

The Eye in the Mine

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There were many things in the past long decades that Walter James felt guilt over, and if asked to pick the one event that most haunted his aged, dementia-riddled mind, he would invariably respond with the event which transpired in the early winter of 1952.

Though never an overtly intellectual man, Walter did have certain qualities which he considered to be highly exceptional: he was both particularly prudent and cunning, likewise was he very cautious with whomever he conducted business with. He felt it was his duty to remind others that he was a farmer yes, and his daddy and granddaddy had been farmers before him, but that didn't give none of them the right to try and pull the wool over his eyes. He could smell the stink of a liar a mile away, and he liked to think this very useful talent had not diminished over the years, though his sense of smell had long since left the list and his eyes weren't far behind. He was a sharp man, if not overly smart, and perhaps this is the defining character that drove him to partake in the activity that took place in that cold winter.

Walter sat now in a hard, lumpy rocking-chair, cupping a mug of hot tea in his wrinkled, veined hands, steam rising in a transparent cloud. The window that he looked out of showed a moonlit night, shrouded in the cover of darkness that seemed so expectant and even more eerie out here in the country. The silence that exuded from the surrounding forest was like a heavy blanket, softly suffocating anyone unfortunate enough to be under its malevolent weight. Walter could feel that silence like a judge, mocking and taunting, prodding at his decayed mind like a scalpel. He could hear that silence like a heart-beat, muffled and so persistent. And though he tried desperately to push it away, that steady, methodical beating refused to be ignored. He had thought he was a country man, through-and-through, but the past five years had cured him of this notion. He wanted a city, something he could say honestly he'd never thought he'd want, but boy howdy would he take one now, stinking smog and pissant little jerks and all. He'd even take the twelve-by-twelve apartments if it meant he would hear something beyond that choking, blaming silence, anything but that.

But he was an old man now and it seemed his opinion didn't matter. He had three kids, all of whom had ignored his request to be moved into a more populated area, waving and *shushing* like he was a goddamn child, assuring him they knew what was best and his opinion to the dogs. Forget that it was *his* life, *his* money they were spending, *his* dementia they were speeding along, oh yes, forget all that. That was just the punchline to some cheap joke. They could care less about what he wanted, as long as they got to forget about their aged, senile father as soon as they left the home smelling like imminent death and slow, reluctant heart-beats, breathing a sigh of relief all the way.

Walter couldn't remember the last time he'd had a real conversation with one of them, and the thought made his head hurt- worse, in fact, than it already did. He was fairly certain it was not dementia he had, actually, but a brain tumour that would explode like a ripe pumpkin the minute God got tired of pulling the

puppet strings. He would die of a tumour that could have been removed easily and have an end to his miserable life.

He began to hack uncontrollably, his sagging, dry-boned figure shaking in the uncomfortable rocking-chair. The mug shook, slopping hot tea onto his weak hands, and he managed a wet curse through the coughing. His nose was full and his chest felt like a lead weight, but that was a prerequisite for getting old, wasn't it? Being sick all the time and having your opinion ignored.

He sucked back a wad of phlegm, wiped his burned hand on his pants and settled back into the chair, trying unsuccessfully to find a position of semi-comfort. His bones ached dully, a deep, low throb like growing pains. All the time now, he ached, all over. It seemed he could never shake the hurt and he guessed that was normal too, for getting old. His bones were breaking down like acid was eating away at them and his heart was just a tired, over-worked muscle that propelled blood only out of habit. His gums were sore from the dentures - he'd had them in earlier and he regretted it - and he could still taste that sticky, tacky cream that claimed to keep them in place, but shit if *that* worked. They'd wiggled and jiggled around in his mouth all morning, scraping his gums to almighty hell. He kept his mouth open now, breathing in so the air could help to numb them.

He could see the moon outside. White and pregnant, hanging like a bloated ball shockingly close to the horizon. It cast a bare luminescence to the small room that made the place ominously sinister.

