

Thursday the 12th

From my desk at the high school I fielded a variety of complaints, many times in the form of notes from parents. *“My son’s car was legally parked yesterday when it received this ticket. Please take care of it.” “Bus #995 has an incompetent driver who does not come to a complete stop at stop signs and sometimes uses the ‘s’ word or even the ‘s-o-b’ word when avoiding near collisions. Please see to it that he’s fired—ASAP.”* I was reading these notes to Sean McElroy (Mac), the civilian hallway/parking lot security guy, when I unfolded the last of them, written neatly in long-hand on a full sheet of notebook paper: *“I’ve grown increasingly uncomfortable with a neighbor boy, Tad Jenson, who’s on the JV football team. His family lives next door to us and Tad has a crush on my daughter, Tracy, who is a JV football cheerleader. You see the problem. After asking her to prom, and being turned down, he’s been giving her dirty looks at games she’s cheering. He even came into our house unannounced. I feel he should be removed from the team.”*

“Man, they think you got the power all right, don’t they?” Mac said.

Mac was a fifty-year-old ex-trucker whose own two teenage daughters attended high school in another city. He always wore cowboy boots with his faded Levis. His long silver hair and full matching beard made him look like an itinerant Grateful Dead fan. Along with this look, Mac had an easygoing, natural manner that endeared him to the students.

“Yeah, they always seem to think that since I’m a police detective I can fix tickets,” I said, “and that I would even if I could. It kind of negates their purpose doesn’t it, if you write ‘em and then I cancel ‘em?”

“Ah, who gives a shit? I don’t care if you cancel them. What about that last note?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the same old story isn’t it? Boy meets girl, boy wants girl, boy asks girl, girl turns boy down, boy stalks girl.”

I noted his seriousness and laughed, “I don’t remember stalking any of the ones on my wish list, do you?”

“Fuckin’ A-right I did,” he said, staring me down, dead serious.

I bit my lip, not really knowing how to respond to this without insulting him. I silently considered how complete his background check had been for this job. “Relax, Mac. What about your daughters?”

“Shit. I know the same thing is going to happen to them,” he grumbled. “The only thing different is that I’ll be waiting for these guys with a shotgun on the other side of the door.”

“Whoa there, big fella. You don’t want to get yourself into any trouble over some lovelorn lad who’s infatuated with your daughter.”

“The hell I don’t,” Mac said, rising from his chair as the overflowing well of self-righteous indignation mixed with his blood, invigorating him. “I don’t give a rat’s ass what they do to me. No one’s getting near my daughters!” He turned from

my office with a huff, and headed down the hallway, cutting short our usual half-hour BS session by about twenty-five minutes. I could live with that today. Now I could make my calls.

With our debate on the cheerleader fresh in my mind, I decided to call that mom first. Many of the west-side families were well enough off that the moms could stay home rather than work. Such was the case with Tracy's mom, who answered the phone on the second ring. I told her I was calling in response to her note, and that she'd have to take up Tad's position on the football team with the coach or the principal—that I only dealt with criminal problems. I suggested that if her daughter could not handle being around Tad at the games, that maybe she consider switching her cheerleading talents to another sport.

"I didn't really want to get Tad into any criminal trouble, but I don't think my daughter should have to switch sports because of him. She likes cheering football."

"What criminal trouble are you talking about, Ma'am?"

"I mean with him sneaking into our house, and the knife."

"The knife?" I said, wondering if I'd mixed up my messages. "I remember you wrote something about Tad entering your house unannounced, but you didn't say anything about a knife." There was a long silence on the line. "Ma'am?"

"Well I didn't want to get him into trouble. His parents have been our friends for a long time, before Tad was even born."

"I understand. Tell me what happened with the knife."

"Well, you know that Tad asked Tracy to the prom, and she just didn't feel like going with him. She said it would be like going with her brother. They've been friends since they could crawl."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, the same day she turned him down I saw him walking out behind our house right around dusk. I didn't know what he was doing. He couldn't have known it, but Tracy had to stay after school for a Yearbook Club meeting. Those meetings always run long. Normally, she would have been home right after cheerleading practice. He knew she didn't have cheerleading practice that day. He rides the same activity bus home with her after football practice."

"So he thought she was home, right?"

