

Killing the Dope Boy

by Michael Henson

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READ BY MICHAEL HENSON
ART BY DAVE LAMPLUGH
MUSIC BY GOODMAN CARTER



He was fixing to kill that little dope boy, and that dope boy knew it. He had let it be known out on the street that he had a gun and he meant to use it.

It would have been enough just to kick the boy's ass. It would have been enough just to know the boy had got the message. He was not to be played with. But he had put it out on the street that he meant to kill the boy, and he would, if it came to that.

"That little motherfucker took my car and damn near ruined it," he told his friend in the barbershop. He had stopped pacing to stare out the barbershop window at the drizzling street. He was a man in his late twenties, tallish and square. Just off work, he still wore his coat, a workman's coat, and his cap, a ball cap with the name of a construction firm stitched across the front of it. He wore heavy work boots flecked with mud.

The thin rain had lashed the window and darkened the street and the iron-colored sky. The block was lined with shops and apartments, some filled, some abandoned. Beyond these rose the line of high-rise housing projects where the man had grown up. It was late afternoon; some people, like him, were already off work. They rushed past pulling their coats and jackets tightly to their chests. Three men, still at work across the street, stood in the rubble of a building newly torn down. With long-headed hammers, they picked the bricks clean and stacked them on a pallet. A fire in a fifty-gallon drum licked up the scraps of wood they tossed into it. Off to the left, a group of boys stood at the corner, each in a heavy jacket with a hood pulled up around his face or a knit cap pulled down to his eyes. The man studied the group of boys on the corner, for he wanted to know if the boy who had ruined his car was among them. But the boy was not among them; he would have known him by his black coat with a white slash stitched across it front and back.

"Who's the fool that gave the boy the car?" His friend spoke slowly. He was an older man who had been his father's friend before he passed. The barber

had stepped out; the older man was watching the shop until he returned. He had been sitting in a chair at the window with his eye also on the group of boys, but turned when he spoke to look at the younger man beside him.

"I didn't give that boy nothing," the younger man said. "I loaned it to him." He pivoted, and began to pace again.

The barbershop had a wide front window with the barber's name painted across it in large white letters. There were two barber chairs --an extra from when the barber still had a partner. The wall behind the chairs held a long mirror above and counters below. A back wall was lined with coat hooks, another with chairs for waiting. Thick, vining plants hung in every corner and stretched from planters on the window ledge and pots on tables in every empty space.

"I loaned it to him for just that night."

The older man rolled his eye and turned back to the street.

It was a good car, too. It had been anyway. Sleek, not new but well cared-for, and black with a black interior and a wraparound sound system fit for Quincy Jones. He had been proud to drive his family in it.

But after the dope boy brought it back, three nights late, he found the ashtrays stuffed full of the stubs of their little cigars. And he found half a dozen ash holes burned into the upholstery. And candy wrappers and fast food bags. And he had to pluck a nasty used rubber from off the floor in the back. And the speakers in his sound system had gone flabby and ragged from all the gangsta rap pumped through them. And the engine ran with a whimper that had not been there before. It was ruined, sure enough.

"So why you gonna let some young boy have your car in the first place? When you know . . . "

He flashed at that. "Damn," he spat out. "You all the time pickin apart everything I do."

He did not want to talk about it any more. His friend folded his arms and continued to stare out at the street. Cars and trucks streamed past in both directions. The men sorting bricks had stopped to warm their hands at the fire. The little gang of boys on the corner stared out, each of them in a different direction, like sailors on watch.

The younger man could not handle his friend's silence any more than he could handle his words. He stopped mid-pace, and looked out the window, up and down the street. He nodded toward the empty barber chair. "So what's up with him anyway?" The barber had been gone a good twenty minutes.

His friend shrugged; he was in no hurry and was not worried. "He'll be back," he said.

"Damn," the man said. "I aint waitin here all night." He began to pace again, from the window to the barber chair and back. "This is the first day I been able to drive. If I don't get home, my old lady gonna think I'm walkin again."

"What'd you tell her when you didn't have no car for three days?"

"Man, I don't even know. I told her somethin and she didn't say nothin back. So I aint worried."

He jammed his hands into his pockets as he paced. The man in the chair noted that every few turns, he pulled his right hand out of the pocket of his jeans and touched the bulge in the pocket of his coat.

