John B. Rosenman
prof@picusnet.com

The Nature of Evil

By

John B. Rosenman

"I recognized you, you know."

Olson looked up from his newspaper and saw a man about his age sitting across from him at the table. "Excuse me?"

The man gave him a knowing smile. "I said, 'I recognize you.'"

Olson set down the paper. The holiday season had been busy, and he had worked late at the accountants' office before stopping for a hamburger on the way home. The last thing he needed was some stranger who claimed to know him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I don't know you."

A shrug. "I don't know you either."

"Then what—"

"I said I *recognize* you, not that I know you. To be precise, I've never met you before."

Uh-oh, some nut. But Olson was shy with people and didn't say that. He looked down at his hamburger, which he'd barely touched. Maybe he should take it and go.

The man's smile widened, revealing sharp incisors. "Aren't you going to ask me *how* I recognized you?"

A Christmas carol, "Deck the Halls," played faintly in the background. "Okay," Olson asked, "how did you?"

The man pointed at Olson's tie. "It was your tie. It's the exact same shade of green that he was wearing that day."

That *who* was wearing? Olson would have asked, but he made it a point to avoid uncomfortable, embarrassing situations. In fact, he had developed a sixth sense for them. So he didn't ask, but the man continued on anyway.

"I knew my wife was seeing someone," he said. "I even hired a detective to snoop on her. But he found nothing. Then one day, I happened to see a man meet Kate in Brookside Park." He stared at Olson's tie. "Your tie is the exact same hue."

This was crazy, Olson thought. Who recognized someone by the color of his *tie*? More seriously, though, this man was accusing him of having an affair with his wife, which was outright madness. The idea of him doing something so wrong and dangerous was unthinkable! Olson glanced about the neat, clean fast-food restaurant he sat in, seeing people eating sandwiches and enjoying the Christmas season. It all looked so safe and normal. And yet this complete stranger had invaded his life here and accused him of adultery with his wife.

Olson gulped his Coke and put his hamburger back in its wrapper. "Nice talking to you," he said, starting to rise.

The stranger reached across the table, seized his arm, and pulled him back down. "*Sit,*" he said. "Stay and chew the fat with me."

Olson acquiesced. After all, he didn't want to create a scene. He'd just sit here a little while longer and see what this man wanted, maybe make him understand that it was a case of mistaken identity. In the event matters did get, well, awkward, he'd just leave.

The man leaned toward him. "Actually, to be precise, it wasn't just the tie that helped me recognize you. It was also the way you eat your cow meat."

"The way I eat?"

"Yes. Dainty little nibbles." The man raised his hand and mimed Olson eating his hamburger. "Are you always that neat and mousy?" He shook his head. "Surely not in bed. Kate liked big bites in the sack. You couldn't have kept her happy with neat little mousy nibbles."

Stunned, Olson watched his visitor pull napkins out of the holder, making an untidy mess on the table. Olson, who like to keep things neat, found this act deliberately goading. But even worse, the man had accused him of sinful acts that were quite beyond his nature. Despite Olson's shock, one word came through clearly. "Liked? Did you say she *liked* it?"

The man grinned, revealing his sharp incisors again. "Ho, ho, ho, indeed I did. Strictly past tense." He leaned forward again. "I had to kill her, you know."

"Kill her?" He couldn't continue.

"Of course. Just as I'm going to kill you."

Olson tried to rise but couldn't. The man's eyes bored into him, sapping his will.

"L-Look, mister," Olson said, "this has gone far enough. I-I don't know who you are, and I never even met your wife. This is a mistake. For your information, I've been married seventeen years to the same woman. I've never once looked at anyone else."

"Sure," the man said. "That's what the first two said."

"The first two?"

The man winked, pulling out more napkins and scattering them on the table, making even more of a mess. "The first two men I killed said the same thing. Regrettably, I realized later that I was wrong about them. They were innocent lambs, pure as the driven snow." He pointed at Olson with a wolfish smile. "But I'm not wrong about *you*, my friend. You're the ram that tupped my sweet ewe."

Mad – the man was mad! Olson looked desperately about for assistance. A police officer, even the restaurant's manager. But all he saw were customers eating fries and burgers and laughing in a clean, neat place where everything looked so safe and normal. At any rate, the man had spoken so quietly that Olson knew no one else had heard him. Olson couldn't prove this man had killed three people and threatened his life.

He swallowed. "Listen, I never knew your wife, never even met her!"

A shark's grin. "They why are you wearing that tie? And why do you take such dainty nibbles?"

Enough – he couldn't reason with this man. Olson tore his eyes from the other's stare, bolted up and rushed toward the exit. En route, he bumped into a woman and knocked her purchases to the floor. Looking down he saw a taco salad and chicken strips, plus two spilled drinks.

