The Unbearable Loss

With the rise in child murders, victims' families are seeking legal rights and channels for their grief

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Life is arrested in the quilt. The muddy pictures of the dead stare out like faces in a yearbook. Some squares have a bric-a-brac or heartfelt verse below the dates of birth and death. Forever in our hearts. Under Raynell Muskwinsky's picture, her mother, Gilda, satin-stitched a yellow rose of Texas; the faint red stain is lipstick from where she bit the thread.
Glen Enright, who would have taken over his father's business, smiles from his parents' family room. Kimberly Strickler is settled happily on the knee of a department-store Santa. Daniel Ward beams at the camera in a picture taken a month before his father shot him in the head. The photo of Elena Semander comes from the session she hoped would show her potential as a model; she was strangled by a serial killer. The youngest face belongs to Sam McClain Jr., murdered with his mother, Linda, six weeks after his first birthday. She was found on the floor of the living room, Sam, in the kitchen freezer, frozen solid, with many small cuts on the soles of his feet.

The keeper of the quilt is Shirley Parish, mother of Kimberly. Shirley is a warm and hospitable woman, a former nurse, but in parts of Fort Bend County, where her only daughter was shot in the trunk of a car in January 1979, she is known as "the crazy lady." For ten years she has made no secret of her determination to see the state of Texas execute Roger Leroy DeGarmo, the convicted killer of her daughter, a man who testified at his own trial that the guilty verdict was correct, and that, furthermore, the jury should put him to death because if he ever got out he was going to track them all down and kill them too – and if they were sleeping he would wake them up first.

Many pictures on the quilt are all the more poignant because they were never envisioned as images of commemoration. Some of the parents Shirley asked for photos were reluctant to part even temporarily with what had become their most precious possessions. A Houston T-shirt shop called Street Smart agreed to transfer the pictures onto fabric for free, and Shirley got a book of quilting patterns. She picked out a blue border with a calico backing. A year ago last February she started sewing. By the fall she had filled twenty-seven of the thirty spaces. She laid the squares out boy, girl, boy, girl, like a dinner party, but the pattern didn't hold, because there were too many murdered men.

On the second Tuesday of every month Shirley removes the quilt from her bed and bundles it downtown to St. Paul's United Methodist Church, where she hangs it on a stand in a room on the second floor of the youth building. As people drift in they gather around it. Some fall to reminiscing cheerfully. Others just stand there in a kind of stone communion, as if they were staring into an abyss. The people arriving are mostly white middle-aged women, but there are a number of men and some younger faces, and you would not know from their disparate looks and backgrounds what they have in common, why they are all here – not until the meeting starts and everyone takes a seat in the circle of folding chairs, and a grave ceremony commences.

“We will being tonight by introducing ourselves and telling our stories. I’m Gilda Muskwinsky, president of the Houston Chapter of Parents of Murdered Children. My daughter, Raynell, was murdered August 15, 1984.”

Gilda turns to her left.

“I’m Paul E. Martin and my son, Todd, was murdered November 26.”

“I’m Linda Kelley and on August 29, 1988, my two children were murdered by an ex-con who came into a pawnshop and shot them in the head. My two children are gona nad my life is destroyed.”

“I’m Gloy Redden. James Goss was my son. I didn’t say anything at the last meeting.”

And so they go around the room telling their stories, quilt songs, rote summaries of privation and grief. Now it is the turn of the attractive young Korean woman.

“My name is Caroline Min and my young brother, Walter, was killed by two men.”

It is only her second meeting, and she begins to lose her composure. As a new member, she has been cited in the September newsletter piled on the table: “Into our circle of friends we cordially welcome…” Shirley Parish has already had Walter’s picture inked onto cloth, and she has presented the square to Caroline. Now, with forty pairs of eyes on her, Caroline starts to weep. She clutches the quilt square like a handkerchief she can’t use.

“He was supposed to graduate from high school…” she says. Her last words come out in a vehement sob. “They didn’t just kill my brother, they killed a part of my life!”

For all the lives that terminate in the quilt, the quilt is a point of departure, the place from which survivors can start back from the dead. It is a long road. That nothing is harder to bear than the death of a child is axiomatic, but the truth is the death of a child by homicide is a hundred times worse. “You can’t prepare for it,” Shirley Parish told me one day. “One minute you’re waving good-bye, expecting to see your child at home that night, the next you’re looking at a tag on a toe.” These years after Kim’s death, she still cannot stop herself from running after a stranger in the mall because a flashing resemblance makes her think it’s Kim.