He paced in silence for several more turns, his breathing growing heavier on each pass. Finally, he stopped in mid-stride, pivoted toward his friend, and tried to speak. He knew what he wanted to say, but he hated to admit it. But this was his father's friend and he wanted to tell him. The words caught in his throat and he gestured several times before he shot out, "I'm through, man."

His friend raised his eye.

"I aint takin no more dope. I been slung around too much already. I keep messin like this, I'm fit to lose everything I ever worked for. You know how I grew up. Now I got a wife, a son, a job, a car. I don't need to be messin with what these dope boys got."

He had started pacing again, with a new energy. "I could of lost my job this week. Just because I let that dope boy trick me. I'm through with it."

"That's good," his friend said, nodding. "That's what I been tellin you these past six months."

"It hasn't been no six months."

"It was way back, first part of last summer, I said . . . "

"I know. I know. But I'm done with it for sure now. I been clean for . . . " He gestured, as if to indicate he had lost count of the days.

"That's good. That's what I been prayin to hear."

"Well good." He did not like the idea of this friend praying for him, but he did not say that. "I'm still gonna kill that little motherfucker."

"You aint gonna kill nobody and you know it."

"I got a piece." He tapped his jacket pocket.

"You aint killin nothin."

"Well, he don't need to know that."

The older man shook his head.

"I will, I get the chance."

"What about that wife and son and job?"

"I aint gonna let nobody see me do it."

"I aint talkin to you no more."

"Just to let him know, don't mess with me."

"You aint makin no sense."

"You aint seen him around here, have you? He's scared."

His friend waved his hand at him and looked back out the window.

"If I could kill him and wouldn't nobody catch me . . ."

"You keep talkin like this, you be the first one they look for."

"They gonna have to prove it. Just like OJ."

"I aint talkin to you no more."

Don't, he thought. I don't need you and your sorry advice anyway.

The older man sat in that chair by the window, day after day, his old crippled-up self. At one time, just a few years ago, he was a powerful-built, square-shouldered man. But now, he sat. He limped when he walked, but mostly, he sat. His shoulders had gone round and buttery, his belly had folded over his belt; his hands had gone soft.

And he wants to tell somebody how to live, thought the younger man.

"When you say he gettin back?"

The crippled-up man turned to look up at the clock. "He should of been back."

"He probably out somewhere talkin somebody to death."

The man at the window shrugged.

"He probably got some poor fool cornered," the younger man said. "He'll be layin it out about the weather, football, bad checks, women, the state of the nation. He should of been a preacher, stead of a barber."

"He does a good job cuttin hair."

"Well I aint got all night to wait."

"So don't wait. Come back tomorrow."

"I don't want to be goin around all nappy."

"So get comfortable and wait. He'll be back."

"Man, you always like that."

"Like what?"

"Just so logical. Like, you got it all figured out."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's all so simple to you. Either one way or the other. It aint always like that."

They were interrupted by the jingle of the bell on the door. The barber, a graying, jowly man with a trim mustache, pushed the door shut. "Thank you, gentlemen, for waiting," he said. His felt hat and the shoulders of his coat were dotted with rain. "We had some business to take care of." With swift, efficient moves, the barber took off both hat and coat and hung them on a hook in the back of the room. Then he moved to the chair. With a similar crisp

motion, he pulled up a fresh chair from a drawer below the mirror, took it in both hands, and snapped it out full length. The air stirred around him with a smell of witch hazel and gin. His eyes had taken on a silvery glaze that was difficult to look on. The younger man began to feel strange and agitated.

"Take off your coat and have a seat," the barber invited. With his silvery eyes, he directed him to the chair.

"It's late," the younger man said. The smell of gin had made him distrustful.

"It's not so late. We can have you home in minutes."

The younger man looked at his watch. He looked at the clock on the wall. "All right, man," he said. "You know how I like it." He hung his cap and his heavy coat on a hook next to the barber's hat and coat and sat in the chair. The barber settled the cloth around his shoulders and cinched a paper napkin around his throat with a metal clip, then pumped the chair up to a comfortable height. With his clippers in his right, he raised both hands around the head of the man who wanted to kill the boy and framed the head a moment, as an artist might mentally frame the picture he wanted. In the next moment, he set the clippers buzzing and went to work.

