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# “I Did It”

Why do people confess to crimes they didn't commit?

By **Robert Kolker** Published Oct 3, 2010 [ShareThis](#)

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Frank Sterling, near the scene of Viola Manville's murder, this summer.

(Photo: Eric Ogden)

**T**woman was naked from the waist down, her pants and underwear tossed into the weeds. Her down jacket was pulled to her chest, exposing her left breast to the autumn chill. Her head and face had been pummeled, and embedded in the blows were pellets from a BB gun; smashed shards of the gun were found nearby in the brush. Her hair was so gummed with blood that the hunter who stumbled on her body couldn't tell that it had once been all white.

By nightfall on November 29, 1988, the whole upstate village of Hilton was talking about Viola Manville—74 years old and a grandmother, a free spirit, outspoken, and now a homicide victim. Hilton is a small, blue-collar farm town on the edge of Lake Ontario west of Rochester where a good number of people once worked on the assembly lines at Kodak. The town can be rough—one neighbor from a wealthier suburb calls it “a little Appalachia here in New York”—but Hilton had never seen a murder like this. The Monroe County Sheriff's Office interviewed dozens of people: neighbors, family members, an ex-boyfriend, troubled teenagers. They learned that Manville often had been seen walking along the same set of abandoned railroad tracks where her body was found, even after having been the victim of an attempted rape there three years earlier. The man arrested in that attack, Glen Sterling, was still in prison.

Glen Sterling had a brother named Frank. He was tall but hunched and painfully shy. Frank Sterling grew up just 100 yards from the abandoned railroad tracks, a mile from the spot where the victim's body was found. Both his parents were janitors, and Frank was the middle child, a chain-smoker so lonely that as a teenager he'd do almost anything to make a friend. His classmates at Hilton Central High called him Bug Chower, after a story got around that he ate insects to get attention. The name stuck. “He was the kid in school that everybody berated,” says a former classmate, Rob Cusen. “An easy mark.”

At the time of the murder, Frank was 25 and still living at home, working as a school-bus monitor. He had a clean criminal record, but to the police, he had the makings of a motive. What if Frank had been angry that his brother Glen was in jail? What if he'd been nursing a grudge against Manville ever since she accused his brother of trying to rape her? What if this wasn't a sex-related murder but revenge? It

was all just speculation, and indeed when the police questioned Sterling, they found his alibi was solid—he'd been seen working on the school bus all morning, and he recited the plots of the *Smurfs* and *Chipmunks* episodes he'd watched that afternoon. There was no physical evidence linking him to the crime, and Sterling was not arrested. Within a few months, other leads also dried up, and the Manville murder went unsolved.

Almost three years later, on July 10, 1991, an unmarked police car with two plainclothes detectives pulled up to the Sterling family's house. This was the third time in four years that the police had come to see him. He was now almost 28. He had become a truck driver and moved to Alabama for a year, then came back when work dried up. That afternoon, he was tired; he'd just finished a job that took him through a half-dozen states over two days. The detectives said they'd been assigned to reinterview people of interest in the case, and they realized Sterling had never been polygraphed. They asked him to come with them to a Rochester police station. He agreed.

At 7 p.m., Sterling followed a polygraph technician, Mark Sennett, into a small room on the fourth floor, where he sat at a table and waited. Before hooking up Sterling to the lie detector, Sennett spent more than two hours asking him questions: Did he know why he was there? Why would the police think he might have killed Vi Manville? Early on, Sennett told him that Glen had told his fellow inmates that one of his brothers had killed Manville—a lie he'd made up on the spot to see how the suspect might react. Sterling was startled; he said (maybe a little too defensively, Sennett thought) that there was no way his brother would have said that. Sennett told Sterling he was in for a long night. When the polygraph man left the room at 10:45 p.m., Sterling began to panic. If he stayed, he feared, the police wouldn't stop—but asking to leave or for a lawyer, he thought, would be as good as admitting he was a murderer.

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