

I LEARN ABOUT THE GILLEY FAMILY MURDERS TEN years before I contact Jody. A friend of mine tells me about the case. She doesn't say much, only that Jody's brother killed the rest of their family while they were sleeping; that he did it because he loved Jody and hoped or believed or maybe just wished that afterward the two of them would run away together—to Reno, Nevada, my friend thinks it was. They were going to take the family car, leave their childhood home, and never return.

That's all my friend says, that's all she knows, and for ten years I ponder those few things: the murders, the crazy brother, the failed escape. I forget them sometimes, but never for long, and over time the story of the Gilley family, the little I know about it, resolves into what's more of a picture than an unfolding drama. I never embellish the scene. I don't know how, or I can't. The magnitude of the crime, of a tragedy that belongs to other people, not to me, makes it sacrosanct; it prevents me from taking license with what I've been told. Instead, my preoccupation wears it down to an essence, just as years of handling might erase details from the profile on a coin. I don't have a face for the boy or the girl. I don't see the house or the bodies within, the blood. All I see is the lateness of the hour and the silhouetted heads of two teenagers in a car, leaving the dead behind.

Sometimes I imagine headlights shining into the dark in front of them, but the two beams reveal only blackness. I—they—can't see what's ahead. What I have is just the barest

idea, like a single frame taken from a film, of two teenagers—children, really, sixteen, eighteen—driving away into the night. Driving away from what most people consider impossible, an impossibly violent crime. And one that is, of course, not possible to leave behind.

Is the scene sexual? It feels that way. Not overtly, but even if the brother and sister aren't lovers, even if one never touches the other, still, when I linger at this scene, one assembled from fragments of another woman's past—alleged fragments at that, gossip, unsubstantiated—when I linger, I find it has a forbidden, sexual charge. Because my friend used the word *love*? Because she said that's why Jody's brother did it, out of his love for her?

Yes. Because love, murder, and running away together do imply sex. They do suggest an illicit erotic fixation.

We all read these stories, don't we? In the tabloids, on the Internet, in books of "true crime"? Drawn to what we don't understand, to examine lives darker and more desperate than our own. I'm worse than most, I imagine. A bad habit, reading about murder—this is how I explain it to myself—but it starts innocently enough. It's 1986, and my not-yet husband brings home a copy of a magazine, *Startling Detective*. We're graduate students studying creative writing in the Midwest. Practicing being artful, crafting good sentences, refining our ability to parse the human heart and reveal subtleties of emotion. It will amuse me, he thinks, the artlessness of the magazine.

Because there's nothing subtle about *Startling Detective*. It's sordid and pandering, with gruesome photographs. It cultivates voyeurism, unapologetic in its mission to exploit personal tragedy for mass-market entertainment. I'm fascinated, and he

buys me more. They're all the same, yet I don't tire of them. In that way, they're like pornography. In other ways, too. They reveal a need I only half understand, one that finds no answer in my waking life.

Although my dreams are often bloody: I happen on the aftermath of a crime, find signs of struggle in a ransacked room. I discover myself in the role of murderer, careless about the clues I've left, sure to be caught and punished. I'm the decapitated victim, dead but somehow conscious, observing how life goes on without me.

By the time the magazine folds, I'm the mother of two young children, living in New York, working hard, without much time for guilty pursuits. Still, I haven't grown out of my taste for pulpy accounts of murder. My husband isn't sure what to make of this—my sustained interest. Whatever it means, it's not something he wants to encourage, so I end up browsing at our local bookstore, flipping through the true crime paperbacks, their covers splashed red and promising "16 Pages of Shocking Photos!" Even when I don't buy a book, I study the photo insert, as predictable, and mesmerizing, as the text. First come the baby pictures, then the graduation pictures, maybe a wedding scene, a mug shot of the killer or, if he wasn't caught, a composite drawing. And of course there are forensic photographs of the dead body, the spilled blood black where it soaked into the carpet or spread across the pavement.

It's an addiction, true crime, easy to satisfy. There's an endless supply of these books, just as there is of murder itself. Reading one on the subway, I make sure strangers can't see its cover and presume my choice of diversion reveals something about me, as it undoubtedly does.

