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Guy Wright: “Nightmares every spring”

Because the monster of her nightmares is now eligible for parole, once each year Annette Carlson must relive the night of horror when Angelo Pavageau wrecked her life and left her for dead in a flaming house.

If she kept silent, she fears the parole board might turn him loose. “And I live in fear of that,” she said.

One April night in 1973 Pavageau broke into a Victorian house that Annette and her young husband were renovating on Potrero Hill. Brandishing a knife, he demanded money. They gave him all they had. He demanded a hammer. They gave him one.

He tied them in chairs and began beating the husband, first with the hammer until it broke, then with a chopping block, a vase, a penny jar. Frank Marion Carlson’s head literally disintegrated before the eyes of his wife.

Next the blood-smearred killer raped the horrified woman. Then he set out to beat her to death, breaking her jaw, shoulder, arms. He slashed her wrists and tightened a telephone cord around her neck. Leaving her for dead, he emptied a can of paint thinner and set the house on fire.

Miraculously, she dragged herself from the flames and called for help as her house burned. Pavageau was caught, convicted and sentenced to death. But when the state Supreme Court abolished the death penalty, he was among the dozens of condemned killers who automatically became ordinary lifers eligible for parole.

With his altered status he has been allowed to attend college, marry and father a child, all the while in San Quentin.

Annette Carlson hasn’t fared so well. “I still sleep with the lights on,” she said. “I

still have nightmares. When I brush my hair I can’t help seeing the scars on my face and scalp. I can’t get away from it.”

She would be better off if she could forget. But if she forgot, who would remember? The tables are now turned. On the parole board scorecard, the bestiality of Pavageau’s crime counts less and less. His good behavior in prison counts more and more.

And so each spring when his annual parole hearing comes up, Annette feels obligated to reopen the painful wounds in her memory in order to refresh the memory of the parole board.

The board refuses to let her appear in person (Paul Gann’s crime initiative would change that), but each year she writes a letter relating the horror of that night.

There is something grotesque about a criminal justice system that requires this woman to make an annual plunge into psychological pain as the price for keeping her tormentor from returning to her world.

While her case is dramatic, dozens of people share her dilemma as a result of the state Supreme Court decision that turned condemned killers into potential parolees.

Since the court was determined to find an excuse to end capital punishment, it had a duty to deal with this consequence, most logically by changing death sentences to life without parole.

Parole board members say privately that they shouldn’t hold a parole hearing each year for these killers.

That leaves the Legislature, where, as Willie Brown observed, money is the best catalyst. People like Annette seldom have enough cash to whet the appetite of our elected hucksters.

So we are stuck with a rotten criminal justice system and an officialdom content to feed on the rot.