It seemed only yesterday, Walter reflected. He'd recently celebrated his 93rd birthday – his children had been mysteriously absent – and still, it seemed like just a night ago it had happened. His memory wasn't all that good anymore, but he could still see how it went in gravely vivid detail, etched like a painting into his once-sharp mind. He could see it, but it was beyond that. He need only close his eyes and be taken back to that precise moment in time, when he'd been younger and stronger, but most of all he'd been sharp. Sharp, and cunning. And lacking something, he knew now. Exactly what, he wasn't completely certain he understood, but he knew the absence of this something was what had allowed him to let that idea, floating untethered in his sharp mind, to take shape and form into something concrete. Walter had a pretty good idea that he was no longer missing that something now, however, because he felt something now that he hadn't felt when he'd taken part in the killing. He felt GUILT. GUILT was not something he was used to, in fact, not something he'd even considered to be a problem until these last few years. It was simply something other people felt, next only in line to REGRET, and REMORSE, both of which he'd thought he was equally invulnerable to. He'd been surprised when the first soft pangs of hurt, shameful guilt had sidled into his chest, an unwanted visitor, and even more surprised – and horrified – when they'd stayed, particularly when he realized that they brought those memories back, the ones he hadn't thought about in years. He didn't know the reason, didn't know there was, in fact, a malignant tumour pressing against the amygdala of his temporal lobe, triggering that part of his brain that felt emotion, but he suspected strongly there was something in the food of this Christing cemetery that was turning the bats loose in his belfry.

He'd been a young man then, strong and sharp but most of all promising. He thought he could do anything he felt like and to hell with rules and regulations. The farm had been his fathers' but he died in the

tunnel collapse two years earlier and him and his brother had been the only men at home since. His mother, Gladys James, a short, slightly overweight woman who didn't hesitate to take the strap to her sons when they stepped out of line, at least in her mind, was a crooked old bag who couldn't keep her nose out of her childrens' business, as far as Walter was concerned. She never remarried, and though she claimed it was because all men were useless home hands, Walter strongly suspected it was because no man would be give her a hand if his life depended on it. She was handsome rather than pretty, frank and angry in her movements, and she'd had an unattractive wart on her chin from which a single black hair sprouted, seeming to stare at you whenever she spoke. Walter thought the hag was lucky to get one husband, and questioned how in God's name she'd managed even that remarkable feat.

His father was a miner until his tragic, abrupt end, when he was squished like a rotten tomato between the earth's core and 37 kilometres of giant stone and thick clay. He'd been a big man, built like an ox and stained a permanent shade of grey from the same coal dust that infected his lungs and made him cough blood. All miners coughed blood, in those days, and Walter reflected now on how uneducated they were, and not only that, but goddamn stupid. Breathing in carcinogenic shit all day and nobody thought you wouldn't cough blood and die a sick, slow death? Boy, waita show your intelligent side, fellas, ain't nobody can stop you now.

Or maybe they did know. But if you didn't work in the mines you worked on a farm, a hit or miss when you didn't know if the crop would live or shrivel. And with two young men at home there was no reason you couldn't try out both. So Hector James went to the mines expecting to die of a coughed up lung and got his brain juice squirted through his ears instead.

Walter wondered if events would have transpired differently had his father been around. He felt they would have. Unlike Walter, his father had not only been physically powerful but startlingly intelligent. His beady black eyes could flicker suspiciously from side to side and whamo, he knew exactly what you did when you thought no one was watching and don't you dare forget he did. Hector could read people, taste them like a fine wine, tell you the exact sin they were most guilty of out of the seven, and he wasn't against using this eerie talent for dubious methods of bribery. No, it was no question where Walter got his crippled conscious from, and the fact the Hector could back up his promises was the funniest part of all.

Just not funny, ha-ha-funny. At least, not if you were on the receiving end.

With his father around the idea never would have crossed his mind, Walter thought now, resolutely. Not a whiff or a whistle. Because his father had been the man of the house, no doubt about it, and he loved Gladys – for some unfathomable reason – and that meant she had his protection. Walter was unashamed to admit he'd been frightened of his father- not regularly, but he was under no illusions that Hector would have put him down a few notches if Walter had tried to make a move against his mother had he been around.

