

Noose Therapy

by Mark Wilhelm

Neil did a really terrible thing—something so terrible that he still wasn't over it eighteen years later. We met in guilt management class. The class moderator didn't make us say what we were guilty about, but Neil told me his story privately after we'd gotten to know each other a little bit.

He was twenty-four when it happened. He was driving through the suburbs in mid-afternoon. His girlfriend was giving him a blowjob; his driving was suffering because of this. There were people walking along the side of the street. A toddler stumbled off the sidewalk and out in front of his car, and her mother dashed out to save her. Neil didn't see them. He hit and killed them both.

He found out later the woman's name was Susan Dirth and her young daughter's name was Clara. Susan's husband pressed charges. Neil was convicted of criminally negligent manslaughter and sentenced to six years in state prison. He served the full term of his sentence.

But that's not the worst part. He told me that when he hit them, the impact thrust him up out of his seat and rammed the tip of his dick against the back of his girlfriend's throat. This, in turn, made him come. He also said that when he hit them, he instantly knew he'd hit something, probably a person, and this snap realization must have made his adrenaline spike, because for a long time afterward he couldn't shake the feeling that was the best orgasm he'd ever had in his life. He said for the longest time he couldn't help occasionally thinking how lucky it had been that he'd hit those people exactly when he did.

I don't know if all that is really true, but he swears to Jesus he's never accepted a blowjob since.

I didn't really know what to say the first time he told me the story. A few days later, though, I told him the only thing I still couldn't figure out was why the dumb bitch hadn't kept a closer

eye on her toddler.

Neil said he'd thought about that a lot, too, especially when he was still in prison. He said he'd since realized that's a really fucked up way to think, though. He said that way of thinking is more fucked up than coming at the exact moment you kill two people. I didn't know what to say to that.

He told me he still thought about Susan and Clara Dirth every day. He said he wished every day he'd pushed Ashley aside when she'd gone down on him, told her he was driving and needed to concentrate, and there'd be plenty of time for blowjobs later. He wished at the very least he'd been watching the road instead of the back of Ashley's head. He knew what a blowjob looked like; why did he need to watch? But he said none of those thoughts were as bad as the dreams he often had. He said he'd have recurring dreams about murdering someone while receiving a blowjob. The crime varied from dream to dream. Sometimes he ran over someone, sometimes he shot them, sometimes he stabbed them to death, and once he jammed them into an industrial garbage compactor and turned it on. The identity of the felatrix also varied. Sometimes it was Ashley, other times it was a stranger, still other times it was Susan Dirth, and sometimes—he had a very hard time telling me this last one—sometimes it was a grown-up version of Clara Dirth. The worst part was that he always woke up with wet underwear.

He assured me he still had those dreams. He always woke up feeling very numb and very tired. He didn't know what to do. That's why he started attending guilt management class.

Of course, I did something terrible, too; that's why I was in the class with Neil. I think I raped a girl. I say I think because I'm not really sure if it was technically rape or not. It was when I was in eleventh grade. I was at a party. Carol Phelps got really trashed, totally wasted. She was a senior. She started hitting on me for some reason, practically throwing herself at me. I wasn't drunk, but she said she wanted to fuck me, so I said ok.

There were upstairs bedrooms in the house reserved for such occasions, so we went up. She was talking really filthy, talking all about how much she wanted my dick inside her. So I put it inside her. After a little while, though, she passed out; she was smashed out of her mind. I didn't know exactly what I should do, so I just kept going. She would wake up periodically, confused and vaguely annoyed. She would ask who the hell I was and she would tell me to get off of her, but then she'd pass out again. She was still passing in and out of consciousness when I finished. Then I left. I don't think I ever spoke to her again. I'm almost positive she never knew what happened. She never gave me a second glance in school.

I always thought what I did seemed kind of trivial compared to what Neil did. That was the feeling I got, anyway, but I could never really decide for sure. On the one hand, I hadn't killed anyone, and I hadn't even done anything that had serious negative consequences: I wore a rubber, and besides, she didn't even know the difference. But on the other hand, what Neil did was an accident. He didn't mean to kill those people. Whereas I knew exactly what I was doing, and I kept doing it anyway. And what I did was definitely wrong, just as wrong as accidentally killing two people. But I could never really convince myself one way or the other, and I still can't.

