

An Explanation

Your first murder is a lot like losing your virginity: It isn't very pleasant, but you'll never forget it. To extend this tenuous simile one step further, I suppose I could add that most people tend to worry and wring their hands about both, when actually neither is such a big deal, once you get started.

By the way, I only present this comparison for your edification; the story I am about to tell you has nothing to do with losing my virginity, although it has much to do with my first murder.

My story begins very simply. I had decided to murder a dear friend for an insult beyond my capacity to forgive. I shan't bore you here with the specifics, the background of the offense, but since I am writing this, you will simply have to trust me—the insult was most capital in nature.

Once the idea for retribution came into my head, each step became simpler and simpler. Perhaps, though, before I continue, I could tell you a bit about myself, so you will understand how my mind works. I am a short man, thirty five years old, and not self-conscious about either. I have, of course, a serious education (a doctorate in sociology) that, through the devious machinations of an unfair society, I have never been able to put to adequate use. I am the manager of a supermarket by trade, something I resent but am successful at, perhaps because I can use some of my sociology skills in dealing with employees and customers. As you can imagine, this job puts me in contact mostly with people below my social and educational bearing, but I am occasionally able to pick out a rough gem among the bunch and polish it enough that I can tolerate it, at least for a while.

Overall, I am a tolerant man. I am slow to anger, even though at times it seems that half the world seeks only to arouse my ire. My dear friend, for example (the one whom I had decided to kill), was constantly doing things to bother me. He often watched television while I was meditating, and although I was in my room with the door closed, I could hear the high-pitched wheeeeeee of the set as it sought me out to disturb my solace. I tolerated this. After all, television is the meditation of the uneducated man. He also refused to wash the dishes after eating and would leave his plates on the table, or worse—in the damp sink—for as long as an hour after a meal. In

minutes, I could smell the food turning rancid and often felt sick to my stomach. Still, I said nothing to him. After he went to bed, I would run boiling water over the dishes and pass the metal utensils through fire to destroy the bacteria.

As you can see, my tolerance enables me to endure many horrible things.

But back to my plans. Plans come quite simply to me, it's simply a matter of doing what you can and taking advantage of coincidences. If it rains, you take a romantic walk in the rain; if it shines, you sunbathe. Always work with nature's unchangeable flow. I picked up the classified ads and browsed.

GUNS!!! .38 S&W semi - \$150; 44 Magnum - \$300; 9 mm Browning - \$200; many others too numerous to mention. Buy/Sell/Trade. Protect yourself before it's too late! 555-7634 (pri. pty.)

The ad struck me like a bullet.

A gun would be so simple, so civilized, so American. I decided on the .38—a Smith and Wesson—a romantic's choice.

I called the number and was given directions. They led to an address in the canyons north-west of Los Angeles. A dirt road led off the main road, past a rusty mail box that had been pierced by much buck shot. The name "Jenks" had been daubed on the mailbox with white paint.

Jenks sat on the porch, eyeing me suspiciously. He cradled a rifle in his lap as some men would cradle a favorite dog.

It looked like I should take a friendly approach. "Hi! I called about your ad in the paper?" I stated it as a question, hoping my sincerity would be evident through a smile and a pair of sunglasses I didn't want to remove.

He smiled. "Come on in! I'm sure I got watchur lookin' fer!" He leaned the gun against the porch and led me into a model middle-American home. Plush carpet. Clean. VCR and a Jesus statue on the television set. The smell of fresh paint and warm plastic. Children's pictures on the wall in the kitchen, over the shelf with the microwave, surrounded a red-white-and-blue sign that said, "God bless America and this home!"

"So," Jenks said, as he opened a locked door that apparently led to a den, "D'you want protection or are you jes' gettin' ready?"

"Umm. . ." What did *that* mean? "I'm getting ready."

"Good." He swung open the door. "There's a war a-comin'." The room was lined with cabinets, display cases and shelves, each filled with hand guns, rifles, sights and ammunition.

I gasped.

