

Wishing You Weren't Here

By

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*It's easy to pick out the crazy people in a crowd.
They're the ones acting differently from the rest of us.
However, should that really be the definition of crazy?*

*What if it's us who are crazy,
and only a few unlucky individuals
are able to see life as it really is?*

MAD

You reach out to the tape recorder sitting on the table before you. Letting your finger caress the “play” button for a second, you press it down. A crackling-pop stabs into your ears as the machine starts. The gears of the cassette turn for the first time in decades and the squeaks of plastic rubbing plastic fill the dark room you are hiding in.

An old man's voice, rough and dry, reverberates through the speakers. “So, am I just supposed to start talking?”

The loud screech of metal scraping across a concrete floor forces you to turn the volume down. You glance at the door to the room. Even as thick as it is, you know it won't protect you for long. You turn your attention back to the tape player as a younger man's voice spills from it.

“Just give me a moment please, James, and we will begin.” The man clears his throat. “This is Doctor Simon Reynolds, doctor of pathology here at the Nevada Mental Health Institute in Sparks, Nevada. The time is eight thirty two in the A.M. on Monday, November 13th, 1989. I am here with patient James Martin, who has been a resident of this institution since 1949. We are in conference room three.”

The doctor pauses a moment and takes a deep breath before continuing. His voice is softer now. More kind. “How are you today, James?”

“Um... Fine, I s'pose.”

“Good, good. James, I've been asked by the State to have a chat with you. Do you know why?”

“Not really.” The man named James coughs.

“Well,” the doctor says, “you are up for parole next month and—”

"No, no, no, no," James says. You imagine him shaking his head as he repeats the word.

"I'm sorry. Does this news upset you, James?"

"Don't want no parole."

There is a pause.

"But, James. Don't you want to be free of this hospital? You have been here for a long time."

Another pause.

"Don't you want to experience what life is like outside these walls?"

The tape recorder crackles for a few seconds, relaying the uncomfortable silence from years past.

The doctor prompts, "James?"

Reluctantly, the old man answers. "I just..."

"You just what, James?"

"It ain't safe out there."

"Why do you think it isn't safe, James?"

"You have my file. You know why, same as all the others who read it."

"Do you still think it was zombies that day, James?" The sound of doubt coats the doctor's tone.

"If not zombies, then monsters for true. I saw what I saw!" James says, his voice rising to a loud croak.

"I'm not saying you didn't, James. Please, there is no reason for raised voices." For a moment, bodies shifting in chairs are the only sounds that emanate from the recorder. "Do you feel we can continue?"

"Yeah. I guess so." The older man sounds calm once more.

"Good, good. I have read the case file from the... incident back in '49."

"And?"

"And what, James?"

"Does it say I'm crazy?"

"It says many things, James. But there is much it does not say, as well."

"Like what?" James asks, his tone snide.

"Like whether or not you're crazy."

Both men fall silent. In your mind's eye, you picture them in a cold, desolate room—two men, one old, one young—sitting in metal chairs staring at each other across a metal table. White walls surround them, broken by only a metal door, and a tiny window with bars. You wonder what it would be like to live for forty years in such a place.

"May I ask you a question, James?"

"That's why we're here, ain't it?"

"Do *you* think you're crazy?"

"No."

"You answered that quickly." The doctor sounds amused.

"It's been forty years, doc. Don't need no more time to think on that."

A shuffling of papers crackles over the recording.

"Have you thought about that night?"

The pop and hiss of the aged cassette rolls on alone for nearly a minute without either man speaking. Finally, the doctor breaks the silence.

"We don't have to talk about this if you don't want to, James."

"No." The old man sounds timid... afraid. Yet, his voice holds a hint of desire as well. "I... I think I need to tell my side. At least once."

"I've read your statement, James. The one you made right after the police arrested you."

"I doubt they wrote everything I said. *They* sure thought I was crazy. Besides, they saw me as guilty as soon as they found me."

"Do you blame them?"

"Not no more. Still, they didn't really ask me no questions."

"The report *is* rather sparse of details. I would very much like to hear your story, James. If you feel like telling it."

The old man did not answer verbally, though there is a sigh and the rustling of movement.

"Good, good. Why don't you start from the beginning, James? Take me back to that night."

