

Young Tragic Heroines

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The letter was addressed to Diane, predictably misspelled. It was from a postal box in a town known only for its prison. When she saw the name, Ben Strickert, she tore it open. After all these years, a dream come true. Her steady barrage of letters had finally yielded a result. She slipped it out and laid it on the table.

Twenty-five years ago, Dianne's sister Miranda had been four months pregnant when she was shot in her home along with her husband Jeff, murdered by a teenager with no prior criminal record. It was the kind of crime that people read about in the newspapers and talked about on the radio non-stop for days, and still ached for more. Till now Ben Strickert had only offered a predictable refrain of denial, declaring his innocence to a series of confidants. The media, on the anniversary of the crime, always desired an update.

She had first written Ben five years ago, saying she forgave him and that now she wanted him to acknowledge his guilt. This was soon after she became convinced that her anger was a sin, just like murder was. Not to the same degree, but still something to be ashamed of.

Those who knew the extent of her one-sided correspondence did not approve. But in her heart Dianne knew she was right. Besides, she was sick of discussing things with people who were never going to agree with her.

The best gift she could give her sister would be to show Ben Strickert the real face of Christian forgiveness. When it was extended

in the right way, no one was immune from its power. People talked about forgiveness as a selfless act, but she wanted something from Ben. Nonetheless, just the thought of letting go of her anger gave her a semblance of peace, which would be completed when Ben did his part.

The details of the crime were too terrible—the woman pregnant, recently married, senselessly murdered, the baby gifts gathered in the nursery and still in boxes. The wedding photo displayed on the piano. Dianne had snapped that one. The photo depicted a big-boned, healthy girl in a white, ornately embroidered wedding dress—the dress of a woman who was perhaps trying a bit too hard. And in a sisterly way, Dianne had pronounced the gown “ostentatious yet gaudy” and then expected a laugh out of Miranda. But like a lot of her jokes, it landed with a thud.

“We just have different taste,” Miranda had said.

It was a great photo, even better, Dianne told herself, than the professional ones they had taken at the ceremony. There was always an endearing ungainliness about Miranda. The shot captured this. The term coltishness seemed to apply. But Miranda never liked that term. “They’re just throwing awkward girls a bone with that one,” she once said.

During Dianne’s photo session, Miranda had teased: Now for our official wedding photographs we have a professional photographer. Her voice lingered on photographer with a pretentious rigor. Like—*well la-di-da*, only the best for us—a photographer of the rich and famous. She was teasing because she knew better than to take her newly enhanced living situation for granted. She came from self-conscious working-class stock.

So during the goofy informal shoot, they’d been drinking. Miranda probably wouldn’t have consented to pose in her wedding dress in

the backyard without it. School was over, things were quiet at her job, nothing, no appointments. Let's get sloshed.

This was the photo that ran, day after day, in the papers after her death. This was the one that Ben's friend saw. Ben—who was caught after he confessed, or more accurately bragged to this friend. It was as if he couldn't stop himself, as if it wasn't real, until he spoke it aloud. The friend's name was Alan.

"You read the paper?" Ben glanced up almost shyly.

"Nope." Alan shook his head. He threw a rock into the distance. It splashed in the shallow creek.

"Yeah, but, you may have heard about this anyways. That couple that got killed up in West Haven? You know 'em?"

"Christ! Of course I don't know them."

"Yeah, but you've heard of them right?" Ben seemed all puffed up and proud.

Alan smirked. What now? Maybe he knew a friend of a friend who knew the couple, had inside information? Alan wasn't too interested. Ben was always trying to impress, always building up to a climax that existed only in his head.

"What do I care about some rich assholes up in West Haven? It's crazy, though, whoever did it was stupid. They didn't take anything," Alan said. "They didn't even have the brains to hide and sneak out before the people came home."

"Maybe they just wanted to kill somebody."

"Who knows?" Alan shrugged. "Some crazy ass shit though. If I broke into a house like that, I'd do it right. Scope it out the week before

so I knew when they would leave. Check around the perimeter for signs of alarms or guard dogs.”

“Maybe he just wanted to kill somebody.”

For a moment they locked eyes, until Alan dropped his. It was October, chilly and wet. He hugged his windbreaker against his skinny chest. The cheap canvas sneakers he’d picked out this morning were a bad choice, though he would never admit it. They squished when he walked. And now icy water was pooling in the toes.

The last words his mother had spoken to him before he left the house that morning were: *Alan, are you wearing your galoshes?* It was actually a pretty dumb question. Bam, click. The door rattled behind him as he slammed it. Not out of intentional rudeness, the door wouldn’t close any other way. His mom really needed to fix it.

Alan jerked. Ben had poked him with a long branch. Alan’s short laugh was forced and nervous. “Okay—, then.” He drew the word out.

“He did it right, alright. Because nobody knows who did it.”

Alan fidgeted and pulled out a cigarette. “He? Okay fine. I’m hungry and cold and I’m sick of talking about this. Wanna go eat?”

