



Night of

the Shooting Stars

When two **worlds collide** after twilight on a hot **summer night**, the terrible result is **blood** in the water and a **rift** in the Long Lake community that threatens to become a **chasm**.

BY COLIN SARGENT

It wasn't dark yet, but it was getting there. As the crepuscular chorus of tree frogs tolled the close of Saturday, August 11, 2007, with Long Lake on its way to becoming black as a mine shaft, Terry Raye Trott, 55, and his new love, Suzanne Groetzing, 44, departed the shore in their 14-foot Glasspar runabout *Sting Raye* and pattered beyond Bear Point. Meteorologists had promised this night's sky would be the stage for a spectacular performance. No doubt, Trott put his arm around Groetzing as they shared a glass of wine, because what could be more romantic than taking in a meteor shower? Here and there, locals and summer folk alike began to appear in small groups along the shore to witness the forecast event, huddling on dock, deck, and pier during the night of the shooting stars.

NEW LOVE

The hopeful couple was just getting to know each other. "Raye" Trott, a carpenter and the leader of a local blues band that often played at Bray's Brew Pub in Naples, and Groetzing, a waitress there, were looking forward to celebrating his 56th birthday together in just two days. According to accounts, Groetzing, a mother of three who was also holding down two other jobs, "was happiest in a sweatshirt by a campfire" and was very excited about this new relationship. "Suzy and I were very tight, and I hadn't heard from her in a couple of months," her friend and now her family spokesperson Meg Harvey says. "That's how I knew she was deeply in love. Her son called her on her cell phone" while she sat in Trott's black pride-and-joy with red

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trim and a 110-horsepower Mercury on the lake “and asked her, ‘What are you doing?’ She answered, ‘I’m out here with Raye, and we’re going to watch the Perseids.’”

“Oh, yeah,” says Groetzinger’s brother, Stephen Sokol, “it was very much like her to be out looking at the stars. She was very much into nature. She and Raye had only been together for two or three months, so things were just beginning for them—like a puppy love.”

GONE IN 60 SECONDS

Across the lake, Robert J. LaPointe, 38, sat at the controls of his red-and-white 32-foot Sunsation Dominator, a twin-435-hp cigarette-type boat. On board was a single passenger, Nicole Randall, 19, a local girl and daughter of the owners of Harrison Marina, where LaPointe kept his boat. LaPointe would later tell police he had seen Trott’s boat earlier in the evening without its running lights on. According to the Cumberland County District Attorney’s office, LaPointe had enjoyed a few drinks.

Spectators on the lake could see only darkness and the occasional meteor flash from their vantage point. Amid the *oohs* and *aaahs* of watchers marveling at the show, the Sunsation began to thunder across the lake, its lights on, at an estimated 45 to 55 miles per hour, according to a reconstruction team of the Maine Warden Service. In the “pitch black, with just a tiny sliver of moon,” according to Cumberland County District Attorney Stephanie Anderson, the Sunsation then hit the Glasspar on the port side, traveling over the smaller boat and killing Suzanne Groetzinger with “blunt force trauma to the head,” according to the state medical examiner. Trott drowned after suffering a disabling injury to his buttocks amid the wreckage as the Glasspar’s stern sank; LaPointe and Randall were ejected from the Sunsation and were flung into the inky lake.

OUT OF THE DEEP

Gasping for breath, LaPointe and Randall surfaced half a mile from shore, and in pain began a long swim to the closest point of land.

“The police got there before they got to the shore,” says Anderson of LaPointe and Randall. “The CCSOI (Cumberland County Sheriff’s Office Investigator) was the first person at the scene. A member of the Maine Warden service got there, too.”

“I was there two minutes before they reached the shore,” says warden Jason Luce. “There were a lot of fire and rescue people; several boats were out there looking around. I’d already been down to the shore but saw no one involved; when I returned, I could see Mr. LaPointe and Ms. Randall swimming in.”

Maybe we all see ourselves reflected in Long Lake.

