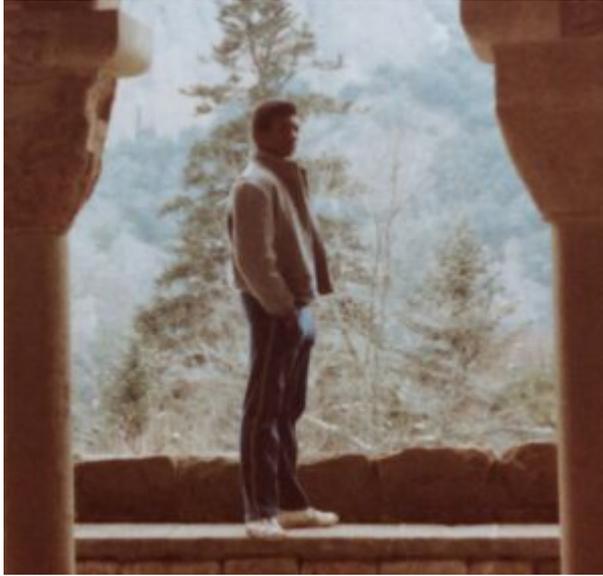


Edmund Perry

written by Guest Contributor | August 3, 2020



I couldn't watch the video of that white cop, face hard as rock as he implacably strangled the life out of the Black man with his knee. Murder in broad daylight, in front of an audience, with no hint of guilt or flicker of doubt.

George Floyd did not look at all like Edmund Perry. With the brawny build of a weight-lifter, a carefully cultivated goatee, and the world-weary gaze of a 46 year-old Black man in America, George Floyd was a father and a grandfather. Eddie Perry was slight, fresh-faced, and when he died in 1985, just 17 years old.

And yet, it was Eddie's face that I imagined under the white policeman's knee. Eddie, who in the years after his death I quickly forgot about, had come back to haunt me with every new extrajudicial taking of a Black person's life.

I first saw Eddie in Trayvon Martin. He didn't look like Eddie either, lighter-skinned, heart-shaped face, even more of a boy than Eddie. He wasn't killed by a policeman, but a self-appointed vigilante; in the years and deaths that followed, it became harder to distinguish between the two.

Like Trayvon, Eddie's death made the national news. It probably wouldn't have, he could have been one of the legions of Black lives that didn't matter in Reagan's America, except Eddie was a scholarship student at Phillips Exeter Academy, classmate to the children of the elite. After graduating with honors, he was back at home in Harlem for a Wall Street summer internship before heading for Stanford.

Two weeks later, an unarmed Edmund Perry was shot in Morningside Park by a white undercover policeman, Lee Van Houten, who claimed self-defense. Van Houten was acting as a decoy for muggers due to complaints of increased car break-ins by the staff of St. Luke's Hospital. Within a short distance of

that hospital, Eddie was left to bleed out with no attempt made to save him.

I met Eddie my junior year of high school on a study abroad program in Barcelona that was sponsored by some of the most prestigious prep schools in America. Eddie and I quickly recognized each other as outsiders with attitudes. Eddie was smarter than I was. I was more privileged than he. As a public school student who had concentrated far more on rebellion than on academics, I was an underachiever who had never had to perform to rigorous academic standards. A Korean adoptee, I was raised by a white family, cocooned in white privilege, and underachievement was my right.

Perhaps recognizing that I was out of my element, or maybe just because it was his friendly nature, Eddie reached out to me, made me know I wasn't alone. He was easy going and fun to be around, always with a joke at the ready. We'd eat bocadillos de tortilla together at the nearby Plaza de Catalunya or get a cheap salad bar lunch at the vegetarian restaurant across the street from our school. We went dancing at the discotheques.

As the year went on, we found separate friend groups. He changed host families because the first one was racist. We drifted apart, and I always look back on our last interaction with regret. I criticized him, and he, rightfully so, wondered where I came off reprimanding him when I clearly had my own issues to work out.

One thing was clear, Eddie loved Spain. He told a classmate that, like James Baldwin in Paris, he felt freer and more at ease in Barcelona than he did in his native country.

When a classmate called me in June, 1985, to tell me that Eddie had been killed by a policeman, I didn't know what to think. I had never seen Eddie be violent toward anyone, nor was it in keeping with his character to be a thief. But, the conventional wisdom of the day was innocent people don't just get shot by cops.

His life was dissected by the media, the now all-too-familiar tactic of claiming that the Black boy was no angel, and therefore had it coming. A sensationalistic book was written by the father of a white Exeter classmate, telling Eddie's story through what we now recognize as the lens of white bias. A made-for-TV movie based on the book aired, making a mawkish soap opera of his young life. Prep school classmates were interviewed who said he didn't try to fit in enough, was obsessed with race, had a chip on his shoulder.

Van Houten was acquitted of any culpability in Eddie's death by a grand jury.

And then Eddie faded from the news. America moved on to other salacious stories about Black men: Rodney King. Mike Tyson. OJ Simpson. Amadou Diallo.

It wasn't until Trayvon Martin that I thought of Eddie again. And then, I couldn't stop thinking about him. America wouldn't let me. Tamir Rice. Freddy Gray. Michael Brown. Elijah McClain.

It wasn't just the boys. Grown men were being killed by the police.

Indiscriminately. Copiously. And then, thanks to cell phones, for all the world to see. Philando Castile. Walter Scott. George Floyd.

I went back to Eddie's story, to see what I had missed. A lot, it turns out. In the years I wasn't paying attention, Eddie's brother, who had been with him on the night of the shooting, was [acquitted](#) of mugging Van Houten. The prosecution's star witnesses, the only ones who could definitely tie him to the incident, had significant reasons for testifying in favor of the policeman.

In 1989, New York City [settled a wrongful death lawsuit](#) brought by Eddie's mother for \$75,000, considerably less than the \$145 million she was asking, but it was the verdict she wanted and not the money.

Eddie's mother [died](#) of a heart attack two years later at the age of 44. I believe she literally died of a broken heart.

I now know what I didn't in 1985: Eddie Perry's life was wrongfully ended by Lee Van Houten.

I almost didn't let his life matter. Now I want the whole world to know his name: Edmund Perry.



Alice Stephens' debut novel, *Famous Adopted People*, was published in 2018 by Unnamed Press. Her work has appeared in *LitHub*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Margins*, *Banana Writers* and other publications. She is the editor of *Bloom* and writes book reviews and a column, Alice in Wordland, for the *Washington Independent Review of Books*.