

You've Got to be Vigilant, Wes

I think about killing people all the time.

Last week, for example, I was at the grocery store, a little health food place not too far from my apartment, and I was in the aisle where all the condiments are, the organic mayonnaise and the hot sauces and the imported olive oils, and there was this guy who looked a little like if Anthony Hopkins and Kirk Cameron had a baby, only grown up, and I thought about picking up a can of kidney beans and smashing it into his head.

When I'm on a balcony I think I'm going to throw someone off. I actually plan exactly how to do it. I picture getting them to lean over a bit first, maybe point out a cat on a lower roof, or a woman throwing flowers at her daughter.

If I'm cutting a lime, I hold onto the knife tightly to make sure I don't accidentally stab my boyfriend through the heart.

My boyfriend, Steve, signs me up for a first aid class at the Y by the waterfront. He thinks it might turn things around a little, make me think about saving people instead of killing them. It's too much work to cancel, so I go, even though I know it's not going to help.

The first hour is CPR. I don't know anyone in the class, so I pair up with the smallest woman there, figuring I could take her if things turn bad. I can't go into a room without categorizing everyone within the first few minutes: Those I Could Take and Those Who Could Take Me. It's usually pretty clear.

Clara, my CPR partner, asks me to go first, so I kneel down next to the dummy and go through the script we just learned:

"I'm trained in first aid, are you okay?"

"CALL 9-1-1!"

I place the heel of my right hand on the rubber pad, place my left hand on top, lock my elbows, and start pushing to the tune of Staying Alive. The instructor yells at all of us to push harder, that it's impossible to push too hard. I doubt that, and start thinking about how I am certainly strong enough to break through a sternum, especially if I was all pumped up on adrenaline.

Clara is crying. I mean, really crying. She's not loud about it. In fact, she seems kind of embarrassed and tries to pretend she isn't. I stop saving the dummy and stare at her.

"He's going to die," she says.

"He's a dummy," I say.

"In my last class, they said 92% of people who have a heart attack on the street die."

Four times. That's how many times Clara has taken this first aid class. Turns out, she's a mess, my CPR partner. You wouldn't know it from looking at her. She is sporty, put together, looks like a model out of a Patagonia catalog.

Our instructor is helping some big guy (Could Take Me) across the room get his rhythm right, so I stop working on the dummy and lean against the wall. Clara gets on her knees and moves over to take her turn.

“What’s the point?” I ask. “Why keep taking the same class over and over?”

She’s crying again as she gets her hands in the right position and leans her weight on the dummy’s chest. There’s no way she could push too hard.

“Because I want to be prepared,” she says, starting the rhythm, and I realize maybe we aren’t all that different. Her nose drips onto the blue plastic chest.

Later, I stand behind a cop in line at the bagel store. I usually don’t let myself get this close to cops because I’m one unintentional impulse away from killing someone at all times anyway, so why add guns and nightsticks to the mix. But I’m starving, haven’t eaten since well before the first aid class, and I don’t do well when I don’t eat for this long.

I could lean to the left, say something to the cop quietly so he has to lean in, then grab the gun off of his right thigh. There’s a safety clip, but I would be quick. Or the nightstick, strapped to his left hip, held in by just a snap. Wouldn’t take much distraction to have that out.

“I just took a first aid class,” I say out loud, which is something I do sometimes to make sure I don’t do anything stupid. If people are watching me, I’m less likely to do something. My last therapist suggested this strategy, which I haven’t given up on yet.

The cop turns to look at me. He sizes up my arms, checks out my chest.

“Why?” he asks, which I think is a strange response. I mean, why not take a first aid class?

“I’m going to Haiti on a service trip,” I say, even though those are two things I would never do, go to Haiti, or do a service trip. The guy behind me in line says, “Building a school?” A quick glance back tells me I Could Take Him, particularly with a nightstick.

I don’t love lying, but now I have to keep going, and I’m already out of things that I know about Haiti, or service for that matter.

“No,” I say, and then, “Corneal transplants,” because I had read an article while I was waiting for the first aid class to start about this doctor who goes to Haiti every year to save people’s sight.

“Are you a doctor?” the cop asks.

I just want to order a bagel without killing anyone.

“Yup,” I say, because who the fuck else could do corneal transplants.

