

A Good Day to Die

by

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It was planned. My friend, Tom Paramigni, showed up at my apartment around ten-thirty. We made pork and vegetable egg rolls in the toaster oven and watched M.A.S.H. on channel ten. We did shots of Cuervo Gold, chased them with three beers a piece. Then we put on our jackets and took his car to the execution.

This was a thing. Tom was a grad student in philosophy and had been anticipating this moment for three years worth of appeals.

Sometimes I think about becoming a writer. All of this, conveniently, happened in the midst of one of these times, which is basically why the following journal exists. The title comes from an old Native American battle cry. The warriors shouted this to each other from the backs of their horses, meaning every word.

So there are times I think about becoming a writer. I also drink a lot of domestic beer and wish I were a famous blues singer. I should say that I don't know how to play the harmonica, much less a guitar. I should also say that I spend a week trying to learn one-handed pushups every time I watch Rocky II.

Unlike Tom, who was my best friend since we were twelve, I dropped out of college my junior year. I work demeaning part-time jobs and wonder what I'm going to do with my life.

What I'm saying is, I'm in no shape to stand up on either side. There are times when I can't even decide whether to watch television or read.

I went because Tom asked me to go. Tom went because he didn't have a choice. As an ethicist, it was a significant event in his life that they were firing the electric chair for the first time since 1959.

Me, I'm pretty much up for anything.

Today Is A Good Day To Die: 17 October 1994

10:45 p.m.

Cue spotlights: We Are Here.

The access road to the prison is a narrow, winding strip of asphalt. There are squad clusters at the entrance and stationed at random points along the grassy expanse on either side. Way beyond us, past the razor wire, are the lights. Blinding white; a shimmering pavilion of camera crews and halogen lamp posts. Out here, it's almost frighteningly dark. The moon is covered, and to our left--on the access road--shadow shapes pass each other on their way in or making their way out.

Already the imagery is in place: the zig-zag road, the rolling cloud cover, the darkness. It's easy to think of them as a shambling exodus of souls, aimlessly trudging Purgatory Lane.

When the kliegs pin us from three directions, I'm momentarily paralyzed. There's no good way to describe this; the night has obliterated in a heartbeat. As soon as I'm able to think, I throw my arms above my head as quickly as I possibly can and turn all the way around in a circle. We're right in the middle of the fucking grass.

"On the road. Get back on the road." This is the voice from a megaphone somewhere; all I can see is light. The voice is low and electronic and loud, robotically deadpan. Tom looks tough for a philosophy student, slouching his shoulders and rolling his eyes.

Screw tough, I'm scared enough to piss on my shoes. I put my hands up higher and keep turning in a circle, clinging desperately to the thought that they don't shoot people who do this in the movies.

"Brilliant," I tell Tom. We parked on the shoulder of the road, maybe three hundred yards past the entrance. There is legitimate parking at a hardware store a quarter of a mile further on. Let's not park here, I said. I also said, Tom. Let's take the road, like everybody else.

Get real, he said to me. They're too busy to care.

"Would you quit doing that? Nobody's going to shoot you."

"Says you." I keep my hands exactly where they are.

Tom sighs and shakes his head at me like I'm the dumbest thing he's ever seen. We make our way to the access road, me with my arms in the air, Tom holding his hands out to either side of him. Giving the faceless men behind the lights the finger all the way.

11:15 p.m.

It's unseasonably cold, even for October. A group of doorknobs wearing Gamma Nu tee-shirts had a fire going in a garbage can before they were rousted by the guards.

Russel "Riptide" Jones is scheduled to be jolted at midnight. With a hunting knife, he cut the throats of two members of the University women's swim team and raped them while their bodies cooled. The girls were heavily recruited the year before and had not yet reached drinking age. Riptide was convicted of the crime in 1975.

"This is Mark Foley. Friend of mine." Tom introduces me to the people we're standing with, most of whom he knows from his department at school.

A girl holding a large, flat elk-skin drum tucks her mallet under an arm and takes my hand. Her hair is long and straight, hanging limply around her face and shoulders. She's got large round glasses and plain, droopy eyes.

"I'm glad you could be with us, Mark," she tells me. She's staring at me very purposefully, squeezing my hand.

I don't have any idea how to respond to this. I go from gaze to gaze; everyone is giving me soul stares, nodding their heads to me in turn. Some of them are holding candles to their breasts, looking for all the world like kindly skulls.

I end up not saying a word, and apparently this carries great weight. By being bewildered, I have cemented some kind of bond. The girl doesn't let go, even after I relax my hand.

On the other side of the barricades, large guys head-butt each other and chant "Time to fry! Time to fry!" They slap each other high-fives and make woofing noises, hoist their girlfriends onto their shoulders to give them a better view of the anchor people.

11:30 p.m.

I'm guessing four-hundred strong, neatly bisected by the alleyway of Safe-T Orange barricades that leads all the way to the mouth of the building.

The demographics as I see them are thus: Yays on one side of the alley, Nays on the other. Plus the media, and a miscellaneous number of people who just sort of blink and wander around.

