John Stickney was an 18-year-old, six-foot-three, 180-pound high-school dropout with a slender build and straight, sandy hair. He lived with his parents near Seattle, on Mercer Island, and worked as a charge and powder man at a Monroe, Washington rock quarry. And on a Tuesday afternoon in December of 1979, he took a satchel filled with dynamite to the fifth floor of Washington State University’s Perham Hall and blew himself apart.

There was a reason, to be sure, in Stickney’s madness. There was a reason why three female students and two campus police officers were injured, why part of a dorm room door was blown 500 feet across Stadium Way onto the front lawn of a Presbyterian Church, and why his bone and tissue fragments lay covered by plastic in a dorm parking lot.

Her name was Lisa Clark.

**The beginning of the end**

John’s father, William Stickney, said in a newspaper article that John and Lisa had known each other since junior high. Meeting after Lisa’s family moved to Mercer Island in 1973, John became close friends with Lisa and then something more. They dated, on-and-off, for about three years. To his father’s knowledge, Lisa was the only girl John ever dated.

Eventually, as with many young relationships, their paths in life began to diverge: John dropped out of high school and
attended a Renton vocational school, then got a welding job and, eventually, found employment with the Industrial Rock Products Company in Monroe. Lisa graduated high school and enrolled at Washington State University, nearly 300 miles away from John and her home. According to a Lewiston Morning Tribune article after the bombing, John had wanted her to remain in the Seattle area and enroll at the University of Washington, but she decided otherwise.

It is not difficult to imagine what John might have felt after Lisa moved away: A profound, headache-inducing sense of loss and a near-constant, crushing longing to be with her; a lonely emptiness where there had once been her warmth and kindness, her beautiful eyes and bright smile, the touch of her hands; an emptiness manifesting itself in his stomach with seemingly-physical pain. Worse yet, it is possible he worried about her dating someone else, someone better than him. He might have thought, fearfully, about losing her forever.

John called Lisa often just to talk, frequently enough that Clark’s college roommate, Teri Gregory, complained to their floor’s resident adviser about never being able to use the phone. Mary Beth Johnson, the head resident adviser of Perham Hall, called John “the ultimate romantic” in an article published in WSU’s 1979-80 yearbook. Johnson said he really loved Lisa, often giving her gifts.

At the rock quarry, where John’s boss would later describe him in a newspaper interview as a “conservative kid who always maintained control of his temper,” he was well-liked. On Mercer Island, a neighbor of the Stickneys, Harmon Leonard, called John a “wonderful, caring individual” who was into athletics and caring to friends. John Hines, another neighbor, said he was a bit wild but incapable of hurting anyone. Even true crime author Ann Rule, who featured the story in her book “Empty Promises,” wrote that John’s likeability made him “the kind of boyfriend parents would want for their daughter.”

There was, however, another side to John Stickney.

A WSU freshman who knew John well said he wasn’t surprised to learn John was the bombing’s culprit. The student (who had refused to reveal his identity for a published interview with WSU’s student newspaper) said John made pipe bombs capable of blowing down small trees in junior high, using gunpowder or compressed match heads for explosive charges. Once, John had bragged about setting off a bomb at a QFC supermarket on the south end of Mercer Island, the explosion reportedly making a large hole in the parking lot pavement. Both Mercer Island police and the QFC store manager couldn’t remember any damage being done; the manager could only recall a small pipe bomb being set off near the store.

Also not surprised was Sergeant Ken Miller of the Washington State Patrol, a close family friend. After the bombing, Miller told police John often got into trouble, prompting Miller to have long talks with him. In Miller’s eyes, John was “unstable.” Teri Gregory, Lisa’s roommate, said in a police statement that she’d once seen him douse a wrecked car in gasoline and set it ablaze. John could be violent when mad, she’d written, using threats against Lisa to get what he wanted. According to the police report, he’d once threatened Lisa with a rifle. A number of times during the semester, John had driven to Pullman unexpectedly to surprise Lisa, trying to reconcile their failing relationship. During one visit, he tried to physically force her into his car as she was walking to see a movie.

John Stickney had both a dark side and a constant fixation with Lisa Clark, and when she started seeing another boy, David Hightower, she eventually had to be firm with John. According to a Daily Evergreen article, Lisa called John on Dec. 16 to finalize their break-up. Although the conversation is mostly unknown, John’s father recalled Lisa telling John that Hightower was like “a
big brother” to her. Whatever the details were, Lisa's words were likely as crushing to John as the heavy quarry rock he helped blast apart with explosives at his job. But unlike the explosives at his job, he did not handle Lisa's words well.

That same evening, John called Lisa back to tell her he was planning a fatal workplace accident she would know to be intentional. John had previously attempted suicide in June with an overdose of valium, according to the police report. Lisa told John she didn't believe he would kill himself, and John refused to let her get off the phone until she admitted belief. At some point following that conversation, John asked his father for permission to use the car and told his mother, Janice, that he might not be back the next day. He had something important to do, he told them. It involved Lisa.

The next morning, John called Lisa's dorm to say good-bye. She wasn't home, but her roommate Teri Gregory was. He told Gregory that, if he could only talk to Lisa one-on-one, he might convince her to quit school and come home to him. At 6:30 that evening, after John had put in an eight-hour shift at the rock quarry, he called Lisa to say he had re-thought his suicide. She told John not to call her again until she was home for Christmas break, which would begin the next week. John, however, would talk to her much sooner than that, for he was already on his way to Pullman.

Driving off into the night behind the wheel of a 1976 Dodge Colt, he left two clues to his intentions which would only later be discovered: One, at the rock quarry — where a man would find dynamite missing — and the second, in his bedroom closet, which contained 11 commercial electric blasting caps, one of which had most of its wiring missing.

Continued on landscapes.wsu.edu