

The Strange Case of Harold Irvineⁱ

Now Harold, it seems, was insistent on becoming a Boy Scout troop leader within the Lakeshore Drive community of Washington Park. There were those in that community who would go to great lengths to ensure that Harold never got the chance. They believed Harold might win if it came to a legal battle and so they looked for ways to avoid that. How they found Harry is another story, but find him they did.

Harry assured them that he would remove Mr. Irvine from their community on the condition that he be allowed to do so in his way, and at a time and place of his choosing. There was a slight misunderstanding though. When Harry heard, “remove,” he understood *remove permanently* in a fashion that would preclude Mr. Irvine’s return forever. The folks from Washington Park had only wanted to scare Mr. Irvine and drive him out of town, or at least force him to drop his bid to be a Boy Scout troop leader. But Harry was going to kill Harold Irvine in a most violent and public manner.

Harry was a very moral man, at least as moral as a cold-blooded killer could be. He hated those “fucking queers,” as he termed homosexuals. When confronted with his prejudice, Harry would respond aggressively, “Homophobia? That means fear of man. I’m not afraid of *them*. No! But they disgust and repel me. That behavior and lifestyle are sickeningly vile – Ish!”

Unfortunately for Harold, once Harry was paid (a precondition for accepting any job) there was no turning back because he always saw his jobs through, *always*. It was a matter of professionalism in his mind, an almost pseudoreligious commitment. Once he had the money in hand, Harold Irvine was a dead man. If the people from Washington Park had a change of heart and wanted to call off the whole affair, that was their problem. Harold Irvine was dead the moment Harry was paid.

Harold ended his brief union with the young black boy in ecstasy. He couldn’t believe his luck. This kid was a druggie and needed money bad, bad enough to do anything Harold might desire, and Harold desired much. The kid got up, a little sore from the ordeal, but was satisfied when Harold handed him \$200. Once the boy left his apartment, Harold proceeded to get ready for a day at the mall. He showered, brushed his teeth, shaved, and put on a musky aftershave, one designed to appeal to women. Harold was a

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ruggedly good- looking man, maybe too good looking. He never really thought of his homosexuality as odd or wrong, it was merely the way he was, and although he would take a woman on occasion, he preferred men.

Harold Irvine might have lived longer if it hadn't been for his last lover, Anthony. Anthony was an activist. He was an activist in just about every human endeavor. He was an environmentalist, an animal rights advocate, a feminist, and an advocate of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle. He was a proud member of Act Up, and attended many events that in his words "broke many barriers."

Unlike Anthony, Harold had never been an activist about anything. He was uncomfortable with "rocking the boat." He was quiet, reclusive..., almost shy.

Harold met Anthony 18 months before at the Chicago Ridge Mall while looking for a new home entertainment system. Anthony was the salesman that provided the Sony system now gracing his apartment. The system included a Smart TV, an old-fashioned VHF tape player; a DVD; an out-of-date audio cassette player and even the evermore rarefied quadraphonic tape drive, all complemented by several state-of-the-art speakers providing what Anthony called "...real surround sound. That's what makes the home theater a real experience, Harold; especially the legacy components. Can't beat the flex!"

Harold, intimidated by the complexity of the hookups, asked if Anthony might come over and hook it up sometime over the weekend. Because Harold had just spent 7,500 dollars, Anthony readily agreed. He also sensed that Harold was gay, and had hoped he was right. "I'll be there Sunday morning at 10:00, OK?" "Sure," Anthony answered.

Over the ensuing 18 months, before their breakup, Anthony converted the somewhat introverted Harold into an activist and member of Act Up. Their relationship was perfect, at least until Harold found Anthony with another lover when he dropped by unannounced one month earlier. Harold had entered the expensive apartment building, took the elevator to the 4th floor, and walked toward Anthony's Suite. As he approached, the front door opened, and a young redheaded man exited down the corridor in the opposite direction. Harold was stunned. He guessed that the young redhead was no stranger to Anthony, and he guessed that Anthony had not been sick, as claimed on the phone the evening before. Both realizations came as a shock. Harold had wrongly assumed that Anthony was *the one*, and had

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planned a commitment ceremony in that regard. As it turned out, Anthony was committed to no one man, but rather to as many as he could have.