The thing about the car, the two teenagers in the car in the middle of the night, is that it doesn't go anywhere. The situation is dire and demands flight, but I never see the car moving. I can't. I can't picture it—them—in motion. The headlights shine onto the road. I can make myself see the surface of the asphalt, its texture, a dashed yellow line, but the car won't move.

It can't, because the lives of the people in the car, the life of the girl and the life of the boy, have been stopped. There is all that came before the murders, enough presumably to provoke them, and there is after. And those two parts, before and after, how can they be put back together? They can't, not really. So that night—the night of the murders—is separate, isolated in time. It isn't continuous with the life that came before or what will come after. It's the point of rupture, of division.

I know about this moment in a life. It's something I've thought about: the way some lives have to be begun again.

In my own case, it wasn't murder but a small and usually innocuous transaction between two people. What happened to me took place in public, and no one noticed. Jody knows of this moment in my life and its aftermath. I've written about it, and I imagine my friend mentions this when she goes to Jody on my behalf, to ask if she's willing to talk to me. In my first e-mail to Jody, when I introduce myself to her, I identify what I assume is a connection between us, this sense of having—living—a life divided into a before and after, as part of what drives my curiosity about her and her family, and the history they shared.

My life stopped the week I turned twenty. It stopped when my father, whom I'd seen only twice when I was a child, suddenly

reappeared. His absence had defined my girlhood. Around it I'd constructed twenty years of fantasies. I was an unworldly twenty, with little sexual experience, and I'd never escaped, or resolved, my tortured relationship with my mother, whom I loved and distrusted. I was an only child, raised by my mother's elderly parents, because my mother insisted on living alone. I was anorexic, or I was bulimic; when I wasn't one, I was the other. I struggled with depression, although I wasn't sufficiently self-aware to perceive this and had never willingly seen a therapist. To offset despair, I used amphetamines.

My father, not yet forty, was a prepossessing figure, intelligent, handsome, charismatic. He was also arrogant and grandiose, and acknowledged people only insofar as they capitulated to his demands. But I didn't see this. How could I when I refused to admit that my father had any flaws at all? Captive to my childhood fantasies, I believed they'd come true: Here he was at last, the father I'd invented for myself. The one who knew exactly what to say—that he'd loved and missed me from the moment he and my mother separated, so much that it had nearly killed him.

Immediately, and without reservation, with neither the sense nor the means to protect myself from someone who believed he existed outside the laws that bound other mortals, I fell in love with this man, this father whom I had never known. For a week we were both guests in my mother's apartment, and at the end of this week my father kissed me good-bye, not chastely. I understood—part of me did—the future such a kiss anticipated. But I couldn't articulate it for myself, not at twenty. I didn't have words for what I knew, right away, when my father took my head in his hands and pushed his tongue in my mouth. That he had, in that moment, declared me his ob-

ject, his property. That he'd taken me for himself and would demand my submission to whatever he wanted. That what he wanted would include sex.

Later, when my father insisted he couldn't share me, that I had to choose between him and my mother, I chose him. When he forced me to choose between him and the grandparents who raised me, I betrayed them as well. When he disapproved of my boyfriend, I let the boyfriend go. Whatever my father asked of me, I did. When I dropped out of school because I couldn't get myself to class, couldn't think straight enough to take notes or exams, my father was not worried but pleased. Perhaps it was an unconscious wish we shared, that I could become the child he'd lost so long before, stripped of all I'd acquired growing up apart from him.

Or maybe that's as romantic as it sounds, a conceit, and it was never about retrieving what had been taken from us. Our anger dovetailed—was that it?—and we found ourselves allied against my mother, intent on wounding her by destroying me.

I've struggled to figure it—myself—out. There isn't any other subject I've examined with such perseverance. No interpretation, however, changes what happened.

I resisted his sexual advances. I did for as long as I could. But by then it was too late. I had no one, only him, and he wore me down.

