



# Making Coffee in Lizzie Borden's Kitchen

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DESCENDING TO THE KITCHEN in my pajama bottoms and a tank top, I'm like a houseguest who knows the location of the coffee filters, polite inquiries made the night before. I ever-so-casually scoop and scoop and scoop from a Maxwell House tub so the brand comes close to espresso strength, adding tap water to the commercial-sized carafe at the sink, my back to The Sofa. It uses about seventy percent of my courage storage to descend the servants' staircase from the third floor in the shifting dimness of a summer dawn. It's a narrow staircase—more like something in a lighthouse or Medieval tower than in a grand house, which the Lizzie Borden House isn't. I shove my gaze through the small kitchen past the cast iron stove (found in a field, restored, now uses gas) covered with boxes of Celestial Seasonings tea, plastic axes, and a Lizzie Borden bobble head and into the living room where I half expect to see Andrew Borden's body in his dark photographic suit on the couch. I notice that I'm behaving as though trying not to wake the master of the house out of good manners, not just fear. While the coffee drips, I look at a sign on the employee bathroom door, "Don't Ax to Use This Bathroom," featuring a cartoon person fleeing with an ax in his head. Ordinary things on the kitchen sill: a splicing of a spider plant in a juice glass to develop its roots. A couple of household bills. A whiteboard with chores.

Within easy chatting range of the kitchen, the replica sofa is a foot longer than the destroyed original and positioned along the wallpapered wall, touching the wainscoting visible in crime scene photographs. A guest could spread out full-length on this replica (and guests do), whereas in 1892, Andrew Borden, petite by 2018 American standards, was too long for the sofa, and in the death photo, his booted feet are lowered to the floor, angled like an awkward doll whose bottom half only has been arranged in a seated posture. Both sofas are upholstered in a blackish fabric, with three strangely curvilinear backrests like furniture in an Aubrey Beardsley drawing doing double duty by suggesting tombstones. Below the arm rests, wooden flourishes pose as angel wings. Even that part of the sofa looks uncomfortable, and in the photo Andrew Borden's hacked head rests on an embroidered pillow and a folded blanket or jacket.

Making wide berth of the sofa, I force myself to walk with my coffee mug through the living room and into the front parlor to retrieve one of the enormous binders of laminated newspaper articles on the Borden trial kept in a plastic milk crate on a hotel-grade Oriental carpet. I carry my mug and a binder to the back stoop, where the tour guide smoked an e-cigarette and kept court with us the previous afternoon around check-in. The other B&B guests are sleeping in after their late night, fueled by Maxwell House and energy drinks, of conducting paranormal investigations. I sip and consider the bloated profile of Lizzie Borden in the court drawings, a double chin forming from the forty pounds she gained from rich meals brought by her supporters, townsfolk who would later ostracize her, and the heavy-lidded eyes, likely from the morphine she was kept on throughout the proceedings. The binder contains copies of anonymous tips about Lizzie Borden's activities and behavior around the time of the homicides. A handwritten note expresses moral outrage at the quackery of the medical examiner who decapitated the victims in the minutes between funeral and burial, on site at the cemetery, in a building called the Ladies' Comfort Station. The skulls of husband and wife were later boiled in chemical to remove human flesh and displayed during the trial, causing Lizzie Borden's notorious fainting episode. I read and watch the early morning traffic in Fall River, Massachusetts. Someone swiftly refills a newspaper dispenser near the sidewalk.



The other guests include two childhood best friends from Vermont, another couple dressed in all black, and honeymooners in their late twenties: a daycare provider and an IT professional from the Midwest. The previous night, while I could barely keep my eyes open past ten P.M., the groom set up a laptop in the living room where Andrew Borden was killed. He configured it to capture changes in temperature when aimed at the sofa, though the next morning at the communal breakfast, he says that his laptop somehow lost power during the night. The newlyweds mention a couple who also honeymooned at the Lizzie Borden house and who went on to conceive a child during their stay. *Who am I to judge?* After all, the occasion of my twenty-four hour stay at the LB House is a kind of college reunion. I am present at the request of my college buddy E., a novelist, whose agent sent her to the East Coast to research Lizzie Borden. Since I live in New England and within driving distance of the Lizzie Borden house, E. asked if I would like to join her for one night. In chats with the guests, I explain, “I’m just here as her wingman,” registering a faint blush on people’s cheeks, until E. informs me that “wingman” carries a different connotation than what I had in mind (WWII sidekick co-pilot versus frat boy helping second frat boy get laid).

