

He got bad grades, he didn't attend school as often as his teachers would've liked, and he probably wasn't going anywhere in life, but he was a smart kid. At least, that was what he told himself.

He wasn't cocky or anything. He was always a little depressed about the whole failing in life thing. He just thought of himself as a lot more intelligent than, in reality, he was. And it wasn't his fault, either. Teachers always told him things, like: "You're a really bright kid. If you applied yourself, I just know you could ace this class." His parents were always saying things like that, too. After a few years of this kind of talk, he actually started to believe them. "Yeah," he thought, "I'm really smart... I'm just lazy!"

This sort of thing happens all the time. People casually worm their way through school, passing just barely, and they're constantly being told how smart they are. After a while, they start to think of the people around them as studious, asinine drones. They see every little sign of ignorance as some sort of testimony to the infinite stupidity of the ignorant, even though all people are ignorant about things other people think they *should* know.

What teachers told him, about doing better if he applied himself, that part was actually true. Most students can get good grades if they apply themselves. Even the relatively stupid ones. The part about them being really smart, on the other hand, is almost never true. If they're so smart, why do they have to work so hard to get good grades? Most likely, they're just particularly strong in one or two areas, and standard in all the rest. Or worse. Maybe they're strong in one or two areas, but weak everywhere else.

Yeah, he had a standard IQ and a genius ego. By being quiet most of the time, and occasionally saying something insightful (sounding), he kept other people thinking he was a genius. It was a great system! He got the grades of an idiot, a jester, a bum, a donkey, and all the stupid things in the world, and the confidence of a college professor. It didn't matter that he was going to fail, because that was what he wanted. It was easier to go on failing than it would have been to mend his ways.

All that changed when he moved to New Kent.

New Kent County, an enormous area with very few people and lots of cows. Some streets lined with farms, others suburban homes. Most of the forestland there hadn't yet been cleared out for grocery stores and mini malls, commercial industry only lately peeking its head over the horizon.

When he started going to New Kent High, he realized that, "Hey! So this is what it feels like to be smarter than everybody else! But that means... Damn it, I'm not nearly as smart as I thought I was." This completely shattered his blissful delusions.

"Oh, this sucks," he decided. "If I don't get to feel superior to normal people, it isn't any fun feeling superior." And, of course, he was absolutely right: Pretty much everybody can feel superior to those stupid New Kent hicks.

"I know!" he thought. "I'll burn everybody... Then some normal people'll move in."

"It isn't so bad here," said a voice inside his head. This little voice had never spoken up before, so he was a little shocked that it would let itself be known all of a sudden. "It's nice! There're all those pretty geraniums everywhere... And they still have an all night diner."

"Why talk to me now?" he asked, understandably concerned.

"Because," said the voice, "you've never done anything this bad before! That's when we're allowed to *really* come out, right before you do something particularly nasty. It's like you turning a key to unlock me."

"We?" he asked. He frowned in thought.

"Oh, don't worry," said the voice. "I'm the only one with you. But everybody's got one."

He didn't like the sound of that. "You're a conscience? But I don't feel guilty... Aren't you supposed to make me feel guilty?"

"No, no, no," said the voice. "That's your emotional conscience. Yours isn't very strong, which is why you need me. I'm your cricket."

"Huh?" He looked around for a talking cricket.

"You won't find me," said the cricket. Its cackle filled the room. "I used to follow you everywhere! But then you stepped on me. So now I'm a ghost. Note the sinister cackle."

"What? You're telling me my *conscience* is haunting me. That's ridiculous." He looked around some more, hoping to find someone hiding under the bed, or maybe in the closet...

"Don't worry," said the invisible cricket. "You're not crazy... Yet. I'm not some kind of derangement. I'm the actual ghost of your cricket conscience. But if you set fire to just *one* building, I swear, I'll drive you bonkers."

"Wouldn't I already be bonkers, if I went around setting fire to buildings?"

"Oh yeah, good point. Problem solved, then. You'll just have to find another way to get over your disillusionment!"

He didn't like that reply very much. He understood that the cricket specter was just trying to confuse him. Still, it made sense. At least, it sounded like it made sense.

"Listen, cricket. I'm not listening to you anymore."

"If you're not listening, then why should I?"

"I'll stop talking then you'll stop talking."

