

Cameron McBride

Creating Short Stories

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Charlie Sticks

I watched them put Dale Preslar in the ground on Friday. The temperature hovered around freezing, and the translucent particles of a dense, icy mist stuck to everything like flecks of soap. Brown and stiff leaves, long dead and fragile and scattered like seed, crawled across the ground and its patches of dirty ice in the brief intervals of wind.

The funeral procession had begun at the Sewanee War Memorial Cross, whose towering white marble dissolved into the low-slung clouds, and wound its way through the campus. The chancellor, president, and Dale's colleagues from the university walked slowly, fitted out in black, heads bowed and feet shuffling like Buddhist monks, behind an old black Cadillac hearse that bore the body to its cold, moist sepulcher. The grave was behind a mossy knoll and next to a bishop's.

When they got to the cemetery, a phalanx of bodies obscured the sight of Dale's committal. I stood behind the crumbling perimeter wall with my hands in my pockets, and tried to make sense of the noises coming from the huddle. Tall Victorian tombstones, weathered and glazed with ice, peopled the spaces between the bereaved. The priest's voice was loud and rich with reverence, but I couldn't make out what he was saying. I saw Chief Parrot on the fringe of the crowd, looking in my direction. I put a hand up that said, "Howdy Frank," in the most solemn and cordial of ways, and he nodded his head slightly and turned back to the service.

I noticed the fingernails of my raised hand were still outlined in dirt, even though I'd showered, scrubbed my arms with dish soap, shaved and had on my best suit. I bet Dale had his

good suit on, too. On what was left of him, anyway. I watched the crowd uncurl from his headstone and retreat through the garden of monoliths like an army of carpenter ants, moaning and sighing like death never happened before and might never happen again.

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There was a loud series of knocks at my door on Thursday morning. I parted the dusty blinds in my bedroom and saw Chief Parrot's patrol car and a government Crown Vic in the driveway. I stood for a long time in front of the window, letting the rapping on the door and the voices from outside grow in urgency and volume. I threw on a robe and went to greet my visitors.

"Good morning, Frank," I said with a forced smile. "What can I do for you?"

"Morning, Charlie. Hate to bug you like this, but me and the Feds here have a couple of questions we need to ask you. About Stan. You mind if we come inside?"

"Not a bit. You come on in and make yourselves comfortable." I opened the door wide, and swept my arm back in a welcoming gesture. "You all want any coffee?"

"None for me, thanks," said Chief Parrot. "You boys want any?" The agents shook their heads no. They didn't have on the dark, mirrored sunglasses, or earpieces like you see in the movies. They were clean-shaven, square-jawed kids maybe three years out of the academy, wearing blue windbreakers with big, yellow block letters that read D.E.A. They settled themselves on the couch with a sort of youthful arrogance to their posture, and Chief Parrot slouched in the recliner. He had a new cap on, the seal of the university embossed in gold across the flat surface of its peak, and the brim bent into a triangle. His eyes were still and deep-set, like the eyes I have seen in old folks who have lost their sight but not yet their minds. I sat across from the officers on the edge of the coffee table.

“Now Charlie, we got to ask you about Stan. We have reason to believe that he was operating the methamphetamine lab that blew up and killed Dale Preslar on Monday.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “I know Stanley’s had his share of problems with the law, but he hasn’t been back in town for ages, and he ain’t never messed with any meth that I know of. You know Stanley, Frank. Does he seem like the type of kid to get caught up with that mess? We Sticks are God-fearers, after all. Always have been.” I gave him as sorry a look as I could, trying to conjure from my emotions the template of worry.

“I know you, Charlie. I used to know Stan. But these boys here have had an eye on your brother for some time now. They’ve got pictures and store surveillance of him buying up Sudafed and whatnot all over the area. And we have an eyewitness that I.D.’d Stan running through the woods after the explosion.”

“I just- I don’t believe it. God ‘amighty, I would have known if he’d...” I sat with my eyes downcast, thinking. Be calm, Charlie. Regulate your breathing.

“I know it’s hard to believe, Charlie,” Frank said. “But the government has proof that he’s been doing his shopping in the valley. And we have an eyewitness near the crime scene. Now I can get a warrant to search your place, but I thought I’d come here to ask you if you wouldn’t mind if we looked around a bit. Nothing invasive, just a browse.” He paused, and his eyes drifted over to the window. “I wanted to ask you in person, Charlie.”

My heart shot to the back of my throat, and my brain raced with futility, unable to gather specific fragments of thought or idea to piece together coherently. “Okay,” I said, and never took my eyes off the floor. I sat there, staring at an infinite point on the rug for what seemed like hours, while they searched my house. Then, a heavy hand fell on my shoulder, and Frank Parrot wheeled around in front of me.

“Well, I’m mighty glad we’re coming up empty handed here, Charlie. We appreciate your cooperation.”

