A MURDER OVER A GIRL

JUSTICE, GENDER, JUNIOR HIGH

KEN CORBETT



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PART ONE

MURDER

Behind Me

Have you tried not to think about this at all until today?

Yes.

Is this really hard for you?

Yes.

Did you see Brandon when he came into the courtroom this morning?

Yes.

You saw the same person that you saw shoot Larry King?

Yes.

Yes? Where is he sitting?—I know—I'm not going to ask you to look at him. But can you tell me where he is sitting?

Behind me.

Deep breath. Where?

Behind me.

Mariah Thompson had come to testify in *The People of the State of California v. Brandon David McInerney*. Three years earlier, on February 12, 2008, fourteen-year-old Brandon shot fifteen-year-old Lawrence "Larry" Fobes King twice in the back of the head, during their first-period English class at E. O. Green Junior High in Oxnard, California.

On this, the second day of the trial, July 6, 2011, Brandon stood accused of first-degree murder, lying in wait, and a hate crime. The hate was said to be gender hate. Larry King had begun referring to himself as a girl a few days before he was killed, and it was alleged by the Ventura County district attorney that Brandon killed Larry "because of his perceived gender or sexual orientation."

The bailiff, Los Angeles district deputy sheriff Mike Anton, met Mariah at the main door to Courtroom F51 of the Superior Court of the State of California, Los Angeles County, Chatsworth, California. Room F51 was a windowless, though brightly lit, sage-green box. It had been built for wear: plastic wood veneers, poorly padded folding seats, concrete floors. Even the sparse carpeting was made to endure, not bounce.

Mariah had been a classmate of Larry King and Brandon Mc-Inerney, and an eyewitness to the shooting. Sheriff Anton offered his hand to guide her to the witness stand. She did not look up as she walked past the visitors' gallery toward the well of the court. Sheriff Anton opened a small gate in the waist-high wall that divided the gallery from the well, and gently directed Mariah between the tables used by the prosecution and the defense teams.

Wearing a white cotton sundress and black ballet flats, she recoiled, even as she advanced, walking with her head bent forward, her shoulders rounded into her round frame. She made no eye contact. She stopped a few feet before the judge's bench. She tugged at the edge of her salmon-colored cardigan sweater.

The judge, the Honorable Charles W. Campbell, sat at his imposing bench, above Mariah. The clerk of the court, the record keeper, and her assistant sat at a long desk, perpendicular to the judge's bench, on the right. The court reporter sat just below the judge, not far from where Mariah stood. The jury was seated on a three-row riser, to Mariah's left.

Sheriff Anton instructed Mariah to raise her right hand and face the clerk. Mariah did not turn, nor did she look toward the clerk. She did, though, raise her hand barely above her hip.

Holding a Bible, Madame Clerk asked, "Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give in the case now pending before this court is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

Mariah nodded and was sworn in.

With Sheriff Anton's help, she made her way up a single step to the witness stand, a small perch sandwiched between the judge's bench and the jury box.

Mariah sat hunched on the edge of the brown upholstered chair, the sort one might see in an office cubicle. Sheriff Anton, the unerring butler of the courtroom, ran his hand over the rail, as if to demonstrate that Mariah was protected. She stated her first name and spelled it. She looked, for the first time, out at the room.

FIFTY-SEVEN PEOPLE HAD GATHERED. THE judge, businesslike and patrician, could have just as easily been sitting at the head of a conference table in a corporate boardroom, his wavy silver hair carefully combed. Joining him at the front of the room were the patient women who ran the proceedings: the clerk, her assistant, and the court reporter.

There were twelve jurors. Nine women, three men. Eight wore wedding rings. Nine were white. Three were brown. During jury selection, three had indicated that they were retired; they were formerly a businessman, a career military man, and a social worker. Seven, all of them women, had reported that they were of middle age: three housewives, two nurses, one teacher, one office worker. Two of the jurors were younger: a female college student and a young man who worked in his family's business. Two were fathers. Seven were mothers.

The prosecution and the defense teams also sat in the well. Leading the prosecution was Deputy District Attorney Maeve Fox, a petite woman who wore the kind of suits women wear to formal lunches in fashion magazines. She was focused on her notes and did not look up as she stacked folders and arranged three-ring binders. Her habit of order comically collided with the disorganization of her investigator, Robert Coughlin, who sat next to Ms. Fox and seemed to be looking for something that had gone missing.

