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Other Countries, Other Shores

by Alex Bue

Acknowledgements

I don't want to write an acknowledgements page, but Professor Kumar is making me. In a recent email he said: "The best thing that can be done is to give the reader a clue about your method early on." To me, it sounded like he was asking for an advance-apology, by assuming the role of future reader and communicating retroactively the limits of my work: my dawdling, my indebtedness to Geoff Dyer, and my story, about eight murders two blocks from campus, which might have been lost without a clue's early guidance.

But the author of the email was also my professor of three years, and so his demand seemed also a demand for a kind of advance-advance-apology, in response to the trouble I'd given him as student, and a previous email in which I'd stated my advance-advance-apologia, writing: "I resist the idea of an acknowledgements page." It seemed too precautionary; I would rather my work stand on its own.

But the fact is Professor Kumar has been right about most things, and I don't want to hand over the satisfaction of this last one. And now that I don't want to thank him, but am still profoundly thankful to him—his patience, his guidance—I'm not sure how to go about writing this. Originally I'd imagined something sleek, sparse, like:

Professor Kumar—for writing
Professor DeMaria—for reading
Professor Hsu—for listening

But having already contradicted myself by writing these acknowledgements, I'll yet forsake them by skipping to an introduction of my work.

What follows is journalism about writing journalism. I found my story in a poem, "The Poughkeepsiad," by Joshua Harmon: "We find ourselves plagued by unimaginable circumstances" was the line, taken from a statement issued in 1998 by the Francois family after their son, Kendall, was charged with the murders of eight women. It was May 2013 when I began my research. It was May 2014 when I ended it.

There's a poem by C.P. Cavafy called "The City" that I read everyday before writing. The first lines are: "You said: 'I'll go to another country, go to another shore, / find another city better than this one.'" The original was in Greek, and I appreciate Edmund Keeley's translation, its smoothness and sense of familiarity. Towards the end of the poem, the narrator concludes: "This city will always pursue you."

And as I've stepped into the world in pursuit of the story, I've found my sense of possibility contracting even as it expands. The promise of the story—this true-crime proving-ground—dissolved as I set upon it. Writing about the murders has always been a struggle. Over time, the struggle to write a story became part of the story itself. So it seems ironic, then, that I'd begin here with what is really the end of a year's work and reflection. But I want now to put down the women's names: Wendy Meyers, Gina Barone, Kathleen Hurley, Catherine Marsh, Mary Giaccone, Sandra French, Audrey Pugliese, Catina Newmaster. Because they are not remembered.

You said: "I'll go to another country, go to another shore,
find another city better than this one.
Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong
and my heart lies buried as though it were something dead.
How long can I let my mind moulder in this place?
Wherever I turn, wherever I happen to look,
I see the black ruins of my life, here,
where I've spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed them totally."

You won't find a new country, won't find another shore.
This city will always pursue you. You will walk
the same streets, grow old in the same neighborhoods,
will turn gray in these same houses.
You will always end up in this city. Don't hope for things elsewhere:
there is no ship for you, there is no road.
As you've wasted your life here, in this small corner,
you've destroyed it everywhere else in the world.

C.P. Cavafy

I locked my bike to the Dutchess County Courthouse. Inside a line of people split the room, leading to the counter, and a monitor estimated a 30 minute wait from my place in back. Ticking past D36, the screen followed with F54; my voucher read X23, and the physics of the line were indeterminate. When a man I didn't see saw me staring at the monitor, he took the spot in front of me. He looked like every other man in line, which was composed entirely of men who looked like him. They had blue jeans and grey sweatshirts and they looked so tired and pulverized by life that watching them began to wear me down, until finally I couldn't bring myself to ask the man whether he had cut me or not.

When I made it to the counter, the woman told me I was in the wrong place. "This is the DMV," she said, and pointed towards the elevator to the records room.

The elevator doors opened and the records room was straight ahead. But I went right, down the hall, and stopped at the window. The window was six feet tall and four feet wide. The sky was the color of seashell and spilled chalky light across the hallway. But I was focusing too much on the sky, the wall, and the window, and getting away from my purpose in coming.

Around the corner in the records room I walked up to the tanned woman at the desk, who wore a purple blouse.

"This is my first time here," I said.

"That's okay," she said, smiling.

"Could you check your records for Kendall Francois?"

"Who?"

"Kendall Francois. He committed a series of murders in 1996."

"Oh, sure."

“I can show you a note from my professor if that helps.” In my backpack was a note with the official letterhead of Vassar College.

“You know, he was actually my hall-monitor in middle school,” she said before leaving to gather the files downstairs.

Five minutes later she returned with a file. I introduced myself and asked if I couldn’t buy her a cup of coffee.

“Could you tell me anything else about Kendall Francois?” I said.

“I couldn’t really tell you anything else.”

“Maybe what he was like.”

“Oh, well, I don’t know. He was nice.”

She smiled.

“Try not to get them out of order.”

The folder was heavy and full and when I opened it, the papers poured out in their original order. I flipped through the contents, part of which included a transcript of his confession. The rest was jargon, the legal means to the legal ends of life imprisonment. At the end of a long table was a copy machine that charged 25 cents per page. I realized it would take more trips to get through the folder in its entirety. A dozen copies in hand, I left the building and on my way home stopped at the Poughkeepsie Courthouse to request whatever files they too had available. A crime has different files for different levels of investigation, and because this crime began locally, the first records of Kendall’s crime were the women’s missing person reports, issued by their parents to the police. Later, after his arrest, the crime would exceed Poughkeepsie’s jurisdiction and files were relayed through county and state offices. Inside the

courthouse a woman who had short brown hair told me there would be some delay in the file's retrieval. A week later I returned to gather them from the precinct. A man behind plexiglass told me he wasn't sure which papers I was referring to. Then he looked behind his chair and saw them there atop the filing cabinet. "Here," he said, and pushed them through the change vent.

I biked back to the County Court to copy more of the records I had begun the week before. The price of copies had gone up to 50 cents per page, so that when I left again on my bicycle, into the grey-white winter half-light, some documents still remained un-copied, still unfiled in my file. At home I read what I had:

It was three in the afternoon when Kendall Francois heard a knocking at the door. Standing on his porch were Detectives Robert McCready and Skip Mannain. They asked him to come to the Town of Poughkeepsie Police Headquarters. He agreed and they drove to the precinct. The date was September 1, 1998.

In Room 112, Detective McCready explained to Kendall that the police wanted to speak with him because of an incident that occurred with a woman named Christine Sala earlier that morning. It was explained that this person had come to the police and alleged that Kendall had physically assaulted her during a sexual encounter at his home at 99 Fulton Avenue.

Kendall denied assaulting Sala. McCready gave details of the bruises around her neck.

Kendall asked to speak to a prosecutor and to view photographs of prostitutes since 1993.

He was shown a series of photographs of women's missing persons flyers. Kendall flipped through the papers and separated them. He placed four photographs, those of Wendy Meyers, Gina Barone, Catherine Marsh, and Sandra French in one pile and stated, "I killed them. I did it." He then placed the photographs of Michelle Eason and Kathleen Hurley aside and said he didn't know about them. He looked at the photograph of Mary Giaccone and said, "I'm not sure about her."

He said he began picking up prostitutes in 1993 in the Poughkeepsie area. The first woman he killed was Wendy Meyers, 30. He had been with her twice before the last day he was with her, around October 24, 1996. That morning, he picked her up in his red Subaru on Main Street. On one of those earlier occasions, he said Wendy Meyers had "ripped him off," explaining he meant that she had agreed to have sex for money, taken money from him for sex, but did not want to

complete the sex act for the money he paid. He drove her in his old red Subaru to his parents' home at 99 Fulton Avenue, where they went to his bedroom. He paid her money and they had sexual intercourse. Soon Wendy Meyers indicated to him that she had "had enough" and had to leave for another appointment. This made him mad, because she had ripped him off before, and he started choking her by putting his hands around her neck while they were laying on his bed. After she was unconscious, he took her body to the bathroom, where he filled the bathtub in the second floor bathroom with water and put her in the bathtub. After a period of time he took her body upstairs to the attic, laid her down and covered her up. He said the body of Wendy Meyers was still in the attic.

He killed the other women in identical fashion.

Kendall knew Gina Barone, 28, from previous encounters and picked her up in downtown Poughkeepsie in November of 1996. He parked the car in a parking lot off the Arterial and she became "rude and nasty." Kendall choked her until she stopped moving, then drove to his home and parked in the garage and left her body there in the back seat. The next day, he moved her body from the garage to the attic where she remained today.

