

Casper

A Novelette from

HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER

The Loveliest Shade of Red

An Anthology of Nightmares

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Warning

This anthology contains mature content, including explicit language, adult themes, gender and racial issues, scenes depicting graphic violence, explicit sex, self-harm and suicide.

Discretion is advised.

To all the monsters I've met along
the way.



*one of us is guaranteed
against failure or corruption
of any kind; witness what's
going on in the world in this
moment, the follies of
human nature and the
failures of human nature.*

— **Morris West**

I guess you could say that I'm a ghost. Well... maybe not in the traditional sense. I'm not the chain rattling, door slamming, blurry-image-in-your-peripheral-vision sort of ghost that all the scary books and movies are made of. But I am a ghost nonetheless. Or, at least it feels that way.

People don't seem to see me or hear me when I want them to.

Maybe I'm the sort of ghost who is stumbling around the earth waiting to take care of some sort of unfinished business. Maybe I'm a benign ghost, stuck in the limbo between Heaven and Hell that is Earth. The sort of ghost that doesn't even know he's a ghost until he drifts through a crowd, unnoticed, unperturbed, invisible. Yeah, that sounds right. That might be how you would describe me.

Sometimes I wonder if I've ever really lived at all.

There were so many times I would walk through the crowded halls of my high school without anyone acknowledging me. I would sometimes muster up the courage to hail my fellow students with a quiet hello here, or a polite nod there. Rarely would I ever get a response. Sometimes, on days I was feeling especially bold, I would smile at one of the cute girls (not popular-cheerleader good looking, but the sort of girl-next-door cute between very pretty and very plain that I may have actually had a shot at). Nada. No response, no hello, no nod, no wave, no nothing. Nil.

I wasn't sure if they saw me, because many of them SEEMED to be looking in my direction, but it was sort of as if I wasn't there. It was like they saw through me. So, rationally, that would make me some sort of ghost, right? Maybe not. There were times when I would address a person by name, or get too close to them (maybe one of the cute girls whose attention I couldn't quite catch), and it was evident that they would sense me. They would react with a snort, a grimace, an upturned nose, but not much else. So maybe I'm not entirely ghostly, after all.

When people DID see me, they always seemed to see me at the most embarrassing times. Trust me, I've had A LOT of embarrassing times.

There's one moment that keeps coming back to me like a recurring nightmare. It was a few weeks ago, on an April morning. There was still snow on the ground, but the weather was warm. I remember being excited about the warm weather. Warm weather meant the end of another miserable winter. Warm weather meant longer days were ahead. Warm weather meant baseball season, and few things got me more excited than a brand-new baseball season. The warm weather also meant that the school year would be over in just a couple of months, and after this particular day, pretty much all I prayed for was Summer Vacation.

I got to school earlier than usual that day, and saw that some of the seniors were playing a game of Texas Hold'em in the cafeteria. Texas Hold'em was what anyone with a deck of cards and a couple of dollars in their pocket was into. During the months leading up to that day I'd become hip to the Hold'em craze and I started to play online. I actually did pretty well for myself. I'd even managed to make a little bit of a profit. Sure, it wasn't actually real money that I was playing with, but winning is winning, imaginary internet money or not. Maybe it was my online success, or the Wheaties I'd had for breakfast, or maybe the other nerds that I talked to in the poker chatrooms and forums had given me a boost of confidence, I dunno, but for some reason I decided that morning I was going to play with the big boys, and I was going to win.

I walked over to the table where the game was being played. It was in the far back corner of the cafeteria where only the most popular kids hung out during lunch and on spare periods. I'd only seen the table from a distance before that morning. Seeing it up close was like grabbing hold of the moon after years of wondering if I could ever reach it. It didn't seem real. My heart raced faster the closer I got to the table. I could hear the conversation, smell the remnants of the fried egg and cheese sandwiches that had been pushed to the side of the table nearest to the cafeteria wall. I stood there along with a few other guys who were either waiting for the

right time to get into the game or just watching the money change hands. No one seemed to notice me.

I had obviously become a ghost again.

I cleared my throat in an attempt to get the players' attention. They still didn't notice. I was sweating at this point. My pulse was drumming at my temples. I'd never dared to be this bold before, I'd never tried to put myself out there like this. I suppose it makes sense that people rarely ever noticed me, now that I think of it. If you never fully step out of the shadows, how do you expect to be seen? I decided that it was time for me to stop being yellow. I cleared my throat again, this time not just hoping to be noticed, but because I was going to actually speak to the group,

"Hey... How much to get into the game?" I asked, admittedly meekly. The response was unresponsive. No one, not even the spectators, seemed to have heard me. As I said, I'm not sure what was driving me that morning because usually I would have accepted that I was still unseen and unheard, and I would've walked away. But I decided (at some point I can't remember) that on this day I would be bold, that I would be heard. I wouldn't settle for being their ghost anymore. So I called out to one of the players by name.

"Hey, Jamie! How much to get into the game?"

Jamie Wilson was one of the popular guys at school. "J-Wil" was what the other kids called him. Like, J-Wil decide if you are worthy, or J-Wil make or break your life. Jamie was the sort of guy whose name everyone knew, and who didn't have to know anyone else's name to stay popular. He was a member of the rugby team in the spring, and a member of the football team in the fall. He was tall, built, and had the classic blond hair and blue eyes that girls died for. But I don't have to tell YOU what Jamie Wilson looks like. You've probably seen plenty of his pictures by now.

At the point when I called his name on that warm April day, he was poorly hiding the pot for the poker game on the table underneath his Milwaukee Brewers ball cap. Upon hearing his name, Jamie broke his gaze from the two cards in his hand and

looked at me. I remember that moment clearly. His expression was one of genuine confusion. It was a look I had long since grown used to by that point. It was the ‘who the fuck is this guy?’ look. After a few ticks of the clock, Jamie literally shook the look off of his face and flashed a smile that confirmed why he was as popular as he was.

