

Overcome the Podcast
By Christian Bowman

On July 23 1992, four people were killed in a car accident outside of Chicago. This podcast explores what happened to those who survived.

I was 15 years old when I bought my first street bike, a 1977 Honda 554 supersport and scraped up about 300 bucks and was preparing to leave the family to venture out on my own.

32 public schools and a GED and I was ready.

Up to that point, I'd grown up bouncing back and forth between parents and traveling across the country. The majority of the last few years was spent in a pop up camper and a Jeep camping out in parks from Austin, Texas up to Philadelphia.

My mother had received a phone call from a family in Hilltown, Pennsylvania. Doug and Danny hoops had been living with their mother Louise. Their father had passed a few years earlier and their friend, Eric Motis who lived across the street, came over one day with a sledgehammer and killed them all.

We were brought in to help solve the murder and clean up the house.

My name is Christian Bowman. And this is Overcome.

When we got to Hilltown I distinctly remember the feeling I got as I climbed that staircase for the first time. Eric had entered the house at around 330 in the morning and made his way up the stairs. When he went into the master bedroom, he held a pillow over Louise's face. She fought hard, she managed to get the pillow off and scream helped me.

Eric brought the sledge hammer down on Louise's head seven times. When she continued to breathe, he slit her throat.

Eric then made his way down the hallway to Danny's room. Danny was still passed out in a sleeping bag when Eric took the sledgehammer to his head. Only his friend Doug remained alive in the house. The noise of the first two killings had awakened Doug. He sat up and rubbed his eyes.

Eric watched and waited until Doug lay back in bed. Then he crawled on his hands and knees to the side of the bed and commenced to club Doug. Doug had managed to grab Eric's arm. But soon the blows took their toll. He released his grip and fell back dead.

As Eric passed the master bedroom, he heard Louie breathing. Eric then walked into the room and raped her as she died.

In an interview from state prison in Pittsburgh, on WPVI TV's "AM Philadelphia", Eric said a second man, whom he identified as Robert killed the family. Motis said he had gone to the house to commit a robbery and stayed outside while "Robert" went inside and unexpectedly killed the family.

"This is evil", said Bucks County District Attorney Alan Rubenstein. "Eric is probably on his way to becoming psychotic."

On January 13 1998, Eric fashioned a noose from a long bedsheet and tied it to the electrical conduit at the top of his prison cell in Huntington County, and then he jumped off the bed.

My mother was considered a medium. I say that with the skepticism of a preacher's son, as I have battled with the ideas of religion and spirituality, personally. However, her work as she would describe it, would be "allowing spirits to take over her body to communicate with the living." In this particular case, it was communicating with members of the family and cleaning the house spiritually, if you will.

...I chose to sleep in the basement, and then at one point decided to move into the backyard in my tent.

It was a very strange experience living in that house, but it was also the last time the family was at least mostly all together.

In addition to cleaning up the house and giving it a fresh coat of paint, we planted rose bushes and lots of flowers. The line of cars had stopped and the dust had settled.

The realtors came in, put the house back up on the market, and it was time to head out again.

My mother had received a phone call and they were heading out to a log cabin in the middle of the Ozarks.

I had different plans.

I was gonna hit skyline drive and ride my motorcycle down the Blue Ridge Parkway. I figured I would hit Nashville, shoot straight down to Austin, and then work my way west to LA and up the Pacific Coast Highway. But first, I was going to volunteer at the Philadelphia Folk Festival.

I watched them pack the bags into the back and we all gave each other hugs and said goodbye. And then I watched them drive away.

The end of the summer was here in the last of the hot Pennsylvania area gateway to the twisting roads and covered bridges of the back country. throttling the motorcycle through the turns, it began to sink in.

I'd been out on my own before, but always with a direction or a general plan to return to the family, or at least one version of it. Even when I was homeless at 12 and lost, my primary objective was still to try to find my mom and reunite with the family.

The solitude on the ride from new hope to the crowded entrance at the old pool forums in Shanksville weighed heavy that at 15... I was starting my own life,

I pulled into a gathering that took me back to the days of the dead, the flowing swatches of colorful, beautiful people. The euphoric sensations that only outdoor music festivals can provide. I'd pre registered to volunteer so everything was set up for me. I pulled in and parked my old scooter next to the line of bikes that included everything from custom Harley's and World War Two BMWs to stretch out custom choppers and Speed Racer bikes. Though she wasn't as pretty as the others on the hill, I looked at that 1977 Honda with gratitude for getting me at least one county West safely so far.

