



Our Way of Life

by Kirk Wolcott

“You want me to kill *more* kids?”

“Yes.”

“That’s crazy. Why would I kill more? I don’t understand.”

“What’s not to understand? You already killed six today. Now kill six more.”

Anthony Theodore Zirk digs at a zit on his chin. Cinched-tight handcuffs complicate the routine as he scowls into the wintry eyes of the man seated across from him in this square, squat, windowless room, ripe with the funk of old paint, chilled sweat. Slouched low in a stacking chair, his sneakered foot metes out a manic paradiddle under the table between them.

“Who are you again?”

“I told you. I’m Neal. He’s Red.”

“At least *that* makes sense.” Releasing the zit, his hand clanks back on the tabletop. Short for his age, and slim, he could easily play fifteen or sixteen in the movies despite his eighteen years and change. He fails to shake a coil of greasy blond hair obstructing one eye before redirecting his scowl toward the other man in the room, the man with the ginger crew cut and patchy beard who leans against a wall observing him. “So, if he’s Red, why aren’t you Curly or Cue Ball?”

“*Hilarious.*” The one called Neal dons an apish grin and rubs his slick skull while inspecting the teenager’s driver’s license. Both men wear dark jeans and windbreakers, crisp metal eagles

pinned near their hearts. “What should we call you, Mr. Zirk, aspiring comedian? Anthony? Tony? Teddy?”

“Theo.”

“Theo. Why Theo? Sounds like a Black dude’s name.”

“Because Anthony Theodore Zirk sounds like an English noble cyborg.”

“It’s your name, *Theo*.” Neal squints at the pimple, all messy and inflamed. “You know why they do that, don’t you?”

“Do what?”

“Use three names. When they talk about you, on TV.”

The boy hesitates, sneaker pumping faster, louder.

“So every other Tony or Teddy or Theo Zirk on the planet who didn’t start his day slaughtering six of his classmates and wounding nine others gets a free pass from the shitshow of Hitler hate mail headed your way.”

“Everybody knows that,” Theo scoffs, indicating the cluelessness of that class of people called adults. He returns a shackled hand to his face. The welling bruise under one eye is spreading, but he aims lower, interrupting the examination of his chin. He wonders if Neal is this guy’s real name. He looks more like a Clint or a Chuck. Heavy shoulders and a prominent jaw signal some sort of special agent or undercover cop. Talks like it, too. His partner, Red, who never talks, he just looks like somebody’s dad.

“I have a question.”

“Fire away, Theo, but we don’t have much time.”

“This is screwed up. I mean, the only reason I can imagine you guys would want me to kill more kids—and this is just my theory—but I think it has to do with raising the number of school shootings. So, you know, someone finally does something to stop all the gun violence in America, like in those other countries. But if that’s what this is, it’s really screwed up.”

“Nice theory, professor. Your question?”

Theo’s mouth opens but then, without warning, he starts to shiver. Violently. His slender body twitches and jerks like he’s been dunked in ice water or suffering a fit.

“Cold?” Neal calmly eyes the quaking youth.

“May...be,” Theo struggles through chattering teeth. “I don’t...feel cold. I just...can’t stop...shaking.”

“Shock.”

“What?”

“You’re in shock. Who wouldn’t be? You shot up half your school this morning and now you’re sitting here with us. That’s got to be unsettling.”

Theo emits a long, tremulous sigh and somehow manages to bring the convulsion under control. He blinks several times while taking stock of his surroundings. “Where are we?”

“Would you like something to drink? Something warm, perhaps?”

“Perhaps,” he says, eyes landing back on Neal. “Like what?”

“Like coffee.”

“Can I have tea?”

“No, your English lordship. We only have coffee.”

“Okay, coffee, with lots of cream and sugar.”

“We only have white chemical crap.”

“Okay, but lots of it.”

“Red.” The other man grunts, leaves the room. Neal waits for the door to latch behind him before turning back to the table. “Are you going to do this for us or not?”

More foot-drumming. “What’s the plan again? And who *are* you? Undercover cops, right? Or is it SWAT? FBI? CIA?”

“You watch too much TV.” Neal shifts in his chair. “It’s not a *plan*—not yet. Still just two options. Easy to understand if you pay attention.”

