

Dead End

by Mark Krieger

Tim Pohl was my first best friend. He had cystic fibrosis and a splotch birthmark over the left side of his face that kept him inside a lot. The Kremble brothers down the block had a name for him.

Turd Eye! they'd holler from the seat of their junkyard mo-pads. Who shat on your face? That's where his mama sat on him with her twat!

I'd pretend I didn't hear.

He had a younger brother, Quinn, and a baby sister, Sam. Sam used to shadow behind me on all fours everywhere I'd go. She had big eyes and sang da da da although her da da da ditched them before she was born for his Scandinavian secretary and was now no more than a family photo flipped upside down on their mother's bedroom dresser.

Those days with Tim and his family were innocent, pure, isolated. A short pleasant dream before the ache of adolescence.

Mornings while their mother was at her job at the factory we'd watch the ritual of shows, *Captain Kangaroo*, *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers*. We'd play in the woods, firing dirt grenades at mosquitoes. Popped enemy wasps from the air, ants on the drive with G.I. Joe squirt guns.

Nights when Tim's mom returned home we'd put on a puppet show for her on a stage of cardboard boxes. And although her eyes were sunken in their sockets and her work clothes stunk of turned-steel smoke, she tried hard to smile.

On weekends for lunch she'd fix us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and tomato soup. She'd play board games with us and Go Fish. She'd smile and rest her fingers on your back, rubbing you gently. Sometimes I spent the night, sleeping in Tim's bed beneath his Burt and Ernie sheets. And although he'd piss the sheets each and every time I was there, I never complained.

I wanted this life to never end. I wanted Mrs. Pohl to be my mother. I wanted to live there with them and have nothing ever

change. But time was working in an inward spiral all around us. While other kids our age moved on, watching shows like *The Twilight Zone* and *Night Rider*, trading baseball cards, and spying on slow-hipped chicks like Julie Lennon and her sister Marie walking their black lab down Canary, Tim and Quinn continued to be wowed by the song and dance of Mr. Rogers, still struck their knees and cackled every time Captain

Kangaroo got a shower of ping pong balls. Suddenly each day I found myself more and more divided by new enigmatic forces. Some other life seemed to be calling me, warning me I was missing out. I'd catch myself staring down the blossoming lane of lilacs and crab apple trees where the black top of Tim's dead end met Elm and gangs of hoods drifted past on boards with their t-shirts tucked in their back pockets, hollering, swearing, smokes dangling.

What? said Tim. Why don't we check it out? Naw. We can't stay here forever, Tim. Why not? But I didn't have any answers. I think deep down Tim knew what'd happen if we ventured beyond the dead end. He wanted to stay where things never changed.

* * *

When Phil Miller moved into the neighbor- hood, everything changed. With Phil came his cousin DJ. With DJ came the first wave of heat that would stick for the rest of the summer.

Tim and Quinn were gone that week at their aunt's house. A death in the family or something. I'd wiped out at the bottom of the hill taking the turn onto Canary too fast.

Nice one, someone said.

I twisted round. Two boys on Huffy dirt bikes sat staring down at me, one foot on the pedal. You couldn't tell if they were smiling—the late afternoon sun making silhouettes of them.

I hobbled to my feet like it was no biggie. Shit, they said. The whole right side of my thigh and elbow were as raw as butcher's meat. I tailed them down Canary. We veered off the shoulder, slipping with our bikes into a grove of pines where they had a fort. Old candy wrappers lay among the scattered cigars of pinecones.

We each sat on a branch, wiping the sweat on our sleeves.

DJ motioned to Phil. We show'm? Phil shrugged. He looked at me then out through the quills of branches down the street where a car was turning.

DJ hoisted his t-shirt. Sticking out from the waistband of his blue jeans was a small candy store. Snickers, Skittles, Starbursts . . .

Wo, I said, where'd you get all that?

It ain't where, brother, said Phil, grinning. It's how.

