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ESSAYS THAT KILL

Killer Essays are staging a comeback. The beasts used to be virtually extinct. Few contemporaries knew them except from books. Since ancient times, literati had sung their praise. Many had sought a brush with their own Killer. Killers preyed on the best of minds only. It was a distinction to be taken on by one.

The fortunes of the Killers changed at the turn of the last century. The Academie Française came out against Killer Essays, denouncing them as “*de mauvais gout*.” Tasteless! I will get back later to what so motivated the august French body.

Matters got worse for the Killers forever thereafter. Writers bunched up with academics and publishers, and Killer Essays were the victims. The wetlands of the interior were staked out as the creativity and information network built up. This deprived Killers of their natural habitat. Wherever they roamed, Essays were likely to be sighted. Informers were on the lookout throughout the provinces of the human mind and the most remote outposts of the soul. Informers would take no chance with an Essay turning wild. In no time would they lasso any Essay remotely resembling a Killer. They would make the Essay run in circles until it was broken in.

It was not poaching of Essays so much as coaching of Essays the informers engaged in. Informers tamed Essays before they would strike. Teachers kept Essays from straying and gave them no chance to outgrow and overpower writers. That arrangement rendered the world of Essays a cozy one. Writers ran no risk of being attacked and eaten alive by their own Essays. Readers were sure not to be troubled by Essays, or at least not much. With all their tact and good taste, Essays became to the educated what sermons were to churchgoers. Indeed, many churchgoers turned to Essays after the Pope threw out the traditional liturgy. Essays became Sunday reminders that truth comes in glimpses, and only to those who keep their minds open to serious reflection. The rich ritual of Essays combined the artsy with the mindful and made them sanctuaries from the HERE AND NOW. Writers,

trusting the natural forces of fermentation at work in Essays, heaped all their leftovers from stories and poems onto Essays. Some had the urge to enrich Essays with everything they normally held in their guts.

Today, Essays of the Sunday species are on the run. On their heels are Essays which strike fear into the hearts of men. All this began when a Killer sprang on a certain Judy Jay. Jay's case illustrates that today's Killers are no less deadly than the ones which reigned in past centuries.

Jay was a homemaker, on the Mainline, in suburban Philadelphia. She held degrees from Yale and Stanford. After the birth of her second son, Jay stopped practicing law. Nobody understood why she did not mind. One day Mister Jay returned home early. He stormed into the bedroom and Judy pulled the walk-in closet shut. Her eyes were shining and her hair was unfurled.

"What are you hiding?" Mister Jay wondered, already wounded. "Nothing," Judy buttoned her blouse and combed her hair.

Mister Jay opened the closet.

"Shoes, nothing but shoes!" he moaned.

"I thought we had an understanding about this?" Mister Jay plowed into the pile of boxes. Many boxes that toppled had never been opened.

"Yes, darling," Judy insisted. She was like a mother to a child with a nightmare. "I kept my promise."

Mister Jay kept waving his arms about the shoe boxes as if drowning. He saw his wife kissing somebody good-bye. His wife embraced somebody Mister Jay was unable to see.

"See you this summer in Iowa," he heard his wife whisper. "Who are you seeing in Iowa?" Mister Jay exaggerated the longing in his wife's voice.

"Darling, I love you," Judy replied.

She did, and it was not out of pity for his blindness.

Mister Jay was unable to see the Muse next to him. His wife's Muse who hovered there, right over the shoe boxes. Mister Jay could see a Muse only as a mystical thing of the past. Half goddess, half bare-breasted slut. A free-spirited female hanging out with Homer and writers of repute in old Greece. Reciting rhymes in white nights of hanky-panky. While Homer was drinking himself blind.

Mister Jay's eyes were wide open, and his arms hung down limp.

The Muse attending to his wife Judy was in no way frivolous. She was a board certified professional. She belonged to the VMA, short for Visiting Muses Association. VMA is the oldest and finest association of registered Muses in the industry. VMA Muses have a Master of Fine Arts degree from a prestigious institution. Upon registering Muses take an oath that they will appear only to those booked. Booked through a reputable agent using a major credit card. Sessions take place in kitchens, over a cup of coffee, on Saturday mornings, mostly. The Muse makes her presence known by letting her forehead shine and by incanting: "Voice and Form." The client enters the session by humming along: "Form and Voice. Voice and Form."