At breakfast, the two Vermont best friends, visiting the LB House to celebrate a thirtieth birthday, scroll through cell phone pictures of a toddler doing various spending-time-with-Dad activities. We eat our repast in the narrow dining room where autopsies were conducted on Lizzie’s father Andrew and her stepmother Abby Borden. This room, like the others, is modest in size and not at all like the nineteenth-century mansions on the hill or the Fall River Historical Society with its fifteen-foot high entrance mirror that reputedly cost more than the construction of the mansion. Over a wooden sideboard, a water color triptych depicts two pears in the left panel, two apples in the right panel, and two peaches with two wilted dead songbirds in the center panel. I keep in mind what E. and I heard the previous afternoon at the historical society—that the Victorians liked their taxidermy—but to my credit, it should be pointed out that in the next room, where Andrew Borden was found bludgeoned, a cross-stitch hangs over the fireplace, “A Home Without Father Isn’t a Home

At All.” Plastic axes are lying all about the house like spare TV remotes. In the attic where E. and I stay in the maid Bridget Sullivan’s room (all rooms have the feel of the board game Clue), a statue of a black cat with gold eyes watches from the landing. The day before, the statue’s alter ego, a limp black cat lying on the driveway near the gift shop, caused E. and me to step out of our cars at arrival. We stood looking at the animal. It possessed the slightly sunken look of an animal several hours dead. Each of us reluctantly pondered the cat as a sort of omen for our trip when its torso started rising and falling.

At the overflow table sits a middle-aged Nevadan with waist-length raven hair and skinny jeans who gives the impression of wearing a fanny pack though she isn’t. Her two adolescent daughters are in tow, doe-eyed matching pre-Raphaelites, one brunette, one blonde. The previous evening, after saying very little during the house tour, the woman announced that she was a professional psychic on tour of America’s haunted locations and that she would be making herself available to anyone who wanted a free psychic reading in the other living room. At breakfast, she feels less a clairvoyant than a mother of two teenage girls, antsy to pack duffel bags into her rental Chevy Tahoe and hit the road to the next haunted destination.

Because I am someone who regularly enjoys midday naps, a fact my whole family knows, I find myself taking the Borden case almost personally throughout my stay at the B&B. I’m not accustomed to taking measures to protect my skull while settling into a nap. I’m betting that after this visit to the LB House there won’t be a single occasion in which I head to our living room couch and set my cell phone alarm for twelve minutes of post-prandial snoozing without wondering if I shouldn’t position myself with a view of the door. According to popular belief, on a muggy summer mid-morning on August 11, 1892, almost 129 years prior to my visit with my friend E., Lizzie Borden allegedly bludgeoned to death her father and stepmother in their own home, one person on the sofa on which he napped and the other near the bed that she may have been tidying for a guest. Andrew Borden returned home mid-morning from the office and felt drawn to what would shortly become The Sofa, possibly not feeling so buoyant after the mutton stew. There’s something so troubling about this; it’s like deciding to eliminate one’s pater familias while he’s watching Super Bowl play-offs or as he’s teaching you to ride your bike without training wheels. Shame was the sensation when I prattled to my parents about where E. and I

were headed—"you know, that nursery rhyme," and then a pause. Just visiting the LB House seems a massive case of filial ingratitude by association.

More laminated photos of the autopsy are passed around like dishes while we eat half-dollar sized pancakes, scrambled eggs, and fried potatoes: noticeably not the mutton stew promised by the B&B website. On the morning of the homicides, the maid served mutton stew and cookies to the family. Out of parsimoniousness, Andrew Borden insisted that the stew be dished up as leftovers many weekdays past Sunday in August heat, sans refrigeration. This morning's breakfast service includes an element of authenticity since the potatoes look and taste like leftovers from a previous set of B&B guests. As we chew, the guide explains how the coroner performed a hasty on-site autopsy in the dining room to remove the victims' stomachs and livers and determine whether poisoning was involved. She tells us to take comfort in the fact that the autopsy wasn't conducted on this actual dining room table but instead on a canvas autopsy cot. In fact, every piece of furniture in the LB House is a replica, including The Sofa, since Lizzie Borden and her sister emptied the house after the Not Guilty verdict, and the warehouse storing the originals was destroyed in a fire.



