**Works Cited**

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Section:

Society

Mind

**Tragedy at the Prom**

Why did a teenager hide her pregnancy and then deliver and dump the baby between dances?

THE NEWS DARTED ACROSS Lacey Township, N.J., like a new Camaro. Minutes after a high-school senior arrived at her prom on June 6, she gave birth in a bathroom stall. Then she dumped the infant in the trash, cheeked her hair and makeup in the mirror, smoothed out her black velvet dress and headed back to the dance floor. An hour later the baby was discovered, dead. No one had even known the mother was pregnant.

While television news crews camped outside the house where Melissa Drexler and her parents live, another teen was making eerily similar headlines just an hour up the highway. Claudette Felix, 19, gave birth to a baby girl in the garage behind her family's Jersey City home around 2:30 a.m. June 11. According to police she cleaned the baby, wrapped it in a blanket and left it in the garage, then went back upstairs and passed out. The next morning her father discovered the infant, alive. Both mother and child are recovering. Prosecutors say they expect Felix to plead guilty this Friday to endangering the welfare of a child.

Why did both girls keep their conditions secret, apparently even from their families? "There are so many reasons this happens," says Dr. Phillip Resnick, professor of psychiatry at Case Western Reserve University, who has studied hundreds of cases of hidden pregnancy. "Maybe a woman wishes she weren't pregnant, so she denies it. Rarely, she's psychotic. Or she's so terrified of telling her family that she hides the pregnancy and hopes the baby will be stillborn."

Of the two cases, Drexler's was the more shocking because of the apparent nonchalance with which she delivered the baby and then returned to what should have been one of the happiest nights of her life. Drexler and her longtime boyfriend, John Lewis, a stockroom employee at the local Wal-Mart, arrived at the Garden Manor Catering Hall, a turreted meringue pie of a building in nearby Aberdeen, around 7:30. She headed for the bathroom, where, for at least a half hour, she told inquiring class-mates she was fine. "I was so embarrassed, I just got the hell out of there," says a senior who asked not to be identified. She'd assumed the moans in the next stall were the sounds of a couple having sex. "Duh," she says. "Do I feel stupid, or what?"

Around 8, police say, Drexler emerged from the stall, dumped a plastic bag in the trash can, then primped and rejoined Lewis on the dance floor. That's when students noticed blood on the walls of the stall. Workers came to clean up; in the trash bin, they found the tiny body.

Lacey is the sort of tidy, blue-collar town where even the lawn ornaments are unassuming. The woman behind the counter at the local Dunkin' Donuts fields a steady stream of 8 a.m. requests for "the usual." At Lacey Township High School, a few of Drexler's classmates wore white ribbons in memory of the baby. Someone slapped a DEPOSIT BABY HERE sign over a trash can in a school bathroom; teachers swiftly removed it. Counselors are helping students cope with what they term "our medical emergency." But few can understand why Drexler didn't ask for help.

"I think she just really freaked," says Cassie Dulany, a classmate of Drexler's since sixth grade. "She probably didn't know what to do and just wanted it to go away. I guess I can understand, but it's not like she's 14. She should've been able to handle it."

Forensic hitch: If medical examiners determine the baby was stillborn, prosecutor Rob. ert Honecker says, Drexler will go free. But if they find air in the baby's lungs-evidence that the infant breathed independently of its mother and was therefore alive at birth-she'll face murder charges. However, there's possible forensic hitch. Some pathologists now argue that such cases, attempted CPR or jostling can push enough air into the lungs of a newborn to make it appear to have breathed on its own. Teachers and paramedics made frantic efforts to resuscitate the infant. That could make it difficult to establish the status of the baby's health at birth if the case does eventually go to trial.

Students have started placing bets on whether Drexler will show up for graduation this Saturday. Others are still arguing over whether she was the one to request the maudlin Metallica song "Unforgiven" at the prom. Nearly all of them have flipped to her picture in the new yearbook, searching for clues into the psyche of the quiet, slender girl who hid her pregnancy under nothing more than baggy clothes and a slouch. But all they find is a photo and a name. No teams, no activities, no clubs.

If Drexler is accused of murder, prosecutors may cite FBI reports showing that most women who kill their newborns are young, white and unwed. They may also pull out various psychiatric reports that say such women are often shy and immature, acting out of fear of the social stigma of an illegitimate birth. But no matter what they find, no psychiatric evidence can ever fully explain the awesome power of denial over a young woman's heart and mind.