

The Exact Truth

by Gary Fincke

Sunday

“You awake?” I heard my younger son’s voice just before the tapping on the bedroom door registered. The clock radio read six-thirty a.m.

“Why so early?” I managed, checking to see if my wife Liz was awake, whether she was preparing, like I was, for bad news on a mid-January Sunday morning.

For nearly five months, my son had been a Food Dude delivery boy and a guitarist in a rock band. The band had an occasional show, but nearly all of his evenings he drove a variety of dinners to customers in houses and apartments within a fifteen-mile radius of the company’s home base, which operated out of a nearby KFC: omelets and muffins from Perkins, roast turkey dinners from a local diner, even steak and shrimp from a high-end restaurant, risking the purchaser’s unhappiness with the quality of a fifteen minute-old steak and baked potato delivered like an upscale Meals-on-Wheels.

“I waited for a while,” Aaron said. “Until it started to get a little bit light out. I’ve been up all night.”

He took one step into the nearly-dark room, stopped, and then he swept the walls with his eyes as if he were memorizing for a recall-the-objects test. “I went out after work. Eleven’s not late. I ate something at Perkins, and I was driving back past the store, and it was full of police. Arlene, the manager, got robbed last night right after I left. She was closing up when I walked out the back door. She was maybe two minutes behind me.”

“Arlene Hart?” my wife said. “And you found this out from the police?”

“Stories spread, Mom. Somebody shot her. Whoever it was didn’t say a word. Just shot her in the head and took the money.”

My wife gripped my arm and squeezed. I shuffled through phrases, finding only obscenities and inadequacies. “Shot in the head and she’s talking?” I finally said.

“Not now. Randy, the KFC owner, sent all of us an email. The doctors put her in a coma on purpose. Whatever she said, she said to the police before she blacked out, but she never saw the shooter.”

“It has to be somebody from somewhere else,” I said.

“Why?” Aaron said at once, and I scrambled for evidence.

“We don’t even lock our doors.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, Dad. Why would anybody lock their house? Thieves don’t try the doorknob.”

It was nearly full light outside by now. For the twelfth day in a row there wasn’t any snow on the ground and no sign of it in the forecast. The three of us went downstairs to watch the early morning news, but Aaron had already reported more than what was revealed. Even at noon, the report hadn’t been updated aside from the station declaring it was withholding the name of the victim and the hospital where she was being treated. “To protect her,” I said. “So the shooter doesn’t finish the job.”

“Well, he’s the only one who doesn’t know where she is then,” Aaron said.

“Could you be in danger?” Liz said. “You were the last person to see her. You might have walked right by whoever it was that was waiting in those bushes back there where you always park. Maybe that somebody thinks you’re remembering something.”

The police would surely interview Aaron, I thought. The shift-schedule was clearly posted on the inside of the employees’ exit door. I’d seen it there when Aaron had taken me into the kitchen in order to introduce Arlene Hart during the first week he’d worked for Food Dude. She would have checked it by habit as she opened the door to leave, reminding herself who was expected to open the KFC Sunday morning.

“I didn’t see anything.”

“The shooter doesn’t know that,” I said.

“Both of us are going to school in the morning. You’ll be by yourself nearly the whole day,” Liz said.

Aaron switched to another channel where, a few moments later, a picture of Arlene Hart was posted to the side of the anchor man. “I’ll lock the doors,” he said, “if that makes you feel better.”

Monday

I walked in the cold between my morning classes. I didn't want to see students, especially the one or two who believed, on the first day of the new semester, that having a class before ten a.m. was a crisis they expected me to mitigate. I ate lunch with the office door closed. By early afternoon, though, I wanted to see a stream of students with drop/add issues, their complaints a distraction.

Arriving home just before five o'clock, when Liz stood quickly to greet me, I felt a flush of heat race through my chest. "They caught the guy," she said.

"Already?" My voice cracked on the edge between fear and relief.

"He told his friends. One of them called the police. His name is Victor Deaver. He's nineteen, the same as Aaron."

Victor is a thug's name, I thought. "So where's this Victor Deaver kid from then?"

"See for yourself. He went to the high school." I noticed the yearbook on the kitchen table. "I don't know if he graduated, but there's his senior picture. He's right there in among all the normal people."

I studied the picture, comparing the hair, eyes, and expression to seventeen other seniors in the class of 1995 pictured on the two facing pages, and I didn't notice one thing threatening about Victor Deaver or any of the others.

