

The Art of Human Sacrifice

(full version)

A short story by Patrick Mackeown

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“Would it be exhilarating to kill someone?” Adam said to me. “Killing has been done for fun before, you know. In Chicago, in 1924, two wealthy students called Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb murdered a third affluent youth, Bobby Franks, mostly due to their own slavish devotion to Nietzsche’s Nihilism coupled with the determination to get a fierce rush of excitement.”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I’ve never really thought about it. What makes you ask?”

Adam held his hands out towards me with their palms upwards.

“Look,” he said. “If the idea frightens you, then we don’t need to discuss it any further. All you have to do is tell me that you’re scared and we can talk about something else.”

“I’m not scared of discussing it,” I protested. “Why would I be frightened of that? I just don’t see what the urgency is.”

Have you read this?” he said, throwing Thomas Common’s translation of Friedrich Nietzsche’s novel *Thus Spake Zarathustra* at my feet.

“Of course I’ve read it. Everybody’s read it,” I replied. “And, in any case, what does a dusty, old book have to do with killing people?”

Adam tilted on the balls of his feet. His eyes glinted. “Do you dare?” he teased. “Do you dare?”

“Do I dare what?” I said.

“It’s a bravery thing. According to Nietzsche: A new philosophy takes a dangerous stand against convention,” Adam explained. “It stands beyond good and evil.”

Adam had crossed my father’s hallway and entered the study on the eastern side of our house. At that point he was surveying my father’s weapons cupboard on the study’s north-facing wall.

“Where are the keys?” he said.

“Oh, don’t be silly, Adam,” I warned him. “The farm manager has to be here when Dad’s guns are taken out of that cabinet. Guns aren’t toys, for Christ’s sake! Those things are bloody dangerous!”

Adam drew his hands along the cabinet’s lid and around its sides. “The keys are not here,” he mumbled. “Where are they?”

Then he shot past me for a second time and returned to our hallway. There, above the hall telephone table, our electric mains supply’s fuse box sat. Adam drew a chair up and climbed onto it, flicking the fuse box open as he did so. He threw a silver key into the air triumphantly and caught it in the midst of his descent.

“I remembered seeing your dad fetch it from here last autumn,” he reminded me. “I’d simply forgotten where he kept it.”

“Which are you?” Adam repeated, brandishing Dad’s key in front of my face, “Are you a contemptible, weak, mindless ape or a Nietzschean Superman? Face facts, Tim: Are you beyond good and evil? Or are you withered up and dried in old, slavish morality, as Nietzsche would have said, like that ridiculous, old cunt, Kant?”

I returned to guard my father’s guns, and, at a run, I reached Dad’s strong box before Adam did. I positioned myself between it and him.

“Get out of my way,” he hissed.

“Joking about killing isn’t funny any more, Adam,” I told him. “I thought that is was, at first. But enough is enough. Leave the guns where they are!”

He transferred Dad’s key to his left hand, and put his right palm on my shoulder.

“I’m asking you nicely, Tim,” he said softly. “Get out of my way.”

I had no intention of letting him past me, and every intention of fighting him off, until he said the most curious thing.

“We need death,” Adam told me.
I was perplexed.
“How can we need death? Death just happens,” I said.

Adam looked at me in a way that I’d never seen him do before. He’d crumpled one corner of his mouth the way a disappointed parent might when composing a thoughtful reply for an obtuse child.

At a little over six feet tall both of us were approximately the same height. And yet, for some reason, Adam now seemed a head taller than me, at least. Then he just moved me from his path. It wasn’t as though he pushed me, exactly. He didn’t; he couldn’t have. I’m an experienced martial artist. And, if I’d wanted to, I could have twisted his outstretched arm and pinned him face up against the strong box, which he’d taken such an interest in. I didn’t of course. I didn’t do anything. I just let him move me.

