

## [Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Paper Thin

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the Match app today. In April of 2011, David Zettner and his girlfriend Luanne settled down for the evening in the Shoreview Apartments in Santa Cruz, California. The dated three-story building has chipped paint and a rickety balcony. But it overlooks the Pacific Ocean and the roaring roller coasters on the boardwalk. The multi-million-dollar hotels share the same panoramic views. But the old apartment is the last of its kind on this beautiful street.

David and Luanne snuggle on the couch in their breezy suite,

instinctually flicking on the TV. Suddenly they hear the neighbors next door, Apartment 7.

An old man named John Clower lives there and he has a young blonde who often stays with him.

David and Luanne are used to hearing thumping and bickering from Apartment 7. The blonde girl talks boisterously while John stops around the room. They are always fighting. Tonight, the noises start as a mumble, but the walls at the Shoreview are paper thin and with only the distant roar of the ocean to help drown out the neighbors. David and Luanne can hear the blonde girl next door. Her voice is almost a whisper and it sounds like her face is pressed up against their common wall. John, stop. No, no. Get off of me. Luanne's heart skips a beat.

Get off me. John, stop. Then there's a choking sound. Luanne looks at David. He huffs, rolls his eyes and turns up the volume on the television as the blonde woman's cries slip away under the six o'clock news.

Welcome to Sword and Scale Nightmares. True crime for bedtime, where nightmare begins now.

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Santa Cruz, California is one of the West Coast's most beautiful and famous beach towns.

Resting on the northern tip of Monterey Bay, Santa Cruz was the coolest place to be in the late 70s. Rebellious hippies and government opposing surfers made their homes here, amongst the sand, palm trees and blue ocean. They hung out at the boardwalk, sipping beer and riding the giant Dipper coaster. That old, creaky, twisty ride had been throwing tourists and locals around since

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1924. Santa Cruz was the kind of place that people never left. It was just that beautiful. Anyone who visited Santa Cruz was enamored by the crisp ocean breeze and endless sunshine. But for those who grew up in Santa Cruz, the picture-perfect seaside town was stiflingly inescapable. Heather Stearns was born there, on March 31st, 1981. She was your typical California girl, blue-eyed, sun-kissed and super blonde. Heather and her sister were homeschooled for the first few years of their lives, staying close to their mother and enjoying most of their days outside in the sunshine and nature. Heather always had a deep connection with animals, especially horses. She told her mother she wanted to be a veterinarian one day. By the time she hit her teenage years, Heather had enrolled in Santa Cruz High School, and for the first time in her life, she was introduced to boys, parties, drugs, and alcohol. Heather tumbled hard into partying and drinking. She got a job at a local pet hospital and loved being with animals every day, but she was still drinking heavily in her senior year. I don't even feel like I belong in my own skin, she once confessed to her mother. By the age of 17, she had moved out on her own, lost her veterinary job, and was spending most of her time on the streets. But she was shy and naive, whereas the Santa Cruz

street scene was filled with people who had been doing this for years. They knew the deal and were happy to accept Heather just as she was, lost, addicted, and lonely. Heather tried to get sober, her aunt and grandmother both lived close by and kept their doors open for her. Heather would come back and try to sober up, but often found herself on the street again with a 40-ounce steel reserve in hand. Then, their father died. Heather sunk deeper into addiction. Heather used to be the girl who loved to cook garlic-infused Italian meals in her grandmother's kitchen while belting out Patsy Klein songs. Now, she had lost touch with her mother and spiraled further into life on the streets, getting arrested over 40 times in three years for public drunkenness, and even landing herself on a list of serial inebriates in Santa Cruz.

It was around this time that she met John Clower.

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24 hours. John Clower was a Vietnam veteran who lived in apartment seven at the Shoreview.

He was thin and tanned, with a broad nose and slicked back white hair. He wore Hawaiian shirts and loved his RV. John had a deep disdain for the government after being honorably discharged from the war. He ended up in California and drank away all of his problems, living off his veteran pension and running a sketchy used car operation. 30-year-old Heather and 60-year-old John had only one thing in common, alcohol. Heather needed it to feed her growing addiction, and John was happy to supply it to her in exchange for her company. So Heather found herself spending

more and more time at the Shoreview apartments and less time on the streets. John's warm seaside bungalow was a place for Heather to get another drink and rest, but it was always filled with misery.

