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Five Ways to Kill a Man

Written by Alex Gray

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FIVE WAYS TO
KILL A MAN

Alex Gray

sphere

SPHERE

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To Renée and Winnie,
remembering you both with love

‘Five Ways to Kill a Man’

*There are many cumbersome ways to kill a man:
you can make him carry a plank of wood
to the top of a hill and nail him to it. To do this
properly you require a crowd of people
wearing sandals, a cock that crows, a cloak
to dissect, a sponge, some vinegar and one
man to hammer the nails home.*

*Or you can take a length of steel
shaped and chased in a traditional way,
and attempt to pierce the metal cage he wears.
But for this you need white horses,
English trees, men with bows and arrows,
at least two flags, a prince and a
castle to hold your banquet in.*

*Dispensing with nobility, you may, if the wind
allows, blow gas at him. But then you need
a mile of mud sliced through with ditches,
not to mention black boots, bomb craters,
more mud, a plague of rats, a dozen songs
and some round hats made of steel.*

*In an age of aeroplanes, you may fly
miles above your victim and dispose of him by
pressing one small switch. All you then
require is an ocean to separate you, two
systems of government, a nations’ scientists,
several factories, a psychopath and
land that no one needs for several years.*

*These are, as I began, cumbersome ways
to kill a man. Simpler, direct and much more neat
is to see that he is living somewhere in the middle
of the twentieth century, and leave him there.*

Edwin Brock

CHAPTER 1

The First Way

Mary listened to the noise of something rattling in the lane outside. The wind had strengthened as the evening progressed and she really should have made tracks for bed by now, but there was still a chance that he would drop in. How she had enjoyed her day with them yesterday! Christmas with the family meant so much. Sarah had picked her up just before midday, taken her to that fancy restaurant where they'd pulled crackers and enjoyed the same meal as fifty other strangers sitting at adjacent tables.

It wasn't like the old days, Mary told herself. Then she'd have had a turkey in the oven by seven o'clock in the morning, all the trimmings prepared the day before, vegetables peeled ready in pots of cold water with just a wee dash of milk to keep the starch from leaching out. Her Christmas pudding would have been made months ago, like the rich fruit cake that she baked from a recipe that had been her mother's. No shop bought fare for *her* family, Mary thought indignantly. Oh no, it had all been the best of stuff.

She'd thanked them all nicely afterwards, though, aware of the size of the bill that Malcolm was having to pay, but in truth the thin slices of turkey meat swimming in tepid gravy had given her

a bout of indigestion afterwards. It was either that or these under-cooked sprouts. Frozen probably, she decided, for who would spend their Christmas morning in a hotel kitchen peeling masses of vegetables when they could open a catering pack?

Danny had slipped away just as the meal was finishing, a wee pat on her shoulder and a half-promise to come round to see her tomorrow. Well, Boxing Day was almost past and not a soul had appeared at Mary's door. Not that she blamed the boy, of course. Her grandchildren were all nice kids, well brought up, but they led such different sorts of lives from the one she had known as a teenager.

'Och, well,' Mary said aloud. 'He'll be with his pals having fun. Who needs to see an old crone like me anyway?' She smiled at that. There was no self-pity in her tone, even though the hours had hung heavily between bouts of watching TV. Danny was her favourite out of them all and he'd come round and see her some time, just as he always did. His visits were all the more special for being unexpected and Mary was bound to be in to greet him since she never went out much these days, what with her bad hip and the arthritis that made walking so difficult.

When Mary heard the back door being knocked, a smile lit up her wizened features: it was him! Danny hadn't let her down after all, she thought. Shuffling through the hall, the old lady placed one hand on the papered walls for support, breathing hard at the effort. She switched on the kitchen light, an expression of delighted anticipation on her face at the shadow beyond the half-glazed door. The tea tray was still prepared for them; Danny's favourite biscuits on a plate beneath the embroidered cloth, two china cups and saucers all ready beside them. Mary smoothed down her skirt and patted her tightly permed white curls, just as if she were about to welcome a young suitor to her parlour.

Eager fingers turned the key and then the cold air rushed in, sweeping Mary's skirt above her knees, making her tremble at the empty darkness. Where was he? The trees outside swayed in the gathering storm. Had she really seen his shadow there on her doorstep? Or was it a trick of the light?