He lifts a hand but Theo flinches back, so Neal extends a single finger, marking the air as he explains. “Option one. We drink our coffee. Walk out of here. Turn right. Get in my jeep and drive to the school, where you shoot six kids. Then we let you live. Got it?”

Theo frowns.

“Good.” Neal adds a second finger. “Option two. We drink our coffee. Walk out of here. Turn left. Go down the hall and hand you over. You get a lawyer, waste a lot of time, mine, a lot of money, yours. I go back to living my life, while you rot in a room smaller than this one until they shove a needle up your arm and squirt it full of potassium chloride.”

There’s a thump at the door. Neal leans back and Red enters carrying a pair of cheap white mugs. One, containing black liquid, he places in front of Neal. The second, dishwasher gray, he serves the teenager.

“Thanks,” Neal says as Red reclaims his territory against the wall and Theo takes a sip.

“Shit, that’s *terrible*.” The teen drools a gray stream back into his cup.

“Guess Starbucks was closed,” Neal smirks.

“I don’t like this.”

“Obviously.”

“No, any of it. I don’t know where I am, who you are, who you work for, or what I’m doing here.” Theo pauses, thinks. “I don’t know why you want me to kill more kids, but I do know my rights. And *you* have to let *me* speak to a lawyer.”

“No, we don’t!” Neal slams a fist on the table, coffee mugs shuddering. “*You* have to give *us* your *fucking* answer.”

“Alright, alright.” Theo raises his hands as if warding off an attack. “Let me get this straight. I shoot six more kids and you let me walk, right?”

“I never said *walk*. Live, you get to live. Reduced sentence, minimum security.”

“Okay, I get to live. And if I don’t shoot them, what, I die?”

“That’s the deal.”

“Some deal,” Theo mutters. “Which school is it, anyway?”

“Who cares? You already killed six kids at one school today.”

“I hated those kids.”

“Well, these ones hate you, or they will once we reveal your name. Every kid in America will hate you. Their parents, too. Millions of people you’ve never met will soon hate—”

“They don’t know my name?”

“Not yet,” Neal says, shaking his head. “We grabbed you before anyone saw who it was. Nice idea wearing a ski mask. Next time, though, I’d think twice about plastering your evil plans all over social media. You were clever but left too many clues.”

Theo stays quiet and Neal leans forward in his seat.

“If you don’t give us your answer—*now*—we will spread your name and scary photo all over Insta-Twitter-Face-Tube, or whatever you punks are playing with these days. You’ll be a big hit in prison, I promise you that. If you do agree, however, to perform this one task for us, nobody needs to know who you are or what you did today.”

Theo regards his coffee.

Neal taps his watch.

Red stares on.

“Fuck *me*,” the boy says at last, snatching his cup, closing his eyes, draining the contents. He grimaces at the temperature or the taste or maybe both. “I’ll do it.”

“You’ll kill six more kids?”

“I just said so.”

“Well done, son.” Neal extends a hand.

“What’s that for?”

“Shake.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to know we have a deal, that you won’t back out once we get started.”

“I told you I’d do it. Isn’t that enough?”

“No. Shake.”

Theo considers the offering, accepting it at last.

“Now we have a deal,” Neal says, smiling, standing. “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To the school.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“Why now?”

“It’s nearly recess.”



A flat tan complex nuzzled in a wooded valley spells out a capital letter “T” below them. Single-storied, the base leg runs slightly longer than the wing stubs. They head for the base.

“That’s an *elementary* school,” Theo says from the back seat of the jeep, his first words since being strapped in under strict instructions not to say a word.

“What difference does it make?” Neal asks, guiding the jeep downhill. A black baseball cap, matching leather gloves, and tinted sunglasses complete his desperado outfit.

“I’m not doing this.”

“Yes, you are.”

“They’re *toddlers*,” Theo protests.

“Not my problem. Now, shut up.” Neal keeps driving.

Red, hatless, no eyewear, monitors Theo from the passenger seat. They cruise by a lonely strip mall, wind through a bashful subdivision, chase a forested stretch of road interrupted intermittently by powerlines, fading billboards, a weather-beaten fence. Neal eventually angles the vehicle off-road, into a rough, shaded area, before bringing it to a stop.

