



KNIFE/TAPE/ROPE

STORY

DENNIS COOPER

"A DISQUIETING GENIUS."—VANITY FAIR

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SHORT STORY

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 HarperCollins e-books

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KNIFE/TAPE/ROPE

Steve: So I was fat and weird looking since I was fucking born. So everyone hated me at school and everywhere else. I didn't care, or not enough to blow my brains out. So after about like third grade I didn't even want anything. Anyway, all the great bands are totally ugly too. Rob Halford, Bruce Dickinson . . . Ozzy. He's even fat, but that's not why I liked him. They're all just right about a lot of things if you really listen to them like I did. Thanks to them I made these friends finally. Ron, Jim, Jen. Nice people in a way. They had these criticisms of me, but

I accepted that. Ron knew all this stuff about Satan, which was amazing 'cos he, Satan, is pretty fucking ugly too, and even fat according to Ron. So I thought, you know, Teach me about death, Satan, I don't care. And it was all about murder, which was great because when you're not the one getting murdered, murder's the ultimate interesting thing. I totally agree with that.

Jim: I used to feel like there was someone else inside my head, but I couldn't understand what they were saying at first. Then last October Ron turned to me in psychology class and asked me if I ever thought about killing a person. I said, "Yeah," 'cos, you know, we talked about it a lot. And he said, "Well, let's kill Steve." I said okay because it was obvious Steve didn't mean much to anyone, not even us, and we hung out with him *all the time*. Ron said that Jen, who I think he was fucking, should come along too, which was okay with me. Then he said that he'd already planned that we should do it on Halloween night before even talking to me. He just knew I'd agree, which was cool, I guess. He's great. I mean, Halloween?! Steve kind of knew things were weird pretty soon, thanks to Jen. She's a really good artist. She draws these great medieval-type scenes that look like album covers. She did one of a giant warrior holding somebody up in the air who looked exactly like Steve but mutilated and stuff. And she showed it to Steve one day to see what he'd say, and he laughed, but he *knew*. I also think he'd overheard Ron and me maybe talking about it, I don't know. But I knew that he knew . . . just the look in his eyes like "I

know you're going to kill me, but I'm not going to believe it." So Halloween day Ron asked Steve to come into the woods by the chemical plant with us. There's a pack of stray dogs around there, and we'd caught two and sacrificed them to Satan once, but we hadn't asked Steve along then 'cos he was too fucking ugly and weird. So after school, Ron gave us rides to his place. Jen was already there. We got high and played metal, and Ron got these baseball bats out of the basement. Then Steve knew for sure we were going to kill him. I mean, there were three bats and four of us. Ron threw one to me and one to Jen, and I could tell by his look that Steve was really wanting to have one. So Ron went and got a little axe from the garage and told Steve, "Here, you carry this bat, and I'll carry this axe." Steve really knew something final was going on. You know, four people and three bats. So we hiked to the well. We'd already agreed Ron would strike the first blow because he was the strongest and smartest of us, or we thought so. And it was his big idea, his bats. He chose Steve. And I mean, Steve was huge, over two hundred pounds and shorter even than Jen for fuck's sake. So . . . where was I? Oh, there's this well in the woods where we'd dropped the dead dogs that other time which was known as the Well of Hell. Some of us used to go there and pray to Satan when we were emotionally fucked up. The four of us stood by the well for a while sort of looking at each other, giggling. Steve was giggling too, which was really pathetic. There weren't any dogs, of course. Anyway, Ron chickened out. He just stood there staring weirdly at Steve, not talking, and we eventually went home. It was dark. Steve had to go

home and eat dinner or something. We just watched him walk down the road waving bye at us feeling totally fucked. Then we went back to Ron's and put on metal and Jen drew this really great picture of Steve looking into the well, standing all by himself, with an evil smile looking at him from the water. It looked exactly like Steve. Jen said the smile was the smirk of triumph, which cracked us up. Even Ron. Then we rescheduled the murder for Sunday. And Ron said, "Let's make a pact that we stay sober this time," and that we'd get more out of killing that way. It's kind of weird to think now what was driving us on after failing at first, but I guess we just wanted that sort of experience, Jen and me from killing dogs, and Ron from dogs and from thinking about killing Steve all the time, I guess.

Jen: So Sunday Ron came over and helped my dad burn some dead leaves. And this kitten walked into the yard. When my dad wasn't looking, Ron picked up the thing and said, "Bait for Steve," and put it into a net bag. Jim came by later, and we drove over to his place. I think Ron was waiting for us. He looked cute. I always thought so. Then Ron called Steve and invited the jerk to come and help us kill something. The kitten, I guess. Then we listened to metal, and I drew their portraits 'til Steve arrived. When Steve got there we showed him the kitten and stuff, then we got in the car with the bats. Ron let Steve hold the kitten bag—I don't know why—but he started becoming too rough with the thing like a jerk. Petting it real hard, and that's not the way we ever did it with animals we killed, so Ron took it away and said Steve was a shit. We parked

