Assassin

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Assassin

Kevin Clouther

Published on February 17, 2022
They talked about class or basketball, though they didn’t care about either. They talked about the jobs they would have: bar owner, motorcycle seller, assassin.

“I would kill someone if he was guilty,” Billy said.

“How would you know?” Nick asked.

“I would have to know to kill him.”

They smoked cigarettes when they had them. They drank the most awful malt liquors, but they didn’t throw up—it was a sort of superpower. Their lives seemed impossibly long.
They didn’t talk about Andrea. Nothing Billy said to Nick or vice versa would make any difference.

They’d known Andrea forever. Jim didn’t understand what was different now. Besides, everyone knew how stories like this ended.

Jim kept waiting for it to pass, but it didn’t. Better to focus on what they could do something about, like the record. Jim made a proposal, which was unlike him. What about the school?

Billy recognized the challenge before Nick did. Billy said he knew where they could get a car. Jim and Nick followed Billy to his house.

When Jim saw the patrol car, he thought: this isn’t what I meant. He thought: abort. But Nick, more than the others, responded to displays of courage. He looked at the patrol car reverently.

“Where are the keys?” he asked.

“He keeps two sets,” Billy said.

Jim walked around the perimeter of the patrol car, relieved they weren’t already attempting to get inside.

“When does your mom get home?” Nick asked.

It was a stupid question because Billy’s mom was always home. She suffered from a mysterious ailment, something to do with her legs. It was another thing they didn’t talk about.

“She can’t know,” Billy said.

When he went inside the house, Jim and Nick loitered around the plastic mailbox. They kept their distance from the patrol car. No other cars drove up or down the street.

“Okay.” Billy appeared in the door a short time later. “Okay, it’s fine.”

Billy’s mom was sitting in the blue recliner she always sat in. The footrest was extended. She looked somewhere between drunk and hungover. Jim could relate. He could barely have one drink without worrying over a headache, a confession he didn’t dare make.
Billy’s mom acknowledged Jim, whom she tolerated. She didn’t trust Nick. She was right not to trust him. Mothers knew. (Fathers, when they existed, tried to impress their son’s friends with cryptic stories about past debaucheries, stories too humiliating to acknowledge.)

“Where are you going?” Billy’s mom asked.

“Nowhere yet,” Billy said.

She reached for a glass that wasn’t there. He walked to the kitchen and retrieved one from the cabinet. He filled it with water from the sink and handed it to her.

“Have you eaten?” he asked.

She drank from the glass.

“Let me make you something,” he said.

“Play with your friends already,” she said.

Jim and Nick stood by the door, hands in their pockets. When Billy walked to his room, they followed.

“I didn’t see the keys anywhere,” Billy said.

He opened the window. You could see the patrol car. Billy’s mom always had a boyfriend. This one was a cop. That was all Jim knew about him.

“Sometimes he visits the guy next door,” Billy said.

He reached under the bed, where he kept cigarettes when he had them. He lit one right there in his room. It meant his mom wouldn’t be getting up any time soon.

“The guy next door has a lot of guns,” Billy said. “Or says he does.”

“Have you seen the guns?” Jim asked.

“I think that’s why he goes over there: to see the guns.”

Jim had no interest in seeing guns. But when he started moving toward the door, Billy thrust a cigarette into Jim’s hand. Billy clasped one hand on Jim’s shoulder and lit the cigarette with the other hand.

“Is that him?” Nick pointed out the window.
“What does he look like?” Billy asked.

“I don’t know. Strong.”

“Is he walking like he took a shit in his pants?”

Billy never liked his mother’s boyfriends.

“He might be a little messed up,” Nick said.

They heard the front door open. Then, almost immediately after, music: the loud drums and obvious guitars that soften old guys.

“Now we wait,” Billy said.

He sat before his tower of compact discs. It was important that nobody had heard of the band. Sometimes it was just a guy with an instrument, a guitar or trumpet or unpronounceable percussion. Jim listened with begrudging respect, but Nick ignored the music altogether. He stayed fixed at the window, like someone might drive off in the patrol car. Jim wondered if Billy’s mother’s boyfriend had a partner.