It took four years to deliver me to the place where I saw that the person I used to call myself was gone. And all of it, all that transpired, was foretold by that first, single kiss in the Los Angeles International Airport. We were alone there, as my mother hadn't accompanied us; she hadn't wanted to see him off. "You'll miss your flight," I said when he didn't react to a second

boarding call. Instead of picking up his bag, my father moved a step closer to me and took my head in both his hands. He held me so that I couldn't turn away, and he filled my mouth with his tongue, but he didn't hurt me, not physically. Still, I was immediately disabled, too shocked to push his big body away from mine, too shocked to struggle, or to think, to make the words follow one another inside my head. Around us, people walked, they waved and called out to one another. Airline personnel announced delays and departures. Planes took off and landed, the high-pitched whine of their engines penetrating walls and windows. Inside myself, though, I had fallen silent.

After, when my father withdrew from me and boarded his plane, I didn't move. His flight left, then another took off, and another. Eventually I was alone at the gate, standing where he'd left me, my hand still covering my mouth, the feel of his tongue, its muscular, wet force, still with me.

Now, remembering that girl, I wonder that she didn't think to rinse out her mouth. To do something—anything. Would it have mattered? Perhaps. Not because what her father did could have been washed away, but had she been able to think of taking herself to the women's room and turning on a tap, had she been able to think of anything at all, to respond in any way, then she might have been all right, she might have been strong enough to refuse her father.

Instead, she stood motionless among the travelers, everyone hurrying forward into his or her life. Everyone except for her.

Jody and I exchange e-mails and agree upon a time to meet, 7 P.M., and a restaurant where we can talk. She knows what I

want from her: to see into her family's history; to see into her brother and the people he killed; and into her. I want to know how much she has kept of her sixteen-year-old self, to learn enough about her past that I can visualize a person who no longer exists, a girl whose brother beat their family to death with a baseball bat and who wanted, then, to run away with her.

I know that the adult Jody, now thirty-seven, educated at Georgetown University and at ease among the power elite on Capitol Hill, a communications strategist who has worked with such cultural behemoths as the Kennedy Center, the American Film Institute, and Sundance Institute, must have either buried or silenced or lost the girl she was. I know this not because Jody has told me so, but her continued success in the sophisticated world she's chosen for herself must depend on the erasure of her past, the disappearing of the girl she was at sixteen. She can be one or the other Jody, but she cannot be both. I don't see how she can be both.

"I'm trying to understand your story," I write in my first e-mail to Jody. "To get some kind of hold on what happened to you, and how it is that you continued in your life, when that life was violently interrupted and had to be begun again. There must be many of us whose lives have been divided into a before and after, with an accident, a death, a crime, a crisis, some moment or year or relationship that came between and changed everything. I want to see how your life moved forward from that point of division."

If I have an endless appetite for reading about murder, for seeing how yet another young woman's life is ended, I also need to hear—perhaps I need to tell—the other story, the one about the girl that gets away, who goes on to invent another self, another life.

“This is the story of my rebirth,” Jody wrote when she was twenty-five, the opening line of her own account of the murders, titled “Death Faces” and submitted as her senior thesis for graduation from Georgetown. It’s a project of narrative nonfiction, an ambitious project, I think, brave. Jody sends me a copy a few weeks after our first meeting. *This is the story of my rebirth*. Of course, I think, she would have to believe this; she would have to believe that she has been reborn. And yet I’m surprised enough that I stop reading, stop right there, before I’ve begun. Surprised by what? Her honesty? The relationship of her statement—the statement of a stranger—to my own life?

Or maybe it’s her perspective—whatever allows her to introduce the story of her family’s annihilation as a beginning rather than an end—that strikes me as unusual.

In the years after I broke away from my father, I dreamed often of car accidents or of buildings collapsing. In these dreams, by some miracle or fluke—it’s never a function of ability or intelligence—I escape from the wreckage, I run and keep running until I am some distance away. When I reach a place of safety, I begin to inventory my body, which is naked, stripped of clothing. In the dream, I run my hands over my arms and chest, down my flanks and my legs. I touch every part of myself I can reach, counting fingers and toes, the way a mother does a newborn, to see if I’m intact, all there. How much have I managed to take with me? Sometimes I appear to be all right, at first I do, but I’m injured in a place I can’t see. Blood leaks from a wound I can’t find. Often a leg is gone and this perplexes me. How have I escaped—run away—without it? In a recurrent dream, my face has fallen into small pieces, like those of a jigsaw puzzle, and I gather up all I can and set off to find a

surgeon who can put me back together into a person I am able to recognize.

