

A SERIES OF ONE-SIDED CONVERSATIONS

by Greg Stolze

PART ONE: NORMAN'S SUSPICIONS

What do you do when your prick brother-in-law kills your sister, and you know it, and you can't prove it? That's not a rhetorical question, Donald. I'm really asking.

I'm sorry if I'm laying a big heavy trip on you right up front, but I was given to understand that you're, um, a serious customer. A guy who's seen things, done things. Good with electronics and not too hung up on laws and regulations.

Yeah? "Go to the cops?" I'm sorry, if that's the best you can do for me, you're friggin' useless. I mean, don't feel bad, lots of people are useless. I'm pretty useless. Even before the accident, really. But Bruce (that's the brother-in-law) is rich as balls. Parents built this giant baked-goods factory, or were early investors or something, or maybe his grandparents did it. Doesn't matter, except that it means he grew up soaked in money. It doesn't matter, except he got everything he wanted and every fifth person in high school had parents who worked for *his* parents. So he never got bullied (even though he had a stutter) and he got a shiny new T-Bird for his 18th birthday, and he dated the prom queen, Cissy Hennings.

He didn't marry her though. She was pretty, but stuck up and her family didn't have to work for his. *Entitled*, that's the word you could use. She went off to a nice college, and so did he, and when he came back he married my older sister, Crystal. And he killed her.

Our town's small, and a lot of the cops are guys who didn't go away to a nice college, some were on the football team with Bruce. (You'd expect him to be quarterback, but he actually played defensive end.) The rest have spouses or parents or kids who work at the goddamn baked-goods factory.

I mean, I suppose if he'd done it on the library lawn in front of the mayor and everyone, he'd be busted. Society can only put up with so much, even from a *job creator*. But he did it in secret, out on the water.

Maybe the FBI could have proved something, if Bruce or his family had raised a stink. But he said it was an accident, and when her body washed up there was no inquest, just a quick cremation and he cried at the funeral. After the burial,

he gave me a big ol' hug, which is awkward in my wheelchair, and also awkward since I never hugged him since his wedding, and *triple* awkward because I knew he thought I was friggin' useless and kind of a weirdo besides.

Bruce was not a big weeper. When he hugged me, I smelled menthol. Not like cigarettes, but like that stuff you put on your chest when you're sick. Or that you put under your eyes when you need to fake-cry.

I don't know why Bruce killed Crystal. Maybe just because he could? She was still a good-enough trophy wife for (let's face it) a jumped-up 1% baker, even if she wasn't as hot as when he married her.

That's the difference between Crystal and Cissy, according to my asshole friends. Cissy was pretty and Crystal was hot. Never mind that she was also kind, and polite, and a good listener and she knew how to *tell a joke*, honestly, her timing was *killer*. But so was her body, I guess, and that's what guys noticed.

(Yes, I have to guess. I can't see my sister as a hot piece of ass, sorry, not even hypothetically as a mental exercise. She was the older sister who picked on me just enough to let me know I was nothing special, and then turned me on to all her cool music to let me know that, actually, I was kinda special. When I got in my first big trouble, when I was seventeen and she was twenty, she stuck by me when even mom and dad were treating me like garbage. When I imagine her, half the time I still see her how she looked at fifteen with braces when she said "Dad rock is where it's at, kiddo. I'm going to put on Led Zeppelin now. I think you're ready." Too much of the rest of the time, I picture her bloated and drowned at thirty-four.)

Well. If you accept at face value that Bruce killed Crystal and that the cops aren't going to do anything (because he's rich and they're not super competent and anyhow, ever since my first big trouble they've regarded me as "That asshole who did all the Satanism in the graveyard"), what next? You might suggest I kill him myself.

I've thought about it, but it's not easy. Overpowering him is clearly out of the question. He's gained weight and lost wind, and I can stand up and walk a few steps, sure. But he still plays touch football with his butthole nephews on weekends, and I can only stay up just about long enough to reach something down from a high shelf in the liquor store—long enough to get snide comments from people who think that walking's like a light switch, and that if you can walk *some* of the time, you don't need the chair *most* of the time.