The third woman he killed was Catherine Marsh, 31, in November of 1996. They went to his bedroom, where he choked her to death, and then put her in a bathtub of water. Later he moved her to the attic, where she remained today.

Kendall stated that one of the other eight women he killed, maybe Mary Giaccone, 29, the other one he did not know or recall (Kathleen Hurley, 47) but he killed them both by choking them to death with his hands, like the others, and these two women, which would be numbers four and five, are also in the attic. He said he could not recall any particulars or circumstances surrounding the deaths of these two women.

The next woman he killed around June 11, 1998, was Sandra French, 51. He said she had stolen from his car on a prior occasion. First he put her body in the attic, and later moved her body to the crawl space in the basement where he buried her.

Kendall stated that the next woman he killed, the first week of August, was a woman named Audrey Pugliese, 34, from Yonkers. He said that Audrey fought him and struggled the most of any of the women he killed. Her body was still in the basement.

Kendall stated the last woman he killed was Catina Newmaster, 25, last Tuesday, August 25, 1998. She had "ripped him off before," and in his garage, he choked her to death and left her body in the front seat of the Subaru until the following morning, when he moved her to a crawl space in the basement.

Files in hand, I went to see my professor in his office the next day. I took a seat on the couch while he walked to his desk.

“This is good work,” he said, flipping through the pages. “No one else has done this.” He paused and looked at his bookshelf. “Wait here,” he said. “You need something,” and left the room. I had known my professor for three years now and admired him. He was going to teach me how to write. He spoke casually of writers he knew and of successful older students and used impressive words like “vociferous:” “If you will remember, I was most vociferous in my praise of...” He trailed off. Praise was usually in the past tense, alluding to a distance, if not impossibility, that haunted me. One of his former students had published a book several months ago. His unalloyed praise of the former student convinced me this was my desire in life: to be that student, spoken well of later.

He returned with a yellow folder. He put the records inside and handed me the folder.

“You must go to the house,” he said.

“I must go to the house,” I agreed. But my insides demurred. Gathering records had been easy. The prospect of a visit went to my stomach; it crumpled my guts, and when they straightened out I felt empty, like there was nothing there and nothing to be gained. The feeling was so acute that that I felt nauseous, and then hungry because I couldn’t eat. And because I ate so little ultimately I ate more during this time I spent not going to 99 Fulton Avenue. It didn’t seem right, to go. It was inappropriate. What had happened was in the past and I wouldn’t bring it to a family’s doorstep.

I found other ways around the project, and on a walk to buy groceries, I went up to a security guard, assuming he would talk to me because he was just standing there. After introducing myself I asked if he’d heard about the murders that happened two blocks from here. “Yeah...” he said. “That was that home where they found them in the basement? He lived with

his parents? How didn't they know?" His questions told me that he did not really remember. But what he probably remembered was the newspaper headline from September 3, 1996. "SPECIAL FOUR-PAGE REPORT: Women's corpses found; man charged in 1 death." It was an unseasonably hot day, in the high seventies and windy, but he probably didn't remember this. Probably he remembered the photo of Kendall, an African American man with swollen cheeks, and of the women, seven of whom were white and brunette, and one, Michelle Eason, who was black (Kendall said he didn't kill her). Audrey Pugliese was not pictured. (Police were surprised to find her). And it wasn't clear from the photographs, but Kendall was a 27-year-old hall-monitor, 6-foot 5-inches and 300 pounds. The women were each about five feet tall.

A week later I bicycled to Reservoir Square, where prostitutes had frequented in Kendall's time. It was about eight in the evening when I left. The sun had left before me and was turning the light off as it left; the sky was more dark than light, somewhere in-between, the street lamps were flickering on, and the sky looked milky, I thought, clotted with cloud and light. I realized I was slowing my bike to watch the sundown and losing valuable time; soon the road would be too dark for me to see, and the Square too. Kendall had found each woman after midnight, and if this was still the schedule, having left as early as I did, I would not find a woman to talk to. Three questions I had in mind: How long have you been doing this? How did you start? Do you wish you did something else? But it was too early when I arrived and too late for me to see. I saw nothing.

The next day I knocked on the door of 99 Fulton Avenue. The houses were all the same. Two stories, two bedrooms, a foursquare foundation—they were so similar that I forgot they were different and biked past without stopping. Then I turned back and knocked. I considered

how to say it: “I am here to interview her about the crimes that happened in your home fifteen years ago.” A woman with hoop earrings came to the door.

“Can I help you?” she smiled.

“Hi, I’m sorry to bother you. I’m writing about a series of murders that happened in Poughkeepsie in the nineties.”

“Oh,” she said. “Hello.”

“My professor told me I should come here.” I smiled. “Can I ask you a few questions?”

She hesitated. “Sure. That’ll be fine.” She introduced herself as Evelyn and led me through the door.

Kendall lived in an upstairs bedroom. His father McKinley and mother Paulette lived across the hall, and his younger sister Kierstyn lived downstairs. He had a younger brother, Aubrey, and older sister, Raquelle, both of whom lived downtown because their home was too small. After Kendall’s confession, police searched the home. The yard was dug up. Four bodies were recovered from the attic and four more from the basement. In the attic Kendall had put the women in black trash bags; in the basement he buried them in the crawlspace. Some of the women upstairs Kendall put in trash cans. After he searched the home, Detective McCready told news crews that one body had become “like a square.” The search was slow-going, he said. It was reported that searches were conducted in waves, with officers taking frequent breaks. Reportedly, the smell was unbearable. A day after the story had broke, District Attorney William Grady confirmed that the search was still under way but incomplete. He couldn’t say how many bodies remained or had been found. “It’s not the cleanest house in the world,” he explained.

Every photograph of the home was taken from the outside, but 99 Fulton from the outside was an inarticulate image. A virulent blend of undergrowth had taken over the yard, the porch, and the building. There is one alleged photograph of the home's interior, which shows a very dirty kitchen. "Squalid" and "grisly" were how journalists described it. "Garbage and pet excrement...littered the house," said one *New York Times* reporter. The kitchen was a sulfurous yellow and dishes covered the counter.

Evelyn took me through the white kitchen into the living room, where she left me to find her husband, who worked as an administrator at my college. They were familiar with students, and had probably welcomed me for this reason. It was a nice living room with hardwood floors and big open windows. The house was lit so brightly (I still remember the bright gauze of the curtains). Most of the interior was new, having been renovated in September 1999, a year after Kendall's arrest. Four months prior in May, the realtor Violet Curry had bought it for \$15,000. In September she put it on the market for \$139,900. There were already buyers, she said, locals who knew about the home's past. "I'd love to live here," Curry told Middletown's *Times Herald-Record*. "I can just see it all furnished with traditional furniture." Pat Barone, whose daughter Gina Barone was found in the attic, expressed discomfort with Curry's plans. "I want the house down," she said. "It's just a lousy, lousy feeling for me. I want it down, the land cleared and blessed because the place was truly a tomb for eight women."

Breakfast was still on the table—fried chicken, a fruit tart. Two young girls walked barefoot through the living room. They glanced at me in acknowledgement, and when they left they took that acknowledgement. I was in their home and I was not in their home. It's not that I didn't belong, it's that I didn't matter.

Evelyn came back and sat down at the table. I asked if those were her daughters who just left, and they were. Evelyn and her husband Luis, whom she couldn't find, had four children. The other two are older. They moved to 99 Fulton Avenue in 2006, after buying it from the Sherblom's, the first family to live there since the Francois. As the second generation of owners since the crime, they are no longer required to disclose the building's history. They can sell it without mentioning the murders. But for a time they told "anybody who walked in the house" about the crime. "We were like this is what happened in here," she said. "But our friends are our friends. We've had people over for Christmas, Thanksgiving, barbecues, baseball teams..."

Evelyn said she is rarely bothered by attention the house receives. "We have students over often," she said. One student, she said, staged a play in the basement because "It had the creepiness she was going for." But she was troubled by an incident in 2012, in which a man filmed her home from the outside. The video is on [YouTube](#). You can hear a man talking over his car engine.

"I don't like doing this, I don't like taking pictures of the house, I don't like filming it. The people living there are probably looking at the door right now. I'm invading their privacy but whatever. This happened in my town minutes from my house and I knew these girls and some of them threw me a pretty good time a couple of nights."

