

# THREADS

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Frank Jonas didn't believe it. "It can't be 3:33!" He wondered if his ghostly analogue clock sitting on the upper right corner of the screen was wrong. "Thing's been nothing but problems," he murmured as he moved the mouse down towards the hidden OS' taskbar. The system time read 3:33 AM. "Crud!" he said. The night before it had said 2:40 AM, and three nights prior it was 4:12 AM. When he had sat at the computer this time –what he swore was no more than an hour ago– he had promised himself that he'd be on just to check his e-mail. "Crap!" escaped his mouth as the computer finally shut down. Now he would have to crawl into bed and share it with his wife –"A stranger; cold and distant," he thought to himself.

His side of the bed was indeed cold. There would also be no warmth to come from his wife –his love. Did he ever love her? He could no longer remember. When was the last time they shared an intimate moment? When was the last time she showed any attention? This was what he used to justify the porn. "She drives me to it," he'd say to himself. But so much? Night after night? His conscience worked at him; nipping at his stubborn pride. Eighteen years of marriage, two kids, and what? He tortured himself –keeping sleep at bay. "Two kids!" there were days he couldn't remember their names. "Debbie and Jeremy! There, I remember." He knew though, these were just names. Names to kids living in his house, but so foreign to him. "They may as well be the neighbor's kids."

"I'll stop," he told himself. Just like he'd done every other late night on the net. "Porn, who does it harm? It's not like its hard porn... or bestiality." He'd mulled over all this before as well. And the next night, he would be right back on –"just to see what's new," he'd say, only to become agitated when it was nearly day break again and he was still lurking, looking, and lusting.

During the day, it was Mr. Jonas' son, Jeremy, lurking, looking, and lusting. He would follow his dad's cookie trails on the web browser. With his mother always busy and his dad always absent, Jeremy could explore this adult world without compunction. "Dad does it, why shouldn't I?" he often commented to himself. And at school, he would purposely trip into Margaret, touching her developing breast and think, "adults touch each other all the time." The videos showed adults touching, so to him it was alright to touch. "Why else would dad watch these?" his inquisitive 11 year old mind pondered. Why?



"Where are you going, son?" Mrs. Smith asked her 17 year old son as he made for the door. "Goin' out" he said, walking out and throwing the door shut. Mrs. Smith whispered a prayer for her son, gathered her purse and keys, and headed out to her second job. "I need to give my kids what they need; to provide for them," she would say when asked at church why she worked so hard. She needed to provide for them and give them happiness. Jacob Smith, 17, a "D" student in a school for at-risk youth (not dumb, but for lack of trying), didn't know work, never held a single job. Yet he wore the latest fashions, carried the newest phone, and found himself lacking little –except the freedom to do what he wanted without being looked on by his mother and answering her million questions. "Yeah, she never let's off," he told his friend. Slamming the Escalade's door closed, he added, "She doesn't trust me. It's like she wants to know what I do and where I go 24/7 like I were some kid." To him, it was too much; "I'm not a kid anymore."

"You get it?" Jacob asked his friend. "Yeah" was the response –and out came a jet black 9mm. "The guy kept it in the toilet. Believe that?" Jacob would have been the

one fishing the gun out of the toilet tank the day before, but that was Sunday, and Sunday's he was forced to go to church with his mom and baby brother. Jacob held the gun –eyes wide, lusting.

“You should’a gone.” Jacob smiled and replied, “nah.” He thought about hanging out with Debbie. “Church is cool” Jacob told his friend. “Right, yeah. We can always hit another place.” Jacob’s friend had stolen a list of recent gun purchases from a gun store near the mall. “When?” Jacob asked –brought out of his reverie of the time spent with Debbie. “When are you free from police mom and little Mrs. Jonas?” Jacob would be back at church Wednesday night –Debbie always went Wednesday nights. “We’ll go in a couple of nights,” he said. He really wanted his own gun. “Finally,” he thought to himself, “I’ll have respect. They’ll see me as a man.”