Scarcely ten years ago, family members who had been victimized by a violent crime often felt injured twice – once by the crime and a second time by the criminal-justice system. Judges excluded them from courtrooms lest they prejudice juries. Prosecutors dropped charges or fashioned plea bargains without notifying them. Their emotional losses were not taken into account. They were shunned, perhaps out of some superstitious fear of murder, or judged morally defective when they voiced the natural desire for revenge. Grieve, but privately, was the message. Express your anger, but not too loudly. Seek justice, but don’t get in the way of the law. With nowhere to turn, they turned to one another.

The Parents of Murdered Children was founded in 1978 by a Cincinnati couple whose daughter had been murdered. Today the organization claims 30,000 members in seventy chapters.

P.O.M.C. is one of a raft of groups in the victims'-rights movement, which has improved the treatment of the survivors of violent crimes. In death-penalty cases, the Supreme Court is reconsidering whether to allow "victim-impact statements" that describe for jurors the suffering of a victim's family. Many states have adopted restitution laws and passed victims' bills of rights. Many prosecutors now make a point of keeping families apprised of legal developments. "I was one of the very first parents allowed to be present at the trial in Texas," Shirley Parish recalled.

But these victories have been won in the face of greater losses. Murder rates continue to rise, and in the late eighties criminal homicide was the second-most-common cause of death for Americans between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. Congress, which will declare August 12 to 18 National Parents of Murdered Children Week, has been locked in debate over a more substantive response to violence in America. The Brady Bill, passed by the House, would impose a waiting period on handgun purchases. And President Bush has submitted a crime bill that would expand the use of the death penalty, limit legal appeals for death-row inmates, and permit "good faith" exceptions to existing restrictions on the use of evidence by police and prosecutors.

Congressman Charles Schumer, the New York Democrat who chairs the hose subcommittee on crime, believes that P.O.M.C. is a valuable outlet and hopes the commemorative legislation will "generate a broader base of support and assistance."

In Houston, where there's a murder every fifteen hours, P.O.M.C. has one of it's most active branches. A core of about forty people regularly attend meetings. Newcomers are referred by police and victims'-assistance officers. Active members canvass the morgue and drop brochures off at funeral homes. ("A lot of men think we just sit around and cry," said one member.) The format is not for everybody, and the attrition rate is high.

"Nobody can tell you what to do," said Jack Enright, sitting in the office that had once belonged to his thirty-two-year-old son, Glen, murdered in the summer of 1989. "We needed help and we knew it. We were going in all crazy directions. My wife and I went to one meeting of Parents of Murdered Children and we didn't get a lot out of it, but I stuck it out, and she started coming, too. It's the best thing we've done. They don't perform miracles, but they can help you mentally or with things you don't know about."

The purpose of the meetings is "to give sorrow words," but often parents unburden themselves of darker emotions that can't be expressed anywhere else in public. They voice their rage, the violence in themselves that tempts them to take the law into their own hands. They are bound as much by the effort to articulate a loss that beggars description as by their special suffering. Their stories, repeated month after month, acquire a kind of liturgical power. As in the text of a Mass, the language is both literal and symbolic. Even at the extremes of despair, the ritual of telling the tale reflects some faith in the power of the word. In saying what happened, somehow there's hope.

And so, that night newcomers and long-standing members alike were introduced to Terri Jeffers: "I'm Terri Jeffers and my son, Daniel, was murdered by my ex-husband while I listened on the telephone."

A few days later, I visited her at her home in an apartment development twenty miles north of Houston. Now thirty-seven, she works as a scrub technician for an ophthalmologist, and lives alone with ten-year-old Melissa, her daughter from her first marriage. James Ward was her second husband, and at the time, they had been divorced a month. He had three-year-old Daniel. She had attached a tape recorder to the phone, trying to get proof that he was dangerous. She played the tape of the phone call for me.

Ward's voice is flat and purposeful, and filled with calmly insane logic. She is sobbing as she pleads for the life of their son.

"Honey, I do love you," he said.

"Don't kill my baby. How could you threaten to kill my baby?" she said.

"You want to tell him good-bye?"

"You're going to kill him?"

