

THE LETTER SEASON 2, Episode 7: The Next Generation: inheritance of trauma and forgiveness

A warning about content. This episode contains discussions of sexual assault. Please take care when listening.

Amy Donaldson: For most people, the squawk of a school intercom system lives somewhere in the abandoned hallways of our memories. A sound that once alerted students to the day's big events and important issues fades, slowly, to become a small part in a distant symphony of childhood noise.

But for Lisa Rassmussen Opfar, that sound never faded. And even decades removed from those grade-school hallways, it drags her back to a loss so profound, it's just part of who she is. That noise, or anything like it, instantly summons fear.

Lisa: Whenever I would hear like that beep and then an announcement, I would get nervous.

Amy Donaldson: When Lisa hears that sound, she's not a 47-year-old woman. She falls through time, back to Friday, March 5, 1982 when she was a carefree 5-year-old sitting in her kindergarten class. The most exciting thing about that morning had been the storm that brought new snow and then she heard that intercom beep and the voice of someone asking her to come down to the principal's office.

Lisa walked down the long hall to the office, where her neighbor stood waiting and someone told her she was going home early. No one told her why and she doesn't remember asking any questions.

Lisa: I had never been checked out of school before.

Amy Donaldson: She walked outside where her 8-year old brother Dave was standing next to their neighbor's car holding his arm in a strange position.

Lisa: And I remember seeing him outside in front of the school. And he was like folding his arms. It looked like he was holding it weird. Like, oh, he probably broke his arm, and we're going home.

Amy Donaldson: She compliantly climbed into the backseat of the car. She doesn't remember how she felt or what she expected. Just what she saw as they drove into their neighborhood.

Lisa: I remember pulling up onto our street and I saw a lot of cars outside and I thought, Oh, I wonder why those cars are there. And then I remember like, walking up the sidewalk and in the front door. But then I don't remember anything.

Amy Donaldson: She knows what happened after that. She just can't remember it. Everything that happened in the weeks after her father Jordan Rasmussen was murdered at Log Haven Restaurant are memories inherited from other people. All she knows for herself is how it all felt the confusion, the sadness, the fear. And she knows that sound. it's never left her.

Lisa: one time I was in high school, and the beep. And my name got called to the office and I thought, oh, no, what's happened?

Amy Donaldson: She felt sick, her mind raced. Was it her mom? Her little brother? Her grandpa? She rushed through the halls of the school.

Lisa: So I went to the office and checked in. Yeah, hey, my name was just called over the intercom. And she said, Oh, that must have been a mistake.

Amy Donaldson: But it wasn't a mistake. Because this experience, this always wondering if or when Something terrible might happen again wasn't hers alone. On that day, after Lisa left the house, her mother's fear hijacked their ordinary morning.

Lisa: My friend had picked me up. And shortly after my mom heard sirens, and this was before cell phones. So my mom got nervous. So she called my school to see if I had made it okay.

Amy Donaldson: At DeAnn's request, the office staff called Lisa down and made sure she was safe. Neither of them knew how their fear terrorized the other.

Lisa: My mom didn't know that I had anxieties about the intercom, and so.

Amy Donaldson: You didn't know she had

Lisa: I didn't know that she was having anxiety that she heard sirens after I left the house.

Amy Donaldson: Even years later, when Lisa and her husband left their children at home for a cruise-ship vacation with friends, that sound stalked her and the fear that came with it.

Lisa: And whenever I would hear that bell on the cruise ship, I would get anxiety, because I thought something Oh, they're kind of going to announce that they're going to call me and tell me something's happened back home.

Amy Donaldson: The more she built a life that she loved, the more she risked losing.

Lisa: I'm pretty much affected by it every day, um.

Amy Donaldson: Just contemplating the pain of losing anyone she loves strangles her voice. and she buries her face in her hands.

Lisa: Just um, my anxiety didn't manifest itself until I was married. Not that it had anything to do with my husband at all, but I think it's because I cared and loved for someone so much that I didn't want him to be taken away from me. And with every child that's been born, my anxiety has just increased more and more. I know that the anxiety is because of that tragedy.

Amy Donaldson: Lisa wasn't the only child left with remnants of a trauma she can barely remember. When Michael Moore killed Jordan Rasmussen and Buddy Booth, he left five children to grow up with ghosts to wrestle with emotions they were too young to understand.