Mister Jay drove to Iowa City to pick Judy up. They would go on to Taos. Mister Jay was looking forward to some serious jogging in the wooded hills there. The morning of Judy's last class, Mister Jay ran up and down the Iowa River. He made good time, and was confident he could do better still in Taos. Presently, he sat by a tree with a book Judy had recommended. The reading came easy. Mister Jay stopped whenever reflections from the river blinded his eyes. Once she got the hang of it Judy would write stories every bit as good. She should do that in Taos.

A shadow fell over the book. A man holding a brown bag stood before Mister Jay. The man did not take the dollar bill Mister Jay held out to him. He took a bird out of his bag for Mister Jay to see. He said the bird's name was Dr. Codeine. The man asked Dr. Codeine to say "Hi" to Mister Jay. The bird stopped picking grains from the man's palm and greeted Mister Jay. Mister Jay replied "Hi" and quickly added, "And good-bye." He was alarmed by a sick tingle in his spine. "I must not be late for my wife," he told Dr. Codeine and company.

Mister Jay climbed up the river bank, and by Danforth Chapel he crossed the lawn to take the pass under the railroad track. On the whitewashed walls were scribbled Chinese verses dating to the Mandarin era. What kind of people would turn graffiti out of poems, thought Mister Jay. By the river bank sat the English/Philosophy Building, window casings of cement popping out of red brick. Inside the Building, Mister Jay expected to become acutely aware of vistas larger than his own. The proximity of people creating worlds of truth and beauty

would work magic. Higher meanings which he craved secretly would reveal themselves. He might catch sight of a face not to be forgotten in a lifetime. Meet a writer of an awesome piece or a poet soon to be discovered.

Doors opened and participants, elderly ladies most, stepped into the hallways. Their shoulders sagged from the weight of materials in their tote bags. They wore white sneakers with blue stripes, boys' sizes and padded. Mister Jay looked into *the* poetry class. Light from the window in the room's back cut the silhouette of a female figure. The figure was on a pedestal, placed there to inspire poets, Mister Jay thought. On closer look, he realized that the figure was actually on roller skates and moving. She turned around, and rolled from light through shade into light. As she skated out of the room, she caused panic among the sneakers in her path.

Mister Jay wondered whether the skater would be one to be talked about. She reminded him of a dancer in the club which he frequented when with special clients. I might be wrong, but perhaps she is THE ONE, Mister Jay repeated to himself. The more Mister Jay thought about this, the more he hoped for the skater to be THE ONE. If the skater were to be THE ONE this meant his wife was safe. Mister Jay could not bear the thought of what it would be like if his wife turned out to be THE ONE. But what *if* his wife had been struck? Struck means that somebody regular flips out and becomes a writer. Mister Jay knew that for a fact.

Mister Jay had noticed his wife for a while. He could not tell whether she had been moving so slowly or whether he had been slow to tell himself about her. She seemed so serene, not the Judy he knew. Had he been hoping, privately, that who he saw was not *her*? Not his Judy. Thoughts like that worked Mister Jay. Mister Jay sure wished Judy *would* stop moving the way she was. Somehow she was not walking. She was floating.

"Hi, dear, I am over here." Mister Jay waved towards Judy. She stopped and vaguely waved back towards Mister Jay. Mister Jay was alarmed. Judy was not connecting. Not with him, not with anything around, really.

"Judy, honey," Mister Jay said, all jovial ooze. "Off to the shoe shop! Storefront of arcades. Like the one we used to have back home.

Remember stucco ceilings, oak cabinets, the works? I bet they have all your favored brands. You pick a pair for every occasion in Taos. My treat! For my little writer. My artist love.”

A girl too elegant to have breasts served them. The first pair fitted perfectly. Mister Jay had it set aside. The next pair was nice in a different way. Mister Jay reserved that one as well. After the third pair, the girl glanced at Judy and motioned to Mister Jay, “Best thing, Sir, you help me bring them out.”