"Yes I am. Here he is."

"Don't you dare!"

"Huh?"

"Don't you dare touch my baby!"

"Hey, you're the one who called the cops. You thought you were cool, bitch. You did what you thought was right, huh? Think about it."

Then two light, flat pops that on the tape sound almost inconsequential. Terri shut off the recorder and removed the tape. It was raining outside. I didn't know what to say.

She had met James Ward in May 1983 through friends of friends. He was a carpenter, and as she wrote in notes made after Daniel's death, "He seemed to be everything I wanted – hard worker, family man, churchgoer, [and he] liked Melissa." She said that his temper surfaced eight months later. He drank caseloads of beer. Extremely jealous, he accused her of being a whore, and threatened to cut her hands off. Eventually she moved out; they reconciled when he agreed to see a counselor. In February 1988 he smashed he against the headboard of their bed, and she fled to a women's shelter and filed for divorce. He received the news with what seemed to her to be an "eerie calm," and persuaded the court to let him have visitation rights. While she believed he might try to kill her, and Melissa too, she was sure he would not harm Daniel. When Daniel kept saying "Daddy's got a gun and he's going to kill me," she reassured him, "No, Daniel, Daddy loves you."

At the hospital on August 6, 1988, Terri held her son's hands. He was brain-dead, but his heart flailed on at two hundred beats a minute. She cradled him until the organ-donor team arrived.

Now, two years later, in her bedroom, she pulled down the books of Daniel, four blue volumes of photographs showing Daniel being born, Daniel standing up, Daniel wearing a fire hat with a siren in the crown. Terri paged through his short life: "This is when he was three – he was so proud that he was tall enough to jump up and turn off the light switch. And here he's bobbing for apples. And this is Daniel at his last birthday, at Show Biz pizza. I bought him a banjo and his cowboy hat, and some six-shooters because I had them as a kid. That's Jim loading them with caps."

The last pages are filled with pictures of the funeral: three days after Daniel died, she was spending money she didn't have to buy him a white shirt, a double-breasted navy blazer with gold buttons, and a bow tie. She bought him shoes too, even though no one would be able to see his feet in the casket.

Melissa came through the living room. Terri stopped me from opening a manila envelope until Melissa left. "She's never seen it." Inside was Daniel's autopsy photograph: one of those pictures that register before you mean to look. A .22-caliber slug smashed open a raw red crater of tissue and blood in Daniel's forehead. Jim Ward recovered from his self-inflicted wound. Six months after his son's death, he was convicted of murder. He is serving a life sentence, and in 2003 he may be eligible for parole.

"I just don't think I can forgive him," Terri said. "If it was a drowning, or something accidental, but to deliberately pull a gun and pull the trigger – to say 'I've got him now and I'm going to hurt you'… I believe in God, but I'm angry at God because he'd let somebody like Jim go to heaven. If he repents, he can go to heaven. There's something terribly wrong with that. My heart has been ripped out. All the plans I had, all the love – you raise your child, you teach them, you stay up at night when they're sick. Daniel never got to play baseball. He never got to go to AstroWorld. One of my last vivid memories is of him standing in the bathtub, saying, 'I love you, Mama.' It's all I've got…"

She began to cry. Every time she opened the newspaper she found more evidence of man's depravity. And now the atrocities were impossible to ignore: "Christopher Kalmbach – his mother's boyfriend poured pepper down his throat. Tommy Lott – he was tortured to death in 1981. I just wrote the parole board. A man just got fifty years for raping an eight-month-old baby – she had semen in her chest cavity, her chest cavity had been penetrated. Another child was thrown out a window and died, and the man who did it got ten years. A father shot his two kids in the head; that was the one-year anniversary of Daniel's death. I listened to all the little details. Just last week a mother stabbed her daughter twenty-seven times because she broke a music box. There's a lot of us in Parents of Murdered Children who are considered crazy because we're talking about what happened, because we're not afraid to say how we feel. I just get this rage – how can these people do this and get away with it? I'm stunned. I can't believe it. There are some people in this world that are evil."

She was stunned, and that rage which had given her strength also threatened to consume her. It had eroded her faith. She used to read lessons at Mass, but after Daniel's death biblical homilies made her restless, and the doctrine of forgiveness, the axis of the New Testament, outraged her sense of justice. She had bought a .38 with a four-inch barrel – a present to herself one Christmas. There was a bullet-riddled target taped to the back of her closet.

