

Until the Whistle Blows

“Nine hours until the A-bombs drop,” I announced, my voice a thundering whisper. My sleeve slid over and concealed my watch. I tugged at my shirt collar, attempting to loosen my scratchy turtleneck. My gaze drifted back to Eddie.

Eddie stood vigil at the window, one hand cracking the shutters, the other’s fingers drumming a solo on the sill, with eyes darting up and down the street below, back and forth and back and forth, marking any signs of life in the neighborhood, stirrings in the night: dogs barking, cats screeching, police sirens, or whistling, whining screams from above. Silence. He saw a town settling down for bed, for a night that might be their last. I remember that night clearly, like a black and white photograph one might treasure in a wallet—a wallet they lost, went back for, and never found. Damn. Silence, except for the slow drip of the day’s rain saying farewell to the gutters, falling, not wanting to let go. “Good-bye!” Splat. Silence. Drip. Drip. Drip.

“I’m not worried,” Eddie claimed, denying it for the hundredth time.

Sure, I thought.

Two days ago Eddie murdered some guy in the back of a lot. It was just like Eddie to do something crazy like that. The cops suspected Eddie from the start. So while my folk’s weren’t looking, I snuck him up the ladder and hid him in our attic, where dust bunnies rolled in great tumbleweeds. He was a real outlaw. Up here, Eddie survived on Wonder Bread and canned sardines; if we all survived, Eddie swore he’d never eat sardines again.

Satisfied the coast was clear, Eddie sat down in a wooden chair past its prime, wobbly; he leaned back, and every time he shifted or rocked, the floorboards creaked. I winced, praying my

parents wouldn't hear. They didn't, of course, not ever. Even when they did, they didn't bother to listen. They were too dull, and I was much too dumb.

On the desk beside him there sat a leaning tower of pulp magazines: mostly kids' stuff and trade journals; on the bottom of the pile, well hidden, I knew, there was a girly magazine. Knowing Eddie, I thought he would go for it right away, but Eddie picked up a journal off the top. It was a journal of abnormal psychology, the kind amateurs read from their armchairs late at night in order to flavor their dreams with a little extra pizzazz and feel good about their own personal quirks; "It can always be worse," they say. He flipped through it, eyes squinted, as though evaluating every word for duplicity.

"So will you help me, Ed?" I asked.

"What?" he said. Eddie hadn't been listening. He carelessly tossed his magazine aside and grabbed another, rifling the pages the same as before. On the floor where the first landed puffed up, sprouting tiny mushroom clouds of dust, becoming ground zero for some misfortunate mites. He swiveled his ears toward me now. "Apologies, Jimmy, I—"

"It's 'James,' Ed, you know that," I said. "*Please* call me '*James*.'" It was no use, I knew. Eddie always called me Jimmy. My parents always called me Jimmy, (except when they were truly infuriated at me for some arbitrary offense, like playing my Buddy Holly records in the house). So most times, the whole town called me Jimmy, and boy did I hate it.

"God-Almighty, Jimmy!" Eddie swore, looking up from his page to stare me down. "The Reds are gonna drop the Bomb on us, and you're arguin' about semantics!"

"Sorry, Ed, I just don't like being called Jimmy," I told him. "It makes me feel like a little kid."

“You *are* a little kid,” Eddie teased, deadpan. I was still a virgin, and Eddie loved to rub it in. I paused in hurt silence, letting the topic die.

“Will you help me?” I implored again.

“With what?” Eddie demanded, returning his eyes to the reading.

“Annette!” I exclaimed, as though the matter was obvious.

“Ohhh!” Eddie exclaimed, “That girl you’re *croonin’* for!” I hated the way he said “crooning.” He formed a sly grin and emitted a disdainful chuckle; Eddie’s laugh could cut through lead; it was gamma radiation. “Help how?” he asked when the humor had reached its half-life.

“Help me...you know...confront her...” The words evolved sluggishly and imperfectly from my mouth, a creep from primordial slime onto the beaches of Normandy and into all the romantic mastery of a tree-swinging primate. I might as well have said, I Tarzan, you Jane. “Tell her how I feel,” I gasped finally.

“Before the bombs drop,” Ed said matter-of-factly.

“Yes,” I answered.

“And that’s so important to you?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Jeez, why? You think you’ll tell her you love her, and she’ll just jump in the sheets with you, just ’coz we’re all gonna die anyway?”

“No!” I denied. “No, not like that—I just—I have to—I... Maybe...” My words faded into silent affirmation. My bashful expression confirmed it.

“Maybe,” Eddie nodded.

My God! I was such a little lamb then. But Eddie wasn't: Eddie was a real tiger. He lit up a cigarette and blew a cumulous of smoke my way.

“Put that out!” I pleaded. “My parents will smell it. I'm not supposed to be smoking. They say it's bad for the health.”