They inherited a lot from their fathers eye color, smiles, mannerisms. And there is no doubt, they inherited the pain of their violent deaths. But something else happened after those murders. The mothers of those children made choices about whether to forgive the man who murdered their fathers. Leaving the children to figure out. If it's possible to inherit trauma, is it also possible to inherit forgiveness? Or is that something each person just has to struggle with for themselves?

The answer to that question doesn't just matter to them. Remember the Rasmussens enlisted former prosecutor John T. Nielsen to help Michael get another chance at parole...and his efforts would bring them all together again and this time, the children of the men Michael killed would be old enough to speak for themselves.

From KSL Podcasts, I'm Amy Donaldson and this is the Letter, Season 2: Ripple Effect. Episode 7, Inheritance.

[Music]

Amy Donaldson: Jordan Rasmussen's murder left three children to grow up wondering what life would be like if he'd lived. They suffered the same loss, listened to the same stories about what a great guy he was, and they took comfort in the same faith. They all watched as their mother and extended family chose to forgive their father's killer and extolled the healing power of forgiveness. But their struggles with grief were not the same in part, because what they lost was not the same.

For example Lisa and her big brother Dave both remember leaving school early the day their father was murdered. They both remember how odd it felt and the strangeness of all the cars parked outside their house. Once they walked inside, though Lisa's memories end. But for 8-year-old Dave the oldest of Jordan's children not only can he still see pictures of that day in his mind he can still feel the sharpness of every emotion that frames them.

David: I remember going in that there are a lot of people in there. I could tell that my mother was upset. And my dad wasn't there and I knew seeing my mother's face something was up. And I recall her saying that our dad wasn't coming home and that he had died.

Amy Donaldson: Some details have slipped beyond his grasp. Dave doesn't remember his mother leading him and Lisa into his bedroom. Or that she sat between them on the

wood-framed bed his father built for him as she told them he was gone. In fact, answering questions about his father's death is like trying to assemble a puzzle that's never really finished.

David: There's a lot that I think I've just kind of put on a shelf in my head and blocked it out.

Amy Donaldson: Because he has so few memories of his father, he hoards all of them. Even the silliest moments have become significant, sentimental. Like the time he wanted a BMX bike for his birthday and his dad delivered some atrocity with a banana seat and oversized handlebars.

Dave: And I look at kids riding those things now that are the you know Cool, cool kids and back then that's what I had been given and I kind of thought oh wait, my dad was ahead of the curve for sure.

Amy Donaldson: Did you think that as a child though?

David: No, I thought I got a dumb bike.

Amy Donaldson: (laughs)

Amy Donaldson: Scarcity has made him more grateful for every shred of memory that remains and it's made even the most ordinary moments with his dad magical.

David: I remember one time being in the backyard of our new home that they had built and we'd moved into and walking around the yard. I remember some conversation about a hot air balloon and one day he was going to take me up in a hot air balloon. I remember him talking about going to Disney World. I remember just kind of filling me with all these wonderful wonderful opportunities and dreams and just kind of gave me a lot of excitement as a little kid.

Amy Donaldson: Dave never got the chance to experience any of those things with his dad but he does have tangible evidence of his dad's devotion. It's that bed his father built for him. And when he yearns for a physical connection he can reach out and touch something infused with his father's love. Or he can reach out and touch it.

David: I have that to this day something that he had made with his own hands and so there's certainly a connection to him through that physicality that still remains.

Amy Donaldson: Dave says they all grew up hearing that same thing from their extended family that Jordan was the best dad.

David: The stories they were trying to convey to me that he was a great man and how much he loved his kids and would do anything for them.

Amy Donaldson: But for Dave these stories have also created a conflict, a resentment that he didn't understand. What good is having the best dad if you don't get to grow up with him?

David: Hearing the stories of aunts and uncles talking about how amazing he was in some ways, I guess I feel cheated, that it sometimes obviously didn't feel fair. and so then I think okay, well, those experiences I do have even though I may have blocked them out they're experiences that my siblings didn't have at all.

Amy Donaldson: Because Lisa was only 5 when Jordan died, her memories of him are faint shadows of the real thing. She can't remember that she worried about giving him a cold when she looked into his casket at his funeral or that she insisted her dad would be home for Christmas. But, she knows these stories because her family told her. They gave her the pieces to make something tangible. He's someone she loves not just a face in a photograph.

Lisa: I know he was tall because I've seen pictures of him standing next to my mom. And I know that he was kind and a peacemaker.

Amy Donaldson: He belongs to her because of them.

