

## Six Shots | Kiara Braden

Dana Harrison was 17 years old the day Teddy Bates died. Or at least, she was 17 the day that they found him dead by the train tracks. He had six bullets in his back, a broken nose, and jaw locked in a scream from rigor mortis. No indication as to why he was out there; the only thing he had on him was his wedding ring and a pack of spearmint gum. Whoever had done him in had even stolen his blazers and loafers, as well as broke his dollar store wristwatch into twenty pieces. They were all strewn about by his head, covered in flaky dry blood.

Dana's dad woke her up that morning and told her that school was canceled for the day. Bleary-eyed and half bundled in her blankets, Dana listened to him tell her how the town was in an uproar over his death. This was a small town, after all, one school with less than 100 kids. One of which was Teddy Bates's son, Theodore Jr. He always went by Theo, never Theodore, and definitely never Teddy. Theo always showed up to school blitzed out of his mind from the weed that he'd buy just outside of the school gates before first period from the kids who graduated but had no other plans in their life but to hang around their old high school.

Theo's dad used to get on his case for hotboxing in his car. Dana never understood why, the thing was a rust bucket, some old Suzuki X-90 with peeling purple paint. It only had two seats with ugly blue upholstery and a horn that sounded like a dying goose. Theo and Dana would spend a lot of afternoons cramming into that car to skip class. They'd drive off into the empty desert, past the newer houses, all the way over to the train tracks—something that their parents always scolded for.

Her dad wasn't the biggest fan of Theo, always said he was a bad influence— that he smoked too much and had no respect. Nor was he the biggest fan of Teddy. Teddy was a dancer, or at least he used to dance back when he and her dad went to college together. Took the girl of his dreams, Vera McDougall with his swaying hips and full

dips. Her mom always said her dad had two left feet, and that he couldn't follow a beat even if it hit him square in the jaw. Her dad was always the type to be jealous, even years after he had moved on. Hell, just the other day, he was jealous of the Bates's pristine lawn that definitely broke the county's water restriction laws. He bragged about complaining about it anonymously on the town's Facebook drama page.

Still, when he told her that old Teddy Bates died, it was as if he had lost his closest friend. His hands trembled, his voice wavered, and sweat was slick on his wrinkled skin. His tired eyes were welled with tears, but Dana knew that he would never dare to let one fall.

He told her to get some more sleep. After all, school was canceled.

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Though it had been over three days since her husband had died, Vera Bates was still convinced he was skulking around her home. It was too strange to think that he'd be finally gone for good, not when she had spent years trying her best to drive him away. It was as if she was seeing ghosts of him in every corner of the home, hearing his wobbly gait on every staircase and seeing his smug face in every smile her son gave her.

Theo looked just like his father; it was almost a shame. Still, she managed to bless him with her own thick brown curls. Hopefully, he would get to keep them. His father was bald by 27, his jet-black hair gone after just two years of marriage.

To say she was devastated would be an overstatement, but to say she wasn't grieving would be a lie. When Vera found out, she was sitting with her newest partner, a tall man named Geoffrey that she had met at the small sports bar by the grocery store. He smelled like sandalwood and had a laugh that sounded like a crackling fireplace. And when they danced, she melted into his grasp, his hands on her waist, her head on the crook of his shoulder...

Teddy and Vera hadn't danced like that in a very long time.

Not since before Theo was born.

Geoffrey had heard the news from a friend who had heard it from the cashier at the local liquor store. Teddy had been out since the night before, after another fight about finances and Theo's grades, and God knows what other silly grievances that didn't matter in the face of his death.

The last thing she said to him was that she'd be better off if he was gone.

How could she have known that her wish would come true?

The guilt ate at her conscience. What if he knew she had been unfaithful?

Geoffrey wasn't the first affair she had in their bed, and it was likely that he wouldn't be the last. Before him was Peter, the auto mechanic who could lift her with one hand, and before Peter was Joseph, an older gentleman who would lend Vera his coat for the cold winters and always made sure her wine glass was never empty. And before Joseph was Henry, and if Teddy ever found out that she had slept with his cousin of all men, well...

Vera couldn't go on if she had been the reason Teddy was dead. Maybe she didn't love Teddy anymore, or at least, she didn't love him in the way that she used to, but Vera wasn't going to be a murderer.

Upstairs, they kept a gun in Teddy's office, in the lower drawer of his desk. The drawer had a combination padlock. The password was 03-14-81, Teddy's birthday, as decided by a coin flip. Personally, she thought her birthday, 05-20-82, would have been a better password—it was easier for her to remember. She would be the one using the gun anyway; Teddy was a horrible shot.

