

STAR CROSSED

A NICK CREED SHORT STORY

Kurt Ellis



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The door to the interrogation room opened and Nicholas Creed stuck his head in. 'You Evan?'

Evan Muncie sat behind a metal table on a metal chair, both pieces of furniture bolted to the floor. His hands were in tight fists and rested on the surface. Although he had the body and face of a scrawny teenager, he had the eyes of an octogenarian. The bags beneath them looked as if they carried more than his twenty-four years on this planet.

He blinked at Creed, but he didn't respond.

'I'm Nick.' Creed walked into the room with a big smile. He reached out his hand. The suspect took it. 'I work with the FBI,' said Creed. He placed a thick file gagging with paper on the table top.

The chair across from Muncie was not bolted to the cement. Creed grabbed the back of it and dragged it around the table, next to Muncie. 'You don't mind if I sit here, do you?'

Creed didn't wait for an answer before flopping into the chair with an audible groan.

*

Douglas Redman pressed the pause button on the remote control of the DVD player. The footage of Creed projected onto the wall froze just as his buttocks touched the chair padding.

Red, as his colleagues called him, turned to the first-year FBI cadets in his interrogation-techniques lecture. 'Did you see what just happened?'

This was not a rhetorical question. He was hoping for an answer, but no one responded. Red was disappointed but he wasn't clueless. He knew what his reputation meant to many of the newbies who joined the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and it would take them time to get over being intimidated by him.

'In less than a minute, Special Agent Nicholas Creed psychologically knocked Muncie on his ass. Remember, before this,' he pointed at the paused interrogation footage, 'Bartlett PD had been going at him hard for over two hours and when the FBI came in, we went at him hard again for another hour, but he wouldn't break. He wouldn't be intimidated. You see,' Red said, walking closer to the class of thirty-two men and women, 'many unsubs know the risk of what they're doing. They

know they may become suspects and therefore they imagine what their interrogation would be like. They plan for it accordingly. This is what Muncie did.'

He walked back to the podium. 'He was prepared for the barrage and intimidation of the police, but he was not prepared for Agent Creed. His first question – Are you Evan? A simple question that got Muncie thinking "yes", even if he didn't say "yes". A small yet crucial step in getting him to become agreeable. He then introduced himself as Nick, who works for the FBI. His first name only and no title. Not "Special Agent Nick Creed", but simply "Nick". Just a regular guy meeting another regular guy and not the suspect in four child abductions, and three rapes and murders. They shake hands. Friends. He calls him Evan. Just Evan. Creed then goes even further by asking Muncie's permission to sit, and when he does, he sits next to him. Not across from him. Not placing himself as an adversary, but as a potential ally. At this point, Muncie is completely confused and doesn't know what to make of him.'

Red pressed play on the remote and the footage started again.

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'This heat is ridiculous, man.' Creed leaned back in the chair and undid his tie. He dropped it on the table. 'How do you stand it?'

A half-dozen seconds passed before Muncie shrugged. 'You get used to it after a while, I guess.'

'Well, I don't intend to test that theory, buddy, 'cause I want to get outta here as soon as possible.'

'Where you from?' Muncie turned his shoulders slightly to face Creed.

'I told you, I work for the FBI.'

'Nah, man. I mean your accent. Where do you come from?'

'Oh, Virginia.' Creed held a deadpan stare for a second, before laughing hard. He slapped Muncie on the shoulder as if they were old buddies. 'Nah man, I'm just kidding. I'm from South Africa. You heard of South Africa?'

'Yeah, I think. That Mandela guy, right? Apartheid?'

'Yeah, that's the place.'

'So how the hell did you get here?'

‘A ridiculously expensive plane ticket, I can tell you.’ Another laugh. ‘You ever been to Africa?’

Muncie shook his head. ‘Nah, too hot for me.’

*

Red pressed pause. ‘Notice the words Creed uses when talking to him. More importantly, the ones like *outta*, *yeah* and *nah*. The same words and phrases that Muncie uses. And the joke and pat on the shoulder. Again, all to break down Muncie’s prepared defences. Muncie was prepared for an attacker, not a potential friend. And we can see Muncie is starting to see Creed as a non-threat. You know how?’

‘He replied with a joke of his own?’ a handsome cadet offered.

‘Exactly.’

‘Sir,’ another cadet started. ‘Is that accent real?’

Red nodded. ‘His accent is real. Creed is South African.’