"Right. Anyway, I saw him walking through our backyard as I was doing the dishes."

"How did you know for sure it was him?"

"He always wears that same beat-up green, down-filled jacket. I knew it was him right away."

"Were you the only one home?"

"Yes," she said. "My husband had taken our younger son to soccer."

"Okay."

"So then I hear our garage door, the service door, open and I figured it was Tad, but usually he would have come to the front—"

"Had he ever entered unannounced by the garage?"

"No—never," she said, sounding more concerned at my concern over the door. She waited for me to say it.

"Go ahead."

"I heard some rummaging around in the bathroom by the stairs, and after a couple minutes I decided I'd better go see what he was doing." She paused.

"Uh-huh."

"So I walked into the bathroom and I could hear him breathing in the shower, but the curtain is pulled. I said, 'Tad, what are you doing?' but he doesn't answer, so I pull the curtain. Well, I have to tell you, he gave me quite a start. He's

standing there in his green jacket, but he has a mask on—”

She had me after, “I could hear him breathing in the shower.” I interrupted, “What kind of mask?”

“Ah, well, you know, like the kind with the eye and mouth holes. A knit cap, the kind hunters wear when it’s really cold. But his was black.”

“Okay,” I said. “What did you do?”

“Well, I saw the mask and I backed up a little and I saw he was holding a butcher knife in his hand.”

“A butcher knife?” I asked, wondering if she’d seen *Friday the 13th* too many times.

“Yes, I recognized the knife as one from Trudy’s set.”

“That’s Tad’s mom—Trudy?”

“Yes. I recognized it right away. I’ve been at their house socially, many times. So I said to Tad, ‘What are you doing with your mother’s knife, Tad?’ But he just stood there. He stood there for the longest time behind that mask—there in the shower stall. Just standing there with the knife.”

“What did you do?” I asked. Then, without allowing her a reply, “Were you afraid?”

“Well, like I said, I’ve known Tad since he was a baby, but the mask and the knife were a little unnerving. I asked him to take it off, but he just kept standing there. I think he was embarrassed. I finally reached over and took it off him.”

“What did he do?”

“He looked down and he didn’t say anything for a minute, and then he asked me if Tracy was home. I told him to give me the knife, and he handed it to me. I told him Tracy was not home and that he should go home. I told him not to sneak into our house again and that his mom or dad would have to pick up the knife.”

“That was good. You handled that well. You probably don’t get much practice at that sort of thing.”

“No.”

“So then did he just leave?”

“Yes. I walked him to the front door and he left. I knew he wouldn’t tell his mother so I called her, and Jim came right over to get the knife. Jim was very concerned and said he would take care of this. He’s very strict so it seemed like enough. I just—it didn’t seem right or necessary at the time to call the police. I know it probably sounds crazy now. When I think about it at night and all the things that could have happened I just...whew.”

“Yeah. Well, now the cat’s out of the bag, and I’m going to need to talk with Tad.”

“Will he have to go to jail?”

“I don’t know,” I said quite honestly. As a rookie detective I’d never handled anything even remotely similar to this. As far as the shower scene was concerned, it had ended much better than the shower scene from *Psycho*, but it could have been just as bad—or worse. I considered what I had as far as a crime was concerned. Was it a prank, a burglary, a threat, an attempted rape—murder? Of course I couldn’t prove any of these things. Tad was the only one who knew his true intentions when he stepped into that shower stall holding a butcher knife, breathing hard under the mask, his thoughts a whirlwind of emotion. He couldn’t deny his presence, but he could feign a simple prank.

Jim and Tad walked into my office the following morning at my request. Jim was reluctant to leave his son alone with me and asked what my intentions were. I told him that I already knew what happened, but that it was important in the juvenile justice system for the child to admit his misconduct. Judges took into consideration such things as forthrightness, remorse, attitude, and honesty. When suspects reached the age

of eighteen our justice system considered these virtues virtually irrelevant, since the system was forced by sheer numbers to focus on simple guilt or innocence.

Jim wanted to avoid the whole criminal justice court thing if possible, preferring instead to handle it within the family. I understood what he meant and sympathized with him. I told him that there could be some criminal consequences, but that Tad's status as an honest juvenile, willing to take responsibility for his actions, would be taken into account by the judge who in turn would most likely mandate only court-ordered counseling. Jim argued that if that was the case, he would simply take Tad to counseling on his own and we could avoid court altogether.

