

THE TRAVELER

New Sligo is a peaceful town. We know our neighbors, support one another. Our kids can play in safety here. This man, this invader, took that from us. We will heal these wounds, but it will take time.

--Mayor Jake Fuller, Stone County
Tattler, Feb. 22, 1936

As the sun dropped behind the surrounding sweetgum forests and hills, the Traveler stopped next to the pumps at Oberfell's Esso Station. He buttoned his tweed jacket, making sure it covered the straps of his shoulder holster and stepped out of the car.

A gray-haired man in bib overalls, hobbling on a cane, emerged from the small, once-white structure.

"What can I do for'ya, young man?"

"Should take about ten gallons. Your best grade."

"You bet."

The Traveler leaned against the corner of the building and tilted back his herringbone driving cap. Watching the road, he lit a cigarette. The flare transformed his deep-set eyes and angular face into a disembodied red and yellow mask.

A car came toward the station. The Traveler stepped back out of the fading sunlight. Two men in a green Hudson passed by and kept going. *Look like farmers.* He studied the ancient gas pumps with the glass cylinders on top, the Drink NEHI sign on the station screen door and the rusted skeleton of a piece of farm machinery among the weeds in a nearby field. A bad smell of some kind filled the air. *Christ, how do people live in a place like this?*

The old man pumped gas up into the cylinder. While the gas drained into the Packard's tank, he looked up at the stranger. "Rained this afternoon. Radio says more comin'."

The Traveler said nothing.

The old man removed the nozzle from the fill pipe and rested his hand on the car's fender.

"New car, huh? A thirty-five?"

"Yeah." He dropped the cigarette and crushed it into the gravel under his polished shoe.

"Real nice. Want me to clean that windshield for'ya? Got some bugs on it."

"No."

"Well, okay. Let's see, that's ten gallons at twenty-four cents, taxes included. Two dollars and forty cents will do'er."

The Traveler walked over, reached into an inside pocket and took out a clip of bills. He peeled off three dollars.

The old man shuffled into the station; The Traveler followed. The old man stepped behind the counter and rested his cane against it.

"Anythin' else today?"

"You got a roadmap?"

"Yes, sir." He pointed to a wire rack on the candy case. "Right there."

The Traveler took a map and added, "Give me a couple of those Upmanns."

"Tell'ya what," the old man said, "I can go you even better." He reached for a cedar box on a wall shelf and took out a cigar. "Upmanns—but rum flavored. Infused 'em myself." He chuckled. "I like to say they're my only sin."

The Traveler held the cigar under his nose and took a sniff. “Alright, give me two—and a box of matches.” He took a silver cigar case from his jacket and slipped the cigars into it.

“Fine. That’ll add... 14 cents to the bill, but’ya won’t be sorry.” He opened the register, then hesitated.

“You know, you look kinda familiar.” He squinted at the stranger from under his bushy eyebrows. “But I don’t think you’re from around here, are’ya?”

“No.”

“First time in New Sligo?”

The Traveler responded with impatience, “Look, I need to get back on the road.” He extended his hand across the counter, palm up.

“Okay, sure.” The old man counted the change into the Traveler’s palm. “Well, I ‘preciate—” He stopped mid-sentence as his eyes fell on a newspaper lying beside the cash register. He snatched the paper from the counter and looked stricken as his eyes met the Traveler’s. “Oh... see, this here’s an old one.” He clutched the newspaper with both hands, folded it and put it under the counter.

The Traveler raised his chin and stared at the old man, his face expressionless. He said in a flat tone, “You know how to read, don’t you?”

“Well, sure I do.”

“And you’re a smart fellow, aren’t you?”

“I guess... tolerable.” He shifted his stance.

“You understand,” the Traveler spoke softly, as if imparting a secret. “If a man’s not smart, he can do the wrong thing and get into trouble.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“You know how to crank up that telephone too, don’t you?” He indicated the telephone on the wall behind the counter.

“Well, s-sure...”

“That’s a shame, isn’t it?”

The old man laughed, but there was no mirth in it. He hooked his thumbs over the side pockets of his overalls; his fingers trembled.

