

HUFFPOST PERSONAL

My Aunt Has Had A Bullet In Her Head For 50 Years. I Finally Asked Her About It — But I Wasn't Prepared For The Truth.

"I have an ache to time travel, to do something to stop it all or at least to get the truth out sooner."



By Kathy Flann

Aug 14, 2024, 08:12 AM EDT



20 COMMENTS



GAH500N VIA GETTY IMAGES

Note: The following essay contains discussions of sexual assault, abuse and suicide, and may be difficult or triggering for readers.

There's been a bullet in my aunt Beth's head since a winter night 50 years ago when she retrieved a handgun from her father's underwear drawer, took it into the bathroom, and crawled into the tub, fully clothed.

ADVERTISEMENT



FROM OUR PARTNER



My Aunt Has Had A Bullet In Her Head For 50 Years. I Finally Asked Her About It — But I Wasn't Prepared For The Truth.

"I have an ache to time travel, to do something to stop it all or at least to get the truth out sooner."



By [Kathy Flann](#)

Aug 14, 2024, 08:12 AM EDT



gahsoon via Getty Images

Note: The following essay contains discussions of sexual assault, abuse and suicide, and may be difficult or triggering for readers.

There's been a bullet in my aunt Beth's head since a winter night 50 years ago when she retrieved a handgun from her father's underwear drawer, took it into the bathroom, and crawled into the tub, fully clothed.

"I didn't want to make a mess," she tells me now at the long-term care facility where she lives, flashing that same cheeky grin she had as a teen. These details are new to me, even though the event is my earliest memory.

I'd been nearly 4 at the time, and I regarded my aunt Beth — the cool 17-year-old — as a rock star. Younger than my mom by more than a decade, she wore fashionable bell bottoms and her long, wavy hair parted down the middle. She played with me, told me jokes, gave me her Archie comics.

Even though some part of me always wanted to ask about what happened, I'd been taught that questions like this were intrusive. Such is the power of family secrets. But during COVID, Beth and I started talking on the phone, forging a relationship outside of the usual group situations.

When AARP offers arrived and a cousin my own age passed away, it really seemed like now or never. Over several sleepless nights, I worked up the nerve to call Beth to ask if we could discuss what happened to her.

As usual, she picked up right away because, although the long-term care facility has provided a safe home since her mobility declined in middle age due to her brain injuries, she does get bored there. Then again, I know if someone should wheel over to say hi, she would hang up on me. So, I speed-asked my question — then held my breath, scared to cause hurt or offense. But she immediately blurted, "YES!"

She invited me to drive the hour for a visit, and started calling multiple times a day, even at 4 a.m. It turns out she wants people to know what happened to her — not just our family, but people anywhere who might be struggling. My aunt is done with secrets.

Growing up, I kept a framed photo by my bed, taken before I was born. In it, my seated grandparents are flanked by their teen children — my mom, her brother Frank, and her sister Tina — all in horn-rimmed glasses and a suit or a dress and pearls, like guest stars on "The Donna Reed Show." Beth — the only kid in the group — is about 5 with a pixie cut, and she sits on her dad's lap.

The family always characterized her suicide attempt as the consequence of a mental health disorder. I studied that girl for years, wondering if the same thing could happen to me. But the story was incomplete by design, providing Kevlar protection for others in the photo, and fragmenting the truth like shrapnel.

My aunt informs her therapist we're going to talk, and the therapist calls me. I should be aware of my facial expressions, she says, because my aunt could get the idea that I find her horrifying, rather than what happened to her. She tells me to brace myself. But I think I already know the family secrets — my hope is to hear my aunt's insights about them.

The therapist says, "You're going to hear that it wasn't only your uncle who abused her." She pauses. "There was some involvement from your grandfather."

This sounds backwards to me.

"I always thought it was the other way around — my grandfather was the main abuser. My uncle had less involvement," I say.

There's a stunned silence. "Hm," she says. "Interesting."

Although my aunt is insistent about pinning down a date, some of her many calls each day are to tell me jokes.

"Knock, knock," she says.

"Who's there?" I reply.

