

Prey/Pray:
Origin of The Average Man

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If you do find yourself believing that any part of this work is about you, please seek psychological help immediately or turn yourself in to the police (whichever you can do fastest).

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Second edition 2021

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Final Edits by Lynne Pearson
With special thanks to Oscar Raymundo Garcia
for helping with designing the
center element of the cover

ISBN (paperback) 978-1-7349338-4-0

ISBN (hardcover) 978-1-7349338-5-7

Introduction

The Average Man's story, despite being first published in 2020, actually started with an unfinished couple of pages I wrote back in 2003. It was a simple concept of who I wanted the character to be and his meager beginnings with one violent act leading to another violent act. A catalyst of sorts that was meant to spiral into a full story, but for some reason I let those pages sit in purgatory. I could blame a host of things or life events on why I didn't complete the story until recently, but the reality is, I just needed to sit down and write.

Instead of writing the tale of The Average Man back in 2003, I would periodically look at it, and the story would grow in my mind. Occasionally I would add a sentence or a thought, but never anything of true substance. The result of those lackluster efforts was something akin to madness, with the character's voice beckoning me back to the story throughout the years.

But what can I say? I'm a bit stubborn. And so, the character's voice was ignored. Turns out though, that The Average Man can be pretty stubborn himself, and his voice grew louder as the years passed. Going from a gentle whisper, asking me to write more of his story, to full ear shattering screams, demanding I finish what I started.

Eventually, I had two choices. Go mad, or write his story. I chose option two, and in 2019 I started writing what has now become this book. I finished the story in December 2019, editing and reworking the original couple pages into what is now Chapter 2 of this book, and I have to admit to being very pleased with what it's become. I should have listened to The Average Man earlier, but late is better than never.

I hope you enjoy the twisted ride that is The Average Man's story. A story once confined to the actions of a nameless character, that has now exploded into a wild journey with a host of side characters. A story told by a narrator, but also by The Average Man himself. After all, I shouldn't be the only one to hear his voice.

The Interview Begins

The walk to the room seems to take forever, as the reporter takes step after step, thoughts racing through his head. The place is eerily silent. Even the sound of his and the guard's steps seem to disappear into the emptiness. Darkened uninhabited cells run parallel to them as they walk. Looking around the reporter wonders, not for the first time, how he ended up here.

He thinks to himself, *I've done a million interviews before, but this is insane. Why did he request me? I do business and tech for heaven's sake. What in the world do I know about murder?*

The reporter takes a deep breath, trying to relax before reaching his destination. He remembers back to when children used to tell him he was tall. He enjoyed being seen as tall. Being tall could equate with being strong, and he needed that right now.

He tries to hold on to that image of himself and pull strength from the words.

"I am tall," the reporter says to himself, "I am The Tall Man."

Looking at the guard, The Tall Man asks, "Is it always this quiet and empty here?"

"No," the guard replies, "We had to clear the place out for security reasons. The prisoner gets the other inmates worked up, so the warden thought it would be best to hold the interview away from the rest of the population."

The guard stops and looks at the reporter with an intensity that forces The Tall Man to stop walking without even thinking about it.

"You've been briefed on all rules and protocols, right?"

"Yes sir," The Tall Man timidly replies, "several times."

"Good. Because once you walk through the door, you'll be alone with him." The guard warns.

"Yes, I understand. I was told it was one of the only ways he'd do the interview," The Tall Man says, swallowing hard to force down his nervousness.

"I can't believe it was agreed to, but yeah, that's the only way he'd have the interview. Just you and him. No recorders or notepads allowed, so I hope you have an excellent memory," the guard says, and begins to walk again.

The Tall Man flashes back to his arrival, and getting roughly frisked by a stern looking woman, before being allowed to continue with the guard. She had taken everything from him. His cell phone, keys, wallet, notepad, pen, and even his cigarettes were confiscated with the promise that everything would be returned when he left.

"Yes sir. I believe my memory is good enough to jot the information down after I get home," The Tall Man says, resuming his pace slightly behind the guard.

The guard slows and then stops in front of a double door.

"Here we are. Don't forget everything you've been told," the guard says, standing next to the open door, "I'll be out here when you're done."

All right. Just another interview, he thinks as he pushes the door open, *I am The Tall Man.*

The room, as it turns out, is a cafeteria. Completely empty, except for a lone table in the middle of the room where his interviewee sits, looking down at the table. The Tall Man takes a moment to absorb his surroundings. He takes a deep breath to relax his nerves again and approaches the table. The man sitting at the table looks up, and a chill runs down the reporter's spine as their eyes meet.

