"Have You Ever Thought About Killing Someone?" by Rachel Monroe Matter April 22, 2015 https://medium.com/matter/have-you-ever-thought-about-killing-someone-9abedcc531ad

On a warm day in March 2000, national park ranger Cary Brown woke up early and decided he might as well go ahead and start his patrol. Big Bend, where Brown was stationed, is located in Far West Texas, with the thin green ribbon of the Rio Grande serving as the border with Mexico. It's one of America's least-visited national parks, a remote and sunbaked place whose martian landscape of sharp canyons and sudden outcroppings implies some deep-buried geological violence.

Not long after sunrise, on the park's main road, Brown pulled over a pickup with a suspicious tarp-covered load in its bed. There were two men inside the cab. When he peeked under the tarp, he found blocks of marijuana, about 400 pounds of it. As Brown started to arrest the driver, the passenger reached under the seat, grabbed a bottle of water, and sprinted off into the desert.

A group of rangers set out on horseback to look for the runaway drug smuggler later that morning. Deep into the search, in a remote part of the park near Dagger Flat, one of them spied an incongruous scrap of color in the desert. When they got closer, they could make out a red blanket and, nearby, a human skull and upper torso protruding from what looked to be a hastily dug grave. The search for the runaway was immediately called off. All the park's investigative resources were diverted to the new body.

"It's amazing that we found him at all," Brown told me. "Nobody ever goes out there, it's the most remote part of the park. Maybe years later somebody would've stumbled on some bones, but they would've been all strewn out. We were lucky. He had only been dead around six weeks when we found him."

The man was still wearing the clothes he had died in — a denim shirt with the word "Magic" embroidered over the left pocket. At the bottom of the grave was a pair of green, black, and purple Nikes, size 13. Investigators collected scattered bones, cigarette butts, and a shovel from around the site. Several things about the scene seemed strange to Brown. The body was partially wrapped in chicken wire. Even more inexplicably, there were aluminum stakes driven into the ground around the grave, even though the land's slope made it exactly the wrong kind of place to pitch a tent.

This close to the border, most violent crimes are at first considered drug-related. But the carefully staged scene — the deep grave, the blanket covering the body, those mysterious tent stakes — didn't resemble a typical drug murder. And while visitors to the park occasionally died of natural causes in remote areas, that didn't seem to be the case here, either.

The depth of the grave pointed to an intentional death. Perhaps it could've been a strange, ritualistic suicide — except for one problem. "It was obvious he didn't bury

himself," Brown said.

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If he had known then what he knows today, thanks to more than a decade spent among the perverts and neo-Nazis and idiots and masterminds of federal prison, Mike Baker would have been able to tell exactly what Doc was the first time he set eyes on him. That's one thing you can say about being locked up: It's a great way to learn about human nature. But back then — San Antonio, the summer of 1997 — Baker was fresh out of Christian school, where they taught you parables and prophets — nothing actually useful, like how to spot a creep or tell when a situation was getting out of hand. If they had, maybe things would've turned out differently; maybe Baker wouldn't have taken even a single step into Doc's cluttered apartment, with its distinctive, unwashed-laundry smell. He'd have turned around and found someone else to buy him cigarettes, or just stolen the fucking cigarettes for God's sake.

His then-girlfriend is the one who introduces them. Him and Doc. It's funny how their names are linked together now, because of what happened later — how a crime can tether you to the exact person you want to get the farthest away from. Back then Baker was 17 and scary-smart in a way that made him feel invincible. (These days, in prison, he subscribes to the Mensa magazine and spends his afternoons working through a quantum mechanics textbook recommended to him by UCLA physics professor/Big Bang Theory science consultant David Saltzberg.)

So one day, Baker wants to buy a pack of cigarettes. His girlfriend says she knows this older guy, Doc — he's weird, but he'll buy you whatever you want. He's a medical student and always has lots of pills, too. His mission in life, he likes to say, is corrupting the youth of America. Doc's apartment is in the same low-rent complex where his girlfriend lives with her brother, and she'll go over there to hang out sometimes, when she doesn't feel like being at home. Doc even gave her a key.

So the two of them let themselves into Doc's apartment. It's a hoarder's paradise, full of random clutter — plastic models of skulls and scuba gear and Native American dolls. One lone poster on the wall: My Own Private Idaho. A narrow path through the boxes of junk to the TV and a single La-Z-Boy recliner. After a little while, Baker and his girlfriend get used to the smell. When Doc finally shows up, Baker is surprised: He's older than a medical student should be, in his early 40s, and looks like a slightly more overweight version of Mr. Bean. He's also one of those people who strikes you right off the bat as strange. In 2015 parlance, he's probably "on the spectrum." Smart-weird. The kind of guy who has a piece of the Arctic tundra in his freezer, and excitedly takes it out to show you. Baker's girlfriend gets a kick out of him.

This all happened a long time ago, at a time when Baker was smoking a lot of weed. All the strange interactions he had with Doc over the years have blurred together. At a certain point, things began to feel inevitable, all Baker's small choices gaining momentum until it felt as though there were no more choices to make. And while he insists that he has no regrets about what took place later — it happened the way it should

have, the way it had to — maybe if he'd made a different decision that afternoon, he wouldn't be in prison right now. Because it can all be traced back to that very first time they met, when Doc turned to him and asked, straight-faced, as if it was the most normal thing in the world: "Have you ever thought about killing someone?"