Lisa: Almost every time that we would get together and still do, one of the aunts will make it a point to talk to me, and they don't coordinate this with each other like, Okay, I'm gonna be the one that talks to Lisa today. But they would always tell me how much he loved me and what a great man he was. And so, yeah, it was an active part of my life. Not specifically, like, like, I couldn't tell you what his favorite ice cream flavor was.

Amy Donaldson: Like his sister, Jordan's youngest child Chad clung to every word of those stories. He stalked the pages of photo albums looking for pieces of himself in images of his dad. His pain comes from what he never had the chance to experience.

Chad: I don't have any of my own memories. It's all secondhand. And yeah, that that was probably what has been the hardest

Amy Donaldson: Chad is the sleep-averse 16-month old we met in the very first moments of this podcast. He was the child Jordan spent his last night alive cuddling in that cold car after he locked himself out of the house. Chad knows that story well. But he can't remember the feel of his father's arms around him, the sound of his laugh, or the scent of his jacket as he laid his head on his shoulder. It's real for him because his mother told him about it, she wrote it down, and even put it in his baby book. Because he had no memory of the trauma they all shared, he became a symbol of healing for his extended family. In a way, his childish oblivion was a reprieve from the grief.

Chad: I think probably for me, people felt most sorry, because I never knew and, but also I was like an innocent joy. And I was innocent from this harm. And so I think I gave a lot of hope to a

lot of people. I know that that's what my mom has said that because I was naive to what was going on I didn't have the sorrow way down. And so I was like, a little bit of hope.

Amy Donaldson: But not remembering the trauma of losing his father doesn't mean Chad escaped the torment of grief. He has lived with losing something so essential, that no matter what he has, he feels a yearning a void that even the best people, the strongest religious belief, and the most loving, attentive family just can't fill.

Chad: You know, it's been the hardest thing that I've had to deal with because of the unknown, you know, you're a kid and you wish that you know, as you're going through your own developmental stages, you know, I had an incredible stepfather that is and like a real father to me ever much is what a father should be. But you still have this like desire to know what your biological father was.

Amy Donaldson: Chad's challenge was envisioning who he could become without knowing the man he hoped to emulate. And it seems a cruel irony that in his last moments alive, Jordan gave Chad the one thing his son has longed for all his life. Just a few minutes with his dad.

Chad: I wanted to go and just have a father-son talks and learn what his likes or his interests were and but it was mostly that, that I wanted to be able to just spend time with him.

Amy Donaldson: And while it feels like Jordan is more of an idea than a real person, he said the picture his family painted of his dad has helped him strive to be a better man.

Chad: I'm grateful that my family did. That they did share all the good. Because it did, like, set that standard of, of how I wanted to be and then something to aim for.

Amy Donaldson: Chad never got to stand in the backyard with his dad and dream about the future, at least not the way his older brother Dave did. But he does have his own version of that father-son moment.

Chad: There was one particular night that in fact, I was at my aunt Diane's house, and me and my cousin Mitch, were sleeping outside. And I remember he fell asleep and I'm still sitting there awake, looking up to the, stars or to the heavens, and, and there was a particular star that stood out bright to me. And I felt a closeness to that star and to my dad at that time.

Amy Donaldson: The next morning, his aunt asked if he knew the day before was his father's birthday. He hadn't known but he'd never forgot that birthday and how they sort of spent it together

Chad: And I, later throughout the next several years, could always find that star, and had a sense of connection.

Amy Donaldson: Those connections are made more real because of their family's religious faith. The Rasmussens are devout members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Their faith promised that their dad wasn't really gone. Lisa said she feels his presence in her life even if she can't see his face or ask him what kind of ice cream he likes best.

Lisa: I really do feel his closeness at different times. I feel that he's with me and I truly believe that he is my family's guardian angel.

Amy Donaldson: All three children took comfort in the idea that they would see their father in heaven. Dave says one of the explanations given to him was that his father's death was part of a larger plan orchestrated by God.

David: Throughout my upbringing, I had no reason to question. It was just who, who I was as part of my, my heritage. And had always believed that God has a specific plan for all of us. And my plan included you know, the loss of my father.

Amy Donaldson: But he could never make peace with the idea that God's plan for him included his father's murder.

David: If this was the plan, nobody consulted with me.

Amy Donaldson: Dave left the Latter Day Saint religion about 12 years ago, and he now recognizes how those religious ideas helped him in some ways and created conflict in others.

David: Even though at times, I may have been harboring resentment to God and say, Well, if this is the plan you know, it sucks. But I know there was also a faith that I had in the time that there's something beyond that we're all working towards and striving for. So that got me through some of those challenges.

