

Steve and Dillon

Impatient sirens blared from the front parking lot of the school. Students rushed to their parents to find safety in their urgent arms. Fire trucks and ambulances lined up right up to the double glass and wood doors that led to the front office information desk. EMTs rolled gurneys and medical supplies into the chaotic foyer, past trophy cases and a four-foot tall ceramic statue of a shiny black panther. On the tiled floor in the center of the foyer painted in the school colors of red and black lay the circular emblem of Washington Heights High School.

Eyes unblinking, Steve Hilmer handed his father's handgun to the police officer as nonchalantly as if he were giving the man a book or a pen. Then he unloaded the rest of the ammunition in the AK-47 and gave it and the rifle to another officer. He held up his hands for the pat-down. Steve had watched enough *Law and Order* television shows to know that he should hold out his wrists for the handcuffs and listen politely as the female detective read him

his rights. He paid no attention to the shouts and barks of orders surrounding him. The sight of spreading pools of blood from the felled victims on the cafeteria's linoleum floor did not interest him, nor did the waves of white plastic sheets being shaken open and laid over the bodies.

Only mildly curious as to what would happen next, he reveled in the frantic scrutiny of all the adults who pressed around him, clamoring for him as reporters did high-ranking politicians caught in some unsavory endeavor. At last, he was an important person because he was in that elite group of high school students who had captured the country's attention by lethal action. He wondered if he would have a chance to call his mom to tell her to watch the "breaking" news. *Look! There I am in handcuffs, arm in arm with a couple of sheriff deputies. I'll try to wave at the camera.*

Several hours later, after being processed, fingerprinted, and photographed, Steve was put into a jail cell by himself to sit and wait. Every few minutes an overweight guard sauntered by and glared at him, saying nothing. Steve wanted to talk but the stern looks kept his mouth closed. The small, bare room smelled like damp concrete and industrial floor cleanser. There was no window, nothing of the outside world to gaze upon and appreciate. So, the teenager became bored quickly. He wasn't tired or sleepy, and he had been fed an adequate meal earlier. All he could do was to wait for the guard to walk by again.

"Steve, darling! Are you all right?" announced a distraught, feminine voice.

Jack and Donna Hilmer stood at the cell door, their anxious arms outstretched through the bars.

"Mom! Dad! Of course, I'm all right. I'm fine." Steve quickly stepped to the cell door and took their hands. "What do you think about my new jump suit? Pretty cool, huh?"

"Ten minutes, folks," said the guard as he unlocked the door.

More hugs followed and the three sat on the bench against the wall. Steve's mom kept rubbing her son's neck and shoulders. "When we heard what happened at the school, we thought the worst."

"We worried you were in the cafeteria mixed up in the . . ." Jack Hilmer stopped abruptly as if something was caught in his throat.

Steve beamed proudly. "But I was, Dad. I was the shooter. It was great!" He slapped his palms on his knees. "I only missed three times. Nineteen rounds. Your Glock nine is a fantastic weapon. I wish I could do it all again. Our target practicing sure did . . ."

"Son, do you understand what you did? Nine students are dead, two might not make it, and five are badly wounded. What in God's name were you doing?"

Donna Hilmer began to cry.

Dropping his grin, Steve replied, "Gosh, I know what I did. But now I'm famous. Don't be disappointed in me, Dad. It'll . . ."

"Disappointed? Are you crazy?" His father stood and paced the cell.

Another man, in a perfectly-tailored gray suit and blue tie, appeared at the cell door. "I'm Attorney Franklin Oates." He held an expensive-looking briefcase. Once inside, he sat next to Steve, opened the briefcase, and took out a legal pad and a pen.

Steve's parents looked at each other in confusion. Mrs. Hilmer said, "We didn't . . ."

"I received a call from a Mrs. Alice Hummel. She's Steve's grandmother, is that right?"

"Yes. She's my mother," Mrs. Hilmer answered cautiously.

"We'll be going for an insanity plea." Mr. Oates began writing. "There'll be an interview with the state's psychiatrist. We will counter with our own. I recommend . . ."

"Wait a minute!" Steve stood quickly. "I'm not insane!"

The lawyer nodded. “Good, good. That’s what you’ll need to say. A truly insane person doesn’t know he’s insane. Good thinking, Steve.”

