

He would stare at the cardboard cutout of a woman (used to market some sort of diet pill) as if she were going to come alive and adorn him the King of Man.

Chapter 1: Foundation.

I was a healthy eater, and had done enough personal homework on the subject that working in a health food store seemed like a great job for an 18-year-old in the midst of trying to figure out where his life would go.

I applied in person, and had an instant report' with the manager, Jim. He loved the mall for the environment, which goes a long way in describing his character; He was *quite* a character. He picked up on my non-slapstick sense of humor immediately, and we got along swimmingly. A perfect cross between Higgins from Magnum P.I. and any other trim, well-kept, mustachioed incarnation of an English butler, his sarcastic smile and scowl were interchangeable, and both were used as methods of passing judgment on every customer, passerby, and employee in our mall.

Jim had a long history in retail management, and even a brief stint as the owner of a video store. That wealth of experience enabled him to work just hard enough not to draw unnecessary attention to himself, and still shine brightly in the face of upper management in-person. He was a low-level management wunderkind, and would not hesitate to tell you so.

Daytime at the mall is often a dead time, and conversation becomes vital so as to not look like you're doing nothing. Jim and I often talked about his numerous ideas for inventions (*all of which he was going to patent at some point*), and also movies- he watched, critiqued venomously, and lived vicariously through the silver screen.

Prior to my new job, I had interned at a local paper as a staff writer, and was sent to the movies several times a week to watch and review... Jim was jealous, and I think that having held such a prestigious and sought-after position as an unpaid movie reviewer for a sub-par local paper caused him to consider me a peer and not a subordinate.

The only other employee at the store was a very un-noteworthy college girl who up and left with no notice, leaving us searching hastily for a replacement.

Mark Christie was the 3rd person interviewed, and arrived at the mall in a suit and tie.

I know this because Jim would conduct interviews on the benches in the middle of the mall, just to assure that everyone knew he ran the store we worked in. Mark came in, addressed Jim as "Sir", and outside of the get-up, looked about as ordinary as one could look. He looked *notably* ordinary. Light brown hair, 5'7- 5'8, undefined features, slightly pudgy build- not fat, but not fit.

Mark had no knowledge of health food, vitamins, or customer service. He had worked prior at an industrial refrigeration facility in the city as a security guard, and was looking for a job in the mall because his wife worked at a kitchen store there, and they only had one car. Jim was sold.

Ordinary, polite, non-threatening family man.

Hired.

Chapter 2: Time, management.

Free time was no commodity in most mall jobs. Save the one day per week that we would receive vendor orders and have to unpack, count, tag, and shelve all the items, the daily rigors were limited to dealing with occasional customers and straightening when they left. Simple? Depends who you ask, I guess.

Mark made it known quickly (*and without intention*) that he had no concept of “*neat vs. messy*”, and also no concept of, in a store filled with thousands of tiny bottles, the importance of knowing what went where. His “*straightening*” often looked like a Rorschach test, and it became apparent very quickly that the suit he wore to work every day was but a deception- overdressing, he must have hoped, may mask his incompetence.

Ordinary, maybe, but *normal*... not even close.

The day's conversations were always interesting, and Jim and I were in agreement that Mark's contributions were a case of the bland of the bunch telling tall tales to impress his new associates. Tales of philandering and womanizing, burglary, drunk driving... depraved acts of animal cruelty... .. assault on the weak... We believed about half of the stories- the suburb that Mark had grown up in lent itself to early adult petty crime and alcohol abuse. A much better storyteller than he was a mall store employee, Mark's performance did not improve- not even a little bit- in the entire two months since he had been hired.

I had many occasions to work side-by-side with Mark due to the fact that there needed to be two people on per shift, and there were only three of us. We got along OK, and the message that he liked me was made clear when he started talking to me openly about his relationship. His wife was very plain and pretty, but looked very, very, sad. Her face was always hidden under mounds of long, curly, dirty blonde hair, and her nails were always bitten to the quick and often band-aided. They had a two-year-old boy that her parents looked after while they worked at the mall, and she would often bring him in a stroller when they came to pick Mark up at shift's end. She was friendly, and I think she could tell that I did not judge her, as she would mention various things about my appearance, notice if I had changed my hair, gotten new shoes, etc.