“It’s no problem, Frank. You boys need anything else, you let me know. God bless.” The trio of officers moved for the door, and then Frank stopped and turned to me. He came up close to my ear, and whispered, “You don’t want to be an accomplice, Charlie. If you know anything, you call me at home.” The bass of his voice sent the skin on my neck crawling, and I nodded compliantly and showed the men out. They got in their cars and drove off.

I stood in motionless silence after they left, listening to the roar of my blood’s quick current and the noise of my heart, and staring at a painting of Jesus Christ hanging by a nail on the back of the door. Then, I felt a presence behind me.

“Where did you go?” I asked without turning around.

“Crawl space. Nearly shit myself I was so scared- Charlie, do they know anything?”

“They know you’re missing, and they’ve got a file on you. Did you have any idea the government was trailing you?” I turned around to look at Stanley’s face. Above the carpet of unruly stubble, terrific tracts of excoriated flesh, and the deep age lines carved in his skin sat his bright, unspoiled sapphire eyes, which gave him the look of a child wearing a grotesque mask. He had the sense to go ahead and shave off his hair. Good boy, I thought. Too bad it doesn’t-

“No, sir. No. Sir. I was being real careful, I thought,” Stanley said.

“Well not careful enough, don’t you think? Doesn’t it appear that you weren’t careful enough? God dammit. If it had been a moonshine still, Frank Parrot would have been our best customer. People ought to know better than to go running around in these woods, anyway. Maybe if the government wasn’t busy trying to bust a couple of Joes who are hunting for their slice of the American Dream, they wouldn’t have so many damned problems. Boils my fuckin’

blood.” I stood with my hands on my hips, shaking my head. “And you are sure the whole damn lab was burned up in the explosion? No evidence for Frank Parrot and his government friends to find, then?”

“Charlie, that damn lab went to hell. You heard it. There ain’t nothing left of that place.”

Stanley stuttered and twitched badly, either from the fear or the jones, maybe both.

“Well there was enough evidence for them to conclude that it was a meth lab, right Stanley? What about the place in Georgia?”

“Still safe as far as I know.”

“Good boy. There’s a prepaid phone and two grand under the floorboard in my bedroom. I want you to get them and get the hell out of here at midnight. Take the trail through the woods, and make your way down across the state line. I’ll call you when things die down. Until then, you get in the basement and you stay there, and you be ready to get your ass into the crawlspace again if you need to.” I put a hand on his naked, blistered shoulder and squeezed tight. Stanley moaned, but I held my grip. “And Stanley, keep your mouth shut. What do we say about kinfolk, huh?”

“I will, Charlie. I will. ‘Blood has to look out for blood,’ like you say. You and me is all that’s left. I won’t ever tell nobody, even if I get caught.”

“Even if you get caught,” I echoed. “There’s a jar of corn liquor down there. Take a couple of pulls and settle down.”

“I will, Charlie. You sure is good to me.”

“I know, Stanley. Now get your ass back down to the basement.” I checked the kitchen drawer after Stanley left. The nickel-finished steel was cold and smooth as fish flesh in my

hands. I stood staring out of the window, clicking the cylinder over and over again, the metal and its singular purpose resonant through my entire body.

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Stanley had showed up at my back door on Wednesday night. His naked torso was covered in welts and blisters. Parts of his long, blond hair were singed black and curled up like they themselves had recoiled from the flames and got stuck. He was a gross caricature of his former self. Stanley Sticks the all-state quarterback. Stanley Sticks the homecoming king. Poor kid wasn't content to just cook the stuff.

I spent nearly an hour questioning and berating him. He told me that he was out in the woods when he saw Dale Preslar lumbering towards the lab, hollering, "Sally! Sally!" and groping around like a blind man. He told me that he saw Dale's leg snag on a length of fishing wire, and then the next thing he remembered was being on his back on the forest floor. He said he got up and ran like hell, and spent the last two days cowering in the woods like a wounded animal. When he talked, his body contorted like a man in a constant state of half-seizure, the way a frog, when caught by one hind leg, will still try to jump away with the other. I dressed his cuts and burns and gave him a glass of water. I was beside myself with rage and worry, pity and fear. My hands would not stop shaking.

I put Stanley in the basement. No, he couldn't have a cot. If someone were to come looking for him, I couldn't have a whole bedroom set up for nobody down there. I draped a blue tarp over the workbench, and that's where he slept. I sat in my kitchen for a long time, watching the brown liquid in the bottle of George Dickel progressively vanish. Stanley had compromised the whole damn operation. I sat for a long time. How could he be so stupid? The gears churning in my head, slowly, deliberately, ruthlessly.

Outside in the dead silence of the Tennessee night, an owl began its monotonous interrogation. The voice was quiet at first, aimless and detached. It grew louder, like the owl itself was right outside my kitchen window, not satisfied with anything except an answer from me and committed to getting it. I saw the solemn bird sitting at the other end of the old formica table, looking at me with those great, night-defeating eyes and asking me the only question of his vocabulary. I thought the answer, but didn't dare say it. The owl, as if satisfied by my unsaid reply, ceased his calling. I saw him gliding away silently, his serrated wings cleaving the undisputed blackness of the forest where unseen he could see everything.

