

**MARKING GRID FOR BA PAPERS IN LITERATURE, CULTURE &
CREATIVE WRITING FOR THE DEGREE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE &
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Category [Code]	Description	Comments
Content	quality, elegance, originality, argumentation, scope & reading	Sophisticated close reading of two novels in light of the development and causes of protagonists' downfall into madness, put within a broad context and contrasted to many other primary sources. Coherent analysis of the representation of madness in literature.
Structure	thesis & research niche context within academic literature methodology reporting format & rationale	Creative niche found in contributing to much unexplored character development of villains. Topics and thesis clearly phrased and additional creative piece justified on the basis that it addresses the nature/nurture argument and aims to reflect the individual's agency in their downfall into madness. The piece shows more potential in its link to psychology.
[MLA]	parenthetical references works cited, word count & layout	ok
[G]	grammatical accuracy & use of complex structures	At times complex nuanced and sophisticated.
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The Emergency Exit: The Nature of Evil and Madness in Literature

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INTRODUCTION

“The hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live” (*King James Bible*, Eccl 9.3). The question of the origin and existence of evil has long been part of many stories, myths and philosophical musings. The story of the fall of man explains the corruption of mankind through Adam’s sin, attributing evil to mankind’s willing decision to stray from a higher moral standard. Friedrich Nietzsche offered a secular description of evil as “all that is born of weakness,” as has psychologist Stephen A. Diamond, naming “violence ... the pre-eminent evil of our postmodern era” (10; 179). In entertainment evil is explored and sometimes even glorified, clearly seen in the many iconic villains in literature that have captivated readers’ attention, some more popular than the heroes that fight them. Diamond notes that, “we are clearly a culture at once afraid of and fascinated by the evil of violence” (180).

The subject of evil and madness has not only inspired many writers but also scholars, who have fervently written on madness of both literary characters and even their authors. Martin S. Lindauer has criticized an apparent eagerness in critics to draw “a relationship between madness and creativity,” arguing that such accusations points to “unconsciously envious or jealous” “scholars and researchers” (33, 43). D.R. Godfrey has demonstrated the “madness of jealousy” to be at the heart of Othello’s downfall into madness, and a vital tool in the hands of iconic villain Iago, who is also the subject of Richard A. Andretta’s essay, which explores “the nature of evil and the demonic” (209; 1). Although madness has been a popular subject among scholars, Carol Thomas Neely laments how few critics have “[read] madness closely in [Shakespeare’s] plays” to understand its “rhetorical structure” and “dramatic

function,” especially because of its potential “cultural significance” (322). Branimir M. Rieger’s statement that “studying ... ‘madness in literature’ might actually contribute to our knowledge of human behavior” similarly supports the importance of the subject (9). Many stories written about evil and madness deal with characters with dual natures or alternate identities, such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, in which Henry Jekyll attempts to divide the good and evil in his character into “separate identities” so the “the unjust might go his way” (ch 10). Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* speaks of his “mask of sanity,” and William Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* also speaks of this duality: “look like the innocent flower / but be the serpent under’t” (621; 1.5.66-67). It appears that identity is at the heart of the creation of madness in the mind.

This thesis seeks to explore the nature of evil and madness in literature and, more specifically, its origin. It will focus on the conjunction of evil and madness, so behavior that is labeled as evil, but to the extent that it does not appear to have a logical cause. The term madness will thus be used to indicate seemingly irrational, often extreme, behavior that is seen as evil. Other forms of madness that are not necessarily viewed as evil will not be explored in this paper. David A. Winter’s paper “Destruction As a Constructive Choice,” highlights how evil behavior can be used to create meaning for individuals, “giving birth to a new persona” (163). In the first section there will be a close reading and comparison of two characters who have descended into madness through the creation of new personas, Jack in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, and the Joker in Alan Moore’s *The Killing Joke*. These characters were chosen because both authors emphasize a different explanation for their madness; Golding focuses on man’s nature being inherently evil, kept in check by civilization, and Moore concentrates on external traumatic influences, yet the

downfall of the two characters is remarkably similar and hinges on their identity.

Despite having good intentions, both Jack and the Joker adopt a mask in search of an identity, which, aided by an immoral environment, develops into a mad and evil persona, yet, although both demonstrate that any man can fall, it is their persistence in justifying their acts that truly makes them fall into madness.

The second section will be a short piece of fiction exploring a man's fall into madness. While the stories of Jack and The Joker highlight many aspects of the nature of madness, addressing both the nature and nurture side of the argument, they offer few direct insights into the development of madness in the mind. Indeed, few stories have been written about the origin of villains or mad men from their own perspective. The short story will attempt to fill that niche and use the key elements of Jack and the Joker's descent into madness found in the first section as a framework, and attempt to portray how madness germinates and evolves in the mind. A commentary will be provided to explain and justify the creative choices made in the short story.

In short, this thesis will argue that, in literature, the creation and development of a persona can lead to a man's descent into madness and that this method is fueled by both nature and nurture in the form of identity and tragedy as the main catalysts that corrupt the mind. Nonetheless, the final step into madness is indeed a step, a willing choice to abandon a previous identity and worldview and, ultimately, despite external influences, it is a decision for which only the protagonist himself is responsible.

SECTION I

SEARCHING FOR IDENTITY

Both Jack and the Joker seek to establish their identity and adopt their masks with good intentions but it leads them nonetheless to a downwards spiral into madness and evil as their new persona takes over. When Jack is introduced in the novel, he appears confident and is described as “the most obvious leader” (Golding, ch 1). It soon becomes clear that Jack is already a rather mean and dominant child, even though he is portrayed as a choirboy, which is suggestive of innocence. He is quickly agitated, with eyes “turning, or ready to turn, to anger,” he commands his “wearily obedient” choir, and dismisses and insults Piggy, calling him “Fatty” (Golding, ch 1). This, along with Jack’s description as “crumpled and freckled, and ugly without silliness,” has led many critics to immediately label Jack as “satanic” or “demonic” and view him as “an externalization of the evil instinctual forces of the unconscious” (Spitz 27; Oldsey and Weintraub 97; Rosenfield 1). However, this hasty conclusion overlooks important events that contribute to Jack’s descent into madness. Bern Oldsey and Stanley Weintraub warn against too quickly viewing the novel solely as an allegory: “Golding’s characters, like his setting, represent neither fictional reality nor fabulistic unreality, but rather partake of the naturalistic and the allegorical at the same time” (93). Indeed, rather than immediately being a manifestation of evil, Jack “must undergo a metamorphosis from a timidity-shielding arrogance to conscienceless cruelty” (Oldsey and Weintraub 94). An important seed that leads Jack to doubt his identity is planted when Jack is not chosen as leader, giving him “a blush of mortification” (Golding, ch 1). No longer a leader, Jack seeks to establish his identity

as a hunter, yet he fails to kill a pig on the first couple of occasions, leading the others to doubt if he can do it. Because his identity hinges on hunting pig, Jack starts to become obsessed with it, trying to “convey the compulsion to track down and kill that was swallowing him up” to the others, already bringing “madness ... into his eyes” (Golding, ch 3). J.D. O’Hara remarks that “fear controls most of man’s actions in *Lord of the Flies*,” and this can also be said of the obsession that drives Jack to succeed as a hunter (417). He seeks to reestablish his position of importance, something he lost when Ralph became leader.

Fear is also a key emotion for the Joker, driving him in his search for identity. Unlike Jack, the Joker is already desperate and highly insecure at the beginning of his origin story, which is told through multiple flashbacks. He is a struggling, unsuccessful comedian who lives in an undesirable neighborhood with his pregnant wife. He describes himself as “a loser” and he admits to his wife that he “can’t support [her]” (Moore 10). This inability to fulfill his duty, similar to Jack’s failure to catch pigs, is the main thing wearing him down, seen in his aggressive response to his wife after his latest act was unsuccessful: “As in ‘oh, so how are we going to feed the baby?’ You think I’m not worried about that?” (Moore 9). However, his image appears to be of greater importance to him than his wife, apparent by the focus he constantly places on himself and how his identity is damaged. Describing his show he says: “I have to go and stand up there, and nobody laughs,” emphasizing his embarrassment, and when his wife mentions the landlord, he retorts: “she hates me” (Moore 9, 10). Not once during the scene does he pay attention to how his wife feels, always shifting the conversation to his own misery. The desperation to solidify his narcissistic identity is again clear when he contemplates doing “one big crime,” saying, “I have to prove myself, as a husband, and, as a father” (Moore 17).