(I've been in the chair since my second big trouble, which involved high speeds and a semi-truck with Bruce's family bakery logo on the side.)

Anyhow. I could hide a gun in the chair, see him, go bang. I'm not a great shot, and I think he might be a little leery of me, but that would be an option, for sure. If I wanted to trade my life for his.

Which is the rub, now ain't it? Cold-blooded revenge, but no one's going to care when they look at my record, and my laughable evidence. They'd lock me up tight—it's not like I could carry off a grand-ass getaway when I need to get Dave or Pete to drive me somewhere. I'd have to lure him out somewhere or ambush him and... he just is not real ambushable.

Plus, and this shames me so shut up in advance... he scares me. I don't know if, way down inside, I've got the killer instinct. But Bruce does. He's gotten away with it once. If he knows I suspect (or suspects that I know), inviting him to go off to a secluded (but wheelchair accessible!) location away from witnesses and bystanders might play right into his hands. He might kill me too, and claim self-defense. Thanks to big trouble #1 and him being rich as balls, people would probably buy it, or buy it *enough*.

Yeah, no shit. It's a 'pickle.' That's exactly the word, Donald. But I have a plan. I'm going to get myself unpickled. How? That's where you come in. You and your computer stuff.

PART TWO: MANDY'S GOOD JOB

It's a good job, Gina. Not perfect, of course. What would that be, anyhow? Lounging poolside and eating chocolate-covered cherries all day? I bet you'd get tired of chocolate-covered cherries after the first week. Plus, I sunburn. You remember, don't you? How burned I got when we were at boot camp?

Well.

You might not believe me, but murder for hire has a lot to recommend it. The pay has been very satisfactory. So far, at least. Anonymous internet makes it fairly easy to get work without a lot of, like... *exposure*?

Getting caught? I honestly don't worry about it. Gina, I *don't*! Go to google and see how long it takes you to find a case where a woman was paid to kill somebody, and got caught, and was convicted. Honestly, all you hear about are the women trying to *hire* assassins. The supply side is secure, if you're picky and smart. I'm way more concerned with getting arrested trying to launder the money.

So far I have a straw job at a friend's fishing tackle store. I give him cash, he pays it to me in salary with proceeds from the business, then he takes the currency to buy drugs and hire dudes under the table to fix up his house.

Yes, it's Neal. You remember him too? From Kaneohe base? He's OK. I wouldn't let him in on this job though. I mean, for one, you remember what a blabbermouth he is. And also, he just *looks* like a killer. Well, doesn't he? Barb-wire tattoos and that scowl? The cops would suspect him, like, instantly.

The hard part is... well, getting started was tricky, but you have me to set you up for that. No, the hard part is pulling the trigger.

I mean, if you can't, that's cool. I won't stop liking you or respect you any less, I just thought... I don't know why, I just feel like you could go through with it. Some people can. I can. I guess I always knew I could. When I was a kid? OK, I shouldn't tell you this, but I killed the neighbor's dog.

Well it was a *pest* is why, they let it poop everywhere. Also, it was a leg-humper? Scared the *heck* out of my little sister, so one day after school I looped some line around its neck and hung it from a tree in their backyard.

Sad? Not particularly. If they wanted their dog to be safe, they shouldn't have let it run around loose. If I was going to do it now, I'd make it look like a car-hit. Then, of course, I was too young to drive.

One writer, this guy Grossman? I'm pretty sure that's his name. He's a sociologist or an anthropologist or something like that. He reckons that about 3% of people just don't have a "no killing people" valve in their brain. Like being colorblind or, I dunno, born albino? Some frontal lobe thing and, fine, shooting a guy feels OK.

I bet that's why a lot of hit *men* get caught. You know what they're like. I bet a lot of guys would do it for free if they weren't smart enough to get paid. But I see it as a paycheck. Honest.

Look Gina, I see you have reservations and I'm not surprised. Let me tell you about my first job, OK?

PART THREE: BRUCE GOES TO CHURCH

Bless me father, for I have s-sinned.