Parents of Murdered Children helped channel here feelings. She'd toured death row with members from the group. Campaigning to make child murder a capital offense, she'd taken her autopsy photo to Austin to show to state legislators. She'd played the tape of her son's execution on TV talk shows. Now she'd shown the picture to me, and played the tape for me, and as I stood up to leave she thanked me profusely.

Was it simply that she needed someone to hear her out? To help her come to terms with the evil she had encountered, the grief, the pointlessness of her days, which made her not care if she got fat or ever met anyone again?

It was more than that. One could venture that she was stuck in her story, telling it over and over, but not getting anywhere. She was still devoured by rage at what people did – what your own family could do. Such feelings were only human, but they had trapped her. Anyone who listened had to know there was a plea for help in her confidences, her willingness to review the most harrowing episodes. There was an appeal not that one endorse her bitter feelings but that perhaps one could show her the way beyond them. There had been meaning and purpose in the days before Daniel was killed. There had been peace of mind too. Whatever rage might accomplish (and she had sworn to return violence for violence if the occasion should arise), it could not beget peace of mind. However much vengeance might satisfy her, it did not contain the germ of new life. She could not build happiness around brutal news clips and a .38, and yet she could not get her mind around forgiveness, the untenable idea that the murderer, who once had been her husband, had a place in heaven with her son. The rain had quit, and the air on the front porch was fresh. We shook hands, and Terri thanked me again. Then she summoned Melissa inside, pulled the door, and threw the lock.

If Terri Jeffers was stuck, her friend Sam McClain had moved on, or at least seemed to. He had made a new life for himself. He had remarried. He had a new son. His days had been redeemed, and yet he still viewed his life through the prism of the past, and on the second Tuesday of the month, sometimes accompanied by his new wife, he went to the Parents of Murdered Children meeting, where he said, "My name is Sam McClain and my wife and son were murdered and no one was ever caught."

A few days later I drove out to see him at his house in northeast Houston. He let me in while Jumbo, his black "bark-and-hide" lapdog, bounded about like a keyed-up cat. His new wife, Kerry, was holding their boy, Ricky, born four months earlier. On the living-room shelf were pictures of Sam's first wife, Linda Annette Flora, and his first son, Sam junior.

At twenty-seven Sam was younger than most members in the group, lanky and soft-spoken, with large liquid eyes. Two years ago he had been living with Linda and Sam junior in a house in Woodland Acres, a short drive away. He worked as a machinist; Linda had a job at a Wal-Mart store. They had been together for a year and a half, but had dated since high school. The baby had been born prematurely, and pulled through only after five dicey weeks in neonatal intensive care.

Shortly after two on the afternoon of August 7, 1988, Sam returned from a trip to Trinity County. The door was shut but not latched. The stereo was playing, the air-conditioning was on. Linda was sprawled on the floor on top of some of Sam's toys. By the eerie pallor of her legs and the

glazed, milky color of her eyes, Sam knew the situation was dire. Baby Sam was nowhere to be found. Sam called the police.

At eight that night, after the cops had combed the house, a patrolman on guard noticed a couple of loaves of bread on top of the refrigerator. On a hunch, he opened the freezer. Sam junior's naked body was curled up in the fetal position, frozen solid. It had to be pried out. The morgue was unable to type the blood, and the coroner noted evidence of torture: thirty-three cuts on the boy's feet and buttocks, abrasions on his penis, fractures on both sides of his head.

"I went in to see him for ten or fifteen seconds," Sam recalled in a soft, halting voice. "I had to see him – I couldn't let them take this object off under a blanket and me accept it. It was a gruesome sight, but if I hadn't seen it, I might have trouble believing it."

For a week he was a suspect. He was interviewed by detectives all night, and several days later took six hours of polygraph tests. No money or jewelry was missing, and there was no sign of forced entry. The horror of being a suspect himself scarcely registered as he struggled to come to grips with the annihilation of his family. "If the police were suspicious of me, I didn't care. Their deaths were such a giant idea. It was so big you couldn't conceive of it all at once in your mind. I'd go home and pick a little piece of it to think about."

Eventually the police ruled out Sam. They videotaped the funeral, but turned up few clues. Today the case remains unsolved.