After three months of working with Mark I had developed a strange sympathy for her, because it was obvious at every turn that there was only so bright his star was ever going to shine. Those feelings deepened during conversations about his sneaking out to strip clubs, hiding pornography

in the most obscure of places, and his fixation on women... all but the one he was married to. To be even-handed, I do not believe he was cheating, but that simply may have been due to the occasion not arising. More than once there was mention of one particular dancer that he was SURE was flirting with him, and there were several female mall employees that were, at a basic level, flattered by his constant staring and attempts at conversation. As soon as one was struck however, their interest waned at once. "*Ordinary*" was no longer a term I would use to describe Mark Christie.

Chapter 3: *Discovery.*

There was a palpable level of tension in the mall and surrounding communities that was making mall work even more tedious, and making our already finicky customer base almost unbearable. For the better part of two weeks, a four-year-old girl named Kali Poulton had been missing, and it had put the entire county in a state of alert. It would be impossible not to feel sympathy for the parents and some general hostility towards the entire situation, however the general public channeling those frustrations and fears towards whoever crossed their path was only making everyone more upset. Police presence was intense for the first month of the ordeal, and due to the confusing nature of it all, other states were brought in as well as some national press outlets. There were posters of Kali on every highway, video on every news channel, and flyers in every window of every store in our mall, and all others in the area. Conversations shifted from the mundane and boring to the timely and confusing... *How could someone just walk off with a 4-year-old? Was it the parents? No one saw anything? What is society coming to?*

The environment was somber, and it affected everyone.

Chapter 4: *The un-closable door.*

Women, even as an inanimate form on a pill bottle, had become an almost singular topic of conversation when Mark was involved. From the teenagers that worked in the bookstore across the way, to the women pictured on the sports nutrition products, very little else seemed to be present in the front of his mind.

Regarding private matters and our personal lives, Jim and I were both very guarded... One afternoon Jim gazed upon a very handsome man for the entire length of his walk through the mall, obviously smitten, and that is the only reason I ever would have considered his orientation. Jim's privacy, and my being an 18-year-old only having had one girlfriend, made the daily forays into Mark's dysfunctional sexual psyche very challenging to deal with. One solution Jim came up with was to schedule himself with me almost exclusively, leaving my shifts overlapping with Mark's, and broadening my exposure to him and his family. The morose character of his young wife intensified, and even visually, there was a darkness to her that was new, and growing.

Story time this week included a riveting tale of deceit and deception: In order to spend the entire day at the strip bar, Mark told his wife that he was going to a training seminar, took the day off, took the family car, and sat- for what he told us was almost nine hours- at the Klassy Kat... a far from high-brow gentlemen's club. I was sworn to secrecy, and that was very difficult for me, because I did not particularly like Mark, and I was always glad to speak with his wife for the brief moments she was present. My criticism of the day squandered at the 'Kat evoked a defense mechanism in him... and he challenged "*Aw, that's NOTHING... My friend and I killed and buried an old woman in a gulley out in Hilton a while back. We were hunting and saw her and just decided to do it.*"

From a stranger, a disclosure such as that would be very shocking and upsetting, but somehow from Mark- someone I knew better than I'd like to- I took it as a very demented, flawed, cry for attention. "Wow", I replied. "*Playing hooky to go to a strip bar IS nothing compared to that.*" Pleased that he had "*impressed*" me, he responded "*Yeah, like I said... That was nothing. No one even knows about that but you and Jim... My friends and I, we were crazy. That's NOTHING.*"

Jim and I talked many times in those few weeks about Mark, and came to the unscientific conclusion that he was just a dunce, and talked mostly just to hear himself speak.

His work performance was consistent, and poor. Attendance was fine, very simply because he was at the mall a majority of each day whether on shift or not in order to shuttle his wife. I had only seen his son a handful of times but never once had he stood, walked, or crawled out of the stroller, nor had he ever made a sound.

One of the most notable and maddening oddities that had developed in Mark's behavior was a strange, smug smirk that would appear like clockwork whenever his work was called into question, his performance was critiqued, or a mistake he had made was pointed out. All too familiar at that point with his own sub-par performance, the irony of his expression and handling of rebuke was that he made NO effort whatsoever to correct the behavior, or even perform the mentioned task successfully the next time through.

The demeanor of his wife was becoming easier to understand every day that passed with Mark as a co-worker. If the attitudes, smugness, and ambivalence that he exhibited at work were any indications of how he behaved in actual life, I feel that her level of composure was admirable... and her loyalty and love for him must be very strong. Even being subjected to him in small blocks of time made me anxious, confused, and most of all concerned for their poor little boy.