Last confession? Actually, this is my first. I am not Catholic. Not anything, really. I went to church on Sundays because my family always did, but it was in one ear and out the other. Sorry. We didn't even get any good hellfire and brimstone preaching, just...

Hm, I can not remember a single sermon. It may explain some things.

I suppose I'm here because I've seen it in movies. Confession is reputed to be good for the soul. I don't believe we have souls. At least, I don't believe I have one. I simply don't feel anything inside where all that elevating soul inspiration belongs.

Beg pardon? Oh, no, father, I understand that you must be eager for, for seekers who c-come in hoping to be 'saved.' I can only assure you this is not about that. I imagine it would be a f-feather in your cassock, but let's just leave that be, please. I am not here to be forgiven, or to discover Jesus.

I just have to tell somebody.

Ahem. Right.

I... am responsible for my wife's death. I am. I am r-responsible for the death of my wife.

No, I really am, father. This isn't s-survivor guilt or neurosis or any bullshit psychological hangup. Sorry, I didn't mean to swear. My m-m-mother was very strict about that. I expected to be tense, but I don't like to lose my temper.

P-please, let me take a deep breath.

Thank you.

Thanks, but I don't need a tissue. I'm not a big weeper.

Well, I say it because it is *true*, my wife's death is my fault. Because... because I killed her.

Yes, I really did!

You're not g-going to *believe* me? Holy f... ahem. Look p-p-pastor, I don't really care if you believe me or not. I k-killed her! I dragged her out of b-b-bed and

stuck her head underwater and held it there until... no, you know what, I don't have to tell you details.

I don't have to t-tell you *shit*.

I don't even know why I came here! C-confession isn't a relief, it's just wallowing in stupid, p-pointless emotions! I'll leave it to you and your, the, to the stupid cretins who follow you!

Don't try to follow me, either! You think I didn't p-pick the slowest, oldest, most f-feeble priest with a walker I could find? You're pathetic. F-f-fuck you, father.

I hope I burn in Hell if it means I don't see you in the afterlife.

PART FOUR: NORMAN EXPLAINS

Look Donald, I had a couple classes on TCP/IP stuff before I dropped out, but what I really need is some secure communications if I'm going to blackmail Bruce.

Well yeah, *of course* that's what this is about. I mentioned he was rich, right? That's kind of the core of the whole problem. That and... you know, what he did.

How do I know? Well I don't *know*, at 100%. It's like... 99%. 98% at the very least. But before I go to jail forever, which has to suck even more for a convict with a wrecked spine, I'd like to be absolutely totally sure.

I toldja about his stammer, right? It was funny. Strange I mean, not like you'd laugh. Most of the time, he didn't have it. He was actually kind of smooth. But if he was upset, he'd get kind of red and then he suddenly sounded like a snare drum solo. I saw it in high school, there was one teacher who *hated* him and would call him out, bawl him out, just to make him go off. Hm, I kinda wonder what happened to that old bastard. Wonder if he knew something we didn't...

But so, here's the point. He didn't drop a single *sound* when he told us about her dying. About waking up and finding that she'd fallen overboard in the night. Finding her fucking slipper on the deck, all this bullshit... his face was the same nice golf-asshole tan, voice just flowing along like some, some kinda, fuckin'... *brook*. Tears just when you'd expect, menthol-scented and on cue.

And after I had a few, when were alone, I said to him, "It was your fault, wasn't it?"

I guess I'd guessed? I dunno. I just faced him. Shot in the dark. And you know what he said?

"I di-dih-dih-didn't!" Face red as a cooked lobster.

That's when I knew. Well... almost knew. You can see, I'm sure, why I can't go to the cops. And why I'd like to have some proof that isn't just... y'know...

Right, so deniable.

So that's why I figure blackmail. If I blackmail him and he pays, I know he did it. Because who'd pay blackmail over a murder they didn't even do?

I bet Bruce is good for at least fifty grand. Five of that could be yours just for deniable tech shit you can do from a laptop. C'mon. I wish I could give you cash up front, I really wish that, but I'm flat—Bruce ain't exactly generous with his dead wife's relatives, especially since I all but accused him.