Vera couldn't remember when the last time they celebrated Teddy's birthday was. Definitely before Theo was born. Their birthdays were so close together that they never bothered. What was the difference between a birthday celebrated on the 13th and one celebrated on the 14th? As she rushed up the stairs, she passed by endless rows of birthday photos—photos where they painted on those forced, happy, tight smiles.

When Vera reached the top of the staircase, she could tell something was off.

The office door was ajar, and through the gap, she could see that the bottom drawer was open. As she stepped inside the room, the situation became more unnerving. Teddy's desk was a mess—his notes were scattered all over the surface. The lock of the drawer was missing.

The gun was gone.

Panicked, Vera began scrounging around the room. The bookshelf was sparse, only a few water-damaged novels were on the shelves. There was nothing in the closet, other than a few boxes full of old Christmas decorations that never got donated to the church. The upper desk drawer also did not have the gun, but it did have a few overdue bills that she remembered yelling at Teddy to pay.

The rest of the night, Vera was all out of sorts, searching every nook and cranny in her house for the gun. It was going to nag at her until she found it, the endless thoughts and fears worming their way into her mind.

Did she move it? She hadn't touched that gun in months, not since the false burglar alarm back in February. Did Teddy really off himself? But he couldn't have shot himself in the back, right? Did Theo somehow get his hands on it? She loved her son, but she knew that he would probably be stupid enough to show it off to that Harrison girl he always hung around.

Geoffrey was over again. He'd been anxiously pacing

around the Bates's living room, as if it was his husband who had mysteriously kicked the bucket and not her. Every single pop and crack set him off, as if he was waiting for someone to come and shoot him next.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when there was a knock at the door. Started blubbering faster than Vera could keep up with. Spilled his guts out like he was guiltier than Teddy's murderer himself.

He had hidden the gun. He was sorry he didn't tell her. Didn't want the police figuring that she had done poor Teddy in. It was mighty suspicious, he said. Cheating wife tired of her loveless marriage offs her balding overweight husband for the sweet taste of insurance money.

He couldn't bear to see her go to jail, even if she did kill Teddy.

It was a sweet thought that someone was willing to go to such lengths for her. It was more care than Teddy ever had for her.

But one thing was bothering her.

How did Geoffrey know about the gun?

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The day of Theo's dad's funeral, he had brought out the old record player from the garage. Like most of the junk his dad owned, it was rusted and halfway broken. His dad was always bad at keeping his stuff nice and intact. Even his blazer was riddled with holes in the back and tears in the shoulders—he never knew how to sew, and Theo's mom thought it was something beneath her; poor people pretending to be rich didn't have time to sew. Home Ec taught Theo the basics; just throw some patches over the small holes and no one would be the wiser.

Theo's mom wanted to play some old records of Teddy's, in honor of his old dancing days. Some niche ballroom tracks, boring, slow, and dusty with age.

A lot of the music his dad listened to was slow. All the CDs in his glove box were always ballads, songs about lost loves and tragedy. It was perfect music to fall asleep to while Theo was playing passenger princess. His friend Dana would drive them out during third period, the trig class that they were both failing. Dana was always the better driver; she said it was the only time she ever felt free, seeing that empty road ahead of them. Theo hated looking out at the empty road. Reminded him of those long drives he and his dad used to take where Teddy'd end up screaming at him for being an idiot, for ruining his life, for killing his dreams.

That he wished Theo was never born.

Shame that Dana's dad fucking hated him. Mr. Harrison said Theo was a bad influence on his kid because he smoked weed sometimes. Pretty rich from the guy who would buy loose cigarettes from him after school. He and Theo's dad had that in common, bunch of chain smokers. The day his dad died, Harrison was asking him for a whole pack. Calmed his nerves, he said.

Theo never saw the appeal of nicotine.

The torn blazer was thick with the musk of old smoke, and in a way, it felt comforting. Like the asshole was still here. Like he had Theo in a choking embrace. Looking in the mirror, with his shoes that were a size too big and a shirt Theo's mom got at a thrift store, Theo felt like a right gentleman.

His mom said that he looked just like Teddy.

Theo hated when she said that. It made him wish he was the one being lowered into the grave.

It was almost like a party, the way the music was blasting. There was food inside the chapel, dollar store cheese plates, and cold cut sandwiches from the local liquor store. Theo didn't see any real tears, and he didn't expect any. It wasn't like he was crying either.

But, he did hear whispers.

Some of his dad's drinking buddies talked about the good times. He loved golf, loved his putter, and loved pretending their backyard was a golf course, like the fancy one a town over. But Theo couldn't play soccer because his cleats would "ruin the lawn." And what would the neighbors say if they found out that their lawn was less than pristine?

A coworker, Geoffrey, was talking about his additional workload. He hung around their house a lot, talked with mom, made himself way too at home. Theo always found him slinking around, drinking beer, and watching TV. He was never around when dad was around, but honestly, neither was mom.