"Nice set up, eh? I got just the thing for you, if you're gettin' ready." He opened a case and removed a long, slender tube with a handle at one end. "It's an Uzi, like what the Jews got in Israel. Jes' the thing to send the Commies or A-rabs runnin' back fer their boats when they land over at Malibu."

"Oh no," I said, "I just wanted that .38 you had advertised. The Smith and Wesson."

"A .38? Watchu gettin' ready fer? Commie squirrels? You need fire-power, son."

I smiled. "I'd rather keep a low profile."

"Ohhh," he whispered and winked, "A sniper-type!" Jenks grinned appreciatively. "The last line of American defense." He reached down and pulled out a black, well-oiled piece of destructive machinery. "This is gun that won the West, an' this is the gun that'll defend her!" he half-shouted, and passed the gun to me. It was heavier than I had expected.

I eyed the gun apprehensively and it eyed me back. It left my hand coated with a thin film of oil that smelled like warm plastic.

"I'n't she a beauty? I got a pair, myself, next to the bed—one on my side, one on the lil' woman's. If any one ever breaks into this house, God help 'em!" He laughed.

"I know what you mean," I said, and smiled thinly. You have to humor these deranged freaks, you never know when they may crack. "How much was it again?"

"One-fifty, but since you seem to be a red-blooded American brother, I'll give it to you for one-forty."

I smiled again, but inside I wanted to retch at the thought that I could be the brother of such a vile human being.

I handed him the money, said, "Thank you very much," then shook his hand and turned to leave. He showed me to the door.

"I got some friends like you," he said. "Silent types, they're always the snipers. You'd like them. We got meetings Sunday, after church. The boys come over here and we discuss tactics." He winked. "Come on over, ya'll fit right in."

"Yes. I'll see if I can make the time." I waved as I walked to my car, feeling dizzy and nauseous. My tolerance had been stretched to the limit, but my facade had allowed me to purchase the necessary weapon without suspicion or state registration. I paid cash and hadn't even given my name. Jenks wouldn't be able to identify me under any conditions.

The next step was to plan the time of the execution. This was simple. At precisely two a.m. every Friday night (Saturday morning) a local redneck bar closes, discharging its questionable clientele (friends of Jenks, no doubt) onto the quiet streets of my neighborhood. This event is always accompanied by the sudden blaring of half a dozen

stereos, the revving of hyped-up truck engines and innumerable backfires. Precisely fifteen minutes later, the Southern Pacific train roars through the edge of town, horn blasting and bells clanging. I would simply take advantage of these ready-made coincidences.

Access to the criminal (my dear friend and insulator) was simple. I hinted previously that we shared a flat—a detail that was not really important until this point in the story. We slept under the same roof; his bedroom door shared the same hall as mine. He slept with his door and window open. The window adjacent to his bed looked into an old weather-beaten redwood fence, which would also help me.

On the night of the murder, I cooked a delightful meal of broiled sirloin tips, sauteed in a mushroom sauce with German potato salad and sweet miniature carrots for myself and my doomed friend. Even though he had disturbed my meditation once again earlier in the week, I played cards with him and joked for a couple of hours. As I said, I'm a tolerant man. Since it was his last night, I made him a gift of a fifth of Scotch, which he immediately opened and began to down, much to my pleasure. I never drink, but he offered me some anyway, so I took a shot, much to his pleasure. By eleven, he had reached his limit. I discouraged him from drinking any more and offered to help him to bed. He seemed quite touched and remarked that he appreciated my kindness and gentility. He said that sometimes he didn't know why I tolerated him, with my civility and greater intellect; that he was just a poor slob. I almost pitied him then and almost called off my plans, but I remembered it was the talk of a drunk man. If he had actually gone as far as apologizing for the slight that had infuriated me and begged forgiveness, I may have given in. Probably not.