“Get him out and hold on tight.”

Red grunts, exits, and hauls Theo from his seat. He frees the cuffs and clamps a fist around the teen’s trivial bicep.

A cold breeze stains an otherwise sumptuous day.

“One move, I put a bullet through your head,” Neal declares, rounding the jeep, assault rifle in one hand, pair of angry looking bolt cutters in the other. “Probably get a medal for it.”

Theo bites his lip, inhales through his nose—moss, pine, camping trip scents. Beyond a tangle of trees comes a chorus of muffled shouts and playful shrieks, like a jolly muted horn section. “Those kids,” Theo whines, “they’re practically *babies*.”

“Quit being so dramatic,” Neal orders. He hands Red the bolt cutters, points with the barrel of the gun. “Look, over there. Here’s what’s going to happen. You, me, Red, we’re going to walk, quickly, into those woods. You’ll stay between us, not making a sound. When we get to the fence, Red will cut through it. Then, we’ll all hunker down, real low, and hustle to the back door of the school. Got it?”

Theo looks like he might be sick.

“Good,” Neal says. “Let’s go.”

They reach the door, Theo more winded than the two older men. Children’s voices chime shriller, owners still unseen.

“Catch your breath,” Neal commands in a harsh whisper, stooping just beneath the door’s window. Red shoves down on Theo’s shoulder and crouches beside him.

“You okay?” Neal asks.

Both nod unsure where the question is being directed.

“You don’t look okay.” Neal assesses Theo. “You’re not getting cold feet, are you? Because we can turn around right now and—”

“No,” Theo replies, pale and sweaty. “I’m good. I swear.”

“Good. And you know how to use this?”

Theo takes the rifle. “Of course. It’s the same gun from this morning.”

“Your AR-15.”

“My stepfather’s, actually. Still loaded?”

“Thirty rounds in the magazine. We could go sixty. Even higher if you want.”

“No,” Theo says, cradling the weapon, a superhero all over again. “Why so many bullets for just six kids?”

“Let’s call it your *insurance policy*.”

Theo smiles weakly and starts to take aim, until Red squeezes his arm.

“Ow. I thought you wanted me to—”

“Not yet,” Neal says, motioning for them both to lay low. He rises from his haunches and peers through the window, then drops back down. “What is it, Theo?”

“Nothing,” he answers, brow creased. “It’s just, well, what’s to stop me from, you know, shooting both of you?”

Red tightens his grip, but Neal waves him off.

“You won’t.”

“Why not?”

“I trust you, Theo. We have a deal, remember?”

Theo eyeballs the gun. When he looks up again, he finds Neal regarding him in a deferential way he rarely encounters with most human interactions. “Okay, we have a deal.”

“Then let’s get this over with.” Neal hands Theo his ski mask from earlier in the day.

“Thanks.” The young man pulls it on, over his face. “How do I look?”

“Like an assassin.”

“Great.”

Neal yanks the door closed behind Theo and turns to his partner, squatting next to him on the other side. “So, what do you think?”

Red scratches his whiskers, speaks at last. “You sure there’s not more I can do?”

“You’re doing fine.”

“I’m not doing much of anything, so far.”

“Your turn will come, my friend.” Neal stands and gazes through the window, ducking down once more. “Think of today as your *training day*.”

“Love that movie,” Red says, grinning.

“What’s not to love?”

“So, that makes you Denzel?”

“Careful now.”

Both men snigger, then fall silent. A moment passes before Red asks, “You think this is going to work?”

“It has to,” Neal answers, serious again. “How else are we going to preserve our way of life?”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Damn right,” Neal says, tapping his baseball cap. “And don’t worry, my friend. We have an insurance policy too.”



“*Arm*? What the hell kind of name is *Arm*?”

“Nickname. Short for Armando.”

“*Armando*. You don’t look like a Mexican, Armando.”

“You don’t look like a fourth-grade teacher, Mr. Shively.”

“Call me Buck,” the peaked-in-high-school offensive lineman instructs while molding his expansive shape back into the adult version of the dwarf-sized desks populating the deserted classroom in front of him. A roving scan of the premises, alive with the smell of art paste, chalk dust, ensures none of his students are hiding beneath one of those desks or behind a painting easel toward the back of the room trying to catch him cursing. “That Mr. Shively shit, it’s just for the kids.”

