

The Antihero of Little Babylon
Mark Harrison

When I was a boy, growing up near the city of Clerkston, Tennessee, my father once told, “country folk are shiftier than city people because they can easily hide their secrets and crimes from others.” At thirty years of age, I understand the meaning behind his words.

In January of 1997, I moved to rural Ellis Hollow, Tennessee, to get away from the noise and watchful eyes of Clerkston. Ellis Hollow included a post office, a garbage dump, and a two-way stop sign. The two-bedroom trailer I was renting couldn't hold a candle to the basement house I grew up in, but I couldn't have dreamed of a better location. The trailer was located a half-mile into the woods off the main road, close to fifty yards from my front door. I could sit in my living room with the window open, and hear the sounds of water. It was a wonderful, soothing sound I grew to depend on when the weather was nice.

I didn't have much when it came to material objects, nor did I desire to accumulate junk. Since I'd played the drums most of my life, I still had a rickety drum set that was thrown together from various equipment I'd owned in the past. After not having played for a few years because I was no longer in a band, I finally had a place to set them up and bang away on them day or night. I was determined to start a band with a few people I played with off and on over the years.

After receiving permission from my landlady to put a vegetable garden in the backyard; tomatoes, cucumbers, banana peppers, and cayenne pepper plants were in the ground. What did she care anyway? She lived in North Carolina, so it wasn't like she had to look at it. The rent was mailed to her every month in a 300 dollar money order, and as long as I paid every month, she had no reason to come to Tennessee. Her family and friends were all in North Carolina. No nosy neighbors spied on me while I was working outside, having friends over for a party, or playing the drums whenever I felt like it. All my friends were envious of my location, and the carefree landlady who lived an entire state away. I had it made and everyone knew it.

As a construction worker, my day always started at 4:30 am by eating breakfast, watering my garden, and feeding my two pit bulls, Meathead and Shasta, my security team. I had a few friends out there, and one of them, James, was an old high-school buddy. Always decked out in camouflage shorts and t-shirt with flip-flops on his feet, he had long hair and a heavy beard. He resembled a mellow Charles Manson on an eternal vacation. We also worked together, which made things easier because we could carpool to our jobsites in Clerkston. When we weren't busting our humps for Triple S Roofing Company, we helped one another in our “second gardens,” as we liked to call them.

Cultivating marijuana felt like a second job sometimes. There is a lot more work to it than most people can comprehend. It was definitely a labor of love, though. While in the field, our clothes, along with the food and water containers, were painted camouflage, and we walked the deer trails and tree lines to keep from making new trails that could be spotted from the sky. I had very few plants that were actually in the ground. The majority of my pot plants were in ten-gallon planters so I could move them in case someone got too close to my operations.

After the first crop came in, it was so potent; James and I felt like scientists. We took such care and pride in our pot that we became legendary among the potheads, young and old, whoever smoked our stuff. He grew up in Hawaii, and learned the grower's art from family. I

learned my growing tips and skills of stealth from and family and of an old friend that I served in the U.S. Navy with who lives in California.

During first harvest, I had so much weed; I was exalted about it. I was still making 1,000 dollars a week in my spare time, and was able to smoke as much as I could stand.

I loved my new life in the country and the friends around me. Things were so much better out there. I despised Clerkston.

The sad part was, just like in Clerkston, Ellis Hollow also had its share of degenerates. Because I'd never formally met any of my surrounding neighbors, I soon realized all of them were leery about new faces moving into their small community. They not only spied on yours truly, they spied on each other as well.

James told me before I put the first seed in the ground, "They won't snitch on you because they're afraid the cops might start looking at them too. As long as you're not moving corpses around or kidnapping their children, they won't encourage the Sheriff to come out here."

"The last time I checked, cultivating weed in Tennessee is a class X felony," I reminded him.

"How are you hurting anybody by growing weed?"

"I'd only be hurting myself if I got busted, I suppose."

Besides cops, insects, and deer, a grower had to watch out for rippers who would steal your crop for profit. It didn't happen often, but when it did, it was usually teenagers trespassing on a grower's land with their dirt-bikes and ATVs. Most of their parents were growers and they already knew better than to take someone's crop. And who said most kids are naïve and disrespectful?

In the beginning of summer, the paranoia about cops searching for plants where I grew while I was gone waned as the plants got bigger. They would have to catch me in the act; tending to the plants. I was growing on my neighbors' land anyway. Old man Hughes was busing ninety years old and he was probably thankful to make it to his front porch, more or less explore the sixty acres he owned behind the four acre lot where my trailer was located. The pot-growers unwritten code was, "Unless you live in Canada, Holland, and most of South America, never grow weed on your own land!"