Their cheeks bulged with gum. Wrappers snowed about their feet. Finally Phil tossed me a pack of Hubba Bubba. I picked it off the ground. Sour Apple.

I stared at the green chunk between my fingers. I squished it. I didn't want it. I didn't want to be party to this crime. I put it in my mouth anyway, tossing the wrapper. There came a scream on the other side of a fence, a little girl. Somewhere an old couple was shouting at each other.

DJ stared at me with his piercing iguana eyes, his mouth so wadded with gum he couldn't speak. I stuffed all five pieces of gum in my mouth. He kicked his chin at me, drool running down his mouth.

We all laughed in a low garbled way, our mouths packed.

This, I told myself, was all wrong. I'd eat this, sure. But I wouldn't like it. I'd go along with things as usual then I'd go. These guys were trouble. Wouldn't catch me hanging around here again. I was just being polite. I was glad I wasn't like them. I was a blithering saint in comparison.

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I met DJ and Phil at the fort the next day. Today, they explained, yer gunna learn how to steal your own shit.

I fished for excuses to get out of it. The day being so hot should be spent swimming. They weren't hearing it. My lamblike gullibility grated them. They wanted blood on my hands. I didn't understand.

We rode to Zeagler Grocery and left our bikes tipped against the mulch. The blacktop trembled in the sun. A gray haze chewed all distances. I didn't know who I was anymore.

The plan was so simple I was certain it'd end in disaster. But I didn't know how to say no. So in I went.

We looked each way down the aisle. When the coast was clear, Phil gave the signal and we began emptying the shelves.

Actually. They began emptying the shelves. I stood watching, the packages beginning to blur away from me. I felt the eyes of God stinging down from above. Worse. I felt the eyes of my mother on me. An eternity in hell was a drop in the bucket compared to the endless sadistic torture my mother would inflict upon me if we were caught.

DJ pinched my arm so hard I almost screamed. His fierce iguana eyes told me to start *fucking* stuffing or else.

Fountains of sweat stung my eyes. I grabbed anything in front of me. Saltwater taffy. The biggest, noisiest bag on the shelf.

I fumbled with the bag as though it were an atomic bomb.

DJ pinched me again. I screeched. It could've gone down in the Guinness Books as the worst shoplifting heist of all time. The bag stuck out like a yardstick. With each step it screamed to the cashiers for help. Near the exit it slid out the bottom of my shorts, slapping against the polished marble floor.

Ooops, I said, and simply picked up the bag, shuttling out the auto doors. What *anice* day out, I said to an old lady in a walker.

On bikes we rocketed across somebody's yard. I smashed into a tree so hard my chain fell off.

Phil and DJ laughed so hard they fell off their bikes, too.

We rode down Philly, side by side. They slapped my back.

Takes balls, man! I wouldn't've grabbed that big a bag.

We gotta start thinking bigger. 'Ooops'? said Phil. *Ooops!*

'*What a NICE day.*' Oh, shut up, I said. We all laughed. This was my initiation. We were full-fledged best friends and crooks. Crime had united us. I was grateful we weren't caught. God had saved me this time. I wouldn't push my luck again.

* * *

I shoved the Rubik's Cube down my pants and was eyeing the trick handcuffs on the lower shelf, considering. DJ stuffed an entire

pellet gun beneath his shirt. Never mind the slingshot and Sony Walkman he had on the other side.

We were getting bolder and yet we were the most half-assed trio of thieves you ever saw. Strolling out glass doors, our shirts bulged with hundreds of dollars worth of stolen merchandise. By some miracle each and every time the floor manager just happened to be giving a mother with the screaming three-year-old directions to the bathroom, the cashier shuffling for the office for a fresh receipt roll.

We were lucky. That was our genius. Lucky and cocky. A bad recipe.

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The sun continued to shovel down its riot of heat and light. For three solid weeks temperatures climbed into the 100s. Smog thickened and swelled over the city. Storm clouds sailed over us for weeks, but no drops fell.

