

Kill



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ANTHONY GOOD



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*For my father, who wanted to see this in print, and didn't.  
For Hayley, always.*



### *Publisher's Note*

*After taking legal advice, the publisher has obscured all references to or descriptions of actual living persons in the novel. Several characters' names have also been changed, in order to distance the fiction from the real events and personalities it was inspired by.*





Kill



How settle that account? I am entitled to  
exact payment, of course. Every Debit  
must have its Credit, the First Golden Rule.  
But payment in what form?

B. S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*

Every tyrant shall another know.

*The Thousand and One Nights*



The last words I said to my wife: “Please don’t leave.”

It was an argument. She left. Those were the last words.

Angela wants to know more. She always wants to know more. Now she asks me to write about it – not just talk. She thinks I’ll be more forthcoming, perhaps.

I said to my wife, “Please don’t leave,” while we were arguing, and she said she was going to be late and so she had to leave, and she did, and on her journey she was killed by an explosion on the Underground.

Apparently my last entry wasn't enough. So I'm tasked again with writing another entry on the same subject.

Clearly, I don't have a talent for confession.

Dear Angela,

This is my fourth attempt at writing this letter. It is NOT a “Self-Expression”.

There is a man I hate and I want to talk about him. But you have to know my reasoning first. I can’t skip straight to the end, though I think about it every day. Because I want you to hate him, too. I want you to understand my reasons, and agree. I’d like you to try to refute my reasons, and fail. I’d like you to try very hard. I want you to admit that I’m right. But you wouldn’t let yourself – would you?

This letter isn’t going well.

I missed last week's appointment with Angela – to my surprise, she rang me. In truth, the phone ringing was surprise enough in itself.

I don't find Angela attractive. Is that the truth or am I writing it to hurt her?

The truth is I haven't had a sexual thought in years. I look forward to discussing these points on Wednesday.



And again, the old topic:

Angela asks for the details, for the content of the argument, the time of day, how the morning had started, the first sign of disagreement, was it me or my wife that started it – is that my guilt, for starting the argument, for being angry the last time I saw her? – or is it that she was angry with me, she started it and was angry with me and that's my guilt, that I can never re-live the last part and have her not-angry with me, that we were denied any reconciliation? –

The explosion nearly split the train carriage in half. It put a hole in the top and bottom. If I'd wanted to, I could have gone to court and listened to their explanation of precisely where my wife had been sitting, or standing, when the explosion occurred. I could have listened to them describe the injuries she incurred, in the long list of injuries that day. Well, I didn't.

Will you try to get rid of this anger? I ask.

(She doesn't respond. Her silence is greater than mine.)

I'm not sure I want it gone, I say.

Perhaps I'm free-associating, now, I tell her. Can you be free-associating while talking about it?

(I keep pausing like this, as if she'll answer.)

I'm trying to work out my anger. I know it has an object. An objective, maybe.

I look at her directly, which she doesn't like, I don't think.

There's a real person that I'm angry at. I can tell you his name, what he looks like.

Then I stare at her, just to measure her curiosity. To measure her technique. There are silent ones and chatty ones, and Angela seems like something else. Like both, or neither. It can't be *productive* to be comparing her like this, so much, in my mind.

"Who is it?" she asks, and I wonder whether it's curiosity or technique guiding the question – my neurosis or hers?

██████████, I say. It's the first time I've said it aloud in many

years. [REDACTED], I say again (though I don't know whether that's neurosis or technique either).

I wait to see if she'll ask a question. I practically will a *Why?* from her lips, which never comes. I scratch my face, cover my open mouth.

I don't think it's fair, I say. What happened to my wife.

Not just my wife.

My daughter.

Myself.

My father.

Paul, of course. And his family.

If you were to ask me, I say, that's where this sickness has come from. You probably think of it like that, as a sickness. An acting out of something or other.

She writes something down. If it was one of the other ones – one of the other therapists – I'd guess it would involve the word *transference*. That's the catch-all. But who knows what Angela's writing? It could well be the necessary ingredients for her dinner.

Are you even listening? I ask.

She looks at me.

"To every single word," she says.

She told me to stop endlessly referring to the process of my therapy. She banned me from using her name, which seems an ineffective prohibition. I won't stoop to giving her an alias. She told me I'm frightened (she may have used the word *scared* at some point, as well) of *engaging* with the tasks she sets.

I pretend to believe in Good and Bad, Right and Wrong – but what have I really done? I've been subject to the most heinous injustice, and what do I do? – I mope, watch daytime television, attend endless therapy, sit at home, break things, act like an adolescent.

The fact is, someone caused it. Someone did this to me. It was wrong.

Is my anger at myself? At my unhappy victimhood?

This is what I have to do:

Delineate the Causes.  
Identify the Principal Actors.  
And then?

