Kelly Grey Carlisle

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

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The room into which the attendant has led me is dim, made more so when he pulls the thick shade across the only window. He threads the spool of microfilm into the viewer, turns the machine on, and shows me how to work the controls: forward, backward, focus, zoom. He doesn't talk much, eager, I think, to return to his computer game. I'm glad he hasn't asked me what I'm looking for in these old newspaper reels, but part of me wants to tell him. I'm afraid of what I might find, and I don't want to search on my own. The attendant leaves, and I am left alone with the sound of the machine, the hum of its fan, the clunk and whir of the film as I advance it. Two weeks' worth of the *Los Angeles Times* blur in front of me, the motion making me slightly queasy, until I reach November 29, 1976, three weeks after I was born. I read through headlines, glance at ads for J. C. Penney's Thanksgiving Sale, Safeway's holiday specials. And I laugh a little because not much has changed in all that time: Donald Rumsfeld is still secretary of defense, and depending on whom you ask, Elvis is still alive. What I'm looking for isn't in the big headlines or the ads, so I go back to the front page and read through the smaller items—articles about Amy Carter's high school, a robbery in Fullerton, a blind drum major—but I can't find it. I read on to the next day, and then the next, but still there is nothing. Pretty soon I reach the end of the film: a blank screen and the jarring clack, clack of the tape flapping on its spool.

On November 28, 1976, my mother, Michele Grey, was beaten and strangled, her body abandoned in an empty lot near downtown Los Angeles, about

a half mile away from the *Los Angeles Times* headquarters. Her death didn't make the paper.

When I was a little girl, this is the story they told me:

My parents were killed in a car accident when I was three weeks old. My grandmother Spence was half Hawaiian, and that made me special. I lived with her until I was four, when she died, but now she was in heaven watching over me. Her father was full-blooded Hawaiian and a cliff diver, and that was why I liked to swim so much. My grandfather was English and a descendent of the Earl Grey of tea fame, and also of Lady Jane Grey, and somewhere in England our family had a house named Fallodon. And that made me special, too. I had blue blood and Hawaiian blood, and I was going to grow up to be the most beautiful girl in the world, and who knew, maybe I'd become a princess. Sometimes I still let myself believe these things.

I was raised by my grandfather and his second wife, Marilyn. Before I knew the truth about her death I wanted to know everything about my mother, Michele. What did she look like? What was her favorite color? I wanted to know if my mother had curly hair or straight, whether she was tall or thin. Did she like cats or dogs better? Was she pretty? Did she like ice cream? Could she draw well? My grandfather could never really answer my questions. He hemmed and hawed and changed the subject.

I wanted to see a picture of my mother, but all my grandfather had to show me was a snapshot of the back of a little girl who was petting a cat and another one of her blowing out candles on her birthday cake. I couldn't see her face in those pictures, her back was always turned toward the camera. The little girl had red hair, and in both pictures she had on the same dress. I counted the candles on her cake and there were eight of them. I'd always thought of Michele as a tall, graceful woman, with long hair and soft, cool hands, the way Marilyn's hands were cool on my forehead when I was sick. I'd never thought of my mother as an eight-year-old, that she'd ever been a little girl like me.

What I did not know until much later was that my grandfather barely knew his daughter. My grandfather told me that when Spence was pregnant with Michele she pumped gas to earn extra money that he thought would go toward their life together. But a few weeks after Michele was born Spence left him. He said Spence lied to Michele about her parentage, telling her that her father had run off before she was born. The few times my grandfather got to see his daughter he was introduced as "Richard," a family friend. My grandfather admitted that he said nothing and went along with the lie. When she was fourteen Michele figured out that the old family friend to whom she was shipped off once a year for a visit, the old family friend who looked so much like her, was

her father. It was not a happy reunion; Michele was furious. She refused to talk to him for months. Four years later she was living on the streets. When my grandfather told me this story he seemed hurt and indignant that Michele would take her anger out at him, as if he thought he was just as much a victim as she was.

One night when I was eight my grandfather and I sat at the dining room table, our empty plates and glasses still before us. Marilyn was out with friends, and he and I were alone. I don't remember what we were talking about or how we got to it, but suddenly there it was, the truth, sitting between us like a round, hard stone.

"... the man who killed your mother."

"I thought she died in a car crash," I said. I thought maybe he was talking about a drunk driver who'd killed my mother or some teenager who drove too fast.

"No, she was murdered."

I remember how my mind leapt from question to question.

"What about my father? I thought he was killed in the accident, too." The truth was, until that moment, I'd never thought to ask about my father.

"We don't know who your father is."

I pulled my legs up underneath me and fidgeted with Marilyn's orange vinyl placemats.

"Who killed her?"

"We don't know."

"You mean ... they'll never go to jail?" I was indignant. My notions about fair and unfair were very strong when I was eight.

"The detective on your mother's case thought that maybe she might have been killed by the Hillside Stranglers, but there wasn't any evidence."

