

Killing in the Name Of

By Timothy L. Hopkins

One evening in the fall, young Miles Lester sat in a quiet corner of a small coffee shop, glaring at his laptop screen, grumbling loudly about being unable to compose a coherent sentence, when a stranger at the table next him overheard and said, in a deep, gruff voice, “Words ain’t nothin’ but a band of letters trying to be somethin’ bigger, friend. Not unlike you, I suppose?”

Miles looked up and saw a tired man in his forties staring back at him. The man had a beard that hadn’t been shaved for weeks, and wore a dingy black t-shirt and torn, faded blue jeans. Propped in between the stranger’s table and window was a large black suitcase, wide enough to fit a small body inside.

Miles closed his laptop and rubbed his eyes, bloodshot from a lack of sleep. “These letters would shame their parents if they found out what they’d become in my hands.”

The stranger sipped his coffee as he looked Miles up and down. “I’ve seen you in here before, banging away at that fancy-lookin’ calculator of yours every day for over a month now. What is it you’re working on?” he said.

“Nothing much, just my life’s work,” Miles said. He nodded toward the suitcase. “What’s in the bag?”

“Ah, nothing much, just my life’s work, I suppose,” the stranger said with a sly grin.

“You moving?” Miles asked.

“Sort of.”

“Where to?”

“Not quite sure yet,” the stranger replied. “Depends on what your beliefs are.” He motioned toward the laptop. “Mind if I take a look?”

Miles shrugged and opened the screen toward the stranger.

“It’s just a novel about my life, the messes I’ve gone through, how I’ve gotten out of them to where I am today.”

“Messes, huh?” the stranger said, scanning the screen. “I’ve seen you in here enough to know that unemployment is at least one of those messes you’ve got left to get out of.”

“Got me there.” Miles said, grinning.

Several minutes went by as the stranger scrolled through the document, grunting in amusement every few moments.

Finally, he sat up and turned serious. “You ain’t half bad, kid, believe it or not. Even worse, you’re actually pretty good.”

“Ha!” Miles said. “I’m about as good as a potty training toddler aiming for the toilet – only with a lower success rate.”

The stranger stared back blankly. Miles straightened up. “Really? You think so?” he said.

The stranger nodded. “You could use a little work on your tenses, stop using the word ‘clearly’ so goddamn much and curse a little more but otherwise, shit, you tell a decent story.”

Miles grinned and then fell embarrassed when the stranger caught him.

“Don’t go cheesing so much, or your cheeks’ll dislodge your ears from your head,” he said.

Reaching into his pocket, the stranger pulled out a pack of cigarettes and pulled one from the carton. “Got a light?”

“You allowed to smoke in here?” Miles said as he surveyed the empty room.

“I’d like to think so, considering I own the place,” the stranger said. “Bought it a few years back, so I could research a final masterpiece, a book about moving on from the messes in my life.”

“You write?” Miles asked.

“Some would say so,” the stranger answered.

“Well, I’m afraid I don’t smoke.” Miles said.

“Well now, that’ll have to change if this is going to work out,” he said, turning and sifting through the side pocket of the dark suitcase at his side. He pulled out a pack of matches, lit one and shut his eyes blissfully as he inhaled.

“What’ll work out?” Miles said. “All writers smoke?”

“Naw, not all writers. Mainly me.” He surveyed the room, empty other than a dozen small tables with chairs, a single plush couch and lone young, pretty cashier girl slouched in between the register and counter, chatting away on a cell phone with her back turned.

The stranger blew smoke into Mile’s direction playfully. “What’s your name, kid?”

“Miles. You?”

The stranger extended his hand and said, “Thomas P. Wortham.”

“Wait, Thomas P. Wortham the author?”

“In the flesh. Though if you asked, you couldn’t find a single living soul to place that name with this face right here.” He looked out through the glass window. “You’re the first person ever given this formal introduction, and you’ll be the last, I assure you.”

Miles’s face twisted in confusion. “I’ve read all four of your books and I must say, you’re incredible. I guess I did notice in each of your books there’s no photo or bio. Why wouldn’t you want to put your picture alongside your books?”

“Because I never planned on becoming famous off of the shit I wrote. And I never do.”

“Hell, I wish I could have as much talent as you,” Miles said. “And if I did, I’d have my picture on the back, for sure – hell! I’d have my picture on every damn page of the book!”

“Today’s your lucky day, kid. How would you like to post your picture on all of those books and sell ‘em off as your own?”

“Huh?” Miles said. “That’s crazy.”

“Maybe so. You not a fan of money?”

“No, sir. I love money,” Miles said. “Can’t get enough of it. In fact, that’s part of my problem.”

“Well then,” Wortham said. “I’ve got a proposal for you that’ll change your life, and give you enough money to solve that problem, and get out of those messes you keep finding yourself in.”

Miles stammered for a response. “I... I don’t get it.”

“Nothing to get quite yet. You haven’t heard the deal yet,” Wortham said. “You interested?”

“Why would you do that, just hand over what you have, including not just money but also recognition for the work you’ve done?” Miles said.

Wortham flicked his cigarette into his cup and watched as the flame faded into the dark liquid. “I’ve had a hell of a life, son. And I wasn’t worth much in life until I took pen to pad and began recording the crazy things that started happening to me once my mind got to rolling.”

“What, the things in your books actually happened?”

“Most of em.”

“Hold on, what about the train wreck caused by the Samuel character in the book, Your Stop Has Arrived? You really did that?”

Wortham nodded.

“But why?” Miles said.

“A man who did me wrong a long time ago, when I was young, was on that train. I was on the run then as I am now, and I couldn’t just get on the train and hunt him down out in the open like that.”

