

The Tarleton Way

by Jason Ryan Dale

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Alexander watched the twin dots of light race closer and closer like the eyes of some hungry beast pursuing its prey. The growling of the engine grew louder until it drowned the nighttime whisper of the woods. As he stood at the center of the gravel path through which the beast would have to pass, Alexander worked hard to bind all his fear deep in his chest before it was too late.

The pickup stopped just inches from his stomach. The world behind the headlights was a dance of shadows. Alexander glared at the darkness, waiting for the beast to decide what to do with him.

The cries of a squeaky door rose above the rumbling motor. "Evening," said someone from the driver's seat.

Stepping slowly to the side of the road, Alexander sought out the owner of the voice. The roof of the cab had an old, yellowing light bulb. In the sickly glow he could just make out a smallish man leaning on the elbow between the door and the frame of the truck.

"This is not a public street," Alexander called. "You should not be back here!"

The man ran his fingers through the black beard on his chin. Alexander saw red flame tattoos stretching as far as the wrist.

"We know that, mister," he said. "We're sorry if we disturbed you."

"Well 'sorry' isn't good enough," said Alexander. A shard of pain stabbed his knee, but he knew it was just his arthritis. "There's nothing back there for you. You're trespassing."

"I know it must look that way, mister," the man said in calm, patient tones, "but we got permission."

"From who?" Alexander demanded, trying hard to stare the man down. The driver had some sort of birthmark near his eye that Alexander found distracting. "The township hasn't authorized any activity back there. I would have heard about it."

"Our boss talked to a guy named Amos," said the man.

Alexander's heart sank. "Jimmy Amos?"

"That's right. He gave us the keys. Here." A jingling sound echoed from the cab. "Now I'm sorry if we woke you, mister, but I think we both got things we'd rather be doing right now."

Steel banged on steel as the man closed his door, though the bulb stubbornly kept burning. Groaning gravel pellets followed the truck as it moved again, down towards the main road. Alexander watched the man pass and marveled at the tree trunk-like bicep that hung from the window. Peering into the rearview, he realized the man did not have a birthmark after all. High on his cheek, a teardrop shape had been drilled into the skin with a tattoo needle.

Alone in the woods, Alexander resigned himself to one more night with the unhappy mystery that had invaded his life one week ago. The night air blew across his shoulders and the arthritis in his knees was kindling again, but a restless impulse pushed him further down the gravel path.

The ring of houses on top of the hill kept vigil over Alexander as he made his way through shades of grasping branches. Their lights shining through the trees seemed to flicker as he walked. What Alexander and the rest of the town called "woods" or "the Park" was really a basin of unkept land, a flood plain for the creek when it swelled after a heavy rain. In old suburbs like Tarleton, where a honeycomb of trimmed backyards and storefronts covered the landscape, any green space was rare and, to some, precious.

Alexander didn't need the starlight to find his way. He was guided by memory. Soon he reached the twisting, interlocking chains that barred any further travel.

He could only think of this place in the sun. Like snow under a warm sky, the cracked concrete and striving weeds melted away. All around, Alexander could see in the old what once was new.

* * * * *

“Can I have another cheeseburger, Mr. Vauxhall?” said Jeannie McCandless. The scene came back in halting snapshots. For reasons he never understood, the girl's crooked smile and matted black hair always tumbled down effortlessly through forty years of memory.

“Sure, sweetie,” said Alexander. He grinned as he stabbed the meat and wrestled it into the bun. Jeannie was not a pretty girl, nor did she grow into an attractive woman, but something in her eye and in the way she mangled her vowels had stuck to Alexander after all these years.

She smiled when she took the food, her face framed by the brilliant turquoise of the pool. The water seemed alive with shimmering waves and the bobbing heads of children at play. Sounds of splashing and babbling voices bounced off the walls of the bathhouse, punctuated often by the odd scream. There was always screaming down at the Swim Club, but somehow it never seemed to signify anything sinister.