When the house fell silent, Billy led the way to the living room, where his mom slept loudly in the recliner. She hadn’t had any of the water Billy left. Her boyfriend was also asleep, on the couch. He wasn’t in uniform. He used his arm as a pillow.

Billy walked right up to the arm. Jim worried Billy would touch it, but he didn’t. He slid one skinny hand beneath the couch cushions. When that produced nothing, he moved down the couch. Billy’s mother’s boyfriend didn’t move. Billy’s mom continued her ugly breathing. Jim and Nick stood still. They were prepared to run if anyone moved, but only Billy moved. When he finished investigating the couch, he got on all fours and started feeling around the floor. It was dark. Plus, he was nearly blind.

Jim didn’t want to disappoint Billy. But Jim didn’t want to wait to see what happened either. He looked to Nick, who studied Billy closely, as though he were searching for something more consequential than keys. Of course, keys mean all sorts of things, like freedom. But Jim wasn’t sure keys should be anything but keys. They were for starting cars, opening doors. It was enough.

Billy stood. He stretched his arms and stretched his fingers. He took a step toward his mother’s boyfriend, who remained immobile. Jim wondered for a moment if he was dead. But he wasn’t dead. He flinched at Billy’s touch. Billy stepped back, but he didn’t panic. He slipped his hand into his mother’s boyfriend’s pant pocket so quickly.
The keys Billy produced were enormous, obscene. They looked more likely to launch a spaceship than start a patrol car. Victory washed over Billy’s face but only momentarily. Already he was walking out the front door.

Billy handed Nick the keys. What happened next was unimaginable, but that’s the thing about imagination—it exists to expand the sense of what’s possible. Nick sat behind the wheel like there was no more logical place for him to be. Jim and Billy got into the backseat. He made a predictable joke—bet you never thought you’d be in the backseat of a cop car like this ha ha ha—but Jim couldn’t concentrate. Although the shock of what was happening was still moving through him, the specifics seemed familiar. It was, after all, just a car. Not even a new car. It was obvious how many people before Jim had pulled down the thick seatbelt.

Of course, Nick didn’t put on the siren. He wanted to draw as little attention to himself as possible. He was so skinny. No matter how much he ate, he didn’t gain weight. There was no uniform to slip into. Anyone who looked through the windshield would have seen a seventeen-year-old boy. He looked younger.

But nobody saw Nick. It was dark, and when people see a patrol car, they look away.

There was nothing keeping him from driving right up to the school. After he parked, he looked back to Jim and Billy.

“How now?” Nick asked.

“We just go,” Jim decided.

So they went. They locked the car. They weren’t wearing masks or even hats.

The school was an outdoor campus assembled haphazardly over time, a series of freestanding colorless buildings rather than the red brick monolith that reliably appeared on television dramas. The school possessed so little dignity that it didn’t seem a transgression to walk among the buildings alone at night. That was a disappointment. Jim didn’t know what had taken them so long.

But the disappointment was short lived. When he stopped at the sign he’d imagined stealing, it looked nothing like what he remembered. It looked so large, so green, so irrevocably fixed to the pole. The pole looked indestructible.

“This is it,” Jim said.
Nobody asked why. To do so would have been beside the point. Courage was its own destination.

Billy stood on a bench. He leapt and caught the sign with each hand, leaning his weight to one side and then the other, but the sign didn’t budge. He opened his hands and glided to the concrete.

“You think there are cameras?” he asked.

“The school can’t afford cameras,” Nick said. “Half our classes are in trailers.”

They hadn’t gotten to the trailers yet.

“You can have cameras and trailers,” Billy said sensibly.

Jim climbed onto the bench. He leapt for the sign but missed. He jumped again, missed again.

“Back up,” Nick said.

He stood on the bench for a while, considering. When he jumped, it wasn’t to hold onto the sign but to push it from the bottom. He did this several times to no effect, but he didn’t stop.

