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Author Highlight

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Kim O'Hara helps people write books in Los Angeles, with a prior career as a movie producer and screenwriter. Many of her clients have achieved top ten placement on notable lists such as WSJ Business Books, USA Today and Barnes & Noble Top Ten Non-Fiction. Her self-help book on sexual abuse denial will be published in 2023 with WriteLife Publishing, and she hosted a successful podcast You Should Write A Book About That in 2021.



Please note,

"I Now Know Your Name is a firsthand account of how little the needle has moved from the ancestral and systemic pain exemplified in the riots 30 years ago."



I NOW KNOW

YOUR NAME

BY KIM O'HARA

In 1992, as I watched trucker Reginald Denny pulled from his truck and severely beaten in the LA Riots, I worked on Madison Avenue in New York City. As a young hopeful secretary in a television company known for such hits as *Kate and Allie* and *Gimmie A Break*, each day was fairly mundane. I assembled glossy

presentation folders for a young hot shot sales executive who made lucrative advertising deals when not dating his glamorous fiancée who ran the marketing division of a sports network. I was content with this adult job out of college that paid for a room in an apartment, but I was struggling with college debt. The company was opulent, and many days I was hungry hoping my boss would call out from his office, “I am staying in. Let’s order lunch.” I felt radically misplaced in the corporate world and gravely alone.

The LA Riots shook us all that day. From the Chairman of the Board to Sonny in the mailroom, our silence was matched as we watched Watts and South LA burn in mayhem. On a grainy black and white television, no faces visible, that moment was suspended in time when Denny's assailant held the cinderblock over his head and smashed it down. We watched helplessly feeling no hope that Denny could live. Some employees moved away from the broadcast to hurriedly gather their possessions - word swept quickly up and down the avenues to get out of the city and board up the windows – but I was transfixed. A preacher moved into frame to pray over Denny's body as the looting continued all around. I watched helpless, removed, quiet. As I hustled the thirty blocks to the Path train to get home, you could hear a pin drop in New York City. Even the taxis appeared to cascade across potholes in a silent reverie. I was racing from something I didn't understand way

across the United States in a place called Los Angeles. Pamela Anderson, Valley Girls and Hollywood... and racial crisis?

Three decades later I would own a home in Los Angeles, four blocks from the intersection of Florence and Normandie where Reginald Denny was pulled from his truck and beaten to an inch of his life. I had no idea this was the location until my boyfriend informed me. The conversation arose at the tail end of a two-week neighborhood skirmish with a young man named Din Din who it was easier to codify as a “local meth head” rather than see him as the product of mental illness, drug addiction and a broken post-incarceration rehabilitation system. He arrived at our block in a vortex of energy, blowing in as hard as he blew out, singing and ranting at my neighbor's front gate and taking residence on their bench. As a homeowner for the last 18 months, I acquired only a brief snapshot of South

Central or what my friend calls “a 50 mile radius where the government got away with disenfranchised services for the people.” Knowing I was writing a book about buying my house as a single woman, she urged me to not refer to where I lived as South Central but rather near the 110 freeway. She said such a label propagated the systemic issue.

This experience was an unexpected entry to the table of contents and no longer a writer’s observation. I was involved. In the midst of Din Din’s disconcerting mental state, he took residency at my gate, fixated on my house. The thematic context of his rant “This is MY house” wasn’t lost on me. He thought all our houses were his home. He was seeking a place, a connection, roots. Still, I was in fear. He had trespassed on two other people’s properties. I needed to open the gate and pull out to drive my daughters to school. I was unsure what he would do. My best thinking was to

approach him with a bat to assert my authority in the situation.

“What do you think you are going to do with that?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just want you away from my gate.” I am not proud of my delusion violence would help, and his reaction was as one would expect. I incited his ire and he started shaking the gate. I back pedaled and called my boyfriend to come stand by as I opened the gates. I called the cops, acutely aware as a white woman I was doing something greatly frowned upon in these times. I was calling the cops on a black man. Yet, this small community of ours was in a state of chaos and while I was never given a manual of what to do when disorderly conduct struck my block, I knew that you call the police as a first measure to reinstate order. Neighbors hid behind their curtains. I don’t blame them. They hoped the problem would go away, which is the very problem. The cops couldn’t do anything because Din Din was technically not committing a crime.

They were tasked with patching a problem not creating a deeper solution.

After I called the cops, several of the neighbors, mainly black and brown, called as well over the next week as Din Din continued to unravel on the block.

A friend told me I had shown “leadership” by taking initiative, but I couldn’t own that assessment. In fact, I look back at my overblown fear as desperation to swat away the problem and seek order in for what I was powerless to heal. I wasn’t a mental health worker, and while I was sober, I didn’t know how to talk to people on meth. Experts were needed to fill a void created by the design of the ages.

Suppressed rage and racism.

Then Din Din appeared to get better. He sobered up. I heard he was finally let into his house. He had showered and had a meal and was to check into a shelter. I had hope.

A week later, I came home to Din Din standing in the middle of the street drenched from a rare Los Angeles

downpour, illuminated by the police car headlights, yelling incoherently.

I PRAYED IN THAT MOMENT HE WOULDN'T GET SHOT. THE FEMALE COP HAD HER HAND ON HER HOLSTER. HE WAS BACK TO HIS MANTRA OF “THIS IS MY HOUSE.”

I could see he was an intensified version of his own demons.

Later that night, he threw a cinderblock through his aunt’s picture glass window, and hurled a boulder at my front window, just missing by inches and taking a chunk out of the window frame. His aunt wasn’t having it any longer. She called in the family member willing to deal with the problem old school style. An uncle, normally a man who wears a suit and goes to church, showed up in his street clothes drunk, and almost choked Din Din to death. Din Din has not come back.