The Escalade rode slowly along the tree-lined street. “Wow!” exclaimed Jacob. They were passing one of the places listed as a gun’s registered address. “It’ll be just the woman and kids,” explained Jacob’s friend. “The guy is never home,” he added with a chuckle. “Wow!” was all Jacob could put in, while staring with a hungry eye at the large house they were passing. “That’ll be me someday,” he assured himself, and turned back to the heavy weapon in his hands. “Yeah, soon. I’ll be rolling in it”



The night before he hadn’t made it home from work until after 9 PM. Today, half the morning gone and Pax Hendricks, Mr. CEO, President, and company hero, knew it would be another late night. He had to do it. ‘Nobody else can’ he told himself. Besides, he was a driven man. The dollar signs, the control, and the prestige gave him a high. That was real power. He worked day and night because, to him, money was power. ‘Money is everything’ he would swear.

Mr. Hendricks reached into the desk drawer and pulled out his friend –the thing that gave him his edge and helped him cut through all the gnarled mess of WEB hosting, video production, and people –especially people. One swig and he could deal with even the worst of them. “Yes Mr. Hendricks?” answered his secretary when he buzzed her desk. “Get him on,” he instructed her. The him was another weak director who had trouble staying on time, under budget, and producing sellable material. “Director... ha!” mused Pax Hendricks.

“Good, willing girls are hard to find,” said the meek voice. Pax Hendricks shook his head as he listened. “Useless” he was thinking. “I pay you to produce, so produce.” Hendricks knew how these directors worked –they need constant pressure. “I can always find me someone else.” The call ended with the assurance the videos would be completed.

The pressure was high, but Hendricks relished it. Well, it and the money. Of the various ventures the company funded, the streaming videos were the most lucrative (with one of the lowest overheads). He rarely viewed any of the videos himself. Sure, the girls were luscious, but he got more pleasure from his true friend. He poured another glass and moved to the next order of business. It would be another long day. ‘The price of providing’ he told himself. “Marcy and the kids never are in need.” Another shot –to smooth his words.

“With the gun, they’ll be safe.” All his work was for his family. That was what he told himself. It was for them. The big house, the SUV, the private school, etc. –all the best for them. The gun would keep them safe while he worked. Too many break-ins and robberies, even in his high-end neighborhood, prompted him to buy the weapon. “Now they are protected” he justified himself. He let this thought drift away from his family and rang his secretary again.



“Have a blessed day,” Dursban Long exclaimed to the customer. Deep in the recess of her mind things weren’t so regal. She was sure the last few customers were sinners with no hope for redemption or salvation. One wore a crucifix –“Catholic” she assumed. “Deviants and blasphemers, all.” Yet she blessed them and prayed for them. She would have to do a lot of extra praying tonight. “That mixed couple need it.” With every new ‘have a blessed day’ she wondered about their sins and transgressions.

As soon as her shift ended Mrs. Long rushed home. She arrived home screaming –another of those heathen children from next door waved at her. “What were they?” she wondered. She could never make eye contact with any of them. “Dias and Brown – another immigrant and migrant mix” that’s how she saw them. That was what her neighbors were to her. How she longed to move –to a neighborhood that was “clean and pure.” ‘A Christian neighborhood’ she imagined to herself.

Walking into her own house, her own child was sprawled in front of the TV watching filth. Peter scrambled to turn it off, but was too slow. “What did I tell you about that!” she bellowed at him. Peter knew not to reply. Mary, his big sis, could not hold her tongue. “It’s just a stupid show, mom. Really!” “I will not have that filth in my house!” Mrs. Long snapped. “You will not be drawn into the devil’s den, carrying on lose and carefree. I will not allow it.”

After much more talk of damnation, God’s heavy hand, and the need for perfect adherence to the word of God, Mrs. Long drove them to church. At 12, Peter feared and misunderstood church. He saw contradiction, secrecy, and manipulation. Even on the drive there he heard his mother curse and vilify strangers only to preach love and mercy later on. It hurt him. It confused him. It forced him to close himself off. This duplicity seemed far worse than anything he did –or any of what those strangers his mom so often “prayed” for ever did.

More than once Peter had seen the neighbor boy run to his mother, crying. The little boy only saw hate from Peter’s mom. How could he know, or see her other self when all she showed to any stranger that did not fit her ideals was loathing? Every time, the little neighbor boy would run to his mother, “por que, mama?” Why, mom? Her only consolation was a loving embrace. “Shh, niño. No es tu culpa.” How could she explain when she was hard pressed to understand herself? Holding her stricken and puzzled child, she would think to her self “Dios no pide amor con exceptions o estipulaciones.”

