

## THE KILLING ROOM

There is, south of Cleveland, an old, sandstone quarry. Hidden from sight, but accessible to anyone who knows it is there, is a shaft that burrows into the abandoned wall of the quarry and ends in a rather spacious, manmade cave. No one remembers why the shaft was dug. Perhaps there was a pocket of green sandstone. However that may be, it was in this cave that the bones were found, and the journal. I will recreate as best I can the events that led to the writing and the death.

1

It appears that thirty years ago, on the last day of August, Saul Kavis spotted Miriam Levine in Higbee's department store. Actually, she was having lunch, high up on the tenth floor in the Pronto Room. She was beautiful, her hair lustrous black, falling in great waves like flowing water, down her back. Her eyes were brown, almost like eyes he had seen when he had chanced upon a mourning dove. Her lips were scarlet and her cheeks like the blush of pomegranates he had seen while traveling with his parents in Israel.

"If I were a christian", he wrote in a diary he kept, "she would be my Beatrice. Thank god I'm not. She will be my prey and I will feast on her before I kill her."

Kavis stalked her for a month and then conceived a plan. "A single woman", he wrote, "should not live alone. But since she wishes that, I will prepare a place for her where she will be alone and no one can disturb her. Yes, I go to prepare a place for her."

Kavis then set up shop at the old Cainite Sandstone Quarry, where, in the belly of darkness, he had found the shaft and then the cave at the end of the shaft. High above the cave, when the daylight came, a fissure provided light.

Kavis then went to work, and with great skill transformed the cave into a room. I have seen it: the wash basin and even the toilet. With great labor he bore a hole into the sandstone and limed it and placed a toilet over it. It was skillfully done. He set up a sink with a barrel over it to hold water. He then bricked the opening of the cave in such a way that he could hang a door. Finally, he hung a great stainless steel door at the opening of the room. It was hung with such skill that even thirty years later it could be opened and closed with the touch of a finger. He set the locks in such a way that only with a key, from the outside, could it be opened. Hung on the wall, outside the door, were the keys; almost as if Kavis had planned that someday his handiwork would be discovered and admired. Morning by morning Kavis labored at the quarry.

In the afternoon he would visit Miriam's house. He noted her preferences and purchased them. Thus, by the great metal door, there was an Amish rocker. (It had made Kavis smile to think an Amish man had labored to enable his plan). Thus, also, a large, canopied bed stood in the back of the cave, flush with the wall. Here, also, was a small book case. Prominent in it was a Bible. Kavis had smiled as he purchased the Bible. Miriam Levine went regularly to Church. Kavis had almost followed her in one Sunday. But he did not want to go, and finally determined (with a great epitaph) to wait outside. If she wanted to listen to "some stupid son of a bitch burble nonsense" she could. It was "no sweat off his back". And he would disabuse her of her notion of God soon enough.

And the Bible? Well, it would prove useless to her. But perhaps it would please her that he had bought it and she would please him under the canopy. There was also a small cherry desk and chair where she would read and write. For her writing Kavis had purchased a fine fountain pen, a bottle of ink, and a journal. When this was over Kavis could read her words of fear and brokenness. That would be better than the sex. Well, maybe. He would be glad to compare. He smiled. He really was a merry fellow. Perhaps when this was over he would socialize more. His smile alone should prove pleasing. Why should he hide it? No. He would share it. He would share his joy.

At night Kavis would stalk her, following her wherever she went; sitting quietly outside her house on the many nights she did not go out. When finally he went home he would fall asleep imagining her beneath the sheets. And, when that thought did not please him enough to put him to sleep, he would imagine her slow, bloody death and, gently sighing, sleep like a baby.

## 2

At last, the room was finished. Tomorrow, when the prey had been secured, tomorrow, when terror had made her pliant, he would bring her water and food. Kavis looked about the room, proud of his labor. Yes, tomorrow he would bring water. But tonight he would teach her of fever: the fever of passion and the fever of fear. How, he wondered, would she describe her first hours, the first of her last hours. Ah, yes, her last hours. There was killing to be done in that room. Killing. And so, he thought, I have named my masterpiece. It is the Killing Room.

Kavis sat in the rocking chair, nibbling on one of the candy bars he always carried, carefully rehearsing the abduction. And then he rose to go. It was not soon enough.

