

Eddie's Revenge

by Hugh Blanton

My ninth birthday party was the biggest of my life. There were 30 guests, not including the parents of my classmates that showed up that day. There were so many presents I had to leave them out on the front porch, they would have taken up too much room inside—and our house was the biggest one in Bell County, Kentucky. I had passed out the invitations one week ahead of time to all my classmates at school, all except one. Junior McDonald sat in the back of the class with a dirty toboggan on his head (even during the hot months), never doing any classwork, grunting in disapproval whenever the teacher would call on him in class, stinking as if he had never had a bath in his life. Mrs. Robbins pulled me aside after I passed out the invitations. "Richard, did you forget to invite Junior?" she whispered. "No," I said, and she simply nodded and began the day's lessons. I was one of the many students in class who had been on the receiving end of one of Junior's unprovoked physical attacks and there was no way in hell I was inviting that foul-smelling imbecile to my birthday party.

Our house sat atop a hill overlooking the Cumberland River and had a forest of pines and poplars for a backyard. All my classmates ran though the house, peeking into rooms and closets, oohing and ahing in astonishment before the party started—it was the biggest house they'd ever seen. My father sold heavy equipment to the mines around Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia during those coal boom years of the 70's and made a fortune. (In addition to the house we got a new family car every year, too.) After cake and ice cream, all of us kids went out to play, my mother telling me to keep an eye on my little brother Eddie, who was only six at the time. After about an hour or so of throwing footballs, frisbees, shooting BB guns, and other assorted birthday party activities, two of my classmates came running around the corner of the house from the woods screaming hysterically. Eddie was hanging from a tree branch, noose around his neck.

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My mother and two of her friends got him down from the tree while one of the other mothers got on the phone. None of the fathers were there that day, not even my own who was out working. None of the mothers knew first aid, they tried CPR as best they could remember from television shows or movies

they'd seen in the past. It took the paramedics over a half hour to get to our rural home, and they declared Eddie dead almost immediately after their arrival.

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Soon after I started my freshman year at high school (five years after Eddie had been killed), a detective from the Kentucky State Police came to our home and told my father that the case had gone cold. The detective emphatically ensured my father that the case was not closed, that it would never be closed, that they never close unsolved murder cases—but it was now inactive. Ever since Eddie had died there had been a total ban on mentioning anything about it, strictly enforced by my mother who had fallen into a depression and never came out of it. So I did not say a word after that final visit from the authorities, but I knew who had done it. And if they couldn't get him—I would.

The only one who wasn't there from my class that day was stinky Junior McDonald. It didn't dawn on me for several months after Eddie had been killed that it had to be Junior. I guess the reason I never even suspected him was he was too stupid and lazy to do anything, let alone murder someone. Junior dropped out of school two months after my ninth birthday, but the school didn't report it, they were happy to be rid of him. It wasn't so much that he caused problems, the attacks that I'd mentioned before were actually few and far between, but his quiet, sullen (and malodorous) presence was an undercurrent of distraction to the class. I had no doubt that his family knew he did it and pulled him out of school in case he were to moronically admit it. But how would I get him? What would I do? I didn't give one flying fuck about justice, I wanted revenge.

The McDonald home was a huge but dilapidated hovel on the banks of the Cumberland River. Trash was strewn all about it, and even by the standards of poor white trash, it was a shithole. It was visible from the highway and whenever I passed it I would surreptitiously survey it as best I could as I went by. But this went on for months and I could not come up with any plan for getting near it or near Junior. It was known that his family sold bootleg booze and drugs out of their home, but Junior was too stupid to be involved with it in any way, so I probably couldn't even use buying booze as a pretext to

get near him. And even if I did, what would I do? Shoot him in the face with a gun? I didn't even have a gun. The only thing I knew about him was that he would get worms for fish bait from behind the pig pen where the school custodian kept a hog. The hill that sloped down from the back of the pen was covered with hog shit, supposedly making prime ground for catching night crawlers, a type of preferred worm for catfish bait. This seemed like the best opportunity to get near him, but again, what would I do even if I could get near him?

A big part of my problem was solved when my uncle passed away and left a shed full of junk behind. Among the detritus of his life was a crossbow and about a dozen arrows which I sneaked off with as his relatives cleaned out his house for an estate sale. I hid it in my bedroom closet and waited for someone to notice it missing—nobody did. I had learned archery, including the use of crossbows, during summer camp between 7th and 8th grades, so I had the confidence to pull this off, if I could just get the opportunity. And on the second full moon of that summer, I got it.