In the storage room, the girl whispered, “Sir, I would rather sell shoes to somebody who *cares*. Your wife . . . I mean. I have seen it before. You might need your money. *Afterwards*.”

Mister Jay was plagued by a tingle in his spine like before when with Dr. Codeine. He settled for four pairs.

“Exactly one for each of our hands.” Like a violin teacher, Mister Jay took Judy’s hand. He placed her fingers on the strings of the shoe bags.

In Taos, Judy told Mister Jay that something was growing in her. She had been up late, writing past dark. Mister Jay thought Judy meant something like a story was taking shape in her head. One day, Judy took Mister Jay’s hand and made him feel the growth under her dress. She would not let go of his hand until he had felt how it kicked and stirred inside her. Mister Jay was shaken up. He had undergone a vasectomy after their second son.

The Jays cut their Taos stay short. They sought out their priest back home, who listened to them a long time. Next time, the priest said he might have found a passage through which GOD was speaking to them. With that, the priest opened the Bible to a shredded napkin marked *Judy J*. The priest read them the story of good old Martha and her sister Mary. Martha who is upset about Mary sitting by Jesus instead of sharing in her chores.

After he was done reading, the priest held his head in his hands. Then, with due consideration, he asked Judy and Mister Jay, “Maybe this is not what you folks expected? Think about it. Come back in a couple of days. Perhaps I *will* come up with something more fitting.”

In the following months, Judy was always famished. As soon as her Muse went on break, Judy called Mister Jay for food. Mister Jay was

working the dishwasher, taking down pictures for dusting while running the vacuum cleaner. Judy, car keys and checkbook in hand, would unplug the cleaner to get his attention.

"I am sorry," Mister Jay would wipe his hands on his apron. "Dumplings, smoked ribs, sauerkraut from the Deli?"

Mister Jay would spread the containers out in front of Judy. He had gotten extra pieces of cheesecake and bratwursts. He pulled a chair under the light. He had learned to knit without the slightest clicking of the needles.

"How are the boys?" Judy asked sometimes.

"The boys are fine," Mister Jay beamed, "they do so well in piano lessons."

"Maybe the boys wanted some of this?" Judy would say when done.

"Oh no," Mister Jay would smile, "the boys could not be any better."

Ultrasounds were done even though hers was not a regular case of pregnancy. Tests were repeated because no doctor had ever seen a case like Judy's. That fall Judy moved into a new addition to their home. The bank had underwritten the mortgage providing the rooms could be rented as a separate apartment, *afterwards*. The addition included a kitchenette next to the bedroom where Judy nursed her Essay. There was a library with a bay window and a chimney where Judy met the Muses. Her original Muse had been promoted to Head Muse. A Head Muse takes reports from the shift Muses, and directs the overall artistic progress. Judy's Head Muse had, for example, seen to it that there was a fire going in the chimney all the time. The heat of the Indian summer was almost unbearable then. Still, a blaze was critical to the growth of the Essay. The Head Muse also took Judy and her Essay to readings at area colleges and bookstores. The VMA provided a bionic stroller with one seat for Judy, who was quite weak by then, and one for the Essay who was all attached to her.

Mister Jay would visit when he was done with the work around the house. He would bring one of the boys over. Mostly the younger one. Judy was worried because the boy was clumsy and might hurt her Essay. Then she saw how the Essay unwound before his natural brother. And her son was so taken in by the Essay. Her great little Essay.

The Head Muse gave to understand that Essays, while doing well musing, were not to entertain the familiar. Judy defied the Head Muse over this. The Head Muse deemed it unprofessional to show her pique and retreated to dusting books. It is there where Mister Jay would say hello to the Muse. He knew the Muse was around even though he still could not see her. The Head Muse, ever so discreetly, would let Mister Jay in on a thing or two. He always wanted to know how much cappuccino the Essay drank by now.