“We’ve both forsaken the West for the East coast,” I write, e-mailing Jody before we meet, “and I wonder if you feel as I do, that the past is another life, in another country, a place you’ve left forever. The people with whom you and I grew up are gone—dead or permanently separated from us by what came to pass. You’ve abandoned the landscape, started over. And yet, of course, you remain yourself. You are the girl who was in the house that night with your brother. You and he are your parents’ children.

“I remain fascinated by my father,” I tell her. “I don’t know who he is. I rebuilt myself after he dismantled me. I feel there are parts of myself that he has yet to relinquish or that I have yet to reclaim. Perhaps, in contemplating you and your brother, studying what came before and precipitated the murders and what has happened since in the lives of the two survivors, I can articulate something both of us want to understand. I can’t tell you what that something is, not yet. I’d have to write my way toward it.”

Later, after I read her thesis, I think: Was this what Jody was doing, at twenty-five, in writing “Death Faces”? Was she trying to understand how she’d survived, or even *that* she’d survived? And what about her brother, Billy? Because the more I know about Jody, the more I want to understand him, as well, a boy of eighteen at the time of the murders. He had to go on, too; he had to have some kind of life after. And of course I want to know what made him do it, what happened in that family before.

I know my history and Jody's are not comparable, that the massacre of her family was catastrophic in a way I can barely begin to imagine. Almost everything she knew was destroyed, lost. The connection between us—a parallel I assume and she confirms—is that both she and I had a previous self who no longer exists. We didn't arrive at our adult selves through the usual transitions, the normal trials. Instead, a rupture occurred, a violence was done to each of us, an act or acts that were outside our ability to avoid or manage or even understand—the kind of thing that wasn't supposed to happen, didn't happen, could not happen. When it did, its effect was like the foundation being torn out from under a house. Everything came apart; what was salvageable had to be reassembled into a new whole. The adult Jody may be rebuilt from pieces of the girl she was before, but she is not that same girl. The original Jody is gone. I know this from my own history. And I know that in terms of my telling the story of her family, the difference between Jody's and my experiences is as important as the intersection. Were Jody's a story of incest (rather than one that may turn out to include incestuous motivations), I couldn't approach her, it, as I can a story of murder, which, unlike incest, remains for me an impossible something, the kind of violent rupture that is final, and that wouldn't, couldn't happen in a family.

There's a part of the analogy I draw between Jody and myself that she rejects even before we meet. "Your brother lives, exiled from you, and from everyone else," I write in my first e-mail to her. "And my father lives, also and necessarily exiled from me. I wonder if your brother and my father are not similar figures, not through their actions but in the way they exist for us: out of reach, the unknowable recipients of our love, anger, confusion, fear, and more."

Jody replies immediately. I'm wrong, she tells me. She doesn't love her brother. She's tried to, but she can't. "It's me who is out of reach and unknowable," she writes, "and I reserve all my anger, confusion, and fear for myself."

*A self who is out of reach and unknowable.* I read those words many times before the two of us meet, trying to understand them, her. Is she stating a human truth that applies to all of us, being philosophical in suggesting that no one can ever know him- or herself completely? Or is she acknowledging something peculiar to herself and, by extension, others who have experienced violence, trauma? Are people like us left with parts of our own psyches walled off, removed from our ability to access them? And are those parts alive? Or are they dead? Are they aspects of ourselves that were destroyed by the shock, whatever it was, and interred within us?

I bring the printout of Jody's e-mail with me when I drive to the restaurant we chose for our first meeting, a Japanese place not far from where she lives in Washington, D.C. Parked a few blocks away, I consider her words, propped on the steering wheel. It's 6:45. Having allowed myself time to get lost, I find the restaurant easily and am early, with minutes to fill. I turn the radio on, then off. I read the e-mail, watch traffic move along Connecticut Avenue, the busy thoroughfare that runs through the Capitol. A fine rain has begun to fall; the street is wet. Long, dazzling reflections of red taillights spill over its dark surface.