The Traveler shook his head, as in disappointment. He reached his right hand inside his jacket and brought out a pistol. The old man backed away.

When the stuttering sound of an engine began nearby, the Traveler glanced toward the road. A pair of yellow headlights was coming toward the station. He put the pistol back into his jacket. “Just don’t like anybody sneaking up behind me.” He smiled. “Nothing to worry about here though. Right?”

The tractor roared into a higher gear. As the Traveler watched it lumber by, the old man bent down and grabbed something from under the counter. The Traveler quickly stepped around the end of the counter, caught the old man’s wrist and wrenched the tire tool out of his hand. After ramming him against the back shelf, the Traveler dragged him to the floor, locked his right elbow around the old man’s neck from behind and hooked his left forearm around his right wrist to tighten the hold. The old man wheezed and gurgled, clawed at the Traveler’s arm, and kicked his legs, shattering the glass doors of the candy case, and knocking over a stack of Essolube cans. After a few seconds, he became limp. The Traveler held the choke hold for another minute before letting go.

He got up, snatched his cap off the floor, and pulled the old man's body out of sight behind the counter. Hearing another vehicle coming down the road, he stepped around to the front of the counter and leaned on it as if waiting for something. The car passed by.

Pulling out a handkerchief, he used it to wipe the top of the counter, draw the chains to extinguish the inside lights and reverse the sign in the window to read "CLOSED." He shut the door, wiped the handle and glanced up and down the street. Beyond the swarm of bugs attacking the single lightbulb hanging under the station's portico, light rain had started. Nothing moved on the street. No sound other than crickets. He got in the Packard, switched on the wipers and turned right onto Main.

He passed a rock wall to his right. He had turned the wrong way, away from the highway. *Goddammit.* As he looked for a place to make a U-turn, a dim pair of headlights appeared ahead. A pickup truck passed going the other way, its elderly woman staring at him as the headlights illuminated their faces. He looked away. *Well, maybe she can't see good.* He sped up and watched the pickup in his rearview mirror. When he looked back ahead, he glimpsed a blur of red lights and a yellow rectangle. He rammed his foot against the brake pedal, but the car crashed through something, skidded down a slope, and came to a halt, slamming him into the windshield and steering wheel.

Dazed, he raised his head and saw swirling, glowing cones. *Headlights...through...water.* As the car settled nose-down, he tried to open the door but could not. He opened the wing window and let water pour in. When the water rose to his hips, he forced open the door and got out. Pain shot through his left side. He felt his ribs. Two sharp bumps under the skin. Something broken. *Shit!*

He heard bubbles erupt from the car as it sank deeper into the water, almost submerging beneath the rain-dimpled surface. He staggered to the shore, each step causing the holster to tap his side and trigger jabs of pain. Pulling the pistol from his holster, he tucked it under his belt and unbuckled the holster from his trousers. He looked up the embankment to check for headlights on the road, then twisted his shoulders to remove his jacket. Pain ended the effort. He lowered himself into a sitting position on the shore, took a knife from a sheath on his right ankle and sawed through the leather shoulder straps. He pulled the remains of the holster from under his jacket and threw it into the lake, then stood and put his left hand into the side pocket of his jacket to keep his arm still.

As he slogged up the slope toward the road, he lost his footing in the mud and fell. A stunning, knife-thrust of pain in his side caused him to nearly black out. After recovering, he struggled up toward the road. *Get out of sight.* He crossed the road and came to a wall of stacked rocks. Like a three-legged spider, he felt his way over the wall and eased down the other side. After a few steps in tall grass, his left toe struck something hard in the darkness. *A headstone—a damn cemetery.*

Each time he took a breath, it felt as if his chest were splitting open. There was a soft rustling sound. He drew the pistol and looked around. Nothing but vague outlines of grave monuments. *Could be anything out in these fucking woods.* After a silence broken only by the soft patter of rain, he put the pistol back under his belt and continued walking. There was a hint of light ahead through the trees. A way out?

* * *

Hazel Curtis had passed a strange man as he sped away from the Esso station. She approached the station. The outside light was on, but it was dark inside, and the sign said closed.