“So are A-Bombs, Jimbo, but you don't see anybody bannin' 'em.” He put it out anyway. The cigarette smoldered where Eddie's shoe stamped it into the floorboard, sending up little waltzing trails of vapors. I imagined dancing with Annette. The notion soon faded into oblivion.

“Why'd you do it, Ed?” I asked again. “Why'd you kill him?” I wanted to hear what Eddie would say this time. The first time Eddie told me, it made me uncomfortable, like a feral cat was clawing its way into my guts—I'd never been friends with a murderer before. It was an embarrassing fact one might share with a dentist, “So how was your summer? Do anything fun?” while under the bright light of the interrogation chair, medieval torture implements at the ready. But after a while it was just another interesting tidbit about him, the novelty of murder had worn off; eventually, the topic almost seemed fit for polite company, over cocktails and fondue. That's how it seemed, anyway. “Why?”

Eddie thought about it for a long time, even though it was clear he knew what he was going to say. I could read the inner debate upon his face; forces beyond words crashed inside him—a growing tempest. The storm won out, dark clouds setting in. Mr. Hyde was taking over.

“I didn't like the way he was lookin' at me,” Eddie began, his voice crisp, his emerald eyes full of fire, “I was just mindin' my own business, walkin' behind the lot. And there's this worker there, glarin' me up and down, thinkin' I'm gonna steal something...accusin' me, like I'd already done it. People like that, they take one look at a fella like me and assume the worst:

think I'm up to no good. So that's why I knifed him:" Eddie pronounced, "He insulted my honor."

I weighed the story, remembering everything I had learned in Sunday school. "Were you going to steal something?" I inquired, curious.

"I was thinkin' about it," Eddie admitted. "So?"

"So the guy was right!"

"Right, wrong, what's it matter? The guy was gonna call the cops on me whether I'd done nothing or not." Eddie pulled out of his blue jeans a shiny silver pocket watch, bloodstains still on the chain. "Took this off the bastard. His time was up anyhow..." Eddie checked the time. "Nearly eleven now. Eight hours to go."

A pounding on the floorboards. We both listened hard. An angry shout. I jumped, terrified. "Dad," I uttered. "Hide!" I whispered to Eddie, and Eddie did his best. I quickly went to the ladder. My father stood at the bottom, dressed in robe and slippers, a broom in one hand, a newspaper in the other, and that damn corncob pipe of his dangling from his lips. He wasn't at all surprised I was in the attic: I often read books up there or used binoculars to birdwatch out the window.

"I smell cigarettes up there," Dad told me. "I told you I don't want you smoking!"

"I'm sorry, Dad, I—" I tried to cover.

"I don't want to hear it!" said Dad. He was furious. His eyes were Babylonian furnaces, stoked seven-fold. I stared into them; I had to hold his glare: everything within me said I'd die if I didn't. My body felt weak. I locked my muscles to keep from collapsing. Oddly enough, too, my vision was starting to fade; all I saw was white. My father's voice continued: "I told you not to, and I expect to be obeyed—no excuses. Now throw me the pack." My sight spottily returned

as I staggered to get the cigarettes from Ed. I threw the pack down to my father. It resounded dully on the floor. Dad bent to pick it up, his face displeased. “We’ll discuss your *punishment* in the morning.” “Punishment,” somehow I feared the word more than the actual penance itself.

“After the bombs drop,” Eddie muttered slyly. Dad didn’t hear.

“Yes, Sir,” said I, scolding at Ed. Then Dad retired for the night, and Eddie and I returned to reclining by the window.

“Why d’you put up with him anyhow?” Eddie asked.

“He’s family,” I replied simply.

“Family is relative,” Eddie sneered.

I gave him a look that said, *Why do I put up with you?* and remembered back in Second Grade, when we were playing hide-and-seek in the junkyard outside of town and the guard dog, a pit-bull, cornered me alone. I still remember the fangs, the drool, that menacing growl. I thought I was done for. Then Eddie found me and threw rocks at the dog until it was pissed to high hell and ready to charge us. So Eddie picked up an old rusty pipe and smacked the beast up the side of its head until it went away, whimpering, tail between its legs.

Eddie decrypted another magazine. I stared out the window, admiring the little house across the street, the one with the baby blue door.

We knew the bombs would drop in the morning: we had heard the news announced on the radio. We believed it instantly. It was called “The Red Ultimatum,” and declared that if The United States did not surrender unconditionally within the time allotted, the Soviets would unleash their full atomic arsenal upon us. Of course, should this occur, America would retaliate. But even so, this was to be indeed the end: mutually assured destruction. Madness. Still, over the last couple of days, none of the other townspeople had seemed particularly concerned about

the bombs. “No reasonable person,” they said, “should take the Reds’ ultimatum seriously.” Whenever I brought it up, they said I was the Boy Crying wolf, with the Big Bad Reds coming to blow all our houses down, or I was Chicken Little, yelling “The bombs are falling! The atomic are falling!” at the top of my little yellow-bellied lungs. No one listened; no one ever does—not until a wolf eats their grandmother.