“What?” Jack stopped pacing and turned to the lawyer whom he didn’t know. “There’s nothing wrong with my boy. He’s a good kid . . .” He would not return the distraught look from his wife.

“The district attorney will no doubt want to prosecute Steve as an adult—there’s precedence for this sort of thing—and we want to get him into a psychiatric facility. He’s not eighteen yet, is he? Of course, if he’s tried as a juvenile he may end up at Rossdale Correctional Facility. Not a good place to be in, even for hardened teens. But it would be worse if he were tried as an adult.”

“This is all too much. I don’t know what to think or to do,” said Mrs. Hilmer. She took a tissue from her purse.

“We should leave things to Mr. Oates,” Jack told her, trying to muster a reassuring tone of voice. He awkwardly patted his wife’s shoulder. “He knows what’s best.”

His wife stood and whispered, “How are we going to pay him?”

“Hey! Don’t forget about me!” Steve piped up.

“Don’t worry about my fees,” said Mr. Oates. “Mrs. Hummel has made the arrangements.” The other three just looked at him as he smirked while closing his briefcase. What they didn’t consider the publicity this case would generate for his firm.

The next day was the arraignment, and Steve was charged with ten counts of first-degree murder (one of the wounded students had died during the night at the hospital). He was remanded without bail. Again, while watching the proceedings with great interest, he basked in the spotlight of the news people who surrounded him at every turn. The youth literally had to hold his tongue between his teeth to keep from talking, as advised by Mr. Oates. All in all, it was fun stuff. The only downside was the insistence by the defense attorney of claiming insanity, which to Steve was bogus defense. He had never felt more in control of his mental capacities than now.

When he bothered to think about what he'd actually done, he dismissed his actions as being as meaningless as playing a video game. The aim had been to destroy, to terminate, to obliterate the targets. His father had often told him to try to be the best at all of his endeavors. The shooting was no different. With the hours of practice in both video games and shooting tin cans in the woods near his parents' house, his training paid off yesterday. He would admit having a competitive spirit, even if meant competing against himself in the shooting spree. That day's efforts had been a total success, a day to go down in the history books.

Sometime during the night he awoke to the sound of someone saying his name. Sitting up in his bunk, he looked around, seeing no one. The intense light from the hall made him squint. Sighing, he laid back and closed his eyes.

“Steve.”

The voice was definite. It was a male voice, young and clear but faint. He got up and looked into the hall to see who was calling him. There was no one.

This calling of his name occurred the next night, and the next. Steve knew someone, probably another prisoner, was playing games with him. The voice always said his name in the same subtle tone. Finally, on the fourth night and having enough of this, Steve spoke back to the voice:

“What do you want? Why are you calling me?”

Blinking again and again, Steve saw the apparition standing several feet away from his bed. It was the form of a milky white youth, so transparent that Steve could see the opposite wall behind it. The image swayed about, opening and closing its mouth and waving its hand. Steve’s heart went into overdrive. Fear clutched the marrow of his bones.

“Steve,” it moaned again. “Steve. Why, Steve?”

Before it disappeared, it became almost recognizable. “Wait!” Steve stood to get closer to it.

But the apparition dissipated like smoke. Steve decided he had been dreaming.

The next evening while Steve ate his supper, he felt a presence next to him. To his right he saw one of the students whom he had shot, Dillon Phieffer. A huge patch of blood soaked the front of his shirt. They met eyes, but Dillon did not smile. The sadness in his face spoke to Steve. *You did this to me.*

Before Steve could speak, Dillon vanished. Reluctantly, the youth turned back to his meal, although he had no appetite.

Unable to sleep that night, Steve tossed in his uncomfortable bunk, his whole body attuned to hearing his name. By morning he was exhausted and nervous. He refused his breakfast, despite aggressive pushing by the guard. Today was Steve's interview with the state's psychiatrist, and he dreaded it.

They met in an empty room on the ground floor of the prison building. Everything was gray, including the chairs and table. The antiseptic dampness hung in the air in the quiet, cool room.

The psychiatrist introduced himself as Dr. Beaumont. Being a big man, he wore a slightly disheveled, too-tight shirt and an ugly orange tie. His wireless half-glasses kept sliding down his oily nose. In front of him on the table were a folder and a legal pad. He held a Mont-Blanc pen in his wide, meaty hand.

