

# Mad Dog

by Jas. R. Petrin

"It's him," Robert told us. "I know it is."

We were at Pappy's, a local steakhouse, a place we'd frequented in our twenties but had gotten away from in recent years. Recent decades, more like it. I was shocked at their appearance: Robert rotund, wheezing and tonsured; Eddy gaunt, bent at the shoulders and sporting old-fashioned spectacles with built-in hearing aids.

What I looked like to them I couldn't guess.

"And you say he's where?" Eddy refilled his glass and knocked back half the contents. There was a fine web of broken blood vessels in his hawk-bill of a nose.

"At River Glen. One of those retirement homes."

"I know it." Eddy shuddered. "A hellhole."

I shared that opinion. I'd made a service call there once, just before giving up my heating and air-conditioning business, and it had almost caused me to shelve my retirement plans. Empty-eyed inmates drifting about like zombies. One old codger staring at a television that was displaying only drifting lines. A lady who looked at least a hundred, tied to a chair so that she wouldn't hurt herself.

"How can you be sure?" I asked. "It's been a long time."

"A hell of a long time," Eddy said. "And you never actually saw him back then, did you, Rob?"

Robert gave a dry smile, a grim twitch of the lips. "I saw his picture. It gave me nightmares. I've never forgotten it, believe me."

I believed him. I refilled my own glass, folded my arms, and contemplated the ruby liquid.

It certainly had been a long time ...

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In our small, peaceful city of Easton, back in the summer of 1957, something terrible happened. Young men began to go missing. It didn't attract a lot of notice at first; the police weren't anxious to get the citizens riled up.

And the first few victims were apparently transients, and disappearing is what such people do. But then local boys started to vanish, and terror began to stalk the streets.

Even in our neighborhood, parents were anxious, and we lived in a part of the town where indifference to current events was endemic — more important was where next month's rent was coming from, or tomorrow's groceries. Still, I recall my mother's face flushed with apprehension if I came home late from school, or stayed out with a friend too long.

To me and the guys I chummed with, a kidnapper — hell, even a murderer — was about as relevant as the atomic bomb. Something you heard about on the radio, not something that actually touched your life.

But that was before Eddy's mad dog.

#

"Crazed," he assured us. "Foaming at the mouth. Out by the city dump, chasing some kids."

"What kids?" Robert looked horrified.

We were walking home from school along Birch Street and had reached Bestway Grocery, where we generally stopped for candy if we had any money: red licorice, jawbreakers, sometimes flat, dusty sticks of chewing gum.

"Where? Where did you see this?" Robert wanted answers. "You mean where the creek comes out behind EAGLE OILS?" When we spoke that name, we saw it in upper case. It was to us the equivalent of a haunted castle.

This time only Eddy could afford to duck into the store and buy something — he had a job delivering fliers, which meant he usually had more pocket money than Robert and me. Which was fair, and as it should be, since his dad was never home and his mom couldn't give him an allowance. He came out with jujubes and shared them around.

"You mean behind EAGLE OILS?" Robert repeated.

"Uh-huh." Eddy popped a cherry jujube into his mouth and chewed it with his mouth open. We began walking again. "Mad dog. Foaming at the mouth. We could head out there tonight after supper, and I could show you guys."

"And we could get our butts chomped off," Robert said with a scowl. But he looked interested. I was fascinated myself. I liked dogs. And a truly mad one? Yikes.

Robert asked suddenly. "What were you doing out there?"

I was wondering about that too. Excursions to the mountainous landfill that was the city dump, we generally made as a group.

"I was looking for stuff," Eddy said. And it made sense. That was the reason any kid went to the dump — to find stuff. We'd struck upon many treasures there over the years. I brought home a birdcage once, slightly squished, which after a few twists and straightenings was practically as good as new. And you could always find wheels there for any racing cart you were building. But my prize item was an old square-framed Remington typewriter with a couple of wonky keys. I used it for years.

"You could've told us," Robert said.