LaPointe sustained bruising to the side of his body and cuts. Randall suffered a broken elbow and must have felt excruciating pain. “She said it was sore, but adrenaline’s a wonderful thing,” Luce says. “She’d swum maybe half a mile. Maybe farther than that.”

“The first thing they said was something like, ‘There must have been another boat out there!’” Anderson says.

MAYHEM ON SHORE

As for the Dominator, it zoomed “with nobody aboard for hundreds of yards and came aground on Bear Point” with such force that it smashed into the shoreline and continued to explode a measured 135 feet into the woods, its engine roaring. “A group of about four or five camps was there. They were lucky it missed them,” says Phil Dugas of the Maine Warden’s Service. “It never hit a tree square on, because it’s shaped like a needle.”

The needle pierced a family playground with a swing set and crashed a badminton net, caroming off a big oak tree. “It did slow,” finally coming to rest on an upgrade, dripping lake water.

“A resident of one of the camps came out-

side, walked up to it, and turned it off.” With deadly efficiency, the liquid-cooled engines’ computer monitoring system had adjusted engine speed to a purr at idle.

THE RIPPLES SPREAD

In the following weeks, some Maine newspaper accounts would identify LaPointe first and foremost as “A Massachusetts man,” as in, “A Massachusetts man faces multiple charges in the crash that killed two” and “A Massachusetts man was drunk and driving too fast when his high-performance speedboat plowed into a smaller craft in a nighttime crash that killed two people on Long Lake in Harrison, prosecutors say” (*Portland Press Herald*, October 6, 2007).

Why the emphasis on Massachusetts? Perhaps it’s a cultural thing. Asked about it, humorist Tim Sample says, “Up here in Maine, the only thing worse than being from Massachusetts is being from Maine and wishing you were from Massachusetts!”

There’s no crime in being wealthy, a cliché, or even from Massachusetts. But rare is the story that’s devoid of overtones of allegory. And this isn’t one of them. Will our own prejudices and situational morality end up being a part of this tragedy?

To be precise, LaPointe has property in Medway, Massachusetts, but also owns property in Bridgton, Maine. Formerly of Framingham, Massachusetts, he is the co-owner and chief operating officer of Comptel Services, Inc., established 1993, of Holliston, Massachusetts. According to their web page, Comptel is “a leading re-marketer of Nortel telecommunications products,” with “satellite offices located in Texas, Missouri, and the Philippines.”

From a different perspective, a story in the *Milford Daily News* alludes to him as a Mainer first, as in, “Robert LaPointe Jr., 38, of Bridgton, Maine, and Medway, Mass.” He is married and the father of two children, according to the *Lewiston Sun Journal*, which refers to him as a “Medway man” and “a Massachusetts man.” Not to mention, he is “apparently wealthy,” says district attorney Stephanie Anderson. A Dominator, even used, sells for \$100,000 and up.

As for the Bridgton teen sitting beside LaPointe in his Sunsation, the blonde 2006 Lake Region High graduate was not LaPointe’s wife. Instead, Randall “is the daughter of the family that owns Harrison Marina, where LaPointe keeps

his boat," says Harrison harbormaster Gary Pendexter. "Both families are close friends. The families [frequently] get together on that boat or one from the marina." The harbormaster volunteers, "There was no hanky panky involved."

According to the Associated Press, "LaPointe and Randall were on the water for about nine hours prior to the crash and LaPointe had stopped and consumed alcohol at various locations."

But that's incorrect, according to Anderson. "I don't know where they got that figure. It was closer to three hours."

"I don't know that they were anything *but* family friends. They hooked up with some people and stopped on an island. She was working [at her parents' marina] until 6 or 6:30 p.m.," Anderson says before adding, "You can be showing off no matter what your relationship with someone is."

A FAMILY GRIEVES

Groetzingler's brother, Steve Sokol, now of Plantation, Florida, says, "He's with a 19-year-old, out on the lake, drunk on his ass. To me, it's pretty clear. It's not what I focused on at first, because it's not what's going to bring my sister back." But during the days leading up to and following her funeral [at Bray's Brew Pub], with some family members traveling great distances to attend, as more information came under discussion, "at some point I remember thinking, 'She wasn't just a family friend.' But I'm just speculating."

