

## The Massacre

“Ordinary people can readily engage in atrocities.”

—Robert Jay Lifton

“What the *hell* happened here?” I asked.

“We killed them,” Lem replied grimly. “We killed them all.”

The bodies were strewn all over the hillside. They were naked and white, as if we had drunk all the blood out of them. Some were piled one on top of the other, their eyes open and mouths gaping.

The trees were sparse, but tall. Their large leafy branches blocked the sunlight, covering the dirt on the side of the hill in shadows. It was late afternoon but looked like dusk. Willy was moving among the bodies, counting them.

“How many are there?” Lem asked.

“I reckon about three hundred.”

“Three hundred!” I exclaimed. “You mean, we killed three hundred people?”

“That’s what I reckon,” Willy said.

I looked at Lem and then back at Willy. “It can’t be. I don’t remember a thing. I have absolutely no memory of doing *anything*.”

“Well, you were right there with us,” Lem said. He added, “And you seemed to be enjoying it.”

“Absolutely not!” I cried. But neither Lem nor Willy responded.

“There’s no way I could have done this,” I continued. “And I certainly wouldn’t have enjoyed it.”

“Well, you did,” Lem said.

“So what are we going to do now?” I asked.

“Just leave them.” Lem reached down for his cane.

Willy unzipped his rucksack and pulled out an empty plastic water bottle. “I’m thirsty,” he said. “Let’s go get some water.”

“Good idea,” Lem replied.

We walked down the hillside towards a small stream that ran through the middle of the valley. A dirt road had been built beside the stream and when we reached it, we began walking upstream deeper into the mountains. It would have been easier to get water further down the road, but blood was running into the stream. All of us wanted to get as far away from the sight of the bodies as we could. We continued up the road in silence for about a hundred yards and then slid down the bank to the stream.

Willy began filling his water bottle while Lem watched. Lem’s white suit was spotless, as it always was, and his white hair and moustache made him look every bit like the dignified gentleman he always tried to be. Willy’s clothes were clean, too, as if nothing had happened. Willy was young and had an innocent air about him. He looked like the kind of kid who would do anything you asked him to.

My own T-shirt was bloodless but drenched in sweat and smeared with mud. My hands and arms were filthy. I felt like plunging into the stream to wash myself clean, but just as I was getting ready to take off my clothes, there was the sound of voices further down the valley.

“Looks like trouble,” Lem said, walking back to the road to get a better view. “Probably hunters. They’re still pretty far away, but I can see them. They’re headed this way. They haven’t found the bodies yet.”

“So what do we do?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Lem said. “Just stay here. They haven’t seen us yet, but they will. Don’t worry, I’ll handle it.”

“Why don’t we just run up the road?” I asked.

“You know as well as I do that there’s no way out,” Lem replied.

“And just look around. There’s no place to hide,” Willy added.

Lem sat down on a rock, while Willy began gulping down the water he’d filled his bottle with. He emptied the bottle, refilled it, and handed the bottle to Lem. Lem took a few long swigs, then returned the bottle to Willy. I was still standing by the side of the stream, wondering how Lem and Willy could

be so calm under the circumstances.

"I still think we oughta run," I said.

"Impossible," Lem said. "It'd only make us look more suspicious. Like I said, just relax."

But I couldn't relax. I still had no memory of having killed all those people. How had we done it? I tried to imagine what had happened but couldn't. We didn't have any weapons on us. No guns, no knives, nothing. It was hardly possible that we killed them with our bare hands. How could the three of us have taken on the three hundred of them?

Shouts suddenly began to ring through the valley.

"They've found the bodies," Lem said. "Let's go!"

It occurred to me that I still hadn't drunk any water. "Wait," I said. "I'm still thirsty."

"No time for that now," Lem said. He climbed back up the bank from the stream to the road and began walking down towards the hunters. Willy and I fell in step behind him.

