

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Matt McGowan

Let's Go for a Ride

It must have been 1977 or 1978, because Kelly was there, standing on the back porch, messing around with his trombone. I caught my parents whispering at the kitchen table, my father holding the newspaper, folding it quickly and then tucking it under his arm.

They turned toward me, but then my father looked away.

"What?" I said. "What's going on?"

My mother stepped from the table and met me in the middle of the room. Her hair was short then, and that too told me it was '77 or '78. Standing in front of me, she placed the ends of her fingers against my chest and kissed me on the cheek.

"Nothing, honey," she said. "You better hurry. Kelly's waiting for you."

For three summers, Kelly and I worked on a treehouse in the post oak behind our garage. At the end of the third year, while building an extension on two branches reaching out across the fence, we saw a burgundy Jaguar pull into the alley between our garage and the Parker's. We were sawing and hammering when we heard the roar of the Jag's engine. We stopped working and watched the car roll under us. The driver turned and parked on the concrete slab in front of the Parker's garage.

Kelly and I scurried out of the tree and crept up the alley. Peeking around the corner of the Parker's garage, we saw the driver. He was leaning against the Jag, reading a book.

Tall and lean, his chestnut hair shined in the sunlight. He was focused on the book, nodded slightly, then licking his forefinger and turning a page.

"I like your treehouse," he said, without looking away from the book.

I looked at Kelly. His eyes widened like an aperture opening in slow motion.

"But I'd do that wall a little different," said the man.

"Which wall?" asked Kelly.

"The one facing the garage. I could help you with it, if you want."

We nodded. "Okay," said Kelly.

"But first..."

The man slapped the book shut and tossed it in the car. Stepping back, he glanced at the house and then turned and started walking toward us.

"Who are you?" Kelly asked.

The man reached us and offered his hand to shake, me first.

"Dallas Parker," he said.

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"Parker?" said Kelly, before he and Dallas finished shaking. "So you're related to...?" Kelly pointed to the house. He knew who lived there; he just didn't know what to call them.

"My folks," said Dallas.

Kelly muttered. "Oh, I didn't know..."

"Listen," said Dallas. "Can you guys do me a favor?"

We nodded.

He reached back and pulled out a fat wallet, the leather worn at the edges. He flipped the wallet open and revealed the compartment for bills. There were scores in there. Rifling through them, he found two fives.

"Here," he said. "One for each of you."

"What for?" said Kelly.

"I need you to watch my car," said Dallas. "Don't let anybody touch it."

"That's it?" said Kelly.

Dallas nodded and then turned and started toward the house. As he passed the car, he thought of something. Reaching inside, he pulled out a blue towel.

"Here," he said, handing it to me. "This too. If a bird shits on my car, wipe it off."

At supper that night, when I asked my parents about Dallas Parker, their eyes lit up and they looked at each other. My dad frowned. It was the same countenance he took on when I brought home Bs and Cs instead of As.

My question was simple: "Why didn't anyone tell me the Parkers had a son?" Everyone knew the family. Dr. Parker, Dallas's father, had delivered virtually every baby in town since 1953. Mrs. Parker grew world-class peonies and hydrangeas, which brought hundreds of gawkers by their house. She played the organ at church and was the attendance secretary at the high school. Their daughter, Mrs. Feland, was my eighth-grade science teacher. Her son Chris was two grades behind Kelly and me.

Despite all this, despite the fact that this prominent family lived right behind us, that we had exchanged pies and sometimes socialized during the holidays, I had no idea they had a son.

"Why do you ask?" said my father.

"Because I met him today. Kelly and I did."

Again, my parents looked each other, their brows furled.

"What?" I said. "Why are you guys acting so weird?"

"Is he home?" asked my mother.

"Yeah," I said. "We talked to him in the alley."

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My dad said Dallas had gone away to college on a football scholarship. It was years ago, before we even moved to town. He lived somewhere in California, and until now, apparently, he never came home.

But what my parents didn't know – and Dallas's own parents didn't know – was that Dallas Parker *had* been home, or close to it, for months.

Dallas had a smile no one could say no to. I remember thinking, if this guy likes me, I'll do fine in the world. There was electricity around him, a glow, and it came on when his subtle nod turned into a grin, and that grin turned into a smile.

He was washing the Jag. I met him in the alley. He'd already helped us with the treehouse wall and bought us lumber for a new room. We'd gotten to know him pretty good.

But that day, Kelly wasn't there, which seems odd to me today. Until his family moved to Texas, he and I were always together.

Dallas and I talked while he washed the car. He caught me staring at it, mesmerized.

"Come on," he said, "let's go for a ride."

Before I even considered what my parents would say, we were gone, cruising down MacArthur.

We didn't talk during the ride. I think he knew I wanted to feel the car under me, listen to its engine roar as he shifted through the gears. We cruised slowly through the neighborhood, never reaching fourth gear. This went on for ten minutes, and I thought he was taking us home.