“You're a hell of a hand at that grill, Vauxhall,” said a voice behind him. A bulbous gut rose above his work area.

“Some of us have the gift, Jimmy,” said Alexander.

Jimmy Amos was a friend to everyone who lived in Tarleton. Every door got a knock at least once a year from Jimmy, for the sake of the boy's basketball team, the Fourth of July Fireworks Committee, the Volunteer Fire Company Breakfast, or the Beef and Beer Benefit for the family of Ricky Owens or Paul Larossa, or another tragic face on a gold and red leaflet. Children who did not know his name knew him by sight. His round, swaying frame hovered over them as they crisscrossed backyards, and they knew instinctively that he would take their misdeeds back to their parents. Businesspeople went to Jimmy before any trip to the Township Building, asking about building codes and zoning laws whose invisible grasp they feared might strangle them if not for his help. In winter, when snow and ice came to the tight, unwieldy roads of Tarleton, it was Jimmy's number you called if you thought your cul-de-sac or backstreet was being ill-served by the municipal workers whose snow plows were sometimes slow in their sacred responsibility.

“Pretty good turnout,” said Alexander.

Jimmy nodded. “Pretty good.”

Alexander turned over a batch of meat paddies. “Think it'll be enough?”

“Don't know. We'll meet later and count it all up” Waddling away to the next stop on his rounds, Jimmy yelled to a group of children. “Hey! Slow down! You know the rules.”

A bag of ice exploded onto the chest beside Alexander, drowning dozens of sodas and ginger ales. Two bony arms retracted under a stenciled rib cage. “Is that going to be enough, Mr. Vauxhall?”

Alexander sensed his answer had the power to break the boy's heart.

“That's fine, Bobby. Have some food.”

“Are you sure you don't need anything else?” said the boy. Though Bobby was barely a teenager, his long neck stretched well over Alexander's head.

“I'm sure. You've been helping all day. Why don't you go and sit down.” Alexander turned toward the rows of picnic tables behind them. “Hey Cassie! Do you have room for Bobby over there?”

Unlike Jeannie, Alexander's daughter had been beautiful. A flawless beechwood mane flew

from her shoulders over a smile that was too big for her face. She was giggling at the center of four or five other girls, gesturing wildly with her hands to make the emphasis that words alone could never achieve. Since Cassie didn't seem to hear, Alexander was about to repeat his call, but Bobby interrupted. "It's okay, Mr. Vauxhall. I'll find someplace."

Alexander watched him slink away, towards a corner where no one would see him.

* * * * *

The arthritis in Alexander's knee renewed its assault. Feeling in the dark, he found a slice of a tree stump that seemed willing to hold his weight as he sat and recovered. On the other side of the fence, he could just make out the edge of the pool. Past the rocky lip of the coping, a row of brown, furry reeds stood ready for duty. A sign on the bathhouse that once read "Tarleton Swim Club" now said something more like "Ta on Swi." The township was supposed to maintain these grounds, but Alexander knew no one ever came back here. No one, that is, until one week ago.

The picnic tables and the grill were long gone. When the Board decided the pool wouldn't open, all of it had been sold on something called "e-Bay," along with the ladders and the diving boards, to pay the last of the outstanding bills. The snot-nosed son of the new president was very proud of the price he got.

Alexander still saw them, though.

* * * * *

The tables were where they gathered when all the food had been served. The Board of Directors for Tarleton Swim Club had twelve members, but only four who mattered. Anything that could reasonably bear the name "decision" was made at meetings like this one, far away from the public sessions that were advertised in bulk mailings that went out in February.

"That's two hundred from the food," said Jimmy. "Good work, Alex. Five hundred from the raffle. That's a little worse than we were hoping. Okay, Brian. With what's left of the bond fees, does that put us over?"

Alexander knew the answer from the weight that seemed to press on the treasurer's shoulders. "Well," said Brian. "I'm afraid we're going to have to wait another year."

