

Worst Person



Summer Afternoon or What Shall We Do for the Rent?, Walter Richard Sickert, 1907–9

Not one to habitually look on the bright side of life, I often ask myself who is the worst person I can think of ... short of Adolf Hitler that is, for reasons all sentient people who are not Holocaust deniers can understand even if they imagine someone worse. Perhaps I should modify that a bit, for I really mean people roughly in the same league as Hitler, because I don't want to let the likes of Josef Stalin off the hook, or that Cambodian sadist whose name escapes me.

If the *worst person* does not have to do with the taking of another's life, we are dealing then with a kind of aesthetic prissiness and challenging sophistication (see how exceptional I am). We can all agree there are different categories of murder. Not being a pacifist, I don't think there is any such thing as *murdering* the enemy in war. But there *are* political murders, gangland "intramural" murders, murders for hire, quarrels turned deadly violent, "incidental" murders during robbery or such, parricide and its immoral equal, the killing of a spouse or lover: illogically (yet somehow, I think, morally correctly) I think Uxoricide, killing the female, worse than killing the male, Mariticide.

That last clause is because—I admit to subjectivity—of an experience of my own which I have written about twice, once an essay, once a significant allusion. Both times I employed a physics metaphor to try to understand. Here's the metaphor. In quantum mechanics, there's the phenomenon of "the quantum leap," which isn't really a leap at all, *leap* implying a movement from one place to another. An elementary particle in one orbit within an atom is suddenly in another orbit *without moving there*. Rather, it's as if the particle ceased to be, to exist, in Orbit A and came to be, to exist, in Orbit B, *while being the same particle*. I employed the metaphor to suggest the possibility that a person, call him A, could somehow and mysteriously undergo a "transition" (so to speak) after which he is person B. A and B look and speak exactly the same, but B is capable of actions which were impossible (not just

improbable) for A. Person A did not *grow* to be person B; B was not what he *really was* all along. There is no transition (which implies a process of change) but a kind of quantum leap, if you'll take my weird meaning. Now the experience:

More than 50 years ago occurred maybe the most traumatic event of my life. My then-closest friend had his wife murdered. He spent a year on Death Row before retrial and released on a technicality having to do with an *evidentiary arcanity*, as odd as that phrase is. As Charles Dickens said, "The Law is an ass." Nobody (certainly not I) really thought him innocent or thought the technicality meant that. I still think him, as A, incapable of Uxoricide. I never saw him, B, for the rest of his life. Nonetheless, for half a century I have sorely missed A, my once-closest friend. So, no, I cannot be objective. And, yes, I think no murder comparable, after Parricide (mother, father, sibling) to Mariticide and especially Uxoracide.

Mid-October 2021 my wife and I were watching a documentary of a developing mystery. I said to her, "The worst person since Adolf Hitler is Brian Laundrie." I am not a TV addict, but I have become obsessed with the murder of Gabby Petito and the ambiguous (so far) death of Brian Laundrie. I shall call Miss Petito *Gabby*, but I can call Mr. Laundrie *Brian* no more than I can refer to Lee Harvey Oswald as *Lee* or *Harvey*. Let me remind us of the essential details.

The two, engaged, had lived with his parents in Florida for two years before their van journey westward. In mid-August, he was seen roughing her up and police were called by a witness; Utah cops pulled the van to investigate for over an hour and separated them for one night (she sleeping in van, he in local hotel) before they continued their journey the next day. Roughly two weeks later, in Wyoming, they had a violent quarrel in a diner, then disappeared. Early in September, Laundrie returned to Florida without Gabby but in the van, which belonged to her, that trip financed by Gabby's debit card. Gabby's parents on Long Island, not having heard from

her for days (she regularly texted them) and getting no news from Laundrie's parents, declared her missing. On September 19, her body was found in a Wyoming National Park, she evidently having been "throttled" and "strangled" to death. A few days before that discovery, Laundrie—after an odd brief vacation with his parents in state park—disappeared, not to be found until late October when his remains turned up in a swampy area. The heavy television coverage showed two major things: 1) They had documented their journey by film in the van, showing them cavorting about, hugging and kissing: two young people (22 and 23) "surely" deeply in love, and 2) The Utah police, with body cams, documented their *separate* interviews with Laundrie and Gabby. He is seen and heard to downplay their quarrel, which had resulted in multiple scratches and such, suggesting that Gabby had gotten a bit out of hand, and walks about casually, smiling all the time. She is seen and heard sitting nervously in the patrol car, next to or in tears the entire time, displaying with gestures how he rough-handled her but refusing to blame him while her gestures cannot be understood any other way. She is absolutely miserable. She is also—so says my wife, who is twice as observant and attuned as I am—deeply afraid, unable to ask for help. I know that looking at her my heart broke—and would have broken even had I not known she would be dead within the month.