The old man doesn't respond.

"You were staying at the San Souci Court on the day of the incident, correct? I found this old postcard when I was doing research on your case. I thought it might help you remember things. It has a picture of what the hotel looked like back then, see?" The sound of someone flicking thick paper comes across the speakers. "You know, the San Souci is gone now. They demolished it a few years ago, right after Steve Wynn purchased the land. The Mirage sits there now. A beautiful building. They say it's a hotel to 'usher in a new era' for the Vegas Strip. After seeing it, I'm a believer. It's massive, James. Unlike anything there now. I think it opens in a few weeks."

"I don't care 'bout none of that." James did not sound amused.

"Of course not. Still, that's what's there now. Things change, James. The world moves forever forward. What was it like all those years ago?" the doctor asks.

"It was nice enough, even back then." A chair creaks. "You much of a gambling man, Doc?"

"Not really. I go down to the strip from time to time for one thing or another. But I wouldn't call myself a gambling man, no."

"Well I was... back in the day." The old man sounds almost wistful now. "There was just something about the turn of a card that got my pulse a racin'."

"You liked cards, then?"

"Oh, you bet, Doc. And I was darn good, too. Lady Luck was kind to me. And when she wasn't, I could bluff a man right out of his shoes, I could. Make him doubt his own mother."

"Is that what you were playing the night of the incident, James?"

"Yeah. I was sittin' at a table with four others. Weren't none of us talking, though. Cards were turning, chips were changing hands. Never asked any of them their names."

"Were there others in the room?" the doctor asks.

"A few. Sam, the bartender, was doing his thing. A couple girls serving the tables. But, other than our dealer, that was all. But you already knew how many people were in the room, didn't you?"

Again, papers are shuffled. "The police report says there were ten people in that room other than yourself. But that doesn't mean I know how many were there before..." The doctor trails off. You get the sense that he is uncomfortable.

"Before I killed them, you were gonna to say."

"That is *not* what I was going to say, James. Other people could have been in that room. People who left before the incident."

"No. Not one person who was there ever left that room again."

"What happened, James?"

You listen as the tape turns, the occasional pop or hiss filling the emptiness. Finally, you hear James take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It all started when Ted burst into the room. Ted was the handyman. I had seen him around, said a kind word in passing. Didn't know him beyond that." The tone in the man's voice begins to change, taking on an edge of fear. "Ted was in a bad way. A real bad way. Covered in blood. His side mostly. There was a large rip in his shirt just under his left arm. He was screamin' about something in the basement."

"Did he say what happened to him?" the doctor asks.

"No. It was all folks could do to calm him down. I stayed at the table, minding my own. At that point, I wasn't interested in how some fool hurt himself."

"So you weren't concerned or curious?"

"A little. But I wanted the game to continue. If memory serves, I had aces over fours. Weren't no one going to beat me that round. Sam brought over some towels from the bar while the girls sat Ted in a chair. They began tending the wound on his side. Once the manager came in and looked at things, he told us everything was under control and we should just get back to our fun."

"And did you?"

"For a while. There was still a lot of fuss over Ted."

"Why didn't they move him to another room?"

"They tried. But, once they had him sit down, he just wouldn't be bothered with moving. So they tended him there in the gambling hall."

"What happened then, James?" You feel like the doctor knows more than he's saying.

"We were playing another hand. I only had a pair of tens, but I was betting hard on 'em. Like I said, I could make a man doubt he was ever born. Chips had started building a nice pile in the center of the table since none of us had folded yet." James stops talking. The rhythmic sound of a chair rocking back and forth comes from the small speaker on the recorder.

"If this is upsetting you, James, we can stop," the doctor says in a comforting voice.

"No... No, I want to tell it."

"All right then. The pot was large. Did you win or lose?"

"We didn't finish that hand."

"Why not?"

"Because Sally screamed."

"And Sally was...?"

"One of the waitresses tending Ted. We all turned when she screamed and saw that Ted had fallen out of his chair. I didn't think nothin' of it until she yelled that he was dead."

"So Ted..." The sound of papers shuffling spill from the recording again.

"That would be Ted Mackenzie?"

"If you say so."