"Sir," The Tall Man chokes out, "do you mind if I sit across from you?"

“Sir?” the sitting prisoner replies. “It’s been a while since someone has called me that.”

The prisoner chuckles. “Yeah, go ahead and have a seat.”

“Would you prefer I call you something else?” The Tall Man stammers, fumbling his way into the bench-style seat.

“No, I guess ‘sir’ is as good as anything. I suppose I’ve earned it for being a master hunter,” the prisoner states.

The reporter, trying to commit details to memory, notes the prisoner’s build.

He thinks to himself, *Hard to tell with him sitting, but he’s probably not much more than five foot seven inches, maybe five nine at most. Broad shouldered, but not remarkably muscular. He just looks so average.* He sits up straighter.

It dawns on him, while the story was all over the news, there was never a picture or video of the killer’s face. Not so much as a mug shot in any article or news broadcast.

“How do you want to start this? I’ve never been interviewed before,” the nondescript man inquires, seeming very relaxed.

The Average Man? I’ll definitely have to come up with a better word than average, The Tall Man thinks to himself.

There’s a brief pause as the two men look each other over, feeling the presence of one another. The Average Man’s relaxed disposition in direct contrast to The Tall Man. One, unburdened by anxiety, like a hyena smiling as it relaxes on cool blades of grass. The other, rigid and wide-eyed, like a fawn who’s just heard a twig snap. Yin and yang. Predator and prey.

“Actually sir, if you don’t mind, I have a question about that. I understand many people have tried to interview you over the past month, and you’ve refused them all. Then out of the blue you request me to interview you.” He pauses, “I feel privileged to do it,” The Tall Man asserts, not wishing to give the man a reason to cancel the interview.

“It’s just that,” The Tall Man continues, “I can’t understand why you would request me. This isn’t the type of interview I normally do. So, if it’s OK, I’d like to start with why you picked me to interview you?”

The Average Man looks at The Tall Man for a second, and the reporter’s heart pounds as fear grips him.

“We’ll circle back to that at the end. I don’t feel like starting there though. Pick something else,” The Average Man says, his stern look telling The Tall Man it’s not a request.

“Yes sir. No problem at all, sir.” The fearful reporter gulps. “How about we start at the beginning then? Is that OK?”

“Sure.” The Average Man looks down at his side and lays a pack of cigarettes on the table. “Want a smoke before we get started?”

The Tall Man’s hands shake as he reaches out to accept the cigarette.

“Yes sir, that would be very nice. They didn’t let me bring mine in,” he replies.

Taking the cigarette, he lights it and inhales a long drag.

“So,” The Average Man speaks, “the beginning. I guess that’s as good a place to start as any...”

First Prey

I still remember my very first time. I remember my pulse pounding. I was sweating. It's funny to think back on it now. My whole body trembled with excitement. I was so nervous, but it was worth it. I'd definitely do it again, and I have. I've done it so many times. It's something that doesn't grow old, especially when you don't do it the same way every time. I remember the inviting warmth of the blood on my hands. My first time was absolutely amazing.

It happened so quickly, but at the time, it seemed to take forever. I still remember the look on his face as I thrust the knife into his stomach. He was a rather fat man, and I forced my hand down so hard the hilt pushed through the skin. I thought for sure I'd touch his spine. It was the first time I killed a man. The first time I saw that look of fear I've grown to love so much. The first time I realized what it felt like to turn the hunter into prey.

He was my first kill, and the only one I've ever killed out of anger. The rest are just game, but he was different. The first are always different. That's what they say anyway.

He did something unforgivable. He made her die.

She was only twenty-four. She was my love, my precious fiancée. We were dating for three years before he came along. At the time, she was the only woman I had ever loved. She was all mine, and I was all hers.

She worked nights at a little diner not too far from my apartment. That's where he found her. She said he had been coming in regularly for a few weeks. She told me he always ordered the same thing, steak. I remember that well. It's what I cooked for him after I killed him. I cooked it well done, then I shoved it down his throat.

My fiancée always closed by herself, and would leave out the back door. He knew that. It's how he got her. He waited in the back one night. Waited in the shadows, like a hunter stalking its prey. Waited for her to leave, then when she was all alone, he attacked. She told me how he threw her up against the wall. Told me how he punched her in the face, and how he held a knife to her throat and warned her not to scream. She told me how he raped her, how he forced her to do things. He shouldn't have hurt her. No one should ever hurt those I care for.