“Hey, buddy,” he said, still smiling. “We’re actually about to call it quits on this poker game and play some Extreme Blackjack. How much you got?”

I immediately reached for my wallet. I knew how to play Blackjack a little bit, but I hadn’t heard of Extreme Blackjack. I wasn’t about to admit that though; not when I was finally talking to the cool kids. I felt like I was finally close to being accepted by one of the most popular guys at school, and I wasn’t about to ruin that by acting like an ignoramus. I fanned through my wallet, pulled out its paper contents and flashed what I held to the guys at the table.

“I have about... fifty bucks. Is that enough?” I asked nervously, thinking of how many months’ worth of chores I’d had to do to earn this money from my mom. I was also thinking of my step-dad, and why I couldn’t leave the money anywhere but on me at all times, not even if I hid it in my bedroom. I wasn’t a big gambler, but I didn’t want to be excluded from this one chance to get in with these guys. They heard me. They SAW me. They looked at each other as if to confirm whether the amount of money I had would be acceptable. It was Derek Brown (another popular athlete) who spoke next,

“You’re lucky dude. Fifty is the minimum buy-in for Extreme Blackjack. Hand it to J and we can start up. You know how to play?”

Derek’s look was less conventional than Jamie’s. He was shorter, probably about five-nine (still much taller than me), and tanned with brown hair and green eyes. He was the sort of guy who exuded charm and charisma. I would bet that even if he looked exactly like me, he would have much more success with

the ladies than I could ever expect to have. He wasn't some transparent worm, unlike me.

"Yeah," I lied, as I fumbled with the bills in my hands. I gave over a ten, seven fives, and five singles to Jamie, who quickly counted the money and nodded to Derek. I sat at the table across from Derek, who had the deck of cards in his hand. I had to squeeze between two guys I recognized from back in my grade nine gym class; Jackson and Martin, the types of guys who were cool enough to be referred to only by their last names.

"Okay, it's nearly identical to regular Blackjack. I deal, and you tell me whether you want a hit or you want to lay down," Derek said the last bit while waving his hands over the table. I knew from watching my step-dad and his buddies play the game that the gesture was associated with staying with the cards you were dealt, but I'd never heard the term 'lay down' used before. I wondered when the extreme part of the game came into play, and hated myself a little bit more for not just admitting that I didn't know the rules. It was too late to admit my ignorance at that point, not without looking like a loser and a liar.

"Ready?" Derek asked. I nodded. I wasn't ready.

"I've always wanted to hang with you guys," I said nervously as Derek dealt us both two cards each, one of each of our cards was facing downward, the other was exposed, facing up. I was following the game so far; it didn't seem to deviate from standard Blackjack as far as I could tell. Derek smiled at me. The smile made me feel good. It made me feel like I was finally in.

My exposed card was a four of clubs. I took a quick peek and saw that my bottom card was a King of Hearts. Derek's exposed card was a Queen of Spades.

"Whaddaya say, hombre?" Derek asked in a rhythmic tone, smiling broadly at me after checking his bottom card. I knew he likely had me beat. I had to hope for a seven, and hope that the rules of extreme blackjack didn't vary too much from the original game. I lightly slapped the table with my palm and said,

"Hit me."

Almost immediately my head reeled backward. Initially I wasn't sure why I was being propelled in the wrong direction, but as the immense pain settled into the left side of my face, everything became all too clear. I toppled over while still in my chair, looking up, barely able to open my left eye. It was Martin that was hovering over me. I'll always remember how his eyes lit up maniacally as he and his friends laughed at me. It was like they'd been allowed to exclusively witness the greatest joke ever told. Like most nerds would be in this situation, I was speechless. I knew that anything I said would just make things worse, so I stayed silent, maybe hoping that if I was quiet enough, I would go back to being the unseen, unheard ghost that I was accustomed to being. Unfortunately, these guys weren't about to let that happen.

"You did say you wanted to hang with us, right buddy?" Jamie asked in a tone full of bad intentions. I would soon understand why he put an emphasis on the word 'hang'. He was now inches from my face as he grabbed me by the straps of my backpack (I always kept my 'pack on unless I was sitting in class) and pulled me to my feet. At that point I refused to say anything else for fear that they would use my words against me yet again. The details of what happened next will always remain a blur to me, but the end result has stuck in my brain until this day, and I'm sure it will remain in my head until I die...

After being dragged out of the cafeteria and through the hallways, the next thing I distinctly remember was being hung onto a tree by my backpack. They had hooked my backpack, with me still attached to it, onto one of the low hanging branches of a tree not too far from the school. It was pretty much right beside the dirt path that separated public property from school grounds, an area at the side of the school that half the kids would have to pass by in order to get into the building. J-Wil maximize your shame and ridicule, apparently. He and his pals walked away nearly stumbling over each other as they slapped each other on the back and pointed and laughed at me while they headed back to the entrance of the school.

I hung there for what seemed like hours; I can't quite recall the amount of time between my being hung up on that tree and the beginning of first period classes, but it felt like an eternity. The kids all laughed as they walked by me. So many of them. And there was no doubt about it this time, they were all able to see me at the most embarrassing of moments. I stayed silent and averted my eyes from their gazes and gestures. I remember wishing to God that I *was* invisible at that point. I wished to everything holy that I could go back to being my normal ghostly self for that moment.