In their search for recognition, both Jack and the Joker have failed to accomplish the duties expected of them. They realize they are either unable or too afraid to do what they want; Jack unable to kill a pig, the Joker afraid to commit a crime. As a solution, they don a mask, which allows them to do what they could or would not do before. Their motivations seem logical and their intentions good. Jack suggests they “paint our faces so [the pigs] wouldn’t see,” “like moths on a tree trunk” (Golding, ch 3, ch 4). The Joker agrees to wear the mask of the red hood for “additional anonymity” during a one-time robbery so he “can switch neighborhoods and start a proper life” (Moore 18). However, immediately after painting his face, Jack becomes something else, feeling “liberated from shame and self-consciousness” (Golding, ch 4). This is emphasized in the description of the mask as “a thing on its own,” even leaving Jack unable to recognize himself when he looks at his reflection: “he looked in astonishment, no longer at himself but at an awesome stranger” (Golding, ch 4). Shortly thereafter, Jack succeeds in killing his first pig but neglects to keep the signal fire burning, the only way to be rescued off the island, illustrating the transition from light to darkness that has already started in Jack. He is both excited and disturbed by his violent behavior: “‘I cut the pig’s throat,’ said Jack, proudly, and yet twitched as he said it ... ‘there was lashings of blood,’ said Jack, laughing and shuddering” (Golding, ch 4). The Joker also notices an immediate change when donning the red hood mask, describing his experience as “weird,” and “like a dream,” noticing that the mask makes things “[look] even worse” (Moore 31). This seems to foreshadow the crooked worldview that the Joker will eventually adopt. Contrary to Jack, the Joker does not find immediate success; Batman foils the robbery and confronts the Joker, who jumps off a ledge into chemically polluted water. The acid in the water bleaches his skin white and turns his hair green, giving him a permanent

mask. Upon seeing his new self, the Joker breaks out in manic laughter, the traumatic event completing his descent into madness and the death of his former self. Similarly, a confrontation with authority combined with a traumatic event is also what seems to complete Jack's transformation. Jack is humiliated publicly, "heavy and full of shame," as his suggestion to demote Ralph as detective is supported by no one, not even by his group of hunters (Golding, ch 8). His following statement, "I'm not going to play any longer," marks a new beginning for him and foreshadows his increasingly cruel behavior that will follow (Golding, ch 8). The next time that Jack appears to Ralph, he has become a detective over a new tribe, described as "demonic figures," and is now confident in his newly acquired position of power, even being seen as "an idol," and also mentioned simply as "the detective" (Golding, ch 8; ch 9; ch10). Both Jack and the Joker were insecure about their identities and in their desperate search for recognition adopted masks that altered their identity to a point where they fell into evil and madness, losing original, fragile identities, now replaced by their new personas.

EVIL SURROUNDINGS

The environments in which Jack and the Joker adopt their masks lack moral and civil structure, do not have any clear authority present, and they have a negative impact on their memory, facilitating Jack and the Joker's descent into madness. The island that Jack crashed onto is far removed from civilization and, despite their honest attempts, the children cannot maintain a system of rules to hold one another accountable. At first, Jack himself is a proponent of civil structure, saying, "we've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages" (Golding, ch 2). However, not much later, when the possibility of a beast on the island is discussed, Jack shouts "bollocks to the rules! We're strong—we hunt! If there's a beast, we'll hunt it down," despite Ralph insisting that "the rules are the only thing we've got" (Golding, ch 5). Again, as O'Hara states, "fear [is] ... an activating force ... for violence and cruelty;" it is the fear of the beast that leads to the first instance of disregard for the rules (417). The beast, or lord of the flies, is the symbol of evil throughout the novel and Jack increasingly surrounds and associates himself with it. Oldsey and Weintraub argue that Golding "depicts Jack as being directly in league with the lord of the flies and dung," supported by a passage where "Jack bent down to [the droppings] as though he loved them" (94; Golding, ch 7). Many critics have noted that Golding sees evil as being "innate in man," or "specifically human" (Spitz 29; O'Hara 417). In the novel, Simon suggests this when the children argue about the existence of the beast: "maybe it's only us," and it is confirmed later on when the beast speaks to him in a vision: "fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill! ... You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you" (Golding, ch 5; ch 8). Consequently, even though "the island is isolated, fertile, healthy, and comfortable," seemingly "ideal ingredients of Utopia," evil is still present in the children themselves (O'Hara 411). While all

children have the capacity to do evil, some are clearly more inclined towards it even from the beginning. It is not surprising that one of the most ruthless children, Roger, is present when Jack first adopts his mask, and Ralph, “who tries to live by the rules,” or Piggy, “the voice of reason,” are nowhere near to say anything about it (Oldsey and Weintraub 94; Spitz 26).

The Joker is similarly surrounded by a lack of rules and morality. It becomes clear that he lives in a bad neighborhood, one of the main reasons he wants to move out, and he mentions “girls on the street” making more money than him, emphasizing that immorality is rewarded (Moore 10). The Joker is also in an immoral environment when he contemplates taking part in a robbery, the idea itself given to him by a pair of criminals. They also suggest he wears a mask, to reassure him that “nobody will know [he] was involved” (Moore 17). On the day of the robbery, the Joker finds out that his wife has died in “a million to one accident,” and wants to cancel his agreement with the mob, saying, “there’s no reason anymore” (Moore 25). However, the mobsters force him to join, telling him that “nobody backing out now remains healthy,” once again making fear the main motivator for the Joker (Moore 25). His surroundings become even worse as he goes to the place of the robbery, a chemical plant that he describes as “grim and ugly” (Moore 18). It is there where he first puts on the mask, or rather, the mask is put on him by the mobsters. The police and Batman arrive when it is already too late, and it is actually his fear of Batman that makes him jump into the acid water, forever altering his appearance and, consequently, his mind.

In both novels, a climate of immorality makes it hard to remember any goodness outside of the protagonists’ direct environment, and being unable to remember the past is also a key part in Jack and the Joker’s fall. When the Joker first puts on his mask he can still remember his wife, although it feels “like a dream,”

suggesting that his memory of her is already fading and that his perception of reality is shifting (Moore 31). Once he has finally gone mad, the Joker cannot remember the tragic death of his wife anymore, saying, "I'm not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another" (Moore 41). Jack's memory of a world outside the island also begins to fade rather quickly: "Jack had to think for a moment before he could remember what rescue was" (Golding, ch 3). It is interesting that rescue, the only real link to the outside world, is the first concept that the children start to forget. Throughout the novel, Ralph struggles to help everyone remember that the signal fire is the only way for them to be rescued, yet even he is prone to forget its importance: "Ralph tried indignantly to remember. There was something good about a fire. Something overwhelmingly good" (Golding, ch 10). At the end, Jack's former self has completely disappeared; in vain, Ralph is "trying to remember what Jack looked like" (Golding, ch 11). Moreover, none of the children, not even Jack, who, at first, was so fond of having "lots of rules," can remember the importance of having rules, and Piggy's question, "which is better—to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill," is met with "great clamor" and thrown stones (Golding, ch 2; ch 11). J.D. O'Hara also notes how "no one laments his absence from parents or brothers; no one's memories of home include memories of friends" (418).

It appears that the memories of both Jack and the Joker automatically begin to fade when they are placed in an immoral climate that lacks any authority to be accountable to. This aids the transition into madness, although it still is not an automatic transition, as Ralph does not go mad like Jack does. However, while the past becomes less prominent in the minds of Jack and the Joker, they also make conscious decisions not to remember, which is one of the symptoms of their madness. Completely disconnected from his past, the Joker finds that "memories can be vile,

repulsive little brutes,” and he argues that “remembering’s dangerous. I find the past such a worrying, anxious place,” naming “madness” as “the emergency exit” (Moore 23). This is certainly the case in *The Lord of the Flies*, because when the children do try to remember, they often remember the horrifying acts that they have done: “each savage flinched away from his individual memory” (Golding, ch 10). However, by refraining from remembering the bad in the past, they also forget the good.

Furthermore, Jack actually distorts their and his memory by falsely claiming they did not kill Simon, very similar to the Joker distorting his past, preferring “it to be multiple choice” (Moore 41). As the Joker points out, “memories are what our reason is based on. If we can’t face them we deny reason itself” (Moore 23). This is exactly what has happened to Jack and the Joker. Without moral structures around them, they were quick to adopt their masks, the first step towards madness, which was perpetuated by their inability to remember the good in their pasts.

