

Congratulations. You have been randomly selected to hear me tell the story. I'm overjoyed that you have the pleasure of listening, and I hope you enjoy yourself.

If you haven't guessed, I'm being sarcastic. I resent that you have what you'd call the pleasure of listening to this story, mainly because I have the *displeasure* of telling it. AGAIN.

Before we begin, I invite you to view this situation from my perspective. Imagine that you've died. You've died and gone to hell. Now, when I say "hell," you imagine fire and death and general communal suffering, yes? Stop it. Hell is not one place. No, the wonderful faculty here are kind enough to design each and every one of us our own personal hell, tailored to fit our worst nightmares. Mine--or, in this case, yours--is telling individual strangers the story of how you killed a woman when you were nineteen over and over for eternity. And you are in this hell, in your hell. You have been here quite a while, and have told this story that you hated in the first place millions of times. You can't imagine yourself being very polite to your audience after a while, can you? No? Good. Then it won't seem so outlandish when I ask you to forgive me for my lack of aforementioned politeness.

So, will you? Forgive me, that is. Or don't, on second thought. I was never particularly concerned about anyone's opinion in life, so why should I be in death?

Well, whatever impression I've made on you, I have you to myself for a while. Or, rather, I'm stuck with you for a while. I say that because I'd hate to make it sound like I'm going to enjoy any part of what will happen next. I'm going to tell you the story, and you're going to listen, and gasp and glower in all the right places, as anyone would. Then, you're going to be guided into another room, and there are going to be lots of bright lights, and you'll forget this all happened, and I won't, and I'll loathe it all. Sounds lovely, doesn't it?

Her name was Taylor McBride.

Now, if it were up to me, I'd end the story there, because Taylor McBride was tragically boring, with boring stick-straight hair, and boring flaky foundation, and boring ankles and elbows and breasts and hips and thighs. She ate oatmeal for breakfast, and she had two cats, and I could sum up her personality by yawning.

I loved her.

I loved her dearly, and you wouldn't believe the capacity of stupid things a 19-year-old in love can do. In my case, it was robbing a bank in order to pay for an engagement ring I'd been dying to buy her for months.

There were several things wrong with this plan in the first place. Why didn't I simply rob the jeweler that sold the ring? Why did I do it in broad daylight? Why did I choose the bank directly next to the call center at which Taylor McBride worked? I could go on, but that would mean I'd spend longer telling this story, and in case I haven't made it clear enough for you, I DESPISE

this story.

She was still asleep, when it began. Still asleep having her boring dreams about boring cats and boring oatmeal. I kissed her on her boring cheek and whispered in her boring ear that I loved her.

I thought about her as I toed on my shoes, and as I walked to the corner and hailed a cab, and as I directed my driver to Hamilton Bank. I thought of how she made her oatmeal with almond milk, and the way she chided me for leaving my jacket on the floor, and how her jeans were always too loose, but I did not once think that I would be responsible for Taylor McBride's death later that day.

Fifteen minutes and a cab ride later, I was making my way into the bathroom of Hamilton Bank as unassumingly as I could. My backpack should've felt lighter, as I'd traded the textbooks that usually occupied it in favor of a ski mask and a gun. But, it was somehow heavier than before, as though I carried the possibility of two deaths in the neat lead bullets I'd kept in the gun.

Oh, don't tell me you really believe that garbage. I'm lying. Yes, I could easily turn this whole god-forsaken affair into a life lesson for you by way of some beautiful quixotic metaphor about the value of a human life, but that is not my purpose. I am here to tell you a story and hate it (which I'm doing an absolutely stellar job of, I might add). The backpack was light, and the reality was that I was just a kid about to make the biggest mistake of my life.

Now, I should explain to you something about the gun: it was unloaded, save for the two bullets I mentioned earlier, which would serve as the two warning shots I planned to fire into the ceiling. I was lovesick, not bloodthirsty. But, the teller didn't need to know that.

As it was 7 o' clock in the morning, there was only one teller, and she was quite a woman (if we're assuming the teller was, in fact, human, rather than a cosmetology experiment gone horribly wrong).

May I be frank? She looked like a toad someone had spilled paint on, with thin, uncomfortably rounded brows and teeth like a broken picket-fence.

Ah, and I suppose you thought that was too harsh a way to put it. They always do. But you seem to have forgotten where I am. They don't keep me here for my sparkling personality.

I didn't even have to draw my gun. Beneath the canopy of lashes that drooped from the excessive, clumpy mascara, I could see her eyes widen. She knew.

Something else I should explain: I am not heartless. Well, literally, yes, I am heartless. I'm dead, for crying out loud. But I'm not heartless in the emotional sense. Oh, don't look so surprised; there are many in hell with massive hearts. If anything, we're more passionate than our

counterparts in heaven. The only difference between a saint and a sinner is that the latter cannot control their heart. It's a very romantic concept, isn't it? I could make a poet scream.

I'm getting off track. Where was I? Oh, yes. The ugly teller. She reminded me that I was not heartless, because I could feel a bud of remorse planting itself in my stomach as I plunged my hand into my backpack, locked my fingers around the gun, and unsheathed it from the pocket. There was hesitation in my fingers as I turned the safety off. There were second thoughts in the beads of sweat I could feel forming at my hairline. But one can't very well apologize and slink out of such a situation with their tail between their legs. I had to commit, and I did.

Now, if I could do the mission over, I can assure you that I would've shouted something much more clever than "Everyone, on the ground! And don't move a muscle! I want everything you've got." However, I have not been given the chance.

