David M. Lawrence
MATX 601
Reworking the text: The Killers by Ernest Hemingway

"The Killers" is a short story by Ernest Hemingway. First published in Scribner's Magazine in 1927, the story—part of Hemingway's "Nick Adams" series—begins and ends in Henry's diner in Summit, Ill. Summit is a small, remote town, but not so small and not so remote as to completely avoid big city problems. In this case, the problems are two hired killers, Al and Max, who have come to town to murder an ex-boxer, Ole Andresen, who frequently patronizes the diner.

The story is essentially three scenes. The first scene begins with the gunmen arriving and spending more than an hour alternately insulting and terrorizing George, the waiter, Adams, a patron, and Sam, the cook more often referred to as "the nigger" rather than by his name. Al and Max are clear about what they've come to do.

> "Talk to me, bright boy," Max said. "What do you think's going to happen?"
>
> George did not say anything.
>
> "I'll tell you," Max said. "We're going to kill a Swede. Do you know a big Swede named Ole Andresen?"

Andresen does not show up, and Al and Max, realizing their prey will not show up, leave the diner with George unmolested and Adams and Sam tied up in the kitchen. George unties Adams and Sam and dispatches Adams to Andresen's boarding house to warn the Swede of the coming threat.

In the next scene, in Andresen's room, Adams finds the Swede on his bed, aware of the danger, yet completely resigned to the fact that he will soon be killed.

> Nick looked at the big man lying on the bed.

"Don't you want me to go and see the police?"

"No," Ole Andresen said. "That wouldn't do any good."

"Isn't there something I could do?"

"No. There ain't anything to do."

"Maybe it was just a bluff."

"No. It ain't just a bluff."

Andresen doesn't reveal why the killers are coming from him, offering only a cryptic comment that "I got in wrong." When Adams leaves the room, he takes one last look at the living Swede, seeing the big man fully clothed, lying on his side and staring at the wall.

The final scene is in the diner after Adams returns. He honors Andresen's wishes and does not go to the cops. George surmises that the Swede double-crossed someone. Adams resolves to leave Summit—presumably to return to Michigan where the rest of the Nick Adams stories take place. As the story ends, it is clear he is traumatized by the experience.

"I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful."

"Well," said George. "You better not think about it."

The story, at first glance, offers little material for adaptation into a feature-length screenplay. An audio version of the story, read by Stacy Keach, takes about 18 minutes. With director Robert Siodmak's input, screenwriter Anthony Veiller (with uncredited help from Richard Brooks and John Huston) wisely takes the one obvious question left unanswered in Hemingway's story—What did the Swede do?—and uses that as a basis for crafting the screenplay for a 103-minute-long feature film, "The Killers," which was released in 1946.

Although Summit, Ill., has been changed to Brentwood, N.J., the opening scenes of the movie largely follow the first two scenes of Hemingway's story. The film begins in classic noir style:

the two killers look for Andresen, known as Pete Lunn to the locals, at a gas station where he (and Adams) works. They are harshly lit by streetlights, but as they turn away to head for the diner, they move farther into darkness. They enter the diner by different doors, Al (played by Charles McGraw) by the front, and Max (played by a pre-Bullwinkle William Conrad) by the side. Inside the diner, the wording of the dialog differs somewhat from Hemingway's story, but his fingerprint is unmistakeable.

> GEORGE: What are you going to kill him for? What did Pete Lund ever do to you?
>
> MAX: He never had a chance to do anything to us. He never even seen us.
>
> AL: He's only going to see us once.

The growl in McGraw's voice as he utters, "He's only going to see us once," is especially chilling.

The setting changes from the diner to Andresen's boarding house, where the Swede (played by Burt Lancaster in his debut role) awaits his death. Veiller makes a subtle, but crucial, change in the dialog that reveals Andresen's character and his sense of responsibility for why he is about to die.

> ADAMS: Why do they want to kill ya?
>
> ANDRESEN: I did something wrong. Once. Thanks for coming.

Andresen "did something wrong," he didn't merely "get in wrong."

Adams leaves, and now the movie departs from Hemingway's blueprint. The killers come up the stairs. Andresen hears them coming, rises up on his elbows, and awaits his death. He does not resist, meeting his fate with something approaching serenity, but the expression on Lancaster's face is a complex mixture of fear, guilt, and resignation. The camera turns toward Al and Max,

and we hear the guns and see the light from the muzzle flashes. They leave, and when the camera turns back toward the dying man, we see a hand lose its grip and slide down a bedpost. At this point the movie leaves Hemingway's detachment behind and slips briefly (but effectively) into the realm of horror.