"He is listed here as the maintenance man for the casino. I'm asking if this is the same man."

"Yeah, Ted. The guy who cleaned up around the joint. Why are you grilling me about him, Doc?"

"I just want to make sure I understand the situation as you describe it. So, you are saying that Ted died in the gambling hall from a large wound in his side."

"Yeah. They even brought in a sheet to cover him with."

"And you are certain of this?"

"There's not much about that night I'm not, Doc. I've had plenty of time to think on it."

"Then how is it that Ted's body was found later with his head bashed in by a hammer?"

"Because Ted didn't stay dead."

The tape clicks to a stop. You fumble with the eject button. Something bangs in the hallway outside your room. You don't know how much time you have left, but you have to know. You must find out what started all this, even it's the last thing you do. With trembling fingers, you turn the tape over and slip it back into the machine. Closing it, you press play once more.

"I'm sorry for the interruption. Please, let's continue." Frustration laces the doctor's words. "You were saying that Ted came back to life. But, is there a chance Sally had been wrong about him being dead in the first place? Perhaps Ted had just passed out from blood loss."

"That would be nice if it was true."

"So you are certain."

"Look, Doc. That wasn't the first time I had seen a dead body. He'd stopped bleeding, wasn't breathing. His eyes...they stared up at the ceiling all vacant like. The man was dead."

"Very well, James. Help me understand the events that happened after Sally screamed."

"Like I said, they brought in a sheet and covered him. The manager tried to get everyone to return to their game, but none of us really wanted to. We gathered around the bar, on the far side away from Ted's body. Sam poured out hefty shots of whisky for everyone at the manager's request."

"Something you said earlier brings up a question. You said no one left. With all that had just happened, I mean, a man died in that room, you would think that some would have wanted to leave."

"Oh, several wanted to split—me included."

"Why didn't you, James?"

"The manager wouldn't let us. He locked the damn doors, saying 'the cops will want to ask ya'll questions.' Plus he gave us free whisky. Wasn't turning that down. So everyone gathered around Sam as he poured us drinks."

"So, the five of you who were playing poker were now at the bar, drinking. How many drinks did you have?"

James laughs. "Yeah. The cops accused me of being drunk too."

"Were you?"

"No. Before I even finished that first drink, Ted sat up."

"Just like that?"

"Pretty much. I was looking at him. Laying there under that sheet. Thinking what a waste it was to die working as a handyman. Then the sheet slid off him as he sat up."

"Did anyone else notice?" the doctor asks.

"Not at first. I just sat there, my drink half way to my lips, looking right into his eyes."

"His vacant eyes?"

"Oh no. Not this time, Doc. This time they were far from vacant. They were cold, burning with hate. Like he was angry at me for still being alive."

"Who noticed him next?"

"Sam said something first. Then Sally screamed again when she saw him sitting there. The other girl, don't think I ever knew her name, knelt down next to him. She tried to ask him if he was okay. That's when he—it—grabbed her and bit into her neck. Just ripped right into her flesh with his teeth. I never seen so much blood pour outta one person." James stops again and a long silence fills the recording.

"Did anyone try and help the girl?" the doctor finally asks.

"We did. All of us. Me and Sam grabbed the girl, tried to pull her away. A bunch of the others went after Ted. Or whatever he had become. I think that's when one of them got bit on the arm.

"The girl died in my arms, Doc." James' voice quivers as he continues. "Just gurgled a bit on the blood in her mouth. She looked terrified as she stared up at me. Her eyes begging me to do something. To make her not die. Then she was gone."

"How did that make you feel, James?"

"I didn't feel nothing, Doc. I was... numb. My mind was still struggling with what was happening. I just laid her down between me and Sam. Then we went to help the others with Ted."

"They were not able to restrain him?" The doctor sounds genuinely shocked. "There were what, four or five men on him?"

"At first, I thought they had him. As I said, one of the guys got bit on the arm, but he was still in the fray. As me and Sam got near, Ted flung one of the men off. Practically threw him across the room.

"Sam slammed into Ted's chest, so I went for his legs. I'm telling you, Doc. even with all of us on him, we were making no headway. He was like a maniac. We even started hitting him, but it was as if he felt nothing.

