

THE BOY WHO KILLED NO ONE

BY ZACHARY HAY

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We don't associate crime—especially murder—with any kind of tenderness but the story you are about to read will turn that idea on its head. Just as it will up end your thinking that genre fiction cannot touch us as deeply as 'serious' lit. The prose here is achingly beautiful in its emotional transparency and clarity of voice. Hay demonstrates a natural facility and easiness with writing that cannot be taught—it comes with the body, so to speak, and you either have or you don't. He has it in spades. If 'The Boy Who Killed No One' reminds us of anyone...it's James Baldwin. And as far as comparisons go, that's about as good as it can get. Quote: 'The boy does not know what he can say to that and so he says nothing. You can tell from the way that he sits that he has nothing to say--he is slumped over in the chair like his back is broken. He stared at the policeman at first but now his eyes dart back and forth. The policeman asks if the boy has anything to say for himself but he does not. He has already told the policeman the girl's name--Shawnie--but the policeman keeps on calling her 'That poor girl' or 'That girl you stabbed.' So what good is it to tell the policeman anything if he does not listen? the boy thinks.' Five stars.*

The Boy who Killed No One

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You can see the boy. Tall skinny pale boy. Look through the window there and you can see him. He's sitting at the desk waiting for the policeman to come back. He is getting anxious now because the policeman said he would be only a minute but now it has been twenty. Or more than twenty because he has no clock to see how long it has been.

The question is remorse--if the boy has any or could, if all this is the result of something that happened to him that could be undone or if some people are born rotten. Though the boy

does not know it, this will dictate a number of things hereafter: where he will go and what will happen to him when he gets there and for how long, and if something like this will ever happen again.

The policeman is back now and the first words out of his mouth are that the girl the boy stabbed had not died and that is lucky for him, the boy, because it is a whole new charge now-- *attempted* murder, and disfigurement. The boy does not know if disfigurement is a real crime or not. He has never heard of it. But he figures there are many things he has not heard of and so he says nothing.

“They’re stitching that poor girl’s face up as best they can now while we speak and you ought to pray that nothing more goes wrong.”

The boy does not know what he can say to that and so he says nothing. You can tell from the way that he sits that he has nothing to say--he is slumped over in the chair like his back is broken. He stared at the policeman at first but now his eyes dart back and forth. The policeman asks if the boy has anything to say for himself but he does not. He has already told the policeman the girl’s name--Shawnie--but the policeman keeps on calling her ‘That poor girl’ or ‘That girl you stabbed.’ So what good is it to tell the policeman anything if he does not listen? the boy thinks.

Worse yet is he told the policeman a great deal more. He had told him--though now regretting it--that she was kind of his girlfriend and that he had seen her naked twice. The first time was on accident when he saw her naked through her window. He did not feel good about this and told her a day later, but she said it was alright and she did not care if he saw her naked and he felt that that kind of made her his girlfriend. The second time was three months later which made it last summer. He had seen her in the woods by the falled tree they played on and

she was crying. He asked what was wrong and she did not say anything but then she stopped crying and she began to touch him and then she began to touch herself too. He did not see her all the way naked then, only part ways, but he figured that counted and so he said she was his girlfriend.

The boy did not say this to explain why he had cut her up, but only because he thought this was what the policeman wanted to know. But the policeman did not acknowledge a thing he said, and so now he says nothing. If the policeman had asked, he would have talked about his finding out that she had touched other boys too--moreso and more often than he--and that that was when she stopped being his girlfriend, but the policeman did not ask. He is not interested in those little details and so the boy keeps on saying nothing.

The boy cut Shawnie up for what she said about his father, that he was crazy. The boy was going to say that but because the policeman did not and will not ask, the boy will not tell him. Even if the policeman asks now the boy will not say because he does not believe the policeman is interested--he is only interested in calling the boy a killer. But the boy is not a killer, he has killed no one. He will admit that he tried--twice in his life he has tried--but he has killed no one.

The first time he tried to kill someone it was his father and he prayed for it. And for a long time, two years, he believed it had worked. That was the time you had heard of before when he had stolen his father's shotgun and tried to run off to Canada. But the shotgun was too heavy for him to carry for long and it only had one round in it anyway. So what he decided to do was drop to his knees and pray to Jesus to kill his father. He said, 'Jesus let it be Your will that my father die. Let it be Your will that this bullet find him in the head,' and then he fired the shotgun in his house's direction and then dropped the shotgun and kept on walking. That night he was

picked up by a policeman--a different one, one a whole lot nicer than this one--and was told that his father was dead of a gunshot wound to the head. The boy then believed the bullet to be his and God to be real. And when he was sent two hours away to live with his grandmother he told her that he had killed his father and how and she said no, he did not, and then would never even talk about it again.