CALLING EVIL GOOD

Perhaps the most vital component in Jack and the Joker's fall into evil and madness is that they never realize their mistakes but rather seek to justify their behavior. After they have adopted their masks, Jack and the Joker's identities are built upon their increasingly violent and evil conduct, and they refuse to admit that they are in the wrong because this would again leave them with a fragile identity. They dominate and hurt others to reaffirm their identity. No act is too cruel or senseless to "prove a point," as the Joker says after shooting an innocent woman (Moore 16). This self-centeredness could be equated with pathological narcissism, which Stephen A. Diamond calls "a tragic tale of rejection, and the indelible pain and bitterness of being rebuked," elements that were all present in Jack and the Joker's origin (190). Furthermore, Diamond's description of a narcissist as someone who "has buried his or her true self-expression in response to early injuries and replaced it with a highly developed, compensatory, 'false self,'" is eerily similar to Jack and the Joker's behavior (189). Functioning through their new personas has allowed them to make sense of themselves and the world around them, however violently they may act, something David A. Winter has named "destruction as a constructive choice" (153). He mentions how violent behavior can be "part of a scheme of imposing meaning" and how something as vicious as killing can change "a view of the self as weak and impotent to one of the self as omnipotent" (Winter 157; 162).

Jack uses violence and fear to give himself a feeling of omnipotence. He orders his tribe to tie up and beat Wilfred, but for what reason they "don't know. He didn't say" (Golding, ch 10). He also uses the tribe's fear of the beast to control them, warning them "you can't tell what he might do" (Golding, ch 10). Jack's persistence in his new ways becomes clearest during his final confrontation with Ralph. Jack

immediately responds with violence after Ralph accuses him of stealing, even though Ralph was right. In vain, Ralph tries to explain once more the importance of the signal fire but “Jack watched him inscrutably through his paint” (Golding, ch 11). As a response, Jack orders Samneric tied up only to taunt Ralph: “See? They do what I want,” again trying to solidify his identity as the new detective (Golding, ch 11). His mind is so lost in madness that he even claims responsibility for Piggy’s death saying: “See? See? That’s what you’ll get! I meant that,” even though it was Roger who moved the stone that killed Piggy (Golding, ch 11).

The determination to justify his new perspective is even more powerfully present in the Joker than in Jack. While Jack only confronts and rejects Ralph, the last remnant of authority on the island, the Joker seeks to not only confront but also convince the remaining power structures of his worldview. The Joker has become convinced that “human existence is mad, random and pointless” and that “order and sanity” are “useless notions” (Moore 35). He is sure that “all it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy,” and he tries to prove it by using police Commissioner Gordon as an example. First, he shoots his daughter in her spine in front of him, effectively paralyzing her. Then, he kidnaps, strips and chains Gordon and, while he has him pushed around by deformed little people, forces him to look at nude images of his wounded daughter. During the entire ordeal, he persuades Gordon to give up his sanity, saying that if his mind is “heading for the places in your past where the screaming is unbearable, remember there’s always madness” (Moore 23). This is of course exactly what the Joker himself has done. He has chosen to let go of the past and his rationality, and he tries to justify himself by attempting to show that it is indeed a logical decision to make, even saying, “any other response would be crazy” (Moore 35). Winter gives a possible explanation why a person like the Joker

can be so singularly convinced of himself: “the more a particular violent identity is elaborated . . . the more attractive a choice it may become for the individual who has no other well-elaborated identity” (158). It is clear that he seeks to reaffirm his identity as he acknowledges that he did everything to “[demonstrate] there’s no difference between me and everyone else,” which reveals some of his insecurity (Moore 40). Nonetheless, he is so blinded by his conviction that he cannot see that what he did to Gordon was not, as he claims, “random injustice,” resembling what happened to him when his wife died, but that it was all meticulously planned and executed by him (Moore 30). His persistence in proving his point shows, as C. Fred Alford puts it, “that the evildoer is evil out of ignorance, failing to understand that inflicting dread on others cannot bring him to life” (318). At the end, Batman confronts the Joker, who recognizes that Batman also “had a bad day,” which, according to him, “drove [Batman] as crazy as everybody else . . . only [he] won’t admit it” (Moore 40). However, Batman reveals to the Joker that, despite his efforts, Commissioner Gordon is “as sane as he ever was,” and he discloses an important truth about the Joker’s descent into madness: “maybe ordinary people don’t always crack. . . . maybe it was just you all the time” (Moore 43).

Another element that supports that it takes an effort of the will to fall into madness is that in both novels there are people under similar circumstances who respond differently. In *Lord of the Flies*, Piggy suffers from much the same amount of rejection and humiliation as Jack, perhaps even more, yet he never loses himself as Jack does. Likewise, in *The Killing Joke*, Commissioner Gordon also does not go mad despite the traumatic experience that the Joker put him through. Right before the police arrive at the scene, the Joker declines Batman’s offer to get him help, saying, “it’s too late for that,” and instead tells him a joke about two men attempting to

escape a lunatic asylum (Moore 46). One of the two men suggests using the beam of his flashlight as a bridge to cross a gap to which the other responds: “You think I’m crazy? You’d turn it off when I was half way across” (Moore 47). The joke gives an important insight into the nature of madness, namely that the vicious cycle of mad thinking prohibits the escape from madness once the mind has gone too far, a dangerous trap that the Joker has fallen victim to. Nonetheless, it was their conscious effort and persistence in justifying their behavior and identity that truly caused Jack and the Joker to become mad and evil to the point of no return.

CONCLUSION

Sholom J. Kahn has noted that “man's central problem is surely that of the good and evil in his life, and it is because the books he reads and writes are, in one way or another, concerned with that problem that they are so important to him” (98). This is perhaps why *The Lord of the Flies* has been such a timeless classic and why *The Killing Joke* has remained a favorite among graphic novel readers. Although both Jack in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and the Joker in Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* started rather innocently, they underwent a transformation from choirboy and comedian to vicious savage leader and murderous psychopath. Their lack of a stable identity and fear of failure led them to adopt masks with relatively good intentions. However, these masks altered their minds in such a way that a new persona was unleashed that soon controlled them completely. Furthermore, there was no moral structure or authority to prevent them from adopting their masks and being surrounded by immorality distorted their memory, making them unable to remember the good in their pasts, which aided their transition into madness. Still, while the circumstances were an important factor, it took Jack and the Joker's own will, and their determination to justify themselves and confront the power structures around them that truly solidified their new evil and mad identity.

Identity and tragedy are at the core of the two stories and the adoption of masks is merely a method to cope with these integral themes in their lives. It is neither solely external nor internal influences that spawn madness but nature and nurture both appear as catalysts for the genesis of these villains. As tragedy strips away their original means of identification, the masks allow them to re-stabilize their character. Ultimately, it is not Golding's emphasis on evil being innate to man that causes madness, for although all his characters are capable of evil, none come to embody it

as Jack does, nor is it extreme external trauma and tragedy as with Moore's the Joker, for both Batman and Gordon were able to maintain their sanity, but madness is, as the Joker puts it, an "emergency exit" (Moore 23). Madness is the choice to deviate from the accepted, often moral, norm of behavior to establish an identity or, more particularly, to find and add meaning and importance to a life that lacks both. However, the nature of madness allows a man to make this decision only once, after which he is sucked into a vicious cycle of thinking from which the mind grants no escape. Consequently, the madman is actually like the tragic hero, but one who fails to realize his error and instead justifies himself to guard his fragile identity from further pain. In conclusion, the nature of evil and madness in literature is neither a manifestation of man's nature nor a consequence of tragic events but an expression, however devastating, of man's own free will.

SECTION II

A Storm Is Coming

A short story by Wesley Smit

The walls were black, the hallway seemingly endless. Jared peered into the darkness in front of him. There was hardly any light and he felt like he could actually see the darkness, as if it was an entity. Hollow steps echoed through the hallway.

Hehehehehe.

Jared stood frozen to the floor, neck and back sweat-soaked. He couldn't figure out if the voice was real or just in his head, but he recognized it immediately.

Come here boy; let's have some fun.

Though he wanted to, he couldn't turn around. The steps came closer, in front or behind, he did not know. He felt the darkness moving steady towards him. It was pulling him in. With every muscle in his body he tried to move but they all failed him.

Hehehahahaha.

The laugh became louder. Jared tried to open his mouth. "Help." He hardly heard the faint yelp himself.

You know you can't run.

A black hand reached out to Jared's face.

"Aaaaaah!" Jared shot up straight, eyes wide open, muscles tense. He breathed hard, felt his heart pounding in his throat. It took him a couple of seconds to realize he was in his bedroom.

"Are you okay honey?"