I heard Aaron on the stairs. "He was bragging, Dad," he said at once. "He said 'I capped the bitch'."

"He's been watching too many movies," I said, but I looked back at the yearbook, examining the faces of the eleven girls to decide which of them Victor Deaver would cap if she had her back turned and a thousand dollars in her purse.

"'I capped the bitch.' What the hell?"

"You know any of these guys? The ones who turned him in?"

"Sure. You met one a few days ago." I saw Liz glance my way and stiffen. I closed the yearbook as if that would make him disappear. "At the mall," Aaron said at last. "Brent Healey. He rang up our CDs last week."

"That guy talked to you like you hung out with him."

"Hang out is a stretch. I've been places where he's been at the same time."

I imagined Brent Healey turning off the exit alarm and standing with his head turned at the FYE store while Victor Deaver loaded a backpack with CDs and tossed it over the exit scanner to split between them later. To break the spell, I said, “And how about the shooter?”

“Likewise.”

“I’ve never heard either of these names before. How’s that possible?”

“Because we’re not friends. The shooter’s a jackass. He’s a pumping iron dude. Arlene fired him last week.”

In less than two weeks, Aaron was driving to Florida to begin studying music technology. My wife and I would be alone in the house where we’d raised three children, and though the youngest of them was still standing in our kitchen, it felt as if it were possible I might never see any of them again.

Tuesday

The police didn’t contact Aaron. The news broadcasts featured pictures of Victor Deaver and cautious medical reports about Arlene Hart. Downstairs by the television it was cold just after five o’clock because our heating system was calibrated to run on off-peak electricity, meaning it shut off at eight in the morning and didn’t come on until six. On cloudy days, our large, passive solar windows, facing south, didn’t absorb additional heat from the low winter sun. “I’m chilled,” Liz said, gathering the blanket she kept on the basement couch around her and climbing the stairs.

I shivered and told myself it was because I was thinking of Victor Deaver and his swollen biceps starting a mosh pit in front of the stage while my son’s rock band churned out some furious song. When somebody’s elbow hits Deaver in the mouth, he pulls out his gun and caps the fucker.

“Tell me something else about Victor Deaver,” I said. “Be exact.”

Aaron threw his hands up and open, but he didn’t turn and leave. “Okay,” he said. “He was always late.”

“That’s not unusual.” I felt my teeth clenching. I needed Victor Deaver to be transparently evil, but all Aaron seemed to remember about him was he was lazy and angry at being fired.

“How about stealing? Did he take stuff before he got fired?”

“Chicken? Nobody cares about somebody carting off some extra crispy.”

“Somebody might think all those little thefts add up.” I looked out the back window toward where the row of forsythia that bordered the edge of our lot loomed like a thick and tangled hiding place, but Aaron didn’t move. “I used to take change from the drawer where my mother kept it—nickels and dimes.”

“Not much of a thief,” Aaron said from behind me.

“I wouldn’t take any quarters because it seemed like that would make it stealing. That I had self-control. That the amount was so small I wasn’t really a thief at all.”

“Fifteen cents is no different than fifteen dollars, Dad.”

“You sound like my father. I’m just trying to get the details right.” I wanted to tell the exact truth, something without embellishment.

“That’s not the same as knowing the truth,” Aaron said.

“Really, I thought not taking quarters made it okay because nobody would miss it,” I said, but I began to count the times I’d gone back to that drawer, how I’d taken more nickels after a while. More dimes.

I went upstairs. I put on a coat and walked outside. I skirted the forsythia and headed down the hill below the house, crossed the adjoining field, and strode past the foundation of the new intermediate school, trying to decide whether my nervousness would take me between the rows of nearby poplars or back into the street.

I slowed, gnawing at the end of my thumb. I had never been able to bite off fragments of nail like my wife routinely did, but I felt the nail of my index finger begin to tear, and I dropped my hand to my side. I’d been in this field a hundred times, but I felt myself begin to panic. When a car approached on the nearby road, I had to force myself not to duck as its headlights swept past. I thought about being seen, what a man alone in winter’s dark by a construction site would be taken for.