The crowds of mocking faces grew thin as time passed. Eventually, there were only a few stragglers left around, none taking the time to help me down despite me breaking my silence long enough to beg them for help. The stragglers included the kids that liked school just enough to hang out around it, but not enough to actually attend class, as well as a homeless man who was often around the school begging for change. I remember clearly, through teary eyes, having those pothead eventual dropouts laughing at me. One or two of them even threw crumpled pieces of paper and other objects in my direction. Not all of what they hurled at me hit me, but the few objects that did land seemed to give them the thrill of a lifetime. They laughed uproariously between tokes of their cigarettes and joints, high fiving each other at my expense. Even the homeless man (who had no shoes on, and was so dirty that he looked like he'd spent his morning climbing up and down a well-used chimney) seemed to find my predicament funny. He stopped, looked at me, laughed while he slapped his knee, and then composed himself enough to approach the group of stoners for spare change. Imagine being mocked and scorned by a filthy, toothless bum.

But that wasn't the worst part of that morning. The worst part of it was when one of the smokers, who had just outed whatever it was he'd been puffing on, walked toward me, got right in front of me, and reached out for me. I recognized him from seeing him around the school. He was a few years older, he had a light beard and mustache, evidence that he probably ought to have graduated

two years ago. For a second I thought he was going to help me down. He was smiling, and I'd hoped that it was a friendly smile, the kind of smile that says 'alright, the kid's been through enough for the day'. But it was actually the smile of someone who wanted to rub a little bit of salt in my wounds. He pulled off my shoes. The others looked at what he'd done and began to yuck it up again, the homeless guy too. Then the homeless guy became serious when the shoes were waved in his direction. I said absolutely nothing through all of this, refusing to show them any emotion. I didn't want to feed into their cruelty. So I just watched as the homeless man's eyes became fixed on my shoes like a dog watching its owner wave around a stick. Then the older kid chucked my shoes across the path, into the trees of the wooded area across from the school. The homeless man went sprinting after the shoes, again like a dog chasing a stick tossed by its owner. They all watched him collect the shoes, put them on, do a little jig to celebrate his newly found prize, and then run into the woods. They laughed at him and they laughed at me. Their laughs were like razor blades against my ear drums.

Are you starting to see why I did what I did?

Well, at the very least I can take solace in the fact that I had let someone know that their own miserable life could be worse. That dirty homeless bum was better off than me. Still, as funny as a shoeless kid hanging from a tree by the straps of his backpack was, the novelty eventually wore off, and I was ignored completely. Once again, I had become a ghost.

Things didn't get any better for me when I got home that afternoon. Yes, I eventually got down from the tree. No, no one helped me. The straps on my backpack weren't strong enough to handle my weight for very long, and they eventually broke. I was simultaneously even more embarrassed and somewhat relieved. School had barely begun, but I knew I couldn't face another day in that hellhole. I gathered up my broken backpack and slowly trudged away from the school. This wasn't my first walk of shame. This level of embarrassment usually happened each of the few times I could actually be seen at school. I'd once had my head

dipped in the toilet by one galoot while another bully flushed. I guess I was wrong to think that that sort of thing only happened on TV. I'd been tripped while walking down the hall, or walking to my desk in class several times. I'd had an entire meal (including the drink) dumped on my head while I was minding my business and eating my lunch alone in the cafeteria. I'd had balloons full of paint thrown at me the day after being told that it was Wear All White Day at school the next day. I'd been here before. Lots and lots of times. You'd think I'd have known better. What the fuck was I thinking trying to play with the big boys? I deserved this; the pain, the hurt, the humiliation. It was my fault. I guess it's true what they say: if you don't know your place, you have to be put in it. At least that's what one of my mother's ex-boyfriends had repeatedly told me (usually when he was finding a reason to beat me up).

That memory made me pause. I couldn't go home. Not yet. I wasn't ready to face what I knew was there. So I went to one of the few strip malls in Moon Bay first to kill some time. I checked out the arcade that was about to close down; I'd lost my bills to Jamie and Derek, but I had about three dollars in change in my pockets. I managed to stretch that out for nearly two hours playing Street Fighter II, wishing that I could deliver a Blade Kick or a Sonic Boom or a Tiger Uppercut to the guys who had strung me up by my 'pack. When my change ran out, I hung around for a while, watching others play from a safe distance. Then I noticed that the owner of the place kept looking at the 'no loitering' sign, then at my feet, then my face, his annoyance turning to anger with each passing minute. I took the hint.

After the arcade, I'd roamed around the clothing stores looking at things I couldn't afford, holding my broken 'pack in my hands while the cashiers and salespeople gave me looks that were full of either pity, sorrow, suspicion or disgust. I'll never forget those looks. And, eventually, as I walked from store to store, I noticed that someone had put a security guard on me. A big, baldheaded, angry looking guard that looked eager to take whatever was bugging him out on whoever happened to fall in

his sights. I was the only person he was focused on. So I left the mall, walked the four miles to our apartment building, and even though my feet felt raw and cold by the time I got into the building, I decided to walk the six stories up to our floor, not in a rush to meet what I hoped would not be waiting for me inside of our apartment. But I knew that my step-dad would be home. I still hoped and prayed and begged any god willing to listen to make it so he wasn't home, or wasn't alive, or had ditched my mom like all of the others. But I knew he was home.

He was always home.

Though between him and the bullies at school, I figured he was the better choice. At least if he embarrassed me there wouldn't be hundreds of kids to see it. They wouldn't be able to laugh at me again. It was times like this when I wished I really was a ghost and I could just float by the old fart as he lay uselessly on the recliner. That never ever happened though, and this particular day was no different. It was nearly mid-afternoon by the time I got home. Too early to be home from school, but late enough that I might have been able to convince him that I'd had an early dismissal from last period. I hoped he wouldn't notice the time at all. The less explaining I had to do to him, the better off things generally were for me...

Before I tell you what happens next though, I should explain a bit more about my life. I'll try to be concise, as I'm sure you have a lot on your plate, and you probably have a lot of explaining to do because of what I did. Sorry about that.