Heading up the defense was Scott Wippert, whose belt was as tight as he could cinch it, yet he still had to hitch up his pants. (I would later learn that he had lost ten pounds as he prepared for the trial.) Mr. Wippert was leafing through a yellow legal pad, making notes. Like Ms. Fox, he did not look up.

Robyn Bramson, the defense co-counsel, a freshman litigator, looked around the room. She squinted and squirmed. Kathryn Lestelle, the defense investigator, sat at the edge of the table, struggling to gather the tangled nests that were her hair and her notes.

Just before Mariah entered the room, Brandon had been escorted from a door on the right-hand side of the courtroom, a doorway that led to the holding cell in which he had been waiting. Two deputy sheriffs, broad men in khaki uniforms, had walked alongside him as he took his seat. Brandon was wearing civilian clothing: gray slacks, a light blue oxford-cloth shirt, and square-toed black shoes. He did not look toward the visitors' gallery. It was difficult at first to see his face, although it was not hard to see that he was taller than the sheriffs who accompanied him. Brandon now sat between Mr. Wippert and Ms. Bramson.

In the gallery, the press sat in a row of four single-file seats. Each chair was full: two local print journalists (Zeke Barlow from the *Ventura County Star* and Catherine Saillant from the *Los Angeles Times*) and two local television reporters (Christina Gonzales, FOX LA; and Amy Johnson, KCBS/KCAL).

The main visitors' gallery comprised five rows of eight seats each. Three retired attorneys, with three bald spots, sat in the front row. Four members of the McInerney family sat in the second row, behind the defense team: Kendra McInerney, Brandon's mother, tall like her son, wore a black-and-white sundress, with sandals. Her long blonde hair was streaked with gray and looked perpetually wet, as if she had just come from the beach. Seated to her right was her friend Nancy who dressed in men's work clothes and wore her black hair in a tight braid. She could have been the handsome Indian in a Hollywood movie from the 1940s, save for the fact that she had PAYASO GUETO (ghetto clown) tattooed on her neck. Shannon Mulhardt, Brandon's aunt, his father's sister, also sat close to Kendra. A family friend sat next to Ms. Mulhardt. Both of them looked like the settled suburban sisters of the less domesticated Kendra and Nancy.

The King family sat in the third row: Greg King, Larry's adoptive father, sat in the aisle seat, a red-faced man who looked over his glasses toward the well of the court. Whenever there was a break in the proceedings, he was the first out of his seat, reaching for his cigarettes as he hit the door. Dawn King, Larry's adoptive mother, struggled to settle in her seat, fiddling with her handbag and adjusting her necklaces. Dawn sat next to her mother, Sharon Townsend, Larry's adoptive maternal grandmother, a trim, unadorned contrast to her daughter. Larry's biological brother, Rocky, a long-limbed thirteen-year-old, sat still next to his grandmother. And next to Rocky sat Larry's adoptive uncle, Greg's brother. I never heard him speak, and I never learned his name.

The fourth and fifth rows were unofficially reserved for various family members and friends who had accompanied witnesses to the court. Witnesses were required to wait in the outer hallway until they were called into the courtroom. Today, the second day of the trial, Mariah's father and stepmother were in the fourth row, along with three other mothers who had come with their children, all of whom had been eyewitnesses to the shooting and would testify later that day. The back row included five more family members who had come to support their kin.

I sat in the second row of the visitors' gallery, two seats to the left of Kendra McInerney. I was one of three people who were there to observe the proceedings, for various projects on which we were working. I am a psychologist and had come to observe the trial as part of my research for writing this book. Sitting to my left was my friend Gayle Salamon, a professor at Princeton University, who was researching a book about how gender and sexuality were emobied at E. O. Green and in the courtroom. Marta Cunningham, a documentarian who was collecting data and interviews for her film *Valentine Road*, sat behind us, in the third row.

Sheriff Anton and his two deputies were stationed at a small desk near the jury. Two other deputies were stationed in the back of the courtroom, near the main entry.

AS MARIAH LOOKED OUT UPON the room, I doubt that she took in all the different people, for as quickly as she looked up, she lowered her head again, and began to weep. Fear illuminated Mariah's pale skin and blue eyes.