A month after the murder, Sam went to a neighborhood hangout called the Junction with Linda's brother. He met Kerry, who read about the case, but didn't recognize him. She sympathized. She let him go on. Not long afterward, he asked her to go with him to a meeting of Parents of Murdered Children. He felt out of place among the older members of the group, who were in their later forties and fifties, but he could relate to Terri Jeffers. Their children were killed on the same day.

Two months after Sam met Kerry, he gave her an emerald ring. "You helped me," he said. "You were there to talk to. You weren't involved."

"I had some reservations about getting married," she recalled now, shifting little Ricky to her shoulder. "I knew he wasn't over it, I know he'll never be over it. There are some people at Parents of Murdered Children whose child died twelve years ago and they're not over it. I just thought, this is what he wanted. I knew I loved him, I knew it was going to be tough, and he told me he needed me."

"Most people at the meetings are able to tell their stories," Sam said. "what I say is: 'My wife and son were murdered and I have had a hard time.' It's easier to avoid it than to say my little boy was cut up and Linda was stabbed eleven times. When I try to wonder what Linda felt, all I can feel is panic… Sometimes, I get real mad. I drove by the house once; a lady with a little kid was sitting outside. Part of me wanted to stop and say, 'Do you know what happened here? How can you live here?' But I've had a second chance. It's harder on an older person. If I'd have been twenty years older, I would have lost out. I had Sam for thirteen months. That's not a long time. I'm wondering how these people whose children are my age, how they manage. It's not like

somebody being sick. It's just all of a sudden, boom, like lightning striking. Everything in my whole life changed the moment I walked through that door. I lost my wife, I lost the person I talk to, I lost my son, I lost the place I lived. It took everything. I almost feel it took a part of my life sometimes."

A year after the murder Sam and his brother Jim had leaflets printed up offering a $1,500 reward. On the night of the first anniversary of the murders, Sam stayed up all night assembling a model of a gold Jeep. Kerry slept beside him on the living-room floor. He is afraid of losing his new family, and insists Kerry spend the night at her mother's if he has to go out of town. For months he used to time her trips to the Laundromat. He moved Ricky's crib away from the window. He always phones before he comes home, not wanting to enter an empty house. He'll check the closets. For months it was impossible for him to open the refrigerator and get ice.

His keepsakes are few; two pairs of baby shoes, one outfit, and the blue scrub suit he wore in the delivery room – the smock stamped with his son's inky footprint. And photographs, including the pictures of Linda and Sam that Shirley Parish sewed into the quilt. And there is the videotape: baby Sam's first birthday, June 26, 1988, at Pistol Pete's Pizza in Pasadena. We watched it that night, laughed about all the p's as Sam slipped the cassette into the VCR. Suddenly baby Sam's face appeared on the screen, prodigally smiling. He was dressed in a red-striped shirt and shorts and a party hat. Kerry glanced at her husband's face and at the video. The camera zoomed in on Linda.

"She's perfect now," Kerry said. "I can never be that perfect person."

Jumbo climbed off the couch. On the screen, the party unrolled with no dramatic developments. "This is probably pretty boring for you," Sam said to me.

"Not at all."

"Look at this part. He's on a merry-go-round and somebody calls his name, and he almost falls off trying to look back over his shoulder. He'd just started walking. He was killed four days after he took his first steps."

On the sound track a voice called, "Sam! Sam! Sam!"

"He's smiling a lot."

"He'd smile at anything. You see him there, and then what happened… You wonder how anybody could… It's two totally different deals… I wonder…"

Little Ricky began to fuss in the other room. "I better throw a bottle in the microwave," said Kerry, getting up.

"It's really helped since he came along," said Sam.

When Kerry was pregnant, she had a baby shower; Terri Jeffers came. She gave them Daniel's stroller.

“Two and a half years ago,” said Sam, “if somebody showed me a picture of where I’d be now I’d say, ‘No, that’s not me, that’s somebody else…’ ”

His voice trailed off; he seemed embarrassed by his frailty. In some ways he would never catch up to the events that had engulfed him; he would always be dislocated by his life’s violent turn, and the tenacity of grief, and the mystery of never having answers, much less the satisfaction of justice. Perhaps he would always struggle with the miracle of deliverance too, as the possibility of happiness now hovered before him in the form of his new wife and son.