She didn't go home that night; fear wouldn't let her. She was afraid he might follow her, so she came to my apartment. I remember her tear-streaked face when I answered the door. The happiness I used to love to see in her eyes was missing. There were bruises on her face. I can't describe the anguish and anger I felt as she cried on my shoulder and told me what happened. She refused to let me take her to the hospital, or even call the cops. She was terrified that he was still out there waiting for her. I didn't know what else to do, so I let her wash up and gave her a pair of my gym shorts and a t-shirt to wear. She cried herself to sleep in my arms that night. I cried with her. It was all I could do.

I took her home the next morning, and she kept saying how dirty she felt. She couldn't deal with it. It tore her apart. I did what I could to be there for her, but in the end it didn't matter. The following week, her father found her dead in her bedroom. She had slit her wrist in the night while everyone slept. She left me a note. It simply said:

"I love you. Don't worry, I'll be waiting for you on the other side. No matter how long it takes."

That night I went to the diner, my mind ripped and in shambles. I went to find him. I don't know how I knew he'd be there, but I just knew. And there he was, in the same seat she said he always sat in. Eating a steak dinner like nothing happened. He looked just as she described him. About six feet tall, bald, a tattoo of a snake on the back of his head, and fat. He looked as though he weighed at least three hundred pounds.

I ordered a drink and sipped on it while I looked him over. Then I got up and left. I waited outside for what seemed like hours, just standing patiently in the shadows and watching him. That night he stopped being a predator. It was his turn to be the prey.

When he left the diner, I followed him home. He only lived about three blocks from the diner in the opposite direction of my apartment. I sat outside his shack of a home and waited for him to go to sleep.

I didn't even have to break in. He slept with his doors unlocked. I remember thinking how nice it must be to live with that kind of peace of mind. I quietly walked into his bedroom and saw a hunting dagger on the nightstand next to his bed. My original intention had been to beat him to death, but seeing the blade sitting there, it was almost as if it was calling to me. I stood looking at it for a moment, imagining it to be the blade he used on her. Maybe it was, I don't really know, but that thought was all it took. It was almost too easy. I picked up the knife, hands shaking, and pushed it deep within his hideous gut.

The look on his face was priceless. Surprise and dread filled his eyes as they teared up. The pain must have been fierce, because he couldn't even scream. His mouth just hung open. He tried to grab my hand and pull the knife out, but it was too late. I just kept pushing harder and harder until he finally stopped gasping for air.

I left the knife in him, although you could just barely see the butt of it sticking out of his stomach. Then I went into his kitchen, cooked him a steak from his fridge, shoved it as far down his throat as I could get it, washed up in his kitchen sink, and left.

I went home, packed my bags, and left, tossing my bloody clothes in a random dumpster on the way out of town. That was several years ago now, but I still remember it like it was just yesterday. My first time, my first prey.

The New Assignment

One week before the interview:

The reporter sat by the window in his small apartment. On the third floor, it was one of several just like it in an uninspired building, with its sole window overlooking a school playground. The simple layout consisted of a single bedroom and bathroom, a kitchen with an attached dinette, and a small living room just big enough to fit a couch and television with a small coffee table between them. The majority of the residents in the building were either college kids needing a cheap place to live so they could afford school, or lower-income earners just happy to have a roof over their heads.

Had he wanted, the reporter could afford a bigger place, but he was content living here. He liked the view from his window. He also liked that, since everyone else living in the building was busy going to classes or working, he never seemed to get noticed or bothered by anyone. There was the occasional nod or wave from the passing stranger in the hall and other common courtesies, but no one even knew his name. That's the way he liked it now.

Perturbed, he sat at his window watching children play in the playground below. The deadline for an article he was working on was quickly approaching, with only ten days until it was due. He had spent the last day and a half with a severe case of writer's block staring at a half-written article titled 'Dark Web Fact and Fiction'. Typically, he didn't have any problems completing assignments before the deadline, but this one was bugging him. Even the title didn't sound right to him. So, he sat at the window waiting for something to spark inside of him.

While his bouts of writer's block were rare, this one drove him to grab his rosary out of its box under his bed. Caressing the beads, he hoped for divine intervention to get him back on track. A few years had passed since he was active in the church, but he still found himself drawn to the rosary when stress got the better of him. Maybe it was what the rosary represented, or maybe it was just caressing the beads, but something about it brought him a level of quietude.

As he touched the rosary, trying to force his mind to bring words to the surface that would benefit his article, the phone rang. He looked down at the cell phone on the windowsill before him, wondering what telemarketer or scammer he was about to hang up on. Perplexingly, it was his boss.