"Yes, yes." Jared looked at the sheets. They were soaked in sweat. "Yes. I'll be alright."

"That nightmare again?"

"Uh-huh." Jared looked at Ellen. Her eyes calmed his heart. "The same one every time." He put his head back on his pillow; Ellen leaned over and put her head on his shoulder.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Jared remained silent as he stared at the ceiling.

"You don't have to talk to me, you could see someone," Ellen said.

"No." The voice still echoed in Jared's mind.

"There's no shame in it, lots of people go nowadays."

"It's not that I'm embarrassed, it's just—" Jared briefly closed his eyes. He could not shake the image of the black hand and the memories it made him relive.

"It's just, I'm not like that you know? Plus, we don't have the money for it anyway."

"That shouldn't be an issue—"

“But it is. And you know it. We talked about this didn’t we?”

Ellen looked up at him. “It’s just that... I worry about you.”

Jared sat up. “Don’t. I’ll be fine. Look, I don’t want you to worry about me, all right? We have enough to worry about as it is.” He stroked the side of her face. “Okay honey?” The more he looked at Ellen, the more he felt at ease. His mind stopped racing. She could always calm him down, no matter the situation. It was as if she radiated this confidence that everything would be fine, as though she could see beyond what he could see. He reached for her hand and kissed it, wondering why of all people she had chosen him.

A loud bang disrupted the silence.

Jared looked at Ellen.

“What was that?” said Ellen.

Jared quickly jumped out of bed, put on his pants and grabbed the baseball bat in the corner of the room. He whispered. “You stay here.”

“Honey don’t go.”

“Ssssh.” Jared snuck out of the bedroom and walked through the hallway. A creak. He froze. Nothing. He gripped the bat tight, his hands sweaty. He made his way to the living room, fear forcing his steps to be slow and deliberate. The room was dark, the shadows deep black. Jared moved towards the light switch and flicked it on. He felt a sting at the back of his skull and toppled forward. Dizzy, he turned around and stared into a gun barrel.

“Where’s the fucking money?”

“Money? What are you talk—”

A swift kick connected to Jared’s face.

“Where’s the fucking money?”

Jared felt his head throbbing. “I don’t know! I don’t have your money.”

“Wanna play dumb with me? Mr. Furino don’t like people playing around with his money. You lost, now you pay up.”

“I lost? What are you—” Then it hit him. Ellen. He turned and looked towards the bedroom. Ellen stood in her bathrobe, one hand covering her mouth in shock.

“I’m so sorry.” Ellen could barely control her voice. “I was so sure I was going to win this time, I was so sure...”

“No, no, no! What did you do?”

“Looks like you can’t even control your own woman. She borrowed 6000 bucks and put it on Berry Randall. Sucker went down in the second round. A woman got no business being in boxing, guess this is proof right here.” The man gave a crooked grin. His face looked wearied and his skin was rough. There were burn marks visible on his neck.

“6000 dollars? I barely make 1500 a month.”

“Not my problem,” said the man as he aimed the gun at Jared.

“No, wait! I’ll get your money, just give me... give me a month or two.”

“You’ve got a week.”

“A week?”

A bullet blasted past Jared’s face.

“Okay, okay, I’ll get the money, I will.”

The man studied Jared and smiled. “Don’t blame me that I won’t take your word for it.” He looked up at Ellen.

Ellen’s eyes opened wide. “No...”

“No! Don’t even think—”

Jared was too late to dodge the incoming hit. The butt of the gun hit his temple. He fell on his back and saw the man step over his body towards Ellen as everything faded to black.

Jared felt himself moving down the stairs, something pushing him in his back. The darkness moved and shifted in front of him.

Weak-ling, weak-ling.

The voice was all around him.

Hehehehehe.

He tried to run but his legs were heavy, mechanical almost, as if they obeyed a different mind. They stopped. A weight came on his shoulders, ice cold, reaching into his bones, slowly spreading through his upper body, like a thick liquid.

Surprise, surprise.

The sharp ring of the phone woke Jared up. It had been two days. He quickly rose out of his chair and picked it up. “Hello?”

“Jared?”

The sound of Ellen’s voice made his heart jump. “Ellen? I’m here honey.”

“If you wanna hear that voice again, you pay the 6000 dollars.”

Jared recognized the man's voice. "I'll get the money, I promise, I just— just give me more time."

"You've got three more days."

"Three? No, five. You said I had a week!"

"And now I say you've got three days."

Jared's face turned red. "Bullshit! How the hell am I supposed to get that kind of money in three days?"

"You'll figure something out. You wouldn't want anything to happen to that lovely wife of yours, right?"

All the muscles in Jared's body tensioned, his hand gripping tighter around the phone. "If you hurt her, I swear to God, I swear—"

"Who says we'll hurt her? Way too pretty for that."

Jared felt like his head could explode. "I'll kill you if you lay one hand on her, you hear me? I'll fucking kill you!"

"Three days."

The phone went dead.

"Hello?" Jared threw the phone across the room. "Fuck!" He flipped the coffee table and smashed a vase against the wall; it crashed into a thousand pieces. He collapsed to the floor on his knees and only now started to realize what he had just said on the phone. Sorrow filled his heart and tears came to his eyes. He muttered Ellen's name as he fell on his side, alone, with nothing but the voices in his head to accompany him. The night failed to give him rest.

Jared looked through the window at the grey sky. He felt exhausted and his body was limp. Every breath felt heavy and it was like an ever-tightening grip strangled his heart. His mind kept going back to the night Ellen was taken. Over and over he relived the event, trying to alter the outcome. He failed every time. A recurring sound drew his attention. The water cooler was leaking. He watched the drops fall to the floor, escaping their plastic container, only to be absorbed by the carpet. Jared's eyes were fixated on the wet spot that grew gradually.

"Jared James?"

Jared looked up and saw a tall police officer standing in front of him with short dark hair, a big moustache and broad shoulders.

“Mr. James, my name is detective Phil Johnson, I’m sorry to hear what happened to your wife, but I want to tell you that we’ve got our best men on the case. You’ve made the right choice coming to us sir.”

“Are you going to get her back?”

“We’ll do the best we can.”

“No. Answer me. Can you get her back?” Desperation was in his eyes.

The detective paused for a moment. “Yes sir, we’re going to get her back.”

Jared felt a mild sense of relief, but it didn’t linger.

“I have just a couple of more questions for you, Mr. James. You said the man worked for Furino, correct?”

Though he had replayed the evening countless times in his head, Jared had trouble remembering. “Ehm, yes. He definitely said Furino.”

“And he was alone?”

“Yes, as far as I could tell.”

“Thank you sir. To help you process all this, you should talk to Ms. Sophia Cosimo of our victim support unit.”

“Support unit? Like a shrink?”

The detective chuckled. “She would say she is there to help you.”

“I don’t know…” Jared stared blankly in front of him.

The detective tapped Jared on his shoulder. “Give her a shot. It’ll do you good. Won’t hurt to try right?”

“I guess not.”

“Come, follow me.” The detective turned around and started walking.

Jared stood up and followed him. It wasn’t a large police precinct, and besides the woman at the reception area it was mostly empty. The detective told him they were hard at work at building a case against Furino, but he hardly registered any of it.

“Her office is right over there, next to the canteen,” the detective said. He knocked on the door and opened it after he heard a response. “Hello Ms. Cosimo, I’ve got someone for you here, Mr. Jared James.”

Sophia was in her late twenties, wore glasses and had long black hair. She had a warm smile. “Welcome Mr. James, take a seat.”

Jared turned to the detective. “Please, find her.”

“We’re working as hard as we can Mr. James. I’ll be on my way now.” The detective gave a short nod to them both. “Sophia, Mr. James.”

Jared watched him as he walked to the canteen and he could see a couple of cops laughing and playing cards as the canteen door swung open and shut. He entered Sophia's office and closed the door behind him.

"Can I offer you something to drink?" Sophia said.

"I'd like some water, thank you," Jared said as he looked around the office.

Sophia gave him a glass of water.

"I have no idea how this works." Jared didn't feel comfortable, despite sitting on a large leather sofa. Sophia sat down opposite him on a chair, legs crossed, watching him intently. Jared looked at her, unsure what to think of the situation.

"Why don't you start by telling me what happened to your wife?"

"Her name is Ellen. She..." Jared cleared his throat. He looked down at the floor. "She was taken three days ago. Somebody had broken into our house, saying we had to pay up 6000 dollars. Turned out Ellen had a gambling debt. She'd always had problems gambling, but never amounts like this."

"Do you know why she did it?"