The weather forecast had called for storms, but the great wind that filled the valley that day was beyond expectation, indeed, beyond the wildest dream of anyone. From a distance Miriam Levine watched the dark clouds rush by. She shivered as she did and crossed herself and prayed for anyone caught in that great wind. And then she shivered and praise surprised her and welled up within her. She could not stop it. She threw her hands to the sky and cried glory to the Author of stillness and storms.

And as she did the wind rushed past the quarry shaft, and its great rushing sucked from the shaft the air, and the heavy metal door swung gently and closed and locked. Lost in his dark schemes Saul Kavis looked up and, as if in a dream, watched its closing and locking. He heard in the soft click his own death sentence.

## 3

At the end of the first week, with no food except the remaining candy bars, and only the water he caught in the water barrel from the rain that dripped down the fissure to drink, Saul began to write in the journal. The writing betrayed a skill that was powerful and as crafted as his work on the Killing Room. He told of his plan, his preparation, his misfortune. He railed at God, and, at the same time, denied His existence. He “pissed the Bible” he had bought. The scatology that filled the pages worked. It was crude, defiant, shocking, elegant. Its darkness made me ill. Literally. I vomited all over the journal.

During the second week the darkness lifted. Resignation took its place. He wrote: "I am going to die. I have cursed god and pissed his book. I have beaten my hands to raw meat on the great steel doors. Nevertheless, I am going to die. There is no curse that will free me. There is no strength in my limbs by which I can escape. By my wits I built the trap that has trapped me. And I will die in it."

Later he wrote: "Fear is beating at the edge of my mind. But I will not let it in. I am not afraid to die."

And then he wrote: "It is in. I cannot keep it out. I am afraid. But not of death. What, then, do I have to fear? I will die. So what? Judgment? I would be afraid if there were a god. But there isn't. And, yet, I am afraid."

And then: "The candy is gone. And my water supply depends on the rain. It cannot last forever.

Finally he wrote: "The thought of what I planned no longer gives me joy.

On the first day of the third week Saul took the Bible from the floor and placed it on top of the bookshelf and opened it to dry. On Wednesday of that week he began to read it. It was still damp. But he could not help himself. Fear drove him. He began to read.

He read, that day, Genesis. He wrote: "I do not see the science here. Deep in my mind I hear a voice say 'hardly up to Darwin's standards'. But at the edge of thought there is another voice (It stirs a longing in me. What is that all about?) It rebukes me: 'not germane!' There is no rebuttal. It is like the voice of my second grade teacher summoning me from nonsense to the task at hand. It then commands a question: 'what do you understand? Get on with it, Saul, before it is too late. What do you understand from what you have read?'

"I am going to die. There is no hope. But I will play the game for a little while. To keep the fear at bay if nothing else. I answer: I see men as I am. Cain and Esau, even Jacob the liar. The eleven brothers selling Joseph. Willful men, ready to take or do what they want. There is something else, also. But I cannot put my finger on it. I will read more."

He read Exodus the next day and wrote: "if there is a god he surely could have done better. His people are blind and dull and utterly unlovable. And I...I feel like Pharaoh's army...utterly helpless before all his waves and billows. I will die here. But the waves and billows, of course, are of my own making. There is no god.

For the next three weeks, before he died, Saul read that book. Whether he read it all I do not know. But here is a sampling of the comments.

On reading Leviticus he wrote: "the bloody sacrifices are a bloody gift. A man asks 'how can the likes of me come to god' and god answers 'here's how'". Nonsense, though. Why appease what does not exist?

"Psalm 51 is to me as if a light had been turned on in a dark room. Nuts! That is crazy."

On reading Jeremiah he wrote: “am I responsible for having a heart that is ‘desperately corrupt’? Or did god just screw up? How, you great, weeping prophet, do you answer? I guess I know.”

“And so, here I am at Matthew. And I am afraid. What the hell do I have to fear. What can god do to me he hasn’t already done? I am going to die. And soon. The weather is fine outside. There is no more water. And my mouth and tongue are cracked from want of water.”

(Something happened during the reading of Matthew. Kavis made notes as he read. But now he wrote as man in the grip, not of fear, but of the text itself. His notes did not evidence the reflection of some of his earlier ones. Instead, they are visceral, almost violent responses. The reading of this gospel seems to have been seminal to Kavis, so I am reproducing all of the notes he made while reading Matthew.)