"Sounds logical, to me. So of course you're not crazy. Crazy people aren't logical."

"Shut up."

"But you're still talking..."

"..."

"..."

"Stop that!"

"Stop what? I didn't say a thing!"

"Screw this, cricket. I'm going to get some gasoline." And with that, he started down the stairs.

"Wait a minute!" shouted the cricket. "You forgot to feed your cat! It's enough you plan on killing off an entire county of hicks. Don't starve all your animals, too."

"Oh, all right," he replied, going for a can of tuna fish. "But only if you promise to leave me alone for the rest of the night."

"I haven't even sung any songs yet!" protested the cricket. "I have to sing at least one song."

"No. If you sing, I'm not feeding the cats. You gotta give a little to get a little."

"Give a little little bit..."

"You sing, no food. You sing, no food."

"Fine," said the cricket. "Just don't come whining to me when you're stuck in prison with nothing to do and no songs with which to pass the time."

"Prison!" he shouted, dumping some tuna into the cat bowls. "I'm far too smart to go to prison. They'll run and run as fast as they can, but they'll never catch me."

"That's really lame," said the cricket.

"Shut up already. I fed the damned cats, so leave me alone."

"What's holding me to a verbal agreement, if you're going out to kill people?"

"Because you're my *conscience*," he replied. "What kind of sense would it make for you to do the wrong thing?" And with that, he left the building.

It was getting kind of late, by the time the bowling alley went up in flames. He could barely see three feet in front of him, which probably explains his track through doggie dookie.

"Serves you right," said the cricket.

"It's still night out!" he shouted.

"Technically, it's another day," said the cricket.

"But it's still night out!" said he.

"I guess you're right," said the cricket, and that was the last thing said until sunrise.

"What the hell!" he cried, pulled into consciousness by a horrible rendering of "It's a Wonderful World". "I don't have a damned alarm clock!"

"So you don't," said the cricket, ending the song. "What, does mommy wake you up?"

"No, daddy does... and what's that got to do with anything?"

"Nothing." And the cricket sighed. "I just thought you might like to wake up a few hours early this morning."

"I didn't, and it's more than just a few hours before school. I'm going back to sleep."

"No you're not," replied the cricket, a voice full of cheer. "I'll just wake you up again in five minutes. I've got lots of songs, you know."

"Stuff you and your songs. You'll drive me crazy with that garbage."

"Crazy with guilt! That's my job. I'm your unbearable guilt manifest to torment you. The only way to get rid of me and clear your head is to confess."

He laughed. "Guilt? What guilt? I feel fine. Good, even. Killing people is kind of fun. And besides, you appeared before I ever even did anything."

"Well okay," stammered the cricket, "but that's only because you were guilty about what you planned on doing."

"Bull," he said. "I felt fine then, and I feel great now."

"Not even a little guilty?" asked the cricket. "Not even just a little?"

"Not even just a little."

"Not even about all those sad families? All those people hurt that never did anything to you?"

"Nope."

"Not even about all that property you damaged, all those dreams you shattered?"

"Nope."

"Then you're a real ass," said the cricket. "You're hopeless."

"You'll leave me alone now?" he asked, his eyes sparkling.

"Of course not, you stupid ass. I'll still make you go nuts. There just won't be much of a point anymore. Not even a little tiny bit guilty?"

"Nope, sorry..."

"Then I'll just have to keep singing until you die. Die, or miraculously see the error of your ways."

"How's singing going to make me feel guilty?" he asked. It was too late. The cricket had already started.

Meanwhile, Deputy Billy Bobby Joe Bob Junior uncovered something interesting near the scene of the crime. "Lookit dis heya poopie!" Deputy Billy Bobby Joe Bob Junior shouted.

"Well dang diggidy doo ding dang doo doo!" proclaimed Sheriff Bobby Billy Bobby Joe, waving his hand about in the air like a bird. "Dis heya's hibba purdy piece o' evipie!"

It was he's shoeprint, of course. This told Sheriff Bobby Billy Bobby Joe and Deputy Billy Bobby Joe Bob Junior a great deal. Most people in New Kent, including he's parents, don't wear shoes. Those that do wear boots. This was no boot print. Being the renowned hunters that they were, both Deputy Billy Bobby Joe Bob Junior and Sheriff Bobby Billy Bobby Joe could tell the exact time the poo was disrupted, which was soon after the fire. All the fuzz had to do now was find somebody with shoes on, so they could ask them who burned down the building!

