

MOURNING JIMMY CROOKS

Robert Meixner

Jimmy Crooks, five days dead and sober at last, lay screwed into a cherry wood casket in the cargo bay of his brother, Ray's, luxury motor home. Directly above him Jimmy Jr., known to everyone as Sonny, sprawled on the sofa, his arms stretched out along the leather cushions. He peered through half-closed eyes at his aunt, Abby, who was reading a magazine in the chair across from him. Sonny was thinking she looked very good indeed in a short black sheath that showed a lot of leg.

Abby was Ray's third wife, half Ray's age and some dozen years older than Sonny. She was a compact woman, with a coppery tumble of hair that fell down her back to the place where her hips hinged to her spine. Her fashion sense, if not exactly disreputable, seemed always just a little too sexy for the occasion. Not that Sonny minded. The sight of her had been a welcome diversion at Jimmy's funeral.

Right now Sonny was busy imagining what it would be like to be alone with her in the motor home. To smoke the fat joint he had rolled up in a piece of tin foil in his pocket and knock back a couple of Lone Stars. Then take her into the bedroom and peel her out of that black dress. Grab her by the ass and mash his mouth down on hers.

Abby looked up from her magazine and smiled at him. She'd be into it, Sonny thought. Being married to an old codger like Ray must leave her wanting. Everybody in the family figured she'd married Ray for the money. There wasn't much else a woman like that could see in a washed up old truck dealer with two heart attacks already under his belt. Sonny closed his eyes and focused on sending her a signal, a mental picture of the two of them making love under the mirrored ceiling with the fan spinning slow circles over his back.

The CB radio crackled up front, snapping Sonny out of his daydream. It was Nana Rose calling from her white Cadillac. She and Sonny's Aunt Ruby were following the bus from the memorial service in Waco up to Ray's place in Arkansas where they were going to bury Jimmy.

"Ray?" the speaker crackled again.

Ray pulled the mike from its clip and held it to the side of his mouth. "Yes, Mama."

"It's getting warm out. Jimmy ain't gonna get too hot down there underneath the bus, is he?"

"No, Mama."

"I know it ain't air conditioned. I don't want my boy to be hot down there."

"He's dead, Mama."

"Don't you sass me, Ray. We gonna bury my baby boy. Least you could do is show a little respect."

"I know, Mama. I'm sorry, Mama. Jimmy won't be too hot, Mama."

"And slow down. It's bad enough poor Jimmy's roasting in that casket. No reason you got to bounce him over every pothole in Oklahoma at seventy miles an hour. You slow down to fifty."

"But Mama, the speed limit's sixty-five."

"That don't matter. This here's a funeral procession, not no damn stock car race."

Sonny watched his uncle tap the brake, coast for a few seconds, then reset the cruise control. Ray's white head bobbed up and down with the motion of the pneumatic seat. Outside, the Oklahoma landscape streamed by the windows on either side. Sonny closed his eyes again and tried to recapture the vision of himself and Abby in the bedroom, but it was gone, replaced by an expanse of dust and dry grass that seemed to go on forever—the perfect backdrop for their sad little parade.

Sonny hadn't been able to muster much feeling about his dad's dying, not past thinking that he wouldn't wish being sealed up in

a wooden box on anybody. They'd never gotten along as father and son, and Sonny couldn't remember ever not being afraid of Jimmy. He'd learned early to stay out of Jimmy's way, to make himself invisible, to flatten himself against the nearest surface and slide out of Jimmy's reach like mercury. This was the quality he had taken with him when he had moved out of the house, the sum total of life lessons passed from father to son: to always go unnoticed. Sonny hadn't fared well, not even compared to his own dim expectations. He had discovered early on that even jail time was an improvement over his childhood.

