

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

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Confessions Of A One-Time Murderer

Why do we humans torture and kill? Oh, it's one thing to kill in a moment of passion or for survival. But to concoct a simple or an elaborate plan, analyzing and calculating with cold-blood precision the best and most efficient ways in which to take the life of a single individual or of a million. Where does that urge come from? Why do we like to watch it endlessly and pretend we are doing it ourselves in games? And then, what makes us turn the *idea* of killing--the tantalizing fantasy of it in our minds--into reality?

I have felt that detached curiosity, that heady grip of power over another. I have taken that leap and experimented through actions. I have tortured and murdered. I did it once. And then I stopped. But why did I stop—because some people don't. Some people keep on going.

In the two-storied house my family had animals. I was five when we moved there and I hardly remember the house before that one. It had been in the country, near Merced, and there had been a big field in the back with cows. When we moved to the two-storied house in Los Angeles, Dad wanted to bring the country with him. He loved animals. Mom didn't. Actually, she liked them well enough as long as they were in the wild where they belonged and not in our house. Although, now that I think about it, Mom would have loved to have a lamb if it would have stayed little and cute and never grown up. Or maybe a goat because they eat anything and they might have eaten some of the other animals, which would have made Mom happy.

But we didn't have a goat or a baby lamb. We had geese and ducks, chickens and roosters, a guinea pig, a cat and a German Shepherd named General. The geese and ducks were ill-tempered and made big splats all over the backyard, which I hated as much as Mom did. They lived in a pen at the way back of the yard but Dad liked to let them out so they could run around and flap their wings. At the end of the day it was nearly impossible to catch them. They were almost as big as me and would bite if I came near. When I waved my arms and stomped my feet, trying to herd them towards the cage, they backed up for a second, but then they'd realize my plan and hiss and spit and come at me worse than ever, like zombies from a horror movie. I always ended up running away, crying.

Dad was the only one with authority over the animals. He'd shake his head at our feeble attempts, give a command and a whistle and somehow or other, amazingly, they obeyed. Much as Janna and I tried to imitate exactly what he did, it never worked for us.

None of the animals belonged to me. I thought when we got the guinea pig that maybe it could be mine but the first time I touched it I found out I was allergic. My sinuses closed up and I couldn't breathe. My skin became covered in itchy bumps and my eyes swelled shut. It was horrific. After that, I used to stare at the guinea pig in its cage and wonder what it had against me. Whereas before it had looked sweet and cuddly, it now looked sinister and monstrous, beady little eyes staring back at me with malicious intent.

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One day, my older sister Janna came home with a mouse. I don't know how she got so lucky but she did, and I didn't, which seemed to be the story of my life. The mouse was adorable. It was brown with a twitching nose and whiskers and bright, lively eyes. Janna named it Jasper. She kept it in a cage by the back porch and she loved to take it out and play with it.

I asked if I could, too, but Janna refused.

"Baby!" she said. "If you touch Jasper I'll kill you!"

I hated being called a baby. I didn't mind being threatened with death. Of course my sister would never actually kill me.

One afternoon when Janna wasn't home, I took Jasper out of its cage and went into the family room with it. I sat on a chair and looked at the mouse. It was wriggly and nervous. It wouldn't stay still. I hadn't realized how wriggly and nervous a mouse could be and I worried, on no, what if it *does* get away, Janna really will kill me.

The mouse climbed up my arm and tickled my chin. I put it back on my lap. It climbed up again and I put it back again. It wouldn't stay still. I held it a little tighter. It wriggled furiously, right out of my grasp and onto the floor, immediately trying to scurry off. I grabbed it and the little creature twisted like a contortionist, back-flipping out of my hands and down to the floor. I quickly grabbed it again.

"Bad Jasper," I said, squeezing tighter.

It wouldn't stop wriggling, so I decided to punish the mouse and teach it a lesson. I dropped it on the ground and then picked it up before it could get away.

