



TANYA BROWN

MURDER'S PAINFUL LEGACY

NEARLY 20 YEARS AFTER NICOLE BROWN SIMPSON WAS KILLED AND HER EX O.J. SIMPSON ACQUITTED, NICOLE'S SISTER OPENS UP ABOUT THE NIGHTMARE— AND LEARNING TO LIVE AGAIN

"I don't forget," says Brown (outside her Orange County, Calif., home on Feb. 27), "but I do forgive so I can move on."



Brown calls Simpson's 1995 trial "a circus act."

Every year on June 12, Nicole Brown Simpson's family visits her Lake Forest, Calif., grave, "bringing her white roses and Gerbera daisies—those were her favorites," says her sister Tanya, 44. "We light candles in our own little way." This year, the 20th anniversary of Nicole's murder, Tanya is doing something bigger: She has written a memoir about the devastating loss of her 35-year-old sister, the media-circus trial and ultimate acquittal of Nicole's ex-husband O.J. Simpson and the horrific toll it all took on Tanya's life. Now a life coach and mental-health advocate living in Dana Point, Calif., the youngest of Nicole's three sisters battled major depression for years and spent 10 days in a

HAIR & MAKEUP: LUCY HALPERIN/REN HAIR/CAE/CHANEL LES BEIGES/ONE REPRESENTS; STYLIST: NANCY LUCAS/ONE REPRESENTS; INSET: SAM MIRCOWICZ/REUTERS



1976

At age 7, Brown gave her beloved “Uncle O.J.” a lighter that matched his backgammon table.

psychiatric unit after coming close to suicide. There were other contributing factors—the deaths of two close friends, a broken engagement—but she believes Nicole’s murder dealt the biggest blow, and she was frustrated that her family discouraged her from speaking publicly about the case. “I wanted to speak out and was told by my family, ‘Let Denise handle it,’” she tells PEOPLE’s Howard Breuer. Her older sister Denise “says I was a very young 24-year-old and they were protecting me, and I get that now, but I didn’t like not feeling included.” By sharing her struggles and journey to health in *Finding Peace Amid the Chaos*, excerpted below, she hopes to encourage others going through tough times. “There’s joy after pain,” she says, “but you have to let the anger go.”

The news of Nicole’s death on the evening of June 12th 1994 did not reach our home until the next morning. It was about 6:30 a.m., and I was sound asleep. Then . . . the screams.

“Noooooo!! My God!! No!! Nooo!!”

They were horrendous, earsplitting shrieks that will be forever ingrained in

my memory. I dashed into Denise’s son Sean’s room, which was right next to mine. Denise was sitting on the bed, squeezing Sean against her chest. Her face was soaked with tears.

“She’s dead!” Denise cried, rocking Sean back and forth. “She’s dead!”

“Who’s dead?” I asked, bewildered.

“Your sister!” she screamed. “He killed her! Coco’s dead!”

I knew Denise and the rest of the family were with Nicole the previous night, at a dance recital for Sydney. How could she be dead? That didn’t make sense.

I found my mom sitting at the dining

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—TANYA BROWN



1985

“I was just getting to know her” when she died, Brown (right) says of big sis Nicole.



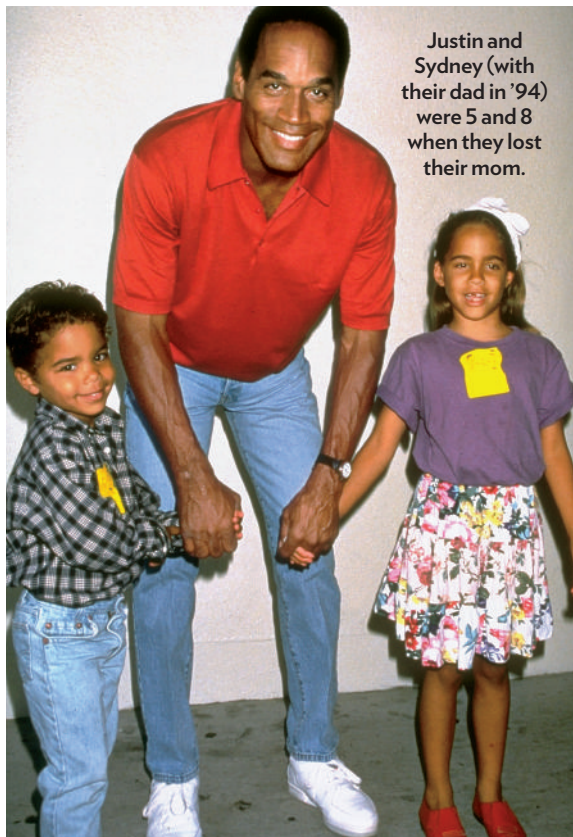
room table, her fingers covering her eyes. “Mom?” I said hesitantly. “Mom . . . is it true?”

She gently nodded. “Where’s Daddy?” I asked. She didn’t answer, which terrified me. I ran toward their bathroom,

my heart racing. There he was, one hand smashed flat on the sink counter, the other clenched and pounding that counter over and over. He was sobbing. I threw my arms around him, and we wept for what seemed like forever.