Mrs. O'Leary's punctured tire sigh did service for Alexander's feelings too. "Damn it!" she spat, blue hairs bobbing up and down. "I thought we had it this year."

"I did too, Mrs. O," said Jimmy, eyes wide with the pain they were all feeling. "I guess if the kids have waited this long, they can wait one more year."

Rubbing her glasses on her blouse, Mrs. O'Leary shook her head. "Motherfucker!"

"Now Mrs. O," said Brian. "We all knew not to get our hopes up. These things take time."

"We've been at this fundraising shit for three years in a row," said Mrs. O'Leary. "I ask you? How hard should it be?"

"We shouldn't give in to a recriminating tone, Mrs. O," said Jimmy. "We'll get there next year. The Lord will provide."

Mrs. O'Leary had more cursing to do before joining her husband by the pool. Jimmy quickly found a gaggle of parents he hadn't yet showered in handshakes and kisses.

"Brian," said Alexander as he packed up his grilling forks. "What happened?"

"What do you mean, Alex?" said Brian. "You heard the meeting."

"I heard. I also saw the budget you laid out for the new lighting system. Remember? When you were drawing out cash for me to buy food with."

"Oh yeah," said Brian. "So?"

The ketchup taste in Alexander's mouth turned sour. "There's no way we didn't have enough money this time. There's just no way."

Brian peeked to his right and his left, then leaned over Alexander's ear. "Technically, you're right, Alex. Technically, the cash is there."

Alexander zipped his carrier bag. "So what's the problem?"

"There's no problem," said Brian. "Jimmy says it'll be next year."

"What?" said Alexander.

"Jimmy says we can have the lights next year. So no big deal. Right?"

"This is a big deal," said Alexander. "We've been working really hard on this. Mrs. O went door to door telling everyone about the new lights and how the pool will be open later. This just isn't right."

"I hear what you're saying, Alex," said Brian. "But Jimmy says it'll be next year. He needs the money this year."

"Needs the money for what?"

"I don't know."

Alexander squinted. "What?"

"I don't ask Jimmy his business."

"You're the treasurer. This is your business."

"Not always," said Brian. "Look. How did you get here? Who knocked on your door and asked if you wanted to be part of a swim club?"

"That's not the issue," said Alexander.

"Sure it's the issue. It was the same guy who knocked on my door. Jimmy's the one who makes this place happen. This is his temple. He's Pope Jimmius the First. If you got a problem with that, why don't you run for president in the Fall?"

"You know that'd never work," said Alexander. "Even if I wanted to, Jimmy's too popular. I just think this stinks, Brian. There's a limit to what you can excuse."

"Alex," said Brian. "We'll have the lights next year. Is this really the point of no return? Are these the dark deeds that will haunt us in years to come?"

* * * * *

The massages that Alexander had been pressing into his knee were beginning to take effect. The tinkling creek had made it easy to dream, but now the winter cold was working its way through the layers of his jacket.

Was a memory like a freight train? he wondered. Can you sidestep it, or pull a string and stop its terrible momentum. If so, Alexander had never learned how.

* * * * *

Only the closest of Jimmy's circle remained at the Club. Technically, they closed at seven, but that was just a signal to let everyone know when they tapped the keg. The Club had no liquor license, but Chief Taylor was a friend of Jimmy's.

Alexander sat in the shade alone. The beer in his hand was not his first of the evening.

Cassie walked up behind him. "I'm going back to the house," she said. "Can Maggie and Sophie sleep over tonight?"

"Ask your mother," Alexander said, then called to her back, "and be careful."

"Dad," Cassie said with intense frustration. "I can see the house from here."

"Don't talk back," said Alexander, lifting the beer to his lips again.

Jimmy was at his usual perch by the keg, holding court with a dozen people. Every now and then a woman would laugh, which was a constant when Jimmy was around.

“You slippery little turd!”

The shout had come from the parking lot. Most of Jimmy's crew had heard it, but their conversation managed to push forward anyway.

Alexander stood up.

“I told you I needed you today!”