Amy Donaldson: And even though Dave no longer shares his family's faith, he's grateful for his mom's example.

David: I told her, you know, Mom, you've done an amazing job. You've helped me to get to where I am. And it's just not something that I hold as a belief anymore. But God bless you for helping to get me through tests and trials the way I have, with some sense of structure and belief that ease some of those pains and gave me yes an idea that there's more beyond the this life.

Amy Donaldson: Jordan's murder clearly had deep, enduring impacts on all of his children. But what impact would their mother's decision to forgive his killer have on them? As Lisa got older, it was clear that like her mother she was plagued with fear and anxiety. If one of her three boys wanted to go on a road trip it would send her into a panic, just as it did for her mother when she was a teenager. And because it was a trauma that happened so early in life, she doesn't even know who she might be without it.

Lisa: I know that I have issues in my life that remain from this trauma. And, for me, I know, it's just part of who I am. Do I like it? No, It manifests itself through anxiety. And sometimes it's more extreme than others. So I do wish that I could live a life without these anxieties, but I don't even know anything else.

Amy Donaldson: But if Lisa inherited her mother's anxiety, she also learned something from watching how her mother processed grief. She was a teenager, maybe 15 or 16, when she understood that her family had forgiven Michael Moore.

Lisa: knew that my mom had been writing to Mike, it wasn't a secret but it also wasn't like this huge thing, either.

Amy Donaldson: Did you think this is a natural process or this is crazy, like

Lisa: Oh I didn't think it was crazy.

Amy Donaldson: Yeah.

Lisa: No, I just thought this is, I just thought this is good. You know, I've been taught that it's required for us to forgive all men. Everyone.

Amy Donaldson: Lisa absorbed the lessons of forgiveness almost without realizing it. It was just what her family did.

Lisa: I think that forgiveness was definitely I owe a huge part of that to my mom, and to my grandparents and my aunts, because they were such good examples to me that they just made it so that it was possible that I saw their love and their compassion and the love and light that they shared that it bled into me.

Amy Donaldson: As unbelievable as it sounds Lisa has accepted this forgiveness so completely, she doesn't even blame Michael Moore for the traces of trauma she struggles with everyday.

Lisa: Even with, like all the anxieties that I do have, I don't ever blame that on him. I'm glad for that. I'm glad that I don't have to have such negative feelings towards someone on top of dealing with my own anxieties and insecurities. I can't imagine what it would be like to have that negativity poison in my body on top of the other things that I feel. For me, forgiveness is to free ourselves. It's to free ourselves from that poison that negativity in us.

Amy Donaldson: But for both of her brothers, it would be more complicated especially as they approached adulthood. And it would be Chad who'd ask his siblings to do something they hadn't even considered. Meet with their father's killer and decide for themselves if he deserved forgiveness.

Chad's reasons for doing that would come from his family's efforts to help Michael earn parole. And it would bring him for the first time into a room with Buddy Booth's family.

After the break we'll hear how the choices the Booths make will lead them to that room in the prison.

[Music]

Amy Donaldson: Buddy Booth's oldest daughter Norma insists she's a daddy's girl.

Norma: Oh, I was a big-time daddy's girl.

Amy Donaldson: Even though she can't really remember being the center of her dad's world. She lost her father when she was only 4 years old. But all of her life everyone has been telling her this. And they've also pointed out how his habits, his mannerisms show up in her.

Norma: There was times when my family were like, some of the things I would do, it's like, your daddy used to do the same thing.

Amy Donaldson: Her little sister Dana inherited Buddy's curly red hair and freckles but Norma has traces of her dad that only someone who loved him might recognize. Her aunts would point out these remnants of Buddy whenever they saw them like how she finds comfort in tucking her hands in her pants when she watches TV.

Norma: my Aunt Joetta, she's like, What are you doing? I'm like, Nothing. Because I was just sitting there watching TV just goes, You know what? Your dad used to do the same thing.

Amy Donaldson: Or the way she looks when she's processing a joke.

Norma: I was talking to my aunt Joanna one time, and she made a joke or something. But then she's like, you and your dad, you're like two peas in a pod. When he makes, he cracks a joke or hears a joke and he's like, trying to comprehend what the joke was. And we're like, huh, he used to do the same thing.

Amy Donaldson: Not really memories but connections to him. And they mean everything to her even if the joy she feels is tinged with longing.