But the old man's truck was beside the building. *Somethin' wrong, for sure.* She turned and stopped in front of the station. Trying the door, she found it unlocked. She went in, located a pull chain and switched on a light.

"Bud! You here?" Silence. *Maybe he's in the outhouse. No, why would he turn out the lights?*

In the shadows behind the counter, a foot was visible. Broken glass and candy scattered over the floor. She stepped around the counter, gasped, and knelt by Oberfell's body. "Oh, Lord!" She placed her hand on his chest. He was not breathing, and his eyes were partly open. She rushed to the telephone, cranked, got the night operator, and was connected to the Jackson County Sheriff's office in Caddo. Sheriff James Babineaux was working late and answered the ring.

"I tell you Sheriff, Bud Oberfell's just layin' here in the station. I think he's dead! His eyes is open. Things a real mess, too. I don't know—"

"Dead? Hazel, what happened?"

"I don't know, but I seen a strange feller drivin' outa here real fast. Went down Main Street, toward the lake, here by the cemetery."

Babineaux asked her about the man's appearance.

"Well, I couldn't see very good, but he had a hat. His face was kinda... thin, maybe. Mean eyes, like—"

"Could you tell anything about his vehicle?"

"I don't know much about cars, but it was some dark color. What should I do, Sheriff? Oh, sweet Jesus!"

“Just wait there—don’t touch anything. Try to calm down, Hazel. Might be best to wait outside. We’re coming over.” Babineaux called his reserve Deputy Burt Forsyth, caught him and Pearl at supper, and dispatched him to check on Bud and Hazel.

Babineaux buckled his gun belt around his waist and headed to New Sligo, five miles away.

The fire bell was clanging as he passed the Volunteer Fire Department in New Sligo. At the end of Main, his headlights revealed the shattered warning barrier and left turn sign. He aimed his patrol car’s spotlight down the slope, took his pistol from its holster, and walked to the edge of the embankment.

The car was in Parson’s Lake, its still-glowing tail-lights making blood-red smears through the murky water. He glanced around the area, then worked his way down closer. About an inch or two of the car’s rear window was visible, but the car was filled to the overhead with murky water. *Well, if he’s in there, he’s dead.* He searched the area and found footprints headed up the bank; one set of prints were long smears next to a handprint in the mud. *Looks like he fell. Injured maybe.* Faint, muddy prints continued across the road, toward the cemetery wall.

A string of lightning erupted over the lake, revealing trees on the far shore in shades of gray. *Damn, don’t need that right now.*

As Babineaux returned to his car, his Deputy drove up. “Well, Sheriff, Bud’s dead alright. Looks like something violent went on, but I couldn’t see mark one on him. I called the coroner. He’s there now—and Hazel notified the sleep-over shift at the fire department.”

“Robbery, you think?”

“Maybe, but there’s money in the damn cash register.” He noticed the splintered barrier behind Babineaux. “The guy ran through that? Is he down there?”

“Not anymore, he made it out. Footprints on the bank over there. Looks like he went into the cemetery.”

They saw headlights coming down Main. Alerted by Hazel, her husband Wayne and another man arrived in a pickup, carrying rifles and lanterns.

The younger man asked, “Did you catch the guy, Sheriff?”

“No, he crashed his car down there but got away. Likely hiding in the cemetery now. Who are you?”

“Bud was my grandpa. I’m Vern. Wayne and me can help find the bastard in there.”

“Fellows, I appreciate your willingness to help, but the vegetation is dense, and those lanterns are pretty useless.”

Vern responded. “But he’ll get away if—”

Babineaux shook his head. “Someone else getting killed won’t help anybody. The guy might be armed. Besides, he’s not likely to get far with no car—injuries, too, maybe. You can help out here.”

Several more cars and trucks showed up, carrying men with lanterns and guns.

Rain was getting heavier. Babineaux turned to the Deputy. “Let’s get the State Police down here. Sheriff Kilkenny over in Burl County can probably help too. We’ll stake out the perimeter of the cemetery, wait for daylight—he looked at his watch—in about seven hours.”

He and the Deputy organized the informal posse to stand watch around the cemetery.