When a car begins to pull out of the driveway, the man jumps back into his vehicle.

"I'm gonna get out of here before the cops show up because I'm sure they already called them."

But my arrival wasn't much different from the man's. The day before I had stopped at 99 Fulton Avenue on my way to Reservoir Square. I knocked but no one was home. So I looked

under the crawl space. I walked up the driveway to the garage. I stared down at the street from the porch. I imagined answering the door for two policemen, and then I imagined Kendall, which meant kind of imagining being Kendall, which I couldn't imagine. I had assumed visiting Fulton Avenue would give shape and degree to the horrors of the past. But instead the home was quaint and it was easy to imagine living there.

Evelyn took me downstairs to the basement. Above the dirt crawl space where four women had been buried, new insulation was being installed, and balls like popcorn puffed between the rafters. I think there were boxes down there, but I can't remember. Her husband yelled down to us: "Anything scary down there?" Evelyn shouted up the stairs: "Just a leaky faucet!"

Upstairs in the kitchen I asked Evelyn why Kendall killed the women. She said she didn't know, but that she worried "someone's going to come and try to retaliate, vandalize the house." She still finds pieces of glass in the yard. It's not clear when the Francois vacated, though a week after Kendall's arrest, their lawyer issued a statement: "We find ourselves plagued by unimaginable circumstances. Our youngest son is suspected of committing grave offenses from which his life hangs in the balance. We have virtually lost everything, been dispossessed of our home and cast into the street with only the clothes on our backs." Photographs show that, after the Francois left, authorities mowed the front lawn before turning it inside out, and locals painted the home with graffiti.

In the dining room Evelyn reminded me to call my mother because it was Mother's Day. "I completely forgot," I frowned, and apologized for ruining her day. But it was OK, she said, and shook my hand as I stepped out the door.

On the sidewalk I found her husband watering the lawn. “I’m sorry to do this on Mother’s Day,” I said. “That’s alright,” he said, and aimed the hose into the street so I could pass.

I went home and typed up a story about my visit and emailed it to my professor. A couple days later he wrote back. He said that he liked the “the self-reflexive turn” in which I called myself “an invasive strain of history infecting the present.” This part has since been edited out.

I felt so bad about ruining Evelyn’s day that I stopped writing. But my professor’s praise pushed me to do more research. In my files were the women’s missing person reports; they included the addresses of the family member who had issued the report. I began writing letters to those addresses, but found the writing difficult. I couldn’t write the letter without explaining why I was writing the letter—it was part of the persuasiveness. “It would be helpful to talk to someone who actually knew Gina Barone,” I wrote, but I couldn’t say how it would be helpful. What drove me was curiosity and validation. There was also the idea that this was what journalists did: report back the suffering of others.

While I waited for replies, I continued to research the crimes, beginning where the court files ended, after Kendall’s confession, with the police’s search of the home.

Kendall’s cousin MonRay was a hairdresser when the crime broke headlines. On September 5, 1998, he told *The Associated Press*: “I’m angry at Kendall. I really got upset about the last lady, Audrey. She was a customer of mine.” The next day, another story was published quoting MonRay: “I went to see how they were doing. They were crying a lot. It needed a cleaning,” he said of the house. “All I know is they had nothing to do with it.”

On September 10, *The New York Times* published an article: “Families of Slain Women Demand Bodies for Funerals.” The police search was ongoing. It wasn’t until September 29 that

forensic investigators withdrew, and families were given with their daughters, mothers, and sisters. The article describes the beginning of Kendall's trial.

“‘That man had my mother’s body for three months,’ shouted Heidi Cramer, the daughter of one of the slain women [Sandra French], as the suspect, Kendall L. Francois, stared tensely ahead and a brawny court officer loomed over her. ‘He’s not going to have her for another day.’”

The outburst came on a day when District Attorney William Grady disclosed new details about the case. On January 18, 1998, eight months prior to Francois' conviction, a police officer followed Francois as he drove his mother to work, in response to several prostitute’s allegations that Francois was violent. After he dropped off Paulette, the officer intercepted Francois and took him to the station for questioning. He admitted to nothing, and then passed a lie-detector test and went home.

Five days later Kendall assaulted Lora Gallagher, before letting her go inexplicably. On February 26 she filed charges for his arrest. But, because more than a month had passed between the alleged assault and the charges, police were denied a warrant to search his home. Detective Skip Mannain was the officer who issued the arrest. There are conflicting accounts of what happened. The article said there was no search; an interview with Mannain said there was. In his account, Mannain arrived at 99 Fulton Avenue and asked Francois if he could come inside. Francois led Mannain to his room, which Mannain said was the dirtiest part of the home: a mattress with piles of clothes and food around it. Mannain left the room ahead of Francois, hurrying around the corner to the basement door. He opened it and started down the stairs. Suddenly there was a pull from behind. Mannain turned around to see Kendall sweating profusely. “We have to go now,” he said, almost yelling. “Just a second,” Mannain said, and tried

again. Another pull, more forceful. “Let’s go outside,” Kendall said. Mannain left the house with Kendall and they drove to the precinct. He served 7 days of his 15-day sentence for assault.

At the time of the encounter two women—Sandra French and Catina Newmaster—were yet to be killed. News that police had come so close to the crime incited the families, who thought police would have been more aggressive if the victims had not been prostitutes.

After their unburying from 99 Fulton Avenue, the bodies were slow to be returned to their families. The family of Catina Newmaster planned her funeral for September 10. But that same day Kendall’s lawyer demanded a second series of autopsies, conducted by their own pathologist. The judge granted the postmortems, provided they be done quickly, and the funerals were postponed.

On October 13, a Dutchess County grand jury indicted Francois for intentionally strangling eight woman and assaulting Christine Sala. The next day he pleaded not guilty. A *New York Times* article described the courtroom.

“Kendall L. Francois, in a soft-spoken and polite manner, pleaded not guilty today to the serial killings of eight women, but once the women's families began taunting him from their seats here in Dutchess County Court, he threw back his head and laughed softly.”

His lawyer Randolph Treece was quoted in explanation: “He’s scared to death,” he said. “That was not a sarcastic or sardonic laugh, not at all. The guy is terrified. he was shaking like a leaf in there and he was shaking as he walked out.”

Charged with eight accounts of first degree murder, Francois was eligible for the death penalty. District Attorney William Grady said he would wait until after the holidays to make the announcement.

On December 23, Francois and his lawyers changed their plea from not-guilty to guilty. If Judge Dolan accepted the plea, Francois would be spared the death penalty. Whether or not he accepted depended on his interpretation of the state's death penalty laws. This was because on December 22—the day before Francois had plead guilty—a state ruling voided most of the state's plea-bargaining provisions, concluding they unfairly encouraged defendants to plea guilty rather than face trial. Leftover was a technical reading of the law that allowed the defense to plead guilty preemptively, before prosecutors even announced whether they would seek the death penalty. To do so was to reduce the defendant's maximum sentence to life without parole. Mr. Treece, Kendall's lawyer, noted this was the first time that a defendant in New York State had ever plead guilty to a full indictment before a death notice was even served.

On Christmas Eve, Grady announced he would seek lethal injection for Kendall Francois, stating: "It would be a total distortion if a defendant rushes to the courthouse and attempts to plead guilty before the district attorney files his notice, just to avoid the death penalty."

It was up to Judge Dolan. The families were conflicted. Rejecting Kendall's plea would guarantee further legal battles. The death penalty invariably had a long life in court. Pat Barone wrote to Judge Dolan, urging him to accept the guilty plea and "stop all this publicity." She didn't want Gina's death in the news because Gina had a daughter.

On February 12, Judge Dolan dismissed the defendant's "narrow, technical" plea. The defense was then barred from negotiations; Kendall's fate was at the mercy of the District Attorney, the Judge, and the jury. Francois had lost his bargaining chip—his own guilt. Only if William Grady withdrew his call for the death penalty would Francois be able to plead guilty, and live.

After months of appeals Judge Dolan reversed his decision, and on June 22, 2000, accepted Kendall's guilty plea. "Many of the families do not want their children and grandchildren needlessly exposed," he said. In court Kendall's one-word answers were barely audible; officials asked him to speak up several times. His reticence enraged Heidi Cramer, daughter of Sandra Jean French. "I want a public disclosure of everything he did to our mother," she told reporters. "His mother can go visit him in jail any time. I can't go visit my mother, except in an urn in my closet."