Years ago, I used to ask myself over and over why that stupid whore had gotten so wasted and seduced me. She should've known to be more responsible about how much she drank. Besides, I wouldn't have done anything if she hadn't seduced me. But talking with Neil helped me sort out those thoughts: after a while I realized that way of thinking is more fucked up than coming inside someone who's drunk senseless and passing in and out of consciousness. But then, to console myself, I thought I probably didn't actually do anything so terrible or unheard of: that sort of thing probably happens a lot more often than you would ever think. I couldn't decide whether to be comforted or seriously disturbed by that thought.

So we went to guilt management class. We met every Tuesday at eight. That went on for about four months. Neil and I got to know each other pretty well. We got together and talked about our guilt, what we were going through that week. I always thought Neil handled his very well. He hardly showed it, anyway. I showed it. I always looked miserable. Everyone always told me I looked miserable. Neil just looked very calm, very sober, but also very tired.

One Sunday afternoon, Neil tried to hang himself in his one-bed one-bath apartment. I guess his next door neighbor heard some sort of commotion through the paper-thin walls—maybe the chair falling over or Neil making some gasping and choking sounds—because she found him shortly after he lost consciousness. She was old and weak, so she called for help and someone came and cut him down within a minute or two. They called an ambulance and he went to the hospital, and the poor bastard ended up living. They managed to resuscitate him, but not before he'd suffered brain damage. He had permanent memory loss—post-traumatic retrograde amnesia was the term they used. It took them a while to figure out exactly how much he'd forgotten. He couldn't remember much from when he was nineteen until he was about thirty-five. There were chunks in there he remembered alright—like his trip to England when he was twenty-seven—and he was missing some chunks outside of that period, too, like his elementary school graduation. He'd also forgotten most of a week or so of time leading up to his suicide attempt. But the majority of his memory loss was in that seventeen-year period. But here's the kicker: I went to see Neil at the hospital as soon as he was well enough for visitors—he remembered me just fine since he was forty-two when we met, though probably he'd lost some very recent memory of me—and I swear to God he looked happier than I'd ever seen him. He didn't look tired anymore, despite his near-death experience. He wasn't sober like he'd always been before. He looked invigorated in some way. He looked fresh, ready to restart life.

He looked fresh, ready to restart life. It took me a little while to figure it out: he didn't remember a damn thing about the accident. His guilt was completely gone.

I didn't bring it up for a few days. They kept him in the hospital, keeping tabs on him, running tests. After a few days I asked him how he was handling the memory loss. He said it troubled him, of course, but he was getting used to the idea of it. He felt that in time he could accept the fact that he couldn't remember large chunks of his life. At least he still knew who he was and who his family was. He said he felt blessed for that. I asked if he remembered the accident he'd been in when he was twenty-four. He said he knew about it, but he didn't actually remember it—his sister Jane had been visiting him frequently and doing her best to fill in what he'd forgotten. I asked him how he felt about it. He said it was terrible—a terrible, horrible tragedy. And he said he hated to think he could have been so stupid, so reckless. But he admitted he didn't feel guilty about it. He speculated that because he couldn't actually remember the accident, he couldn't feel the guilt he'd held onto for eighteen years. There was a variable missing from the equation. The accident became abstracted for him, distant—and you can't feel guilty about something you can't connect to yourself.

I must admit I secretly hoped Neil would retain his guilt. It didn't seem fair. He got a free pass—a free pass that of course didn't come nearly as free as it seemed to me. But he was finally free of the guilt that had been crippling him for almost twenty years. He'd taken a shortcut, skipped all the bitter hard work of resolution and gradual acceptance. He didn't have to learn to live with what he'd done. He'd simply forgotten it. But I'm still stuck with all that bullshit.

I try to persuade myself that maybe Neil's easy out isn't as heavenly as it seems. After all, working through guilt and learning to accept yourself makes you a stronger, healthier person, doesn't it? Don't you improve yourself by facing your shortcomings head-on?

People always say things like that, especially when they're trying to comfort you. Maybe Neil is missing out on something—maybe now he won't become the better person he would've become if he'd worked through his guilt the traditional way. Maybe he's cheated himself out of real growth as a person. But then I think about how peaceful he looks. I can see, physically see how much he's been helped by just forgetting it all. I wonder if he's been this happy in eighteen years.

I'm still in guilt management class. I'm sticking with the therapy—for now, anyway. But sometimes, I remember how Carol Phelps looked at me whenever she regained consciousness—that distant, confused, annoyed look—and how I just kept pumping her through it all, and I distract myself by looking up online guides on how to tie a slip knot.