## The People Who Matter to Me

My wife

My daughter Amy

Paul, a former pupil and family-friend

Paul's family

Frank (aka Frankie), a close friend of mine

Angela, my therapist, for whom I'm writing this list

My wife played the piano. She earned money, sometimes quite a lot, writing jingles for advertisements, mostly. She had a deep respect for her clients, who would often make very odd requests. Sometimes she'd be paid as an arranger. She would take a melody and make it fit a variety of timespans – five seconds, fifteen seconds, thirty, forty-five, etc. Often, this work came to her after it was abandoned by the original composer, who no doubt felt such a procedure denigrated their work. Sometimes she'd have to make an old jingle sound more modern. In these cases, I remember, she had learned to do very little: the client, for whom she had great tolerance, would never want to deviate from the original work, but nevertheless would want to get their money's worth. She'd usually change the key or the time signature or remove some extraneous notes or make a particular chord louder (or softer). She would complete her changes in an afternoon, but deliver the manuscript many weeks later. These briefs were the most handsomely paid.

She'd sit and play into the evening. If I was lucky, I'd arrive home to her playing and I'd soften my entrance. I'd defer our usual kiss – instead I'd go to my study and put away my bag, whatever folders I was carrying. Only once did I indulge myself by going to the bedroom and lying down, listening with my eyes closed.

If she was playing haltingly, repeating chords or phrases, I'd know she was closing in on her goal. But if I was lucky, she'd be very far from it – utterly lost, even. When she had no idea what

to put into her thirty or forty-five seconds, I might sit in my study, above her, and listen as she invented whatever pleased her. It's difficult for me to imagine those times.

The old piano still stands there – the upright she intended to replace with a baby grand (a full grand was too immodest for her liking) were she ever to become a millionaire. Sometimes I go to that old piano and lift the fallboard, and poke a key, with no intention except to hear a note. It sounds bright; I can't tell if it needs tuning or not, but of course it must. I imagine I can play a single chord. I imagine my hand in the right shape.

If I'm in a particularly self-pitying mood, I'll open the lid of the stool and stand one of her manuscripts on the music tray. I sit, and pull the stool closer, as if I might play. Then I look at her handwriting, at the dots and lines and numbers and crossings-out.

On my blackest day, I turn to her last manuscript – it is unfinished. I look at where the pencil marks stop.



## Paul

He was one of my students. He was a Year Seven and I barely had cause to ask his name, being that he appeared a quite solemn and well-meaning boy, except that his shoes were not correct.

Regarding the school uniform I was always to-the-letter. In my brief career as a policeman I had the same attitude – enforce the small things, was my motto. The small things make a character. What I mean is that it's the everyday details that accumulate and begin to shape us. They are the life-changing things we can control. The life-changing things we cannot control come in the form of tragedy (a car crash) or fortune (winning the lottery) and both tend to destroy rather than build character.

On average I stopped half a dozen boys on account of improper uniform every day. Mostly it was the shoes. Young men have a thing about shoes just as strong as young ladies, and for very much the same reason. Shoes were the main way these boys compared themselves with each other. Apart from the usual acts of intimidation, of course.

And so it was one day I came across a young, solemn Year Seven whom I addressed for his non-regulation shoes. They were black AstroTurf football boots with defiant white trim.

His excuse was first-rate: they didn't have the right shoes yet. *They* being his family, of course. I liked, and was intrigued

by, that “yet”. He said it very meaningfully. I asked him why not – he said his mum hadn’t got round to it.

This excuse, or similar, was fairly old even two decades ago. When confronted by Authority, boys will seek to hide behind Propriety – this often manifests itself in raising Ethnic boundaries, or, failing that (in young Paul’s case), luring authority into the sensitive area of Family, where it must tread very carefully and usually make a hasty retreat.

I said I expected him to have proper shoes next week, and he nodded.

I asked him if that would be a problem, and he said, No, sir.

Then I told him to fix his tie, and he looked down at his chest in crooked appraisal. So I adjusted his tie for him and dismissed him with a pat on the shoulder.

When I discuss my retirement, it's in guarded language. I speak about it defensively, as if about a mistake.

Angela tells me – reassures me? – one of the reasons for the long course of my therapy is the need to *disentangle* two kinds of loss. This is Angela's scheme: that the root of my emotional malfunction is the double-whammy of losing my job and losing my wife in fairly close succession.

She asks me how I'd planned to spend my retirement, and I believe it's just a way to underline her point.

Dear Angela,

This is my fifth attempt at writing this letter. It is NOT a “Self-Expression”.

There is a man I hate. You have to understand my reasoning. I can’t skip straight to the end, though I want to. Because I want you to hate him t

Dear Angela,

This is my sixth attempt at writing this letter. It is NOT a  
“Self-Expression”.

I thought I was above hate all my life, and now look at me.

One teacher – at wits’ end, shortly before his resignation – asked me:

“I’m paid to teach them, am I to police them as well?”

Of course! Police them foremost! How else will we teach them? We flatter ourselves when we talk of our roles as Teacher and Headteacher – better call ourselves Constable and Superintendent instead.

He told me he respectfully disagreed. To which I said no he didn’t, he disagreed and saying the word *respectfully* was neither here nor there, respect wasn’t something you issued from your mouth.

And then I said, You don’t know the first thing about Respect. It was an ugly moment.

She told me to “zone in” on the “big points” and “expand” upon them. She said I was too “deliberately oblique”, which I thought was presumptuous.