"So I hear you've been having some encounters with our young entrepreneurs," the barber said.

The younger man sulked lower in the chair. Ever since his father died, these men had tried to tell him what to do.

"You let that street life hook you, my brother."

"I just told him," he nodded toward the man at the window. "I'm through with all of that. I'm finished."

The man at the window did not even turn.

The barber framed his work again. "Well, that's good," he said.

"I got too much to lose."

"We all do, my man. We all do." That thought seemed to affect him, for the barber set back to work in a silence not typical for the man. The younger man could not see the face of the barber nor his searching, metallic eyes, but he sensed a somber, new bearing to him as he clipped, buzzed, and trimmed. And when at last the barber spoke, after only a minute but a long minute for a man so untypically silent, he spoke, over the buzz of the clippers, steadily, with a ring like hammered silver. "See," he said. "It shouldn't be this thing of people runnin around with brother-this and brother-that when there is no brotherhood behind it." Every few moments, the barber stopped his cutting to emphasize a point with a wave of his clippers, then went on, steady as rain. With the buzz of the clippers so near his ear, the younger man could hear only snips and trimmings of what the barber said, but enough that he could give a limping sort of sense to the barber's words. The barber spoke, without a hint of irony, of the love that formed the spiritual bones of all things and of the bone-deep fact that all men are brothers and all women are sisters and of the absolute and dire need to look out for, care for, find shelter in, and give comfort to one another. And that God's message is about that love and nothing else.

"And the thing which makes this such a terrible time, an evil time, is that we fail to abide the strength of that love."

"That's right," said the man at the window. "You talkin now."

The barber finished the haircut and fell silent. He clicked off the clippers and dropped the tool into its box on the counter below the mirror. Silently, he swept off the younger man's shoulders with a little, soft broom, then whirled him around the face the mirror.

"What do you think?"

The barber's speech had left the younger man angry and disgruntled. Why does he need to lay all that on me? he thought. He could not even look at his own face; in the brief glance he gave to the mirror, he saw that the barber's eyes had lost their silver gleam and that his eyes here human, dark, and sad. It was as if he had come out of a trance.

"It's fine," he told the barber.

The barber pulled loose the clip that bound the napkin and the cloth to his neck; the younger man got up out of the chair and reached for his wallet.

"No. No," the barber said. He stood with the cloth folded over his arm. "I kept you waiting. This one's on me."

He wanted to argue; it was not in him to accept charity. "Man, I got the money," he said. "It aint like . . ."

The barber was firm. "You paid me before and you'll pay me again. But this one is mine."

"Well, that's on you, then. I pay my own way."

"You paid by watchin my store."

The younger man said nothing to this. He reached for his coat before the barber could touch it and raised the coat and its burden off the hook. He nodded to the barber and to the man at the window as he slipped on the jacket and pulled his cap down over his eyes.

"I'm headin home, ya'll." He saw that the streets had grown darker in the time he was in the chair. Kitchen and living room lights burnt in some of the homes on the block; lights were scattered across the faces of the dark high rises. The brick cleaners were gone; the fire in their barrel glowed dimly in the rain.

"You keep yourself safe now," the barber said. "And leave that street life alone."

I already told you, he wanted to say. I threw all that down like a smoked-up cigarette. Instead, he merely nodded. "Yes sir," he said. He pushed open the door and rang its little bell, and stepped out into the street.

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The streets had grown darker, but the wind had not changed. He felt the drizzle of rain in his face, and he pulled the bill of his cap down closer over his eyes.

He had turned left out of the barbershop, toward his home, and walked a few paces with his head down. When he reached the alley, he looked up to cross and realized he had forgotten all about the boys on the corner, directly in his path. Damn, he thought. He stepped into the darkness of the alley and paused to plot his move.

I could turn around now, he thought. I could go around the block and still get home easy.

He remembered his resolve and felt firm in it. He knew it was best to avoid the dope boys. Already his bowels had begun to churn. The dope boys stood on their corner, dark and motionless as boulders.

That's what I ought to do, he thought. I ought to turn around and go the long way home.

But something held him in place, in the dark of the head of the alley, watching the dope boys in the rain.