'Danny? Danny! Are you out there? Come in, lad, it's too cold for me to leave the door open.' Mary's smile faded as she heard the branches of the old apple tree creak in the wind. Had she imagined the door being knocked? Had her heightened anticipation tricked her into imagining that familiar sound? Was it the wind?

Disappointed, Mary was about to shut the door once again when she heard it: a pitiful cry just out there in the garden, some small animal in distress. Was it a cat? She'd had cats for years, but after Tiggie had been put down Malcolm had persuaded her not to have another one. *It's too much for you, Mother*, he'd scolded. But Mary still missed the companionable creature and on a night like this a furry body curled on her lap would have been very welcome. So, was it a stray cat, perhaps?

Peering into the darkness, Mary heard it again, a bit closer this time.

'Puss?' she queried. 'Here, pussy,' she said, her words drawn away by a gust of wind. Venturing forwards, Mary took one step down, her fingers gripping the rail that the nice man from social services had put in for her, and called again. 'Puss, puss . . .'

The figure seemed to come from nowhere, the hood concealing his face.

'Danny?' Mary stood still, wondering, doubting as he mounted the steps towards her.

But in that moment of hesitation she felt her fingers being prised from the railing, then the figure was suddenly behind her.

One blow to her spine and she was falling down and down, a thin wail of pain coming from her mouth as the sharp edges of the stone steps grazed her face, cut into her flailing arms.

Mary closed her eyes before the final thud, her skull smashing against the concrete slab below.

‘Meow!’ the hooded figure cried, then laughed softly at the inert body splayed at the foot of the steps. Bending down, it lifted one of the woman’s thin wrists, feeling for a pulse. A moment passed then the hood nodded its satisfaction, letting the dead woman’s arm fall back on to the cold, hard ground.

They had all gone away, whooping and screeching as the yellow sparks flew upwards but I remained, standing still and silent, watching the skeleton of the car emerge from the flames, its white paintwork already melting in the heat.

It had been our best Hallowe’en night ever: the others had been eager at my suggestion, so casually slipped into the conversation that afterwards nobody could remember just whose idea it had been in the first place. The Beamer had been left by the kerbside and it was pretty obvious no one was at home that night, probably out partying, we told one another, sniggering that they were too goody-goody to drink and drive. Didn’t bother us, did it? We laughed at that, as the stolen car careered over the hilly track and down into the shelter of the woods, bright and alive with the rush of booze and adrenaline in our young veins.

Setting fire to it afterwards had been my idea too, though everyone had a hand in starting the flames licking at the cloth upholstery. We’d sneered at these owners; it was just a basic model, not like the better cars belonging to our own fathers. (Mine had smooth biscuit-coloured leather to match its classy exterior and it was not the sort of car that anyone would leave carelessly outside our home.)

When the engine caught fire and the petrol tank exploded we all dived

for cover, screaming and laughing as though it was bonfire night come early and we were little kids again. But after that the rest of them became bored with the fire and wanted to go back up the road, bent on other mischief.

They thought I wanted to watch the car until the flames died down, but I had quite a different reason for staying behind. The tree right beside the wreck of the BMW had caught fire when the petrol tank blew up, a river of flame leaping up and scorching its branches. Now it was quivering as the fire burned away the bark, each limb blackened and shrivelling as the tree began to die. The trunk that had been smooth and grey in the firelight was now covered in patches of glowing red embers as if the wood was bleeding from within. I stood there, watching and waiting, one ear tuned for the possibility of a fire engine that might roar up from the coast, tensing myself to slip through the fence that bordered the wood.

I had never seen a living thing die before and it was with detached curiosity that I stood there seeing the tree shudder, imagining the noise in its crackling branches to be a groan of anguish. A small wind sprang up and I had to shield my eyes from the cinders coming directly towards me, so it was a little while before I noticed the adjacent pine trees begin to sway. They seemed to be trying to put a distance between the dying tree and themselves, bending to one side away from the conflagration. I grinned at that: as if trees had any sense! It was just a trick of the imagination and the direction of the wind. Only stupid girls in my class at school who raved on about Tolkien would think the trees were living creatures. I'd hated Lord of the Rings, though more recently I'd made myself watch the whole damned trilogy so nobody could catch me out.

But then, alone with the sound of crackling wood and that moaning voice, it was easy to think I was seeing a living thing in its death throes.

And I liked what I saw.