

The Killers / Ron Hansen

He was fifteen his first chance and the boss flew back in his chair like he'd been hit in the chest with a fencepost.

The kid, his name was Rex, worked in the basement washrack until he got the word, then he slapped the chamois twice across the hood and watched the boss close up. The garage door rang down on chain pulleys, then the boss rode the belt lift up to his office. Rex opened the car door and lay across the transmission hump to jerk the shotgun out of the springs. He zipped up his cracked leather coat as he too rode the lift up to the office. He punched himself out on the time clock, wrapped the shotgun up in coveralls, and slid it under the bench. The boss, who was Art, had his pants unbelted, unzipped, tucking in his shirt. He said goodnight. This was 1960.

Rex walked down the street. Down by the auditorium Ron dropped a cigar at his shoe. Ron was the man who sent him. The ash blew red across the sidewalk. Rex ate a fried ham on rye at the lunchroom. It used to be a trolley, the lunchroom. Green and yellow and too much light. A man at the end of the counter licked egg yolk off his plate. Rex drank milk until the news came on, then paid the cook with two bills and told him thanks for the change.

The guy who sent him was still down the street. He bent over fire in his hand. Cigar smoke sailed up when he lifted his head.

Rex stood next to the time clock with the shotgun in his hands and the coveralls on his boot tops. The time clock chunked through four minutes. Rex walked to the office in his stocking feet. He opened the door and Art looked up.

"I thought you were gone," he said.

Rex swung the shotgun up and dropped it down on the desk top cracking the glass. He centered the barrel some with his hip. Art grabbed for it quick and then pitched back in a mess while the noise shook the windows and smoke screwed up to the overhead vent. The chair was pushed back three inches. You could see the skid on the tiles. Art sat there like he was worn out, his glasses cockeyed on his face. Rex turned out the lights. Luckily he saw how his socks picked up the dirt, so he got out a mop and washed the floor, then put on his boots and locked up. He leaned the shotgun next to the drainpipe and walked down the hill, smiling big with his hands on his stocking cap.

Ron dropped the envelope out of his pocket and was gone.

It was in 1940 that Max leaned across the seat and opened the car door. The man at the corner stooped and looked at him, holding his coat flaps

together. Then Al sat in the car and closed the door. He looked at Max. "You, huh?"

"Yeah. I'm elected."

They drove in silence for awhile. Al bit a cuticle and looked at his finger. Al got a cigarette out and lit it with the green coil lighter from the dashboard. The smoke rolled up the window glass and out through the opening where it was chopped off by the wind. At a stop light Al said, "Look at my hands." He held them shaking over the dash. "Would you look at that?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm a little jumpy too."

The man's eyes were glassy. "You know what I've always been scared of ever since I can remember? I was always afraid I'd wet my pants."

Max smiled.

Al looked out the window. "You think it's funny but it's not."

"I'll let you relieve yourself first. How would that be?"

"That'd be sweet."

They worked in and out of traffic and found a parking place. Al got out and straightened his coat. He pressed his hair in place in a window reflection. Max got out, flattening a gray muffler against his chest, then buttoning his black wool coat. He put his key in the door and turned it. They both wore light-colored Homburg hats. Al tied both his shoes on the bumper.

"How far is it?" he asked.

"Three blocks."

They walked in step on the sidewalk. Max held his hat in the wind.

"What are you using?"

"'38 Police Special." He put up the collar on his coat. "That okay with you?"

"Oh that's just swell, Max. You're a real buddy."

Al stopped to light another cigarette. He coughed badly for a long time, leaning with his arms against a building, hacking between his shoes, then wiping his mouth with a handkerchief. Al shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched forward. The cigarette hung from his lip. "Cold, that's all." Smoke streamed over his face. "I feel it in my ticker when I cough."

"You ought to have it looked at," Max said.

"You're a regular funny-boy today, aren't ya?"

They turned left at the corner and walked into a lunchroom that used to be a trolley. A bell jingled over their heads. They sat on stools at the counter and ordered coffee and egg salad sandwiches. They were the only customers there.

"Do you remember the Swede?"

Max nodded.

The counterman turned over the sign that said "Closed," then got out a

broom and began sweeping the floor. He swept under their feet as they ate. Max turned on his stool.