Sonny got up off the sofa and stretched. Abby looked up, smiled again, and went back to her magazine. Sonny wandered back to the bathroom and slid the pocket door closed. The other side of the bathroom opened to the bedroom. He walked around the cross-wise bed to the built-in chest of drawers along the back wall. He opened several drawers and came finally to a neat array of satiny panties, jewel-toned, lace trimmed, laid out like candy in a box. He pulled out a dark red pair and pressed them to his face.

Back in the bathroom he sat on the toilet and spread the briefs across his knees. He got the foil packet out of his coat pocket and opened it on the vanity. He licked the joint and lit it. Three deep tokes later he stubbed it out on the foil, and leaned his head back against the wall, feeling the first bleary effects roil to the top of his head:

He was ten years old. The family was on an outing at a lake somewhere. He was paddling around in an inner tube, wavelets lapping at his ankles, the sun warming his face. There was a splash nearby. Jimmy was on the shore chunking rocks and clods of dirt at him, laughing. Sonny tried to paddle away, not wanting to get stung by a rock, but also not wanting to get too far from the safety of the little beach. Finally Jimmy had thrown his empty beer bottle. It bounced off the side of the inner tube and into the water, staring at Sonny through its vacant eye.

Sonny thought about another hit off the joint, but decided against it. He wrapped its remains in the foil, stuffed the panties into the right-hand pocket of his suit jacket, and ambled back to the front of the coach. Ray turned and gave him an accusing look.

“Goddam, son. Thought maybe you fell in,” he said.

Sonny settled back into the sofa without a reply.

When they got to U.S. 44 and headed east toward Fort Smith, Ray got Abby to drive. He did this by getting up and walking back toward the kitchen, leaving the coach to drive itself until Abby slid in behind the wheel. Sonny was impressed with how coolly she handled this, swinging in there and taking the wheel like it happened all the time. Probably it did, he thought.

“You want a cold drink, Hon?” Ray yelled above the road noise.

“Sure, Sweetie.”

“Sonny, come back here. Get your auntie a cola, will ya? I’m gonna take me a little nap in the back.”

Sonny popped two sodas and brought one to Abby. He set it in the drink holder in her arm rest. Abby was intent on the road ahead, both hands on the wheel. Sonny fixed the curve of her neck in the cross-hairs of a dopey stare. With Ray napping in the back and Abby stuck behind the wheel, there were new possibilities. He was glad now he’d taken some hits off the joint. He was feeling just right. He dropped his left hand onto her shoulder, and reached with his right toward the stereo controls.

“Say, Abs, how ‘bout some tunes?” he asked.

“What?”

“Music, Abs. How ‘bout I turn the radio on?”

“You’ll wake Ray up.” She said. “And don’t call me Abs. I hate that.”

“Okay, Abby. I just thought it’d be nice to set the mood a little.”

She swiped his hand off her shoulder. “Set the mood for what—the gravesite?”

“No, I don’t know,” Sonny said. He moved to the passenger side of the coach, parked himself sideways in his seat, and took a swig of soda. “Just a little conversation I guess. A good lookin’ woman like you must be starvin’ for a friendly chat with somebody closer to her own age.”

“A friendly chat? Is that what you call it? You know your old man used to pull this same shit. Soon as Ray was out of sight he’d want to get a little ‘friendly chat’ going.”

“Don’t lay that on me, Abby. I ain’t my old man.”

“Well, you’re startin’ to act like him, if you ask me.”

“Actin’ like him would be gettin’ drunk and slappin’ somebody around. That ain’t me.”

“Well I guess we each knew him in our own way,” she said.

Abby concentrated on her driving. Sonny sipped his soda and stared out the window at the dun prairie.

“I hope you ain’t sore,” he said.

She turned to him. She shook her head. “Go ahead and find some music if you want,” she said. “Just keep it low.”