Deputy DA Fox, leading the prosecution, instructed Mariah to breathe. Ms. Fox offered to delay the questioning. She asked if Mariah might like to have one of her parents join her on the stand. Judge Campbell reiterated those offers. Mariah caught her breath, and said that she could go on.

Led by Ms. Fox's questions, Mariah described Larry King as a "skinny-ish" brown boy who was "out there" but "seemed happy." She smiled warmly when she said this. It was as if the smile had escaped. Then she explained that a month before Larry was killed, he had begun "dressing up." He wore high heels, makeup, and earrings to school. By Mariah's account, Larry was often teased and called names like "gay" and "fag." Yes, Larry would react to the teasing, sometimes taunting in return, but Mariah thought such rejoinders were always provoked.

Ms. Fox shifted her questions, and her focus, to the accused murderer. Mariah told us that she shared two classes, PE and English, with the defendant, Brandon McInerney. Mariah recounted how she had observed Brandon, along with her other classmates, teasing Larry. Careful to include Brandon in a group, Mariah did not name Brandon

as a lone bully. She did not even have a clear recollection of seeing Larry and Brandon interact, one-to-one.

Mariah glanced at Brandon. Just as quickly, she returned her gaze to her hands, worrying a tissue in her lap. She smiled. Again, the smile quivered, and was quickly checked. Ms. Fox asked if kids said things to Larry like "You're so gay. Why do you dress like a girl?" Mariah quietly said, "Yes." She dared another glance at Brandon.

Moving quickly, as we would learn was her style, Ms. Fox turned to the day of the murder, February 12, 2008, and the classroom at E. O. Green Junior High School, where the murder took place. Using an aerial diagram of the school, Ms. Fox asked Mariah to identify the classroom and to confirm where she had been sitting on the morning in question. Mariah hesitated, and Ms. Fox repeated the question. As Mariah pointed at the diagram, she began to cry.

Sheriff Anton offered tissues and water. Mariah took the tissues, leaving the water bottle unopened on the edge of the witness stand. Calmed, she went ahead to describe how twenty-eight students had started off the school day together in their homeroom, where they stayed for about fifteen minutes before walking together to the computer lab to work on research papers. Mariah's paper was about Anne Frank.

Twenty minutes after the class had settled into the computer lab, Mariah turned away from her computer to ask a friend a question.

"What did you see? What happened?" Ms. Fox asked.

Mariah looked sidelong at Brandon, then back at Ms. Fox, who repeated the question. Mariah lowered her head. Her shoulder-length red-blonde hair fell forward. She attempted to push it back, but strands of hair caught in the corners of her mouth.

Mariah was by then seventeen years old. It was not difficult, though, to see her at fourteen, her age when she watched fourteen-year-old Brandon become a murderer and fifteen-year-old Larry leave life. Flush with emotion, caught in the magnifying lens of the witness stand, Mariah began to tremble. Terror emerged from her eyes and unfurled across her body.

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She was not alone. When Mariah entered the room, she brought murder with her. It was with us all. One juror, a trim, elderly man, leaned forward and put his head in his hands. Two jurors wept.

To my right, Brandon's mother, Kendra, sobbed. She held a tissue to her nose, but it had given way, and her hands were wet. She struggled to breathe. As her gasps accelerated, I began to think through the medical response to a panic attack. (We might need a small brown paper bag for her.) Someone in the visitors' gallery said, "No!" not loudly enough to fill the room, but loudly enough to breach the court's instructed silence. The court reporter bowed her head. Larry's grandmother, Dawn King's mother, Sharon Townsend, put her hand on her forehead and then reached out to touch the shoulder of Larry's younger brother, Rocky.

Ms. Fox offered Mariah a break. She asked if Mariah might wish to move her chair so that her back would be turned to Brandon. Mariah did not respond.

Judge Campbell ordered a twenty-minute recess. Time would be reset. His order was kind but firm. He was not going to be insensitive to emotion. There would, however, be a limit to its interference and to his willingness to indulge it. Judge Campbell explained that when the proceedings reconvened, one of Mariah's parents would join her on the stand. The judge excused her, and Sheriff Anton helped her exit the witness stand and walk to her parents, who met her at the gate that separated the well from the visitors' gallery. Looking frightened, Mariah's father put his arm around her and led her from the room.

