

JOHN

Written by, David Green

(First draft.)

If you enjoy this, please let me know.

krodatem@gmail.com

Hello, my name is John.

This isn't my real name, of course. The real one is stitched into documents and staff directories and a handful of birthday cards I never threw away, and I'm not giving you that. You don't need it. You don't need the name of the little town I call home either. I won't hand you a map you can press pins into.

If you are reading this, there is a chance you have stood beside someone like me in the grocery store. You may have handed your child to a teacher who smiled the way I know I smile, with the soft creases that make other people relax. That's the part that matters to me: the ordinariness, the way it shelters things people don't want to imagine living next door.

I am not writing this to frighten you. I'm writing because I have spent years pretending that my silence was a kind of mercy, and I think I have finally understood it was mostly cowardice in disguise.

This story exists because I need to put boundaries around my own memory. After all, memory leaks. It runs into dreams, into conversations, into the pauses between sentences. I've tried to dam it with work, with routine, with the rituals of a profession that rewards predictability, but something in me kept eroding the walls.

The compulsion did not shout; it whispered. It was the quietest thing in my life, and that quietness is what let it grow.

Maybe you are wondering why I would bother to write any of this if I'm not going to offer names or places or the satisfying clarity people expect from confessions. The reason is simple enough: I'm not seeking absolution, and I'm not here to be hunted. I'm here to be understood, at least in the thin, limited way a reader understands a narrator.

If you imagine me living anywhere, that's fine. Let me be the man who waves to you while taking out the trash, or the one who grades essays in his car before going inside, or the one who buys the same brand of cereal every week. Let me be that, because that is who I was. The point is not where I live, but only that it is a place as unremarkable as yours.

I chose the name John because it is the kind of name that disappears in a room. You can project onto it any face you like. You can place it on any street. It's a name that does not tell you whether the person behind it is tall or short, polite or sullen, capable or

forgettable. It gives you nothing except a silhouette, and silhouettes are the truest version of me. The rest of me has always been layered in shadows I cast on myself.

I don't know how long this record will be. I don't know what shape it will take once I start cutting into the past. I only know that I've reached the point where the silence feels heavier than the truth, and I am tired of carrying things in the dark.

So I will write, and you will read, and neither of us will ever know whether we passed each other once in a hallway or a parking lot. That uncertainty is the only part of this that feels honest.

vvVvv

I wake before the alarm most mornings. It isn't discipline. It's habit, the kind that fits itself into your muscles long after intention has drained out.

The room is the color of early light, that faint gray that makes everything look gentler than it is. I lie there for a moment, listening to the heater tick in the corner. Then I stand, stretch my back until the joints hum, and then pad to the bathroom.

The shower is always too hot at first, then too cold, then something like acceptable. I watch the steam cloud the mirror and try to imagine what version of me will be reflected when it clears. I never get an answer I trust.

I soap, rinse, turn off the water, step out onto the same frayed bathmat I keep meaning to replace. There is no drama in any of this.

I move through the routine by memory: stove knob, skillet, the packet wrapped in butcher paper that has thawed in the refrigerator overnight. I cut off two slices of meat and set them in the pan.

The meat sizzles and for anyone else the sound would mean only breakfast. For me it looms like a small, precise memory. I know how odd that sounds. I know how obscene it must feel to say, but I will say it plainly.

That packet in the fridge, the one wrapped in butcher paper, contained meat that had once belonged to a man. I don't dress that sentence with metaphors or hedge my meaning. It was human flesh, and it was on my plate, and I ate it that way because

eating is how I kept the world from fraying. The smell was not theatrical; it was ordinary, the same savory note that had been part of my life for months now.

When I bite into the meat, the memory comes back, not as a film but as a single, sharp coordinate. It is the man's small, human things: the pair of cheap gloves he had in his back pocket, the scar at the corner of his eye, his half-formed sentence about being late for a shift. I don't linger on the mechanics. My mind refuses that intimacy.

Instead I return to the point where recognition blooms: the way his face shifted when he realized I was not someone who would walk away. There was a beat, the sort that holds the whole world for an instant, and in that beat the ordinary rearranged itself into something final. I think his name was Charles?

Later that night, I disassembled his body, packed various cuts of meat into butcher paper, and burned the rest in an incinerator. The bones, the gut, the rest that other killers might enjoy using for various reasons, were only liabilities to me.