“Then why’d you take a first aid class?” says the guy behind me. I look at the cop and shake my head knowingly, like we’re in this together, the two of us against all the dumbasses in the universe. He puts his hand over his holster and orders his bagel.

I tell Steve about Clara that evening. I try to explain how desperate she was, how pathetic. But in retelling the class I start to worry about her, start to think she just needs a friend.

“Did you want to kill her?” Steve asks.

To be clear, I don't actually want to kill anyone. In fact, I actively don't want to kill anyone. I just can't stop imagining it.

I decide to take the first aid class again, this time at the Y down by the theater. I really think things have been better since I went, though I'm not entirely sure because I pictured pushing a child down the stairs in my apartment building last night. But the difference is that this time I also pictured making a splint for her arm from my belt and the takeout chopsticks.

I breeze through the CPR portion of the class, partnered this time with Mark, an electrician (Could Take Me). After my turn, he takes the instructor's direction that we can't push too hard as a dare, and before he can save the dummy, he's popped the bag in the plastic chest.

"You killed him," I say.

"Shit happens," he says. He tells me his boss is making him take the class because his partner died in an electrical accident. The guy was sixty-two years old and on Christmas Eve his daughter got hit by a drunk driver on the way to his house and died, along with her fiancé and their two dogs. And the next day (Christmas), he got paged for an emergency call in Westchester, some rich couple's new dryer kept blowing a fuse, and he went, even though his daughter just died, and even though it was Christmas (or maybe because it was Christmas?), and he showed up and screwed up and rewired things wrong and BAM. Dead. In their laundry room.

The story makes me want to throw up.

Ten minutes later, I watch Mark through the electrocution part of the required video. I want to hold his hand, which I think is real growth.

Later, I tell Steve what to do if I ever get a projectile stuck in my eyeball. You're not supposed to pull it out, which is counter-intuitive, so I thought he should know in case it happened, because chances are he would just yank it out. He's kind of a fixer. I tell him you're supposed to take a Dixie cup and poke a hole in it and place it over the projectile and then tape it to the person's head until you get to the hospital.

"Your sister called," he says. He's not always a good listener.

I think about taking the pen off the kitchen island and jamming it into his neck.

I think Steve's idea may have backfired a bit. Knowing 50 ways to save someone also means knowing 50 ways to let someone die. Yesterday I had to leave the hardware store early because I pictured shoving "Hello! My name is Wes" into the wall-cutter. I was having some 2 x 4s cut into blocks for a furniture project I wanted as a surprise for Steve, and there's this wall size saw that only the employees can use. They have to put in a code (3697#--written in pen on his hand) and then they cut the pieces you want. There's a roped off area around the saw, but who are they kidding? It's a rope. In less than two seconds I could be under and shoving Wes' hand right into the blade.

Anything could happen, Wes, so you've got to be vigilant.

In the case of amputation you have to stop the bleeding immediately with a tourniquet, and then you have only minutes to get the amputated part on ice before it becomes useless. You're supposed to put it in a baggie and then write the exact time on the baggie with a Sharpie. I bought a box of Sharpies this morning.

I run into Clara at the grocery store. I almost walk right by, but we are the only two people in the paper towel aisle and we make eye contact so it's too awkward not to acknowledge that we know each other.

"I'm sorry," she says, clutching her cart.

"It's okay," I say, smiling. I appreciate people who apologize for no reason. So many people don't apologize when they should, so having people like Clara balance out the books a bit makes sense. It's like she's doing the rest of us a favor, handing out apologies like bandaids.

A man with a baseball hat turns into the aisle (Could Take Me), and I reach towards the paper towels so I won't think about slamming my cart into him. I know that if I did, there's no chance of Clara being able to resuscitate him. Once he passes, I move over to the Dixie Cup section and pick out a box with bees on it. I hand one to Clara, which she adds to her cart.

"I'm sorry," she says.

I think we would be good at being friends.

"Who's Clara again?" asks Steve, which makes me want to grab him by his hair and submerge his head in the pasta pot.

"My friend," I say, starting to feel a little bit proud about not killing him. I add aloe to the grocery list.