"I-I'm sorry," he gasped. Raising his eyes, he saw that everybody in the place was looking at him, their private conversations forgotten. Olson's stomach twisted in mortification – this was just the kind of thing he always tried to avoid!

"You just ran into me," the woman accused. She was fat, had a triple chin, and her tongue protruded between her lips like a snake's. "You didn't even look where you was going."

"Look, I'm terribly sorry. Please excuse me." He yanked out his wallet, found a twenty-dollar bill, and pushed it at her.

"You ought to be more careful," the woman said, only slightly mollified.

"Yes, I know." Olson glanced back at his table. The man not only was watching him, but he raised Olson's burger in a mock salute.

Without another word, Olson turned and left the restaurant. Outside, the winter air was biting cold.

The parking lot had been packed, so he'd parked on the street behind the restaurant. At his car, he searched for his keys when he heard footsteps.

The man from the restaurant was jogging toward him, pointing a gun.

"You can run but you can't hide, home wrecker." The man stopped and waved the gun to Olson's right. "In there, Romeo."

Olson saw a narrow alley between buildings. "What do you want?" he croaked.

"In the spirit of giving, I want to bestow your Christmas gift a little bit early."

"What?"

"I want to show you the precise color of your blood." He jabbed Olson's stomach with the gun. "Move!"

He was about to be killed. Olson started to resist, but the man's fierce glare intimidated him and old habits prevailed. He did as the man said.

The alley was about six feet wide and fifty feet deep. The man made him walk all the way to the wall at the end.

"Turn around."

Olson obeyed, shivering. His breath fogged the cold air. "You use that word a lot," he said to buy some time.

"What?"

"Precise. You say that a lot."

The man chopped the air with his gun. "What's your point?"

Olson didn't know. He glanced about. The walls were close and high. He was trapped.

"Alas, there's no mistletoe," the man said, "but we'll make do. You know, I'm going to enjoy this. I killed my wife with poison, the two guys with a knife and a shove out of a fifth floor window. Maybe you read about them?"

"I . . . I don't remember." Olson shivered in the freezing air.

The man smiled. "Go ahead, ask why Santa's using a semiautomatic this time."

"I don't know."

"GUESS!"

He swallowed. "You like to try something new each time." He giggled hysterically. "You don't like to repeat yourself."

A feral grin. "Precisely."

"But . . . you must know I'm not the man who slept with your wife," Olson said.

"After you shoot me, you'll realized your mistake, just like you did with the others."

The man frowned. "Then I'll just have to keep at it until I get it right, won't I?"

Olson didn't understand. Was this man insane or just using his wife's betrayal as an excuse to hurt others? Did he really believe that he, Olson, had slept with his wife, or was it just a convenient way to justify his vendetta against all men? Olson didn't know, but he sensed that either way, he had just run out of time.

The man glanced behind him, checking the mouth of he alley. "Okay, my little elf, I want you to get down on your knees."

"W-why?"

"I want to hear you beg."

Olson stared at him. The man was evil. Every day, all his life, Olson had seen or heard about ordinary human beings doing dreadful things to each other, and

had wondered why they did it. From what sadistic motive or fount of darkness did their evil actions spring? A woman in his office, a devout Christian with a husband and three children, had embezzled a million dollars from a client and been sent to jail. Why? And a scout leader he'd known, a regular Pillar of the Community, had been arrested for having sex with his own ten-year-old daughter. Why? Was it some sickness or weakness or just humanity's innately depraved nature that made them do it? Dear God, wasn't everybody born pure and innocent? Why, then, did they grow up to commit such horrible acts? Didn't they have a conscience? Didn't they examine or question their own deeds and see that they were inconsistent with their professed beliefs?

The man's upper lip curled. "I told you to *kneel*."

Though Olson had been passive and obedient all his life, he hesitated. For the first time, he saw that the man was half-bald and had pock-marked skin.

The man's voice hardened. "You're not going to kneel?"

Olson took a deep breath. "Precisely."

His response stunned the man, and Olson moved forward and snatched his gun away.

"Hey!" The man tried to grab it back but Olson swung the butt directly into his mouth, smashing in his teeth. The other screamed and clawed at Olson's face, ripping his skin. Sharp nails searched for his eyes.

Olson knocked the hand away and swung the gun again, smashing the man's face and nose. Again and again he struck, blinking against the sprays of blood.

He stepped back as the man finally collapsed with a cry.

Olson was unable to believe he had actually struck back and defended himself. Why, he had never done such a thing in his life! He watched blood seep from the other's mouth and heard him moan.

It was a moment of great joy. Despite the cold, he felt warm and powerful, complete as never before. He had actually fought back, refused to be pushed around and killed. He remembered all the vicious bullies he had known. For the first time in his life, he had stood up to one of them!

Gazing at the man's bloody face, Olson felt a new purpose in life. There were a lot of bullies in the world. An awful lot of bullies.

The End