“I know who did it,” Ben said.

“Whooo, shit. You gonna tell anybody?”

They sat in silence in a corner section of the diner, the smoking area. It was three o’clock in the afternoon. Their dirty dishes had been taken away by the waitress, or in the case of Alan, the meal he had barely touched.

Ben looked up. “So what are you thinking?”

“Umm, I dunno. Can’t say exactly.”

“You said they were just some asshole couple up in West Haven and who cares, so I’m with you—who cares?”

“No, you’re right. I don’t care.” Alan’s cigarette was shaking, so he stubbed it out and put his hands under the table until they steadied. Then he went for the cold coffee. But when he picked up the cup again his hands were shaking anew, so hard that he slammed the cup back down. The saucer rattled.

Ben said nothing. There was a momentary curl of the lip, slight amusement. *I’m in charge*, he seemed to say. But instead of mocking Alan, he stared at the wall in back of his head.

“It was something, alright. They came stomping in around ten o’ clock laughing and I thought, *These are their last moments*. I knew that.”

“Weren’t you freaked out?”

“I was calling the shots. My opinion, my decision.” He shifted in his seat. “They were talking about some party they went to and I thought, *That was your last party*, and then the lady asks for a drink of water, and I thought, *Your very last glass of water*.”

Alan shrank in his seat. They were always one-upping each other, but until now he’d always felt like Ben was more of a punk and he was the smarter, ruthless one. If one dawdled on the railroad tracks with the train coming, the other wanted to do him one better, lingering for another two seconds after the other one had bailed—one Mississippi, two Mississippi. Once they had met some kids who stuck a lit firecracker up a cat’s ass. It was only a stray, not a pet. But that time he and Ben had only watched.

Ben got up to leave. “Hey Bud. Don’t make me think I can’t trust you with my deepest, darkest secrets.”

“Oh, you can trust me,” Alan said.

Alan was the one who came forward. The police broke him after threatening him with “accessory after the fact,” which probably wouldn’t have stuck anyway.

The articles at the time struggled to make sense of the senseless. They speculated that these two disenfranchised, angry, semi-privileged suburban kids were a symptom of a larger problem. They were labeled latchkey kids, who came home from school to an empty kitchen instead of the smell of mom’s cookies. In the case of Ben, this wasn’t even true since his mom worked only part-time. As to whether or not she baked cookies, that remains a mystery.

But absentee parenting was brought up, maybe not as the cause but definitely a contributing factor. Because who wouldn’t notice their kid was a psychopath unless they just weren’t paying attention? And working parents? Well, you know . . . make sure your kids have everything they need and most of what they want, and also be home by five.

So Ben was portrayed as an anomaly. Not someone regular people would have to worry about unless they were very unlucky. Yes, it had happened in what used to be called “a good neighborhood.” But what were the odds of such bad luck striking twice? They could all breathe easier knowing that.

Dianne read every article published at the time and even kept a scrapbook. It wasn’t morbid. It was more like a memorial. For the most part, the commentary, the articles, were respectful when discussing the victims. As for the criminals, the smallest details of their lives were held up to scrutiny, especially the ones that seemed unexpected. She even came to know that Ben had done well on his standardized tests. Everything was carefully phrased. But there was always the whiff of privilege and envy in the stories. The tale of a young couple starting

a new life in an expensive suburban enclave. Both employed with great jobs. The wife, newly pregnant, always ahead of the game, was interviewing nannies. They had picked the most lucrative and practical majors in college. Late twenties, awfully young to have figured it all out. Spoiler alert! Obviously they hadn't—look what happened.

But some of the details didn't so much elaborate the details of Miranda's life as judge them. It seemed there was no end to conjecture as to how readers might escape a similar fate. Much was made of the fact that the house they bought lacked a security system. (Dianne always suspected this was probably the fault of the notoriously cheap Jeff.) The previous owners had one in place. But this young foolhardy couple hadn't reactivated it, at least not yet. What had they been waiting for? If only they'd been a little more proactive.

Speaking of Jeff, she had always wished, and she knew it was a bad wish, that Jeff had been killed and Miranda spared. And, of course, the baby too. Jeff and Dianne had never really clicked. He always seemed a bit preoccupied and when they talked, *Hi* and *I'm fine* were the extent of the conversation. A very nice guy, as the saying went, certainly, but a little smug, a little soft, an aficionado of expensive cigars when he could find them at discounted prices. But never Cubans since he didn't want to break the law.

A *cautionary tale*—went the headline in the Sunday section. Dianne had complained about that one, long and hard. It talked about how fate played mysterious tricks and how an opulent lifestyle couldn't protect you from life's grim and shitty realities.

After her complaint, the writer of the article called her personally. "I'm so sorry for your loss," he said. "But I don't write the headlines. And honestly I cringed when I saw that one."

“It wasn’t just the headline,” she said. And then she wondered if that was really the reason he had cringed.

