



THE MAN WHO KILLS DOGS

SIT. STAY. ROLL OVER. PLAY DEAD.

— **ADRIAN DAWSON** —

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He's here; right on time.

The Man Who Kills Dogs.

Nobody on the street knows his name because nobody ever gets that close to him. Not if they can avoid it. Indeed, they veer if he gets too close, if only to spare their own delicate noses. I had a run in with him once, for killing a dog, and he pulled a chipped old baseball bat from his trolley and started hitting me hard around the shoulders. I hadn't eaten for three days and I was too weak to fight back. In the end he knocked me down and I stayed down. From there on, he left me alone. He's not one of us, and never has been. He keeps himself to himself, appearing every two or three days, pushing his trolley with his head down and cursing quietly to himself. We all know that he is as homeless as we are, it's obvious both from his similarly ragged appearance and his dark feter, but how or why he became so remains as big a mystery as why any of us should find ourselves pushed to such extremes.

He is at the entrance to the alleyway right about now, his torn raincoat glistening in the blue lighting. It rained all last night and my guess is that, unlike me, he did not choose to take shelter.

My guess is that he was out killing dogs.

I despise him for that.

Why he should hate them as passionately as he does I really don't know. I cannot begin to think, but he does. He really does. I've never seen him kill one yet, not for myself (though I know those who have and they claim it is the most violent act they have ever seen), but even I have seen the way he looks at them when they are unfortunate enough to cross his path. His eyes go a deep red, as though caught by a camera flash, and his lip curls as though hidden under that ragged and grime streaked beard is none other than the King of Rock 'n' Roll himself; all but ready to sing 'you ain't nevah caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend o' mine'.

Not one of us who reside on the rain and filth soaked streets have ever heard this man speak; not properly. He only ever mumbles incoherently to himself, but when he sees a dog he does not manage anything even so eloquent as that. He growls at them. Not a real growl, of course, like he had somehow learned to communicate in the dog's own language, but a cheap human imitation. Sometimes it contains so much venom that his spit starts to spark from between his teeth like a welding torch. Then he hunches his shoulders and clenches his hands like claws. A few seconds later he grabs the bat from his trolley and chases after them.

Still growling.

It's what happens when he catches them that cools my skin to the touch.

I have no details of this man's history, and I don't really care to seek them out if they exist, but to let you into a little of my own life... I have been on the street for a little over three years now. People might refer to me as 'homeless', I guess, but what they cannot understand is that this is my home. It may not have a roof, a fireplace or a TV set (unless you count the rack of them which show the news twenty-four hours a day from the electrical store on Third), but that does not make it any less the place I call my own. The first year I spent out here was the hardest, but only because I missed so many things I had once possessed. Silly things like warm fires when the rain fell like

glistening stones outside (instead of the rain pouring but inches from my own shivering body) and regular meals.

I last ate yesterday morning. It was just scrap pizza, more dough than nutrition really, but it was food and when you are on the streets you learn very quickly to take pleasure from whatever you can get. It had been thrown out with the trash from the back of the Italian restaurant on Seventh, the place that always smells so good as I pass (and even manages to lift my head upward momentarily, instead of staring resolutely at the cold stones). It is a place that makes me dream of sitting inside its faux Venetian walls as an attentive waiter brings me 'most everything on the menu along with a nice cold drink to wash it down.

Barney used to help me find food, but Barney is gone.

Barney was a dog. The Man Who Kills Dogs stole him from me.

I came across Barney in this very alleyway, just before I suffered my first winter. He had been a stray for quite a long time, I could tell. He probably weighed less than fifty pounds and a hand run down his side would have bounced across each of his straining ribs like a stick on a picket fence and felt the frightened, irregular beat of his heart. His coat was an interesting mix of brown and black with a distinctive streak of white on his underbib, though it had long since lost any of the sheen it might once have possessed. His body might have been losing some fight or other, but not his eyes. They were big and wide, great ochre disks set in the hopeful white of opals.

At first he was as wary of me as I was of him but then I saw his nose twitch at the bacon pieces I had found in the dumpster. I offered some out to him and he came a little closer. In the end I placed a few pieces on the floor and retreated a few feet, gave him a chance to get acquainted at his own speed. It was rotten but I'll bet it smelled like a still sizzling steak to his hungry nose. After a few moments of edging forward and retreating with an unsure look creasing his eyes he rushed forward, grabbed the meat from the floor and rushed back to his dark corner again to eat. We performed this tentative routine for almost half an hour before he gained the confidence to take the food directly from me.

