

LOST & FOUND

by **Toti O'Brien**

There is death, and there is untimely death. They are different. Twenty years after your passing I still wonder about the appropriateness of your early call. About its legitimacy. I think of these two decades apparently stolen from you—an expanse of days, weeks, months, inexorably attached, marching forward without hesitation. They did not stop and wait to see if you'd catch up, when you slipped off board. No. Time didn't look back.

I do. When I glance behind my shoulder I see an intricate, colorful landscape you might have enjoyed exploring . . . I wonder why you weren't given a chance. Is there any ratio to life's diverse spans? Any reason beyond erratic sentencing? Any justice?

During your last summer, you became obsessed with the murder of a college student. I knew about it but I didn't pay attention. I was too preoccupied by your illness, though I didn't imagine how imminent the end was. Cancer was galloping, causing parts of you to break down in rapid succession. I was painfully aware my massage couldn't soothe the aches in your disintegrating bones. Still, every day we went through the motions. You quietly complained. I massaged, then I asked if you felt better. A little, you said. You didn't lie very well.

Once, you asked me to give you a ride into town. Too weak, you couldn't drive any more. But you needed a better radio in order to follow the news. Something your arm could hold up to your ear, in spite of its weariness. Something powerful, for you to capture each word.

I was consternated by how fast your hearing had gone, by the fact you could no more enjoy music. But you had zero interest in music, or anything else. You only cared about

that murder on campus, in our town's oldest and most famous university. You were listening non-stop, eager for the next update.

Curiosity wasn't like you. Had my mind been in its normal state, I would have caught the incongruity. You could have been found with a book of poetry in hand—or art history—a good novel, perhaps—rather than the daily paper. Politics and crime had never been on your menu. But that summer I remember you muttering to yourself: “This is very important. Extremely. I need to understand.”

Could the reason of your fascination have been not the crime (and the impenetrable mystery surrounding it) but the setting? You were a college professor. And you deemed your role precious, essential, almost sacred. Your devotion towards your students surpassed routine obligations. Now, while the news unfolded, it appeared as if faculty was involved. A department director was charged with obstructing the inquiry. Two teaching assistants would soon become the defendants.

There was more. Your daughters were about to start college. Did you worry about them? Were you aware you might be leaving them soon?

She was twenty-two. The shot was so sudden, so silent, her friend thought Marta had simply passed out. She had dropped to the ground like a rag doll, like a string-less puppet. Then her girlfriend saw the small hole concealed by her thin blond hair. She started screaming. A passerby called for an ambulance. People rushed out from the adjacent building, hosting classrooms and offices of the school of Jurisprudence. The campus police arrived promptly. Marta was transported to a nearby polyclinic, where she died five days later. In fact, she was dead already, at least cerebrally. She never awoke from the coma into which she had instantaneously fallen.

Her life came to an arrest a bit before noon, sun reaching the zenith, in a hallway trapped between massive buildings hosting some of the most praised academia of our town—including the Law Library. Marta was a law student herself, and a good one at that.

A few steps and she would have entered the main plaza where Minerva stood—the university navel, hub, meeting point, main landmark—the statue of Athena, symbol of human wisdom and knowledge.

Truth about Marta's murder was never found.

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But this you don't know. When you died at the end of November—seven months after the bullet was shot—the authorities were still in the dark about the murder of Marta. And I wonder if their speculations (in absence of tangible proofs) kept you occupied during the confinement of many hospital beds. Could you have guessed the case would remain unsolved? Could you have resigned to the gratuitousness of a severed life? I don't know. You were a splendid researcher. One whose patience defied all frustration. One of those who dig until they find water, or gold.

In spite of your inclination for humanities, you had been trained as an engineer. Unreflectively, you had followed your father's directions. Young and docile, you had complied out of discipline and meekness. Then you had bitterly regretted your choice, yet developed excellent skills, specializing in earthquake prevention. You had taught for decades in the Architecture department of the college where Marta was killed. Your students adored you.

Still, when mid-life crisis hit you, you gave your career a brisk turn. You pursued a totally different path, switching to the study of old monuments and ancient towns. You spent months questioning ruins until you understood how they were originally built, in order to remake their whole structure from the inside. A work of keen observation, fine detection, rigorous deduction. The new discipline you created for yourself, then scholarly formalized—founding an original school of thought—befitted you. You felt realized, fulfilled by your labor. Rapidly, your goals shifted from restoration to vulnerability. You focused on preventing the loss of architectural heritage—especially if belonging to endangered cultures.

