

Hit and Run

by Bob Rich

How a blind old man helped me

A blind old gentleman was referred to me as a victim of crime. A teenage gang had beaten him up and hurt his old seeing-eye dog.

You can't do therapy when you share your client's emotions; if the issue becomes personal for you. I needed to do something about my outrage.

So, on the evening after our first session, I started a story I could invest the emotion in. I invented old Sylvia, who witnessed a horrendous crime.

I thought the story would be one of just retribution, but... but once you create a character, that person comes to life. Sylvia had different ideas. The story has become one of compassion, and changing the unchangeable through love.

This is why Sylvia has become dear to me, one of my teachers. I hope you will also make her special in your life, and learn from her.

What happened to the blind gentleman? I did manage to work with him. We had four sessions, at the end of which he once more felt able to walk around his neighbourhood without undue anxiety. He resumed his previous activities and got on with life.

How did I guide him to this achievement?

In the same way Dr Vlad guided Sylvia in the story. After all, Vlad is one of my students.

1.

As I opened the front door, the broad-shouldered, dark haired man said, "Good afternoon, Mrs Kryz. I'm Vlad Stavrou, the psychologist sent by Victims' Services."

I invited him in, settled us with a cup of tea, and a plate of my latest baking for him, and waited. I'd never dealt with a psychologist before, and didn't know what to expect.

He put down his cup, saying, "Just tell me about last Friday morning please. Make me feel I was there, I was you."

So, I started.

If I wasn't an old girl of eighty-four, I'd be dead too.

Not that I care — I'd be better off dead than the way I am. I haven't slept since it happened. Every time I close my eyes, I see the horribly mutilated little bodies, and Naomi's white crossing supervisor uniform covered in deep red blotches and bits of her brain, and his gloating face as he flashed by.

It was on purpose. I saw it in the leer of his eyes, his half-open mouth. He looked like a naughty kid snatching a chocolate bar off the shelf before running out of the shop.

If I'd been able to walk as fast as the children, I'd have been among them, beside Naomi, but I was a few steps behind, leaning on my wheelie frame, so he missed me. I felt the wind of the red car's passing, smelt the stink of its exhaust, was close enough for blood to splatter my stockings and the bottom of my dress. He missed my wheelie frame by inches.

Six lovely little children, none over seven years old I'd say. And kind, fat Naomi who always had a laugh for everyone, and was out there twice a day during school term, whatever the weather.

Dead. Killed. Snuffed out in an instant of terror.

And me, I live.

At first I felt nothing, only saw a meaningless painting of red and grey blots until some of the blots moved, I guess the twitches after death, and the horror swam into focus. A few seconds ago, that thing with the moving arm had been Shane, cheeky, with a freckled face and a gap-toothed grin. I'd often said hello to his mother. That broken doll had been a bright little girl with red plaits. She'd been singing the alphabet when the car appeared from nowhere.

Oh, how could he?

Why?

People appeared, probably within seconds but I have no idea of the time. Someone led me away, gently, and took me into her house, across the road from the school. I noticed an Australian flag next to the door.

When she saw me looking at it, the lady said, "My husband is a Justice of the Peace. Come in, my dear."

Soon I was in a deep armchair with a hot water bottle behind my back and a hot sweet cup of tea.

Nevertheless, I was still shaking when the police arrived. It was a woman and a man. She asked the questions, kindly enough, while he scribbled.

"Mrs Kryz, do you think you could identify this man?"

"Hmm, more a boy than a man. Well, all young men seem like boys to me, but he didn't look like he was shaving yet. You know, baby-face skin."

"You saw that in such a short space of time?"

If... if my hands weren't shaking like this, I could draw him for you."

She perked up at that.

“At home, I can show you a few drawings. As a young woman, I often fed my children by doing a portrait for a pound. I’ve had people come up to me in the street, telling me they still have the drawing I’d made of them as children.”

“Wonderful! Mrs Kryz, when you’re up to it, draw him, please. Then...” she gave me a business card, “...phone me and I’ll rush to your place. I want him.” She looked like an eagle swooping on prey. Maybe she was a mother too.

Eventually I felt well enough to go home, and my kind hostess drove me there. I put my clothes to soak and had a shower and another cup of tea, then got out my crayons and sketchbook. Crayons are my favourite medium. But, thinking of the purpose of the exercise, I also found my coloured pens. This one required sharp lines.

