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The Death Rattle of Lori McBae

Dawn Hackett

October of 1983, parole, in existence since 1941, was eliminated in the State of Florida except for capital crimes. By the mid 1980's, at least 4000 new inmates entered the Florida Corrections System each month. As a result of the extreme overcrowding in Florida jails and the legislature's unwillingness to devote tightly budgeted funds to adding more beds to the system, the Florida Early Release System was created under Republican Gov. Bob Martinez and begun in 1987. By 1990, prisoners served only 33% of their sentences on average.

Jacksonville, Florida
January 31, 1995 Approximately 2:30 am
Cedar Hills Shopping Center

In the darkness of an enclave in front of J.C.Penney's main entrance stands an old fashioned window display case. It's formed as an island surrounded by glass and a walkway in a semi-circle. Bits of paper and Styrofoam cups are inevitably skirted by the wind into the area by virtue of the 12 inch abutment of the display case's front side. The shopping strip was old and fallen on hard times. Cloth World closed when making your own clothes became too time consuming. Morrison's Cafeteria, once swarming with Jacksonville's older citizens, could no longer afford to provide low cost meals to fixed income residents. The vast parking lots, once filled daily, were ragged. Only the light fixtures closest to the store fronts were maintained and the owners bypassed new building regulations to add additional lights based on occupancy, a neat loophole that deferred costs. There was still hope for the old center as long as J. C. Penney, Walgreens and Winn-Dixie at the northern end of the strip did not terminate their leases. The Walgreens was open 24 hours, a relatively rare but convenient option to people living anywhere near Cedar Hills. To help lower operating costs, J. C. Penney gained permission from Cedar Hills' owners to darken the front display cases after business hours. The scattered parking lot fixtures, though dated, would

shoved her against the side of the Bronco. They were facing away from the Walgreens. "Take out your ATM card, we're going inside to get some cash."

Lori spit in his face, bringing her knee up into his groin but her strength had left her when her breath did. He drew back his fist and punched her square below her heart. He put his hands around her throat. He could not leave her there, her wallet was empty of cash and she would run if he tried her card himself. When she refused to give him the PIN, he turned her toward the ATM machine inside the front of the Walgreens and slipped his knife hand under her sweater, holding it against her back. He put his other hand on her shoulder. A young man of about twenty walked down the sidewalk in front of the shopping center, stopped and looked at them, then moved on.

Their awkward dance began, two lovers, the man trying to make things up to the woman who was obviously tired and upset with him. Just inside the Walgreens entrance, he pressed the edge of the knife harder into Lori's shirt. 50 yards away, a bored cashier turned to see who had entered the store. Seeing a couple using the ATM she went back to a list on her counter, her back turned to the couple.

Lori passed out in his arms. The man bit the back of her neck. She came to. "Fuck you," she said, low, no breath to draw on, and brought her hand up into his face behind her shoulder, gouging his eye with the edge of the ATM card. He grunted. The clerk looked over again, he quickly smiled, kissing the back of her head. She reared her head backward then forward, vomited without much force, soaking her chin and the front of her sweater. He forced her back to standing straight.

The clerk looked over again, decided they must be arguing over money, and went back to the list.

"Get me as much cash as you can then I'll let you go back to your car. Just fucking do it now," he found the bottom of her shirt and put the blade underneath, running the sharp edge across the right side of her back. His left hand still rested near her shoulder. Lori fumbled with the card, finally getting the



remain lit to compensate.

On this chilly morning, crouching at the edge of the abutment, a man ran his hand over the handle of a sheathed knife in the shadows. He watched, fighting off powerful cravings, whispering to himself about a deep, dark need. Wearing only a long sleeved flannel shirt and greasy jeans, he shivered violently, wracking his elbow against the glass. He had the sallow, bony look of a fiend, his face pocked and scarred. The sound of a deep throaty engine took his attention to the parking lot where he saw a woman, short hair, slight shoulders, driving a Bronco through the lot. She passed in front of the J. C. Penney store-front and turned into the line of spaces near Walgreens.

Lori McRae's postal shift ended at 2:00 am and as she drove home, her husband called her cell phone. He was out of work due to a back injury and needed Tylenol and was craving ice cream. She slid her Bronco into a space near Walgreens. She shut off the ignition and gathered her purse, unlocking her door to get out.

