

# Kill the Lights

“Killer.

Coward!”

There was a lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. The wires were visible. Carefully, I pulled the chain half expecting a shock.

“A cowardly killer dressed like a dweeb.

And now you’re talking to yourself. Pathetic.”

This room is so small. It’s claustrophobic. Like a cell. It must’ve been built as a walk-in closet or pantry. I sat on the quilt-covered cot. It squeaked loudly as I sat down, and I cringed. There was a full-length, unframed, cracked mirror leaning against the stained panelling and a small window that looked like an afterthought. The window frame was off-center. It made me feel uneasy. The homemade blinds had once been white but were now piss yellow from age.

“Shithole country. I feel ya, Donald.”

Of course, this was not the context the Don was referring to.

Looking at the shitty person in the shitty mirror, I asked him, “Look at you. Is this who you want to be? What are you doing in a cabin... in West Virginia?”

The reflection of a twenty-year-old dressed in a T-shirt, navy slacks and tan brogues didn’t answer.

“Why did he give me a T-shirt? Has he ever seen me in a T-shirt?”

T-shirts are not choice apparel for me. Not anymore anyway. Not since starting at Georgetown. For me, Georgetown wasn't just a new place and school. It was the beginning of a new life, the new me.

Even worse, it came with a matching canary-yellow painter's hat promoting:

*Dependable Painters*

*Paint, Supplies 'n' useful stuff*

*New Creek, W.Va*

"You look like a douchebag, douchebag. Is that what you want to be?"

Ken, my girlfriend Tammy's stepfather, had bought the hats and t-shirts. One for each of us: Mommy, Daddy, Tammy and me. The premise was simple: if we look the same, we are the same. Like a uniform. One big, happy, unified, hick family.

New Creek is a sleepy little town at the foot of Saddle Mountain. If in a generous mood, you could say that New Creek was the last stanchion of civilization before getting into hill country. From there, the cabin was another hour's drive. The winding road snaked up the mountainside under a cover of spruce trees. Finding the dirt driveway that led to the cabin was not easy. You had to know what to look for or you would miss it.

Ken's Grandpa had built it to make moonshine during prohibition. Ken was exceptionally proud of that and religiously kept the still in working order.

When we got to the cabin, he threw a t-shirt at me and handed one to his stepdaughter. He hugged her and said to me, "You look like hell, boy."

After the habitual greetings, Nancy, Tammy's Mamma, said, "Supper in an hour. You're in the guestroom, John." Then she added, grinning. "Until we leave you cottontails alone."

"Mamma!" feigned Tammy.

"Oh hush, child. I was young once too. Hell, what do you think Ken and I do up here, all alone, with a belly full of moonshine and no heating?"

"Mamma, you're embarrassing John."

"Listen to you. I should have named you Mary." Nancy put on a holy act of innocence. "I don't know how I got pregnant! must've been the angel Gabriel. You are a true prudey-Judy. Tell me this, sweetie, just why are you wearing those hotsy-totsy-shorts?"

"Mamma!"

"Alright, Tammy, don't get your panties all in a bunch. Come on, we'll leave the men to do their men stuff. Let's get your things inside and fix some ice tea. You must be parched after that drive."

Standing alone with Ken, I prayed that the pregnancy joke was just that. Ken slapped my back and I stumbled forward.

"That woman is something," he laughed.

Ken reminded me a lot of my Dad. Nancy was not much like my Mom. She was a lot like my Aunt Betty. This might have made someone else feel at home. Actually, I did feel at home. That was the problem.

"I am glad you're here. I really need your help. When you helped me with the shed last time? Well, it went real good. Your Daddy taught you well. You can tell him I said so, too."

He looked at me expecting a response.

“Oh, yeah. My Father is a very handy fellow.”

Ken chuckled. Imitating me, he said, “My father is a very handy fellow.”

“You don’t have to put on those college airs with me, son. You’re with your own people now. Say, when we gonna get to meet your folks? Didn’t Tammy tell ya’ that they was welcome here this weekend?”