* * *

After picking his way through the bushes and weeds of the cemetery, the Traveler's rain-soaked jacket was heavy, and he was tired. But he had found a way out—over the back wall.

Need and easier way over.

He heard a rhythm of steps crackling through the undergrowth. Too exhausted to run, he flattened himself behind clumps of thick vegetation by the wall, but pain made it hard to lie still. He watched through the leaves.

A man came into view. As he walked toward the Traveler's hiding place, the shadows of his lantern seemed to make grave monuments move. The Traveler pulled the pistol from his belt. The man parted the bushes and raised the lantern. A lattice of light and shadow slid over the Traveler. He saw the silhouette of a double-barreled shotgun above his head and pointed his pistol at the man's chest. When the man saw him, he pulled the trigger. The lantern and shotgun crashed to the ground, and the man gasped like someone who had the wind knocked out of him, staggered backward and fell.

Getting to his feet, the Traveler watched as the overturned lantern revealed blood flooding over the man's shirt. His foot twitched, then became still. *Dumb cracker. Searching at night wearing a white shirt.*

He thought about taking the man's shotgun. *No, too hard to use with one hand.* He returned the pistol to his belt. After 50 or so yards, he saw what seemed to be a low section of the wall, a light of some sort beyond it. He headed that way.

He discovered a string of rocks that looked like a long, deformed spine; a section of the wall had fallen. The light he had seen was on a pole next to a water tank. There were railroad tracks, glistening under the rain. He made his way over the collapsed wall and found a gravel

road on the other side. Through the forest ahead, he noticed a second light. A narrow lane, perpendicular to the wall, led toward the light.

* * *

After his Deputy left to call the State Police and Sheriff Kilkenny, Babineaux returned to his patrol car and put on his oilskin. He reminded himself to contact Mel, the owner of the auto shop, to see if he could use his wrecker to pull the suspect's car out of the lake. It might help identify him.

As he opened the door to get in, he heard a gunshot. *What the—* Starting the engine, he raced toward the sound. It seemed to come from the cemetery. He passed a truck parked by the gate. He motioned the man watching the gate to follow him. As he turned into the cemetery, he placed his pistol on the seat next to him and crept along the gravel paths, searching, the truck behind him. Near the back wall, his spotlight illuminated something among clumps of tall weeds, next to a flickering lantern. He searched the area with the spotlight. No movement. He grabbed his pistol, got out and approached the object.

A body, young face—familiar. Rain-diluted blood covered the man's shirt. Drops of rain fell into his open eyes. *Sonofabitch*. No pulse, shotgun near his hand. Babineaux muttered, "The damned... kid."

He holstered his pistol. The truck had stopped behind the Sheriff's car. Babineaux walked to the truck. "There's a body over there. Vern Oberfell, if you know him."

"Naw, can't say I do. Related to Bud?"

"Yeah, grandson. Look, it's dangerous around here. Go back to the gate."

The Sheriff knocked water off his trooper's hat and got back in the patrol car. He needed to get to the fire station to contact the Arkansas State Police and the county coroner. He prepared

to start the engine, yet something stopped him. Rivulets of water zig-zagged down the windshield as he stared into the darkness.

The eyes... He was in Belleau Wood again... Barely out of his teens, he had taken a hasty shot that missed the German, then froze as the German ran his bayonet through Jimmy Inness. A machine gun round from somewhere took down the German. He could only grip Jimmy's hand and try to comfort him while he bled to death.

My fault, my fault... The nightmares had faded, but even after almost 20 years...

Need to focus.

He took a deep breath, started the engine and left the cemetery. Driving down Main, he saw a car coming toward him, an arm out the driver's window, motioning him to stop. It was the town's night telephone switchboard and telegraph operator. He handed the Sheriff a telegram.

2238 AUG 13 1935

ALL COUNTY SHERIFFS AND POLICE DEPTS
ORAZIO PUGLISI AKA ZIO PUGLISI KNOWN ASSOC CHARLES LUCKY
LUCIANO SUSPECTED KILLING POLICE OFFICER HOT SPRINGS ARK STOP
BELIEVED HEADED CHICAGO ON BACK ROADS STOP UNPREDICTABLE
EXTREMELY DANGEROUS STOP

—CAPT WARD MECHAM ARK ST POLICE

Babineaux tapped the telegram. "This is likely our man. Thanks, this helps a lot."