"Is there a place where a fella could get a newspaper?"

"There's a booth at the corner," the counterman said.

Max handed him a folded bill that the counterman put in his shirt pocket.

"Which one you want?"

"Make it the Trib."

He rested his broom against the counter.

"Walk slow."

When he was gone out the door, Al put down his cup of coffee. "Very nifty."

Max smiled. "You like that?"

"I bet his memory's bad too."

Max used a toothpick on all of his teeth. Al folded two sticks of chewing gum into his mouth. He crumpled up the wrappers. Max said, "You know how it works. You get the call and she says do this, do that. What do you say? She got the wrong number? You do what you have to do. Nothing personal about it." He looked at Al's face in the mirror behind the counter. "What am I telling you this for? You know all the rules."

"If it was me, I'd do the same thing."

Max got off his stool. "You said you wanted to visit the Men's room."

They walked to the back of the place, Max following the man. He stood on a chair to switch on a small radio and turn it up loud. Then he went into the small room where Al was washing his hands and face in the iron lavatory. He looked at Max in the mirror. Max was pushing down the fingers of his gloves. He asked, "What'd you do anyway?"

Al shrugged. "I started taking it easy." He dried his hands with his handkerchief. "I burned myself out as a kid. I lost my vitality."

Max opened his coat. "Do you want to sit down?"

The man sat down under the sink.

Max crouched close, reaching into his shoulder holster. "Waiting's the worst of it. You don't have to do that now." He felt for the heartbeat under Al's shirt and Al watched him press the revolver's muzzle there. Max fired once and the body jerked dead. The arms and legs started jiggling. They were doing that when Max walked out and closed the door.

He's short for one thing, so the cuffs on his jeans are rolled up big and he folds a manilla paper up six times to put in the heels of his boots. He chews gum instead of brushing his teeth like he should and he pulls his belt so tight there're tucks and pleats everywhere on his pants. He washes his hair with hard yellow soap, then it's rose oil or Vitalis and he combs it sometimes three or four times before he gets it right. He keeps aspirin in

his locker. He says he falls asleep each night with a washrag on his forehead. He etched a tattoo in himself with a ball-point pen, but it's just a blue star on his wrist and mostly his watch covers it. You can go through school and see his name everywhere: Rex on a wall painted over in beige, Rex on the men's room door, Rex on a desk seat bottom when it's up, Rex Adams stomped out in snow. He eats oranges at lunch, even the peell, and gets D's in all his subjects, primarily history and math. If he comes to sock-hops he just stands there like a squirrel, or like he's waiting for lady's choice. He's always giving me the eye. Especially when I wear dresses. He doesn't have a father or listen to records or play sports. He was the first one in school with a motorcycle, which is chrome and black and waxed and which he saved up for with money from the parking lot. His favorite pastime is collecting magazine pictures but there's only one taped over his bed; it's from the fifties, from *Life*, about a gangster washed up out of Lake Michigan and swelled up yeasty in his clothes. He says the thing he remembers most is the way the blood collected in the creases of Art's pants and dripped to the floor like out of a faucet when it's not tight. He's got a gun. He's the only Rex in school. He's not cute at all. His shirts all smell like potatoes.

The Swede? That's an old story.

Max had dressed at the hotel window. Leaves rattled in the alley. He crossed his neck with a silk muffler and buttoned a black overcoat tightly across his chest and put on gloves and a derby hat. He met the other man on the street. They both held their hats as they walked.

"I see you've got it," Max said.

The man, whose name was Al, said nothing but kept one hand in his pocket.

"Good," Max said.

This was fifty years ago. This was 1926.

They sat at the counter of Henry's lunchroom facing the mirror. A street-light came on outside the window. There was a counterman and a nigger cook and a kid in a cracked leather jacket and cap at the far end of the bar. He had been talking with the counterman when they came in.

Max read the menu and ordered pork tenderloin but they weren't serving that until six. They were serving sandwiches. He ordered chicken croquettes but that was dinner too.

"I'll take ham and eggs," Al said.

"Give me bacon and eggs," said Max.