I never knew my father. To be honest, I'm not quite sure if my mother knows who my father is, or was, or whatever. My mom didn't always make the best decisions when it came to men, so there was always a slew of men... well, some of them were so young I can barely use that word to describe them... going in and out of my and my mother's lives. Very few of them were good people, and most of them took advantage of my mother for one thing or another. But every time she fell apart, I was always there to pick up the pieces. For as long as I can remember it's always felt like I was the parent and she was the kid. Drugs, booze,

beatings, breakups and repeat. It's the same old story of the idiotic, single, fucked up, white trash single mother. That sounds harsh, I know. But it's all I know. It's who she is and it's all she ever showed me. Everyone's heard that story before, so I won't bore you with the details. What you do need to know is that one of her loser fuck-faced boyfriends actually stuck; my mother found her Prince. More Prince Harming than Prince Charming is what he turned out to be. It wasn't like he was a saint that suddenly turned sinner after their wedding. He was the sort of guy that was open about being an asshole pretty much right from the start, because he knew he had landed someone broken enough to take whatever shit he was willing to dish out. That was my mom.

When things were good between them, I was invisible. And, in this situation, I really, really liked that. But when things went sour (and they often did for little or no reason at all) it was like I was the only thing in the world. If there was ever a time I didn't want any sort of attention, it was when my step-father was angry. I tried to hide whenever that happened, but he'd always find me. The longer it took him to find me, the worse the punishment was. One time he got so angry that he broke my nose. I couldn't afford to go to a doctor to have it looked at properly, so I did my best to set it back into place by myself. As you can tell by the few pictures of me that are out there, I didn't do a great job of it. Oh well. Some good came out of that one situation though. I told him that a teacher of mine had noticed the bruises on my face and had asked what happened. I told my step-dad that I'd lied to the teacher and said that I'd banged my face into someone's knee while playing a game of two hand touch football with some of the neighborhood kids. My step-dad's response to that was a quick nod and a grunt after looking me up and down intensely. The sad part about it was that no teacher had actually noticed my face. I had lied to my step-father about the entire thing. It worked though, I got the result I'd hoped for: after telling him that lie, unless he was really, REALLY angry, he would usually avoid hitting me in the face when he was beating me up. Thank God, right? Wrong. You see, being bullied at school was awful, and

being bullied in my own home was unbearable. The combination of the two? Well... you've seen the result.

On the afternoon I was hung from that tree by the straps of my backpack, my step-dad was incredibly pissed about something, because he focused in on me as soon as I closed the door and walked into the hallway of the apartment. I fumbled nervously with my backpack, trying to nonchalantly hide the two obviously broken straps. I failed. My black eye and scuffed up clothes didn't exactly help draw attention away from me either. My step-dad rushed over to me. He wasn't concerned about my current condition, he was angry that the backpack and clothes that he had zero part in paying for were damaged. He glanced at my filthy socked feet but didn't react. We usually didn't wear shoes in the apartment, so I hoped that he assumed I'd quickly taken them off before walking into the hallway.

"Now what the fuck did you do to get your ass beat, you little shit? How're you gonna explain this broken 'pack to your ma? She works hard to give you the things you have, and this is what you do to 'em?" he half spat, half screamed directly into my face. He pronounced the word 'your' as 'yer', slurring it more than saying it. His breath smelled like beer and grease and overcooked onions. Beneath those smells there was the distinct scent of a set of teeth and a tongue that had gone too long without being brushed. I remember that pretty clearly. I wasn't sure what to say in response, so there was a brief period of awkward silence. Aside from the noises coming from the television in the living room, everything was silent and still. The TV said enough to explain his current mood though...

I should explain a bit more about my family (if you could call a collection of three absolute fuckups a family). My mother is a pushover and an enabler. My step-father was an alcoholic, an abuser and a compulsive gambler. His three vices were all made worse when they mixed together, like they were doing on that afternoon. I heard the Milwaukee Brewers broadcast from the TV in the living room and knew that he was losing a bet on his beloved Brewers. Baseball was his favorite sport (too many of

‘them darkies’ taking over football and basketball, he would often say. To him, those sports had been made ‘unpure’ because of that. He could tolerate the ‘spics’ in baseball, he would begrudgingly announce from time to time, because at least they seemed to appreciate the game). Things were great when he was winning. I would even occasionally get a high five or a friendly slap on the back. But when he was losing, look out!

“Umm... it wasn’t anyone that I knew. They saw me walking to school and tried to rob me for my ‘pack, but I fought them back and I ripped the ‘pack away from them. They ran off when a car stopped to ask what was going on,” I lied through my teeth. Lying had become far easier than telling the truth over the years.

“Well good for you, you little shit,” I could see him struggling to find a reason to continue this ‘discussion’, but he couldn’t find one. “Next time don’t get into shit with people that can kick your ass,” was all he could say. Luckily, he didn’t seem to notice that I should have still been at school. The losing bet and the half-dozen or so beers he typically went through before the twelve PM games had even started probably had something to do with that. I hid my smile and rushed towards my room, carefully listening to the Fox Sports Milwaukee broadcast. From what I could gather, Trevor Hoffman, the future hall of famer who the Brewers had recently acquired, had entered in the ninth inning and was in the process of blowing yet another lead for the Brewers as they faced the pitiful Shittsburgh Pirates (which was what my step-dad used to call them). Even though I was still in pain mentally and physically, it felt good to know he was experiencing some stress as well. Too bad that good feeling would soon vanish. Shortly after heading to my bedroom I would feel the extent of his rage.

It was a few minutes later when my hunger got the best of me. I hadn’t eaten since the bowl of Corn Pops I’d had that morning before school. I walked warily towards the kitchen, which was directly connected to the living room where step-poppa defined the term lazy boy as he watched the television from his recliner. I could see him as I tip-toed by. He was literally on the edge of his seat, squeezing at the peeling pleather armrests of his chair.