"Abby."

"Abby who?"

"ABBY NEW YEAR!"

When I arrive at the facility, my mom stands outside, waiting to hand me doughnuts from my aunt's favorite bakery. "These are for after," she says, face tight with worry. Then, she hugs me and leaves.

The two of them are the only surviving members of their original family — the oldest and the youngest. They speak daily, and my mom takes care of things like paperwork or swapping out my aunt's clothes each season. She buys in bulk the peppermints Beth likes to hand out to residents and staff.

They overlapped at home only during Beth's earliest years. My mom always says that when Beth was born, she fell in love instantly. "She was like my own living doll." The past is a place where she can't protect her.

Inside, my aunt waits in her signature fuzzy pink bucket hat, ready with a key to a quiet space that the staff has offered to let us use for our talk. I wheel her out of the room she shares with a roommate and past the residents whose wheelchairs line the hallways. We flip on the lights in the closed hair salon and sit amongst the dome dryers.

She launches right away into the story of that night — the gun, the bathtub. She's been waiting weeks to tell me everything. That night, her father had grounded her out of the blue, hollering, "There are going to be some big changes around here!"

She'd endured so much in that house; being trapped there seemed unbearable. She'd already been accepted to college, aspiring to be a veterinarian, but losing access to her after-school clubs meant losing her community, her lifeline. She thought suddenly, *I have to kill them, or I have to kill me.*

"I chose me," she says.

"You never had suicidal thoughts before?"

"No," she says. "Never."

I'd somehow assumed she didn't remember much of that night. The bullet severed control of the left side of her body. The doctors drilled holes in her skull to relieve pressure that was so intense, it left her blind in one eye. But she recalls so much, including being angry at the nurse who washed the blood out her hair.

“It hurt so bad,” she says. “As soon as I could wheel myself back to the ICU, I went up there and told her off.” She laughs, astonished at the perspective of her younger self.

Then, she tells me about another nurse whose surname was Wolfe. My aunt would turn off the light in her room and shout, “Wolf! Wolf!” until the poor woman came running. She was the girl who cried wolf. This still cracks her up. Laughter has always been important to her. “There’s not much difference between a laugh and a grimace,” she says. “It’s just that a grimace has fangs.”

She gets to the part I know: My mom insisted Beth come stay with my family after her discharge from the hospital, and their parents acquiesced. My mom understood, or thought she understood, just how difficult that house could be. She had a damaged disc in her own back from being beaten with a rod.

My aunt’s doctors advised my mom to tell me that Beth had shot herself — rather than to use euphemisms about “an accident.” They also suggested that she explain it was a private matter, something never to be discussed with others. Perhaps it was the tension between clarity and concealment that embedded the situation so deeply in my memory, even though I was under 4.

Yet from the formative full year that my aunt lived with us, I recall only images — her newly shorn hair, the cross-shaped scar on her forehead, the ambulance lights flashing red outside the night she had a seizure. She reminds me that she spent that year in a work training program for people with disabilities (which she found dull), and that when she left us, she relocated into the dorms at the university in her hometown, 500 miles away. “I surprised everyone by earning B pluses in both of my classes!”

She’s curious about what I remember, what I knew and when. So, I tell her about those summers later at my grandparents’ house, about traveling on an airplane by myself. My single mom had sent me there because her parents had become softer people with the grandkids — chastened, she thought, by what happened with Beth. “She didn’t know then about the sexual abuse,” I say.

During those visits, I stayed in an attic bedroom, playing with my aunt’s stuffed animals and reading her books. Sometimes, at 5 a.m., I’d wake up to find my grandfather standing over me in the dark. He kept his head shaved bald, like Kojak, and his silhouette was severe. After he’d see me staring back, he’d flip on the light and throw a glass of water in my face. “Get up. We’re going fishing,” he said.

I spent many a day with him in a rural field, not a tree or a soul around for miles, fishing for rainbow trout in a creek (or “crick,” as he’d say). He cleaned them downstream to spare me from seeing the guts. Later, my grandmother would fry the fish, along with green tomatoes, and the three of us would eat at their small kitchen table.