Jared took a sip of water. "We struggled a lot. Money was always low."

"You think she did it to help you?"

Jared looked up, his eyes meeting Sophia's. "She lost her trust in me."

"Why would you say that?"

"I should have provided for her. I promised her a better life than this."

"As a couple you share responsibilities—"

"I wasn't there for her when she needed me." Jared's pulse increased.

"You can't put this all on yourself, Jared. That man—"

Jared stood up. "I should have taken him out! It's because of me that she's—" Jared was shaking. "I failed her." He averted his eyes; his voice quivered. "I failed her."

Sophia was taken aback by the sudden outburst. She let the silence speak and waited until Jared sat back down.

Jared looked at the table and saw that he had spilled his cup of water. It was dripping off the table, forming a small puddle on the floor.

"Don't worry about that Jared." Sophia tried to make eye contact. "Your wife, do you love her?"

Jared avoided Sophia's gaze and fought to control his emotions. "Of course I do."

"Then you know you did all you could to help her."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Can I ask you something? Why did you wait three days to call the police?"

"I guess I was trying to save her myself." The reminder of his failure stung deep in Jared's heart.

Sophia chose not to push the issue. "Do you have any family, someone we can call?"

"My mother died when I was eight years old. I was her only child."

"Oh, I'm sorry. And your father?"

Jared looked up and clenched his jaw.

Weak-ling, Weak-ling.

He wasn't sure if he had heard the voice. He refocused. "My father... My father is in a lunatic asylum."

"You mean a psychiatric hospital?"

"Whatever you wish to call it."

"How long has—"

"I rather not talk about him."

Sophia paused briefly. "You know Jared, sometimes it is good to talk about the past. It helps us to—"

"He did something terrible and got away with it. He's a maniac."

"I'm sure there was a good reason to admit him. I know it can be hard to understand the mentally ill."

"Do you?" Jared leaned forward. His tone changed. "You know what is like to live in fear? Praying the alcohol will knock him out before—" Jared calmed himself. "There is no such thing as mentally ill."

"I can assure you there is. It's not always easy to explain. And no, there is no quick fix. Counseling is slow, but sometimes real progress can be made."

Jared stood up and started to walk around the room. "Counseling." He shook his head. "You know what the worst part is? People like you who are more interested in curing his so-called condition than in the lives he's ruined. Instead of letting him rot in jail you treat him like a fucking victim."

Sophia was adamant. "It's not always like that Jared."

Jared exploded. "You know what he's done? You want to see my fucking scars?" Jared felt the hate coursing through his veins. Painful memories fueled his rage. "You want to know how my mom died?"

"Is everything okay here?" An officer stood in the door opening, one hand on his firearm.

Sophia quickly answered. "Yes, yes. Everything is fine." She looked at Jared. "Just some emotions running high."

"I'm wasting my time here." Jared moved towards the door. He stopped right before he walked out and looked at Sophia. "I'm sorry, this just isn't for me." He quickly walked on before she could respond and made his way to the reception area. Opening the front door he glimpsed the water cooler out of the corner of his eye. It was still leaking. The spot on the floor was still growing.

The sun was slowly setting in the distance, its light barely penetrating the thick clouds. One day remained. Jared had barely eaten the last couple of days and his racing mind prevented him much sleep. When he had been able to close his eyes he was plagued by nightmares and that all too familiar voice.

Weak-ling.

He found some solace on the streets, where he had spent most of his time, making multiple visits to the police precinct daily. He had just received the same answer they always gave him, "we are doing everything possible, sir. We'll call you if we'll have more information on the situation." What bothered him most was that he found it increasingly difficult to recall Ellen's voice. Hope was both his sole source of comfort as well as a poison in his veins. He felt a small drop fall on his head. He looked up. "Looks like rain," he mumbled.

Jared's phone rang.

He stopped abruptly, the ring sending a chill through his body. He regained focus, took his cell phone out of his pocket and answered after the third ring. "Hello?"

"Mr. Jared James? Detective Phil Johnson here."

The pause between the words seemed like an eternity.

"I have some good news for you Mr. James," the detective said.

Jared lifted his head to the sky, eyes closed, still afraid to hope.

"We found your wife sir."

The news hit Jared slowly and it took a while before hearing led to comprehension. “You found—” A bubbling flow of joy and relief overwhelmed him. “You found her? My wife? Ellen?”

“Yes sir.”

Jared put his hands in his hair and took some deep breaths. He felt like a weight had been lifted of his shoulders. “Is she alright?”

“She has some nicks and bruises but other than that she’s perfectly fine.”

“Where is she?” Now the realization of it all had set in, Jared longed to see, hold and kiss Ellen again.

“A patrol car is on its way to the precinct right now with your wife. We have the suspect in custody as well.”

“Thank you sir. I’m on my way.” Jared hung up the phone, turned around and looked down the street. A warmth slowly spread through his chest. “Yes!” The shout alleviated some of the tension that had been built up in Jared’s stomach for the last couple of days. He started to run. The police precinct was only five blocks away. He seemed to gain energy with every step he took. He rushed past the people on the sidewalk, almost bumping into a couple of them. His heart beat rapidly in his chest, as he sprinted as fast as he could, his lungs struggling to keep up with his rapid pace. The precinct was just across the large intersection. He stopped to gain his breath as he waited for the light to turn green. He felt another drop of rain on his head. He looked to his left and saw a pair of police cars pull up to the red light. He froze. Ellen sat in the back seat of the car in front, unaware of his presence. “Ellen!”

Ellen looked up as the light turned. She turned her head and her eyes locked in on Jared’s. The car moved forward. She smiled.

Jared stood still as his eyes followed Ellen while the car moved across the intersection. A red blur entered Jared’s vision from the right. A loud crash filled the air followed by screeching tires. Ellen’s car stood still in the middle of the street, half bent around a red pick-up truck that obscured the back seat of the car. Jared stood at the corner of the intersection, the collision constantly repeating itself in front of his eyes, the sound of crushing metal and breaking glass still echoing in his ears. Police officers in the other car came out and immediately started checking the totaled vehicles. Slowly strength returned to Jared’s legs. His voice was barely audible. “Ellen?” He began to walk towards the cars. His voice was louder now. “Ellen?” His pace increased.

One of the police officers approached him. “Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to stand back.”

Jared ran into the officer, who stopped him and attempted to keep him away. “Let go of me!” He struggled to move past him. Then he saw Ellen, her head twisted to the side, hollow glassy eyes staring straight ahead, lifeless. “Ellen!” Blood dripped down her busted face and a shard of glass protruded from her neck, covered in blood. “No, no...” His hands were shaking. The grip on his heart clamped down, crushing the last bit of hope he had held onto, succumbing to the finality of image in front of him. He looked towards the officer. “Is she—” a wave of sorrow silenced his words, penetrating his bones, weakening his knees.

“I’m sorry sir,” said the officer.

He could not match the morbid image of the woman in the car with that of his wife. He tried to envision his Ellen but he could not. Her face was elusive like smoke, quickly fading and dispersing. Instead another figure emerged from the smoke, a dormant image chained to sorrow and guilt, locked away in the dungeons of his mind. He could only see his mother.

Hehehehehe.

Grief and rage intertwined themselves around Jared’s heart, sinking their claws deep into his soul, opening wounds that were covered but never healed.

Ambulances and more police officers had already arrived at the scene.

Jared looked up through teary eyes and saw the officer who had driven Ellen’s car being treated for a wound to his head. Jared snapped. He rushed towards the officer, blinded by tears, fueled by fury. “You killed her!”

Before he could reach the officer, another one stopped him.

Jared grabbed him by his collar, shouting madly. “You killed her!”

The officer quickly countered with a swift elbow to the face. He grabbed Jared’s arm, twisted it behind his back, pushed him to the street and handcuffed his arms behind his back.

Jared was on his knees, all strength leaving his body. His cries carried an immeasurable anguish and his loud sobs drowned out the rumbling thunder in the background. He felt as if his veins were filled with acid, continually tearing him up inside. Instead of giving life, every breath burned his lungs, his cries making his throat sore.

The officers could not help but stare at him, his body shaking from his violent sobs. All bystanders stood and watched in silence.

Detective Johnson had also arrived at the scene, somewhat stunned by the agonizing sound of Jared's cries. "Is the suspect hurt?"

No one responded.

The detective raised his voice. "The Furino witness, is he alright, is he still in custody?"

The officers nodded and pointed at the car 15 feet in front of Jared.

Jared looked up and saw the vehicle, standing slightly sideways, just enough so Jared could see the kidnapper in the backseat through the car window. He had a smug look on his face. Jared's cry slowly turned to a chuckle.

