

Forensic Fiction: “Tangled Roots”

Susan Hatters Friedman, MD, MSt

J Am Acad Psychiatry Law 53:93–6, 2025. DOI:10.29158/JAAPL.250002-25

Key words: neonaticide; genetic genealogy; denial of pregnancy; fiction; cold cases

I look up just as the deputy—sheriff? officer?—opens the heavy metal door.

“You can have 15 minutes,” he says as he leads a woman to the chair across from me. She’s 10 years younger than me—she looks like Jennifer Aniston in the 1990s—and wearing a smart suit.

“You need anything?” He is asking her, not me.

“Actually, I need 30 minutes alone with my client,” my newly assigned public defender says to the officer.

“Fine by me,” he says, giving me a sneer before he walks out. I think he says “baby-killer” under his breath.

She introduces herself to me, Kathy—Katie—Kath? What does it matter when my life has just completely gone past a point of no return? She says tell her nothing about the crime itself, just the details of my past, so she understands what “we’re” (notice how quickly she is on my team) dealing with. I must be the “case of the year” in our middle-class suburb. Paralegal, soccer mom, done for murder. I’m about to lose everything. I just need to tell her.

“Jenna, I’m here to help. We don’t have much time,” she urges.

Time? My time clock had started after the police realized they could use the popular ancestral DNA kits to solve the Golden State Killer case. It started them looking at a lot of other cold cases.

“You’re sure they can’t hear us?” I gesture toward the one-way mirror across the room.

“Listening in’s illegal, don’t worry. Just go on.”
I take a deep breath and begin.

*

Everything started with Ariel turning 18 and wanting to do the whole DNA test thing. Of course, I wasn’t totally surprised that she would want such a thing. Sharing a name with a Disney princess had given my daughter Anastasia-like dreams of secretly being royalty ever since she was little. My husband—her dad Tom—didn’t think anything of it. It cost less than \$100 on top of the other presents for her big birthday. Her last birthday before she’d go off to university, splitting up our little nuclear family-of-four.

Tom really should’ve asked me first.

*

I know I am frowning from the way my new lawyer looks at me, her pen pausing above her legal pad. I shake my head. No. It started long before that.

*

The story started thirty years ago, when I was 16. I was an old 16, so different from my girls. Tom and I joke about our girls, that if they ever knew what shenanigans their parents got up to when we were their age, they’d stop being such perfect little rule-followers.

Tom had no idea.

My teenage years were not what Tom imagines. His dalliances were skipping class or sneaking out to a Pearl Jam concert. My Mom was a single mother, working two minimum-wage jobs to pay for our apartment in a “good neighborhood,” and I was the original unsupervised adolescent.

I was 15 when Mom married John and we moved into his place. Now I had a bigger house to be in unsupervised,

Dr. Hatters Friedman is the Phillip J. Resnick Professor of Forensic Psychiatry, Professor of Reproductive Biology and Pediatrics, and Adjunct Professor of Law, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio. Address correspondence to: Susan Hatters Friedman, MD, MSt. E-mail: sjh8@case.edu.

Disclosures of financial or other potential conflicts of interest: None.

but I was a new kid in school and had no friends. No easy way to see my old friends, no instant messaging.

*

"It's damn depressing in here," I say, knowing I am just playing for time. I don't want to get to the part of the story that brought me here. "I feel like they'd want warm colours, yellowish sunlight, to make people want to confess. Not this grey."

The lawyer is not impressed. I think she knows what I am up to. She moves her hand in circles, hurrying me along.

"You said you didn't want to know about the 'crime' itself," I say, wondering how one could even define what aspect, exactly, was the crime.

*

I was alone and when some of the "older" guys in my new neighborhood—by "older," I mean 18—started paying attention to me, I thought it was going to be a bit of fun, would help my street cred. So I hung out with them at school, and after school we hung out in my basement. John let me have the basement as my bedroom. That whole "children should be seen and not heard" thing? Cold at night, wickedly cool to me. I used my spending money for posters—the Cure, Green Day, that one from Nirvana with the naked baby swimming? And we dragged an old vinyl couch down there that someone was getting rid of from the neighborhood. Cleaned it up. Bought some black lights.

I was the cute 5-foot-2 goth girl. I mean, a little weed and I learned to pretend to like drinking So-Co & Cokes. And I mean fooling around with the guys. And I was sometimes a little wasted, but it was the 90s. . .

*

"We have to be careful. You can't tell me about the crime itself or I can't put you on the stand. I can't risk suborning perjury," she reminds me, breaking my flow. "Just tell me the before and the after."

I nod. Wondering how to not talk about what brought me here in the first place. The logic of the law escapes me but then—

*

Long story short, two years later, the summer that I was turning 18, and about to be off on full scholarship to university—thank God I was good at tests and had aced the exams—Mom's husband John was digging up the garden. He loved his garden, his white picket fence, his American dream.

That was the summer of the Elm Yellow disease. The neighborhood trees were getting killed off by some bacteria that first turned them yellow. The only tree Mom had ever planted, only a couple years earlier, had needed to come out. Mom had been away at some work training weekend, and John had planned some quality landscaping time while she was gone. I came home from my summer job at Wendy's to find a coroner van and a police car, red and blue lights flashing, out front of the house. John had hit something hard with his shovel. He thought it was an animal carcass—but good old citizen John had called it in just in case.

