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I Wouldn't Remember Me Either

Nat Smith

People find it so hard to rationalize killing another human being. But are we better than beasts? I fear I have lost my empathy.

The man draws a sharp breath as the blade plunges into his stomach. He coughs and sputters, spittle flying from his lips. His jaw drops from the contortion of his guts... the blade twists. And twists.

It's so difficult to articulate why I despise him. Maybe it's his pretense of friendliness. Maybe it's because I feel like I've met him before. Maybe it's the overpowering sense of déjà vu I get whenever he speaks. I wonder if he's had an original thought before.

"Man, he said he'd hit me up when they left."

"Fuck it, let's head over now. And Gilbert, do me a solid and find somewhere else to crash tonight. I got a good feelin' about my chances," Steve laughs and his friend offers up a fist bump. "The goddamn dorms, no privacy when you need it." For once I agree with Steve. His herd of followers stampedes out of the room behind him. I absorb myself in *As I Lay Dying*.

It's like there was a fellow in every man that's done a-past the sanity or the insanity, that watches the sane and the insane doings of that man with the same horror and the same astonishment. —Cash

I peer out the stairwell window and wave to my parents. I turn and begin to make my way up the stairs when a short, chubby student wearing an orange beanie, white t-shirt, and green basketball shorts rounds the corner and runs head first into my chest. He stumbles back onto his heels before quickly recovering and leaning forward with his hand extended. He crushes my hand and vigorously shakes it up and down.

"I'm Gi—"

"Did you know Steve is going to live here? In this dorm?" He cuts me off with enthusiasm. I look down at the large tuft on his beanie. He cranes his head upwards and returns my gaze.

“Who exactly is Steve?” I respond.

“You haven’t met him yet? Oh boy, you’ll know it when you do,” he says with a toothy grin.

I nod slowly and start to step towards the stairs, struggling for something to say. “That’s nice,” is all I manage.

“He’s just such a likable guy,” he pauses and his face lights up with the realization of an idea. “I bet we’ll all be good friends. This is gonna be great. College!” He punctuates his last statement with an animated holler then rushes off down the stairs.

The smile haunts me. The welcoming part of the lips and glint of the teeth only drive me deeper into the recesses of space. But I cannot escape.

Most people have no problem with killing animals. Who is to say a human life is more valuable than a deer’s? We hunt deer for sport and no one complains. We see each person as a unique individual, but we do not differentiate deer. Humanity has a pervasive sense of superiority over the animal world. Just because we have large brains and self-awareness we think we are so damn special.

I have never partaken in hunting, but when I was a child I had a habit of slaughtering ants. I loved to take a shovel, and perhaps a can of AXE and a lighter, and exterminate entire colonies. My genocide of numerous ant populations was a guilt-free and enjoyable endeavor, save for the occasional slip up when an ant would make it to my bare skin and bite back. There is nothing quite like imposing dominance over the natural world. Ants are so insignificant killing them by the hundreds is easy to justify, but when people do it to each other they are labeled as psychopathic maniacs. I guess that makes sense.

“My favorite part,” he paused, scratched his mustache and grinned, revealing his yellow and rotten teeth. “It’s when you see the fear of death leave their eyes. It’s the instant they realize time’s up and there’s nothing they can do.”

The jingling of keys breaks my concentration. I turn around and prepare to meet my roommate. The door swings open and Steve strolls in. He briefly surveys our tiny dorm and nods slowly. He is dressed in the University’s unofficial uniform. A flannel shirt and jeans with a North Face backpack. I don’t know what else I could have been expecting. He sets his bags on his bed then confidently

walks up to me. Steve is tall and muscular with a swirled mass of curled locks adorning his head. His face is plastered with an amiable grin and penetrating green eyes. He introduces himself and extends his hand.

“I’m Gilbert,” I respond. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I was just stopping by to meet you and drop off my stuff before I head down to the lobby for the ice cream social. Should be a good place to make some friends, maybe meet some girls,” he says with a pleasant chuckle. “You comin?”

“No, I’ll skip out on that,” I tell him as I avoid eye contact.

“Alright suit yourself, but you’ll be missin’ out,” he says with conviction, his face still decorated with an inviting smile.

“Be Yourself!” the poster with the adorable kitten tells me. I wish I had another choice.

I turn the corner and head through the hallway towards my dorm. Even from a few doors away I can hear the shitty rap music blaring out of my room. I open the door to discover four guys lazing around the room swilling cheap beer. The only distinction I can make between the four is the color of their flannel. I shoot the one lounging on my bed a dirty look and head straight to my desk. Steve introduces me, but his three friends’ names go in one ear and out the other.