Washington is a city I know only through my husband's family, and whenever I visit I stay with my mother-in-law, who lives near Rock Creek Park. Often when I run in the thickly wooded park, I lose my way. I follow its deeper, unpaved paths

and my mind wanders, I forget to watch for trail markers. Today, before I shower and dress to meet Jody, I go for a run and get so turned around that I emerge more than a mile from where I intended to exit. It frightens me sometimes, getting lost. I remember stories of women who disappeared, what's left of their bodies found months later in one of the park's many dells or ditches, and I chastise myself for choosing so lonely a place to run. But solitude helps me think, running helps me think, and I like the way the earth absorbs my footfalls, so that I hardly hear myself as I pass among the trees.

Maybe, too, I want the sense of danger, court it the way I used to as a young woman, twenty-five, twenty-six, when I took recklessly long swims at night. Each time, I walked out of the dark water breathless, exhilarated, my legs scraped and stinging where I'd brushed against rocks I hadn't seen. Again I'd escaped. The heaving black ocean with its wraithlike tendrils of eelgrass reaching around my legs, its hunger, never satisfied, for another and another sacrifice, the gnashing and churning of its depths—I'd swum out of it. My old self, the girl I'd been before, waited in the shadows against the cliff, shoved with my towel in a crease between the rocks. Or maybe I'd taken her along, buried within me. In either case I'd proved it again: the dead girl couldn't drag me under, she couldn't slow my speed.

*A self who is out of reach and unknowable.* We all have such a self, of course, at least one. But for people who are fated to sift through the debris that remains in the wake of a family's disintegration, the ones who can't stop searching for the piece, perhaps very small, that might explain what happened and why, that secret self whom we glimpse but never truly see can take on a sinister cast. She is dangerous, perhaps, or she is wicked. She is guilty of something—why else would she refuse to be known? She is broken and frail, empty to the point of trans-

parent. Because she remains hidden, she invites a measure of dread. Who is this self that consciousness—conscience?—is unable or unwilling to acknowledge?

If any admission by Jody other than this, of a secret, unknowable self, could have fixed my desire to understand her life and the lives of her parents and siblings, I don't know what it might be.

What follows is a narrative of a family tragedy, my reconstruction of the events that occurred on April 27, 1984, their antecedents, and their still unfolding consequences for Jody, and for her brother, Billy, who remains in prison. Studying the Gilleys required making inquiries into myself as well, attempts to understand how my enduring fascination with the violent end of another woman's family informs the way I regard my own, very different past.

Jody and Billy provided most of the information on which this account is based. With Jody as my guide, I visited the places where the Gilleys lived and where three of them died, and it was through Jody that I contacted her brother, Billy, with whom she does not correspond and whom I've come to know. Jody introduced me to other people who were affected by the Gilley murders; she and her brother allowed me access to documents essential to my re-creating their lives and the lives and deaths of their parents and of their little sister, Becky.

Mine is not the first narrative of the Gilley family but rests upon and responds to others: the case files of social workers; the memories of people I interviewed; the records kept by law enforcement and by the Children's Services Division of Jackson County, Oregon; the ten psychiatric evaluations made of Billy between the ages of thirteen and thirty-five; the transcript of his trial for murder; the reports compiled by two private investigators hired by Billy's appeal attorney; the affidavits collected

for his appeal for a retrial; the appellant briefs that argue against claims made by his appeal. Among all the efforts to understand how a child is driven to so extreme and desperate an act as killing his parents and sister, most revealing are the stories, both fiction and nonfiction, that Jody and Billy have written in the years since the murders. Their words are very much a part of this book; their various accounts demonstrate how essential the process of telling and retelling the story of their family has been to their surviving its destruction.

For Jody and for Billy, the work of putting together a coherent narrative from what were often dislocated, fractured memories has been inseparable from—and even, I believe, the same undertaking as—reassembling what remained of themselves, of salvaging what they could of the children they had been before—before he murdered his family, and before she endured the kind of psychic assault most of us will never have to contemplate.