Anyway, the skeleton was the top story in the local news for weeks. The police chased up the leads but nothing stuck.

*

My lawyer is nodding along, as if we were at some sort of reunion and just reminiscing. She says, "I remember that summer. I was eight, nine maybe, just old enough to understand when my parents were watching the news about 'Baby Misty.' I always wondered where the name came from. Us kids dared each other to ride our bikes past the 'dead baby Misty house' in the haunted yellow-tree neighborhood. . . Sorry. . ."

I shake my head.

*

So after that summer, and the strangeness in the garden, I went off to college, studied hard. Got married. It was when John got sick that we moved back to town, me, Tom, and our girls.

I took care of John and Mom like they never took care of me. Mom, God rest her, was never the maternal type. She loved me, but I was her burden to bear, her albatross, not someone to cherish. She died of heart disease two years ago. I wanted to be a different mother than the one I was dealt. Wanted to be there for my girls. Look at me now, PTA mom, paralegal. . . .

And now here with you instead.

*

"Wait, but how did the baby get there in the first place?"

"I. . . don't know."

"But it's your baby, the DNA says." My new lawyer scoots closer, and points to the file on the institutional table in front of us.

“That’s what they say. But my baby was born dead. And then she was just. . . gone. I’ve been over it so many times in my head. I know. It doesn’t make sense.”

*

The dead baby had one-quarter the same DNA as my vibrant daughter Ariel. A randomly assorted half of my DNA went to each of them. I had worked on a DNA case at Dewey and Howe last year. Re-learned the science that I had forgotten since high school.

Never thought I’d be using it in this long-buried situation. Or that DNA and genetic princess technology would suddenly bring me back so far. My whole adult life later.

I had turned my life around the next day after I lost the baby, after I got my strength back anyway. Stopped hanging out with the guys. Didn’t touch liquor again. Even now I don’t drink the hard stuff.

I started going with the nerds to the library that summer. By the time school started back in the fall, I was in that group. I threw myself into my studies. Probably why when John found the body, nobody—I mean NO-body—thought the girl with the glasses at the top-of-the-class could’ve done it.

*

“Well, it’s your DNA. . .” She looks at the wall, the one-way glass they are supposedly not watching us through, at any place but me. “. . . and in these cases, the mother. . .”

*

I had no idea I was pregnant. Liam or Dom or Mick for sure had no clue. My DNA, yes, but it takes two. That’s one lingering mystery the DNA test could actually solve.

I still had my periods. Didn’t gain any weight. I’ve read about it since, trying to make sense of myself. Turns out with your stronger abdominal muscles as a kid, and the fact that your periods don’t really get regular ‘til you’re in your 20s, it made a lot more sense how it could happen.

I went into labor in the basement toilet. June 6th. School had just let out. It wasn’t like my labors with my daughters—it was a quiet short trip to the bathroom. The last thing I remember is the baby looking dead. Me feeling faint. I woke up the next morning, drained and bloody, no baby anywhere.

So cold. So confused.

After?

After, I knew something bad had happened. But I don’t remember.

I did it. I must’ve done it. I don’t remember.

*

She is squinting her sharp brown eyes at me.

“Yes, I know, that’s what all the guilty clients say.” I’m a paralegal, you know.

“But why didn’t you get an abortion? We’re talking the 90s, they were legal,” she says, as if it was all so simple.

It’s almost like she is not listening to me, instead, she’s hearing what she wants to hear.

*

I didn’t know I was pregnant.

I didn’t even know she existed.

I couldn’t get an abortion.

Even if I could’ve, how would I have gotten to a clinic, gotten parental consent in that house? Mom was always working, didn’t pay any attention. John mellowed in his old age, but back then, no way. Bible thumper.

*

The lawyer turns to look straight in my eyes. Does she think that’s how we’re going to have a sudden catharsis? “Look, I’ve read about these neonaticide cases. It’s the one crime where it is almost always the mother, acting alone.”

“But what if it’s not? I don’t remember anything. The body looked dead.”

“People around here want justice for Baby Misty.”

“Does everything I’ve done since not matter? Does it bother anyone that it’s all on me? One person to blame and one only? DNA doesn’t prove guilt.”

“Maybe I can get them down to abuse of a corpse. We might consider a psych eval,” she replies. “What’s the first thing you remember after—not about the library or about how you were all bloody. Really think back, what else happened at home?”

*

It was surreal the next morning. Mom stayed home from work—she never did that. I almost thought she knew what had happened. But no, she had been out in the garden planting a new tree when I came to.

Forensic Fiction: “Tangled Roots”

She never used to do gardening.

She said, “the spirit moved me” and that she wanted to surprise John. She drove out to the garden center and bought an oak tree for the garden. John was excited that Mom was finally growing a green thumb. But it was a one-off. Just that one time.

And now I know why.

*

“It sounds like we have a defense here,” Katie says.

The door summarily opens, and the officer pokes his head in. “We need to get this moving along, start the interview.”

Maybe Mom really was more than she seemed.

Acknowledgments

“Tangled Roots” was short-listed for the Florence Staniforth Student Fiction Prize, University of Cambridge. The thoughtful comments regarding earlier drafts of this short story by Femi Kayode, Emily Winslow, Katri Skala, and the author’s workshop group were greatly appreciated.