss. We can imagine pleas for more light, more life, a few pleasures of girlhood, and we can imagine them refused. It is difficult to imagine a loving family. It is easy to picture powerful hate that grew for years, then bloomed and disappeared in a few violent minutes. After that, more silence.

Patricide, the killing of a father, is an evil crime. Our fathers and our mothers gave us life. We may disagree with them. We may even dislike them at times but we owe them everything. It is a debt we must, at the very least, pay in respect. Murdering a parent for any reason flies against life.

Part of the evil around this crime was in the men who brought it to judgement. Everyone who sat in judgement or argued for or against Miss Borden seemed more concerned with preserving a false stereotype of women than with looking at facts. They didn't care about Lizzie at all; they cared about their own comfortable illusions of women as sweet, mindless dolls.

Poor Lizzie, repressed by a heartless father, ignored by hypocritical men. Was this frustrated spinster a victim, imprisoned in a tight-lipped Yankee nightmare?

No, the victims of this crime died violently in their own home. They may have deserved harsh words or a kick in the pants but not a hatchet in the head. The true and deep evil of Lizzie Borden is that she knew how tightly men clutched at their stereotype of women, and she used it. She kept that stereotype alive more cynically and falsely than the police and lawyers and jury and judges. Lizzie Borden killed, lied, hid behind a false front, and profited by it. She helped continue an evil stereotype. She only subtracted two from the population of Fall River, Massachusetts, but there was, somewhere, a strong hint of Vlad Dracula in her.