Billy sat on the bench. He lit a cigarette. It was weird to see him sitting there, smoking. At school, they only smoked in the narrow space behind the gym that teachers willfully ignored.

The sign didn’t say anything special, just the name of the school, followed by street. But they weren’t on a street. It was a stupid sign. That’s why Jim thought to steal it. That and the pleasure he imagined of possessing the sign. It would be too risky to display, so it would have to be a private pleasure.

Like his devotion to Beth, which nobody knew about, not even Billy or Nick, certainly not Beth, who presided over such a tiny dominion as president of the Spanish Club, which was dismissed as irrelevant by the Cuban kids who actually spoke Spanish and unacknowledged by everyone else. The positions of vice president, secretary, and treasurer remained unfilled. Beth ruled alone. There were no members, other than Jim. He attended all of the meetings in an emptied classroom after school. A diligently typed newsletter was delivered to his locker the first Monday of every month. The newsletter smelled like cocoanut hand soap.
Outside of Spanish Club, Jim didn’t speak to Beth. They had no classes together—she sought the difficult ones he didn’t qualify for or avoided—so he admired her from a distance. He didn’t understand this attraction, or decided he didn’t, and since he never talked to anyone about her, he had no occasion to try.

She seemed so tidy: books covered with brown paper, hair pulled back tight. Nothing in Jim’s life was like that.

At home, his parents battled ruthlessly. Although the subjects of their fights changed, the outcomes were constant. His father slammed first the door of the house and then the door of the car. Jim’s mother was as quiet as his father was loud. She poured a tall, translucent drink—vodka, gin, water?—and sat in the screened-in porch, where she ran her index finger around the circumference of the lime-wet glass. Sometimes she hummed, almost inaudibly, to herself. She never sighed. Never cried.

The sign landed on the concrete with an abrupt clank. Billy approached the sign cautiously, as though it were a bird that had fallen from the sky.

“Let’s go,” Nick said.

He wedged the sign beneath his arm. They started walking but soon were running. They only stopped when they saw the golf cart. It was empty.

“That wasn’t here before,” Billy said.

It was then that the future came to Jim with merciless clarity. They would never go for the record again. Nothing like tonight would ever happen again. No more directionless drives. No more blithely seeking trouble. Even if they escaped, they wouldn’t forget their proximity to the end, which made this the end.

Jim recognized the golf cart, typically piloted by a security guard who commanded so little respect that Jim hadn’t thought to worry about him. His absence now was no comfort. Billy circled the golf cart, trying not to look worried. This worried Jim. Nick looked from side to side, but there was nobody to see.

“Let’s just go,” he said.

But Billy kept circling. He lit another cigarette. Jim couldn’t smell anything but smoke. He couldn’t hear anything, no matter how hard he listened.

“Okay,” Billy agreed. “Let’s go.”
Jim expected to see the security guard by the patrol car, but he wasn’t there either. Nick unlocked the doors, and Billy joined Jim in the backseat. He didn’t ask where they were going. They were almost out of the parking lot when he saw the security guard standing at the edge of campus with a walkie talkie in front of his face. Or maybe Jim didn’t see that. He was struggling to separate fear from reality; there would come a time soon, he thought, when they would merge completely. He didn’t say anything.

He wondered if they were drawing attention to themselves. Nick drove more deliberately than any cop Jim had ever seen. He leaned his head against the window. On cop shows, the officer always made a show of protecting the criminal’s head before guiding him into the backseat. Jim wondered if Billy’s mother’s boyfriend did that. Billy stared ahead. There was a metal grate separating the front of the car from the back. Through the grate, Jim could see the stolen sign on the passenger’s seat. He could see Nick, who kept both hands on the steering wheel. Jim wondered what Nick was thinking. He drove so evenly. He came to a complete stop at every stop sign. He hummed one of the strange songs Billy had played at his house.

The outside world looked different from the back of a patrol car, both dimmer and more authentic. Jim thought that if he opened the door at the next stop sign, he’d step into his real life.

But he wasn’t ready to leave this life. The seat was firm. The seatbelt was tight. When Nick parked, Jim remained in his seat.