On your deathbed, you oscillated between awareness of the end and plans for the future. "It is very important," you said—your eyes bright, animated. "Extremely." You were talking of a book you wanted to write, one you had drafted already. About vulnerability.

You must have read, of course, about the projectile. You might have seen pictures of the CAT scan. There is something haunting about how lead was split in eleven fragments, each acting like a tiny separate bomb. Like an earthquake, simultaneously and irreparably damaging many areas of the victim's brain. Private Hiroshima. The shell, never found,

became one of many controversial elements of the case. It should have fallen in the street, unless it were shot from far within the building, in which case it could have been recovered and then disposed of. But the inquiry firmly settled on a window partly obstructed by an air-conditioner. Thus, the shooter's arm must have been stretched out to bypass the obstacle, and the shell must have necessarily dropped to the pavement. Like the gun, it was never located.

Firearms were discovered on campus—a variety of them. Some real, some modified toy guns. Some hidden and rusted, some in perfect shape. Some with shells trapped within. Indiscretions of improvised shooting parties—for fun, after work, in various facilities—reached the press. But the gun killing Marta wasn't identified.

The projectile might have exploded in small lethal shards, multiplying its destructive potential, because it was handcrafted, belonging to the amateurish arsenal the police was bringing to light. But homemade or manufactured is irrelevant. Brains are vulnerable anyway.

Was the intriguing fauna of weapons—sprouting like mushrooms at the core of academia—preoccupying you? I wouldn't be surprised, but I didn't ask. I was worried about you.

Were you instead fascinated with the calculations—based on painstaking simulations, drawings, reconstructions—meant to determine the trajectory of the bullet, thus defining its probable point of origins? Everything conjured against credible results. Because Marta was hospitalized for five days, her wound had been dressed and had somehow healed. Therefore, during the autopsy it had been impossible to accurately assess its shape. In addition, no ballistic expert was present. Later, they had to be contented with the insufficient evidence of photographs.

Also, establishing the posture of Marta's head when she was hit was impossible. She was walking and animatedly talking with her friend. She might have lowered her eyes to avoid the sun—she was approaching the plaza. She might have looked up, turned back, shook her head for a yes or no.

Certainly, she wasn't shot at close range. Not from the street, which was empty. From the buildings, then. The projectile had entered above her left ear. Since she didn't walk backward, it could only have come from the premises at her left. Jurisprudence.

Straight left. Left and behind. Left and front. Same level. Higher. Higher still. Up high. Fifty windows. By all means, police experts tried to reduce such number. Frantic computations—is it what enthralled you? Were you trying to follow those desperate attempts, taking a maddening number of days, while fingerprints or other possible evidence faded away? After all, it was your field of expertise—calculating angles of incidence, fall trajectories, velocity, impact. Hadn't you done just that for your entire life? All the Sanskrit must have been no more than a crossword to you. Did the puzzle keep you occupied? Did you form an opinion? Come to a conclusion?

Buildings were live entities to you. You treated them like persons. You had feelings for them. You could perceive their soul. Did you foresee the absurdity? Twenty years later—past an endless trial neither acquitting nor condemning, settling out of despair for ambiguous compromise—the only ascertained culprit of the crime is the building.

I told you the inquiry had focused on a particular window, one blocked by an air conditioner—on the basis of a chemical particle found on its sill, maybe a trace of gun powder, although the same residue, probably caused by pollution, was then found elsewhere. I mentioned how such a bulky item would have forced the shooter to lean far out of the window. Otherwise the bullet would have hit the appliance, crashed into the opposite wall, or gone upwards, ending god-knows-where after some kind of parabola. But it couldn't have reached the street unless the shooter's arm had bypassed the obstacle. Whoever killed Marta saw her, if the shot—as it was decided—came from that particular point. Yet the crime was judged unintentional, which could only be true if the shooter thought the pistol was empty. An old relic, a toy.

You, of course, must have seen her picture. You must have known it by heart. I didn't until twenty years later, when the months preceding your death briskly came to mind, and I dared taking a look at what I had previously ignored. Meaning, why you were so

enthralled by a news item while you should have focused on your cancer, your pain, your imminent death.

Her face startled me, changing my preexistent feelings.

She was a casual victim—press, police, and law concurred on this topic. Her extraneousness to all sorts of troubles was stated beyond doubt (arbitrary as such conclusion might be). A plain girl, no-nonsense, a good student, not involved in politics. Her romantic life, straight-forward and pristine. Just a faithful boyfriend, no jealousy involved. No drugs. Thus, she was described. The shot being intended for her was out of the question. The projectile had accidentally met her. Those later accused of pulling the trigger didn't know her, therefore couldn't have premeditated her killing. She had never met them (arbitrary as such conclusion may be).