They ate with their gloves on, then Al got down from his stool and took the nigger and the boy back to the kitchen and tied them up with towels. Max stared in the mirror that ran along the back of the counter. Al used a catsup bottle to prop open the slit that dishes passed through into the kitchen.

"Listen bright boy," Al said. "Stand a little further along the bar."

The counterman moved.

"You move a little to the left, Max."

For awhile Max talked about the Swede. He said they were killing him for a friend.

At 6:15 a streetcar motorman came in, but he went on up the street. Once the counterman made a ham and egg sandwich for a man and wrapped it up in oiled paper.

"He can cook and everything," Max said. "You'd make some girl a nice wife."

Max watched the clock. At 7:10, when the Swede still hadn't shown, Max got off his stool. Al came out from the kitchen hiding the shotgun under his coat.

"So long bright boy," Al said to the counterman. "You got a lot of luck."

"That's the truth," Max said. "You ought to play the races."

They went out the door and crossed the street.

"That was sloppy," Al said.

"What about where he lives?"

"I don't know this town from apples."

They sat down on the stoop of a white frame house. Inside a man and woman were leaning toward a crystal radio. There were doilies on their chairs and the man slapped his knee when he laughed. Part of a newspaper blew past Max's shoes. He snatched it and opened it up. Al nudged him when the kid in the leather jacket came out of Henry's. They followed the kid up beside the car tracks, turned at the arc light down a side street, and stood in the yard across from Hirsch's rooming house. The kid pushed the bell and a woman let him in.

"The Swede'll come out looking for us," Al said.

"No he won't," Max said. "He'll just sit there and stew."

Al stared across at the second story window.

After awhile the downstairs door opened again and the woman said goodnight. The kid walked up the dark street to the corner under the arc lights, and then along the car tracks to Henry's eating house.

The two men crossed over to the rooming house yard. Al stepped over a low fence and went around the back. Max walked up the two steps and opened the door. He stood in the hallway and listened and then he climbed a flight of stairs. He softly walked back to the end of a corridor. Al came up the rear stairs from the kitchen. He unbuttoned his coat and cradled the shotgun.

Max knocked on the door but there wasn't an answer.

He turned the handle and pushed the door with his toe. They walked in and closed the door behind them. The Swede was lying on a bed with all

his clothes on, just staring at the wall. He used to be a prizefighter and was too long for the bed. He turned to look at them and Al fired.

Rex got the call on a Thursday. His Mom was just home from work at the grocery store and he was in his T-shirt and jeans eating a TV dinner and reading the newspaper spread over the ottoman and not paying attention to me. His Mom called him to the phone, said it was some man. Ron, it must've been. He put his finger in his ear and turned with the phone but he still had to ask the guy to repeat this and that. Rex went ahead and jotted everything down on the calendar from church, then tore off the month and folded it up to fit in his leather braid wallet. Then he sat down on the couch and belched, he's so uncouth. He looked at his TV dinner with the crumb custard still in its dish. Then he got up to run the sink faucet over it and stuff the tray down in the trash. His Mom was cooking at the electric range when he was in there. She moved the tea kettle onto another coil and dried her hands on her apron and turned around kind of smiling. He swung his hand back like he was to slap her and she screamed and hid under her arms. When he never hit her but was grinning instead, she just walked right out of the kitchen, heavy on her heels. She was careful around him the majority of the time. You couldn't help but notice.

So Max was an old man now, with a trimmed white beard and brown eyes and size eleven shoes and trouble sleeping nights. He combed thin hair forward to hide the bald spot. His face was baked red from the sun, his shirts were open at the collar, he could no longer drink wine. When he last met the man in the black suit, they talked about quail hunting and heavyweight boxing and fishing for marlin off the Keys. Then the man passed a paper to Max which he signed with a strong cross to the X and a period at the end of his name. They sent a check twice a year. He said as he stood, "Let me defend the title against all the good young new ones."

He woke early to stand at his easel and paint still lifes, like Cezanne's. They gave him a lot of trouble. The colors were never right. He stacked them in a closet when they were dry. At noon he left his room and walked the city streets or shopped for his evening meal. Or he would sit in the park with a stale loaf of bread and tear up slices for the pigeons. At night he sat in the stuffed red chair and listened to music. Or he wore his reading glasses and slowly turned the pages of art books about Degas or Braque or Picasso.