The boy now knows--thanks in part to the microfilmed newspaper in the school library and in part to some rumors that began that the boy's father was a killer--that his father died by suicide, that he had taken a newspaper office hostage and demanded they print a letter he had written, that he shot himself after they agreed, though they reneged after and the letter was never printed. The boy did not know what was in the letter but he had some idea: that he was a war hero and that he had been evicted from his house and he would have liked to see the man who evicted him on the battlefield. But all the boy knew was what the newspaper had printed: that the editor himself had come into the office as requested when he heard that a secretary had a gun to her head, that a madman threatened to blow the secretary's brains out if some godforsaken letter were not printed, that the editor agreed because the man meant business, that the man turned the gun on himself the moment police came through the door, that the letter could not be printed due to foul language, grotesqueries, and 'poor composition.' The newspaper had said nothing about his father being whisky drunk at the time of the incident and at the time of the letter's composition, but the boy knew that that was true as well.

The boy stopped reading the paper when it accused his father of poor writing. The boy did not like this because he believed his father had been a good writer. His father had told him that he had written a dozen quality stories and one of them--his best--had been printed in a magazine. The magazine could not be found today because it took a chance on quality writers; it

went under long ago. But this story was close in quality to Fitzgerald and Dickens and he was happy to see it printed anywhere. He had written it during the war years, though it was not about the war. Just the opposite. It was about a man with a family. The story went that there was a man with a family and he and the family always did right even though they never had any money and always came into misfortune. And the story just lets you walk in the family's shoes for a while. It wasn't any kind of action story; it was a literary piece. But then at the end of the story the man gets into an argument with a man from town. The two of them get into a minor car accident and even though it's nobody's fault the man from town talks down to the man and starts making personal swipes. And then the story ends with the man saying, 'I may not have much but I've kept my family under one roof. Can you say the same?' And the boy thought this was a very good story because the man from town could not say the same.

And so the boy became angry reading the newspaper article because he knew his father to be a good writer--say what you want about him, say that he was a bad man or an alcoholic but he was a good writer and if they printed his letter it probably would have made a lot of sense, probably too much sense. Probably it would have roiled whoever read it and that's why they didn't print it. And so the boy did not finish reading that article which was too bad because he did not get to the point where they mentioned what kind of gun he used. Probably it was that little snubnose his father had, because that was the only gun that his father owned except for the shotgun. That was the gun that his father caught him playing with and so he fired it next to his ear to teach him how powerful a gun could be. His ear rang for a day and he cried but he liked that little gun and part of him wished he could have read about it in print.

And so that is how the boy found out about his father's death, and also how he stopped believing in God.

But the boy made a mistake because he ran off, not wanting to read another word, but leaving the microfilm in the reader. It was found later by another boy and that's how word spread and rumors were confirmed that the boy's father was a killer or close enough. And it was only the next day that people began to ask what was in the letter. "What letter?" "The one your father wrote." "What letter?" "The one he wrote before he killed that girl." "He didn't kill any girl." "The one he wrote before he killed himself." And he went on answering questions like that. Though what really bothered him--what set things in motion--was six weeks later when it was Shawnie who asked. "Wasn't it your father that took over that newspaper house?" she asked. Almost sounding as if it were a new job of his, as if he were Charlie Kane. But it was the last of it for the boy and so he said, "Yeah. He was crazy and so am I. What about your father?" "No." "No what?" "No he isn't crazy." "Then why were you crying in the woods and how was it that you knew where to touch me?" And at that she got angry and began to cry. Then she told a few boyfriends to take the boy outside and beat him up and the first chance they got they did. That is, he thinks, why he was so angry at her--angry enough to bring a knife.

The policeman is talking now. He is standing above the boy, trying to intimidate him.

"How long," he asks, "did you plan on killing her?"

See the boy. He's getting ready to say something. He doesn't know what but he'll say something--you can tell because he's getting red and those are tears coming down his face. If he does not say something, he is bound to scream.

"I have not killed anyone," he says.

The policeman looks down on the boy. He sees as well how angry the boy is. "No. But you tried."

"Maybe I tried but that is not the same. I have not killed anyone."

The policeman does not know what to say because the boy is hollering now.

“I have not killed anyone. I have not killed anyone.”

You can hear the boy clear now. You can hear his voice all throughout the police station.

It sounds like his throat will split open and he'll bleed out. There is a lot of rage in that voice.

They do not know why now but they are soon to find out. Listen now.

“I have not killed anyone. I have not killed anyone.”

He cries. Though he does not cry because of the trouble he is in or because he knows the place he is going to go. He cries because for a moment he sees that girl's face somewhere in his mind's eye. He sees how pretty she had been. And then he sees all those bad things that had happened to her.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The story was inspired by the case of Evan Ramsey who killed two people in a 1997 school shooting in Anchorage, AL. Ten years prior, Ramsey's father had taken the office of The Anchorage Times hostage at gun point after they refused to print a political tirade he had written. The shooting occurred two weeks after Ramsey's father was released from prison. The question I wanted to ask with "The Boy who Killed No One" is whether violence is genetic and whether a person may will themselves away from it.*

BIO: *Zachary Hay was born in Detroit, MI in 1994. His work has appeared in The Arlington Literary Journal Online, Crab Fat Magazine and The No Extra Words Podcast.*