"Good thing. I guess we got lucky," the detective said.

The laugh grew louder. "Hehehehehahahahaha."

The detective and the officers looked at Jared, disturbed.

"hehehahaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Jared leaned backwards, his head to the sky, laughing uncontrollably. "HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!" The manic laughter filled the air, becoming louder and louder. A sense of dread filled all who were present. A flash of lightning lit up the sky followed by a loud crash. Jared continued to laugh. Slowly, a rhythmic tapping permeated the air. It had started to rain.

Eddie looked in the fridge. There was nothing in it except for a half filled carton of orange juice. He grabbed it, closed the fridge and took a sip. He looked at Martin and Joey playing cards at the table. "Where are all the guys?"

"They're out to get Furino." Joey took a card from the deck and discarded another.

"You mean Furino, Furino? The crime lord?" Said Eddie.

"Yeah, who else? They got some new Intel from that kidnapper guy they brought in today. Guess he thought he was too old to go back to jail, so he decided to roll on Furino," said Joey.

"Really?" Said Eddie.

Joey found satisfaction in knowing and telling the story. "He gave up names, addresses, the whole shebang."

Martin chimed in. "Safer to do some jail time if you ask me."

“You got that right. He’s got some balls to tell on Furino,” said Eddie.

“Uh-huh, that’s why the Chief wasn’t gonna waste any time going after him. You never know if he has a guy in our precinct, news like that travels fast,” said Joey.

Eddie put down the carton and yawned. “He must have taken an army with him then, nobody is around.”

“Just us old timers and administration,” said Martin.

“That hot shrink still around?” Said Eddie.

Joey continued to display his knowledge. “Yeah, she stuck around, wanted to follow up on that guy who lost his wife. He’s in a holding cell right now.”

“Guy is ready to snap if you ask me,” said Martin.

“Naw man,” said Joey. “I saw him just an hour ago when I checked the cells at ten, looks more like a limp noodle. Ready to jump off a bridge as soon as he goes home.”

“Can’t blame him,” said Eddie. “What are you guys playing?”

“Three Thirteen.” Martin put his cards on the table. “And I’m out.”

“What? No way.” Joey looked at the cards on the table. “Two wild cards again? Get outta here. Next round is without wild cards.”

“Why? They’re a part of the game.” Martin wrote down the scores for the round.

“Because. Even a retard can win with wild cards,” said Joey.

“Then why aren’t you winning?” Eddie chuckled.

“There’s no way I can win if he constantly has two or more wild cards,” said Joey.

“Stop whining man, you’re just pissed off because you had a bad hand,” Martin said as he reshuffled the cards.

“For five straight rounds! Screw this, man. I’m hungry, let’s order something,” said Joey.

“You’re always hungry,” said Eddie. He and Martin laughed.

“Come on, let’s finish the game.” Martin dealt the cards. “I’m sure your luck is going to change.”

The door swung open, all three guys turned in sync and saw Sophia in the doorway.

“Good evening guys, is Mr. James still in custody? I believe detective Johnson told you to let him go home after he cooled down. I would like to have a word with him to see if he’s all right. It’s already getting kind of late.”

For a moment they just stared at her.

Eddie spoke. “I’ll go take a look ma’am.”

“Thank you,” said Sophia.

“You wait in the office, I’ll bring him to you.” He looked at Joey and Martin. “You guys play nice now alright?” Joey gave him the finger. Eddie chuckled and walked out of the canteen towards the holding cells.

Jared sat on the bed in his cell, staring at the wall in front of him. Outside, the rain was still pouring down. His mind was calm, perhaps because of the predictable, soothing rhythm of the steady rainfall. There was no moonlight, only a moving, shifting darkness filling the sky, occasionally lit up by a flash of lightning. “Ellen.” Jared mumbled the name of his wife, unable to conjure up her face in his mind, like a blurry and old photograph fading away in front of his eyes. The small cell reminded him of the basement of the house where he grew up, small and filthy, with a musky smell that penetrated his nostrils. It was the only thing he could clearly recall. And it kept coming back. He vividly saw his mother in front of him, tied down, bloody, barely breathing.

Surprise. Surprise.

He wasn’t sure if he was dreaming or not. He didn’t care anymore.

Hehehehehe. What. Do. You. See?

“Why are you doing this?”

To show you, son. They’ve got it all twisted.

Jared remembered the bottle of whiskey in his father’s hand, the smell of liquor on his breath and his sweaty face. His hands were covered in blood, as was the metal pipe in his other hand. Blood spatters were sprinkled across his white shirt.

You’ve got to make them listen. Hehe.

His father took a large sip of whiskey.

She has to listen.

Muffled moans came from his mother’s mouth, the sounds barely recognizable as human. His father offered him the pipe.

They're playing with you. Hehaha. PLAYING! Hehe. Show them who makes the rules.

Jared had never forgotten the fear. He couldn't move. He couldn't take the pipe. He couldn't turn around as his father walked past him to his mother behind him. He heard the dull sound of steel hitting flesh, of steel breaking bones. He could not turn around. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he covered his ears and screamed, trying to drown out the monotonous thumping behind him. The sound seemed to shift to his side.

"Mr. James." Eddie was banging on the cell door.

Jared looked up, the memory slowly fading from his mind.

"Have you calmed down a bit?"

"Yes, I'm fine." Jared felt numb.

"I'm going to let you go home now, but Ms. Cosimo would like to have a word with you to see how you are. Is that alright with you?" Eddie looked through the small window in the cell door.

"Yes, I would like that."

Eddie turned the lock and opened the door. "I'll warn you, if you make a scene like before you'll have to stay the night here."

"Don't worry officer." Jared stood up and looked him in the eye, his words deliberate and decisive: "that will never happen again." He walked out slowly.

Eddie patted him on the shoulder. "Sorry about your wife. Come on, this way." He walked out in front of Jared past the other holding cells.

"Yeah, sorry about your wife."

Jared froze. It came from one of the holding cells. He recognized the voice immediately. The kidnapper.

"Real shame to see such a fine woman go. Such a waste."

Jared could see the man's filthy grin in his mind. Heat flared at the bottom of his neck. His hands were shaking.

Eddie grabbed his arm. "Let's go Mr. James."

Jared acted instinctively. Before Eddie could move Jared hit him hard in his face. He quickly turned him around, and ran him through the swinging door of the men's bathroom opposite the cell. He pushed him hard to the floor. Eddie fell backwards and awkwardly hit the back of his head against a sink as he fell down. Jared heard a snap. Eddie lay on the floor, his body not moving. Jared stood there,

staring at the body, breathing heavily. His heart beat relentlessly in his chest. Panic possessed his mind, weakening his limbs, slowly pulling his heart into an icy cold abyss. He felt as if the ground eroded beneath him. He turned and walked to a sink, splashed water in his face and looked in the mirror. “What have I done?” His hands were still shaking.

Weak-ling, Weak-ling.

“Shut up.”

You know you can't run.

Jared looked at the body again, still lifeless. He looked back at the door and recalled the conversation with the man on the phone. He relived the anger. It slowly subdued the rioting thoughts in his mind.

They're playing with you.

“I can't, I can't.”

He has to listen.

Jared looked up in the mirror. He started to pull his hair back but he stopped. He saw his father's drunken face in front of him, sweaty and dirty.

You've got to make them listen.

“You have to make him listen.” As Jared said it, he started to wet his hair and pulled it in front of his face. The sight almost overwhelmed him. He looked exactly like his father.

Show them who makes the rules.

“I make the rules.” Jared could barely distinguish his father's voice from his own. He walked over to Eddie's body and took his keys and baton. He spoke in sync with his father: “Let's have some fun.” He walked towards the cell door, found the right key and opened it. The man was lying on his bed, looking slightly agitated that his rest had been disturbed. Jared forgot the fear. He moved swiftly. He swung the baton and hit the man hard in his face. He toppled over onto the floor. He couldn't turn around as Jared jumped on top of him and kept hitting. Jared heard the dull sound of the baton hitting flesh, of the baton breaking bones. Adrenaline surged through his veins. With every hit he felt a current running through his bones, lifting the numbness of his body. He started to chuckle. “Hehehehehehe.” The stick kept coming down on the bloody, lifeless body. Warm blood splattered on his shirt, in his face and on his arms. A surge of power infused Jared's heart; a feeling of invincibility saturated his mind. Loud thunder rumblings drowned out the laughter and the monotonous

thumping. Finally, he stopped. Jared closed his eyes and listened to the sound of the rain. It was like he could distinctly hear the impact of every separate drop. His heart was calm, his mind clear, his hands steady. He stood up and looked at the body below him. It looked like roadkill, a big mess of blood, brains and hair. “Hehehehe.” Jared wasn’t sure anymore what the man had done, but instinctively he knew the man had deserved it. Lightning flashed and illuminated the cell. Jared looked at the shadow that his six foot frame cast on the prison floor. He felt invigorated as he stepped over the dead body and made his way towards Sophia’s office.