She had. But I had chosen not to inform my ‘folks’.

Wouldn’t that be a hoot? I guess that would have left me to sleep in the doghouse. There was a dilapidated doghouse. And a chain spiked into the ground. But no dog. Woof-woof.

“Anyway.” Ken continued, filling me in on his plan, “been meaning to fix-up the outhouse for years. And listen, if you play your cards right, John-O, that *John* will be yours one day. Hardy, har, har! Well, yours and Tammy’s. The shithouse matches that shit-look your sportin’. You need some hair-of-the-dog?”

Ken is a peckerwood, but I could tell he was really trying to make me feel welcome. The other part of his plan was as follows, Tammy and I would spend the long Fourth of July weekend with them. When we had been schooled in the ‘do’s and don’ts’ of the cabin, we could use it the rest of the summer. Year after year. The rest of our lives. One big happy family.

I snapped back into the present and asked my reflection, “What is wrong with you? This isn’t what you want? Right? We have been over this.”

Placing the cap slightly askew on my dirty blonde head, I sang part of an old Doors’ song my brother taught me.

“Riders on the storm

Riders on the storm

Into this house we're born

Into this world we're thrown

If you give this man a ride

Sweet family will die

Riders on the storm”

Of course, I have no idea how a *real* killer felt. I'd thought about it a lot. In high school, we had a teacher that loved statistics. Mrs. Summers would tell us these in hopes of saving us from lives of 'decadence and disgrace.' She hoped that these facts would scare us straight.

I can still hear her voice in my head: “Smoking increases the risk of dying from cancer by 80%. And listen up young bucks, smoking makes you impotent.”

Of course she meant well. It was all just a bit too much. “Alcohol ruins lives and drugs will make you do unspeakable things. They don't call them crack whores for nothing.”

We would laugh and promise not to become impotent, crack whores.

I did get what she was saying though. Don't be a screw up. Make smart choices.

Another one of her fun facts went something like this: “Your generation has seen more deaths, murders and atrocities than any other previous generation since the dawn of man. Don't be dumb. Don't be numb. Killing's no fun.”

When I told my Daddy about this, to my surprise, he agreed. He told me that when he was young, he wasn't afraid to die.

"Nowadays though," he said "you teens aren't afraid to kill. There's a big difference."

We lived in a rural area but people were getting shot fairly often. Many kids had either died by violence or opiates. I guess that explains Mrs. Summers' worry. She always ended her sermons with, "Lord, watch over these lambs. Please God, don't let them become another statistic."

Despite witnessing a kazillion killings in video games, movies and what-have-you, I definitely did not know how a person feels after killing someone. And I don't think I would be numb to it either. The way I figured, it must feel different if you were a soldier killing an enemy soldier. Or if some dirtbag rapist was attacking your mom. Killing someone then must feel better than if you murdered someone in a fit of anger. Or after drinking and driving like my Uncle Dave.

"She came outta nowhere."

She being a four-year-old on a tricycle. I know the gut wrenching feeling in my belly was not as bad as how Uncle Dave must've felt. Still, I imagined it was pretty damn close. *Why did Ken and Nancy have to be so God damned nice? Why was Tammy so sweet? It isn't fair.*

I had not spoken much during the three-hour drive from Washington, D.C., The silence was a clue. Normally, I was talkative, even when hungover like I was today. The hangover was a clue too. We had left the city nearly four hours later than

planned. This was my fault. *That* was a clue. Tammy either didn't care or pretended not to.

We had met early on during the first semester. It had been a wet night at the Tomb's, a student bar with cheap food and a generous happy hour. My team, the Hoyas, had won our first home game of the season. I had played the bench, but I was still on the team. Tammy and I were both freshmen and the first in our families to not get married (meaning pregnant) directly after high school. We were both 'born and bred' rednecks. Most important for me, Tammy also longed to get to 'anywhere' but the 'nowhere' she came from. A perfect match. Or so I thought.

