

“Hello!” said the young man brightly. He had just walked into the Sunoco station after sprinting to the door.

“Why were you running?” I wondered out loud. I was just sitting behind the counter, trying to stay awake as I made my far-reaching contribution to society as a gas station cashier. The reason I was so curious as to why he was running and why I was even speaking to anyone was because my grandmother’s house had more excitement than this history class of a town. Seriously, the most exciting thing I had ever heard that had happened here was the Great Mosquito Swarm of last year. It lasted six hours. Needless to say, a sketchy-looking guy that smelled like smoke and that was wearing a big, black trench coat and orange jeans easily grabbed my attention.

“Oh, you know, I’m just full of energy,” he said in a much less cheery voice. I pulled out my phone and pretended to text someone so he would just buy what he wanted and leave me alone.

“You like those sirens?” he said, after about a minute and a half of just pacing around the store. It startled me, and I accidentally sent my phone flying into the air.

“Excuse me?” I asked as I turned into a flying ninja for a moment and managed to snag my phone.

“Those sirens. Aren’t they... beautiful?” Was this guy serious? He was starting to remind me of the Joker a little bit. Right as I was wondering if he was going to show me a magic trick, he roared, “Answer my question!” Dear God, I was going to die.

“Yes! Yeah, sure. Geez, mister, calm down. Just pick out something to buy, buy it and get out of here.” The vein that had appeared in his forehead when he screamed at me was now receding. He decided to ignore my order to him and tighten his vocal chords so the next sentence that came out of him sounded like something out of the long lost movie, *Chip and Dale’s Rampage*.

“Have you ever killed a man?” Holy crap, this guy was bonkers.

“What? Of course not! Your voice okay?”

“Do not lie to me!” he yelled. Great. He was back to his pissed-off voice. And I was back to my cowering position. His eyes were huge, and his fists were clenched. I was thoroughly spooked. After about twenty seconds of heavy breathing, he closed his eyes and a maniacal smile formed on his face. He then cocked his head to the side as he said in

a voice that sounded like Elmo from Sesame Street, “My name is Samuel, but you will not call me that. You are not worthy. Understood?” As he said this, he put a hand inside his inside coat pocket and removed a knife. A really, really big knife. I didn’t know what to say or do. I just stood there, trying to accept the fact that I was probably going to die. Not that I was leaving anything behind, but it was pretty depressing, nonetheless.

“Understood?!” bellowed Samuel in his Hulk voice. I was ready for it this time though, so I didn’t nearly empty my bowels like the previous two times. I actually wanted him to continue yelling so that possibly someone outside would hear him and come to the rescue. I still decided to answer him though, purely out of fear that he would stab my head if I didn’t.

“Yes, understood,” I said very shakily.

“Marvelous. Now tell me your name.” It was a command, and he said it in a British accent. It sounded a lot like Russell Brand. I was very pleased with myself with this observation of mine, and I was obviously tremendously stupid that day, so I decided to share my thoughts with him.

“Okay, Russell Brand, you need to leave right now or I’m going to call the police.” I was laughing on the inside. I had a very odd sense of humor. I laughed at the sight of a dying man once. The next dying man would probably be me, and this time he would probably be the one laughing, along with every person I had ever met. People weren’t exactly big fans of me. To my surprise, he didn’t revert back to the Hulk when I said my smartass remark. He did his creepy head-cocked-to-the-side smile again and said in his Elmo’s Nether World voice, “Look, I really don’t have the time for your jokes.” He opened his coat and revealed a belt with about seven guns of all shapes and sizes strung around it. “Now, I would really appreciate it if you told me your name before I cut you.” He put his big knife to my neck.

My bravery decided that enough was enough and abandoned me, leaving me hopelessly frightened. “Nick! My name is Nick!” I whimpered.

“That’s all I wanted to hear.” Back to his normal voice. He took the knife away from my throat and started laughing quietly. Now, I’m not going to say that I used the clichéd “Oh my God, I’m definitely dreaming. Oh I know, I’ll pinch myself. Oh no, it didn’t work!” I didn’t do that. People don’t do that. If something is actually happening,

people know it, and they don't try to pinch themselves. As much as I wished I was dreaming, I wasn't, and I knew it. I didn't have that creative of an imagination to come up with this loon, even in my dreams. "Well, Nick," Samuel continued as he reached into his coat, "Let's have some fun." He pulled out a detonator and pushed the big red button on the front of it.