The hollow sound of Jared’s footsteps echoed through the hallway, his long black hair still in front of his stubbled face. His short sleeved shirt revealed burn marks and scars on his arms. He took large strides with his lanky body across the smooth floor, quickly closing in on the office at the end of the hallway. In his right hand he held Eddie’s keys, in his left hand the bloodstained baton. He stroked the handle of the baton with his thumb, its rubbery grip pleasant to touch and in contrast to the texture of the sticky blood that he felt as he rubbed the fingers of his right hand together. Heavy and solid, the baton felt like an extension of his arm, its weight perfectly balanced. The rumbling thunder made him feel powerful as if the force of nature was under his control. An unknown energy circulated through his muscles, veins and bones, reviving a body that had felt lifeless for so long. As he neared the office his hands began to tingle. He heard voices coming from behind the canteen door, which was adjacent to Sophia’s office. The right key was easily identifiable on the bunch of keys. Jared locked the canteen door, broke off the key and walked in Sophia’s office. “You wanted to see me?”

Sophia looked up. “Yes, I wanted to—” She saw the blood stains on his shirt and hands. Fear gripped her heart. The phone on her desk rang.

Jared took two quick steps and smashed it with his baton.

Sophia screamed.

He pointed the baton at her face. “Shut up.”

Sophia stopped screaming. Her eyes were wide open. She was immobilized by dread. Her hands were shaking.

Jared grinned. Her fear gave him strength. “You wanted to see me?”

Sophia couldn’t stop staring at the blood on his hands. “What did you do Jared?”

“He had to listen. Hehehehe.” The urge to laugh was beyond his control. “But that’s okay right? I just need counseling.”

“Jared, whatever this is you need to stop it, this isn’t you.”

“It’s not?” He was enjoying the confrontation.

“I know now what happened to your mother. I’m so sorry for what I said before. I didn’t know what your father did.”

“My father gave me this baton. He warned me about you. About your rules.”

Sophia tried to reason. “What are you talking about?”

Jared raised his voice. “You’re trying to play me.” His hand gripped tighter around the baton.

The look in Jared’s eyes frightened Sophia. “No, Jared. I only tried to help you.” Her words seemed to go right past him. Mad eyes met hers. She began to panic. “Think about your wife Ellen, what would she say if she had seen you like this?”

The name only vaguely registered with Jared. He couldn’t quite place it in his mind, but he began to feel increasingly troubled the longer he lingered on it.

Sophia noticed his mental struggle. “Try to remember Jared.”

He shook his head. “You’ve got it all twisted.” His clear mind slowly began to buzz, grief and rage creeping into his thoughts. Jared looked confused.

Sophia saw his face change and persisted. “Face your pain. We can’t control the world around us, but we can control how we choose to face it, Jared.”

Gradually, feelings of fear and insecurity leaked back into Jared’s heart.

They’re playing with you.

Jared wasn’t sure if the voice was his own. He closed his eyes.

“It’s okay, I’m here to help you.” Sophia gained confidence and took a step towards Jared.

Different voices echoed through Jared’s mind, their incomprehensible noise filling him with dread. He looked into the eyes of a beaten woman and a sense of guilt clamped onto his heart. He felt as if the ground was melting beneath him, sticking to his soles, slowly pulling him down. One voice rose above the clamor.

Show them.

The words sent a pulse through his body, briefly quieting the noise.

Show them who makes the rules.

Jared desperately sought to calm the turmoil in his mind and reached out to the authoritative voice. Jared spoke softly. "I make the rules." Immediately, his mind began to stabilize, pushing out the agonizing fear and guilt.

"What did you say?"

He opened his eyes. "I make the rules!"

A deafening crash of thunder enforced Jared's proclamation.

Sophia jumped back.

Jared heard a breaking sound and quickly looked behind him. The canteen door.

Sophia saw an opportunity as Jared was distracted and ran towards the door.

In a reflex he swung the baton and hit Sophia in the face as she ran past him, dislocating her jaw. The sound excited Jared. She fell hard on her face, her body limp.

"Hehehehe." Jared's uneasiness faded with the laugh. "Weak-ling."

He dashed towards the opening door.

"Ms. Cosimo?" Martin was the first through the door, Joey right behind him.

Jared ran full speed into Martin, baton extended. His hands were tingling again. He hit Martin in the throat, his momentum pushing Martin into Joey, who toppled over. Jared followed up with a kick to Martin's groin. "Hahahaha." The compulsion to laugh was uncontrollable now. He grabbed Martin's head, pushed it down forcefully and kned him in the face, breaking his nose. "Weak-ling, hehehe."

Blood was dripping down Martin's face.

"Martin!" Joey was slow to stand up. He grabbed his gun and tried to aim at Jared.

Jared reveled in their fear. He pushed Martin at Joey, who was immediately off balance. Swiftly and vigorously, he struck Joey's hand. The sound of fingers breaking made Jared's heart jump. The gun dropped to the floor.

Joey screamed out in pain.

"Weak-ling, weak-ling." Jared relentlessly swung at Joey's oversized body, hitting his side, crushing his ribs. He hit low and shattered Joey's knee, bringing him to the floor. Towering over the heavily injured men, Jared felt the current running through his body again.

Loud wailing sirens filled his ear. Martin and Joey must have alerted the rest. He looked down the hallway and heard footsteps in the distance. He ran the other way towards the emergency exit and pushed the door open. He was immediately engulfed

by the rain, his clothing completely drenched within seconds. He looked up and surrendered himself to the unending barrage of raindrops. Water streamed down his face. He felt free. He looked to his right and saw the street, busy even at midnight. Police cars were continually arriving at the precinct. He looked to his left, the walls were dark, the alleyway seemingly endless. Jared heard footsteps nearing behind him. He turned left, his walk turning into a jog, turning into a full sprint. He ran as fast as he could, exhausting every muscle in his body. His image disappeared slowly into the dark alley until he could no longer be seen, completely engulfed by the darkness of the night.

COMMENTARY

The story of Jared James' descent into madness centers around his fragile self-image and specifically on his fear of identifying with his insane father. Through tragedy, Jared's mental barriers to distance himself from his father are torn down and eventually his fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as he adopts his father's identity to seek vengeance, which inevitably becomes his new persona through which he finally finds a stable but mad identity. This commentary will seek to expound on and justify creative choices that were made in the story as well as highlight major themes. The analysis of Jack and the Joker in section one provided the basic framework for the story. The key elements of a fragile, narcissistic identity shaped by an immoral environment and traumatic events leading to the adoption of a mask as well as persistence in living through the new persona are all present in Jared's downfall. Flashbacks, dreams, foreshadowing, and allegory are literary techniques that play a large role in Jack and the Joker's story and they are featured as well in *A Storm Is Coming*. They are used mostly to illustrate Jared's internal struggle as he slowly loses his grip on reality and becomes insane. The style of the story is heavily influenced by the visual style of the graphic novel, using many symbolic elements to help describe and foreshadow Jared's development. This was done to shorten the story while still seeing the parallels to Jared's past experiences, and it also fits the extreme emotions that figure in the story. The pessimistic, violent atmosphere is inspired by *The Killing Joke*, but more specifically the crime noir genre, which typically features a corrupt city beyond saving. The criminality and violence of the city shapes Jared's life, from his mad father to the kidnapper to the accident, and eventually Jared becomes a part of this cycle himself. As common in the genre, the story does not end well. The killing of the supposed bad guy, the kidnapper, only results in a new bad guy being created. As E.M. Beekman notes: "the purported solution does not tidy things up since there is no end to a waking nightmare" (164).

