

What lies across the border of causing a death? Let me try to tell

by Kathryn Borel

On Monday, former Ontario Attorney General Michael Bryant killed a man with his car. His name was Darcy Allan Sheppard. He was a bike courier.

It is likely you already know that. Perhaps you have constructed a narrative in your mind based on media reports. Maybe you've pictured the black convertible Saab and the grip Mr. Sheppard had on it; the speed of the car; how the cyclist ricocheted off a mailbox; and the position he lay in after he hit the ground. Perhaps you've wondered what was bombing around Mr. Bryant's frontal lobe as he made that initial decision to leave instead of stopping.

Possibly you've taken a side.

The story I want to tell you requires some stripping away. Forget that Mr. Sheppard allegedly had a run-in with the police earlier in the day. Forget that Mr. Bryant is represented by a top Vancouver lawyer and a public-relations firm. Allow yourself to picture only two fragile, complex human beings whose lives were both ruined, in very different ways.

On Feb. 23, 2001, I was driving my mother's GMC Jimmy down a slushy main thoroughfare in Ste. Foy, Quebec. I was 21 and as well-adjusted as anyone that age can be. With me was my terrific boyfriend, Peter. I was about to graduate with an honours Bachelor of Journalism (BJ Hons., for short, which I found hilarious). The road was a little slippery, so I was making sure my speed was in check. All the lights ahead of me were green.

A song by Pavement was playing in the CD changer when a human form appeared in front of the truck. I wrenched the steering wheel left, heard a cracking thud and saw a body flip off the side

like a slowly spinning coin.

When I screeched to a stop and barrelled out, I saw that it was a very old man. He'd been shopping. Some of his groceries - a bag of puffed rice, an economy-size box of Special K - were spattered with blood. As I watched blood leak out of his wrinkly ear and form a pool, I thought, He sure does like cereal. At the time, "Special K" was my nickname; I thought about how I'd have to tell my friends back at school in Halifax to drop it.

For many interminable, sickening moments, I sucked up his image like ink in a quill - his outfit, all navy blue; the way his pant leg scrunched up, revealing a few inches of navy-blue thermal underwear. Finally, I began to wail. I covered my face with my hands and screamed, "I'm so sorry!" The breathy heat from the words blew back into my face. It felt good in the cold, so I screamed some more.

Peter called an ambulance and retrieved my coat from the truck. The police questioned us both individually. My officer was a young woman who was so empathetic and delicate with me that I felt as though I'd been the victim. Everyone I knew treated me similarly, on eggshells. Even my two university roommates - boys viciously territorial about their food - said nothing as I lay supine on the couch eating a hamburger made with one's frozen beef patties, lined with the other's barbecue-flavoured chips.

What set me on course for nearly a year's worth of seawater-head depression was the irreconcilable cognitive chasm between the notion that I was the cause of a death and the unluckiness of the situation. Part of me wanted punishment, some real repercussion for having snuffed out a life.

The Globe and Mail, Saturday, Sept. 5, 2009, F3

When I was lucid, I was able to draw the demarcation between being murderer and accidental killer. But when a person is depressed, there is a deficit of lucid moments.

It all made me understand mortality in perhaps a more vivid manner than most, and completely recontextualized my idea of driving and the power of the car. In one tiny moment, it went from an abstract idea of "getting from A to B" to the very concrete notion of "killing machine."

The car and I had become killing machines, life-wrecking forces made for crunching and crushing up human bodies. That day, the old man and I had ruined each others' lives. The access that I acquired to depression has never left. Neither has the small voice that cries out for retribution.

This Wednesday, in the late afternoon, I was on my bicycle crossing University Ave. in Toronto - a strip of road roughly the same size as the Quebec thoroughfare on which I killed the old man. A wave of nausea overcame me. All at once, to my left, there was a huge cluster of cyclists riding toward me, dingling their bells. There were hundreds of them; quickly I realized they were on a ride to memorialize Darcy Allen Sheppard.

I hurried across the intersection to the other side of the street, forgetting that cars were on that side, driving toward me in the other direction. Suddenly, I was so sad and so angry and so full of regret that I stood up on my pedals and rode - unthinkingly, like a maniac, against traffic - all the way back to my house. It was a seven-minute spell of irrationality: I wanted to be hit.

When I got home I went to the kitchen, breathed deeply for a bit and drank a glass of water.

Kathryn Borel is a CBC producer in Toronto. Her first book, Corked: A Memoir, comes out this month.

Thanks to Kathryn Borel for providing this article for use in SOCI 435