Clara and I meet for coffee a few days later because I think I'm going to make a go at this friend thing. I had gone back to the Y by the waterfront and waited around until the first aid instructor showed up. I told him I needed to get in touch with a woman from our class, that she had lost her engagement ring and I had found it, and I went on to say how she had given me her number but I lost it, and that I understood it was probably confidential and all. I could have saved all those lies. He didn't give a shit about confidentiality.

Clara wasn't surprised I called. It was like she was expecting it, like virtual strangers called her all the time wanting to be friends. I started in on some sort of excuse, but she just cut me off and asked if I wanted to get coffee.

"I don't really know anyone in the city yet," she said.

"This is nice," I say when we sit down the next day at the coffee shop. I'm nervous I'm going to say something stupid so I drink my coffee, which is too hot, and I burn my tongue.

"Fuck," I say.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Thanks," I say. I think we're going to be good for each other.

I think I need to break up with Steve. Or marry him. I can't decide which, so I buy a bottle of tequila and decide to have three shots before he gets home and let what happens happen without overthinking it. There

are too many decisions to make in the world, and there's a fifty fifty chance you'll make the wrong one each time. I had to make at least 10 that I can think of on my walk back from coffee. Eleven, if you count what kind of tequila to buy. Twelve, if you count deciding which credit card to use. Thirteen if deciding not to grab the bottle by the neck and swing it into the 19-year-old cashier's head counts. It's exhausting.

I hear a key in the door, straighten my back so my boobs lift a few inches, and move the tequila bottle so it's not within immediate reach.

But it's not Steve who opens the door. It's my sister, who has a key because she owns the place and never forgets to remind me that I'm 29, unmarried, and freeloading. Her overactive guilt keeps me housed, so I accept the attitude.

"Hi," she says, and then looks at the bottle on the table. "Really? It's not even five o'clock."

"You could have knocked," I say, not getting up. This is how we are with each other.

Turns out my mother is off her meds. My sister shares what she knows, which isn't much, just what the neighbors told her.

"It's your turn," she says, "I can't take off work again." She has an important job.

"You could have just called," I say.

"Right," she says.

I try to get her to stay, but she says she has to go back to work.

"We can't keep doing this," she says at the door, and I don't know whether she means the mom thing or the us thing. "It's just a matter of time before someone gets really hurt."

She's gone before I can tell her she's a little fucking late with that concern.

I don't break up with Steve or propose when he arrives. I tell him about my sister dropping by and that I need to go to my mom's in the morning, and he hugs me in a way he never has before. Even though there are dozens of sharp or heavy objects within reach, I don't imagine killing him.

Clara comes with me to my mother's. We were supposed to meet for lunch, the next logical step in our friendship, and when I called to cancel, she offered to come along.

"I'm good with mothers," she said, as if they were a particular breed of dog. Even though it's a terrible idea for at least a dozen reasons, I agree to bring her along.

Steve offered to come too, but I told him I can handle it on my own, which led to our first real fight. He said something about how I never let my guard down even for one goddamn minute and I said something about how he never stands up for himself and he said something about me being too controlling to let him stand up for himself and I said something about him letting me be controlling because he can't handle control and then we both just drank tequila until we forgot why we were fighting. The truth is I become fourteen again when I am home, which was not my best age. Not sure 29 is a whole lot better, but if there is any chance Steve and I are going to make it as a couple, which I'm starting to doubt, there are things he shouldn't see.

On the ninety minute drive upstate, I tell Clara just enough to make her helpful, but not enough to make her pity me. I tell her my mother is bipolar, that the diagnosis and the meds that came with it were a little late to

our family, that my father was gone by the time I was five, that my sister, six years older, was the responsible one for awhile, but then left for college, that it was all good, really, in the grand scheme of global little-t trauma.

“She’s fine when she’s on her meds,” I say, as we get closer, and then, because I’m worried I may have over sugar coated the situation, “It may not be pretty,” I say. “She can get mean.”

“I’m sorry,” Clara says, putting her hand on my arm.

“Not your fault,” I say.

When Clara and I get to the house, my mother is in the kitchen. She has painted the walls with paprika—actual paprika, not the color—and nailed lemon slices to the doorway. It must have been hard work, because she is sitting at the island, sweating through her tee shirt, which says Save the Manatees. She is wearing pink sweatpants and no shoes. There is broken glass all over the floor, and I notice that all the frames with the school photos that lined the back wall are missing their glass.