“Where are we?” Jim asked.

Nick removed the keys. He opened his door. Billy opened his door too.

“Wait I’m coming,” Jim said.

The apartment building looked like any apartment building. Maybe a little worse. Nick tried to open the glass doors, but they were locked. He moved to the callbox, but Billy grabbed Nick’s arm before Nick pressed anything.

Billy said, “You’ll wake her mom.”

He walked to a payphone. He picked up the receiver, but he didn’t say anything.

“She doesn’t have a beeper,” Nick said.

“I gave her one,” Billy said.
Andrea passed through the glass doors a little while later. She was wearing shorts and a tank top. Jim wondered if she’d been sleeping. Or if maybe those were the clothes she put on to give the illusion of having just gotten out of bed. She didn’t look tired. She looked wide awake.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Want to go for a ride?” Nick asked.

He walked to the patrol car, tucked anonymously among the other cars in the unlit parking lot, and opened the passenger’s side door. Andrea looked to Billy, who shook his head like don’t ask me. Nobody asked him. Everyone got in the car.

“What’s this?” Andrea placed the sign on her lap.

“You don’t recognize it?” Nick asked.

He casually backed up the car, like he’d been driving it his whole life, and clicked on the headlights. Andrea turned to the backseat.

“Are you the bad guys?” she asked.

“Maybe,” Billy said.

“The sign is from school,” Nick said.

“What am I doing here?” she asked.

Jim wondered if Andrea really had been sleeping and was only now waking up.

“Turn around,” she said. “Bring me back!”

Or maybe they were sharing a dream. Was there any rule against different people occupying the same dream?


He stopped the car. They were still in the parking lot. Andrea didn’t move.

“Where are you even going?” she asked.

“The beach,” Billy said.

Now Nick turned to the backseat.
“I love the beach at night,” she said.

Billy nodded.

The ride there was quiet. Forgetting where they were, Nick leaned forward to turn on the radio. The dashboard was bright, indecipherable, terrifying.

The pavilion was empty. Nick left the car beneath squat, ragged palms. Outside the car, Andrea handed the sign to Jim. She started walking with Billy. The sign was lighter than Jim expected. Jogging down the steps to the beach, he felt the enormous emptiness that follows accomplishing exactly what you set out to accomplish.

One cloud after another passed across the moon, so sometimes light scattered across the water, and sometimes you couldn’t see anything. The ocean was relentlessly loud. Jim sat on the sand and began to bury the sign. It was completely covered by the time Nick sat beside Jim.

“How did you want to go to the beach?” he asked.

“I didn’t,” Nick said.

“Why did you want to get Andrea?”

“It was stupid.”

“Taking the car was stupid.”

“No, taking the car was great.”

Nick threw a shell toward the ocean. Jim couldn’t see where it landed. He didn’t hear a splash.

“Where’s Billy?” he asked. “Where’s Andrea?”

“I don’t know,” Nick said.

It was hard to imagine that the ocean had another side, that if you kept going, you’d hit Africa. There would be islands along the way, people with lives that were both familiar and distant, beautiful and horrible. Mostly, there would be water: cold, blue, unthinking.

“I think I hear them,” Jim said.
He started walking toward the ocean. There would be no way to remember where he’d buried the sign. An old lady would find it later with a metal detector and bring it home as a curiosity her husband would barely acknowledge.

Nick caught up to Jim. They walked together. Whatever Jim thought he heard, he lost in the wind that whipped off the surf. He could faintly make out a shape before them. It might have been a bird or it might have been Billy and Andrea or it might have been something Jim had never before encountered.

Then, as if somebody pulled apart curtains, the beach filled with light.

Jim stopped. Although the light was very bright, he couldn’t see anything. He wondered if this, and not total darkness, was what blindness looked like. It didn’t occur to him to be afraid. He wondered if he was becoming brave.

Then he did hear something, the muffled crunch of shoes hitting sand. He knew he should run, but which way? Nick seized Jim’s wrist before Jim could decide.