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On Tuesday morning I had been measuring out pain pills for Lucretia Thomas- 5721 Otter Falls Road, Sewanee, TN, 37383, physician Dr. Robert Ivey, Take Before Bedtime, Do Not Operate Heavy Machinery Under the Influence Of- when my supervisor told me Dale Preslar was killed in the explosion the day before, and that's all I heard about for the rest of the day.

Spoiled, uppity, out of state kids from the university came in to pick up their attention deficit drugs and mentioned it to me like it was last weekend's football game, like we were on friendly terms. "So, did you hear about Professor Preslar? Wild, huh?" Ignorant kids with every advantage in life shoved into their greedy little hands on a silver platter, and they don't give two damns.

"Sure did," I said. "A real tragedy."

And the old folk who had lived here all their life came in and said "Oh what a shame," or some other one-dimensional platitude. And one of Chief Parrot's deputies came in to talk about it, since he had nothing better to do.

"Shouldn't you be up at the crime scene?" I asked.

“Hell, Chuck. Can’t everyone be up there. ‘Sides, the feds showed up. They’re running the show now. Say it was a meth lab that exploded.”

“In our county? A meth lab? Come on now, Ricky.”

“Honest injun, Chuck. Officers from the drug enforcement agency and everything. Said that the place was probably booby-trapped. Can’t really tell and all, what with their being so little evidence. Like a small nuke went off in the woods out there, I tell you. I bet it was folks from the valley, come up here from old trouble to start new trouble. God ‘amighty, some mess. Poor Dale, pieces of him everywhere.” Ricky paused and tugged at his gun belt and leaned one elbow on the countertop. “Had to get a big ol’ stick to get his arm out of a tree. Got a good look at his face. Can’t for the life of me figure out why Dale Preslar would be out messing around a methamamphetamine lab. Found his dog caught on a spool of chicken wire three miles down the mountain at Hank Reed’s place. I know Dale was a drinker, but meth? No way. Not a professor. Not a gentleman like that.” I motioned for Ricky to come close, and I leaned over to whisper in his ear.

“It’s usually the folks that seem normal, what have the darkest secrets.” I drew back to look him straight in his dull, bovine eyes. “And you sure you should be running that mouth about all this? Might want to keep those details to yourself, you know.” His fresh, young face turned yellow, then bright red, and his expression slackened the way a body does, like a taut string cut loose, when death is instantaneous.

“Right, Chuck. Good call. You have a good one, now.”

“Okay Ricky, see you at church on Sunday. Oh- and how’s that wife of yours?”

“Just fine, Chuck. Just fine. Baby’s due in a month or so.”

“God bless you kiddos. Take care, now. Keep warm. Let me know if I can do anything for the two of you.” I went back to filling prescriptions. Idiot, I thought as I looked down at my hands. They were red from my wringing them.

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I was reading at home on Monday evening when the glass in my window frames trembled, and low rumbles shot across the county. At the time I thought it might be the guys blasting away in the quarry.

I don't know what Dale's death was like exactly, but I have the scene set down in my mind's eye. Dale Preslar is walking his big golden retriever just like he does every evening. Something, maybe Stanley, catches the dog's attention, and it sets off into the woods. Dale runs after it, his fat face jiggling, red behind his salt and pepper goatee, his breath short and ginged, his strides short and haggard. Dale calls the dog's name in the dwindling light of the forest, the sun cutting its path through the leafless trees, stretching the shadows of the raised and barren limbs, and maybe there is a light breeze. Dale calls the dog's name again and sets off in a different direction. The light dims even more, and Dale notices the outline of a raised piece of land in a small, distant clearing, and when he gets closer he sees there is a door and a little, squat chimney. Dale's pulse quickens, and he approaches the hut, still calling the dog's name. Dale gets close to the hut and the cuff of his pleated suit pants snags on something.

He would not have had any time to think about his life, about the things he had achieved or regrets. Maybe he was conscious for a bit before he bled to death. Maybe in the light of the flames he caught a glimpse of his arm in the tree above him, or of Stanley coming-to. But that kind of awareness can't last for long. And so he died, Dale Preslar- the Sewanee professor, the Harvard graduate and father of three, on the forest floor. These things happen. Death does. To

everyone, eventually. To some it happens prematurely, but it only seems premature to us. To the stars, each expiration occurs exactly when it should. Some flames are pinched out while others leap to life, and still others flicker on towards inevitability and quietude and lightlessness. We are all one thing or the other. Nothing lamentable or tragic about any of it. Kind of beautiful, in its own way.

The trembling of that Monday earth faded quickly, diminishing like ripples on a quiet pond, and I put my book down on an end table and walked to the window. In the distance, a wisp of black smoke danced above its hidden source, and the far-off cry of sirens began. The fading sunlight gave the underbellies of gray clouds the brilliant look of molten metal. I put a sweaty hand against the cold windowpane. Snow began to fall.