"Yeah, well, you weren't around. You're around now, so are you coming or not?"

"There's that kidnapper. Our parents won't let us."

"They're not gonna know."

"What about the dog?"

"It's the reason we're going."

Robert thought for a minute. "Well then," he said finally, "maybe we should each take along a stick, or something."

#

In those days our fathers were powerhouses. Mysterious, remote and unfathomable. It didn't matter that one of them lay on the front room couch and snored his lungs out most of the time; or that another spent almost every evening in the tavern at the end of the block, and threw up by the back stoop when he came home; or that one went away on long unexplained absences, leaving his wife to scurry along the street avoiding people. They were powerhouses. You didn't screw with them.

That, at least, was how we saw them. They lived in a world entirely removed from ours, as distant as gods on Olympus.

Which I suppose was why — later — we couldn't go to them.

When I got home my father was lying on the sofa with his face planted in the back cushions. He didn't come to dinner. He rarely did. My mother and I ate in the kitchen, keeping our voices down so as not to disturb him. I think we had stew that evening.

"Did you come straight home from school, Will?" my mother asked. She had a strained tone in her voice. I heard it a lot.

"Yup."

"I hope you're not planning on going out somewhere with your friends this evening."

"Aw, mom. There's this mad dog —"

"What?" She froze with her fork in the air. "It could have rabies."

"Oh mom!"

She knitted her brows, trying to work it out. "I hope you mean it's on TV tonight. Is that it? You want to go to Robert's house?"

She had thrown me a lifeline. "That's it." Robert was the only guy I knew whose folks owned a television. His dad, in spite of his drinking, held down a switchman's job at the CPR rail yards.

"You've got exams coming up. You should stay in and study."

"I study every morning." It was true. I did. But I didn't let it get around. That sort of thing could mark you in the neighborhood where I grew up. But my mom knew it. And we both knew her real reason for putting up an argument was because of the vanishing boys. Three local ones, by that time.

"Robert lives just down the street," I reminded her.

She gave an exasperated sigh. "All right," she said finally, and there was that strained note again. "But don't go anywhere else. And don't talk to strangers. And don't go near any real mad dog."

"Listen to your mother!"

My father's voice boomed from the sofa so unexpectedly, we both jumped.

God had spoken.

#

Eddy came striding up the street, and I burst out our front door and fell in step with him. Half a block down, Robert joined us. "Did you tell your mom you were heading over to my house?" Robert asked, reading the look

on my face. I nodded, and he added, "I said I was going to yours." We both grinned. Eddy, who enjoyed great freedom, glanced at the two of us and rolled his eyes, as if to say, "Poor slobs!"

We continued along the Street to Bannatyne, then turned east four blocks to Weston Road. At that time this is where civilization stopped. At least for us it did. Just past that point was the CPR mainline south, then the creek, then a sprawling uncharted and undeveloped wilderness of alder scrub and waist-high thistles. If you followed the train tracks, you reached the city dump, and down below it the moldering pile that was Eagle Oils.

Which is what we did.

"So where's the dog?" Robert said when we got there. We stared at the dump. Begun a hundred years ago by Red River's first citizens, it was now a hundred feet high and half a mile long. There was a meadowlark singing somewhere in the rushes near the creek, and a steady drone of cicadas from the slopes.

Ed got huffy. "What? You think it's nailed to the ground? It moves around, you know. It's got legs. But this is where I saw it. Right here."

"Where?"

"Right here." He gestured vaguely. "It chased these kids down the slope there, and right around the back of the building."

"It must have been an awful slow dog," I said, "if it didn't catch them quicker than that."

"No kidding," Robert said. "Slow as molasses."

We suddenly realized Eddy had made the whole thing up. Personally, I was relieved. I didn't really want to find a mad dog. Robert, trying to act disappointed, said, "I think you just told us that to get us to come out here tonight."

"Yeah, well, " Eddy admitted, "so what. If I hadn't, you wouldn't have come, would you? You guys never get to go anywhere anymore."