His mom was in the corner of the chapel with her friends, in a nice black dress that he was sure was new. She looked like the perfect widow, veil over her face, black tear streaks on her cheeks. But none of that could mask her bright veneered smile.

Dana came up to Theo and gave him a pat on the back. Her dad was nowhere to be seen. Probably off smoking far away from the processions. Dana offered him a hug that he refused—he felt restricted enough. She hoped that they'd figure out who did it. Even though Teddy kind of sucked, he still needed closure, right?

Seeing the casket close was enough for him.

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Dana was beginning to get a little sick of hearing about Teddy Bates.

Every morning, before she went to school, her dad would tell her something new about the case. Speculations from the town's Facebook group, wondering who might have had it out for Teddy, where the murder weapon was, if he deserved it or not.

Teddy seemed to have a lot of enemies. Servers who he stiffed for tips, kids he chased out of his house after

another fight with Theo, old classmates who remembered his pompous attitude. Even her dad still had a lot of negative things to say, mostly about his money or his big house, but instead of ending his thoughts with bitter jealousy, he would talk about how Teddy's death was such a shame.

It was bad karma to talk poorly of the dead.

He had enough weight on his soul as it was.

Dana's mom said that her dad had a guilt complex larger than the Empire State Building. He would probably die feeling bad about talking behind old Teddy's back. She had only hoped that he wouldn't die with bullets in his back too.

Terrified, Dana asked her mom that night if she believed in karma. She told her that people got what was coming to them. Put bad out into the world, and bad will come to you, she said.

Teddy had the ending he deserved.

She knew her dad agreed with her. It's why he spent so much time at Teddy's grave. He would tell her stories from his visits. A few old friends would visit and reminisce, as if they hadn't also been shit-talking the man behind his back. The groundskeeper was always friendly, glad to see someone grieving a man gone too soon. There were never any flowers at the grave, he would bring some himself. Apparently, Teddy loved daisies, always had a bunch of them in his window when they shared a dorm.

It was the least he could after years of animosity, he said.

Maybe a good gesture would save him after all.

One day he stayed out all night and when he came back in the morning, he was near silent. No updates. No silly stories. No conspiracy theories.



Just some dirty shoes and a haunted look.

Just a handful of broken glass and three loose cigarettes.

Just another canceled day of school.

Just another warning to stop hanging out with Theo.

Dana gave him a warning in return, to stay away from the train tracks. Nothing good happened there. Even before the death, it wasn't safe out there. Too many coyotes.

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Vera couldn't bring herself to visit Teddy's grave. The funeral was hard enough on her, pretending to be the sobbing widow. Pretending her life was ruined, in shambles, destroyed for a man who couldn't be half bothered to even say good morning to her before he headed off to work. Pretending that she was a loving wife who would pour him coffee in the morning, kiss him goodbye, and pack his lunch for him.

Pretending that she didn't feel responsible.

People around town gossiped about her. When she went to the store, the other moms would watch her every move. How could she be so calm when her husband died? She must be broken, poor thing. She was a terrible wife, she was a grieving mess, she was the reason it happened, she couldn't have known. Worst of all, she believed them. Believed every mixed-up contradicting word.

If she visited Teddy's grave, what would she even say? Would she talk about how life went on without him? How his son spent his days rifling through his old boxes stored in the garage? How she jumped every time she walked past the living room, thinking she saw a glimpse of him? How his gun was still missing? How Geoffrey still slept in his bed and wore his shirts, like he was replacing him?

Would she apologize for any of it?

Even Geoffrey was scarce around their home these days. She would see him on the odd night or so, but he'd always be quick to leave. He never stuck around for breakfast anymore. Never said hello to Theo either. The look in Theo's eyes unnerved him, he said.

Like a dead man walking.

Theo was quiet these days too. He wore his father's old blazer like a security blanket and went to school every day without so much as a fight. He didn't want to talk after school, nor at dinner, nor when they passed each other in the halls. Vera wanted to do something to make it up to him, something that would actually have him happy for once.

One of them should be happy in this house.

God knows Teddy wasn't.

She was planning a trip, just the two of them. It was about high time that she made an effort to connect with her child, without the distraction of resentment and lies. Teddy had always wanted to travel. He'd talk about flying to Barcelona, visiting El Liceu, spending time at Henry's villa. It had been years since Theo had seen Henry.

Vera wasn't even sure if Henry knew his cousin had died.

She wasn't even sure he would care. They weren't close.

Teddy wasn't close to many people.

She set aside most of the life insurance money towards Theo's college fund. She didn't know if he was going to college—she didn't know if he wanted to do anything other than hang near the train tracks after dark and run off with that Harrison girl—but she didn't want to crush any futures more than she already had. Another part of it went

towards the shiny blue pearl headstone that Vera knew she would never see. Upright, granite, and 4 feet tall. She made sure to keep the inscription sweet and simple.

