

# What We Did with Rupert's Body

*By Aidan J. Walsh*

My friend Andy used to drive me to and from work because I always got lost on the back roads going home. One time, driving on a normal, starless night, we hit this guy named Rupert, and we buried him by a gnarled tree a few hundred feet into the woods. Andy said we needed to, and I guess he was right. Well, maybe I didn't so much agree as I did mutely follow his instruction. He was the smart one, with an engineer's mind. I helped him dig and I dragged the body off the road because he didn't want to touch it.

No one else knew about it. I didn't see anything in the papers, and I checked every day for five months. Eventually, I stopped checking. I don't think anyone was really looking for Rupert. His clothes were torn up like he was homeless or a lonesome drifter, but maybe that was just from the impact of the car and then the wheels. The way he became bumps in the asphalt to us. This was around South Pine, Georgia, where Andy and I both lived at the time.

Anyway, I saw Andy at work the day after it happened. He was flipping burgers with his bright yellow suit on, and he looked like he hadn't slept. He had the morning shift. I tried to lift his spirits.

"We're going out to see a movie," I said to him through the steam that the hot grill emanated. "Me and Cynthia. You know Cynthia? Tonight. If you wanted to come with us."

"A movie?" he said distantly. "That's what you're thinking about?"

I became conscious then of some social error – was this not what friends did to cheer one another up? So I just didn't respond.

"Anyway, I don't want to be a third wheel," he clarified. His eyes didn't meet mine when he replied, and they looked like they were retreating deeper into his skull. His dark circles were stacking, a new layer being added hour after hour. I guess the whole situation had gotten to him.

But that was that. Andy left work that afternoon early, told our boss that he had the stomach flu. Maybe he did. But he didn't come back. He got a job at a Petco across town.

I picked Cynthia up that night, and we skipped the movie. I didn't tell her about the accident in the woods. I just drove around, and she talked at me about her friend Emily and some drama about who-knows-what. I guess it was important to her. I wasn't really paying attention. I was watching the twin yellow lines of the road pass by on my left. When we went back to my flat, she sort of quizzed me on the drama, asking what I would do in Emily's position.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess I'd do the right thing."

"You're so good," she told me, and that made me feel a little better.

We got married a few years later. Me and Cynthia. I don't know why. She proposed, and I guess I just go along with things. I loved her as much as I loved anyone else. Andy was at the wedding, but he didn't look quite right. Like he still hadn't slept a single night. After that, though, I didn't see him again for a long time.

Cynthia and I moved into a nice suburb on the outskirts of Macon. She had finished her degree and had found a good enough job in the city. I found a job at a local Sheetz which paid less but wasn't too bad. Our house was a few hours from South Pine.

We had neighbors who were nice. In the suburbs. I met some of them at what they called a 'block party' where the neighborhood comes together to eat and celebrate its existence. We were in the backyard of somebody's house that looked exactly like ours. Some kids played on a backyard jungle-gym, and I sat talking to Cynthia for a while. She left to talk to some other people, but I stayed sitting with the high sun on my neck. The grass was bright, and I sat oddly, out of place, beer in hand. But it wasn't so bad. I liked the nature, even in such an artificial place. I turned to Cynthia and saw her laughing with a group of people and pointing towards me. What a perfect middle class life. I was happy enough.

She lied about being on the pill and poked holes in a few condoms, and so we had our first in March. I knew about all that, but I didn't say anything. She chose the name Evan. I looked into Evan's eyes and there was something behind there. Some sort of glow. I can't explain it. Cynthia was just excited that he was an Aries like she was. I guess she had it planned out, though.

My job at the Sheetz was banal. People dropped like flies and I usurped their responsibilities. Mr. Ericson, my manager, liked to schedule me where five people should have been working. He didn't bump my pay or anything. Mr. Ericson said I was a "hard worker," and I worked long shifts because I didn't object. I went along with it. The only good guy there was this kid Billie, who was a hard worker too, and we talked sometimes. Besides him and Cynthia, I didn't talk to anyone.