Brandon had remained motionless throughout Mariah's testimony, head down, shoulders loose. He'd stared at the edge of the table and at the water bottle he occasionally tipped on its side. After the recess was called, he rose from his chair with his defense team. He turned to face the visitors' gallery as the jurors filed out. He stood with his hands folded, as if he were in a receiving line. The pose looked coached. So, too, had Brandon's long brown hair been coached and combed in the manner of an Eton schoolboy. His social performance was as new and stiff as his shoes. The following week, Samantha Criner, Brandon's girlfriend,

would testify that she had never seen him with long hair. "Gosh! He's never looked like that," she exclaimed. "I always wanted to see him with long hair, but he never would, you know. Buzzed, it was always buzzed."

Brandon was "a handsome boy." Most everyone said so. He was pale, prison porcelain, with gray eyes shadowed by a strong brow. His small chin, his thin mouth (it could have been drawn with two quick pencil strokes) were just the right element of flaw. At six foot three, he towered over his lawyers. His muscles pushed against the seams of his extra large shirt that sought to cover the evidence.

Two deputies escorted Brandon from the courtroom to his holding cell.

I walked to the bathroom. I went to the sink and began splashing my face with cold water. I put my glasses back on and looked in the mirror, taking in my short gray hair and the bags under my eyes. A thin man, I am often taken to be younger than I am. But as I looked at my reflection, I did not see much that spoke of youth. I thought about my father's father, who was fifty-seven years old when I was born. In my eyes, he had always been old. I myself was fifty-seven as I stood in front of the mirror. I was ten when my grandfather died. His death was my first. I had had to be ushered from the funeral, in tears.

As I stood at the sink, Zeke Barlow, the reporter from the *Ventura County Star*, came in, used the urinal, washed his hands, and began to pace. Zeke, whom I had met the day before, looked at me and asked, "Dude, you all right?"

"Barely," I said.

An elderly gentleman, unknown to me, walked to the urinal. And, as if he were speaking to himself or rhetorically to the room, the stranger said, "How could he?"

JUDGE CAMPBELL RECALLED MARIAH TO the witness stand. During the recess, her chair had been turned so her back was to Brandon. Mariah's angry-eyed stepmother joined her on the witness stand, sitting behind her, looking out over Mariah's right shoulder.

Ms. Fox asked Mariah more questions about the shooting, questions that would be asked over and over during the first few days of the trial. Mariah's answers were similar to the answers that would be given by all the eyewitnesses. Each would report the same basic sequence of events, the same baseline perceptions, and the same matters of fact. Their perceptions, however, gathered and diverged in distinctive ways. Their reports were unique, in detail and in torment.

Mariah, for example, told us that she made eye contact with Brandon as he dropped the gun and turned to leave the computer room. Together, they were the first to see who he had become.

Along with her classmates, Mariah heard both gunshots, but, unlike most, she saw the gun. "It was black, and it was like . . . I don't know how to explain it. It was like a little hand. It was little. It was black."

She could not recall seeing Larry slip from conscious life. Asked if she saw Larry fall, as she had reported to a police officer on the day of the shooting, she said, "I don't remember that much." Mostly she remembered "looking at Brandon, then running."

Mariah had come to the witness stand unprepared to see what she was going to see. In an e-mail exchange following the trial, she wrote to me, "Testifying alone wasn't easy because I never talk about it." "Alone" certainly captured what we saw: a terrified young girl, cornered in her own mind.

Forced to talk about that which she never talked about, Mariah brought us her unformulated, unarticulated experience. She took us outside of words. Language gave up. We moved with her into a frantic suffering that overtook what she saw. She did not so much describe the murder as relive it.

BY THE TIME MARIAH CAME before us, we had listened on the first day of the trial, July 5, 2011, to the opening statements by the attorneys and a half day of testimony. We had heard from grown-ups: authorities, well-groomed men in suits and ties. Each in turn took to the witness

stand with three-ring binders and answered the attorneys' questions with sober precision.