He pressed play.

*

‘You should visit it, man,’ Creed continued. ‘You’d love it. Anyhoo, we’re about to get you outta here. Sorry for wastin’ your time, but before I can do that, I need to go over your statement one more time.’ Creed slithered in closer, as if to share a secret with him. ‘Between me and you, these people have no cookin’ clue what they’re doin’ here, but you never heard that from me.’ He sat back. ‘I just wanna go over a few things with you here, to make sure we got everythin’ one hundred percent correct. You don’t mind, do you?’

Muncie smiled, ‘No problem. Shoot.’

‘Super, let me just get my head around these notes.’ Creed opened the file and pretended to read. ‘You’re a bus driver, right?’

Muncie nodded.

‘And these girls were passengers on your bus?’

‘That’s what they tell me. I didn’t know none of them, though.’

‘But there’re people who say they’ve seen you talkin’ to the girls. All friendly like.’

‘Man,’ Muncie said, trying to throw his hands in the air with frustration, but the restraints prevented that. ‘I talk to a lot of people, all friendly like. I don’t remember all of them.’

Creed nodded. 'That's expected. I mean, how many people go on and off your bus daily?'

'I can't even count that high.'

'And between you and me, I don't trust people. People only see what they want to see, you know what I mean?'

'I do.'

'Aight, let's move on.' Creed turned a page. 'You were previously arrested though for sexual assault.'

Muncie tensed and was about to reply when Creed raised his hand. 'No need to respond, buddy. I can clearly see the truth of what happened here. I see it all the time. You were just playin' with that girl and she blew it way out of proportion. I tell you somethin', if I had a dollar for every time I saw something like this, I'd have enough money to buy every room in this damn station an aircon.'

*

Pause.

'Creed is building a report,' Red started. 'He's raising the conviction of Muncie for molesting a girl in the park when he was fifteen years old and she was eight. He's telling Muncie that he knows his history, a history that would repulse most people, but not Creed. In fact, Creed is playing this assault off as something that's not important. Even acceptable. This is exactly the same way Muncie sees it. As any paedophile sees it.'

He pressed play once again.

*

Creed closed his eyes as if frustrated. 'It just ain't right. You know what?' Creed looked around, as if he was concerned that someone else had magically manifested into the room. 'I work for the law, but you know, sometimes the law makes no sense to me. Like, do you know in Singapore, you can go to jail for chewing gum?'

'No shit?'

'Not a single grain of shit, my friend. That's the law there. How does that make sense? I always tell people, there's a difference between what's right and what's the law.'

'How'd you mean?'

‘Okay, look at the US for example. Look at prohibition. Alcohol was illegal then, but now it’s not. Look at pot. You could do twenty-five years or more in jail for a joint, but now many states are legalising it. You see what I mean? Laws be changin’ all the time.’

‘Yeah, I know that.’

‘So, who’s to say what the law’ll be like in a year or two? What’s illegal now may be legal tomorrow.’ Creed sighed. ‘And why’s something that’s legal here not legal somewhere else? It’s trivial. Look here, here in Tennessee, age of consent is eighteen, but just next door, in Alabama, it’s sixteen. Why’s there this difference?’ Creed shook his head. ‘You should have been born in Alabama, my friend. Or even Yemen.’

‘Yemen?’ Muncie leaned forward, hanging onto Creed’s words.

‘Yeah, in Yemen, a girl is legal the moment she reaches puberty.’

‘No shit?’

‘None. And there are many countries out there that are similar. Morocco, it’s fifteen, Niger, it’s thirteen. Shit, right close by, Mexico, it’s twelve.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘As a heart attack. When you done here, we should go down there and I’ll show you.’

‘Shit. I never knew that.’

‘Hell, come to South Africa. Our age of consent is twelve as well.’

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‘I want to pause it right here.’ Red scratched his nose. ‘Everything Creed has said so far, although simplified, is accurate. He’s not lying, except with the last bit. The age of consent in South Africa is not twelve; it’s sixteen.’

Red glanced at the floor of the lecture theatre as he continued. ‘Sometimes, in an interrogation, you’ll need to lie. But be very, very careful with your lies, because if you slip up and get caught out, it will cause the suspect to shut you down completely. They will lose all trust in you. In my opinion, Creed achieved his objective – getting Muncie to view legal age of consent as being trivial – without that lie at the end. But hey, remember, Creed had only joined the BAU four months earlier on an exchange programme from the South African Police. This was

his first solo interrogation with us, and so far, he's getting ninety-nine out of a hundred.'