The bathhouse blocked Alexander's view of the parking lot. A moment passed before he could position himself better.

“You shit on me, you shiftless son of a bitch!”

Ed Hanlon stood beside a beast of a work truck, grasping his son by the collar of his shirt, pulling him back and forth between the cars. Though he towered over his father, Bobby made no move to defend himself.

“Come here!” cried Hanlon, dragging the boy's head to the ground. With open hands, the man rained blow after blow down upon Bobby's face and torso, muttering incoherent nonsense.

Alexander now stood between Jimmy's crew and the parking lot. Someone let out a nervous drunk laugh.

“That's not right,” Alexander said to himself.

“Now now, Alex,” Jimmy's voice sounded behind him. “Just. . . just let them work it out.”

Realizing he'd been heard, Alexander turned and looked at Jimmy's bloated face and distended belly. “It's not right.”

Hanlon seemed to gain energy from his exertions. Every now and then, he let go with a closed fist, and a deep thud rumbled through the air.

Without his knowing, Alexander's feet had begun making their way to the fence. He could feel a dozen pair of eyes boring through his back.

“Hey Hanlon!” yelled Alexander. “Why don't you bring him round the gate. We can't quite see you, and we know how proud you are of the way you treat your children.”

Two round eyes over flaring nostrils looked into Alexander's face. He watched the red drain from the man's cheeks, replaced by white pulses of shame.

A round of applause sounded from the rear.

Alexander allowed himself a smirk as he watched Hanlon retreat. The smile did not fade even as he watched Bobby stuff himself into the truck beside his father, uncertain of what had just happened.

* * * * *

The site of Alexander's triumph was now locked behind a lattice of steel. With a groan, he raised himself from the tree stump and turned back the way he'd come.

In the dark, a pair of hinges squeaked open, somewhere where no one should be. Alexander hobbled behind a tree and peered past the chain links.

He'd come from the filter room on the far side of the bathhouse, that much was clear. A big man with broad shoulders and a shaved head, he walked without hurrying along the side of the building. Alexander shivered in empathy when he saw the man was naked. His buttocks quivered in the night air. Tattoos of spiderwebs and strange symbols covered most of his skin.

A flashlight appeared in his hand. Removing a bucket from some hiding place, the man began to scrub himself from head to toe. Several times he grunted in pain, but for the most part he went about his work with admirable efficiency. Soon he was drying himself with a towel, and

pulling a jacket and a pair of jeans from the darkness.

Alexander watched him finally bound up the path to the back gate, moving along the broken trail with the confidence that comes from long practice.

2

“You should never have been down there!” Alexander was glad the telephone dulled the edge of his daughter's shrieking voice. “Damn it! It's not your responsibility!”

“Oh, Cassie,” said Alexander. “It's practically in my backyard. I can see the gravel path through my window right now from where I'm standing.”

“Yeah, but Dad! You're eighty four years old! You can't go traipsing through the woods like some kid.”

“But Cassie. Who knows what's going on down there? These people have the run of the place. They could damage something. If the Club ever reopens. . .”

“They're never going to reopen, Dad. Hell. The township keeps trying to get state money to fill the pool in.”

“You don't know what the future holds, Cass. There are a lot of new families moving into town.”

Somehow the contempt in Cassie's chortle came through the receiver unblunted. “In that school district? If they're moving into Tarleton, they either got money for private school, or they don't have enough money for anywhere else. Either way, they're not going to shell out for a swim club bond.”

“Cassie!” said Alexander. “You grew up at that pool. You, and your sister, and a lot of other kids. It's important. It's not something you can just. . .”

“Dad,” said Cassie in the swift punch of a voice that her mother had used to scold her and her sister. “Maybe it's time you thought about moving out of that house. I know it's hard, but since Mom died, you haven't been the same. We should talk about options. I've been looking. . .”

With no little satisfaction, Alexander pressed his thumb to the big round button, sending his daughter's voice into the abyss from whence it had come.