Tom and I are sitting on a curb. You can just pick up the soft, rhythmic sound of drums. An ice-pick breeze has risen from the hills, and nobody can keep their candles lit.

Otherwise, an execution is a lot more like a keg party than you would think.

In front of us, two people dressed as Grim Reapers bump into each other and stare. As they stalk off in opposite directions, both are shaking their hoods: I can't believe you wore the same thing.

"Fuckers." Tom says this every time the crowd on the other side makes a sound.

The picket signs I've seen so far: First Annual Pennitentiary Barbecue and We Got A Nasty Charbroil Jones.

Versus: Thou Shalt Not Kill, and Murder Is Wrong.

Depressing as it is, you've got to give the creativity category to the Yay side, hands down.

11:35 p.m.

Brother, these people are here to party.

Tom is deflating, minute by minute, each step closer to midnight. He's even detached himself from his little crowd, which is still milling somewhere behind us, stroking the drums and squeezing their eyes closed every so often to continue manufacturing tears.

"Would you look at this?" His voice is almost wistful, as he gazes across the crowd.
"We're our own gods, man."

"We most certainly are." I don't have the slightest clue what the hell he means by this. It's cold enough that I can't feel my toes anymore.

I forgot to mention earlier: somebody has set up a shuttle service. Nondescript blue Econolines arrive and depart every ten minutes, carting people from the hardware parking lot and other outlying regions.

The thing that reminded me of this is the guy selling baseball caps over on the edge of the crowd. The sign says they are hand-screened, and they've been going like flapjacks for twelve bucks a piece. There are three choices available, in red, blue or green. One Down, Eight To Go; I Saw The Lights Go Out In Jonesville; and Thank God We Remembered To Pay The Electric Bill.

There are even Porta-Potties. This place is as organized as Disneyworld.

Tom exhales again. "We are our own. . .fucking. . .gods."

"Hey," I say. "You got any gum?"

He looks startled, as if waking up from a dream. Then he pats the pockets of his coat and hands over a pack of Wrigley's.

"Thanks," I tell him.

He says sure.

11:45 p.m.

You can feel it, like a hum in the air. The tension is everywhere, a live thing, amping up a notch with every tick of the clock.

Yes, I know I'm making bad puns. Once you're here, it's almost impossible to get away from the electricity motif.

I notice for the first time a shift in the racial balance of the crowd. The newest arrivals hang on the edges like wolves; glowering, silent, there, slouching inside oversized parkas.

I don't have to say that Riptide Rusty is black.

From somewhere inside the facility, the Powers That Be have noticed, too. The party has only gotten louder, drunk and happily oblivious. It's like a fact simply waiting to occur. Something is going to go down.

The storm troopers materialize from nowhere, coming up the barricade alley in single file. They are wrapped in black from head to toe. Gloves. Jungle boots. Tear gas rifles. The visors on their helmets extend to mid-chest; the camera lights are reflected brilliantly in the shatterproof gloss.

To the front and rear are what I can only assume are dogs. Even they are black, and they move with a terrifying grace. These, I've never seen. Imagine a hybrid cross between a Rottweiler and a shark.

It occurs to me that the Reapers are here now for real, cutting a swath through the crowd.

"Wow," Tom says. He has already begun to move, to where others line the barricades in awe.

"Um, hey."

But I follow behind in spite of myself, as the hell cops file in and wait.

11:51 p.m.

Guards now fill in the alley at distances of about five feet. They stand with their arms folded across their chests, looking like they want to go home. They've been duly upstaged by the hell cops; even with sidearms it must completely suck for them, trying to look menacing in nothing but their regular police uniforms.

Random scenes from the front lines:

The frat boys have begun to razz the guards. Tap one on the shoulder and quickly turn around, try not to crack a smile. Ask one, hey, is that a real gun? Everybody's got the giggles. Look how we talk to actual cops. Everybody's feeling downright bad.

The humanitarians wail things like Nooooo, pulling their faces into various rubber oddities.

Passionate debates spring up here and there. People scream at each other through the guards. Some of them have regressed to the point of shouting about whether it's okay to burn the flag.

A guy wearing an executioner's mask is making a point of wandering around amongst the humanitarians. He's got muscles in every part of his body. He's not even wearing a shirt; it's like thirty-six degrees.

Oh, and the Santa hat. He's got one of those on, too.

11:59 p.m.

One half of the crowd begins the countdown. The other starts frantically banging drums and tries to light candles against the wind.

12:00 Midnight

And the crowd goes wild.

I don't even notice Tom is gone until I see him put a fist into the center of the executioner's hood.

The guy barely stumbles. When he jerks off the mask, I know it's over. His nose is smashed to one side; beneath the halogen lamps, the spatters on his chest are crimson.

By the time he pins Tom to the asphalt and begins slugging his face with both fists, the hell cops have begun to swarm.

By the time Russell "Riptide" Jones was put to death, minutes late at 12:09, the ambulance had already been dispatched and the mock-executioner rendered unconscious by a gunstock to the base of the skull.