The Borden homicides appear to be the town's chief industry, a murder tourism that comports with Americans' fascination with crime and ghost hunter reality shows, attracting viewers who may never stand near any actual yellow police tape. A website for the Oak Grove Cemetery where the Borden are buried reminds visitors of other distinguished deceased, including Lewis Howard Latimer, an African American inventor who collaborated with Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell. The Fall River Historical Society tries to keep up the pretense of seriousness but is like a teacher who has his students' attention only because his fly is unzipped. It's unclear what would otherwise draw outsiders to the historical society other than the homicides. Visitors tolerate the displays of donated wedding dresses of early Fall River inhabitants and a display of a shipping line, but a full room is devoted to artifacts from the Lizzie Borden trial, including a lock of Abby Borden's hair and the rusty hatchet once considered the murder weapon. The mansion's mourning room and the

nineteenth-century artificial “flower” arrangements made of hair from deceased family members—gory blooms in steel gray, chestnut, and blonde—are almost as morbid. Admittedly, the mayor doesn’t mention the LB House or homicides in his welcoming message on the town’s website; the smiling guy who looks all of nineteen lists the town’s famous chow mein sandwiches, Portuguese cuisine, and children’s museum. When I looked at the B&B website before the trip, I had the impression that the Borden house would be located on a street of well-kept old houses, the type you see in posh coastal Massachusetts towns like Rockport. In my mind’s map, the B&B faced the sea and was a few blocks from shops selling gelato, French cookware, and bags made from recycled sails.

In fact, what E. and I discover when we arrive the afternoon before my early hour coffee making is that the Borden house is half a block from an abandoned Gothic Revival public school that looks like it’s been converted into the offices of a short-lived start-up (a high-tech screen is visible in the third floor window and seems incongruous with the tall ceilings and radiators of a classroom from the 1930s). Particleboard covers windows. The neighborhood has the feeling of a movie set of a dying town in middle America after all the actors have departed for the day. Most stores and buildings seem abandoned, right into the downtown area, where we walk for dinner at a Portuguese restaurant. If E. and I keep walking, we’ll soon cross a bridge and over state lines into Rhode Island. We pass shut-up buildings, not a pedestrian, resident, or owner in sight at five P.M., as though the rows of hardscrabble, dusty-shelved, somewhat obsolete, or family-owned businesses—barber shops, shoe and vacuum repair, video rental—all retreated inside themselves, like crabs and sea creatures pulling their appendages into their shells. The Portuguese restaurant, on the other hand, where we order *caldo verde*, *cataplana*, and sangria, is bustling with regulars, husband and wife pairs at least one generation older than us. I have the impression that the wait staff and customers have seen our type before and that we are easily identifiable as LB tourists, though I would like to think E. and I are more glamorous than the usual Goth, more Chloë Sevigny than Wiccan. (A Polaroid of the actress is taped in the LB House Gift Shop—she’s making a movie about Lizzie Borden, also starring Kristen Stewart.) E. and I enjoy a lovely meal catching up, talking about publishers, agents, and life with small children, pay our tab, and hurry back to be on time for the seven o’clock tour.



I'm sure I'm not the first or last undercover skeptic to visit the LB House, but I certainly find it difficult to manage my responses, starting with the basement (said to be haunted by a particularly ill-tempered ghost called Mr. Stinky). The group huddles near laundry machines and boxes. While the true believers listen to the tour guide talk about a rumored mafia execution, pointing to a spray of buckshot holes in a wall near an ironing board, I notice boxes labeled "Lizzie Borden Bobble Heads," one for Blue and one for Red, both MADE IN CHINA. Humoring me, E. tells me I have good eyes. The bobble heads will be outmatched in tackiness the next day in the Gift Shop by golf balls and a coffee mug showing the smashed body of Andrew Borden on the sofa and the smashed body of Abby Borden on the bedroom floor. At the encouragement of the guide who turns off the basement lights, the group takes pictures of a wall niche to see if their cell phones capture the face sometimes seen in that spot.

The tour guide and breakfast staff build secondary plot lines of horror, a sophisticated aspect of LB tourism that's like silverware around the central course. In case the Borden family story isn't sufficient, the staff discuss other ghosts as though gossiping about neighbors. As the house tour continues, we reach the cheaper rooms in the third story (the more expensive suites are the bedrooms of the parents, Lizzie, and her sister, and the guest room). Our tour guide informs us that the third floor is haunted by three potential spirits: the former groundskeeper and two children tossed down a well next door by their mother who then killed herself. We are told to pay no mind if we hear young laughter that night, and that the children are happy because of the toys artfully provided in each bedroom. Sometimes guests see the child-sized rocking chairs tipping back and forth or find that the ragdolls and toy trains moved to another part of a room for no reason. We are forewarned that we might smell cigarette smoke after midnight. The previous groundskeeper, Jim, dearly loved his job at the LB House but for unexplained reasons (slight edge enters about upper management), he had to leave. At his next destination, he fell asleep smoking in bed. The guide tell us, "I'm a smoker, and this isn't just smoke. It's the symbol of smoke—very intense." She reassures us that Jim will go away once he knows that the B&B and its guests are adequately taken care of—that Jim's only wish

is our well-being. Paradoxically, the guide informs us that she leaves around eleven p.m. for her own home, telling us about a list of phone numbers in the kitchen in case of an emergency. It feels like watching a flight attendant suddenly skydive out of the plane right after she puts away her laminated instruction cards.