Tammy did want to get away, but not as badly nor as far as I needed.

Tammy was happy the entire time she steered my Uncle Dave's Ford Bronco toward the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was hot and humid and the Bronco's AC wasn't working. With the windows down, she sang full throttle to Keith Urban, Carrie Underwood and Justin Timberlake. Ignoring my unspoken clues entirely, she'd say things like, "It's gonna be great. You'll see. Almost heaven, West Virginia. It's gonna be great." Her twang getting more pronounced for each mile that separated us from D.C. "Ken really likes you. Mom too." Seeing something in my face, her smile faded slightly. *Finally*, I thought.

But then she trudged on. "Mom says you're a keeper." Lowering her voice and imitating Ken's backwood's accent, she said, "John's a good-ole-boy but with brains. He's like a u-ni-corn." And then she laughed that sweet, sing-song laugh of hers. When she put her hand on my leg my headache dissipated somewhat.

"I thought you were tired of being a redneck?"

“Oh, Johnny. I told you. You can take the girl outta the country, but you can’t take the country outta the girl.”

She let out a, “Yeehaw,” pressed on the gas and laughed and we blew past a few cars.

In my mind, I continued to chew on a tasteless bone. Why does she have to be so great? Maybe it would be alright? She’s right. They like me. They’re good people. Why can’t I just accept that this is where I belong?

“Once Mom and Ken are gone, we can eat, sleep, repeat. Nothin’. We’ll do nothin’ at all.”

And my headache was back. It sounded like a nightmare.

*Do it now. Right now!*

I mustered some courage and started, “Tammy?”

“Whatty?”

“Listen...”

But she cut me off when another song she loved came on. She sang well. Despite my headache, she sounded good. She was cute too. Very cute. In fact, she was a redneck wet dream. Faded cutoffs, low shitkickers and a super tight, sleeveless, flannel shirt. The only thing missing was a straw cowboy hat. Smart as a whip too.

If I had a pair, I would have explained, *Tammy, it’s not you. It’s me.*

I needed to make her see that I wanted more. That D.C. was not the end of the line. If basketball didn’t get me there, then I would become a big shot lawyer defending the OJs, Bill Cosbys and Martha Stewarts of the world. I wanted to move to L.A. or Europe. As far away from Maryland, West Virginia or any other redneck

shithole I could. Tammy wanted to be a midwife. Nothing wrong with that. But she wanted to be a midwife near her Mamma.

“Hey Johnny?”

“Mmmm...?”

“Didn’t you tell me that heaven is the place where nothing ever happens?”

I did. Doing nothing with the person who means everything to you is a dream come true. Doing nothing with the someone you want to dump but haven’t the guts to is a nightmare. Welcome to my nightmare. When you are with someone you don’t want to be with, you’ve got to keep busy.

Like my Mom and Dad. My Dad was my Mom’s third husband but he was my only Dad. I like my Dad. I do. I just don’t want to be *like* my Dad.

They have a cabin too. They’ve painted, repainted, renovated, re-renovated, added on, added on some more, planted a garden, redone the garden, planted another garden, redone the kitchen, the floor, the roof, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Since my parents don’t like each other that much, the place looks fantastic.

Unlike Tammy’s family cabin. Their cabin was a dump. A dump filled with happy people.

The weekend right after finals, I visited my parents back home on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. I come from a town called Easton, home of the Warriors, population 16 500. The Warriors are my old team. My Dad’s too. My room looked exactly as I had left it. Everything in the house looked exactly as when I started at Georgetown. Nothing really changes in Easton, especially since the Black and Decker factory closed. That is not completely true. Pa had been drinking more. A lot more. More than he does, or did, on vacation. He calls his getting laid off a permanent

vacation. Mama worked at the factory too. So did one of her exes, my half brother on my Dad's side, and Uncle Dave before he was sent to prison. Mom has been dealing with being out of work better than Dad. She's spending more and more time at functions at the First Baptist on Idlewood Avenue. Thank God for her prayers, Coach Greene and for basketball scholarships. Especially basketball scholarships.

