

## **Blythe: A Remembrance**

It happened in the dark hours of an early summer morning. It happened quickly and quietly, through an open window. It happened brutally. A log meant for the fireplace. Her brother was asleep in the bedroom at the other side of the L-shaped house.

Her name was Blythe. She was 23. She had platinum blonde hair and reminded me not of Doris Day but of Marilyn Monroe, but not of a woman of the 1950s but of a woman of the 1970s. Confident, sexy, smart. I met her when I joined a bowling league in high school. She was fun and vivacious but I can't remember if she was a good bowler. But she loved to dance. We were dancing at a bar with live music the last time I saw her. I had not seen her since high school.

Her murder ended my belief in the complete veracity of newspaper reporting. Her murder was sensationalized, after all she was a beautiful, young, blonde woman and it happened in a house near a college campus, a college she and her brother were attending. It was her brother who found her in bed under a patchwork of blankets. In the articles about her murder the fact of her brother's proximity lost its neutrality for which there was no evidence. She became a beautiful coed brutally murdered whose brother was asleep in a room down the hall. How does one live with the image of one's sister lying in bed having been beaten by a piece of wood meant for a fireplace? I still hate the word coed.

I had no energy to go to class, to eat, to leave my room, to even get dressed. Her brother, her parents, what must they be feeling, thinking, experiencing? What does one say to someone who loses a child to murder? When I'd read other stories of a person's life ended by violence had I ever considered the ripples of a murder to family and friends and a community? The infatuation I was carrying for the professor who took me out to lunch vanished. It was his class I did not attend.

When I was in high school a friend who had moved to another town 200 miles away lost her best friend due to a car accident. It was just days before the end of our junior year. My visit that summer exposed me to an emotional landscape that I had no language for; no handbook for; no experience with which to navigate. Firstly, my friend was dating a man in his early 20s with whom she'd been having a sexual relationship since meeting him during her sophomore year. Secondly, she'd taken it upon herself to check in on her friend's mother. Every curtain was closed when we arrived and the mother was sitting in a wing-backed, upholstered chair, not even getting up to greet us. She could barely say hello. The TV was on but I don't think she was watching whatever images were flickering in the darkness. She was just sitting there in her bathrobe. Next to her on a TV tray was a bottle of wine and a half-filled glass. "She never leaves the house and is drowning herself in alcohol."

The grief that filled the house almost crushed me, especially when my friend and I looked in the room filled with a teenage girl's life. "Nothing's been touched." It had been two months since she died and all that I could see were brightly colored walls enclosing a bed and a dresser and a display of images and trophies and ribbons and the absence of a smart, talented, well-liked young woman. There were three other people in the jeep when it rolled and rolled and rolled, two were critically injured and the driver, barely scratched. But no one walks away from an accident when someone is killed barely scratched. Every death changes us. So does a murder. And so does a disappearance. One year later my friend's brother would just disappear from a job site. According to their mother's 2014 obituary, he was referenced as "location unknown."

"My name is Albert Schweigen and I exist in time." My name is Karen Renee and I am stealing the first line of John Updike's story "The Music School," a story that was assigned in a literature class not long after Blythe's murder, a story that is narrated by a man trying to comprehend the murder of an acquaintance. I try not

to obsess over the timing of this story in my life but stealing from John Updike's story is my remembrance. "I do not understand the connection between last night and this morning, but there seems to be one." And what brought me semblance: "From all directions sounds—of pianos, oboes, clarinets—arrive like hints of another world, a world where angels fumble, pause, and begin again. . . ."

Art and life and death. When I returned to the class with the professor who took me to lunch on the grounds of a convent with a garden open to the public, he asked about my absence. An acquaintance was murdered. He had heard the news and wondered if someone on campus knew her. We sat together on the patio outside the classroom and he held my hand. He had the most beautiful hands.

As I child I thought that death was a punishment from God because my first experience with death was of a 10-year-old boy who lived across the street. He was the mean boy in the neighborhood and was killed while riding his bike home from the store. There were groceries scattered in the street around where he was hit. He died on impact I heard people say. It was the 1960s. Bike helmets were in the future. What happened to the driver who hit him, the accidental killer? Did I even think about the driver of the car? I found it hard to look at his family. I knew that I should feel sad and not feel that God punished him, but I kept my feelings to myself, kept my head bowed and pretended to feel sad because that was what seemed to be expected.

I never wondered what was buried in his meanness, his throwing rocks and bricks at me and my friends. But now I wonder if we teased him, if we contributed to his anger. He came from a family my parents referred to as hippies. Two older daughters and the son living in a house that the neighborhood kids were never allowed to enter. "She's not a very good housekeeper," I heard my mother say. They had the worst lawn in the neighborhood. The dad worked on a broken cars in the driveway. When I would knock on the door and ask if the daughter my age could come outside to play, the front room was always dark, the curtains on the

front window never seemed to be open. But maybe I created a story about the family with the two daughters and mean son because I was not allowed inside their house. Maybe the darkness happened after the son was killed. Maybe all the bedrooms and kitchen were filled with light that I could not see. Maybe the daughters' rooms were neat and tidy, and why was being neat and tidy so important? Their family protested the Vietnam War and the eldest daughter's hero was Gloria Steinem. Did I think that if I were good that I would not die?

Most story tropes begin with death. A 10-year old girl who was an avid reader once asked me if you have to be an orphan to have adventures. I did not mean to laugh but I laughed and told her I did not have that insight until I was in college. Story archetypes were not taught where I went to school. It never occurred to me when I was tucked up in bed reading Pippi Longstocking that I couldn't be on the adventure even though my parents were alive and well. But the young, insightful reader was raised on Harry Potter and other books that begin with the loss of at least one parent. UNICEF estimates that there are 153 million orphans worldwide. In 1914 my grandmother's mother died and her father put her in an orphanage.

As a child I did not have any friends whose parent or parents had died or for that matter were divorced. Now I realize I was just fortunate. I had a stable home with two parents and two sets of grandparents, even a great grandparent. My paternal grandma was my favorite person in the world. She told the most hilarious stories about her time at the Catholic orphanage. She died when I was 34 and she was 89. Living is learning to live with loss. I think I stole this line from Jeanette Winterson who probably stole it from someone too. Did Jeanette come to this insight before or after she tried to kill herself? A cat saved her life. If Jeanette had not been adopted she would have been an orphan. Or maybe once abandoned by birth parents a child is always, somewhere in their cells, an orphan. Jeanette's life has filled her books with adventures. In "The Friend," Sigrid Nunez writes that

“what we miss—what we lose and what we mourn—isn't it this that makes us who, deep down, we truly are.” In “Sweet Caress,” William Boyd wrote “. . . Are all the deaths you encounter and experience in fact an enhancement of the life you lead? Your personal history of death teaches you what's important, what makes it actually worth being alive— sentient and breathing. It's a key lesson, because when you know that, when you know the worth of being alive, you also know its opposite—you know when life's no longer worth living—and then you can die, happy.” I read these quotations behind a mask at my beloved friend's memorial. She died from complications due to COVID. She was 69 years of age. We had been friends for forty years.

You are probably wondering if Blythe's murder was solved. It would make a compelling drama. A beautiful young woman. A lonely, disturbed young man. Police failure. Persistent parents. A year-long investigation by a private detective.

She was murdered by a former high school classmate. He had defaced two other beautiful classmates before he killed Blythe.

“I do not understand the connection between last night and this morning, but there seems to be one.”

There are only facts, and forgetting and remembering and imagination. And the space between love and death. I think I stole this line too.

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