"Any response you wanna send, Sheriff?"

"No, I'll get in touch by phone. We have another victim now."

Babineaux drove to the fire station and updated the State Police. Although the *Chicago Tribune* with Puglisi's photo and description had arrived by train early that morning, few in town

had subscriptions. Or could afford them. But people knew that Bud Oberfell's station always had the latest.

An hour and a half later, five cars of troopers with two bloodhounds arrived, but the dogs were not able to pick up a reliable sent trail, probably due to the rain. The State Police set up watches at likely escape routes around town. FBI agents were on their way.

* * *

After he climbed over the cemetery wall and crossed the road and train tracks, Puglisi started down the lane toward the light. He went 30 or 40 yards and heard a vehicle on the gravel road back by the cemetery. It was a pickup, moving slowly. *Already looking for me.*

Above the trees, a jagged tendril of lightning cut through the sky. He hated lightning. *Gotta find a place to get in, rest.*

The road ended at a small, two-story, frame house. The porch light was on, and there was a Model T truck parked next to the house. He repositioned the pistol to the back of his belt, under his jacket.

As he mounted the steps, rain drummed on the porch's tin roof. He knocked on the door. A few seconds later, an eye peeked through a curtained window next to the door.

"Who is it?" A female voice.

"I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am, but I need to use your phone. I'm Max Smith, an attorney from Chicago. I was passing through and had an accident on the road over there."

"Oh, you poor thing!" She cracked open the door. "You look a mess. Come on in."

He stepped through the door, faking a limp.

"I'm Sarah." By the light of the lamp she held, her red hair, swept back into a bun, seemed to be aflame. She wore an apron over a flower sack dress with yellow tulips and seemed

about 40-45. “The phone is on the wall in the kitchen. Let me show you.” She turned toward the kitchen.

“If you’ll pardon me, I won’t—I don’t want to track mud on your fine linoleum in there.”

He noticed a worn Bible on a table by a rocking chair. “I see you’re a religious lady. Southern Baptist, I would suppose?”

“Why, yes I am.”

“I’m of the faith too, and sure appreciate your Christian charity, ma’am. I always enjoy my trips down here to God’s country.”

“Yes, people here are kindhearted. But we need to get you some help.”

“Before we do, I wonder if your husband might help me retrieve my trunk. When my car rolled over, the trunk broke off and slid into the ditch. The trunk’s heavy, and I can’t use my left arm. I need to get my medicine. Right away.”

“Well, I’m afraid not. You see, my husband di...” An anxious look flicked over her face. “I mean he’s just not home right—”

He grabbed her arm. “You made a big mistake, lady. Stupid.”

She screamed and tried to break away, but his grip was too powerful.

A girl with auburn pigtails, maybe twelve, tall and thin, ran down the stairs from the second floor. “Mama! What’s wrong?” She saw Puglisi and stopped. “Who’s he?”

“Just a friend, passing through,” said the Traveler. “Now, we’re all going to sit down and talk about some things.” He let go of Sarah’s arm and brought out his pistol. The girl began to cry. “I need to stay here awhile, wait for morning. Then I’ll need that truck out there.”

“Oh, yes, yes!” Sarah said. “You can have it right now. Just don’t hurt us, please!”

Thunder detonated overhead, shaking the house and causing her to jump.

“That truck won’t do me any good just now. I’m not going to hurt you. It’s just a bit of business we need to take care of.” He motioned with the pistol for them to sit on the couch.

“We’ll have a nice, quiet night, just the three of us.”

* * *

The sun rose the next morning, illuminating a gray layer of fog over the hills, forests and the still-dark hollows. The air was still, humid and oppressive.

Babineaux and the State Police organized a search of the cemetery, the woods and the surrounding area. Babineaux drove down the gravel road behind the cemetery, his pistol ready, and a Winchester .351 in a rifle holster attached to the inside of the passenger door. He came to the lane that led to Case and Sarah O’Brien’s farm. Case used to be his fishing partner before a heart attack got him. He realized that he should check on Case’s wife and daughter, Sarah and Mary. Their farm was off to itself and largely hidden from passersby. Case had built it and liked it that way.