Instead, he passed Pennsylvania and drove all the way to Broadway.

I looked at him as he turned the steering wheel. His jaw was tense, the upper teeth set against the lower, and there was something different about his eyes, like the light had gone out of them.

We went several blocks before he said anything.

"You wanna have some fun?" he said.

"Okay," I said. "What kind of fun?"

"I'll show you."

He turned right on Madison and headed toward the new high school. The building was only a few years old. They had built it on top of the field he'd played football on. If he was nostalgic about this, it didn't show. When we passed the ugly, windowless structure, he didn't even look at it.

At the first entrance to the school parking lot, he shifted down into second gear. The Jag's engine revved so loud I thought it would explode out of the hood. Dallas's right foot played with the throttle, pumping it, making the car lurch. He did this a few times, and then he buried his foot on the accelerator and everything just opened up. I could hear the carburetor sucking oxygen as we screamed down the street.

I knew what he was gunning for but I didn't think he would do it. Just beyond the T intersection up ahead, there was a bump in the road, a remnant of the old embankment that had been there before the city ex-

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tended Madison to the north. I'd gone over the bump several times, with my mother behind the wheel of our station wagon, at no more than fifteen miles an hour. When the Jag hit that bump, we were pushing fifty.

When we launched, my right hand white-knuckled the armrest on the door while the other pressed against the dashboard. My head thrust forward, and I levitated, suspended there, floating in slow motion like an astronaut in a gravity-less capsule.

I grunted but it wasn't audible. All I could hear, while flying through space, was the whine of the engine, the wheels spinning and Dallas screeching like an insane monkey. When we slammed to the pavement, the car heaved and skidded. Dallas grunted too but immediately sucked air back into his lungs and then blew it out again, having himself a good laugh while furiously cranking the wheel to keep us from rolling.

The engine roar and the squeal of the tires were deafening. We slid sideways for a long time and I thought we would flip over. Somehow, we didn't. When we stopped, we were facing the opposite direction.

"Aaaaahhh haaahhhh!" shouted Dallas, slamming his hand against the steering wheel.

I hadn't breathed since we'd launched. I was laboring to catch my breath.

He looked at me. "You okay, man?"

I don't know what I said. All I can remember is feeling the door handle on my palm and my back tingling against the seat.

It rained the next week, which kept Kelly and me out of the treehouse. I started to care less about it, but he wanted to continue working.

When we returned to it, eight days after the joyride with Dallas, neither of us had seen any sign of him. We were working, still fiddling with the small room that hovered over the fence, when we saw a different car pull into the alley. This one was a tan, a two-door Oldsmobile with a chrome bumper and a white felt top. The car moved slowly and stopped next to the concrete pad in front of the Parker's garage. Kelly and I watched as it idled there for less than a minute and then moved slowly, continuing down the alley.

After it was gone, we may have driven a few more nails, but I know both of us were thinking about the car. When it returned, this time stopping on the street at the end of the alley, we hopped down out of the tree.

The man standing outside the car, which was still running, was wearing a bright blue and yellow Hawaiian shirt, half buttoned. Acne had permanently scarred his face. He was probably much younger than he looked. His hair was greasy and gray, and there was an unlit cigarette stuck between his lips. He did not seem intent on lighting it.

When he saw Kelly and me, he removed the cigarette and smiled.

"Boys," he said.

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We waved. I looked at the car. A woman was sitting in the front seat. She turned and looked at us briefly, but then she turned the other way, twisting around, and said something to someone sitting in the backseat.

"I'm looking for a friend of mine," said the man standing outside the car. "He said he lives right around here. I haven't been able to reach him."

We nodded.

"Dallas Parker," said the man.

We nodded again.

"You know him?"

"Yes," I said.

Kelly pointed toward the Parker's.

"Okay," said the man. "I thought that's what he said. We'll check back later."

The man smiled again and thanked us. When he drove away, the woman sitting in the front seat was laughing and nodding vigorously, as if the person behind her had told her a joke that had some kind of deep truth.

We waited a few more days and Dallas finally showed. He stepped out of the Jag wearing a tattered jean jacket and silly wig, a blond afro. I couldn't tell if it was meant for a man or woman. Kelly asked him about it. Dallas said he found it in thrift shop and thought it was funny.

"Your friends stopped by," I said.

"Oh yeah," said Dallas. "Who?"

"They didn't say. There were three of them, but we only talked to one. He had marks on his face."

"Oh yeah," said Dallas, calm and cool as always. "I know who you're talking about. I talked to them already."

We saw Dallas even less after that. His visits home became more and more infrequent, and he rarely had time for Kelly and me. He'd stop and talk for a few minutes, but then he'd hurry off into the house, where he didn't stay for long. These visits always occurred during the day, when his father was at the clinic. Returning to the car, he'd wave at us before taking off, but that was it. He was always in a hurry.