I heard the noisy smack of paper thrown upon floorboards. I turned around.

Eddie leaned hand against a wall, his eyes boring into it as if the details could be leeches from the wood. “It was that snitch,” he ranted, teeth clenched, “that damn rat bastard snitch called the cops on me. He didn’t see me do it—I’m damn sure of that. But he seen me walkin’ ’round before it happened. Another rat bastard accusin’ me ’fore I done nothing. He’s lucky I didn’t nix him too. I shoulda. No point now. Dumb bastard’s already blabbed.”

I said nothing in reply. Eddie’s ears were turned inward anyway.

By now the leaning tower was fully dismantled, the pile of pulp carpeting the floorboards, and the girly magazine lay exposed to the open air. Eddie’s hand reached for it now. He promptly flipped it cover-side down, then, thinking better of it, threw the magazine in the trash. Eddie noticed a little corner of paper sticking out of the wall. He pulled hard on the corner and, as a magician might a hare, produced a newspaper. It was an old issue, good times good for only insulation now, but he began to read it anyway.

Eddie lit up another smoke, from an spare pack he’d stashed in his leather jacket. I didn’t bother to stop him this time—the damage was done. Ed used a matchbook, the free kind you get when you pay to go places. His was from a motel he must have got when he took Selene for an “adventure,” or was it Stacey or Barbara or Collette?

“How do you get a girl?” I asked.

“Pardon, Jimmy,” Ed said, “but you’ll have to clarify the question.”

“How do you *always* get a girl, one you like? What do you do?”

“Oh,” Eddie considered, his face growing strangely solemn, contemplative. “I don’t know, I just do,” he mumbled then fell silent.

“But how?” I implored. I couldn’t understand why Ed was being so quiet about it—he loved talking about girls. Normally, I couldn’t get him to shut up about them. I expected him to gloat and lord it over me like the ever-entertaining matter of my virginity.

“I said, I don’t know.” His restless knee bounced, a caged animal smacking the bars. His cigarette trembled, hot ash breaking off, free falling.

“But how?!” I demanded. “How do you do it?”

“I DON’T KNOW!” Ed shouted, “I JUST—DON’T—KNOW! I DON’T KNOW, AND I DON’T CARE ANYMORE, JIMMY! Alright?”

I was scared shitless.

“ALRIGHT?” he demanded.

“Alright,” I answered softly.

As pal’s outburst sufficiently drained away, my desperation circled back, shooting up my mind like a fighter plane laying waste to an enemy airfield. I had to get my question off the ground, whatever bullets may fly. “But you’ll help me?” I asked, resurrecting my plea.

Eddie took his time in answering. “Sure, Jimmy,” he agreed at last.

“James,” I reminded him.

“Sure.”

I expelled a sigh of relief.

“What’s the time?” Ed asked.

“Two-thirty.”

“Plenty of time.” Ed blew a smoke ring into my face, and handed me the pack. “We’ll start right away.” I lit up. “We have until the whistle blows,” Eddie mused, “and then whereto, no one knows.” Here Ed demonstrated the whistling sound of the weapons in flight, his trailing cigarette playing the part of the bomb. He chuckled. I puffed stoically, trying to perfect the form.

“Why her?” Eddie asked, taking a comb, switchblade, and grease to my hair. “And why didn’t you ever tell her before?”

“I don’t know, the moment just never seemed right, I guess.” Or at least, that’s what I think I said. Stupid kids always say stupid things like that.

“It’s *never* right,” said Ed. “But why her? Why, when there’s trillions upon trillions of girls in this world, you gotta tell this *one* you love her?”

“Because I do.”

“Before the bombs drop.”

“Yes.”

“What’s your plan? Do you even have one?” Ed asked.

“When she walks out to go to school, I’ll walk up and...and then...”

“And then what?” Ed took over. “‘Greetings, my name is Jim, and you don’t even know I exist, but I love you, and I think we should spend the rest of our lives together’—KABOOM!!!” he mocked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted sadly. “What *should* I say?”

Eddie donned his best John Wayne stance and impression. “Howdy, darlin’. How’d you like to saddle up with me?”

“You’re an idiot,” I declared, “certifiable.”

“*All* lovers are,” Eddie told me. “Strange thing is, *you’re* the lover, and *I’m* the fighter.”

I weighed this. The words just came out suddenly, horses before the starting gun.

“What’s it like to kill a man?” I asked, my voice solemn and boyish.