These assumptions informed my perception of the events while I kept perusing the literature. A plethora of articles—even books—all regard the inquiry, trials, prosecutors, defendants, and witnesses. They comment about clumsiness and delays in the investigations, prosecutors' irregular ways with the witnesses and following legal claims against the prosecutors, witnesses' contradictions, reversals, obstructive behaviors, and sheer absence of evidence. They describe a public opinion split between those believing the defendants' guilt and those swearing for their innocence, persuaded that a terrible error was being made. Medias found a mine of diamonds in the murder of a twenty-two-year-old, but the focus of all that clamor wasn't Marta. Her life had very little to offer. In fact, nothing at all.

Her face startled me. Something seemed wrong with the picture ... the entire picture I mean. See, the girl staring from the papers is uncannily beautiful—her gaze almost disturbingly smart, deep, and pure. If her life was as unexceptional as reported, *she* wasn't. Honestly, it is hard to believe she hadn't been chosen. Or chased.

It occurred to me you had lost a daughter about three decades earlier. You had just married—she was your first girl. Not yet three years old, she died of a rare, sudden, incurable illness. Sparse symptoms had started in late summer, but she lasted until the beginning of May. For nine months you struggled, trying all sorts of cures, bringing her into whatever clinic offered a fistful of hope. I remember you at the airport, coming back

from the foreign town where she had finally passed—the doctors being unable to keep her destiny in check. You brought back a doll you gave me as a gift, a cute little nurse. You said your daughter had sent it.

Nothing the nurse could do now. Not for your girl. But you brought it as a concluding memento. Did it mean something still could be fixed after someone dies? Or was she intended for prevention? To be aware of future vulnerabilities.

It occurred to me that Marta died shortly after the date of your daughter's passing. Had you observed the recurrence? You never talked about it. You had had four more daughters, a good marriage, a good life.

I recalled a black and white picture of your little girl. I had found it between the pages of a journal I had left unattended. You might have put it there. Your child looked very smart, uncommonly beautiful. In the photo, her gaze has the same uncomfortable depth I saw in Marta's. Is it just afterthought? Do these eyes seem to reflect the imponderable, just because we know they are irreversibly shut? Because they have seen their last vision? I am not sure.

Once the crime scene was determined (in a quasi-random manner), the inquiry only had to find out who was behind the window at the crucial moment. Luckily, the timing had been properly documented. Initially, all denied having entered that particular room, that morning. But a telephone was inside it, near the door, from which calls had been dialed a minute after the shot. Getting ahold of the caller wasn't hard. She was faculty, an assistant to the Department Head. The entire case started to take shape around this first witness as she slowly articulated her memories. Contradictory, vague. Then sharper. Convoluting, baroque. Then suddenly lucid. Like a Master of Ceremonies, the first witness named other witnesses in a non-linear progression, subject to rectifications, erasures, and changes. The new witnesses, as they came on stage from the wings, proceeded quite similarly. They also dug out of memory names, faces, events—a slow and complicated delivery, punctuated by dramatic reversals.

The case, instead of unraveling, built itself. Strange construction—partly a maze, partly a castle of cards. Hocus-pocus.

Two young teaching assistants were accused, one of the actual killing, the other of abetting. Both were promising scholars. They had no motive, but their alibis were confused and porous. Still no proof was found—they were judged upon witnesses' declarations. They claimed innocence. All verdicts (the case was reopened a number of times) were unavoidably ambiguous, due to the inherent weakness of the inquiry. The case had poor foundations, flimsy structures. It reposed on mud. The defendants were found guilty each time, but charged with negligible penalties. A few years of prison for the shooter, then transformed into house arrest. Only house arrest for the accomplice.

I am wondering if you were also trapped in the spider web, stilled by the unsolvable question. Did they do it or not? Are they criminals—those twenty-and-some who could be your students, your children, those well-bred middle class boys? Are they clear? Are we burning vampires? Are we sacrificing lambs? I wonder if you entered the maze, if you played the guessing game. If you did, you would have told no one. You would have kept your deductions for yourself.

Twenty years later, I certainly brooded about it. Had I been called to be part of the jury in one of those trials, I should have necessarily formed an opinion. Based on facts? Facts were missing, still are. Based on what? If I look at pictures (the papers abounded with them) what do I see in the defendants' eyes? Tough question.

I am glad I wasn't part of the jury. I am glad I missed the case altogether, in 1997. Because now it brought back—like an unwanted echo—a similar one I had followed in 1975. I was a teenager. It was spring. Together with other protesters I had sat in the courtroom and demonstrated in front of it, on occasion of the infamous Circeo massacre. Two girls from the outskirts were abducted by a trio of upper-class boys—very wealthy, a bit older—brought into one of their empty vacation houses, abused, and raped. One of them was killed, the other left in critical condition in the locked trunk of a car.