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When he first met Doc, Mike Baker was already, at age 16, something of expert in the messy, gray areas of life. Mike's dad was a Korean War vet and an accomplished pilot, the kind of guy who was invited to give lectures on Air Force bases. He has a small airport named after him in Nebraska.

When Mike was 6, his parents split up and he moved with his mom to San Antonio. John Baker wasn't much for talking on the phone, but he sent his son books — mostly spy thrillers — which Mike devoured. John would sometimes make elliptical allusions to a period in his life when he was involved in, shall we say, classified operations, and Mike was smart enough to fill in the blanks himself: CIA, obviously.

And so the novels his dad sent, with their twisty tales of conspiracy and counterconspiracy, were like missives from his father's secret life, a world of good bad guys and bad good guys, with an unspoken code of behavior that had little to do with what was, strictly speaking, "legal." The good guys needed the bad guys, and vice versa. They were players in the same game.

Along with the books, Mike's dad also sent tuition money for the private Christian schools that Mike's mom couldn't afford. Mike and his friend Travis were always the kids with Payless shoes in a sea full of Air Jordans. At school, they scrapped with the rich kids; on the weekends, they escaped to Travis's family's ranch in the country where they shot guns, set things on fire, and played games like what if you were running from the cops and had to survive on only your wits. Over the summer, Mike's dad would visit, scold Mike for his uncut nails, and then buy him Umbros, or whatever else the branded object of desire of the moment was.

So Mike grew up with both an inclination toward mischief and a deference to protocol. It was like: Be bad, but be bad skillfully. He grew into the kind of teenager who listened to Metallica but tucked in his shirt. When he got pulled over, he was always polite. He liked cops — the smart ones, at least. "I got arrested quite a few times," he told me, mostly for drugs later on. "I never minded. The cops and I had a good time."

Mike and Travis got — well, not exactly kicked out, but not invited to return to a couple of schools. When Mike was 16, he went to public school for the first time. Tom C. Clark High School was one of the biggest schools in San Antonio; there were a thousand in his grade alone. Kids at Clark dyed their hair blue, they did drugs — they sold drugs. At this point Mike hadn't even smoked weed. Luckily, though, he was a fast learner. These days, from prison, Mike remembers those years as a kind of glorious, unsupervised utopia: computers and cars and drugs and girls, the world opening up before him,

dazzling in its possibilities for trouble and fun. Soon he was getting high every day and basically failing out of school. It was the best time of his life, like something big was about to begin.

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Pretty soon a whole crew of them is hanging out at Doc's once or twice a week: Travis and his little brother; blue-haired Rodney and his girlfriend; Dan*; and, of course, Baker. (Baker's girlfriend got too troublesome for her brother and was shipped off to her sister in Arizona.) An adult-free zone is a precious thing when you're 17 — and despite being in his 40s, Doc often seems like a teenager in an adult's body, impulsive and uncensored and not great at taking care of himself. He's been in AA for over a decade, but he'll do everything else: LSD, nitrous, coke, mushrooms, weed, Ambien. He buys the teens Boone's Farm wine and whip-its, shows them disgusting pictures in his med school textbooks. When Travis mentions he might want to be a dentist, Doc puts him in a white lab coat and sneaks him into the cadaver lab, where they take an up-close look at teeth and jaws.

Sometimes they'll all get high and put in one of those Faces of Death VHS tapes, watching car accidents and failed surgeries and assassinations, all the creative ways a human body can be ruined. During the day, at school, in that alternate universe of lockers and homework and pep rallies, they talk about him — their odd friend. "Baker and I thought Doc was really strange," Rodney told investigators later. "We basically talked about his weirdness."

Doc doesn't reveal a whole lot about his past, but over time Baker and his friends get a sense of the rough outlines. He grew up in Idaho, where his parents were artists and professors, kind and nature-loving people, beloved by their neighbors. Doc took a different tack, studying physics, eventually making good money as a geophysicist for an oil company. For a while, his life seemed set: He had friends his own age, went camping, traveled to Hawaii and Peru. Then the Gulf War happened, the oil market contracted, and Doc got laid off. He decided to become a doctor — more for the money, prestige, and job security than for any longstanding love of medicine. While taking chemistry prerequisites at the University of Texas in Austin, he started going to raves with his undergrad classmates. On the phone with his sister, he called them his "little friends."

And evidently, Baker and his high school friends are becoming Doc's newer, littler friends. It's a funny kind of relationship — everyone is using everyone else. The kids get the drugs and alcohol; Doc gets the audience and companionship he seems to crave. But that doesn't mean they aren't friends, after a fashion. Doc will drive halfway across town to give Baker a ride when he's stranded somewhere. He tutors Travis in calculus for free. "He was cool," Travis told me. "It was good to have a conversation with someone who was actually smart, not like uhhhhh guns are cool where's the weed."

There's another reason Doc likes having a bunch of high school boys hang out at his apartment. Spending time with Doc requires a certain tolerance for hearing him talk

about his fantasies — S&M ropes-and-domination stuff, mostly. A recurring fantasy involves Doc being choked from behind by a muscly alpha-male type. Once, early on, Doc puts his hand on Travis's thigh. An obvious invitation. Travis plucks the hand off, Nope, and Doc doesn't try again — except for this one other time when Travis tells a story about a wrestling match he's just won, all the grappling and sweat, and Doc is like, you have to let me — and Travis again has to be like, dude, NO.

