

[Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Protective Services

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In May of 1998, in the small town of Romeo, Michigan,

a crew of detectives found themselves knee-deep in a hoarder's nest. The whole house was littered with trash. Greasy paper bags and half-empty cups of soda were collected on every surface. Pest strips hung from the ceiling collecting flies. The floor was so cluttered with garbage you couldn't see the carpet that was once creamy and pristine.

Splattered on top of all the clutter and trash were ketchup drippings. There was an obscene amount of ketchup smeared over the entire home. With each step into the layers of trash on the floor, the detectives wondered what mysterious noise would pop under their feet. The squish of an old hamburger, a cat, a small dog perhaps. After all, the people living here shared this mess with their seven pets. The Macomb County detectives trudged through the sea of clothes, feces, trash, and children's toys. The smell was overwhelming, like animal urine and expired milk. All mixed up into a tasty concoction. How were they expected to find anything in this mess? Suddenly, one of the detectives called out from the backyard. He'd found something in the shed, shining his flashlight into the darkness of the mess he pointed to his discovery. Plastic bag filled with bloody clothes and chunks of blonde hair.

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In 1997, 28-year-old Lisa Putman was a social worker, employed by Child Protective Services in Macomb County, Michigan. She was recently engaged to a man she adored. Lisa was the least threatening

CPS worker. She exuded warmth with her kind eyes and welcoming smile.

Beyond her physical appearance and unlike some of the other CPS workers we've heard about here on

certain scale, Lisa was a really tender person who cared deeply for the children and families she was employed to protect. She took her job very seriously and wanted to help these parents and children mend whatever was going wrong. After all, Lisa loved kids. She longed to be a mother herself

one day. Then in May of 1997, Child Protective Services received an anonymous call about two sisters living in Romeo in deplorable conditions. The mother and head of house was a 27-year-old woman named Josephine Varelin. Joe had two kids, an eight-year-old and a seven-year-old.

Her 21-year-old sister Jackie also lived in the house. When Lisa Putman first showed up at Joe's place that sunny afternoon in spring, she felt a ping of sadness when she saw that the woman answering the door was a mirror image of herself. Lisa and Joe were the same age, but Joe looked tired, overwhelmed, and stressed. She had no sparkle in her eye. It was as if though life had drained her of all that she had to offer. Joe's house was a mess as Lisa made her way around the small home. She held her breath and stepped into piles of clothes, trash, and toys. The place looked like a bomb had gone off, but Lisa could tell that underneath this disaster, a somewhat pretty home once existed. Joe was embarrassed. She insisted that she was just about to clean up, but things had been a little hectic. She was overwhelmed with the kids and her job at their school. Her younger sister lived with them now that the kids' father had left.

Things were just crazy. Joe started to cry. She told Lisa that it had been rough for her. She was depressed. Just then, Joe's kids came running into the room.

Lisa expected them to be a reflection of the dirty house they lived in, but they were clean and happy. Their hair was brushed, their clothes were tidy.

They looked perfectly normal. Lisa felt sorry for Joe. She saw a single mother who was struggling and had let herself and her house go. So she told her she would help her out.

Lisa said that she would give Joe time to get the house back in working order.

Lisa got a temporary order from the court and told Joe she had one week to clean up the mess.

As planned, Lisa returned the following week. She knocked on the door, but no one answered.

Lisa noticed that the front porch was piled up with trash. Maybe Joe was taking this stuff to the dump. She had high hopes, but as she made her way over to peek in through the window, Lisa noticed that nothing in the house had changed. The floors were still littered with refuse and toys. Every surface in the house was cluttered with junk. The kitchen sink was now filled with goopy, gray liquid, and gnats buzzed around the room. It wasn't as though Joe was

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hoarding. This house wasn't a trophy case of weird collectibles or Martha Stewart magazines. It was simply filled with garbage. When Joe returned home, Lisa confronted her about the mess. She told her that she had no choice but to remove the children. They could go and stay with Joe and Jackie's parents. Joe pleaded. She didn't want her parents to be involved at all. They could not know about the mess. But Lisa told her that this was the only option, well, that or foster care. Joe reluctantly agreed and gave Lisa her parents' address. When Lisa met Joe's parents, John and Simone Verlin, they were shocked to find out about the putrid conditions that her daughters and grandchildren were living in. They happily welcomed Lisa and the kids into their spotless home. John and Simone Verlin promised Lisa that Joe's house would be cleaned. The problem would be taken care of. As Lisa appeared around the pristine, tidy home of John and Simone, she wondered how Joe had ended up the way she did. Lisa at that moment had no idea of the spider's web that she would soon be caught in.

