

Chapter 9

THE LETTER

Late at night on the last day of September 2012, I put my two sons to bed and crept downstairs in the darkened house. I sat at the computer, turned on a small desk light, and typed this letter:

I scarcely know how to write this, how to begin. I have given it much thought. You know who I am: one of the sisters of Nancy Bishop Langert. I know who you are: the son of Nick and Joan Biro, who knew my parents, and the person convicted of killing Nancy, her husband and their baby. We saw each other every day during your trial at 26th and California. Since then, we have talked about each other, but never to each other. I have heard news of you: how prison has been hard at times because of your association with me and my sisters. I am sorry for that. Nancy above all was about love; she never would have wanted her death to result in more brutality, even to the person who took her life. You have heard news of me: how I have forgiven you for killing my family members. I never conveyed that forgiveness to you directly; I am sorry for that, too. It was wrong to tell other people and not the most important person of all: you.

When, a few years ago, a campaign began to abolish the sentence you are serving—juvenile life without parole—I resisted that effort. I lobbied the Illinois legislature, successfully, to stop the bill that would have changed the law to prohibit the sentence. I became a public voice for keeping you and others serving that sentence locked up forever. I am sorry for that now, too. I am writing to tell you that, and to explain why. You deserve to know. It's a story that begins with a law professor whose life's work has been about mercy. An ex-prosecutor, he has spent his career arguing against harsh sentences such as the death penalty and juvenile life without parole. He gave me a book about forgiveness with an article by his former colleague, pastor and academic Dr. Randall O'Brien. Randall wrote in the article that each of us has an obligation to reconcile with those who have wronged us. That floored me. Until that moment, I thought that forgiveness was enough. That I could simply say, in essence, I forgive you, and now I am shaking you like dust off my feet. I never saw reconciliation as possible because you have never taken responsibility for killing my family members. How do I reconcile with someone whose position is, I have not wronged you? I called Randall to ask him that question. He responded with some stunning observations. First, that you and I are no different in the eyes of God. I am someone who has fallen short and hurt God's heart; I have sinned, to use that Biblical word, just as you have. You are a child of God, created in God's image, just as I am. God loves you every bit as much as me; nothing you have done could ever stop God from loving you. The division I have made between us—you, guilty murderer, me, innocent victims' family member—was a false divide. I was wrong to do that. Randall's second observation was this: How did Jesus respond to the people who were taking his life, in the very moment they were killing him? He prayed for them: Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing. It struck me that I had never prayed for you. I had never even said your name. That was wrong of me, too. So I did pray for you, in the garden outside Kenilworth Union Church—you know the place—where Nancy and Richard and their baby are buried, alongside my father, who found their bodies the morning after they died. Here is what I have come to believe: sentences like the death penalty and life without parole reflect our need to find a response to something as heinous as the murder of innocents equal in weight and gravity to the crime itself. The only thing that could possibly pay for the loss of Nancy, her husband and their baby is this nearly-impossible thing: that you would make your way home to God, the way the Prodigal Son in one of Jesus' parables finds his way

home. So I can no longer support the sentence of juvenile life without parole. It says to you, and to every other person serving that sentence: never. No matter what you do, how you may be transformed, or who you become, we will never even give you a chance to get out of prison. That means I will argue in the upcoming session of the Illinois General Assembly to change the law, so that there will be a possibility of parole at some point in cases like yours. I owe it to you to say it to you first, before I say it publicly. That doesn't mean that I will advocate for you to get out of prison, only that there should be that possibility in the future. This will be difficult for me, and create tension with people I love. Part of my own pain has been that you have never expressed remorse for the deaths you caused. I want that to change. I hope it will. I invite you to talk with me. If you want that, let me know and I will come to see you.