“Why don’t you stay and have a few beers with us? We’re just pre-gaming before we go crash a frat party. It’s gonna be a fuckin’ riot.” Steve says with his trademark smile while his companions nod in agreement.

“No thanks, I have an anthropology paper to finish,” I declare as I grab my books and laptop and head to the study lounge. I feel that my red polo and pleated khakis are not the only things that would keep me from fitting in with Steve’s crowd.

Gazing into the mirror I run my hand through my hair. A massive clump rips off in my fingers. My face slowly begins to twist and distort. Grotesque lumps and contusions grow from my skin. Abscesses pop in a bloody spectacle. My skin peels, revealing bone. My very body tries to escape my putrid existence. I can’t pull my eyes from the mirror.

“Yeah, but dude, listen to this. A guy I knew in high school had

such low testosterone they had to shoot some up his ass.”

“That’s fuckin’ whack bro.”

Their laughter grates on my ears as I roll my eyes. Listening to Steve one-up his friend with ridiculous and unbelievable stories makes me feel stupid just for being in the same room as them.

I am four years old and covering under a table, hugging its leg for dear life. Tears stream down my cheeks. My breaths are rapid and uncontrollable. Besides my choked sobs the house is eerily silent. The man with the yellow teeth quietly watches.

“Hey man have you gotten laid yet?” Steve inquires, his tone more serious than usual.

“No, not really... I guess.”

“See that’s why you need to come to a party with me and the guys. I personally guarantee you could find yourself a sweet piece of ass.”

“I don’t want a hook up, or a girlfriend, or anything,” I try to be forceful.

“You gay or something? I mean that would explain your shirt,” Steve laughs derisively.

“No I’m not, I just care about things other than sex.”

“Well me too,” he counters, suddenly defensive. “It’s just one of the best parts of college, you know? Cute girls everywhere you look and most of them willing to jump in the sheets, especially when you get booze involved. It’s perfect, a man can’t ask for anything more.”

I wish my thoughts were as pure as my lack of libido may seem to suggest. Lust fell into the same pit as everything else, even if I had the courage to flirt with a girl I do not have the desire.

“Bite me,” she moans seductively. I sink my teeth into the sinewy flesh on her neck. The sweet, metallic taste of blood seeps across my tongue. I violently jerk my head back bringing with me a chunk of skin and muscle.

I keep my eyes glued to the pavement as I skirt around the quad. I lock into the rhythm of my feet thumping on the sidewalk and focus on avoiding all the cracks. My little game insures I eschew any unwanted eye contact. I cannot tolerate making eye contact with someone who is laughing. I always imagine they are laughing at me, although I know it is preposterous.

I hear someone shout, "Watch out!" and my attention shifts to the bike speeding towards me. The sidewalk is clogged with other pedestrians and my reaction time is too slow. Milliseconds before impact the biker swerves to my right off the path. He probably would have stayed upright if I hadn't been passing a light post. His front tire clips the post throwing him dangerously off balance and stopping all his momentum. With a slight yelp he awkwardly tumbles over the handlebars into a cushion of grass. I nervously approach him and extend my hand. He looks up with a familiar incessant smile.

"Oh hi Steve, I didn't recognize you at first. Sorry about that... I wasn't paying attention," I tell him with a shrug. He grabs my hand and pulls himself up.

"No worries man, I was goin' too fast anyway. Plus I could have fallen in a lot worse of a place," he says laughing and gesturing to the grass that still retains most of its summer green. I nod and struggle to think of something to say.

"Why the bike?" I ask. "Is your car in the shop?"

Steve gives me a quizzical look and hesitates. "I don't have a car, just the trusty bike. Anyway, I need to get to class. I'll see you later." He readjusts his blue and white striped button-up shirt, briefly rubs a grass stain on the knee of his jeans, then mounts his bike and pedals off. I am too struck with confusion to return his farewell. He looks identical to my roommate, but I know for a fact Steve has a car.

I return to my dorm room to find Steve typing away at his laptop. He is wearing tan shorts and a green hoodie.

"How's it goin'?" He greets me without looking up.

"To be honest, I feel a little strange," I reply.

The spotlight glares down, trapping me in place. Hundreds of eyes bore into my body.

"I'm sure you'll do great sweetie," Mom's empty encouragement rings in my head. I turn and flee the stage.

I am staring at the ceiling, procrastinating an essay. I can't force myself to focus on anything. I try to read some of *The Stranger*, but the words blur across the page. My mind has been scattered since I woke up. I feel like I'm unable to make sense of anything. I exhale slowly then

I had only a little time left and I didn't want to waste it on God.

roll out of bed. I decide a walk around campus will clear my head.