You can hear the pain in his voice, because he mourns not just the loss of his sister, but most poignantly what she might have done in the future.

"Suzy was different," Sokol says. "I have vivid memories of having real conversations with her. She wasn't afraid to speak her mind, but she had an eloquent way of connecting with people. She was always very positive—she just had a way of making you feel good. She loved Maine. I tried to talk her out of Maine, but I couldn't. She just loved the lakes and mountains. She was very much into nature."

"...She was extremely bright, very attractive. She didn't have a lot of luck with guys until she met Raye. That's one of the hardest parts." He's quiet a moment on the telephone. "There's nothing wrong with being a waitress, but she had an incredible mind

(Continued on page 82)

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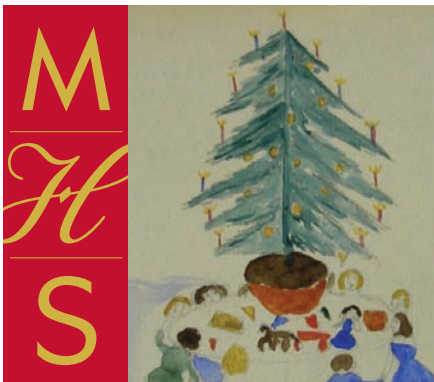
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PERSPECTIVE

Night of the Shooting Stars (continued from page 33)
for business and had shown so much potential" for more achievements in that vein. "If she could have enjoyed this time with Raye, who knows what opportunities were in front of her?"

THE CRIME SCENE

"I'm the lead detective on the case," says Phil Dugas. "The bodies [of Trott and Groetzinger] were recovered on August 14, three days after the crash, within an hour or two of each other, near the crash site. Twenty-three officers from our department participated in the recovery." He pauses. "Three days might seem like a long time to you, but imagine: There's no skid marks on a lake."

Moreover, "We relied on eyewitnesses who told us what they saw from a distance. While more than one person saw the two boats come together, it was at night. There was no explosion or flash; circumstantially, you might be able to say that there was a sound.

"I refrain from using the word accident when I talk about marine crashes," Dugas says. "An accident implies something totally at random. Although it's common verbiage to refer to a car crash as an accident, the word implies something that may not be true. I refer to these investigations as crash investigations."

As for eyewitnesses, at least two have come forward, but their view of the crash was from a distance. "We're not hearing there were a lot of boats around, like you'd expect on, say, July 4, but there were boats around," Dugas says. "August 11 was a clear night, with a slight wind, a warm summer evening. It was obviously after sunset... We have witnesses who were sitting around on boats, getting ready for this meteor shower, but the lake wasn't crowded with boats."

The problem was, the nearer to the point of remembered impact the search boats got, the blacker, and more enormous, the search area became.

"We worked 10 divers on August 12, and had nine in the water on both the 13th and 14th," Dugas says. "We dove again on the 15th, with seven divers."

WATERY GRAVES

Rick Stone of the Maine Warden Service says, "It was so silty. It was a brown darkness. We have a piece of plywood that is two-and-a-

half feet across with handholds in it, and as the dive boat moves along on the surface, two divers are towed underwater, one on each board along the bottom of the lake.

"The max depth I hit was 42 feet. The problem is you're looking at a greenish hue, so you couldn't really see if you were on the bottom unless you reached out and touched it. They go really slow, and they have a GPS so they can grid search the bottom. When we see something major, we call up to the surface and 'drop off the board.'"

The first clue to the location of the bodies was the single, half-floating "credit card of the missing man," Stone says. "I saw it from six or eight feet away.

"I turned my flashlight on. I can't remember if it was MasterCard or Discover. I'm guessing it was 400 feet away [from the boat wreckage]," Stone says. But he and his fellow divers were not alone.

"Sometimes bass stick around and watch. Trout or salmon, all you see is a swirl where they used to be. The bottom was remarkably smooth, but that made you lose points of reference, too. For example, I saw just one log in four days of diving.

"After I found the credit card," the search tightened and adjusted accordingly, but wind had blown the boat and the debris south on the lake and blew other debris, wallet items, onto the island [off Bear Point].