As I'd hoped he would, Junior decided to go fishing during the full moon and he went to the hillside beneath the hog pen to get night crawlers for bait. He looked nearly the same as he did five years ago—a little taller, still with his trademark toboggan and filthy clothes, still with the lumbering gait of a moron. He was carrying a one-gallon plastic milk jug with the top cut away to drop his worms into. I set the arrow as he came across the school playground and waited in the thicket of dogwood trees and underbrush about fifteen yards from the spill of hog shit. He turned over the turds and the mud, occasionally dropping a worm into his jug, but his side profile was too slim a target. As he grubbed around he finally turned his back to me, I aimed, and pulled the trigger. The arrow flew straight and true and found its mark right in the lower left of his back. I had been calm and steady through it all, but I was not the least bit prepared for the inhuman shrieking scream he let out when the bullet-shaped point went through his kidney and intestines. The nearest home was hundreds of yards away, but surely someone heard it. I left out of the back side of the thicket, hopefully out of sight, down the hill, across the Old Road (so named because it was closed after US Highway 119 was built and was

no longer in use), and up the mountain on the other side of a large pond. I thought about tossing the crossbow into the pond, but the water was too clear and I was sure it would be spotted. I was able to walk mostly silent along an old logging trail until I found what looked like an ideal spot to bury the crossbow near a felled beech tree. If Junior was still screaming, I couldn't hear it anymore. After camouflaging the shallow hole with leaf litter, I made my way back home. I barely broke a sweat through it all.

There were no local television stations in that part of Kentucky back then, so it took a couple of days before a Knoxville station reported the discovery of Junior McDonald's dead body. Since he was still writhing around in the pig shit the last time I saw him, it wasn't until then that I was completely sure Eddie had his revenge.

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By the time my father had been diagnosed with colon cancer at age 84, he had already been suffering with the effects of it for a year, unwilling to admit the severity of the problem and go see a doctor. He was so far gone by the time of the diagnosis, there was nothing that could be done and he was sent to hospice care. My mother visited with him every day, and I would visit as often as I could, usually with my wife and two teenage daughters. However, one particular day after I had closed a deal with a company in China to purchase three Caterpillar backhoes, I stopped by to see him on my way home to tell him the good news. Maybe it would lift his spirits a bit, he was the one who had gotten me the job right after I'd graduated high school and it always did him proud when I closed a big deal. My mother was already there, and when my father noticed that I had not brought my wife and children with me, he said that it was well past time that the three of us talked about Eddie's death all those decades ago.

"It's been eating at me all these years," he said. "If I had been home that day, it might have never happened."

My mother tried to reassure him, *not your fault, you had to work that day*, etc.

"No, I wasn't up at Bailey Hill Mining that day," he said. "We were at the courthouse waiting on the survey blueprints, and there was some ruckus in one of the courtrooms. It was that damned McDonald family raising hell at the judge, Rufus yelling that he was being railroaded again, his wife screaming and waving her arms, on and on, the bailiff couldn't get control of it all, and me and Gambrel decided to stay and watch the circus. That's why I didn't get home that day, we were watching those goddamn troglodytes put on a show."

We all sat in silence for a few seconds, then he looked over at me and said, "That classmate of yours, that dirty little ragamuffin Junior, he was there too, squealing and grunting right along with the rest of them. He was trying to kick the bailiff in the shin, the bailiff backing up like he was being chased by a skunk."

The vertigo that hit me surely would have knocked me down if I hadn't already been sitting when he said that. Obviously Junior could not have been in the woods behind our home if he was in the courthouse. My mother and father sat there for another hour talking about that day, sometimes turning to me as if they expected me to say something, but I sat silently as Junior's dying screams echoed in my head.

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I had been able to comfort myself somewhat over the last 30 years knowing that while there was never any justice for my little brother's murder, at least there was vengeance. Now I don't even have that. My wife and daughters assume that the change I underwent when my father passed away (he died the day after his revelation) was the grief of losing him. Of course that was partially true, but the guilt that I'd thought I absolved myself of for not keeping watch over Eddie that day by putting that arrow through Junior McDonald's body came back with all the weight of the decades upon it. There aren't really any feelings of remorse—just failure. I haven't had a single thought of turning myself in to the authorities, but I did return to the scene of the crime soon after my father's funeral. The pig pen is gone now, reclaimed by weeds and brush. The old logging trail is still there, kept worn by hunters and fishers, and

off to the side of it about halfway up the hillside, the remnants of the felled beech tree is still there. And, yes, the crossbow was still there, plenty decayed by decades in its shallow hole. And yes, I reburied it.