

No Animal

By Bethany Lake

[DR. JOHN ROLSTER is seated at a table with an open folder in front of him. Seated across from him at the table is AARON WAGNER, his head bowed, silent. Rolster opens a bottle of pills, takes one and takes a drink of water. He looks at the bottle of pills. He takes another pill and washes it down with more water. Wagner is agitated and has the nervous habit of turning his cuffs five times, pause, then another five times. Over and over. He keeps his eyes down and does not look at Rolster. Rolster studies, and then points at, Wagner's hands.]

Rolster: Your cuffs. You turn them five times.

Wagner: You don't waste any time.

Rolster: There isn't any to waste. So please explain.

Wagner: Explain?

Rolster: Why did you do it?

Wagner: I did as I was told.

Rolster: By whom?

Wagner: The children. They wanted me to. They asked me to.

Rolster: How did they ask you?

Wagner: What do you mean?

Rolster: Did you physically hear them?

Wagner: Yes.

[Rolster pauses to write something down.]

Rolster: Why did they want you to do it?

Wagner: They wanted me to save them.

Rolster: So you believe you were doing them a favour?

Wagner: No.

Rolster: But you just said so.

Wagner: I do not *believe* I was doing them a favor. That makes it relative. I was doing them a favor.

Rolster: Okay. But why you?

Wagner: I had to. I was their only friend.

Rolster: I see. It says here that you've been the owner and operator of that day care for five years this September. Is that true?

Wagner: No, it was five years in May. The fifth.

[Rolster pauses to write something down.]

Rolster: Do you have any violent images or dreams?

Wagner: It's hard to tell which ones are violent.

Rolster: Do you have any dreams in which you are causing destruction or injury to others? Anything with, say, an extreme force involved?

Wagner: Yes.

Rolster: Describe one for me, please.

[Rolster grabs his pen and poises it to write.]

Wagner: One night, I dreamt of the ocean. A glorious, innocent ocean. Then before I knew what happened, a violent hurricane ripped through...

Rolster: *[Interrupting]* No, no, no. I'm sorry. I think you misunderstood. What I meant was, do you have homicidal dreams?

Wagner: But you didn't say homicidal. You said violent.

Rolster: You said that these children asked you to do this. Did you mean all of the children in the day care, or just these six?

Wagner: Five.

Rolster: You murdered six.

Wagner: No, five. One was injured.

[Rolster checks one of his papers. He pauses then looks up at Wagner again.]

Rolster: Well?

Wagner: Well what?

Rolster: Did all the children ask for this *favour* or only those five?

[Pause.]

Wagner: Have you ever looked at someone and you could see what they looked like as a child? Through all the stubble and time-worn lines, you can still see the original outline. The smooth, pure, milky-sweet delicacy that once glazed their face. The trusting eyes. Even the fine, soft hair that fell across their forehead. *[Pause.]* Have you ever tasted the blood of a child?

Rolster: That's enough. Would you please just answer the question?

Wagner: They all asked. But I could take only five.

Rolster: What were you saving them from?

Wagner: Nothing.

Rolster: Your claim that you were saving them implies a threat, a danger from which you were keeping them.

Wagner: Wrong. I was preserving them.

[Pause. Rolster sighs, picks up a pen and makes a note.]

Rolster: Are you married, Aaron?

Wagner: No.

Rolster: Any girlfriends or boyfriends?

Wagner: No.

Rolster: Is there anything that provides a sexual release for you?

Wagner: Yes.

Rolster: Was there anything about killing that excited you sexually?

Wagner: No.

Rolster: Are you aware that several of the parents committed suicide after they saw what you did to their children?

[Pause. Slowly, Aaron gasps, shocked, as if realizing for the first time what has occurred.]

Wagner: Oh my god what have I done? When did I turn into such an animal?

Rolster: Aaron, you are no animal. It's normal to experience moments of clarity in any delusion. If you were an animal, there would have been a different quality to your crime. It would have been much more barbaric. You would have enjoyed the act of killing so

much that you would have taken your time to make it last longer. You did nothing of the sort. There is, however, another quality to consider. For example, some types of killers often write letters to police trying to taunt them, to make them seem more powerful than the authorities; a self-glorification. Or, in the case of Albert Fish, a letter to the mother of a child he murdered. You did none of these things. You say your mission was not to glorify yourself or your actions and you say you truly believe that you were only following the instructions that were given to you. A selfless act of mercy. Very noble. But self-glorification, selfishness, does exist in a false sense of nobility. Drop the act.

Wagner: It was not just about me.

[Slowly, Wagner raises his head to look at Rolster. He stops playing with his handcuffs. Rolster reaches again for his pills and puts one in his mouth.]

