

A Silent Funeral

“It was the first time I saw my dad cry” my mother said over the phone through tears of her own. She stopped to collect herself, taking a breath before starting again. “I remember it like it was yesterday” she spoke, describing how my grandparents had sat her and her siblings down to tell them what happened to Joan. “He had to keep trying to compose himself.... He just cried and cried.”



My family had always been pretty religious growing up. My mom made sure that every Sunday me and my siblings had our church clothes on and were in the car by 10:45, just in time to catch mass at 11. Church became a ritual of sorts. We would walk in together, dipping our fingers in the outstretched dish of holy water and grabbing the paper written by our parish. The church was always warm, never stifling though, and smelled of wax and wooden pews. Light shined in through the stained-glass panels, illuminating both sides of the altar as my family sat down in our usual spot. As the hour dragged on, I would watch the hands of the lady playing the organ and follow the length of the instrument's pipes to

where they resided on the wall. I never fully understood the readings of the bible or the priest's sermon, but I found the most convincing part of my faith within the songs. Now, I find my Sundays cleared of this catholic routine and my faith in the church weakened. My life feels too busy to focus on religion since I've come to college, and I question whether or not I truly believe in a supreme being. But, as I piece this murderous story together from old newspaper clippings and dwindling memories from my mom's childhood, I find myself back in those wooden pews.

The story begins with Joan Wagner, a bright ten-year-old girl, and the youngest daughter of 7 kids. She was known by her family to be very athletic as she regularly played softball and was excellent at bowling. In a newspaper article her brother John describes how her dad nicknamed her "peanuts" because she used to read a Peanut comic strip book (Detroit Free Press, 1975). My mom still calls her "Joanie". During our interview she reminisced on the time she spent with her cousin saying "I used to go to Joanie's house all the time and have sleepovers and then she would come to our house and sleepover too... I used to see Joanie all the time." My mother was nine at the time, just a year younger than Joanie, and loved her cousin like a best friend. I asked her what it was like after her passing, she stated "oh it was devastating." The evening of June 9th, 1975 was like any other for Joan as she left her house around 3:45 and made her way down the street. Around 4:30 she was seen by a neighbor standing at the corner, waiting for her ride to her softball game. When her ride arrived at the corner of Branden and Malden Street, no one was there waiting. On Wednesday June 11th, her name appeared on the death notice page of the local newspaper.

As I write this, I imagine the panic her family must have felt. The unease of a missing daughter, an empty bed in their cramped home. I think they would have prayed together that night, her parents and siblings, hand in hand, eyes closed. I imagine her mother's grip on the rosary as police searched every house in the area.

Hours later, at 10:40 pm, Joan's body was found. Tangled up in bushes and wrapped in plastic bags lay Joanie. The prayers did not work that night, her family's pleas left unanswered. The only justice they received read "Farmington Youth Held In Girl's Death" in the newspaper two days later (Detroit Free

Press 1975). Below this headline says, “Farmington Hills Police made the arrest at the boy’s home, a few doors down from the victim’s home”. “Boy’s”, my mind reads over and over. That simply cannot be right I think, so I continue to read. Her killer was a boy in fact, and her neighbor. He was 14 years old. Youth slaying youth. The paper goes on to report “There were bloody sheets and towels in a laundry room and blood on the floor of the boy’s bedroom...the slaying occurred in the bedroom...the girl was strangled as well as stabbed” (Detroit Freedom Press). Youth slaying youth. It was that night that my grandpa sat his daughters down to tell them the fate of their cousin, “it was the first time I saw my dad cry” my mom said.

Two days later Joan’s funeral was held at the same church she received her first communion in, just months before her death. I wonder how her funeral would have felt if I too was in attendance. Would I notice the smell of the air or watch the organist at work. Would I still believe in God as Joan laid in her closed casket. I imagine it being rather silent, reflective perhaps. Echoes of “a life gone to soon” and “I’m so sorry for your loss” while 6 kids dressed in black stare at their grieving parents. The weight their stares must have held. “Life goes on” as some people say- but how does one recover from something like this. How can you sit down to pray before dinner with one less plate at the table, one less serving of food, one less child. Does God truly exist at the hands of a 14-year-old boy? Or was God in the bushes with Joanie, was he the bag wrapped around her body? Maybe he lies in the 6 other kids of the Wagner family, still full of life and love to give. My mom recalls being at her funeral, how it was her first experience with death. She said “I remember just thinking, well Jesus was resurrected so Joanie is going to sit up and come out of that coffin. She will come back”. I wonder if my mom ever thinks about Joanie when she prays, if her mind strays back to that year. Maybe God is a child’s first experience with death.

The trial began shortly after. The prosecutors were left with two choices. The newspaper details that they could “seek a petition (warrant) to bring Joan Wagner’s slayer to trial on first degree murder charges, probably in a juvenile court, conviction in that court would mean the youth could be held only five years if convicted” (Detroit Free Press). Five short years. The other option was to “have the

youngster declared insane and then commit him to a mental institution” (Detroit Free Press). At the end of this swift trial, the first option won in court, and her killer served 5 years in jail. I wonder what those five years felt like. Did her parents count down the days until his release? Did they have it marked on the calendar alongside birthdays and family reunions? Time passed and the five years were up. At the age of 19 he was released, right back to the comfort of his home still a couple doors down from the Wagner’s. My mom said that her family would still see him in the neighborhood, she said that “he would wave to them. It was like he was saying ‘here I am, right back out again’.” I was speechless when my mother told me this. She was crying again, and I sat frozen. I didn’t think that God would let this much evil exist inside a boy.

Going into the project, I did not know that this story would be so brutal. That my family would never receive true justice. They had to look into the eyes of their daughter’s killer, and yet the Wagner family prevailed. Six kids still needed to be taken care of, and so they continued. Life could not simply stop in that household. Joan’s parents grabbed onto their faith as hard as they hugged their children before bed each night. And so, the children eventually grew up and the parents grew old. “The church came together” as my mom said, and the Wagner family still prayed each night. My whole family is still very religious today, my mom goes to church every Sunday and says how blessed we are. Personally, I am not sure where I find myself with God, but this story makes me reflect upon my experience. It makes me question what it means to be religious and what parts of our lives God is present in.

I never expected this essay to tie into religion, I just hoped to learn about family history. But I guess it’s almost impossible for me to talk about a tragedy without my religious foundation seeping in. To not put life in the hands of holy authority.

After writing this, I went home for thanksgiving break and found myself back in the church I began this story with. I listened to the sermon and sang all the refrains; I even knelt next to my parents and uttered prayers of my own. But once I left the holy walls of church, Joanie was still dead and the world around her changed.

The next day, I visited my family and talked to my aunt about this assignment. She told me that inside my grandpa's bible lies the original newspaper. The story I have been wondering about for years was hidden on a bookshelf, with the text of Joanie's murder touching the word of God. I fell silent when she said this, retracing every detail of her story in my mind. I thought about the way her picture looked in the newspaper and the sound of my mother's voice when I interviewed her, how it quivered as she began to cry. But for the first time since beginning this story I felt at peace, like I could gain some sort of closure. I think that newspaper clipping holds more than just Joanie's story. The soul of that poor little girl lives there too.

I may not believe in God, but I know in my heart that there is a special part of heaven for little girls like Joanie. May she forever rest in that pearly, white temple.

Newspaper Sources

[Detroit Free Press from Detroit, Michigan - Newspapers.com™](#)