That was never a good sign. I decided to go about my business very quietly. All I wanted to do was make a simple sandwich, take it back to my room, and pretend I didn't live in a world where the score of a baseball game could predict my physical well-being. I managed to get the peanut butter, the jelly and the bread out of the pantry. I pretty much had my sandwich fixed without making a peep when I accidentally knocked the cap of the jelly onto the floor. The rattling sound the lid made as it spun on the linoleum seemed to reverberate throughout the apartment. It was one of those moments where it seems that everything else in the world pauses, and all a person can experience is the enormity of themselves fucking up once again. That's how I felt at that moment, like an enormous fuck up. The cap spun on the ground, again and again, and nothing else would matter in the world until that cap stopped its noise. I held my breath, hoping for the best. But what I got was exactly what I'd expected. Maybe it was what I deserved for being so careless. What was I thinking trying to make myself a sandwich? What was I thinking trying to not starve to death?

“What's with all the fucking racket?” He yelled from the living room.

“Nothing, sir. I'm just making a sandwich. I'm sorry if I disturbed you, sir,” I responded, hoping that being overly polite would do something to calm his obviously growing rage.

“Of course you disturbed me with that fuckin' clankin' an' rattlin'. And you better not be leavin' any goddamn crumbs on my counter!”

I almost thought to say that they were my mom's countertops, and that his lazy ass didn't contribute a damn thing to this unit, making it not his concern about the upkeep of the countertops or anything else. But I'm sure that if I had he would have killed me right there and then. Actually, it was my body that decided it was best to say nothing. I was frozen with my sandwich in my hand. Frozen because he had decided to get out of his chair and was rumbling towards the kitchen where I stood, staring stupidly at a mess of crumbs on the counter. And, even worse, at the splotch

of jelly that was on the counter beside those crumbs. I never did get to respond before he rushed into the kitchen. I just stood and stared in paralyzed fright as this man thrice my size rushed into the room, stumbling slightly as he often did when he got deep into a case of MGD.

He rushed straight at me, this giant lout who was supposed to be my parent, my caregiver. I winced and closed my eyes. That didn't stop him, of course. He stomped past me toward the fridge, the right side of his body banging into the right side of my body on his way there. It was as if he thought he could walk through me (there I was being a ghost again). The hard bump made me drop my sandwich on the ground. I looked down at it, knowing what it would mean if he saw the mess on the otherwise clean linoleum floor. I immediately dropped to my knees, racing to pick up the splattered sandwich.

“What the fuck did I tell you about keeping this place clean—” I looked up just as he had stopped his sentence. Oh how I wish he hadn't stopped his sentence. His eyes bulged insanely, and I thought he would shatter his jaw with the way he was grinding his teeth. Looking at him I nearly left another mess on the ground next to the sandwich.

“What is this? Goddamn it!” He bellowed. I tried to get up from the position I was in, kneeling and cleaning with most of the sandwich in my hands.

I'm not sure why I bothered to try to get up. I should have known better. He pressed the bottom of his bare foot against my forehead and pushed me backward. I landed hard on my tailbone, and, though it did hurt, I didn't dare let a sound escape my mouth. Any sign that what he did had hurt me would only encourage him. He fed on my misery. I sat on my ass with my hands behind me as he quickly removed his belt. I could see he wasn't really looking at me anymore. He was looking through me, perhaps picturing Trevor Hoffman causing him to lose his (actually my mother's) money, pitch by pitch. I didn't bother running. Running made it worse. He would inevitably catch me, and the extra effort

he put in would only make him angrier, making the beating he would give me even worse.

I remember closing my eyes and wishing that I could somehow disappear. I wished I could be anywhere but there. It was times like these that I wished I really was a ghost. My eyes were shut firmly when I heard a loud slapping sound and saw a flash of bright multicolored light. For a very brief and hopeful moment, I thought I was looking at a star-filled night sky. I stupidly thought for a split second that I had actually managed to teleport out of harm's way. That was until the pain brought me back to where I really was.

Have you ever been whipped in the face with a leather belt?

I bet you haven't. Golly does it hurt! I opened my eyes in time to see the man who had married my mother wrapping his belt around his fist (excuse me if my face bruised his precious knuckles). Long story short: he pummeled me until I blacked out. It wasn't as good as teleporting, but blacking out at least gave me a period of time where I didn't have to deal with the bullshit.

I was extremely groggy when I woke up. I remember wondering if this is what my step-dad's hangovers felt like. God knows he complained about them enough. You'd think that would get him to quit. Instead he usually just drank the hangovers away; something about a hairy dog.

I was flat on the kitchen floor with my ear resting in my fallen sandwich like it was a sticky little pillow. I'm sure you'll understand that I had lost my appetite at that point. To say I had a headache was an understatement; my head felt like he was still hitting it. After taking a quick inventory of myself and realizing that nothing was broken (only sore and bruised), I quickly slinked to the bathroom to check myself in the mirror, cleaning the smushed remnants of the PB & J sandwich from my right ear and cheek. My lips and chin were caked with dry blood (like a strange brownish-red mustache and goatee), my left eye was blackened further than it had been from my original beating that morning, and I had a huge purple stripe of a welt that ran diagonally across my face. I suppose my step-dad thought that my face was fair

game again since I had already been beaten up at school. Nice guy, right? Very thoughtful and considerate.