Rolster: *[patronizing]* I know it isn't easy to understand. I'm only here to help you. *[Pause. He takes a drink of water.]* When you think of each of those children now, what do you feel?

Wagner: Exactly what I felt afterward.

Rolster: Which is?

Wagner: *[Long pause.]* Peace.

Rolster: How do you get peace from a slaughter?

Wagner: There is only peace after a slaughter. You know that, John.

Rolster: This isn't about me.

[Wagner and Rolster are looking each other in the eye.]

Wagner: You know what this is about.

Rolster: I didn't tell you my name.

Wagner: This isn't the first time.

Rolster: I'm sure in one of your delusions...

Wagner: THIS IS NOT A DELUSION!

Rolster: Please sir. I'll have to ask you not to shout or I will call security.

Wagner: What happened to 'Aaron'?

Rolster: What?

Wagner: Aaron. You were calling me Aaron before, now suddenly it's 'Sir'. Why?

Rolster: *[Pauses, clears his throat and glances down at his paper. He develops a slight stutter.]* You said that you had violent dreams. Is there any particular image that recurs?

Wagner: Yes.

Rolster: *[He picks up his pen. He accidentally knocks over his bottle of pills. This catches Wagner's eye.]* Describe that for me please.

[Wagner and Rolster speak face to face during the following.]

Wagner: Which one? The image or the dream?

Rolster: There's a difference?

Wagner: The image is real.

Rolster: Your image.

Wagner: Your image too.

Rolster: It's not a dream.

Wagner: A birthday party.

Rolster: A birthday party.

Wagner: Chocolate cake.

Rolster: With pink icing.

Wagner: There were shots.

Rolster: I ducked.

Wagner: I fell to the ground.

Rolster: One went through my party hat.

Wagner: One went through my arm.

Rolster: Party hats and hamburgers with ketchup were all over the ground.

Wagner: Only it wasn't ketchup.

Rolster: It was blood. It tasted like...

Wagner: It smelled like...

Rolster: Copper.

Wagner: Playing dead.

Rolster: Almost was.

Wagner: And would've been.

Rolster: If my father hadn't grabbed him.

Wagner: I lost interest in school.

Rolster: I started reading crime novels.

Wagner: I started doing coke.

Rolster: I did a project on Albert Fish.

Wagner: Everyone thought I was stupid.

Rolster: Everyone thought I was gifted.

Wagner: A party right after school. May.

Rolster: The fifth.

Wagner: I've never told anyone about that.

Rolster: It's been years. Years spent trying to forget and yet wanting to understand why...

Wagner: There is no reason why.

Rolster: I don't accept that. It must have been nurture.

Wagner: Not nature?

Rolster: No. There must've been an external reason for...

[Rolster breaks down and rubs his hands over his face. When his eyes are covered, Wagner takes the pen. He hides it and his hands, still handcuffed, under the table. Rolster is now talking with his head down with Wagner looking and speaking directly at Rolster.]

Rolster: I'm tired.

Wagner: I'm sorry for bringing it up. Maybe it would help you to talk about it?

Rolster: I don't know. Maybe. I can still see his eyes. That man. How old was he?

Wagner: 'Bout our age.

Rolster: Twenty-nine?

Wagner: Thirty. *[Pause.]* Twenty-five years goes by quickly, John. You still remember it like it was yesterday?

Rolster: Yes.

Wagner: And how often does this violent image come to mind?

Rolster: More than I admit.

Wagner: And you've never told anyone either, I bet. Not even your own wife.

Rolster: That's right.

Wagner: And how does this knowledge affect you in your daily life?

Rolster: I don't let my children to go to birthday parties. I get panic attacks just thinking about it.

Wagner: *[Tenderly]* I'm very sorry to hear that, John. *[He indicates to the bottle of pills.]* If it isn't working anymore, maybe you should switch to something else.

Rolster: You're probably right.

Wagner: How many have you taken today?

Rolster: More than usual. Three so far.

Wagner: You know, I know a relaxation exercise that seems to help my panic attacks. You breathe in for four counts, and then hold it for another four. Then you let the breath out slowly over eight counts. Try it with me? Shhh, just close your eyes...

[They do the exercise once together. They both close their eyes. Wagner opens his eyes as Rolster's remain closed while they do it a second time. Wagner quietly frees himself from the handcuffs and sneaks over to Rolster. Wagner grabs Rolster's hair with one hand and holds the pen to his Adam's Apple.]

Rolster: I knew what you were going to do.

Wagner: You did?

Rolster: Yes. You're not going to kill me.

Wagner: I'm not?

Rolster: No. It was nurture.

Wagner: Not nature.

Rolster: Right. It isn't in you. You won't kill me.

Wagner: Of course not. I'm no animal.

[Wagner is still holding the pen to Rolster's throat as the lights go down. Out of the darkness, Rolster screams.]