Sometimes Doc will also go to a very dark place. He has a thing about wanting to die, and wanting his death to become a snuff film. Some of the other kids who hear that are out the door and refuse to come back. It's creepy. But the rest of them develop an attitude that's basically like: Whatever, it's just Doc. It's not exactly normal — nothing about Doc is normal — but it becomes part of the background noise, the price of entry for spending time at Doc's. Like that faint persistent stink. It's amazing what you can get used to after a while.

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Here's how I remember 1999: Britney Spears, millennium panic, everyone playing that Prince song on repeat as if it was going to expire at midnight on New Year's Eve. For Doc, 1999 was the year of things getting worse. He was in his early 40s, overweight, balding, and in debt. He spent a lot of his time with high school students who made fun of him. He had a spiel that he'd slip into when he got high: I'm all used up, I'm a hag, my life is worthless. The guys were sometimes like, No, man, you've got so much to live for but then sometimes they're like, Whatever, shut up, Doc.

In Doc's third year of medical school, he develops a bad habit of asking patients questions that the attendings deem inappropriate. He takes it hard when he fails his psychiatry rotation — it's a blow to his confidence, and also to his finances. He has been living off his med school loans, occasionally borrowing money from his parents so his electricity doesn't get cut off. Plus, there's the tension of leading what amounts to a double life: No one from his family or med school knows about his after-hours life — the teens and the drugs and the dark sexual fantasies. Only a handful of friends even know that he's gay. When he talks to his parents on the phone, it's all Yes, school is tough, but it's going well, even though by September 1999 he's stopped showing up to class entirely.

As Doc feels his life spinning out of control, he gets increasingly fixated on the snuff film–suicide idea. He asks Baker and Travis and Rodney: Would you? For money? The guys all say a variation of: No, of course not, no, I will not kill you for money, fuck no. But Doc has an engineer's mind, and is skilled at thinking his way through problems. What if he could find someone to do it for free? He puts an ad in San Antonio's underground gay newspaper, using carefully coded language — occult, autoerotic asphyxiation. When Baker comes over, Doc gives him the latest update: This guy is going to fly in from California to do it; no, that fell through. But this guy who works at Kinko's is going to do it; no, that didn't work out, either. It must have been frustrating. All those other problems, and then not even this going in his favor. His death is the last thing he'll ever have; of course he wants to get it right.

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Incidentally: Autassassinophilia, or the sexual fetish of wanting to be killed, is quite rare. There was that German cannibal, who posted an internet ad "looking for a well-built 18-to 30-year-old to be slaughtered and then consumed" — and actually found one, and also a famous case of consensual homicide in Maryland (that one also started with an internet ad). Last fall I called up Dr. Fred Berlin, director of the Sexual Behaviors Consultation Unit at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, to ask him about it.

"Auto what?" he said. "Actually, your predecessor, John Money, coined the term — " I started to explain. "Well," Dr. Berlin said, "he coined a whole lot of terms." Being turned on by your own death is a fetish that causes both moral and legal problems. People who are into the more torture-y kinds of S&M can make the case that they're consenting — indeed, inviting — their own abuse. But can you consent to your own death? Kind of — attempting suicide may be religiously proscribed, but it isn't illegal. But assisted suicide is a trickier question, even when it's done for socially sanctioned reasons, such as cases of terminal illness. A handful of states have legalized physician-assisted suicide; others classify it as first-degree murder. Add sexual compulsion to the mix and the waters get so muddied it's hard to see anything clearly.

Autassassinophilia, as defined by Dr. Money, is a reciprocal fetish — it's not just the victim who's deriving pleasure from the experience, but the attacker as well. Then it's no longer a case of humanitarian intervention, but something selfish and sick — even if the outcome (a person who wants to die is dead) is the same. Courts have a hard time knowing what to do with such circumstances. The German cannibal was at first convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 8.5 years; in a 2006 re-trial, the charge was upped to murder, and he was re-sentenced to life in prison. Robert Glass, the man who killed the Maryland woman, died in prison near the end of his two-year sentence for manslaughter. Both men expressed remorse; the German cannibal is now a vegetarian.

Baker: [Doc] started getting a little more edgy-pushy about the killing issue. Several times he called to say "Goodbye," a couple of times he stopped by my mother's house and dropped off crap (I say crap, because that's all it was [i.e., Bible covers, feather boas, books (awful books), and misc. junk, all in the same box, too]).

Travis: The last time I saw him, before he disappeared, he was like, "Yeah, I found somebody else to do it." I was like, "Oh, okay, whatever, it sucks that you're gonna go." He was a med student, man. He had stuff to offer the world. He was only 38 or whatever. [Actually, he was 43.] So I was like, that sucks. But okay. Then after a while I didn't hear from him.

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And so it happened that one day, not long after the non-event that was Y2K, Baker and

Doc drove west from San Antonio, leaving after midnight, arriving at Big Bend National Park at dawn. Doc drove Baker's car; Baker curled up in the backseat, trying to sleep. The rising sun illuminated the rough face of the desert, the long spine of the Chisos Mountains in the distance, and beyond that, Mexico. The desert air was clean and clear in January, no humidity at all, everything sharp-edged in the morning light, looking exactly like what it was.