At the testimony, Christine Sala stood up to "confront the man who took innocent peoples' lives and tried to take mine." She was, she said, "living proof that people can turn their lives around for the better. I hope you remember me for the rest of your life. I hope you remember who put you away," she said, sobbing. "You will never be forgiven for what you have done. I hope they kill you in prison. Goodbye, Kendall."

The same day, Francois announced he contracted HIV in 1995. During his 22 months in county jail, he received no medication. Afterwards, rumors said that Kendall's killings were motivated by the virus he contracted from a prostitute, but these claims were never substantiated.

On August 7, Francois was sentenced to life in prison without parole. He relocated to Attica Correctional Facility in upstate New York, near Buffalo, where he became prisoner #A4160. Today he earns \$30 a week as a welder. I sent him a letter asking about his work, but he didn't reply.

I sent letters to Randolph Treece, William Grady, Judge Dolan, Skip Mannain, and Bill Siegrist, but none of them replied.

...

8/19/13

Dear Alex,

I have no problem talking to you. Would you like to meet sometime in September at one of the coffee shops along Raymond Ave. or College Ave.? Let me know.

Pat Barone

...

On September 17, Par Barone and I met for coffee. She arrived promptly at 5:00 o'clock, and when I pushed open the door she turned around: "Alex?"

She sat down at the sky blue window. I asked her about herself—where she was from, how she was doing, if she liked Poughkeepsie.

"I come from Yonkers," she said. "Poughkeepsie's not a very nice play to live."

Gina's mugshot was included in the missing person report filed by her mother, and I saw now they had the same noses, like sailboats.

"I think New York is a really beautiful state. People go to new England for the fall, for the trees, and we have them right here. But it's an expensive state. But then we have a lot of services that they have especially for children. Now my granddaughter, because I was just her legal guardian and her mother was diseased and her father was in jail, she gets many services from the state that she wouldn't get in other states. This state is grandparent friendly. They really try to help us."

Her granddaughter's name was Nicole.

“She’s still trying to get out of high school,” Pat said. “She’s nineteen and she’s had a very rough time. Very rough. And she also has multiple sclerosis. But it hasn’t done anything to her. She does have it and she has to be treated for it. But so far she has no symptoms except the original symptoms that showed she had it. But they have it under control.”

I asked if they lived together.

“Since she was one. She lived with me.”

Gina was 28 when she died in 1996. If Nicole was 18, that meant she was born in 1995. Gina had still been alive when Pat became Nicole’s legal guardian, and I wondered what this meant.

I asked her if she could tell me about when Gina disappeared.

“I called *The Poughkeepsie Journal* and asked them to write a story about the girls.”

The first woman Kendall Francois killed was Wendy Meyers, 30, in late October, 1996.

“Four girls were missing, and they tell me that they weren’t connected. But I said, ‘If a Vassar College Girl was missing, believe me, you would have written a story.’ One mother wouldn’t speak out because she put the kid out on the street, so she really didn’t have too much to say. One girl nobody even reported missing. Supposedly she came up from Yonkers. One of them is buried by Gina up at St. Peter’s.”

It wasn’t until December 14, 1997, that *The Poughkeepsie Journal* published its first story about the disappearances. “IS THERE A SERIAL KILLER LOOSE?” read the headline. At this point six women had been reported missing: Wendy Meyers, Gina Barone, Kathleen Hurley, Catherine Marsh, Michelle Eason, and Mary Giaccone. “I fear the worst,” Detective Siegrist was

quoted in the article. “We have no bodies, no crime scenes, but we have six missing women. I can’t say we have somebody out hunting women. I don’t know what happened.”

The waitress came to take our order. I asked Pat if she wanted anything. I was having coffee. She ordered tea.

Kendall lived at home with his mother, father, and sister. After his arrest, they claimed to be unaware of his crimes. I asked Pat if she thought the family was innocent.

“Now, the mother was a registered nurse, the father was an engineer, and the sister, I believe, was studying to be a nurse. These are not stupid people. I still believe they knew it.”

The week before I’d talked with a woman whose sister had worked at the Hudson River Psychiatric Hospital with Kendall’s mother Paulette. Every week the nurses played poker at one of their houses. Paulette never volunteered to host, and it was her coworker’s theory that Kendall had intimidated his family, that he reigned over the house and scared them into silence.

Pat said: “My own belief is that they brought the first girl in there. And they found out about it but didn’t say anything. Then he brought the second girl in and then they realized, ‘If we say anything now, we’re implicated in those murders.’ But I always said they knew. They said to everybody there were raccoons.”

I thought I had read Skip Mannain’s obituary last week in *The Poughkeepsie Journal* and asked Pat if he died recently.

“No, stop. Please,” she said, and I apologized. Pat distrusted journalists; she resented *The Poughkeepsie Journal* for ignoring her. This was what she would remember from our interview: that I had told her Skip Mannain, her friend, had died when he hadn’t. For a moment her body

caved inward, her head sagged and she shook. It was embarrassing to watch this transformation, in part because I had caused it. She had seemed so durable.

She said: “Don’t tell me that. His father died.”

Her tea arrived. I watched it land on the table, then looked back at Pat who was staring at me. I asked her what Gina was like.

“She was a very good child. She was sweet. She was shy, very shy, and she didn’t give me any trouble really until she got into the drugs. She started using at 15 when she met her boyfriend—Nicole’s father—then dropped out of school two years later. From there it was downhill.”

This was Gina in a few sentences. More has been said about her dead than alive, and it is strange to think, that for most of us, life is a stream of words, ending in an obituary.

“We had a good relationship,” Pat said. “Up until I had to choose whether I would keep Nicole or let Gina in the house and I had to choose. I took Gina to court to get Nicole. I had to do that, and get her away from her father too. I had the two of them up in court in Poughkeepsie and I got awarded Nicole. At the time I had no qualms about going after her, none. I mean, Gina blamed me: ‘You took my daughter blah, blah, blah.’ But I told her I had to. You couldn’t take care of her. I’ve had Nicole since she was one. Now she’s been a ride,” Pat sneered. “She doesn’t have the sweet personality that Gina had. But she loves me.”

I asked her what happened when Gina disappeared.

“I worked the whole time. I took Nikki to dancing school. I took her to day care. I worked the whole two years that she was missing. I had reporters come to my job and they used

to film me because I worked in a really small place like in a living room and they used to sit in the living room and film me on my job.”

Her tea was getting cold.

“They declared Gina dead on September 3. I went over to the house on Fulton maybe two days later. I was numb. I just sat down. I got my sister up and we all sat around the living room, like, ‘Is this possible?’ And then I called my cousin and he and his daughter—his daughter was raised with Gina—and they came over right away and we all just stood around. It was weird. And then two days Skip came back and said it was definitely her, that they had found them and that they were all identified. It was maybe a couple days after that, and the journalists were over there and one of them wanted to know how I was carrying on, why I wasn't crying. I said to them, ‘My Gina was missing two years. Don't you think I grieved my daughter two years?’ I mean how much crying can we do? They wanted to see all this emotion. Well I'm not a person that shows emotion. I was just standing there looking at the house with Liz, saying, ‘That's where she is.’

“And one of the good things about it: he killed her right away. Gina never went in that house alive. Her body went into that house. But the essence of Gina, her spirit, never entered that house. She was already dead. So that was really a good felling for me. Because I don't think I would've liked the idea of him taking her alive into that house.”

I asked her to explain.

“He killed her—you know where? The Catholic Archdiocese on the Arterial going east. He took her down in the car. She was in the car. He took her down in the back of that building and he strangled her and she was dead. She died there. Then he took her body. See, I'm a

Catholic. I believe your soul leaves your body. Her soul and her essence—that was gone. She was wherever she was going. So all he had was her body that he brought into that terrible, terrible house. Some of those girls he killed them in that house. He had her body. He brought it downstairs first. I believe he brought her downstairs. And then he brought her to the attic. And then he dismembered her. Skip had to tell me. My whole family doesn't know that. Skip had to tell me: he started to dismember Gina. But she was already dead, it was just her body.

“So it's another time now, and you can't drag this stuff around forever. My Gina. She was a wonderful child. She just wasn't mean to live her life. It's sad.

“Now your professor wants you to write this thing up?” she said.

I said that he did. Pat Barone was losing her patience, and her irritation seemed more irritable because I was nervous. And my nervousness was irritating to her because it made me sincere: I told her that I wasn't sure why we were talking. Kendall Francois was in prison and I'd never known Gina. I asked what she had gained from our conversation and she said: “Nothing. There really isn't much else to say.”