"I have a series of questions to ask you, Steve. Please answer as truthfully as you can." He did not even look up but started writing.

Head pounding, Steve pulled at the handcuffs on his wrists.

"Tell me what today is. The date."

"April 17, 2009. Today is Friday." Easy enough.

"What happened on the day of the shooting?" The psychiatrist spoke so calmly he could have been ordering his meal at a restaurant.

Steve shrugged. "Not much to tell. I went to school the way I always do, and around noon I went into the cafeteria and started shooting. The police came after I was done and took me to this place."

Without raising his voice, Dr. Beaumont asked, “How did you feel about the shooting? How did you decide to do it?”

“I dunno. I wanted to do something nobody else did. I’ve done other things like sports and being on the chess team, but those were things other kids did, too. I wanted to do something different.” He said his last sentence with emphasis, putting a hand to the table top.

Over the psychiatrist’s left shoulder, Steve saw Dillon standing in the corner, not moving but staring right at him. The same downcast look was frozen on the apparition’s face.

Steve fought to control himself. “Could you repeat the question?”

“I said, were you singling out specific students or just firing at them at random?”

“Well, I didn’t have a list of who to shoot, but I took careful aim at them so I wouldn’t miss. I only missed three times. I think that’s a pretty good score, especially when the targets are moving.” He smiled bravely, trying very hard to ignore the figure in the corner slowly shaking his head.

“You sound as if you’re proud of your actions.”

Giving a short laugh, Steve replied, “You bet I am.” He forced himself to keep smiling.

Dr. Beaumont wrote quickly. “Do you hear voices?” He put down his pen, leaned back, and crossed his arms.

“What?” Steve had heard the question quite clearly.

“Voices? In your head?”

“Oh, no.” That wasn’t a lie.

“Do you ever see things or people who shouldn’t be there?”

Steve sat very still. “Y—yes.”

Dr. Beaumont seemed to take a new interest. He took off his glasses and looked directly into Steve's eyes. "Oh? What have you seen?"

The youth ran a fingernail along the edge of the table, concentrating. "Sometimes I see one of the students I hit. It's like he's a ghost or something. He even talks to me."

Returning to his notes, Dr. Beaumont wrote quickly. His jaw tightened. "What does he say?"

"He asks me why I killed him." Steve tried to squash the worm of unease forming in his chest.

"Do you answer him?"

"He disappears before I can." Steve glanced at the psychiatrist.

"Tell me, Steve. Do you have any urges to harm anyone, yourself, or others?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Do you have any remorse or regret about what you did?" The pen went down on the table.

Deadening his rising discomfort, Steve said, "No, can't say that I do."

"Do you realize *what* you have done?"

"Oh, yes."

"Repeat it to me so we're clear on this." Pen back in hand, Dr. Beaumont began writing again after turning to a new sheet. His face had the expression of a block of granite.

"I shot and killed a bunch of students." The figure, Dillon still remained in the same spot. But now he put his hand over his stained shirt. He tilted his head from side to side very slowly.

"No feelings for the students, dead or wounded?"

“What about *my* feelings? What about me?” Anger rushed into Steve’s voice.

Frustration at the apparition made him pound his shackled fists on the table. “I deserve some attention, too. I want some notoriety. I wanted to have my name in the newspaper and be talked about on TV, and now it’s happening. I’m famous now. That means something to me.”

“You feel that you were ignored, at school and maybe at home?”

“Maybe not ignored, but not standing out. I’m just an average student in a school that’s very competitive. I wanted to do something that would make kids write about me in the yearbook.”

“Even if it cost the lives of ten of your classmates?”

“So? I’m like the Walter Mitty of my school, always dreaming of being someone special, whom others look up to. I’ve got that now.” Still the plastered smile.

Dillon was gone.

“All right, son. I get the picture.” Dr. Beaumont closed the folder and put his pen in his shirt pocket. “We’re done for now.”

“What happens next?” Steve was very afraid. What did the psychiatrist think of him? What about the confession of seeing ghosts?