This takes 12 minutes—barely long enough for a short—but the movie enters new territory by tackling the mystery of what the Swede had done. The man asking, and eventually answering the question, is Jim Reardon (played by Edmond O'Brien), an insurance investigator trying to determine whether to approve a life insurance payment to a beneficiary that barely knew, or remembered, Andresen. In going through the Swede's effects, he finds a handkerchief that triggers a memory of a payroll robbery at the Prentiss Hat Factory in Hackensack, N.J.—a factory that his insurance company had also covered.

In a series of flashbacks based on interviews with witnesses of accomplices—and a Dutch Schultz-style deathbed rant from hophead "Blinky" Franklin (played by an uncredited Jeff Corey—we learn that that Andresen's boxing career was cut short as a result of a badly broken hand. He falls in with a circle of criminals lead by Big Jim Colfax (Albert Dekker), and falls for Colfax's girlfriend, Kitty Collins (played with requisite seductiveness by Ava Gardner). After doing a stretch in prison for (falsely) claiming responsibility for the theft of a piece of jewelry worn by Collins, the Swede is invited to join the hat factory job. After the robbery, Andresen appears to double-cross his accomplices by absconding with the money and Collins. But the double-cross is not what it seems. Some days later, Collins leaves the Swede and takes the money with her.

After learning of Andresen's death, two of the accomplices begin to search for the money. We learn that one, "Dum-Dum" Clarke (Jack Lambert), is responsible for Franklin's murder. He

eventually is confronted by, but escapes from, Reardon. In the confrontation, Clarke determines that the "double-cross to end all double-crosses" was planned by Colfax and Collins so that they could keep all the money. Clarke begins a race with Reardon and Philadelphia police Lt. Sam Lubinsky (a childhood friend of Andresen; played by Sam Levene) to find Colfax, Collins, and the money.

Reardon finds Colfax first, then finds Collins and meets her at a nightclub where she has planned another double cross—the assassination of Reardon by our friends Al and Max while she has gone to "powder her nose." As they open fire on Reardon, Lubinsky, who was also present, shoots and kills the killers. Reardon finds that Collins had escaped, and he, Lubinsky, and other police officers race to the mansion where Colfax and Collins (the pair had married) live. As they arrive, they hear gunfire. Clarke beat them to the mansion, and he and Colfax exchanged mortal wounds. Other officers find Collins near the home, and bring her in as Colfax lay dying.

In this next-to-last scene, we learn how different Collins's character is from Andresen's. Andresen took the rap for a theft he did not commit, and he accepted death for a double-cross he did not engineer. Collins was not so dignified in the face of her fate. She shed tears, but not for her dying husband.

> COLLINS: Jim! Jim! Tell them I didn't know anything! Jim, listen to me. You can save me. Jim, do you hear me? Tell them I didn't know those gunmen were coming. Say, "Kitty is innocent. I swear, Kitty is innocent." Say it Jim! Say it! You can save me if you do.
>
> LUBINSKY: Don't ask a dying man to lie his soul into hell.
>
> COLLINS: Kitty is innocent! I swear, Kitty is innocent!
>
> REARDON: It's no use, Kitty. Your would-be fall guy is dead.
>
> COLLINS: Come back, Jim, tell them! Come back! Save me! Jim! Kitty is innocent! I swear, Kitty is innocent! Kitty is innocent! I swear, Kitty is innocent! Kitty is innocent!

The movie ends on a comic note. A weary Reardon explains the double-cross to his boss, R.S. Kenyon (Donald McBride), and is congratulated for doing such a good job.

> KENYON: Owing to your splendid efforts the basic rate of The Atlantic Casualty Company—as of 1947—will probably drop one-tenth of a cent. [He shakes Reardon's hand.] Congratulations, Mr. Reardon.
>
> REARDON: I'd rather have a night's sleep.
>
> KENYON: Why don't you take a good rest. I must say you've earned it. [Reardon begins to leave.] This is Friday ... don't come in 'til Monday.
>
> REARDON: Thanks.

The next adaptation of "The Killers" was for the radio program *Screen Director's Playhouse* in 1949. The performance featured Burt Lancaster as Andresen and Shelley Winters as Collins with a brief (and unilluminating) appearance by Siodmak. The radio script was an extreme condensation and simplification of the Vellier's screenplay to fit a half-hour time slot. For example, instead of several flashbacks, much of the story was told through one flashback from a nowhere-near-dead "Blinky" Franklin.

[As an adaptation, the *Screen Director's Playhouse* version is forgettable—so forgettable that I cannot remember much of it even though it has only been a week since I listened to it. And it was so dreadful I would just as soon not give it another listen.]