Doc had some pretty clear ideas about where and how he wanted to die. The area around Austin and San Antonio didn't strike him as an appropriate setting — it was just flat, characterless fields; sprawl, strip malls, and cows. But the Big Bend region had a rugged drama that reminded him of his childhood in the mountains of Idaho.

He was also firmly fixed on a method of death. There's no polite way of putting it: Doc had decided that he wanted to be filmed as he was staked down and cut open. His very own Face of Death, caught on camera. This was a crucial but problematic part of the fantasy. It tended to turn prospective killers off. Doc was worried that once they were out in the middle of the desert, Baker would just shoot him dead — or, worse, drive away and leave him to wander the desert until he succumbed to a slow, unwitnessed death by starvation. But Doc had thought this through, too. He put a thousand dollars in his apartment mailbox. He filed the head of his little mailbox key so it was as small as possible. Then he encased it in some plastic tubing and swallowed it. In order to get the money, Baker would have to get the key. And in order to get the key, he'd have to cut Doc open.

Baker saw all this — Doc filing the key; Doc loading the shovel and pickax into the trunk of the car — but still, somehow, the idea that he would actually kill Doc seemed impossible. Even as they got in the car and headed west, he was still thinking about the whole experience like a rehearsal for a play that would never actually be staged. There was no one at the park's entrance gate. Doc signed in anyway, identifying himself as "sol. hiker" and his destination as "Dagger Mountain." They drove 20 miles into the park, until they reached Old Ore Road, a rarely traveled unpaved road that heads out to one of the park's least-explored corners.

After a few miles, Doc pulled over, and the two men walked even farther into the desert, over ground that was too rough for the car. Baker thought that it looked like an ugly, lonely place to die. "I see pictures of Big Bend inTexas Monthly and it's green, there are flowers. But I don't remember seeing anything green anywhere in that park," he told me later. "Just yucca or something poking the shit out of me over and over again."

Baker followed Doc through the desert until they reached the place Doc was looking for. It was clear that he'd been here before; the grave was already marked out and half-dug. A handful of tent stakes had been driven to the side of the small sloping hill. Baker sat there, smoking weed to dampen his hangover and rising panic, as Doc dug the grave deeper.

Here's the thing: Baker loved shooting guns, but had gone deer hunting only once in his

life. He'd been fine with killing the deer; it was the part that came after — dressing the carcass — that undid him. There was no way he was going to have anything to do with the intestines of a human being.

Baker's memory of what happened next is not exactly clear. At some point, he says he told Doc the disemboweling was a no-go. They started arguing about it — Doc standing in his fresh-dug grave, sweaty and pissed off; Baker feeling queasy and annoyed, sick of the whole scene on a few different levels.

Baker: There was a pickax sitting there and I distinctly remember looking at the pickax and instantly turning away. Because I'd have to pull it back out... Then I grabbed the shovel and hit him in the head with it as hard as I could. I remember expecting him to drop like they do in the movies. I hit him twice. Right on top of his head, as hard as I could. It was like — nothing. He was bleeding profusely. But it didn't phase him. That fucked me up. You see all these goddamn movies — you hit someone with a broomstick and they fall over. I put everything I had into hitting him with that shovel. And — nothing.

Defeated, the two men walked back to the car. It was 450 miles to San Antonio; this time, Baker drove. Next to him, Doc sat quietly, brooding and dripping blood on the passenger seat. The drive back seemed endless to Baker, all that West Texas scrubland stretching on for miles, with nothing to rest your eye on. Baker stopped for lunch at Subway, but when Doc staggered in — woozy, dirt-stained, blood crusting on his head wound — Baker noticed the other customers start to stare. He hustled Doc back into the car and kept driving. When they made it back to San Antonio, Doc seemed depressed. "I really hadn't planned on coming back to town," he told Baker. Now he had to start the whole process over again.

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On April 5, the El Paso Times ran a small story with the headline "Half-buried Body at Big Bend Baffles Police." Before long, investigators had determined that the body belonged to a San Antonio medical student named Shannon Roberts. Roberts' father had reported him missing in early March, shortly after he'd paid two months of rent in advance. When investigators started interviewing Roberts' friends, they learned that he'd been talking about wanting to be killed for a long time; he'd mentioned it to a friend in Oregon as many as 15 years ago. In recent months, his death fantasies had become more urgent and real-seeming. Roberts' history seemed to point toward suicide.

The investigation easily could've gone nowhere. There were no witnesses, no useful DNA, no way to determine cause of death, precious little physical evidence. But there was one thing working in the investigators' favor:Because the crime took place in a national park, federal authorities had jurisdiction. That meant the FBI, with all its money and resources, took charge of the case. FBI agent Steve French partnered with Cary Brown, the friendly, dogged park ranger. They were joined by Texas Ranger Dave Duncan — a quiet, analytical man who proved useful to have around. "The FBI is not well thought of in some of the local jurisdictions," Brown told me. "Some of these

sheriffs' departments, if I walk in the door, all they'll tell me is where the men's room is. But when you're a Texas Ranger, doors open. Dave was our door-opener."

