

# STEAMBOAT WILLIE'S CARNAGE

Prologue:

Hugo:

I tapped my fingers anxiously on the bench of my porch and worked through some homework. I think it was ten at night, but I couldn't be sure. I kind of lost track of time. All I knew was that the sun had been down for a while and that I didn't feel like breaking my focus on my work by getting up and going inside. My hair was matted from pulling at it in stress. Though the stress was sort of self-inflicted, I had to admit. I heaved a sigh as my mom's voice still echoed through my head. *"Hugo, I specifically told you to get your homework done **before** the day trip with Arvid and your cousins! Don't you start complaining to me about the amount of homework you have to cram in tonight. This is on you!"* She had stood there with the classic 'reap-the-consequences' kind of look all moms probably made. I had only grunted in reply and had avoided her gaze. She wasn't exactly the easiest person to argue with.

I flipped the page on my homework assignment and hurriedly answered some more questions. I was tapping my foot against the hard ground impatiently. It made sense why I was impatient, I mean, what kind of idiot liked biology homework? My thoughts went immediately to my friend Arvid, and I instinctively glanced at my phone sitting on the bench next to me. I was tempted to text him, but decided not to when I read that the time was eleven. *Damn*, I thought to myself. It was later than I had imagined.

The breeze was starting to pick up now, just as I thought this, and I was beginning to feel a little cold. I kept working, though. I only had two more questions. I wasn't going to let anything interrupt me. Suddenly, I heard a loud crash, and I practically jumped out of my skin, the hair on my nape standing on end. It sounded like metal hitting the sidewalk. I smoothed the hair down on my arm with a hand and steadied my breath. It was probably my trash can. I looked at my homework again when another strange noise reached my ears. It was... whistling. Chills went down my spine a second time. Okay, now I was spooked.

I got up hastily, my body jolting towards the door, only to find that it was locked. I cursed my mom out in my head. Of course, she forgot I was out here. I felt terrified. I tried to blame it on the stress, but I somehow knew it was more than that. Or that is what I had convinced myself. I looked out to where the light from my porch reached the grass. I couldn't see anything, but I heard footsteps. My blood froze and I pressed myself against the door. Too scared to make a noise. There stood a man, only he wasn't a man. His head was too big and his ears too... I sucked in a breath of panic. Dimly aware that it would be one of my last.

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## Arvid:

I woke up as the light seeped through my blinds and a ray of sunshine pounded down on my delicate eyelids. I turned over and sighed, rolling my body out of bed begrudgingly. I hated Mondays. I lazily walked downstairs and poured myself some cereal. My younger brother Jerry was shoving his face with food as if someone would steal it from him, and was staring at the glowing screen of his phone. Our mother scolded him for it with a frown stretching across her face. Thoughts filled with the day ahead, along with my classes, as I downed my breakfast half-mindfully. I was dreading the classes I had today. Our schedule was a B day today. I liked to say that the B stood for bad because all my hard classes were crammed into those days. Though I obviously knew that it didn't really stand for anything.

Taking my attention away from these thoughts. I glanced over to the screen my brother had opened up on his phone while he was up, rinsing his bowl in the sink. I could recognize the familiar whistling of Steamboat Willie from anywhere. He was whistling the same tune as always. On the screen, it was the same scene he was always on, only Steamboat Willie was strangely missing. His whistling was there, and the steering wheel was moving, but he wasn't there. It was disturbing, but at the same time amusing. I chuckled a little and shook my head. It was probably some dumb fan fiction parody. For some reason, my brother seemed to love those kinds of things.

"Arvid, what's your first period today?" Jerry inquired curiously as he came over to the kitchen island and picked up his backpack.

"AP American Literature," I answered plainly as I got up to rinse out my own bowl. "You?" I asked, pretending I cared, when in reality I was too tired to.

"Geometry," he replied happily as we both got ready to head out the door. I raised an eyebrow in reply, which is a rude habit I have been meaning to break, but I haven't had any luck in doing so yet. Geometry was by far the easiest and most boring class a sophomore could take. How my brother enjoyed it was beyond me. Though I suppose our personalities have always been opposite of each other, to begin with.

As we walked to school, I breathed in the fresh air gratefully. Starting to feel a little more awake. I noted in the back of my mind a strange smell in the air. I couldn't place it, though. It sort of smelled like something rotting. I soon realized why this was the case as Jerry pointed out

a dead mouse on the sidewalk right in front of me. I wrinkled my nose in disgust at the sight of its fermenting body and stepped around it. “Thanks,” I responded gratefully to his gesture toward the mouse. We continued walking to school. My dread for today’s classes grew with each step.