Bam bam bam a man's fist against the driver side glass. "Hey. Sorry to scare you. Got any change? I'm freezing and I just want to get something to eat."

Lori reached for the lock, yelling at the stranger to go away. She was too late. The man pulled the handle and the door opened. He punched Lori several times in the ribs, shoved her over onto the passenger side of the bench seat, telling her to keep quiet.

"Shut the fuck up. I'm not going to hurt you anymore I just want you to get me some cash. Where's your ATM card?" He rifled through her purse and found her wallet. No cash. He shoved it into her hand. Lori couldn't breathe from the gut punch, couldn't scream, reaching for the other door lock. She curled into herself as he landed a blow to her side.

He showed her his knife. "I'll fucking gut you right now cunt if you don't do what I say." He punched her in the side again, unlocked her door, opened it and pushed her out. She hit the pavement groaning. He followed, pulled her to her feet and

full limit of her cash to come out. She only had two hundred and fifteen dollars in the account. Two hundred appeared in the tray. The disappointment he felt tightened his grip on her shoulder and slid the blade against her back again. He pressed her shirt into the wound to keep the blood from dripping onto the store's floor. Then he grabbed the receipt and saw the balance. He turned them toward the door as Becky tried to fight him not to leave. She was too weak. The clerk gave them one last glance then returned to her list.

He gut punched her as soon as he saw that no one outside was watching, taking the breath out of her screaming attempt to get someone's attention. She had barely recovered, now she returned to struggling to get air into her lungs. He opened the passenger door, propped her against the side of the seat, reared back and cuckolded her. She lost consciousness. He unzipped her pants with one hand, shoved them down then shoved her body onto the seat. His thirst was unreal now he said later. "I wanted to fuck her," but his crack habit murdered that skill years ago, so he settled for playing with her while he drove. A mile away from Cedar Hills down Blanding Blvd., he sat alone at a stop light. He turned her against the locked door on the passenger side and beat her face, stomach and legs, then fingered her until the light turned green. "I was out of control. I stabbed her legs for fun." He then drove to his dealer's house, tied Lori's hands with her shirt, now blood soaked and bit her nipples. She did not respond.

When he returned to the Bronco her eyes were open. He got in, punched her face several times and she passed out again. Two hours later he was on I-95 at the Florida Georgia line. Lori was still alive. 40 minutes later, down a dirt road in rural southern Georgia, the man stripped Lori of what was left of her bloody clothes, threw them into the backseat and molested her. She woke up, started screaming and he pummeled her alternately with his fist and the knife for several minutes. He dropped the knife, put both hands around her neck and strangled her, his head to her chest wanting to hear the death rattle, listening to

her heart surging at first then slowly stop beating.

For the two weeks before a man was stopped by Jacksonville police for driving the Bronco of a missing postal worker, mother of four named Lori McRae, her family held its breath. They missed work, felt helpless, tried to find her, vomited, cried, sat still over phones, prayed, cursed, and held onto hope. All was lost two weeks later.

Lori's first husband called his family to give them the news. His three children with Lori and her daughter with her second husband were now the children of a murdered mother. They were 18, 12, 8 and 2. The man driving her Bronco, Lori's bloody clothes in the backseat, denied he knew anything about a missing woman. He held onto his story for several days, then issued a full confession and led the police to her naked decomposing body, thrown in the woods at the end of a rural dirt road in southern Georgia. The knife was found as well. The man had been released 18 months before Lori McRae's murder after serving five years of a 20 year sentence for second degree murder of a 61 year old, central Florida man. He had robbed, stabbed and strangled the victim. He was pulled over for driving a car with stolen plates. Searching the trunk, the police had found the body of his first victim.

During the pretrial investigation for Lori McRae's murder, both the young man who walked by during the struggle and the clerk in the store assumed domestic trouble between the couple and were afraid to interfere. Neither attempted to intervene, neither called the police to report a dispute. At Lori McRae's murder trial, the son and daughter of the 61 year old man sat at the back of the courtroom, praying for justice after so many years. The killer was sentenced to death and awaits execution on Florida's Death Row.

As of October, 1995, legislation passed requiring all violent offenders in the Florida penal system to serve a minimum of 85% of their terms regardless of their behavior.