The news team actually missed the first three media witnesses as they emerged from the prison, somber and fundamentally stunned. The story had abruptly shifted; the camera crew, in fact, was lucky to regroup in time to get tape of the M.E. when he pronounced Rusty dead.

Tom was strapped to the crash cart by his ankles, wrists and forehead. His spasms suggested anything from brain hemorrhage to a bizarrely pinched nerve; precautionary measures were strictly essential.

One of the EMT's dug the car keys from Tom's jacket and told me I could follow behind.

It was nearly a quarter to one in the morning when I discovered the car had since been towed.

* * *

The following is what I didn't tell you in "Today Is A Good Day To Die."

I drink imported beer, not domestic. Saying this now is my way of admitting that I had already begun modifying things even before I really got started.

I did not drop out of college my Junior year, and the fact is I am a writer. I've sold freelance articles to seven major newspapers and am currently being interviewed for a columnist position here in town. I didn't tell you this because if I had, it might have suggested credibility, and you might then have expected something from me.

The truth is not that I think sometimes about becoming a writer, but that I think about writing fiction.

The guy was selling both hats and tee-shirts, in five colors not three, but I didn't want to appear as if I were reaching.

The storm troopers seemed every bit as menacing as I described them. The dogs, however, were standard-issue German Shepherds and more of a mottled brown.

In the nineteen years since his conviction for double-murder, Russel "Riptide" Jones had completed extension courses from the local community college in both Speech Communications and Business Management. He had also become a poet; though his lawyers failed to impress the general public with the fact, a New York publisher bought rights to his first collection, to be published within the year.

The murder weapon--determined by forensic pathologists to be a large, flat-bladed knife--was never found. Despite an initial confession, which weighed in at nearly thirty pages and is said to contain intricately horrifying detail, Jones began proclaiming his innocence in 1978, which he maintained until the end.

One of the victims was white, the other black. Only the white girl had in fact been sexually engaged in the manner described. Something else I didn't say in "Today is a Good Day to Die:" Their names were Janet Peerey and LaShonda Alice MacNeill.

Tom was not the one who said, "We're our own gods."

I was. I give credit to him in the journal to better preserve the image of myself as detached observer.

And here is how it really went down:

When I said that Russell Jones maintained his innocence until the end, I was referring to Tom's end, not his. The fact is that even at 12:09, Jones was nowhere near the electric chair. He'd been pardoned by the governor at eleven-fifteen and was being interviewed in his cell.

This, not the gangbangers, was the real reason the black-clad troopers appeared. Everybody else involved had been sequestered in the prison while the warden, aides to the governor, and various liasons worked collectively to prepare a statement for the press. They were supremely aware of the atmosphere they were about to walk into, that they were toying with critical mass.

Philosophy notwithstanding, every last person in attendance was here for a killing. They'd been waiting for a very long time. There was just no telling how this thing could go, and officials were prepared to take no chances.

Short of air support, they couldn't possibly have been prepared enough.

When Tom put a straight left into the bridge of the executioner-guy's nose, it was already too late to intervene. The troops reacted within seconds, but the crowd had already smelled the blood.

It happened as if on cue. Ground zero: Yays, Nays and Otherwise--almost as if they'd been waiting--converged beneath one collective primal scream, unifying at last. Barricades were splintered like matchsticks beneath the simplicity of sheer human tonnage.

I was thinking of a black woman writer most people have probably never heard of, and that was what I meant when I said what I said. "Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers," this woman said. "Real gods require blood."

We are our own, I thought again, when beside me I saw the mousy girl who'd squeezed my hand an hour before peel her lips back in a snarl.

And bury the handle of her drum mallet deeply into an onrushing fratboy's eye.

I wish I could put down here that I did not smell meat in the air.

What I can say is that the last thing I glimpsed before joining them all was the look of utter gratitude that flashed like heat lightning across the face of a nearby gaurd. Thank you, God, he seemed to be thinking, as he smiled and drew out his club.

As it turns out, my dance with the beast was almost comically brief. One lousy set of fingernails across my left cheek snapped me back to front and center. One glance at my immediate position and I was worming my way back toward safety on my hands and knees. Jesus, a guy could get killed.

What else. Pepper gas grenades, lots of people howling and choking on their own snot. The police dogs looked positively bemused.

News people peeking out from beneath each other and then barking at the camera guys, trying to point. It was difficult to mobilize; everyone's eyes were swelling shut.

Ambulances. The bag of skin that had been my friend Tom Paramigni winked out en route to the hospital. It was just as well. They'd never have been able to repair his face.

There was no tow truck, but I did discover that we'd locked the keys inside the car.

And in his book, Exploring Psychology, David G. Myers said: "Proximity--geographic nearness--is perhaps the most powerful predictor of friendship. Of course, proximity also provides opportunities for assaults, rapes and murders."

When I read this passage, Anne Murray was singing "Close to You" on the stereo in my den. I mention this only as an example of perfect irony.

It has nothing whatsoever to do with the story, and let's face it. You wouldn't have believed it anyway.