

## Bloodwood

‘On 7 March 1975, while purchasing ammunition, Urban James inquired about “silencers” for his weapons at a gun shop in Mooresville, Indiana.

Urban’s early life was troubled. Deeply depressed after the birth of her first son, his mother, Prudence James, told him her second pregnancy was “unplanned” and a “mistake.” She revised this opinion later, saying instead that she had wanted a daughter not another son. Urban’s father, Levi James Sr., died of a heart attack in 1947. Urban and his brother Levi Jr. were 12 and 14 at the time. Levi Sr. was well-liked at work, but at home he displayed a vicious demeanor, regularly beating his sons when his temper turned violent.

When Levi Sr. died, Levi Jr. became the head of the household because he was old enough to work a steady job. Privately, he took on his father’s abuser role at home and frequently belittled Urban, taunting him for his height and lack of muscle. At 16, Urban attempted suicide. He tried hanging himself from a white oak tree with a bedsheet, but the threadbare linen tore and he fell to the earth. He returned to 536 Minos Avenue, the family home.

Urban did not perform well in school and had negative experiences in both high school and college. His adjustment to most educational settings was consistently fair to poor. He missed social queues and classes. He only participated in school activities when continually prompted by a teacher or forced by his mother. At home, he did little work on assignments. The friendships and attachments that his brother seemed to form easily remained out of reach for Urban. He joined the high school chess club briefly and made only two or three friends by the end of his final year. Enrolling in sports was out of the question as Urban suffered from debilitating asthma and spinal meningitis. He attended college but dropped out after two years then trained as a draftsman.

Fully grown, at the age of twenty-one, he stood 5ft 1” and weighed 124lbs. Neighbors described Urban as “unassertive” and “bookish,” but generally saw him as “helpful” despite his inability to find employment. Most parishioners at his mother’s church thought the younger James was “unassuming and quiet.”

In the early-70s, Urban became a daily drinker, drinking heavily from the afternoon until late at night. By contrast, Levi Jr. earned a degree in electrical engineering, married Urban’s ex-girlfriend Ruth, had eight children, and owned his own home in Indianapolis. By 1975, Urban was envious of Levi Jr.’s success at work and his increasing family. He began to withdraw from his home life. He remained unemployed, never married, and lived with his mother into his forties.

Prudence was frustrated with Urban’s inability to work and his constant drinking. On more than one occasion, she threatened to evict him from her home and, as recently as February of that year, had given him a letter to this effect. Urban also owed both his mother and brother considerable sums of money having lost his only source of income

during the stock market correction the previous year. His drinking worsened. Urban became more withdrawn, rarely spoke, and appeared to be battling a deep depression.

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In the spring of 1975, Prudence served Urban with another eviction letter. The letter stated that she wanted him “out by the second week of April” so that she could paint his room and rent it at the beginning of May.

On Good Friday, Prudence again reminded Urban about leaving and told him “Levi Jr. and his family would be coming to the house that Sunday.”

On Saturday afternoon, 29 March, witnesses on their way to Friends Church had seen Urban shooting tin cans with his .357 Magnum by the banks of White Lick Creek.

That night, Urban went to his local bar as he did nearly every night. At the tavern on Main Street he talked with the server on staff, Samantha Bishop, a 28-year-old mother of two. She would later say that Urban told her he was angry with his mother and his impending eviction and that he needed to solve the problem by doing “whatever needed to be done.”

Samantha Bishop was kind and a good listener. Local customers liked it when she tended bar because she had such an easy, open, and empathetic manner. Samantha happened to be a distant relative of William Bradford Bishop Jr. a fugitive American Foreign Service officer and resident of Bethesda, Maryland, who in less than a year would murder his family, drive across state lines, burn the bodies and vanish.

Authorities indicted William Bradford Bishop Jr. on murder charges in 1976 after discovering the bodies of his mother, Lobelia, 68; his wife, Annette, 37; and their sons William Bradford III, Brenton, and Geoffrey, aged 14, 10, and 5; in a shallow grave in the Creswell area of North Carolina. Bishop was later spotted walking in a park in Stockholm, washing hands in a restroom in Sorrento, standing on a Basel train platform, and elsewhere. The FBI cannot confirm his death and the case is still active. (In March 2021 for instance, a woman named Kathy Gillcrisp came forward and the FBI confirmed via DNA testing that she was indeed Bishop’s biological daughter.) David Casavis, the NYU professor, continues to research Bishop, who is 87 years old and still at large.

Urban left the bar at 11:11pm that night but returned before last call. According to Samantha Bishop, Urban told her that his mother expressed “anger about his drinking,” and apparently ordered him earlier that morning to “pack up and leave.”