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While I did not do the overused pinching yourself technique, it did start out as just a normal day, like every other story ever. I woke up, took too long in the shower, had to rush to get dressed, and, as usual, sucked at making my coffee. It tasted more like chocolate dirt with milk than coffee. My niece called me right as I was heading out the door at 7:05 am to tell me that it was her birthday. I didn't say happy birthday. She was seven years old, had glasses that were three inches thick, and weighed one hundred and ten pounds. Her life was going to be full of disappointment. I was helping her practice.

That was my excuse every time I did something mean to her. One year on Christmas Eve she was saying how Santa visiting every house in the world in one night seemed impossible. I, being the great uncle that I was, helped her out of her confusion by telling her that Santa is not real, that it is indeed impossible, and that it would take magic for that to happen, which also does not exist. She did not come downstairs on Christmas morning and refused to open any of her presents, claiming that they were just "lies wrapped in paper." I thought that was kind of deep for a five-year-old.

I, of course, did not believe my pathetic excuse for why I was such a jerk to her, and neither did anyone else. The real reason, and I'm not afraid to admit this to anyone, was because she was the spitting image of her mother. When we were children, my sister was awful to me, so I promised her that I would be horrible to her first-born. I was just holding up my end of the bargain.

On the topic of my horrible sister, she was the reason that I was depressed for most of my childhood and adolescence. Her excuse for it these days was that her friends had pressured her into being mean to me, which I know is bull. I never understood the idea of peer pressure. I hear statistics all the time like, "Ninety nine percent of high

school students have either done drugs or alcohol or had sex due to peer pressure.” If that’s true, then does the peer pressure start with one person? Is that one person so cool that their decision to do these bad things good enough for everyone else to start? I don’t know about anyone else, but I never once saw anybody in high school say, “Oh come on, just do it. All the cool kids are doing it,” despite health teachers’ warnings that they will. And I don’t know anybody that would be such a follower that saying things like that would even work on them. I think peer pressure is something made up by high school kids so they can have an easy excuse for being assholes.

My sister was recently widowed. Her husband went missing one night after going to a party with his friends. This was about a year ago. His body was found three months later. My sister was in a deep depression for weeks afterwards. I can’t say that I was sorry for her, or even affected by it. I don’t know if that makes me a bad person or not, but I assume most people would say that it does. I don’t care, though. I’m already dead to myself, so it doesn’t matter what other people think about me.

I walked to work like I did every day. I cared more about the environment than my sister. No, that’s a lie. Well, actually it’s not, but I just made it seem like I cared about the environment, which I don’t. Someone who walks four miles to work at a smelly gas station in over-ninety degree weather every single day just to cut back on fuel-use to help the environment should really reconsider their life. My reason for it was that I didn’t have a car. I didn’t have a car, because I worked at a smelly gas station. It all came together nicely.

Anyways, once I got to work, all sweaty and tired, my boss started yelling at me for God knows what reason. I checked out two girls who both must have had some mental condition. One bought a pack of gum, decided it would be cute to pay in nickels and pennies, and then skipped the numbers fourteen, seventeen, and twenty five while trying to give me exact change. The other one brought me a bottle of water and asked me what it was. I gave her an “Are you serious?” look so she just put it back and left with her friend. My only hope is that they never reproduce and pass on their idiocy to their offspring, which is why I am a firm believer in people being forced to take tests before having children. If they fail the test, they are neutered. That is how society should be.

After the girls left, I was done with people for the day, so I decided to try to take a nap at the register. That's when a man wearing a trench coat and orange pants walked in.

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It was instantaneous. The second his finger pushed the button, it was like we were in the middle of an earthquake, except with explosions. The ground shook violently and we both fell to the ground. I tried to stand back up, but another shake of the ground sent me tumbling into the wall behind me. My head hit the wall, which made me a bit dizzy. Unconsciousness finally came to me as the wall farthest from me exploded and a piece of debris struck the top of my head.

When I finally woke up and opened my eyes, I wasn't sure that I actually had. Everything around me was completely pitch black. I was dazed and confused from the blow to my head, so at first I was unsure why. Then I remembered that Mr. Kooky coming into the store and blowing it up and that pissed me off a little bit. I assumed the reason I couldn't see anything was because the ceiling had caved in, blocking out all sunlight.

I was so concussed that I didn't even realize that the counter I stood behind every day was on top of my legs, and that they were both in pain, probably broken.

"Well this wasn't supposed to happen," said a slightly angry voice from across the room. Oh joy, he's still here. My eyes had started to adjust to the darkness a little bit, and I could faintly make out what the rest of the room looked like after the blasts. The shelves were all knocked over and sprawled all over the floor in various positions. I could also make out Samuel in the corner of the store. He was lying on his back, and there was an enormous chunk of stone from the wall on top of his arm. I wasn't a doctor, but I knew there was no saving his arm. The rock must have completely flattened it.