“Do you remember when Zarathustra said: I love those who do not first seek a reason beyond the stars for going down and being sacrifices, but sacrifice themselves to the earth, that the earth of the Superman may hereafter arrive?” he asked me.

“Of course I do,” I snapped. “He said it to the townspeople on the edge of the forest.”

“You see!” Adam cried. “Danger and human sacrifice! That’s what Nietzsche respected. Zarathustra told the dying man: thou hast made danger thy calling; therein there is nothing contemptible. Because Nietzsche himself believed the necessity of human beings sacrificing themselves to Mother Earth in order to achieve greatness. That’s what he said.”

By that time Adam had already opened Dad’s strong box door and taken out a double-barrelled shotgun and a hunting rifle. He passed the first gun to me. But the one with a telescopic sight, and the ammunition which went with it, he kept for himself.

“Ancient civilisations such as the Aztecs of Mexico sacrificed humans to their gods,” he said. “Why do you think that they did that? Their temples had gullies cut into their sides to allow the victim’s blood to run all of the way down the building’s side.”

“The Aztecs didn’t have guns,” I said. “They might have had more respect for human life if they had.”

“They loved death!” he said suddenly. “Come on, Tim, I’ll show you.”

I didn’t follow Adam simply because he had a crazy theory about killing people; the reason that I followed him was because he had Dad’s hunting rifle, and its bullets, and I wanted to get them back.

I heard a Land Rover’s engine starting up and I began to run. When I reached the courtyard which separates the front of my farm house from its driveway, I saw the back of Adam’s four-wheel-drive receding into the distance. I put my shotgun down and dashed into the yard waving my hands frantically in the air.

I could see the Land Rover’s brake lights coming on at the far end of our drive. I took a breath and doubled over with my hands upon my knees. Then I saw Adam’s gun barrel protruding from the driver’s window.

I couldn’t breathe! I tried to shout. But “Aaaaa. No, Aaaa!” was all that I managed. My lungs ached. My legs ached. I flew across the remaining gap between me and him faster than the fleetest-footed Olympian. I wasn’t merely a human then; part gazelle, part cheetah and part mechanical projectile, I devoured the necessary space.

A shot rang out. It was a single, crystal-clear report, akin to the sound of a strong man hitting a solid hardwood table with a claw-hammer. And at that moment the world that I knew shattered into a blizzard of poisoned fragments.

“Where have you been?” Adam said.

He’d alighted from the car and was closing the driver’s door casually.

“Adam,” I panted. “What have you done? What the hell have you done?”

I could see two red, stiletto shoes; they were protruding from a clump of grass on the opposite side of the road from the entrance to my driveway.

“It’s a clean kill,” Adam said. “I hit her right between the eyes.”

Then there I was, standing above the body. She was a youngish, fair-haired woman. She would have looked pretty if she hadn’t had a small, red hole in the centre of her forehead.

Adam brought the car around.

“Get her up!” he said.

I began to lift her. Dead women are quite heavy.

“For Christ’s sake, Adam!” I hissed. “Adam, what the hell?”

We bundled her into the back of our car between two oil drums and a coil of rope. From the road Adam picked up one red shoe and threw it into his victim’s lap.

“OK, get in,” he barked at me.

I stared at him.

“What the hell are you waiting for?” he screamed, revving the Land Rover’s engine. “Get in!”

Adam pulled away from the roadside at speed.

“Where are we going?” I said.

“Into the trees, of course” he replied. “In his novel, why do you think Nietzsche makes his main character, Zarathustra, carry his dead friend’s body for several hours into the heart of a dark forest?”

“I don’t know!” I snapped. “Look, look, Adam, can we stop all this Nietzschean crap? I really need to think. We’re in serious trouble. You know that don’t you?”

“Because Mother Nature’s forests and seas are clean and mankind isn’t!” Adam persisted. “Here, take the steering wheel a minute, I need to find the book.”

A red tractor came towards us. We veered slowly across the carriageway and were on course to hit it.