Cappuccinos had saved the Essay. Judy had tried to breast feed the Essay. Her breasts were full and hurt. The Essay would take them into his mouth, and chew and chew but not suck. Judy drank cappuccinos to nurse the Essay all through the night, next day, next night and so on for weeks. The Essay whined and grew weaker all the while. Judy kept bawling because her breasts were bleeding and the Essay was starving. One night, a Muse did not wake Judy because she was close to exhaustion. The Muse filled the cappuccino into a baby bottle and, miracolo, the Essay drank every bit of it, and never stopped asking for more. Judy had later shared that experience with a noted speaker. "My poor child," the speaker leaned over Judy. "Did nobody tell you that Essays are to chew, not to suck?"

By Christmas Judy, now the size of a fetus, was admitted into a special room at Mayo. The Essay was as tall as her first boy. In the following weeks, Judy grew so tiny that they mounted a magnifying glass by her bed. At nine months, Judy Jay, under the microscope, resembled an egg. A tiny pink egg. Pink had always been her favored color.

Every day specialists came to examine Judy. Some said that the Essay had grown in her, through her and out of her. Others argued that Judy had grown into the Essay and would be immortalized in it. That and many more ideas like that were created. Each idea spawned additional ideas which refined it or opposed it. This led to ever more insight, more discourse and more writings. Such was the effect the Essay of Judy Jay had on medical writings and the World of Letters.

Magazines had heated editorial arguments. Interns were assigned to cover the *Killer Story of Judy Jay* weeks before she succumbed to her Essay. On their stopover in Minneapolis, the interns agreed to conduct their visit in the most dignified manner. She was, after all, the first

woman ever to carry to term a Killer Essay. By her bedside, the interns poked and pushed one another. None dared to walk up to Judy and to ask her, "Hi, how are you? What does it feel like to be taken over by an Essay?" None could stop giggling. None dared to look at the Essay.

The evening before there had been a special broadcast on Killer Essays. A professor talked about a Killer which had preyed some fifty years ago on a writer of great hope. The writer's remains were in the collection of the Centers for Disease Control, a microscopic spindle with a blue hue to it. His detractors of the time had mocked the writer for having turned into a fish for his love of booze. His Essay was buried, in a bomb shelter, unread. Those were the times when so many threats became imminent. First there were threats from nuclear bombs, from missiles and from communists. Then came threats from missiles with nuclear bombs and from communists with missiles. Ultimately, there were threats from communists with missiles which carried nuclear bombs. Mankind, understandably, was in no mood to put up with Essay threats.

Today, mankind is no longer at liberty to ignore the threat posed by Killer Essays. Since the demise of Judy Jay, new cases of Essay fever are reported daily. It is projected that half of those engaged in serious writing will contract the deadly bug within the next ten years. Public debate on Killer Essays is taking on a shrill tone. Writers are pleading with the Food and Drug Administration to allow the import of treatment devices said to have worked wonders in Korea. Some criticize The National Institute of Mental Health for wasting, year in and out, tax dollars on paranoia when that money could serve to fix fiction.

Self-help groups have rallied under the banner of *SafeWrite*. *SafeWrite* holds that writers have only themselves to blame for their current plight. According to the *SafeWrite* camp, writers whine themselves to death and treat lamenting like a personal entitlement. The camp crusades against such self-destructive behavior. It vigorously promotes the practice of sound writing in kindergartens, grade schools and community colleges. *SafeWrite* engages Parent-Teacher Organizations in motivating students. It wields formidable force in Congress.

"Rubbish," says XY, the country's favored poet turned guru, to all that. "*SafeWrite*, that's swindle. To me, *safe writing* means *bad* writing."

I know only of one kind of writing which is safe. It is the one which is dull and without consequence. Writing ought to pain some men or tell some of mankind's pains. Lamenting has been a prerogative of our trade since biblical times."

His wife, XX, a noted writer herself, claims that the Killers have been among us under some guise or another. She believes that forever Killers pushed their creators off the deep end. Killers might startle writers with a fresh thought when they should pull away from the curb. So writers run into a car, and it is called an accident or suicide. In reality, Essays are acting out. It is precisely that they are so unpredictable that makes Killer Essays scary. Some turn wild because a writer neglects them. Others hate writers for becoming their slaves. It is a no win situation for writers. One writer might build a home for an Essay out of the best verbal blocks and make all ideas of the Essay shine in the eye of the public. Another writer may shun all responsibility. He might steal from the Essay only to sell out to a shady platform, to instill a moral into a silly song or make sense out of a cheesy story. Still, both these very different writers might be dealt the same deadly blow. "Do not fear. Only a few Killers are wild and bloodthirsty," laughs XX. "Most are more like whiny daughters or rebellious sons."