So there, then. It was Hector's fault. He had to go die in those goddamn mine explosions and leave his two sons in a house of obnoxious judgement and unrelenting, bitter anger. He didn't deserve to feel this guilt.

But he did and he had a deep, sinking feeling he would continue to experience these feelings for the rest of his grey life, such as it was. Walter was not and had never been an optimistic man, and he felt a grim,

bitter amusement at the thought of those first few months, after the shock had died down and, slowly but surely, everybody forgot about the sudden untimely disappearance of Gladys James. The expectation that he would be caught, somehow, that he and his brother had slipped up on that slippery slope of murder, had haunted him late into the night, the only real panic settling in after the deed was done, because goddamn if Walter would go to jail. So he'd lain awake, heart thumping heavily in his chest – not fast, but *loud*, the drowning beat of a methodical drum – eyes open and not seeing, waiting with bated breath for the inevitable knock that would mean the sheriff was on the stoop and he was coming to haul him and Gregory to the slammer, lock em up and throw away the key. He would rot in some rat-infested shithole with Tiny the Peaceful Paedophile shootin-the-shit on the top bunk, asking him to come up for a play ol' Walt, ol' pal, let's have us a game of shiver-me-timbers, you go first. Yes, those first few months had been the worst. Jumping at every shadow, growling at anyone who dared bid him good day, walking around in a disbelieving haze when one month passed, two months passed and *they still had not come to get him*. They had gotten away with it, impossibly, incredibly, and though that gut-wrenching twist of panic still curdled in his gut whenever there was a knock at his door, even now, he and his brother had moved on. Lived life, however paranoid an existence.

Even the act of murder had not been as bad. It had been relatively quick, in fact, and afterwards the body had been only a minor inconvenience. She had been a heavy lump and unforgiving weight, trussed up in a great burlap sack like a Christmas turkey, twined around with thick rope a dozen times. And what a dark night it had been, black as the depth of a cave buried deep within the earth, not a star and definitely not the moon. He and Gregory had stumbled down from Joe Pox Lookout and through the quiet, pernicious forest, eyes peeping out of shadows and a copper around every bend, waiting with the death warrant and two sets of hand-cuffs, a giant black man in jailhouse orange standing behind him and asking to play a little game. The sweat had been disgusting, he could remember that, collecting slick and slimy in the hollows under his arms, trickling down his brow. His wet hand-prints had stained the burlap, nearly stuck to it, when he and Gregory had unceremoniously dropped his mother next to the giant, dusty pit. The edge sloped gently before tapering off into a steep, deadly drop, receding into a black that had not only been consuming, seemingly flat and somehow solid, but *alive*, staring out at them with a knowing, malevolent eye, pricking at their skin and testing their sweat with invisible little vines of consciousness. And his brother, oh poor Gregory, half insane with panic and wild-eyed fear, shaking to the bone and covered in wet blood, looking to his big brother for guidance and getting only a cool, calculating look. What did he expect, condolences? He'd taken part in the murder sure as Walter had, and if he thought he was gonna get blue balls before the job was over why'd he go along with it in the first place? So Walter had only told him to put his back into it, and when they tossed the body over the side of the pit there had been one terrifying moment of uncertainty as it tumbled down the side, kicking up a cloud of dirt as it went- a moment when it had stopped, balanced for a moment at the point where the angle turned deadly, and sat, seemingly for a good dog's year, while the two boys had stood staring at it with mouths slightly open. And then it had shifted, taken off at double the speed, the sound of its decent like gun fire in the silent night. Over the side it went, into that endless hole, the depth swallowing it without a sound.

Gregory had spoken only once that night. Walter had been the one barking orders to get the burlap, the rope, pack a bag and for Christssake don't forget to wash your *hands*. It was while they were stripping down next to that collapsed mine, both of them shivering now, that Gregory paused in pulling on a clean set of trousers, and looked up at his brother.