Mary dealt with her mother’s duplicity by looking the other way –by filling her life with other diversions. Debbie, Debbie, Debbie! was all Mary thought about. That was why she went to church now -to hang with Debbie (and her new friends). Through these friends Mary could get away from her “freak” of a mom for a little while. Debbie was an actress. Mary had seen a few of her videos. She thought them glamorous. She wanted to be part of that world, to be a star her self. She was hoping to get a chance soon. Debbie was working it all out. “I’ll get you in, then you’ll show your mom what’s what.” Debbie once told Mary. Debbie saw how Mary’s mom loomed over everything Mary did, just like her own mother use to do.

“They are all the same” Debbie and Mary once agreed. “They’re always talking about what everyone else is doing...” “...but don’t see what they do themselves” Debbie easily finished Mary’s words. The videos would show them all. She would become an adult. She would amount to something. She would have her own money. She would make her own choices –live her own way. It was her life, after all.



Why? Mr. Jonas wonders why his kids show no affection towards him. He wonders why his marriage has gone cold. “Why do I feel so cold and alien in my own

house?” He works hard. He provides for his family. This makes him a good family man, right? Yet he wonders why he feels so empty inside and so alone.

The question of why also fills Jacob Smith’s thoughts. Why do so-and-so have the nice house or the fancy new cars? Why was he not living the life of a star? He has talent. He has the will; he has skills. So why? Why can’t he have what other’s have?

Pax Hendricks has it all. He has climbed to the top. But even he asks why. Why are people always trying to hold him back? Why are so many jealous of his success? Why are there so many “haters?” And why does he feel incomplete?

Why are often a part of Dursban Long’s thoughts, though she avoided letting the doubt contaminate her prayers. She wonders: why are there bad people? Why can’t people just give themselves over? Why do so many choose the wide path? Why do her kids fight, oppose, and reject her so ardently? Why, despite her attempts at righteousness, was her soul still so torn?

Why? Why do eyes search far and wide yet live so blind to what is at hand, to the vessel that gives them purpose? Why does a heart yearn for its own warmth and peace yet, when looking at others, at strangers, at unknowns or unfamiliar, beat so cold and apathetic?



Some days later, an officer doing a welfare-check spotted Mr. Jonas. Jeremy Jonas was in custody of the Middle school’s police while officials investigated an allegation of sexual assault against him. This required the boy’s parents to be contacted. His mother referred them to Mr. Jonas. “He’s the boy’s father, talk to him,” she had told the officer on the phone. She suggested they check for him at home. And that prompted the visit to the house.

The man’s body was seated in the home’s office, in front of the computer –the porn video still playing, on a loop. There was a ligature around the body’s neck –a neck tie used for sexual stimulation. Mr. Jonas had not prepared for the sudden loss of consciousness and asphyxiated. None of the family could quite understand the term of auto-erotic asphyxiation, but they caught the hint that had any of them checked on him as they left the house that morning, they may have found him still alive. But one by one, they had left the house to deal with their particular interests, never bothering to speak to their own provider, to the head of the household.

Jeremy Jonas would have to deal with the loss of his father while living in a juvenile detention center, accused of sexually assaulting a female classmate. This left his mother and sister to get on with their lives, ever wondering why? Why did this happen to their family. Why did things go so wrong? Why had they been so cursed?



Around this same time, Jacob Smith took his last breath. Feeling lofty and full of life after attaining his very own 9mm, he and his friend went to an ordinary, nothing special convenience store to get some beer and snacks. An argument over an “inappropriate glance” led to a shoot-out. The outcome was three lives lost and four people injured. Dead were Jacob Smith, the objectionable “foe”, and a three year old little girl. The girl was a block away. Her head exploding from one stray 9mm hollow point slug that struck her from behind as she walked up to the front door of her home. She died, unknowing, innocent.

Jacob Smith had figured his gun would gain him respect. He was sure people would see him as a man. He knew he would be something. Seeing the fear in the other

man's eyes swelled him up with a sense of power. He didn't count on the other man also carrying a gun. Nor did he consider that fear did not automatically result in respect. Even as the bullets started to fly Jacob reeled in adrenaline, fascinated and fueled by the sudden rush. He was ready, he was sure. It was just like the videos he played hour after hour. "What a rush," he thought to himself as he pressed the trigger, over and over.