Norma: In a way it was comforting and happy to know that I had some kind of trait from him. But at the same time made me sad because I wanted to see him for myself. I wish I could have had some kind of experience with my dad. Memories, you know, that I can know and carry on.

Amy Donaldson: When Buddy was killed, it left his 23-year-old wife Carla a widow. She relied on help from family, and then, felt a pull to create a more solid family structure around her girls.

They needed a father. She needed a partner. When a friendship turned romantic, it seemed like a blessing. The fact that he was already a father, that made him more attractive.

Carla: He was a single father. And he was raising his own children. And I thought, Well, maybe he's a good guy.

Amy Donaldson: They married within a year of Buddy's death and added a sixth child, a boy to their blended family.

Because Norma was only 4 when her dad was killed, she didn't really understand why her dad was suddenly gone. Remember, she spent about 8 months in foster care, so she had been taken away from Buddy before. But she was so young, that even when her mother took her to her father's grave and tried to make it clear, she still didn't understand.

Norma: I remember him there one moment, and then he wasn't there. I was wondering where he was. And I thought I did something wrong. I'm like, well, I guess he's not coming back. I don't really know if I knew the concept, like, if Buddy was my dad.

Amy Donaldson: So when her mom remarried, she just accepted the new father figure.

Norma: And then I remember one day, my stepfather was there. I figured, this is my dad.

Amy Donaldson: It wasn't until she was older, Norma thinks she was in second grade when she finally started to piece together the puzzle of her missing dad. Her class was studying family origins, and parents were invited to come to school for the day. Kids had a chance to show off moms and dads. Carla attended with Norma but her step dad was working. Norma breaks down remembering how her friend asked why her dad wasn't at school with her.

Norma: One of my friends is like, where's your dad? And I'm all like, well, he's at work. So I asked my mom when I got home. Can you tell me the origin of my dad, And she slipped and she's like, which one?

Amy Donaldson: Norma was momentarily confused as she listened to her mom, she felt a memory somewhere in the shadows of her 7-year-old mind taking shape.

Norma: What do you mean which one? And she goes, your biological dad or your stepdad? I'm like, wait, you know, like, oh yeah.

Amy Donaldson: Suddenly Norma understood what her mother tried to tell her when her father was killed.

Norma: When I was younger, I didn't realize what she meant by, your dad's gone. That's when it really hit me.

Amy Donaldson: The loss changed her life, it changed how she felt about herself, about her mom. Realizing her 'real' dad was dead was like losing him for the first time.

Norma: I felt like somebody just punched me in my chest. I felt like my mom should have prepared me more and I felt like I needed to talk to her about it she was always like, you know, it's over, it's done with you know, let's move on. You got a stepdad now and, and my problems weren't significant enough to talk about.

Amy Donaldson: Her yearning for her dad never went away. She turned to her stepfather to fill that void and that only led to more heartache.

Norma: I leaned on my stepdad, because he was showing me affection that my mom wasn't, you know, he was taking my side, so I kind of leaned on him more, which I shouldn't have because certain things that had happened.

Amy Donaldson: Carla's new husband drank all the time, drank away their money and threw them deep into debt. They fought constantly.

Carla: Yeah, he was a horrible person. He did things in the marriage that I should have left him after five years. But I stayed with him like a good wife.

Amy Donaldson: But the worst thing about staying for so long is what happened to her daughter. The man Norma trusted to love and care for her violated that trust in one of the worst ways possible. He began molesting her around age 10.

Norma: He would always tell me, you know, if you tell your mom, it's gonna split us apart, our family's going to be split apart. And you don't want that right? And I'm like, No, I don't, because with my biological dad Buddy, being taken away from us, I didn't want to be the reason that another family would be separated. You know, so I wanted to keep hold of what family I had.

Amy Donaldson: Carla didn't find out about the abuse until her husband molested two neighbor girls, and their parents called police. She didn't believe the allegations at first but then he confessed. It devastated their already fragile existence. For Norma, the arrest was a relief. But it also set off a new wave of pain.

Norma: I blamed him for my psychological, my mental thoughts. How I felt about myself like I didn't feel worthy. I felt like I deserved it. And I wasn't strong enough to say no. But as the time went on, and I got older, and when it all came out, I had a chance to really sit and say, You know what, that was wrong. He shouldn't have done that to me.

Amy Donaldson: I think it's important to note here that it is common for children to blame themselves for things that happen to them. Remember, Norma assumed she was to blame when she didn't understand why Buddy just disappeared from her life. Psychologists say children see the world from the inside out and if everything comes from within then it's easy to

see why a child would blame themselves for things that happen to them. Thankfully, Norma was able to see through therapy that the things that happened to her were not her fault. But even as adults, sometimes there is a gap between what we know to be true and how it makes us feel.