Pestilence began to take its toll. Grass quit growing, turning into brittle hay. Beyond the city stunted corn dried on stalks in fields. Neighbors dragged hoses through sagging gardens and rattling clouds of grasshoppers rose with the dust. Public swimming pools swarmed with kids at all hours. The evening news warned the elderly to stay indoors in front of fans or A/C units.

I was never home anymore. I only came back for supper in the evening, then always tried to slip back out before my mother made us pray the rosary.

With DJ and Phil came the shadiest characters in the neighborhood. The types parents once warned us about. The Krembles. The Bogard Brothers. Skitzo Scott. And so on. All the people that'd once terrorized me, Tim, and Quinn. Now I was a terrorist among them.

We chased little kids into their houses. Wagged and slapped our bare asses at angry, shouting mothers. We played baseball with a flaming gasoline-soaked tennis ball. We broke into houses being built in the new subdivision, urinated our names on the walls, shattered windows. Teddy, the oldest Kremble, showed us how to make pipe bombs in his closet amid stacks of *Hustler* and *Soldier of*

Fortune. We loaded them with nails and glass and blew up Porta-Johns and mailboxes and old TVs.

When we were thirsty, we went to Amoco and reached our arms inside the soda machine and jerked cans down from the slots. Once by accident the entire machine emptied. A river of cans thundered over the gravel parking lot, bursting and spraying. A mechanic rushed out the open shop door, tossing his rag. So you're the little *cock fuckers!*

He chased us across the street and through a yard until Fender out of the blue swung around and dropkicked the guy in the gut. The mechanic, bigger than Fender, lay doubled-over on his side, dry-heaving.

The Krembles were experts at cherry bombs and M-80's too. Once Freddy Kremble blew up his hand. Fuse hissing he brought the thing over his shoulder to toss—WANG! Right behind his ear. When I spun back around he was staggering about holding his wrist, his finger dangling on a string.

Everybody smoked or chewed. I'd never smoke or chew, I told myself. Never. Then they offered it to me and I smoked and chewed at the same time. I vomited all but my intestines, sick in the brittle grass for hours while they pointed and laughed. Fights. Chases. Anarchy for any cause. These were our gods. When dusk fell over the city we'd mill around on the shoulder of Vanhoover and shout at traffic. We swore at mothers with kids. We swore at grandmothers. We swore at full-grown men. We flipped them off. We taunted them, calling them pussysasses, daring them to come and get us. When this didn't work we threw stones and cans. The screech of tires— The mad dash— The hurtle through inky suburban jungles. Shouts tearing the night.

One night we stumbled onto a carload of jocks that just happened to be out fishing for punks like us. They were drunk and more vicious than us. This time it was only me (the youngest of our gang), Jimmy (the youngest loudest Kremble), and Phil. A lousy combo for a brawl if it came to that.

And of course it did.

We watched the headlights tracking down Vanhoover. We heard the stone snap across the windshield in the dark. They slammed on the breaks and u-ied. They were out of the Camaro and on our asses before we had time to scatter.

I was lucky. I tripped into a drainage sewer and split my forehead open on broken concrete. They worked Phil and Jimmy. They were jumping on them, punching and kicking as though we'd gang-raped their mothers. They stuffed earth in their mouths. Their mangled cries climbed into the darkness. Then there was nothing. I stayed in the ditch, breathing, blood running into my eyes, certain I was next.

An ambulance took us to St. Francis emergency room. Me, I only had stitches. But Jimmy and Phil, the jocks broke or fractured just about everything in them there was to break or fracture.

I was alright because I hid.

* * *

The neighborhood, once inexorably divided as the north and south, suddenly banded together. Hate, revenge, the lust for blood made brothers of us. Tall Teddy and Skitzo, once arch enemies, were now united leaders with a plan.

We knew who the jocks were and roughly where they lived.

