

Carey Ford Compton

Mowin' Day



Junior hauled ass down Sheets Road, kicking up clumps of oiled gravel that clanked around in the wheel wells of his pickup.

“Gawdammit Candace, we’re gonna be late!” he said. A hand slapped him upside the head.

“Hush!” Candace said, settling low in the passenger seat. She propped one bare foot on the dash and the other out the window. “The Lord heard you say that. He don’t want you cursin’ on the way to His house.” She wiggled her toes in the breeze.

“We ain’t there yet. We’re gonna be late ‘cause a you.”

“Jesus don’t care if we’re late.”

Junior thumped his hand against the side of the pickup. “Hang on back there,” he hollered out the window. His teenage son and daughter hunkered down in the truck bed and braced themselves against the cab. With a rev, Junior drove over the bridge and hit a pothole on the other side, tossing the kids near a foot in the air. He heard a whoop of joy from the truck bed as they landed.

They got to the little white church just as the bell was done ringing. Candace tossed her flip-flops onto the ground next to them and stepped into them one at a time. The kids climbed out of the

truck bed and the four of them slipped in the front door as quietly as they could.

“There you are, Junior!” Pastor Max said, stepping down into the aisle to shake his hand. “I knew you’d be here. We waited a minute to start.”

“Thanks, we was runnin’ a bit late.” Junior pulled off his baseball cap and looked around. “Only ten today? Where’s Martha?”

“She wasn’t feeling good. But the Lord will be with her whether she’s here or home. Let’s get started.”

They sat by the open windows, hoping the August breeze would help cool down the stuffy sanctuary. A lone ceiling fan spun lazily above them and Candace fanned herself with a chunk of pages that fell out of one of the hymnals. They prayed for Martha and for their families and prayed especially hard for a young mother in town who lost her newborn son a couple of days before.

With a nod from the pastor, the wiry piano player hopped up from the first pew and got herself situated at the upright. Everyone else stood as well, searching through the books for the right song. The piano player plinked out the first line of the hymn and then cued everyone else in.

He knew the song because it was one they sang every week—“Little Brown Church in the Vale.”

There’s a church in the valley by the wild-wood, No lovelier spot in the dale, No place is so dear to my chi-ild-hood As the little white church in the vale, they sang. It had become a theme song for the little white church of theirs, and one Sunday, years ago, Pastor Max sat down to cross out each ‘brown’ and replace it with ‘white’ in spidery pencil.

There, close by the church in the valley, Lies the one that I loved so well, She sleeps, sweetly sleeps, ‘neath the willow, Disturb not her rest in the vale. As they sang, Junior saw movement outside the church window.

Come to the church in the wild-wood, Oh, come to the church in the vale, No spot is as dear to my chi-ild-hood As the little white church in the—“Oh Gawdammit,” Junior said.

Candace frowned and swung her hymnal at his face, connecting to his jaw with an audible *thump*. Then the rumble of a big engine flooded through the open windows, drowning out the piano and singers both. Ten heads turned and saw a great big rusty farm tractor towing a mower deck pass the window, mowing the pasture across the way. An old man hunched over the wide steering wheel, frowning

and pushing his lips out, a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. His right leg ended in a sock-covered stump just above the ankle, and he held the gas pedal down with a heavy cinder block instead. He looked in the church window, the shade from his cap casting his face in a dark shadow, and drove out of view.

“Junior, help me shut the windows, will ya?” Pastor Max shouted over the din. He and Junior pulled out the rulers, bricks, and books propping the windows open. The swollen wood creaked and squealed as they slid the sashes down. The old glass kept most of the sound out, but also kept all the heat in. Pastor Max wiped his forehead.

“That Ol’ Boy just has ta mow during service, don’t he?” Pastor Max asked. “Why don’t ya ask him ta stop, Junior? He likes you, far as I can tell—he might listen.”

“Ol’ Boy don’t like nobody,” Candace piped up. “He’s old an’ stubborn. It won’t do no good.”

“I reckon I can give it a shot,” Junior said.