Most days, though, I was left to my own devices. My grandfather read the paper or tended his vegetable garden. My grandmother spent hours baking or bent over a sewing machine with her long, white hair swept up in a tidy bun. I wandered the halls, imagining the night they found their daughter in the bathtub.

They’d heard something — a bang — and thought the furnace had backfired. My grandfather finally took the locked door off the hinges, and they still didn’t understand until he picked her up and the gun clattered to the floor.

I felt sorry for them then. I didn’t even grasp that they were mean because their comments went over my head — like when my grandfather remarked that my parents’ divorce was probably the result of my

mom's lackluster performance in the bedroom or when my grandmother referred to my aunt's suicide attempt as "that little stunt she pulled."

Beth and I saw each other those summers. She was still enrolled at the nearby college. Young and strong, she'd learned to walk with a cane and a leg brace, swinging her hip to propel the paralyzed leg forward, and to keep her left arm wrapped to her chest to stop it from getting in her way and from dislocating under its own weight.

When we all got together with Uncle Frank's family, my cousins and I would run ahead on the sidewalk toward the ice cream parlor until one of us said, "Stop. Wait for Beth." She was, after all, not that much older — and surely excited about ice cream. We'd spin around and she'd be hurrying as best she could, always with that grin.

The college eventually furloughed Beth for taking too long to graduate. With over 90 credits, she got close, but accommodations for disabilities were not a thing in the early '80s.

I tell her the first overhaul of my perceptions took place after my grandfather died. My mom learned sometime after the funeral that he had sexually abused my aunt, and she explained this to me. At 13, I had not yet realized that sexual abuse was a fact of the world — that people assaulted their own children — so, it was shock upon shock.

These days, my mom does not recall this conversation, nor the discovery of the abuse. She's in her 80s, but this tendency to block out certain memories is not new.

"She probably can't cope with remembering," Beth says.

"Do you know how she found out?"

"It seems like it would have been me," she says. "But that period is a blur for me, too. The mind protects itself."

I explain that the moment my mom told me about the abuse, I flashed to my grandparents' living room when I was 8. A couple was kissing on TV, and I said, "Ew, why do people like that?"

My grandfather leapt from his chair. "I'll show you why," he said, gripping my head, holding me by my hair. He wrestled my chin toward his, his alcohol breath on my face.

It seemed he might not stop, but then he did — he let me go. I'd been stunned by his force and the proximity of my grandmother in the kitchen. He laughed like it had all been a joke — a loud braying.

When I looked at the photo after learning about what my grandfather did and saw his tight smile, a different family materialized. I speculated that he'd become more abusive over time — each kid treated more violently than the last, and I studied each person's eyes for sorrow. The way his gaze pierced the camera haunted me, as did his hand on my aunt's waist. I could hear one of his favorite things to say to kids: "Oh, did I hurt your feelings? Well, I'll make you some wooden feelings, and then they won't hurt anymore." I told myself that at least we had the truth.

Family gatherings continued after my grandfather's death, organized by Uncle Frank — visits to each other's homes, to beaches, to lakes. A successful businessman, Frank was always in motion — biking, trekking, kayaking. He liked to involve everyone in these pursuits.

Beth would hang out with my grandmother while everyone did activities, and sometimes also with Aunt Tina, who'd always been timid, almost childlike, nervous to try new things. Around big dinners and card games, everyone talked openly now about how physically and emotionally abusive my grandfather had been, as if the storm clouds had lifted. For my teen years and into adulthood, it seemed that life for my family was all about healing.

Eventually, everyone gathered for a wedding — the first of us grandkids, now in our 20s — and my uncle seized the opportunity to organize a group therapy session for his siblings and his mom. He liked to read self-help books, and he'd done a lot of therapy on his own.

Afterward, my mom told me that her brother had confessed to something unthinkable: He'd pointed at Beth and then he pointed at Tina and said, "I had sex with you. And with you."