If I do that, he thought, if I turn tail and run the other way, what kind of man am I? He scorned to think himself weak, unable to face a little dope boy on the street. Besides, he thought, he could show just how strong was his resolve to stay clean. So he pulled himself taller and made his face stern and began to walk again.

He was relieved to note that the boy who had stolen his car was not on the corner. He knew the boy's jacket and he knew the cut of his shoulders. The faces of these boys were obscured by their hoods and their caps and by the steady dark rain, but he knew the boy he had wanted to kill was none of them.

That's good, he thought. I didn't really want to kill him anyway.

He was doubly glad now that he had not gone the long way home. These were his streets. He was not afraid to walk his streets.

He did not need to pass directly by the dope boys on the corner anyway. Their station was across the street. To get home, he did not need to speak to them or to come any closer than corner to corner. They stood where they had stood all that evening, each keeping watch in his different direction.

He knew how it worked. Once they noticed him, one of the boys would lock eyes on him and wait for his response. If he looked back, the boy would indicate where to meet him with a flick of his head, and they would go to that spot and deal.

"Wassup," one of the boys would say.

"Wassup," he would answer, if he were to answer.

He was determined, this time, he would not answer. He would not meet the eyes of the boy who turned. He maintained himself tall and stern and watched only the sidewalks ahead. There were lights in nearly all the houses around him and along the path to his home. But some of the buildings were abandoned; their windows and doors were dark, their walls switched over with graffiti. When he had been a boy, these buildings had all been full of homes and shops. He passed three of these and three that were still occupied. A siren rose suddenly in a street behind him and he tensed. But he did not change his demeanor. He did not want these boys to see him tense or fretting. He had decided not to turn his eyes toward them to find out, but he knew that he would sense when they had locked their eyes on him.

He began to sweat all along his brow and temples and neck. A bead of sweat threatened to roll down through his brow and into his eye. But he was nearly through. Fifty more paces and he would be directly across the street from them. Fifty paces after that, he would be out of their range.

There was no chance they would not know him. They would know his coat and they would know his cap. And they would know him by the way he walked and the way he held himself. He felt four sets of eyes bear down on him, but none of them had dared to say a thing. Perhaps, he thought, they too were afraid of him, just like the boy who had stolen his car. .

With satisfaction, he felt the pistol in his coat pocket thump, heavy and comforting, against his side.

They won't mess with me, he thought. They know I'm strapped. They'll see me and look the other way.

Braced by the thought, he dared a look in their direction. He darted his eyes quickly to the corner and back, careful not to turn the bill of his cap or to make any small gesture toward them. Two of the boys met eyes briefly and the taller one nodded. The shorter one started across the street.

Damn, he thought. He steeled himself. These boys needed to know that he was through; he wanted nothing that they had.

The boy was small and slender. He knew him; he knew him by the knit cap pulled down nearly to his eyes and the brightly colored, thick down coat with its bright team logo stitched across it.

"Wassup," the boy called. He had a small, easy face with the thin line of a boy's mustache across his lip. His cap was pulled down so low that the boy had to lean his head back just to see.

The man shook his head slightly, the way a person signals a bus to pass on. He continued to look straight ahead and to walk tall and stern.

"Yo," the boy called. He had a boy's crackling voice.

"I aint on that no more."

"We know that, man. We heard." The boy fell in beside him, walking at the same pace and looking up at him. "We heard you kicked, man. That's cool, man. Get yourself straight, man."

"So wassup?"

"We just wanted you to know, you cool with us."

He said nothing. They had walked the fifty paces. He glanced again quickly to the boys back at the corner. Each kept watch in his different direction. He wanted to move on toward home and to leave this young boy behind. But the evening traffic was heavy; several cars passed and he could not cross. It was still four, five blocks to home.

"I told you, I aint on that no more. I'm through."

"I told you, we know."

"So what you want?"

"I just want to talk, man."

"So talk."

"Aw, man." He made an open gesture with his arms. "You gonna be like that?"

"Be like what? You boys damn near ruined my car."

The traffic cleared so he could cross. The boy followed, step for step. The heavy fabric of his coat crackled as he waved his arms again.

"But that's just it."

"That's what?"

"That's why I come over to talk, man."