The only thing Harold salvaged from this shattered relationship was if you could call it that, a new resolve to advocate the gay lifestyle at every opportunity, at which he was becoming quite effective. That's what bothered Washington Park, and that's how Harry was brought into the picture. Washington Park and Harold Irvine were wholly unprepared for anything like the sudden and shocking savagery of Harry Blankenship.

On the weekends, Chicago Ridge Mall opened at 10:00 A.M. Harold liked to arrive a few minutes before the opening to ensure an advantageous parking spot. He'd leave his place at about 9:00 and work his way to the mall. When he arrived at his choice-parking stall, he would back in for an effortless departure. In so doing, he could also protect at least one side of his beloved Cadillac Eldorado from dings by the concrete pillar on the left side of the car. He parked very close to the pillar making an exit from the driver's side quite tight. In this fashion, he reasoned that the car parking next to the passenger side would have far more room to open their door, thereby reducing the possibility of dings on that side. The Caddy was new, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Harold got out of the car, locked it with the remote, and strolled toward the mall entrance anticipating a couple of restful hours browsing through the stores. He loved this routine and could be found here each Saturday morning looking for little knickknacks to buy just for fun. Harold made a little over \$180 thousand a year, and so could afford his rather extravagant lifestyle with ease. He was a software and networking expert, one with wide-ranging experience in establishing and sustaining complex networks for business and government. He held certificates in just about everything you could be certified in from Microsoft engineering to Cisco routers to ATM backbone, and anything else the geeks could rattle off.

Harry had learned well that routine was his best and most reliable ally in the murder business. He would accept a contract on his terms only, taking adequate time to successfully execute the contract. He liked to get to know his target as much as possible before deciding how to kill it. Harold Irvine turned out to be unbelievably easy to set up. His routine *was* routine. He'd go to the Chicago Ridge Mall every Saturday, rain, sleet, snow or sunshine. He parked in the same spot every time, always backing in close to the pillar. He'd exit his car at about 10:15 A.M., without exception. He wanted the

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morning surge to get into the store because he detested waiting in lines, especially when those lines were waiting for doors to be unlocked.

He would enter through Sears and proceed to the mall and food court area for coffee. He would then make his way to the men's room, spend 8 minutes there, and leave. He would then head back to the main mall for one and a half hours of window shopping, occasionally picking up a bauble or two before finishing his Saturday routine. He would invariably depart the mall for his car at 12:00 noon.

Harry had verified Harold's routine over the past several weekends. It never varied. Most useful was Harold's funny little habit of stopping by the big fitting mirror in the ladies' department as he passed through Sears on his way to the food court. He would stop in front of that mirror every Saturday morning and comb his thick, black hair. This routine consumed a full minute, 40 seconds of which were spent searching for his comb. He always had to search for his comb.

Harry had decided to shoot Harold in the back of the head at the moment he turned left, away from the mirror in the direction of the food court. One round of ball ammunition from the Smith & Wesson .44 magnum would do it. The mall would be crowded, even at 10:15 in the morning because it was the Christmas season, and the 25th would fall on Monday. Last minute shoppers would be waiting at the doors and would flood in at 10:00 on the dot Saturday and Sunday. This year they might not flood in on Sunday though, because Harold's brains, blood and skull fragments would be all over the ladies' department.

Harry believed, correctly, that the noise and flash of the .44 magnum, accompanied by the sight of Harold's exploding head, would so horrifically traumatize innocent bystanders that not one would be able to provide a useful description after the fact. Only Harry could be so cavalier about murder. He was right of course, but the cosmetic beard he wore was the only precaution he would take, and Ike thought such a limited precaution dangerous.