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Joe was the eldest daughter born to John and Simone Verlin.

John was in the U.S. Army in the 60s and married Simone while stationed in Saigon.

The Verlins stayed in Vietnam for a few years with baby Joe, but soon they moved to Romeo, Michigan for a fresh start in America. John worked as an electrician with Ford

and Simone opened two businesses, a jewelry store and a nail salon. Soon they welcomed a boy to the family, Jason and another girl, Jackie. Joe and Jackie were seven years apart, but they were very close. Simone worked all the time and could care less about mothering her kids.

At the ripe age of eight, Joe took on the role of mom and raised her siblings. Simone was a self-obsessed workaholic mother whose primary concern was keeping her businesses prosperous and her house spotless. The kids all referred to Simone as dragon lady. She made the children handle all the housework and they were punished if they disobeyed. She would beat them, scream if they spilled food on the floor or pinch them if they didn't do what she wanted. Simone was a tyrant. The kids were all terrified of her, but Joe took it the hardest. In the early 80s, Simone decided to foster two more kids to add some extra income to the family. Joe was now tasked with raising four siblings instead of two. That same year, 20-year-old Joe found out that she was pregnant.

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Simone was furious at the idea of her daughter being an unwed mother, but still allowed Joe to stay in the house. Meanwhile, Simone got busy employing the two new foster kids to take over the domestic chores like little Cinderella's. But all that came crashing down on Simone when CPS showed up at the Varellen house responding to allegations of abuse. One of the foster kids had told someone at school that Simone pushed his face into a bowl of food and beat him for eating too slowly. When CPS showed up at the house, Joe denied everything on behalf of her mother. She was pregnant and terrified of being kicked out. Who knows what Simone would do if Joe told the truth. But a few days later, when Simone's rage started again, Joe called CPS on her own mother. The foster kids were removed and Simone was humiliated. Though Joe called CPS in secret, Simone had a suspicion that it was her and held an even angrier grudge against her pregnant daughter. Tensions between Simone and Joe rose. Simone resented her daughter and pushed her away. That same year, Simone and John bought a secondary house and decided to move. They told Joe that she could keep the family home for her, her boyfriend, and their new baby. Maybe Simone just couldn't stand the idea of being under the same roof as her daughter anymore. Who knows. Jackie decided to stay with her sister rather than go with her parents to the new house. Joe was more of a mother to her anyway. Plus, she wanted to finish high school with her classmates. Joe and her new boyfriend soon had another child and the family grew happily. Joe was a soft, kind mother who was determined to be nothing like Simone. She gave her kids everything and loved them unconditionally. She never hit them or even raised her voice. She even volunteered at their school where she was beloved by the staff and students. But as the years went by, something just started to slip with Joe. Maybe it was the years of being beaten and forced to clean her mother's house, but Joe very slowly let her house go. She just couldn't be bothered anymore to keep things in order. It was the last thing on her mind even as her house slowly became a hoarder's nest. Joe's boyfriend finally had enough and in the fall of 1994, he left Joe and the kids. He couldn't handle it anymore. Ironically, Jackie had started working as a cleaning lady at a low-budget motel nearby. But still, the two sisters could not keep their own house clean. The mess grew and grew. That's when Lisa Putman entered the picture and knocked on Joe's door in the spring of 1997. CPS was here, just like they had shown up when her mother was bad and now Joe was the one in trouble for the way she was raising her kids. She didn't want to be like Simone. She didn't want to fail, but her depression and the mess were like two insatiable animals eating away at her. After Lisa removed Joe's kids and took them to Simone's house, it felt like the ultimate defeat. Joe could no longer hide her depression behind piles of trash and dirty clothes. Everyone knew what was going on. More importantly, her mother knew and now was involved. Lisa Putman really felt awful for Joe. During the first few visits, she went the extra mile. She bought containers and trash bags. She hung out with Joe and helped her organize the house while the two talked about what was going on in Joe's life. Joe confided in Lisa and told her about her depression and how much she missed the father of her kids. The two women bonded like

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a therapist and a patient, but when Lisa came back to check up on the progress, the house was still a disaster. It had somehow gotten worse. Joe had fallen into a spiral of shame. Simone had Joe's kids and she knew what was going on, so she sent her husband and son to go and take care of the mess

that her daughters made. It took two days to remove all the junk, garbage, and filth. But finally, the house resembled a home again. Lisa came back to the house and was satisfied. She wrote a positive

report for CPS and Joe was reunited with her kids. But that's not where the story ends and you know it, don't you? This case was not closed at this point and that is why you're listening.

