

I. Matter

By: Brandon Fries

I sat in the crowded room wanting to stand out—wanting to be different. I looked at the faces surrounding me; each one different from the last. Whether it be their skin color, their facial dimensions, or how their frowns created a ripple of wrinkles, each face contorted into something completely unique—something special. But I never felt that way. I felt normal—average. Yet, I grew up desiring so much more.

I remember Carl was hailed as the best athlete in high school. No matter the season, he was always deemed the captain. Soccer—Check. Football—Check. Basketball—Check. Swimming—Check.

Alyson was by far the smartest in the school and went on to be a member of Mensa—she’s probably working on a resolution to save the Polar Bears.

They didn’t have obstacles like I did.

The Yearbook Club even conspired against me by choosing almost everyone in my class to be “most likely to do something,” but mention of me was conveniently left out.

I used to think, ‘Maybe high school isn’t my time to shine.’ But college came and went, along with my twenties, thirties, and an obligatory midlife crisis. I married a plain-Jane-type and managed to get her pregnant—but only once. That’s all it took, or maybe that’s all I had in me.

Work was oppressive, tedious, and boring—just another cog in the machine of a Midwest factory. Every day doing my part to help the boss purchase another vacation home. Clock in. Do enough. Clock out. Five days a week. Eight hours a day. Boring as fuck. I ached to stand out—to matter. My desire marinated in the background. I needed meaning—I was meant for more.

They say that “luck” is preparation meeting opportunity, and a year ago, my “luck” finally hit. It was one of those clichéd Midwest Summer’s day—the sun was out, it was hot, it was humid, it was beautiful. That day I woke up feeling different—not average, not normal, but alive. I went to my job ready to absolutely kill it. I wasn’t going to half-ass anything anymore. I was going to go all out and make sure that people would remember me—that my name would stand

out—that I would be a highlight on the local news, or mentioned in *The New York Times*. I was giddy watching highlight reels play out in my mind—my name and my picture plastered on every television and newspaper across the city, the state, the nation, the world.

After work, I came home anxious to fall into the arms of my wife, but instead was greeted by her usual look of dissatisfaction. I ignored her disdain and passed through along the squeaky kitchen floor. As I walked by her, she followed—raising her nagging voice and hammering the air with a blend of primitive vowel sounds. Unable to make any sense of her idle aggressions, I dismissed all she said and walked to our baby boy taking his afternoon nap in the nursery.

I used to think having a little boy running around would give me meaning—that I’d be the center of someone’s world, but this little boy was Mama’s boy. I loved him, but his eye was always on her, but today, I didn’t care. I felt great and I just needed—I just deserved a deep, long hug—and if that nag wouldn’t give it to me, I would get the attention needed from him.

I flung the door open and whisked him out of the crib. He cried and squirmed, because he needed my love—my attention. I swaddled him and wrapped him in my arms to calm him down. His cries grew louder while that hateful woman continued her berating from the other room. I just wanted him to be quiet, but he kept crying—so I pressed him deeper into my chest until finally there was silence—yes, against my beating heart, he fell dead asleep. I laid him down in his crib and heard his mama clatter out the front door, start her car, and leave. Finally, the peace I wanted was mine.

That was a great day—that day led me here—the day I have always wanted. A day where my life is all that everyone can think about.

I sit quietly hearing them talk about me in the background. A gentle smirk crosses my face as they repeatedly call out my name. This is the greatest day of my life.

Then a hush washed over the room and I look up to see Carl looking down at me, and in his deep gravelly voice, he coldly states, “Guilty.”

I. Finally. Matter.