We heard first from Detective Bernard Chase, a man with white hair and a goatee, who had worked homicide cases for thirty years. He calmly described the crime scene, point by point, showing us photos of a cluttered corner of a classroom. Blood pooled on a black-and-white checkerboard floor. There was an overturned blue plastic chair, as well as an upright but askew red plastic chair. (Or was that the blue chair? I struggled to recollect, even as I saw.) Strewn across the floor were a brown backpack, blood-soaked paper towels, three books (one green, one tan, one red), and some scattered papers. What seemed to be a pile of rags were in fact Larry's clothes, cut and torn in the haste of emergency. His black-and-orange sneakers had come to rest along the baseboard. Blood smeared on the floor had begun to dry and turn brown. The gun was an indistinct black blur on a bookshelf. Detective Chase explained that a first responder, concerned about safety, had picked up the gun from the floor and put it on the shelf.

We heard next from the lead detective, Jeff Kay, a studious young man with close-cropped hair and close-set eyes. Detective Kay carefully arranged his four large three-ring binders on the edge of the witness stand and answered Ms. Fox's questions about the gun. Detective Kay told us that the gun had been fired twice and had then jammed. It was not clear if it jammed as Brandon attempted to fire it a third time or if it jammed when he dropped the gun on the classroom floor.

Referring to his notes, Detective Kay went on to explain that the gun was an "RD 23, a small caliber handgun, that was made in Florida in 1979, the same year that it was sold to a Mr. George Gay." Beyond that, "no history" was known; efforts to trace the gun "through the ATF went cold," Detective Kay said. "The gun has been around for a long time" he continued, "and clearly, the defendant took the gun from his home; he told us that. But we do not know whose it was, or how long they had it."

"Well, how did Mr. McInerney get it?" Ms. Fox asked.

"We don't know. He has not said. But there were a lot of guns in that house," Detective Kay said.

He went on to detail the search of the McInerney home on the day of the shooting. His officers seized fifteen guns, mainly from an unlocked gun closet: handguns and rifles. Throughout the house, the officers found guns, gun paraphernalia, firearm references, gun-related resource materials, boxes and plastic bags filled with ammunition of different calibers, gun-cleaning supplies, a newspaper clipping of the Virginia Tech shooting, a DVD titled *Tactical Readiness: Shooting in Realistic Environments*, a loaded handgun in a bedside table drawer, a gun holster inside a laundry bin.

Following Ms. Fox's questions, Detective Kay told us about finding three notebooks that contained drawings, along with cutout drawings that had been wedged between pages of the notebooks. A drawing of an "image of the iron cross caught my eye," Detective Kay said, "but then, I saw that it was inscribed with the phrase White Pride World Wide."

Detective Kay explained that after seeing the drawing, he began to look differently at other materials his officers had found in the McInerney home, especially in the bedroom Brandon shared with his father. Detective Kay said, directly to the jury, "We found a lot of stuff, we found a lot of stuff that was Nazi related, or, I thought, maybe white supremacy related."

What his officers found included German maps, T-shirts (one with a sparrow on it and the word *Aufweiten*, a word he did not recognize, which led him to look on the Anti-Defamation League Web site, where he learned that it is a word and symbol employed by white supremacists), and computer printouts of several of Hitler's speeches. The officers also found a copy of *The 12th SS: The History of the Hitler Youth Panzer Division*, volume 2. This book, Detective Kay reported, was a companion to volume 1, found in Brandon's backpack at the murder scene.

"I quickly understood that I was beyond my depth," Detective Kay told Ms. Fox. On the afternoon of the shooting he called Detective Dan Swanson from the Simi Valley Police Department, a local expert on matters related to white supremacy. By the evening of the murder, Detective Swanson had begun working on the case. In the course of the trial he would take the stand for six days, longer than any other witness.

But on the first day of the trial, Ms. Fox was setting the scene of the murder, noting the facts. Matters of motive, which would come to dominate, were not under question yet. Instead, along with the detectives, we heard from the coroner, Dr. Ronald O'Halloran, a pathologist who spoke with measured clinical objectivity about the cause and course of death: "gunshot wounds to the head." One shot was "dead center," he told us. We studied his close-up photo of the wounds: two small patches of flesh where hair had been shaved from the back of Larry's head. We lingered over the bullet holes: so precise, so small.

We had seen a picture of murder. But it was not until the second day, until Mariah's traumatic response, still caught in the murder, that the madness of murder cracked into the room.

