

A LOVE LETTER TO CENTRAL PARK: PLEASE STOP THE VIOLENCE

THOMAS GANT

In a heartfelt letter, Thomas Gant asks his home city and neighborhood to put an end to gun violence. He reflects on and apologizes for the harm he has caused, and entreats those who come after him to learn from his mistakes. His message is one of humility, love, and hope.

I write this letter to the city I love and the neighborhood that I grew up in on the East side of Buffalo, New York. While I am speaking to my loved ones, friends, and the generation that I do not know, my hope is that my words reach all the inner-city neighborhoods that are being destroyed by violence right now. First, to Central Park and all the other communities in Buffalo, I owe you an apology. I am so sorry for the gun violence I perpetrated against you more than two decades ago. I now know that the energy I left in the streets you walk today has reverberated to you and that is a burden that weighs heavy on my heart.

As I sit in this six-by-nine prison cell I see the news reports of shooting after shooting; not just in Central Park but all over Buffalo. Just recently, I saw on the news that a three-year-old boy had been shot and succumbed to his injuries. I cried. I cried real tears for this child, for his mother and for my city. "Enough is enough!" I yelled to the thirteen-inch TV screen from which I watched. What will it take to put an end to the senseless violence that only breeds more violence and pain? I am not alone in my tears or lament. Many of us behind these walls know the path that violence leads to, and some of us are moved to action.

You may be asking yourself, what could a man sitting in prison could possibly have to say about ending violence in the streets? Well, I can speak from experience. I know firsthand the violence you are dealing with right now, both as a perpetrator and as a victim. I am in prison for taking a man's life twenty-four years ago. Then, in 2015, my eighteen-year-old son, home from college summer break, was shot and left for dead with nine bullets in him. One of those bullets remains in his skull to this day. He was in a coma for over a month and in the hospital for almost six months. It is only by God's grace that he is alive today.

I began this letter of love by offering an apology to my neighborhood. I want to be clear: no amount of words I offer could ever repair the damage, harm and pain that I caused my victim's family and loved ones. I took a life and that left a gaping hole, not only in his family, but in the universe. He never had the chance to fulfill his destiny. I robbed that from him and the world. I also caused my family much pain. They were robbed of countless things, especially my children who only know me as a prisoner.

You see Central Park, these are consequences that I did not factor in or think about when I was in the streets so long ago. I didn't think of the fear that my actions imposed on you. I did not think about the horrific images and pain that I caused on that day. There are many who still carry those burdens all these years later.

When you're young you think that your actions only affect you; you don't factor in the impact they have on others. Think about this for a moment: the victim was not the only person harmed. It was also his family, the neighborhood, the EMT's, nurses, doctors, law enforcement, (all of whom had to come to the scene) the hospitals and then years later, the court officers – *all* of them had to re-live that scene of violence that I was responsible for. How can anyone be the same after that? In less than four seconds, with the pull of a trigger, I was able to negatively impact so many. None of this ever crossed my mind back then. Now in prison, I think about it all the time. Certainly loss of freedom, and the way the way the prison system rips your humanity out from underneath you will cause one to reflect on the consequences of our actions. And so will praying for your son to survive the very kind of violence you perpetrated yourself.

Which brings me to the point of this letter. My hope is that today you stop and take note of what your actions will have on others. You must start to think about how you are affecting yourself and other people. When a shot rings out it cannot be taken back. It starts in motion of events that cannot be stopped. That chain will drag everyone down with it and will ruin your life, your family's lives and impact your community in ways you will never fully understand until the next generation grows up.

The same is true for what I am suggesting: love and forgiveness. Love opens the door to being able to forgive. This has a chain reaction as well, it will instead pull everyone up. What I am suggesting is not easy to do, especially when death has occurred. It is not easy to do when the culture you are around thrives in hate. It is not easy to do when you have a reputation or some false loyalty you are trying to uphold. But there is good news: it can be done! It must be done or we will extinct ourselves. And I know it can be done because I have done it. In prison I have come across and even worked with those that I counted as an enemy or "OP" (opposition) years ago. After getting to know them, I found that we have more in common than what is different. I even call some of them brother now. Who would have ever thought a guy from Central Park could call someone from the Fruit Belt a brother, right? When my son was shot I called for no retaliation. None! I didn't want any other father to have to experience what I did.

We have to stop this willingness to want to destroy one another. We have to love ourselves and others. The very same people you hate right now can easily become your brothers and sisters. Although I wouldn't wish prison on anyone, prison isn't the worst thing that come from gun violence: death is. The pain that you inflict on others is. The children you leave behind (rather in prison or a grave) is. The forsaken futures are.

So take a second to think today: you can have hope. We have to put the guns down. Reach out to someone, anyone who can help. Reach out to me. Talk to someone you can trust. People are there. The time is now. There is something special on the other side of all this. In case no one has told today, Central Park, all of Buffalo, I love you.

–Thomas Gant aka “JayBird”