Hemingway is a case in point. He always treated like a stepson his firstborn, an Essay on the sense of life. All his fatherly love went into stories about drinking, hunting and fishing. All those stories wanted a life of their own, and never sent so much as a Christmas card. None of them went along when Hemingway went to the hunting lodge in the wilderness. Only Hemingway Junior, by now almost an old man himself, hung out with Senior. Senior took little notice of Junior, which the Essay liked better anyway. Every time his old man had watched him closely, it had been to flesh out a spiteful character for one of his stories. When Hemingway cleaned his gun, the Essay was free to walk up to him. Being the Essay he was, Junior paused at one point, testing his grounds. Hemingway, of course, knew damn well that the Essay waited for him, and kept looking down the gun barrel this way and that rather than at the Essay. The Essay saw how tired his old man had grown of the game the two of them had played all his life. He took pity and pulled the trigger.

Junior Essay Hemingway grew up before the days of drugs, TV sex and all that violence. The greatest racket Junior ever caused in the Hemingway household had to do with an empty bottle of whiskey. Hemingway had been writing away at his desk since dawn, to make a living. By noon, he needed a drink to face the rest of the day. Not even a shot of whiskey was left in the bottle he had stored under the gun rack the night before. Hemingway took his heaviest rifle, and smashed its butt through the bathroom door where Junior nursed a hangover. His face green, Hemingway Junior protested, "It was not only me. The other ones are still drunk in bed."

"It is you. You are supposed to be the responsible one," old Hemingway scowled. He resented the Essay attitude of his son. "You. You Essay-son-of-a-bitch. Who always knows better. Who is full of shit."

Hemingway shook Junior by the shoulder. The Essay clutched himself tight to the toilet seat. Hemingway Senior had enough. He craved a drink and he could not stand the smell of his Essay son. He punched the Essay so hard that the toilet seat shuddered.

Sweet mother Hemingway arrived at the scene as the old man lifted his arm to strike the daylight out of the Essay. The Essay had always been her favored. "Let him mother, for once let him do it," the Essay pleaded with her. Hemingway's arm drifted. He went back to writing that whole afternoon, the night and the next day. He turned out story after story about fishing, drinking and hunting. And all the fuck that goes with it, any fucking detail that helped the old man to forget. To get away from his Essay of a son and all the misery that came with him.

Essays haunting their creators until they broke down in exhaustion were rampant in the last century. They were known to every doctor in the far steppes of Russia. Think of Dostoyevski. His writing was all horror and terror as his Essay worked him over. The Essay perched on his shoulder like a vulture. It picked morsels from his soul, tearing old wounds apart. Dostoyevski went to Germany to spare his ailing son his deadly stench. Accounts differ on how Dostoyevski got rid of the vulture in Dresden. Some say a lady took it as a centerpiece for the salon where she entertained Europe's luminaries. The lady arranged to meet

Dostoyevski during his daily promenade on the Bruehl's terrace there. She slipped several thousand gold marks into the wide kaftan Dostoyevski wore that day and no police agents of the King of Saxony saw a thing.

Others say the vulture took off after a dove had made its nest on Dostoyevski's other shoulder, and turtled "Love" and "Peace" all the time. Dostoyevski fiercely hated the chatty dove. He pawned it off in the casino of Baden-Baden after he had lost every penny gambling there. Dostoyevski was given credit of a thousand gold marks for the dove. It was worth much more, of course. A French diplomat on the gambling table next to Dostoyevski had vied for the dove all the evening. He needed it to give some spirit to his own literary efforts. The first round he won big, the Frenchman grabbed the dove. A second later, he lay on the ground with a tiny hole in his head. A security guard had shot at the Frenchman. The dove, like any object pawned, belonged, technically, still to the Casino. The guard had missed the Frenchman. The dove had killed him.

