

Revenge
by
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Note to readers: This is a slightly revised version of a story first published in 1976, in a little antiwar magazine called *WIN-Workshop in Non-Violence*, a story set in the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

Bands of men gathered on street-corners, in front of pubs and in alleys. There was ' murmuring. The news had spread with incredible speed.

They got to him in broad daylight, near a public place, not far from a market. They threw his body off a balcony, and maybe a thousand people saw his body hit the street. As soon as people realized who it was, there was an outcry and the news spread like wildfire. By the time it was dark, men in cloth coats hurried from one part of the city to the next without looking behind them, with their teeth clenched and with determined looks on their faces. Our boys under the streetlamps searched one another's faces for resolve.

Everyone took a street. It was only a matter of time before we found them. What did they expect? What were they thinking? They knew how we'd react.

Our boys traveled in pairs, except when they were checking a street in one of their sections. Then our boys traveled four together. If a door wasn't opened willingly, it was broken down. Teams went into the residential sections where there are houses with lawns, houses on the foothills overlooking the harbor, and broke into a few cars. Those cars are much faster than ours and can't be traced back to us. Soon our men were swarming over the highways.

Most people in our sections opened their doors to us because we had won their trust. We would have come in anyway.

Everyone had their orders. Revenge. Plain and simple. The law of the jungle. Give them an inch and they'll take a mile. Ten of their lives for every one of ours. An eye for an eye. Take no prisoners. Ask me no questions. I'll tell you no lies.

Our friends in towns and villages along the way had been alerted, though we doubted his killers and the two who were in charge had ever left the city. Just a precaution. One way or another, we knew we'd find' them before morning.

There was scattered gunfire all night long. None of our people were hurt.

The gunfire was mostly from our boys in the streets, who were nervous, which was understandable, considering what had just happened.

I went out right away and secured my block.

It was just a formality, really. Everyone here is trustworthy. They have to be.

Then I sat by the phone to coordinate things a bit. Every few minutes, the phone would ring. Street X¹ secured; Section Z is clear -- no resistance.

Even in their sections, people were opening their doors. Their people weren't surprised at the sweep. Their people didn't like this one. Some even offered their condolences, I was told. I never thought I'd live to see their people showing us any emotion at all, and certainly never about him.

Maybe they are finally losing their base, I thought. Maybe they've lost touch with their people. Everyone is tired. If they'd been that stupid, that careless, and didn't have popular support for this action, then maybe this killing would turn out to be a good thing after all. It might turn the tide. The killing showed they were desperate. A last-ditch attempt to drum up support they'd already lost. In any event, they failed. Failed miserably. Their people were turning away from them.

And if their attempt to rally support had failed, or if we could make it *look* as though it failed and that their popular support was gone; then maybe, just maybe, the whole thing could finally come to an end. We'd wipe them off the face of the earth, and then they'd never bother us again.

Suddenly, I found myself thinking about *them*, which was a mistake. What were they thinking? What did they feel? What would they do next? But then I pulled it back. They are the enemy. They want to destroy us. Compassion is weakness, and any weakness puts all our people at risk. We've learned the hard way. He learned and he taught us, and me. No mercy. No negotiation. No seeing it from their perspective. No bargaining. No hesitation. No regrets. We had tried it the other way, once. At least, he had. Once upon a time. There were some in his generation who thought that way. They're all gone now. Losers. The soft-hearted, the generous, the weak, they fall first. He would have shot me then and there if he knew what I was thinking.

But I couldn't help myself. What good will it do? I wondered, if the battle is already over. If they'd lost their support; they're as good as dead already. Someone on their side had likely taken out the triggerman already, before any of our people could get there. And perhaps even those two, the leadership, as well. So no one could talk. That's the way it works. Ours is a harsh justice. We all live together in this very hard world.

But if not, if they were still alive, perhaps we should wait a bit, I thought. It might be a good political move. If their people were already moving toward us, a show of generosity might move their people toward us more quickly still. If this thing were really ending, we would need help in their sections, with their people, who neither know us nor really trust us yet. If we shoot them down on sight like dogs, like our boys had orders to do, we might alienate their people. It might be a good idea to take a little breather, to take a little time to think.

And if it *was* over, and they *had* lost their people, they couldn't really hurt us anymore. They could pull another assassination or two if we didn't get them this time, but they would know beforehand that it wouldn't do them any good. That they'd probably be shot down in the street before long.

If I were in their place. I'd slip out of the country. Or proclaim myself

reeducated. Or shoot myself. I think I'd know when my number was up.

But then I pulled myself back. Thinking about them was self-indulgent, just a waste of time. You can't trust them. You can't trust those people for one second. They've hated us since they were kids. They'd cut their teeth on the thought of getting rid of *us* once and for all. All of us. People like that are willing to do anything, Animals. Worse than animals. The bastards had blown a hundred chances for a settlement, for peace. *He'd* given up trying. Now we're always ready, always have a finger on the trigger.

We don't negotiate with terrorists. An eye for an eye, ten times over. If we didn't get them this time, if we didn't get revenge, they'd be back again, and not only would this go on and on but many more of our people, civilians and combatants alike, would fall, the innocent with the guilty, the young with the old, the weak with the strong.