I checked in with the main tent and met the other volunteers with my group. Everyone was already paired off. Although a little dismayed to not have a partner, I was fine alone and look forward to the experience. They let me know that the first night was the third shift and to go get set up and return at 11pm.

I tried to pitch camp but there was no room and I was anxious to explore the grounds. So I just laid out my stuff and my sleeping bag, between some other tent

groups and went through the drum circles and jam sessions up on the hill. As it got later in the night, I returned to greet the other volunteers again and began making a cup of coffee.

As the creamer went in, time slowed down... out of the corner of my eye. I saw her come in and started walking towards me.

She captivated the attention of every man and woman in the room. Her long flowing dark brown hair framed her face, covering one eye. The white cut and skirt illuminated its transparency from the fires up the hill behind her. She pulled her hair back in slow motion, revealing her other eye and I caught the scent of jasmine that she looked at me “Is this for groupies EZ?” she asked in a thick French accent.

It took me a moment to reply, fumbling for my badge, looking down to see if she was in my group. “I think this is E2” I said, disheartened that she wouldn't be with me. we stared at each other.

The coordinator came to check her badge. “You're in the right group” he said “E2, you two” pointing at her and I and assigning us together. “Take this walkie talkie and check in once an hour. Your job will be to walk the fence perimeter and keep an eye out for any fires burning unattended.” He gave us the radio. “If you are with me, I am Sonia.” she said. “Christian” I replied.

As we began down the hill, her hand reached out and touched my fingers. I slipped my hand into hers and we held tight to each other as we walked through the small tent city. We strolled along the perimeter talking for hours. The sounds of laughter and music filled with patchouli, sage and burning smells of timber eventually brought us upon an unattended fire. "This seems unattended, we should attend it" I said. She leaned in to kiss me.

We made love until the sun rose in the morning dew cooled our steaming bodies. The next day after returning the walkie talkie, she moved her sleeping bag into my tent area. And our schedule remained the same all week.

It was love.

After the festival the original plan was to keep riding the bike West. But Sonia was attending the University of Pennsylvania in West Philly and jumped on the back of my bike to head down.

She had rented a room and a 12 bedroom house near the corner of 41st in chestnut she asked me to stay the night. So I parked the bike and brought in my backpack and guitar.

Then she asked me to stay. And I said yes.

I realized that I would need to get a job whether I was going to stay or not. My little savings had run out fast. At first, Sony tried to get me a job with the guy she was sleeping with right before the Folk Festival. But that was uncomfortable and didn't last long.

I started sneaking into classes on campus, anything with 300 people and it wouldn't realize I wasn't supposed to be there. It wasn't long before I looked for work on campus.

I got my very first real job as a librarian in the van Pelt library, work in the stacks and sneaking over to see the rare books collection

I had a fake ID made and I was able to get into the bars.

I became friends with a Hari Krishna drummer who had served in the Navy and was studying history, life was good.

I became a fixture on campus always in the quads playing hacky sack or guitar, writing poetry and sneaking in on cultural anthropology classes.

The Christmas break came along, and the University shut down.

Sonia went to Harare, Zimbabwe to see her father.

And I went out to the Ozarks to see my family.

We wrote each other love letters every day, letters I still have.

I cried every night in that log cabin wanting to be back in Philadelphia, or in Zimbabwe with her. It was a very strange experience for me.

The one great thing that happened in Robertsville, Missouri, that I will never forget, was a jam session one winter night. My stepdad and I were on the guitars. My younger brother Matt playing the jaws harp. My mom was singing.

We recorded it and the tape exists somewhere. I counted the days until I could see Sonia again. I really did not give the Ozarks a chance. And I think that hurt my mom a little because I wasn't present with them while I was there.

After someone close to you dies, you usually remember all the details of your last few interactions. But she was supportive of my love and couldn't wait to meet her.

They would meet only once and forever.

When I arrived back in Philly, I walked into the room and Sonia was asleep.

I crawled into bed with her in the darkness and we made love for what seemed like hours. Finally we lit a candle and looked into each other's eyes until we passed out.

Returning to Philadelphia in the spring was a process of establishing Sonia and I in a serious relationship. I had a steady job at the school friends and an address as a regular at the bar and never got stopped. springtime bounced back and the annual spring fling at the University of Pennsylvania that year it was Blues Traveler. It suddenly brought back memories of the festival life and Sonia and I talked about going traveling for the summer.

My birthday came around in March and she asked me if I wanted to go to Italy.