The bartender cracked open a Bud and set it on a cardboard coaster in front of Junior. He wrapped his hand around it, soaking up the cold like a new sponge drinks water. The tail-end of the Indiana summer was starting to get to him, and spending the morning in a hot church didn’t help. The Legion had cold air conditioning and even colder beer—maybe that’s why he spent so much time there.

“Dammit!” the guy next to him said. He was playing pull-tabs and tossing the spent ones in a bucket on the bar.

“Any luck yet?” Junior asked him.

“I won a dollar,” he said, “but then I lost it again.”

“Well that’s life for ya.”

“No shit.”

The bartender appeared. “Two in the jar, buddy.” She held up a plastic pretzel jar labeled ‘swear jar,’ shaking it so some coins jingled. He grumbled and stuffed two dollars in.

Junior took a big gulp of beer and looked around the bar. Someone had bought the jukebox for the next hour or so, all country music, and Junior wondered why they didn’t just listen to the radio instead. There was a NASCAR race on both of the two flat screens,

and two of the ladies, too drunk for late afternoon, argued over who was going to win. Someone had brought in a cake for the occasion, and it lay half-eaten and forgotten on a table near the kitchen. In the corner of the building a fenced-off table held a place setting for one. Its dollar-store vase with a plastic rose collected dust despite its prominent place, and each day the Legion Commander laid a fresh slice of lemon on the plate—a tribute to the soldiers who will never come home.

The door opened and a breath of late-day heat rushed in, followed closely by a hobbling figure. Ol' Boy leaned heavily on his cane as the door slammed behind him. A few turned and looked but were quickly drawn back into the race. He stumbled to the far end of the bar and climbed with difficulty onto one of the red pleather chairs.

"There he is!" A woman in cutoff jean shorts and a tank top slithered over to the old man. "First one's on me," she said to him, pulling some sweat-crumpled bills out of her cleavage and laying them on the bar. "Second one, well, I'll just leave that up to you." She smiled through bright red lipstick.

Wham! Ol' Boy slammed something down on the bar and the woman took a step back, surprised. It was his prosthetic right leg, the foot wedged in a steel-toe work boot.

"I don't want none a yer titty-bills, Marquita, an' I don't need yer charity, neither," Ol' Boy said, his toothless mouth whistling alongside his words. Marquita wadded the bills up and stuffed them down the front of her tank top.

"You'll come around. Ya always do when ya get drunk enough," she said. "Get this bastard a Bud," she hollered to the bartender, pointing thumb over shoulder, as she stumbled back to her seat.

Ol' Boy tugged a couple dollars out of the work boot on his prosthetic leg and tossed them on the bar in front of him. There was a click-pop of a can being opened, and his beer appeared in front of him, swaddled in a foam koozie. Ol' Boy took a big gulp.

Junior saw his chance. He moved to the seat next to the old man and dealt his coaster onto the bar like a hand of euchre, placing his beer on top of it. A moment passed. The old man pretended not to notice him.

"Hot outside, innit?" Junior asked Ol' Boy. The man grumbled, taking another gulp. "I reckon it's the hottest summer we had in

years. Yer tractor holdin' up alright?"

"I dinnit come here ta have no conversation, boy." He downed his Bud and tugged some more money out of the shoe for another.

"We have service jus' fer the two hours—on Sundays a all days, even. Cain't ya wait ta mow 'til later in the day?" Junior leaned in closer. "It jus' gets so gawdamn hot in that church with the windows closed—pardon my French." The bartender brought him another.

"You a carpenter, boy?"

"Yessir."

"Then why don' ya get out there an' work while ya still can. Winter's comin' soon—won't be no jobs fer ya."

"Will ya think about it, at least? Take Sundays off."

"No. Git outta here, go be with yer family."

Junior stood, chugging the last of his beer until it was gone.

"Damn, Junior," Marquita shouted across the room, "if ya don't cut it out yer gonna end up jus' like Ol' Boy over there." She laughed, drunkenly swinging her arm and knocking her drink into her friend's lap. "The ol' bastard's got a cow pasture but ain't got no cows!" She and her friend laughed despite the mess she'd made. "An' what happened to yer leg? That don't look like no war wound!"