"It's that kidnapper."

"Yeah, yeah. The kidnapper. You're not going to see any kidnappers hanging around here."

"How do you know?"

"Well, look around, for crying out loud. No kids."

"We're kids," Robert said.

That statement kind of floated on the air a minute, then Eddy turned on his heel.

"Look. We're here, aren't we? So we might as well check things out."

We fell in behind him.

Eagle Oils was an ancient abandoned factory, sprawling, decrepit and rat-infested. And we loved it. It was built of wood — no bricks and mortar squandered here — and it had once housed the equipment and workers of a major food oils manufacturer. That, of course, was in a bygone age. Now the wild oats and thistles grew waist-high around it, and to reach it we walked along a rusted spur line, then crossed a rubble-strewn lot. This brought us close to a small, sagging out-building. I called it the shed, Robert called it the garage, and Eddy called it the old shack. "Look," Eddy pointed out, "they've been at it again."

We peered in the door. The last couple of times we'd been here, we'd seen evidence of someone trying to burn the place. The traces were still there. A splintered pallet and hunks of tarpaper lying half-charred on the floor.

"Dumb kids," Robert said.

"They weren't trying very hard," Eddy said. "I could start this place burning in ten seconds."

"That'd be arson," Robert reminded him. "You could go to prison — and get raped."

Rape was something we understood, and so appalling a notion that we didn't talk about it.

The factory slumped at one end. Its few windows were boarded over or smashed. We crossed to the loading dock, ducked under it, then waddled with bowed heads to the underpinnings of the place. Here, set at intervals in the foundation wall, were heavily-meshed openings that vented the crawlspace. One of these could be pried open. We passed through it and dropped inside.

The air was musty and smelled of cat droppings. And something else. We stared around in the dismal light.

"It stinks," I said.

"It always stinks," Robert said.

"Anybody bring a light?"

Since Robert and I had come to see the dog, we had brought no such thing. But Eddy was equipped, of course. He was already pulling a small torch from his pocket and switching it on. He played the beam around, and shadows bobbled and weaved. Recalling that scene now, I don't know what the attraction was. With dry-

rotted floor joists grazing our heads, and dank earth under our feet, it wasn't the most inviting place. In fact it was downright creepy. Anything could have been lurking there. Maybe even Eddy's dog.

"Somebody's been here," Robert said. "Look at that." He seized Eddy's hand holding the flashlight and directed it at a short-handled spade lying flat in the dirt.

"I told you guys the last time that I thought somebody had been poking around," I said in a voice that came out tighter than I wanted it to.

"Yeah, well this time we believe you," Eddy said.

Weeks had passed since that visit, and even then the place hadn't seemed quite right to me, though I couldn't have said exactly why. Now it was obvious, with the abandoned spade before us. The spade had damp earth clinging to it. I was about to mention the fact, and suggest we look to see where the hole was, when something happened that concentrated our minds. A door slammed loudly above us, followed by the heavy tread of feet crossing the floor.

"Let's get out of here," Robert whispered, instantly panicking.

"Hang on," Eddy said, "this is our place. We need to see who's up there."

"Are you crazy?" Robert's eyes bugged out.

There was a trap a few feet away. We often used it. Eddy started to move toward it, but I pulled him back.

"No," I said. "Better go the other way."

There was another trapdoor into the building but we rarely used it. It opened into some sort of equipment room filled with old boilers that had leaked dark brown sludge, probably toxic waste, that had rotted out the floor in places. You had to watch where you stepped.

"I'm not going up there," Robert said.

"You don't have to," I told him. I wasn't crazy about the idea either, but I couldn't let Eddy do it alone.

"You stay here and watch our escape route." Robert calmed down, and I glanced at the shovel. "Maybe while we're gone you can look around and see what this is all about."

Robert bobbed his head. "What about the light?"

"You keep it," Eddy said, handing it over.

Robert took it and almost kissed Eddy's hand. I can still see the relief in his eyes.