As she recounted what happened in the session, my mom and I held eye contact and felt a shared sense of shock. I remember thinking that his phrasing mischaracterized something he'd done *to* his younger sisters, not *with* them. My grandmother apparently gasped and clutched my uncle's arm, leaning on him, as if to seek comfort. She told him he must be confused.

After that weekend, everyone returned to their respective homes, scattered in states thousands of miles apart. In a sense, my mom had been the only person for whom the revelations were truly revelations. She didn't know how to parse them or hold onto them or what to do.

She started visiting her sisters separately from the rest of the family. She had always talked to Frank on the phone daily, and now she stopped, becoming estranged. She urged her siblings to start or continue therapy, which they all did, and she also sought it for herself.

There was intensified survivor's guilt — why was she the only one of the sisters who hadn't been abused? There was also regular guilt about having left home at 18, a sense of having abandoned her sisters. She thought constantly about what she should have done differently.

It seemed like that group therapy confession would change the family forever, but when it came time for more weddings, for my grandmother's funeral, and other whole-family occasions, my aunts and my uncle still attended together and even sought each other out — conversing, laughing, sharing childhood memories. These events transpired before social media, at a time when there was less awareness of mental health or the psychological effects of abuse on victims.

My mom thought her sisters, especially Beth, were ahead of her in processing the trauma of the past, and she deferred to them. After all, they had experienced things she hadn't. Who was she to comment on her adult siblings' wishes or choices? She would well up when she talked about how these gatherings could continue. "I don't know... I just know they're my family," she'd say. "The only family I have."

Tina would fly up to visit Frank sometimes, just as she visited other family members. Beth maintained a connection with him, as well, talking regularly on the phone after her mobility declined and travel became difficult. These relationships continued until Frank became ill and died — both he and Tina passing away before reaching old age.

When I ask now how Beth felt about him, she says, "I always liked Frank. He was interesting to talk to." She says she appreciated his interest in learning and books. "He had great insights."

I'd never questioned that supporting my aunts meant respecting their perspectives and decisions. Still, the "normalcy" felt distressing — a sensation I simultaneously felt I wasn't entitled to have.

I didn't have the language then, but my mind's vacillating admonishments were like the push and pull we now see on the internet — *silence is complicity* but also, *stay in your own lane*. Those long-ago feelings transformed into burning questions only with time and with the benefit of insights from online strangers.

To whom do family secrets belong? Who gets to bring them up and when? Even if the #MeToo movement had existed, showing what was possible when survivors raise their voices, where did that leave a Not Me or an Almost Me?

Because I never knew how to comprehend the unwavering connections, I started to assume that my uncle's abuse somehow didn't rise to the same level as my grandfather's. Perhaps Frank overstated his involvement. Maybe, at some level, I just wanted this to be true.

But now Beth tells me that, for her, the group therapy session itself had not been what was important that weekend. She'd barely clocked my uncle's confession because all she heard was my grandmother's refusal to believe it. Throughout her childhood, she'd told her mother again and again that she was being abused, only to hear, "Beth, you must be confused." She relived that pain in real time, and everything else was background noise.

She tells me something else she's never told anyone: Frank acknowledged the abuse to her privately that weekend, too. She'd been carrying a book called "Adults Anonymous Molested as Children," which she got at a support group she'd joined. He noticed it and pointed at the cover. "Remember when I did that to you?"

She replied, "I was 5. You were 15."

"No. I was 16. I remember because I had a driver's license," he said.

"I guess he was in a confessing mood," she tells me. She'd felt relief. "Finally. It was acknowledged."

The things Beth tells me resonate with the therapist's hint that I've misconstrued the reality about Frank — a dizzy realization, like the floor dropping out.

Now, Beth goes on to share details about the abuse, the extent of which she has not shared with anyone else in the family, including my mom — abuse that went on for years, perpetrated chiefly by my uncle, much of it in the attic room where I stayed.

My grandfather abused her less frequently, but more violently. These details about both abusers are graphic, reminiscent of war crimes from the news. At one point, my uncle and my grandfather even assaulted Beth together in the garage, cleaning up the blood afterward to conceal what they'd done. I try to control my facial expressions, as it dawns on me that I never knew anything at all — that my life is a lie.