"Who were the Hillside Stranglers?"

"No one you need to worry about. They're in jail now. Besides, it was just a guess."

I don't remember what we said after that or what story my grandfather read to me when he tucked me in or what I thought about as I fell asleep. But even though I was only eight I knew everything was different.

For my eleventh birthday Marilyn gave me a picture of my mother. She had spent days looking for it in my grandfather's closet and had had it framed in red lacquered wood. When I first unwrapped it I didn't understand.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"It's Michele," she said.

It was the first time I'd ever seen my mother as an adult.

She had long brown hair and thick arms and eyebrows like mine. She wore a half smile that said, *I don't really want my picture to be taken.* I knew, because I smiled like that, too.

I put that picture up on my dresser, and it was like she was watching me quietly, always with the same shy smile. I kept her picture with me as I grew up. She kept me company during my adolescence, made me feel less alone when I'd convinced myself that no one loved me. I left that picture behind when I moved away to college. I was worried that something might happen to it in my dorm room; worried, too, I think, that my roommate might think me strange because of it. It's still in Los Angeles, and now I am in Nebraska. I find myself wanting to have it again, but Marilyn has moved twice since my grandfather died, and we're not exactly sure which storage space it's in. I'm worried it might have gotten lost in the move, worried that somehow it got thrown away. I hope it's in a box somewhere waiting for me with that quiet smile.

Marilyn remembers how my mother, five months before she died, called my grandfather from a pay phone on Sunset Boulevard and asked for help. She was four months pregnant with me and alone. She needed a place to stay and some money. She said it would be only temporary, that she'd get a job. She even promised to stay sober, a promise both of them knew she couldn't keep. He heard her crying on the other end of the phone, the catch in her voice as she tried to muffle her sobs. It was the first time she had asked him for anything since she had run away from home four years before. My grandfather said *no*. I like to think he was just hurt, angry, when he said, "You've really fucked up now, haven't you?"

It was their last conversation—not that he didn't change his mind a few weeks later and try to get in touch with her. He called her last known number, but the man who picked up couldn't speak English. My grandfather called his ex-wife, my grandmother Spence, and asked if she knew where their daughter was. She hadn't heard from her for two months. She had said *no*, too.

One night three weeks after I was born my mother left me with some friends in a motel room on Wilcox Avenue in Hollywood. Before she left she laid me in a dresser drawer, nestled me between some socks and jeans and a dirty T-shirt, and tucked my baby blanket around me. I like to think she kissed me before she went out into the night. I like to think she loved me, wanted me. I like to think I made her happy.

Her body was found the next day.

Except for that one night when I was eight my grandfather did not talk about my mother's death again. When I was twelve I decided to find out about it for myself. Over the years I had been infatuated with, sequentially, Sherlock

Holmes, Perry Mason (when Raymond Burr was young and trim), Steve Garrett, and Sam Spade. So I snuck into my grandfather's office late at night, slipping folders out of his filing cabinet, paging through documents hurriedly, terrified he might catch me. I found my birth certificate from the hospital. It was printed on heavy paper with a pink border and two cherubs and my real name spelled in calligraphy: Kelly Michelle Archibald. My mother had given me a father, at least on paper. I found my grandmother's state-issued birth certificate, a purple mimeograph that spelled out her full name, Yvonne Kaia Spencer, and said that her father was born in Honolulu, Hawaii. It listed his "race or color" as white. I found my grandfather's birth certificate, an ancient copy creased and folded, worn soft like suede at the edges. I found my mother's birth certificate. And finally, her death certificate, purple ink on shiny paper that listed her cause of death as MANUAL STRANGULATION in thick, bold caps.

The filing cabinet held no other details of her murder, but that didn't matter because soon I found my grandfather's books about the Hillside Stranglers. I read bits and pieces while my grandfather was at work, read passages late at night when I couldn't sleep. Their dust covers were splashed with words like *sensational, shocking, savage*. One of them was written like a novel, and in it I read how Bianchi listened to Buono rape a thirteen-year-old girl, how he got hard imagining his friend thrusting inside her. When I read these things I thought about my mom. Fifteen years later I wonder how many men have been aroused reading those descriptions, and I can't help but wonder if the author was counting on it to sell his book. I wonder if he ever imagined a twelve-year-old girl reading the book, looking for the truth about her mom. I wonder how much money that book has made.

I read those books, and with a morbid fascination of which I am ashamed, I imagined what had happened to my mother, what her body looked like when it was found. I pictured my mother naked, spread-eagled, her foot touching a crumpled bag of Fritos, an empty can of beer by her side. It was 1976, and so I figured it must have been one of those steel cans of Bud with the pull-away tab—the kind I'd found in the woods buried under layers of leaves. I saw my mother lying in a lot overgrown with weeds, littered with trash, within earshot of the 101. I imagined my mother's hair, brown like mine, long like in her picture. I saw it spread around her head, a halo in the grass. Her death certificate says she was found at 8:10 in the morning, and so I always pictured her a few minutes before she was found, in the quiet hush of morning that can happen even in L.A. I imagined purple bruises around her neck, her lips torn, rope burns around her wrists, her eyes, hazel like mine, filled with hate.