While I do not know what powers the Utah police had, I think that if they could legally separate them for one night, they should have found some way to intervene more forcefully and longer to see if this "domestic violence" was potentially more dangerous than a scratching quarrel, giving the victim—and the victim in such cases is the woman with very few exceptions—the opportunity to get out and call home for help, a chance for protection from the Stockholm Syndrome (when the victim blames herself), which police surely should be aware of and which even I, unaided by my smarter wife, could see Gabby was in the grip of. A tragic failure. The police behavior back in Florida

was equally unfortunate. Gabby was declared a missing person on September 11. Why the cops did not pick Laundrie up for questioning immediately, at the very least as the last person to have seen her alive, before he disappeared two or three days later (his parents first said three before changing that to two) is unfathomable to me. To say ineptitude is almost a compliment.

Of course, I never knew Brian Laundrie, so I have no idea if he was an A Person who became a B Person. But I am clear that his performance before the Utah cops, always smiling and joshing about and joking even—unlike distraught Gabby—was a *performance* indeed, fraudulent. There will probably never be total proof that he killed Gabby, only circumstantial evidence. But if anyone does not think that he did, that anyone should have his or her head examined. For two and 2 make four, not 3.99.

The only real uncertainty about death in this case is how Laundrie died. Suicide? Poisoned by a snake or gnawed by an alligator? If suicide, had he a gun, poison? Clearly, he didn't hang himself. It's unlikely that one drowns oneself in a ditch even though the remains were submerged. Until there is clear evidence, I'll assume suicide, even though Gabby's father said Laundrie was too big a coward to harm himself, which is what I thought for the longest time, for the performance before the Utah police was that of a coward hiding behind false casualness.

Nothing I have said so far justifies my assertion that Brian Laundrie was the worst person after or other than Hitler; it only means that he is my subjective choice. Nonetheless, there is a strong degree of objectivity challenging the subjectivity. Here goes.

Despite the guy-in-love in the selfie videos, this was a male who on at least two occasions could physically assault a 95-pound woman to the extent that it horrified witnesses, once

enough so that police were called. There is nothing that she could have done to him physically, slap or scratch, to put him on self-defense. If she simply insulted him, he must have been clever enough to insult back unless he was, and this has to be considered, insane beyond others' recognition. Whatever, by the end of August in a National Park in Wyoming, he killed her. (How do we know? Because we are not overly cautious idiots.) Then he flees the scene, thinks better of it, and hitchhikes back to the scene of the murder, disposes of her body under a bush, so to speak, at some point takes her debit card, then takes her van and drives hundreds of miles back to his parents' home in Florida.

I had assumed for a while—like others I'll bet—that the death was an accident, that he had hit her in a rage without intention but, because she was so frail, the impact was a death blow. But the evidence showed that besides being "throttled," she was strangled. And you simply cannot strangle someone to death unintentionally. I do not speak from experience, but it is very hard to choke someone to death. It takes a length of time which bespeaks intention. (I was once a soldier, and there are certain things I know,)

Once he arrives in Florida, in her van, with her debit card, but without her, he apparently goes about his business as if nothing has happened. What in God's name did he tell his parents about the girl who had lived in their house for two years? What did they ask or assume? Why did all three go on a brief vacation three or four days after his arrival? What the hell is going on? Why does he disappear into a nature preserve (where his remains and some possessions will be found much later) even before Gabby's body is found in Wyoming? Nothing makes clear sense.

Except perhaps one thing. Watching the TV reports, we are told that before he disappeared in the direction of the nature preserve, he seemed to be grieving. Which, if accurate, points toward suicide, does it not? I'll accept that he could be

grieving. But if it was real grief for poor Gabby, how does one explain his curious actions of the subsequent couple of weeks or so? Those actions do not suggest a grieving person, although a kind of delayed psychological reaction is possible—while suggesting at the same time a level of something pretty close to moral insanity. (I have known at least one person in my life I think of as morally insane if not clinically so.). I would suggest that if he was indeed grieving, the grief was for himself. He must have known that in spite of his running home to Mommy and Daddy, Gabby's body would be found before long and that his theft and use of her card, and her van, would make him surely suspect number one even if called "a person of interest." He had to know that he had trapped himself.