On the second day, when it came time for the defense to cross-examine Mariah, Scott Wippert, the lead defense counsel, rose from his seat and said, "Mariah, I'm sorry that you had to come here and go through this, and I have no questions for you. Thank you very much."

Uncertain about what she was to do, Mariah looked first at Mr. Wippert and then toward the judge, who told her that she was free to go. The bailiff approached. Mariah bowed her head and walked from the room.

THE TRUTH HAD ALREADY HAPPENED. Larry was dead. Brandon had killed him. Those undisputed facts were parsed, and that story was told in the first four days of the trial.

Why Brandon killed Larry was the unsettled question: What was his motive? What drove him to shoot a fellow student in front of his homeroom teacher and twenty-six of his peers?

In response to the central matter of motive, Prosecutor Fox and

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Defense Attorney Wippert set about to build their cases. They worked to tell the story they wanted the jury to see. They presented evidence, they called upon experts, they questioned witnesses, coaxing and confronting.

Ninety-eight witnesses were called to the stand, almost all to talk about motive. Some dressed as if for church and some with no nod to the courtroom's solemnity. Susan Crowley, Larry's seventh-grade special resources teacher, lifted the shoulders of her navy serge dress, too hot for the day, with her fingertips, and said, "This is my weddings and funerals dress." Tattooed straight-razor blades served as muttonchops on the inked face of Kyle Benavidez, who came to speak as a character witness for Brandon. Abiam Martinez, an eyewitness to the murder, was pressed into black pants and buttoned up in a starched long-sleeve shirt, his hair soberly combed into place. Samantha Criner, Brandon's girl-friend, tucked her mirrored sunglasses into the V of her tangerine T-shirt, after the bailiff had handed her a tissue for her gum.

As witnesses took the stand, they found it hard to follow customary courtroom restraint. Lawyers asked questions, and the witnesses were instructed to give brief answers, preferably "yes" or "no." But simple agreement or assent would not do. Some choked with fear. Some were hostile. Some were solemn. Some were brokenhearted. Their emotions were as much the story as the facts that were being argued.

Not only did witnesses contest the custom of attorney/witness exchange; they regularly talked over the attorneys, resisting the attorneys' reasoning or their tactics. The court reporter eventually fashioned a small sign and put it on the rail of the witness stand, to coach people: PLEASE LET THE ATTORNEY COMPLETE THE QUESTION BEFORE STARTING YOUR ANSWER. THANK YOU. THE COURT REPORTER.

Questions of trust reside at the heart of any trial. But they come to life with particular relevance when the matter before the court is motive. Motive is a story of emotion: not only is the story told with emotion; it is also deliberated with emotion. Jurors and we observers were left to determine whose story, whose facts, were to be believed. The jurors were explicitly instructed to do just that. Jurors and observers alike either

joined a witness in belief or empathy, or discredited a witness as unbelievable and unsympathetic.

In the courtroom we lived often, as we did with Mariah, in a single, brief interlude, in a space flooded by feelings, as they saturated memory. The way Mariah described the gun as a "little hand" stayed with me, because the gun was personified, felt, and—in the way of living, especially in the wake of trauma—distorted. In Courtroom F51, while the story was under way, the certainty of knowing was in constant doubt.

Memory is cast by allegiance and recast by contradictory feelings and experiences. Memories and beliefs also follow on social customs or norms; our beliefs build and solidify our memories. None of us can claim a pristine memory-house.

Telling the story of a murder is not simply a recitation of facts or a pragmatic account of the living and the dead. The trauma of murder speaks beyond what we can see and understand. And it was this incomprehension—this departure from the story—that often allowed witnessing to begin.

ON FEBRUARY 23, 2008, I read a short account of Larry's memorial service in the *New York Times*. I was living then, as I do now, in New York City, where I am a clinical psychologist in private practice and an assistant professor of psychology at the New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy. In the winter of 2008, I was doing the final edits on a book about boys and boyhood, a subject I have studied for over twenty-five years.

I have a particular interest in examining the ways in which boys are various. No two boys are the same. No one boy is invariable. I have worked with and written about gender-expansive boys, as well as aggressive and hypermasculine boys, who are often called "normal." The story about the killing of a boy who had begun to identify as a girl, by a boy who was referenced in the early reporting as a "regular kid," naturally caught my attention.