As investigators continued to interview Roberts' former co-workers and med school classmates, one nickname kept coming up over and over again: Sweet Thing. From what they could piece together, Sweet Thing was Roberts' boyfriend. Roberts was clearly obsessed with the young man and talked about him all the time, but the relationship had to stay secret — Sweet Thing had a girlfriend and didn't want anyone to know he was involved with Roberts, too. For the investigators, he quickly became both Roberts' probable boyfriend and the chief suspect in the murder: a local kid named Mike Baker.

Back in Idaho, Roberts' mother kept careful notes in neat, forward-slanting cursive, trying to piece together what had happened to her eccentric, brilliant, troubled son. After the autopsy, she planned to scatter his ashes in a meadow on top of a mountain, the same place where his grandparents' ashes were scattered. The last time Doc had visited Idaho, in 1997, he and his father had hiked up to the meadow and found the bear grass all in bloom. There was no official service. Doc's parents told their friends that their son had fallen while hiking.

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The investigators' first interview with Baker took place at his mother's house. Cary Brown recalls Baker as charming, nonchalant, and intelligent. For the most part, the interview was routine. Baker admitted that Roberts, who he called Doc, was "a friend," but said that he hadn't seen him in a while. He denied having a sexual relationship with him, and the investigators decided to drop that bit for now. When Brown asked Baker if he'd ever been to Big Bend before, the young man said that he'd gone once or twice when he was a kid, on a family trip. "No, we've never been there," his mother corrected him. Baker gave her a funny look. It was the smallest thing, but Brown remembers flagging it in his mind: There's something this kid isn't telling us.

A scrap of evidence would later confirm Brown's suspicions: After the presumed date of Doc's death, his debit card had been used to buy concert tickets and a room at the New Orleans Hilton during Mardi Gras. That hotel room had been occupied by Mike Baker and two friends. If nothing else, the investigators now had Baker on debit card fraud. But at this point, the case against Baker was just speculation. No physical evidence tied the young man to the scene.

To Baker, after the initial flurry of interviews in the spring of 2000, it seemed as though the case had gone away. In the intervening years, his life straightened out somewhat. He got more serious with his girlfriend. They moved in together, bought a purebred husky named Jinx. He got a good computer job and began taking classes at Southwest Texas University in San Marcos. He was still both using and selling drugs, but he was less reckless, he says, more businesslike about it. Then, in 2002, more than two years after Doc's death, Baker was in his dorm room in San Marcos, rolling a joint and talking on the phone to his father when there was a knock on the door. "Who is it?" he shouted. "FBI," a voice said, loud enough that Baker's dad could hear. "I'll call you back later," Baker's dad said, and hung up. When Baker opened the door, he saw the men who had questioned him two years before. They wanted to talk again.

The trio of investigators — park ranger Brown; FBI agent French; and Texas Ranger Duncan — knew by now that no useful DNA evidence had been found at the scene. The only way they'd be able to determine what happened to Doc was if Baker told them. "He's a smart guy, he was real tuned in. You kind of felt like you had to talk to him as a peer," Brown told me later. "It felt like a real game with him — who was going to outsmart who."

The interview started just before noon at the station. The four men sat in the bare, windowless interrogation room. The investigators told Baker they knew about Doc's problems — his huge loans, his struggles in med school, his despair about aging, and his longstanding interest in suicide. All they wanted, they said, was for Baker to tell them what happened, so they could wrap up the case and provide closure to Doc's family.

This time, Baker was more forthcoming. He said that he knew that Doc was obsessed with committing suicide, but denied that he'd been involved in any way. He again denied having any kind of romantic or sexual relationship with Doc. If anything, he said, he'd found Doc both embarrassing and annoying, and he'd been trying to distance himself from him. But Doc was impossible to ignore — when Baker didn't answer his pages, he'd start calling Baker's mom, asking where he was.

Duncan told Baker that he had evidence that proved that Baker knew more about Doc's death than he was letting on, something that could possibly result in felony charges. Duncan wrote the mystery charges on a piece of notebook paper and placed it facedown on the table. Baker eyed the paper. "That little note Dave turned upside down on the table, that was the key to it," Brown said.

The investigators told Baker that they'd recommend that prosecutors drop the additional charge — the mysterious thing written on the piece of paper, still facedown on the table — if he'd cooperate in helping them close the case of Doc's death. Still wary, Baker asked why he hadn't been read his rights; Brown told him that he hadn't been arrested, and he was free to go at any time. "It would be stupid for me to leave," Baker said.

At this point, the four men had been in the cramped room for a couple of hours. They took a break; Duncan brought Baker a Coke. When the questioning resumed, Baker started talking. Admitting what really happened, he said, was "like jumping into cold water." And then he described that first trip to the park — the swallowed key; the grave; the shovel; how he'd tried, but failed, to bash Doc's head in. When they made it back to San Antonio, he said, Doc had given him \$1,000 for the lame attempt. And that was all he knew about the death of Shannon Roberts.

The story was shocking, but something was off; the room didn't have the feeling of a person who had just confessed. Baker seemed "disturbed and thoughtful," Duncan wrote in his report later. There's more that you're not telling us, Duncan said. Baker's mind was still on that piece of notebook paper: It's about the debit card, he ventured. Duncan congratulated him and flipped the paper over: DEBIT CARD ABUSE, it read. The card fraud was a possible felony charge, investigators told Baker, but assisted suicide was a Class C misdemeanor in Texas. (Strictly speaking, this is true — but only if the assist doesn't result in serious injury or death. If it does, then it's a felony.) They told Baker they'd recommend that the DA drop the felony fraud charges if he came clean about what had really happened between him and Doc.