I knew one of the boys by sight. Some of those rich guys hung on their pricey motorbikes in front of girls' schools. They mated with girls of their own milieu, but didn't disdain borrowing less fortunate ones for fun, or to make fun of them.

The trial called attention both for gender and class-related issues. The accused were known for their extreme-right beliefs. Nazi. Nihilistic. Amoral. Deep contempt for their

victims' social status admittedly informed the crime, otherwise explained by machismo, bravado, and ennui. Guilt was proved without a doubt. The three got life, but two managed successful escapes. Interestingly, the defendants didn't seem affected by the trial. Neither did they show remorse, nor attempt to justify themselves. Of course, claiming innocence was impossible, yet their supreme indifference was eerie and disquieting. As if what had occurred was irrelevant. As if the machinery of justice had befallen them by an unfortunate, unforeseen error. As if, truly, the trial didn't regard them. I remember the guys' faces, all over the news. I recall them quite well—their rubbery surface, vacuous impenetrability.

Of course, the two crimes have nothing in common. Under certain angles, they are perfectly opposite. There, evidence was blatant. Here, facts vanish into thin air. Even the bullet hole goes unnoticed, until the CAT scan reveals what's hiding in Marta's brain. Yet there are subliminal echoes. For example, the difference of status between accused and victim. The gratuitousness also resonates—the appalling hypothesis that whoever killed did it for fun, toying with weapons in order to fill listless moments. To prove something, perhaps? Both cases seem to imply boys sharpening tools in hopes to become men, using innocuous girls as living targets. And the bold look on the perpetrators' face—both for those claiming non-involvement, in Marta's case (yet somehow unworried, uncaring of alibis), and for those impassively admitting their guilt, as if it were a minor annoyance.

Looking in the eyes of Marta's supposed killers isn't recommended. Not a healthy exercise. I would not trust my impartiality. I wouldn't dare casting a judgment. I'm sure you didn't either.

Did you blame the building? The school of Jurisprudence, the Law Library, the corridors through which maybe a shooter escaped, the bathrooms where a murderer might have flushed a weapon. Did you condemn those walls? You might have interrogated them, repeatedly. Ask every stone, brick, and tile.

When I moved a bit farther from your bed, to give someone else a chance, I switched from a side position to a frontal one. Accidentally, I lowered my gaze and I spotted the buckets. Until then I had concentrated on your face, your intermittent smiles, especially the words you proffered with great effort. Unbelieving, confused, shocked, I saw a mass

of purple and brown percolating, slowly filling those containers. No, they weren't excrements—I hoped so for a minute. I asked, later on. Those collapsing pieces were your intestines and liver—they were your organs, surrendering. At least this is what a nurse said to the uncouth relative. Clearly, everything could be said by then. You wouldn't survive the night. You, of course, were spared the vision of your disintegration. It happened under cover. Did you sense it?

Marta's parents donated her organs, in order to respect a will she had previously expressed. You must have read it in the news. Her heart, liver, both of her kidneys, saved four lives. Her eyes granted two persons' vision. Six in total.

I am thinking of the little doll you brought back from Zurich after your daughter died. I remember you pulling it out of your pocket at the airport. I reflect, now, upon the kindness and care carried by your gesture. I remembered tears in your eyes, the crack in your voice. Uncle dear, what did you want to say? Please. Can something still be repaired after someone's death?

I remember when they pulled a sheet over your face, then they rolled the cot through the corridor. It was night. Relatives sat on metal chairs. The bulbs cast a green light. Farewell.

Did you wonder, during the fall—you spent many weeks alone, sent like an uncomfortable parcel from hospital to clinic to hospital, all over Europe—why the witnesses of Marta's murder (those who at the fatal moment were in the incriminated room, originally empty then filling up, slowly, like a Swiss clock animated by mechanic figurines) built their Byzantine soap opera? If the crime still screams for a motive, so do those conflicting memories, affirmed then denied, reaffirmed then denied again.

Why would several people lie about something so grave? For grave reasons would be the obvious answer. Such as covering up their own guilt. Or the guilt of someone close. Someone powerful perhaps, capable of revenge. Only these kinds of reasons would explain incriminating scapegoats extraneous to the facts. Unless the scapegoats were the target of pointed retaliation, and thus had been damaged by design. Once again, no background justified such hypotheses. Yes—the testimonials were full of incongruities, repeatedly denied, then reaffirmed. But a purpose for the entire fabrication (if such) was

never detected. It seemed aimless—a self-fed nightmare, pulling the dreamers ever deeper, adrift in a labyrinth, unable to backtrack and find a way out.

