

White Crosses

by Andrew Newman

Junior held the steering wheel of the beat-up Chevrolet pickup casually, like part of his own body, as he wound it around the hairpin curves of Highway 36. As I watched him drive, memories of summer nights spent tear-assing around every road in the county arose in me. I could still almost hear the four-barrel carburetor kicking in as we careened down shitty gravel roads with forty-ounce bottles of cheap beer between our legs. We had lived like wildfire, with the winds of our passions reducing our youth to ashes before we ever realized we had it. Even now I could still see that aura of invincibility in Junior, a hint of adolescent immortality that even the plodding years of clock punching had failed to steal from him. He looked much like I remembered him from our high school days, the same stone-carved features that had swayed so many of our girl classmates to renounce their virtue to him. And he still had much of that Herculean build that had allowed him to dominate the opposition on the football field, though his midsection had gone to flab.

“How long’s it been, Marv?” he asked me as he lit a Camel Wide.

“Since what?”

“Since you and me rode around together like this.” He looked at me with a foolish grin, as if he had just pointed out the obvious.

“Is that what you call it? I thought you were dragging me along because you needed somebody to have your back.”

“What the fuck are you smokin’, Marv? You’re here to keep me from doing something stupid. The day I need protection from a piece of shit like him is the day I’m too embarrassed to have anybody around me, especially you.” The piece of shit in question was Dwayne Pierce, Junior’s father and the former Police Chief of Cynthiana. I had vague memories of him; of his terse and aloof presence when I hung out at Junior’s house. I don’t think he ever said more than a few sentences to me; when he did speak he did it with a mocking, condescending tone. He gave all of Junior’s buddies a hard time, and he always took it too far. When my hair got past my shoulders, Junior reported to me that his father was referring to me as the “girlfriend.” We merely laughed about it, as childhood friends tend to be amused by most of the absurdities they experience together. I think by that time Junior had come to see his father as some kind of ridiculous cartoon character, and had learned to bear his criticism and his physical abuse in silence.

When Junior got old enough to fight back, Dwayne quit beating him, and had instead turned the full focus of his brutality toward Junior’s mother. Juanita Pierce, however, had grown tired of his abuse and broken a bottle of single malt scotch over

his head. She had then jammed the neck of the bottle into Dwayne's belly, and blood had poured out of him through the broken bottleneck like water out of a spigot. The beating he had given her afterward had nearly killed her, but she won her freedom, and Dwayne won a stint in the pokey and a decommission from the force. Junior had gone to live with his grandparents, but the rage he felt for his father burned in him, and fueled him in his quest to achieve high school football stardom, fleeting as it had been. After graduation, he went to work at the local foundry, just like all the local boys do when their guidance counselors convince them they aren't cut out for college.

After some thought, I answered Junior's question. "About ten years," I said. "Ten years since we've seen each other."

"That's about what I thought. I ain't seen you since you went off to college at that fancy school. Where was it again?"

"Columbia. In New York."

"People say you fell in with a sorry bunch a losers up there in that city, said you started firing junk in your veins and eatin' outta dumpsters and shit. That true?"

"Yeah, man, most of it is. I guess you let a dog out of a cage and he's gotta run a little bit, and roll around every pile of shit he sees." I found myself surprised that I wasn't uncomfortable with Junior's inquiries about my life's failings. Then I remembered that he fought demons of his own. "You staying off the whiskey?" I asked him.

"Got to . . . ain't got no choice. I get red every time I so much as touch the stuff. Last time I drank I beat Teddy Bellamy's boy damn near to death. I caught an assault charge and I don't even remember being out that night. I never had no reason to hate Bellamy either. Guess he just looked at the wrong guy."

"Maybe if we had known where we were going to end up, we wouldn't have started getting wild like we did," I said.

Junior drew hard on his cigarette, and I could see the wistful regret on his face. The directions the two of us had gone after high school had been as divergent as could be: I had gone off to the city and a world of higher consciousness, Coltrane and dimebags, while he had stayed home with Bocephus, pickup trucks and bathtub crank. I guess somewhere God was laughing at us, since despite everything we had both come back to the same place.

He looked at me straight in the eye for the first time that night, and I saw the years reflected there. I saw the pain of opportunity lost, dreams left out on some forgotten football field, likely in some game that nobody remembered. In that moment I knew that even during the worst of Junior's struggles he had never dared hope for escape to some place like New York or Timbuktu, and now he had to deny himself the only other escape he had ever known, the kind he got from a bottle of Kentucky bourbon. "Sometimes you just gotta take a stand," he said, "even if it kills you. That's why I quit drinkin'. That's what I always tell myself."

"I never did stand up for anything," I said to him, "I guess that's why I came back home. When I got out there in the world, I realized I was a lot weaker than I ever thought. I never had to go through the kind of shit you did growing up, and when trials came I just fell over; I never learned how to fight, at least not until I had to fight to live."

"You're stronger than you think," Junior declared philosophically. "Most people wouldn't come out here with me, not after the way he treated you."