"Then we found a pillow and blanket on the bottom. It was after dark, but we pressed on." With the disorientation even greater in the path of kicked-up silt and flashlights: "The turbidity reflects the light, the way snowflakes in a snowstorm flash back at you" when you turn on the porch light. "Think of going into a lit room from the darkness.

"Until you see something on the bottom, you don't know where the bottom is. There's just this brownish or greenish hue," this blinding silt swirl. "Then you see something and you have a line of reference.

"I'm the one who discovered the female. I came right upon her. She had a white shirt on and was lying on her left side. I could see the boat ahead of me. I reported 'I've got a body!' and let go of the board.

"I never saw her face, because she was turned away, back to me, her hair in the water, swirling. [My fellow diver] Irene Yaws's buoy surfaced to mark the spot for the GPS, and two other divers went down on her buoy. They made a circle search, and



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Bruce Loring found the other body. It was a long process. You keep swapping tanks, another diver goes down."

A SENSE OF CLOSURE

Finding bodies in the murky depths may be an unenviable part of Stone's job, but he brings a lot of heart to the scene. "When I see the body, I think yes, now the family has some closure for this. The family has to deal with this tragedy. [Only now can] the family go to the funeral and start the grieving process. No matter what anyone says, they can't really begin that process until the body's discovered. When we don't find someone, that's what hurts. We have a snowmobiler still missing in Sebago Lake from last February. That hurts. If you have cold water and deep depths, it's just..."

CHARGES FILED

On October 13, the Lewiston *Sun Journal* reported that Robert LaPointe, Jr., posted "\$100,000 cash bail" and surrendered his passport after being indicted. According to the DA's office, he's been charged with two counts of manslaughter (no mandatory minimum, statutory maximum 30 years and maximum fine \$50,000 each), two counts of aggravated OUI (mandatory minimum 6 months/\$2,100/10-year license suspension; maximum 10 years/\$20,000 each), two counts of aggravated OUI watercraft (mandatory minimum \$400; maximum 5 years/\$5,000 each), and one count of reckless conduct with a dangerous weapon (no mandatory minimum; 5 years/\$5,000 maximum).

ENTER THE BIG GUNS

Now there's a high-profile lawyer involved. LaPointe has hired J. Albert Johnson of Boston to defend him.

Johnson has online credits that touch on his famous defenses of "Patty Hearst in San Francisco and Los Angeles," "Pamela Smart in New Hampshire," "James McCord of Watergate fame in Washington, D.C.," even "Captain Ernest Medina-Mai Lai Massacre Cases/Vietnam."

Johnson "successfully defended his colleague...lifelong friend, [and fellow helicopter enthusiast] F. Lee Bailey, in California" as well. Johnson is a celebrity in his own right, and viewers may recognize him from his appearances on, according to the bio, "ABC Nightline, ABC Good Morning

America, ABC World News Tonight...CNN Wolf Blitzer...Inside Edition with Deborah Norville...ABC News [with] Diane Sawyer," and on and on.

Johnson has told the Associated Press, on October 6, "Everyone ought to remember fully and completely that Mr. LaPointe has the presumption of innocence. Negative pretrial publicity, prejudicial publicity can be very dangerous to a fair trial."

OKAY, WE CAN COME IN NOW

Visiting the Cumberland County District Attorney's office these days means a trip through the back door and a slink through a security metal-detecting portal that is unmanned for the moment, because the imposing front door facing Lincoln Park in Portland is blocked off. Here and there, courthouse visitors appear to be lost because so many doors are temporarily closed and out of use. It's as if the present generation is camped out here somehow—functioners, filers, lawyers, clerks, and wheezing photocopiers—in this grand marble palace of justice created for a posterity that wishes it were more technologically advanced.

Golden oak trim and original golden oak furniture such as library tables dating to the building's original structure increase as you approach Stephanie Anderson's office on the second floor. A swinging Dutch door in the same substantial wood opens to her waiting room. With a forward wave, she cracks her private office door slowly, as if it may be rigged for a bomb.