He was deathly pale, a ghost, and the whites of his eyes seemed entirely too big. His hands trembled around the waistband of the pants.

“We done it, brother. We actually done it.”

Walter nodded, once, slowly.

“It don't feel right.”

Walter had disagreed. No that it felt *right*, exactly, but it didn't not feel right either. It felt like a job done, and they were peaches from here on out if they didn't get themselves caught. But he could see that feeling of not-right written all over Gregory's face, saw that no, Gregory would not be able to live with himself the way Walter could. Gregory was soft, plush, still a boy and still attached to feelings. He could not go on like nothing happened. Walter saw it then, but had chosen to ignore it, because there were more pressing issues at hand. But he wished now he would have done something, anything, not that there was much he could have done, but there was another little nugget of GUILT he bit into now, and it was in part because four years later Gregory had killed himself. Strung himself up and chewed his tongue off, and Walter had only been grateful that the dumb bitch hadn't written some whiny suicide note confessing what him and his brother had done.

But Walter felt it now, oh yessiry did he ever. A whole bunch of GUILT along with a nice heaping spoonful of REMORSE. It had been his idea, after all, and even though Gregory had agreed to it – that made it *his* fault that he couldn't handle it, not Walter's – he hadn't really known what he'd been getting himself into. He was just a kid, and probably didn't understand *forever* and *ohshitthere'salotofblood*. Walter had known exactly what it was going to be, and maybe it was his fault because he never really discouraged his brother from taking part, and Walter had a suspicious guess it was because he knew it would be oh so much easier with two rather than one. Harder to carry a body with only one.

So his brother had killed himself, haunted by the dreams of all that blood, their mother gurgling and choking on it, eyes bulging and hands scrabbling weakly at the second grin opened in her throat. Her fingers had sunk in deep, thick claret pouring around them, not just pouring but *gushing*, so much of that warm red life, draining from her as they watched. The first attempt had gone horribly, laughably wrong, and even now Walter stifled a snort. Strangling her had been a bad idea- no, not necessarily bad – there would not be much blood and *Christ* was that bitch to clean up – but strangulation was just so *personal*, up close and dirty, hands holding her down while she bucked and fought for breath. He could still feel her clammy, pudgy skin under his palms, squeezing through his fingers, before she in her incredible weight had thrown him off and gasped for air, purple in the face and looking like a cartoon drunk about to hurl. And then she'd risen, insane and screaming in rage, reached for Walter's own throat and got her strong, vice grip around him. He'd almost died then, with Gregory standing to the side, mouth hanging open like a goddamn fool while the old sow had nearly choked him. She

would have, if he hadn't reached blindly behind himself, searching for a weapon – maybe something to bash her head in with – and found the skinning knife, sitting like God-set kismet on the work table. He'd opened her throat but it hadn't been that easy. They don't tell you that in books and movies, how thick and stringy the oesophagus is, how wiry the trachea is, and they definitely don't say that blood squirts into your face, your nose, your mouth, while she struggles and bites her tongue off. Walter could still see *that* one, a fat, squiggly worm flopping like a dead fish onto the floor of the barn. Then she'd spurted blood through her mouth and Jesus Almighty how could anyone have that much blood? She'd made this awful sound, a bubbling, percolating yell, a fine spatter of blood spitting from her crimson lips. A sort of *Urck!Urgthurk!*

The act of dying had been very quick. The whole thing had taken maybe two minutes, but it was afterwards that thrown Walter a kink. The cleaning up. And then, the waiting.

He still couldn't believe nobody had found her body. But then, what reason would someone have for peeking down a great, useless hole? It wasn't his idea of a good time and probably nobody else's' either. And that hole was *creepy*, a watching, laughing eye, and boy howdy did it stink, a putrid, rotten smell like dead leaves.