But I imagined wrong.

. . .

Because there is nothing in the newspapers about my mother's murder, I decide to call the Los Angeles Police Department and request a copy of her files. It has taken me days to work up the courage to make this call, and I shake as I dial, but the lady in the Cold Case Department who answers the phone is kind.

"All I can do is give you the case summary," she says when I've explained my situation, "because your mom's case is still open. We can't release any other details. Can you hold for a second? I have to go pull a book from the shelf." I imagine leather-bound folios gathering dust on a shelf, or, more likely, huge three-ring binders stamped with LAPD.

"Okay," she says when she gets back. I hear the thump of the book on her desk. "What I have here is a case summary of your mother's file. It's not . . . it's pretty ugly, okay? I really wish you were here in person so that I could be with you to tell you this, but I'll try to read it over the phone."

She pauses a second as if she is trying to control her emotions. "I really wish you were here in front of me."

I had steeled myself to talk to a burned-out detective or a calloused bureaucrat. I wasn't prepared to talk to someone kind. It is her care, and not what follows, that makes me cry.

"In the upper-left-hand corner it says: 'Beating—blunt instrument—unknown. Strangulation—ligature.' That means she was strangled with a ligature, like a rope or a cord or something. Then it says her name: 'Michele Ann Grey.' Your mom was murdered between November 28th and 29th, between 10:00 p.m. and 8:10 a.m., when she was found. It lists the suspects as 'unknown.' Okay, then it says—

"You're gonna hate me," I hear her mutter under her breath, then she continues.

"Victim is a Hollywood prostitute who was living with three companions at the Hollywood Center Motel. At 10:00 p.m. she told her companions she was going next door to turn a trick to help pay the rent because they did not have enough money. Her friends thought she meant a hotel up the street. They did not see the victim alive again."

She clears her throat.

"The victim was discovered by a gardener in the vacant lot at 610 North Hill Place. An autopsy revealed the victim had been beaten and strangled with an unknown ligature. She was fully clothed except for her right shoe. There were no witnesses to the body being dumped or the homicide occurring.

"Status: Investigation Continued."

She takes a breath.

"That means your mom's case is still open. And it always will be until . . . until it's solved. And I'm actually the investigator for homicides in 1976, so I'm the detective on your mother's case. My name is Amelia Chavez."

I don't trust my voice, so all I can say is "Thank you."

Amelia takes down my contact information and tells me she'll read through my mother's file to see if there's anything else we can do. A week later she calls me to tell me that she has sent the available physical evidence to be tested for usable DNA. She is also locating and interviewing all the principal witnesses in the case, including, she says when I ask, my birth father. She also says that the detectives ruled out the Hillside Stranglers long ago.

"This isn't like CSI, okay?" she warns me before we hang up. "It'll take four to five months for the test to come back. And we're probably not going to find anything."

But at least you're trying, I think, at least you care. And suddenly it is like that night when I was eight years old. Everything is different now. In a few months I might know who killed my mother. In a few months I might meet my father.

I try to imagine the physical evidence in my mother's file: her clothes, I imagine, maybe jeans and a sweatshirt, underwear; perhaps her wallet or a watch or earrings; her left shoe, her socks. I keep thinking about her right shoe, the one that was missing. I wonder what happened to it, where it is now. I imagine they store all the items in a big cardboard box, the kind you see on TV mysteries. I think of how more of her belongings are in that box than I will ever possess. The only thing I've ever owned that was hers was the Bible she had when she was a child. It had color illustrations of Moses in the rushes and Mary Magdalene weeping. On the inside cover my mother had written her name, Michele Ann Grey, in big cursive loops. I used to touch that Bible, rub my finger along its spine when I was lonely or sad. I think of the evidence in that big cardboard box, and I want to touch it too, run my finger along the jeans my mom once wore, the hem of the sweatshirt that once kept her warm. I lost that Bible somewhere along the way to adulthood. I wish I had it back.

Hardly anyone cared about my mother while she was alive, and when she died few people took note. All she left behind was a birth certificate, a death certificate, a few pictures, that Bible, and a box of ashes—the only evidence that she ever existed. It is so little with which to reconstruct a life.

This is what I know about my mother: when she was a little girl she had a cat, when she turned eight she had a birthday party. She spelled her name, Michele, with one *l*. On my birth certificate she spelled my middle name,

Michelle, with two. She had brown hair that, like mine, shone red in the sun. She named me after a steak house by the 405 Freeway called Kelly's. She was a prostitute; she was addicted to drugs. Against all reason she carried me to term. She took care of me as best she could. She died at night, with only her murderer for company. This is what I know about my mother: I am her daughter, and her memory rests with me.