No one can say what would have happened if Buddy had lived, but Norma often wonders what her life might have been like if fate had been kinder to her.

Amy Donaldson: Do you ever think about what your life would have been like or what would have happened to you if your dad had lived?

Norma: Yeah, I don't think that this would have happened. I think we would have been a happy family.

Amy Donaldson: Your parents did, I mean, they had struggles. They were young, but, and maybe they would have worked it out. But even if they were divorced, do you think it would have been better for you? Like, if he was alive, and you could talk to him?

Norma: Yeah, cuz I would have had my dad and I would have been, you know, able to go to him with my struggles in life, you know.

Amy Donaldson: Norma's step father was jailed for a year. He attended therapy, and when he was released, he apologized.

Norma: He started talking to me, he started crying, and I cried. And he's all like, I never meant to hurt you. I feel horrible, very terrible about the things I've done to you. And I wish I could take it back. But I know I can't. All I can think about is moving forward, and trying to rebuild the relationship that I destroyed. So after a while I just knew that, you know, I needed for myself to forgive him.

Amy Donaldson: Norma thinks forgiving her stepdad may have set her up for how she'd handle other questions of forgiveness. Surviving sexual abuse haunts her in so many painful ways but she said it's where her belief about redemption was formed. For those who try to change, who are remorseful, she sees a way back.

Norma: Knowing that he was in jail, he was getting his own therapy sessions, and he was on the road of recovery and understanding and feeling remorse, and he was sorry for what he had done. I felt that he deserved a second chance.

Amy Donaldson: But it wasn't just her stepfather she had to think about forgiving. Norma didn't know it yet, but her mother Carla had started a correspondence with her father's killer. For years, Carla thought Michael Moore deserved to die for his crimes, but she figured he was locked away and no longer a reason for concern so she didn't think much about him.

But after a 1995 hearing, Michael Moore asked the Utah Board of Pardons and Parole to forward his letters to the Booth family. In a letter to Jordan's sister Leslie, Michael said that her decision to forgive him had inspired him to find a way to reach out to Buddy's family especially his widow Carla.

Carl: When I got the first letter of his. I was like, oh, no! I was kind of freaked out. but then I read it. He apologized. He wanted to when he got out, he wanted to sit down with me and have coffee and talk and stuff like that.

Carla: And I had believed that he was truly sorry.

Amy Donaldson: In his letter, Michael told her about his troubled childhood, his father's abuse. And I want to note, we don't have any way to prove or disprove Michael's allegations. But he did tell therapists, clergy and he shared what he endured with the families of his victims in his letters and Carla believed what Michael told her.

Carla: And I was sad for him for what he had gone through prior before all this had happened. It hurt me, hurt me to hear what he had gone through in his family life.

Amy Donaldson: With everything that Michael told her, Carla could finally make sense out of what happened.

Carla: You know, I believe that when somebody is so angry at someone else, that they can snap on someone else. He was angry with his father for all the abuse his father had put on him and his mother. And so he was angry that day, Michael needed help because of all his childhood abuse, and he never got that help.

Amy Donaldson: Carla decided to write back. In her letter to Michael, she said she was quote "just too old to let this keep haunting me anymore. I need to face this chapter of my life head on so I can close it."

She acknowledged her inlaws did not forgive Michael but she said wanted to try and she asked if he'd meet with her.

She wrote: "in order for me to do this, I must see you and hear from you not just in a letter, but in person. I guess I'm not as bitter as I was 13 years ago or a few months ago."

After an exchange of several letters, Carla went by herself to visit Michael in prison in February of 1996.

Carla: I was nervous. I was super nervous. And they had me sit across from him. And he had someone sitting next to him. And I was by myself, you know, sitting there. And it was tough at first. And there was a lot of emotion between both of us. And we cried a lot. That's when I really knew he had changed. He was really sad, really sorry for what he did. I had anger when it's in

the courtroom looking at him. But then at the prison, the anger was gone he told me, he says, he expected this bitter, angry old woman to show up. He says, But what he seen before him was a beautiful young woman. And I told him, then I told him, you know, Michael, I can't stay angry with you. I says, if I was angry and bitter about things, it would affect my children too. And I couldn't let that happen.

Amy Donaldson: In that meeting, Carla told him how she wished she'd gotten her high school diploma, how she had dreams of going to college. And a few months later, Michael sent her money to help her go back to school hoping that might help her find financial stability.