Eddy and I duck-walked away into the smelly shadows, knees bent, heads bowed, to what I think was most probably the north end of the old building. There, just visible in the grey light that filtered through the mesh, lay a slab of ancient, spalled concrete, rocked at an angle, settling into the earth. Above it was the other trap. Shut tight. I remember praying it would stay that way, that it would be too swollen with damp to move.

But no such luck. It opened easily enough. When Eddy gave it a push, it popped loose right away. The stench of the sludge immediately flooded down on us, and I gagged; I had almost forgotten how bad it was. But there was light up there in the room above. A thin, colorless light that we knew seeped in through small windows set up high in one wall. Eddy put his head up above the sill for a quick reconnoiter, then grabbed hold to hoist himself up; but I pulled him aside. I wanted the bragging rights. Dumb. I can say that now.

"Don't make any noise," Eddy warned, giving way.

I went up through that hole like a cat.

The room was small, or maybe only seemed that way, crowded with leaking boilers and a bewilderment of grungy pipes. I took one step and my foot nearly went through the floor. "Quiet!" Eddy whispered. A moment later he was beside me, jabbing his elbow into my ribs. He pointed to the disturbance we had made in the dust the last time we were here, and we followed our own trail amongst the boilers, to the door, a warped, sagging slab. It stood ajar an inch or two, and through the opening we could distinctly hear the faint sound of voices. Adult male voices. We crept along the corridor to where it joined the main factory floor.

There was some sort of cabinet, or bench, at the hall's end, and we crouched behind it and peeped cautiously over it.

The room had been crammed with machinery at one time; you could trace the outlines of it in the grime on the floor, and see its bolt-holes everywhere you looked. But what we noticed were the three men. Two of them about as old as our fathers, and the third much younger, maybe still in his teens. One of the older men, a full-gutted guy in bib overalls, was doing introductions and smiling a lot.

"This here's Hank, Charlie." He pointed out the other older man. "My partner, you might say. Been kicking around together for quite some time." Bib-Overalls sounded pleasant enough, but didn't look it. He was in rough shape. He had one drooping eye. He was unshaven and needed a haircut, and there was an egg-white pallor to his skin. His partner Hank looked even worse, practically skin and bone; a living cadaver with a balding death's-



head and mottled skin stretched tightly over it. He seemed lost in his clothes — a shapeless plaid shirt over several other shirts, and a pair of stained, raggedy cotton trousers, bagged at the knees and unraveling at the cuffs. His belt was far too long, the tongue drooping almost to his knees and swaying when he moved.

Eddy nudged me. "Couple ole rubby-dubs," he mouthed with a smirk.

Charlie, the younger of the three, was pretty shabby himself; but even at a distance his grime looked superficial, not ground in the way it was with the other two. He gripped a small suitcase, and I remember thinking that he must have been on his way somewhere when he had met up with Overalls. And he looked to be having second thoughts.

"Charlie plans to stay a day or two, Hank," Overalls said. "We met at the depot. Seen him getting down off the bus, I did, and I said to myself, now there's a young fella could do with some Christian charity."

Hank's little eyes shifted.

Bib-Overalls, still smiling, reached for Charlie's bag. "I'll just find a place to put this so's you can sit down and get more comfortable."

Just where he expected Charlie to sit wasn't clear. On the floor, apparently. There was no furniture, only a couple of filthy bedrolls.

But the young man wasn't handing over anything. It was clear from the expression on his face that he knew he had made a bad mistake. "Ah, no," he said. "I guess I won't stay after all. I'm running out of time. I got to get to the West Coast."

Overalls narrowed his good eye until he was squinting through a malevolent slit.

"But you said your bus ride ended here."

"Well, that's right. It's all I could afford. What I'll do from here, I'll thumb a ride, I guess —"

"Good plan," Overalls agreed. "But if I was you, I'd stick around till morning. Nobody'll pick you up at this hour."

"Oh, somebody will," Charlie said. He blinked. "Or I can stay at my cousin's place."