As we approached the hillside, we could see five hunters all dressed in camouflage, running among the bodies, apparently checking to see if anyone was still alive. We were only a short distance away when one of the hunters finally saw us. He shouted something to the others, and soon Lem, Willy, and I found ourselves surrounded by the hunters, with their guns cocked.

"What are you doing here?" the apparent leader of the group asked.

"I was about to ask you the same question," Lem said. "What the *hell* happened here?"

"A massacre. I don't know how else to describe it," the leader replied. "Didn't you hear anything?"

"Not a thing," Lem said. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to the mountains behind him.

"We've been hiking up there all day and just got here now."

"So you didn't see anything?"

"Nope," Lem said.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

The leader was looking Lem straight in the eye. For a moment it seemed as if he didn't believe him. I bent my own face downward, trying to conceal it from view. I knew that my face would immediately give everything away if anyone happened to see it.

"Look," Lem said to the man. "I don't know what you're doing here either, but I think we'd better get some help."

"Right," the leader said, apparently feeling satisfied with Lem's story and relaxing his gaze. The hunters put their guns down. "We'll stay here to see if anyone's still alive and you run into town and get the police. It should take you less than an hour to get there from here."

Lem motioned for Willy and me to follow, and the three of us headed back down the road towards town. When we'd put a bit of distance between ourselves and the hunters, however, I couldn't help looking back. I saw the bodies again, silent on the hillside, and still couldn't understand what we had done. The hunters had resumed checking the bodies. As I stood there watching, however, the leader we'd been talking to suddenly looked up and his eye caught mine. I couldn't avert his quizzical stare and felt my face slowly begin to contort. I wanted to run—not away, but back to the hunters, to confess everything.

"After them!" the leader shouted to the others, who turned almost in unison and quickly grabbed their rifles. "Don't let them get away!"

Lem and Willy immediately began running up the hillside, leaving me standing on the road alone. It took a moment for me to realize the urgency of the situation, but as soon as I did, I started running up the hillside after them. Lem veered off to the right and Willy to the left. I continued straight up the middle and soon lost sight of both of them. The hunters, meanwhile, had arrived at the foot of the hillside where we'd started our ascent and started to open fire. I could hear the blast of their rifles and feel the bullets whizzing past me.

I kept pressing upwards without looking back. Within a few minutes I saw a craggy rock in the distance with the open sky behind it. Getting closer, I intended to scramble over the rock and down the other side of the mountain. But as soon as I reached the top of the rock, I saw that there was a precipice on the other side falling straight down for hundreds of feet. I caught myself and teetered for a moment on the edge of the cliff.

I looked back and saw the hunters, already halfway up the hillside, skirting around the trees and pausing from time to time to fire their rifles. I didn't know which way to turn. Standing on the rock I could see the town far below me. The rooftops of the houses and buildings gleamed in the sun. The

streets flowed like dark rivers between them. I knew I would die if I jumped from the rock, but there was no other choice. I felt a moment of vertigo and then leaped.

When I awoke the next morning, safe in my own bed, I realized it had all been a dream. I snuggled my head into my pillow and lay there for a while, wondering how I ever could have dreamt such a horrid thing.

Then suddenly another scene came back to me. I could see Lem and Willy killing people to the right and left of me. My own two hands were wrapped around the neck of a young boy who was begging me not to kill him. I looked at his face for a moment, then squeezed harder until his head went limp. I couldn't get the image of his pleading eyes out of my mind as I got up and dressed to go to work.

As I was walking to the radio station where I was supposed to give a performance that morning, a police car slowly passed me on the street. The patrolman inside looked at me and I looked back, but he just kept on driving.

A short distance further I saw a poster taped to a streetlamp. It said in bold letters:

### WANTED FOR MASS MURDER

The police sketches of Lem and Willy were so accurate they almost looked like photographs. The third sketch didn't look like me, however. I felt relieved. Whatever memories I'd had were of events I had never participated in.