Alexander swore when he heard his doorbell ring. He'd reached the age when his only visitors were selling something or bringing news of death. After the harangue from Cassie, Alexander was in no mood for either. “I'm coming,” he shouted. Stomping toward the door, he fitted himself with his best crotchety old man face.

The first thing Alexander noticed was the shadow across his doorstep. There was no sunlight at all coming through the window. He could not remember that ever happening before.

When he finally swung the door open, all he could see was a massive torso wrapped in a flannel shirt. He had to crane his neck to find a face to which he could address himself.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Vauxhall.”

A second passed as Alexander fought an attack of dumbness. “Bobby?” he said. The hair on the man's head had grayed at the temples, and his limbs had thickened. A trim goatee clung to his chin. The face had lengthened and creased in places, but still had the placid quality that Alexander remembered.

“Sorry to call unannounced.” The voice was like weary thunder, totally different than the one Alexander had known. “Am I disturbing you?”

“No,” said Alexander. “Come in, please.”

Bobby had to tilt at the waist to avoid the chandelier in the foyer. “I was sorry to hear about Mrs. Vauxhall,” he said. “She was a nice lady.”

“Yes,” said Alexander. “She was.”

They walked towards the living area, but Bobby stopped at one of the walls between the rooms. “That looks familiar.”

Alexander stood at Bobby's shoulder and peered at the framed pictures. “Yes. I like to keep those close.”

“There's the Fourth of July party,” Bobby said, pointing to the grainy photos. “There's old Mrs. O'Leary. I always liked her.”

“Me too.” Waves of warmth fell on Alexander as he watched Bobby scan his mementos. Only rarely did he have a chance to share his memories.

“There's your girls,” said Bobby. “I always had a crush on Cassie, but I guess all the boys did. How's she doing?”

“She's well.” Alexander tried to keep his answer brief, but he couldn't help elaborating. Soon he was knee-deep in a history of both his daughters, a clipped report of all five of his grandchildren, and a blurb for his great-grandson. Bobby nodded his head with serene patience, sometimes asking polite, encouraging questions, but Alexander finally tired. “Would you like to sit down?”

“Yes. Why don't we?”

“So tell me what you've been up to,” said Alexander, settling into his favorite lounge chair. “Ever see anyone from the old school?”

“I've been away a long time.”

Alexander waited for him to explain, but Bobby just sat on the sofa, studying the ceramic coasters on the coffee table.

“So what brings you here?”

Grave focus came over Bobby as he spoke. “I heard you've had some disturbances lately.”

Alexander bolted in his chair. “That's true! How did you hear? I've only spoken to Cassie. And the police, of course.”

“I thought so,” said Bobby. “It's good you haven't talked to many people, Mr. Vauxhall.”

“Oh?” said Alexander. His mind reeled as he tried to stitch together the threads of Bobby's words.

“That's why I'm here,” said the big man. “There's no need for a lot of fuss or trouble. We can handle this quietly. The Tarleton way.”

“Bobby,” said Alexander, “I don't understand.”

“You see Mr. Vauxhall, I'm responsible for the those men you've been seeing.”

“Responsible?” said Alexander. “Responsible how?”

“They work for me. I assumed Jimmy would have filled you in on all this.”

Alexander rubbed his eyes. “I didn't realize you and Jimmy were in touch.”

“Oh yes,” said Bobby. “We hooked up a few years ago. I've learned a lot from Mr. Amos, I don't mind telling you.”

“Really?” said Alexander. “I don't talk to him much anymore. How is he?”

“He's good. Florida really agrees with him. Yeah, he sent me his keys. That's how I set this whole thing up. I'm sorry if we've been bothering you.”

“Bobby,” said Alexander, “what exactly are you doing? What kind of business are you in?”

“Well that's a complicated subject, Mr. Vauxhall. I mean, we do a variety of things, really. We're kind of a hub for different organizations. I guess the best description for us is freelance logistics specialists.”

“I still don't understand. What do you do with the Swim Club?”