He looked at the boy skeptically.

"For real, man. It wasn't us."

He looked at the boy again, the way his grandmother might if she suspected a lie. "So where's Artel?"

"Man, that's just it."

"What's it?"

"What Artel did was wrong, man. It was wrong."

"Damn straight, it was wrong. Burning up my seats and fuckin his little ho's in my car and ragging up my speakers. Damn straight it was wrong."

"That's what I mean, man. He made us look bad."

"So?"

"That's why we told him we don't want no more to do with him."

"That why he aint on the corner?"

"We told him, like, get on, man. Like, that was wrong, man. Like, you gonna have to get with your own peoples, man. Like, we aint on that."

"So where is he now?"

"He with his grandmother across the river. We told him. Man, you can't play people like that."

"So why you tellin me all this?"

"We just wanted you to know." He put his hand into the pocket of his coat. "And look." He stopped him with a tap at the elbow. He pulled his hand from his coat and, with a glance to the side, pressed a small envelope into the man's palm. "We just wanted to give you somethin, man. So you know we cool."

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From where he stood, he was within a block of home. He could see the lights of his own apartment, three flights up in the air. His wife would be right now fixing supper and watching the news over her shoulder. His son would be spread across the floor of the living room with his homework, carefully penciling in the answers. He was so close.

I won't be long, he thought. I won't be but a minute.

He was in the dark of the door of an abandoned building. The lights of homes were all around him. And the darks of the boarded-up shops and empty houses were all around him also. He could even see, massive above a vacant lot, the high-rise lights of the projects where he had grown up.

I won't be but a minute, he thought again.

His was a thick coat, with many pockets. From an inner pocket, he drew out a small pipe of glass.

I should have throwed it away, he thought. I should have pitched it in the garbage. I should of stomped it to bits.

But the thought did not stop him. He opened the little envelope --damp now with sweat-- and shook from it a little pebble and guided the pebble into the glass pipe.

He fired it up and in seconds, the world was sweet. The pipe grew hot and threatened to blister his mouth and his fingers but he continued to hold the flame to it and continued to suck smoke deep into his lungs. His brain began to crackle with connections. He drew himself taller and, without lowering the pipe, looked around him. The lights in the houses and in the massive project high-rises had each grown brighter; each of them had achieved an intense clarity, as if a camera had come into focus.

Yes, he thought. I can see it all now.

He had begun to see what the barber had seen and the truth of it began to ring in him like a bell. The whole world around him was a sea of struggle. Behind each dot of light, and moving in the darkness between the lights, were souls struggling to cling to life: the mothers of children, and the fathers and even the children themselves struggled. All of them struggled every day. All his own life had been the same struggle. And he saw now, with the clarity of light, that even these young dope boys were struggling, just as he had. Even the boy who had ruined his car was just another lost, struggling soul.

And it was exactly as the barber had said: that what bound all those struggling in their common desperation was the failure of love. But the commitment to love could heal it all.

It was just so clear.

He continued to admire the lights and the darks from his spot in the abandoned building, so much that he decided to fire up a second rock, just to hold onto this feeling of wholeness, blessedness, and sympathy.

He set the flame back under the pipe and smoked up the rock and looked in the envelope for a third. But there was no third. He tore open the envelope to be sure. He even licked the creases, just in case.

He tried again to see the lights, but it was as if they were lights on water. Everything was blurred. Everything was upside down. Behind each light, and in the darkness between each light, it was all confusion. He looked down the street toward the lights of home and he thought, That's where I need to be.

But not just yet. He still had his haircut money. And his pistol. He could trade that too.

He looked toward the dark coats gathered under a street lamp. In spite of the hoods and the skullcaps, he knew each one and he saw by the black coat with the white slash that the boy he had hoped to kill was now among them.

His eyes began to beat with blood and brim with tears. He hung his head to avoid the mocking eyes of the dope boys, but there was no shelter from the rain of their laughter.

Michael Henson is author of Ransack (a novel), A Small Room With Trouble on My Mind (stories) and two books of poetry. His column, "Hammered: Essays on Poverty and Addiction," appears regularly in StreetVibes, the newspaper of the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless. He is a member of the Southern Appalachian Writers Cooperative. He can be reached at michaelhenson642@gmail.com.