Bib-Overalls faked astonishment. "Your cousin's place? That's funny. You never mentioned any cousin before."

Charlie had already backed away several steps, and was turning and moving to the door. As if at a signal, Hank the death's-head darted forward and smacked the back of his head with a stick of wood, the arm of an old wooden chair.

I think I gasped. I know Eddy did. The attack had been so sudden and brutal, neither one of us had seen it coming. Charlie let out a grunt and went down on one knee, tried to stand but his leg folded under him. He had a bewildered look on his face.

Eddy and I scrunched down even lower.

"What'd he do that for?" I hissed in Eddy's ear.

"What do you think?" Eddy whispered back. "These guys got a system. They get chummy with a guy, get on his good side, then bring him back here and mug him."

"Jeez!" I said.

"Look," Eddy said. "We better scram. Let's go grab Robert and get the hell out of here."

But I had to look again. I couldn't stop myself.

Charlie was dazed but not down. Hank and Bib-Overalls hovered over him. They were like predatory animals gloating over an antelope. Then Overalls produced handcuffs, snicked one end to Charlie's wrist and the other to a pipe sticking out of the wall. "I think," Overalls said, "you should stay. That's my advice. There's no telling what might happen to a young fella like you at night."

He stroked Charlie's face with the back of his hand, his grin showing two yellow canines. Meanwhile, Hank was tearing into the suitcase.

I glanced back over my shoulder at Eddy; he was already halfway down the hall. But still I seemed to be rooted in place, mesmerized, paralyzed, I don't know what. The young fellow, Charlie, was gaping around in a stunned, wide-eyed kind of way, as if too dazed to see anything, but suddenly his eyes locked onto mine. I ducked, but not before Bib-Overalls noticed, spun around and spotted me.

"Hey!" he shouted, and made a lunge.

It unstuck me. I turned and ran. In the boiler room, Eddy was at the trap, standing over it and holding it open for me. I was impressed by that. Still am. I dropped through, and then the unthinkable happened: the death's-head suddenly materialized and grabbed a handful of Eddy's hair as he hopped down after me. I'd

describe how Eddy screamed but he wouldn't like that, so I'll just say he hollered. Man, did he holler! It was the most tortured, traumatized wail I'd ever heard in my entire life.

That might have been it for us — at least for Eddy. But at that moment we caught a break. The death's-head tried to yank Eddy back through the hole, and his foot — in fact his whole leg — suddenly burst through the floor right in front of me. And he screamed, you'd better believe he did. Splintered boards chewed into his flesh, digging deeper as he tried to pull free. But he still had hold of Eddy, and I had to do something about that. I had no weapon, not even a stick, so I did the only thing I could. I kicked that dangling leg. I booted it square in the kneecap, and above the trap there was a roar like a buffalo. Eddy pulled free, and we beat it back under the floor.

We had no plan. We just wanted to run. Grab hold of Robert and keep on going. But Robert wasn't where we'd left him, and he wasn't scouting around with the flashlight either. Instead he was huddled under the loading dock, shivering and quaking with his knees drawn up under his chin. He looked like an old man. I swear there were lines in his face. We tried to scoop him up but he shied from us.

"I found — I found a grave," he whispered.

"What?" Eddy's voice was harsh. "What are you talking about? We got to get out of here. There's these men — where's my flashlight?"

"Flashlight?" Robert blinked. "I must've dropped it. I just ran."

"Well that's great." Eddy let out a few choice cuss words. "It's my mom's. She'll skin me alive. I'm going back for it."

"Eddy," I said, trying to reason with him, "those men. They know where we are. We've got to get out of here now."

"I'm not leaving without that flashlight."

He ducked back through the mesh. I clapped Robert on the knee. "Wait," I told him. "We'll just be a second."

I didn't know if he understood, or even if he'd heard. He wouldn't look at me and his jaw was quivering.