Once he was satisfied that all was in order, Harry hated to draw these things out; he would act quickly. As he had confided to Ike in passing conversation, "Too much planning after the basic groundwork has been laid will get you into trouble." Ike thought that was the stupidest comment he had ever heard but had said nothing. Harry was Harry, and nothing you could say or do would change his mind. So why piss him off? Just go along with the

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program. Harry was a good earner. Ike just hoped he never got caught. Harry would rather be dead than in jail, so whoever might draw down on him had better be prepared to kill him, because Harry would sure as hell defend himself no matter the circumstance. Harry told Ike, "No such thing as innocent bystanders." He could be a very scary guy.

Early on the 23rd of December, Harry arose and made his coffee. He always made it very strong. He never liked to drink it when it was hot, but rather when lukewarm. When the coffee was finished, he would add ice cubes or cold water from the refrigerator. That brought it down from almost boiling to lukewarm, simultaneously diluting it to a tasteful strength. Coffee made him regular. He would drink it while checking his email every morning. He would have either one or two cups, never more. In about 15 minutes the urge to evacuate his bowels would become critical, and he would go. Next, he would take a hot bath, never a shower, but always a bath. He would step out of the bathroom into the bedroom in front of a floor fan that was never shut off. He wanted to cool down and dry up immediately. He hated to sweat after a bath, always said it made him uncomfortable for the rest of the day. Next, he would shave with an old-fashioned straight razor, brush his teeth, and select his clothing for the day. Talk about routine! This schedule and its absolute predictability drove Ike nuts whenever he stayed with Harry, which he tried to avoid. Harry's wife thought the routine was smart, and it made her life a little easier. At home, Harry would always do the same things most predictably, even when he made love to Karen. She was amorous, but not excessively so. Harry would only make love at night, never in the day, but never too late either, and never if Karen was not in the mood. Harry would wash clothes, dishes and keep house. Harry kept everything in its place. Karen believed she was very lucky to have a husband like Harry. He was always thoughtful and treated his wife with formal respect. Today though, he had to depart early for a meeting but would be home early because he and Ike had a pending trip. Karen didn't like Harry's job, whatever it was because he was gone so much. But before they were married, Harry had carefully explained that he worked for a federal law enforcement agency and that his work was classified; he would not be sharing any work-related information with her. He hoped she understood. She said she did, and she had volunteered that she would never ask. Harry said, "Good, only a few years left before retirement anyway Karen."

At 8:30 A.M. Harry went back into his bedroom to kiss Karen goodbye. He always kissed Karen goodbye, believing such little displays of affection kept marriages strong. "As we discussed, I'll be out of town for about a week and will not be able to call, but please don't worry. My work is

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classified, but not James Bond-dangerous.” She smiled at this worn-out line. She had heard it dozens of times before, and by now, she was comfortable with it. “If you’re going to be late, I mean more than a week, will you call?” “Yes, of course,” Harry replied, in a reassuring voice, “I’ll call if I stay longer, but I expect to be back without delay, so don’t worry. See you later babe!”

Harry went to the hall closet, pulled out his favorite silk scarf, grabbed his topcoat, hat, and gloves and dressed for the arctic Minnesota winter. He didn’t mind the cold. As long as he had adequate money, cold weather didn’t bother him at all.

He opened the door, stepped outside, and turned to close it firmly but quietly. He didn’t like the sound of slamming doors and didn’t want to startle Karen. He double-locked the door and wiggled the handle to make sure it was secure. Satisfied, he proceeded to the open garage, climbed into his 67’ Corvette, backed into the drive, closed the garage door with the remote, and headed off to meet Harold Irvine.