That's when Baker set back in his chair and told them all about the second trip to Big Bend.

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In the days after the two men returned from the shovel incident, Baker said, Doc kept "giving [him] shit" about the botched murder. He also promised Baker more money — \$4,000 — if he'd try again get the job right this time.

In early February, Doc and Baker made the 450-mile drive from San Antonio to Big Bend for the second time. Again, they hiked out to the gravesite. Doc got in the hole and began digging; by this point, it was deep enough that it reached up to his chest. Again, Baker told Doc he wasn't going to disembowel him. "He started getting irritated," Baker later wrote in his confession. "From the hole, he started grabbing at me with the pickax he had. I honestly don't remember everything that took place but eventually I ended up with some rope that he had bought to be tied down with and choked him with it. After that I started filling in the hole." Doc hadn't liked the idea of being gnawed on by coyotes after his death; as a precaution, he'd bought chickenwire to keep his body protected. Baker partially covered Doc's body with the wire, then placed the red blanket over him. Jets kept flying overhead, and he felt as though every one was surveilling him.

Driving out of the park, Baker felt both panic and relief. He had an early MP3 player that held only a handful of songs, and he remembers listening to two over and over again: Faith Hill's "Breathe" and Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car." Back in San Antonio, he went to Doc's apartment to retrieve his payment from the mailbox using a spare key. It turned out to be less than \$2,000. "[I] figured that would be the end of it," Baker wrote in his confession.

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In May 2003, Mike Baker was arrested and charged with first-degree murder in the death of Shannon Roberts. If Baker was lucky, his lawyer told him, he was looking at life in prison.

While all that was being worked out, Baker was housed in the Reeves County Jail in Pecos, a rough, hot West Texas town 400 miles from San Antonio. He spent his 10 weeks there planning his escape. While his jailbreak couldn't exactly be called a success, even now Baker is still proud of the plan he came up with. "My dad got a kick out of it," he says. It took a few weeks to put together the elements: the mop closet that popped open if he kicked it in just the right place; the cheap, easily pickable lock that provided access to the crawl space above the ceiling; the rec periods he spent exploring the jail's ventilation ducts; the street clothes he snagged from the jail's property room during one of these ductwork excursions.

On August 12, Baker called his lawyer and asked if there was any chance his charge could be pled down to second-degree murder. According to Baker, the lawyer said the odds weren't good. The next day, Baker put on street clothes under his jail uniform. When his unit was called for rec time, he headed for the mop closet. He shimmied out of his uniform and crawled through the ventilation shaft until he reached its end. The sudden shock of sunlight was disorienting; Baker hadn't been outside in months. He jumped down onto the sidewalk and began walking toward the train depot, where he planned to hop on a train and head east. He knew from his friends in jail that he'd have to pass by the volunteer fire department, which he'd been assured was always empty; as luck would have it, though, this morning the firefighters were hosting a family barbecue, and the place was packed. Baker kept his head down and tried to walk as much like a free man as possible.

He had almost made it to the corner when he heard someone call his name. "The first thing I thought was, 'Well, shit, I made it 100 feet,'" he told me later. He looked up to see one of his jailers walking toward him from the barbecue. "What the hell are you doing out here?" the man asked. Baker spun some story about his attorney getting him bail. "Well, good luck," the jailer said, holding out his hand. Baker shook it. As soon as he turned the corner past the fire station, he sprinted toward the railroad tracks, sure he was minutes from being caught. (The jail didn't notice his absence until 4 that afternoon.)

Baker set up camp in a small stand of mesquite bushes, sure that any minute now a posse would be after him. "I expected a movie-level response with dogs, choppers, SWAT teams, roadblocks," he told me. It was a long August day, and the sun took forever to set. Once it was finally dark, Baker crept unnoticed onto a train. With a series of frightening mechanical clanks, the huge machine worked itself to life. Then they were off, "hauling ass across the pitch-black darkness of BFE Texas," as Baker described it later.

At dawn, the train paused in a small town not far from Dallas. Baker hopped off and began walking toward a Dairy Queen he saw in the distance. His plans for this phase of the escape were hazy: He'd call his friends, the old gang from Doc's place, who would come pick him up. Then — well, they'd figure something out. Still, it was hard not to feel demoralized. He was sunburned, windburned, and thoroughly freaked out. He hadn't had anything to eat or drink since his escape the day before. He walked by a dead cow near the tracks — its guts had been devoured by buzzards and its skin tanned by the sun,

leaving just a hollowed-out carcass, four feet pointing straight up in the air like a dead animal in a cartoon. When he finally made it to the Dairy Queen, he told the cashier he'd been beat up and robbed. Whether she believed the story or not, she gave him a free Hungerbuster meal and a Heath Bar blizzard. He was so grateful he could've cried.

Baker began calling up his friends, asking them to come pick him up. The first guy he reached, Travis, said no way. The second said the same thing. The third didn't answer. Baker holds this against them to this day. He'd pulled off this improbable escape, and now friends who he'd bailed out of trouble before were ditching him when he needed them most. But these friends had also been visited by Texas Rangers, who suspected Baker might get in touch. "It was so stupid," Travis said. "He should've just gone to Mexico."