Wordlessly, the pre-Raphaelite daughters trail their mother, and the tour guide patiently accepts questions from guests. Most of the questions are about blood spatter patterns and whether the furniture was original. Several people frown as though given a math problem they could solve. Despite the court acquittal, whether or not Lizzie Borden committed the murders is forever suspended in a sort of vial, for people fascinated by the Borden homicides. Tip the vial in one direction and truth points to a repressed, suppressed, and possibly sexually abused thirty-something kleptomaniac whose father once took an ax to her pet doves. Lizzie Borden may have also craved a more extravagant, Kim Kardashian lifestyle than her miserly father permitted and resorted to murder. Tip the vial in another direction and truth aims elsewhere: to the Irish maid, a visiting male relative, a stranger seen walking away from town with blood on his clothing, or a business nemesis of Andrew Borden. Everyone is a sleuth. The guide whirls breathlessly through facts and dates, and the part of her presentation she seems to most enjoy is when she instructs us to descend to the front parlor room. We hear a pronounced thump as the guide lets herself fall on the floor above our heads on the exact spot Abby Borden's body was photographed. The victim may have been surprised from behind as she made the houseguest's bed that morning. The guide tells us to wait a few seconds after hearing the noise and then climb the front stairs. We note how the body would have been directly in Lizzie Borden's line of sight while she chatted with the maid who stood below in the entrance way.

The pervasive feeling I have is of pity for the family—especially for the seconds of horror the parents must have endured, compounded by the ordeal of thousands of strangers standing on their living room rug, people who find their death fascinating. A whole bouquet of six-inch nails jams the door that connects Lizzie Borden's bedroom to the bedroom of her father and stepmother. Whether Lizzie or her father drove in the nails and whether it was because of Lizzie's theft of her parents' belongings or, as some hint, his sexual abuse of her, that angry bouquet snags my breath. Here is a group of North American



Caucasians clustered around a replica of a sofa, spending their money and attention on two sad fates in a possible domestic dispute more than a century prior, looking for blood spots like missed four-leaf clover.



By tour's end, guests are encouraged to avail themselves of a plastic tub of store-bought chocolate chip cookies and coffee and tea in the kitchen and to make themselves comfortable. Guests freely wander through rooms in which other guests' shoes, clothing, and handbags are lying around, giving it the feeling of a dormitory. While others set up ghost-catching software or share various divining wands, I'm still dealing with a mismatch of amusement, exhaustion, and fear. Using my husband's trick of pretending there's food stuck between teeth when laughter seems too imminent, I listen to the true believers make plans for that night. At the same time, I am really struggling to keep my eyes open, though there's zero chance that I will head to bed in the Bridget Sullivan Room without E. I eat a cookie. The groom pops a Red Bull.

When the mother-psycho offers to give psychic reading gratis, the guests herd into the front parlor as though for a family meeting. The daughters silently follow their mother, one girl holding up a neon pink i-Phone to video their mother. I pause, fetch a glass of water, and follow the group.

The psychic sits on a high backed chair and is in session with a mid-twenty-something with a wholesome, freckled visage out of sync with her combat boots and black dress with a laced bodice. For several moments, the psychic prompts, "I sense someone close to you who has recently died" and "someone wants to communicate with you." The young woman seems eager to cooperate but an expression of appreciative confusion appears on her face, which remains throughout the reading. She leans forward. She isn't sure; no one she knows has died recently. The young woman says she guessed that must be her great aunt, but they aren't that close, so it's surprising she wants to talk. The psychic says, "This person had a strong personality." Her client smiles and agrees that her great aunt was quite the character—no one really liked her—but, yes, she was a character. The psychic pauses after each response to listen to the air and flourishes a floral pen in a matching floral journal. The psychic says, "This great aunt

has something important to tell you about a big change that's about to happen in your life." The young woman doesn't say anything. "Are you expecting news?" the psychic asks. The woman says, no, not really. Another bout of listening. The psychic adds, "Your aunt is saying it's about your career. Something is about to change for you professionally." Here the girl looks really confused. A few of us shift in our replica Victorian seats. She looks like she's flipping through a Rolodex in her mind. "I can't see what," she says. The psychic repeats, "Your great aunt is very clear. Something is about to change for you professionally, a significant career advancement." The girl thinks for a few more seconds and says, "Maybe it's about Lindsay, she has the shift before me at the gas station. She's always complaining, so maybe she's leaving. I don't like the night shift. Maybe this means I can have her shift?" I immediately raise an index finger to my front teeth. An embarrassed lull drops all over the parlor until the psychic asks, "Okay. Anyone else?"