“Oh.” Bobby scratched his goatee. “Storage. It's kind of a way station between our other warehouses. Again, I'm sorry if my boys were disturbing you. I was just talking to Johnny Taylor, making sure there were no problems.”

Alexander ran his fingers through his hair. “You know Johnny Taylor?”

“Jimmy introduced us. Looks just like his Dad. Nice to have that kind of continuity in a police department. Good for the community.”

“Yes,” said Alexander. “I suppose it is.” His imagination couldn't help but dwell on Bobby's arms. Even through the striped shirt, he could see the sinews of muscle, like coiled pythons.

Bobby leaned forward in the sofa. “Mr. Vauxhall, I hope you know I would never do anything wrong or irresponsible when it came to that swim club.” His hazel eyes looked deep into Alexander. “I've got a lot of good memories of that place. . . and I don't have a lot of good memories of my life.”

“I believe you,” said Alexander. Head swimming, he wanted time to process what he'd heard. “Well then. If you have the permission of the police, I guess there's nothing left to say.”

Bobby stood up. They shook hands in the center of the room. It could have been his imagination, but Alexander thought Bobby tugged him closer as they shook.

“This is what I'm talking about,” said Bobby. “An understanding between old friends.” He gave up a warm, compassionate smile. “The Tarleton way.”

Alexander walked him to the door. “Oh yeah,” said Bobby. “I forgot. It looks like you missed some of your mail. Better check the box.”

“Thank you.” Alexander watched Bobby travel down his walkway, clearing the lawn in a few enormous steps.

Still bewildered by his visitor, Alexander lifted the steel lid of his mailbox. Inside he found a thick roll of dollar bills, folded neatly into a pocket-size rectangle.

* * * * *

That night Alexander sat upright in his bed, debating whether to go into the medicine cabinet where he kept the pills that helped him sleep. He wanted to sleep, but he didn't feel tired. On his dresser, the green lump of paper stared back at him.

* * * * *

“I know this is unpleasant for all of us.” He could still hear Jimmy and the cold gravity his voice took during board meetings. “We have to make a decision, though.”

Alexander drummed his fingers on Jimmy's dining room table. “This situation is totally out of hand. I don't see how we can avoid calling the police.”

“The police know perfectly well what's going on,” said Brian. “If they haven't done anything yet, it's because they're not inclined to.”

“Do you people know what we're talking about here?” said Alexander. “There's a teenaged boy living in our swim club!”

Sal Previte, the accountant who always felt the need to speak at the few meetings he attended, broke in. “Do we know how he got into the building in the first place? That's worrying by itself.”

“The building was just padlocked,” said Brian. “The filter is the size of this room and it's filled with sand. It's not like we ever worried about somebody stealing it.”

“It's winter,” said Mrs. Pinter, the waitress who usually just parroted whatever Jimmy had said. She'd only just joined the board, replacing Mrs. O'Leary, who'd passed the previous year.

“How does he keep warm?”

“I've spoken to the school principal,” said Jimmy. “The rumor is that he keeps a space heater inside, along with a hot plate.”

“Isn't the power cut off this time of year?” said Sal.

“He must have tapped into the grid directly,” said Brian. “It's hard to do, but Ed Hanlon is an electrician. The kid must have picked up the skills to pull it off.”

“That's theft,” said Alexander. “As well as trespassing. Look, I like the kid. I've always liked him. That's why I want to involve the police. It's no way to live.”

“We could do that, Alex,” said Jimmy. “We could.” His fat face was sagged in a frown. “But there are other considerations. Now, I've spoken to the boy's father.”

Alexander blanched. “If Ed Hanlon was any kind of father, none of us would be in this mess.”

Mrs. Pinter gasped in horror. The men at the table stood stone-faced.

“He's not one of my favorites, either,” said Jimmy. “But he's a man who's been through a lot. He works hard at his job and he's put up with a lot from that boy.”

“That's right,” said Brian with enthusiasm.