The transaction itself was quite smooth, but I don't care about that. The teller's hands shook as she produced stacks of money. I don't care. I couldn't look her in the eye. I don't care. One woman wept out of panic in the corner. I. Don't. Care.

These are details I have no particular emotional affiliation with (other than abhorrence, but that's a constant). They were only vehicles, transporting me from one action to the next. There's nothing else to say about them, and even if there were, I'd make a point not to mention it, because it would mean I'd have put more thought, more effort into telling this story that deserves neither.

Here are more such details:

- I procured an amount of money.
- For some reason, I chose to thank the teller for her compliance.
- I physically harmed no one in the bank.
- I kept my gun pointed at the teller as I made my way out, to ensure she wouldn't call the police.

Now, another mistake I made in planning my endeavor: I hadn't taken into account the fact that the patrons at the bank would also possess phones, and that one could easily call the police while I was focused on obtaining my money, and explain in a panic-riddled whisper their situation and location. This is another reason I hate to tell this story; I can't paint myself as anything but an unprepared idiot. To be fair, that's what I was, but you must remember I'm in hell, and the faculty are quite making sure I suffer as much as I deserve to. Cut me some slack, if you would.

So, not having factored the wonder of the cell phone into my plot, you can imagine my surprise when I exited the bank and was greeted with five police cars and a smattering of officers. You can also imagine a collection of profanities leaking from my lips, running down my chin, and dripping onto the sidewalk, if you'd like. But the most important thing you must imagine is Taylor McBride. More specifically, you must imagine Taylor McBride making her commute to her boring

call center, seeing her significant other had become the target of the police, and reacting accordingly.

I wore the ski mask, yes, but she knew. Of course, she did. She'd taken the time to memorize every physical and emotional inch of me, just as I had done for her. Looking back, this had been a massive waste of my time.

Taylor McBride wore a plain white dress and a tremor in her right hand. Neither fit her very well. She accessorized with gasps and screams and pleas to the officers not to harm me and demands to me to explain myself as she jogged to my side.

As for me, I tied my own outfit together with an idea: a hostage. The fact that she didn't know what was going on and that she was stupidly predictable enough that I knew how she'd react made her the perfect candidate. I convinced myself the ring would serve as a worthy apology that could be delivered later. I also convinced myself that though I was about to traumatize her beyond belief, she would have no interest in ending our relationship for it.

I put her in a relatively gentle chokehold (as gentle as one could be), and moved my other arm so the barrel of the gun kissed her temple.

Again, I can think of a million clever things I could've said instead of "If any of you move, I pull the trigger!," but it got my point across. I had no plan of escape yet, but I figured this would buy me a bit of time. Anyway, I mused, the gun was empty. I could do no harm.

Now, I'd like to try something with you. A little test, if you will, that will tell me just how attentive you are. Don't worry, no harm will come to you if you fail. I don't have that luxury, and if I did, I wouldn't use it. I'm just curious.

Why was I wrong in my assumption that I could do no harm?

I'll give you a minute to think. I gave you the exact answer earlier, but I know I've said a lot, so it could easily have gone unnoticed.

Are you ready?

The warning shots. Or, rather, the warning shots I'd planned to fire into the ceiling of the bank but hadn't.

I really didn't know what I would do if an officer would call my bluff and make a move. This was unfortunate, because an officer did just that. If I'd thought it out, I certainly wouldn't have let my reflexes rule my decision. But alas, this was not the case.

I pulled the trigger.

The kiss provided by barrel of the gun deepened, with a tongue in the form of a bullet darting into her skull. It was a passionate kiss, one that, at the time, I wished my lips had delivered. I was always the jealous type, when it came to that sort of thing, and watching as the surprised blood and brain and skin tissue leapt from her skull and latched onto the sidewalk felt like catching my lover having an affair.

I was jealous. Of the bullet that ravished her, of the patrons still huddled in the bank whose own traumas surely couldn't match mine, of the officers with their weapons drawn that weren't forced to *feel* anything as Taylor McBride wilted into my arms, as her lifeless body fed that bud of remorse in my stomach until it bloomed as a lump in my throat.

I took my revenge in a kiss of my own, from the other bullet in left in the gun.

Then I met death, who I really can't blame for being rude to me. As brusque as he was, he seemed unsurprised as to how I came to meet him. Bored, even, as though he were waiting for a smoke break, or something. Then paperwork was filled out, and decisions were made, blah, blah, blah. To make a long story short, I soon found myself here, in my own personal hell. I'm not allowed to tell you about any part of that process. I'm not sure why; you're going to forget this all in just a moment. But, I digress.

The important part is that this is the end of the story. Now is the time for some cliché metaphor about bullets being the representation of my inner demons or some allusion to Romeo and Juliet, or some other ridiculous prolix that could make an English teacher weak in the knees. I've chosen to leave this out because these literary devices you learn about in school exist to remind you that storytelling is an art form, that it's beautiful, that it's something to be proud of, to aspire to be good at, to enjoy. But this was nothing of the sort. The blood the city would spend days trying to scrub from the street was not beautiful or romantic or a work of art. It was just blood. I'm not proud of any of this, and I don't enjoy recounting it, and I sincerely hope that you haven't enjoyed listening to me do so.

Thank you for your time. Please follow the red arrow into the room to my left and do as the woman in the white gown tells you.

Actually, will you do one favor for me? You can think of it as my death wish, if you'd like.

Tell her I say hello.

[2,499 words, not including these in brackets]