'But this line of questioning sir,' started a young woman at the front of the class. She looked almost twelve herself, the same age as Muncie's victims. 'Did this not disturb you, or at least the locals?'

Red recalled standing with the lead detective Ray Dubois as he sucked on a toothpick on the other side of the two-way mirror, watching the interview unfold. '*I swear, if he fucks this up, I'm holdin' you personally responsible,*' he had threatened. '*I will make sure the girls' families and the damn media know this as well.*'

Red nodded. 'If it doesn't make you uncomfortable, then you're not human. But because it makes you uncomfortable doesn't mean you shouldn't use it. Remember, Kerry Bryson was still missing but we believed that she could still be alive. Based on the autopsies of the other three victims, we were able to determine that they were alive for days after the kidnapping before they actually died of dehydration. Kerry had been missing for four days. Dehydration can kill you after only three. There was still a chance. A small one, but a chance nonetheless. And we needed to find her fast.'

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'If you ask me,' Creed continued, 'it's all hypocritical. Especially here in the West. You guys idolise them ancient Greek and Roman cultures, yet it was common for those guys to take young lovers. I mean, what's the greatest love story of all time?' He didn't wait for Muncie to reply. '*Romeo and Juliet*: am I right?'

Muncie shrugged. 'I guess so. We did it in school, I remember.'

'Exactly. The greatest love story of all time, but you know how old Juliet was? She was thirteen, buddy. Thirteen. We idolise this as the ultimate love story yet when this kinda love happens in real life, then it's deemed illegal.'

Muncie laughed. 'You sound offended.'

'I am. It's bullshit, because it doesn't only mess us guys up, but the girls.' He leaned forward. 'My friend, the first time I went to a mall here, I was blown away. The girls? The way they dressed?' he hissed lasciviously through his teeth. 'Mmm, mmm, mmm. They know what they're

doing. They know what they want. Biologically, they know what they want, but now because of these stupid laws, they're bein' told it's wrong. In their heart, they know it's right but ...' he shook his head. 'It's not right, bud, what society does to these girls. I can tell you, at first, when you make love to a girl, no matter her age, they always feel guilty. They're gonna cry because yeah, it hurts too, but it's mainly the guilt. They feel like they did somethin' wrong, but in a day or two, they realise that this is right. Hell, they even fall in love with the guy.'

*

'If you've read the case file, you would see our profile of the unsub. We know the victims all died of dehydration. We know that they were all raped before their deaths, but we also saw signs of their injuries healing. The bodies were all discovered on the side of a busy road and ...'

'Dumped like trash,' a cadet spat.

'Quite the opposite,' Red corrected. 'Yes, it may look like that at first glance, but that's not accurate. Being dumped on the side of the road could mean one of two things.' He raised a finger: 'Either they are indeed trash to the unsub and he discards them like an empty soda can, or,' he raised a second digit, 'he wants them to be discovered. These roads, although busy, cut right through some of the thickest woodland you'd ever see. He could easily have hidden the bodies to never be found again, but he didn't. Furthermore, the girls were dressed and they were wrapped in a blanket, including their faces. This is a sign of remorse. No, this unsub wasn't dumping them. He was giving the girls back, if you will.'

'How can he feel remorse for what he did, if he did it four times?'

'Because it's a compulsion. Based on the healed and healing wounds on the victims, we believe the unsub assaulted them on the very first day of the abduction, imprisoned them somewhere and never went back to see them until weeks had passed. Haven't we all done something in the heat of a moment that we regret later? A late-night call to an ex? A drunken one-night stand? This is the same with this unsub. The sick desire inside him builds and builds until he feels like he's going to burst, so he abducts a girl and lives out his fantasy. But once the fantasy is done – and remember, for these guys the reality is never as good

as the fantasy – he’s left with a broken, crying victim and his guilt. He couldn’t stand to see them like that, nor could he release them as they could identify him, so he just left them there and pretended that they never existed. Until that desire rose again in a few days, but by then they’d already died, so he gave them back.’

Red pressed play

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‘In psychology, it’s called the Socrates principle,’ Creed started.

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Red paused the video long enough to say, ‘In reality, it’s called bullshit.’

Some in the class laughed.