“Understood, *Buck*,” says Arm, standing inside the door he carefully closed behind him before inserting a firm handshake and a fat envelope into the other’s humungous mitt. Roughly the same age yet half the teacher’s size, Arm wears dark jeans and a windbreaker, crisp metal eagle pinned near his heart. “So, how did you end up in a place like this?”

Buck laughs, a giant’s rumble. His maroon polo shirt could shade a picnic table. “Fair question, Arm. I did a stretch in the Service, but then had to, you know, part company. The old

lady got tired of me sitting around on my ass all day, watching too much ESPN. Her words. God knows I wasn't going to wander some mall as a rent-a-cop, or worse yet, work construction with my brother-in-law. No, thank you, *Señor*. When a buddy of mine told me about teaching, well, I love kids—I mean, you know what I mean—so I jumped at the chance. I've been here nearly five years. Great gig, if you can get it, but..."

"But what?"

"Well, don't get me wrong, Arm. I'm pleased as hell to have this job. But there are some days when, you know, I miss it."

"The *money*?"

"Sure," Buck chuckles, patting the envelope he's placed on his desk by a wobbly stack of workbooks. "I was going to say *action*."

"You saw combat?"

"Not exactly," he concedes. "Came close, a couple of times, if you know what I mean."

"I certainly do, Buck. That's the reason we contacted you."

"And by *we*, who did you say you work for again?"

"We're the ones protecting the children."

"The School Board?"

"Something like that, Buck. As my colleague told you over the phone, with your skills and experience, we believe you're ideally suited to safeguard the welfare of this school."

The big man nods. "And all of this is legal, Arm?"

"I'm not a lawyer, Buck."

"No, of course not."

"The handgun, you've got it?"

"Affirmative," Buck replies, brightening. "Straight from my collection."

"Excellent. Background check?"

"Oh...I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Not really," Arm shrugs. "The gun, it's loaded?"

"*Loaded*? Here at school? With all these children?"

Arm tenses.

"I'm joking. Of course it's loaded. Why else carry a weapon?"

Arm relaxes. He watches Buck dig into the pocket of his cargo pants, producing a spiny knot of keys. One of these he fits into the lock on the desk's bottom drawer. Buck then deposits the envelope and withdraws a Glock 19, which he sets on the desktop, between a spongy black chalkboard eraser and a heavily stained coffee mug proclaiming him to be "The World's Greatest Teacher."

"Someone's got to look after these little guys," Buck says, draping a hand over the semi-automatic pistol. "Remind me. How did you find me again? Principal Anne?"

Arm peeks at his watch. "Sorry, you were saying?"

"Nothing, really. It just seems, well, maybe you know something you're not telling me."

"No, Buck, we've told you everything you need to know."

"Okay then, tell me this. Why *this* school?"

"Why *not* this school?" Arm counters. "Do you read the papers, Buck?"

"Not much," he admits. "More of a TV guy. Fox News, mainly."

"Good. Then you should appreciate how *no* school in America is safe anymore. Just today, in fact, six kids were killed at a high school not so far from here."

"I heard. It's horrible. Did they catch the bastard?"

Arm frowns, tilts his head. "Did you hear that?"

"No. What?"

"I don't know. A child, maybe."

"Yeah, they're at recess," Bucks says, glancing over Arm's head at the classroom clock on the wall by the door. "They should be returning soon and—"

"There it is again."

"*What?*"

"A scream, I think," Arm says, staring at Buck. "You must have heard it."

"No. Really?" He climbs from his chair, listening.

"Yes. There's *screaming*."

Buck grabs the pistol off his desk. "Are you certain?"

"And *gunfire!*" Arm steps back as Buck rushes for the door, shouting over his shoulder.

"Coming, Arm?"

"No, Buck. You've got this one."



Theo enters the school and realizes everything is off. Way off.

I don't know this place. These halls and walls. Strange sounds. Peculiar odors. How the doors open and close. Where the teachers drink their coffee...

He stops to gain his bearings as a long empty floor unfurls before him like a runway.

I had weeks to plan for this morning. Think about it. Dream about it. Visualize every step along the way...