We gathered steel bars and aluminum bats. We gathered knives and chains because we'd seen it in our favorite violent movies. The Bogard Brothers paraded their infamous brass knuckles. The ancient Buick that'd been slumped in the Krembles's garage with the hood up and parts strewn everywhere since the Carter administration was suddenly fixed and running within a day.

We piled into the Buick. The Bogard Brothers and the rest piled into their old man's Ford van. We spotted the red Camaro at a party on the eastside. We parked a block up and waited. Finally two of them came careening out. Two would have to do. One threw the other the keys. Dude—That's what Malada says. You're getting all Malanda-dified on my ass, you know that?

Teddy gave the signal. We scrambled out the doors. An insane army storming the beaches. We rushed them before they'd made it to their car. We beat them with pipes and bats. We beat them with

brass knuckles and chains. We beat them with our heels and with our fists. Their mangled cries climbed into the darkness. Then there was nothing. Skitzo had to be torn off kicking and screaming before he killed someone. He'd stepped on the tall one's throat, and now his head went funny. For a moment we stood above them, shocked over what we'd done.

Their faces were bathed in blood. It screamed from our knuckles and from a few faces. It screamed to the sirens now wailing in the distance.

We ran.

* * *

One of the boys we'd beaten was in critical condition. The other, the one who'd been stepped on, was in a coma. Two weeks later he recovered but was paralyzed from the neck down. Doctors said he'd never walk again.

Police arrested Skitzo and Teddy. Teddy, almost 18, would be sentenced as an adult and eventually sat for a year in county. Skitzo, 16, they sent to juve right off. Something that should've been done long ago anyway.

Neither ever gave the cops our names. Divine luck once again.

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The summer went on in this way. It seemed the earth was dying. The wilting maples lining Elm wept endlessly with the cries of cicadas, as though this itself were the voice of dust and heat.

Sometimes when I was alone in the night, unable to sleep, my old life caught up with me and I'd remember Tim and Quinn. A life that seemed centuries ago.

Guilt glared down at me from the ceiling. From the metal fan rocking its head slowly back and forth on the dresser. In the dark I imagined things as they could never be. Tim and I getting together with DJ and Phil. Right away we'd hit it off, riding bikes together down the Hill like we'd been friends our whole lives. Tim and Quinn had matured. DJ and Phil stopped stealing. And we all lost our lust for violence and crime. We'd eat lunch that Tim's mom would fix for

us. She'd still rest her fingers on your back, and her smile still lit the lantern of your soul.

But these fantasies were right up there with one of Tim's puppet shows. I'd tried in my passive way to meld the two worlds together: Once I dared mentioning Tim's name. DJ cut me off. Tim *Polh!* Tim Pohl's the biggest pussy that ever walked the earth! Why? You know him or something? No! I said. No! They ride chick bikes, for shitsake.

I never brought it up again.

My old life would vanish, I told myself. Tim and Quinn and even his mother would some- how disappear and forget about me. They'd move away and there'd be no conflicts I'd have to face.

If you desired something enough it would happen.

* * *

October came. One of those dreamy Indian Summer afternoons. Breezy, dry, sun breathing down crisply from a polished sky. The very air glowing in autumn shades.

I was burning red and black ants warring at the bottom of the driveway with kitchen matches. I didn't want to be in my house. It was Saturday. Cleaning day. You could hear them all screaming from the open windows.

Behind me I heard the clicking of an idling ten-speed.

Hey, Mr. Luke. Long time no see!

Tim sat on his bike, a brand new BMX. Quinn sat next to him, still riding the banana seat bike. His mom waved to me from a rusted Schwinn, a quick sprinkle of fingers.

Lucas, she said, where you been? We haven't seen you in ages.

She waited for me to say something but my lips felt super-glued shut. Sam was seated behind her in one of those children's seats, looking at something under the wheel.

It's Tim's birthday today, she continued. Come join us.

For his birthday Tim wanted to ride to Estuary Park and catch salamanders for his aquarium. He wanted me to come with, his only friend in the world.