The old man slammed his beer down on the bar and slid off his chair, using his cane to hop over to the door. Each time he stepped with his sock-wrapped stump, his right side sank a few inches.

"Ya forgot somethin'!" Marquita yelled as the door shut behind him. Junior looked down and saw the leg still lying on the bar where Ol' Boy left it. "Well, take it to 'im, Ol' Boy Jr." She laughed at her own joke and the bartender went over to escort her out of the Legion.



The leg was heavy in his hand—some kind of thick plastic. It was more of a foot, actually, with a long hollow tube that secured it to the calf. He laid it in the passenger seat of his pickup. Ol' Boy was gone by the time they got Marquita out of the way and Junior got outside, and Junior wasn't quite sure where to go. He knew where Ol' Boy's field was, but was his house nearby? He put the truck in gear and aimed for Sheets Road.

A gravel road next to the little white church took him up a

hill and around a bend. He came upon a barbed-wire fence and his tires buzzed as he drove over a rusted cattleguard. After a moment a tall red house rose just over the hill and he approached it. The sun began to set, a sliver of red and orange burning at the horizon. He parked, turned the truck off, and hefted the plastic leg.

He climbed some dusty steps up onto a crumbling concrete porch, stepping toward what seemed to him to be the front door. The screen door sat uneven on its threshold and the door itself hung open. Orange streaks of light stretched across a modest kitchen, a small round table in the center piled high with yellowing newspapers.

"Hello?" Junior called to the quiet house. "Hey, Ol' Boy? Ya here?" He heard the creak of a piece of furniture and the banging of a cane. The old man rushed around the corner into the kitchen best as he could on his stump of a leg.

"Boy, I told ya ta git!" he shouted. In his haste he stepped wrong and started to fall, catching himself on the kitchen table. A stack of papers slid sideways and crashed to the floor, muffling the sound of broken glass. "Damn blood sugar's gonna kill me," he muttered, pulling himself up. He looked through the screen at Junior. "Ya come all this way ta stare at me? Ain't ya gonna help an ol' man out?"

"Yessir," Junior said, pulling the screen door open. He helped Ol' Boy onto a chair and began to scoop the papers off the floor.

"Gimme that," the old man said, swiping his leg out of Junior's grasp. He slid his stump into it and buckled it at the top.

A shard of glass fell from the stack of papers as Junior collected them. He dug through, looking for the source, and came across a shattered picture frame. In it was a black-and-white photograph of a young man wearing an army uniform. Junior pulled the photo from its broken frame and flipped it over. In curly handwriting, someone had written "Henry A. Clark, Jr., 1981" on the back. He'd seen the name somewhere before, he thought. Ol' Boy snatched the photo out of his hand.

"Git!" he shouted, a string of saliva stretching from his lip. Junior leapt up and pushed the screen door open, letting it slam behind him as he left.



There's a church in the valley by the wild-wood, No lovelier spot in the dale, No place is so dear to my chi-ild-hood As the little white church in the vale, they sang.

Ol' Boy's tractor rumbled outside, growing louder and softer again with each pass by the church. Inside, in the sweltering heat, Candace fanned herself with one of the hymnal covers that had fallen off. Junior had to shut the windows again, and to top it off the lone ceiling fan had stopped working. Even Pastor Max seemed willing to leave early. Besides, they had a supper to get to.

The Legion's frigid air conditioning was welcome after the heat they had endured all morning. Junior ordered a couple beers and sat at the bar for an hour or two, while his two teenage kids settled at a family table in front of one of the flat screens. On top of the carry-in supper, the Legion had organized a fundraiser benefitting the young woman who lost a newborn son nearly two weeks prior. Candace stood by the food, having baked and prepared much of it herself. Junior picked up his beer and headed over.

"How's it goin'?" he asked.

"Made thirty dollars already," she said, holding up a handful of cash. "Ain't it great?"

"Thirty dollars won't buy no baby coffin."

"Naw, but it's a start. Every little bit counts."

"I reckon it does."

He looked over at his kids. His daughter held a whole tenderloin up on a fork and took bites out of it, hypnotized by the TV. His son swiped around on his smartphone, clearly bored. He'd rather be back at the house four-wheeling in the river bottoms with his friends.