The city had been carefully checked by the time the sun rose, and since we hadn't turned up any sign of them, I gave the signal for our men to go to work, but to keep their eyes peeled. It's important, in situations like these, to keep things looking normal. Sometimes, thinking they're safe, they'll make a stupid move and give themselves away. Even if they don't, it takes pressure off our people and when they're less jumpy not as many people get shot by accident.

But I couldn't understand how they'd slipped away. We have great intelligence. We were right behind them, and we had a hundred times their mobility.

I doubted they were in one of their own sections. All night long, our people kept telling us that their people had disowned them. They were well-known in their sections. They would have been betrayed there, as far as I could tell. Their people were exhausted. Their ranks had been decimated, and the people were ready to come around. No, their own section would have been too dangerous. They *had to* be in

one of our sections, where they were not known. I sent out the word - be suspicious of any and all strangers. Stop and frisk. Every single stranger you see on the street.

I remember slamming the phone down just as the sun turned from red to yellow. The last section had been cleared, with no sign of them. I was exhausted and needed sleep. In the evening, there would be demands that we take a different kind of revenge, that we hit one of their strongholds. I was tired, but I knew one thing for sure. Revenge itself didn't interest me. I thought we ought to get them this time, do the job right, and be done with it once and for all. Eliminate the problem. Rip the weed out by its roots. Not another random action, however well planned. No blowing up an empty office where they'd once been. They had gotten *him*. I couldn't see why we shouldn't wait and get *them*.

"Don't turn around," the first voice said.

"Stand up slowly," the second voice said.

I stood up. All that thinking had gotten the better of me. I hadn't heard them come in. When you start to think about anything other than survival, you take your life in your hands.

"Frisk him," said one to the other.

They frisked me and took my handgun.

"Turn around," said the other one, who was standing by the door. I started to turn around when the telephone rang.

That didn't faze them at all.

"Who is it?" asked the one by the door.

"Probably our people in one of the towns, calling into report they haven't seen you," I said.

"Answer it," said the one who'd frisked me.

I reached for the phone.

"Be careful," said the man at the door.

I would have given anything to see his face when he said that, but I didn't have time to turn around. I answered the phone.

"Good morning to you," I said. It was a signal. Our people knew never to answer the phone that way. Our boy on the other end of the line spoke. I hardly listened. Sometimes, their side shoots people who are talking on the phone for the effect it has on those they were talking to. And everyone else.

The boy on the phone finally finished. He said goodbye twice, to acknowledge he understood my message, and then we both hung up.

It would only be a few minutes now, I thought. Hope those boys move quick.

"Turn around," said the one who had frisked me.

I turned around very, very, slowly, the way I would have wanted someone I was about to kill turn around.

I recognized them right away. I had seen them from a distance a few times at meetings and on the telly, and from the few blurred pictures our intelligence people had of them.

They looked like full brothers. The one near the door was taller. They were both dark. Both wiry men with mustaches. They were wearing wrinkled suits and dirty white shirts open at the collar. If they weren't armed, you might have guessed that they were farmers who had just come into town for the day. They had weathered faces and hands, just like our people.

"So you've gotten to me now," I said as carefully as possible.

"Who was on the phone?" asked the one near the door.

"One of our people in the north," I answered. "He said you're not north of the city."

The one who had frisked me smiled a little. It was the only time either one of them showed any sort of emotion. Self-discipline. That's how we all stay alive.

"We don't have much time," said the one by the door, not knowing how right he was.

"We may not kill you. We came to talk. *We* didn't kill him."

They looked at me and waited.

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Of course they'd killed him. Of course they were going to kill me.

Of course they had killed him. They didn't like the truce either.

Then I got it. What they were thinking. Why they'd come.

If they didn't kill him and they knew what the mood was in their sections, then they'd come to me for protection. They knew they would be betrayed if they went back to their section, where no one doubted it was them. They knew we would get them before long. We were certain it was them.

So they had come to me, hoping they could catch me alone and make a deal.

They were trapped. If they hadn't killed him, *they* were about to be shot for no reason. It wasn't their fault. It was just a mood the city was in.

I was trying to figure a way out when the thought struck me. What if this was a trick? I had no way of knowing who killed him. Who *else* would have killed him but them? He was a hero to his own people and now they had me. If this was a trick, the lives of others would be endangered.

I did not let my face soften. We all knew the score.

"If you didn't kill him, who did?" I asked.

They hesitated. It was the last mistake they would ever make.

The one who had frisked me looked at the one standing by the door.

Then, both together, on signal, they laid their guns on the floor and kicked them over to me. The heavy metal grated on the wooden floor.

I let the guns be.

"Who killed him?" I asked again, barely raising my voice above a whisper. The one who had frisked me looked again at the one standing by the door.

"He shot himself," said the one near the door.

"We know because he sent us this. It's a note for you."

He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

Suddenly it was over.

A patrol of our best people burst through the door, guns blazing.

I picked up the paper that had been in the man's hand and was now on the floor.

We took them out to the river, where they wouldn't be found for a while.

And then we came back to the city to bury my father.

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