I ducked back under the building and went after Eddy. I knew we only had a minute or two. Outside the sun was going down, red-orange rays striking in horizontally through the mesh, lighting things up. I found Eddy crawling around in the dirt, groping for his flashlight. "A grave," Eddy grumbled. "Rob's freaking out."

But even as he said it, my hand touched something, and I knew exactly what Robert was talking about. In revulsion, I threw myself backwards, and my head grazed a floor joist, sending a bright sheet of pain through my skull.

"I just touched a body!" I hissed through clenched teeth, writhing and cradling the back of my head.

"There's a body right here in front of us!"

Eddy had recovered the flashlight, and now he switched it on and skipped its beam around. Then he steadied it. We looked and saw a dry, bony hand — a whole arm! — sticking out of the earth.

"Ah, jeez," Eddy moaned, and made a hawking noise.

The setting sun was dying fast, and the beam of the flashlight cast every lump and mound in stark relief. There wasn't one grave. There were several. Here a jutting knee, there a foot, and when we saw an eyeless face staring back at us — the rats had been busy with it — we both screamed.

We were back with Robert in seconds. "There is a grave back there," Eddy said. "In fact, there's a whole freaking cemetery. Come on, Rob. We got to —"

Then he saw the expression on my face. "What?"

"That guy up there," I said. "That Charlie guy. They're not going to let him go, are they?"

Eddy took a shaky breath. He sank down on his haunches. "Yeah. I mean no."

"We can't leave him," I said. "That'd be murder."

"Hey. They're the murderers. Not us."

"But if we don't help ..."

Part of me was screaming "Run!" But still we sat there. We wanted to help the guy. But how could we do it? We couldn't go back upstairs. Eddy's mad dog, growling and slaving, couldn't drive me back inside that place.

Then I remembered the shack — garage, shed, or whatever the heck it was. Eddy nodded. The same thought had struck him. We scampered across the lot, and in less than a minute had a roiling blaze sending up billows of oily black smoke.

"If nobody spots that," Robert said, coming out of his shock, "then they're all blind."

It was pretty dark by now, and the flames lit the side of the building.

There was a shout, and we practically wet our pants as Bib-Overalls came bursting out the door. We pelted across the rutted gravel, skipped over the train tracks, and crashed through alders and scrub willow down the embankment. I last saw Bib-Overalls glaring after us with an animal rage in his eyes.

"If that guy ever catches us," Eddy said, "he'll kill us."

We didn't doubt that for a single minute.

#

When I got home it was completely dark, and I was hoping I could scoot straight to bed without any explanations. I had things to answer for. I'd lied about where I was going; worse, I'd left the safety of my own front street; and I'd been trespassing, never mind that Eagle Oils had been boarded up for about as long as any of us could remember.

At least my father wasn't in sight. He'd gone to bed to rest up for another demanding day on the sofa. But my mother was there. And after giving me a scolding for coming home late —not too convincing, since she had to do it at a whisper — she kind of softened a little.

"Did you see your mad dog?" she asked me.

I nodded. "Yes."

#

The following day Eddy emerged from the grocery with a newspaper in his hand — no candy. We were disappointed, but he had a look on his face. A look I'd last seen on him when we'd each paid a dollar to inspect a sasquatch frozen in a block of ice at the Royal American Shows: amazement, awe and wonder, all tussling inside him at once.

He held the paper up with the headline showing.

#### KIDS SAVE YOUNG VICTIM FROM KILLERS

There was a picture of Eagle Oils, and one of the shack belching smoke and flame. Below was an inset of the guy who had been cuffed to the wall, and another of the death's-head who had clobbered him.

"Wow!" Robert and I said together.

"How did they find out about us?" Robert asked.

"They haven't found out anything," Eddy said.

"That Charlie guy saw me," I reminded them. "So did the guy in the overalls."

"That doesn't matter. He doesn't know who you are."

We read the rest of it with our lips moving, and when I was finished I sat back, bewildered. The young man had seen at least two boys, he'd said. And he'd overheard his captors shrieking about a third one. He'd also heard them discussing what they planned to do with him, and had told the cops to take a look under the floor. The authorities had disinterred nine bodies. And they were still digging, the article said.