I eat slowly. I am not trembling, not exultant. I am methodical in the ways that do not require a bone saw. I chew, I swallow, I clean. I wash the skillet, fold the butcher paper, and put the scraps in a sealed bag. I have never thought of those actions as ritual; they are simply the closing of a small, private account. To myself I call it housekeeping. To anyone who knew me, it would look like nothing at all.

People assume this is the moment where I must feel something. A revulsion, thrill, guilt. I don't. The truth is simpler. For me this is breakfast. It has been for years. The meat is familiar, dependable, part of a pattern I don't question in the quiet of morning. If you were here, you'd see a man making an ordinary meal, nothing more. I chew slowly, the way my doctor told me to years ago, and wipe my mouth on a cloth napkin that once belonged to my mother.

When I'm done, I wash the plate, dry it, put it back in the cabinet. I rinse the pan and leave it to air dry. Then I grab my bag which holds papers to grade, lesson plans I barely had time to revise, a paperback with a cracked spine. Then, I step outside.

The air is crisp. My neighbor, a man who wears the same fleece jacket every season, is out sweeping his walkway. He looks up, nods, says good morning in the tone of someone who has said it a thousand times and expects it said back. I give him a wave, the friendly kind, the kind people trust. The woman across the street is loading her toddler into a car seat. She glances at me and smiles.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to kill these people, but I wouldn't. I've evaded capture all this time by knowing not to shit where I eat.

I unlock my car, slide in, adjust the mirror. In the reflection I look like anyone about to begin a normal day: a teacher thinking about attendance sheets and the broken projector in room 214. I back out of the driveway carefully, as if the whole world is fragile and I have promised not to disturb it.

The school is fifteen minutes away. I signal at every turn. I stop fully at every stop sign. My hands rest lightly on the wheel. If you passed me on the road, you wouldn't notice me. That is the truth I am trying to give you. Not a confession, not a warning. I am just a mirror tilted at the angle where ordinary life and unthinkable things exist, close enough that you can't tell where one ends and the other begins.

vvVvv

I park in the same spot every morning, the one near the back where the pavement splits like old clay. The sun is just high enough to draw thin metallic lines across the bike rack, and a few students drift toward the entrance with that half-awake shuffle teenagers have. I step out of the car, sling my bag over my shoulder.

"Morning, Mr. J!" a girl shouts across the lot. One of my sophomores, bright and eager, the kind who color-codes her notes and apologizes when she sneezes too loudly.

I raise a hand. "Morning. Big test today. Keep your eyes open." She groans, laughs, and keeps moving. I can almost predict the way she'll flop into her seat later, dramatic in the way that only fifteen can be.

Inside, the building smells faintly of floor polish and pencil shavings. My shoes catch on the waxed floor for a moment. Mrs. Holland at the front desk gives me the kind of smile people save for dependable friends.

“You’re early today,” she says.

“Was awake anyway. Thought I’d beat the copier stampede.”

She laughs, and the sound tucks itself neatly into my morning, one more familiar piece of routine.

Down the hall I hear other teachers getting ready. Mr. Ellis emerges from his classroom with papers spilling out of a folder. He claps me on the shoulder.

“We’re organizing another bake sale for the robotics club. Think you can help?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I say. And I mean it. People expect me to say yes, and I like the way their faces loosen when I do.

Near my room a group of juniors wait for me even though the door isn’t locked. They straighten when they see me.

“We saved you a muffin from the fundraiser,” one of them says.

“You’re going to ruin me with kindness,” I tell them, taking it. They grin like they’ve pulled off something heroic.

I open the door and let them drift in. The room greets me with the sight of slightly crooked posters, forgotten fidget toys, ungraded papers, a plant that should have died but refuses to. Every inch feels like a map I’ve walked a thousand times.

If someone watched me from the doorway, they’d see the teacher everyone calls their favorite. The one who stays late to decorate for dances, who volunteers for anything that needs a warm body and a smile. Faculty lean on me too. I’ve listened to colleagues cry over crumbling marriages and impossible students, holding their sorrow as gently as I hold their coffee cups.

And none of it is false. It’s just the part people prefer to focus on.

I set my bag behind my desk, take in the soft chatter of students settling into their seats, and feel the room slide around me like a familiar coat. This life fits. It always has. What they see is a good man, a helpful man, a safe man. And I don’t correct them. It’s the easiest truth in the world to let them believe.