‘Another lie by Creed, but this one I feel is necessary. Creed is telling Muncie that these desires that he grew up knowing were wrong are actually not his fault and are not uncommon. They even have a name. And maybe he shouldn’t be ashamed by them. But that is bullshit. There’s no such thing as the Socrates principle. Remember though, if you’re going to lie, make sure you don’t get caught.’

He rewound the interview for a few seconds before pressing play again.

*

‘In psychology, it’s called the Socrates principle. I’ve seen it many times. After the first sexual encounter, the girl feels guilty. May even cry and make accusations, but eventually, they realise that there’s nothin’ wrong with makin’ love.’

Muncie looked down at the table, the smile no longer on his face.

‘That’s what you did with them, right. You made love?’

Muncie didn’t reply.

‘There’s nothin’ wrong with that. And I know they told you that when you went back to see them. That they loved you.’

‘I never ...’ Muncie’s words dissolved into the silence.

‘Sorry?’

‘I nev ... never went back.’ It was almost a whisper.

Creed sat back, his mouth slightly open in a caricature of surprise. ‘Oh, man. I’m so sorry. I mean, if you had, you would have seen how much they loved you. You loved them, right?’

Muncie nodded. 'I really did, but like you said – these laws, man; they make it impossible to love who you love.'

'I know. It's not your fault.' Creed tapped himself on the chest. 'We need to take responsibility for what happened to these girls. Not you.' He sighed.

'Do ...' Muncie looked at the mirror, then back down at his fingers. 'Is the Socrates principle accurate every time?'

'Every time, buddy. Every single time.'

'You think ... Kerry ... she might ...' He searched for the words in the palms of his hands. 'You think Kerry might be in love with me?'

'She probably was. It's just a shame that it's too late to ask her now.'

'It might not be.'

Creed's only visible reaction was his jaw muscles rippling once. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean, she's only been in the cabin for three days, you know. She might be not ... you know.'

'I know, but it takes three days to die from dehydration, buddy. It may be too late to ask her. Unless I can get to her now.'

Muncie nodded. He ran a hand through his greasy hair. 'The cabin is warm, though.'

'That may help, but warmth ain't water.'

Muncie nodded. 'If I tell you where she is, will you ask her if she loves me?'

'Of course, and I'll bet you she does. I can guarantee it.'

'You sure?'

'One hundred and ten percent.'

Muncie nodded and stared at his hands for over a minute. Finally, he began, 'My stepdad took me up to this cabin once, to hunt for deer, you know, before he left my mom. Nobody uses it any more now, because all the deer are gone, but the cabin's still there.'

'Is that where she is?'

Muncie nodded.

'Aight, let me go ask her.' Creed stood and walked to the door.

'And you'll tell me what she says, right?'

'You have my word.'

*

‘We picked the stepfather up and he took us to the cabin. We got to her in time.’

Red sighed as he recalled the day Kerry Bryson was found. He and Creed had stayed behind at the station while Bartlett Police and a few of his FBI team went to the cabin. The next day, Creed and Red went to see this so-called cabin themselves, barely bigger than an outhouse. They stood outside and just stared at it. At the paint that was peeling like dead, sunburnt skin. At the grey wood being eaten by rot.

Red blinked hard to bring himself back to the present. ‘This interrogation is perhaps the best I’ve ever seen. It was well planned and well executed. This is what you want to be aiming for.’

‘I don’t think I’d be able to do what he did,’ a cadet said. ‘To smile and get chummy with this sicko. I don’t think I could act that well, and if I could, I don’t think my soul would be able to stand it.’

Red recalled the phone call he had received from one of his team to say that they had found Kerry alive. Creed had been standing next to him, as still as a pillar, but the moment Creed heard that she was alive, he collapsed to his knees and began to dry heave until tears ran down his cheeks. The things he’d had to say and do to find her had emotionally drained him. They made him feel psychically sick, but once the nausea had subsided, he stormed into the interrogation room.

‘Is she ...’

That was all Muncie managed to say before Creed grabbed him by the collar and slammed his face into the table. His anger and repulsion caused the saliva in his mouth to froth in the corner of his lips.

‘You fucking piece of shit,’ Creed hissed.

Red was about to pull him off when Creed released Muncie himself and stormed out of the room.

Red’s thoughts returned to the present. ‘You’ll be surprised by what you’re willing and capable of doing when an innocent life is at stake.’

The End