She takes a deep breath and peeks inside. "Okay," she says. "We can come in now."

Two extremely young gray-and-white kittens now creep out from behind her desk, with a soft blanket and cage now visible behind them. "I didn't want them to get out," she says. "They're too young to be here, but I'm doing what I can."

She gets down to business. "Defense-attorney rhetoric," she says of Johnson's comments to the press. "[LaPointe] faces two counts of manslaughter because there were two people killed," she shrugs. "He was essentially driving blind. What I mean is, he couldn't see. Because it was pitch black—it was very dark that night, just a tiny sliver of a moon. And he was intoxicated."


According to the Associated Press, LaPointe had a blood alcohol content (BAC) of .11 percent. Groetzinger's was .06, and Trott's .07. According to Maine.gov, "In




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As far as the time line for the case in the future is concerned, that's "controlled more by the defense," Anderson says. "Last time I checked, Mr. Johnson hasn't filed a motion for discovery, dismissal, [or whatever.]" LaPointe was scheduled for arraignment at the end of November.

As for lessons learned, "It has stimulated a discussion of boating safety," Anderson says. "I hope it's made every boater take a breath. I hope they consider that a body of water has no headlights, no lanes, and no streetlights. He was going way, way too fast, an estimated 45 to 50 at the time of the crash..."

"When I saw the reconstruction of that boat coming on top of the smaller one, it was like 'a tractor-trailer hitting a Volkswagen,' Anderson says. "I don't think this story is about 'a Massachusetts man' with a 'scantily clad 19-year-old'—I think I've read that somewhere—aboard. This is a story about a man who is driving a large powerboat recklessly, and he caused the death of two people."

FROM AWAY

"The fact that he was from Massachusetts, apparently wealthy, and had a young female passenger in the boat are wholly irrelevant, don't fit into the legal analysis, and don't fit into the criminal culpability," she says. "If the reverse were true, with two wealthy Mainers in the big boat, and two people from Massachusetts in the small boat, we'd still have the same [charges]. Let's say it *was* LaPointe and Nicole in the 14-foot boat. Let's say [Trott] and [Groetzinger] were in the big boat. For anybody to suggest the charges would be different is offensive and irresponsible."

Besides, she says calmly, as if pulling out an ace from a deck of cards, "most of the *witnesses* are from Massachusetts."

"The bottom line is if he's from Mass., Mars, or the moon, he killed two people," Dugas says on the telephone. "My job is to make sure we provide the facts and evidence to the DA to their satisfaction so they can provide an indictment, and ultimately a conviction."

As for the lights on the deceased's boat, "The state cannot prove that the lights were on," Anderson says.

"I'm going to need to prove that

[LaPointe] was at least criminally [negligent]. I don't know if the defense is going to move to suppress the name of the boat, or the blood alcohol test, or things like that, because the motions haven't been filed yet..."

"...But if photos of the wreckage or reconstruction are shown, jurors will see the name of LaPointe's boat, *No Patience*, in big letters right on the boat."

WHAT THE FUTURE WILL BRING

Meanwhile, life goes on. It has to. Like many 19-year-olds, Nicole Randall, nicknamed "Coley," updates her Facebook page regularly on the internet. October 20, *Nicole of Red Sox Nation is cheering*. October 21, *Nicole says: I feel Content*. October 22, *Nicole took a movie quiz!* Friends have left condolences and words of encouragement on the page, including, "Keep your head up." A big hockey fan, she continues to work at Harrison Marina and at the Bridgton Ice Arena.

**"A body
of water has
no headlights,
no lanes, and no
streetlights..."**

When we call to speak to her father, David Randall, at Harrison Marina, we are told, "He's not here right now. I'm not saying what my name is. We don't have any comment on that here." Then they hang up.

"[Nicole Randall's] family was out on the lake partying on another boat at the time of the crash, from what I understand," a source, a long-time resident of Long Lake, says.

"The Randalls had a place on the lake first, and then bought the marina six or seven years ago." There's a pause. "They're from Massachusetts, too."