I was balancing here atop a slippery slope of diplomacy, since Jim had every right to tell me to take a hike, and then leave my office with his son. (I'm sure if he had it to do over, he would do just that—emphatically.) If he had, I would have attempted to charge Tad with something like misdemeanor disorderly conduct, but it would have been tough to get him charged with no intent. Had he been a stranger rather than the next-door neighbor kid, a felony burglary would have been a cinch. I needed Tad to tell me his thoughts as he stood breathing behind the shower curtain.

I told Jim that it was important for Tad to understand the serious implications associated with entering someone's house with a knife, and that all well-intentioned families offered to take their kids to counseling, but unless it was court mandated, the families usually found a convenient excuse to quit going. Jim looked me up and down, and reluctantly capitulated.

"So you don't think Tad will have to go to jail?"

"No," I said. "I don't think so. I'm not going to arrest him today, regardless of what he tells me."

"Do you think we need to get an attorney?"

This question spurred the moral dilemma that always left a bruised conscience. As the lead detective, I was the last person Jim should have been asking for legal advice. If I said yes, then the attorney would advise his client—Tad—not to talk with me, and I would have no case. If I said no, I was lying, since an attorney could save Tad from experiencing the true, crushing power of the legal system's hammer. Tad needed to feel that blow in the worst way. In the long run, his taking responsibility now for his very deviant behavior could save him from a life of wrongs he might not be able to forgive himself for, not to mention time lost in prison. The adult legal system would offer him no sympathy.

"I'm not really the right person to answer that, Jim. You know you can always call an attorney for advice. That's what they're there for."

Jim considered my reply as he looked at his son seated beside him. Tad was a bigger kid than I'd imagined after talking with Tracy's mom. This tenth grade boy-next-door was probably 5'11", 180 pounds. He had short blond hair, blue eyes, and was wearing a clear expression of wanting to be somewhere else. I'm sure his father saw this too.

"Okay then," Jim said. "I'll leave you two alone and, uh, Tad—just tell Mr. Greelis the truth." Jim nodded to me and conveyed in that nod his trust in my interceding on his son's behalf, which was not at all my intent nor my job. A free radical cell of betrayal ricocheted through my brain as Jim closed the door behind him, leaving his son at my mercy. My portrayal of trust and integrity facilitated Jim's decision to leave his son in my care. I would use that trust to get Tad to tell me his intent in pulling a mask over his face and wielding a knife in his neighbor's shower. I told myself there was a goal at the end of all this artifice, and that goal encompassed a greater good. It even had, at its core, a belief that dealing with Tad's

problem now would actually serve him in the end.

I told Tad that I already knew what happened and that I was proud of him for having the guts and fortitude to come to my office and tell me the truth about what happened. I told him that everyone makes mistakes and that I had certainly made more than my share, but it was the brave few who could admit their mistakes and be willing to make amends for them. I was tempted to recite my favorite Shakespearian verse here since it fit so well: *Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never tastes of death but once.* The insinuation of impending death probably wouldn't have served my cause, so I thought it better to keep my Shakespeare to myself.

The only true part in my little preamble was the segment about me making a lot of mistakes, but the difference between his mistakes and mine was that, while I may have engaged in some petty mischief bordering on major mischief that I got away with, I never holed up in my neighbor's shower outfitted like an evil Zorro—not even on Halloween. The part about him being willing to come and tell me the truth was, of course, a bunch of BS. I'm sure if he had his druthers, he'd have been miles away from my office, riding his horse at full gallop as he turned back to measure the distance between himself and the posse.

Tad nodded his head, a bit proud of his doing all those good things I'd mentioned.

I asked him to please humor me in repeating the events of the day, since I already knew what happened. He slumped down, a little disappointed that he'd have to participate, and cleared his throat.

"Want me to just start from the beginning?"

"Yeah, wherever you want."

"Well, I suppose that would be when I asked Tracy to the prom." He looked up at me for my approval.

"Sure that's fine," I smiled, "perfect."

"Well, I wanted Tracy to go with me. She's really the only girl I've ever really liked, you know, and she just really shot me down, you know."

