

Jeff no longer called his story “The Heliotrope”. Previously, when he was more eager to please the various forces in and the guides to and the bouncers outside of the exclusive clubs of literature, he acceded to the advice that his title should be plainer and more direct. And consistent with the relentless counsel from every direction to the effect that every aspect of every story should grab the reader’s eyes by the balls from the very get-go, Jeff was repeatedly told that his title should clearly state the ingredients of the narrative. Compliant and open-minded, he suppressed his curiosity as to whether some of the world’s greatest short stories would have been better if titled “The Man who was Tricked into Stepping behind a Wall in the Basement and Bricked in for Revenge” or “The Man who was Hanged but Dreamed in his Dying Moment that he Escaped.” Instead of questioning the wisdom, he retitled his confession, “Why I killed Roger Wong.” Though six months had elapsed since he took this step, however, Jeff could discern no increased willingness of people to read his story, or at least to read past the first paragraph.

(And his original envisioned form of the story was no epic, anyway. The significance of “The Heliotrope” to the circumstances leading to the murder of Roger Wong might require a reader to reach the fourth or fifth page. It wasn’t buried.)

So Jeff’s professional-style poster, representing about the last format of quasi-publication Jeff could think of, was also titled “Why I killed Roger Wong.” The conference program book had arrived as a zip-filed PDF at the start of the week. When Jeff signed up for the Conference, the organizers had implied that a well-chosen title might inspire some attendees to reach out with questions in advance. Jeff also dared to hope that the organizers of the more prestigious “paper sessions” (where a researcher was equipped with a podium and

a set amount of time and an audience, or at least the seats that might potentially contain an audience) might reconsider and select “Why I killed Roger Wong” as a substitute for a paper that may have been withdrawn. Like many conferences, the one Jeff was attending had paper sessions in exclusive meeting rooms and a poster session for submissions that hadn’t qualified for paper sessions, all presented at the same time with each author standing by his or her poster. No one had reached out to Jeff about his entry being upgraded, so here Jeff was.

The St Romuald Conference for Colloquial Criminology was situated in half the basement cafeteria of the Student Center, that half being split between a Registration area and the poster area, with an island between that seemed to be dedicated to vendors. After registering, and picking up a jazzy lanyard for his ID badge, sassily striped with St Romuald’s school colors of saxe and light pearl, Jeff checked out the meeting. Two were locked but industrious AV people were in the third, haughtily checking a projection system. Twenty-four chairs with gold padding were arrayed in a space of about twenty by forty, representing twenty potential witnesses for whoever had been fortunate enough to be tapped for a paper instead of a poster. One chair was already occupied by a man gnawing on a listless bagel; the man had a complete suitcase as well as a briefcase on the next chair. The man’s lanyard was tangled insouciantly with a sweater he wore like a cape; Jeff longed to read the badge and commune with a fellow confrere, but the lettering on it was blocked from sight.

(Early on, Jeff would try to reason with the writing instructors and other experts about the unseemly obsession with the first few sentences. *The Great Gatsby*, he would point out, starts with “In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since.” That sentence would grab no one’s attention and

gives no information to the reader except, get comfortable, it's going to take this one a while to get to the point. The instructors never agreed, and Jeff came to realize that for many of them, the point of the title and the first sentence is that, for the vast bulk of would-be writers, one sentence is all the attention they have a right to expect from the busy people who were already in the writing club and didn't need to prove themselves by the ordeals designed for amateurs.)

(These busy instructors were only taking their cues from literary magazines. Jeff had an uncle who had tried to get stories published and described what it was like in, say, the 1980s, preparing a manila envelope that contained a full printed copy of the manuscript and also a second envelope, folded inside it, and stamped with enough postage for your rejected story to be sent back to you. Every writer in the 1980s knew the term SASE, and no one questioned the requirement that you always address your rejection letter yourself because the busy paragons should not be expected to bother themselves to handwrite or type your insignificant address. Your manuscript would come back folded in half with a card apologizing that your story didn't fit their needs, which might have a hand-scrawled editors name in teal ink at the bottom, or might not. Eventually the magazines caught up with computer printing and acknowledged if the author didn't want the manuscript back, he or she could just send a regular envelope with one twenty-five cent stamp and settle for the rejection card alone, handy for a bookmark or emergency coaster. Email submission of manuscripts made things even easier for the writer and more friendly to the environment, and as an added bonus, made it practical for a bot or algorithm to generate the rejections without the delicate intervention of a human soul. Even this relentless paring of the extent of human involvement in rejection was not enough, so the periodicals launched the brilliant expedient of creating story ghettos for the outside writers.

Now you could submit “flash fiction”, limited to 500 words or so, and published in a special area that didn’t disfigure the hallowed pages for the real writers. Correspondence on your flash fiction was always accompanied by the opportunity to donate to the magazine. Jeff had tried to reduce his confession to 500 pages for one flash fiction contest but despaired – how could anyone understand why he had murdered Roger Wong without the proper setting and context and atmosphere? When one of his potential magazines offered a “six word story” contest, Jeff didn’t even try.)