It took the crack police force months to search the dozens of houses in New Kent, but eventually they found one with shoes in the closet. He was at home relearning cursive writing at the time. His father was home, though.

"Bib bob flam dang diggidy do, ding dang damn damn diggidy damn dong, dabbedy boo, damn it!" shouted Sheriff Bobby Billy Bobby Joe at Ed, he's father. "Who's 'at dabbedy do shoo?"

"Well I'm sorry fuzz, but I don't know what you're talking about," said Ed, having no recollection of the bowling alley fire since he wasn't there.

"Bibbedy poo poo, ding weewee dong dang damn it!" countered Sheriff Bobby Billy Bobby Joe.

"But I don't *wear* shoes," said Ed, lifting his crusty naked feet up off his leg rest for emphasis.

"Bibbedy dang dog it nab flabbidy bip!" retorted Sheriff Bobby Billy Bobby Joe.

"Officer, I swear it! Those are my son's shoes in the closet!"

"Shibbedy shabbedy bip boop, dang dong digit shigut, flabber blab flobbit," muttered Sheriff Bobby Billy Bobby Joe, heading for the door. It was at that moment he walked in, wearing a pair of shoes smelling ominously of dookie.

"Sham bam bib bob baggit bagagagaga, boy!" shouted Sheriff Bobby Billy Bobby Joe, as they passed each other.

"Sorry, no. I don't know anything. But a pleasant day to you too, sir," he said, taking off his shoes and walking towards his room.

"Well, flib flab fab dab nab gizzard!" said Sheriff Bobby Billy Bobby Joe to Deputy Billy Bobby Joe Bob Junior.

"May toe," replied Deputy Billy Bobby Joe Bob Junior in a huff. "May toe!"

He stepped into his room, slammed the door behind him, and buried his head under a pillow. He couldn't get the singing to stop.

"Feeling guilty yet?" asked the cricket, pausing to do so.

"Uh... yeah. I'm feeling really guilty! I can't believe I did all those terrible things." He rolled over and stared down at his feet in shame.

"Guilty enough to confess?" pressed the cricket.

He looked to the ceiling, thinking. If confessing would get the cricket to stop... No, he decided. Prison rape seemed a little more terrible than nonstop whimsical music.

"No, but that'll just make me feel more and more guilty as time goes by. My sins pull on me always, weighing me down right to the ground. I'll have to live with all those horrible things I did! Life will be my prison."

"Right you are," said the cricket. "You'll have to live with all those horrible things on your conscience. That won't stop. I'm here for keeps, pal, unless you confess."

"But I feel so bad about the fire!" he said. "I'll be worse off out here than in there. It isn't fair that I should get free food and shelter for the rest of my life."

"Unless they execute you. Are you absolutely *sure* you're feeling guilty?"

"Sure I'm sure," he said. "I feel like such an ass! Now that I see the error of my ways, I'll never be able to look at myself the same. Oh, the horrible agonies of the self-mutilating force they call sin! You've done your job, cricket. You watered it and cared for it and now I have a real conscience."

"I don't know," said the cricket, visibly narrowing his invisible eyes. "If you can kill, you can probably lie too. I'm afraid you just don't sound sincere."

"I am sincere, you dirty cricket!" he shouted, fists clenched. "You just want to stick around because you like to torment me. What kind of conscience are you, anyway?"

"I'm a damned good one," said the cricket, "and now I see right through all your lies. You won't trick *me* again."

"Never did trick you, cricket!" he shouted.

"If you want to repent, confess. That way, the families of your victims will have some kind of explanation for what happened."

"I'll confess alright," said he, "but only if you leave me alone and unguarded, in good faith. It's like I always say, you gotta give a little to get a little."

The ghostly conscience considered this. "I would have to trust you."

"If you can't trust me," he replied, "why should I trust you? How do I know confession's really the best thing?"

He had a point, the cricket decided. "All right, but you had better not be lying to me..."

He frowned. "When did I ever lie to you, cricket? You've done your job, and now it's time for you to go."

That said, the cricket sighed and took off, leaving he to rest in peace. He would get back to the business of arson in a few hours, when it would become suitably dark.