It took me a moment before I realized that she was serious.

Rome was unlike anything I had ever seen.

The history there is visible and tangible.

The land around the Seven Hills is breathtaking. Vonda, her mother worked near the forum, and Sonia and I explored all the Piazza's of the city, the fountains, the architecture, the smells, the markets. Rome is truly unlike anywhere else on Earth.

I'm forever grateful to Vonda for taking me in so kindly.

Another amazing moment that stands out was a flamenco show behind the building at the top of the Spanish Steps. The passion in the introduction to the world was so new and abstract. As a young dumb kid that was smoking a bunch of pot back in America and suddenly I'm hanging out with people who own international companies and are very successful travelers with grace and poise.

An example of my idiocy: Sonia is birthday party. Many of the men were given bottles of champagne that were to be popped after toast, a song and a cake. I kept thumbing the cork and blew my load halfway through the toast.

The whole party stopped and stared. I had been very American.

There were a few lessons I learned the hard way about how to behave properly.

An amazing trip we took included a road trip around the country. Some of the magical spots on the way were abroad so important the female copying on a copy. And this ancient port city that had been abandoned, just outside of Rome, close to Antica. I left with a part of my heart there on those artistic sidewalks with Sonia.

The vignettes of her memory are hyper realistic.

After an amazing time and copy, we traveled down to the Aeolian islands. We made stops and Lipari, Salina and Vulcano but my favorite was an active volcano on the island of Stromboli. At night, you can see the orange magma shooting to the blue sky while enjoying a nice red wine and a pizza overlooking the full moon, shimmering off the Tyrrhenian Sea just north of Sicily. A truly unforgettable moment in time.

When it was time to leave, I woke up late and join Sonia and bond at a restaurant. When I got there, Sonia was talking to a rich young handsome guy about the yacht he own docked in the harbor. I got really jealous and upset that I walked out of the restaurant, went down by the harbor and hid behind a rock and began to pout.

I was such a stupid young fool.

Our boat was about to leave so Sonia and Vonda had to go looking for me. So when you found me and my tantrum by the sea, and had to reassure him and insecure little kid that the rich guy didn't mean anything and that she loved me.

It was time to head back home.

I was completely sold on moving to Rome. We said our goodbyes to Vanda got on the plane. And we were on route back to America. along to go back to LA the moment the wheels left the tarmac. On the flight. I couldn't sleep. I was tossing and turning while Sonia was able to get a solid rest.

When we arrived in Chicago, my mom was holding a single rose high above the crowd.

We moved our way to her and after some strong long hugs, we got into the old brown wood panel station wagon she driven up.

She kept going on about how she was going to take a trip but not to pack any bags.

Because she had driven up from Roberts Ville, Missouri, she opted to spend the night with some family friends, Bill and Barb. They were very warm and kind and put us up in a den on a couple different sleepers.

After my mom passed out, Sonia and I silently made love until the morning arrived. I didn't think sleep at all that night either. It was time to get on the road and head back down to Missouri. My mom had asked me to drive since she was feeling a little tired from the drive up.

I didn't give it another thought and said "Sure, no problem."

We fueled up at the gas station.

And we got on the road.

I 55

We had been on the road for about three hours.

My mom laid down in the backseat.

She wanted to take a nap.

Sonia had let me know that she was also feeling pretty tired and she was gonna sleep as well.

We rolled the windows up and put on the air conditioning and played some classical music on the radio very softly.

I put the car and cruise control and slid my feet underneath the brake pad.

I woke up as the car started drifting into the meridian.

My mom woke up screaming my name.

I tried to correct the car and pull it back to the right.

But there was a diesel truck in the middle lane.

So I threw the car back to the left and the tail of it just spun and shot us straight across the meridian.

I opened my eyes just after impact. The metal was still flipping through the air.

My head was stuck between the steering wheel and the windshield looking back into the backseat.

My mother's body had been pushed up from her sleeping position and I could see that life had left her already.

The car slammed down onto the other side of the highway, breaking the windshield in my view.

I looked down to see that the steering wheel column had penetrated my stomach.

Then I heard her fighting to breathe.

I glanced to the passenger seat and saw that the whole engine had pushed through the dash into her.

Her face was down in her lap.

I tried to reach it but I couldn't move.

The window had been kicked in. an extinguisher sprayed in to stop the fire.

Little shards of glass hitting my face drew my attention to the other drivers who'd stopped out.

And then I realized.. there must have been people in the other car too.

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