The St. Romuald conference program encouraged poster presenters to be ready at their displays for the very outset of the session, and not to linger at the opening talks. Jeff could just barely hear the greetings begin in a gathering area away from the poster area, on the outskirts of his senses, a friendly buzz punctuated by an occasional smirk of feedback. The easel containing his poster was one of about sixteen spread out in the hall; maybe a third of the easels had a poster and about half of that third had a presenter standing guard like himself. When the speeches ended and there was a happy shuffling of feet, Jeff waited for the onslaught of observers but none appeared for quite a while. He reconnoitered and looked uncomprehendingly at two posters that were unattended. They seemed to address an arcane aspect of crime science that was apparently not designed in any way to affect the incidence of crime. A third was empty but had an interesting apology note on a purple index card.

A dapper gentleman with a white goatee and a loud plaid jacket appeared, and all of the poster presenters immediately stiffened, ready for his interest and his questions. The gentleman beamed at the presenters but walked deliberately at an equal distance from each of the posters, avoiding any eye contact and just flitting on each title long enough to reject it as

worth a stop. A few minutes after the disappointment of his departure, a couple of the other more extraverted poster presenters abandoned their easels to look at each other's displays, asking animated questions.

Jeff did not know what to hope, but presently one of the wandering presenters wandered to Jeff's easel. "What do we have here?" the visitor said in a businesslike manner. "Walk me through this."

"Roger Wong and I were hired the same day, six years ago," Jeff began. "At the beginning we were friendly to each other, and I even believed we were friends. The learning curve where we worked was steep, and everyone needed an ally..."

"Well, give me the big picture," said the visitor. "Just the overview."

Jeff hesitated. "What kind of overview?" The visitor was silent, so Jeff continued, "Should I just state in a sentence why I killed Roger Wong? I could attempt to do that, but it would lose something compared with how I am presenting it here."

"Let's try it another way," said the other presenter with patience. "What's your bottom line? What do your results prove? What lesson are we to draw? And if your results are inconclusive, what can they tell us about the search for other results?"

Jeff drew a blank. "Don't act like Roger Wong. Or if someone does, don't react like I did. It isn't worth it."

The visitor said "thank you" halfway through this precis and moved on to another poster with a perfunctory flick of his eyes to suggest he had absorbed Jeff's text and graphics in a blink.

Jeff thought he should return the favor and strolled over in a few minutes to read the poster of his visitor, but lost his nerve on the way and ventured into the vendor area instead.

The vendor strip of the cafeteria was equipped with eight tables, each covered in a full-length tablecloth with curtains of the same color behind the seat or seats of the vendors. In a couple of the booths, there was a pair of salespeople who spoke only to each other. A third had a brightly-colored bowl full of keychains; Jeff saw a civilian reach for one of the keychains who was then accosted by a salesperson describing some sort of software. A booth selling *The Journal of Colloquial Criminology* was relatively popular; the salesperson was apparently hooking passersby by plausibly claiming they would be great potential authors for an article in his journal. Jeff was somewhat sophisticated about this ploy since he had also submitted his confession to that particular journal and received an email back stating that it did not fit their editorial profile and thus had not been sent out for review.

Some of the other vendors slumped with haunted eyes before displays with nonsense logos that gave no hint of the nature of their wares. Jeff avoided these and walked deliberately at an equal distance from each of the booths, avoiding any eye contact and just flitting on each one long enough to reject it as worth a stop.

(A week before the poster session, Jeff had gone to the local police precinct to confess officially, in the normal recommended manner. He was shown a waiting area and given a number. A nice red-faced cop called him up to a desk and was completely unfazed, when Jeff indicated he had murdered someone and needed to make a statement; he had anticipated that these very words would call out reinforcements and handcuffs and an evacuation of the

observers and nonviolent perps. The policeman brought over a form the size of one magazine page that was subdivided into fourteen different-sized boxes. The title at the top said, "Form 107A-version f, confession to Manslaughter".

There was a line behind Jeff and he anticipated that if he had any questions about Form 107A-version f after leaving the red-faced policeman's desk, he would lose his turn. "Would it be possible to make a verbal statement?" he asked. "This form is a little confusing. Maybe hearing my story, an expert like yourself could help me fill out the form properly. Save everyone some time."

The man at the desk brushed him aside gently. "This is the preliminary. We'll have you fill this out, and we base an interview on that if it turns out to be called for. There is a little cubby behind that wall if you need some privacy."

The form seemed to be a photocopy of an original that had been tilted on the copy machine, and possibly spilled upon. Another box used obscure language but seemed to call for the means of the murder, so he filled that in. Then Jeff reached the box labelled "Motive", which had small print instructions he had to squint to read. The small print read "Use a maximum of 18 characters. Any information beyond 18 characters will not be processed." That was the dealbreaker for Jeff but when he left the paper behind in the cubby, he included his phone number so that anyone who wanted more detail could reach him.)