Dostoyevski knew all this was coming. He had seen it in several auras. He used the confusion after the shooting of the Frenchman to slip out of the Casino. Dostoyevski shoved aside the stationmaster who asked for a ticket, and jumped onto the train which was about to pull out. Dostoyevski tore into a compartment occupied by a couple from Berlin and their unmarried daughter. He dropped onto a seat above which it said *Reserved* in German, French, English and Russian. Dostoyevski caught his breath, then took his shoes off. His feet were hurting. He was a young man no longer.

"You believe he is causing a scandal, then?"

The daughter was pulling straight the costume of a doll she had bought for a neighbor. The doll wore a white blouse with bell shaped sleeves and a black hat with three cherries on its rim.

"I have no doubt. It *is* a scandal, a threat to *all* culture," her mother held a bottle of *Kirschwasser*. She was upset for not having taken a larger bottle. How would she get by until she returned to the spa?

Dostoyevski listened in on the women. He always paid attention to what folks had to say about his books. Not that he cared about their opinion. Folks had no clue about writing. They only *talked* about books,

repeated what they had read in the papers. They got upset about the way he described them. They were embarrassed by all he knew about them. They accused him of not understanding. They argued he had never been as hard pressed to get ahead as they were.

Dostoyevski took the rags off his legs. He had not washed since leaving Russia. As long as he was covered by her dirt, he belonged to mother Russia. The matron eyed Dostoyevski's legs with suspicion. She grabbed a flask and sprinkled eau de cologne into the air.

"But the gen-i-us, ge-ee-nius," the daughter said before being taken over by a coughing spell. The evaporations from Dostoyevski's feet did not mix well with the perfume.

"Think of it, of it!" the daughter tried again while breathing out. She turned to her father. One sleeve of his jacket was neatly folded with a rubber band. Where his hand should have been, there was a stump of shiny wood with two steel hooks opposing each other. He lifted the arm with the prosthesis, looked over to his wife, looked at Dostoyevski, then with the prosthesis took hold of the armrest.

"I know what your father likes," the matron spoke up. "*Cavalleria rusticana*, Barber of Seville. Bel canto. Prima donnas. Prima donnas with bosoms heaving."

The matron lifted her hand before her frowning eye and gave a rendition of the Queen of the Night. A queen at her most furious, if not exactly most beautiful singing.

"Thank you, but *that* is not bel canto," her husband stopped her. "By the way, perhaps Mozart was not much of a patriot. I mean, he wrote operas, German or Italian, that did not matter much to him. Only what operas! Now this hero of yours. If an opera has to be German to be worthy, thank you." He clutched the prosthesis onto the armrest. "Basta."

Dostoyevski felt a seizure coming. Folks were mixing up writers and composers. They were talking of operas as if they were books. *Wagner!* An alchemist who laced vocal molasses with the poison of heroics. To compare him, Fjodor Dostoyevski, with such a fake. Him, the master of precision in matters of the soul.

Dostoyevski decided against having a seizure. He would imitate voices he had heard in the asylum. He thundered, "That Frenchman got what snotty spirits deserve!" Looking around the compartment as if listen-

ing to somebody he snickered, "I was attached to the vulture. My very own vulture. I did not trust the dove. Now I know. The dove is no idle chatterer."

Dostoyevski looked at the matron as she stored the bottle of *Kirschwasser*. Life without demons to keep in check! He was pleased to be in the same place as she. To be rid of the vulture and the dove. He would sleep when he put his head down. No scenes and thoughts would flicker through his mind. No more demands on him to capture everything in words. No more upsets from writings which made a mess of what he had in his head.

Dostoyevski felt a fuzzy kinship with the matron. He fell to his knees and said a prayer from childhood. He looked up with a smile and took the hand of the matron as if to kiss it. He held the chubby hand to his lips, admiring it like a delicious fruit. Abruptly, a sound filled the compartment. The sound carried through the railroad wagon.

"There you got it. The high C, you got the high C," her husband pointed the prosthesis at the matron.

Dostoyevski let go of the matron's hand. In Russian, he blessed the Germans, "Love and Peace!"