"Hello," he answered.

After exchanging greetings, he confessed his confusion. Typically, he only spoke to his boss during office meetings or to receive an assignment.

"Did I miss a meeting again?"

This happened once in the past, when he set the reminder on his phone to the wrong date.

"No, nothing like that," his boss replied.

"Is it about my current assignment? Don't worry, it's coming along," the reporter stated, half lying.

"No, no, listen for a minute. I need you to put your dark web story on the back burner. That's no longer a priority."

"What? Why?" the reporter asked, both relieved to not have the assignment due as but equally bothered by the idea that something he was working on was getting pushed aside.

"Does this mean I'm not getting paid for the dark web story?" There could be other complications to not finishing his current assignment.

“Just listen for a minute, will you?” His boss interjected. “Don’t worry about the dark web story. That’s no longer important. I’ll give you the money that you’d earn for it. What I need you for now is much bigger than anything you could write in that anyhow.”

The reporter sat at attention now, hearing his boss’s voice become more intent and direct.

“You know the trial that’s been all over the news the last month?” His boss continued, “The one with the killer who’s being tried for those five dead bodies found in that house fire.”

“Yeah,” the reporter replied, not sure how this had anything to do with him.

“Well, the killer’s lawyer reached out to us and said he is expressly asking for you to interview him! I don’t care what you’re doing, you need to drop it. An interview with this guy could be huge for us!” His boss’s voice brimmed with the excitement only the potential of a big pay out can bring.

The reporter’s confusion was audible. “Me... What...? But I don’t even... How does he even know me?”

“Does it matter?” his boss replied. “This is the opportunity of a lifetime. Your name will become nationally recognizable overnight if you do this, and more importantly, so will our magazine.”

“I don’t know if I can do this. This just isn’t my...” He stammered, trying to compose himself.

His boss cut him off. “I don’t care what you think your role is. Let me make this clear for you. You are doing this. I don’t care if I have to drag you down to the prison myself and throw you in his cell. You are doing this. We can’t miss this. He won’t talk to anyone other than you. You have to come through for us on this. Think about the money if you have to, or think about the people who will interview you for being the sole person he speaks to. You’ll be able to get a book deal out of this if you play it right!”

A chill went through the reporter as he realized his options were to do the interview or risk his job. As his boss’s words echoed through his head, he made a choice.

“OK, I’ll do it, but I have one condition,” he said, trying his best to take control of the situation.

“You want more money? Fine, we can work that out,” his boss stated, trying to predict his employee’s demands.

“No, it’s not that. That’s not my condition. If I do this, I don’t want it published under my real name. I don’t want the publicity. I’m a very private person. You can’t let it get out that I’m doing this interview. I’ll take the money, but I don’t want a byline,” the reporter replied.

The phone went silent, and for a moment he wondered if his boss had hung up on him.

“Are you serious?” his boss finally replied. “You want no credit at all for the interview of the lifetime? Why in the world would you...?” He paused. “You know what? I don’t care. If that’s what you want, I promise no one will ever know you had anything to do with it.”

“OK,” the reporter replied with a sigh. “I’ll do it.”

“I knew I could count on you!” The reporter’s boss exclaimed. “I’ll pass your contact information to the lawyer and he’ll set everything up for you.”

“Just make sure the lawyer knows I won’t be attaching my name to the story,” the reporter stated, wanting to make sure they met his condition.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure your name is nowhere on the finished article myself,” his boss replied, then abruptly hung up, preventing the reporter from backing out.

Over the following days, the details were set up and sent to him. He received a security briefing over the phone. It was explained to him that to avoid other reporters intent on seeking an interview, he would use the guards’ entrance. He would be met by a guard, and then frisked, where they would take all his personal items. The guard would then escort him to where the interview would be conducted.

As the day of the interview grew closer, the reporter’s stress built, causing his most dangerous vice, smoking, to increase from two packs a day to two and a half.

“Why me?” he kept asking himself. “What would a guy who killed a family of five want to talk with me about?”

The Interview (part 2)

As the story of the first kill concludes, the reporter sits with his jaw slack. Smoked to the filter, his cigarette hangs from his lips. The gravity of the story hits him and his mouth goes dry. This wasn't in any report he read. Nowhere was another murder mentioned. The reality of why the killer insisted on not allowing recording devices hits him. If he recorded this, it would mean more murder charges brought against the man. But if it was just written from memory, then it could easily be argued that it was the word of some reporter trying to make himself famous by publishing lies. After all, the man hadn't given him details of where the crime took place or names of the people involved. Sure, if he did enough research, he might be able to piece together the information. However, even if he managed to figure out the question of who and where, there would still be no evidence to tie the man to anything. It would all be circumstantial evidence at best.