First of all, numerous psychology papers about madness have helped shape Jared's downfall. His turnaround was deliberately radical to indicate that everyone has the potential to go mad and that it is ultimately a choice. Dave Holmes and Cary Federman's findings of how admittance to an institution or prison "sees [the inmate] stripped of [his] representation as the result of stages leading to a new identity,"

mirrors how Jared transfers identities at the police precinct after he was incarcerated (24). They mention how “isolation from the outside world accelerates this hazing process of identity ‘deconstruction’ and ‘reconstruction’” (Holmes and Federman 24). The emotion of guilt also plays a key role in the process. David Winter names it “the awareness of dislodgement from one’s core role,” which could lead to “even the most apparently self-destructive behavior” because it provides for such people “best available means of anticipating their world at that time” (155). This mirrors how Jared finally finds stability in his new mad identity by repressing his guilt, even though he has become extremely violent in the process. Another example to support Jared’s radical change is the transformation of Dr. Harold Shipman, who went “from being a life saver to the opposite pole of this construct, a killer” (158). Winter mentions how Dr. Shipman used “murder as a part of a scheme of imposing meaning” and that he was “someone who ‘enjoyed power and control’” (157). The satisfaction for power and control is seen in one of the final scenes in the story when Jared is enjoying the role reversal in Sophia’s office, finally being someone in control. Lastly, Heinz Kohut has labeled “the need for revenge ... for undoing a hurt by whatever means, and a deeply anchored, unrelenting compulsion in the pursuit of all these aims,” to be “characteristic features of narcissistic rage” (qtd. in Diamond 190). This compulsion is also a big part in Jared’s downfall, a compulsion to which he finally succumbs when he kills the kidnapper.

The three women in the story, Ellen, Sophia and Jared’s mother, the weather and the names of the main characters are used allegorically to illustrate Jared’s descent into madness. The name Jared means descent, or he who descended (“Jared”). The name Ellen means light and Sophia means wisdom (Kachold; “Sophia”). In the story, Ellen’s presence both physically and in Jared’s mind acts as a beacon of light and hope for Jared and the loss of Ellen initiates his downfall. Allegorically, her disappearance allows the darkness to spread in Jared’s mind and this is also symbolized by the coming storm. The storm darkens the sky and the closer the storm comes, the more Jared slips into madness, similar to the function of the signal fire in *Lord of the Flies*, where the children’s inability to maintain the fire signifies their descent into savagery. The leaked and spilled water are a premonition of the coming rain and they also symbolize Jared escaping from the normal confines of his mind. The rain finally pours down when Jared loses control, the rainfall and loud thunder drowning out the sound of Jared’s actions at the police precinct just as madness has

drowned out the reason in his mind. This spreading darkness in Jared's mind is also emphasized by his growing inability to remember the good things in his past, similar to Jack and the Joker. Jared's mother is never named in the story in order to strengthen the parallel with Jared's wife, who almost functions as her surrogate in Jared's mind, both their appearances not described. Ellen's death is eerily similar to Jared's mother death; both are randomly killed with the main perpetrator walking away unpunished and, more importantly, Jared feels guilty and responsible for both of their deaths, his wife's death a painful reminder of his mother's. The scene where Jared kills the kidnapper is purposefully similar to the scene where his father kills his mother to show that, ironically, the very act that appears to give Jared freedom actually kills the memory of his mother, the last good thing he could remember, allowing the madness to spread through his mind without hindrance, effectively killing his old self. This death of the old persona through murder was inspired by the case of Ian Brady, discussed in the paper of David Winter: "Brady considers that the serial killer has made a choice not to 'exist as a grey daub on a grey canvas'," and by committing murder "he is killing his long-accepted self as well as the victim, and simultaneously giving birth to a new persona, decisively cutting the umbilical connection between himself and ordinary mankind" (qtd. in Winter 163). Sophia, and figuratively wisdom, is the last thing standing between Jared and complete surrender to his new insane persona, and after he has confronted and beaten her, he becomes completely mad to the point of no return.

Another main element in the story is Jared's internal struggle to distance himself from his father. His nightmares and outbursts of anger are meant to illustrate that he has had a traumatic experience in his past. Stephen A. Diamond notes how "traumatic parenting," is one of the causes of "pathological narcissism," which is "closely correlated with rage" (189). This is incorporated in Jared's character, seen in his frequent outbursts of anger. His narcissism is also visible in how he almost always focuses on himself rather than those whom he cares for when he worries. When remembering the abduction of his wife, he emphasizes his failure to rescue her and when he recalls his mother's death he focuses on his inability to move and to act. Even before Ellen's abduction he wonders why she had chosen him, again focusing on himself. Jared's rage is often triggered when his father is mentioned or when a situation has occurred that reminds him of his father's unjust actions, such as the kidnapper taunting him or when the kidnapper is apparently escaping punishment for

his crimes. At first, his attempts to distance himself from his father seem successful, mostly illustrated by the distinct voice of his father in his mind. However, both his actions and his words increasingly start resembling his father's as past and present begin to merge in Jared's mind, distorting his reality. For example, the moments right before and after Jared receives the news of his wife's death mirror one of his nightmares. Another distortion is that Jared claims that his father handed him the baton when he confronts Sophia, mixing memory with reality. Eventually, Jared adopts the persona of his father and starts mimicking him in appearance, actions and words. The most blatant example is when he kills the kidnapper in the exact same way as his father killed his mother. In the end, Jared has lost himself in his new persona, enjoying the terror he spreads in the hearts of others, using his father's mad arguments to justify himself and even displaying his compulsive laughter.

Descriptions in the story are deliberately kept short and most characters are only described briefly, Jared himself not being described at all in the beginning. This is to emphasize Jared's numb and depressive view on the world as well as his inward focus. It is not until he adopts his new persona that he finally starts feeling alive and this is reflected in the more detailed descriptions in the latter part of the story, including Jared's appearance as well as his gruesome actions. Certain characteristics of Jared before the adoption of his new persona, such as being immobilized by fear as well as trembling hands, are also seen in Sophia during the final scene to emphasize the role reversal that has taken place and to demonstrate that Jared terrorizes others as he himself was terrorized in his past. As mentioned before, both Ellen and Jared's mother are not described physically to make them appear interchangeable in Jared's mind as they both have a similar role in his life and in the story.

A lot of foreshadowing takes place in the story, beginning with the very first scene. The long black hallway signifies Jared's journey into darkness and where he is unable to move in the first scene, he runs with all his might into the dark alleyway in the final scene, symbolizing his complete surrender to madness. The hollow steps that haunt Jared in his first nightmare eventually become his own later on as he makes his way to Sophia's office, symbolizing the role reversal. The nightmares as a whole are there to prepare the reader for the flashback scene of Jared's mother's death. Aside from the nightmares, Jared's outbursts at Sophia's office when she mentions his father and when he heard that his wife died also foreshadow the flashback, which in turn is a foreshadowing of Jared following in the footsteps of his father. In his second

nightmare, Jared is led into a basement against his will, unable to move, which would eventually happen again when he is locked up in the holding cell, its resemblance to the basement triggering the same nightmare. Only now does the reader discover the true significance of the nightmare and Jared's aversion to his father. Like Jack's statement "I'm not going to play any longer," and Joker saying "nothing's going to be the same," Jared also has an ironic statement that indicates his impending change: "that will never happen again" (Golding, ch 8; Moore 18).

The canteen scene where Martin and Joey play cards was inserted to alleviate some of the building tension and decrease the pace a bit, allowing the reader to process the hectic events of the previous part. However, the card game also functions as an allegory for Jared's situation. Joey constantly loses because of wild cards, cards that are above the regular rules of the game, figuratively standing for the wild cards in Jared's life that seem to function above the rules of the law such as his father and his kidnapper escaping conviction. Joey emphasizes the unfairness of the imbalance, but Martin responds that "they are part of the game," just as luck and chance are a part of life. Martin's statement, "I'm sure your luck is going to change," foreshadows a change in the status quo and is a signal of Jared becoming a figurative wild card, acting above the rules. Chance also favors Jared, as the police precinct is conveniently vacant when he kills the kidnapper, who, ironically, is the reason why most of the police force is absent.

In short, the short story was an attempt to show the development of madness in the mind. It shows how emotions of fear, anger and guilt, spawned by past trauma and tragedy, influence a man's identity and view on the world. Jared constructed barriers in his mind to distance himself from his mad father, mostly through his narcissistic rage and the calming image of his wife, who reminded him of the presence of his deceased mother. When he loses her through randomness and injustice, similar to the death of his mother, he loses her stabilizing presence in his mind and, consequently, his identity begins to crumble. He finds strength in the only well established and firm identity that he can remember and that is the identity of his father. He adopts this identity as a persona to seek revenge but completely loses himself in it as he finds more security in it than in his previous fragile identity. Ultimately, it does take a deliberate choice on his part to completely surrender to the madness. Just like in the stories of Jack and the Joker, it is tragedy that leads Jared on his path to madness and a new identity that grafts it into his being.

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