I closed my eyes for a moment, opened them and drew. There is the red car — faded, powdery red. Square shape of the car, silver grille and bumper bar. New cars don’t seem to have those. His head a pale blur at this stage. No P plate. That surprised me. Maybe, he is older than he looks? If you pass your test the first possible time at 18, you’d have to be 21 for the full licence. I couldn’t read the number plate... PL something?

I got a fresh sheet of drawing paper. Naomi, frozen, half-facing the roar of the car. She holds her STOP on a stick as if it would act as a barrier. Around her, the little figures, all with heads turned left, toward death. Looming on the left side, the car. I want to stay realistic but cannot: it’s huge, a juggernaut, a giant red-and-silver monster. You can see it move on the paper.

My hand hurt from having gripped the pens so tightly. I looked at my watch — heavens, three o’clock and I hadn’t had lunch!

A couple of dry biscuits with cheese and a cup of tea are enough for an old bird, before returning to work.

The car, almost side-on, was in front of me as I closed my eyes. A moment, then I opened them and my hand drew. As always, I felt no control of the process, merely watched shapes appear.

His face, the expression, almost of ecstasy, the staring pale blue eye I could see from one side, untidy mop of light brown hair, black T-shirt. A cigarette poking forward from his mouth, the wisp of smoke visible.

The car... scratches around the keyhole, and up higher, under the black rubber lining the window. I carefully drew them in. I realised, he stole that car. Probably, he stole the car in order to kill someone, anyone.

I glanced over the three drawings. Satisfied, sprayed them with a light protective coating.

Another hour had passed. Once more, I was exhausted, but got out the policewoman’s card. Detective Sergeant Jemima Johnson. I chose her mobile number, not wanting to go through endless switchboards and “We’ll pass on your message.”

She answered on the third ring and I introduced myself.

“You have the drawings?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there in half an hour. Got your address in the files.”

“And I’ll have the jug on.”

While waiting for her, I took out my crayons again, and did a quick sketch of her face, with the fierceness on it when she’d said, “I want him.” I sprayed it too, and put it to dry. I took off my glasses to rest my eyes for a few moments, sitting relaxed and drained.

It took her about twenty minutes. Her car was red too, but a shiny new one, a low-slung thing that looked like a sports car. It had no bumper bar.

“Good evening, Mrs Kryz,” she said and that’s when I realised that indeed it was evening.

I sat her on my couch, passed over my drawing of her, and made my all too slow way to the kitchen.

As I returned with a tray carrying the teapot – I hate teabags – cups, saucers, sugar, milk, and a plate of biscuits I’d baked yesterday for my great-grandchildren’s expected visit tomorrow, she smiled at me. “Mrs Kryz, I’m sorry, I don’t have a pound.”

“Have it for free then. Just catch him. That’ll be reward enough for me.”

I eased myself into my chair. She poured, added milk, then so did I. She didn’t take sugar, but sampled my baking, her face reflecting delight.

I passed over a manila folder.

She opened it and looked at the first drawing. Her mouth half opened, and she stopped breathing for a long moment. She looked at the other two drawings in turn.

“Marvellous,” she finally whispered. “That’s a 1960s Holden, I don’t remember the model name, but it’s clearly identifiable. Few of them still around. Easy to steal.”

I drew her attention to the scratches on the door, and she nodded.

“Mrs Kryz, do you want a job as a police artist?”

We both laughed.

She said, “Oh, I have a typed copy of your statement. Could you please read it, make any corrections, and then sign it?”

I did so.

She finished her tea, put all four drawings in the folder and stood to go.

I showed her to the door. Unexpectedly, she gave me a great, warm hug.

As I’ve said, I couldn’t sleep that night. Whenever I closed my eyes I was THERE, replaying the horror, over and over. Finally, maybe at 4 a.m., I got up, put on my dressing gown and turned on the TV. It was, of all things, a horror movie. I switched channels but everything was equally unsuitable. I picked up the last book I’d borrowed from the library, but it might as well have been Chinese. I couldn’t take in a word.

Eyes on fire, I returned to bed, but as soon as I tried to sleep, I was back there, heard the roar of the engine, lived through it all again. So, I switched on my bedside lamp and looked at the white wall I could see. I projected his face, side on like I’d seen him, and demanded, “Why?”