On February 29, 2008, Ellen DeGeneres opened her daytime

television talk show by making a "personal statement." I did not see the original broadcast, but by the following day the clip was rebroadcast on a variety of social media outlets. Backed by a projected photograph of Larry holding a caterpillar in the palm of his hand, Ms. DeGeneres reported the plain fact of the shooting. Then she held that "Larry was killed because he was gay" and detailed what had, in short order, become the accepted motive-story: "Days before he was murdered, Larry asked his killer to be his Valentine."

This declaration of romance and gay identity, according to Ms. DeGeneres, led to Larry's death. She choked with emotion as she said, "Somewhere along the line, the killer, Brandon, got the message that it's so threatening and so awful and so horrific that Larry would want to be his Valentine that killing Larry seemed to be the right thing to do. And when the message out there is that it is so horrible to be gay, that to be gay you can be killed for it, we need to change the message."

Ms. DeGeneres did not mention anything about Larry's gender identity, a point that was subtly emphasized by Rebecca Cathcart, who wrote the *New York Times* account of Larry's memorial. Ms. Cathcart quoted various sources on the subject of gay teens, but she turned most of her attention to Larry's gender expression.

Ms. Cathcart did not specifically delineate the difference between sexual identity and gender identity. She did not spell out the difference between our sexual wishes—the objects of our desire and how we long for them (typically tagged as straight or gay, more rarely bisexual or polyamorous)—and our fantasies and convictions about our gender, or how our bodies come to matter (masculine, feminine, transgender, more rarely nonbinary). Nor did Ms. Cathcart explain that gender identity and sexual identity are generally conflated by social convention. For example, a masculine boy is presumed to be straight, while a feminine boy is presumed to be gay. It does not always work that way.

Ms. Cathcart did introduce the idea of Larry as a gender-expansive boy. She emphasized how Larry had begun to question gender as he began wearing makeup and feminine accessories: "Lawrence had started wearing mascara, lipstick, and jewelry to school, prompting a group of male students to bully him."

As I followed the early reporting of the case, I wondered about the "gender trouble" Larry had set into play (to borrow the philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler's felicitous phrase). How was he to be named? Gay? Transgender? What category applied? What consequences would this category crisis have on how the story would be told? How would Larry's mixed racial identity, African American and Caucasian (he self-identified as "black"), be considered, as it intertwined with his gender? And what account would be offered, if any, of Brandon's gender? Would his "regular kid" boyhood go unquestioned or unexamined, as is often the case? Similarly, would his race be considered, or his whiteness be seen as a matter of race at all?

Soon I found myself imagining my way into Larry's and Brandon's lives. One way to think about what a psychologist does is to consider how psychologists imagine their ways into the minds of others. A strange business, to be sure, as the nineteenth-century English romantic poet John Keats took note. In the published edition of Keat's marginalia on his copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Keats wrote, "One of the most mysterious of semi-speculations is, one would suppose, that of one Mind's imagining into another." I like the way the transitive action of "into" captures the reach and force of finding another. On another page, Keats wrote simply, "we imagine after it." We search. We look in multiple places.

Sitting in the courtroom, I sought to imagine my way not only into Larry's and Brandon's lives but also into the emotions of the storytellers, the witnesses. And tried to learn from what I thought and felt, in my position of imagining. Psychologists ponder and sift. We get lost. I followed my own mind as it got lost. The minds of others and the stories they tell are often best understood if we slip beneath the surface and follow their misstatements and contradictions. If we are willing to follow the other, even making wrong turns, we may discover that we are lost, but, left to find our way back, we may learn along the way.

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The national press coverage of the shooting, thin to begin with, quickly died down. I began to follow the story in the *Ventura County Star*. I started collecting data in a Bankers Box on the floor next to my desk. I taped pictures of both boys, school portraits taken a year before the murder, on the side of the box. Even as other boxes have gathered, those black-and-white images, which I cut out of the *Ventura County Star*, have remained on the original box and have accompanied me throughout this project.

Larry looks over his right shoulder. His dark eyes peer out from under a shelf of black hair. He looks hesitant and smiles gently. Brandon smiles brightly, youthfully. His hair is buzzed. He looks as if he is in on the joke of school portraits.