Michael talked about his relationship with Carla in letters to the Rasmussen family. Michael told them how being forgiven by them made him want to do more than just apologize. In one letter, Michael shared his feelings about what it meant to finally connect with Carla and how he'd tried to make amends for what he'd done to her and her daughters. Here's part of a letter he wrote to Jordan's sister Ann Marie read by an actor.

Michael Moore Voice Actor: Carla was much poorer than your family. When I shot Buddy, she was very young. In her letter to me, she spoke of her desire to finish high school and go to college. She took a second job at night to try and save money for tuition. I wrote and told her that while I could not replace Buddy, perhaps I could restore the educational opportunity I took from her. I took most of my savings and provided her a fund to pay for four years at the University. She received that last month. She's now enrolled in Creekside High School and soon headed for college. So while I can't make restitution, in some ways I can at least try.

Michael had saved the money he earned running the prison's printshop and he'd invested it. So he decided to send Carla \$10,000 so she could go to school and a bit more money to help with bills. But Carla said she ended up using it all just to survive.

[Music]

Amy Donaldson: Norma was married with two children of her own when her mom started talking to her about forgiving Michael.

Norma: My mom was saying that he felt really bad. And that he is asking everybody for forgiveness.

Amy Donaldson: Norma said she'd think about it. She is Pagan and she doesn't go to church, but she considers herself spiritual. And she prayed for guidance, for relief from the pain, the anger, the resentment and a few nights later she had an unexpected visit.

Norma: I had a dream. And my dad was visiting me in my dream. And he's like, at some point you gotta forgive, you know, and I didn't know what that meant if it was for my mom or it was for my sister. Because my sister and I didn't have a great relationship, my mom and I didn't have a great relationship when I was growing up. And I just kind of like, I actually forgave all of them.

Amy Donaldson: So when her mother asked her if she wanted to write a letter to the Board of Pardons on Michael's behalf, she was ready.

Norma: I mean, I will never forget it. You know, that he took my dad away. But it's kind at some point in your life, you got to just forgive. You know, he's done his time. He's apparently shown remorse.

Amy Donaldson: After the dream, she chose to forgive not just Michael, but anyone who'd hurt her. There was no conversation, no confrontation and no apology. It was just what she needed to do for herself.

Norma: In order for me to be happy, I need to move on, and accept that things just happen out of my control.

Amy Donaldson: She said her decision was about the person she wanted to be and the kind of life she wanted to live. And it was after that dream that she realized what her anger was doing to her.

Norma: So I forgave them. All of them. And I just felt like, like a truck just lifted up off my chest, you know, and I felt right like that was when I needed to do.

Amy Donaldson: She sat down and wrote a letter to the man who robbed her of a life with her dad but she didn't put it in the mail. She took it with her to the prison where she'd have a chance to read it to Michael herself.

That's after the break.

[Music]

Amy Donaldson: Two days after former prosecutor John T. Neilson ran into Michael Moore at the prison's printshop, he ran into Jordan Rasmussen's brother-in-law at a bank. And it was this moment when he began working on a plan to get Michael Moore in front of the parole board.

John T: I made contact with the Rasmussen family and told them that I would do what I could to help Michael. And he wasn't due for a parole hearing for several years. But I knew the Chairman of the Board of Pardons Mike Sibbett. And so I called Mike up and I said, you know, I've learned this incredible story. And we need to, we need to cut this kid some slack, we need to do something.

Amy Donaldson: Chairman Sibbett agreed to take a look at Michael's case. and he was apparently moved because he took the very unusual step of granting Michael Moore a special attention parole hearing three years early.

Mike Sibbett: Good morning, are you Michael Patrick Moore?

Michael Moore: Yes sir.

Amy Donaldson: It was warm for a winter morning Feb. 21, 1999 Chairman Sibbett started with the standard formalities, welcomes, and then an explanation as to why the board decided to hear his case three years earlier than planned.

Mike Sibbett: You need to understand that one of the reasons that we decided to do that was the reality that you have probably earned a parole date.

Amy Donaldson: All these years, it had been only the Rasmussens who had attended parole hearings. But this time Buddy's family was there and ready to speak on Michael's behalf. Jordan's parents, sisters and widow were seated in the audience. And for the first time, Jordan's youngest son Chad Rasmussen attended a parole hearing.

Mike Sibbett: Let the record show that. That the victim's wife and victim's daughter for Buddy Booth present. They have asked to testify and I'll allow that testimony.