"We were there," Eddy said. "Corpses all around us."

"I touched one," I said. And felt suddenly queasy. The back of my head ached as if I had rapped it on a joist again.

The mayor wanted the three boys to step forward. He said the police were interested in talking to us, and that we would probably be awarded a citation for bravery. "Cool," Robert breathed, putting his finger under the word. "What is it?"

"Never mind," Eddy said. "What about that last bit?"

"Henry Lingus Malley, of no fixed address," Robert read under the picture of the death's-head, "was remanded by Judge Kohler to the end of the month. He is accused of kidnapping, forcible confinement, murder, and sexual assault. A second man, Joseph Shorki, fled the scene. Shorki faces warrants in North Carolina for desertion from Fort Bragg in 1944." There was a picture of a much younger Shorki with two good eyes.

"So," Eddy said, "anybody want to sashay down to City Hall and claim this whatever-it-is? — sedation? You better realize that the minute our names hit the street we're gonna be on that Shorki guy's hit list. A soldier, for crying out loud."

"He didn't look like a soldier," I said. "He looked like a farmer."

"Don't let the overalls fool you. He deserted years ago. He could be a commando. Or a sniper. Put a bullet through each one of us before we even know what's happening."

"Omigod," Robert mumbled, quivering.

I closed my eyes and felt faint.

"Best thing for us to do is keep our heads down," Eddy said. "Shut our mouths about it. That's the smartest thing."

"What about the sedation?" Robert whispered. We could see in his eyes he really wanted that. Hell. We all wanted it, whatever the heck it was.

Eddy let out a strange barking laugh. "That's something we're gonna have to forget about. We're gonna have to keep our yaps shut and totally forget about being big brave heroes."

Heroes? No, we weren't that. Brave? Not that either. If we had been, we'd have sashayed down to City Hall for our reward, Joseph Shorki be damned. But we were decent kids. And I think we were honest. When I said yes to my mother's question about whether or not I had seen a mad dog that night, I don't think I was telling a lie.

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So we followed Eddy's advice. We kept our yaps shut. And we continued to keep our yaps shut for the next forty years, leaving the city's gratitude unclaimed. Oh, I'm not saying we didn't allude to it once in a while, or that we didn't discuss it among ourselves— especially later in life, and usually over a beer. Robert confided he'd had nightmares well into his teens. But by and large we kept it at the backs of our minds, only beginning to lighten up when we realized Shorki was getting old enough to be eating pabulum off the end of a spatula.

And now Robert was telling us he'd spotted the aging ogre.

#

We drove out to the River Glen Home For the Elderly and Infirm in Robert's car. Entering the building, I could see things hadn't improved much since I'd been there last. Major redecorating was long overdue.

"He's changed his name," Robert said. "He goes by Gilbertson now. Which is pretty much what you'd expect, right? That he'd change his name? If he hadn't, they'd have nailed him years ago."

"He'd need some fake i.d." I pointed out; but Robert only sniffed in reproach. And, of course, I realized it would have been relatively easy for Shorki to assume the identity of one of his victims. If not somebody from Easton then from some other place. God alone knew what trail of mayhem stretched behind such a man.

The place was cold. There were only a few scattered visitors. Elderly men and women in bathrobes wandered aimlessly in the halls. We followed Robert into one of the older wings, and peered through an open door into room number 8. There was nobody in it. And it was devoid of personal effects.

"This is where I saw him," Robert said. "Glanced in the door, and there he was."

"Maybe he died," Eddy said, putting his head inside and sniffing the air as if death might have left a tell-tale scent. There was a scent, all right. Of disinfectant and urine. But the walls were bare — no books, no ornaments, no fading photos of happier times.