"The Killers" was next adapted into a film by a young Andrei Tarkovsky in 1956. This was shortly after Hemingway's collected works were made available in the Soviet Union, and Tarkovsky—a film student at the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK)—proposed to adapt it for the screen because it was "… a very tragic story, filled with deeper truth." He was granted permission to go ahead with the project—this was the first student film allowed to be based on a foreign work—and he and fellow students Marika Beiku and Alexander Gordon co-directed it.

Tarkovsky and Gordon wrote the script which was taken almost entirely from Hemingway's story. They and their fellow film students played the roles, Gordon as George, and Tarkovsky as a customer who walks into the diner while George, Adams, and Sam are being held hostage by the gunmen. Tarkovsky's role is the only significant departure from Hemingway's story. His customer is one of three (two in the short story) who walk in to order food. In Hemingway's story, the two customers leave empty handed, one handling the news gracefully while the other gets rather snippy. Tarkovsky's customer enters in the middle of the sequence, orders two sandwiches (prepared by George rather than the tied-up Sam), and whistles the "Lullaby of Birdland," a song which was regarded as a symbol of freedom by Soviet citizens.

The result was rightly praised by their instructor, Mikhail Romm. The lighting and cinematography effectively set the mood. The only jarring aspect of the film was the age of the actors—all teens or early twenty-somethings, but that is the age range one would expect to find in a film school project. Once that fact is accepted by the viewer, what one sees is a skilled and entertaining short film.

The final adaptation of "The Killers" was released in 1964. It was the first "made for TV" movie, although the final product was deemed too violent for television and was released in theaters instead. This version was directed by Don Siegel—ironically, he was the director Mark Hellinger, the producer of the 1946 film, preferred—based on a screenplay by a pre-Star Trek Gene L. Coon. Siegel did not want a remake of the 1946 film (Siegel 2003). He did not want to use any of Hemingway's dialog nor any scenes from the original film. Siegel said, "The only thing I wanted to use from the old picture is the idea that the guy knows he's going to be killed and doesn't do anything to save himself" (Siegel 2003). He also wanted the story told from the

killers' point of view. Coon gives Siegel the screenplay he wants—and does so quickly, which was one of the reasons Siegel wanted him to write the script in the first place.

Unlike classic film noir, the movie was shot in color, and it was brightly lit—for better viewing on the small screen. The darkness is supplied entirely by the performances and plot, and they provide plenty to make the film noir-worthy.

The movie opens with the two killers, Charlie Strom (Lee Marvin) and Lee (played with sinister comic gusto by Clu Gulager), who enter the Sage Home for the Blind to find their quarry, ex-racecar driver Johnny North (played by John Cassavetes, whom Siegel lovingly refers to as "a pain in the ass") who teaches auto mechanics there. Their entrance to the school is especially sinister—they wear dark sunglasses, as if they needed them to hide their features from the faculty, staff, and students. They brutalize a blind secretary to learn where to find North, and leave for a classroom upstairs. As they try to find North's room, another staffer finds the secretary calls and North to warn him. North tries to evacuate his students, who leave unmolested as the gunmen come in. North leans on his desk, grins a bit as Strom asks his identity, then nods to confirm it before being gunned down.

Strom is disturbed by the way North accepted his death—quite atypical for the rest of his victims over his long criminal career. He also knows that North had been involved in a big mail robbery, and resolves to find out more. Much of the backstory is similar to the 1946 film—femme fatale Sheila Farr (Angie Dickinson); criminal mastermind Jack Browning (Ronald Reagan in his only, and arguably prophetic, role as a villain); and an athlete (North) whose career ends prematurely because of an accident, who falls in with the wrong people, and who is double-crossed twice by his putative lover.

In the end, though, nothing ends well. The only rest earned is that of the eternal sort. As Strom and Lee close in on the money, they are double-crossed (no surprise to ether the viewer or the killers themselves) by Farr. She leads them into a trap—Browning ambushes Strom and Lee with a rifle, killing Lee outright and mortally wounding Strom. Strom, however, does not die quickly. He catches Browning and Farr at their home before the married couple can make their getaway with the cash. Strom kills both, grabs the money and tries to run, but dies as the police arrive on the scene. In one of the greatest death scenes ever, Marvin raises his right hand as if trying to shoot at the police with his forefinger, then falls back on the lawn as the briefcase with the cash flies open.

Rarely in the world of film and broadcast has so much been made of so little. "The Killers," Hemingway's notable but rather short story has spawned a radio adaptation (the less said the better) and three film adaptations—one largely faithful, one good but with great moments, and one that ranks as one of the greatest noir films ever, with Oscar nominations for best director, best screenplay, best film editing, and best score. The brevity of the original material posed many challenges for those intent on adapting it, but that brevity also left a vast expanse for interesting and worthwhile explorations of its mysteries.

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