Harold was feeling exceptionally good. His sexual appetite had been satisfied. His subconscious was released to other endeavors. He would shop today for some odds and ends for his curio cabinet. Perhaps something of a collectible, he had always wanted an ancient Roman coin and decided on impulse to find one today. “To hold in my hand money from 2,000 years ago!” He relished the thought of sharing a common experience with another human being spanning two millennia. With an ancient coin in hand, he could do just that.

He walked toward Sears, halted for a moment just outside the entrance eyeing a young boy wearing chromed cap guns, a cowboy hat, cowboy boots, and spurs. The kid couldn’t have been seven years old. The sight brought back distant memories of lost innocence. Harold wistfully thought how nice it would be if people didn’t grow up. He shook his head with a slight sigh and entered the store heading toward the ladies’ department. Always on the prowl, he noticed immediately a strikingly handsome though somewhat soft-looking man just to the right of the fitting mirror rummaging through a shopping bag. Harold thought lewdly, “I’d like to rummage through his pants.”

The man looked up toward Harold then abruptly walked off to the right, opposite Harold’s established route. As he did so, their eyes met very briefly. That momentary gaze was striking because it erased Harold’s sexual interest

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in the stranger, in an instant. So disturbing was it that Harold had to suppress a sudden feeling of panic, averting his eyes as he walked away. He was very uneasy and wanted to get away as fast as he could without betraying his obvious fear. As he walked further toward the main mall, he looked back over his shoulder. The man with the scary blue vacant eyes was gone. Harold had the oddest sensation; what he thought a blood- sugar imbalance must feel like, accompanied by sudden perspiration in a shopping center that was just a little more than cold, a sensation accompanied by a strong feeling of internal shaking without any visible confirmation. He held his hand out. It was as still as death. "What the fuck's wrong with me? Jesus, I feel like shit! I've got to get something in my stomach," he thought, half out loud, looking about furtively, not fully understanding his sudden fear.

Perhaps it was some instinctual telepathy or prescience, but the fear Harold was experiencing left him an instant before his life ended in a flashing explosion as the round from Harry's .44 painlessly blew most of his head off. That explosion and its attendant concussion horrified everyone within 100 feet of Harold's head. Then, just as they seemed to recover from that initial shock, a mind-wrenching vision of brains, blood and skull fragments crept into their awareness, splattered in a terrifying yet distinctly radiating pattern from where the dead man had been standing. One woman started screaming so loud that everyone focused momentarily on her. It was as though her lungs had the limitless capacity; she just kept screaming. Everyone was in a daze but would later realize that this shooting was not at all like those described in the news or portrayed on television or in the movies. This shooting was to be the most frightening experience of their lives, and yet, not one of them saw Harry. As it turned out, not even the cameras saw Harry. The security officer had called in sick the night before, and his surrogate missed that little detail. He never turned them on. Harry was lucky, again.

The Mayor of Washington Park was a very successful investor and the proud father of three athletic sons. As he listened to the NBC affiliate describe the gory scene at Chicago Ridge Mall's Sears store, he grew nauseous. The Mayor was one of those who financed Harry's mission, but the thought that this man Harold Irvine, this aspiring Scoutmaster would be savagely murdered by Harry shook him to the core. "My God!" he thought, "He killed him!" On another level, the Mayor was pleased. He didn't want to deal with the cadre of rebels that would take up Mr. Irvine's case, the ACLU, ACT UP, the local colleges, and others he considered infected with a liberal bias destructive of the mores and civility of America he had grown up and been comfortable with. "Fuck it," he thought. "They'll never catch

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him anyway, and I didn't make \$100 million by not taking a few chances. It's just another chance I had to take for my family, and even if they caught him, they'd never connect it to me, not in a thousand years."

The Mayor was right. They never would catch Harry; nobody would catch Harry, ever. They would never even know if it was a man or a woman who shot Harold Irvine. There wasn't a clue. They weren't even sure of the motive, although it was an execution-style killing.

Harold Irvine, it turned out, was essentially unimportant.

The case was closed. Nobody gave a shit about Harold Irvine.

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