But windows he'd closed were opened. Books he'd left open were closed.

Or he sat in the back of a bus and saw a small kid on a black motorcycle changing lanes, spurting and braking in traffic. He wore goggles and big-cuffed jeans. The kid saw him staring. The kid gave him the finger. Max read his newspaper.

Then Max saw him again at dinner in the lunchroom downstairs. Max ordered the meat loaf special and the kid walked his machine to the curb. He sat on it, looking at a map. Every now and then he'd wipe his nose on his sleeve.

The coffee was cold. Max told the waitress and she filled a new cup.

"And give me a piece of whatever pie you've got."

"We've got apple and banana creme."

"Whatever's freshest."

She brought him banana creme.

"That your boyfriend out there?"

"Where?"

He pointed.

"Never seen him before."

"He seems to be waiting for somebody."

"He's reading a map. Maybe he's lost."

"Yeah. And maybe he's waiting for somebody."

He wiped his face with a napkin and threw it down. Then he pulled up his pants and went outside.

"Hey!"

The kid was looking at the letters along the right, then the numbers across the top. He tried to put the two lines together.

"Hey bright boy. You looking for me?"

"What?"

"Do you want me?"

He squirmed in his seat. "No."

Max slapped the map from his hands. It fluttered, then folded in the wind and was blown against a tire.

Max grinned and took a step forward making fists. The kid hopped off the cycle and into the street. Max put his shoe on the gas tank and pushed. The cycle crashed to the pavement. The back wheel spun free.

The old man was about to tear some wires loose when the kid spit at him. Max straightened slowly and the kid spit again. It whapped against his pants leg and slid. "What kind of . . . ?" Max took a few steps back, frowning at his leg, stumbling off-balance, and the kid climbed over the cycle, hacking and working his cheeks. Then he spit again and it struck Max on the cheek.

The old man backed against the building and took out his handkerchief. "Get outta here, huh? Just leave." He slowly sank to the sidewalk and mopped his face. The kid picked up his cycle.

"That's a dirty, filthy thing to do to anybody," Max said.

The kid started the cycle and smiled and said, "Oh, you're gonna be easy."

Rex poked a jar of turpentine and it smashed to smithereens on the floor. Then he went and ran his arm reckless along the top of a chest of drawers and everything—hairbrush, scissors, aerosol cans—spilled to the floor in a racket. There was a mug of pencils and brushes on a drawing table that he shook out like pick-up sticks. He ripped the sheets off the bed and wadded them. And he dumped out all the drawers too.

We came back at dark and saw the roomer in just his undershirt and slacks wiping the turpentine up with a paper towel. He was big and had a white beard and he used to be good-looking, you could tell. He looked like he might've been a prize-fighter or something.

"There was a guy looking for you," Rex says.

Max was it? Max gathered the pencils and brushes and tapped them together. He didn't even notice me there.

"He looked pretty dangerous," Rex says.

Max just dropped pieces of glass in a trash can. They clanged on the tin. He struggled to his feet like a working man with a chunk of pavement in his hands. He looked for just a second at Rex, then he went to the chest of drawers and began picking up clothes.

The kid sat down at the lunchroom counter and unzipped his cracked leather coat. From the other end of the counter Max watched him. He had been talking to the waitress when the door opened. The waitress gave the kid water and a menu. The kid rubbed his knees with his hands as he read. He said, "I'll have a roast pork tenderloin with applesauce and mashed potatoes."

"Is that on the menu?"

"I've changed my mind," the kid said. "Give me chicken croquettes with green peas and cream sauce and mashed potatoes."

The waitress didn't know what to say.

The kid smiled and then he stopped smiling. He flicked the menu away. "Just give me ham and eggs."

She wrote on her order pad. "How do you want your eggs?"

"Scrambled."

The waitress spoke through the wicket to the cook. The kid put his chin in his hand. He turned his water glass.

Max stared as he drank from his coffee cup and set the cup down in the saucer. The kid jerked his head.

"What are *you* looking at?"

Max put a quarter next to his cup. "Nothing."