As I walked through the school halls, passing between excruciatingly slow-moving students, my friend Stuart darted up to me and slapped me on the back, jolting me forward a little. “¡Qué lo que, mi hombre!” he shouted enthusiastically and grinned wildly as he tightened his grip on my shoulder. I laughed, and my previous stress disappeared.

“Stuart, you know I can’t speak Spanish, man,” I mirthily replied and shrugged him off.

“No es posible,” he muttered, pretending to be shocked and in horror as he placed his hands on his head. I just shook my head in amusement and punched him away playfully.

He brushed his overgrown brown hair off his forehead and smiled as we walked to American Literature class. “How was your day trip with Hugo and his cousins? Where was it again? Lake Allatoona?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “It was great, the water was amazing. We uh, played chicken,” I smiled sheepishly, just thinking about it.

He laughed. “I’m assuming he bribed you into playing it with him?” he asked as we turned into our classroom.

“No, I mean yes, but it was one of his cousins that did,” I grinned a little, not hiding the truth. It was not like I had a good poker face anyway.

He shook his head a little. “You’re such a people pleaser.”

As I sat down, I noticed that curiously, many students were missing from class. *Strange*, I thought to myself. As we settled into our seats, Stuart and a few other kids pulled out their phones with their eyes immediately hypnotized by the bright screens. I sighed and pushed my backpack under my desk. Of course, what else would we teenagers do in our free time? Clearly, socializing with each other or doing other things was way too difficult for the average student. Just as these negative thoughts began to run through my head, Stuart leaned over to me with a worried expression on his face and showed me his screen. “Arvid, you might want to look at this.” On it was a news headline about missing teens from our neighborhood, and below it, it listed the names of all the missing people. I read them to myself in my head.

- *Noah Rodriguez*
- *Jacob Miller*
- *Mia Jones*
- *Hugo Anderson*

- *Ella Garcia*
- *Olivia Moore*

The fourth one on the list smacked me in the face, and anxiety seized my throat like a tight noose. That had to be a mistake. Hugo couldn't be missing. "That can't be right," I retorted out of wishful thinking.

Stuart shrugged with a grim expression on his face, "It's a legit news source, and if you haven't noticed, quite a few people are missing from our class." I felt upset with him because I knew he was probably right. Even so, I pulled out my phone to text Hugo, to check on him, but just then, the teacher, with his oh-so-perfect timing, walked into the room and scolded us all for having our phones out. I exhaled an inaudible sigh and tucked mine away into my bag, anxiety still gripping me. I tapped my foot nervously.

When I looked back up, I saw that Mr. Campbell had seated himself at his desk. He looked oddly stressed. More than usual, that is. He's a teacher, their jobs are hard, so of course they're stressed, but I'm wondering if it had to do with the missing students. Distracting myself from my anxiety-filled thoughts, I pulled out my homework from the last class since I knew he was going to ask for it. Quite honestly I also just wanted this class to be over so that I could text Hugo and make sure he was okay. Though that was really the only thing I wanted.

I waited for Mr. Campbell to collect our papers before the announcements came, but the PA system beat him to it as its staticky noise sounded through the speakers. Principle Neko spoke over the intercom with his semi-British accent that I had slowly grown used to. "Greetings students and teachers. I hope not to dampen your moods this morning but an important matter has been brought to my attention that I must discuss." My stomach dropped a little as I realized what was about to come. "Six of our students have all gone missing just last night with no signs of how or why. If you know anything about this I am asking for you to please report it to our staff right away. We will have police officers arriving at twelve today to investigate this problem. Please be respectful and treat them as the brave first responders they are. That is all I have to say regarding this at this moment. The schedule for today is a normal B day. I hope that you all have a good rest of your day and that we can soon put this problem behind us."

The PA system cut off sharply and everyone in the room exchanged concerned and suspicious glances. A couple of boys and girls started whispering to each other about it and a sudden wave of emotions hit me. I usually didn't let myself cry in public. I tried to block out the cruel community of high school from seeing any of my emotions, but I couldn't hold it back as tears welled up in my eyes. *Oh my god, Hugo. What happened to you?* I thought quietly to myself.

The day moved by excruciatingly slowly. During the second period, I had texted Hugo and got no reply. I was terrified to know what that meant. By third period I had texted him again. Still no reply. By fourth period I had texted one more time and gave up. I sat alone at lunch. I was too emotionally drained to talk to anybody, of course, Stuart being the good friend he was noticed this and gave me some distance, which I was grateful for.