The radio was in the dash on the driver’s side of the coach. Sonny had to get out of his seat to get at it. He knelt on one knee and braced himself against the edge of Abby’s seat. She shifted slightly to make room for him. He watched her hand on the wheel while he adjusted the tuner. The dark red polish was chipped on her thumbnail. A fat gold chain hung from her wrist. He was suddenly conscious of her perfume, peppery and sweet with a slightly sour undertone. It reminded him of the flower boxes on Nana Rose’s front porch.

Abby turned the wheel to miss some obstruction on the roadway. Sonny lost his balance. He was thrown into her seat and reached out to steady himself. His hand found her bare leg between her knee and the hem of her dress. She looked down at his hand. Sonny jerked it away, but the memory of her flesh

nestled in his palm like a living thing. He resisted the temptation to look at it.

“Sorry,” he said.

He tuned in a country station. Some weepy old song with a lot of peddle steel was playing. Sonny left it, and started for his seat.

“You want to drive?” Abby asked

“The bus?”

“Yes, the bus, silly. Sure. It’s easy. Just slide in here.” She stood up and moved to her right. Sonny slid around her, brushed her hip, sat down and took the wheel.

They crossed into Arkansas, leaving the interstate on the other side of Fort Smith to head north. The countryside began to roll and build like a running sea. The trees grew more dense and green. Some had started to turn and dotted the hillsides with occasional gold or red foliage, shimmering in the early afternoon sun. Abby chatted easily about their place in the Ozarks. About her garden and the birds that came there. About the view. It would be a good place to be buried, she said, even for someone like Jimmy who wouldn’t appreciate it.

An hour later they were near the end of the trip. The roads had narrowed, and Sonny had to concentrate to keep the bus off the shoulder. Abby had tilted back her seat, and was dozing, her mouth open slightly.

Sonny had been to Ray’s several times when he was younger. He wasn’t sure he remembered the way, but didn’t want to wake Abby to ask either. He wanted to come off as competent, to reach over and pat her on the knee when they got there, and watch her stir awake. When he passed a hand-lettered sign pointing the way to Tiny’s Saddle Shop, he realized he’d missed the turn to Ray’s. There was no way to turn the bus around on the narrow road. He checked the rear-view monitor for the Caddy. It was right behind him. He could see Nana Rose and Ruby’s faces, nearly identical behind matching sunglasses. He switched off

the CB just in case Nana Rose had noticed him miss the turn. She probably thought Ray was still driving, but he didn't want her to call to see what was up. Didn't want her to wake everyone up and have a big conversation about it. He'd just take the next turn and double back.

In a quarter mile he slowed, flipped on the turn signal, and checked on the Caddy again. He cranked the bus around a hard right onto a recently paved road. The black tarmac wound smooth as ribbon over the low hills. Sonny was feeling good. He had mastered the bus, mastered the situation. He glanced over at Abby again as they crested a hill. One day he'd have a woman like her. Who knew? If Ray had himself a stroke or something and died -- if Sonny played his cards just right -- maybe he'd have Abby herself. When he looked back at the road his heart stopped.

The road dropped several hundred feet into a narrow valley, a ravine really. A short, rusty bridge spanned a small creek at the bottom. Then the road climbed straight back out. From Sonny's angle, looking down, it seemed impossible. They were going to plunge down the hill picking up speed, bottom out on the bridge, and if the bridge held, run smack into the cliff that was the other side of the ravine. That's what it looked like. It couldn't be though. It had to be an optical illusion. Somehow they'd got a paving machine up and down that road. It would be okay. He'd just take it easy. It just couldn't be as steep as it looked.

He stabbed the brakes a couple of times on the way down. It wasn't too bad really. The bus flattened heavily at the bottom, bobbed over the bridge, and started to climb out. Looking up from the bottom Sonny realized his real problem was going to be getting back to the top. He should have been accelerating down the hill, gaining the momentum they'd need to get back out of the ravine, not riding the brakes like a candy ass. Now it was too late.