There was a large lump behind my right ear. Either he had landed a solid blow there with his fist, or that was where I'd hit the ground after he had beaten me into unconsciousness. Either way, it didn't feel good. What felt worse was going back to school the next day and having no one notice (or care) about what had happened to me. The teachers, the students, no one seemed to give a damn. There were a few whispers, snickers and chuckles from my schoolmates as I walked down the hallway with my head down and my hoodie up. I didn't know whether they were laughing at my face, or at the realization that I was the boy who had been hanging from a tree by his backpack the day before. It made no difference to me. Being laughed at hurts no matter what the reason is. You wouldn't think that a sound that's supposed to indicate pleasure could cause so much pain.

When I got home from school on the day after my beatings, I finally ran into my mother. She had been working a double shift the previous afternoon and night. We exchanged pleasantries while she did everything she could to not look me directly in the face. What a gutless bitch...

Wanna know what the kicker was? The absolute worst part of it all? At school I'd overheard a couple of guys in my fourth period geography class talking about the epic Brewers' game that they wished they'd been at the day before. It turns out that even though Trevor Hoffman blew the save (which was what had inspired my step-father's rage), The Brewers had come back and won the game in extra innings. All of step-poppa's anger was for no real reason. They won. He won. I lost. Hilarious, right? Maybe to a sadist.

No one spoke of that day in my house. The weeks went by without anything major going on (just the regular minor abuses to myself and my mother). It didn't take too long for that to change though. After a stretch of 'tough luck' for my step-father where the Brewers looked like they were headed toward yet another lost season, and the Bucks failed to cover a very

important point spread while being blown out by the Atlanta Hawks in game seven of the first round of the NBA playoffs, I wound up with my nose broken (again) and had to listen to my mother being raped through the thin walls of our apartment, not for the first time. Their sex used to sound kinda like the stuff I'd seen online, but after a while it turned into him yelling, her saying 'no' a bunch of times and then staying quiet (sometimes after the sound of him hitting her). Then, after he'd grunt and finish, I could hear her whimper or cry. Sometimes he'd mutter something to her if she cried for too long, then she'd go silent again.

That can't be what love sounds like, can it?

Anyway, my step-dad only decided to break my nose (this time) because one of the bullies at school had already done a number on my face after I'd accidentally stepped on his shoe a couple of days before. It was like my home bully was working along with the school bullies. This system seemed to work out very well for my step-dad; if anyone at school asked a question about my face, I could easily pin it on someone other than him. He didn't have to worry about being blamed or charged because others would have witnessed someone else get to me first. I have to give him credit, I never thought he was that clever. Anyhow, while I switched the blood-soaked cloth that had been beneath my nose with a fresh one and listened to my mother sob while my step-father reminded her that it was her wifely duty to pleasure him whenever he wanted (that's why they took vows, according to him), I realized that something had to change. I stood there, hearing her say 'no' again and again and too many agains for me to write down here. I stared into the bathroom mirror at my bruised and bloodied face as she begged for him to stop. But, of course, he continued on until she did nothing but weep and groan and then go so silent that I had to wonder if he'd finally killed her. The occasional whimper let me know that he hadn't.

I wished more than ever that I could go deaf at that moment. But turning a deaf ear and a blind eye to this situation hadn't helped before, and it wouldn't help now. It was then I realized that I'd had enough. I mean, even Casper the Friendly Ghost got

back at his mean old uncles from time to time, right? Right. I decided to wait in my bedroom, in the dark and with everything off so they'd think I'd gone to sleep. I listened as my freshly sexually abused mother left to work the graveyard shift at her second job that night, as she did several times a week in order to keep her two favorite boys clothed and fed. I waited further until my step-dad had sat in front of the television and gotten comfortable after what must have been a very exhausting evening of beating and rape. Then I waited another two hours as he drank himself to sleep in his recliner.

When I was certain that he was in a deep enough sleep (his snores could be heard from down the block), I snuck into their bedroom and into his closet, grabbing his most prized possession: an Ash wood bat signed by former Brewers' legend Paul "The Ignitor" Molitor. Molly was my step-father's ALL TIME favorite. Old step-pa had often said that a lot of people would die to have this particular baseball bat. As I looked down at the bat in my hands I laughed at the irony of that statement.

I left the bedroom with the bat in tow, not bothering to turn on the lights in the hallway. I walked through the darkness, dragging the bat on the floor behind me, for once not caring whether or not I was irritating or bothering the old asshat. When I reached the living room and stood directly over his sleeping body I wasn't sure exactly how I felt. Well, that's not entirely true. I knew I hated his guts, but for a very brief moment I wasn't sure exactly why. It's very difficult to put into words. I would be lying if I said that all the thoughts I had were negative. I did remember some good moments from the years I'd known him. We had gone to a few Brewers games together, driving the hour or so from Moon Bay to Milwaukee, listening to 'the talkin' heads' (as my step-dad called the broadcasters) on The Big 920, and talking about nearly every player in the Central. He'd told me a thing or two about how to improve my batting stance (and hopefully my batting average), and we'd even had a laugh together from time to time. Unfortunately for him, those few good times only made me angrier because they reminded me of what

my mother must have felt like: vulnerable to the man's charms, knowing that he was capable of at least acting like a decent fucking human being, while being all too aware of the monster he would inevitably transform into when he became upset by something that was out of our control. So, in a sort of twisted way, it was more the few good memories that I had that fueled my next actions. Those few good memories hurt me more than his being a constant asshole did. No one deserved to be treated the way my mother and I had been. No one deserved to repeatedly have the rug swept out from under them. After a while, you learn never to get up again. I knew my mom would never get up from under his bootheel, from under his thumb. But this was my time to rise up from beneath him. I watched him breathe, the rise and fall of his beer belly nearly hypnotizing me. The only light in the entire apartment came from the television set that was now behind me. The same set that he seemed to revere and appreciate more than his family. The same TV set that determined his mood, and determined my and my mother's well-being. He seemed so at peace with the bluish-white glare of the TV illuminating his body. He had one hand down his pants and the other loosely holding onto the neck of his beer bottle as it rested in the recliner's beverage holder. I smirked at the sight of it, of how different he looked being the vulnerable one. Like a sleeping cow instead of a raging bull. My smile got even bigger for a split second before it vanished altogether.