She continued: “So what're you going to do with it? What are you planning on doing with it? If you wrote a paper I wouldn't mind. I just want to know the motivation. And is it going to help you in school? Out of curiosity.”

“I think I want to be a journalist—”

“And you know, maybe you want to go be an investigative journalist and go disrupt people's lives. Because that's what you do, really.”

The week before I had told my father I wanted to write journalism because it put me in contact with a larger world. He replied: “For most of us, family becomes the world.

Opportunities to look beyond it are rare.” Pat’s loss had been opened up by journalists. For ten years she’d been mending that hole. And now, in a small way, I’d unstitched it.

Back in his office, I told my professor about the interview. “That’s good, but you are not working hard enough,” he said. I told him I hadn’t written since the interview. This story wasn’t a story. Kendall was gone and I’d already talked with Pat Barone. I had no way of contacting other victims’ families, and the Francois, as far as I knew, had changed their names and left Poughkeepsie. My professor stuck out his lips and nodded.

“Shut up,” he said. “You have to find a story.”

He reminded me that Gina had been killed at a church. He said, “Go to the church. Write what you see.”

This was becoming a story about telling a story. Or maybe a story about not telling a story. I’d encountered resistance in Pat, and what bothered me going forward was the sense I’d opened a wound. She had laid her daughter to rest. What could be left to tell. But my professor told me I had to find something, and the new story was a kind of dissonant reaction between Gina’s past and my present. In the absence of Gina’s story, my journalism would become exhibitionism: an attempt to tell her story through my attempts at telling it.

So I went to church.

It was still early when I left, about four in the afternoon: the sky was a darkening bruise. I headed west on the Arterial going east and the cars came right at me. Between traffic lights I ran through the middle of the street until I was forced onto the curb again. And eventually the space of these intervals disappeared with the sidewalk, which was buried in snow, and I made a left, looking for a less busy street.

And I was lucky to have made this turn. Having already decided this trip was tangential to the crime, that the crime itself was a kind of circle, going nowhere because there was no where to go, I wasn't expecting to find, here, what I found: the Vassar Garden Apartments. When Kendall was born on July 26, 1971, in Poughkeepsie, his parents lived in the Vassar Garden Apartments, which were small and cheap. His mother Paulette worked as a nurse at Hudson River Psychiatric Hospital. Pat Barone said that McKinley was an engineer; but an *Associated Press* article, published September 4, 1998, quoted MonRay Francois, Kendall's cousin, saying that McKinley worked in a factory. He and his wife bought 99 Fulton Avenue for \$11,500 on January 20, 1975. The assessor rated the neighborhood as "average" and the home as "normal," and in 1997, they built the garage in which Kendall would later commit his crimes. A year after his son's arrest, McKinley died at age 53. In a statement Paulette wrote: "This ordeal has caused us to lose our beloved McKinley, husband and father, whose broken heart finally yielded." He was buried in Milbrook, Dutchess County. The family left town afterwards, and as far as I know, Paulette is still alive today.

Fulton Avenue was less busy than the Arterial and I followed it two miles, before turning right at the intersection of South Hamilton and Church. Saint Mary's was a block away.

It was a small red brick building with a parking lot in back. Inside I was greeted by several women who seemed glad to see me. When I told one of them that I walked here from Vassar College, she smiled and said that I was a good Catholic. I turned to another woman and said I'd walked two miles to mass: "That's wonderful," she said. "Find some peace."

I blessed myself at the baptismal font and took a seat near the back of the church. In front of me a mother sat with her child, who had grey hair and Down's Syndrome. Her son followed as

she shook hands with neighbors, and when I held out my hand, she took it and kissed my knuckles.

Behind the altar was a mosaic of Jesus with his arms outspread. The background was an image of the Poughkeepsie Bridge. The music started—not the boom of the organ I was expecting—but a man with a clarinet and social security. An old woman next to him did the singing. I went to Catholic School through high school and the music was immediately recognizable. But I didn't know the words and felt sad to be remembering everything I had forgotten.

The priest gave the gospel, which I passed through in a stupor sent from childhood. And when the Nicene Creed began, it brought a boredom so acute I was jarred awake. Then the mass began its denouement—communion—with the coming together of blood and bread, and soon, the cross-bearer made his exit, priest in tow. It was my habit to wait for the cross and the priest to leave, this being the point at which I was allowed to leave, said my parents, and lapsing into habit, I let the priest go. By the time I'd followed him out, to ask about Gina Barone, he'd disappeared, back into his priest quarters, and I was left in the parking lot, alone amid a wake of old ladies, a puff of heat dispersing horizontally and vertically, of which I was the last lingering particle.

I walked through the parking lot.

Gina had been killed in this parking lot, in one of these parking spots. Kendall drove a red Subaru, but his car could have been any car. The horror of the crime came to mind, in response to the almost obscene understatement of this gravel patch. But then, imagining the crime, I flinched, and the parking lot came rushing back. I couldn't tell whether I was failing to

grasp something profound or mundane. I felt the cheapness of reality and the failure of imagination simultaneously. St. Mary's pulsed with the energy of a headache.

I was feeling like I'd disappointed my professor when I thought of confession. I hadn't gone in years, but having just been into church, sacraments were in the mental neighborhood. I thought, then, that a way of pinning down a priest for an interview would be reconciliation, the sacrament of reconciliation: would be asking questions inside the confessional.

In part, this bold new direction was the result of my reading at the time, Tom Wolfe's "The New Journalism." Every author in the anthology talked about "moxie," and the '70s seemed full of moxie. I had it in mind that journalism was half writing and half posturing; that journalism's worth was essentially second-hand, passed on from the page to the mouth, where it circulated in the spoken word economy—if a piece of reporting was to be worth anything, then it had to be worth talking about, and not just talk itself. The crime was no longer a story. But maybe I could make it one.

Next Saturday I walked to church.

I sat in the same spot and watched my shirt flutter above my heart. I tried to calm myself but couldn't. I wondered if it was religion or the story that was making me nervous. First I thought it was the story, and this was the guilt of abusing the story, because the story was about Gina Barone, who had been killed behind the church, and because rather than going to confession, I might have called the parish and asked a priest about the crime, and never had made this pilgrimage. This would have been more efficient, more journalistic, but then I would never have met those nice women, or walked through Poughkeepsie, or watched the weather. (That April day, the sky was like a canvas, only behind the white was a a startling blue.)

I started to worry about blasphemy, and my profaning of the sacraments.

I have never lost the Catholic's gift for guilt, his self-sacrificing stance towards it. To conduct an interview in confession was a sin. But I was in confession to repent my sins. This option was left open and I held to it sincerely, trusting the wisdom of a man who was, if not a priest, then older than me, to guide me morally and tell me to apologize. Somewhere I am still fearful and believing.

I looked behind me to the confessional. Two wooden doors, above one a circle, a filled-in halo. A walker was parked between them. I was rehearsing what I would say. "Father, I am in a difficult spot and need advice." Or: "Are you aware a woman was killed in your parking lot?" Or: "Father, I am writing about murders and wonder if I should be questioning God's will." My heart was pounding and I was sweating. A deep breath later I was up and walking towards the door, the lit door. Grabbing the brass handle I pulled. "Why, hello there," came a voice. I looked down. The priest, an old man, small even in his chair looked up at me. A light bulb dangled from the ceiling of the small room, empty except for him. He had nothing to read. "Oh, sorry," I said and closed the door. Not wanting to slam it on him, I left it slightly open, and through the crack I could still see his profile, absolutely still and facing the door. I felt as if I had opened a coffin to find a living person. Not just a living person, but someone who lived there, in the coffin, who woke from a full-time slumber to answer your sins. He was paid very little, I imagined, but given free room and board, a meal delivered daily. It was not a bad deal for a man with social security, without a family, alone. A crack of light spilled from the unclosed door. I had unmasked—or at least given face to—the disembodied voice and was finding it difficult to resume the illusion of my confession. Another deep breath, another try at the doorknob—the other doorknob—and it

was stuck. Wouldn't budge. I tried again with the same result then tracked down the altar server who was refilling the baptismal font, and whom I had seen on my previous visit. Probably, I thought, he was the youngest son of a family that had given him to the clergy.

I told him the door was stuck and he said "Um" before going to the priest's door and opening it and saying something I couldn't hear. The boy shut the door, returned to the other door, tried again. A few tugs later the door was open. I stepped inside and the coffin-metaphor seemed apt; there was something morbid about this place, a darkness that chimed with claustrophobia.

