

A WINDOW OF TIME

The coffee shop was bustling. Customers sat at the rustic farm tables, strangers squished together, ordering coffee and slices of pie. Shannon and I sat across from one another, waiting for our food to arrive.

Despite having known each other at work for six months, acting as youth outreach counsellors for the Child and Youth Mental Health Office in the Ministry of Children and Family Development in Surrey, British Columbia, we hadn't spent time together outside of work. By the time we became good friends, I was balancing two jobs, working half my time with Shannon, and being seconded the rest of the time to the Quality Assurance department, working concurrently as a continuous quality improvement coach and practice analyst. I wanted to work in a quality assurance position full-time, but I knew that would be difficult to achieve. No new jobs had been created since the recession in 2008, around the time I was first hired. I didn't realize how exhausted I was from work, so exhausted that I'd regularly come home, get takeout for dinner, and plop down in front of the television for the rest of the evening. Repeat. Not to mention the hour commute each way. That morning, Shannon had a prenatal appointment at her doctor's office, which was close to my home, and I had the day off from work. We

finally managed to find the time to meet as friends.

All new friends eventually ask how my father died. Shannon was no different. I told her that a twenty-two-year-old boy, high on drugs, entered our home intending to rob us and picked up a knife on his way. It was 4:20 in the morning. My father, attempting to protect the lives of his wife and four children, confronted the intruder. In the altercation, he stabbed my father multiple times and left him on the floor, bleeding. The intruder ran away but was caught by the police a day or two later.

I've described the murder so many times it has become rote, as though I'm reciting my list of errands for the day. Sometimes my matter-of-factness worries me, especially when I read the faces of the people as they learn the details of my father's death. *Should I be more upset?* I ask myself, and then realize I am evaluating my behaviour according to someone else's standards. People expect a lot from me: to be sad, to move on, to be well or unwell. I wonder if they know they're pushing their assumptions on me, or if they, in fact, think they are showing compassion. This information—that my father was murdered—is normal to me. It is what happened. I cannot think of my life without it. Of course, I'll tell it like I'm reciting errands.

Shannon responded differently than my other friends.

"Do you know anything about him?" she asked, rubbing her expanding belly without a trace of judgment on her face. Most people cannot hide their horror, disgust, or sensational curiosity. *What is it like to have a father who was murdered?* I imagine them thinking when they look at me with their disoriented expressions. *What is it like not to have a father who was murdered?* I want to respond, for this is all I know. Meanwhile, I'm afraid that I'm being judged for something I had no part in but am nonetheless given the responsibility to respond to. I appreciate the nonjudgmental, curious, and gentle existential

philosophers of the world. Shannon is one of them.

“He’s in prison in Alberta,” I said. “He was convicted of second-degree murder and received a life sentence with eligibility to apply for parole after twenty-five years. I was told that twenty-five years was unusual. Ten or fifteen years is the usual period for second-degree murder. I don’t know why the judge set parole eligibility at the maximum, but the community and the lawyers in Alberta were angry because he blamed the murder on his friend. My dad had contributed so much to the community—he was a father, an orthopedic surgery resident, a good man.” I wondered how this came across, *a good man*. What does that really mean?

“The guy’s been moved from maximum to minimum security. There’s a photo of him online, from a prison-college partnership with a construction apprenticeship program. He looked big, heavy, like he was protecting himself. My mom told me some things about the trial, like how he lied for a really long time. And after, a former schoolteacher told the police, ‘I could see he was bad from early on.’ I know things like that.” Sharon nodded and smiled.

“He has five years left before he gets an automatic hearing for full parole,” I continued. “That doesn’t mean he’s free, though. I’ve learned that a life sentence is a life sentence—they’ll watch him for the rest of his days.”

“I didn’t know that,” Shannon said.

“Yeah, I’ve worked in the social services field my entire adult life, and I hardly understand the language the justice system uses,” I said, shaking my head. “A few years ago, he applied for an earlier parole date. He applied under the ‘faint hope’ clause. If prisoners with life sentences have been good, they can apply for permission to shorten their ineligibility times. But his application was denied—he hadn’t been telling the truth for long enough, hadn’t been off drugs long enough.”

I wondered if the people near us could hear our conversation, if they could put together what we were discussing.

“Telling the truth?” Shannon asked.

“Yeah, he lied for a really long time, saying he was breaking into garages with his friend and that his friend killed my dad. The police proved he was alone, though, through alibis, footprints in the dirt around our house, and glove prints on windows. And my mom told me that the police inquired about the possibility that the guy came to our house on purpose, that someone at the hospital may have given him the address. The police never did prove it, but that question has always irked my family.” In fact it irked me just to say it aloud, the uncertainty still weighing heavy in my gut.