Miles’s eyes grew to the size of a pair of walnuts and his heart sank down into his chest. “So you rigged the entire train to go off track, killing all the passengers? Just to get to one man?”

Wortham nodded again. “Sometimes sacrifices must be made to get what you want.”

“That’s just sick and terrible!” Miles shouted. “You should be ashamed of yourself! Wait, how about The Sketch Diaries, when the Judd character goes from living in New York City to Tennessee to find the girl he’d loved through school but hardly knew, then killed her in a fit of jealous rage – that true too?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Wortham said. “I’ve done some terrible things in my life, most of which I’m not proud of.”

“How could you possibly get away with all of those things without being caught?” Miles said.

“Unfortunately, two of the things I’ve grown quite good at through the years is writing words for books people want to buy, and staying invisible enough to never get caught doing anything, bad or good.”

“So, what, you want to pass everything along to me so I’m framed for all those terrible things you’ve done through your life? You can forget that shit!” Miles said.

“That’s not it,” Wortham said. “I’ve just reached a point where I’m sick of the reflection I see in the mirror every day, and no amount of money can put back together all of the terrible things I’ve done in my life.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Miles said under his breath.

“Look, I’ve seen you in here, going at your life’s work every day. You remind me of how I was when I first started – all dreams, persistence and purity. Way before I got too deep in my story telling to figure out where the pages ended and where my life begun, anyhow.”

“So you’ve killed and now want to give me all your money and fame? Great. What exactly would I have to do?”

Wortham leaned in and stared coldly into Miles’s eyes. “I need you to rid the world of one of its worst persons who cannot be caught.”

“You? You want me to kill you?” Miles said.

Wortham nodded and sat back in his chair. “It’s the perfect do-gooder act. And, lucky for you, I’ll even help you get away with it, easy.”

“No one gets away with murder,” Miles said before stopping himself. “Well, most people don’t anyway.”

“Lucky for you the one person you know who can get away with it is here to help you. And reward you for you for it. Think of yourself like a modern day Doctor Kevorkian, only you’re sending people who escaped from death row to their graves and helping balance the world out for the victims of their crimes.”

Miles sat in his chair in silence for what seemed like forever. He eyed his laptop, the blinking cursor reminding him of the unfinished masterpiece far from completion. He thought to his small basement apartment underneath his parents’ townhouse where he could hardly find privacy and quiet to concentrate on writing. He thought of the men and women on the train in the book *Your Stop Has Arrived*; the young girl chased down by jealous Judd in *The Sketch Diaries*; and the other characters from the Wortham collection he’d read with disgusted delight through the years. He was overcome with a deep guilt and felt his stomach turn.

“How does this work?” Miles said.

For the next twenty minutes, Thomas P. Wortham explained the perfect crime to Miles Lester. Once Miles agreed that he’d understood it all, Wortham reached into his the large suitcase next to him and handed over a thick stack of one-hundred dollar bills. “The entire bag’s full of those, plus everything you need to assume this life.”

As he held the money in his hands, Miles already started spending it in his head. New apartment, laptop, maybe even a motorcycle, he thought to himself.

Finally, he nodded and said, “Ok, I’ll do it.”

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Miles and Thomas P. Wortham walked through the back of the coffee shop, through the steel door leading into the alleyway. A cold, strong wind blew, though the hair standing up on Miles’s arms and neck were hardly from the weather.

Wortham handed Miles a twelve inch sharpened hunting blade with a snakewood handle.

“It wouldn’t be fitting if I did this myself, you understand,” Wortham said, leading Miles down the dead end of the alley. “The world needs a hero, even if he’s never unmasked or gets full recognition for his good deeds.”

The next few minutes were a blur for Miles Lester. As instructed, Miles stabbed Wortham. As he dragged the lifeless body to a marked dumpster, he heard feet shuffle behind him. He turned and saw the cashier girl standing by the back door. They stared at each other in terrified silence. She held a phone to her ear and slowly walked toward Miles. She handed him the phone. It’s the cops, Miles thought to himself. A dark voice on the other line says, “Thomas P. Wortham?”

“No,” Miles says. “This is Miles...”

The voice interrupts and repeats the question.

“Sure, yeah, this is he,” Miles says.

The voice introduces himself as an agent and lawyer, recently hired by Wortham “The manuscript you sent over was missing an ending,” he says, “but I still managed to sell it for a shitload of money. They’re even talking about optioning it off as a movie. Congratulations, sir.”

“Gee, thanks,” Miles said and he stared down at his hands covered in blood.

“There’s still the matter of the final scene. It’s incomplete. In our correspondence before, you said you’d send it over once everything was settled. That last scene of the book leaves the two killers in an alley, old pro and rookie. In our emails you mentioned that the end was already written but that they’d be sent over when I called right at this exact time. You said you’ve been carrying them around with you, I believe. Could you send those in?”

Miles dropped the phone and ran past the cashier girl in through the back door. He sprinted to his original table, right up to the dark suitcase Wortham left behind. He opened it up. Inside, he found stacks of hundred dollar bills, passports and bank account information showing large sums of money spread across the globe for the name of Thomas P. Wortham. Looking closer, he saw his own picture in each of the ID cards. A small stack of typewritten pages laid in the bottom of the bag, with a sticky note on them labeled, “The End.” Miles picked them up and started to read. He relived the last hour of his life, the proposal, the

stories, the stack of money, the cashier girl and the phone call. As he gets to the end, he hears sirens outside the coffee shop and loud voices shouting for Thomas P. Wortham to come out with his hands up.

“Fuck,” Miles said as he plopped down into a chair. “What have I gotten myself into?”