I sat down and glanced at the black screen.

"Sorry about that," I said.

A pause, or not a pause—we hadn't spoken yet. A silence emanated from the screen.

"I'm sorry," I said.

A sigh and then a voice: "That's ok. Probably our fault anyway."

Now a pause.

"Tell me how you have sinned."

I considered how to plot the conversation.

"I don't know where to start."

Nothing.

"Did you know a woman was killed in the parking lot? About 20 years ago?" I said.

Nothing.

"No questions."

But I could hear all the big questions—Why am I here? Where’s God? Who are you?
Who am I? Why did Gina die?

“I am a college student writing about a murder. It is causing me to question my faith. Do I keep writing?”

A sigh. A voice that sounded like whiskey.

“Well, it depends. What kind of questions are you asking?”

“I am questioning whether what I am doing is right.”

“It depends what you are doing. If writing about these murders is influencing your own thoughts. If the intent of writing about these murders is a murderous intent. Then yes, it is wrong.”

Silence is inherently theological. In the space of my question and his answer, indecision entered. I wondered, Where is God in the middle of this? Gina, Kendall? Me? A conversation with God feels a bit like having a camera trained on you. With all that blank airtime, you soon sense another question, more like an answer: “Where’s God?” becomes “So you're asking God?” And then—

“Many of the Church’s greatest thinkers worked through theological matters with rhetorical questions. This was a way of testing themselves. If you are asking rhetorical questions, if the intent is rhetorical and not violent, then there’s nothing wrong with what you’re doing. But I don’t know you. I’m sure there’s a guidance councilor at your school who can help you.”

“Ok.”

“Do you have anything else to confess?”

“No. That’s it.”

I left the confessional and returned to my seat where I said ten Hail Mary's. I walked up the aisle to the door and pushing found it stuck. I pulled—still stuck. I paced the hall for several minutes before an old woman came in from the street. I caught the door, said “How are you,” and left.

I went to tell my professor about the confession. Over lunch, I said: “What if I interviewed a priest in confession?” Rather than admitting to it outright, I would weigh his response, and confess in writing, later.

“That seems unnecessary,” he said without looking up from his chicken.

I nodded.

“Just talk to a priest,” he said. “Don't get distracted.”

In a gesture of repentance, I emailed a priest at St. Mary's. His name was Father George and we arranged to have lunch on Friday.

They weren't expecting me when I arrived. Father George was out, a woman told me. Then he arrived, ten minutes past noon; we shook hands, and he asked, “Want a sandwich?” I insisted I pay, but he said, “No, I'll pay,” and I insisted again, explaining I'd contacted him, that I was a journalist, and that journalists buy the sandwiches. But he waved me off, with a small hand and babyish features—Father George looked half and twice his age simultaneously—and said, “Come on. I'll buy the sandwiches.” He asked what I wanted and I said I'd have what he had. “Um,” he said. “An Italian?” Sure, I said, and he continued, “It's got salami, peppers, lettuce, tomato. On a sub.”

Forty minutes later the sandwiches arrived. In the meantime we had talked about nothing, which is to say, I explained the crimes, which he hadn't heard of, and which there was nothing to

say about after. He was shocked and saddened to know Gina had been killed behind the church. We stared at each other.

“Before we put the gate up in the 90’s, there were lots of drug deals and prostitution in the parking lot,” he said.

Father George hadn’t been at St. Mary’s long, since 2008 or so. He was from Queens. His mother was Puerto Rican and he spoke Spanish, arriving to meet the demand of Poughkeepsie’s growing Mexican population. He told me I might talk to Father John, who was Priest Emeritus of St. Mary’s. But this was the priest from confession, and since I’d unmasked myself at confession, he knew my face. Talking to him wasn’t an option.

The sandwiches arrived. We moved to the dining room. A woman set the table with paper towels and plastic forks. Father George grabbed a bottle of pineapple soda from the fridge and offered me a plastic glass, but I said it was OK.

We talked about theology. I have an hour long recording of the conversation and it’s very boring; we didn’t say anything interesting, except once, when he said that nothing can be innately evil. He said stabbing someone isn’t evil, only the intention of it, and that a surgeon could stab you in order to help you. “But Kendall Francois was pure evil,” he said.

I nodded my head, more willing to agree than disagree, but still unsure what to think. I never know what to think about good, evil, God, or truth, and this ambivalence that compels me to write. Not towards a resolution. I wouldn’t want to be opinionated, because opinions so often make others feel bad. Around the time of this interview, my dog died, and in a conversation with my brother, he said: “The dog was very gentle. He was good because he was gentle.” And this struck me—that I would like my writing to be gentle, as my dog was gentle, and that this means,

in many cases, effacing myself to seem less authorial, authoritative, because in life I am so vulnerable to figures and opinions of authority, like those of my professor, that in writing, I want to reverse this experience, to seize my life softly and without protest from anyone.

But I was trapped between my story and Gina's. Hers lingered on, while seeming increasingly present by its absence. And this was correct to the extent that, trying to tell Gina's story, I had failed, because these attempts conveyed something of her death: Gina was a mystery because she was absent. If she was absent in my writing, then it was, I suppose you could say, in service of a kind of realism. But the writerly reality was that I had failed my subject. Gina was a mystery as before, nothing of her death or life illuminated. A new desperation for answers led me along.

In March, my girlfriend and I went to Amsterdam. Initially the vacation and the crime were unrelated.

"You should be writing, not traveling," my professor said the week before. "I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't tell you not to go." He shook his head in disappointment.

I went anyway, and our first few days in Amsterdam we ate some very good meals, and on the fourth night I went to the Red Light District, the center of Amsterdam's prostitution industry. I told my girlfriend that I was going to interview some women who were also prostitutes. She frowned and began to argue, but by the time my shoes were tied she just told me to be safe.

I wrote three questions in my notebook as I walked. How long have you been doing this? How did you start? Do you wish you did something else? The street I walked along was very narrow, and melons of light hung from a wire above. The lights went down the middle of the

street, ending at the intersection of a canal. I didn't notice the quiet until it was gone, and snippets of Dutch and Italian came drifting across the water, the debris of intelligibility, like a kind of smoke.

I found the Red Light District in an alleyway about ten feet wide. Suddenly I was surrounded by hundreds of men wading through a syrupy red light. On either side were tall windows with women behind them, dressed in only their underclothes. The booths were lit by an ultraviolet light that bleached their skin, and the women were literally radiant. Men walked slowly across the windows. "I didn't drag you here," one American told another. I felt embarrassed.

I kept walking until I passed an empty street. Above, the roofs were a pattern of ups and down, of bricks, tiles, chimneys, and clotheslines, but below, a wall of identical red windows collapsed all difference. The windows seemed specifically designed in emulation of a dollhouse. The red light did away with all shadows, and the impression was that of looking into a box: had there been furnishing it would have resembled an interior design catalogue. But this wasn't the kind of catalogue it was. It was more like a toy catalogue, and the awfulness of the effect was clear from the lengths its owners had gone to render it: the tall plastic-wrap windows, the tiny box of a room, the ubiquitous blonde hair and bangs. I watched a tall black man walk up to the window of a tall blonde woman and spread his body like an X across it. She looked back expressionless and kept the door closed. When he left the street was desolate again, humming with red light. For a moment I was the only one there and the sound of knocking trickled after me. Then I turned around and walked up to one of the windows, approaching at an angle so that I wouldn't see the occupant, and stopped at the doormat of red light. She was sitting on a bench in

the back of a room. The room was red and the bench was red. There were no shadows. She looked at me. She had a nose slightly like Gina's. She nodded. She moved quickly. She nearly ran, hooking her hand around the doorframe and swinging into the adjacent room, catching herself against the glass. She was blonde and had had plastic surgery. She opened the door.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” I said. “How are you?”

“Would you like to come in?” she asked.

Her accent was Eastern European. There was another woman, too, pushed into the corner against the glass.

“Fifteen euro five minutes?” I said.

“No, baby. Fifty euro is the price. Not fifteen.”

She had already begun to close the door—

“Five minutes? Anyone?”

She closed the door.

I walked away embarrassed. She probably thought I was trying to haggle, when really I didn't have fifty euro for an interview. I returned to the canal hoping no one had seen me. I had twenty minutes before my girlfriend expected me home.