I continued to do this, dropping the mouse and picking it up again. As I did, I became acutely aware of how delicate the mouse was, how tiny and vulnerable. I marveled at how perfectly it fit inside my hand, which was small because I was small.

But the mouse was much smaller and more vulnerable than me. Before holding the mouse, I'd felt like the most vulnerable person in the world. But here was something much more vulnerable. It had a little heart that beat in such a frantic way, I was sure it would burst right out of the mouse's chest. It had bones that could crack; teeny, tiny bones thinner than twigs, maybe even as thin as straight pins. It had flesh that could be cut and blood that could flow from the inside out. When I squeezed the mouse, I felt how the little body yielded to my strength and power.

Once again, I dropped the mouse on the ground and watched as it tried to run away. Then I grabbed it, squeezed a little harder... and dropped it again. I kept doing this, watching dispassionately, and after a while the mouse didn't try to get away so quickly anymore and then, it hardly moved at all, just feebly fell on its side, its legs not working and splayed at odd angles.

Eventually, it didn't move at all.

At that point, the mouse felt different in my hands. No more twitching whiskers, no more beating heart, no more squirming body, just a limp and lifeless ball of fur. The body now felt terribly heavy, an unnatural heavi-

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ness that was out of proportion to its little size. Its eyes darted no more, just stared, empty black holes with the light forever gone.

How was it possible that a few minutes before the mouse had been filled with life, absolutely filled with it, and now, the life was gone? What had happened?

I had a sudden realization. I had done this! I had taken the life away.

In that moment, a sort of evil came to me. I might have only been five, but I understood that I had the power of a god and it was a heady, delightfully sinister feeling, that feeling of power, the power to inflict pain and even death on another.

It wasn't that I, myself, was evil. It's impossible to know exactly what evil is. You can't say, "Here is evil," in the same way you say, "Here is a cat."

Evil isn't a thing. It's not like you can find evil at a certain location, as if someone could say, "Okay, just drive down this street, up that hill and around the bend and there it will be, you can't miss it—a cloud of evil by the side of the road."

You can't order a cup of evil. You can't rub it on your body like lotion or eat it like bread.

Evil isn't a person, either. People think of Satan as evil, and yes, Satan is evil—if you believe in Satan, that is. But, still, Satan isn't EVIL.

Evil's a word, just like truth, justice, love, and hate. And who knows exactly what they are, either?

Nobody knows, not really. Nobody knows if any of those words actually *exist* apart from we who have created them.

So, that afternoon, holding the dead mouse in my hand, I felt surrounded by evil and the desire to let it enter me, fueled by the heady feelings of power and control that killing the mouse had aroused.

At the same time, I felt horror and guilt—not that I'd taken a life, because that reality hadn't yet sunk in, but that I might be found out by my sister.

And then, the most terrorizing realization of all made my insides churn uncontrollably. My parents would find out!

And this was where the *real* horror of my actions began to sink in. First, with fear for myself because of the consequences I would surely suffer when my crime was discovered. I hadn't known it was a crime until I'd realized there were consequences that went with it. Consequences beyond myself, because what I'd done affected not only the mouse (it was undeniably dead and had probably suffered pain) but also my sister, since she would be mad at me and heart-broken to have lost her mouse.

Then, there were my parents who would be disappointed that I'd not only killed the mouse but that I'd hurt my sister. Most importantly, I had disobeyed a command not to take the mouse out of its cage. Because of my disobedience, disaster had fallen upon me and my family.

That was about when I looked at the limp form of the mouse and was

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hit with a sudden epiphany and I thought, with a whole new understanding, "I killed Jasper!"

The mouse was dead, the life gone, and I could never repair the wrong. Or maybe I could?

I shook the mouse, talked to it, pleaded with it to wake up, come back to life. But it just lay there.

I didn't actually know *why* it was so terrible that the mouse was dead. During the act of killing it, I couldn't deny that I'd felt some kind of pleasure, the pleasure of power.