No, I don't have the money!

Prescriptions? What does that have to do with...?

Oh. Yeah, I get it Donald. I do have an oxycontin script.

So I guess we're in business after all.

PART FIVE: BRUCE ENQUIRES

Lovely shot there Dinah. I always slice this hole. Clearly your new clubs were worth it.

So Dinah... I was curious, if I could bend your ear about something. Not exactly legal advice, no, though... well, you'll understand. It's just something I'm wondering.

Thanks so much. I knew I wouldn't regret putting you up for membership, heh.

So hypothetically, how would you deal with a blackmailer? As a lawyer, I mean. Would you make a police report? It's a crime, certainly, but—just between you and me—I'm not sure the local PD has what you'd call a first-rate financial crimes unit. Heh. Probably just Ray Girardi with a calculator.

Oh, you and Ray used to date? I guess I'd forgotten that. Time sure flies. Anyhow... if you didn't know who was b-blackmailing you, how would one even

find out? Assume they're calling you from, I don't know, one of those 'burner phones' or from a payphone. I wouldn't know how to trace a line, unless the police were involved. Pay phones are still around, I know. I can come up with at least three ways to get someone an anonymous message. Just off the top of my head.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that you were guilty. I mean, that there's substance to what the blackmailer's claims. Nothing *awful*! Assume I mean something embarrassing but not actionable.

What do you think I'm capable of, Dinah?

Hm?

Why would g-gay sex be the first thing you say? I mean, n-not that there's anything wr-wrong with it, it just...

Ah. I see.

Sure. It's an example of something that's not illegal but for which one could be blackmailed. Very well. Certainly. Something like that, like... cheating on a spouse. Heterosexually. Or g-gay, whichever. Hypothetically.

Hold on for a second, I have to set up this putt. Read the t-terrain. Right.

Shit! I thought for sure that was g-going in.

Oh, nice shot!

So... if a friend of mine did something embarrassing but not *actually* wrong, and it was found out what would...? Really?

Do you think that paying him off would stop him? Or her, depending... But it's... isn't it like bullying, where if you give them what they want, they just keep coming back for more?

OK, good point. Have you ever *dealt* with someone who was being blackmailed?

Just curious, just wondering. I read a mystery novel with that plot. Hm?

Oh, in the book, the fellow figured out it was actually cheaper to just hire someone to get rid of his blackmailer.

PART SIX: MANDY'S FIRST JOB

My first job was to get rid of this blackmailer? Here's how it went down, from A through Z.

First thing was, I put up an ad on the deep web. Hm? Not too hard. My MOS was 0651 you know. The guy who did my on-duty training spent half his time buying weed on Silk Road.

The hard part was coming up with an ad that, like, stressed my Marine credentials without sounding so gear-queer that I'd cringe if it ever got read into a court record. But of course, I didn't get any hits until I punched it up to sound more moto. Totally. All this nonsense about about ninety confirmed kills, blah blah... but this guy bought it. Said he had a guy who needed some Xs on his eyes and that he'd pay \$30,000 for the job, with ten K paid in advance.

Bitcoin? No, not Bitcoin. I'm sorry Gina, Bitcoin is bullshit. I insisted on cash money.

Being an internet assassin is a little like being on OKCupid or something, I guess? First you need to get the attention. Then you need to establish, like, a rapport with the client? *Then* you interact in real reality, and only if that goes smoothly do you seal the deal.