* * *

We spent hours flipping rocks and logs, watching them tumble down the leaf-caped slopes. We didn't find any salamanders though. Through the trees below, we watched sunfish touch the glass of water on the ponds, rings spreading. *Phew*, said Tim, your breath stinks like smoke! *Really?* I said. Crazy. Must be my old man. His pipe or something. I didn't know your dad smoked. O shit, I mean—yeah, like a chimney. Near the dam Quinn spotted something on the ground. Now he lost it. Tim and his mom wandered over with Sam in her arms. We were all there now in a row looking down at the bed of leaves in the dying light.

Tim scoffed, You didn't see nothing. I *did*. Then a leaf twitched and something flitted

away. A few paces over another leaf twitched as though hit by a single drop of rain.

There! cried Tim.

At first I couldn't see it. Then without any movement a tiny tree frog materialized on the arc of a curled leaf. Its skin camouflaged the color of the fallen leaves. Its eyes scanned me. Then it cocked its head and fired off.

Quinn caught the first one and Sam ambled over from the safety of her mother's round bare legs and snatched it from him.

Mine. He-ey. She sat on my lap, her big intense eyes fixed on the frog in the little saucer of her two hands. She didn't know what to do with it now.

Tim cried out, galloping past us down the hill, cupping a frog in his hands.

Hang on! We need jars! I'll get the mason jars!

Leaves sprinkled down all around us in the mild breeze. I felt a soft hand on my shoulder. Something loosened inside me. Tim's mom was looking down at me with her soft brown eyes.

She loves you, Luke. She asked about you for a long time. She's not like that with other people. We've all missed you. She scratched her cheek and looked off down the slope. You could help him. . . . She hesitated, her mind untangling for the right words. Get to where . . . you are now.

Above her an oak stood against the sky, a torch of leaves.

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We had birthday cake, and afterwards Tim wanted to take another spin on his new ride. His mom said it was too dark out now.

She paused, placing the plate she was washing in the drying rack. She looked from me to Tim. A motherly look so unfamiliar to me it made my heart twist.

Just up to True Value and back, OK? You'll be hit by a car like your Uncle Leo. I'd never forgive myself.

In the garage I gave them a stolen pack of gum each. A kind of birthday present, since I didn't have anything else.

We peddled along in the twilight, chewing. Tim surfed the street from side to side. He hooted at an owl hidden somewhere in the trees.

Hooo! Hooo! I hear you, too, Mr. Owl. Shhh, I said. You probably shouldn't do that. We were passing James Adderman's house. Why? asked Quinn. Because, I said. You just shouldn't. I asked if they'd heard what'd happened to

Teddy and Scott. They hadn't. I asked if they'd heard about Freddy's finger. They hadn't. They hadn't heard anything about anything outside of the sheltered world of the dead end.

I looked at Tim on his new bike. He was the same goofy bed-wetter he ever was. His innocence, his naiveté stabbed me to the core. Hate blossomed from my confusion. Now I could see what'd bothered Phil and DJ about me when we'd first met.

Tim cried out, Hey! Let's play magic world. Remember when we used to play that all the time?

He swept ahead of us. I'm the invisible one, said Quinn. We can all be invisible, nimrod, said Tim, and he wheeled way out into the street. Sounds cool, I said. We should get back though. It's pretty late. Quinn sneezed. This is great. He sneezed again. All together like this again. Come on, Lucas, said Tim. Don't be *chicken*.

You're the one who always wanted to come out here. Now we're out here and you wanna go back?

He was quiet, then he said, Lucas Aurelius. If it means we'll still be best friends, I'll come out here whenever you want. How's that sound, old buddy? He patted my shoulder as we rode.

Tim, I said. I don't want to come out here anymore. You were right about—

Then it came. As I knew it would. From behind there was a flemmy shout.

Hey, check it out! It's FagotyAnn and her little sister!

The voice jolted me, an electric surge. Three figures motored up from behind. Sharks gliding alongside us. Phil, DJ, Jimmy.

DJ hissed. Hey—Luke. Thought you didn't hang out with these knob gobblers?