With that, I stopped typing, printed out the letter, and signed my name at the bottom. The next day was a crisp Monday morning. I walked to the post office, the main one in the Village of Winnetka, a few blocks from my home. In my hand was a large manila envelope containing the letter I had written the night before. I pulled down the handle to one of the large blue mailboxes out front and was about to drop in the envelope. It was addressed to David Biro, Pontiac Correctional Center, Pontiac, Illinois.

Something stopped me short—an image that flashed through my mind of a small child's hand pulling down that same handle on the big blue mailbox: David Biro's. He had been a boy here, in Winnetka. He might have come here, perhaps on an errand with his mother, and put some mail in that same box. Perhaps the Christmas cards my family had received from his, bearing photos of David when he was just a child, had been mailed here.

I held the envelope poised in the air for a moment and breathed a prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to do its work. I dropped the letter in. How would he respond? Would he respond at all? I had visions of him reading my letter and laughing— showing it to a cell mate, maybe, scoffing at my earnest foolishness. He might crumple it up and toss it into a prison receptacle. He might write back, angrily telling me where I could shove my letter and my lofty words about God. I had no idea.

All I knew was this: it was out of my hands now. It was in the hands of God. Weeks went by and I heard nothing from Biro. I imagined that he might have sent the letter to a lawyer, to get advice about whether to respond, and if so, how. A cautious attorney might counsel him to say nothing at all. I began to think I would never hear back. Then one day, when I was coming back from court, I stopped at the mailbox in the public defender's office where I work and pulled a stack of mail from the slot: some returned subpoenas, some junk mail, and a large manila envelope with a return address from a downstate prison. I thought nothing of that last piece of mail; clients often write me from prison. I took the pile of mail to my desk and tossed it there, to look at later. But something peeked out at me from the upper left corner of the large manila envelope: the return address didn't just say "Pontiac." Above that address, in small, neat print, was the name Biro.

My heart leapt. I looked closer, to be sure I wasn't dreaming. It was from him, David Biro. I picked up the envelope; it had weight, it was thick. Whatever was inside, it was more than the one page my letter had been. Needing quiet, I closed the door to my office and returned to my desk. I sat down and picked up the envelope, holding it my hands. I willed them to open it, but

they refused to budge. I could not do it. What if I opened it, and the letter was a screed of derision and defiance? Or worse, an attempt at manipulation, filled with lies? I put down the envelope, intact. It sat there, untouched, for the rest of the workday.

At the end of the day, I gathered up my belongings: purse, coat. I glanced at the envelope on my desk and realized I could not leave such an irreplaceable object unattended all night. I picked it up and took it home. There it stayed, sitting on my dresser. Each time I thought I had summoned the courage to slit open the end of the envelope and pull out its contents, something inside me shrank from the task. I could not do this alone. I called a friend and made an unusual request: would he open and read the letter first? He readily answered yes. Two days after I received the letter, he did.

I am drawing a circle around that moment; it is a memory so precious to me that I want to keep close its details. Here is what I can tell: He took the envelope from my hands and sent me on an errand—made up, I realized later, so that, as he read, I would not see the expression on his face, and wonder and worry. The generosity and thoughtfulness of that will stay with me forever. I returned almost an hour later carrying a plastic bag with the items he'd sent me to get. He was seated outdoors; it was nearly evening. The late afternoon light bathed his face. I looked at him searchingly. He was holding a fistful of lined notebook paper covered with small, neat writing in pencil. He looked up at my anxious face and smiled, a calm, quiet smile. "It's good," he said. I let go the breath I had been holding in. He had been kind enough to answer right away the question looming in my heart: *How is it?* My heart lightened with relief. I dropped down into the seat next to him. "I'll read it to you," he said. He told me later that he wanted me to hear the words of my sister's killer spoken in a voice I knew and trusted. I sat still, drinking it in. Biro's letter to me began like this:

Dear Jeanne,

Hello there. As I write to you, I hope that you and your family are all doing well. Thank you for writing to me. I appreciated your letter very much and in many ways it touched me very deeply. I commend you on your courage in writing. I know it must have been difficult to write to me and put yourself out there, especially as you had no idea how I was going to respond. I think by the end of this letter, you'll understand better what I mean when I say that it took courage to write. One thing I liked about your letter was that it had a kind of tone to it, that I interpreted as saying "Let's cut the crap and be honest with each other." I agree. I don't want to keep you in suspense any longer, so let me get right to the point. I know that for a long time you and your family have been looking for me to confess to the murders I committed years ago. Of course, as you know in the past, I have always maintained my "innocence." Well, for a lot of reasons which I'll get into in a little bit, I think the time has come for me to drop the charade and finally be honest. You're right, I am guilty of killing your sister Nancy, and her husband Richard. I also want to take this opportunity to express my deepest condolences and apologize to you.

A cry escaped my lips, a kind of sob buried so deep, I hadn't known it was there. I leaned forward, fingers pressed to my mouth. To hear those words: *You're right, I am guilty.* . . . I never thought I would hear that, ever. It was more than I'd ever dreamed. My reader was right: it was good. I sat up and breathed deeply. He read on, for fifteen pages, passages like these:

You may wonder why I've finally decided to tell you the truth. Well, let me see if I can explain a few things. . . . I'm in prison, and this is a place where one is naturally given to introspection and reflection. I can't even tell you the number of hours I have spent contemplating my life, thinking about the mistakes I've made or what might have been, and I feel a great deal of regret over some of the things I've done. Obviously I don't like having to live in prison and miss out on so much of life (who would?) but I can honestly say that in many respects this experience has been good for me. . . . Over the years, I've done my best not to waste my time in here and educate myself, and I've read a great number of books on a variety of different subjects including history, philosophy, religion, etc. . . . I'm not saying that I've become a moral person simply because I've read a lot of books. But I do think the process of educating myself has helped me to grow and mature as a person, and that in turn has led to me doing a lot of critical thinking and reflection about my situation.

Biro discussed watching television news stories about heinous murders and feeling sympathy for the victims and revulsion toward the killers:

When I see different crimes being discussed on t.v., it reminds me of my own crime and I feel the sting of shame and embarrassment even more. These days, not a day goes by when I don't think about the crime I committed. Every day I wish I could take it back, not only because I dislike life in prison, but also because I wish I could give you back the lives of your loved ones. . . . I don't know how much my apology means to you at this point. It might be "a day late and a dollar short" as the old saying goes. But this is all I have to give. If I could give you back the lives of Nancy and Richard, I would.

Explaining why he had waited so long to take responsibility, Biro wrote something that struck me as courageous: *I only held back . . . because of my reluctance to give a full confession which I know from this point on I can never retract. That's exactly what this is. I'm sure you realize that from this point on I can never again say I'm innocent. You have my handwritten confession right here.*

It was true. He had given me something he could never take back: an admission to the murders in his own hand. Biro came to a close by agreeing to meet with me, telling me how to get on his visitors list, and suggesting that I call his father about visiting procedures and directions to the prison. The letter ended:

I'm sorry to take so long responding to your letter, but as you can see, I had a lot to say, and I rewrote this letter a couple of times because I wanted to make sure I said everything the right way. As I reread this letter, I still feel as if I didn't express myself as well as I would have liked to. I wish my words were more eloquent and my thoughts flowed better. But alas, I think we both accept that I'm not William Shakespeare. And if my words fell short in their beauty, please know that they were sincere.

*Sincerely,
David Biro*

I sat in stunned silence, letting the words sink in. My mind filled with wonder. Who could have imagined this? Not in my wildest dreams did I suppose David Biro might do what he had resisted

doing ever since the murders: confess and say he was sorry. It was beyond anything I could have asked for—and I knew, even as I heard his apology, that it would not have come if I had not gone first. The time I spent waiting for that apology! That was the price I paid for my coldness toward Biro, for holding myself aloof. Eager to follow up on the offer of a visit, I acted right away, sending the prison the required information so I could get in to see him. I wanted to act on David's suggestion that I call his father as well. I had not spoken to Nick Biro since the night his son was arrested, more than two decades earlier. My response to the grief-stricken father had been curt. I knew what I had to do: apologize to him, too. I hesitated, a little afraid. I had been a voice for keeping his son in prison all these years. How would he react to a phone call from me, out of nowhere?