Although running this way was awkward, it surprised him how quickly they achieved rhythm. Their adrenaline surged in union. They were running away from the light, and shape was returning to the world.

Nick stopped before Jim did. Nick crouched and then lay on the sand. Jim did the same. The sand scratched his arms. He felt, absurdly, like they were soldiers in a foxhole. They would always be friends.

“You think Billy and Andrea are okay?” Jim whispered.

“I don’t know,” Nick whispered.

Jim rolled onto his back. He couldn’t see any stars, just the moon, diminished now by the light.

“I think the light is getting closer,” Nick said.

“What is it?”

“I’m going to find out.”

Jim closed his eyes. He listened to Nick’s steps until he couldn’t hear anything. He didn’t know how long he rested like that. When he stood, the light looked different. It had a source, but he didn’t approach it. He wasn’t brave, but he wasn’t stupid either.
On one side of the light were two men. They moved with languid authority, and the light moved with them. On the other side was Billy. He waited for the men and the light to reach him.

Nick and Andrea were absent from this scene. Jim wondered if they were also hidden spectators.

“Show me your hands,” one of the men suggested.

Billy held his hands before him. The men looked disappointed.

“You’re alone?” the other man asked.

Billy nodded. The men continued to approach.

Jim considered what might happen next. Would Billy fight back? He also wasn’t stupid. The man who told Billy to show his hands reached him first. The man placed his hand on Billy’s shoulder. Billy lowered his arms.

The man’s other arm lay flat against his side, and only then did Jim recognize the man from Billy’s mom’s couch. The man leaned forward to say something into Billy’s ear, and Billy shrank lower. Jim wondered if Billy would shrink so low he’d disappear completely.

The other man watched from a distance. Maybe he was Billy’s mother’s boyfriend’s partner, or maybe he was the neighbor with guns. Jim thought this would be a good place to shoot somebody. The ocean was so loud that someone driving down A1A might not even hear.

But there were no guns that Jim could see. When the man pulled back from Billy, Billy started walking. Once he was a few steps ahead of the man, the man started walking, and then the other man started walking too. Soon they were all in a row with Billy in the middle. Jim heard their footsteps on the pavilion. He heard one car start and then another. You could have heard a gun, after all.

For a while, Billy didn’t go to school. When he came back, he didn’t have a black eye or bruises, but Jim knew there are other things a person can do. Billy didn’t say anything, and Jim didn’t ask. Jim started seeing less of Billy, who spent more time with Jake, who went to a different school or maybe didn’t go to school at all. Jim never saw Billy’s mother’s boyfriend again.
That night at the beach, Nick and Andrea found Jim. He was sitting very still. He thought he might watch the sun rise, which he’d never done, but he had no immediate plans beyond his next breath and the breath after that.

“We messed up,” Nick said.

“I know,” Jim said.

“Now what?” Andrea said.

“We can walk you home,” Nick said.

“Okay,” Andrea said.

The patrol car was gone. Nick dropped the keys into a trash can a mile from the beach. A mile past that, they arrived at Andrea’s apartment. Jim was guessing: it could have been twice that, more. He was prepared to walk forever.

Andrea looked at Nick for a long time before pushing through the glass doors, and for the first time, Jim thought he saw what Nick saw.

Nick walked away quickly.

“Where are you going?” Jim asked. “I’m coming with you.”

They stayed to the side of the road, though there were few cars at this hour. They didn’t talk about Andrea, and they didn’t talk about Billy. Eventually, they reached Nick’s house.

“What are you going to tell your mom?” Jim asked.

“Don’t worry,” Nick said. “You’re okay.”

The house was completely dark inside. They could have been anywhere. Nick disappeared, and Jim stood in the darkness. He imagined this was all there was to see in the world. Nick reappeared with a pillow and blanket.

Jim lay on the couch. Broken coils stabbed at him unconvincingly. He fell immediately to sleep, where he dreamed of a locker filled with newsletters from Beth.

When he woke, the room was hazy with sunlight. He smelled bacon. Nick’s mom was singing a love song. Jim knew that so long as he didn’t move, nothing would change.

Genre: Fiction
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