“Adam, take the wheel back, quick!” I cried. “Adam, Adam!”

But Adam was otherwise engaged. He’d twisted around and was in the middle of climbing into the back of our car. The driving seat was now completely empty and the oncoming tractor only meters away. We were going to crash. I knew that. I pulled the steering wheel and nothing happened. The tractor was only feet away now. I could see its driver’s face. First he simply waived me away. When that act failed, he scythed the air manically. Now there were only feet between us. We hadn’t yet collided. But I anticipated the horrific force of our impacts. My gut clenched. I closed my eyes and yanked the wheel. And then our two vehicles met. Our whole car shook as though some mythical, gargantuan beast was doing its level best to swallow it. At the same time a hideous screeching sound arose as if every sentient being on earth was having its throat slit right outside.

“Oh, shit. Drive!” Adam said. “Drive, man, drive!”

I’d hit my head. I wriggled into Adam’s place.

“Drive! Drive,” he said.

“What the hell do you think I am doing?” I protested.

I took hold of the rearing, metal beast. Roadside branches smashed my window. I swore. I wrenched my controls. I thrust the accelerator down. And we tore off for mile after mile through open, English countryside.

“Turn here,” he said.

I said, “why?”

“Because I said so,” he replied.

And so I did. A few meters along an overgrown track we stopped. With Nietzsche’s story book in one hand Adam opened the back of our car.

“It says that you have to carry her,” he explained. “You have to put her on your shoulders.”

“Where are we going?” I pleaded. “Adam, we need to think this through.”

“Why must you always be the slow one!” he spat. “Here! You take this.”

He thrust his novel at me. And then grabbing the dead woman’s ankles, he began to drag her out of the car. Her skirt rode up, and she had precious little on beneath it. I looked away.

“Help me get hold of her!” Adam said. “For God’s sake, Tim! Wake up.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I said.

“Lift her first,” he said, kicking me closer towards the car. “Be sick later.”

Adam had somehow twisted himself underneath her.

“Lift,” he screamed. “For God’s sake, Tim! What the hell are you doing?”

“I am lif...” I began.

The dead woman stared at me. Those hollow, unblinking eyes drilled holes through every sense I had. My dry throat shrank.

“I am,” I said. “I...”

I followed Adam into a nearby wood.

“Which direction to Zarathustra walk in?” he said.

“What do you mean, which direction?” I replied. “How the hell should I know?”

And then he stopped.

“It’s there,” he said. “Just like it says in the book. Zarathustra put the body into a hollow tree, just like this one here.”

Adam was pointing because on the edge of a gully which we were approaching a gutted oak tree stood. The only problem that I could see was that the entrance hole into its trunk was at the same height as our heads.

“Back in a sec!” Adam said, dumping the body at my feet.

He was as good as his word. Moments later he returned with the coil of rope from our car. He flung part of it over a branch above our heads and wound the other end around our corpse.

“Pull this,” he said.

We pulled. The woman rose shedding dead leaves as she went.

“Get her legs in the hole,” he said.

I climbed and pushed. She went in more easily that I’d have expected. I cut our rope and she vanished.

We drove home and waited for the police who never came. A day became a week and a week became a month, and still the police never came.

The shooting season came and went. Dad couldn’t understand why I didn’t use my gun.

“I just don’t feel the same about guns any more,” I told him.

On one summer evening I was standing at the entrance to our hall. Adam's Land Rover approached our house. When it stopped he and a philosophy student that I recognised climbed out and came towards the house.

"Zarathrustra walked for two hours with the dead body on his shoulders," Adam was explaining to his new student. "The ordinary human is little more than an ape. It's only the Nietzschean Superhuman who is capable of understanding."

The two young men passed me in my hallway. But Adam wasn't looking at me. He was looking at the fusebox above our hall telephone table.

"Wouldn't it be exhilarating to kill someone?" Adam asked the student.