I had no reason to believe my parents found out about the joyride. If they had, the punishment would have been severe, probably grounding for weeks. They made no mention of it when they called me downstairs and told me to stay away from Dallas Parker.

"Why?" I asked.

My father looked at me with an expression that said he would not engage in a protracted conversation.

"Well, honey..." said my mother, gripping my forearm.

"We don't have to explain why," said my father. "Just do what I say."

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The shift from “we” to “I” meant that was the last word, so I didn’t pursue it. But that night, when I was reading in bed, my mother came into my room and told me that Dallas had gotten into some trouble.

“What kind of trouble?” I asked.

“Well, we don’t know the details,” she said, “but it involves the police. So your father and I think it’s best that you...”

“I know,” I said. “I will. I’ll stay away.”

But I didn’t have to. I didn’t even have to try, because, to my knowledge, he didn’t visit again.

I found out what happened. There was a raid at house on the west side of town. Local cops and even the FBI had been following him and others for months. There were a lot of rumors and misinformation about the arrests and a large drug-trafficking operation that covered the four-state area. But one thing was certain. Those involved, the people arrested, worked for a man named Cecil Cox. I’d never seen Cecil Cox, but I’d heard people talk about him. When they did, there was always a dark edge, as if merely uttering his name made one vulnerable.

And then a month later, three people – two men and a woman – were found murdered in a house on old highway 43. I knew where the house was. We used to drive by it on our way to Kansas City.

Something this bad never happened, and everyone in town was talking about it. Again, rumors circulated. Most of these involved one or other gruesome detail, the most popular being that blood was dripping off the dining-room table when the cops got there. Some folks said the victims were from Chicago and possibly connected to the mafia. Others said it was Cecil Cox’s gang.

It took almost a week for police to release the victims’ names. When the story ran on the 10 p.m. news, I was sitting on the living room floor, sorting coins. My father was behind me, in the armchair by the window. He may have been expecting the story, but I wasn’t. The names themselves meant nothing to me, but when they flashed images of the victims on the screen, I recoiled.

“That!” I yelled, standing, pointing at the screen.

“What?” said my father. “What is it?”

“Him! He’s the guy!”

“What guy?”

My body shivered. I was bouncing on my toes, still pointing at the TV. “He’s the one who stopped by here... looking for him.”

“For Dallas?” asked my father.

“Yes! And her. She was there too!”

“When?” asked my father.

“I don’t know,” I said. “A few months ago, I guess.”

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My father called the police and told them what I told him. He said they might want to talk to me, but so far what we had to offer didn't help much.

After Dallas's arrest, we saw the Parkers less. When we did, they didn't talk a lot. They seemed distracted.

They had reason to be. Dallas's trial was coming up. I knew this, but I didn't think about it much. I was disappointed and even a little mad at Dallas, although at the time, I don't think I understood it that way. All I knew was, with each day that passed, I became less enamored with Dallas Parker.

That's how things were when I came home from school and found Mrs. Parker holding on to my mother in the alley. They were standing near the corner of the Parker's garage. My mother was facing her house, and Mrs. Parker was facing ours, but I couldn't see her face because her head was buried against my mother's chest. When I coughed to get my mother's attention, she shooed me away without turning around.

We had a baseball game that night. Kelly and I played on the same team. I rode to the fields with his family. My parents, who were busy with my sister, came later.

After the game, we were drinking Cokes and hanging out between the Babe Ruth field and the girls' softball field. That's when we saw Mrs. Feland, our science teacher. She and her son Chris were walking to their car. Chris had dirt all over the front of his uniform, and he was staring at the ground while his mother talked to him.

I said hello. Mrs. Feland heard me. She looked up and waved, but she acted like she didn't know who I was.

"Did you hear about that?" said one of our teammates.

"About what?" asked Kelly.

"Feland's brother."

We shook our heads.

"He got killed," said the teammate.

"What?" I said.

"It's true. Some kind of shootout."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"I don't know," said the teammate. "School, I think."

I didn't say anything on the way home. I waited until we were inside the house, until my sister had gone upstairs. When I asked them, my father nodded. My mother started to cry.

An hour later, we turned on the news.

They killed Dallas Parker in broad daylight. He was exiting the courthouse in Carthage, ten miles to the east, where he had been on trial for two days and mentioned the names of several associates. He was shot twice in the chest. Another bullet hit him in the neck, just under his left

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ear. A sheriff's deputy who was escorting him out of the courthouse was hit too, but he survived. Two other deputies returned fire at a Mercury Grand Marquis, but they did not catch the assailants.

At the end of that summer, Kelly moved to Corpus Christi, Texas. His father, who worked for a petroleum company, got transferred. It was hot and hazy the day we stood out on the sidewalk and waved goodbye, as they loaded up the last of their belongings and drove away.

I stopped working on the treehouse. I had other interests – music and sports – and it just wasn't the same without Kelly. My little sister and her friends played in it from time to time, but I didn't go up into it again.