From his seat, Dostoyevski bowed towards the matron, apologizing. He expressed disbelief for her leaving. He failed to understand why she was grabbing her belongings. How could she feel humiliated? He had not meant to hurt her. When he sank his teeth into her flesh, he was reaching out to her. She had been an outlet for the mad love welling up inside him.

"Love and Peace!" Dostoyevski repeated in French.

Switching into their language, Dostoyevski told the Germans how much he would miss their company. He could not bear the idea of being alone, in a first class compartment, all the way to St. Petersburg. He looked on as they stormed down the gangway. No compartment had enough places for the three of them, and they had to split up.

Dostoyevski sat down by the window. The seat was still warm from the matron. He arranged his legs in the place where the German had rested his prosthesis. Later, the man came back. Excusing himself for disturbing Dostoyevski, the German waved the prosthesis through the luggage rack above Dostoyevski. The steel hooks made a sound of touching glass. The man looked down to Dostoyevski. Dostoyevski

was not used to having folks look into his face and he stared at the bottle of *Kirschwasser*.

"You are going farther than we," the prosthesis dangled the bottle into Dostoyevski's face. "Look after this. You did hurt *her*. Poor soul. You *must* understand."

Dostoyevski was awakened by a voice saying, "Love and Peace."

The train had come to a halt. It was bitterly cold in the compartment. Dostoyevski scratched the ice flowers from the window and opened it. He could not tell whether it was day or night. The land was wide open and there was snow on the ground. Off center stood a clump of trees, bare and black. There had to be a creek nearby. A creek was the reason, Dostoyevski thought, for the way snow had formed banks over there. The engine whistled, there was a thump and the train moved forward. Dostoyevski closed the window. He could see everything in the compartment. The voice must have been in his dream. He was not about to turn mad, surely. He only faked being mad of mind when people sickened him in his soul. Dostoyevski reached for the bottle of *Kirschwasser*, and drank it empty. He held the bottle by his lap and relieved the pressure on his bladder. When he buttoned his pants, there was a rustle above his head.

"Love and Peace."

Dostoyevski looked up to the luggage rack. "Welcome to Russia," Dostoyevski made himself say.

The dove kept waiting. Dostoyevski kept hesitating. The dove moved a certain way. Dostoyevski opened his lips, then closed them. The dove moved again. Dostoyevski forced, "Love and Peace!" over his lips. The dove came fluttering down.

Much has been made out of how Dostoyevski came to witness a new faith. One theory is that Dostoyevski took to it after knowing depravation abroad. Another notion has it that Dostoyevski was eaten up by guilt. Guilt over gambling in high society while his son passed away in a boarding room. Such explanations do not cut it with me. To me, it was the dove that did it. The dove made Dostoyevski change his mind. The dove, with a little help from a German matron Dostoyevski had scandalized. Help from the matron's *Kirschwasser*, to be exact.

Dostoyevski's story had a sad sideline, though. After the dove killed the Frenchman, there was a great commotion and agitation among the writers of the day. Writers felt they should be allowed to go through life without a thought killing them. As I alluded to above, the Academie Française sided with the poor writers and came out against Killer Essays. Such is the love of the French for their writers.

Men of insight were appalled. Among them was a legendary Russian critic of the day. That critic had discovered Dostoyevski, Tolstoj and all the others. He had mocked contemporary intellectuals for, predictably, spoiling evenings in pleasant society by sighing, "This Essay of mine. It kills me." Rightly, the critic had pointed out, "There are many more writers who kill their Essays than Essays who kill their writers."

Now the critic wrote to the Academie Française to plead the cause of Killer Essays. He worried the French had misunderstood him. It was for the sake of real Killers that he had exposed *fake* ones. The critic underlined the following statements:

"Do not do away with the Essays of Essays. All writers worthy of your Great Nation were anxious to have their showdown with one.

"Man is to wrestle his Essay like Jacob did wrestle the Unspeakable by the river. Not winning over the Essay nor winning it over. When eventually the Essay disappears into the morning, man shall be blessed, albeit disjointed."

The Russian critic got nowhere with the Academie Française. *Naturellement*. By the time of his letter, the Great War had broken out. Essays did not kill people. People killed people. *Mais, bien sure*. Essays never *kill*. Essays only *kid*.