One February morning, I was leaving the gym after an early morning workout. I ascended the stairs and walked into a world radiant with sunlight. It wasn't the usual thin, pale light of Chicago in winter; the sky was sapphire blue. The air was gentle and still. The distant, sweet sound of birds chirping echoed from the trees all around. I sat down on the curb of the parking lot and turned my face upward to the sun, soaking in its warmth. I crossed my arms over my knees and rested, flooded with peace. *Now*, I thought. I pulled out my cell phone and called Mr. Biro.

An answering machine picked up, with the voice of Nick Biro just as I remembered it, slow paced, kindly sounding. I left a message saying how sorry I was for our last phone call, and that I had written to David and hoped to visit him. Would Nick call me back? I gave my number and said I hoped we could speak soon. I hung up and breathed another prayer, like the one I'd said silently when I dropped my letter to David in the mailbox. *Holy Spirit of God, do something with this.*

Nick Biro called back the next day. He was grace itself, saying that he couldn't imagine what I had to apologize for, that he was the one who was sorry, for my family's tragedy. We agreed to get together on the upcoming Saturday. We met at a local coffee shop with big windows the sun shone through, wooden tables, and a cozy fireplace. We sat on a small couch in front of that fireplace and talked for two hours. He looked the same as he had when I knew him through my parents—tall, with a broad, congenial face—but his hair had whitened, and his hearing had diminished. He wore dark pants and a thick green sweater. He had the same courtly, old-school manners my father had had. Speaking to him reminded me of my dad and made me miss him acutely. The story of Nick Biro's last two decades emerged: he had gone to prison to visit his son once every two weeks, without fail, ever since David was sentenced.

Mr. Biro was relieved that he had just passed the test to renew his driver's license; he always drove, alone, to visit David. Even though David had a brother and sister, Mr. Biro was David's only regular visitor. He was eighty-two years old. Those visits could be arduous. When David was in Menard prison, in a far-flung part of Illinois, Mr. Biro would travel around two hundred miles, sometimes only to find that the prison was locked down because of a riot or a fight. He would have no choice but to turn around and go home. When David was in Stateville, a notoriously tough prison nearer Chicago, the guards could be difficult. Pontiac, where David was incarcerated now, was a better place, Mr. Biro said, closer to Chicago. The staff was more

pleasant, but very strict about rules for visitors. One day, he had left the window of his car partly rolled down. He was called out and told that was not allowed; he had to roll it up.

Mr. Biro said all this not as a complaint, but as a word of caution. He gave me a list of rules: When I went to see David, I should call first, to see if visits were still on. I should check to be sure nothing illegal was in my car. I could not bring in a cell phone. As he ticked down the list, he pulled out a sheet of paper: it was his written driving directions to Pontiac, down to landmarks such as the McDonald's restaurant where he would stop for coffee before heading to the prison.

Then he told me about the lockers inside the guardhouse, where visitors must lock their car keys and any other belongings while they are visiting. You drop two quarters in a slot and pull out a key. "I brought quarters for you," he said, pressing them into my palm. Then he took both my hands in his, looked me in the eyes, and said, "God bless you."

It felt just like that: a blessing from God. I walked out, marveling. I understood for the first time what Jesus was saying to us about apologies: you go first. Don't wait. Seeing the fruits that my apologies had borne, I asked myself: why didn't I do this sooner?

Wasn't that what Nancy was telling me all along, with her message of love?

Excerpted from [*Change of Heart: Justice, Mercy, and Making Peace with My Sister's Killer*](#) by Jeanne Bishop (Westminster John Knox Press, 2015)