Chapter 5: *The reckoning.*

Outside of my job at the mall, I was in daily contact with very few people; I have always kept a small circle of friends. At that point I had just moved out on my own, and was living in the city of Rochester on Culver Road. I was welcomed to my new home in the city with a car burglary,

and several days later bore witness to a man being beaten in an alley with a hammer. My mind was filled with thoughts of brutality, violence, and most of all confusion towards all aspects of the environment in which I existed.

I was constantly tense, and was beginning to dread work- not for work's sake, but for the heirs that needed to be put on for my entire shift to avoid confrontation with Mark.

Sympathy existed within me, but it was quickly changing into intolerance and spite.

The Kali Poulton case was still being feverishly investigated, and it added a constant element of tension to all interpersonal situations. No matter what other subject need be discussed, Kali seemed to come up immediately, and everybody had a theory. My sorrow and sympathy for the family was significant, but I was also aware that my opinions on the matter were irrelevant, and talking about it only made me upset.

Jim would speak on it daily, and almost constantly. He had built it up as the demise of society's conscience, and I tended to agree with him. Like most other topics he felt strongly about, he was animated in his telling of simpler times when he was young, where doors were left open, possessions were borrowed and shared with no reservation, and guilt over wrongdoing would prompt an apology and restitution.

I was only 18, but I knew beyond any doubt that those days were gone and would not return.

Our little health food store in the mall had gone from a relatable, well-suited job to an emotional and challenging burden for me. Although I enjoyed talking with Jim, I was developing a strong dislike for Mark. My focus upon entering the mall doors every day began with ways to avoid conversations with him, and then quickly transitioned into thoughts of his wife, who had become a veritable mute for all I could tell, and looked as if she had been awake for months.

Mark was eager to talk to me when I arrived at work. Like a small child trying to keep a secret, he baited me with trivial small talk, all the while grinning like a fool and obviously bursting to tell a story. I began busywork immediately, and he followed, uninterrupted in his quest. *"I was driving on Turk Hill last night and you'll never guess what happened!" "No" I said "I probably won't." "I hit a fucking DEER. Fucking thing came out of nowhere. Luckily it was a small one, and didn't do too much to the car."*

"I am really sorry to hear that. Are your wife and son OK?" I asked, as if that were what he cared about, or wanted to tell me. "Oh, they were at home. The deer, man, that thing was still alive. It ran off the side of the road... I had to drag it back behind the car and drive over it for a while to make sure it was dead. I've never driven over anything that big; you could really feel it crush under the tires."

I decided at that moment I was going to be unable to work with Mark any longer. His story gave me the tight, pointed urgency often felt right before entering into a physical confrontation, and

the feeling did not lessen the entire shift. I truly felt that with even the slightest future provocation I would attack and beat Mark where he stood. He was the embodiment of everything I tried to avoid in my personal life, and my patience with it had reached an end.

Chapter 6: *Descent.*

I was actively pursuing a transfer to a branch of our store in a mall across town, much to the disappointment of Jim, and the confusion of Mark. He was much too immersed in his unsettling fantasy world to think, even for a second, that he could be a factor in my sudden decision to leave a good job with a boss I liked in a location that made sense.

There was a position available across town, and I took it. Two more weeks and Mark Christie would be nothing more than an odd story to tell my friends.

Jim was upset that I was leaving, and made sure that he let me know by scheduling Mark from the beginning to end of all my shifts, leaving him to work by himself in the mornings. Mark's wife had taken ill, forcing him to ask me for a ride home from work. I said yes, knowing that his wife would have had to come after him at 9:45pm- sick, and with little boy in tow- if I had declined.

As I drove, Mark talked. School, friends, jobs- not one topic did he have a healthy or "*normal*" outlook on. His previous job (*security at the refrigeration facility*) he enjoyed- mostly because of the isolation, and "*power*", as he called it. He mentioned he had only been back once to drop something off since he quit in order to seek work at the mall. His home was in a small suburb- a yellow condo in a cul-de-sac, front yards filled with children's toys as far as the eye could see. He thanked me for the ride, muttered something about his car, and reminded me that I would see him tomorrow.

I did not want to see where he lived, I did not want to hear what he thought, and I did not want to know what he knew. I struggled through the last two weeks of our time together, and it was one of the only times in my life where trouble in my mind kept me from sleep. I was truly sad to leave Jim- not only was he an interesting person and a friendly, good natured boss, but I felt sympathy and guilt for leaving him to deal with Mark on his own. I questioned his ability to tolerate the situation, and assumed that Jim would end up letting him go very shortly after I left.