Our tour guide, who apparently doesn't feel inclined to end her work shift and joins us with a mug of coffee, flounces her peasant skirt and volunteers, changing from educator of matters paranormal to recipient of paranormal advice. She and the psychic are off and running. They explore the tour guide's next career move in minutiae and whether it would be wise for the tour guide to resign from her position at the LB House, a job she adores because of her fierce loyalty for Lizzie and Fall River, the town she's lived in her whole life, to move across country to be near a grown son from whom she had been until recently estranged. The whole interchange has the feeling of watching someone politely decline a delicacy, change her mind to "oh, maybe just one," and then devour the entire tray. The tour guide and the psychic solicit the group's input. I decide I have had enough. Somehow the scene immunizes me sufficiently from superstition so I can ascend the stairs.

E. shortly joins me in the Bridget Sullivan Room, and we lie around in our pajamas like two college roommates, leaning on our elbows and facing one another, talking about our children, our writing, and swapping ghost stories, unexplainable phenomena we've observed over the years. We'd both agreed early on that we definitely wanted/needed to stay in the same room. The Bridget Sullivan Room looks like a maid's room—spartan, just the crucifix over the iron frame bed, a newspaper clipping of Bridget Sullivan from her post-trial life in Montana, the requisite line-up of toys and child's rocking chair, and a penny

balanced on the wainscoting. Eventually, we fall asleep, though with the lights on, and I wrap an EMS running shirt across my forehead and eyes. I wake only once, probably around two in the morning, to a dream in which someone is yelling in my head.

The next day after breakfast, E. and I take a thirty-minute uphill walk to find the cemetery where the Bordens are buried, in the upscale part of town. We pass Maplecroft, the fancier house Lizzie and her sister Emma moved into after the trial, and a potential rival for the LB House. It's opening soon as a bed and breakfast and represents possible competition. We also pass a "Dead and Breakfast" venue—maybe it would receive overspill if the other two have no vacancies. After some circumnavigation and stares (I'm shielding myself from the sun with a black umbrella), we finally find the cemetery in a residential area near a hospital. A trodden path in the grass functions as a short cut to the Borden plot with its large monument and headstones for parents, Lizzie, and her sister.

The honeymooners have arrived before us. They have the bearing of people poking around graveyards where they don't have family members interred—like crows pecking around on a highway. The trees are sparse but large and look like the willows found on urns and funerary art, even the maples. I step aside to allow E. her quiet time with the Bordens. I'm ready to leave. I feel like I've been sucked into another family's drama during the past day, a myopia, and I notice how I've forgotten the outside world. The problem is that the outside world is not that different from this family drama.

It's as though the whole group of us has collectively "Gone to Meeting," a sort of town hall meeting with rented folding chairs set up for the victims and the killers, for the school shootings, concert massacres, synagogue and church shootings, for cars plowing into pedestrians, men in crates set afire, journalists beheaded, children gassed, toddlers washed ashore, rows and rows, lists and lists, bumstocked and opening fire. It feels like a basement has been built under every basement, a sinkhole waits under every kitchen, that the pavement in the bathroom is broken, even the underline has been underlined, and a garland of bees menaces every conversation. Standing a few feet from Lizzie Borden's body, I keep thinking of how many times violence has brushed past me in my life: the men who lurked at closing time outside my father's convenience store with baseball bats, the school teacher working her second job at the town's

other convenience store, raped and murdered the same night my mother was working the counter, my sister's friend whose throat was slit while camping, the young woman killed while jogging and whose namesake scholarship I was given in college, a colleague stabbed multiple times by a student while washing his hands in the university restroom. I'm not afraid of ghosts, I realize, unless a ghost is the afterimage of what people are capable of doing to another person. It's that fear that makes me scared to fix coffee alone in the LB house kitchen, and it's that superstition, if you will, that will lead me to turn my friend's novel cover-side down on the night table when it's published a few months later, not wanting Lizzie Borden's amphibian eyes on me while I sleep.

After a few moments, I step forward to say my goodbyes. I find myself saying aloud to the three headstones, the daughter a few feet away from the father and stepmother, "Best wishes to you," as though I am an Uber driver or a social worker who has just dropped a whole family off at rehab. I walk toward the young newlyweds from Minnesota who are kind enough to offer E. and me a ride back to the house.