About ten years ago I founded a creative writing program for incarcerated youth. The kids in the program made all kinds of interesting confessions in the course of their writing. One teenage boy talked about how as a child he'd enjoyed chopping worms with a Swiss Army knife.

When I asked him why, he simply said, "Power."

He liked the feeling it gave him.

Eventually, though, he stopped doing it. When I asked him why, he couldn't articulate a reason.

Then I asked him, "What would have happened if you'd decided to keep cutting up worms, maybe moved on to bigger things?"

He grinned knowingly. "Then I'd be a psychopathic killer!"

Most people decide to curb those feelings of pleasure and power that they get from killing. I don't know if it's because of that process of thinking—the fear of retribution or of being an outcast, because really you can't have a society where everyone is going around wantonly killing each other. There have to be rules to the killing game.

Or perhaps it's because we know, even from a very young age, that this is the path of madness, the path towards the center of evil and once we let evil in so completely, it controls us and we lose control of ourselves.

The thing is, we do kill and it is a part of us. In fact, on this planet, every species kills. Humans think up ways to kill that we can justify. People don't dare say they're killing for pleasure. They have to say it's for necessity.

How twisted it is to commit murderous acts and then justify them to ourselves because we know that what we've done is depraved and yet we do it anyway. We can watch death and torture in a movie or act it out in a virtual world and feel the pleasure and the power because it isn't "real," it isn't us doing it, even though we are feeling it and living it vicariously. So we justify these terrible acts to ourselves and get rid of the urge by watching it or by waging wars in far away countries that we can feel righteous in supporting because they are "necessary" and we are on the "right side."

As soon as I realized I'd killed the mouse, I started rationalizing what I'd done inside my head. I started telling myself I hadn't known what I was doing. It wasn't my fault. The mouse had kept trying to get away. I had merely been doing my best to keep it safe. It was the mouse's own fault for being so disobedient. It hadn't paid any attention to me. I had

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tried to warn it by squeezing it just a little bit and telling it not to run away and it had still kept running.

There, in front of me, lay the evidence. Staring at the dead mouse, I thought, "What will I do with the body?"

Could I hide it, say it had run away? If I did, how would I explain that it was out of the cage? No one would ever believe it had escaped on its own without me having taken it out.

Okay, then, I would put it back in the cage and just leave it there. Then, when Janna discovered it she would assume it had died of natural causes. It would be sad, but no one would blame me and no one would ever have to know the truth.

So, I put the mouse back in the cage, relieved that no one had seen me take it out and no one saw me put it back. I was safe.

Janna came home and the first thing she did was go to the cage, eager to take out her new mouse and play with it. Her scream traveled all the way upstairs to our room where I was acting innocent and unconcerned, playing with dolls. I didn't really like playing with dolls very much, but I was playing industriously that afternoon. The next thing I knew, Janna had burst through the door and was demanding that I tell her what had happened.

I tried to self-righteously deny that I'd had anything to do with the death of the mouse. I lied, putting on my very best lying face and using my very best lying voice. She believed none of it. I began to feel offended. How dare she accuse me in such a mean fashion? In my self-righteous indignation, I almost began to believe my own lie.

But then, Dad came home from work and what was always my greatest fear happened: he looked me in the eyes and told me to tell the truth.

None of us children, when looked in the eyes like that by our dad and told to tell the truth, could ever look back and tell a lie. My cheeks grew red with shame and before I could stop myself, I was crying uncontrollably and blurting it all out and the relief of the confession was like a wave of cool water washing over a fevered body.

I pleaded for Janna to forgive me and my parents insisted that she did. And eventually, when we began to plan the funeral of the mouse and Janna took charge, imagining the drama of the ceremony, she really did forgive me and we became friends again. We made a coffin out of a shoe box and my mom sewed a little blanket for the mouse to lie on. We picked flowers and placed them inside and put the mouse in the center of the box. We invited all the neighborhood children and they arrived with condolences, solemn and sympathetic. We set the coffin up on some bricks, like an altar, in the backyard and everyone viewed the body. We gave speeches about the mouse and how we'd loved it and what a good mouse it had been, noble and well-behaved.