I walked to the soda machine that had stood near the site for months and examined the selections for cold drinks in January. It had to be empty, I thought, but I wished I had coins in my pocket. I put my hand next to the coin slot, then to the button for root beer, and then bent to the tray and reached as if a can had tumbled down. Something skittered from under the machine, and I jerked back a step. I tilted my head

to simulate drinking and watched my breath blow white and disappear. After I counted to ten, I walked toward the house, hearing nothing but my breathing.

“You haven’t seen this yet,” Liz said after I took off my coat, sliding the newspaper across the kitchen table. She was still wrapped in the blanket. There was a picture of Victor Deaver on the first page of the second section.

“He has tattoos,” I said. “What is that—rope?”

“Pythons,” Aaron said. Neither my wife nor I had said a word to Aaron about the tattoo he’d had inked into his shoulder a month ago. “Everybody does tattoos now.”

“No, they don’t.”

“You just can’t see them.”

“There’s a problem with thinking kids who go to local rock shows are a cross section of the world.”

Aaron folded the other sections of the newspaper as if he were going to toss them onto a porch from a moving bicycle. “You’re wrong. I never see anybody like me when I’m playing at a show.”

What I remembered now was that Aaron had told me how, when he and the singer in his band had tried to get into a bar underage, the bouncer had refused them and said to the singer, ‘You look like the kind of kid who takes a gun to school.’

I’d smiled at that profiling in the summer when it didn’t make me see Victor Deaver eyeballing his former boss as she left the KFC. “What did Matt say to that?” I’d asked.

“You look like the guy I’d shoot first.”

Wednesday

For lunch, I drove to the KFC and sat by myself. Within seconds, I felt ashamed, paying for admission with the \$3.89 it cost, in 1996, for a three-piece chicken dinner, original recipe, and the soda to wash it all down.

I ate the skin off three pieces of chicken, savoring the salt and pepper and fat. I drank half my Coke and watched the other customers to see which ones dropped their change into the glass jar labeled: AID FOR ARLENE that sat beside the cash register.

Less than half of them. Even then, I could see, sitting so close, that it was mostly nickels and dimes and pennies. A woman at the table closest to me sorted through her change before she handed pennies and nickels to her two small children to drop into the jar. I dumped my trash into a container and stuffed a five-dollar bill through the slot.

After I left, carrying the half-filled Coke cup, I walked around back to the employee's entrance. I stepped behind the bushes and crouched. It was so tight the junipers scratched my face and neck no matter how I arranged myself.

I was about to leave when the register girl stepped outside to smoke. I hunched down tighter. Caught where no explanation would serve me, I watched her inhale and exhale for five minutes. Somebody just out of high school, I thought, concentrating on keeping still. Somebody who can ring up chicken orders and think sunshine is a bodyguard. As soon as she went back inside, I stepped out, lifted my hand, and flung the Coke cup against the back wall before I hurried, head down, to my car.

Thursday

The next night Liz served a roast turkey dinner. The turkey was small, able to be cooked by seven. Aaron ate huge portions of meat and potatoes. He hacked out another piece of pumpkin pie and lifted it to his mouth with one hand. "I'll miss this when I leave," he said.

"I know how much you like it," Liz said.

"I'm okay, Mom. Really." He brightened. "Arlene can see," he said. "She's opened her eyes and has focus or something close to it even though she's not really awake."

"What?" I said.

"That's what I said when I heard, but that's the story I got from Randy," Aaron said. "Getting shot where she did usually means damage to vision and balance, so she's half way out of trouble."

"Halfway isn't far enough," I said. "She'll be different now."

"She'll be alive, Dad," Aaron said, his voice turning angry. He stood up, but then his shoulders sagged a bit. "I'm going out in a little while, ok? It's my only night off this

week. Randy's filling in for Arlene until he hires somebody new. By then, I'll be in Florida."

"In the middle of the week? Your friends don't work? They don't go to school?"

"I'm going to school, Dad." A distance seemed to have formed between us. "My friends are in college. This party is something to keep me busy."

Two hours later I opened the left-behind yearbooks of my older children and found the pictures of the would-be killer when he was in seventh grade, then sixth, then fifth, reduced, by then, to a skinny boy in a floppy, tie-dyed t-shirt who looked as if he'd be among the crowd Aaron had skateboarded with in middle school, rolling up and back the half-pipe one boy's father had built for his son, believing it would help him become a professional skateboarder.

Friday

I heaved out of a deep sleep for the second time in one week, hearing "Wake up" tunneling through the ear not buried in my pillow.