The camera zoomed in on baby Sam and then panned to Linda, who was holding up a large yellow T-shirt, a gift to the birthday boy from Pistol Pete’s. She looked into the camera and said, “One of these days it’ll fit.”

Last fall many parents in the Houston Chapter were outraged when two federal judges ordered inmates released from the county jail to ease a severe overcrowding problem. When the release date approached, Shirley Parish stayed on the phone all week mustering a crowd to protest; Jack Enright called local TV and radio stations, and even the White House. He had the idea to form a human chain around the jail. Also, he was hunting around for a coffin, the idea being to dramatize the impact of violent crime by having the parents fill it with copies of their children’s death certificates.

By the time Harriett Semander got to the jail on Friday night an angry crowd had assembled, and sheriff’s deputies had established a cordon between the protestors and the prisoners coming out. Some parents had taped pictures of their murdered children to plastic Halloween tombstones, although the inmates being released were not murderers, or even felons, but people like the guy who’d been in jail a week awaiting trial for driving with a suspended license.

Someone handed Harriett Semander a Marks-A-Lot and some poster board. She didn’t know what to put on her placard, and so in big letters she scrawled a message that had less to do with the issues of overcrowded jails than with her own imprisonment and the story of her daughter Elena, who was strangled to death eight years ago by a serial killer named Coral Watts. He message was simply: NO, NO, NO!

And yet more than anyone I met at Parents of Murdered Children, more than Sam McClain and surely more than Terri Jeffers, Harriett Semander has divined meaning in her daughter’s death. If her conclusions betray the compulsion to twist and bend inscrutable events so that they fit some pattern in our heads, her efforts have at least produced a kind of reckoning. The journal she kept traces her struggle.

Holy Week April 1982: The similarity of Christ’s death and Elena’s was revealed to me – the humiliation, the nakedness, pain, beatings, and in the end, both were wrapped in a sheet and taken away. This was on Holy Thursday. Holy Friday was confusing – whose funeral, Elena’s or Christ’s?

Elena was the oldest of the four kids Harriett raised with her husband, Zack. Zack taught math, and Harriett worked in the office at an exclusive Houston private school. Elena was educated there, a whiz in math, with a talent for sculpture and drawing. She also excelled at sports, enough

to earn a field-hockey scholarship to the University of Denver. She had gorgeous chestnut hair, and was flirting with the idea of being a model.

On the night of February 6, a night cold enough for her to have worn her rabbit jacket, she stopped by a friend's apartment. He wasn't home. It was after midnight. As she was getting back in her car, she was jumped by Coral Watts, a twenty-eight-year-old mechanic who had been under surveillance by Houston police as a suspect in a number of other killings. Six months later, when he confessed that hers was the fifth of nine murders he had committed in the Houston area, Watts told the story of Elena's death.

"Did she fight?" detectives asked him.

"Yeah."

"Remember what she said during the struggle?"

"No."

"Then what happened? What was this that you choked her with?"

"My hands."

"O.K., then what happened?"

"Then I took her coat and her pants and shirt off… I tied the shirt around her neck and one end around her leg."

"What did you do this for?"

"I don't know."

"All right, then what did you do?"

"Picked her up and put her in the Dumpster."

"Remember what the dumpster looked like? What color was it?"

"Gray, I believe."

"Was it a tall dumpster?"

"A short one."

"Was she heavy to lift?"

"Yeah."

Stripped and hog-tied, Elena was discovered that morning by a garbageman. Harriett was able to identify the body when she recognized her daughter's crooked toe. The only reason Watts was

caught three months after Elena's murder was that a woman he had tied up escaped while he was busy trying to drown another woman in a bathtub. IN exchange for telling police where nine of his victims were, the state of Texas allowed him to plaed guilty to one count of burglary. He was sentenced to 60 years; because the judge found that the water in the bathtub was the equivalent of a deadly weapon and therefore an aggravating factor, Watts would not be eligible for parole for twenty years.

Mother's Day 1982: Love never dies, it just grows. I felt Elena's love on Mother's Day and she felt mine. Our love continues to grow throughout eternity. What a glorious resurrection it will be when we are all again united. I wonder if Elena's murderer celebrated Mother's Day and what kind of woman his mother is?