I horked up a giant loogie and spat it directly in his face. He didn't stir at all. I raised the bat and stood in the batting stance that he had taught me during some of the few and far between good times we'd shared together while watching the sport we both loved so much. A love that has diminished for me since baseball became the fuel behind so many raging attacks. I choked up on the bat just like he said was best to do. Choked up on that sumbitch barehanded like Jason Kendall did.

Not many people choked up on the bat anymore, he would say. But that's where a man gets his control, he would say... Control from choking something... I could see why the fucker

liked the idea of that. I nearly laughed thinking about it. His head sat on his neck like a ball on a tee, just waiting to be slugged. But I knew that I couldn't just swing at him as he slept. I had to do two things first. The first thing was inexplicable to me. And even now, as I write this letter, I can't tell you why I did it. I kissed him on the forehead (careful to avoid the spit on his face). The second thing I needed to do was to wake him up. I wanted to make sure that he saw me. No more being invisible until he was ready to attack me. No, I would be in control this final time. I wanted to make sure he REALIZED what was going on when he looked at me. I slapped him in the face as he had done to me on so many occasions. It felt really, really, REALLY fucking good even though he barely reacted.

I looked to the side of the recliner and saw that, in addition to the half dozen MGD bottles that were strewn on my mother's carpet, he had dipped into a large bottle of whisky. For some reason I laughed when I saw the bottle, and for the fun of it I slapped him again as hard as I possibly could. This time I hit him with the back of my hand (and it hurt ME! No wonder he liked to wrap his fist with his belt when he knew he was going to punch me in the face). He was roused by this, but only slightly. I shook him, grabbing his shoulder with my left hand until he grumbled a bit. He still wasn't fully awake. On instinct, I reached down and grabbed his testicles. I squeezed as hard as I possibly could with the Paul Molitor signed bat lingering over my right shoulder in the hand that wasn't grabbing his sack.

That did the trick.

He woke up, eyes bulging, teeth clenched in a grimace. And he saw me. He. SAW. Me. More importantly, he saw what I was going to do to him. I must admit, I loved seeing the fear and uncertainty in his eyes. More than anything else in this whole ordeal, I relished THAT moment. It must have been what he saw each time he beat up on me and my mom. I thought of my mother as I released my grip on his nuts and raised the bat high above my head, forgetting all of his advice about a proper batting stance. She would be sad and hurt. But the fact that she was with a man

like this said that she was probably content with being sad and hurt. Some people are just most comfortable when they're being broken. I wasn't going to let him turn me into one of those people. He tried to lunge at me, but with the mixture of hard booze and beer in his system he was barely able to sit up. I shivered with delight as I saw how helpless he was. With the bat still above my head, I brought my left hand back to his testicles once more, squeezing with every ounce of strength I had. He gasped. It seemed as though he was trying to speak, but by the time anything that sounded like words came out of his mouth I had choked up on the bat with both hands again.

I didn't give a fuck what he had to say.

Not anymore.

I swung with all my might at his left temple. He attempted to block the blow but his reflexes were nothing at that point. The first swing glanced off of the back of his hand and just grazed the top of his head. I didn't hit the way I wanted to, but I didn't mind at all. The more swings I would get, the better. Practice makes perfect after all. I laughed at that thought as I loaded up to swing again. Even in his alcohol induced stupor the man continued to fight for his life, blocking the second blow with his forearm. The sound of that arm breaking sent a shiver up and down my spine.

It was absolutely delightful.

There was no blocking after that, only a resounding and wonderful cracking sound like thunder as his skull fractured under the force of my third swing of the baseball bat.

"I swung for the fences on that one!" I said to him as his eyes began to glaze over and roll back in his head. Blood began to pour down the left side of his face. I was certain he had died nearly instantly; too quickly for my liking. But I still swung. I can't remember how many times I hit him with the bat, all I know is that by the end of the beating I was covered with his blood. I remember screaming: "Single! Double! Triple! HOME RUN!" I remember thinking that I'd just hit for The Cycle on this asshole's idiot head.

I was about to call it quits when he unexpectedly began to speak.

After the savage beating I had given him, he wasn't just still alive, he was aware enough to try to talk to me! I was amazed, even a little impressed.

"Pleashhhe... shhtop," I heard him slur through a mouth that had been beaten to mush. Blood bubbled and dripped out of his mouth after each word. "No more. Pleashhhe... shhon." He hesitated before saying the word son. I wasn't sure if it was because I had beaten him halfway to retardation, or if he was pausing for dramatic effect. Either way, the notion of him calling me son (for the very first time in my life) was so absurd and confusing that I could do nothing but laugh out loud. I think I laughed for several minutes straight, directly in his face. I laughed in his face the way he had screamed in mine so many times. I laughed until I cried. Son?! I was no son of his, and I made sure to let him know that. I made sure that my lesson to him would be the last thing he would ever hear.

"You didn't stop when SHE asked you to stop, did ya, you fuck? I'm no fucking son of yours, you mother raping, child abusing cocksucker. You Goddamn BULLY! And unless my mom is pregnant with your boy right fucking now, no one will EVER be a son of yours!" I went to swing at his head once more, but stopped myself before my bat could move forward. Again, I kissed him on the forehead. I don't know why. I tasted the sweat and blood that coated his face. I could almost taste his fear; I could almost taste his death. All of it tasted sweet; sweet like the peanut butter and jelly sandwich that he had bumped out of my hands. This was sweeter though. Far, far sweeter. I choked up, reared back, and I swung for the fences with every ounce of strength that I had.