The golden and red leaves of fall that still cling to the exposed branches stand out starkly against the grey sky. Hundreds of ripples spread across the puddles. I saunter through the rain aimlessly. The downpour has driven almost everyone else inside and I feel like I have the whole campus to myself. I feel like I should be happy, but I only feel a void.

“If the doctor thinks it best then it’s probably what you should do,” Mom tells me. “But they make me feel so... empty,” I reply. “That’s better than being sad all the time, isn’t it buddy?” Dad says without looking up from his newspaper.

“How’s Steve doing? Well, I hope. He’s a real stand up guy,” says the kid with the orange beanie as he leans over my shoulder. I meet his eyes for a split second then move my gaze down to my plate.

“Mind if I join you?” he asks eagerly.

“Actually, um... I just finished so I’ll be leaving now.” I stand and briskly walk across the room to deposit my half eaten meal with the other dirty dishes. I don’t look back.

Apparently it’s as easy to break a human finger as it is to snap a carrot. The thought reassures me. With a quick jerk my right pinky is at a 90-degree angle. I wince and hold back a cry. I grasp my ring finger and grit my teeth. I hesitate and glance away from my now deformed hand. I grab a towel and shove it in my mouth.

I return with an even firmer grip and force my finger back towards my wrist.

Studying the wood of the desk captivates me more than the lecture. I look up to see the man with yellow teeth sitting beside me.

I reach into my backpack and pull out the knife. Panic spreads like wildfire when I begin slicing. Frightened students clamber for the exits. “How important is calculus now?” I question before I lunge for another target.

“Stop fucking staring at me you creep,” she mutters under her breath. I return to analyzing my desk.

He rams the lit cigarette into her ear.

I came to college with the assumption it would be radically different from high school. In some respects it is: it's easier to ditch classes, you don't have your parents breathing down your neck, and the homework is harder. However, the people are the same. I thought I would step into a sea of fascinating individuals and intellectual discussions. But students here are just as likely to talk about whether or not they're going to the football game and which girl they just slept with as their high school counterparts. Only the names and faces have changed.

The blade slips. My palm is gushing blood. It drips onto the carrots and broccoli in a sticky puddle. "Told you he is too young to handle cutting," Dad sighs. Mom looks disappointed.

Glancing over my shoulder I see him quickly approaching. I hurry my pace.

"Hey Gilbert! Gilbert wait up," the kid with the orange beanie shouts. He is clad in a flannel and brown khakis. I weigh my options and decide to stop.

"What are you doing this weekend? Heard about any cool parties?"

"Steve was talking about one over on Third Avenue I think."

"Oh man, sounds awesome! You gonna be there?"

"I wasn't planning on it."

"Bummer," he replies with a dejected face, "we should hang out sometime. You, me, Steve – that would be great!"

"Yeah... maybe, I'm pretty busy though. Speaking of which I need to get to class." I swerve off to the left, speed walking to nowhere in particular.

Everybody looks the same. And talks the same. And is the same.

"Pass me the stuffing, Gilbert."

"Please don't make me go back there, I really don't like it," I plead, as the anxiety wells up in my voice.

"You'll enjoy it more once you make some good friends, sweetie."

"Some people take longer to adjust and that's ok, just give it some time. You have to get a good education. I refuse to have a loser for a son. It takes a college degree to get a good job nowadays. I sure hope

your plan isn't to drop out and come live back here like a bum. I'm sorry, that simply will not fly in this household. Your mother and I are really working our tails off for you. The least you can do is put some effort in to enjoy yourself and get good grades. That's all we ask."

"You'd have to be pretty naïve to think people aren't selfish," he says with a sneer. He takes a long draw on his cigarette. "Trust me—anyone and everyone will screw you over at a moment's notice, as long as there's something in it for them. People are ruthless, Gilbert. You have to stoop to their level."

"You really need to get out more," Steve says authoritatively.

"I just want to finish *Catcher in the Rye*," I tell him with a shrug.

"It's always homework or reading. Being cooped up in here all the time must be depressing." I can smell the alcohol lingering on his breath. "We have been here for like three months and you still haven't been to a party. I'm right, aren't I? College with no parties—it's like what the fuck is the point? How many more Fridays do you want to waste?"

"I'm not the type who goes to parties."

"No shit, we're gonna change that tonight though," he laughs. I nod apprehensively. I decide it is worth a try, for no other reason than to keep Steve from pestering me.

When you're not looking, somebody'll sneak up and write 'Fuck you' right under your nose.