Lisa told Joe that she would be checking up on her and the kids periodically. She wondered that this was just a trial period. Joe had to keep the house clean or else the kids would go back

to Simone's. As you've probably guessed by now, over the next few months,

Joe slipped back into her old ways. The house became unlivable yet again. Lisa Putman would come back

and take the kids to Simone's house and tell Joe and Jackie to clean up. Every time her grandkids ended up back at her house, Simone would send her husband and son over to help Joe and Jackie.

This went on and on until finally the family was sick and tired of helping out. They'd had enough.

Joe and Jackie were left to deal with the disaster they had created all by themselves.

You know, like adults. Lisa Putman warned the sisters that if the mess was still there

on her next checkup, the kids would not be staying with Simone. They would be placed in

foster care permanently. Joe and Jackie became entrenched in the depths of their own filth

with the news that she would not be getting her kids back right away and perhaps maybe never again.

Joe looked around the house and just saw an impossible hole she could never climb out of.

So she gave up and her baby sister followed suit. The house became so cluttered with trash

you couldn't even walk through it. The plumbing broke and the girls just stopped using the showers and sinks. They set up buckets around the house to go to the bathroom in. It was absolute squalor.

The Varellen sisters had completely lost their minds and were trapped in a septic tank of their own filth. On May 20th of 1998, Lisa Putman made her last visit to the Varellen home.

Jackie answered the door. Lisa was hit in the face with the same putrid smell of old food and rotting animal feces. But as Lisa talked with Jackie at the front door,

Joe was hiding in the hallway clutching a hammer, listening quietly and waiting.

Lisa told Jackie that her supervisors had decided to remove the kids permanently.

That's when Joe sprung out from her hiding place. She barreled into the hallway and smashed the hammer

into the back of Lisa's skull, pounding down on her blonde head over and over and over again

in a maniacal rage. Jackie stumbled back in horror. She screamed as she watched her sister

bash Lisa to the ground. What was Joe doing? Jackie couldn't believe what was happening.

Her stomach lurched and she felt sick. That's when Joe yelled at Jackie.

Hold her down now. Jackie was crying and covered in blood spatter, terrified she did as she was told.

She got down on the ground and wrapped her arms around Lisa's arms and chest so she couldn't

escape the blows. Jackie sobbed as Joe continued to swing the hammer, crushing Lisa's skull.

Lisa's blood sprayed all over Jackie's face, chest and mouth as she sat there and wept,

hanging onto Lisa's body as she kicked and fought for her life. Joe didn't stop.