“I’ll write my report and deliver it to the district attorney. He’ll take it from there.” The psychiatrist stood, making Steve stand as well. Behind them a guard began unlocking the cell door.

“So what will you put in your report? Am I all right? Will you write that I’m not insane?”

“Don’t worry about that. The district attorney will be in touch.” And he left.

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“I’ve had enough from you, Steve.”

The apparition, Dillon, stood in front of him in the jail cell. It was after midnight, and again Steve could not sleep. Facing Dillon, he decided to accept what he saw and let the creature do what it would do. Fighting it would be useless.

“What do you want from me? Why are you here?” Steve stood with feet firmly planted.

“Why are *you* here in this cell?” Dillon pointed his finger at Steve. “Don’t you know why you’re in jail?”

“Of course I do. That’s all right. I accept it. I’ve done what I wanted to do and got what I wanted out of it. I’m . . .”

“You’ll be old news in six months.”

Steve stared at him.

Dillon stepped back. “No one will be interested in you after you’ve been sentenced and put away. You might get an interview or two from some local reporter, but you’ll be forgotten soon enough. I’m here for other reasons.” He paused and then went on, looking away. “I can’t believe you killed me. I came to ask you why you did it. I was just minding my own business, standing in line to get lunch, and there you were with those two guns, pointing right at me. I was the first person you shot. Was that because I’m taller than most of the other students?”

“I’m stuck here on earth. I’m in purgatory, now. I can’t go anywhere, least of all to heaven because of you.”

“Because of me?” Steve asked.

“Yeah. I need to forgive you, but I can’t because you haven’t said you’re sorry for shooting me, or the other students for that matter.”

“Well, okay then. I’m sorry for shooting you.”

“You have to mean it, Steve. Just saying the words isn’t enough. You’re not sorry. I can tell by the look on your face. You’re downright happy about the whole thing. The shooting spree was your ticket to fame, and you’re just gloating about it. You and your Walter Mitty act.”

Dillon looked forlorn again, as if he were going to cry. “But I’m stuck where I’m at, Steve. I don’t have my physical self anymore. You took it. I’ll always be eighteen.” Tears actually ran down his cheeks. “Why, Steve? I didn’t do anything to you. Gee, we barely knew each other. I had a girlfriend, Samantha. I saw her at my funeral. She and my family . . . it was depressing to see how they all cried. *You* should have been there at the church. It was beautiful with all the flowers and music, but very, very sad.”

“Stop it! I don’t want to hear about that!” Steve put out his hand and surprisingly it went right through the apparition. “I don’t need to hear about any funerals!”

“Did you know I had a full-ride scholarship to Brown University? I was going to major in engineering. I was looking forward to it. Were you planning to go to college, Steve?”

“Yeah, I had my applications ready.”

“But you didn’t go through with them, didn’t you?”

Steve could not disagree.

“I’ve got to go. I’ll come back to visit you, Steve. ”

“No! You stay away from me. I don’t want to see you again, ever.”

“No, Steve. You’ll be seeing me a lot.”

Before Steve could reply, Dillon faded away. Steve sat heavily on his bunk and put his face in his hands. His mind turned. Dillon had wanted remorse. Steve didn't have it. But if he did, then there would be forgiveness. That was the only way Dillon would get to heaven and leave Steve alone.

Dillon came back every night, asking the same one-word question, *why?* Steve didn't have a good enough answer, repeating over and over his lust for notoriety. He refused to melt his own frigid heart and actually start to admit to the enormous pain and grief he had caused. The massacre only had the meaning given to a video game, a game Steve had clearly won, although the sixteen by twenty-foot cell he occupied was his only prize.

One night Dillon did not come, and Steve fell into a deep sleep. But in his dream he found himself back in the school cafeteria, gun in hand.

The huge room was exceptionally bright from the overhead lights. The lunch tables were empty, and no teachers or custodians were around. Steve first heard the moans and the crying. Then he saw the sixteen students.

They were on the floor, blood pouring out of the gunshot wounds, from necks and arms and chests. One boy's head was half-way blown off, and he held his remaining face. He screamed and screamed.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Steve covered his ears and shut his eyes, still holding the pistol. "Just stop it!"

The carrying-on lowered its volume.

"Here we are," said Dillon, standing next to Steve. "This is what you did. How do you feel about it now?"