After the last period, I walked home, silent in worry with Jerry. I clenched my jaw as he began to talk. "I'm so worried about Hugo. What happened to him?" Jerry chatted energetically. I could tell he didn't give a damn about him and this pissed me off. "Do you think he was kidnapped or maybe, maybe he was killed?" inquired Jerry.

This hit me hard, and my only response was one full of anger. "Shut up! Hugo was my best friend! You don't even care! Don't you dare think you can relate to me at all, you brat!" I screamed at him and walked faster so that he couldn't be near me. I know this was childish, but I didn't care. I just needed to get away from him.

Once I reached home, I went straight to my room and attempted my homework while doing deep breathing. I wasn't very successful, considering all I could think about was Hugo, my anger, and my sadness. What if there was some other explanation? What if Hugo was alive? Did anybody really know?" I closed my eyes shut for a few moments and, without noticing it, crumpled up my homework from my stress. Despite this, a small twinge of hope slowly sparked inside of me. It might have been false hope, but it was hope altogether, and I wasn't about to throw it away. I uncrumpled my paper and started to work on it, though not very thoroughly. I wrote most of my answers without reviewing what the questions were actually asking and also texted Stuart.

"I'm riding my bike to Hugo's house. I'm gonna ask his parents what happened," I typed hastily.

Almost immediately, my phone dinged with his response. It read *"I'm coming too. I'm concerned about Hugo as well. It felt weird without him in school today. Meet you there at eight tonight."*

I breathed out a sigh as I sent him a thumbs-up emoji and headed downstairs. I wrote a note to my parents explaining where I was going in case I wasn't back by the morning. Though most likely I would be. I then thought about how I yelled at my brother and felt a twinge of guilt. I wrote him a note too, apologizing for how I acted, even though he was in the greater wrong. I guess Stuart was right when he called me a people pleaser.

I grabbed a flashlight from the junk drawer in my kitchen as well as some duct tape, and headed outside into the cold to grab my bike. I taped the flashlight to the front of the bike and

turned it on. I pulled out my phone and pulled up my GPS to get to Hugo's house. It was just two miles away, which was nothing. I probably didn't even need my GPS since it was in the general direction of my school, but I decided to use it anyway. I checked the time and it was nine-forty. It was time to get moving.

As I rode through the neighborhood, the dark silhouettes of the trees and houses seemed like ill-intentioned shadows darting about in the night. The cold air brushed against my exposed arms and ruffled my hair, giving me goosebumps that closed up my pores. I shivered. I hated cold weather, but up ahead I could see Hugo's street and pedaled harder. My bike tires ran over soft lumps that littered the sidewalk which were probably patches of untamed grass.

My tires skirted against the sidewalk as I made a sharp turn onto Hugo's street, when my feet froze on the pedals at the sight ahead of me. There was a giant mound on the sidewalk in front of Hugo's house, and next to it was a stranded bicycle. It was Stuart's bicycle. My gaze traveled to the mound, and I gasped in disbelief and terror. I felt sick. Ahead, the dim light on Hugo's front porch exposed a massive amount of mice eating a bloody corpse in front of the yard. Blood dripping from their hungry jaws. A sob escaped me as I realized who it was.

They all turned their little gazes toward me and I braked hard, stopping the momentum of my still-moving bike. With one loud gathered screech, they all began to scurry towards me and I sucked in a breath of panic. I peddled fast and zipped down the street on my bike, not daring to look back. My thoughts were racing. I had to get home, but no. Home was too far away. School was closer. I had to get to school and hope that the doors were unlocked. Otherwise, I'd end up like... A sob escaped my throat as I thought about what had happened to Stuart.

More screeching sounded behind me, and my tires ran over more and more soft lumps. I kept telling myself that they were just patches of grass, but my gut knew otherwise. I kept pedaling hard, and my determination increased as I saw my school building's dark shadow against the night sky in the distance. I saw another silhouette, it was about my size and looked like a person of sorts, but it just stood there. Chills went down my spine, but I pushed the sensation away as terror engulfed me again. I didn't have time to worry about who that person was. I had to escape.

I was almost there. Just as I thought that, though, I heard the sound of hissing air coming from my back tire. I twisted my head back and saw that it had been popped. It looked as if something had bitten a chunk out of it. I swore out loud and kept pedaling, trying to keep my arms from trembling in terror. School grew closer and closer, and as I came within five feet of one of the back doors, I flung myself off my bike and stumbled for them. The rodents swarmed

towards my feet just as I managed to pull the door open and slip inside. I slammed it closed and heard banging on the other side of the door from rodents jumping at it.

