

Mercy First, First Mercy

By David Harrison

People stop taking their meds all the time.
I'm sorry I killed that dog, though.
Just, stuff gets stuck in your head – am I right? Am I right? Aggravation.

Insults.

Childhood...

Or a plainclothes named Barlow and, behind him, his overwrought partner, the one who's pacing, rolling his eyes through one-way glass along the dirty wall of an airless interrogation room.

"From the top," Barlow says.

This ain't my first time; I know that's an order.

Still, I ask for another cigarette.

Wrong brand, but if I know another thing, it's that beggars can't choose. I close my eyes, inhale – deep – imagine the nicotine like pretty paint rolled on my inside walls... When I open my eyes, I'm guessing I've smiled, 'cause Barlow wants in on the joke and the partner looks, more than ever, loaded for bear.

"Seriously," Barlow says.

But he's the one smiling now – I'm almost sure of it. Doesn't make me nervous so much as it makes me mad that I don't know how long the three of us are gonna be stuck together in this sneaker box of a room. "I'm sorry I killed that dog--"

"The top," Barlow interrupts. "That's an order!"

My stomach growls. I'm probably hungry. There's coffees they'd brought me, all gone cold, collecting in Styrofoam cups atop the dented steel table between me and Barlow. I don't drink coffee - won't, either - I told them early on. Again I ask what it takes to get a Canada Dry around here.

Barlow tells me, "Water."

With my hands cuffed behind me, I spit the cigarette butt from my mouth to the floor; I turn, lean, drink from a straw though the water's lukewarm. I'm picturing the nicotine running and streaking, and I don't think my eyes are even closed...

The top? I liked the dog fine. Some kind of retriever. Square head, thick haunches, dark tail taut like a whip. So black he looked blue when the light hit him right.

And I swear he didn't talk.

I told Barlow and his partner, "Wouldn't stop barking, though--"

Partner'd peeled himself away from the window - in time to slam a big hand down on the table. "From the beginning!"

"I'm right here," I say. Then, to Barlow, "He always shout like that?"

"Take five, Frank."

Partner - name of Frank, I guess - leaves.

Barlow says, "Just you and me."

I want to point to my temple, tap some, correct him. But the cuffs. Fuck it.

"Danny," I say.

"The boy--"

"My brother."

Barlow's bushy eyebrows arch. He thumbs through my file. "Uh-uh."
"Deceased," I tell him. "Long time ago." Mercy is where and whenever you find it.

Barlow only sighs.

"My father was a welder," I continue. "He caught fire once - all up and down his one arm? Wound up limp, all smooth, real ugly - like candle wax left in the sun." Pop liked me and Danny to touch it...

"The boy."

A one-track, steel-trap this Barlow, lucky devil. So, I try to concentrate - I really do...

The boy? His father spoke Spanish. *La madre* went mute. I heard their works through thin walls when I should've been sleeping. Poor kid, in the treacherous dark with his pitch-black dog...

"Boy's name was Antonio," Barlow interrupts.

If he says so; I mostly remembered big ears, skinny legs, bruising all up and down the kid's arms. Clumsy, my ass. Or am I thinking of Danny? Old gets new, again and again...

And again.

Barlow says, "Antonio Diaz..."

"I offered him gum once."

"...age eleven."

I tell Barlow how the kid took a stick, but didn't know to thank me. Up close, his eyes had looked old. "Swiveled his head like he might get caught stealing, you know?"

Barlow knows of what we speak; I can see it in the way he shrugs his shoulders, in the way he taps one foot, in the way he writes left-handed. The scrape of his soft pencil across the notepad sounds like a wagging tail...

"We never had no dog of our own," I say, thinking Barlow ought to know. "My brother stole a turtle once."

"Danny."

"Tyson."

"Tyson?"

Danny's turtle's name was Tyson. Got found, all right; Danny offered to take Tyson back to the pet store, make things right, whatever it took. Pop handed Danny a hammer instead...

"You got kids, Barlow?" I ask.

"You think we got nothin' but time around here?" But he puts down his pencil. Then, he's looking around the entire tiny, shitty room; he's spreading his arms, slowly, and pointing or something - crazy bastard - like he's a television spokesmodel or some goddamn thing.

"I'll show you crazy," I hear myself tell Barlow. But the cuffs; I sit back down.

"Pop handed Danny a hammer."

Like that, Barlow is writing again.

And writing.

I gather I must be talking: Hammers. Housepets. Parents. Pulp. I see sweet Danny's eyes, but my rap to Barlow is all about old man Diaz, about how I figured out which Fridays were payday from the bumps in those nights, from the barley stink of

freshly drained forties in the dumpster, from Saturday bruises still swollen and purple before time turned poor, skinny Antonio yellow...

"Man died much too quick, you ask me. You know the sound it makes when you drop a flat rock onto mud?"

Before Barlow can answer, I'm on to the missus, *tu madre*, the mute. "How dare she?" I ask him. Hurt like a bitch when she dug those nails into my neck. And teeth on her, too; left one of my earlobes about on a thread. "All of a sudden she's a fighter?"

Barlow's scribbling like a genuine madman now. It makes me think I'm talking about the kid, about Antonio, "D" for Diaz, for Danny, for damn sure, 'cause just growin' up is murder enough, but it's worse to be waiting and wishing when you know that things don't change, things won't ever change, old is new, new gets old, like father like son, brother's keeper, losers weepers...

"'D' for done?" I ask.

Barlow nods as he puts his pencil down. He twists in his seat, shoots the same nod out that mirrored glass.

Like that, the partner, Frank, is back. Still ugly, but I'll be damned if he doesn't have my ginger ale.

"Where and whenever." I laugh and lean and sip and slurp. "Danny buried Tyson in the woods behind our house." I found arrowheads out there once; I straight away showed them to Pop. He snatched the lot, made me watch when he put them in hamburger meat, fed the neighbor's Collie...

Dogs bleed.

Kids see.

Danny loved that turtle.

I love Danny...

So, meds or no meds, maybe I ought to tell Barlow and Frank how a hammer's only good enough for fathers, for mothers, for goddamn dogs who just wouldn't stop with the barking and barking. And barking...

But I've said enough.

"Crazy bastard," Frank mutters as Barlow leads their way out...

At last, giving me my own clear view to the one-way glass. I see Antonio's eyes, grown wide as Danny's did in the final instant, not scared nor brave, not empty though, either, just already dead at eleven years-old, long gone before I snap his neck, past lost before I save a soul...

"Mercy, me."

This ain't my first time.

David Harrison lives, writes and teaches in Massachusetts. His essays have appeared in the Boston Globe and on 91.5 WUML-FM. His story Payday appeared in Thuglit # 20. His novel Something Fierce fairly screams, "Somebody, somewhere, represent this sumbitch!" Reach him at: dvd.harrison@verizon.net