"Who's ready to get fucked up?" An excited cheer erupts from our group as we approach the house. People spill out of every crease and seam of the house. We move onto the porch, past the beer pong game, and into the mad house. The crowd seethes this way and that to the beat of the awful music. Elated, drunk, high students are spread from wall to wall. I worm my through the mob to an open spot on a couch.

"Yo! Gilbert try a hit of..."

Flames dance about the house. The plume of black smoke rises to block the moon. I contemplate the book of matches in my hand. My leg twitches uncontrollably. A figure barrels out the front door and rolls on the ground. I would

prefer to freeze to death. I imagine the comfortable numbness overtaking me. The shrill, piercing cries emanate from the decaying building.

She can smell the marijuana on my lips. The smoke still clouds my eyes. I run my sandpaper tongue across the cavernous roof of my mouth. I look into her bloodshot eyes, dilated pupils pushing the blue into the sea of red. I'm pretty sure she is talking to me, but I can't respond.

“Your eyes are so glazed, man, can you even see?”

I sink deeper into the floor. I am slowly engulfed in the gelatinous mass. My face lowers into the darkness. Suffocation grips my lungs as I gasp frantically for air.

I drive the blade into the shag rug. Crossing my legs, I pull it out and repeat with more force. The thump and drone of music drives into my temples. One person is staring down at me. A whole crowd is staring down at me.

“Put the fucking knife away you psycho. Jesus Christ, what are you thinking?”

My tongue flaps against my gums. Words are too much effort for my slacked jaw. I roll the question around in my head. What am I thinking?

“Dude! My rug! Who the hell is...”

I sink the blade just above the knee. I pull it up the length of his thigh towards his pelvis. He shakes violently. He cries. He moans. He begs. Like it will make me stop. He doesn't realize he is telling me exactly what I want to hear.

Relaxation runs up my spine and out to my tingling fingertips. I feel like I could melt into the couch, and I wish I could. I try to make my limp jaw form words. She waves her hand in front of my face. I blink a few times. She stands up and walks off to get another drink. Steve is everywhere. No matter which direction I look I see him.

I think I'm panicking. It's hard to be sure of anything. The doctor told me marijuana doesn't mix well with medication. Too much serotonin. Increased chance of anxiety attacks. Too much happiness. I'm overwhelmed and relaxed at the same time. I am conscious and in a coma.

Strangers in all directions. I frantically look around, but the crowd surges and pulsates, blocking every route. Sweat drips down my face, and I feel like my heart is trying to rip out of my chest. Everyone is talking at once creating a deafening roar. Each voice swirls into the din making it impossible to make out what anyone is saying. I lunge for an unsuspecting man and clamber onto his shoulders. All I can see is a never-ending mob... people stretching out to the horizon.

“Hey buddy, wake up. Get off the couch. The party’s over.” I struggle out of the haze of sleep as Steve’s firm grip tightens on my shoulder. He shakes me back to reality. But it isn’t Steve. He is wearing a blue striped cardigan over a white button up. Steve was wearing flannel last night. His face is the same though. The twinkling green eyes, the curled hair, the smile that I cannot expel from my head. I stand up and observe the deserted house. Red Solo cups litter the floor, and a cigarette is snuffed out on the coffee table. I skirt through the mess to the door. Before I leave I ask the host, “What’s your name?”

“Steve. And by the way, you owe me some money for a new rug,” he says curtly. I walk out the door without answering. I amble along the street headed back to my dorm building. I feel like I should be frustrated with my roommate for leaving me at the party. Every person I pass on my return to campus looks identical to Steve, their only variations being the clothes on their backs.

The man with yellow teeth puts his arm around my shoulder. His breath reeks of stale cigarettes and rotting flesh. “It’s like this, Gilbert,” he says with a wry smirk. “Everybody is out to get you, so you have to get them first. It’s a very simple principle: self-preservation through elimination of competitors. They’ll drive you crazy if you let them, I promise you that.” I nod in agreement.

I spot the orange beanie from across the quad. The tuft bobs towards me. I notice, for once, the beanie is above my eye level, because it is perched on Steve’s head.

Be unique, just like everyone else.

Have I gone insane? I am unable to confidently answer, which makes me think that I am. But I don’t feel any different. Or maybe

I do. I can't be sure of anything. That makes me think something is different. I can't remember. If not insane, I am surely confused. Is everyone else identical, or have I lost the ability to differentiate between other people? Each face blends into the crowd, and each day is indistinguishable from the last. Surely I can't be normal. I wish I could read someone else's mind, just to see how they think. I need to know if I am really that different from all these Steves.