"You ought to get a better job," Cynthia told me one day when I got back from a twelve-hour shift. Evan was two years old then.

"I ought to," I said, but I didn't do anything about it.

But really, home life wasn't much better than work at that point. Cynthia had gotten into the habit of lying about a lot of little things. Maybe she always did that. I don't know. She always told me she did the dishes 'last night' and so I ended up doing them every night. But I didn't complain to her or argue. I never did. I didn't even mind doing the dishes, I just wished she didn't lie about it.

Billie, the guy at my work, was a smart kid. He was going to school for engineering or something. Always going on about roundabouts and how efficient they were. I said I didn't like roundabouts. He was nineteen when he had a heart attack in front of me. Some lady screamed

and told me to do C.P.R. So I did my best. But he didn't make it. When the paramedics took over, I stepped back and watched as they sliced his shirt open and put stickers on his chest. They zapped him for a while and then they shook their heads. When I told Cynthia about it, she said, "That's life."

"You're right," I said.

That night I went back to South Pine. I didn't go to Rupert then, just drove around the town. I think I was looking for Andy, or maybe my parent's old house. I was drifting. Lost. Thinking about dead people. But there was nothing for me there, in South Pine. When I got home early in the morning, Cynthia said she was worried about me. She hugged me, hid her face in my chest, and said, "Don't ever leave me."

"I wouldn't," I said.

"How can you let stuff like that get to you? You didn't know him, right?" she said.

"Billie?" I said, and I thought about Rupert.

She wanted another kid around that time, and I said, well, okay. We might have even conceived her that night. A life springing up from the ashes of another. Cynthia picked the name Evalyn, and she was an Aries too. I looked into her eyes and tried to see if she had any emotions behind them or if she was like her parents. I wasn't sure.

Then there was this high schooler who worked with me who liked to steal from the registers. I don't know how she got away with it, I really don't. One day she stole out of my register. I watched it happen, but I just counted my money that night as if I didn't. The next morning, Mr. Ericson was peeved that my drawer balance was a hundred off.

"I took it," I told him.

"You *stole* it?" he said incredulously, like I had let him down, and I got my lunch from the freezer and drove home. I called Cynthia and told her that I had been fired.

"Fuck them," Cynthia said. "Accusing you with no proof?"

"I confessed to it."

"Even still."

I guess she was right.

After that, she didn't want to keep paying for daycare for the kids, so I was a stay-at-home dad. I mostly didn't see Evan and Evalyn in any real sense, though. They were just these objects, shadows, running amuck around the house. Mostly I just watched Netflix, and sometimes Evan would come on the couch with me, and we'd watch some documentary about war together while Evalyn played with her toys.

One time when Evan was seven, he took apart the thermostat in the living room. Cynthia was angry about it, but I just thought it was a sign of an engineer's mind. She asked me to sit down and talk with him since taking stuff apart was "guy stuff" in her words. So I did.

"You can't do stuff like that," I said to Evan.

"Why?"

"Because it isn't yours."

"It isn't? And so what?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You can't take apart what isn't yours," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because it's wrong."

A few days later, I got a call from Andy. He wanted to meet up but wouldn't tell me why. I think I had an idea about it though.

"It's a long drive to South Pine," I halfheartedly said.

"It's important," Andy said quickly. "And I don't drive anymore."

We met in some café early in the morning. He was dressed nice, but his clothes were disheveled, and he really looked like an insane person. I think it was in his eyes, the way they darted back and forth suspiciously, like he hadn't let his guard down in years. He'd become the town crazy, or maybe a lonesome drifter, elegantly sliding into Rupert's past role. Orange sunlight poured in through the windows and he ordered eggs, scrambled, and black coffee. We didn't talk about anything meaningful for a while.

"We did a terrible thing," Andy said finally.

"Accidents happen."

"I mean after the accident."

"The burial."