The reporter thinks, *Is this why he picked me? Because I'm not a creditable crime journalist? Does he think my background in tech and business, my lack of experience in crime, will make me look less creditable when I write the article?*

Without being aware of it, The Tall Man had been staring at the man across from him without speaking for over a minute.

"This is the part where you can speak again," the man says, breaking the silence.

The Tall Man sits up abruptly, and the cigarette falls from his lips onto the table.

"This-this-this isn't what you're being tried for!" the stunned reporter stutters, reaching over to pick up the dropped filter with shaking hands.

"What you say I'm being tried for isn't the beginning," The Average Man replies bluntly, "You said you wanted me to start at the beginning."

He pauses briefly.

"You have done an interview before, haven't you? I thought reporters always wanted the whole story?" he continues with a cocked eyebrow.

"Yes. Yes sir, of course I want the whole story," The Tall Man stammers, trying to recompose himself.

"Well then," the killer continues, "what you say I'm being tried for is just a minor piece of the story."

The Average Man looks The Tall Man in the eyes, studying him.

"Have another cigarette. You seem nervous," he says as he pulls another from the pack and hands it over to the reporter, "Would you like to know about the others?"

"Others?" The Tall Man replies, hands still shaking as he reaches for the fresh cigarette, "There were others? What about the family you're accused of killing? The mother and father and three adult sons who lived with them?"

The Tall Man can hardly believe what he's being told. *Others?* he thinks. His hands continue to shake as he lights the cigarette. *How far back does this go? How many has he killed? What am I doing here?*

"Are you not paying attention?" The killer sitting across from him states with a slight glare. "I just told you they are only a small part of the story."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to offend you," the reporter says sheepishly. "You mentioned others. Do you mind if I ask how many others there have been?"

A slight smile forms on The Average Man's face.

"That's better. Now you're starting to ask better questions. Hmm," the killer pauses, seeming to do so purely for effect, "I'm not exactly sure of the number off the top of my head, but if I had to hazard a guess, I'd say somewhere in the ball park of twenty."

"Twenty?" The Tall Man gulps.

"Yeah," the killer says, nodding, "somewhere around there. I don't keep track of the exact number. The number in itself isn't really that important to me. It's never been about the number, you understand?"

"What is it about for you?" the reporter asks, taking a drag off the cigarette and bracing for the answer.

"It's about the hunt," The Average Man replies, "It's about taking down the most dangerous game there is. I'm not just talking about man. No. Man isn't the most dangerous game. Actually, a lot of people are just sheep. Easy for the taking. There's no challenge in that at all. The most dangerous game are criminals."

He stops to let it sink in, then continues, "Criminals make it their life's work to be elusive and hard to take down. That's what makes a prey worth hunting. That's why no one hunts a cow. If it just stands there while you walk up to it and put it down, then it just isn't worth the time. If you're going to be a hunter, you need a worthy prey. Criminals are the most elusive and typically most dangerous prey that exists. People often talk about how dangerous an animal can be once it's cornered, but man is the only animal you can corner that can shoot you. You can't just walk up to a criminal and take them down. You have to stalk them. You have to study their movements without being noticed. You have to plan in advance how it's going to happen."

The Average Man now sits smiling broadly, almost giddy.

The Tall Man has felt fear before, but something in this man's elation as he describes the act of killing another person terrifies him to his soul. He swallows hard, trying not to let his fear show. He knows it's too late to turn back at this point and has to see this interview through. Even if he thought his shaking legs would allow him to walk out and end the interview prematurely, the fear of what this killer would do to him before the guard could enter the locked cafeteria has him cemented to his seat.

Just keep things going. The Tall Man tells himself, *Let him tell his story and then you can leave. Don't insult him. Don't make him mad. Just keep things going.*

The shaking reporter takes another drag on the cigarette to steady his nerves.

"When did you decide, as you put it, to become a hunter? I understand your first kill was a crime of passion, but it seems like a leap to go from that to hunting criminals for sport," The Tall Man states, exhaling smoke.

"Look at you," the self-proclaimed hunter of men says, smiling as he looks at The Tall Man. "Three good questions in a row. I knew you could do it."

He tilts his head back for a moment, thinking, "Well, I'd have to say I decided to be a hunter after my second kill..."