

Excerpt of the story

CROW SHINE

by Alan Baxter

Published in the author's collection, *CROW SHINE*,
from Ticonderoga Publications, 2016 © Alan Baxter

Available wherever books are sold.

For more details, click here:

http://www.alanbaxteronline.com/crow-shine?utm_source=free-sample&utm_medium=pdf

Clyde drove his old Ford through dense trees, Robert Johnson on the stereo battling the knock and growl of the almost-dead engine. Tires crunched gravel and hard dirt on the narrow road. When the track ended, Clyde pulled up and left the motor running, enjoying the meagre efforts of the air-conditioning for a moment longer.

He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of gum, stared at it in disgust. He hated the stuff. If only he had the courage to ask Melanie out, rather than simply buying shit he didn't need from her over the pharmacy counter. She

always looked at him so sly, little tip of the head. She knew, for God's sake. Why was he such a coward? He threw the junk into the passenger footwell.

He'd keep learning from Grandpa, absorb that legendary blues prowess. Then maybe Clyde would feel he had something with which to impress Mel, that made him special enough for her attention.

He killed the engine and stepped from the car into the cruel bayou heat, glanced up into the twisted branches of bald cypress trees, hung with veils of Spanish moss like old men's beards. Sweat instantly trickled down his back.

He reverently lifted Grandpa's rosewood guitar off the back seat, fret-stoned and restrung, fresh from the music store – there was no instrument on God's earth more beautiful – and stalked off through the trees.

As he got close, he smelled wood smoke on the air, thought momentarily about Grandpa's tin and copper still, but the aroma was wrong. His breath caught at the sight of blackened, smoking stumps on the water's edge, a skeletal parody of what had once been his grandpa's secret place. He broke into a run.

Everything was silent devastation, twisted metal and blackened remains, burned almost to nothing. Stark, broken bones jutting from the tranquil water. Clyde desperately hoped the old man was somewhere else.

Movement not a yard away caught his eye as hot sun glanced off the satin sheen of dark feathers and a glistening eye tipped left then right. Clyde frowned at the bird, perched on one sooty stub, disturbed by its calm, its indifference to his proximity. He waved a hand and the crow flapped its wings in response, and

cawed. Clyde took a heavy step forward and the corvid hopped to a higher piece of burned wall, out of reach but not much farther away.

“Goddamn you, creature.”

Insects buzzed and ticked in the humid air, other wild things whistled and hooted. Nothing else for miles around. Even his daddy didn’t know about this place. Clyde himself wasn’t supposed to, except for the day after his eighth birthday when he’d followed Grandpa, sneaking and scurrying in pursuit as the aging bluesman ambled out through the bayou.

Then Grandpa had spotted him and his creased face had folded up in a scowl. “The hell you doin’, Clyde?”

“Sorry, Grandpa, I was just curious.”

“Can’t a man have any privacy?”

Clyde had hung his head and one perfect drop of contrition had hit the scuffed and dirty toe of his sneaker.

“Don’t snivel, you’re here now,” Grandpa had said. “Come on in. You tell a soul about this place and I’ll have your hide, you understand?”

Clyde had kept that secret for fifteen years, and learned guitar at the man’s knee. But he had never shared the crystal clear moonshine that made his grandpa famous. He would sit and watch the old man get drunk while playing the most moving blues in the state. Everyone agreed, no one could hold a candle to Moonshine McCreary.

Always sipping from a clay bottle while he picked the songs of melancholy angels from that rosewood guitar, his voice a gravelly resonance from somewhere beyond this world. The man had skills, but Clyde knew the real power was in the 'shine.

“I shouldn’t play for you, boy!” Moonshine would bark, as Clyde would gasp at the drag against his soul. But he’d play on, take a bit more from his grandson, before yelling and sending the young man off home.

“This is my shame, boy,” Grandpa had drunkenly slurred late one night, gesturing with the bottle as pale smoke wreathed his grey curls. “When I’m gone, you don’t ever let it be yours, you hear? My recipe dies with me.”

But Clyde had long since figured it out, and secretly pencilled his notes and sketches, spying as the old man brewed.

He stepped carefully onto the porch of the shack, hoping he didn’t go through the burned wood into the swamp beneath. His heart stuttered when he snagged sight of a scorched foot sticking out of burned up denim. He moved around and the rest of Moonshine McCreary was slowly revealed. Clyde jumped as the crow squawked its laughter at him, and then he was crying.

“Grandpa!”

Loss was a tornado through his chest. Despite all the old man had taken, there was no one Clyde loved more. He crouched by the remains and it was not a pleasant sight. What flesh remained was bubbled and blistered, parts of the man, including his lower jaw, were nowhere to be seen.

The crow hopped down and Clyde tried to shoo it away again, but it danced back out of his reach. Clyde surged to his feet and hollered, swung a foot to kick the foul carrion eater. As it leaped skyward he tripped and fell, but managed to hold the guitar high, away from damage, and scuffed his cheek a little on the floorboards.

He sat up, rested the instrument across his lap, saw his sweat-sheened face mirrored in the deep red, polished surface. His mind drifted to his notebook in the glovebox of his crappy car. Lots of Moonshine's songs, lyrics and chord progressions were in there, along with little scraps of his own inspiration he meant to work on further. And on the front page, a list of ingredients, times, temperatures. The thing Grandpa had guarded with a furious passion. There was a sketch of the still, particulars of its haphazard construction. Clyde knew its energy only worked for the old man, but now he was gone... Well, now maybe it belonged to Clyde.

He was guilt-ridden, considering his inheritance not two yards from Grandpa's blackened corpse, but at last it was his turn. He pictured Melanie's smooth curves and a smile tugged his lips. He glanced across at the gruesome remains. Honestly, if Moonshine was going to go, this was probably the best way, accidentally blowing himself to pieces with his secret still.

Clyde knew it wouldn't take much to rebuild and take on the making of Moonshine McCreary's signature blend. He had to hope its power would come

to him. The dark bird, high on a blackened beam, laughed and ducked, almost as though it approved of his silent resolution.

Clyde headed carefully off the smoking wreck and made his way back to the car to call the police and his father. Pa wouldn't give a shit, he never wanted anything to do with Moonshine, and gave up warning Clyde away years ago, but he had to be told. People needed to know the legend had died. The blues community state-wide would be in mourning.

Read the rest of this story, plus 18 others,
in the author's collection, *CROW SHINE*,
from Ticonderoga Publications, 2016 © Alan Baxter

Available wherever books are sold.

For more details, click here:

http://www.alanbaxteronline.com/crow-shine?utm_source=free-sample&utm_medium=pdf