Dianne never hid from telling her story. She even talked about it with her daughter, Alissa. She described Miranda in detail. The two sisters became closer in death than they were in life.

“I think she would have been my favorite aunt,” Alissa mused. “I can just tell from the way you describe her and all the things she liked. And I would be her favorite niece.” Her only niece, there were no other candidates. Not then, not now, and never in the future.

Her daughter had invented a cool persona for Miranda, pieced together from bits and pieces Dianne had parceled out over the years. “We even like the same movies,” she added.

One time Alissa told her that sometimes she brought it up with new acquaintances on purpose. Dianne understood because as soon as the story was told, there was an unearned importance conferred on the teller. You were considered unique and experienced and damaged.

When Alissa’s teachers found out they always sympathized and said that it was such a shame to have to live with that.

“They don’t press, do they?”

“No,” said Alissa. “They just give me sad looks for about an hour and then it passes. And one time it got mentioned on a day I bombed a test. The teacher came to me later and said *I’m so sorry I didn’t realize*. And then she let me retake it.” Alissa smiled. “Miranda must be my guardian angel. I had forgotten there was a test that day. So I hadn’t even opened the book.”

Dianne had experienced this feeling herself when someone once asked her when was the last time she’d seen her sister. It made her wonder. Could they have possibly thought that maybe she’d been visiting

them that awful day and luck had smiled upon her? Fate intervening as her car drove out of the long driveway just as the car of the perpetrator approached? Because, if so, it would have meant she had been spared for some special purpose. But this was nonsense; Ben had taken the bus to the vicinity of the subdivision and walked the rest of the way.

Besides, in the month leading up to the murder, Dianne hadn't visited. She'd only talked on the phone with Miranda a couple times.

On the way to visit Ben, Dianne stopped at a gas station. After filling up, she spied a drug store across the street. She went in and bought a few things, using a coupon that had been spit out with the receipt on her last visit. For a limited time only, she could get 20% off her entire purchase plus extra bonus points, as long as the purchases weren't already on sale or were store buster specials, whatever that was, so she chose carefully. She piled the snacks, the crackers, nuts, stuff easily eaten while driving, onto the counter. She didn't want to have to stop. But the coupon hadn't worked. They even had to get the manager. This was a very convoluted way to save money.

Dianne sighed and smiled at the people behind her who seemed, for the most part, kind about the delay. She pulled her hat off and set it on top of a box of quick energy drinks in front of the cash register, small bottles of concentrated vitamins in a corn syrup base. She hated the taste but liked the effect. She felt the bottles through the thick fabric of her hat. She carefully grabbed two and then bunched the knit hat into a ball and stuck it into her purse.

The cashier finally returned and apologized profusely as she applied the discount and transferred the points to Dianne's preferred shopper card. "Thanks so much," Dianne said.

Ben sat behind the Plexiglas window and smiled, but pretty soon it became clear that a scripted, tidy scenario was not in the making. She had been warned that he was manipulative, that he was now expressing remorse as a ploy to convince the parole board that he was rehabilitated enough for a release. The Supreme Court had recently struck down mandatory sentences of life in prison without parole for juveniles. At sixteen, that had been his sentence, the best the prosecutor could get in a state without the death penalty. She imagined a not-even-so-great lawyer pleading to a hopefully unsympathetic parole board that his client's years of denial were a natural consequence of his despondency at being put away so young without even the slightest hope of ever being released.

Ben rambled. He liked it when his parents came to visit. They came less frequently now. They were older and less mobile. Mom had stayed home last time. He put words in her mouth. *Thank God I have other children*, he pictured her saying, a small consolation. This would not surprise him.

Dianne wasn't too interested in his parents.

She tried to steer the questions around to Miranda and Jeff. Ben said that the memory of the crime was so vague to him now that it was like an apparition. But he was sure they were good people who didn't deserve to die.

So there was nothing there, nothing there at all.

Sometimes his parents called. His dad told him privately, in a phone call, that his mother wasn't up to it these days. He hadn't said what she was sick with. His dad admitted to not being in great health either, but that didn't stop him from showing up. It just goes to show you—

What had Dianne expected after all these years? An apology? No. An indication that Ben wanted forgiveness from God and she was the person who could lead him there? Maybe. But it couldn't be coerced. It had to be something offered freely. It didn't seem like a lot to ask and she'd waited so long. Ben sat in front of her, rather small, composed, and so determined to plug up any empty spaces in the conversation. But after all his talk about his life being stalled and limited, what were his exact words?

He said he was a useless and sorry excuse for a person then. Their deaths cost him, and all of us, dearly. He wasn't sorry maybe exactly in the way they wanted him to be but that was because he didn't even recognize the person he had been at that time.

But why couldn't he be sorry on the outside? He could do good things for people out there, whatever it took. He understood now how these things were important. How it means something for people to see you doing good. Among other things, it sets the right example.

Then he asked her if she planned to visit again, and she told him she wasn't sure. □