Barney became my friend. My only true friend, and we rode the streets together ever since.

It was good to have a companion, it brought me long-overdue warmth and I guess over the next two years or so I grew to love Barney. He never complained, never criticised and he took me purely for who I was. That's the thing with dogs - it's why I love them so much more than humans - they demand less of you and seem happy purely to be by your side. They genuinely seem to care when you need it, and yet they really don't care if, and when, you screw up.

Barney had a good nose. Before he joined me I would often skulk down an alleyway and search for hours for scraps of food or leftovers but once he became my friend so, it seemed, did a better and more regular supply of food. It's alluring scent never escaped his nose and on occasion we ate until we could eat no more.

Life was better then. I had a friend and I had food to eat.

I miss Barney more than I can tell you. More than I would care to try.

That's why I have to kill the Man Who Kills Dogs.

I have never once killed another living thing, never even thought about such a senseless act. I don't think I've even so much as stepped on a bug knowingly, but yet I know - I have this creeping feeling inside - that I have to take his life and take it soon. He took Barney away and, whilst I

always understood that he was an old dog and would pass away long before I did, I had always assumed that I would be there when it happened, helping him transfer his existence to a better place.

The thing you must understand is this: Barney was a dog, but he was never my dog. He often went off on his own; it was better that way. We had both, in our own ways, learned to limit our trust toward everyone and everything and as such we understood that if and when we tramped the streets together, it was because we wanted to. Sometimes, he had his own life to lead, his own path to follow, as did I. Sometimes he might be gone for an hour, sometimes a whole day, but he always came back, because I think he cared for me too. I think he understood that whilst my upbringing might have been markedly different to his, inside we were essentially one and the same.

Like I say, he had a good nose.

Except that a few weeks ago Barney decided to set himself on one of his trails, following that keen nose of his into the dark unknown most of us fear, and he missed a scent. He missed the scent of trouble.

The scent of his own death.

He never came back.

I have chosen my location well today. I am far enough down the alley for the sound of my attack not to breeze out into the busy streets and cause unnecessary alarm to those who might (or might not) come running, and I have found a corner where even the low light has been completely stolen by a group of unruly trash cans. My body is hunched so tightly back into this temporary den that it hurts my back, but I know I must not be seen until it is too late. He has a bat and I wield no weapon but my anger. I will wait here patiently and silently as he makes his way down and will not lunge out at him until he is standing directly in front of me. I am sure of only one thing - I will be on him before he has even had time to draw a breath of surprise.

I do not need to stick my head out into the open and check his progress toward me, because I know that he will follow this dark alleyway to the very end. To his own end. The homeless, myself included, follow routine as stringently (if not more so) than those who wear suits or uniforms of rank. We all have our haunts and, like living ghosts I suspect, we sneak through the discouraging shadows and search for the things our bodies crave. Routines change, of course they do, but they rarely do so with any degree of frequency. Mine has changed little during my time on the streets and I suspect that his is the same. I do not feel the need to peer forth from my lair just to see his face again either. I have studied it on a few occasions, more so as I have observed his patterns this past few days, and I have no desire to see it again.

Not until it is devoid of life.

In some of the colder, darker quarters of my recent life, when this man's face has chosen to turn up unannounced in my mind and keep me from sleep, I have wondered to myself if he is even human at all. Certainly his cruelty is something that I am fully aware is inherently mortal, but his eyes and his skin are not. They seem to have nothing behind them casting even the dimmest of lights. His eyes, permanently creased, are simply dark circles of oil – except when he is chasing dogs, of course, and that same oil instantly comes ablaze – and his skin is ashen and flaking, as though it has chosen to wither and die years before it will allow his hunched body the same grace.

I wondered once if he had always been this way, whether he was born as such, and came to the conclusion that such an occurrence falls heavier into the realms of probability than possibility. What

act is there (for there is none in my imagination) which could befall a man, no matter how cruel or painful, that would result in such a complete bereavement of his very soul?

Unless, perhaps, he lost a friend.