Only moments later, after some two to three dozen rounds being spent, Jacob Smith's thoughts had shifted. The rush was spent. The pain was like nothing he ever could have imagined. As his mind drifted, several thoughts floated past his consciousness -'bullets burn' and 'blood is really warm.' One of the last things to be processed by his oxygen-starved brain was 'I'll never be a man.'

Jacob Smith's need to be seen as something more left four families broken, damaged, and forever disrupted. None would ever be quite right. Anger would prevail. Resentment would govern the lives of many of those affected by Jacob's search for respect. Some would see the folly. A few would grow from the experience. But like stacked dominos, more heartbreak, pain, and misfortune would plague the victims of Jacob Smith's exploration. Why? Fear is not the same as respect.



Away from the violence of the city, another family came into contact with the authorities and calamity for the first time. Mr. Hendricks did not arrive home from work until well past 7 PM -an "early" night. What he found he never could have imagined. His daughter, his princess and first born, lay in a heap next to her bed. She was barely conscious. She had been brutally beaten and raped. The short shorts she loved were in tatters. The spandex-like blouse and sports bra were wrapped around her neck. The silk sheets off her bed and the hand-made Indian comforter were stained with her tears, blood, and more. All he could get out of his little girl was babble.

Around the corner from the girl's room, in his cave-like room, was the young son. He had stood his ground against the intruding thugs, refusing to relinquish his "wearable-gear" computer eye glasses and wristwatch. It cost him two black eyes (one with associated fractured of the orbit bone), several lost teeth, three fractured ribs, a collapsed lung, and compound fractures of his left ulna/radius. Oh, and he still lost his computer gear -and his TV, Xbox, iPhone, \$250 sneakers, etc.

After frantically searching the house, discovering that his brand-new 9mm, nearly \$4,000 cash, and most of his wife's jewelry were gone, he found his wife. She was beyond relaxed, sound-isolating headphones on filling her head with soothing "nature" sounds, black-out mask over her eyes, soaking in the two person, aerating, multiple-jets soaking tub, oblivious to what had occurred to her children and home.

This was one of several home invasions the exclusive neighborhood had suffered in the past few months. The private security patrols arrived, in response to a neighbor's nuisance call, thirty minutes after the two unidentified intruders walked into the home, unabated and began to unleash their wrath on the Hendricks family.

Mr. Hendricks' anger came close to attacking the responding officers. He demanded to know why this was allowed to happen. Where were the police when it was happening? What was all the money he paid for private security for? He demanded justice. He deserved results. He was entitled to better.



There would be no more of the "have a blessed day" cashier. Dursban Long's manager had to address a customer's concern. When Mrs. Long learned that a

customer had questioned her religious influence, she exploded with rage. Sinners, heathen, atheist, foreigners, and devil spawn; these were but a few of the claims that spewed from her mouth. She alleged a conspiracy against her and her faith. She decried vengeance of the ingrate. It was the devil working to bring her down.

Dursban Long was first offered the remaining of the day off –with pay. Her tirade could not be squelched. It escalated. The manager tried. He dug deep within himself to find the patience and tolerance to sustain the hate and hostility coming from Mrs. Long. An offer for the rest of the day off turned into the rest of the week. A week turned into an open-ended opportunity to consider a change of work location without losing her title, pay grade, vacation or sick-leave time. But she would not relent. In the end, her fury cost her her job.

The drive home did not reduce any of the anger in Mrs. Long. It nearly resulted in several crashes. In the end it was a little boy, innocent and unaware, who paid the final price. As Dursban Long reached her home, finding the neighbor boy coloring on the sidewalk by her driveway, she let loose of her anger, hate, and bitterness. Her car easily rode over the small boy. Looking at her rear-view mirror, the act finally struck her when the boy's mother cradled the limp body in her arms.

The end of the little boy's life became the end of Dursban Long's own life. She would live on away from the world she cherished (but criticized). She would see her family through bars, never again to be a regular part of their lives. She prayed for forgiveness. She prayed for her soul. She prayed for her family. But she never understood. She went on wondering "why?"

Why did her mom do this to her, was Mary's thought as she looked out at the carnage her mom had created. What would she do now? Who would deal with Peter? Pain and shame were what filled little Peter's mind and heart. Guilt floated and flooded him. Why did I not do something? Why could I not have helped her? How could he help now? Could he? Would he? He looked on at the chaos, lost, jaded, reticent-damaged.