Do you know what it is like to hate? I mean, to feel real hatred? When it is buried deep inside with its dark tendrils tangled around your heart? Squeezing? When the hate is so fundamentally linked to your being it's like you cannot be separated from it? It drives out every other emotion, so all that is left is the raw aching of animosity.

I use the knife to make a long, horizontal slit across his stomach. I reach my hand into the open gash and pull out his entrails so the dirty hypocrite can see what he truly looks like before he dies. The phony fuck whimpers, and I smile as wide as his gaping stomach.

I always try my best to avoid conflict. No one else seems to notice, or care, so I figure it's best to keep my peace. In every class I attend, every other person looks exactly the same, and the professors haven't even mentioned it. I assume they're used to it. Each year a new batch of clones shows up to replace the old ones. The cycle never ends. The faces blend into one.

The hot, viscous sludge leaks out of my ear and drips onto my shirt, staining the pure white with a black mark. I tentatively reach up to my ear and feel where it is coming out. It also stains my skin with midnight black blotches. Its rancid smell invades my nostrils. The stain spreads across my skin. My nose begins oozing the sludge as well. I collapse and curl into the fetal position. The blackness puddles on the ground around me as it flows from every orifice.

We're caught in the depths of winter as the semester limps to a close. *The Heart of Darkness* occupies the meaningless hours. The copious amounts of free time I have at college could be spent with homework, extracurriculars, or possibly a social life, but I have no desire or motivation. I don't even have the desire to live, or to die.

Heaps of grey snow line the sidewalks of the quad. The ever-present grey clouds make the sky feel heavy on my shoulders. The

parkas and ski jackets have been brought out of hiding. I miss the leaves of fall, but I'll admit the bitter winter wind better suits my temperament.

We live as we dream—alone...

“Gilbert, I thought I should let you know, I'm moving off campus next semester. I'm getting apartment with some of the guys. It's gonna be dope. Like classic Animal House, but an apartment. So we're not gonna be roommates anymore. Hope that's cool with you.”

I guess “cool with me” is one way to describe it.

“By the way, man, have you seen my backpack? I have no idea how I could've lost it. I can't find the damn thing anywhere.” Steve continues chattering, and I examine my hands. “Dude I asked you a question. Hello?”

I turn, lean back in my chair, and begin staring out the window. Steve keeps talking. “...Useless...Shitty luck...Why of all people...Weirdo...Knives...Brick wall...Dense motherfucker...You?” For once, he isn't smiling.

The man with the yellow teeth is sitting on my bed, observing. I try to turn back to the window, but my eyes are transfixed on his rotten smile. “*Get it over with, kill him. I know you want to.*” His words ring in my head, drowning out Steve's rant.

“The silent treatment is a little childish, honey. I was only trying to help. Why won't you talk to me?”

“Answer your mother, this has gone on long enough,” Dad says trying to sound stern.

I look out upon the ants swirling about beneath me. I turn away from the window and open the bottom drawer of my desk, revealing the hunting knife. I stole the ten-inch monstrosity from my dad's underused hunting and outdoor gear stash over Thanksgiving break. I slide the knife down my pant leg and cover the hilt with my coat. I leave my dorm and head for the elevator.

“Do it,” he whispers into my ear.

On the quad, the gently falling snow hides the afternoon sun

behind a dome of grey. As usual, no one pays me any mind. Even beneath the hoods, I recognize Steve's ceaseless smile on every face. My breathing becomes rapid and strained. My heart thumps.

"Imagine all the blood..."

I make my way to the center of the quad. People bustle to and from their classes. Unaware. I grip the hilt.

Pools of red stain the virgin snow.

I begin to sob. They're just people, I think. They're just a person. All the same. No better than beasts. Something stops me. I contemplate turning the blade on myself. Scattered echoes. Hollow voices ring.

The man with yellow teeth is furious.

I can't tell if I am awake or not. The man with the yellow teeth is right beside me.

"Don't give up you piece of shit. Worthless!"

My knees tremble. The waking nightmare of my existence warps my consciousness. I will die alone. Angst and anxiety. Passion. I cannot control my own...

"Cut the self-pity and take revenge."

I'm lying in the snow. Facing the sky. Flakes stick and melt on my flushed cheeks. Revenge for what?

"Society caused this. Die a martyr!"

Steve is helping me up.

"Slice his throat!"

I resist temptation. Impulses well up inside of me and burst.

Voices still scream. My temples throb.

The man with yellow teeth shakes his head and walks away. I wave farewell.

Once Steve has me on my feet I join the crowd. I saunter along. I throw the knife into a snowbank. I don't need a mirror to know: I am Steve.

Let's go to a party.