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John Clower had been getting into trouble with the cops since he left the army. He didn't care about anyone but himself. When Heather entered his life, he already had a long list of DUI charges, petty theft and narcotics violations, and was on parole for second-degree burglary when he tried to rob a lighting store. Heather and John were companions, but not in the normal, healthy way a boyfriend and girlfriend would be together. Heather didn't love him, and John didn't respect her. But Heather was sick. She was an alcoholic who needed rehab and treatment. She was trapped in the throes of her disease, and behind her addiction was a lovable, wholesome person who had become lost. Even though John was old and ugly, he gave Heather a false sense of stability to keep her addiction alive. But that all came to a halt in 2007, when a fight between them escalated to the point that he grabbed a hammer and came after Heather. With his white hair all wild and sticking up behind him, the old man swung at Heather over and over, chasing her around

the tiny cluttered apartment until she dropped to the floor and curled up like a pillbug to protect herself. Once he relented and dropped the hammer, she ran from the apartment to the nearest hospital.

John started exercising more and more control over Heather. He'd get annoyed with her and lock her out. Heather had nowhere else to go, so she'd sheepishly cry to be let back in. John would ignore her. She'd spend the night curled up in a ball on the balcony with nothing, but the white noise of the waves to comfort her. Then, one night in April of 2011, David Zettner, John's next door neighbor, was watching TV with his girlfriend Luanne when they heard something next door.

Get off me, John. Stop. David turned up the TV. He did not want to get involved.

Still, the mumblings and rumblings tonight were eerie. Heather was normally yelling, telling John to get away from her, but this faint, desperate whisper was less comforting. Something was wrong. Luanne moved her body closer to the adjoining wall.

Help me, she tried again. Luanne heard Heather through the wall, but David said to forget about the noise. Luanne and David heard their sexual struggles every week, and David was sick and tired of it. Then, they heard a loud thumping noise.

It sounded like someone throwing boulders across the room. The entire building shook.

David thought about calling the landlord, but he was sick of being the policeman of the apartment building. The shoreview was filled with crazy tenants, and he'd had enough of the babysitting, so he just ignored the noise. Then suddenly, the thumping stopped. Apartment 7 was quiet. David just went on watching TV.

Two weeks later, and no one in the building has seen Heather. David wondered where that blonde girl

had gone. Then, the smell started. It began as a faint, rotting breeze. Maybe it was a dead seal that had washed up onto the rocks below, but the smell didn't disappear as the days crept on.

It only got worse. David and Luanne smelled it every morning when they got up.

Was it coming from their apartment? They looked in every closet, every cupboard, every nook and cranny trying to find the culprit. They tore apart their arm-war that stood on the wall they shared with John. As Luanne knelt down to sniff, she noticed that the sweet foul odor was coming from that spot. It was traveling through the wall like a fungus. David finally called the landlord. The old lady said she spoke to John. The smell was just his trash, he told her. He would take it downstairs now, and it would all be resolved. But David