The staff at the new store consisted mostly of college kids, as it was in an area littered with everything from prestigious universities to small religious schools. Our district manager was a handful- an ex-jock with a temper and a God complex- but he seemed like an angel of mercy compared to the situation I had just left. Things were good, and due to a departure at the store shortly after my arrival, I was made manager within the month.

The environment I lived in outside of work was hard and cold. I was quickly learning that the area of the city I lived in, although neat and tidy from the outside, was dangerous and required

constant attention and vigilance. My free time was taken up with movies, occasional social outings, and bike riding. I worked a lot; Mark Christie, Jim, and my time at the health food store were never far from my mind.

The week after I was promoted to manager of the new store, I received a call from Jim that confirmed my suspicions- he was unable to deal with the stories and dark recollections from Mark's past, and let him go. Jim mentioned that he took it well, smiling throughout the process, and saying "*I understand, I know I wasn't very good at my job.*" The maturity with which Mark handled the situation surprised both of us, and we were both also very glad that he was going to be out of our lives. Jim and I both spent a lot of time thinking on, talking about, and dissecting people's character... and we were both made very uneasy by Mark's presence. At any rate: Adios, and good riddance.

Chapter 7: *Absolution.*

Winter had come, and the challenges of everyday life are magnified when winter hits like it does in Rochester, NY. It was a warm social time filled with family and food, and there was a general sense of ease, as even the most devious seemed to be distracted by the approach of a festive season.

I was working long hours at the new store, and spending my off time with family and friends at my apartment in the city. Interpersonal challenges arose frequently at the new store, but I harbored a strange gratefulness towards Mark for making them all seem manageable, and even trivial. It had been almost four months since I had seen or talked to Mark. In that same block of time, I learned that Jim had been hired as a manager in a local movie theater. Knowing how important that position was to someone such as Jim, I extended as hearty a congratulations as I would have if someone I knew had won the lottery, or been made president of a company. Jim could hardly contain his excitement, offered me free movie passes whenever I chose, and thanked me for my friendship at the health food store.

It was a good feeling, and a warming relief that such a confusing and troubling chapter had come to an end in a satisfying way. I did not expect to talk to Jim again, and I think he felt the same. We were friends of situation and circumstance, and without the fodder of the mall and its' inhabitants, our conversations would stand still.

Holiday time brought out the seasonal help in the mall stores, which allowed me several extra evenings a week to myself. A visit from my grandma was timed perfectly, and after my parents brought her to the city to see my apartment, she and I stopped at the grocery store to pick up some last-minute items on the way to my parents' house for a meal. Joined arm-in-arm, we moved slowly through the busy, slippery store, picking several items and pausing often in order to ensure we both made it out of the crowd standing.

Upon stopping at a checkout line, I heard someone call to me in a familiar voice. As I looked left, Mark Christie walked towards us, dressed unconvincingly for the inclement weather, and obviously excited to see me. After exchanging formalities, I introduced him to my grandma (*I don't think he would have left until I did so*), bid his family my best, and said goodbye. Immediately upon his approach, my chest tightened and my arms prickled just as they had the day he told the story of the deer. I was upset to have introduced him to someone I care about, and was also upset that he had now re-entered my mind.

Casually explaining to my grandma that Mark was an ex co-worker and leaving it at that allowed me to keep to myself the uneasiness that his presence had caused. It stayed with me all the way to my parents' house, and then thankfully, did not return.

It was almost six months later when it- "*it*" being all the angst, suspicion, dread, concern, questioning, morbid curiosity, and confusion ever associated in my mind with Mark Christie- returned, and would never leave me again.

I was sitting in my apartment watching Channel 13, one of three channels I had reception on, and half-reading a magazine. The voice of a female reporter began talking about the Kali Poulton case, and I listened as if eavesdropping while I continued to read.

"...A suspect has been detained in the kidnapping and murder of four-year old Kali Ann Poulton of Penfield. 24-year old Mark John Christie has been arrested and charged with the kidnapping and strangulation of the four-year-old, who was reported missing on May 23rd of 1994. The body was recovered under Christie's direction at a refrigeration plant on Atlantic Avenue in Rochester. Christie was a neighbor of the little girl, and admitted to kidnapping her while she was riding her tricycle and strangling her to death with his bare hands that same night, fearful that her mother would be upset that Kali had been inside his house..."

I listened, and shook, and PRAYED that it was someone else with the same name that had lived in that same city. My denial was squashed conclusively several seconds later when a mug shot eerily similar to our health food store ID photos flashed on the screen, confirming what I can only describe as a point in my memory in which I can recall every single solitary feeling, thought, color, and sound.