"Remind me why we're even doing this. Why go see your dad now, after all this time and the things that happened?"

"He's tried to call me a few times this month, and I never picked up the phone 'til last night. He asked me if I could come out to the house and talk about some things. Since you were back in town I thought you'd tag along."

“Shouldn’t you be doing this alone? Won’t he just break your balls for hiding behind my skirts or something?” I knew that Dwayne Pierce was not likely to look favorably on any sign of weakness in his son.

“I done told you I ain’t afraid of him . . . I’m just scared of what I might do. Sometimes at night I have dreams about killing him. I don’t feel the least bit guilty; I always dream that I shoot him again, just to make sure.” Junior chained another Camel off the previous one. After this latest admission, he didn’t seem inclined to converse any further. I turned my attention back to the road ahead, and opened one of the Chevy’s wing windows to let in a little of the cool October air. The smells of home bombarded me; cow shit, wood smoke and skunk. Somewhere I even thought I could smell tobacco hanging up to cure. It seemed that in the years I had been away I had forgotten how to smell, that I lived without full benefit of my senses. My failed lifestyle in New York had turned me into a feral beast, only able to sniff out the next rush. Coming home was like being reborn.

It had also been a number of years since I had traveled this stretch of the highway, and I noticed that there were even more little white crosses along the side of the road. The newer ones gleamed in the red dusk: roadside memorials erected to suture the wounds of recent loss. Most of them stood over plastic vases containing dead and shriveled bundles of flowers. You’re still eligible for this, they seemed to say, no one ever escapes this life unscarred. The twisted, windy roads of this county are like little Normandys or Iwo Jimas, places where young lives are snuffed out before they ever produce fruit. Death waits for them shrouded in gray asphalt, and his reaper’s scythe is the bend in the highway. Scarred, weeping trees stand their lonely vigil beyond the shoulder, waiting for young, teenage lives to bust themselves to pieces on their unyielding trunks.

My morbid reverie came to an end when Junior suddenly jerked the pickup onto a washed-out gravel lane leading through several acres of pasture and cropland to a house trailer at the top of the hill. Dwayne’s place sat on a scrap of land that an adjacent farmer had sold off because of its rocky, inhospitable soil. As we neared the trailer, Junior killed the engine and let the truck coast into the front yard, to rest beside a ’68 Nova on blocks. We sat silently in the cab for a few moments, and I knew that he was mustering his nerve. He reached instinctively for the pistol that I knew he always kept under the seat, but he thought better of it and left it there. Thank God for that.

“We better go on in,” he announced, “it’s gettin’ dark.”

The two of us walked through the knee-high weeds to the front door of the trailer. We stood outside on the wooden decking for a moment, listening to percussive, pounding noises coming from inside. It sounded as if Dwayne was into some evening carpentry. Junior knocked, and we heard a muffled “Come in,” from somewhere in the back. I followed him into the stuffy, dimly lit main room. We were greeted with a crude squalor that reminded me of the hop houses in which I had languished in the city. Moldy couches surrounded a large coffee table that had lost whatever finish it once had. The whole place was permeated with the overpowering smell of ammonia and antifreeze. I had heard that Dwayne Pierce had gotten a taste for meth, but I hadn’t known he had gone so far as to start cooking it.

A blonde woman with three inches of black roots sat sprawled on one of the couches. She wore cutoff shorts and a halter top that fit a couple sizes too tight. A long cigarette was perched between crimson lips and a bottle of bottom shelf beer was nestled in the “y” of her crotch. The lack of light in the room almost made her look pretty. “Dwayne’s in the back,” she advised in an indifferent tone.

Dwayne appeared, as if conjured. He stood shirtless in the hallway with a loaded tool belt strapped around his waist. His physique was not nearly as impressive as

it had been in earlier years, but it was clear that he was still a formidable man. He shared his son's towering height and dark, rugged looks. His mouth, however, was a meth-ravaged black hole. His eyes were glazed pits, leading into nothingness. They showed a glimmer of life in the form of animosity when he saw me standing in the doorway. "Well if it ain't Marvin Earlywine," he announced, "I thought sure you'd turned into some kind of transvestite up in that big city; you always did have the hair for it. I'm goddamn proud to see you didn't come back to Kentucky with a set of tits." A scowl darkened Junior's face. I consciously forced my teeth together to keep from rising to the bait.

"Well it looks like we got a regular fuckin' Bob Vila here," Junior declared, "and it's a damn good thing too, this place could use a little work."

"I reckon the old lady's gained a pound or two; I keep having to replace the floorboards in this joint."

"Shut up, Dwayne," the floozy on the couch squealed.

"Go on, now," he told her, "I wanna talk to the boy."

"Who's the chick?" Junior asked after she had disappeared into the back bedroom and we had seated ourselves on the filthy furniture.