My tape recorder had been running in my front pocket. Listening now, after the—what to call it? conversation? dialogue? exchange? encounter?—I hear footsteps. In front of them, the noise of the recorder knocking against my jacket, smudges of sound that stop when I stop to watch the city. Crowds, bicycles, Dutch, Italian. A church bell blaring through the night.

Airplane.

The footsteps pick up again, faster now. I can hear myself singing to myself, an old habit, in which, compelled by some embarrassment I refuse to think of, and thinking of it, I sing. The embarrassment was me. Was this desperate adventure called Story. And listening to myself sing I start singing until I stop singing on tape. After that I stop singing. And then the recorder is flush with sound and nothing is discernible. At that moment I know exactly where I am, was—I had stumbled into the pounding heart of the Red Light District. It was the reddest place I have ever been—the reddest place I can remember—a red crosshair seen from space. The crowd seethed with red, like a poppy field.

I was beginning to think Gina had been lost. In the story so far she'd appeared so few times. Her trail was elliptical. I had thought interviewing a prostitute might explain some part of her life. But the solicitation, even as interview, felt predatory, and I was disturbed by this new parallel between Kendall and myself. But I didn't know what else to do. My options were limited. I couldn't email Pat again. Yet it was only because she'd talked to me that I was writing about Gina. The door had opened and closed as it opened.

I walked around some more and decided to try again. Another empty street of windows. Making one pass, I turned around, stopping at the nearest door.

"Hi, baby," said a middle-aged black woman with dreadlocks and an accent I didn't recognize.

"Fifteen euro five minutes?"

"How much?" she asked.

"Fifteen euro five minutes." I said.

"Fifty-euro."

“Fif-teen eur-o.” I sounded out the syllables. “Fifteen euro for five min—

“Where you from?”

“California.”

She considered this.

“Fifty.”

“Fifteen for five minutes.”

“Naw, fifty.”

“I just wanna ask questions.”

She shook her head.

“No? Can you show me the room?”

Her threw her braids back and forth.

“Fifty euro.” she said.

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, OK. Bye.”

Behind me I heard a man laughing. But when I turned around he was gone. The laughter echoed and grew and embarrassed me. It caught the frequency of Kendall’s life, which had itself been humorous, if humor is to be defined as the spectacular failure of expectations: when you are surprised by what shouldn’t surprise you. Friends remember a man that liked to laugh. But for Kendall, it was life that would have been humorous. He tried to leave Poughkeepsie behind, but kept finding it, here, in front of him. He grew up overweight and teased—teachers remembered an average, shy student—and in 1989 left Poughkeepsie to join the army. He wanted to save money for college and to be a middle school science teacher.

“I don't think I've ever had a real friend in my life,” he said in an interview with the journalist Claudia Rowe.

Three years later he was discharged for obesity. He returned to Poughkeepsie, to Arlington Middle School, where he'd been a student eight years before, now a janitor, sweeping floors, living at home.

“The gateway to Hell is somewhere in this town.”

In 1993 he began picking up prostitutes. Three years later he began killing them.

“I don't want to talk about that time,” he whispered.

He met Gina Barone on the street. She “trusted him,” Pat said, and in November 1996, Kendall drove her to St. Mary's.

“It's not like I was killing saints.”

Kendall's crime had written over Gina's life. Looking for Gina in Amsterdam I'd ended up writing about her killer. Almost, this continued snubbing out of Gina's life implied the existence of a story. As if, beneath Kendall there would be Gina. But there was no getting to the bottom. Gina's story can no longer be told. Behind the laugh was silence.

I returned to Poughkeepsie on March 31.

The next day, I rented a car and drove to St. Peter's Cemetery, where Gina is buried. The cemetery is three miles north of Poughkeepsie, near Hyde Park, where Franklin Roosevelt took his vacations.

I got lost on the way and pulled into a gas station to ask directions.

“Beef or salami?” the woman at the counter asked.

“Hi, I'm just wondering where St. Peter's is.”

She looked behind her to the woman at the grill.

“Sally, where’s St. Peter’s?”

“Back down the turnpike on the right,” Sally said.

The woman turned back to me.

“Back down the turnpike.”

I turned the car around and drove to St. Peter’s. Through the gates the road parted around islands of graves, snaking its way towards a building in the far corner of the cemetery. The air was quiet except for the pattering of a small truck.

“Can I help you?” said the woman at the reception desk.

Her hair was bluish-grey and pulled into a bun. She looked about 60.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m here about a *New York Times* article written in the 90’s.”

Her face hardened. The New York Time article I had in mind was “Our Towns; Symbol of a Too-Hard, Too-Fast, Too-Short Life,” published September 17, 1998. The story began with Michael Miller, a gravedigger at St. Peter’s Cemetery. He had just buried Catina Newmaster and was on a break, smoking a cigarette. “These people don’t have a way out,” he said. “They have no knowledge or education and they’ve got to survive. They’re all nice people. They just got tied up in a hard life.” I was hoping Mike Miller still worked at St. Peter’s.

Recently I typed “St. Peter’s Poughkeepsie New York Times” into Google and found a different story, which might have explained the woman’s brusque reaction. On December 1, 1995, *The New York Times* published “Gravediggers’ Claims Unsettle a Parish.”

“Three gravediggers have come forward to say that, on orders from supervisors, they customarily took miscarried fetuses and amputated limbs from the local Catholic hospital and

buried them, not in a discrete spot, but in the freshly dug graves of people who bore no relation either to the fetus or the limb.”

The woman in the office was still scowling when I said: “Do you remember a man named Kendall Francois?”

She relaxed a bit and said, yes, she remembered. I explained that several of the women he killed had been buried at St. Peter’s. I was looking for Mike Miller, the gravedigger.

“Well, hon,” she began. Her name was Mary and her voice was soft and clear. As she told me about Mike Miller, who had retired last year, I wrote in my notebook: “Very good speaker. Take note.” I asked some questions but they were strained and unnatural. I said “thank you” and “sorry” too much while we talked, or tried to talk, about Gina, who had been buried in St. Peter’s on September 21, 1998, in a coffin lined with concrete. The wood, Mary said, would rot through to the body otherwise. In her soft voice, she told me that weekend burials were more expensive than weekday, and that memorial options ranged from their “slant stone grave” to interment in the mausoleum. The phone rang. “I’d better take that,” she said, and left. I took a picture of the pricing chart. “Single grave: \$950. Winter Removals: \$200.”

After ten minutes she came back. She said that was a family whose one year old had just died. “Don’t think your son isn’t going to be first in line,” she said. We frowned together and I asked how long she’d worked at St. Peter’s.

“Since 1999,” she said. In 1995 she had moved into the house on cemetery with her husband, who was a pastor. She said she liked to help.

I asked her if she would show me Gina's grave. Mary opened a filing cabinet and pulled out a map of the cemetery and a records sheet. Bodies are filed by time of death; Gina Barone was declared dead on September 3, 1998, and buried in Section 21, Range 8, Grave 2.

On the map she drew a line between Gina's grave and me. North of the office was the word "Wetlands" and a series of concentric squiggly lines, with asterisks for foliage in-between. South was the graveyard. The graves were ordered like city blocks, and I would go two blocks south, past the Mausoleum, then make a right. "Count up eight rows," she said. "That'll be Range 8." Then she drew four rectangles. She drew a cross over each of them, but, crunching through the snow, I didn't see any crosses. Gina's grave was half-covered in snow. Two roses were engraved in the top corners and salt had eroded the right one, such that even the gravestone seemed gradually to be turning into stone. I was standing directly above Gina's body when I noticed the pure quiet, the absence of engine, and turned around to see the black pickup truck parked at Range 8. The driver had blue sunglasses.

"I'm looking for Mike Miller," I said.

He was silent.

"Do you know him?" I asked.

"Yeah, he worked here," the man mumbled. A shovel was in the passenger's seat.

"Do you know who Kendall Francois was?" I said. My words went on and on through the quiet. But his words seemed to end inches before his face. He spoke to the air more than he spoke to me.

"He killed 8 women in the 90's."

The man nodded slowly.

“He strangled them and kept them in his house.”

He lifted his eyebrows.

“They were there two years.”

He nodded.

“Gina Barone was one of them.”

“I remember,” he said.

“And Mike Miller buried her.”

“Yes.”

“Here.”

“Right.”

“That’s Gina.”

I pointed.

“Ok,” he said.

I felt angry because he didn’t care.

“Well, if you see him, tell him I’d like to meet him.”

“Sure,” he said.

The ignition fired.