Finally, Baker called his lawyer, who told him that the U.S. Attorney's Office was offering a plea deal for second-degree murder, a charge with an average sentence of six to 10 years, providing he turned himself in. Baker agreed to the deal. His escape had lasted fewer than 36 hours.

While the courts sorted things out, Baker was temporarily put in the Callahan County jail, where he was housed next to a 91-year-old named Red Rountree, the nation's oldest bank robber. Baker asked Rountree why he was still robbing banks at his advanced age. "There is no better feeling in this world than leaving a bank with their money," Rountree said.

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Last year, I called Big Bend National Park to see about getting the file on the death of Shannon Roberts. I started to describe the case, but the guy at the ranger station interrupted me: "You mean the guy who strangled his boyfriend?" That's the official interpretation of what happened between Doc and Baker. The case file repeatedly states that the two men were lovers. So does the only other lengthy account of the crime, a chapter in an anthology of deaths and other assorted tragedies in national parks called Death in Big Bend. There's a dark, upsetting logic to this narrative; Doc's death becomes a sex game taken too far, a classic example of autassassinophilia.

The investigators seemed to take the stories that Doc told his friends about Baker being his boyfriend at face value, even though their reports also note other fantastic tales he seemingly invented (such as being on the run from the Mexican Mafia and being a member of the Witness Protection Program). The particulars of Doc's hidden life as a gay man seemed alien to them. In San Antonio, they enlisted an agent to dress up "flamboyantly" and "go undercover" in a gay bar to retrieve an alt magazine in which Doc had advertised his death fantasies.

The one investigator who would talk to me about the two men's supposed relationship seemed like he'd rather not. Cary Brown spent three years investigating the case. When I pushed him on it, he told me that he disagreed with the case file and didn't believe that Baker and Doc were lovers. "We never could confirm it," Brown said. "Shannon told people that [Baker] was his lover, [Baker] always denied it. My gut feeling was that it was a fantasy of Shannon's. He was infatuated with him, [Baker] had a girlfriend... my read on it was that it probably never happened." Baker wrote in his confession that Doc made "sexual advances," but he's always denied reciprocating. The investigators didn't know how they could confirm the story either way, and didn't feel as though they needed to. "It was irrelevant to us in the pursuit of our investigation," Brown said.

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When I first wrote to Mike Baker, in February 2014, I expected somesort of stock story: I was a sinner then but I have seen the error of my ways or my parents fucked me up orthere has been a miscarriage of justice. Instead, in his emails he was surprisingly matter-of-fact about the whole situation. He'd had a fine childhood, the cops hadn't railroaded him, his lawyer was adequate; he'd made mistakes and been caught fair and square. Most strikingly, he had no regrets about killing Doc. Those were his exact words: "I have no regrets." I dropped the subject for a little while, and we corresponded about books and graffiti and bad prison food.

Once Baker confessed, the investigators didn't need to parse his motivations any further. But I couldn't stop thinking about them. In December, after we'd been corresponding for nearly a year, I broached the subject of Doc's death once more. "The crime itself has never bothered me," he replied."[T]he only thing that stings a little is the damage I caused to my family and 'friends'. I really could have done without spending over a decade in prison. I've missed the entire lifetime of the iPod, which REALLY pisses me off. In the next couple years, the stand alone iPod will be gone and I will have never gotten to hold a new one... Also, the death and re-birth of the Camero [sic], very upsetting."

Baker has a dark sense of humor and a tendency to be brutally honest, which I appreciated. But this time, his words gave me a funny feeling. The worst thing about killing this guy, ostensibly your friend, was missing the iPod? I started a few responses, but kept closing the email window before I sent them. Finally, I decided to meet his blunt honesty with some of my own. I wrote Baker that his lack of remorse sometimes unnerved me. Ninety percent of the time, I didn't think he was a psychopath, but then sometimes he'd say something that made me wonder.

His response came in three emails, because he kept running up against the 15-minute time limit for using the prison computer. My email "got [his] heart going," he said. "It bothers me a little that you could view me as a nut. I think the reason it bothers me is because I see someone who is nuts as out of control (I know that isn't a valid description) and the idea of being out of control runs contrary to everything I think that I am."

He began to explain how Doc's death was the result of logical decisions he'd made while he was totally in control of himself. "[Doc] had no business at all being free in

society....I don't have the ability to accurately convey how disturbed he was," he wrote. "This wasn't a depressed gay dude. This was a really fucked up individual." He went on at length about how Doc was a child molester and a pervert, an "absolute dirt bag" who destroyed people's lives. (There's no evidence whatsoever that Doc molested children.) Baker couldn't walk away from the situation because Doc wouldn't let him; he didn't call the police because he was doing too many other illegal things at the time — and plus, people in action movies never called the cops.

"Did I want to kill him? No, of course not. Was it easy to talk myself into it? No. However, once it was done, it felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Do I view myself as psycho/socio-pathic? No, and I have taken the psych courses to know the signs. I think what I did was make a very deliberate, almost logical decision. I made that choice and to this day, I am still content with it." His dad, the ultimate authority, approved of what he'd done — "Maybe not the execution of that decision, but at least with the fact that I made the choice and followed through with something I felt I had to do," he wrote.