On at least two internet sites, bloggers—including those who claim to be related to LaPointe—are hurling opinions at one another. To view a Naples site, visit topix.com/forum/city/naples-me/TEIALIGHR3O5U6l8F. Then there's a Lake Winnepesaukee blog (there are many cigarette boats there), wolfboro.net/index.php?option=com_joomlaboard&Itemid=53&func=view&catid=3&id=14919. Says one wry blogger, "At least this couldn't hap-

pen on a New Hampshire Lake."

At the Cumberland County courthouse, the district attorney awaits filings from J. Albert Johnson.

When we reach Trott's mother, Elsie Dinsmore of Eastport, she describes a memory of her son that keeps coming back to her. "This was before his grandfather, Alfie, taught him to be a carpenter." Before he adopted his middle name in the seventies—"to us he was Terry."

"He was a very, very sweet little boy," she says. "He loved boats. We had a camp on Boyden's Lake. When he was six, he'd put on his little captain's hat and go out in a skiff he called the *Tee*, just in front of our camp, you know, back and forth. He used to wave at me and give me rides. I have a picture right here of him out in that little boat, giving me a ride. We never let him go out into the lake."

We reach Robert LaPointe at work at Comptel Services, Inc. In the background are noises as though he's talking in an open warehouse. "There was no lights on on the [other] boat," he says, "but you're going to have to call Al Johnson. Thanks."

Though we left multiple telephone messages with associates at his office, J. Albert Johnson did not return our call.

TO BE CONTINUED

This is not a whodunit, but rather a Greek tragedy or something out of Shakespeare. The questions that will hold us over the next several months are, was this a tragic accident or preventable negligence? Just how much is there a crime, resulting in how much punishment?

"It's more than just this accident," our source feels, with a lot at stake. "You see all these coolers being carried into boats on a night like that, and boats that should be on the ocean, not on a lake, and everybody making improvements to their homes on the lake, showing off and trying to beat each other, using credit cards and buying things they can't afford, and..."

"It's something we're all doing to some extent," he says. "It's like we're *all* too good to be responsible any more. I went through an intersection with the light turning red. By the time I'd made it through, I looked back and saw four other cars had come in behind me."

Maybe we all see ourselves reflected in Long Lake. ■ *Emily K. Sears contributed research for this article.*

MAINE LIFE

Holidaying In (continued from page 81)

says, "and a Christmas tree goes up by the ferry building."

On Christmas Eve, he always attends a candlelight service at the local church, which he says the minister once described as "Bapti-episco-cath-itarian, and a few Jewish people come, too." Then he goes for a ride with some former high-school chums to look at Christmas lights. "Almost my entire graduating class lives here now," he notes.

Next morning, he opens his presents "first thing," then heads to his aunt's house and then his grandmother's house to watch relatives open their gifts. At 2 or 3 p.m., everyone gathers for a big dinner that lasts the rest of the day. There'll be "ham and roast beef, scalloped potatoes, bacon-wrapped scallops, and carols playing nonstop by every major singer who has put out a Christmas album (my mother has them all): Roger Whitaker, The Beach Boys, Kenny Rogers, Bing Crosby, Burl Ives."

Quinn, a guitar player and songwriter himself, sometimes wishes his mother were more selective about the music. But he loves the look and feel of North Haven during winter holidays.

It's a hilly, wooded island about nine miles long and three miles wide at the widest point. "But with the first snow, it looks bigger. You can see into places that are hidden by foliage in summer. People's houses smell of cinnamon, gingerbread, and wood smoke from chimneys. The island has a Christmas-song look, like a snow-globe world. I wouldn't be surprised to find a horse pulling a sleigh down the road."

If Christmas is the family time, New Year's is for friends on North Haven, Quinn says. "It's one holiday where a lot of us go away. If we stay, there's always a big dance party for friends, a giant mixing of generations. We never know who will be hosting it until the night before. Someone hangs a sign on the telephone pole by the stop sign near the ferry landing," which functions as the community notice board.

Thinking about the holidays reminds Quinn how much he appreciates his island connections. "I have no desire to live anywhere else. This is home," he says. "It really is a haven—for me and most of the people out here." ■

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