“Joseph—what a wimp. You believed that nonsense. The wise men—too much time on their hands. Time better spent in a brothel. Why am I reading this? Herod—my man! Joseph—the wuss returns. John the Baptist is at least a man. A fool, but a man. And now, Jesus. When I was young I was told that you are the son of god. But who are you, really? Mary’s bastard son! Sucked into the baptizing foolishness of John. Why am I reading this? I cannot stop.

“My god, what nonsense these blessings are. ‘Blessed are the meek’...give me a break. And joy in suffering for the sake of Jesus. Really. Suffering for the sake of too much single malt—yeah, ok, but for Jesus?!

“What an edge there is to these words—these words of utter nonsense—a real edge. Jesus, I would curse you if I could.

“Why am I reading this? What is this about cutting off one’s hand to put an end to lust—god! You have cut ME off, god. Not a hand. But me.

“Am I lost? I have never forgiven a wrong. I have never loved an enemy.

“Oh, I am perfect, all right--- as my father, Satan, is.

“Why am I reading this?

“Now his words do not wound. I have never taken up piety. I have not perverted it. Rave on, son of god. I have never served two masters. Just myself. I have never been anxious—until now. I am going to die, and I am afraid. But—I will read on.

“Judge not?! Ha! I despise all about me. Am I a dog, eating holy words?

“What has god ever given me. But—I ask god to open this door that holds me prisoner. Open. Open. If you are, God, open this damned door. Open. Open Sesame.

“Nothing.

“Well, I read on.

“What is the gate? Where is this gate? Narrow or wide, I do not see it. God, these words of yours beat upon me. I do not see the gate! Show me the gate!

“I am a man whose house is crumbling.

“I am not the centurion. I am more like Herod—but now I despise him. Where is the gate?

“Lord Jesus, cast from me this darkness.

“Take from me these sins.

“He heals those who come. How can I come?

“Have I blasphemed the Spirit?

“How can I do His will? There is no good within me.

“My heart is hard. What seed can find root? But not too hard for weeds. What good plant could flourish there?

“With what can I buy this treasure, this Kingdom of God?

“Even the disciples doubt Him. Who can enter that gate?

“How He attacks the smugly religious. I have been smugly evil all my days.

“He fed the crowds. He feeds the hungry. And now He force feeds me the food that is better than bread. I hunger for it. But will I simply puke it back? God, I have hated you and denied you all my life. Help me.

“What cross can I bear? I will soon die.

“He showed His glory to the disciples. He shows me my filth.

“Become like a child? To what end? To enter the gate?

“I cannot forgive her. I cannot. Dear Jesus. I cannot.

“Forgive me, oh God, my lack of forgiveness.

“Here is a light in the darkness: ‘with God all things are possible’. Even my finding the gate? And passing through it?

“Even the whores? Even the whores might enter? Yes. He said so. Well, then, now I freely choose to read.

“These vineyard renters—these ingrates—but no, I will say no more. I will not revile them—their flesh is my flesh.

“The Pharisees I do not understand.

“Have you, dear Jesus sought to bring me under your wings? Are you? Or is it too late?

“So, the world will end. Mine will end soon. And I am not ready.

“My God, I have never clothed you or fed you or visited you. And if, if you should open this great metal door that will soon mark my grave—would I clothe you, would I feed you? There is in me nothing good. How can I follow you?

“This woman who anoints Jesus: she pours out her wealth to love Him. I have poured out my life to please the obscenity of my imagination.

“What are you doing, Jesus, praying that prayer? I know who you are? You are the Son of God. Why are you praying to do the right thing? Is this your humanity—that you received from the Father, as a gift, what you already had?

“And so you are alone and will not speak to your enemies. And even Peter denies you—as I have all my wretched life—and not out of fear, but out of ---- who can explain the darkness of my denial?

“Am I cut off like Judas?

“You forgave them. Can you forgive me?

“And so, you are alive. Are you everywhere? Are you here?

“Could I, if this door were opened, and I were freed—could I follow you? Be your disciple?

“One thing is clear. What I fear. Not death. But hell. I have earned it.”