The young man looked surprised. I smiled at him.

"It's just a private joke," I told him. "Pay no attention to Adam. Actually there is something that you could do for me, if you wouldn't mind. If I gave you some money could you fetch a cake from the village shop?"

We watched Adam's student making his way along my driveway.

"What did you do that for?" Adam spat. "You've interrupted my lecture!"

"Look, Adam, this has to stop!" I said. "I didn't realise that you were serious last time. But I'm wiser now. This stops here I tell you!"

"We're different, Tim," Adam said. "We're not at all like other people now, you and I. Think about it! You and I are in a group which is above and beyond right and wrong. Think how few people like us, enlightened, Nietzschean Supermen, there are in the world."

I knew that the veins on my neck and temples were protruding. My hands were twitching too.

"I'm not like you!" I said, in a voice which sounded nothing like my own. "I'm nothing like you!"

Adam put one foot on our telephone table.

"Come down from there," I said.

Adam continued to climb. He flicked our fuse box open. As he reached for Dad's gun cabinet key I pulled him down.

"Tim, what are you doing?" he snapped, climbing up again.

"Come down and stay down!" I shouted.

Adam reached for the key for a second time. And this time I pulled him off the table much harder. He fell onto the ground. My fists were tensed now.

"Adam, leave the key alone," I warned him.

I could see Adam's look again, the one he reserved for specially obtuse people. His mouth was twisted. But this time there was menace in his expression and not merely condescension.

"Purile Ape!" he spat. "You're only one of Nietzsche's lesser beings! I knew you were! I always knew that you were."

"I can't let you take that key, Adam," I explained.

"You'll have to," he replied. "Every thinking person knows that Nietzsche's ape creatures have no control over the actions of superior beings like myself."

In order to climb again Adam turned his back on me. I clenched my fist and aimed at his neck, tensing in readiness for a solid blow. And then I struck him as hard as I could. Adam flew forward

smashing his face against the wall and then slid onto the floor. I can't explain how I managed to bundle him into his Land Rover. He lay in the back between two oil drums and a coil of rope.

I climbed behind Adam's steering wheel and pulled away from my farm house at speed.

It was only after I'd used the car to pull Adam's body to the height of the hole in the tree that I remembered Adam's story book. I pulled out the page in which Zarathrustra hid his own body, and I slipped it into Adam's hand. Then I cut his rope.

That was a week ago.

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Mutilation Murders

The torso of a black child has been discovered in London's Kensington Gardens. Detective Chief Inspector Hawthorne and his men quickly discover that the boy was a victim of a ritualistic killing. At Heathrow airport a second child, Jubulani, and his mother disembark from their plane. On his arrival in London Jubulani is kidnapped. A Ju Ju witchdoctor in South London is preparing the new child, Jubulani, to be sacrificed. Hawthorne is racing against time to save the boy.

Midwinter's Children

Georg, a nine-year-old street child, has been captured by human traffickers from Moscow and is about to be sold to a child pornography ring in Amsterdam. Detective Chief Inspector Hawthorne, from Suffolk CID, is on the case...

The Black Daimler

Nexus, a London-based Chinese dissident, learns that his friend was found with an axe embedded in his head. As more of his politically active associates die, he becomes involved in a frantic struggle to understand and defeat the threat to himself and his organisation.

The Expendability Doctrine

Oil tycoon Keith Connors is found dead in the garden of his villa; undoubtedly the work of a pro. His ex-wife flees to Libya, where she is linked to the brutal murder of the White House Trade Representative. In his investigations, Inspector Hawthorne discovers a sinister web of treachery and greed in the international oil business.

The Devil's Brothers

Catherine Bronston, a fifteen-year-old girl, is snatched outside her local swimming pool. The kidnappers, ruthless Albanian mafiosi, issue a ransom demand containing dismembered body parts. Catherine's father fears that the ongoing police investigation could reduce the possibility of her being found alive.

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