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She never stopped until Lisa was still. Breathing heavily, Joe dropped the hammer and told her sister to stay there. Jackie sat frozen with her arms around Lisa's limp body, letting out desperate sobs. Joe came back into the room with a roll of tape. She wrapped Lisa's wrists together, then placed a plastic bag over her bloody head and taped the neck off. Lisa winced through the pain and she wiggled. Jackie jumped. Lisa was still alive. Joe commanded her sister to grab Lisa and together they dragged her body through the rubble into their filthy, mold-filled bathtub. They hoisted her into the basin with a thud. Then they left Lisa there to slowly die, surrounded by buckets of old feces and trash. After the job was done, the sisters got in the car. Joe drove while Jackie wiped away her tears. They went to pick Joe's kids up from school and take them over to Simone's house. The next morning, Lisa would be reported missing by her fiance. The police would find her car abandoned in a parking lot nearby and the Varellen sisters would be home when police came knocking on their door. When Joe and Jackie got home to their filthy house the day they murdered Lisa Putman, they had to decide what to do with the body. Lisa had been chucked into their bathtub and had suffocated to death under the plastic bag. She didn't die from the hammer. Lisa died in that disgusting bathroom, alone, cold and choking on the smell of plastic and dog shit. It was unthinkable cruel. Lisa was just doing her job, protecting children. She'd been so kind to Joe, giving her chance after chance to turn her life around. Once they knew Lisa was dead, Joe ripped off the plastic bag and the tape from Lisa's head, her blonde hair clinging to the sticky plastic. Joe stuffed that along with her and Jackie's bloody murder clothes into a black trash bag and she hid them in a shed in the backyard. Then the sisters stuffed Lisa's limp, bloody body into a trash bag and waited until nightfall to load her up into their truck. They drove out as far as they could into the rural brush of Michigan. They found a two-track road overgrown with trees and bushes. They went as far as the truck would allow and then they hoisted Lisa's body out and into the wilderness. After Lisa had been reported missing, the police were able to easily track her last known location with her CPS schedule. When they came to the Varellen house, Joe admitted that Lisa had come for her scheduled visit, but that she'd left on foot. Obviously, the police weren't buying it. Lisa's car had been abandoned a few miles away and the contents of her purse were thrown all over the back seat. That evening, the police got a search warrant for the Varellen home. When they arrived, the house was dark and quiet. Jackie was at work and Joe was nowhere to be found. The Macomb County sheriffs made their way into the home and began trudging through the unbelievable mess looking for any signs of Lisa. They were disgusted by what they saw. How could two young women live like this? VCs in buckets. Thick black goop in the sink that had been idle for months. It was impossible to look for evidence in the Varellen's sister's trash heap of a house. How could you even see blood spatter in a hoarder's nest that had ketchup everywhere? After hours of searching, one officer screamed from the back shed. He'd found the plastic bag with the bloody clothes and tape still containing chunks of Lisa's hair. The sisters were located, arrested, and taken into custody. Jackie cracked almost immediately. Still in her work uniform from the hotel, she sobbed with heavy shoulders as she flicked her cigarette into a Styrofoam cup on the

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interrogation room table. I had to help her, she whispered. She's my sister. Jackie insisted that there was no plan to kill Lisa. Joe had made a passing comment that morning about getting rid of the problem, but she didn't take it to heart. She thought it was a joke. Then Lisa arrived at the house and Joe came after her with a hammer. It all happened so fast. Jackie wept relentlessly as she described having to hold Lisa down as her sister smashed the hammer into her head. She cried as she remembered Lisa's blood all over her body. Jackie told the cops that she thought her sister would only hit Lisa six times, but the medical examiner determined that Joe had given Lisa twenty-two devastating blows to her skull. When Joe was brought in, she sat with her knees crunched up to her chest and rubbed her eyes. She didn't cry like her sister had, but she spoke softly. She was supposed to help me, she said about Lisa. This wasn't supposed to happen. Joe had shut down. She was emotionless and exhausted. Joe knew it was over. They were caught. So she agreed to show police where the body was. Joe rode in the back of the police car and took cops to the wooded area where they had disposed of Lisa Putman. Sticking out of the clearing and the dense brush was a pair of legs and blue jeans and a shirtless blonde woman carelessly covered in trash bags. In October of 1998, Joe and Jackie Verlin were brought into the Macomb County Court together. Side by side, the sisters stood. Jackie cried as their sentences were handed down. Joe remained stoic, but her long hair hung over her eyes. I'm sorry, she told the judge. I didn't mean for this to happen. Joe was sentenced to 70 years in prison, while Jackie got 25 years. The sisters cried and clutched one another tightly before officers pulled them apart and sent them to their prison cells. It was the last time they'd ever be together. Lisa's death was senseless and cruel. She was left to rot in a disgusting house that she tried so hard to help maintain. Maybe Lisa could have been saved if she had some kind of help that day. In 2001, Lisa's law was passed in Michigan, which made it a crime to physically threaten or harm a Michigan Department of Health and Human Services worker. It also offers CPS workers extra protection when going into dangerous home visits. As for Joe's kids, we don't know where they are today or who raised them after Joe went to jail. All we do know is that they are now grown adults and hopefully they've been able to work through this unbelievable tragedy that they were forced into. As of April 4th, 2022, Jackie has been released. She served 24 years for her part in Lisa's murder. Her sister Joe remains behind bars in a cold, empty cell with no trash to hide behind. And no family to save her. Joe lost everything in her life because she refused to clean. Imagine killing someone because you don't want to clean. Don't you realize that that is actually a requirement after murder? If you don't want to get caught, that is. Now she will spend eternity wishing she had done the motherly thing and taken out the trash. If you enjoyed the show, please consider joining Plus at 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. for your retail store. From accepting payments to managing inventory, Shopify has everything you need to sell in person. With Shopify, you get a powerhouse selling partner that effortlessly unites your in-person and online sales into one source of truth. Track every sale across your

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