No matter, I am convinced that a soul is but one thing he lacks, though it is not my business to comprehend how or why he came to be, only to do what needs to be done. The only attribute that qualifies him a living thing is the fact that he still draws breath and the only article that permits him to be regarded as human is his penchant for preying on those weaker than himself.

What I remember of his fingertips, protruding from the tangled web of loose strands that might once have been cut-down gloves, showed me that they were not just dirty but also rotten like bad meat. It is for this reason, I presume, that as he stumbles the streets and curses to himself he attracts more than his fair allocation of flies, even when the season is long passed. I suspect that this thing that looks like a man, and might once have been, is being eaten away from both the inside and the out. For my part I could wait for the meal to complete each course at its own pace, rather than choosing to help along with it with its slow task, but to do so would be a gamble. One I am no longer prepared to take.

My time is running out and I must do this now. Today.

For Barney.

Barney and I had both been the victims of injustice in our lifetimes; we had both been hurt, betrayed by those who professed to care for us and ultimately thrown out from what we were led to believe were our respective homes. Our lives. We were both fending for ourselves in a world that had seemingly long since ceased to care. A world that would allow us to sit in the pouring rain, begging for scraps of existence on the Corner of Jefferson and Twilight whilst ninety-nine out of one-hundred people never so much as gave us a glance, critical or otherwise. A world where even most of those who did look simply turned their noses up in fervent disgust as though they were somehow better than us because they had brain killing jobs somewhere deep in the city, passing money that does not even exist from place to place on a computer.

All except for Alice Maitland.

I knew that Alice Maitland was her name because she told me so, and not many who choose to spare you a few minutes of their precious time do that. Often they are too worried that you might find out where they live and ultimately arrive on their doorstep one cold January evening and beg a night's shelter from the falling snow. Alice was not like that. She had a home, certainly, and all the warmth and comfort that is want to come with such a thing, but still she took a few moments on her way home from the place she worked to talk to me. She would arrive a little after six-thirty and leave when the time felt right.

If she had not finished all of the carefully-cut sandwiches that she had packed so neatly for her lunch, then she might sit next to me on the benches at the corner of MacArthur Park, open up the tub and hand one over with a consoling smile. It got so that I was having 'Barney Moments' some days - the ability to sense what delights she had brought from the smell alone. Tuna was always obvious, of course, but it even got so that I could differentiate between the variety of cooked meats she sometimes brought along. Ham, chicken and, on rare treats for herself (and me, I guess), still-pink roast beef.

She was one of the few 'working' human beings who did not care that I had no home of my own, or that I was dirty and bore the rancid smell of the streets (though I always did my best with

whatever resources I could find). Alice was one of the few human beings in the world who looked at me with no hint of a critical eye and instead treated me like a human being.

She talked, sometimes for over an hour. I think it was as much a warm therapy for her as it was for me. Perhaps I became some kind of release for her, and a few leftover sandwiches would certainly set her back far less than the cost of a shrink. So she would tell me what her boss had said that day, or how she might have won or lost an account. I listened when I guessed that she needed me to listen and responded when I felt that some form of response, limited as mine invariably were, might help raise another of her warm smiles.

I guess I knew Alice for about four months. Then, one warm Monday evening in late June, she sat by my side and told me that she had been offered a job in Detroit. I saw her for the rest of that week, and she told me each and every night that she would miss our little talks (though not as much as I might, I was guessing), then she was gone. Though I have visited that same bench too many times to count 'a little after six-thirty' she has never made an appearance. It's been known to make me cry a little - sometimes when I have not eaten for so long that my stomach is growling like the Man Who Kills Dogs, but more often when I miss the sound of her voice. Much as I have longed to see her face and hear those soft tones just one more time, it has never happened. I've never seen her since.

But I will.

For a long time after Alice was gone I still had Barney as my companion and I understood that every one of us - including Alice Maitland - has to move on some day but then, three nights ago, as I was sheltering from the darkest rain I remember and shivering uncontrollably, my stomach began to hurt and I knew that it was no longer from hunger alone. Soon I would need medical attention. I'm hoping that Alice might help, and if it takes me all the time I have left, I am going to steal a passage to Detroit and search what are no doubt similarly dismal streets until I find her. I will not beg to stay, not if she does not want me to, but I am hoping that she will offer me the brief help that I need. If she will, and if she is not too angry with me for tracking her down then I, for my part, will do all I can to pay her back.