All of the wounded and dead students looked at Steve. Mournful eyes filled with tears bore down on him.

“Get me out of here! I don’t want to be here!” Steve couldn’t move his feet.

“It doesn’t matter, Steve,” Dillon said. “We will just follow you wherever you go. These kids want to go to heaven, too. But they can’t. They’re stuck here at this school. Why did you kill us, Steve Hilmer? We didn’t do anything to hurt you. We didn’t bully or tease you. You were liked well enough.”

A girl who had been shot in her neck walked up to Steve and put out her hand, wanting to touch Steve. He hadn’t known her even when she had been alive. Her luminous, dark brown eyes were flooded, mascara running down her cheeks. Steve broke into a sweat as she moved her hand through his shoulder. “Please say you’re sorry, Steve,” she begged. “We want to know you really didn’t mean to kill us. We’ll forgive you, then. That’s what we’ll do. Don’t make us stay here at this school forever.”

Steve found the courage to step back. But more students crowded around him. He flailed his arms to get them away from him but to no avail. “Stop it! Get back!” His body passed through several students and he screamed.

He felt the tip of the handgun pressed up against the side of his forehead. “Do you want me to kill myself?” he heard himself say. Realizing that *he* was holding the gun, his whole body began to tremble violently. “Will that satisfy you? Then I’ll become one of you. That’s payback, isn’t it?”

“No, Steve. That’s too easy,” said another student, a girl. “Please don’t shoot yourself. You don’t want to become one of us. We have to suffer day and night in this place. We can’t leave. We’re stuck just as Dillon said. Please, tell us why you shot us. Please, Steve.”

The apparitions began pleading all at once, and their combined voices morphed in howls.

He sat up in his bunk, sweat sliding off his face. Breathing heavily, he tried to swallow. As he swung his feet onto the concrete floor, he feared Dillon would be here. But the spirit did not appear. Hopefully, perhaps this dream was the end of torture. He had seen the other students, now as ghosts, captured in Washington Heights High School. Everything was okay, now. He could move on. But he couldn't stop shaking.

“So, do not buy into this insanity defense. This young man knew exactly what he was doing. He knew where his father kept the guns. He took them and put them in his backpack and went to school that day. He hid them in his locker before his homeroom period.” The district attorney paced back and forth in front of the jury box, waving his hands for emphasis.

Steve wanted to tune out the pompous, egotistical man. He was able to as soon as he felt Dillon's presence in the chair to his left. The persecution hadn't ended. This would be far worse than being locked up in prison, being hounded by this self-pitying ghost.

He decided he'd better do serious thinking about what he had done. However, to appreciate the horrible crime he had committed, he would have to admit to some mental defect or personality flaw. No mentally healthy person would have done what he had done at that school. Yet, he wasn't ready to agree with the good Dr. Beaumont, who had said on the witness stand

that Steve suffered from a psychiatric-babble term that basically meant he was “without a conscience.” As if he was missing a spleen or something.

Dillon put his hand over Steve’s. Steve turned his head to look at the apparition and saw determination in its light eyes. Steve’s hand felt cold.

Less than twenty-four hours later, the jury came back with its verdict. None of them looked in Steve’s direction, and they did not see Dillon standing next to him and Steve’s lawyer, Mr. Franklin Oates.

Just like on *Law and Order*, the judge asked, “Members of the jury, have you reached a verdict?” He handed back the folded piece of paper to the bailiff, who then gave it to the jury foreman.

“We have, your honor.” The serious, bespeckled, bald man unfolded the paper.

The courtroom was hushed.

“We the jury finds, Steve Aldrich Hilmer, not guilty by reason of insanity.”

A roar reverberated to the ceiling. The judge pounded his gavel several times and shouted for order. People began to stand and mill about. Parents of dead children wept.

Steven’s attorney started talking to him, but Steve wasn’t listening. His parents were pulling at his arm. Turning to Dillon, tears coursing down his cheeks, Steve said, “I’m sorry. I’m really, truly sorry, Dillon. I’m not insane. I can’t be. I didn’t . . . I shouldn’t have killed you and . . .”

Dillon gave a half smile. “I forgive you, Steve. Good bye.” He vanished.

Steve was left now to face the new reality that he was insane.