On the advice of James, I broke out and old set of binoculars I hadn't used since I was in the Navy. He also brought me up to speed on the people who lived on my dead-end road. Across the way lived Bill and Margaret Hollister.

Bill was a high-school science teacher with glasses so thick, they had to be bulletproof. A black briefcase, loafers, slacks, white button-up shirt with black tie, and a pen-case in the shirt pocket made up the rest of his 80s retroactive wardrobe.

Margaret Hollister was the complete opposite of her husband. She was a mesmerizing lady with large breasts and straight black hair that went down to her waist. In the warmer months of the year, I could catch her in a bathing suit, working in her garden. She had an Egyptian Ankh tattoo on her stomach, where the ring went around her navel. She was one of those women who looked tan all year long and spying on her when my girlfriend wasn't around became one of my perverted hobbies.

James informed me about someone that had been leaving the Hollister residence before Mr. Hollister came back from work. The rumor going around was about a friend's brother named Tim. Farmer Mike was an old neighbor of mine from the past and we were neighbors once again in Ellis Hollow. I met his brother, Tim, years ago, and he'd always seemed slow.

Drinking or getting high made the guy even slower. It wasn't but a few days later that I watched Mr. Hollister leave for work, and slow Tim emerged from the tree line, walked through the Hollister's front yard, and a waiting Mrs. Hollister let him in and closed the door. I remembered it had rained all day, and I wasn't scheduled to go to work until the following day. Just before noon, Tim left the Hollister's and walked in the pouring rain to his car, parked at the end of the road. For a slow guy, he wasn't altogether stupid. He was definitely getting busy with the cheating Mrs. Hollister.

A few days later, James stopped by my trailer after work, and we did some drinking and smoking on my front porch, when a pack of bikers went zipping down my road. I heard them riding up and down on several occasions before, but never thought much about they're coming and going.

"Those guys are the Satan's Soldiers," said James. "They're a rough bunch of muthas, man. Your best bet is not to mess with them."

I know how bikers are. My cousin is the vice-president of the Sons of Odin motorcycle club," I told him. I know man, but these jokers are running guns and cooking meth right here in the Hollow.

"And?"

"Farmer Mike told me there were Federal Marshals watching those dudes. You might want to back off of your plants for a little while until they make a bust or move on."

"Farmer Mike things every tree, twig, and animal in the Hollow is bugged, man," I said. "He's way too paranoid."

"Yeah, but his brother is a skip tracer, and they usually find out about stuff like that before anyone."

"I know you're not talking about the slow one, Tim, are you?"

"No, of course not. They have an older brother named John."

"By the way, I saw Tim leaving the Hollisters' the other day."

"I'd hate to be him if Hollister ever came home early one day. There's no telling how that geek might react."

"Yeah, well I'm a little more worried about the bikers stirring up a lot of attention out this way than what them yahoos across the road are doing," I said.

"Don't put your ass out there for the whole wide world to see. Keep your shit cool unless you want the feds crawling around here."

"There's no way in Hell I want to deal with their asses."

"Cops could stumble on just about anything out here."

There was a general store a few miles from my trailer, and I'd seen an assortment of the different people there who lived in Ellis Hollow. I met my neighbor on the other side of me for the first time at that little country store. Mr. Tubbs was an uncouth pig farmer who lived to the left of my property line.

He was probably in his mid-fifties with a big stomach that seemed to stretch out the overalls he always wore. With bloodshot blue eyes, and a five o'clock shadow, he wore a stained Co-op hat to cover his bald head which included gray, shoulder-length hair. On that day in particular, the man smelled like he's been rolling in shit all day and when tried to be neighborly and say hello, he looked at me as if he'd seen a ghost. He also emitted a strong odor of homemade whiskey.

Another week went by without incident, so I decided to go feed the plants. I waited until after dark, and the bikers up the road were drinking, shooting off guns, and driving their bikes around like madmen. Everyone else on my road was so busy watching what was happening with the bikers, they ignored me completely. I moved slowly along the tree lines and thickets to keep myself unnoticed to anyone who could be close enough to hear me. After I reached the pants, I saw nothing touched. I was relieved to see there was no surveillance or cops out there. On my way back to the trailer, two helicopters zoomed overhead, headed toward the biker clubhouse. They were spotlighting the area and just missed me by ten feet with the spy light.