"Yeah, Tad. That's one thing I know about. In fact if I was an expert on anything—it would be on getting shut down by chicks. So yeah, I know how that feels. Were you pretty bummed out after that? Did you ask her to think about it or anything, or was that just the end of it?"

"She seemed pretty sure—in fact, she said she was already going with someone else."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. Tell me about what happened that night after school." He looked at me like I had asked him to recite the Gettysburg Address in Chinese. "You know, the whole thing at Tracy's house."

"Oh yeah," he said as if it had slipped his mind. "Well, so I was just going to go over and talk to her and stuff and so I grabbed my jacket and walked out the back door."

"Did you bring anything else with you from your house?"

Again, the *surprise question* expression. "Oh, yeah. I just saw the knife there on the counter as I was leaving and so I grabbed that on my way out."

And why not? He had his coat and mittens, why not a butcher knife to complete the outdoor accouterments? Wouldn't that be included with the winter ensemble in the L.L. Bean catalogue? I decided not to ask him just yet why he chose to bring it, and why he'd left out the mask.

"Okay. Then what did you do?"

"Well, I decided to surprise her so I went around the back and into the garage door."

"The big door or the service door?"

"The service door. They keep that one unlocked."

"How do you know that?"

“Oh, you know, we’re always borrowing stuff from them and they borrow our stuff sometimes, too.”

“Okay. What did you do next?” I asked, as if he were recounting his summer vacation.

“Well, I walked in the house and I was going to go into Tracy’s room, but then I heard Mrs. Skofield in the kitchen and I kind of panicked.”

“So what did you do?”

“Well, I started looking for a place to hide—”

“Did you want to talk with Tracy alone?” I asked. “Was that the thing?”

“Yeah. I just wanted to be alone with her. So I finally went into the bathroom and I was just going to wait until Tracy’s mom went upstairs or something. I don’t know.”

“What happened next?”

“Well, after a while, maybe ten minutes, Mrs. Skofield comes in the bathroom and starts talking to me, and then she tells me Tracy’s not home, and so I just went home.”

And that’s all I can remember. I’d heard that so many times, I prepared myself for the two-hour interview, where I try to get him to remember little by little the incidental little parts about the mask and knife. Then, in keeping with tradition of the boilerplate memory loss, he feigns those parts of the incident have conveniently flown south of his recollection.

“Where were you in the bathroom when Mrs. Skofield came in to talk with you?”

“Um, I was in the shower, I guess.”

“And what were you wearing?”

“I had on my green winter parka and my jeans.”

“Anything on your head or—” I looked at him, conveying that I knew the answer I was fishing for “—anything like that?”

“Oh, yeah. And I had the mask on, too.”

I smiled and shook my head yes, to let him know he had responded correctly. “And what did that mask look like?”

“Oh, you know, the kind for ice fishing and stuff like that.”

“Describe it for me.”

“Well, it was black and it fit over my head.”

Now I wasn’t sure if he was intentionally blocking or if he just had a fashion dysfunction like so many men, young and old. “If you were asking for a hat like this in a store, how would you describe it?”

His patented blank expression returned. “Just a hat, a winter hat with, ah, with the holes for the mouth and eyes, I guess, you know?”

“Yeah. I think I know what you mean now.” Dentists have it easier than this. “Where was the knife when you were talking with Mrs. Skofield?”

“Oh, I was just holding that at my side.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, as if all interlopers who hide in their neighbor’s showers probably hold their knives in a similar fashion. “Tad?” I said, waiting until he looked up at me. “What were you going to do with the knife when you talked with Tracy?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Nothin’, I guess.”

“Well, why did you bring it then?”

“I don’t know. I just decided to at the last minute.”

“Did you want to have sex with Tracy?”

“Yes,” he said, his spontaneous honesty startling me.

“Is that the main reason you went over to her house?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Was the knife for just in case she didn’t want to have sex with you.”

Tad paused a couple seconds. “Yeah.”

The interview automatically moved to the series of questions investigators used to soften up the confessor, to make it easier for the suspect to spit it out. “I think I’ve gotten to know

you a little, Tad, and you don't seem like the kind of person who would hurt someone you really care about. I know you weren't going to hurt Tracy, right?"