Our family spent the next hours huddled around the dining room table consoling one another. The only person missing was O.J., who was evidently in Chicago on a business trip. His friend A.C. Cowlings brought O.J. and Nicole’s children, Sydney and Justin, to the house for us. The children had been home during the crime, but fortunately did not wake up until the police got there. They never saw anything.

As the morning dragged on, we received more information from the authorities. Nicole, they said, had been viciously attacked with a knife outside her condominium in Brentwood. Her friend Ronald Goldman, a wonderful man, had stopped by to drop off something. He was also killed. The details we heard were gruesome, like something you might see on a crime show.



Justin and Sydney (with their dad in '94) were 5 and 8 when they lost their mom.



Simpson in court in '13.



Justin at school in '02.



Sydney in Boston in '09.

How Are the Kids Doing?

After their mother was murdered, Sydney and Justin grew up with their dad but stayed close to the Brown family. “Picking them up from his house was surreal,” says Tanya. Today, she says, her niece, 28, and nephew, 25, are both in the restaurant and catering business in the southeast. “They call my mom each week, even though they’re living on the other side of the country. They’re happy and healthy.” She doesn’t know if they’re in touch with O.J., who began a 33-year prison term in 2008 for a Las Vegas kidnapping and robbery the previous year. “I think Sydney went to see him, but I don’t talk to them about it—I don’t know how they feel about their dad. It’s the elephant in the room.” And likely to remain that way. Says Tanya: “They will never talk about it.”

My God, I remember thinking. Who could do that to another human being? I didn’t think about what Denise said—that “he” killed her.

On television we saw a video of a covered body. Draped in a sheet, she was being loaded into a van, like cargo, to be taken to the morgue. I could feel Mom’s hand tremble in mine.

“That’s my kid,” she softly cried as the back doors of the van were slammed shut. “That’s my kid.”

The next day, we received a call telling us we could go into Nicole’s condo and start packing up her belongings. I felt I needed to go, to try to say goodbye to my sister. It ended up being one of the most terrifying experiences of my life.

On the staircase leading into the dining room I saw a melted ice cream cup. Nicole had taken the kids to Ben & Jerry’s after dinner. It was the last thing they ever did together. There was a knife on the kitchen counter—did she get it out thinking she might need to defend herself? A million questions raced through my mind.

The walls, once pristine-white, were

now an eerie, dirty black, covered with fingerprint dust. And in Nicole’s bathroom, the candles she kept around the bathtub were lit. The tub was full of water. All that was missing was Nicole.

We continued to gingerly make our way through the condo. Just looking. Remembering. We finally reached the front door. *There’s nothing there*, I kept telling myself. *They took her away. She’s gone.*

I took a deep breath as Daddy pulled the door open. “Ahhh!” I screeched. My cousin Rolf was standing there with a garden hose, washing away what was obviously blood.

While the average person who followed the case back then might say, “Of course O.J. was a suspect,” it wasn’t that simple for me. I’d known him since I was seven. He wasn’t a celebrity to me. He was my brother-in-law. I usually referred to him as Uncle O.J. when I was little, someone I looked up to who always treated me well. Even after the divorce, I still considered him family. We had great times together.

I recall one Thanksgiving when he came up behind me and whispered: “I’m

so thankful for your family because they are so much my family.” Another time, when I was fourteen and at a church youth group making crosses out of palms, we were instructed to give them to someone we loved but to whom we’d never said “I love you.” I gave mine to O.J. Nicole later told me she wished I had given mine to her instead. She said even though we were sisters, she felt like she hardly knew me.

After Nicole was found dead, I was shocked to learn about the brother-in-law I didn’t know—a hateful, evil man who brutalized my sister with verbal and physical beat downs for years. Those revelations about him and the way he dehumanized Nicole left me beyond perplexed in the days immediately following her death. I did not want to believe he did it and fought that notion in my mind as much as I could.

At the viewing two days after the murder I walked up to O.J. and gave him a hug. “We’re going to get through this,” I whispered. He nodded and gave me a faint smile.

In the car on the way to Nicole’s funeral,

the pendulum swung the other way. I was staring at the cut on his finger that the media had been talking about. *Maybe he did kill her*, I thought.

My doubts were compounded the next day when he captivated TV viewers nationwide with his infamous low-speed highway chase. He was supposed to turn himself in to face murder charges, but instead he rode in his white Bronco driven by Cowlings, threatening to kill himself with a gun he held to his head. What many people don't know is that he called us during the chase and Denise and my dad tried to talk him down. "Don't do it, Juice!" Daddy urged him, trying to get him to put the gun down and pull over. "Think of your two kids, Juice! Don't do it!"

O.J. eventually surrendered and went to jail until the trial began. A couple days after the Bronco chase, the phone rang in my bedroom. It was O.J. calling from jail.

"Hey Tanya, it's Juice," he said. He went right into what sounded like a



She wrote her book "to turn this ugly thing into something good," Brown says. "I'm striving to educate, empower, prevent suicides."

defense, as if I were the judge and jury. "Hey, you know I loved your sister, right?"