Was I going crazy? The face turned, both eyes scowling at me. Below the shoulders was the whole boy, with the base of my bed cutting off the view of his legs. He wore a yellow T-shirt.

“F–n old bitch, ‘cause I hate everyone.” His voice was a baritone, at odds with his appearance. He could barely be sixteen, I thought.

“Why?”

What I got in response was such a filthy tirade that my mind shut down. He waved his arms, shouted dirty words the like of which I certainly didn’t know at his age, and I really expected him to attack me, but he just stood there. I found not one jot of sense or reason in any this.

At last, he came to a stop and glared at me, panting.

“I can see you’re angry,” I said, “but those lovely little children were not responsible for whatever is eating you.”

Then he really surprised me. “Get outa me dream!” he screamed.

He leaned forward as if struggling to come at me, but had his feet glued to the floor. Slowly he faded: the torso disappeared from the bottom up, until only the head was left. It glared at me for one more long moment, and was gone.

Daylight peeped in between the closed curtains.
 Had the shock driven me crazy? Maybe I'd fallen asleep and dreamt it?

I thought of cancelling my granddaughter-in-law's visit with her children, but decided this was exactly what might get me through the day. So, I showered and dressed, even forced down a piece of buttered toast, and got the toys out of their cupboard.

The doorbell rang, but it was a strange couple. At first sight, the woman looked beautiful, with wavy blonde hair and big blue eyes, but then I noticed it was all peripherals and paint. She smiled, and yet looked cold and calculating.

I only had the door half open when a blinding light hit me, and a fuzzy thing on a long stick descended, to one side.

The woman said, "Mrs Sylvia Kryz, you're on the news!"

Obviously, I was supposed to be thrilled. I shut the door.

Her voice rose an octave and a decibel. I hoped the microphone man had left it switched on. "Mrs Kryz! This is the news! You owe it to the people!"

I took a long breath to quieten my fury. "Go away. You're a vulture. You're as bad as that boy, callous, cruel and uncaring. Go away!"

All the many points of habitual pain in my body hurt more than ever, but I thought of a rescuer.

I hobbled to the phone and called Jemima Johnson.

Before I could speak, she said, "Mrs Kryz, what can I do for you?"

"Oh, how..."

She laughed. "Your number came up on my little screen."

The commotion was still going on outside my house.

"I... 'I'd be very grateful if you, um, the police, could chase the reporters away.'" Then I had a thought. "Also, I'll have another drawing for you."

"I'll organise something, and be over myself when I can."

"Oh, thank you. Thank you my dear."

"My pleasure." She sounded like she meant it, but disconnected. I guess she must be busy all the time.

My kitchen is the furthest room from the street, so I set up my drawing things on the benchtop there. That boy, full face... I had no business seeing him full face, but I had. My pens flew and there he was.

From the side, naturally, his eyebrow had been merely a little square protrusion. Now I'd drawn a perfect arch for the left one, while the right slightly curved up at the outside corner. He had a small, almost skin-coloured mole below the right eye. No one's ears are identical. Despite the mop of hair, I saw that the lobe of the right ear was slightly lower than the left. Also, his sneer exposed his teeth. The left top incisor was set slightly further in than the right. If he ever smiled, it'd look charming, but with the expression on the face, it added to his fierceness.

The doorbell dinged again soon after I'd finished, but I ignored it. Then the phone rang. A male voice said, "Mrs Kryz, this is Senior Constable Barton. We have cleared the street for you."

"Thank you."

We hung up. I looked at the clock, and put on the jug. Sure enough, it started its song when the doorbell sounded, and it was Molly with her three little darlings.

"Oh Nan," she said as she leaned down to give me a hug, "You've been in the wars, haven't you!"

"You're right about that, love. Only, the casualties were all too young." I suddenly saw it all: the little bodies twitching, Naomi's crushed head, smelt the blood

and exhaust fumes. I'd have fallen if Molly hadn't held me. My glasses fell to the floor.

She helped me to an armchair and eased me into it.

Sharna, Bilko and Elleney were looking on with big eyes. Funny names, I know, but that's modern mums for you. Sharna, all of seven, brought me my spectacles and climbed onto my lap. "Nan," she said, "I'm so glad the nasty man didn't hit you. I love you!"