There's an uncomfortable tension running throughout these emails. I think it's because Baker and I have different stories in our heads. In Baker's, he's calculating and deliberate, like the bad guy in an airport thriller. I wanted to believe — I still want to believe — that Baker was caught up in something huge and overwhelming, that whatever was going on between him and Doc — whether it was sex or drugs or money or stalking or some dire combination of all those factors — left him feeling trapped and confused and out of control, and that killing Doc truly seemed to him like the only way out. That's how I can feel sorry for him, instead of scared of him.

Baker's friends and family told me some things that aligned with my preferred version: How in the month or so before Doc's death, Baker was in a precarious place. How his mom had kicked him out of her house because he didn't have a job. How he was crashing on friends' couches, jobless, aimless, doing too many drugs. (Baker, predictably, refuses this characterization: "I always had a job when I needed one," he told me.) In any case, he remembers this as one of his "vampire periods," when he'd stay up all night and sleep while the sun was up. A family member who saw him around this time was troubled by how unkempt he looked — an ominous sign in a guy who was usually so meticulous about his appearance that his friends had to remind him to untuck his shirt when he went to go talk to a girl.

Meanwhile, Doc's fixation on Baker intensified. He paged Baker frequently, and showed up at his mom's house if he didn't answer. Baker had been very careful about not introducing Doc to his current girlfriend — he didn't want her mixed up with that side of his life. But when his girlfriend graduated from high school, Baker says he saw Doc in the audience, watching. "There was some stalking behavior," Cary Brown told me. "But I'm not sure it wasn't mutually beneficial." Baker took drugs from Doc; he sometimes borrowed Doc's car for days. According to Travis, a few times Baker was in possession of an unexpected wad of cash. When Travis asked him where he got it, Baker would shrug and say that Doc gave it to him. None of Baker's friends from those days are still in touch with him. "How can I associate with someone who did that?" his high school classmate Ross told me. Still, the handful that I talked to defended their old friend, after a fashion. "Doc was sick. I think he preyed on Baker," his friend Rodney told me via text message. (He declined a phone interview.) "I think [Baker] was just a confused kid that was desperate and got caught up in something," Ross said. "He was this quiet, shy, very smart kid who kept to himself and all of a sudden he was on this path. Who could he talk to? I think he was just a kid that got too far in and couldn't get out."

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On a warm, false-spring day in January, I finally got a chance to visit Baker face-to-face at the low-security prison where he's serving out the final years of his sentence. He was tall and tattooed and handsome, in a mechanic on a soap opera kind of way. Throughout our conversation, which included a discussion of Infinite Jest and the prison cats of Leavenworth, Baker was unhurried and thoughtful. He recounted stories from his past with a vividness that made me wonder whether he had a photographic memory. As he spoke, he seemed to be gazing into an interior distance, eyes moving back and forth, giving the impression of a computer moving at high speed. Afterward, he wrote me an email apologizing for not making eye contact; he's gotten out of the habit, he said: "I don't think that helps too much with my reputation as an asshole."

Midway though our seven-hour conversation, I asked Baker about the murder. The memory of that day felt surreal, he said. As he told the story, he slipped in and out of the present tense, vague on some points but recalling others with a hallucinatory intensity. He kept coming back to the grave Doc had dug for himself, how long it took to dig it, how deep and wide and big it had been. I'd been listening Baker's story for so long that his decisions were starting to make a kind of sense to me. I found myself in the strange position of nodding along to an account that I knew ended with a man being killed.

"I remember the last time he was down in that hole, digging," he told me, "thinking it would be so easy just to get this over with. Because I really didn't want him back in my car."

And so he grabbed the rope and tossed it around Doc's neck. Doc tried to clamber out of the hole, but couldn't — it was too deep. He swung the pickax at Baker, who dodged it easily. Finally, he stopped struggling. There's a pause here on the tape, full with the background sounds of the prison visiting room, the clank-thump of candy bars dropping down from vending machines. "So he didn't want to die," I asked eventually. Baker let out an odd, strangled half-laugh. "It sure didn't seem like it," he said.

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That same month, 15 years to the day after Baker and Doc's first trip to the desert, my

boyfriend and I drove out to Big Bend National Park to look for the grave. Tom Alex, the park's former archaeologist, wrote down its approximate GPS location for us. We drove 5 mph down Old Ore Road, which was so pitted and washed out that the car listed like a ship on rough seas. After a few miles, we pulled over and walked into the desert. Without a path pointing the way forward, it was easy to feel swallowed up by the desert, the disorienting presence of all that open space. The official report said that Doc dug his grave next to an abandoned stock tank. I had imagined something man-made and substantial. But there was nothing so obvious at the GPS location. "It's okay," I said to my boyfriend. "I'll know it when I find it." What "it" was, though, I couldn't have told him. A hole? A stray tent stake? A feeling of doom? I crisscrossed my way across the plateau, thinking about how convicted criminals who express remorse do us all a favor by reaffirming the societal order that they transgressed, and how hard it is to know what to do with someone who insists he isn't sorry.

We wandered the area for a couple hours until the sun started to set. Twilight moves slowly in Big Bend — the sky is so big that it holds on to light for a long time. But we hadn't brought any flashlights with us. Maybe, my boyfriend suggested gently, it was time to turn back. There was a slight chill in the air as we walked back to the car, prefiguring the cold night to come. I hadn't found what I was looking for, but the defeat felt appropriate, somehow. I think what I mean to say is: You can only ever get so close.