It’s best not to challenge her when she’s this way, you never know what will set her off, so I step carefully through the mess to get a broom.

“Hi Mom,” I say like a fourteen year old.

“Fuck you,” she says like my mother.

“Get me a drink,” she says, and then notices Clara, who is standing with her back against the wall and her hands clutched in front of her as if praying. Maybe this wasn’t the best idea for such a new friendship.

“Who the fuck are you?” My mother says, and then turns back to me. “I said, get me a fucking drink.” It’s ten o’clock in the morning. I can hear my sister’s voice in my head, but I shut it down and get the gin out. Maybe I can get her to take her pills with the cocktail. The goal is to either get her back on her meds or to get her committed, which means things will have to get pretty bad here. Last time I tricked her into taking the pills, so I have hope, which is perhaps, surprisingly, the most destructive of my coping mechanisms.

Clara takes a deep breath and carefully pulls a stool up next to my mother. She is making strange little cooing noises, which I’m not sure she is aware she’s doing. She starts rubbing my mother’s back. My mother has never been one who likes to be touched and she makes that clear with something close to a growl. But Clara soldiers on and my mother gives up and goes back to yelling at me, which I am good at ignoring.

I find a lime in the back of the refrigerator drawer. It’s a bit hard, but I’m pretty sure she is not going to notice. I grab the first knife I see in the drawer, a big one, and am too distracted by Clara, who is now hugging my mother, to imagine killing anyone with it.

And then I cut the tip of my finger off. It takes me a second to realize it. The wedge of lime is halfway to the glass before I notice that there is blood, and it turns out that despite my being able to watch graphic first aid videos over and over, I can’t handle seeing my own blood.

I wake up on the floor with Clara leaning over me.

“I’m trained in first aid!” she yells. “Call 911!” she yells. My mother is standing behind her, hopping up and down like a toddler.

I look at Clara and then at my hand. There's a ridiculous amount of blood. I try to say something about getting a baggie and a Sharpie, but I'm pretty sure it just sounds like a scream.

"Give me your belt!" Clara yells to my mother, who is not wearing a belt. "We need to stop the bleeding!"

"Fuck you!" my mother yells back, and I think she is laughing, or maybe crying, hard to tell. I notice that her bare feet are covered in blood and I wonder if it's mine or hers or if it even matters.

I remember something from our class about remaining calm, about applying steady pressure, but all I can get out is a barely audible apology.

The EMTs are kind and efficient (Could Take Me). Clara apparently pulled it together and wrapped her fleece vest around my hand to stop the bleeding until they arrived, and they praise her as she hands them the gin and tonic glass with the tip of my finger on ice. I see them look around at the kitchen. I'm sure it will be hard to retell this one back at the station. One of them tells Clara on our way out that she may have saved my life, and winks at me over her shoulder as she hugs him tight.

My mother and I ride in the ambulance together. She is strapped to the gurney, her feet wrapped in white bandages, and I am belted in upright. The EMT in the back with us offers to call my sister, but I tell him not to, that I am fine, that I could really drive myself, that this is really no big deal and everyone is overreacting and that I can take care of it all.

"The fuck she can," says my mother, and I can tell from her tone that things are about to get pretty bad.

My hand throbs, wrapped tight in bandages and tape.

"I'm so sorry," I say, maybe out loud. It doesn't matter.

I'm released a few hours later. My mother is not. We'll have at least 72 hours to figure out a plan or try to get her committed again. When Steve picks me up, I tell him we'll talk about it tomorrow, and he's surprisingly okay with that, but only because he's never been through this part with me.

While on painkillers, I don't think of killing anyone. I even try to imagine it, just to test myself, but the water glass next to me is just a water glass and the balcony is just a nice place to sit and watch the rain. It should feel good, this absence of violent thoughts, but I just feel empty.

Clara comes over to help take care of me. She is different. Confident. She spills my water and doesn't apologize. Steve laughs at something she says as if he's sixteen. It's all a bit too much, honestly, how easy they are. I think I'm going to break up with both of them. I think once I can feed myself and zip up my jeans by myself and open a bottle of wine by myself, I am going to tell them, I'm sorry, but I'm going to Haiti.