"GRAND SLAM MOTHERFUCKER!"

I'd like to say that the sound was indescribable, but you've probably heard it before. You've likely heard it when an axe splits the trunk of a tree or when a wooden bat hits a baseball squarely and everyone knows it's outta here. It sounded something like

that. His jaw shifted insanely in his face before he slumped down in the chair, his chin resting on his right shoulder at an angle so ridiculous I knew he had to be dead. I was disappointed that I hadn't been able to remove his jaw entirely, but he was dead, and I was happy for what seemed like the first time in my life. I flipped the bat over my shoulder and did a worthy imitation of Ryan Braun's homerun trot around our little living room. It was the most exhilarating feeling that I'd ever had in my life up until that point. And I didn't want that to be the last time I experienced that magical feeling. I wanted to feel it again and again.

So, what did I do next, you might ask? Well, Detective, or Constable, or Sergeant, or whatever your rank is, I'm sure you've found his body and you can piece together what happened next. I wanted THEM to feel exactly how I felt when they bullied me, when they hurt me. I wanted *them* to know what I went through every single goddamn day. You know who I'm talking about: the boys who beat me up just because I wanted to play a game of cards with them. The girls who brushed me off just because I thought enough of them to say hello. I wanted THEM to know what it felt like to be a ghost like me. So I returned to my step-dad's room and went into the closet. That's where I found his rifle and both of his handguns. The firearms were unlocked and loaded. That's my step-dad for you. Safety first, right?

For the first time since he entered my life, I was very happy that he was such a careless fucking slob. I made sure to pack very carefully for school the next day. I didn't need my text books or my lunch, as you can imagine.

I slept very well that night.

I had made it so that my step-dad finally saw me, and I would make sure that the rest of them would see me too. They would see me, and they would all remember who the fuck I was. The ones I didn't take might say stuff like:

“Hey, wasn't that the guy in our Calculus class?”

“Wasn't he the guy that would keep his shirt on during swim class?”

“Was he the guy who had an anxiety attack whenever we had to present?”

“Wasn’t he the nerd we all got our English answers from?”

Yeah assholes, that was me. You never saw me, but you damn sure saw my answer sheets. That’s okay though, they’ll remember me. They will all know who I am after this. So yeah, I’ve taken my step-father’s guns and the keys to his van. I just want them to know what it feels like to be a ghost. To vanish.

Anyway, I thought that leaving this letter would be the polite thing to do. So, Chief, or Constable, or whoever, if you’re reading this then I may literally be a ghost by now; we all might be. But that’s okay, they’ll all have SEEN me, and they’ll all remember exactly why they know who I am. I sincerely hope this helps with your investigation.

Yours Truly,

Casper

The Milwaukee Daily Reader

SOURCE SAYS STEP-SON OF MOON BAY MAN FOUND BEATEN TO DEATH MAY BE LINKED TO THE DISAPPEARANCE OF 7 LOCAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS.

By Randolph Vendetti, Tuesday, May 4th, 2010

www.milwaukeeailyreader.com

Raymond Anderson, a Moon Bay resident, who was found beaten to death early Monday morning as he sat and watched television in his living room, may actually be one of many victims.

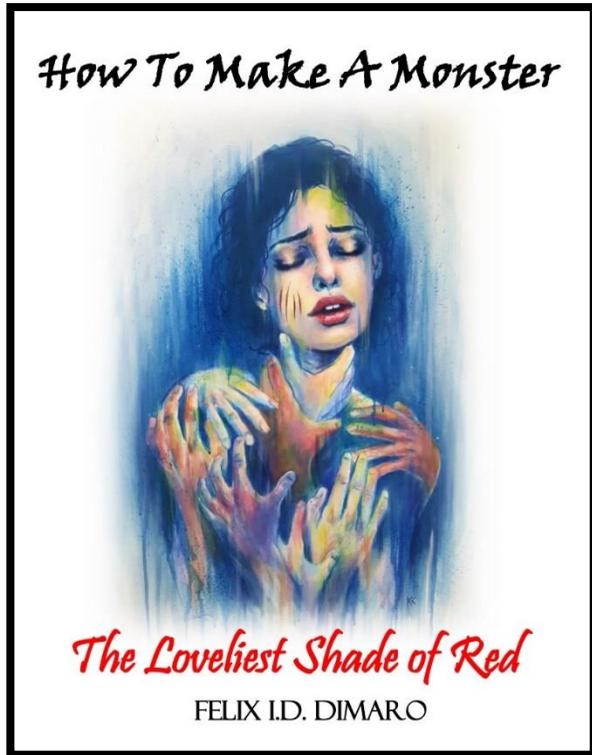
Speaking anonymously, a source close to the Moon Bay police department has provided new details in the case based on evidence found in the form of a note written by Anderson's step-son, Ethan Musgrove, who is one of the seven students who has gone missing. This note is said to detail the reasons behind, and description of, the cold-blooded murder of Anderson by Musgrove. Within the note, Musgrove is also said to have alluded to the fact that he planned on making some of his fellow classmates, who he alleged to have bullied him, "vanish."

Musgrove is said not to have gone into great detail about the missing students, other than to have definitively named four of his six schoolmates who recently disappeared from Riverview University High School. Jamie Wilson, Derek Brown, John Jackson and Spencer Martin were all said to have been mentioned in Musgrove's letter. Along with the four abovementioned boys, Celeste Willingham and Leslie Morton have also been reported missing.

The police are looking to the public for help in solving this upsetting mystery and ensuring the safe return of all of the students. If you have any information, please contact your local police station or Crime Stoppers at **(414) 962-4258**

Thanks for reading!

If you enjoyed this story, check out the rest of the book



And please don't forget to post, rate and review.
It goes a long way.

– DIMARO