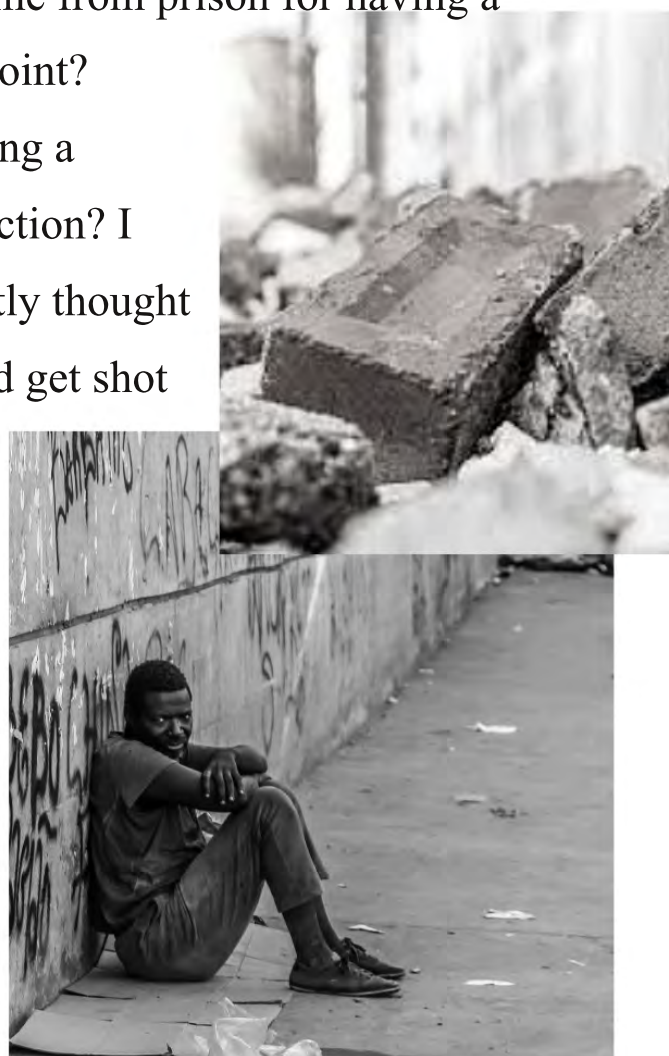
Reeling from Din Din’s enormous presence in our world and knowing how close I now lived to the 1992 incident

that had rocked my world thirty years back, I researched Denny's assailant. I discovered Damien Monroe Williams grew up around the corner from me. He had a bright future in football but since the Denny charge, he had been released from prison, and then committed another crime that put him behind bars for life. I decided to write him a letter. I shared how I now lived in his neighborhood, and I saw first-hand the effects of the decades of anger, frustration, disenfranchised services and the lingering ancestral pain. How could I not connect the downfall of Din Din with what transpired in the riots? I wanted Damien to know we were connected once back then in the viewing of a mass event as an impressionable young twenty-something and now by a neighborhood.

I called a friend to read her the letter because I wasn't sure about sending it. I had found his location and facility number in Centinela State Prison, and even adhered a stamp to the

envelope but I needed a second opinion. Would this man in prison for life really give a crap about my great epiphany of the interconnectedness of life? Was I really wanting him to write me back, and what was my goal? I hesitated to put my home address on the envelope and then was ashamed. How many anonymous people out in the world have my address, I thought, and I am not worried about them sending someone to my doorstep. Yet here I am worried about what Damien is going to do to me from prison for having a viewpoint?

Forming a connection? I honestly thought I could get shot



for wanting to have a dialogue about a shared land experience. I had to sit in multiple levels of my own fear writing this letter, as I had with the threat of Din Din.

My friend heard me read the letter and expressed while my intention was heartfelt, my words were one sided. Sure, I can express how I have connected the dots as a piece of my journey, but what about him? How did I think our correspondence would affect him? I didn't send the letter. It sits in the drawer of my desk waiting for another sign or message about this connection I energetically felt from what has transpired in the last few weeks. My neighborhood continues to present real world incidents before me to examine and tie to my own upbringing. As I am writing a book, the experience will be integrated. It's my job as a writer to take the helm of what is called before me to be expressed.

Both men threw cinder blocks. In 1992 and in 2021 and we think we are advancing in Black Lives Matter?

**BLACK MEN THREE
DECADES APART ARE STILL
TRYING TO CRUSH WHAT
THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND.
HOW MISUNDERSTOOD
THEY ARE AS MEN, AS A
RACE. STILL CALLING OUT
UNDER THE GOOEY OOZE OF
OPPRESSION WHERE TIME
HAS BEEN SLOW TO HEAL,
UNEARTHING SILENCED
INJUSTICES RATHER THAN
ALLEVIATING THE PAIN.**

Shortly after this whole series of events and thoughts, I took my Black Lives Matter poster out of the window from a march I had participated in shortly after the death of George Floyd. Had I thought it protected my house in some kind of solidarity? I had to stop thinking I could protect myself with posters and live in the mix of the deeper issues that present on my doorstep in



real time. We still have not paid for the sins of slavery in a world that continues to enslave and perform as if the problem has been solved.

After this incident, I was stunned and moved at the same time to be a part of a history still so raw and jagged. I have a video of Din Din on my phone standing in the rain screaming from my Ring camera. I keep it to remember we have to stop living by the black and white of safe or not safe. Rather, we need to better integrate in our communities, heal and look squarely at what is around us unfolding and evolving. If that is not your jam, the urban world is not for you. I suggest you go live in a castle somewhere in Ireland or go stick your head in the sand. Those of us in the cityscapes that need the breathing space... we have work to do.

THE END

"We still have not paid for the sins of slavery in a world that continues to enslave and perform as if the problem has been solved."

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