“Now if you look at what this kid has done,” said Jimmy. “Leaving his mother and father's home. Setting himself up in the middle of town. He must have known that word would get around. It seems to me there's more here than teenage shenanigans. I think this boy is deliberately trying to embarrass his family.”

“That's right,” said Mrs. Pinter.

“Calling the cops is probably just what he wants,” said Jimmy. “I think this is best done quietly. Keep it just in this room, the Tarleton way. If we ignore him, I think, in a few days, Bobby'll go back and work things out with his Mom and Dad.”

“I think that's a bad idea,” said Alexander, but, of course, after Jimmy had spoken, he could not convince the others at that table.

* * * * *

Why didn't he call the cops anyway? Or, if the cops still did nothing, the newspaper? As Alexander slid off the lid to the jar of pills, he wondered why it never occurred to him.

The sound of a truck engine rumbled through the bathroom windows.

3

Crocuses were punching their way through Alexander's lawn. Yard work was his primary exercise, so he kept at it for as long as his knee would let him. As he did every day, he fought the impulse to look at the gravel path. Two months' traffic had worn visible indentations in the rocks. Only when he was nearly finished did Alexander look up, surveying the park beyond his property.

* * * * *

For many years, a kaleidoscope of a flower bed had stood at the end of the yard. Alexander had been checking his bulbs for spring buds one morning when he heard a sound coming from the creek.

With a heavy heart, he picked his way through the woods. The boy was sitting where Alexander guessed he'd be, by the boulder that bent the creek into a little waterfall. Bobby was

reaching his arms underneath the gurgling stream, taking it in cuffed hands over his face and under his armpits. He wore no shirt.

“Bobby?” said Alexander, speaking quietly so as not to startle him.

Convulsions of shame flashed over Bobby's features, but he soon recovered and looked up from his work. “Hello, Mr. Vauxhall.”

“You must be freezing.”

Bobby shrugged. “It's okay. Better than it was a month ago.”

Alexander spied a bottle of shampoo on the ground. “Is that all you use to wash?”

“Yup,” said Bobby with a nervous smile. “It works okay, but I guess I won't be asking Cassie to the prom after all.” Pulling a corduroy shirt from under a rock, he stood up. Along his back was a series of strange markings that looked like red tiger stripes, except that some were crooked. Just before the skin was swallowed by the fabric, Alexander realized he was seeing the welts made by a leather belt.

“Are you okay, Bobby?” said Alexander as he watched the boy pass between twisting tree branches. “Why don't you come up to the house for a while?”

“It's okay, Mr. Vauxhall,” said Bobby without turning around. “I'll find someplace.”

* * * * *

Alexander had wanted to call after him, but couldn't think of anything to say. Forty years later, stumbling into his kitchen, he was still thinking.

* * * * *

“I think I'm going to be sick, Brian.” They were sitting at their picnic table again, watching Ed Hanlon string up a bank of brand new floodlights. “No one's seen Bobby for months. He just disappeared.”

“We weren't responsible for him,” said Brian. “We did what was right for the Club.”

“The Club?” said Alexander. “Jesus. If this is the price we pay, then what's the point?”

“Don't look at me,” said Brian. “I just wanted someplace to drink that didn't let the blacks in.”

* * * * *

Alexander had passed eighty years and fought in a war without ever hearing an explosion until that night. Somehow he managed to tumble out of bed and pull on his robe, though his knee fought him at every step.

The chain link fence was now a spiderweb silhouette against searing gold flames. Chunks of concrete littered the woods. Sirens echoed off the hill on all sides.

Yet, Alexander noted, what was left of the “Tarleton Swim Club” sign was still standing.

The news in the morning talked about something called a “meth lab.” The gorgeous woman behind the desk was talking to an officious looking man from the FBI. He explained about volatile chemicals, and the smell they created, so bad that it would follow you if you didn't scrub yourself down, and the segments of organized crime who supported these “activities.”

Alexander turned off the TV. Old men, he reasoned, can't be expected to learn too many lessons too soon.

THE END

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