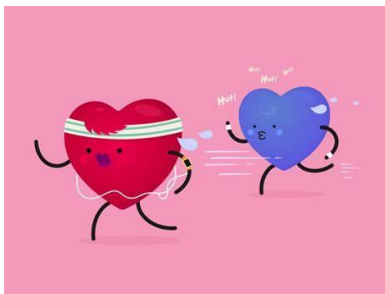


A Life Cut Short

*“The little bastard finally killed her,” he blurted. “Does anyone know where he is?”—
Rodney Jones, victims brother.*

I jumped when the telephone rang that Tuesday morning. I had no idea it would be the call that forever changed my life, and not necessarily for the better. It was not one of those that takes your breath away and causes your heart to race. I felt as though I had been transported to the Indianapolis 500, and my heart, my poor broken heart, was one of the racers.



~

*And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence
(Simon and Garfunkel:
Sound of Silence)*

~

Since my aunt was murdered by my cousin and four of his friends, I have learned the following:

Writing is good for the soul.

I have learned to express my feelings better.

We may never get our questions answered.

*To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;*

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

Lastly, I have learned forgiveness and the power of it. Forgiveness is what my aunt would have wanted; allowing myself to forgive those who cut her life short, I am able to give her one last thing.

~

I ran away from Oregon when I was 19, by joining the United States Army. I wanted to get as far away from home as I possibly could. It started with me going to Missouri, then Texas. From Texas I went to Iraq, then back to Texas. Once I was back in Texas, I moved to Tennessee. Once in Tennessee, I was back overseas. I did everything I could to avoid ever going back to Oregon, more specifically Redmond. *You get hit the hardest when trying to run or hide from a problem. Like the defense on a football field, putting all focus on evading only one defender is asking to be blindsided.*—Criss Jami

~

This phone call, received when I was just 14 years old, would help pave the way for something I would write many years later. For some time, it was like the game of “telephone” where the original message would be misconstrued by the end. Though the purpose of this phone call was all over the news, statewide and nationally, the story behind it would constantly change, and is still changing, even today.

~

How does one wrap their head around their cousin and his friends brutally assaulting and murdering their only aunt? You don't. Both my father and I would self-medicate with alcohol to try and make sense of it all, even years later— me to parole board.

~

For over 20 years, *the monsters in my head have screamed so damn loud.*

But I built a wall so high, they never make a sound.

It's a mask, it's a lie, it's the only home I've ever known.

'Cause being who I really am, has only left me more alone.

Citizen Soldier “I'm Not Okay”

~

Her murderers were up for parole. Because of COVID, the hearing was held electronically. I wrote a 3-page letter to the parole board, pleading with them to keep her killers behind bars. I used emotion, facts and what ifs. My letter was so sincere; I even cried while reading it. The 3-page letter did no good as her killers were unjustly released from prison. Writing the letter was difficult because it needed to be professional and yet heartfelt. Intimate. Sincere. Writing the letter showed me that it did not matter what I, the immediate victims family,

said or felt. The parole board members had their mind made up before the hearings even started because the murderers were “just kids”.

I have had nightmares and flashbacks: seeing the courtroom, writing down everything I can remember, visions of the prison and visions of my then 18-year-old cousin and his mom, my aunt.

~

I began writing to my cousin countless times. I knew I needed to write to him. Writing was a way for me to release my thoughts, my emotions, and my feelings. Writing to my cousin, I had the ability to ask questions and tell him how I felt. I could not figure out what to say, was not sure what to write or where to even begin, but I put pen to paper and wrote him a 10-page front and back letter. In my writing to my cousin, I expressed my hatred for him and how I could not understand his reasoning for the murder. I could not understand why he did not help his mother. As a complete and utter surprise to me, I received a 6-page response from him, along with a visitation request to see him at the prison. He never did explain why he felt killing his 52-year-old mom was a necessity or justified.

The limp justifications that dribbled out during the next two-and-a-half years of court jousting shocked as much as the brutality of the crime:

Five teenagers killed a woman for a car.

They killed her for a joyride to Canada.

They killed her for a warped sense of freedom.

For all five involved in her murder, freedom is but a memory.

(Heidi Hagemeyer, The Bend Bulletin)

~

Adam Thomas. Seth Koch. Justin Link. Lucretia Karle. Ashley Summers. Names now entwined forever. These five youth ended the life of my aunt. The three males received the sentence of life without parole, while the two females received 25-year sentences in a plea deal. Both females were released after serving 20 years, due to Governor Brown granting clemency. Seth Koch and Justin Link were also released early; due to the federal government stating life in prison for juveniles is inhumane. Adam Thomas, my cousin, will be eligible for parole in 2026 since Governor Brown also granted him clemency.

~

I began writing a journal- to keep my thoughts and feelings hidden from the public. Writing was my emotional release. It allowed me to put thoughts and feelings on paper and then burn them. To this day, I am grateful that journal was never found.

~

Often, I go to the cemetery to find peace. The cemetery is the one place I can sit down, reflect and write, without being interrupted. One might find this a bit morbid, but for me, I find solace. I can write to my brother and my aunt. On my last visit to the cemetery, I apologized to my aunt for not fighting hard enough for her. After the parole hearings went opposite of what our family wanted, I felt as though I had not done enough for her. I did not feel as though justice had been served.



Barbara Ann Thomas

05 March 1949 – 26 March 2001

~

My family has tried to heal from this crime, yet every time we think we are close, the wound gets ripped back open. My cousin took my aunts freedom from her. He took her choices, and her life away. He took her chance to be a grandma and great grandma away. My family has been in a prison of sadness and despair since the murder took place. While he may have been sentenced to life in prison, he sentenced my aunt to death and my family to a life of misery and sadness. -Me to parole board.

It may be difficult for someone to make the correlation between this tragedy and literacy, however for me the correlation is rather obvious. The murder of my aunt caused me to look at writing completely different. Before she was murdered, I was not big on using writing as a means of expression. I always looked at it as a chore. As time went on, I got older and realized it was an excellent way to not only express myself; but also bring people together.