So I got this guy—his login name was “110101,” which I guess is better than your typical internet “DongMeister9000” or whatever—I got noticed because I said I could work anywhere on the Atlantic coast of the US. He sent me a message and said he had work, but he wanted me to prove I was, like, serious? So we went back and forth about what kind of proof I had to provide before he'd give me the first payment. It was a hassle, I won't lie. I'd love to hear your ideas about how to streamline this, because I don't want to rely on 110101 recommending me to his other rich friends with enemies. But what we settled on was, he named this particular tree on the shore, with this big dead branch hanging over the water. And he said that if I blew off that branch at 3:00 AM this one Sunday morning, he'd see it and he'd know I could hit a target and not get arrested doing it. So I scouted the branch, checked around it and Gina, it was *not complicated*. There was this, like, walkway along the shore? So I could just stroll up and check it over. I put a phone together with some fireworks, taped it in place when no one was looking, and dialed it at three from a gas station pay phone. Boom, client's satisfied, sends me coordinates for the money. You ever go geocaching? It was just like that. Easier, even. It was this clapped-out barn off some rural route, he said it was on the outside westernmost corner. Drove by it a few times, hiked out late at night with my face covered and no lights, dug it up and opened it when I got back to the hotel. Ten thousand dollars cash.

Honestly, I thought about just taking the money and driving away.

Anyhow, he told me who the target was and his schedule and all that, and I found a good spot right away. I mean, I don't think the guy was really expecting to get snipered? I clocked him for a couple days. He had a routine.

So, before I shot him? I'd been setting off fireworks in the neighborhood a couple days beforehand, at random times. Just firecrackers, but you see how it works? People hear a loud noise, they just think, "Oh, those damn kids with their Black Cats," not that someone just got popped.

I used my own pickup, but I swapped the plates with this guy in Neal's neighborhood, has a car on blocks way in the tall weeds behind his house. I doubt he noticed when I took 'em, and I doubt he noticed when I put 'em back.

I set up a rest and a beanbag in back, under the camper top. The stick was just a used hunting gun I bought and restored. I've got, like, a golf bag full of 'em, chambered for moose and waiting to be abandoned on-site. I'd been real careful with the rifle, made sure the bore was good and that the sight was accurate. Honestly, the scope cost more than the rifle. I got all nondescript, climbed in back and waited. Little curtains drawn on the camper windows. Aimed through a hole rusted through the tailgate, careful to keep the muzzle from poking out. Saw him coming down the street, sighted center-mass and bam. Hit. Aimed at him some more... and that was hard, because I felt like the clock was ticking, right? Like cops were going to jump out of the weeds *immediately* instead of, you know, having a ten minute response time, if anyone had even called in that this guy just collapsed. But I reloaded, fired again, and he wasn't moving, but I put a third shot in his torso just to be sure. He'd just started to bleed from the first hole, I think, and I was unscrewing the scope. I got out, dropped the gun and the empty casings in some bushes, hopped in the cab and drove away.

Scary? Well sure, I was scared white, but I have prescriptions. Inderal before to keep my hands steady, Ativan after to keep me wired tight. I just wish I could have taken it before, but it blurs my vision a little. Not too much to drive, but... yeah. I did *not* want to wing that guy and leave him screaming.

After, I contacted the client and said I was ready for the rest of the money. And this is another part I'd like you to think over? I mean, like, someone who jobs out an enemy is not normally someone I'd trust for \$20,000. He could have stiffed me, and there wouldn't have been much I could do about it. I'd made noises about finding him if he cheated me, but I don't know how seriously he'd take it. That's the whole point of going through an onion router, doing all the cloak-and-

cyber darknet routine. Though, to be 100% honest, ten thousand for a week of work and a couple grand in equipment costs is not bad.

Well, sure it would be lousy if I *got caught*. The whole point of the price is that we're paid for exposure to risk.

Anyhow, the guy told me to pick a time and place for the money drop? I asked for a phone number, and he didn't initially want to give me one! I know, right? I'd just committed first-degree murder in a death penalty state, and he's being reluctant. I mean, I sent him links to the article about the shooting, since I didn't even know if he was in the same *country*. I guess that badgered him into it. He got me a number. I told him to stay by it for 24 hours with the money ready. He said OK. So after a couple hours, I named an overpass and told him to go there with the cash. Then I waited, and called, and asked if he was at the overpass and he said he'd driven past it but couldn't stop right on it, and I told him to get going eastbound. He said he was, so I told him to go to a McDonald's three stops down and wait. That's where I was? I waited a while, then called, and asked if he was there. He said he was. It was late at night then, and the place had a playground. I told him to go leave the money under the slide, and he did.

