

Congratulations to L. Stanley for taking my opening line and creating such a gripping story for our short story contest. Great voice. Nice flow. Well-drafted. Enjoy!

--Steven James

## How I Got Saved: Testimony Night on Cell Block C

by L. Stanley Roeleveld

Murder never goes as planned. That's what the old coot used to tell us boys. For the rest of them, it was a deterrent. I took it as a challenge.

It did take a long time to plot out. I'll give him that. He didn't know a lot about a lot of things but the things he did know, he knew well.

Like, he knew a dozen different ways to serve hot dogs and beans, adding a little of this or that, so it didn't seem like you were eating the same meal seven days in a row. Also, he knew how to target an easy mark from a block away and he was never wrong. He could smell gullible on the slightest breeze and spot stupid walking towards him at a hundred paces. Yup, Pa was a grifter extraordinaire. I'll give him that, too.

He could have been someone I admired except the only thing he knew about raising kids was finding ways to make 'em wish they hadn't been born. Waking up in his house every morning was like seeing a puppy running toward you only to watch it get smashed beneath the wheels of a big-rig right before it leaps into your arms.

A lady at church camp told me that summer that if I didn't give my life to Jesus, I'd spend eternity in the torments of hell. "That won't be nothing new to me, ma'am." I'd muttered, which made her shake her head like I was a lost cause and tell me she'd be praying for my immortal soul.

Her daughter was in my kid-sister's group that week and she treated Mandy like a normal person, not like a poor kid there on scholarship. Mandy even smiled some the last couple of days. So, for a while, I waited to see if the church lady's prayers made any big difference in my life. I think her daughter being nice to Mandy made some stupid part of me think maybe there was a God and just maybe He would listen to this lady and, you know, come save me.

'Course, He didn't. One night, the old man broke Mandy's wrist 'cuz she didn't move fast enough fetching him the TV remote. Right then, I hated that church lady and her stupid kid for giving me the lame idea to hope things might change. So, I gave up waiting and started planning.

You can't be stupid and pull off a murder exactly as planned. There were no valedictorians in our family tree but the old man theorized that we're just too smart not to be bored by conventional methods of education. That must be true because I attacked this project like I was fixin' to get my PhD in homicide. I was brilliant, gifted even, in murder.

I researched execution methods and ways to dispose of a weapon. I staked out the setting. I monitored the routines and habits of my target. Put myself on a strict physical training regimen as if I was competing in the freakin' murder Olympics. Got Pa to teach me to shoot. Downright poetic.

And, of course, I kept a notebook, recording every detail, since what I was doing was trying to make a point.

One night, I came home and a state worker had taken Mandy and the three little guys away. Pa said some church do-gooder probably turned him in, out of spite, for not donating when they asked. Hollered they'd have taken us older boys, too, if he hadn't lied, protected us, said we were staying with relatives. I went crazy on him when he told me he didn't know where they took Mandy. Said he'd beat me with his old shinai stick from his karate days if I even tried to find out.

I ran off, sleeping in the woods for days until I started puking and shivering with a fever. Weird how when you're sick, alls you want is your own bed even if your bed is in hell. I crawled in the back door during *Wheel of Fortune* and all the old coot said was, "Jamie, grab me a beer on your way through."

Well, I figured if I didn't die from that sickness, there was no God 'cuz that would have been His perfect opportunity to stop me from doing what I was planning to do. For six more weeks, I rehearsed, using stray cats for practice. To prevent nerves, I even built up a tolerance for cheap whiskey. Pa called it "courage in a bottle," and I figured when it came to actually doing the deed I'd be needing that courage and a clear head. Little by little, I could handle the necessary amount of liquor without it muddling my thinking process. By October, I was ready.

It went exactly as I planned.

I even wrote that in the notebook. I sat right there on the blood-spattered linoleum of their kitchen. I popped open the Coke the church lady had just set on the table for her husband before I interrupted their Sunday meal. I described, in detail, how I broke in during church, waited in the pantry for them to sit, shot the church lady first, then the dad, the boy, the girl. Pop, pop, pop, pop, executed precisely as planned. Easier than shootin' cats.

Pa had no idea what he was talking about and I proved it.

That's what I thought anyway.

When I finished all the writing and the church lady's husband's Coke, I was pumped and peckish. I knew from my planning that none of their closest neighbors would be home until evening. People might not even discover the dead little family until Monday. So, I figured it wouldn't do any harm to check out the fridge, fix myself a sandwich. Not like anyone there was going to miss a little lunchmeat.

As I reached for the handle, I noticed some photos with sticky notes on them. Missionary cards of smiling families with notes that said, "Pray for strength." "Pray for language learning." "Pray for safe travel." Stupid. Pointless. Boring.

I snorted. More useless prayers.

But then, right in the middle of all the families, there was Mandy's face. It was a shot of her and the girl I'd just shot in the chest hugging and smiling at summer camp. The neon pink post-it note stuck to the picture said, "Pray for Mandy and her brothers to know how much Jesus loves them and wants to forgive them."

Man, I hadn't planned on the crazy sick guilt that slammed into my head and stomach as I read that note over and over right next to Mandy's sweet little face. I hadn't planned on screaming out for God to take back what I had just done, screaming loud enough for the people two houses down to call the cops. I sure hadn't planned on confessing everything to the responding officers, even though I didn't have to, since it was all right there in the stupid notebook I kept for my father, who turned out to be right after all.