But I cannot leave New York until I have expunged its darker streets of the Man Who Kills Dogs.

I know that I should not be wasting what little time I have on such trivialities, but he killed Barney. He kills all dogs who cross his path. It is a cruel and unnecessary crime and in my view it makes him a cruel and unnecessary man. If I do not force his final breath then I know that Barney's life will not be the last that he takes. I cannot in good conscience leave these streets knowing that more innocent animals will die purely to satisfy whatever personal vendetta he has created to enlighten his own wasted existence.

The sound of his trolley wheels catching deep breaks in the stone is becoming deafening the closer he comes, rattling like the chains of isolation into which he seemed to shackle me when he took Barney away. I know that if I wait and stay firmly out of his sight he will continue his journey until he is standing right in front of me. Then I shall summon every ounce of pain I have ever felt, every cold shard of rain that has soaked my often emaciated body over the years and every painful contraction that hunger has brought in its wake. I will launch them at him and use their weight to steal his life away.

Three weeks and two days ago I turned into an alley (not this one, though they are so similar as for it to make little difference) and saw the two suited men as they casually tossed Barney's lifeless

body - his head battered until it was nothing but a reddened hunk of meat - like a bag of garbage into the back of a van. As they did they were laughing loudly at something. Something they had seen on TV perhaps, or a joke that one of them had heard in some warm bar across town. One of the men kicked Barney's body deep into the belly of the van and slammed the door without a care for the truth that this was once - like them - a living, breathing, feeling thing.

It made me shudder.

Barney might only have been a dog but he felt fear as strong as any human; he had known loneliness, cold, hunger and ague just as each of them might. The only difference was that he had no family to turn to when he did. He only had me, and I him.

Barney is gone now and he is not coming back. I know that. He is gone because the Man Who Kills Dogs took him away long before the assholes in the van ever arrived.

The first thing that comes into view from my dark hiding place is the front of the trolley, battered and rusting. The second are the four or five bags settled within the steel framework and I am guessing that, in amongst whatever personal possessions he chooses to carry along on his murderous sprees, there is at least a little food.

When I have killed him I will take every last morsel from him.

The third thing I see, and it chills my blood to do so, is the bat. Old and chipped, dark streaks running through the wood, but within them lighter colours than that of grime alone - streaks of a deep, ominous red. Blood. It has seeped into the untreated cracks and dried into a permanent pattern of grisly decoration. It might be that even now some of that parched life once belonged to Barney and, until a few weeks ago, was pumping with vigour through the veins of the only living thing for which I have held any real feelings in a great many years.

I understand that the action I am proposing to ease the impassioned anger that I feel - an act that could only be listed in a court of law as cold blooded murder and possessing all the relevant forethought required to qualify the crime - will not paint me in any kind of endearing light to you, the reader, but there are certain details about why I must do this that I would wish you to take into account.

It is not just that this is a cruel man, a man born without a heart whose cold blood is apparently pumped around his rotting flesh by little more than the rage he feels toward innocent animals. Nor is it anything to do with the fact that he is not 'one of us', because I doubt that I could condone the cruelty of his actions even he took the time to sit down with me and explain his reasoning in great detail. It is also not that I am wishing merely to satiate my own personal vendetta before I head for Detroit and seek out whatever warmth Alice might spare me.

It is because I cannot allow him to kill any more dogs.

I cannot allow it because soon - very soon - there will be a few more dogs roaming this world which, if I do not do this soon, might one day fall prey to him. You see, when I steal whatever food this man might be carrying with him it will no longer be purely for myself. Not any more. It will be for them as well. Those little ones whose heartbeats I can feel growing stronger inside me with every day that passes. They are already starting to shuffle around innocently within my burgeoning stomach and preparing themselves to deal with whatever the world will ultimately choose to throw their way. Which is why I will spend all the time I have before they arrive tracking down Alice Maitland and asking for her help when their time comes. It is my job, and my job alone, to limit the risks involved as best I can. After all, they will be unable to rely on their father.

Because Barney was stolen from the very heart of their lives. Stolen before they were even born.

By the Man Who Kills Dogs.