The poster session attained a listlessness that made its former state of listlessness seem like a beehive, and Jeff felt safe to wander even further afield from his station. The school building of St. Romuald was part of a parish, unsurprisingly. St. Romuald was an impressively

old-fashioned pile of rain-colored stone, punctuated by smoky stained-glass windows and exuding confidence and solidity. There were newly-painted bars on most of the windows but the oak door by the sermon board was propped open by an iron.

A word on the sermon board outside the church caught his eye: "Confessions."

High windows admitted a quantity of sunlight into St Romuald's; the pews were peaceful and sleepy and there was a pleasant note of wax among the interior smells. One confessional was open, labelled with the name of a priest. No other confessors were visible but an old woman with a rosary knelt near the altar, far from the confessional.

"Welcome, my child," said the priest when Jeff entered. The cleric sat facing forward so that his ear seemed to face the person in the confessional. There was a kneeler in the confessional but Jeff had a vague feeling that, as a non-Catholic, he would seem to be mocking the sacrament if he knelt.

"I wish to make a full confession, Father." Jeff took a deep breath and caught a whiff of a recent cigarette. "It started on my first day of work. Roger Wong and I were hired the same day. At first I thought we would be friends..."

The priest held up a tolerant hand. "That's a lot of detail, my child. Why don't we start with the sin in question. Our parishioners find it easiest to give the number of the commandment that has been sinned against, or commandments if there are multiple sins."

"Oh, the Ten Commandments. Let me see. The sixth – I have broken the sixth Commandment."



“Committed adultery? Make an Act of Contrition and then say one Hail Mary and one Our Father.”

“No, murder. I killed someone. Thou Shalt not Kill.”

“That’s the fifth Commandment around here. Are you Catholic, my child?”

“No Father. Is that a problem? I am still called to confess, right?”

“Yes, and welcomed here.”

“Thank you, Father. So, returning to my Confession, it started on my first day of work. I thought that Roger Wong and I were probably going to be friends. Roger Wong is the murder victim, I should have mentioned that. So on our first day, our mutual first day-“

“I apologize for interrupting, but what we are offering this afternoon is what we like to call Rapid Confession. My parishioners much prefer it. Really you just need to name the Commandment and make an Act of Contrition. And you have already identified the Commandment, even if you numbered it like a Protestant.”

“Oh. But you need some context, to understand why I committed the sin.” Trying to interpret the silence, Jeff continued, “to understand the magnitude of my crime. The heinousness and depravity. To understand the grave sinfulness of my sin, you need to start on the day I met Roger Wong-“

“I think you might be better helped by our Full Confessional Service. Our parishioners don’t tend to prefer it, but we do continue to offer it. We are having one of those the last Saturday of the month.”

“Oh. Father, I know this is very irregular, but would you be able to hear a Full Confession now? I have murdered someone – it would be wrong of me to wait so long before Confessing.” Again he tried to read the room, though it was such a small room. He changed his mind and took the kneeler, which felt like a rock with a tissue on it for padding. “What if I died before Confessing with mortal sin on my soul?”

“You may confess right now. In fact you have, and can make an Act of Contrition. But I can’t hear your Full Confession now because this is the time we have scheduled for rapid Confession. It wouldn’t be right for the people who are waiting for rapid Confession, you can agree with that, right?”

“But there is no one waiting right now, Father.”

“Perhaps they stayed away because they, like you, were waiting for Full Confession. In that case, it would be taking advantage to offer Full Confession this afternoon, can you see that?”

“Thank you, Father.” Jeff rose to his feet, with a January ache in his knees that seemed to spread to his back and shoulders.

“You can still make an Act of Contrition,” the cleric suggested.

“No thank you, Father. It wouldn’t feel right without having made a Confession.”

Jeff did not return to the poster session, but proceeded toward the street in front of St. Romuald, kicking his left leg now and again to dispel the pins and needles. There was a somewhat busy divided highway in front of St. Romuald’s and it was nearly commuter time. He

watched the nearest light turn and the pedestrians scurry perpendicular to the stopped traffic, hastened by a Walk signal that didn't seem generous. It occurred to Jeff that the patch of grass in the median next to the crosswalk was the kind of a place where a prophet or visionary in older times might stand on a soapbox and harangue bystanders. That led Jeff to wonder about soapboxes. Upon reflection, he could not recall ever seeing soap come in a box, let alone the kind of sturdy receptacle that could double as a stool.

When he turned back toward the school, a flash of Crayola red caught his eye – it was a rack full of firetruck-colored milk crates next to a side door of the school. In modern times, a sturdy plastic milk crate was more like the kind of thing on which someone could stand at an intersection. Jeff didn't like the idea of stealing one of the crates. It seemed pointless to break one commandment to confess to another. But stealing, or rather borrowing, the milk crate was certainly a smaller sin. Five minutes later, Jeff had one of the crates in his hand and took his place at the crosswalk, waiting for the next Walk signal.