

# Dear Plant Life Magazine

by Laurel Landis

Dear Editor,

I am writing to you because you are my favorite magazine, and I wanted to tell you what happened without having you look at me while I talk. By the way, I have a subscription, though I don't know if that is necessary to write you a letter. If some parts get smeary it's not because I'm crying, it's because I'm sitting on a rock near the water and it splashes up here sometimes. I'm only going to do this once.

I have enclosed a newspaper clipping, to show you I'm telling the truth. I'm in the picture on the far right, standing near a maple tree with my mouth wide open in a scream. On the far left is a rearing horse with one of the local farm kids on it, and in the foreground is chaos. I have never seen such a picture and can only imagine it is a still from someone's video camera. This was the point in the parade in which the high school band had already gone by, and were far enough onto the next block that they didn't hear or see what was going on. They kept playing, I think they must have played all the way through it, because I can still hear a piece of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" over and over, even though it happened a week ago.

You see that the headline says "65 People Gunned Down at July 4 Parade" and you're probably thinking it seems like a lot, why would so many people be on one block in a town of 300? It's because people sit two and three deep along the street to watch the parade, and once the shooter got to the corner they four or five deep maybe, with babies in strollers and old people in lawn chairs who couldn't just get up and run away or throw themselves on the ground. Besides, a whole week of pops and bangs going off at all hours had acclimated people to loud noises, so they were slow in reacting.

It was Jesus who opened fire on us. People tell me I shouldn't blame the Hands Up church for it but it was their flatbed truck that brought him, standing up there on a the back with a long-

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hair wig and a white robe. I saw it all. Him taking that big gun out from under the robe, just as the float rounded the corner onto Stemper Street. Like time stopped for a second for me to look. I didn't even know what it was at first. I'd never seen a gun that big up close and by the time I recognized it from watching war movies it was aimed straight at us. I looked at his face and something clicked behind my eyes, something that told me I should pay attention, and the first round went off.

You don't see him in this picture, he's already at the corner, so the cameraman must have been across from us, though I don't remember seeing him at all.

I don't know how he missed me. I don't know how. He shot some leaves off our lilac bush and then the whole row of people after it. They are from left to right, my Aunt Cordy in her new wheelchair, slumped over, Aunt Thelma next to her, sort of sitting with her hand on Aunt Cordy's chair, and then my brother and my nephew, (my sister in law had gone in the house for lemonade), and then right next to me my mother laying on the ground. She'd been standing up. And then me. If you look closely you can see some of the bark from the maple tree flying past my head.

It took a while, but the rapid fire from the machine gun didn't stop and finally finally made it's way into our excitement-stunned consciousness and that's when people down the block began to run, but the panic spread too slowly. It was like he was shooting tin cans off a two-by-four, people went down so fast. Some hid behind floats, the newspaper says.

I felt like I was whirling. People laying on the ground right there, blood coming. People I knew each one. And then a huge cry went up at the intersection, men's voices, everyone's.

I read that someone knocked him off the float with a flag pole, not much more than a stick really. But by that time he'd killed sixty five people. I keep trying to figure out how many were there and where everyone was standing and what exact time it was and who took this damn picture.

I'm on a beach in Sarasota now, to try and take my mind away from the shootings, the town, the house that sits empty there and now belongs to me.

There's a celebration here in the harbor tonight, something about boats, with fireworks. I'm not moving. I'm going to stay right here and watch. I want to live through it, make things right again.

If you call the paper you can find proof that it's me in the picture and I'm telling the truth.

I don't know how to say that it's not poetic like in the movies and that nothing good has come of it, or that it wasn't meant to be at all. I also don't know how to tell you how I feel about it except that I am not feeling thoughtful, it's more like horror, and every time I think about it I feel panic, like running, and I have to remind myself of where I am and what is really going on in order to keep myself sitting down.

But most of all I need to know who was taking this picture so I can see if there are more. Please look into this and if you could answer my questions about the exact timing of this and maybe map out who was standing where and figure out why I didn't get hit and so forth, please contact me at the address below.

Sincerely,  
Harmony Wentzel