“Wow. And drugs?”

“I know. How do you get drugs into the prison? Apparently it’s not as hard as it seems.”

“Did you go to the hearing?”

“No. My mom did and reported back.”

I held back my annoyance about how little my mother would tell me. She followed her well-established pattern of sharing only the tip of the iceberg, nothing more, which is troublesome for someone like me who seeks information constantly. From very early on, I’ve wanted to know why people treat each other the way they do, what causes their behaviour, good and bad. I try to bring attention to glaring problems that are obvious to me, and wonder why no one else seems to care.

I was getting the sense that Shannon wanted the same things I did. I liked it. I liked that someone else was also curious.

“My mom said he’s not very smart and that my father’s brothers might have been angry about the victim impact statement she wrote for the hearing. She said, ‘I hope he’s released slowly into the community to learn productive skills, et cetera.’ Mom’s pretty liberal. At first, I

wanted to go to the hearing. Then I realized that the process wasn't for me, it was for him. I was allowed to attend—don't get me wrong, I liked having the choice. But I realized that I wanted more control over the process, not one that's taken over by the legal system, the media, even the psychologists who try to tell you how best to live after trauma.”

We laughed. As counsellors for young people, our attitude spoke to a shared resistance to our profession's typical approach to youth as being passive recipients rather than active participants in their lives. We scoffed at the dated theories that were abundant in our field, with academics and professionals keen on compartmentalizing people's emotions, labelling youth as abnormal if their life experiences didn't fit a predetermined, packaged set of orderly stages. My own theory of grief and loss was based on current literature and personal experience: grief isn't only about the death of a loved one; rather, it is the process of building a new life, including a new relationship with the person who was no longer there.

“I've been a 'registered victim' since his first hearing,” I said, making air quotes and rolling my eyes at the government's term for my status. “It was weird, though. An old friend of mine said something that really bothered me.”

“Oh yeah?” Shannon asked.

I shifted in my seat, unsure how to relay the experience. “I didn't like it at first. He said that as a kid, maybe I'd had the privilege of not knowing what happened to me through an adult lens. I think he meant the trauma of it all.”

Shannon grimaced as I continued.

“At first it really bothered me, as though there could be anything good about being eleven years old and having your world crumble to pieces. But I thought about it more, and I figured that he was worried about me seeing the guy at the prison. Like, I would be traumatized

because this time I would be processing everything as an adult.”

“Do you want to know more?” Shannon asked.

I thought about this question for a moment. Did I? Did I really want to pry the lid off that box?

As a child, I’d had no control over what happened to me. A whirlwind of activity took over my life, and I was forced to witness and experience the dark and traumatic events forced upon me and my family by someone I didn’t know. The murder. The search. The trial. The appeals. The murderer, a human being locked away in prison, was attached to my life somehow yet remained a ghost.

Shannon’s question made me realize that I could process the information however I wanted. I trusted myself more than anyone else, a skill I had to learn much too young. Now there was an opportunity to approach the situation under my terms—not on terms dictated by Canada’s Correctional Service, the parole board, or the criminal justice system.

“Well, maybe there’s a way I can meet him that wouldn’t be too traumatic,” I said.

Shannon smiled and nodded, as though she could envision my future and the kind of peace this decision might bring me.

“I think I have a window of time to do this.”

As I said it aloud, I realized that I couldn’t *not* go ahead, now that I identified what I wanted.



A thick surgical elastic band loops around her waist, cushioned by her padded one-piece baby blue snowsuit. Her father's hand holds the ends of the band.

Following her father's instructions to make a pie shape with her skis, she points her small boots toward each other, forming a triangle inside his, while they stand in snow at the top of the mountain. The sun beats down on them.

He leans forward, holding his pole horizontally in front of her body.

"Hold this," he instructs.

Reaching out, she places her mittens on the pole and stands tall, reaching just above his waist.

They lean into the slope and begin to descend, swooshing through the powdered snow, their pace quickening as they glide forward, held back only by the resistance of their ski edges dug into the snow. He shifts his weight to turn left, then right, then left again. She follows.

"Okay, Carys," he says encouragingly. He raises his voice to compete with the wind. "Now, let go." Her hands let go. With one hand, he carries his two poles parallel to the ground, and with the other hand he grips the thick elastic band.

She feels the tug of the elastic against her waist, feels the space widen between her and her father. Looking straight down the mountain, she smiles as the wind hits her face.