"Sometimes, I still feel like it's my fault, though," she tells me.

"You know that's not true, right?" I say.

"Logically. But there are 18 miles between the head and the heart."

I have an ache to time travel, to do something to stop it all, or at least to get the truth out sooner and surround her with the support she always should have had. But there's only the present, with regrets about what I could or should have done long ago.

The mistakes in my thinking are glaring — perhaps the worst of which was the *If/Then* reasoning: *If things carried on as if everyone was fine, then maybe the situation was smaller than I'd thought*. But the harrowing truth is that things most likely carried on the way they always had because the situation was too colossal, emotionally unmanageable, and monstrous for anyone to process.

Family secrets almost invariably protect the wrong people. A climate of so-called manners (i.e., don't be nosy, mind your business, etc.) can help abusers to maintain the charade, ensuring the rest of us live in the world they created. But now I grasped that it had been a mistake to assume that questions are uncomfortable. Rather, *I* was uncomfortable — the consequence of family secrets can be not trusting reality, other people, or even yourself. Because I was a Not Me, I assumed I was a Not Anything, with no role to play.

"I should have tried to talk about this sooner," I tell Beth.

She shakes her head. "I wouldn't have been ready."

"When were you ready?"

She pauses. "I don't know. Not until after they both died, for sure. When you asked, I was surprised I was ready."

I say, "There's a version of him you liked. But there's a version of him who did such terrible things."

"I disconnect the two. I prefer the one so much more than the other. I like to live in that pretend world."

As devastating as it is to hear my aunt's honest account, there's also relief. Deception has weight, and as it lifts, what remains is the realization of what a Not Me or an Almost Me perhaps has to offer: to bear witness.

That family photo has become so menacing that I've put it away in a drawer. If gazing at a portrait connects us to the past, my family's past seems a place that's dangerous to occupy. The drawer doesn't change the violence, doesn't change the peculiar guilt that comes with unwitting complicity, the feeling of wanting to time travel to shout at myself. But putting it away puts the focus on Beth in the here and now — loving her as best I can, which is far less than she deserves.

My aunt's body has become fragile. It's challenging for her to stand or to care for herself. But it seems to me she has grown more powerful. At the end of our visit, she discusses the loss of her best friend. The residents here are still many years her senior, and they often die. Yet Beth works to connect because she prizes community.

"I'm so glad," she says about the passing of her friend.

"That's not what I thought you were going to say," I reply.

"I'm good at reframing things," she tells me. "What I mean is that I'm so glad I got to know her."

She urges me to write everything she's told me and to tell the world about it — about her — especially her advice for anyone who's struggling, which is to HOLD ON and to memorize 988, the suicide prevention hotline, and to use it. She says what has helped her to heal is “therapy, therapy, therapy.” Then she stops short and pauses.

“Actually, I mean, I started out wanting to help people. I still do,” she says. “But sharing has been different than I expected. It validates me so, so much.”

“You want to feel believed?”

“Yeah,” she says.

“By me?”

“Yes, but that's not what I mean. It's more that it'll be different to have it in writing. Concrete. It makes it believable to me.”

Soon, she'll mark another anniversary of her suicide attempt, which she calls a “celebration of life.” She beams at the ability to tell me this, to say it aloud. When she talks about what happened, she often receives thoughtless responses from people about where she went wrong — the caliber of gun she should have used and the angle she should have pointed it. So, I say what I always wish people would tell her instead. “I'm happy you're still here.”

“Yeah,” she says. “Me, too.” Then, she goes quiet and stares out the window at the boney winter trees.

“I just love it,” she says.

“You love what?” I ask.

“Life,” she tells me. “I just love it.”

Need help? Visit RAINN's [National Sexual Assault Online Hotline](#) or the [National Sexual Violence Resource Center's website](#).

If you or someone you know needs help, call or text 988 or chat [988lifeline.org](#) for mental health support. Additionally, you can find local mental health and crisis resources at [dontcallthepolice.com](#). Outside of the U.S., please visit the [International Association for Suicide Prevention](#).