The door popped open and Marquita walked in, greeted by a chorus of hoots and hollers. Candace leaned in, lowering her voice.

"Don't she just look like a busted can a biscuits with her stomach hangin' out like that? Useless as a tit on a nun, she is. Almost like that Ol' Boy—sittin' around, drinkin', ain't contributing nothin' ta society," she said.

"I bet he's got his reasons."

"Ain't no reason you can't be nice ta people."

"Speakin' of," Junior said, "you seen him yet?"

"Naw, I reckon he's still mowing."

"Ain't he usually here by now, though?"

“Why’re ya so worried ‘bout that ol’ fart?” Candace asked. “The Lord came down an’ claimed a baby boy, an’ you’re worried about an old drunk bein’ late?” She hefted a spoon.

Junior turned toward the bar. “Hey, ain’t Ol’ Boy usually here by now?” he called.

“Hell, I thought he never left,” Marquita hollered back. “He may as well live here.”

“See, ain’t that weird? Even on mowin’ days he’s usually here already.” Junior finished the last of his beer in a hurry.

“What’re you plannin’ now? Ain’t you gonna help with the fundraiser?” She plunked the spoon down in a casserole.

“I’m jus’ gonna check on him. What if he’s dead? Then you’re gonna feel real bad.”

“You can’t always give a shit about everyone, Junior. Ya don’ have to.”

“No, but I can sure as hell try.”



Junior tore down that long Sheets Road to his little church in the boondocks. The sun was setting now, painting the sky in bloody shades of orange and red. From behind the church he heard the distant rumbling of a tractor somewhere off in the wide pasture that stretched west, probably even over the state line. On foot, he followed the uneven barbed-wire fence until he found an opening. Ol’ Boy had mowed there already, and Junior waded through a layer of cut grass, weeds, brambles, and shredded sticks, listening for the sound of the tractor in the distance.

“You’re tresspassin’ now, Junior,” he muttered to himself, “He could run ya over with his mower an’ no one would know.” He walked about ten minutes before he found what he was looking for.

It was Ol’ Boy’s tractor, run up against a tree, sputtering and coughing as it choked on the last of the gas fumes. Junior approached it like it was a wild animal, not sure if it would break free and run off. He heaved the cinder block off the gas pedal and turned the key to shut the tractor off. Hanging off the steering wheel was Ol’ Boy’s cane.

“Dammit,” he said to himself, unhooking it to take it with him. He checked the tree where the tractor had rubbed against it. A patch

of bark was worn down, looking like the tractor had been stuck there at least an hour. “Gawdammit.”

He followed the tracks in the grass back to where the mower deck had hooked a corner on a tree and pulled itself off, sending the tractor off on its own. The sky got darker and redder, devoid of blues and yellows and purples, and the shadows stretched longer. He reached a hand under the mower deck and pulled out a clump of grass. It was dark and sticky with blood.

“Jesus!” he shouted, dropping the clump. He wiped his hand a bit on his jeans. “He just hit an animal—a nest a bunny rabbits or somethin’. Yeah.” He followed the mown path until he saw it.

A shred of cloth lay there, torn from a shirt and spotted with blood. It was plaid flannel—in a color he’d seen Ol’ Boy wear before. He walked a little further and reached a clearing where the grass was short and green. A strip of flesh, rent by the mower’s blades, lay folded over, stuck to itself with drying blood. He considered it for a moment, and then with a trembling hand, picked it up.

He gathered what he could of the old man, placing the pieces solemnly in a pile. He laid the hooked wooden cane across the top, a small memorial to the man he couldn’t make whole again. Looking up from his task, he realized where his search had taken him. He stood in the graveyard on the hill behind the church, the polished gray stones glinting in the last throes of the sunset. That’s where he’d seen it. He walked to the third row.

On the end, a stone read “Henry Allen Clark, Jr., Beloved Son, January 10, 1962 – September 17, 1981.”

Next to it, another stone stood, one that had puzzled him for years. It read “Henry Allen Clark, Sr., July 27, 1944 -,” the second date left blank, waiting patiently for the day he would need it.