"Uhhh... I really don't know," I said. "C'mon Tanya, I would have taken a bullet for her."

"Okaaaay," I said. I tried to change the subject. I told him that a man he knew very well, the father of a friend of mine, recently had an aneurysm and was near death.

"What?" he said. "Why are you worried about that? What about me? I'm stuck here in this tiny cell."

He continued to babble about his

woes and actually tried to put the entire blame on Nicole for their marriage falling apart.

I was incensed, seething. "She dedicated her life to you! She gave you two beautiful children! She..."

Click.

"Hello? Hello?"

He was gone. I slammed the phone down and I cried. It was at that moment that I could no longer deny the suspicions that so many others had. At that moment, I knew what he had done to my sister.

O.J. Simpson's trial lasted one year, transfixing the public and deepening the Brown and Goldman families' anguish. Devastated by his acquittal in October, 1995, Tanya struggled to cope.

It was a Sunday morning in early 1996, just a few months after the acquittal. I was at Mass thinking about Nicole, her kids, where we were expected to go from here. The man we believed killed Nicole and Ron was free, while they were never coming back.

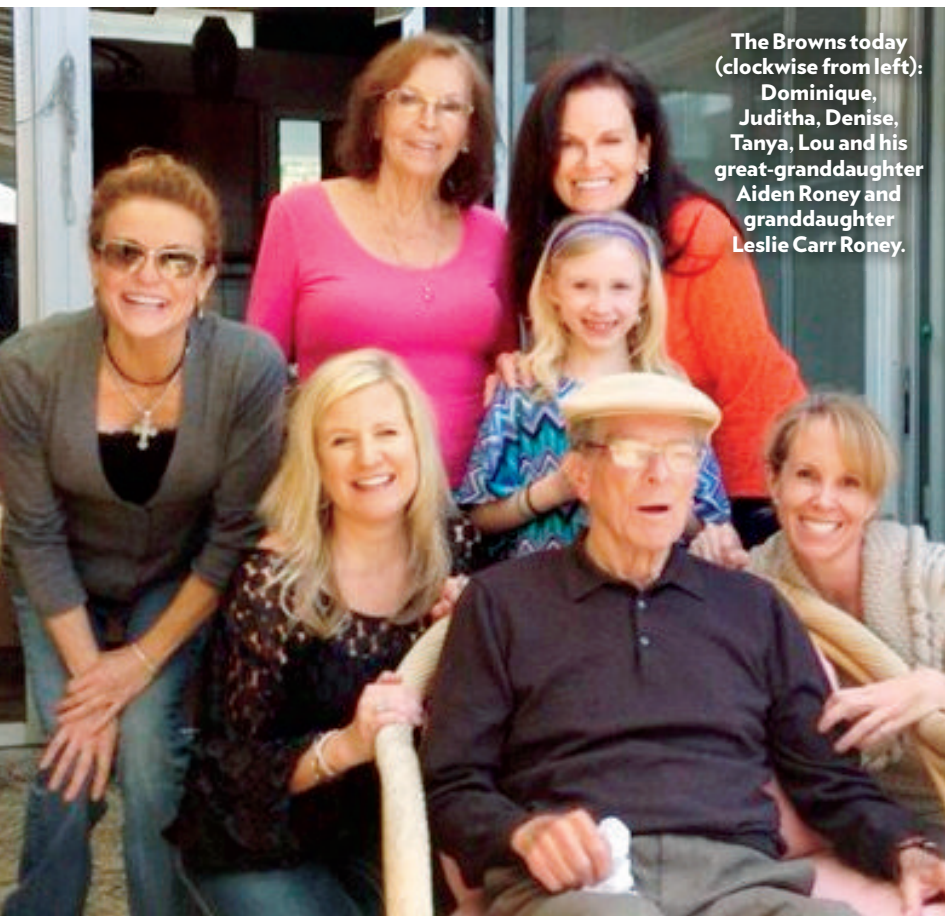
I asked God to take care of Nicole and Ron. I asked him to bless our family, especially Sydney and Justin. And then I asked Him for something I had never asked for previously.

"God, one thing I don't want anymore is to feel the hate that brings me down. Please help me, in some way, to forgive him."

I opened my eyes and experienced a comfort that hadn't existed in me since before Nicole died.

In the years that followed, the many conflicting thoughts I had about O.J. fueled my depression. The pressure became so crushing that I finally snapped on a Saturday afternoon in 2004, lashing out at my family and nearly taking my own life minutes later. The next day I checked into the psychiatric unit of a local hospital. Nearly three months of treatment there provided me with the tools I needed to reclaim my life.

Today, I am at peace with O.J. If he were standing in front of me right now, I truly believe I'd be indifferent. Finding that peace was a very gradual process—one that began that morning in church, when I realized that by forgiving him, I wasn't setting him free: I was setting myself free. ●



The Browns today (clockwise from left): Dominique, Juditha, Denise, Tanya, Lou and his great-granddaughter Aiden Roney and granddaughter Leslie Carr Roney.