Harriett had survived the first years pretending Elena was away at college. She would sign Elena's name to Christmas presents for her other kids. Once, she sat by a pool for four hours watching a twelve-year-old girl who looked like Elena at that age. Even picking up an apple could trigger grief: it reminded her of Elena, who was afraid of red apples because of what had happened to Snow White.

The second year, she started to harness her feelings. She opened files on Watts. She tried to contact the mothers of some of his other victims. She mapped out the sequence of killings, drawing up an elaborate chart, annotating news accounts, digging for information from the police. She worked for four years to audit a tape of his confession. She attended his sentencing. And in August 1989 she and Zack won a $1.1 million wrongful-death judgment against him. (They were represented by Shirley Parish's husband, whom they had met through Parents of Murdered Children.)

"I was at the beginning of the victims'-rights movement, and the police and district attorney didn't know what to do with me. I was asking for things no other parents had asked for. They thought I was crazy, my husband thinks I'm crazy, but it was part of the grief I had to deal with."

When Watts was sentenced, Harriett thought she could move on. In July 1987 she wrote in her journal: "I find myself moving out of the 'justice' stage to the more healing area of 'acceptance' by sharing Elena's story… The type of built-in anger that I can't seem to shake is giving way to an inner voice that tells me life is too short."

Then in August of 1989 she called the Board of Pardons and Paroles and learned the astonishing news that Watts was Eligible for parole. The judicial finding that a deadly weapon – the water in the bathtub – had been used in the commission of the burglary had been overturned on appeal, and though it was unlikely that Watts would be released on parole, he nevertheless qualified for review.

"My husband and I are getting old," she said. "We'd like to do something together in the five or ten years of good health we have left. Then one fatal phone call and I'm back in it." She alerted the national headquarters of Parents of Murdered Children to put out the word, and more than one thousand letters arrived decrying the possibility of parole. The experience impressed upon her the necessity of unceasing vigilance.

June 4, 1986: I was reading through my journal meditation from 1979 to 1981. So many prayers were written for Elena to find a meaningful Christian relationship with a boyfriend! I never understood why the Lord didn't answer that prayer for me before she died, when tonight it suddenly dawned on me that He did answer those prayers. Every boy Elena dated has probably given their relationship Christian meaning since her death. There is no time element with God.

The Semanders are Greek Orthodox; like Terri Jeffers, a Roman Catholic, they are as troubled by the doctrine of forgiveness as by God's purpose in taking their child's life. They have struggled to reconcile religious precepts on life's sanctity with their personal experience of evil, which has made them advocates of the death penalty.

As they are Greek-Americans, I asked if they had read Nicholas Gage's book Eleni, which tells the story of how the author returned to Greece and tracked down the man who had murdered his mother. In the climactic scene Gage stands over his mother's murderer with a gun but does not pull the trigger. They had read the book, and had in fact discussed that very scene with the author when he came to Houston to speak.

"I went up to him afterwards," Harriett said. "I said, 'My daughter's been a murder victim, and there's something bothering me. Do you regret not shooting him?' He said there were moments when he wakes up and wishes he had. In God's eyes he did the right thing, but I don't know how he did it. How did he control himself? If Coral Watts was in this room I would start beating on him. It's not hate – it's an uncontrollable urge to fight back, to protect, to revenge.

"The first time we went to church after Elena's death, we had to kneel down and thank Him for everything good and bad. I had to thank Him for Elena's death. I couldn't do it, not at first. It took a couple of years. I had a list of people to pray for, the living and the dead, and I had to put Coral Watts in the living list and Elena in the dead."

Her husband was staring at a classical clay bust on the den table – Elena had made it. "Wiping Watts out of my mind, I don't know if I could do that," said Zack.

"When I think of Elena, I think of Watts," said Harriett. "I know his birthday. I think about his daughter. I would like to go back to school someday and study painting; I'm interested in portraits, and one of the first I would do is Coral Watts. His face is embedded in my mind. He's part of my family."

Could there be a more wrenching introduction to our condition as pawns of fate than having to cope with homicide? Two cases I heard about seem now to exemplify the beginning and the end of what is a long procession of wounded people struggling to go on. A few years ago, a woman in the Houston Chapter came to the meetings mourning her murdered daughter. She seemed to be mending on schedule, and then suddenly she took her own life on her daughter's grave.

And then there was the late Kitty Yonley, who stands out as the only person anyone can think of in the Houston Chapter who was opposed to capital punishment. She forgave the man who had stabbed her daughter, Nina, to death in August 1979. She sent him a copy of the Bible.

