

The Missing Piece of a Terrible Puzzle

Category: Gun Violence

written by Julie Bloss Kelsey | March 7, 2026

I didn't know I was a victim of gun violence for more than forty years. Once I hit my twenties, I knew I had been sexually assaulted as a child. I carried bits and pieces of that memory, always in fragments: opening the door to a stranger, a breeze through an open window, curled into a little ball by my toy chest. I held these pieces tightly even though they didn't make any sense.

Years of therapy followed. I tried talk therapy and EMDR, self-help groups and books. I kept searching for the missing piece that would bring me back together. I knew there was something important I had forgotten.

In 2015, my family took a trip back to where I was living at the time of the assault. I didn't remember when I saw my childhood home, visited my grade school, or stopped by my old church. It was only after a trip to my favorite pier by the beach that I remembered. Not all at once, not then. But later, after we came home, and I felt safe.

I soon realized that a sensation I had been having for years—too close, too fast, too much—was a flashback. It occurred right before he shoved the gun into my mouth.

With that reclaimed memory, things clicked into place. I wish I could say I felt complete when that happened. Instead, I was a complete wreck. I couldn't put things in my mouth. Couldn't eat unless I distracted myself. Had a mild panic attack at the dentist's office. I felt whole in a way that I hadn't before, but my inner child ran around screaming inside. It took more therapy to put my memories back on track.

I still get queasy when I think or write about what happened. I am thankful for the therapists I worked with over the years—not the ones who took over my story and tried to write it for me, but the ones who stood by, listened, and held space for my grief. Even now, eight years since my reconnection, I am still afraid to write or talk about this. I will never know if it was a man or a teen, a real gun or a toy, but I remind myself that those parts of the story don't matter. I was four years old, and it never should have happened.

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