The pretrial process dragged on and on, over three years in total, and the news cycle rolled on; little about the story found its way into the national media. Still, in the spring and summer after Larry's death in February 2008, there were, in addition to Ellen DeGeneres's widely viewed plea, two national magazine cover stories about the crime that began to frame the story.

The *Advocate*, a national gay and lesbian newsmagazine, ran a cover story in April 2008, and *Newsweek* ran a cover story in July 2008. Both focused on how young people are coming out as gay and transgender at younger ages, and how these kids are growing up caught between "messages of tolerance," on one hand, and often stringent and violent social norms, on the other.

It is a struggle to keep up with gender these days and to follow the gender-expansive ways in which many people are living. Facebook now offers more than fifty custom gender options, from cisgender (a person's experiences of their gender lines up with the sex they were assigned at birth), to gender fluid (a person may at any time identify as masculine, feminine, or nonbinary, or some combination of identities), to transgender (a person who does not identify with their natal body, but rather with the body and mind of the other sex), to gender queer (a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions and does not identify with either femininity or masculinity).

Grappling with gender is something of an ongoing debate that circulates among biology, ideology, and psychology. Gender-expansive bodies come to matter through challenges to social customs: wearing a dress instead of trousers. They also come alive with the help of biological interventions: hormone blockers, cross-hormone therapies, and sexual reassignment surgeries. A gender-y kid might play softball and knit in the dugout while the other team is up to bat. A gender-y kid might shave her head and wear her father's old jeans. A gender-y kid might begin hormone blockers and change his name.

Despite modernity's expansion, social convention routinely rounds up and quashes the complexity and variety that is gender. One is a boy or one is a girl, period. Boys will be boys, the saying goes, and we don't look very closely at their behaviors. Indeed, we often idealize boyishness. "Normal" boys are prized even though, sometimes, their boyishness (their aggression, their stoicism) can contain other meanings that go unnoticed until they are in trouble.

Race, too, as it shapes boys' lives, has often escaped our attention, and at a deadly cost. How was race going to show up in this story, especially given the vulnerability faced by black and brown boys on a daily basis? Or the racial hatred directed at transpeople of color, particularly transwomen and -girls?

We adults are behind the world in which our children live. They are running ahead. And in failing to catch up, we neglect them. We fail kids daily by not taking a more active hand in examining their lives, including the fossilized norms that no longer account adequately for their lives. Perhaps, if there is anything good to be taken away from a tragedy, it is the way in which an act like murder shatters any reasonable expectation and warns us not to fall back on reductive moral relativism, lest the tragedy be left to replay again and again.

One way that tragedy lets us in, and teaches us, is through trauma. Such a proposition may seem paradoxical at first, because traumatized minds and communities shut down. Lines are drawn. A story is told, retold, and, so, remembered.

During the trial, every witness had a story, and after the trial, over

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coffee at their kitchen tables or a drink in a sports bar, or in their offices, each of them stuck to his or her story. The memory, the story, was stowed. As people spoke from the witness stand, or to local reporters or documentarians, or as they answered my questions in one-on-one interviews, or in casual conversations, their positions, their stories, sometimes gained details, but rarely did they change.

Not always, though. Sometimes the stories veered, and at those moments—there were many—I experienced, as I did early on, with Mariah, the way in which trauma resurfaced. In those moments, in those flashes, the stories unformulated, and truth lay fractured. In these instances, terror became my teacher. As it did in moments (and, again, there were many) when emotion spoke outside of words, and emotions of the storytellers drew me into looking anew at what had happened.

In such moments, we make choices. Take Mr. Wippert and Mariah: the gentleman offering his sympathy to a traumatized girl. Did I think his gesture was sincere? I did. Did I think that it was also a masterful turning away from the gravity of murder? I did. In declining to cross-examine Mariah, Mr. Wippert succeeded in shaming the assistant district attorney, Ms. Fox, for questioning an eyewitness, which is the brick and mortar of prosecutorial labor. And, more important, Mr. Wippert succeeded in turning us away from the dead boy Mariah could not see, and onto the boy who was alive, the boy at whom she could not look.

Therein began Mr. Wippert's strategy to shift what we saw, apprehended, and recognized. He understood that what was going to matter was whose life was going to matter. Who would get recognized? Whose story was going to get told?