Some parents are stuck; some adjust. Some cannot pick up the burden of catastrophe; others are able to find grace, a balance between the yearning to remember and the need to forget. A lot of success has to do with ritualizing a connection with the murdered child. For ten years after Kim's death, Shirley Parish, who had never smoked before, would start her day smoking one of her daughter's brand of cigarettes.

Success also often seems to depend on what sort of understanding parents can reach about the people who killed their children. To understand is not necessarily to make peace or to forgive. Time, which according to the platitude heals all wounds, has in many cases turned parents into ferocious advocates of capital punishment. Nearly two-thirds of P.O.M.C. members support the death penalty. In Texas, a fair number would relish the chance to start the lethal solution dripping into the vein of the condemned. They know the appeal-laden process of imposing the death penalty can be more expensive than committing a murderer to life in prison. They know the New Testament injunctions against killing, the plea for forgiveness. They know Camus's famous argument that no murderer's deed can compare with the evil of capital punishment, "the most premeditated of murders."

To Camus, many parents would reply that, however great the agony of the condemned, no doubt exists about what debt is being paid. A condemned man knows why he is to die; their children did not. In advocating capital punishment, what many parents seem to be seeking is not so much the extermination of a killer as an equivalency of feeling: they want their suffering communicated and shared. They want the people who murdered their children to know the torture of their loss. The desire for revenge is the ugliest emotion in the human psyche, but it often collapses into something almost poignant – the longing to find a shred of conscience in people whose moral capacity is grotesquely diminished. Why did you do this? they ask, and they pore over criminals records and family histories, hunting for answers, for any trace of that sympathetic faculty by which one person can know and even suffer another's pain.

Murder ultimately was a measure of their moral capacity. Many found themselves wanting. Their innocence had been stripped away; their values and beliefs had been badly gouged, if not wrecked. For most parents, murder ruptured the idea of unalloyed goodness. But for others, honest of brave enough to look within, it ruptured the idea of unalloyed evil too. Evil was nothing apart from them anymore – no longer "the Other." It had stolen into their homes and seeped into their hearts. They had to live with the vengeful impulse to return death for death, and, conversely, had to find the resolve to hold themselves back. In their extremes of emotion, nothing was black-and-white; the world was a palette of grays. One could a glibly pay sanctimonious lip service to the idea of forgiveness as join the ignorant masses clamoring for the executioner. Forgiveness would never come cheap for parents, but then, vengeance would never be blind. It was personal. It was, in a strange way, family.

So they marched on courthouses and mailed off Bibles and stitched together quilts. They did something because they needed to do something, if only to fend off the full experience of loss. More than from grief, they needed to save themselves from their own powerlessness. If murder was a book of lessons in fragility, ephemeral happiness, the irreversible arrow of fate, the hardest lesson of all was that life is not organized around human needs; for every one thing they could control there were a million they could not.

After Captain Bill Edison from the Houston Homicide Division gave a little talk, and somebody joked that maybe they should get Charles Bronson to speak at the next meeting, and after the group rejected the idea of putting the names of the killers on the quilt below their victims ("Why would you want that scum on the quilt?" "We can make another quilt and let it burn"), and after Terri Jeffers made a pitch for the fifteen-dollar heart-shaped lockets, the proceeds to go to the national organization, and after some discussion as to what might be done to counteract the anti-death-penalty slant of a new movie on Home Box Office (resolved to write a letter to HBO), and after more discussion as to whether the chapter ought to include a rose when distributing brochures to funeral homes, the September meeting broke up.

"Ya'll remember to bring your death certificates next meeting," said Gilda Muskwinsky as the circle of friends dispersed. The cake plates and the truth-in-sentencing petitions were packed up. The quilt came down. Shirley Parish carried it out to her car. The air after the rain was clean and sweet. Caroline Min would return the cloth square fixed with Walter's face, and tomorrow or the next day, or sometime soon, Shirley would sew it into the Houston Chapter's tapestry of phantoms. They'd likely seen the last of Caroline. She was moving back to Seattle with her parents – heart-broken immigrants from Korea. Walter was their American future. Walter was going to be a lawyer… Face after face, story after story. It had occurred to Shirley as the quilt came together that it could never be finished. It could only be kept up-to-date.