Tad nodded his head—yes.

"I'm thinking you were just going to hold the knife by Tracy so that she knew you meant business. Is that right?"

"Well, kinda," he said.

"Tell me what you mean, Tad. I don't mean to put words into your mouth," I lied.

"Well, I just had it in case she said no. I was only going to hold it up by her if she said no."

"Where were you going to hold it, Tad?"

"By her neck," he said, confidently.

I couldn't believe he was giving me these details, and I was shocked at the violence of his plan. I started to wonder what his plan was for Tracy's mom. He knew she would be home, and he must have known she would intercede on her daughter's behalf.

"Okay, and let me know if I have this right. You would only have used the knife if Tracy refused to have sex with you. Is that right?"

"Uh-huh," he agreed.

"And the only way you would have used the knife and cut Tracy's neck would have been if she refused to have sex with you after you showed the knife to her. Is that right?"

"Uh-huh," he said.

"You know, Tad, you thought this out pretty good. I can tell you're the kind of person that doesn't leave much to chance. Am I right?"

"Yeah, I guess," he said, his pride showing through.

"What was your plan for Mrs. Skofield—I mean, if she interfered with you and Tracy?"

Tad shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't believe that, Tad. You've been very thorough in your strategy. Would you have used the knife to stop Mrs. Skofield if she interfered?"

Tad hesitated a moment before nodding his head yes.

Tad and his family would traverse the sometimes capricious world of juvenile justice, and Tad would spend a few days in juvenile detention after all. No one imagined how messed up Tad truly was. There would be complicated Orders for Protection specifying how far from Tracy Tad had to stay while in school. Tracy's family let the excuse of "old friendship" go out the window when they learned of Tad's true intentions. They wanted Tad locked up, and anything short of that was a miscarriage of justice. In addition to long-term probation, Tad would receive loads of court-ordered counseling for a variety of aberrant inclinations. Other than the infrequent notes from Mrs. Skofield demanding that Tad be imprisoned for life, I never heard Tad's name come up again with any criminal connection.

The morning after Tad's interview I told Mac the security guy that Mr. Skofield could have come home to a very messy scene involving the stabbing deaths of his wife and daughter. What he wouldn't have known, at least not right away, was that the stabbings would have been incidental to the sexual assault of Tracy.

"I've seen Tad around, and I'd have never guessed it. He seemed like he had his shit wired fairly straight."

"Well, he's a strategist, I'll give him that. You know it's like everything else in life—it all comes down to sex."

Mac laughed at our ongoing axiom. "Amen. It sure seems to be true around here."

"This school is but a microcosm of the world, Mac. You know that."

"You are so full-a-shit."

"Yeah?" I asked, knowing full well that I was indeed full of shit on this subject and most others, but I wondered at the same time if I might be accidentally right. It happened from time to time. The sex theory certainly seemed plausible, since almost every violent crime and a host of property crimes had, at some level, a gender conflict or, at times, an obvious sexual nexus. Besides the myriad blatant sex assaults and child sex abusers, domestic assaults are, by their nature, sex related. Homicides inspired by petty jealousies, ex-lovers, or outright extramarital affairs are common motivations. The male sex drive, unencumbered by conscience or logic, evolves from a romantic craving to a runaway semi, with no brakes, on a downhill run. And only after the crash (post-orgasmic stage), does conscious thought return and, with it, a plethora of creative alibis. Had Tad decided to kill Tracy's mother as she opened the shower curtain, the sex relation would have been difficult to flesh out, but it would have been there, like a tap-root feeding the visible, healthy vine.

Mac paused conspiratorially. "Well, just in case you're right, my wife and I aren't taking any chances with our daughters." Mac smiled at this, leaving me hanging.

"You mean with the shotgun greeting for all your daughter's suitors?"

"Well, that too." Mac leaned in closer to my desk as if the room might be bugged. "Just in case our advice doesn't *take* with our daughters—every morning we crush up birth control pills and put them in their orange juice."

My jaw dropped, and I laughed, "You're kidding, right?"

"Fuck no, man. If we offer them birth control pills after

telling them to remain abstinent, it's like saying we don't really expect them to obey—"

"Which you obviously don't."

"It's not that we don't trust them. It's just a little insurance."