During my visit, I helped Dad finish off the repairs on the front porch. It didn't really need repairing. At least I didn't think so. But who am I to judge? Afterwards, we finished off a bottle of Wild Turkey and opened a second. Mamma had put a tuna casserole in the oven before heading off to the church.

"Don't let him drink too much without getting something in his stomach."

I nodded and let her kiss my forehead.

Too much Chanel No. 5, I thought. I gave her a bottle last Christmas.

She looks older, I thought, watching her scurry out the screen door. Pa and I weren't all that drunk, but the bourbon had loosened our tongues. He had been complaining about Ma always being away and always nagging him to do this and to not do that.

*Like spend too much money on booze?* I didn't dare say.

His bitching irked me, but still I was surprised to hear the bourbon in me ask him straight out, "why are you two still together? You don't seem to like each other very much."

He emptied his glass, refilled it and sat quiet a spell. He looked thinner and smaller than I remembered. He was still a tall man but something about him made him look less so. Funny how people can suddenly look different. Just two hours ago, I hadn't noticed the changes.

Dad and I looked a lot alike. I've heard that all my life. We are both tall, thin, and blondish. His eyes were paler than mine though. We both had big adam's apples and the same way of walking. And just like me, he had been the star ballplayer in high school. He dropped out when he got his girlfriend pregnant, took a job at Black and Decker and pursued a career in functional alcoholism. He was wearing a ratty t-shirt under his old coveralls. It was his uniform. His thinness had passed over to gauntness. His hollow cheeks and speckled stubble did not do much for his looks. A darkness passed over his sunken eyes and I regretted my question. I could smell the casserole starting to burn in the oven, but I said nothing.

"I thought about it. Thought about it a lot. Why, I've thought about leaving your mother just about everyday for the last..." He paused to look at me then looked away. He rubbed his right leg as if it ached.

"You know we have both been married before. They say three's a charm. A lot of couples our age split up when the kids move out. Well, kid in our case. Your half brothers wouldn't be affected by us splitting up. I think they expect it. Maybe even want it."

He looked at me again and tilted his head with a sloppy grin.

"Just like you, it seems. Just like you."

His smile faded and his eyes looked faraway.

"All them divorcees? Especially the menfolk, they run a gameplay, you know? It goes like this: first, they get all mad. Blaming everything on the wife. First mad, then drunk. When they have been good and drunk a while, they feel sorry for themselves. And then get even more drunk. If they're lucky, they don't end up killing themselves or worse. Like Uncle Dave. If they get real lucky, they get themselves off

that drunken stupor, find some other divorcee and start the process all over again. The women? They manage a lot better. I don't think I am young enough to start that process again.

You know what happens to the old guys like me? Well, they end up drinking themselves to death in some trailer park. Someone smells them rotting and they send in the coroner wearing a gasmask. Stinks to high hell. ”

“Pa? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. I think the casserole's starting to burn,” I said, starting for the kitchen but he said, “you sit right there, boy. I ain't done talking.”

He took a long pull off the bottle of Turkey although he had a full glass in front of him.

“You don't know, so I'll tell you. You know, all those divorces, remarriages, second divorces and so on? Something dies in you. And what's even worse is that something dies in the children after a divorce. It's like, a light goes out in them. I don't know how else to explain it. Believe me, John, you'd rather have a useless, drunk of a dad and a Ma hiding at church than divorced parents.”

He looked at me hard, “It'd kill a part of you, son. Kill the light in your eyes. There's just no good-enough-reason to ruin the part of you that gives you the strength to keep on keepin' on. So, there you have it. You're welcome.”

He stood up and stumbled out into the yard. I went inside and hid on the sofa. When Mom came home, she found me sleeping, Dad drunk and crying on the porch and the casserole burned beyond recognition.

Maybe I am as weak as Dad and that's why I'm here in this hillbilly cabin in bumfuck, West Virginia.

Was I too nice. Is that being nice? No. It's being too scared. Too scared to shut the nice people's lights off.