Theodore Bates Sr.

Loving husband and father.

A lie until the very end.

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Teddy Bate's body was buried six feet under at the Maple Memorial Park, Plot G-16-33. But Theo knew his spirit was face down by the train tracks, rotting in the boiling sun. He wondered if crows scavenged more than just the rotting skin of a freshly deceased corpse. If they dug deep and tore out the soul, tore out the essence, tore out what lay behind a beating heart.

In place of where the body had been, Theo had left a pack of spearmint gum. Theo hated mint. It tasted like toothpaste. But his dad loved it. Mint chocolate chip was his favorite flavor. It was all they had stocked up in the freezer during the summer. It was cheaper, he said.

But one scoop of vanilla couldn't have been that much more expensive.

Springtime leads to rising temperatures, and rising temperatures lead to hallucinations. Even when he wasn't blitzed, sometimes Theo'd see things in the distance. He and Dana used to argue over whose hallucination was more real. To this day, he still thought that a shambling man was more likely to be hanging out by the tracks than a coyote. Too much noise around here for any animal to be comfortable.

Theo himself felt uncomfortable here, but there was something that called him back to the tracks. Nightmares, night after night since his dad had kicked the bucket. He was sure Teddy's spirit was haunting him. That bits and pieces clung to his shitty blazer. He needed to put this

weight to rest.

His dad's spirit needed to rest.

A smoky specter began to form near the stray pack of gum. It was a large, dusty cloud of grey and smelled heavily of musty old cigarettes and cheap liquor store cologne. It opened its mouth to speak, but all Theo heard was the sound of a harsh breeze and the crackling of a tumbleweed in the distance.

The gun in his blazer pocket weighed heavy as he stared at the hallucination. Balding, but wisps of jet-black hair clinging on for dear life. A button nose with high cheekbones, and a thin angular face. A thin-lipped scowl that never left.

With an unsteady grasp, Theo aimed at the hallucination and pulled the trigger. His dad never taught him how to shoot, and his mom never told him where the hidden gun was, but sometimes you needed a nosy doormat of an outsider to show you these things, one who was too scared to rat him out and one that probably wouldn't stay around long.

Theo could only thank Geoffrey for snooping around his dad's office.

He shot once.

Teddy stood there standing in front of him, eyes as hollow as when he was alive. Had Theo ever seen him smile? Had he ever heard him laugh? Had Teddy ever been happy when he was around?

He shot twice.

His mom wasn't as subtle as she thought she was. Dad had asked him about Geoffrey that night. Asked and begged. Offered him two whole packs. Spending money, he called it. Theo had made about half his money's worth that night.

He shot three times.

Theo tried to ask him about dancing once. About when he used to dance in college. His mom had some old tapes lying around. Theo wondered how many competitions his dad had won. How many times he had practiced his steps to those shitty old records from the funeral. How many times he wished he could trade his son in for a nice pair of wingtips. Teddy had told him never to bring up dancing again.

He shot four times.

Theo asked Dana what her relationship with her dad was like. He was strict but forgiving, she said. Always told her stories. Always woke her up every morning. Always wanted to know where she was going and who she was with.

She called him lucky. That he had a bit more freedom.

He didn't know how to tell her that he thought she was the lucky one, to have someone care about her like that. To have someone who would actually blink twice if she dropped dead.

To have someone who didn't consider her his life's greatest mistake.

Theo wondered what her dad told her after he bought that pack off of him that night. He wondered what Mr. Harrison actually saw. He wondered why he came down the other day to pick up the broken watch. Maybe those two might have been friends in another lifetime.

He shot five times.

Theo always wondered why his mom and dad stayed together. His mom was a cheater. He never understood why she didn't just leave. Why hide? Why lie? He didn't know who she thought that she was protecting. Theo? Herself? Teddy resented her. Teddy resented him too. Teddy resented everyone and everything in this town to the point

where most people didn't care he was dead, just cared about what his death meant for the rest of them. Would the town collapse? Would its reputation be ruined? He wondered if it were just the two of them, he and his mom, would they have been happier? They weren't happier now.

He shot six times.

The specter dissipated, leaving only the echoes of gunshots and the sound of the oncoming train.

He was out of rounds.

And he was definitely out of time. Theo couldn't be out here all night; his mom would get worried. Even all the way out here, someone might have heard the gunshots. Maybe they'd get worried that another old man was shot in the back. Another old man thinking of stowing away on the train headed upstate. Maybe that man would have lived. Made it to Barcelona. Took his wife and kid with him. Maybe he'd get the jitters but still slip on his nice blazer and throw on a daisy-patterned tie.

And he'd dance on the stage of that fancy opera house, dance like the world was watching.