Mark Christie- a man who I had worked with almost every day, driven home to the very house where he had done the deed, interacted with the poor wife that had at last turned him in, and who had confessed what I thought at the time to be a made-up murder of an old woman in a river bed- had kidnapped and murdered a harmless, helpless, beautiful four-year-old girl.

I was physically paralyzed, but my mind was electric with thoughts of timelines, feelings of guilt and pain, confusion, panic, sadness, and abject horror.

The situation felt impossible, however at the same time, felt almost logical.

Human instinct is truly a mystery, and yet sadly, it often holds truth and clarity that people are afraid to find or fail to see. Jim and I both KNEW there was something not right, not normal, and not SAFE about Mark, but we did nothing more than discuss it amongst ourselves. I was overwhelmed with fury, and simultaneously rendered immobile with sadness and guilt.

It took upwards of an hour for me to move from my perch on the couch. The news had ended and Entertainment Tonight had started. I could not look away, as if I were waiting for a retraction to flash on the screen, or to wake up from an unintentional early evening nap. My first clear thought was that I had to call Jim.

Acting in auto pilot, I looked up the phone number to the theater where he was now manager, and slowly dialed the number, hoping with all my heart that he was not at work.

A boy answered, and I asked to speak with the manager. Jim took the line, just as he had at our health food store. *"This is Jim Garling speaking, how can I help you?" "Jim... it's Greg."* *"Greg! How are you? Are you calling to take me up on those movie passes?"*

"No Jim... Mark Christie killed Kali Poulton."

Chapter 8: Elevator, going down...

"WHAAAT?!?! How do you know that you motherfucker? That is NOT a funny joke! JESUS CHRIST GREG!" Jim was beside himself, and refused to believe that I was serious. *"Jim, I would never joke about such a thing. I am so sorry, I wanted to tell you right away, because I knew you would be as upset as..."* ...I then heard banging and crashing, screaming, and Jim carrying on in the background of the phone, which he had either dropped or put down. *"JIM! Jim... are you there? JIM? I'm sorry!" "Mister?" "Yes, I'm here."* I said. *"Jim just took off man. He seemed upset, and he just left. His shift isn't over for 3 hours."*

"Thanks. Goodbye"

The city was in a state of agitation and alarm, as the largest child kidnapping case in its history had been wrapped up- the guilty being a man who lived less than 100 yards from the victim; A man that had commented to her mother about *"her attractive little girl"*, a man that shared a playground with her, and had a youngster of his own.

I had not left my house in three days, unable to come to grips with the reality that was everywhere I looked. I had been contacted by the local news station for a comment; Apparently when looking through his employment history my name was in there as well, along with a phone number. I denied the woman an on-camera interview, but told her she could quote me as saying *"Mark Christie is a fucking psycho, and although I was surprised to see that he had kidnapped Kali, it was not surprising that he had done something horrible, as he was nothing but a self-centered piece of shit. All the sympathy in my heart goes to Kali's family, and to Mark's wife and young son."*

In the week following, I would learn that the woman he had told the story of killing in the riverbed in Hilton was, in actuality, his first victim. I vomited when I saw the news on the television, and felt immediately that if I had been more in tune with what I was being told, I could have reported it and possibly averted further disaster. I was sick with disgust, both towards Mark and towards myself for making an assumption about such a grave and serious situation that was put before me. In looking back on my pay stubs from the little health food store in the mall, I also learned that I had worked alongside Mark on May 22nd and May 24th of 1994.

All the idiosyncrasies related to Mark Christie were now so clear... The statement that he had only been back once to the site of his old job to “*drop something off*”... The darkness that seemed to be overtaking his poor wife... His entire fantastical, fake existence- removed as far as possible from his real, twisted, life...

Most of all though was his knowing, smug, smile that appeared whenever things were not going his way. A smirk as pompous as any I’ve ever seen, as if to tell us that he was too good for this world, that he knew more than we ever could... and that he held the trump card, only to be seen when he chose to reveal it.

Chapter 9: *The End.*

I had called the movie theater several times over the next few weeks, and Jim had not returned to work since the night of my first call. I had finally left the house, but was a virtual zombie; For the first and only time in my life, nightmares based on reality had interrupted my sleep to the point of insomnia.

It is now 2007- 13 years after I met Mark Christie- and I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that I think of him more than all of my childhood friends and teachers combined. The details of this story, and the few incidentals that I did not have written notes on, are as fresh in my mind as my most recent meal, and the guilt I feel for playing a complacent bit-part in Mark’s fucked up life has settled permanently into a nice, warm place in my gut.