"At some point in the struggle, he threw all of us off. I ended up behind the bar, stars filling my eyes after slamming my head on the back counter. When I came up, Ted was on top of one of the men, biting him in the face. The man was screaming even while Ted ripped his nose off. That's when I saw the hammer laying on the shelf behind the bar."

"And you used it on Ted Mackenzie?"

"I had no choice!" James yells. "It wasn't Ted no more. That thing just knelt there, ripping bits of the guy's face off with his teeth. Everyone else just stood on, watching. I think they was all in shock. But I couldn't just stand by. The guy was

still alive, still screaming, even while being eaten'. So yeah, I went up behind Ted and bashed him in the head with the hammer!"

"How many times did you hit Ted, James?"

"I don't know. Until he stopped moving."

"But Ted was not the only one you hit with the hammer. Was he, James?"

"No. It all happened so fast, I'm not sure how it all went down. I've tried to recreate the events in my mind, but it's all a blur. I know the girl with her throat ripped out came back to life next. She attacked Sam from behind. I don't remember the guy who had been bitten on the arm actually dying, but he also went into a frenzy and started attacking people at some point. I tried to get the girl off Sam, but it was too late. She had already sunk her teeth into his back.

"I remember hitting her with the hammer, though."

The tape rolls on without either man speaking.

Finally, the doctor says, "The report says when the cops found you, you were huddled behind the bar covered in blood, still clutching the hammer."

"Yeah. That sounds about right."

"It also says every single person in that room had their heads bashed in. That you were covered in blood from each of them."

"It does make me kinda look like the bad guy, doesn't it, Doc?"

Several seconds of tape run before the sounds of a chair creaking fills the void.

"I want to thank you for your time today, James."

"What about that parole. I still don't want it."

"Don't worry, James. I'm going to recommend to the State that they let you stay here at the hospital."

"Thanks, Doc."

"No problem, James."

There was a scrapping of chair legs on concrete floor and the distinct sound of papers being gathered.

"Doc?"

"Yes, James?"

"I know you think I'm crazy, even though you didn't say it out right."

"James, it's not my job—"

"Let me finish, Doc. I just wanted to say, as far as I know, no one ever did figure out what attacked Ted and started that whole mess to begin with. Whatever he found in that basement—it's still there. There may be a shiny new casino on it now, but that don't mean that somewhere underneath, down in a sub basement perhaps, that there ain't some *thing* still down there. Waiting."

"I'm sure everything will be fine, James. Everything will be just fine."

The tape recorder clicks off, leaving a heavy weight resting on your chest. Walking to the window, you pull back the curtains. The Vegas Strip stretches off to your left and right. Across the street, the Venetian stands tall and proud, its delicate stonework and balconies almost glow white in the moonlight. A few buildings away sits the Flamingo. Its crown, usually a burst of reds, pinks and oranges, lays dark. Glancing further to your right you see the top of the Eiffel tower of the Paris Casino. Your whole life, this city has been alive. Now, for the first time that you know of, it sits dark.

Well, you think to yourself. The crazy old kook was right about one thing. Whatever attacked Ted Mackenzie was still down there.

Letting your gaze drop to the street two stories below, you are greeted by a sea of bodies clogging every open space. Two to three million tourists shuffle about. If you did not know better, you would think it was just a normal night on the strip. However, when you look closer, you notice the oddities. A tall man with his jaw ripped off. A fat woman missing an arm. A fatal wound on each and every one of them, though none of them seemed to realize they were supposed to be dead, and not walking around. Whenever one looks up and sees you, their cold eyes burn with hate.

Reaching down, you pull out your revolver and check the cylinder. Only one bullet left.

The pounding on the door to the room you are in resumes. The dead can smell you, and you know they will not rest until they get in.

Letting out a heavy sigh, you place the gun to your temple, it's barrel cold against your skin.

The door to the hotel room gives way and a pile of undead pour into the room. You lock eyes with the one in the lead. A blond woman with most of her side missing. Several lengths of intestine dangle down her leg. She stares at you for an eternity, then lets out a wordless gurgle of a cry.

Just before you pull the trigger, you laugh at a thought that crosses your mind. *If the last person dies in a world full of zombies, does anybody really give a crap?*

You don't hear the gun go off when you pull the trigger.