Ed stopped everything. His smile vanished. He stabbed the knife into the wall. He stared at it. A long moment passed before he finally spoke. “It’s blood throbbin’ in your veins,” he said, “it’s thoughtless, mindless anger—wrath—it’s screaming silence, and then a blur of violence.”

I weighed this too. Despite the seriousness of the situation, a strange smile came over my face. Something in Eddie’s discourse I found absolutely amusing. “That rhymed,” I informed him.

“Oh, shut up!” he barked.

I noticed a new sheen in Ed’s eyes: watering. “What’s wrong?”

Ed turned away. His hands shook, dropping his cigarette. He crossed his arms, trying to steady himself as his whole body quaked.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“It can’t be nothing,” I pressed, peering around to catch Eddie’s face. A tear rolling down Ed’s cheek. The fallen cigarette started the strewn pulps to smoke; I ignored that fire.

“Just tell me,” I said.

Just then we heard a whistling sound from outside the room. I checked my watch, “It’s five-thirty. The bombs are early!” I ran to the window to check the skies. Eddie didn’t bother.

I couldn't see anything even remotely bomb-like, so I turned back around and found him in a state of furious sorrow.

"FINE! YOU REALLY WANNA KNOW?" Ed exploded. "YOU WANNA HEAR IT? FINE! It wasn't for nothing," he said, as if that answer explained everything. His eye darted between me and the growing blaze.

"What?"

"I didn't kill him for *nothing*," Ed bellowed, welling over with angry tears, sobs, and clenched teeth. "I didn't kill that son-of-a-bitch for *nothing*. That rat bastard was...was...I found him...puttin' his filthy rotten bastard hands all over my mother, *Dear Ol' Mom*—and she let him! She let him in six-hundred and sixty-six ways to Sunday! And my poor ol' Dad works his ass off, has worked his ass off his whole damn life, night and day to put a decent roof over our heads and bread on the table, and what's she go and do? The first guy who asks. THAT WHORE A BABYLON!"

I remained motionless, in stunned silence, trying not to infuriate Ed further.

"As soon as I found out, I knew I had to do something. So I found out where that bastard worked, and I went to go give him a piece of my mind. You know what he says to me?"

I shook my head.

"He says, '*She's a big girl, she can do what she wants.*' Imagine that! Then he laughed and called me '*Sport*' and told me to get lost before he called the cops. That's when I knifed him. I stabbed his stupid throat. He bled out on the lot, and I ran for the tree line. But I didn't do nothing wrong, James. I'M INNOCENT. God-Almighty! I didn't do nothing wrong!"

"No you didn't," I told him, stamping out the flames. "Nothing wrong at all."

It was then that I realized the whistling sound was not like bombs at all but was strangely familiar. It came from downstairs. I descended the ladder, went to the kitchen, and saw the teapot whistling on the stove. Mom smiled at me.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Jeez,” was all I replied, eyeing the kettle. I returned to the attic.

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It was morning at last, the neighborhood glowing in the warmth of the rising sun. The birds tweeted. The bombs were expected to fall any minute now; then all would be silence and death, creatures turned to shadows seared into sidewalks and walls. I sat outside on the front porch, waiting. I popped my collar coolly, my fingers fumbling, the leather jacket Eddie had lent me off his own back. Meanwhile, Eddie observed with my binoculars from the attic window.

Then we saw her emerge from her little blue door and stroll the sidewalk, book bag in hand. *Annette*. I sallied forth to intercept her.

As I closed the distance, unbeknownst to me, a police car pulled up to my house and two deputies got out. But my eyes were focused upon my mission, focused upon those crystal eyes of hers, like Christmas ornaments—now like orbs of crocodile tears. The police knocked at my door. My father answered. I didn’t hear them ask about a fugitive—a certain “friend of James”. I was so focused upon my mission: those white-washed teeth and bloody lips, glistening in the light of dawn. I didn’t see Dad check the upstairs attic and find Wonder Bread wrappers and empty sardine cans and a criminal doing his best to hide underneath a pile of magazines.

The bombs never did fall. It turned out some crackpot DJ in Wisconsin had cooked up the whole story in order to boost his ratings. It’s amazing what callous things people will do for a silly thing like money, what stories people will believe—when they want them to be true.

I heard the bombs fall anyway.

All around.

Everywhere.

Silent explosions.

Death.

Madness.

I felt the hard slap as her soft palm impacted on my face.

Now I saw the deputies cuff Eddie and jam him into their cruiser.

I saw her storm away.

Deafness.

If she did say anything, I didn't hear her.

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In the days and weeks to come, I followed along in the paper as local student Edward Golding was arrested, arraigned, and sentenced. In all, it took six years, but they finally hanged him for the murder.

Eddie's parents put on a lovely funeral.

They never did divorce.