Here ended the comments on Matthew. What follows is more of the sampling. Kavis must have grown weaker. This sampling contains the lion’s share of what he wrote after he read Matthew.

“Fear has kept at bay the voice at the center. But now it is gone. Its howling protests have stopped. And the voice that commanded from the edge of my consciousness-- it is also gone. That is to say, it speaks to me solely from the words of this yellow stained Bible. I stained it. But I could not silence it. It is like a sword parting the flesh of my heart.”

“I have finished Luke. How can a man be right before Him? If someone were to rescue me, could I live as I should? And yet there is that criminal, crucified with Him...”

“Have read John. About Thomas. I believe. But can I live as His?”

“Finally, Romans. His righteousness is given to me. That is the secret. There is the power.”

“Reading----impossible. But ---have read enough. This will be--- last entry.” And then scrawled in large letters, filling the last page he wrote: “By His mercy He has killed me. By His mercy He has saved me.”

On August 30, 2003, the room constructed by Saul Kavis was found, thirty years later. He lay—or at least his skeleton did---on the bed, hands crossed on his chest. On the table was the journal. The opening page read “This is the journal of Saul Kavis”. But at the end, with clumsy strokes and great letters, he had crossed out his first name, Saul, and, below it, written “Paul”.

4

I read the journal sometime after the discovery of Saul Kavis’ body. He was my father. And when I read in the newspaper of finding the bones and the journal I contacted the police. Saul Kavis had seduced my mother when she was sixteen. He disappeared before I was born.

I was stunned by what I had read. I had hated the man, but when I read the journal I began to search for more information about my father. All I found was a small box of belongings kept by his landlady for 30 years. She had no idea why she had kept them. In the box I found a diary he had kept for years. It was disgusting. But in it he spoke of stalking Miriam Levine. I burned the diary after I had read it and made some notes.

I did not think that the story would be complete without visiting Miriam Levine. I had noted her address from my father’s diary. And I went to her house. A young woman answered the door.

“Miriam was my aunt. She died last year.”

“My name is Adam Paulson. Saul Kavis was my father.” I watched the woman at the door turn pale. She had obviously read the paper. I moved back a step.

“I, I have been as horrified by what my father tried to do as you. But he wrote this journal while he was still alive in the cave. I was hoping you would read it and then perhaps tell me about your Aunt.”

“Leave the journal on the steps with your phone number. I will read it and call you.”

“It is horrible to read at the beginning.”

“Aren’t we all”, she said. “Now leave the journal and the phone number.”

I did. She called me the next day and agreed to meet me for lunch in a crowded cafeteria.

“My aunt was great woman. Great, at least, in God’s eyes. And in the eyes of all the children she schooled in Christ at her church. Even when they had married they would come to see my aunt. She could not only teach, but she could listen like no one else.

“She died last year of Lou Gehrig’s disease.” She paused and then continued. “It is a horrible thing, Lou Gehrig’s disease. And it was not easy to see her die.” Again she paused and then murmured: “but it was good to see her die.”

When she said this I almost choked on my hamburger. I put it down, sipped some water, and looked at her as if she were my father before the reading of the Book.

“No”, she laughed, “I’m not a sadist. I wept for my aunt. And, yet, there was a glory to her going. It was as if she rested in the hand of God. She could still listen. And she did. Intensely. And she would pray for me before I would leave. At the last she could not talk and I would stutter a prayer for her. (I was not used to praying in front of someone then.) And she would smile.

“My aunt knew nothing of your father’s stalking. But she did keep a journal which you might find interesting. I have brought it for you to see.”

I took it. It was large. Miriam started it long before my father stalked her. The diary began with these words: “By His mercy He has killed me. By His mercy He has saved me”.

5

One more thing needs to be said. I took to my house the Bible on which my father had urinated. Yellow stains marked most of the pages. At the beginning of Romans a long, thin yellow streak ran from the top of the page to the sixteenth verse of the first chapter and there embraced the entire paragraph. I read it. And my life was changed.

It is true that no man can stand before God and defy Him forever.

It is true that God in His mercy breaks some men, before the Judgment, that He might heal them and save them.

And this, also, I can say: By His mercy He has killed me. By His mercy He has saved me.

He who is thirsty, let him come.

He who desires, let him take the water of life freely.

Revelation 22:17

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