The overall impression is that many had something to hide. Routine institutional corruption. Maybe each witness knew a fragment of uncomfortable truth. All started with a partial lie, then got lost in translation. Individual lies conflicted with one another, leading to more confusion. All feared all at some point. The compass needle went crazy, then it randomly stopped, pointing no matter where. As for a game of musical chairs, someone was left standing.

Maybe a number of personnel and faculty were involved, each for some kind of irregularity. Those firearms circulating in the building might have been a minefield, implying serious responsibilities. Maybe all knew how Marta was killed. The institution then attempted to do what institutions do: shield itself, fight for its own survival, crushing a few unfortunate members au passage.

Ask the stones.

Isn't it vertiginous? Someone shoots a bullet, hits a college student calmly strolling from one lesson to the next, on a sunny day. The sky is clear and cloudless. Whoever shot knows what happened.

Let's say it was an accident. A projectile escaped. The shooter didn't even see where it went. Let's say he or she was on the first floor, perhaps in a bathroom, and immediately ran to the street, dumped the gun, jumped on a bus, forgot. Hard to believe—wherever escaped, the killer would have learned about Marta's death soon enough. Someone killed the girl and lived with it. If no one else, the murderer knows. Maybe the killer died, in which case also the truth is gone.

Yet—isn't it vertiginous—a perspective must exist, a vantage point, a location, from where all has been visible. The hand and the gun. The moment of taking aim. The trajectory of the bullet. Marta's fall. The weapon disposal. The killer's escape. A perspective exists from where these actions formed a readable pattern. It's a matter of distance, of angle. Should the viewer have climbed on Minerva's shoulders? Ask the statue. The university church's dome could have been the spot. Ask the pigeons. Some

walls, some roofs should have been removed in order to properly observe. Not unthinkable. Utilize vellum paper, trace dotted lines instead of solid ones.

I remember when you told me about the Birds. What an ancient memory unburied. I was a little kid. What you said sounded like a fairy tale, your voice both enticing and dreamy while you explained about these students of yours, revolting against things I didn't understand. You weren't sure either ... but I detected pride in your voice—admiration and a tinge of stronger emotion. Could it have been longing? Those students did things strange and amusing. For instance, they imitated birdcalls instead of talking. More exciting, once they climbed the very top of a dome, perching there for a long time, night and day. They had chosen a magnificent church in the very middle of town. I imagined them nestled in the heights, stars at reach, but I also imagined them running, arms extended, in harmonious formations. In my mind, I saw them coasting sidewalks, brushing facades, elegant, supple, wild. And I pictured them blue, head to toe. I was a young kid. It was nineteen sixty-eight. At the time when Marta was shot, the Birds were obsolete memories. No one perched nowhere. No human I mean. And I do not believe in gods.

During your last summer, I had the chance to spend time with you, give you a daily massage good for nothing, maybe honoring the doll-nurse you brought me decades before. Sometimes I gave you a ride, or we had a talk, commenting about what was mostly on your mind. The murder of Marta Russo.

In the fall, you frequently called me overseas, where I lived, from various countries where you were receiving useless treatment. You never sounded hopeless, always cheerful, as if just wanting to chat. Yet I slowly realized something was incongruous with your calls. You were sending a message. Time was narrowing. I should come.

I kept postponing. Flying to see you in emergency meant I was admitting the end. I showed up eventually, and I caught your last twenty-four hours. Then I took a couple planes back—a long journey. I sat by the window and of course cried non-stop. I didn't try holding it. Hours later, I noticed the landscape was visible. We had lost altitude while flying over Canada.

I remember how intricate and beautiful the earth looked. Everything. Mountains, rivers, lakes, meadows. Streets, towns, hamlets. I remember how each fragment seemed to

have fallen in place, carefully disposed, perfectly designed. A kind of peace came my way.
Do you hear me?

A kind of forgiveness.

Marta Russo, a 22-year-old student of Law, was shot on May 9th, 1997, within the Sapienza University of Rome, Italy.

In the last years of his life, professor Antonino Giuffré devoted his rich academic and cultural experience to the preservation of historical architectural landmarks, especially ancient towns. His efforts were interrupted by his premature passing.



Toti O'Brien was born in Rome and lives in Los Angeles. Her work has most recently appeared in *Lotus-Eaters*, *Masque & Spectacle*, *Feminine Inquiry*, and *Indiana Voices*.