

Running head: WE KNEW HER

“We knew her...” Murder in a small town: *A hybrid work in three voices*¹

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Biographical Sketch

Rosemary C. Reilly PhD, CCFE is an Associate Professor in the Department of Applied Human Sciences at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada and Director of the Centre for Human Relations and Community Studies. She is also a member scholar of the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology. Her research areas of interest include the impact of trauma on neighborhoods and communities, collective healing strategies and systemic resilience, and qualitative and arts-based research methodologies.

Abstract

This hybrid work blends three voices: a mother and daughter who were deeply impacted by the murder of the daughter's best friend; my methodological notes from a research study examining the influence of violent trauma on communities; and my emotional memory gathered as I listened and re-listened to the digital interview. Drawing on creative forms of expression, this piece attempts to communicate the depth of grief, loss and disconnection that the murder of this young girl created for individuals and the community and the challenge of conducting trauma research.

Keywords: impact of murder, alienation from community, trauma research, poetic representations, creative nonfiction

It is estimated that each week in Canada between one to two women are murdered by someone they know (Dauvergne & Li, 2006; Li, 2007). In 2005, in a rural Canadian town, a 16-year-old girl was murdered by a local man who was sexually obsessed with her. This hybrid piece (Prendergast, 2007) highlights a major theme investigating how this girl's tragic death shaped the community's life, in a way only the voices of the people in that community can illustrate. Drawing on the forms of creative nonfiction (Caulley, 2008) and poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997), this work reveals their pain at her loss, the alienation and disconnection from their neighbors, and the loss of communality² that resulted from such a violent trauma.

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Me

I am driving in the snow down an unfamiliar street
in an unfamiliar town
exploring an unfamiliar territory.
And I'm anxious.

This is the first time I will interview someone who was closely connected to Emmie³
murdered at the age of sixteen.

I find the little luncheonette and enter. I begin to immediately regret that I agreed to meet Grace and her daughter, Cate, here. The place is tiny. There are six tables and assorted rickety chairs, and I imagine elbows banging corners if ever it was full. I wonder how free they will feel to talk... to tell me how this tragedy has impacted their community, and themselves. There is a young man installed at a corner table, not 4 feet from where Grace and Cate are sitting.

² Communality refers to the cohesive threads, which positively bind a community together to create a certain, safe, and wholesome environment in which individuals can lead effective, enriching, and safe lives (Bolton, 1999).

³ All names are pseudonyms.

But this is where they specified. This is where they felt safe enough to meet me.
 Together,
 it would *have* to be together.
 Grace stands, smiles, and extends her hand as I approach the table.
 We exchange the usual pleasantries, common and research. And then we begin.

Grace

**We knew her.
 You never think *that* will happen in your community.
 You don't think it's going to be on your front doorstep.
 You read about it.
 But then it happens right here.
 You're not prepared for that.**

She shakes her head as if the passage of three and a half years hasn't convinced her of its actuality. She reaches across the table and touches her daughter's hand.

Cate

*The community's supposed to be safe.
 It's small and a lot of families live there,
 so you expect everyone to be safe... and secure.
 You trust people around you because you've
 known them all your life.*

*Everyone knows everyone.
 It's your family and friends.
 That's what it is.
 Everyone is webbed tightly together.*

**I moved here as a young child
 and then I left.
 I came back to raise my kids.**

I can hear the nostalgia mixed with resignation in her voice as she gazes out the window.

**I really thought moving back here...
 it was a good place to raise my kids.
 I just wanted them to grow up where they know people walking down
 the street...
 Where the school is half a block away...
 Where the teacher calls you before the kids come home,
 so you already know what's happened.
 That sort of very close-knit community.
 But when something like this happens...**

Everyone is more distant now.

Cate's voice drops to a barely audible whisper.

But she was my best friend.

I watch as tears spring to her eyes.
She bows her head.
Her voice freezes in her throat.
I want to tell her to stop... that this is too painful.
I want to reach over and touch her hand,
but I can't.

Grace leans over and tenderly brushes the hair from her daughter's face.
It is as if we can both talk now.

"Cate," I say as gently as I can, "you can say you don't want to talk about it. It's okay."

pause

"You know what? We'll leave that. It's okay."

*For when?
I don't want to leave it for the end.*

"No, we won't leave it for the end. We'll just leave it. Okay?"

Grace jumps in to fill the space.

**She was the same age as my daughters.
That could have happened to them.
That's just not something that should happen.
Shouldn't!**

She raises her voice, slightly. But it is enough for me to hear the anger rippling under her words.
The young man glances over to our table, for just a second, then turns his attention back to his sandwich.

Grace takes a breath, and straightens her shoulders.
I get the sense she is resolved to be contained... calm... controlled. At least for Cate's sake.

And then, to be covered up.

**I didn't think something like that would happen in a small town.
I knew both these people.
You're not prepared for a man in his 20s killing...
... killing a... a teenage girl.**

*He was always friendly and smiling.
It didn't look like he had a dark secret to hide.*

*And the more and more stuff came out,
the uglier it got...*

We knew the rumors weren't true.

She would never run away for any reason.

**I knew that something was wrong, that something had happened.
The police wouldn't let us search.
The town had people ready to go.**

“I was ready to go” was left, unsaid, hovering in the air.

Neighbors... everyone wanted to search.

**Because the police already knew—
they knew it was useless to go searching for her.**

**We knew her.
The thing that she lived for was taking care of her little brother.
She would never leave him alone.
She wouldn't not show up, you know?**

*Her grandma still blames herself.
Because she left from her house that night.*

**It's not something that's over in a year
or over in two years
or three.
I'm sure a lot of the residents have totally forgotten about it.
But for the people that were very close, that knew her...
That's never really going to go away.**

I sense the time of ending has come.
My heart is so heavy, I cannot carry anymore.
So, I perform my little ritual of closure...wondering what is the damage that I have done today.

And as I turn the recorder off,
Cate leans down and pulls out a large scrapbook from her bag.

*Most of the pictures showed Emmie
Looking angry... serious.
But this is how I remember her.*

And she shows me her family photos including Emmie,
smiling
happy
laughing
hugging
belonging.

And it is through Cate, that I too have come to know Emmie a little bit.

Would you like a picture?

And my heart really does break this time.
“You have so few. I don’t feel right taking one.”

And then Cate tells me about how all of this has changed her life,
irrevocably.
How she participated in a TV documentary to tell the truth of what happened.
How, whenever she can, she does school projects about violence against women.
How she, for one, will never forget her friend.
Even if the town does.

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