I had him scoped the whole time, and honestly, that guy was one cool customer. He didn't even look, like, *furtive*? He honestly seemed exasperated, like, "What is this B.S. and why am I even putting up with it?" Strolled up, tossed it under the slide like it was a bag of trash, not money.

Anyhow, I got the backpack, put it in a farraday cage in case it was lo-jacked, then drove off to this closed-down gas station, where I put on one of those paper painter suits and a hood to open it. I mean, I was *pretty sure* it wasn't a setup with a dye-pack? But you have to be careful, dealing with people in the murder business. It was fine though. Cash money, all fifties.

That was a month ago. I'm actually having trouble *shifting* it. I mean, Neal's promoted me to manager with a big raise, but it's still going to be months before he's gotten that money paid to me clean so I can put it in my straight bank account. That's assuming he wants twenty grand worth of drugs and home repair. Honestly, I'm not sure I trust him with that much meth money. Y'know? That could turn into a spiral pretty quick. So I spent some of it on a few more "friend of a friend" rifle buys, but...

Well, it's a good problem to have, isn't it? More money than you know what to spend it on? Until I can get it put into real estate though, there it is. Unless you've got some ideas on laundering it? Because Gina, this is why I want a partner. Everything went smooth that first time, but looking back I can see a lot of places where the wheels could'a come off.

What do you say? I'm not even suggesting that we... you know, extend what we had going back in the Corps, though if you're open to it, um, whatever... but mostly what I want is someone smart and trustworthy to be in this business with me. Please?

If you want, you don't even have to pull trigger.

PART SEVEN: TRIUMPH

What, you're surprised to see me?

Donald, goddammit just let me into your house, don't make me sit out here while we play cat and mouse. It's unseemly.

Thanks. OK, here we go... You mind grabbing the chair? There's a doohickey in the back, folds it up so you can get it in the... yeah, there y'go.

So I presume you saw the good news in the paper? Yeah. Bam, shot dead in broad daylight, gun abandoned at the scene, cops are 'pursuing leads' but frankly, they haven't even talked to *me* yet and it's hard to deny that I'd be the prime suspect. But, y'know, I was all the way across town at the time, visible in my lil' cripple-mobile there in the Walgreens pharmacy ceiling camera.

What. I'm a cripple, I'm allowed to call myself that. Don't you start though, please.

Anyhow, yeah, I'm real pleased with how it all worked out, mostly. You were great, the dude we got was some kind of super pro. Check it out, I even saw him! Yep, saw the hit man. It was really dark and far away, but... yeah, the guy called up with the whole spooky voice-scrambler robot-voice, told me to get to this McDonald's in middle-nowhere and wanted the cash dropped under the slide. Yeah, because I can run around on a playground, right? But I *finally* talked Pete into running the money over there, poor guy had no idea what was going on, and as he's driving me away I look out the back and see this short little dude dart out of this crappy old truck with a camper top, scamper over to the bag and stick it in this box right away. A no-shit killer for hire! Wild, huh?

My favorite part is that Bruce wound up paying for his own murder. Every time I think of Crystal, that's what I tell myself. He paid, and he paid to pay.

Hm? Oh, 'the heat'? You're feeling it Donald? Well you should be glad you've got half of *my* week's oxy prescription to help you sleep nights then. Feeling the heat, shit, try it in a wheelchair with a back that feels like it's on fire all the time.

Thanks for asking, but I'm here over something else. Turns out, I was in Bruce's will! Or, anyhow, there was some kind of joint trust thing that Crystal talked him into, in the event they both died? It's not a ton of money, but it's a start.

I'm seeing all kinds of potential with that online shit you showed me Donald. You're smart and—since it was kinda your machine that hired the killer—I'm sure I can trust you. I mean, I can trust you right?

I'm sorry you feel that way, man. I guess I could, instead, use the money to go to Columbia or the Dominican Republic and then phone the cops here and tell them who extorted my meds out of me while bragging about hiring a guy to kill my brother-in-law...

Ah, that's what I thought. Cool.

So. How much do you know about Bitcoin?

THE END