After I made it inside, I realized the gunfire had ceased as the copters circled back toward Mr. Tubbs' big farm and over my trailer. The copters circled a couple of more times before leaving the area altogether. They didn't land. The cops never moved in with their cars. Whatever police presence was out there, they goat the hell out of there after the shooting stopped. Why did they bother to show up if they weren't going to raid the clubhouse? Perhaps they were really watching all of the pot growers as well.

Everything was quiet for a few days, when I decided to break out my binoculars once again. The bikers were keeping it down to a low roar and the Hollister's were gone for most of the weekend. I watched Mr. Tubbs stagger around his yard for about minute before he stepped behind one of his sheds. When he came out from behind it, he wiped off his mouth with his sleeve from puking. After walking to his old rust bucket of a truck, he pulled out a 12. gauge double-barrel shotgun, pointed it into the air, and fired off two rounds simultaneously.

He looked toward his house and yelled for someone to come out. A few moments later, a portly woman of about fifty years old came out with her hands on her hips and yelled at Mr. Tubbs, "what do you want, you old fool?"

He smiled at her and put the shotgun back in his truck. He hesitated for a few seconds and yelled, "Woman, come here!" She walked over to him, and he pulled something out of his truck, and fondled her with it, which made her laugh hysterically. I gasped when I could see it was a human arm severed above the elbow. I remember shaking and swallowed several times from nervous fright. Mr. Tubbs moved the arm down to where I couldn't see what his intentions were. Apparently, his crazy wife could see him doing something with it because she began slapping him across the back with a dishtowel. He looked up to the sky and laughed before he turned around and pushed his wife out of the way. He walked over to the pigpen and tossed the arm in.

I wanted to call the police, but didn't. I wasn't thinking clearly, but I felt I had to do something. I called James instead.

"Give me about twenty minutes," he said. "You okay?"

"Just hurry up."

I watched him pull up my driveway after ten minutes. "You look like you've been through Hell."

"That crazy pig famer has been killing people."

"How do you know this?"

"I watched him fondle his wife with a woman's severed arm."

"Man, that's fucking insane," he said.

"I thought I was going crazy at first, but I know what I saw."

"You didn't call the cops, did you?"

"No."

“Keep this shit under your hat unless you want trouble.”

“A woman is dead,” I stressed.

“We have one more week before harvest. Don’t mess this up for everybody else.”

I couldn’t believe he was acting this way about something so grisly. At the same time, I knew he was right. If anybody found I had the cops out here, I might be the next victim, or worse. What if they did something to Mary Beth? You’re right. I’m not going to tell anyone, brother.”

James left after I convinced him no cops would be called; at least, not until we sold the part of the weed we were going to sell. I called Mary-Beth because I knew she’d be waking up soon after working second shift the night before. “Hey, honey.”

“I was just thinking about you, sweetie,” she said, in a groggy, half-asleep tone. “I was going to come out and see you in a little while, but I think I’m coming down with a cold.”

“I hope you’re going to be okay.”

“I feel run down too.”

I assured her that I’d call her a couple of times a day over the next few days or that she could call me whenever she felt like it. I would eventually have to tell her some bad things were going on in Ellis Hollow. She didn’t need to worry about me though; she needed to stay in bed until she was well.

I woke up exhausted the next day. All I could think about was the woman’s arm and the deranged laughter coming from the pig farmer. Saturday was plant feeding time, and no matter how tired I felt, there was work to be done. A strong feeling of paranoia crept over me while I made the plant food and the dogs were making more noise than usual at something in the woods, which added to my high-strung condition. When I stepped off my back porch to head toward the field, my telephone rang one time. Thoughts raced through my mind about who may be calling at 5:50 in the morning. Was it a crank call, a wrong number, or a message telling me to beware?

I went about my business and fed the pot plants along with the vegetable garden without seeing or hearing anything out there. After cutting the grass as well, I went inside to relax, cool off, and break out the binoculars. The Hollisters were still gone, the pig farmer sat on his front porch, drinking corn liquor and looking all around with his binoculars.

The bikers showed no signs of activity until later that afternoon. The first sign of movement at the clubhouse was an old Chevy truck leaving with a load of trash destined for the dump. They were cleaning up the place and from what I could see; it was like they were expecting someone to show up. I called Mary-Beth to see how she was feeling, and spoke to her momentarily. She was down in bed, and I felt bad for her, but at the same time, I was happy she couldn’t come over. The rest of the day went on without any strange behavior from any point besides the bikers’ usual rowdy Saturday night of partying and zooming around on their motorcycles.