There is one last thing to say (before I think of other last things to say). Gabby Petito was not only small and beautiful and lively. You could see this in the videos as well as the cops' film: she was very childlike, not necessarily to say childish (but if that, no insult). So Laundrie had not only committed Uxoricide, but something that could be considered close to Infanticide. How utterly despicable: there is nothing to be said for Laundrie even if, when he killed himself, he was possibly in some degree of agony for Gabby's sake. I can think of no one as despicable since Casey Anthony beat the rap for Infanticide (unless it is Anthony's lawyer and her jury).

Oh, here's another last thing to say. Why is a literary critic, intellectual historian, and philosopher so fixated on this story? The question implies—there's no escaping it—that such a story should be beneath the likes of people like me. I make no apologies. I am a sucker for stories of womanhood violated, and am generally delighted when SOB's get their comeuppance. But there's no pleasure in Laundrie getting his, for the thought only reminds me of why he got his: that beautiful girl's life cut short at 22 the way it was cut short. I think it would require an incredible arrogance to think such beneath

one.

One could say that television exploited the Gabby Petito story, there was so much coverage of it (although at least one high-toned network avoided it all together: beneath itself?). But while one network over-covered it with little new to say night after night, it also in a queer way apologized for the coverage. It let us know that there are other missing persons—and here are their pictures—although Gabby was not a missing person by the time she became famous, but a murdered person. And there has been a kind of throbbing undertone, socially speaking, all during the Gabby epic so to speak: would anyone else get such coverage if she were not a beautiful girl of Caucasian ethnicity? Look at all the non-Caucasian missing persons. There seems no way in America now even during a heart-breaking domestic tragedy to get beyond identity politics.

We should avoid this racial nonsense. If Gabby and Laundrie had been Black or Brown, their story would have received the same or similar attention, especially in 2021 (!), if it were essentially the same mysterious and shockingly grotesque narrative. Can any sensible person really believe that what caused such national attention, outrage, and sympathetic pain was imaginatively (but not literally) *headlined* “Beautiful Caucasian (!) Girl Murdered by Lover”? Can any even non-sensible person really buy that? This is nothing but small-minded ideological point-making, the politicalizing of the suffering of the innocent: excruciatingly disgusting! I can imagine some genius of the Al Sharpton caliber thinking “Why can’t we have one of our beauties murdered by her lover?”

Aside from political assassinations (for which the U.S., against all historical expectations, must be the champion), and serial killings (far too many when one would be more than enough), the murder which captured the American national imagination (if something as amorphous as a nation can

have *an* imagination), was the Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb murder of young Bobby Franks almost a hundred years ago, apparently to prove themselves superior to moral law. Just as famous and stunning was the 1932 kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindbergh's infant son, for which Bruno Hauptmann was executed. Not quite so nationally compelling in more recent years were the Scott Peterson murder of his wife and the unsolved killing of the little girl JonBenet Ramsay—neither of which got as much attention as the O.J. Simpson case and the aforementioned Casey Anthony case. That both of the charged walked away with their lives, as did my once-closest friend, says something not too complimentary about the American jury system. Does anyone really believe that the evidentially-compromised Ms. Anthony did not kill her infant daughter or, if that's too strong (it isn't), was not morally and legally responsible for her death? Does anyone believe that Mr. Simpson did not butcher to death with knife his wife and her male friend? *Anyone* includes the students at Howard University who enthusiastically applauded the jury's verdict, although they could not have passed a single college course had they been that stupid.

Now the case of Brian Laundrie and Gabby Petito enters history on an equal footing. And *justly* so in fact. (And it is right that *justice* be found somewhere here.) I think it just for essentially two reasons, one having to do with Gabby, one with Laundrie:

The only effective way to mourn Gabby Petito (and I have no idea why I use the word *effective* since it can have no effect on her) is to *remember* her, the image of that frightened lovely girl burned into our memory—unless one is religious, the only sure immortality she will ever have. History is a way of not forgetting.

And Brian Laundrie should not be forgotten either. How, however, should he be remembered? There is a natural or maybe cultural tendency we do not often recognize—to think of a

large and shocking crime as having been committed by someone of a large and demonic size, corruptly “heroic’ (Satanic) as it were. But Hannah Arendt in her reflections on Adolf Eichmann invented the phrase “the banality of Evil,” referring not to the evil crimes, as so many foolishly thought, but to the criminal himself—a petty banal non-entity. That marks Brian Laundrie, *the worst person*, who doesn’t even deserve capital letters.