Leave us alone, said Tim. We're playing magic world. Nothing can touch us. Not even you snakes!

DJ's head tipped back, his mouth open in soundless laughter.

O ya! he said. He carved in on Tim. Even this?

He tried kicking Tim but missed. He sped back up and clocked Tim on the shoulder with his fist.

Tim's legs started winding faster but already he was wheezing.

This is the real world, bitch, said Jimmy, grinding his front wheel against Tim's rear wheel. A move to wipe him out.

There was another shout from behind and suddenly it seemed the whole neighborhood had flooded the street.

Wussup *Pohl! Po-ohl!* Lucas, move it. Baron Kremble came jogging up from behind, twirling a broken rake over his head like a helicopter. Watch this kung fu shit, he said, grinning.

Hiee—yah!

He swung the rake in a pendulum sweep through the front spokes of Tim's wheel. The rake caught, jamming against the metal crossbar beneath. Instantly Tim flipped over the handle bars, hitting the street with his face.

DJ circled and dropped his bike to the street. He uncocked the blade of his stolen Swiss Army knife and stabbed each of Tim's tires, flattening them. He ran the blade into the seat, sending pieces of foam and plastic into the air.

There you go. I fixed it for you.

Blood ran down Tim's cheek and from his lip. His right eye was already swelling shut. He crawled on his belly on the street, spitting dust and blood, sobbing.

Somewhere in the darkness we heard Quinn's fading shouts.

Mommy! Mommy! Call the police!

The gang drifted down the street now. One dark shadow moving against the night. Trees

swung in the breeze. The dark mice of fallen leaves scuttled over pavement.

The shadow called back to me. Lucas! Coming? Luke! Let's go! Going to the quarry, man. We got brewskies!

Enough for everybody this time. Getting sloppy tonight! No shit, Greedo. It ain't Greedo, dumbass. It's *Guido*. Luke! Let's GO!

Pus—say! Here pussy pussy pussy! I looked back at vague form lying in the street.

His cries filling the autumn darkness were no longer the maddening sobs of a little child, but of something altogether new and terrible.

* * *

I awoke that night from a deep sleep hearing a strange sound. A scream? A whistle? Something clutched my shoulder. My hand slapped against the wall behind me.

My younger brother Anthony hovered over me on all fours.

Luke! What was that? You hear that?

He was afraid someone was trying to break in. I jerked the fan cord from the wall to hear. Outside, the patter of rain. Lightning flickered.

Suddenly we both turned our heads at the same time, hearing the noise again. A sort of high-pitched whistle that somehow dipped upwards an octave higher. The piercing cry of a lost nymph.

Anthony screamed.

My mother burst in. Light crashed down from the ceiling.

What is going *on* in here? What's that *noise*?

I spotted the mason jar on my dresser and remembered.

It happened a few more times as my mother and I argued over where the frogs should be released. This piercing cry. This lonely bleat from so tiny a thing. So pure. So strange. It seemed too good for this world.

My mother's eyes without her glasses looked crossed.

It's three o'clock in the morning. Get ridda them *now* or I'm gunna get ridda you!

We lived three or so miles from the springs. I was sure they wouldn't make it back this late in the season.

I stepped out the back door and unscrewed the lid. Rain whispered in the dead flowers. I sat there for a long time looking into the jar.

Things would be OK, I told myself. I was still invincible. If the summer had taught me anything, it was that: Invincibility. You could ignore everything with a word like that. You couldn't get caught breaking the law when you're Invincible. You couldn't get caught by anything. Even yourself.

I reached my hand into the jar and let them climb onto my finger one at a time. I held my hand out into the night. With each one it was the same. It stood a moment, poised on the tip of my finger eyeing me. Then it cocked its head, positioned itself, and vanished into the cold autumn veil.

I hoped they'd make it, or could at least some- how start new from where they were.

I'd come to learn many years later from a mutual friend that Tim had done the very same thing that night.