"Huh?" I squinted at the clock radio: 2:13.

"Don't talk. Just listen," Liz said. "That's what I've been doing. There's somebody outside trying to get in. I heard the knob being tried, and when someone taps on the side door where there's no light, we have a problem."

"Where's Aaron?"

"He's staying over at a friend's house, remember? He didn't want to drive."

"Why would the bad guys knock?"

"To see if the house is empty. To see if they need to work in order to get everything we own."

I heard the front door being tried, the loose knob rattling. "Where are your golf clubs?" she said. "We can't just lay here and take it."

I was starting to agree with her, listening intently enough to believe all of the inanimate things in the dark were whispering their resale value. And just as I sat up, my head snagging in the drapes, a tapping started on the window.

I pulled the drapes back, and Aaron's face was so close, I jerked back instinctively. The face disappeared at once, headed, I was sure, to the front door. "For God's sake," Liz said. "You deal with it unless he says he's hurt."

I opened the door. "I decided to come home with a girl who was designated," Aaron explained. "It was boring with everybody drunk and me not into it, and then the house is locked for once. Plus, Brent Healy was there."

"Who?"

"Brent Healy, the CD guy you met who pulled the plug on Victor Deaver. He wouldn't shut up."

"Who leaves their house key at home?" Liz shouted from the bedroom. "Who wouldn't have it on a key ring?"

"It's ok," I said, stepping into the doorway, and when she didn't say anything, I added another "It's ok" before I shut the door and walked across the living room to draw Aaron farther away from her.

"Jesus, I'm cold," Aaron said. "I didn't take a coat because it's a pain to deal with. It's the middle of the night, so where's the heat?"

"We have the thermostats set low because it hasn't been that cold. Wear some sensible clothes for one more week."

"It's January. It's like twenty degrees out. Jesus, Dad, it was cold like this last Saturday, too. How long do you think Victor hid in those bushes?"

"I don't know. Ten minutes, fifteen--not much more than that."

"It would seem like a long time, wouldn't it? What's the longest you ever hid in one place?"

"A minute?" I guessed at once, thinking of hide-and-go-seek. "I haven't done much hiding. Why would I?"

"It doesn't matter," Aaron said, sounding so suddenly sad I thought I was going to have to relay another story to my wife. "You know what I heard at the party? Somebody stole the jar full of money from the KFC today."

"The one for Arlene?"

"During the dinner rush. Inside their coat or something. What the hell, Dad?"

“There’s no end to it,” I said, and he started drumming on the window with the fingers of one hand, leaning so heavily on the other I listened for the first creak of collapse. He pushed off, his fingers closing into fists. If he unclenched them, I thought, they would tremble, and I looked back outside to keep my eyes off them. “Can you tell that’s a Coke machine from here?” I asked.

“What? Sure,” Aaron said at once. “You don’t have to see every detail to know what it is.” I nodded and laid my cheek against the chilled surface of the window and tried to control my breathing.

“I’ve never even held a gun in my hands,” Aaron said. “Have you?”

I stood up straight and looked at him. “A pistol?” I said. “Once. I was fifteen. A friend of my father showed me how to fire it. I didn’t hit anything but the ground and the sky.”

“How did it feel?”

“I was nervous, but I wanted to act like I was cool with it, so I tried to imagine this kid I hated. I thought I’d like shooting the gun better if I thought I was shooting him instead of trying to hit a few tin cans, but all that did was make me more afraid.”

Aaron pressed his hands against the window, but he didn’t lean his weight into them. “Like if that kid was there he would take the gun away and shoot you?” he said.

“Like I could actually do it. Shoot him and feel good about it.”

“While you were holding it?”

“You’d have to know this kid. He was such an asshole.”

“I guess,” Aaron said, and we went on looking outside for another minute before he offered, “I’m beat,” laying one hand on my shoulder before he turned away and we both retreated to our rooms. My wife had fallen back asleep. I stared through the open window, paying attention, for the first time, to the floodlights the neighbors across the street had on both corners of their house, the reason my wife had installed the heavy drapes, keeping their home-protecting artificial daylight at bay so we could sleep.



Gary Fincke's latest collection of essays, *The Darkness Call*, won the Robert C. Jones Prize for Short Prose (Pleiades Press, 2018). A new essay, "After the Three-Moon Era," has been selected to appear in *Best American Essays 2020*.