He turned off the road, crossed the Arkansas and Missouri tracks and drove to their house. When he knocked on the front door, a sound like a scrape of a chair and some creaking floor boards caught his attention, but no one came to the door. He knocked again. An eye appeared at the window

“Sarah, it’s Jim Babineaux. Just checking to see how you are.” She opened the door.
“You may not have heard. A dangerous man may be around here somewhere.”

“Oh, yes, we heard, Jim. But we’re fine. No problem.” He could see into the living room. No one was in it. “I really appreciate you coming by, though.”

He nodded and said, “That’s good to hear.” After a pause, he added, “Well, be careful and call it you need me. Lock your doors.”

“Yes, yes. We will. Goodbye.”

“Take care.”

She closed the door. His hand resting on the butt of his pistol, he stood there for some seconds, his lips pursed. *No....*

He went down the porch steps, got in the car and drove a short distance away.

“I’m going to need backup,” he told his Deputy over the radio. “At the O’Brien farm. Possible hostage situation. I’ll standby here.”

He hung up the mic, pulled off the road and down a slight embankment, out of sight of the house. Taking his rifle from the patrol car, he walked through the forest and lay behind a dense stand of elderberry. He slipped the rifle barrel through the plants, giving him a clear view of the house about 25 or 30 yards away.

After a couple of minutes, a hand opened, then quickly closed, an upstairs curtain. Several minutes later, Babineaux caught glimpses of figures moving around the living room, but they were too far from the veil-like curtains to be seen clearly.

Stop moving... just... stop...

A man came into view close to the window. His outline was clear. A short figure next to him was partially visible.

Puglisi and Mary. Where’s Sarah?

Puglisi reached out, grabbed Mary’s neck, and pulled her fully into view.

He’s going to do it...

Babineaux centered the rifle’s sight on the broadest part of Puglisi’s chest.

Now—

But Puglisi released Mary, pushed her away and raised a pistol. There was a scream.

Babineaux adjusted his aim. *Not..this..time...* He squeezed the trigger, the window shattered, a spray of blood hit the curtain, and Mary leaped backward as Puglisi fell.

Babineaux exhaled and let the rifle sink to the ground. He left it, drew his pistol and ran to the house. When he kicked in the door and dashed into the living room, Puglisi lay face-down by the window, the exit wound beneath his left armpit bleeding into his jacket and soaking the rug.

Sarah, bound to a kitchen chair, wailed, “Oh, thank God. Jim, I thought—”

“It’s okay, it’s okay, Sarah. He’s dead. Where’s—” Then he saw Mary, sitting in a corner behind the grandfather clock, crying and hugging herself as she rocked back and forth.

He released Sarah from the bailing wire holding her, and she went to comfort Mary. Removing the couch throw, Babineaux draped it over Puglisi’s body.

He turned toward Sarah and Mary. “Are you two alright?”

“Yes, yes we are. I think...I g-guess. Praise God!” She and Mary held each other.

After giving them some time to settle, he had them go up to the second floor, out of sight of the body. Descending the porch steps, he ran to pick up the rifle and returned to the patrol car.

As he drove back to the house, he radioed the Deputy. “Puglisi’s dead. Here at the O’Brien farm. Contact the SP. Let the coroner know.”

Five minutes later, the Deputy drove up to the house, accompanied by two State Police cars. When he and three troopers came into the living room, he glanced toward the window. Patches of dark red had seeped into the yellow knit throw.

“Damn, how’d you find him, Sheriff?”

“Mostly luck, I guess. I decided to stop by, check on the O’Briens. Sarah and Mary are upstairs. Just shook up, I think. Dr. Barrett’s coming over.”

“You saw Puglisi, here in the house?”

“No... But when Sarah opened the door, I knew he was inside.”

The deputy frowned. “How?”

“That.” Babineaux pointed to an ashtray by the couch. “You don’t forget the smell of Bud’s rum cigars.”