by the woods, and walked up to the Well of Hell. It takes about ten minutes. Ron had some rope, and we tied the kitten bag to a tree branch and hit it around with the bats. God, Steve was a jerk. He couldn't even hit it he was so fat. Then it died and we cut it down. I think I said I wished we had something bigger to kill. And Steve agreed, which was weird. Then Jim said, "So what're we going to do now, blah blah blah." Ron said, "I don't know." I think we were cracking up. Ron said we should smoke dope and think, but Jim hadn't brought one of his usual pipes, so Ron asked Steve if he had a pipe. When Steve reached into his pocket to check, Ron hit him right in the face. He started running away, but we chased him. He kept saying, "Why me, you guys? Why me?" And when we caught up to him, Ron said, "Because it's fun, Steve." The way he said it, it was real soothing like if you would talk to a little kid. "Because it's fun, Steve." I think that just freaked Steve out because he kinda stopped and turned around like, "Maybe they're not going to kill me after all." It's like he turned around on purpose, almost to see if we were really going to do it. Then we hit him like seventy times. Ron broke his bat. Then we said, "Sacrifice to Satan," and put Steve's body down in the well and went home. Like I said, I draw pictures, and I drew a picture that night of Steve down in the well that Ron wanted to frame. I have to admit it was great. I think it was Steve in the shape of two evil eyes under some water. I just thought it was neat, Steve as eyes, like he was going to haunt us. And I took it to school the next day, and I passed it around. People liked it a lot. They always liked what I did. They'd just trip on it.

Pete: Hey, you guys. I just want to tell you how cool what I think you did was. And there are other people who think so too, so you should know that.

Jim: Yeah, right. I heard.

Jen: You should really thank Ron, though. It's his thing, really.

Ron: (*mumbles*)

Pete: What, Ron?

Jim: I don't think Ron likes you.

Jen: Actually, I don't think he likes us, either. Or anybody, really.

Pete: What does he like to talk about? I mean, how can I get him to deign to speak to me?

Jim: Ask him about Satan.

Pete: Right. Ron, what's your take on Satan?

Ron: He's huge.

Jim: Do you mean popular or big physically?

Ron: Both.

Jen: Yeah, Ron told me once that Satan looks like Dom DeLuise if Dom DeLuise was scary looking. Or . . . did you ever see that guy who heads up the Satan Church in San Francisco, what's his name . . . Jim, what's his name?

Jim: *I don't fucking know.*

Ron: His name is . . . I forget.

Jim: Right.

Pete: Hey, great. It's hard for me to picture a scary looking Dom DeLuise, but I think I get the idea. And I don't know who

that Satan Church person is, but I'm kind of more interested in what it . . . well, what it felt like to kill that guy.

Jen: What do you *think* it felt like?

Pete: I don't know. You're an artist. You understand stuff, not me.

Jim: I'll tell him. Nothing. That's what it felt like. You just do it. You start and then you just keep doing it because it's too late to do anything else. But as far as killing Steve in particular, nothing. It was better than killing dogs.

Ron: Definitely.

Jen: Tell the kid, Ron. Jesus. You're great and everything, but this kid's just interested. Tell him like you told us.

Ron: Okay. It's for Satan. That's all. And as for me, I just always had this obsession with killing things. I don't know really what it was. When I started out as a little kid, I couldn't just shoot a bird and watch it die. I had to tear it up. Same with Steve. I hated the guy, but I couldn't just wait and hope he got hit by a car or something. Besides, Satan sort of advised me to do it, in a way. He like told me, his voice. Jim, you know about this.

Jim: Yeah.

Pete: Cool. Voice?

Jim: Yeah, like he's inside your head with you. Look, you couldn't possibly understand, asshole.

Jen: I think he's cute.

Pete: Thanks.

Jen: No problem.

Ron: Killing someone is just one of those things that anybody who's honest with himself wants to do because it's one of

the greatest things you could do. I mean stopping somebody else forever. Making them rot. How could you not want to do that? And Satan says it's cool to do it. Well, more than cool. I doubt he uses words like that.

Jim: He talks to me like that.

Jen: I see him as a warrior, a really big guy. We're like specks to him.

Pete: Cool.

Jim: Anyway . . .

Ethereal Disembodied Voice: That's what you think.

Pete: What the fuck was that?

Jim: Did I ever tell you about the time we killed a puppy?

Pete: Not me.

Jen: I'll tell it. Let's see . . . yeah, we killed this little dog, poo-dle, inside a clothes dryer. Ron stuffed the dryer with weeds and sprinkled that with paint thinner and lit it on fire. The dog was running around inside, and it's the first time I ever heard a dog scream. It sounded just like a human screaming. We started laughing. We made it into a game, see how long we could make it live. Then we stabbed it a few times and chucked it into the weeds.

E.D.V: Cool.

Pete: *That*. What's *that*? Satan?

Jen: It sounds like fucking Steve, I hate to say.

E.D.V.: Correct. Being dead isn't any big deal, you guys.

Jim: I don't want to hear this.

Jen: Me either.

E.D.V.: It's black, extremely black. I can't even see you.

Pete: Do you like it?

E.D.V.: I don't not like it. Anyway, I just showed up to say that when you guys die, I won't be able to hurt you or your spirits or anything if you're worried about that. Death's weird. It's not about Satan or anything. You just die. It's weird.

About the Author

DENNIS COOPER is the author of the George Miles Cycle, an interconnected sequence of five novels that includes *Closer*, *Frisk*, *Try*, *Guide*, and *Period*. His post-George Miles Cycle novels include *My Loose Thread*, *The Sluts*, which won France's Prix Sade and the 2005 Lambda Literary Award for Best Men's Fiction, and his most recent work, the highly acclaimed *God, Jr.* He divides his time between Los Angeles and Paris.

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