I sobbed in relief. I had been beyond lucky. I had no idea if the door would be unlocked or not. Though to be honest, I had a strange feeling this wasn't luck. I felt as if someone wanted me to be here. Like someone was playing with me. I quickly pushed away the thought and focused only on the present moment. I was safe, for now at least.

My breathing slowed just a little, and I sank to the floor on my knees and cried. I cried for Stuart, for Hugo, and for the relief of having survived. The thought of them being dead sickened me to the point of almost vomiting. I wiped my face with my sleeve. All I wanted to be was home safe in bed. I wish none of this had ever happened. How had any of this happened? Mice didn't behave like that. Certainly not in groups that big either. Maybe if I closed my eyes hard enough, this would all turn out to be a dream, and tomorrow I would see both Stuart and Hugo again in class. I squeezed my eyes closed and counted to five. *One, two*. My breath steadied a little. *Three, four*. I felt the cool hallway tiles beneath my feet. *Five*. I opened my eyes slowly and blinked. This wasn't a dream. No matter how hard I wanted it to be. The pain was still there, eating me up, but at least I could think now.

I lifted myself up off my feet and walked down the hallway. I listened to the unrhythmic sound of the school ventilation system. There was a phone in the front office. I would go there and call my mom. As I continued walking, I began to focus on my breath again. Breathing in *one, two, three, four*. Breathing out *one, two, three, four*. Breathing in *one, two, three...* A loud bang echoed throughout the hallway, and I heard skittering in the vents.

My breathing quickened, and I panicked. I looked up at the ceiling where the noise came from. I then looked around for a safe place to hide. I ended up running into the bathroom and locking myself inside a stall. I sat on the dirty, sticky floor for a few moments, trying to control my breathing. The scittering and banging noises in the vents remained constant. The sound was sporadic and random. I rocked back and forth on my bottom and held my hands to my ears, waiting for an end. My eyes squeezed closed. My breathing was loud and fast like a sick dog dying of cancer. The noises in the vents grew louder and louder until... It stopped.

My eyes were still squeezed shut, and I opened them after a few long moments of hesitancy. I exhaled a sigh of desperate relief and slowly stood up. Just as I did so, a spine-chilling noise came from the stall next to me. It took me a moment to realize what I was actually hearing. It was whistling. My mind rushed to the silhouette I had seen outside, and an awful coldness spread over me. I bit my lip to keep a whimper from escaping my throat. It was the same whistle I heard all the time on television. I had even heard it this morning on my



brother's phone. It played before almost every one of my favorite movies. This whistling was slower, however.

I clenched my jaw as I heard the toilet flush, only the water kept flushing and wouldn't stop. I hastily grabbed the handle on the stall's door and flung it open, darting towards the bathroom door. Behind me, the other stall door slammed open, and there stood a familiar character. It would be funny if I weren't the person in the situation. It was Steamboat Willie. Only lifeless and in the real world. His eyes were two dark voids. His face was petrified, dark, and cold like a statue's. I screamed and rammed the bathroom door open. I darted down the halls faster than I thought possible. The lights started flickering eerily, in an almost patient evil way, as I ran for my life. The hallway blinked in and out. I looked at the room I was about to pass and cried in terror as I saw him standing there. I kept running. The lights went out and came back on again, and he was at the next door. Mice scurried out of a room and started chasing me. I yelped and ran faster.

Each door I passed, he was there in an almost playful manner. As if he saw me as prey that he could play and taunt with. I could see the exit door ahead of me. I still clung to the hope of escaping. With one last effort, I pushed toward the door that was now only a few feet away from me. I grabbed the handle but was yanked back by sharp digging claws. My eyes watered in pain. Steamboat Willie was above me, and I cried in fear. The torture began as the mice bit into me, and I screamed as I felt flesh being torn from bones and little claws gripping me like cold needles. I moaned in agony, hoping for an end, and then everything went black.

Then there was a coldness. A refreshing coldness, but at the same time not. This felt like a dream of sorts. I walked toward the sensation, except I wasn't walking, nor was I moving. It was like I was drifting but at the same time, yet again I wasn't.

A faint image of school the next day drifted into my nonexistent gaze. Everyone was moving around happily like it was a normal school day, not realizing that two more people were missing. There were no mice or even blood in the halls. Next, I saw an image of the front of Hugo's house. There was no trace of Stuart, not even blood, only dead rats and mice lying on the sidewalks.

An image of a bloody skeleton then appeared before me. It was lying next to two other skeletons. They were in an underground tunnel with rodents scurrying around. I felt sad, but also numb at the same time, as if there was nothing to attach the sadness to. I knew what this was. I knew who these people were. The only thing I wondered now was who else would join this pile of skeletons.