Amy Donaldson: Carla told Sibbett her correspondence with Michael Moore changed her mind about him.

Carla: Mike and I have written many letters over the past three years. Every time I read his letters. I feel very confident about the change in him. I have done a lot of changing in my life as well. First, I needed to forgive myself before I could forgive him. Second Mike has helped me believe in myself and in my education. Third, Mike has helped me find the faith in myself and in others. I also believe that if Mike is released, he will continue to help others get over whatever hurdle they wish to get over. Thanks.

Amy Donaldson: And then, Norma, just 20 years old, leaned toward the microphone and opened the letter she'd written.

Norma: Hello, my name is Norma Britton. My maiden name is Booth. I'm here on behalf of Michael Moore. First of all, I would like to say that, um, through the past few years, Michael has really helped my mom in more ways than one. He's also helped me, meaning that Michael has answered some questions that's helped me to understand and that's helped me to move on with my life. I believe people can change within time. I believe Michael has changed and in my heart, I truly believe that Michael is sorry for what he's done. But as the saying goes, we can't change the past, we can only move forward. I believe, to forgive one another is the answer. We can only learn from our mistakes and take responsibility for our actions. I believe Michael has done that by serving his time. I have come to respect Michael Moore in a way to come to the point to forgive him and I would truly like to see Michael get another chance in life of freedom, for his freedom. Thank you,

Amy Donaldson: Sitting a few feet from where Norma was expressing her feelings, her forgiveness. An 18-year-old who skipped school to attend the hearing with his family was losing a battle to hide an emotional conflict that blind-sided him. Chad Rasmussen, Jordan's youngest child, listened with tears streaming down his face.

Chad: I remember sitting there in the courtroom at the prison and they walked Mike Moore into the room and that was the first time I'd seen him.

Amy Donaldson: Not only was it the first time Chad had seen his father's killer it was the first hearing of any kind he'd attended.

Chad: and I did have a flood of emotion I, a whole mix of emotions, mostly the pain that I had been going through. And seeing for the first time this man that had caused that. And again, we were there as a family showing support for justice and mercy to allow him to to come out but it was almost like this was my first trial.

Amy Donaldson: Chad was just a toddler when Michael Moore was tried for his crimes. He never experienced the testimony, the confession, the graphic descriptions of his father's murder. For him, this parole hearing was his first chance to come to terms with what Michael had taken from him.

Chad: So I had a lot of conflict then because again I'm in the throes of my pain.

Amy Donaldson: He knew his family had forgiven Michael. They had already spoken on Michael's behalf at a previous hearing. But all he could feel was what this man's decisions had cost him. A kid who wanted to have his own memories of his father.

Chad: And I just weeped through the entire trial

Amy Donaldson: As Chad listened that day he heard the messages of change, of redemption, of forgiveness. But all he felt was pain. He didn't share this grief or how conflicted he felt. He wasn't sure how to do that with people who'd moved on so completely. It was hard to see how he could ever join them.

Chad: As a family we like openly talked about it. With the healing process that my mom and grandparents and aunts had had been going through. I even remember, we were talking about how even Mike could go and live in the basement of my grandparents like that's how strange this change of heart was.

Amy Donaldson: But how did he feel about Michael Moore? Chad realized he couldn't just let his family decide for him. Especially as his 19th birthday approached. That's because he was preparing to leave the country for 2 years to do missionary work in Hong Kong for his church.

Chad: If I'm going to go out and share a message of the gospel of Jesus Christ and his role the being able to help all men overcome any sin or any imperfection that we can forgive all through that power and also that all people can be forgiven, I realized that I needed to complete that for myself.

Amy Donaldson: Chad Rasmussen knew what he had to do. There was only one person who could answer his questions, and that was Michael Moore. So before he left on his mission, he was going to need to visit the prison.

And for the first time, he would question the forgiveness he'd inherited from his family.

Chad: I started thinking to myself, "They've all been fooled." We're all falling for this guy's trick. And I didn't want to fall for that trick.

Amy Donaldson: That's next time on the final episode of The Letter Season 2: Ripple Effect.

Andrea Smardon: As we heard in this episode, children exposed to trauma can face challenges that often persist into adulthood. I'm producer Andrea Smardon, and on this week's bonus episode, Jordan Rasmussen's son Dave sits down with a psychologist to talk about some of the unresolved emotions that surfaced for him during the making of this podcast. We also get some tips on how to recognize trauma in children and how to help those struggling with loss.

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