After he was safely in his bed, I went to mine. You might imagine I slept poorly, thinking about my plans. I didn't. Once I decide to do something, it is resolved. I awoke sharply, without an alarm, at five minutes before two. I dressed, got my gun and waited. At one minute past two, I could hear the cars starting at the redneck bar. I walked to my dear friends's room and knelt next to his bed. As the stereos began to blast and the engines to rev, I held the gun out in the firing position. At the sound of the first backfire, I nudged my friend with the nozzle of the gun, hard. They say a man has the right to face his accuser. He jerked and sat up in bed, a look of sleepy, drunken confusion in his eyes. I smiled to reassure him nothing was wrong, then immediately after the next backfire, I pulled the trigger and unloaded a single slug into his temple at point blank range. He grunted and lay down at a grotesque angle. A small hole now appeared in his window screen, exactly as I had hoped. The room smelled like warm plastic. I removed his wallet from the dresser and his watch, then left the room and walked to the front door. There were fifteen minutes to go.

Outside, I crushed the door handle with the butt of the gun, neatly and quietly providing a way by which a burglar could have gained entrance. Then I removed the slug from the fence with a penknife, finding its location easily by aligning myself with the hole in the window screen and my approximate position when I fired. I walked briskly to the tracks, a calm quarter-mile, not shaking or nervous at all, placed the gun on the tracks and waited. I put on his watch; it was accurate. At two-fifteen, the train passed, in its chugging, roaring fury, and demolished the pistol. I inspected the track and found a few identifiable pieces of metal that I placed on the track to be finished off by the next train. I walked back to the flat, tossed the slug into the bushes and my friend's wallet deep into the trash dumpster (after removing the money, license and credit cards).

Back in the flat, I burned his driver's license and cards over the sink and rinsed the ashes down the drain. I pocketed the money. Then I washed the dishes to remove the gun grease and powder stains from my hands. All in the dark, of course. I then prepared a snack of chocolate chip cookies and milk for I had become ravenously hungry. After the snack, I went to my room, locked the hallway door and slept soundly.

When I awoke, I felt as if I had dreamt a very strange dream. I walked into my friend's room and saw the blood-stained sheets and horrible evidence of a heinous crime. I screamed and became hysterical, then ran to a neighbor's flat and broke down. (I am a wonderful actor.) They called the police, who saw the evidence of a burglar surprised in the act and told me of my good fortune in not being in a state similar to my good friend's. I remained a blubbing idiot for most of the next week, and when I called in sick to work, they were very understanding.

I moved shortly thereafter and took a similar job in a neighboring town. The police and press despaired over the idea of a homicidal burglar running around town, but soon it became, in the words of an idiot television news reporter, "Just another unsolved mystery in a big and scary town."

I must admit, I felt guilty for a while, went through fits of melancholy, even considered turning myself in once. But what good would that do? I am not a badman, nor a dangerous one. And there are a lot of crazy, even truly evil people whom it is more important to catch, for all our safety.

If you think I'm bragging about all this, let me contradict you. I was careful not to feel confident, not to commit the sin of hubris. I still expect to be caught any day now. The perfect crime is not possible and I certainly did not commit it; there is evidence pointing to me all over the place. Somewhere in a Los Angeles land-fill is a wallet; somewhere in the bushes of our old home is a slug. These are the

chance things that some idiot-savant detective, driven by a one-track mind (a mind incapable of tolerance), could turn up to drag me in.

Many two-bit criminals and petty thieves commit far-from-perfect crimes for which they are never caught because of circumstances; I simply took advantage of my circumstances. Don't think I'm simply appealing to the macabre and ugly side of human nature, telling this story for your gruesome titillation. It's just that I had to explain how I felt, in writing—a study, as it were, of the mind of a tolerant man.

My story has probably become too expository in nature, so I will finish with this anecdote. Shortly after I moved into my new flat, a local police officer visited, offered his sympathy and recommended that I buy a gun for protection. I expressed reluctance, so he handed me an ad in the local paper and asked me to think it over. After he left, I looked at the ad. It said:

GUNS!!! .38 S&W semi - \$150; 45 Magnum - \$300; 9 mm Browning - \$200; many others too numerous to mention. Buy/Sell/Trade. Protect yourself before it's too late! 555-7634 (pri. pty.)

I laughed.

"An Explanation" is the recipient of the 1986 Helen Marcus short fiction award.