Urban told Bishop that Prudence said, “if he could afford to drink seven nights a week, he could afford to pay rent.” After he returned to the bar, Samantha asked Urban if he had solved the problem about his living situation, he replied, “No, not yet.”

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On Easter Sunday, 30 March, Levi and Ruth brought their children, ranging in age from 4 to 17, to see their grandmother. They arrived around 3:00pm. Urban slept upstairs while the younger James children hunted for Easter eggs in their grandmother's backyard.

It began to rain. All the children came inside.

Around 5:00pm, Urban woke up, loaded his .357 Magnum, two Smith & Wesson Model 59s and a hunting rifle, then went downstairs. Prudence was in the kitchen with Levi and Ruth roasting a leg of lamb for dinner.

Urban shot and killed his brother on the stairs leading into the kitchen as Levi greeted him, then went after his sister-in-law and mother. He moved quickly, shooting his nephew Peter and his nieces Lucy and Phoebe as they came into the kitchen. After locking the back door, Urban then went into the living room and shot his eldest niece, Felicity, and his four remaining nephews: Levi III, Justin, Thomas, and Andrew, the youngest child. These were brutal, reprehensible, unforgiveable acts of violence. Levi Jr. had been shot only once in the head; the remaining ten victims had been shot at least three times each – presumably to prevent them from escaping – in an insane frenzy of bloody overkill.

The massacre took only a few minutes. Half-empty purple packages of Brach's marshmallow rabbits and chocolate eggs were scattered on the floor beside the bodies of the children.

Urban removed his clothes, put on a striped golf shirt with a navy collar, washed and shaved. After spending three hours alone in the house with the bodies, he finally called police to turn himself in. He gave his name, address, and telephone number, and told the Mooresville police operator simply, "there's been a shooting."

Officers hurried to 536 Minos Ave. They received no previous calls. The neighbors in the two adjacent houses had gone away for Easter. Urban waited just inside the front entrance blocking the view of bodies inside the house. Local police arrested Urban and charged him with 11 counts of aggravated homicide. He refused to answer questions and sat through interviews in a near-catatonic silence.

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The James massacre shocked the town. By all accounts, neighbors liked the family. Those who knew Urban did not think he was capable of such violence, especially of this magnitude.

The Mooresville officers assumed he would plead insanity. Urban had fired a total of 35 rounds. All four weapons were recovered at the scene with boxes of cartridges and receipts for the ammunition.

The team of investigators for the Morgan County prosecution viewed the crime scene and stated that “the living room floor absorbed so much blood it was dripping through the floorboards into the basement.” (To this day, one can see stains on the wooden joists.)

The original trial was held in Bloomington. The three-judge panel found Urban James guilty on 11 counts of murder and sentenced him to life in prison. A higher court later declared that trial a mistrial. The retrial was held outside the Greater Indianapolis Area because it was believed James could not receive a fair trial in the city of Bloomington or anywhere near Morgan County.

Urban’s second trial began in June 1975, and prosecutors revealed evidence involving the Churchgoers who had seen Urban at target practice, his inquiry about silencers for his gun collection, and Samantha Bishop’s testimony that his mother’s expectations were “a problem” that he needed to “solve.”

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In July 1975, Urban James received 11 consecutive life sentences. A year after the second trial, authorities opened the house on Minos Avenue to the public and auctioned off its contents. The numbers of all the houses on the street were changed. Three families who had lived in the neighborhood for decades moved before the end of the school year.

The inside of the house that had formerly been 536 was cleaned, recarpeted, and rented to a family new to the area, who were unaware of the murders. This new family later left the house, claiming they heard voices and other unexplained noises. Other families have moved in and out since. The house is unoccupied but has not been demolished.

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An appeal court granted Urban a new trial in 1982. By this time the FBI profile of Bishop had captured a particular corner of the national imagination. By July, another three-judge panel found Urban guilty, but this time on only two counts first-degree murder (his mother and brother); they found him not guilty by reason of insanity for the other nine counts of murder. Urban received one life sentence for each count to be served consecutively.

Jurisdictionally, given the timing of the case, despite the number and brutality of the killings, Urban was not eligible to receive the death penalty for his crimes. He served his two life sentences at the Pendleton Correctional Facility in Fall Creek Township, Indiana.

Urban was denied parole three times, and though quiet was not considered an exemplar or obedient inmate. He had ample opportunities to express remorse, complete therapeutic programming, rehabilitate, finish college credits by correspondence, work prison jobs: he did none of these things. He admitted himself to the long-term care section of the hospital block where he eventually died last year.

The James massacre is still the most violent group of murders to have taken place in Mooresville.

Urban's one accomplishment while in prison is that he remained physically sober for over forty years. While he may have been permitted to go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, details about his attendance are unknown. The remaining years of his life in prison are punctuated by the most profound kind of silence.'