It only took knowing Samuel for about two minutes to realize that if he really wanted to escape from the big rock, he was crazy enough to cut off his own arm. I wanted to find a way out of there before that happened. I tried pushing the counter off of my legs. Those are a lot heavier than they look. I instantly knew that it wasn't going to move.

"Going somewhere, Nick?" Samuel asked in his British voice.

“Clearly not, seeing as there’s a five-hundred-pound counter on my legs, dumbass.” I wasn’t in the best mood.

“Oh, I am far from dumb, Nicholas. How do you think I rigged half of the buildings in this city with the same thing that put us in this predicament without anyone noticing?” How do you think I made it so that there would be no one within three miles of this place when the bombs went off? A collapsing police station creates a hell of a diversion.”

“That was you?” I don’t know why it didn’t come to me sooner. About five minutes before this loon came into the store there was a story about how a few blocks down a police station had basically given out, killing everyone inside. It also explained the beautiful sirens.

“Of course it was. The only flaw in my plan up to this point was the unpredictability of the blast in this little place. I did not intend for this building to be as damaged as it is. And I also obviously did not want this wretched thing to fall on my arm. But it is a minor setback. That is why we were given two arms.”

“Oh really? Are you sure it wasn’t so we could have an easier time planting explosives in the workplaces of civilians?”

“You are not innocent.”

“What are you talking about? Of course I-“

“You. Are. Not. Innocent.”

“Yes I am.”

“Oh, Nicholas. Why do you think that I chose you to do this to? Because you’re handsome? Come on. I thought you were intelligent. The only special thing you’ve ever done is kill someone. You’re not that special.” I just sat there shocked.

“I didn’t kill anyone.” He just looked at me for a moment, smiling, until he said in his Elmo voice, “I know what you did.” I sat there in silence, wondering how he knew. I decided to ask him.

“How do you know?”

“I came in here a week ago. You probably don’t remember. You were half-asleep at the register. There was no special reason I was here, I just needed some milk. When I saw your face and looked into your eyes, I could see it. Once you kill someone, it doesn’t

leave your eyes, no matter how much you suppress the memory. I imagine you've actually started to believe that you are innocent. If you act like it didn't happen, it's almost like it didn't. Now tell me. Who was it?" He had a smug smile on his face, like he knew he had defeated me. I didn't want to tell this monster what I had done. I had never spoken of it since it happened, and I had tried my hardest to never think about it.

"My brother-in-law," I let escape my mouth.

"Oh, family! Even better than I thought!" He sounded like a kid at a playground.

"He needed to go. I couldn't let my sister get away with being a bitch to me. I just couldn't. I knew killing the guy she cared about most would send her into the deepest, darkest spiral of depression imaginable. No one treats me badly. No one." I felt like I was going to throw up. The pain in my legs was also starting to really kick in, which didn't help with the nausea. Samuel just lay there on the ground, cackling to himself.

"Wow, Nick, I have got to say, that was much better than I expected. I thought it would just be some guy who mugged you that you accidentally killed in self-defense! But wow! Killing your own brother-in-law when he did nothing at all wrong?! You are a horrible person. I'm glad I came here to kill you. You deserve it, big time."

"How many cops did you kill today?" It was the best I had.

"Oh that is not important. I did it so I could bring you to justice. I'm sure they would understand. Besides, I am sent from above to get rid of the bad people on earth. I am forgiven from everything." So *that* was this guy's deal. He thought he was God's little helper. A bounty hunter sent from above.

"What are you thinking about right now, Nick?" he continued. I decided to be perfectly honest with him.

"Well, for the last few minutes I've been eyeing that big rock right next to me. It sure looks like if that rock goes, this whole place goes. It sure would be unfortunate if someone accidentally gave it a big shove, wouldn't it?" As I said these last words I moved my hands towards the rock as if I was going to push it to see if I could get any sort of reaction from him. Nothing.

"Nicholas, you truly are despicable. You're really thinking of killing us both? I can see the headlines now. Man kills his brother-in-law and then commits murder-suicide by causing a gas station to crush himself and a vigilante striving to achieve world peace.

That's one of those stories kids tell each other at sleepovers to try and scare one another, but you're about to make it a reality. You really think that you're at all better than me?" I didn't say anything, and he didn't say anything more. We both just sat there, neither of us knowing which of us was the crazy one and which was the victim. But, in the end, it didn't matter. It was all a matter of perspective.