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## NEWS

# The Type Set: Bombings in Belgium inspire Mt. Juliet man to reconnect with his pen pal

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The first bomb exploded just before 8 a.m. It was March 22, 2016.

Twelve people died in the blast at the Brussels airport in Belgium and another 200 were injured.

An hour later, another bomb went off. This one was at the Maalbeek Metro Station in Brussels. Twenty people died in the second blast and more than 100 more people were injured.

Both suicide bombings were coordinated and carried out by terrorists.

And they caught the attention of Roy Burkhead of Mt. Juliet, who wrote me a letter in August. On the night of the bombings, he pulled out a trunk in his basement which was full of pictures and letters from Belgium.

**Suzanne of La Mesa, California:** Who is the mysterious Suzanne from California?

**The Type Set:** A little dad advice for the teenager who bashed into my car at the DMV

The bombings launched Burkhead on a quest to find an old friend.

Her name was Carmen Meert.

The last time he communicated with her, she lived about 12 miles from where the Metro station bomb went off.

## Writing assignment

It started in middle school. He thinks it was 1978. His class got an assignment from a social studies teacher. Burkhead submitted his name, and he was given a name in return.

Suddenly, he had a new pen pal in Europe.

Burkhead typed a letter to Meert, a Flemish girl about his age. She lived in a village called Essene.

One detail he remembers was that she wrote about how much the trains were part of their lives. She took the train into Brussels all the time.

They kept in touch for 12 years, from 1978 to 1990.

He met her once.

## **A knock on the door**

In the late 1980s, Burkhead was a cryptographer in the U.S. Navy. He was working in London.

He got a month leave, so he took a trip to Naples, Italy, then Ostend on the Belgian coast and then, finally, Flanders.

He ended up walking on a two-lane road just looking for a place to stay.

A nice police officer stopped and asked if he could take Burkhead somewhere. Burkhead reached in his pocket and pulled out a letter from Meert.

It had her address.

Burkhead approached the front door and saw a woman. "Carmen?" he asked.

The woman started laughing. She was Meert's mother.

When Meert finally appeared, she was with her father and her boyfriend. The boyfriend didn't like the fact that a Navy man had suddenly appeared on his girlfriend's doorstep.

But it all worked out. Burkhead was her friend from the other side of the world. They were only friends.

He thought he might spend a night on their couch before moving on.

The Meert family was so nice, he stayed for a week.

They took him to Bruges, Antwerp, Bastogne and Brussels.

Not long after that trip to Belgium, Burkhead lost touch with his Flemish pen pal.

## **A newspaper gets involved**

Burkhead married his college sweetheart, Leslie. They had two children, Seth and Eryn.

He became a technical writer and, in his spare time, he worked on a novel about a guy who meets up with a pen pal years later.

On March 22, 2016, Burkhead was moved to write about his pen pal.

He put together a blog post about his long distance friendship with Meert, wondering if she was safe after the Brussels bombings.

He sent the post to the Belgian newspaper Het Nieuwsblad.

"And then I went to bed," he said.

Seven days later, a reporter called.

He had found Meert, and not only was she alive, she was thriving.

She had married the boyfriend who Burkhead had met in the '80s. They had been married 26 years and had a daughter.

Instead of a letter, she wrote him an email.

"Dear Roy,

I am so happy to hear from you. I now have my lunch break. I work in Brussels in the accounts of the Flemish Government of Mobility and Public Works."

Decades ago, Burkhead had sent her a Bible.

"I still have your letters and your Bible," she wrote. "If you would like to have your Bible back, no problem. I know it was a very special present."

Burkhead didn't want his Bible back.

It has been five years since that email. Burkhead and Meert still communicate regularly. This week she sent him an email discussing their children.

"What a gift this has been," Burkhead said when I called him this week. "It has been a gift of friendship."

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## **Project 88**

This story is part of Project 88, which is named for the 88 characters produced on a Smith-Corona typewriter. The Tennessean's Keith Sharon types letters on his 1953 typewriter and mails them to people all over the world with an envelope and stamp so they can write back. This story originated with a letter Keith received. The question Project 88 is trying to answer is: Will people communicate the old-fashioned way, through heartfelt letters about the best and most challenging days of their lives. This project is not for political rants, and any kind of snail mail letter (typed, hand-written or computer printout) is acceptable.

You can be part of Project 88 by writing to:

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