I’m sure she’ll dock me more points for prefacing this passage with her critique. Every Wednesday for fifty minutes I sit with her and talk – she asks her questions, I am deliberately oblique – and at some point she reads over what I’ve written, my journal, if that’s what it is – except it’s always a loose sheet of paper or two.

She doesn’t wear glasses, except to read. She swallows quite often, when glancing down the page. When finished, she gently lays the page back on her desk, like a living thing being put to rest. And, gallingly, when the time is up, she asks me whether I want to keep it. And – more galling, even – I say I do.

I’ve not kept hidden my opinion that her vocation can be boiled down to a matter of guesswork and answering questions with questions. Or worse – *silence*. But all the same, I come. Because it has occurred to me that, apart from fifty minutes every Wednesday, I hardly utter a word to anyone.

She’s told me to address everything I write – from now on – to my daughter Amy. I told her this wouldn’t be conducive to my *self-expression*, as she calls it.

“You’re not the Headmaster of the World.” That was one of Amy’s sayings to me.

And then, much later, with a touch less venom: “You’re not the Headmaster any more.”

Amy is distant. She doesn’t like me. I believe she blames me for what happened to her mother, in a way. It’s not always easy for me to be frank with her. I believe she interprets this as coldness.

When we meet, there is a politeness about our conversations. There is an awkward formality, like we’ve been appointed to these roles of father and daughter when, really, we have nothing in common.

When she was small, her mother called her “Daddy’s Little Girl”, but I think it was hopefulness on her part. Amy was a very adoring child and perhaps she did focus her affections slightly in my favour. But when she reached adolescence she grew to hate me – because, of course, I was the disciplinarian. She felt I treated her as just another pupil. I can appreciate how it might have been, how it might have seemed I was indifferent to her.

She was utterly, utterly wrong, of course. Yes, to an extent I treated her as my pupil. But I have no capacity to decode a



girl's psychology – I barely made progress with the woman I lived with for nearly thirty years. So when I was stern with her, and she cried, I floundered. Even the tenor of her crying was different from a young boy's – fuller, less ashamed.

When a young boy cries – and tries not to – he may appreciate a hand on the shoulder, encouragement such as “keep your chin up”, and – importantly – nothing more. Anything more is to further emasculate him, to heighten his shame.

When Amy cried and I didn't know how to respond, she would storm away – often to her mother. This wasn't an option any of my boys had, of course. I was, in this way, critically undermined.

I remember this conversation I had with her, when she was perhaps fourteen. We were sitting sullenly at the dining table. To my mind, I must have been enforcing some prohibition, perhaps I was preventing her from seeing her friends, or punishing her for coming home late or a bad mark. A kind of detention. I had my books open in front of me, which I normally kept to my study. I could feel her glaring at me as I wrote. She had her Science exercise book and textbook in front of her, and was meant to be doing her homework, but she'd made a performance of closing both – I remember it was this, above all, that irked me: the petulant drama, which made her wretched to me. I had made the mistake of standing, walking around to her, and opening her books, one after the other, and then sitting down again, and turning to my own materials and reviling myself, in my mind, for entering into her performance.

She, of course, closed her books again, this time with a casual flick of the wrist. I admit I looked at her then as a problem. I was, at that moment, trying to solve her. She was defiant, but

without a sense of what she actually intended to do – apart from, that is, disobey me. I stared at her a while, and she said,

“Why are you looking at me?”

I held my pen slightly above the page, poised. I stopped myself from capping it, laying it down meaningfully – stopped myself from entering further into histrionics. I said,

“Which, of the two of us, do you think has the greater determination?”

“I don’t care,” she said without a pause, and looked away. I went back to my page, with my pen still poised above it, but was at a complete loss as to what I’d intended to write. It was only a second later, perhaps, that Amy threw her exercise book across the room.

I didn’t follow the trajectory of the book, but kept my gaze on the child. Then she reached for her textbook. She must have felt my stiffening – must have sensed the stakes were raised, now. Looking back, I should have stopped her then – with her hand on the textbook, with the book still on the table, with the picture frame still hanging on the wall. Of course, to her mind there was no way she was going to stop, not without some kind of intervention, perhaps even physical. She was, perhaps, looking to be stopped. But that was never my style. So she threw the book and it flapped heavily against the wall – hit the edge of a framed picture, some dreary watercolour my mother had given me, I think. It fell, the glass cracked.

I grabbed her by the wrist and raised her out of her chair. I hit the back of her thighs, six or seven times – still with one of her arms held above her. She wailed even before the first strike. I let her sink, crying, back down on to the table, then I went and picked up the book, unruffled its pages and laid it

down in front of her heaving, small body, and asked her,

“Why don’t you throw it again?”

She tried to run out of the room, but I caught her again by the wrist. She flailed and kicked at me with her free limbs. I felt rotten, at how puny she was, at how unfairly matched we were. I held her, dangling from one arm again, until she couldn’t cry and scream any more.

Her mother stood in the doorway, asking what on earth was going on. I told her our daughter had taken to throwing books. She frowned, came forward, and Amy reached for her, but she held back. When she left the room, Amy screamed all the harder, still with her one arm held high above her, not even struggling any more.