Then the other two snuggled up to me too, and everything was all right.

Molly brought out a tray: tea for her and me, hot chocolate for the kids. She'd also found the biscuits. We'd barely started when the doorbell rang again. Molly answered it, and returned with Jemima Johnson.

She said, "Oh good, those bikkies again. That's why I came back, on a Saturday."

I told the kids, "Darlings, this lady is a police detective. She is going to catch the man who hit the children with a car."

Jemima did a little jig. "We've got the car, exactly as you drew it! Full of fingerprints, so if we ever find him, he's done."

Molly said, "I thought everyone knows about fingerprints now. Wouldn't he clean them off?"

"He doesn't care about being caught," I told them, convinced, but not knowing how I knew. "Sharna darling, can you please bring that folder to Detective Sergeant Johnson?"

Sharna did, and Jemima looked at the new drawing. "But how..."

"I don't know. In the small hours, something weird happened. Anyway, I believe that that's what he looks like from the front. That's unless I dreamt it."

Jemima accepted a cup of tea, then excused herself and rushed off. After another pleasant hour, Molly took her kids away too.

Somehow the day passed, although I was weary beyond belief. Even so, every time I closed my eyes, terror swallowed me. I dreaded the night.

I was cleaning my teeth when the phone rang. It was Jemima Johnson. "Mrs Kryz, I've been remiss and apologise. You qualify for immediate psychological help. Have you had nightmares, daytime flashbacks, stuff like that?"

"Have I ever!"

She dictated a phone number. "Phone them at 9 a.m. It's a free call, seven days a week. I've faxed them a report, so everything should go very fast."

"Thank you, but can a psychologist take away my memories?"

"Not my field. I wouldn't know what they do, but it works for many people. Please do it."

"Oh, I will, but old dog and new tricks, you know."

The night was a near-repeat of the previous one, except I didn't bother with TV or book. When I got sick of what I now knew to call flashbacks, I projected the boy's face onto the wall.

"You again, old c-t," he sneered. "Leave me alone! I got troubles enough!"

As he turned to face me, I saw a nasty bruise below his right eye.

"What happened to your face?"

"Why should ya f-n care? It's me so-called stepfather. The current one."

"How old are you?"

"F- off. None of your business."

"It isn't. Don't tell me if you don't want to."

"Fourteen, two weeks ago. Happy now, old bitch?"

His face was still twisted by anger, but tears squeezed out of his eyes, and ran unchecked, maybe unnoticed, down his cheeks.

"The police have found the car. Your fingerprints were all over it, and they know what you look like."

"Do I give a f—? They can't do nothing worse to me than the sh—t I've got now. Anyway, I'll just off meself. Only, I'll take a few with me. Them Arab suicide bombers got the right idea."

"You won't go to seventh heaven."

"What crap is that?"

"Those Arab suicide bombers do it in the mistaken belief that if they die killing infidels, they'll go to the highest heaven and live wonderfully forever. But if you accept their beliefs, your fate will be to burn in hell forever."

"F— off. Anyway, no hell is worse than this planet."

Despite what he'd done, I found myself feeling for him. I said, "Life is what you make it. You always have choices."

My reward was another deluge of invective. I saw him strain forward to attack me, but he couldn't move his feet. I didn't know if a mirage could hurt me, but felt relieved nonetheless.

When he came to a stop, I asked, "Could I make a suggestion?"

"Nah. F— off."

"Go to the police and give yourself up. Go peacefully."

He laughed, but it was the laughter of a wounded tiger.

"You're a minor. You won't go to jail, but to a juvenile centre. You'll get help, and it'll be a way out of your personal hell."

"Stick your opinion up you're a—e! Just f— off and leave me alone!"

"I don't know how to do that."

"What?"

"I'm not doing this on purpose. I can't help communicating with you."

"F— me dead! I thought you was a witch and cast a spell."

I laughed, and he laughed with me. I was right. When he was free of fury, he looked a very attractive boy. Somehow, this helped me, and perhaps helped him too. He disappeared. I turned off the light, and slept the couple of hours till morning.

At 9:05 a.m., I rang Victims' Services. I explained my transport difficulties – and here you are.