Then Robert stiffened. "This is him," he whispered, and we stood back against the wall as one of the staff guided a decrepit husk of a man past us into the room where we stood. We stared at the guy as he shuffled past, and I for one knew right away it was Shorki. He had dropped forty pounds and aged a hundred years, but it was him, no question about it. His drooping eye was now closed completely. His once pudgy cheeks had collapsed. He wore a cotton nightdress, and dragged an I.V. pole with one liver-spotted claw. The pole had a wheel that chirped and wobbled, and he walked with careful, hesitant steps.

The aide studied us suspiciously, and I saw fatigue in her eyes. "Are you visitors for Mr. Gilbertson? Yes? Well, just wait a moment while I get him settled." With her bare, brawny arms, she practically dragged the old killer into the room. "Visitors, Mr. Gilbertson," she snapped. "Make sure you behave yourself."

She dumped him in an ugly, plastic-covered recliner, waved us into the room and strode away.

We were alone.

Alone with the monster.

Shorki's feet didn't quite reach the floor, and his hairless shins were bruised. His night-shirt had snagged on one arm of the chair, pulling up to reveal a blue-veined thigh and a diaper that needed changing. His one eye stayed open — staring at us, through us, past us — perhaps he wasn't aware of us at all.

I wondered if his gaze wasn't so empty after all. I could convince myself without much effort that his glassy orb was fully fixed on me. After all, I was the one he'd seen face-to-face that day, except for a fleeting glimpse of Eddy. So what was he thinking? Had something clicked in that murderous old mind? Had he made the connection?

I scowled at him.

#

We trooped back along the halls to the exit and Robert's car. We hadn't said one word to the old horror. Eddy climbed into the back, propping his duffle-coated elbows on his knees, while I sat up front with Robert. None of us spoke. Instead of heading back to the restaurant, Robert drove us up the road to the top of the city



dump. I still called it that, we all did, but it wasn't officially a dump anymore. It was a park now, Overlook Park, though there wasn't a soul to be seen anywhere.

Robert snugged the car up tight to the guardrail, giving us a view down the slope to where Eagle Oils had once stood. The building had long since been demolished and carted away, and in its place there now stretched a clutch of pastel-shaded, low-rental apartment buildings.

Eddy cleared his throat. "The old bastard looked terrible."

"Did you see that diaper?" Robert shook his head in disgust.

"I wonder if he knew us," I muttered. "For a moment there ..." But it was ridiculous. The old man scarcely knew himself.

"What we have to do now," Robert said, "is visit the cops. Turn the bloodthirsty monster in."

"Past time, too," Eddy said.

"Long past time," I agreed.

We continued to gaze down the hill. Not only had Eagle Oils been obliterated, but even the train tracks had been removed. Things that had once seemed so permanent, gone. Soon we would be gone as well. Hell, we were each of us pushing seventy.

"If I end up in a place like that," Robert said, "shoot me. I'm serious. Pull the plug on me. Promise me that."

"We'll do it," Eddy replied, "if we can walk the length of ourselves."

We thought about that chilling prospect awhile.

"We'll have another meeting, and we'll make a decision," Robert said. "We'll decide how we should go about this. Decide which one of us makes the call, or if we should all go visit the cops in a group."

"Sure," Eddy and I agreed.

He started the car. Made three attempts before the engine caught. He took us back down the hill and out to the restaurant, and as we got out of the car, he said:

"So we'll do that then?"

"Yup," we said.

"We're all agreed?"

"Yup."

#

But we never did.

It was a year or two later that I saw the obituary — under Gilbertson. I called a scramble meeting at Pappy's, and we got together, drank wine and searched our souls.

We'd missed our chance. Why hadn't we turned him in? Not one of us could say for certain. Was it because he was such a feeble old relic? Or because his sins couldn't be put right again anyway? Or were we safe in the thought that the hellhole he occupied was at least as bad, if not worse, than any prison they'd eventually stick him in?

We couldn't agree, though it was probably all those things.

But I sometimes imagine, when it's late in the evening and the sun is casting long red-orange shadows, that it was something else. That at some primitive, reptilian level, the old monster still scared the living hell out of us.

The End

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