"That's Cindy, or Debbie, or whoever," Dwayne answered. "Don't worry about her; she ain't good for much other than laying around in that bedroom and snortin' up a crazy check once a month. Sometimes she'll go bring in a little cash dancin' up at them bars in Lexington. That's why I keep her around." Dwayne was matter-of-fact about it, as if the relationship was a normal fact of existence. When he got himself situated on the couch, he pulled a half full pint of Wild Turkey 101 from his tool belt and set it on the table. "Have a drink there boy; drink to your old daddy's health if nothin' else.

"I don't care for any whiskey," Junior answered with slight hesitance.

"Does your fag boyfriend object? Are you my son or some fuckin' neutered puppy?"

"I ain't your son, you tweaked out piece of shit. You ain't no father and I ain't nobody's son. Gimme that goddamn whiskey." Junior scooped up the pint and before I had time to blink, he had it upside down and sucking at it so hard that bubbles gurgled up into the bottle. This is going to get real bad before it's over, I thought. As he drank, I could see rage beginning to darken Junior's face. He was trembling slightly, as if at war with some murderous compulsion that was bringing itself to life within him.

Dwayne, however, was not finished.

"I asked you out here to talk to you like a man, to see if we could sort out some of this nonsense between us. But you can't get the message and come out here by yourself, can you? You're scared of me, all on account of all them beatin' I give you growin' up. I tried my best to toughen you up, but I see now you're like to take after your mother. I sorted her out and I'll sort you out too."

"I don't need anybody to sort me out!" Junior was on his feet now, and he towered over his father and shook his fist at him. I tried to slink into the couch even further, hoping that by burying myself I could make all of this not happen. "I don't want you in my life, you fucked up old man, not ever!" He was shouting in Dwayne's face now, and spit flew from his mouth with every syllable.

"Sit down boy, I ain't gonna have you cryin' like a girl in your father's house. Sit your ass down."

Junior had no intention of backing down. Out of some alternate dimension his fist came flying around in a sucker punch that took Dwayne square in the mouth. Blood and teeth spattered across the coffee table like some gory abstract painting. And then

the older man was up, his crimson, dripping mouth contorted in a grimace of rage—or was it satisfaction? His right hand darted viper-like to the tool belt at his waist and pulled out a fiberglass handled roofing hammer. “I see I’m gonna have to teach you the same lesson I taught your whore of a mother.”

I will remember the next instant the way some people recall their first kiss or the first time they are made to look upon a dead relative lying in a casket. The moment is burned into the fabric of my consciousness such that sometimes it seems that it is my only true memory. It seemed to happen in some kind of weird slow motion shutter frame action: Dwayne raising the hammer, bringing it down in a single, arcing trajectory into his son’s skull. It made a dull sound, like whacking a sandbag with a baseball bat. He brought the hammer down again and again, and then turned it around claw first and struck again. I was showered with a rain of warm blood and pieces of skull. The last reasoned thought that traveled through my mind was that it was my own urine running down my pants leg.

Then I was running rabid and spooked back out through the doorway, and into the night. I ran without direction, my consciousness trying futilely to grasp for some kind of sanity. I scaled the barbed wire fence in the backyard and ran through dry and cracked pastures, cognizant only of the pounding in my ears. I ran for eternity, until my chest and legs began to rebel against me. I collapsed in a hard-packed field among the severed stalks of tobacco plants that jutted from the ground like accusatory fingers. I felt wetness on my hands, and looked down to see them bathed in blood. Was it Junior’s? Had I been sprayed with it in his final moments? Or had I just clawed myself bloody? My mind refusing to process the holocaust my eyes had reported? The answers didn’t seem to matter. I lay there in the field, sucking at the air desperately and digging my balled fists into the earth around me.

After a time, I began to feel human again. I lurched to my feet, willing myself to stay upright. I began to retrace my steps back toward the trailer, pausing periodically to listen for sounds of Dwayne coming for me. When I reached the yard, I tiptoed quietly to Junior’s truck and opened the driver’s side door gingerly, praying that it didn’t squeak. I let out a breath as the door swung out smoothly.

The handgun was right under the seat where Junior had left it, and I pulled it out and felt its heft. I had never shot a firearm of any kind before, but I had watched a movie or two. I touched a release that held the clip in place and confirmed that it was loaded. I slid the clip back in place and punched a button that I thought was the safety. As I walked up to the front door, I heard voices from inside. They sounded surreal in the stillness.

“My boy, my baby boy,” Dwayne was blubbing thickly. He sounded even more intoxicated than before. “I didn’t mean it. I didn’t. He’s my son for Christ’s sake . . .”

“They gonna have mercy on you, Dwayne,” replied his live-in girlfriend in her soulless voice, “you was provoked, attacked. Ain’t no jury in this county gonna convict you. You just calm down now.”

As I stood there watching the last vestiges of my innocence drifting away into the cool night, I thought of the little white crosses back along the road. I could see three of them—one for a father, one for a son, and third I supposed was for me. Father, Son, Holy Ghost. All crucified together for each other. I was like fog, crawling along the Nile, creeping across the threshold to take my vengeance. There was no lamb’s blood on this door. “Sometimes you gotta take a stand,” Junior’s words replayed in my head. It was past time for mine. I opened the front door with my finger on the trigger.