"Yeah. It was a terrible thing, what we did. Leaving him out there? Not reporting anything?"

"I know," I said. The waitress arrived and poured me some coffee. Andy and I sat across the table looking at each other for a little while until she left.

"I'm going to come clean," Andy told me, wincing with every word. "I'm going to tell them, the police, and lead them to the body. They'll need dogs or something. I don't remember the tree."

I didn't say anything. I just kept looking at him.

"Well?" he said.

I shrugged. "Good idea. I know that this has been weighing on you."

"I'm going to tell them that you were there, and that you helped." He suddenly looked very sorrowful and ashamed, and he turned away from me.

"Of course," I said, not wanting him to feel that way. "I *was* there. I helped."

"It's the only way to come clean. Our judgement is upon us."

I drove home slowly, cautiously, like I was worried another body might pile up. When I got home, I came clean to Cynthia about the whole thing.

"That's not so bad," she told me plainly after I exposed everything. "But you definitely broke some prison-worthy laws there, helping him."

"Laws?" I said.

"Well, imagine what kind of trouble you're in if Andy talks! Isn't that what matters now?"

"Doesn't what I *did* matter?" I asked. "My judgement?"

"*Judgement!*" Cynthia cried out. "Christ, who are you, Christ? Stop answering so reflexively and *talk* to me. I love you and I don't want to lose you to some Orwellian judicial system!"

"Well, what do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Think about the children, growing up with a father in prison!" she cried out.

"I am." And I really did for a second. Then I looked into her beautiful, hollow eyes, and she looked into mine. We were both quiet for a little while.

"We'll need to get the body," she finally said. "And bury it somewhere else."

And so we were off. She asked some neighbor to watch the kids for the night. She drove and I sat staring out the window, watching the asphalt streak by. Watched that white border on the right shimmering. I didn't think there was anything worth saying to myself or to Cynthia. I figured she felt the same because she didn't talk either. We drove into the setting sun, and when it went down, I felt like we were plunging into the darkness headfirst.

We put on masks, hats, and gloves, and we tucked the gloves into our hoodie sleeves, and we walked into the woods, crunching leaves beneath our boots, us two people completely shrouded from the world in cloth, until I found the old tree. I remembered it because it twisted upward at an unusual angle. I dug until my shovel hit something hard and I pulled up a little bit

of Rupert. Then I was there all night. Getting every little shrapnel of DNA from the dirt. Cynthia was motionless, staring from over her mask as I scraped out the remains. When I was done, I filled the hole back in and smoothed out the dirt as best as I could, and then I covered it all back up with leaves. I drove in the darkness with Rupert in our trunk.

We took the body further south, even further towards nowhere, and I buried him again out there in a clearing as the sun rose and burned my tired eyes. Then we went home, and that was that. I don't know what happened to Andy. I don't know if he even told the police, or if they had listened to a lonesome drifter. No one cares about a lonesome drifter.

When Evan was twelve, he was admitted into the gifted program. I knew he'd end up being an engineer or someone smart. He kept on taking things apart around the house, and he was even letting Evalyn help. He had a lot of friends too. I was proud and I thought that he would be better than me.

One night I sat on our back porch as the sun was setting in the spring. The clouds were all pink and orange and they stretched on forever. I sat back there until there was only darkness all around me and I felt consumed.

That night I drove back to Rupert's first tree. I sat against the bark and listened to the cicadas crying for a few hours. The sky was slate and starless, so dark I couldn't see the blowing branches above me. But I heard the leaves as they rustled. I was thinking a lot of things about morality and life, but mostly I just wondered if Andy was still lost or if he had found his way around. I got home just as the sun was creeping back up, and I crawled into bed with Cynthia.

"Where were you?" she asked me. There was no judgement in her voice, only curiosity. She knew I'd be back like a magnet snaps to its opposite.

"Lost," I told her.

"What?" she said. I didn't respond. Then she turned over in bed and curled up next to me and said, "I'm glad you found your way back home."