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saw John bringing his trash down to the parking lot. He followed him, and when John walked away, David leaned into the bin and took a sniff. It didn't smell like the thing that was coming from John's apartment. Later that day, David saw John muttering to himself as he dragged a giant city trash bin into his apartment. David's mind went to a dark place. He had flashbacks of the night when he ignored Heather's whimpering. Had he inadvertently ignored something ghastly. The next morning, David and Luanne decided to go to the landlord and ask for a key to John's place. Surprisingly, she hands it over. David and Luanne slowly opened the lock to apartment 7, and they walk inside. Immediately, they are assaulted with the smell of death. They cover their noses and hold their breath. John's tiny place is a mess. His wicker chairs with mustard yellow cushions are sun stained and covered in clothes and magazines. A pothos plant hangs lazily from the wall, as though it was trying to jump out the window into the ocean below. The whole place looks like it has been turned upside down. Then they spot the bed. One side is extra lumpy, with blankets folded on top. David walks over and slowly peels back the duvet. First, he sees the blonde hair. Then, Heather's forehead. It's black. Her body is rotten. The whites of her eyes stare back up at him, and he gasps. David runs out of the apartment and gags himself over the balcony railing. He took a deep breath of the clean ocean breeze. He has to call police. It turned out that David's delayed concerns were right. He had ignored something horrible, because on that fateful night in apartment 7, Heather found herself face up on John's bed. The two were fighting, but this time he had pinned her down. Heather's vision becomes foggy as she struggles to push herself up, but John is too strong. His leathery hands are clasped around her neck. So hard, it feels like her throat is going to pop. Help, she sputters. John Grunzen uses his body weight to push down further on her neck. He watches Heather's face brighten with blood, and her blue eyes begin to bulge like stress balls. He shakes her and pushes her further into the musty old duvet as she swings her arms. But the alcohol in her blood and the lack of air in her lungs are a force she can't battle. She starts to give up. That's when John begins hitting Heather in the chest, punching her tirelessly with a strength she doesn't recognize. He pounds her sternum again and again as her limp body shakes with the blows. Heather blinks and tries to turn away from the angry old man who is hovering over her, the corners of his mouth gathering with spit as he kills her. When the detectives showed up at the Shoreview Apartments two weeks after Heather's murder, they passed John at the front entrance as they made their way to his top floor studio. Heather's body had decomposed so badly that her skin was practically fused to the duvet cover. Her face was puffy and dark like a wild mushroom, and her body had been curled onto the left side. The cops couldn't tell if the body was that of a woman or a man. For weeks Heather had been rotting in John's bed, or once beautiful face had disintegrated under the blankets and the hot sun. It took almost two years to get John to trial, and when he finally showed up his lawyers had dressed him up like a respectable grandfather with tan slacks and a royal blue shirt. This was a far cry from the 63-year-old degenerate felon who liked to beat up prostitutes and do drugs. John wasn't someone's beloved grandpa. He was a sick, twisted man who had killed a woman and slept beside her decomposing body for over two weeks. David Zettner had to testify against his neighbor. He could barely look at the sick old man as he recounted the night he heard Heather being murdered through their shared wall. David told the court that Heather had cried for her. She had told John to get off of her.

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John huffed, yelling out to the courtroom that Heather never called him John. His neighbor was a liar. The judge ordered John to be quiet. The prosecution argued that John killed Heather that night because she had ruined a vehicle that he put in her name. John never confessed or confirmed anything, so we'll never know the whole truth. But what we do know is that John slept beside her night after night as she corroded into maggot food. Why did he keep the body in his bed? Maybe he missed her. Maybe he was just too lazy and didn't know what to do with Heather's body. But maybe he wanted to keep her there so he could finally do whatever he desired to her without having to put up with her loud mouth and swinging fists. Finally, she couldn't fight back. The medical examiner said that Heather had been beaten so badly that her sternum was broken and her brain bled. John had choked her until her neck broke. That's bull, John hollered as the prosecutor gave his opening statement to the jury. John's lawyer argued that he was innocent, that there was another man's DNA found under Heather's fingernails and that's likely who killed her. John was sleeping in his RV outside, not in that smelly room. This wasn't his handiwork. But tenants in the building had seen John shuffling around the shore view. David and Luann had watched him go in and out of apartment 7 every day, like he always had, grumbling and muttering to himself. He even went to a garage sale across the street to shop for knives. Was he planning on dismembering her body? There was no doubt that John had murdered Heather. After six weeks of trial and over 50 witnesses, John was found guilty of first degree murder and sentenced to 50 years to life in prison. Heather's mother was overcome with emotion. Not only was she hurt by the negative press portraying her daughter as a hopeless alcoholic, but she had lost her child, first to addiction and then to murder. I know Heather was no angel and you've heard about Heather's bad behavior, she told the court. The fact remains she was a human being who was brutally beaten and strangled to death. On a Facebook page dedicated to preserving her memory, Heather's mother spoke directly to John, calling him a cowardly psychopath who preyed on vulnerable women who he could control. You are the face of evil, she wrote. You killed any hope that Heather could one day get sober and fulfill her dreams. You killed my child who was loved by her family and friends. You should rot in prison for the rest of your life without the possibility of ever doing this to another human being. Then she begged the community to stop turning a blind eye. When you hear something, anything strange, don't turn up your television. Call 911. How different things might have been if David and Luann had decided to do something instead of turning away. John's apartment was cleared out. It still stands as is and a new tenant lives in the little studio that once acted as Heather Stern's temporary beachside coffin. The landlord is the same, though she's a lot more strict these days. Everyone keeps to themselves and minds their own business. It's hush hush in this quiet, pretty beach town. And no one wants to remember the horrors that happened in apartment 7. If you enjoyed the show, please consider joining Plus at [swordandscale.com](http://swordandscale.com) slash plus. But if you can't, consider leaving us a positive review on your preferred listening platform. Sweet dreams and good night.