The longer I looked at the sketch, however, the more it seemed as if it were in fact a picture of me. Although the drawing was a poor resemblance, it would certainly be possible for someone to think that the person in the picture was me. Would anyone make the connection?

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. Maybe it hadn't been a dream after all. Maybe the whole thing had happened just as I'd remembered it. But if so, I couldn't account for how I'd survived the jump off the cliff. And even if I hadn't actually been involved in the incident, the conviction grew inside me that it was nonetheless something that I *could* have done, given the opportunity.

As I resumed my walk to the radio station, I considered my options. My first thought was to leave town and start life over again somewhere else. I imagined myself living an entirely conventional and reputable life in a respectable house with an honorable job. But that didn't really seem to be a choice. Running away would only arouse suspicion. Staying wasn't really a good alternative either. I had no doubt that sooner or later I'd be caught, no matter what I did. Ultimately there was no escape. I could confess, of course, but I knew the result would be punishment, not forgiveness.

I wondered what Lem and Willy were doing. The thought crossed my mind that perhaps the hunters wouldn't be able to identify me. They'd gotten a good look at Lem and Willy to be sure, but not of me. The police sketch of me was ambiguous enough that no one would be able to make a positive identification. But then, what if Lem or Willy told the police outright that I'd been involved? No, I reasoned, they wouldn't do that. I've known them both too long. I trusted them. Or at least I thought I could trust them.

I concluded that the best thing for me to do would be to just go on with my normal routine as if nothing had happened.

The rest of the way to the radio station, however, I couldn't stop thinking: Had it really been me? How could I possibly have done this? I'm not a violent person. I have never wanted to hurt anyone. I'm a *good* person. Killing someone is totally beyond my capacity. Why couldn't I just go back to the day before and undo everything that had happened?

When I arrived at the radio station, the producer was in a fury.

"The show's already started," he yelled, "and you're late!"

When the producer and I got to the control room, the announcer was already in the studio introducing the next act. Through the glass we could see a boy with a guitar getting ready to sing. He was going to play one of his original songs, the announcer said. The boy was dressed completely in black and had his long hair slicked back. He was smiling confidently as the announcer claimed that the song the boy was about to perform would certainly be a big hit. As the announcer was finishing his introduction, the boy stood up to the microphone, adjusted his guitar, and lifted his pick to strike the first chord.

But then nothing happened. The singer froze. His hand remained poised over the sound hole of

his guitar. He had a horrified look on his face. His face seemed familiar, but I couldn't quite place it at first. Then I realized that it was the face of the boy I had strangled.

As soon as the announcer realized that the boy was not going to perform, he quickly apologized into his own mike and cut to a commercial.

"What's wrong?" the announcer screamed at the boy. His voice was loud enough to be audible in the control room where the producer and I were still standing.

The boy simply stood there, his eyes wide open and his mouth gaping. Then he pointed his finger at me.

"What a day," the producer muttered, slamming his fist down on the table. Turning to me, he said, "Don't mess up. You're up next."

"I need to use the restroom first," I said.

"Well, be quick about it. You've got less than a minute," he snapped.

I went to the restroom and washed my face in cold water. I looked into the mirror and wondered whose face was looking back at me. I was not the same person I had been the day before. I didn't know who I was. I had changed and become someone else. I was unrecognizable.

When I got back to the control room, the boy was nowhere to be seen. The producer was animated. "Just five seconds," he shouted. "Now get in there!"

I rushed into the studio and positioned myself behind the microphone.

"Now here with today's gospel song is—" The announcer's voice crescendoed as he said my name.

I hesitated for just a moment, and then began to sing an old-timey gospel song all about peace and love and forgiveness. I sang it a cappella, with all the strength that I could muster. My voice was broken and husky towards the end.

When I finished singing, the announcer turned off the mikes and segued into the program's closing theme song.

"Wow," he said. "You sang that song like you really meant it."

"I did," I replied. But it wasn't true. Lem was right. I had enjoyed what we did. I was one of the damned. There could be no redemption.