



*“Olene was too good a girl  
to have to face death this way.”*

— Roxie Emberton  
As told to the *Kokomo Tribune*  
November 24, 1965

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## AUTHOR'S POINT OF VIEW: THE DAY SOMETHING INIQUITOUS BLEW INTO TOWN

I will always remember Saturday, October 16, 1965. I had been looking forward to that date for weeks. I had it circled on my calendar. In red. It was supposed to be a fun-filled day of happiness and celebration.

My boyfriend, who was a year ahead of me in school, came home that weekend for the first time since moving to Bloomington for his freshman year at Indiana University. It was homecoming weekend. We went to dinner that evening with my just-married friends, who had recently settled into their first home together and were already expecting their first child. We had a lot to feel joyful about.

Unfortunately, it turned out to be anything but joyful. Instead, for me and scores of others, October 16, 1965, became synonymous with profound tragedy and despair. It was the night Olene Emberton didn't come home.

Back then, round-the-clock news was unheard of and Tipton did not have a Sunday newspaper. That's why most of Tipton remained blissfully ignorant about Olene's disappearance until Monday's *Tipton Tribune* hit the doorsteps around 4:00 p.m. Twenty more hours would pass before Tuesday's edition would go to press carrying the headline story of Olene's death.

I, on the other hand, as a high school student, had access to a fast-moving news network comprised of classmates. Through this grapevine, I became aware Monday morning at the start of my second-period class that Olene was unaccounted for, and I learned of her death before I returned home from school some eight hours later.

At just past nine o'clock Monday morning, I was seated with my

best friend, Gail Perdue (now Wix), at one of the round tables in the home economics classroom waiting for Louise McIntosh's Family Living class to start. As the other students strolled in, I overheard someone say that Olene was missing. Gail and I immediately looked at each other and smirked. No love was lost between Gail and Olene. Both girls had spent months competing for the same boy, and my loyalty would always be Gail's. So, when it came to whatever Olene was up to, we shrugged it off.

Maybe she had run away to get married, Gail said, hopefully. Although it wasn't an everyday occurrence, teenagers occasionally ran off together and eloped. So, we thought if that were the case with Olene, we didn't envy her for the punishment her parents would undoubtedly impose once she was back home. And the fact is, a parent's wrath was the worst consequence I could imagine. The possibility that she was in any sort of danger never entered my mind. At that point in my life, the notion that anyone living in Tipton, Indiana, could be in mortal danger was inconceivable.

However, my sense of security started to unravel that afternoon, when our principal, Charles Edwards, delayed school dismissal and called several students to his office. What remained of my tattered perception of invulnerability completely disintegrated about an hour later as Gail and I kicked back in my '52 Plymouth at Jim Dandy Drive-in sipping root beer and speculating on Olene. Gail had been one of the students called to the office, so, by then, we suspected that whatever happened to Olene had nothing to do with a secret elopement.

Young-Nichols Funeral Home was located across the street from the drive-in. Our curiosity was piqued when we observed one of the Young-Nichols white ambulances cruise past us and pull into the alley just west of the mortuary.

Where had it been? Who had it picked up? Olene? Had it transported her to the Tipton hospital?

Our classmate John O'Banion, who had been parked in the

spot next to us, also had seen the Young-Nichols vehicle. Because he was a close friend of Olene's brother Floyd Wayne, I was certain John was asking himself the same questions. He climbed out of his car without hesitation and hurried across the street. A few minutes later, he returned, his face stern and bearing an odd, pained expression.

I asked if he'd found out whether the ambulance's run had anything to do with Olene. His answer was not at all what I expected or wanted to hear.

"Yes," he said, "she's dead."

John obviously was deeply affected by the development, and considering his close relationship with the family, I marvel today at his steady composure as he articulated the unthinkable.

Over the years, looking back through the fog of time, as hard as I've tried to recall my reaction to John's simple but devastating statement, "Yes, she's dead," my memory is a blank. I have no recollection whatsoever of my words or my feelings in that moment. In retrospect, I don't think I knew how or what to feel. It took many years before the meaning of Olene's death completely registered with me. I was in my thirties before I could fully comprehend how her mysterious, untimely passing had penetrated what I perceived then as an invisible wall protecting my hometown from outside evil forces; but most importantly, to grasp how unanswered questions surrounding her death broke the hearts and spirits of everyone who loved her, her family most of all.

I have never understood why it took me so long to process the full gravity of this tragic loss, and I regret that it did. Perhaps that regret is what fuels my passion to preserve Olene's memory by telling her story. •