

I Am A Murderer

By STEPHEN FARRIS

“I AM a murderer.”
(Good start. That’s got them.)
“Principal Wright, members of the teaching staff, students. I’m not exaggerating; I am a murderer.”

(Pause, two, three, go)

“I say that because, to put it to you absolutely straight, I killed a man. In fact. I killed my business partner. I killed my best friend. And if you follow my path, you might do the same. You too might have to look into the mirror and say:

“ ‘I am a murderer.’ ”

(Good, let that sink in.)

“I’m here to talk to you about drinking and driving, of course. Now, I’m not going to preach to you; I’m not the prison chaplain; they let him go home at night!”

(Wait for the laughter to stop.)

“I’m not going to tell you to flee demon rum. I’m not going to tell you never to take a drink. But I am going to tell you what can happen if you drink and drive; I’m going to tell you my story.

“Most of you people are, what? Fourteen to 18, 19? Is that right, Principal?”

(Turn, wait for him to nod.)

“You guys especially must be wondering ‘What is it that makes a man a man?’”. Maybe you think it’s booze. Well. I’m 42 and I was wondering too. You’ve heard of the mid-life crisis? I was in it. Lots of guys my age are. Here I was, partner in a successful business, had what I’d been working for ever since university and I was saying to myself, ‘Is this all there is?’ I began to buy myself toys. You know the difference between a man and a boy? It’s the cost of his toys.”

(That one missed. Wrong touch.)

“My toys were expensive. For instance, I bought myself one of those big four-wheel-drive pickups. Real macho, eh? Anything to tell myself I was a man. I also picked up a place on the lake, west of the city, to impress the ladies, you know. And I used to love chugging along out to my place in my 4-by-4. Kind of silly, perhaps, but harmless.

“Until I started chugging something else, that is. You’ve heard of the three-martini lunch? Well, I hate martinis, but you get the idea. And every day as business began to slow down I began to tie one on.



Bourbon usually; the good ol’ boys drink bourbon in the movies, right? My secretary knew what was going on; she pretended not to notice. One day Jim, my partner, drove home behind me; he had a place in the west end too, in Bay View up on the hill across the tracks.

“ ‘Man,’ he said, ‘you were weaving all over the place last night. I was almost scared driving along behind you. Why don’t you cut back a bit on the sauce?’

“ ‘Fine,’ I told him. ‘You drive ahead of me and you won’t have to worry!’

“Won’t have to worry!”

(Pause; shake the head; look penitent. Go.)

“So, after that I always waited for Jim to leave first. I didn’t mind; it gave me time for one more for the road. For a while I was lucky. I made it home in one piece every night. But good luck never goes on forever. It was only six weeks later that I got what was coming to me. Trouble is, Jim got it too.

“D O you know the place where Amherst Road bends around the bay, the place where the railway tracks run right beside the road? There’s a level crossing there. People who live in Bay View, people like Jim, have to turn across the tracks there to get home. There’s hardly any room between the road

and the tracks there for a car to wait while the barrier is down. The rear bumpers of the waiting cars point right at the westbound traffic. Anything much bigger than a Volkswagen Beetle almost sticks out into the oncoming traffic. You get the picture?

“Well, the barrier was down, a big freight, three locomotives they tell me, was coming along. Jim was sitting there, waiting. Who could miss his red Trans Am?”

“I didn’t.”

(Pause; drop the head; look up. Go)

“I hit him from behind with my pick-up. I was fine, hardly a bruise or a cut. Seems unfair, doesn’t it? Jim? Jim went under the freight. Do you know how long it takes to stop one of those big freights? They scraped up the pieces a half mile down the track.”

(Pause, a good long one this time.)

“I thought I could hold my liquor; used to boast about it in college. The strange thing was I was barely over the legal limit and I had killed a man!

“Are you sure you can hold your liquor?”

(Good. Let that one sink in. Go.)

“I guess you could say I got off pretty easy. If I’d pulled a gun on Jim I would have got a life sentence with no possibility of parole for 15 years. As it is, they took my licence and sent me to jail for three months. They let me out once a week to speak to groups like this. It’s called community service, I believe. Yes, I got off easy. But I know I killed a man and every morning I still have to look in the mirror. Every morning I still have to say to the face in the glass, ‘I am a murderer.’”

(Okay; give them a minute.)

“That’s about all I have to tell you this morning.

“Now you look like you’re all well-brought-up young people. You look like you clap whenever a guest finishes a speech. Well, don’t clap for me. I don’t deserve it. Just sit there and think. Ask yourself, ‘What do I want to see when I look in the mirror?’ I hope you never have to see what I see every day. A murderer.”

(Stop; nod silently to the principal; sit down.

(Here comes the principal. Funny how they can never wait to get their two cents in.)

“Mr. Lang, I know that the whole school joins me in expressing our appreciation to you for your most interesting presentation. I am sure everyone will take your speech to heart. If that is the case, it may be that, while you have taken a life because of your

drinking, you have perhaps saved another with your forceful message today. Perhaps that thought may offer you some comfort the next time you look in your mirror.”

(Nod gravely; look thoughtful.)

“Now the senior band will favor us with a medley of tunes from Broadway hits. Mr. Lang, you won’t mind waiting till the end of the program in case some of the students would wish to speak to you?”

(Smile; wink at the bandmaster.)

“Mr. Principal, I’m in no hurry to get back to Jail. I’m sure the senior band isn’t that bad!”

(Good. They loved that one.)

“That they are not, Mr. Lang. Our band!”

(Good. he’s down.)

Of course, I wish they could applaud. I really do deserve it, you know. Why? Because even a half-smashed 42-year-old can hit the rear end of a Trans Am if he wants to. And that big ol’ pickup just lifted up that pain-in-the-rear partner of mine and put him exactly where I wanted him.

Of course, it took months for the right combination of circumstances to occur. I forget how many times I watched Jim sail smoothly across the tracks or passed by, tanked but frustrated, as some miserable commuter waited in front of him.

IT really was a pain drinking a pint of bourbon every day just in case that was the day. But the waiting worked out all right too. The secretary could swear on a stack of Bibles that I drove home polluted every night for months. And, of course, she did. Nothing like the truth to make a witness sound convincing.

My only real mistake was letting myself get so close to the blood alcohol limit. I had intended to be drunker than that, but when the accident happened I lost my mostly liquid lunch all over the pickup. But even that may have worked out for the best. The bourbon-smelling vomit probably had a more telling psychological effect on the police than the low breathalyzer scores.

I got about what I expected. Three months is a lot better than life in the slammer. Only two months and six more high schools to go and I’m free, free to run the company myself. And free of Jim.

What about that round of applause now?

You see, I really am a murderer.

A successful one.