He turns back and finds Neal staring through the window, urging him on.

Shit. I did everything right today. Nailed Metzler, Esposito, his bitch girlfriend, though she'll probably live. Got away with it, only to get caught, out of nowhere, by these two...

Theo hugs the wall, rifle to his chest, inching forward.

They didn't even ask me why I did it? Everyone always wants to know why...

He notices a door opening midway down the hall. Freezes in place. A fragile-looking girl with long brown hair in a light pink dress emerges, followed by three little friends.

They're so small...

Theo looks back and this time the window is vacant.

I could run. Dump the gun. Keep on going...

“What’s happening?”

“Nothing yet,” Neal responds, crouching back down next to Red. “Soon it will start.”

“What will start?”

“Change, brother. The change we’ve been waiting for.”

“You mean keeping our children safe?”

“Sure,” Neal says. “Keeping them safe while gaining millions of new patriots. Teachers, my friend. Think about it. Preschools, kindergartens, grade schools, middle schools, high schools, community colleges, universities, graduate schools. All across the country. Not only teachers, but deans and principals, plus administrators, sports coaches, bus drivers, school nurses, crossing guards, even those lunch ladies with the hairnets who run the cafeteria.”

“I love those ladies,” Red grins crookedly, comprehension dawning.

“Who doesn’t?” Neal says, rising again. “Soon, with our efforts, they’ll all be armed. Mandatorily. We’re in a war, a war to keep our weapons, and these are the new foot soldiers.”

Buck lurches into an empty hallway, straining to hear gunshots.

Maybe the next corridor over?

Starts running, loaded pistol like a relay baton.

Was that a cry? A scream? Kids laughing?

Lumbers on, adrenaline spiking his brain.

Should I alert others? Call the police?

Theo raises the rifle to his shoulder.

Nice and easy.

Peers through the hunting scope.

Same as this morning.

Sees the fragile girl balloon in front of him.

Sitting ducks on Gregory’s pond.

Buck’s flying now, Glock extended like a torch.

No time to make calls.

Rounds the corner, children everywhere.

I should stop, drop, and shout.

But he doesn’t, spotting the big kid in the mask.

The big kid pointing a rifle!

Theo keeps his eye trained on the girl.

Picture her body sailing backward.

Takes aim through the scope.

Red spray painting the wall behind her.

Fingers the trigger.

I can’t do it.

Theo releases his hand and hears a loud *crack*. Watches the little girl's body careen forward, blood decorating the space between them.

Crack.

Now he's falling.

Crack. Crack.

The runway swooping up beneath him at a mad angle, a carnival ride, that stupid exercise he was forced to do (and much worse) when his stepfather, Gregory, sent him away to summer camp. The one where you fall back, knees locked, arms over your chest, trusting everyone will catch you. But they don't. Not then—*they conspire against you, even the girls, make you look like a jerk, Zirk the Jerk*—and not now, the floor racing skyward to meet the ceiling.

No one is there to catch him again.

Theo lands on his side in a pool of blood. *My blood.*

Hears Neal's voice in his head. *I trust you, Theo. We have a deal.*

Struggles to aim at the large blurry man hurtling down the hall, firing a pistol.

Crack. Crack.

Theo pulls the trigger again and again, but nothing happens.

Crack. Crack.

The large man drawing closer and closer.

Crack. Crack.

Children screaming and falling.

Crack. Crack.

As Buck keeps blasting away.

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“Are we good?” Red asks.

Neal cups his eyes to get a better view through the window. “Oh, yeah, we're good.”

“Those children, did *he* shoot them?”

“Who? Theo? God, no.” Neal turns from the door. “I jammed his gun, made sure it would fail to feed. If anyone got shot, that came from the other guy, Shively, the teacher.”

Red looks confused. “Won’t they find out? Blame him?”

“Blame *who*? The teacher? The one who just exterminated a deranged school shooter? They’ll make him a goddamn hero, that’s what they’ll do! Come on, let’s go.”

“Where now?” asks Red, scurrying after Neal, away from the school.

“Where else, my friend? To make more heroes.”

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Kirk Wolcott, retired diplomat and former sportswriter, is the author of the international thriller A Simple Game.

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