Max went to the coat tree. He pulled off a mackinaw jacket and buttoned it on. The kid was swiveled around on his stool. "The hell. You were looking at *me*."

The waitress had gone through the swinging door into the kitchen. Max blew his nose in a handkerchief. He smiled at the kid. "You're not *half* of what I was."

The kid smiled and leaned back on the counter. "But I'm what's around these days."

It will happen this way:

He'll kick at the door and it will fly open banging against the wall. Max will be at his easel. He'll try to stand. The kid will hold his gun out and fire. Max will slump off his stool. He'll spill his paints. He'll slam to the floor.

Or Max will open the door and the kid will be to his left. He'll ram the pistol in Max's ear. He'll hold his arm out straight and fire twice.

Or he'll rap three times on the door. When it opens he'll push his shotgun under Max's nose. Max will stumble back, then sit slowly on the bed where he'll hold his head in his hands. The kid will close the door softly behind him. Max will say, "What are you waiting for?" and the kid will ask, "Where do you want it?" Max will look up and the kid's gun will buck and the old man will grab at his eyes.

Or the kid will let the pistol hang down by his thigh. He'll knock on the door, Max will answer. The kid will step inside, shoving the old man. The pistol will grate against Max's belt buckle until he's backed to the striped bedroom wall. The kid will fire three times, burning the brown flannel shirt. Smoke will crawl up over the collar. The old man will slide to the floor, smearing red behind him.

Or the door will open a crack. Max will peer out. The kid will shoot, throwing him to his knees. The kid will walk into the room. Max will crawl to a chair, holding his side. He'll sit there in khakis and a blue shirt coloring black. He'll say, "I think I'm gonna puke." The kid will say, "Go ahead." He'll say, "I gotta go to the bathroom." He'll pull himself there with the bedposts. Water will run in the sink. He'll come out with a gun. But the kid will fire and Max's arm will rocket back, his pistol flying. He'll spin and smack his face against a table in his fall.

Or Max will jiggle his keys in one hand while the other clamps groceries tight to his buttoned gray sweater. He'll open the door. The kid will be sitting there in the stuffed chair by the brushes with a shotgun laid over his legs. The old man will lean against the door jamb. The groceries will fall. The kid will fire both barrels at the bastard's face, hurling him back across the hall. Apples will roll off the rug.

Rex took a wad of rags from a barrel in the garage while I sat against his Mom's car brushing my hair. He unwrapped a gun and wiped it off with

his shirttail. He sat against his motorcycle seat and turned the chamber round and round, hearing every click. Then he got cold without a coat and covered the gun again and crammed it down his pants. He looked at me weird. He said, "Ready?"

Max tried to sleep but couldn't. He got up and put on a robe and took a double-barrel shotgun from the closet. He took two shells from one of the boxes in a drawer. He sat in a stuffed chair by his brushes, lowered the gun butt to the floor, and leaned forward until his eyebrows touched metal. Then he tripped both triggers.

Poor Rex was just about to climb the stairs when he heard the shotgun noise. He just stood there quiet until I took his hand and pulled him away and we walked over to the lunchroom. Ron was there in a booth in the back. He'd had the pork tenderloin. We sat in the booth with him and as usual he told me how pretty I looked. Rex just sulked, he was so disappointed.

"You should be happy," Ron said.

"Do I still get the money?"

Ron nodded. He was grinning around a cigar. He pushed an envelope across the table.

Rex just looked at it. "Then I guess I am happy."

"You should be."

Rex stuffed the envelope inside his coat pocket. Then everybody was quiet until I spoke up and said, "I just can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful."

Rex looked at me strangely. Ron knocked the ash off his cigar. "Well," he said, "you better not think about it."

Phantom Silver / William Kittredge

The great white horse rears above the rolling horizon, which is golden and simple in the sunset, and those sparkling hooves strike out into the green light under the dark midsummer thunderclouds. Far away there is rain, and barn swallows drop like thrown rocks through clouds of mosquito near the creek. A single planet and then stars grow luminous against the night, and the great horse is gone. Moths bat against the screen around the veranda porch, and we are left in that dreamed yesteryear where the masked man rides away, leaving his silver bullet behind. The light is cold in the early morning, and the silver bullet rests on the mantle like a