Since meeting him I have wondered why I remember him. I think now that he was the most bored person I have ever met. I had never been so close to such indifference. I reacted with corresponding sadness. He must be sad, I thought. He had to be sad. It was so sad that he wasn’t sad.

I kicked away the ice around Gina's grave. Then I used my hands to dig a moat around it. Her life came into view, "1968-1996," where the hyphen was a cross, and with my thumb I carved out the numbers. I was still digging when suddenly I felt a prick. I drew back and saw a red hair bow. I spread my hands in the snow, shoveling out with my knuckles, and closed them on a bushel of roses. I pulled it from the ground like a weed. The cold had preserved the flowers and some petals were still intact. In the open air they began to fall, until there was red all over the white. I knew whatever I wrote would be inadequate to what lay below me. So I pressed a sheet of paper against the rock and, running my pen back and forth, tried to preserve it. But in my effort, the paper tore, the pen went through it, and the nib scratched the stone.

In the car I turned the heat on full blast. I got back on the turnpike and headed north to Barre Memorials, Dutchess County's leading grave manufacturer. It was my first time in Hyde Park and what struck me were the thousands of dead trees.

The drive took ten minutes. Barre Memorials was obvious because the sign was made of granite and the lawn was covered in graves. A bell rang as I walked in. The woman inside was on the phone. She mouthed "Be right with you" and I stood in the other room, taking pictures while I waited. Basketball made of granite. Crucifix made of granite. Doorstop made of granite. Doorstop engraved with two roses. Doorstop that was a grave—Gina's grave, I realized. Her name had been erased.

"Slant stone," the woman said.

She leaned against the doorframe which divided this room from that room. It was a slightly seductive posture that had no effect on either of us. She was in her 50s and pale like

marble; I could see the veins clouded beneath her skin. She was from Vermont, I soon learned, and her father and five brothers were all on the memorial business.

I said I'd just been to St. Peter's where I had seen a grave exactly like her doorstep. She told me graves came in stock patterns, but were variable in themselves. When the engraving was done by hand, each memorial came with original defects. Like people, she said. But the process had since been computerized, and now an automated sandblaster handled intricacies.

She showed me some picture of where she was from, a town called Barre, near the granite quarry that supplied her business. The quarry was all edges and rectangles, emerging from the cliffs, a city built in reverse. Granite was cut block by huge block and delivered to Barre Memorials and stored next-door in the garage, where her husband cut it to pieces. Sanded it. Polished it.

Then a someone whose someone had died came to the shop. The woman gave them a binder of designs to look at. Crosses were a motif and most graves looked like tattoos. Pat Barone bought the cheapest grave, but paid extra for the roses. And I remembered the frozen roses, and she must have liked roses.

I thought that seeing how Gina's grave was made would give some substance to who she was. Seeing her grave would make a story. Craft a narrative. A climax in the curves of the road. A denouement carved in stone. To have a grave was to have resolution, I thought. But the grave was just a job for someone I didn't know, for someone her mother didn't know, for someone no one knew. For a computer. For a gravedigger who dug holes, not graves. In the end, Gina's life was a doorstep in Hyde Park. I walked out the door.

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MonRay Francois is the last Francois in Dutchess County. I found him online, the moderator of a Facebook group: “MonRay’s Muscle Confusion Fanatics.” In the picture he is wearing spandex shorts and a transparent shirt. His knees are bent; he is dancing, pumping his fists. I wrote MonRay an email about the class. “I don’t have any experience dancing or doing group aerobic exercise,” I said. “Should this be a problem?” Within an hour he had replied: “You don’t need experience. You will pick it up. It’s not aerobics. Muscle Confusion is a cardio based dance class. Everything is made up on the spot. Bring towel.”

It was May 7 and five in the evening when I biked past Kendall’s house. I couldn’t put the two together, this man who killed eight women and his cousin’s dance class. The fact I didn’t want to go dancing first suggested it was irrelevant. Then, the fact that I no longer wanted to write about Kendall or Gina or the crime suggested my idea of relevance was irrelevant.

But I did not want to go dancing. I had never danced aerobically, and MonRay’s dance class looked like some combination of stamina, flexibility, and age I didn’t have. In the pictures the only participants were middle-aged women, and this made me so nervous, thinking I’d be so conspicuous, that weeks before going, I began telling my friends I’d already gone. I said: “Hey, I went to an aerobic dance class run by a serial killer’s cousin,” and if they laughed, then the story would be worth it. And my professor did laugh, imagining me, dancing, and I had to go.

The Facebook group said class was at six at the APJ Boxing Club in downtown Poughkeepsie, behind Catherine Street in a courtyard. Around me the walls rose three hundred feet straight into the sun. It was the architectural equivalent of palindrome: looking up, shadow framing light; looking down, light framing shadow.

The gym was an abandoned building with people in it. The floor was covered in plaster and the brick walls were crumbling. At the front desk, a man staring at a chess board told me to sign in, and then asked me if I wanted to go a round.

“What?” I said.

“Chess,” he said.

We set the board and I had to ask if the bishop went where the knight was or if the knight went where the bishop was.

“You hustling me?” he asked.

“No, I really don’t know.”

We began playing and when I lost, he told me: “You didn’t hold the line,” he said. “You got distracted.”

MonRay walked in holding a speaker set. I got up to introduce myself. In the photos he looked fun, but in person he was stern. He just nodded and told me to take off my shoes.

The boxing ring was at the end of the room and next to it were five slightly overweight women. I introduced myself to Susan, Kim, and Cheryl. Then MonRay stepped into the ring with such gravity that we stopped talking and I never met the others. He started the boom-box, just a bass-machine really, and stood with his head down in the middle of the ring, which was amplifying the bass with its own springiness. We got in rows and somehow I landed in front, next to MonRay. He started bouncing his hips left and right. I bounced with him. Suddenly he clapped his hands and spun towards me. I spun out of the way, in the same direction, one, two, three times, and on the count of four we clapped our hands and reversed. Then he was waving his arms. Then he was yelling.

“Push!” he ordered.

There were mirrors in front of us and I saw Susan behind me. Susan is 61 and much more flexible than I am. She was Monray’s favorite fanatic, and he stepped out of the group to watch her. “That’s it, Susan,” he said as she swung her hair in circles.

“Move it, ladies!” he screamed.

And he told me to shake it, so I shook it.

He told me to march, and I marched.

Punches, kicks, presses, lunges. Pelvic thrusts. Gluteus to the maximus.

Kim was shrieking. “Oh my God!” she said. “Oh my god!” We were doing something involving our hands and legs and a less than forty-five degree angle, and I could see Kim’s stomach hanging from her shirt, covered in scars.

Then we were on the ground, trying to touch the top of our heads with the back of our feet. A second later MonRay was up off the floor and into the air. I could see the bulging whites of his eyes, the smile like a grimace.

Then it was over.

I’d sweated all over the mat and left footprints. MonRay started peddling water bottles for a dollar each. Susan, the 61 year old, told me I’d done great and that I should find her on Facebook. Cheryl patted me on the back.

I waited ten minutes until Monray and I were the only ones left, then offered to carry his stereo to his car.

“Thanks,” he said, as I dropped it in the backseat.

And I said: “I was hoping you could tell me about your cousin Kendall.”

His eyes widened, and the resemblance was obvious. The Francois' had green eyes and flat noses. Monray, Kendall, his sister Raquelle, and his brother Aubrey, each looked this way. Kierstyn, his sister, looked less like the others, and more like her mother, Paulette, both of whom were skinnier, all of whom were on Facebook. Allegedly, the family vanished after Kendall's arrest. Pat said they changed their names. But they didn't. In 1999 They moved to Hyattsville, Maryland, and in 2005 to Denver, Colorado. In 2010 Aubrey left Denver for Portland, where he now works as a software engineer. He is married and has two kids. I thought about contacting him, as I had contacted Pat.

MonRay said: "I don't talk about that anymore."

He closed the trunk, started the car, and left.

I went back to the gym, where the chess guy asked me if I wanted to play another round. "I'm alright," I said, and grabbed my backpack. My bike was in the courtyard, locked to a broken treadmill. It was dark when I left, about eight in the evening. I could barely see Fulton Avenue.

When I got home I made dinner. Then I wrote 150 words. I emailed my professor to tell him I'd sent Aubrey a letter, even though I hadn't. And before bed, I read some news about the Big Bang which created our universe. Everything is expanding, the news said. Relatively, we are all getting farther apart.