

Duty and Honor

“Hey Dan, you t’ink yer sorry Chevy can outrun a Dodge?”

The face leering over Dan’s shoulder belonged to Landry Lamont, who was already well past any legal limits. Suds from the head of his latest beer ran down the sides of his mug and dripped on Dan’s shoulder. A small cadre of junior coon-asses jostled and hooted in support of their leader.

“Yeah, Dan, put up er shut up!”

“Parnell gonna show ya what a piece of crap is t’at Camero.”

Summer darkness engulfed the Blackwater Tavern where it stood atop sturdy cypress pilings four miles out of town and six feet above mean water level on a winding road running through the swamps and bayous east of Domingeaux, Louisiana. Its cypress-planked exterior had not felt the bristles of a paintbrush in decades and its metal roof was solidly rusted. Even the sign attached to the porch roof was so sun-bleached as to be almost illegible. In addition, the ‘L’ had been carried into the swamp by a hurricane twelve years earlier, leading those inclined to look down their noses at the establishment—that is to say those not native to these parts—to refer to it as the “Backwater Tavern.” Most nights it pretty much lived up to that name, hosting no more than a dozen beer drinkers, pool shooters, and couples dancing to the cheap juke box. But on this early June night in 1971 it was wall-to-wall teenagers, almost all of them, like Dan and Landry, celebrating their graduation from St. Philippe High the night before.

On nights when the town’s youth had occasion to blow off steam local law enforcement tended to look the other way, as long as things didn’t get out of hand. So far tonight, they hadn’t, although a patrol car had pulled through the crowded parking lot a couple of times, turning its spotlight on some of the cars to highlight necking couples. Inside, Emil was serving up beers as fast as he could pry the caps off the bottles. Nobody was checking IDs.

Landry waved his beer toward the door. I got fi’ty dolla’ say it ain’t hot enough to beat Parnell’s Charger.” The knot of boys behind him nodded and jeered. Parnell Robicheau’s ’71 Dodge Charger RT

440, chrome yellow with black racing stripes, was reputed to be the baddest car in St. Phillippe High School's student parking lot.

"Was'a matta? You skeered, Guidry?"

"I ain't skeered."

"Yeah, you is."

"Yeah, he skeered 'cause he know his Chevy's chickenshit."

Dan grinned. "I reckon there's one way to find out." He started to rise from his chair but a firm hand on his knee pushed him down.

"Cool it, little brother."

"Aww, come on, Steve. It'll be fun to make these boys eat my dust."

"Let 'em go." Steve insisted. "It's too good a gift to risk wreckin'." Steve had just finished his sophomore year at LSU, attending on a baseball scholarship. The two brothers were extraordinarily close, though Dan had always lacked the athletic and academic abilities of Steve. There was some thought that he lacked the common sense, too.

Dan drained his beer and slammed the mug down hard on the rickety two-top table. "Let go my leg!" Rising against the pressure of his brother's hand, Dan joined the knot heading for the door. Reluctantly, Steve followed to show support.

Moments later two throaty engines roared to life, tires spewing gravel across the parking lot as kids pouring from the bar jumped out of the way. Rubber squealed on asphalt as both vehicles reached the

road, their drivers jockeying into position. Headlights pierced the night as far as the first bend of the winding two-lane highway through the swamp. Landry stood between them, arms raised unsteadily above his head.

“Hold it! Hold it!” a boy in a Mustang convertible yelled. “Ya gotta give us time to get to the finish line! Somebody’s gotta certify the winner.” The pony car, overflowing with young ‘certifiers’, rocketed out of the parking lot, weaving from side to side when it rounded the first bend. More cars and pickups followed, racing eastward to observe the finish. Landry looked blearily at his watch and announced, “Le’s give ‘em two minutes t’ git t’ere. T’en we gonna rumble, baby!”

Dan and Parnell revved their engines and popped their clutches, the two cars taunting each other and spreading the stench of burning rubber over the parking lot. Deep into the surrounding cypress forest a hundred thousand insects, frogs, and birds ceased their nighttime conversations, confused by the unholy racket and unfamiliar smells.

Landry raised his arms again. Both engines thundered. Steve’s grin turned as phony as blackface.

“Wait a minute!” Landry relaxed his arms again as Beau Thibedeaux dashed between the two cars and jumped into the right side of the Charger. Beau and Parnell were first cousins and best friends. Landry’s arms were up for the third time before the door slammed.

Landry’s arms dropped decisively. Four rear tires screamed in anguish, and Landry disappeared in a roiling cloud of white smoke. Upshift, squeal; upshift, squeal. In seconds the cars were around the first bend and out of sight, but the crowd in the parking lot could hear the final upshift, then the wailing of tires as the two cars entered the second bend. Engines thundered again as they shot out of that curve heading for the hairpin turn. Both cars roared into the wicked bend at full throttle, their tires howling as if in terrible pain. Suddenly there was a series of dull thuds and only one engine roaring out of the hairpin. It sped on, its sound reverberating through the swamp until long after it had passed the mile agreed to.

“One of ‘em wrecked!” Boys dashed for their cars to go see the accident. Girls clung to each other in fear, and were soon left standing alone with Emil, the bar tender. Gradually the sound of the victor died away in the distance and the normal cacophony of the swamp forest at night resumed.

At 80 miles an hour, with the Charger on the inside of the curve, bumping fenders with the Camero, Dan's right front tire dropped off the asphalt and buried itself in the soft shoulder of the causeway. Dan's shiny new ride, a graduation present from his parents, flipped and rolled five times, landing upside down in six feet of water, only its rear wheels and back bumper visible. Both boys were ejected, Steve to the pavement and instant death. Dan's body was not located until after sunrise, when one shoeless foot was seen sticking up among the reeds twenty-five feet from shore.

Within the year Parnell was dead, too, one of the last American casualties in the jungles of Viet Nam. Landry joined the Navy, went to college on the GI Bill, and became a high school history and social studies teacher, with three children of his own.