This, I knew, had not been the case since the mouse would still have been alive if it had just obeyed and not tried to run away, however, it wasn't right to speak ill of the dead and so I agreed that it had, indeed, been an exceptionally well-behaved mouse. Then we cried and wailed and

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rang our hands. We said a prayer for the mouse, put it into the earth and Janna threw a handful of dirt on the coffin. We filled up the hole, put a cross made of two twigs tied together at the head of the mound and that was it.

I never killed again.

Well, except for bugs. Anytime I see a fly I kill it. And I've eaten my fair share of dead animals—cows, chickens, pigs, baby lambs, goats, all the acceptable ones. That is until I realized that our modern society murders animals in far more tortuous ways than what I did to the mouse.

But apparently, it's not evil to torture and kill animals if it's done inside government sanctioned facilities.

Because anything that is accepted as normal by the majority of society isn't evil, it's good.

Right?

For eight years I was married to a Slovenian "rock star" and lived back and forth between London and a small village in Slovenia (but that's a whole other story). Life in the village was very different from how I'd grown up in Los Angeles. People kept chickens in their backyards, for eggs and for food. Only no one really like having to ring the chickens necks. Except for one feisty old lady who lived a few houses down from us. Whenever a neighbor wanted to kill a chicken they called Urska and she did it quite happily, for free. The creepy thing was that years earlier, Urska's husband had hung himself in the attic. He was the only person in the village that anyone could remember ever committing suicide.

I used to think about that—Urska's husband hanging by his neck, neck broken, just how Urska liked to break the necks of the chickens. Did she get the irony of the situation? It didn't seem like it. She wasn't self conscious at all. She didn't apologize or act embarrassed. She was proud of her ability. Really enjoyed it.

Had Urska perhaps driven her husband to suicide? Or had she rung his neck herself, and then made it look like suicide? I would never know.

But it was like Urska had found her calling, killing those chickens. I couldn't have done it. Nobody else in the village wanted to. But they sure were relieved that she did. They found her strange, thought of her as a bit crazy. But they appreciated using her services.

In kindergarten, I encountered kids who loved nothing more than to knock stuff down. I would no sooner finish building a tower out of blocks, carefully and with great pride placing the last block on the tip top, and a kid would come along and smash it, just swing his or her arm with total delight, or kick it down and sometimes even stomp on the blocks to ensure irreparable destruction. I didn't dare try to stop them. If I did, they would most likely turn from stomping on the blocks to stomping on me. It was always the same kids. The Destroyers.

In this world, there are Builders and Destroyers. What would happen if the Builders just kept on building without anyone ever tearing the towers down? Eventually, the entire universe would be filled with towers of blocks, until we ran out of them. If you look at it that way, then the

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Destroyers are very necessary. They just need to be polite about it. Say and do it in a manner that is acceptable by society. Destroyers come along and tear things down, bring things back to neutral. They take great satisfaction in doing this, just as much as the Builders take in creating.

What would happen if nobody ever died? As far as I can see, that would be a disaster. The necessity of death and destruction is a terrible lesson for a child to learn. Good and evil relentlessly balancing each other out. I'm not even sure if we choose which way we're going to go—left or right, up or down; to Build or to Destroy.

That day, I *think* I made a choice, although it was probably inevitable. I had tasted evil and while I found it intoxicating, I also found it to be terribly wrong. And since acceptance in my family and in society is determined by me making the right choices, I turned away from evil, resolving to follow the path of good.

I even made a sort of restitution as an adult by publishing a series of books about cute little mice titled *The Rumpoles* and *The Barleys*, which I wrote and illustrated.

But I still wonder why I ever did such a thing in the first place. Why do we humans feel pleasure from cruel acts?