Or a corpse.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. His legs were running with the sharp pinpricks of reduced blood flow, his ankles were swollen to three times their normal size, and they smarted tightly against the bands of his socks, a pulsing, throbbing pain that suddenly intensified as he became aware of it, waking from his thoughts like surfacing through thick sleep. The sky had clouded over, and outside a deep, dense black loomed through his window, seeming to press against the thin glass, straining to reach for him and strangle him. A consuming dark, a cavernous abyss- or the black depth of a cave buried deep within the earth.

He sank against the back of the chair, cringed. A great tide of guilt swept over him, bile rising hot to the back of his throat, splashing against his ribs. The shame that rose red to his face disgusted him, made him hate himself equally as it made him wish he'd felt it those years ago, felt *something*, because people who feel things don't kill their mothers, nosirry they don't, and they certainly don't let their little brothers tag along for the ride, take a seat in the swing right next to them so they can eat rope burn four years later. People who feel things would have felt that it don't feel right, no, it sure-as-shit don't feel right now, do it? But *urgthurk*, right? *Urgthurk* all the way 'cause ain't nobody gonna save her now, and it wasn't *Walter's* fault buckaroo, no-way-José, it was Hector's fault, because he went and got his brain juice squirted between his ears like a ripe pumpkin, and left them alone with that witch, that suffocating, hypocritical, fat *witch-*

It wasn't Walter's fault. It just *wasn't*.

He wanted to believe that. More than anything, deep in the dried-up muscle beneath his breast, he wanted to believe that. But that darkness wouldn't let him. That abyssal darkness.

Like a gun shot, it had been. The *shhhick* of burlap sliding against dry dirt, dust and rock flying up behind her, and then that soundless *ssa*, as the eye swallowed her whole, sucked her in like a vacuum, dropped her next to dear old dad, a grinning skeleton by then, and now she was too, no doubt. Well, good. Good for the

both of them. They could be together now, two great dumb chits rotting where they should be.

You can rot down there while I rot here.

See? See how I'm rotting?

He could see them now, two gap-mouthed skulls, laughing at him from the inside of a colorless, flat pupil, looking up and watching him rot away, slowly, agonizingly. The darkness outside belonged to the eye, it was the eye's foot soldier, and now it watched him, tried to snatch him up, his sagging old bones, and crush him nice and slow while the jelly squirted from his eye sockets and fingernails. He could see it, there! The eye loomed out of the dark, circular and sentient, moving closer and bigger as Walter shook in his seat, eyes bugging and pallor a deathly, sickly white. His mug, tea now short of icy, slid from his slack hands, spilled its contents in a wet gush – *not just pouring but gushing* – down the front of his pants. Walter didn't notice. His mouth hung open, pink, irritated gums visible through lined, cracked lips.

The eye was at his window now. It was pressing itself through, slowly but surely, sinking into the glass like grease into water, forcing itself through resistance. It didn't blink, and this seemed the most absurd thing of all, because it's an *eye*, how can it not need to blink? *and oh Jesus God it's coming for me someone help, it wasn't my fault it was his, it was theirs not mine, they made me do it they never said no-*

The pupil was red, a bloody – *Jesus Almighty how could anyone have that much blood?* – loop shining like a ring of stretched claret against cold stone, and in its' abysmal, unfathomable pupil sat two leering skulls, flesh hanging in putrid, decaying strips from the dents of eye sockets, the penny-holes of the nasal cavity, slopping down the sharp, jutted cheeks like wet mud down rock. Blood poured – *gushed* – from their mouths, black blood flowing between the tombstone teeth, cracked and yellowed, and this was the last thing Walter saw before the tumor in his amygdala exploded and killed him.

He slumped in his seat. The mug slid to the floor, landed muffled on the carpet, and sat, quiescent. The breath seemed to draw from his lungs, poison drawn from a wound, an echoing sigh that filled the room with the dry smell of phlegm and death. Outside, the clouds broke, and bright, luminescent moonlight blasted through the window, shocking in its brilliance. His mouth gaped open, his eyes stared wide and unseeing, and the last thought that flickered across his numb brain as synapsis spat and fired one last time was,

We done it. We actually done it.