I stayed in bed on Sunday and drifted in and out of sleep to the sounds of the creek and a lone woodpecker off in the distance, drilling his beak into the bark of a tree. Before noon, at least fifty motorcycles went down my road en route to the clubhouse. After grabbing my binoculars to see what was going on, I noticed these bikers had been traveling, and were unpacking weapons, ammo, booze, drugs, food, ice charcoal, sleeping bags, and even lawn chairs. The other men and women from inside the clubhouse helped their visitors erect tents in the yard as well as a volleyball net.

After I rolled myself a couple of joints, I realized the Hollisters had just gotten home from their road trip. As they were bringing in a few tote bags, slow Tim's car passed their house, and I watched him park at the end of the road. He parked his car and began walking toward the Hollisters until he was within a hundred yards of the front door to their home. After watching Mr. Hollister get in his car and leave, Tim stepped out of the woods and walked around the back of the Hollisters' brick home. I wondered what he was doing there on Sunday, because the husband wasn't working. Were the slow man and Mrs. Hollister going to ambush her husband when he returned? No sooner than the thought entered my head, Mr. Hollister came darting up his driveway, spinning gravel and spraying dust all over the front yard. He got out of his car with a case of beer and walked around back and out of my sight as Tim did a few minutes prior.

I couldn't take it. I had to see the confrontation between the men and possibly stop something terrible from happening. I didn't want to walk through the yard in nosy-neighbor-like fashion, so I crossed into the woods on their side of the road. I made stealthy movements to try and keep the attention away from myself until I could stop to get a closer look. When I was close enough to edge around the tree line beside the backside of their property, I was surprised, but happy to see the men weren't fighting. Slow Tim was on top of a naked Mrs. Hollister, grinding her as the husband sat in a lawn chair with a can of beer in one hand, and a camcorder in the other. He was coaching Tim to pick up the pace and after he doubled the rate of his thrusting. Mrs. Hollister let out a moan that echoed throughout the country. Whatever the situation was with the kinky trio, at least they weren't trying to kill one another.

As I left to go back to the trailer, I heard helicopters from a distance. I crossed my road and watched a small convoy of two vans and five black Humvees race by. I stood on my front porch with my binoculars and watched the copters fly overhead as gunfire began. Men on both sides of the law were falling and some of the bikers attempted to flee the fight on their motorcycles. Some were shot off of their bikes and others fled through the woods in a mad panic. One of them went directly through the firefight unscathed and headed down the road toward the main highway. One of the Humvees quickly began pursuit of the biker and shot his back tire out in front of my driveway. He dropped the bike in the ditch and ran across my front yard with three cops behind him. I went inside and watched out my window to see the desperate biker run in the general direction of my plants.

As he got closer to the crop with the police gaining momentum on him, I tapped my foot in nervous tantrum and cursed frantically under my breath. They tackled the man, beat him with a slapjack several times, and hauled him away without so much as acknowledging on leaf of my illegal garden. I was relieved momentarily, but I felt I wasn't going to see the last of them. Technically, the plants were on old man Hughes' side of the property line, so I could claim I didn't know it was out there if they started asking questions. I watched the police arrest the bikers who were still alive, and several ambulances take away the dead and wounded.

The bikers were taken down and the clubhouse was abandoned for the remainder of my time in that trailer. The police never showed to question me about the plants and I harvested with huge returns for my troubles. The crazy pig farmer's murderous habits still bothered me though.

James told me a week later the cops had been summoned to Mr. Tubbs' farm one night on a disturbance call and found the top half of Mrs. Tubbs' body learned over the pigpen, eaten to the bone from her chest up. Apparently, the husband had bludgeoned her and pushed the body into the fence. He was captured hiding in the woods, clinging to his illegal whiskey still when they walked up on him. They also found the bones and partial remains of three adults inside the gruesome pigpen. I remember hoping that sorry son of a bitch would receive the death penalty

for his crimes.

I regret saying that in 2007, I had to move back to Clerkston after enjoying the serenity of the country for so long. The construction trade slowed down when the economy got all screwed up and what little work was out there was taken over by illegal immigrants because the builders didn't want to pay out a decent wage to legal American citizens.

I have no plans of staying in Clerkston because that toilet of a city is being overrun by crooked authorities, illegal workers, and a mayor who prefers to look the other way when it comes to corruption. I have to get out soon, before something happens to me. What I'm trying to say is that I'd rather be dead in Ellis Hollow, than alive in Clerkston. Ellis Hollow may have been like a Little Babylon with its assorted degenerates, but at least it was my Little Babylon.