They were so happy. Tammy, Ken, Nancy, but not me. They deserved someone that would appreciate them. They deserved one big happy family.

"Come on, John," I argued. "It's one summer. When school starts, you can start the process."

I started making a mental to-do list:

First step, Tammy, I need a break.

Second step, we should see other people.

Third step, it's not you...

Enjoy this summer. You earned it. What else are you going to do? Spend it with Mom and Pop? In Easton? Doing what?

Anything but this.

My high school coach and I sometimes talked after practice. Before coaching, he had toured throughout Europe playing for various teams. He had seen more of the world than anyone I knew. We got to talking about what I saw myself doing in the future. At the time, the future for me was next week. Although, that wasn't what he meant. Proudly, I told him I was starting a job as an inthrower at the Hollister store in Salisbury. He looked at me in a peculiar way. I mistook it for a look of respect.

"Really?"

"Yes, Sir. A lot of guys want that job too. Believe you me."

And that was true. Salisbury was just a forty-five minute drive and if you got a job at Hollister? You became a bonafide babe-magnet what with the employee discount and being a Hollister Hunk.

“You mean the store where the guys stand at the entrance half naked?”

“Yes, sir. That’s the one! You been there, Coach?”

Coach Greene looked at me and chuckled a bit.

“Yeah, I’ve been there. Listen, John, you are a good kid. I really mean that. You are doing well in school and you play smart on the court. I know you don’t party. Not to the point that it shows anyway. And that takes discipline. Look, I don’t want to burst your bubble, really. Hell, you look as happy as a dog with two tails about that job. And believe me, I get it. Money? Girls? But, may I give you a bit of advice, son?”

“Yes, sir.”

He thought a bit before continuing.

“Don’t be *that* guy, John. Don’t be the stud, living it up on the edge of seventeen, having your golden years before you have even lived. Be patient. Work hard. You are on your way. And when you get there, you can be the guy paying the tomcat at Hollister. You should own Hollister or at least be the CEO. You hear me? Don’t be just another pretty face getting laid and spending money on wine, women and song. You can do better than that.”

I felt myself getting a bit peeved. Better? What could be better than that?

“John, is that who you want to be?”

“What Do you mean, sir? I’m just being me.”

“But is that really *you*? The *you* that *you* want to be? The future *you*?”

I wasn’t sure what he meant, so I kept quiet.

“I bet you have heard that being yourself is good enough. I second bet that you have also heard people say, ‘just be yourself. That’s all you have to do’. Am I right?”

“I guess so.” And it was so. How many times have I heard that?

“Well, here you are, about to become a man. And I wouldn’t be saying this if I didn’t respect you. Can I let you in on a little secret?”

I nodded.

“You don’t have to be the man you are, John. You can be the man you want to be. You may have to work hard, change your style, and move far away from Easton. You might hurt some people along the way. And that is OK. Don’t be dishonest. Don’t be an asshole. That’s not what I mean. But it is OK not to do or be what other people want. And you will have to sacrifice things too. Things like girls and thrills. You understand what I am saying?”

“Not really.”

He laughed at that.

“Good. Promise me one thing?”

“Sir?”

“Think about what I said, ok? You are a good kid, John. I really mean that. There is a great big world out there that wants to meet you. Easton is not the world. Believe you me.”

*I believe you*, I thought as I moved to the window. From my viewpoint, I could see Tammy and her Mom setting the table outside on the makeshift porch. Ken was tuning his guitar. They looked happy.

“Be the man you want to be. Sacrifice. Don’t be the man others want you to be. Be the man you want to be.”

I had only brought a backpack with me. I pulled a pint of Wild Turkey out of my bag and tossed it on the bed. *No more booze*. I took off the canary hat and

changed back into the white shirt I had worn on the trip up. Once I was in my clothes, I grabbed my backpack and checked I had my car keys and wallet.

I looked in the mirror one last time and said, “Don’t forget to turn off the lights before your go, killer.”