He pressed the gas pedal to the floor. The engine grumbled and surged as the coach started up the grade, climbing steadily at first, but then starting to slow. Sonny gripped the wheel, lifting and pushing on the rim, as if he could drag them up the hill by force of will. Still the bus slowed. He looked over at Abby again, wanting help, wishing for some kind of connection to relieve the panic bubbling up in his chest. She stirred in her seat, stretching, but not quite coming awake.

In his heart Sonny felt the dead weight of his dad's casket like an anchor, holding them back. The bus slowed, stopped. The top of the hill was scant yards away.

Sonny felt a hot tear run down the side of his nose. The bus started to roll backwards. Sonny vaguely heard a horn blowing, somewhere in the distant past, Jimmy wanting him to hurry up and get in the car, tapping on the horn at first and then leaning on it. Sonny jolted back to reality. Nana Rose. He checked the monitor. Saw the two women in the Caddy their mouths open yelling at him. Heard the crunch as the bus nudged the car backwards.

Abby had come to. "The brakes," she screamed. "Hit the brakes."

"What?" Everything registered in slow motion. He looked over at her. Her eyes were as wide as he'd ever seen them.

"The brakes," she screamed again.

"Oh, okay." He looked down to find the pedal, pressed on it with his left foot. The bus veered slightly, but did not slow. In the monitor he saw the Caddy skitter sideways off the road. It bounced backwards across the ditch as the coach passed it, Nana Rose and Ruby's heads bouncing independently inside. Sonny pulled on the wheel, leveraging all his weight onto the brake pedal. Plates and silverware clanged in the cabinets. They were gaining speed, drifting to the left side of the road. Sonny steered right, trying to keep the coach centered, but overcorrected. The rear wheels plowed through the loamy shoulder. A glass crashed in the kitchen sink.

“Shit,” Sonny said.

“Shit,” Abby squealed.

“Shit,” Uncle Ray roared from the back.

The rear wheels bit into the dirt on the far side of the drainage ditch sending the front end sliding around to the right in a wide arc, spewing gravel and dirt. The coach tipped over and crashed onto its right side, sliding down the hill half on and half off the road. Sonny was flung out of his seat, landing in Abby’s lap with his head wedged between her legs. The grinding shriek of steel on asphalt tore at Sonny’s ears and then, gradually, lapsed into an ominous quiet, choked in a cloud of dust and smoke.

“Shit,” Ray said, quietly this time.

Sonny opened his eyes to the expanse of thigh he had been dreaming about all day. He felt Abby pushing at the top of his head, then slapping at him.

“Get off me, Sonny.”

“Jeez, Abby, lighten up would you.” Sonny said, pulling himself free, trying to clear his head.

“You were hurting me.”

Ray came crawling up along the cabinets and over the chairs, sputtering all the way. The door was buried in the dirt, and they had to push the broken glass out of the windshield to climb out. Nana Rose and Ruby were standing outside the bus ringing their hands and wailing.

“My poor Jimmy,” Nana Rose cried.

“Mama, Jimmy is dead,” Ray said.

“My poor, poor Jimmy, busted up under a bus. Lord have mercy,” she said.

“Mama,” Ray started. “Aw, hell. Just forget it.” He threw up his hands and turned on Abby. “What the hell were you thinking about, coming this way? You gone crazy? You see what you done to my motorhome?”

“But...” Sonny started to protest.

“I don’t know, hon,” Abby was saying. “I guess I was a little tired, but we were so close to home I didn’t want to wake you up. I kind of drifted off in my mind you know, and missed the turn.”

“But...” Sonny started again. Abby shot him a look.

“God damn, Abby, how’d you think we was going to make it up that hill? Would you look at what you done to my motorhome?”

“I know, hon. I’m sorry. I was just tired is all.”

“Would you quit yappin’ about your precious motorhome, Ray,” Nana Rose snapped. “My poor Jimmy’s crushed under that useless heap a scrap iron. Ain’t you got no respect for the dead?”

“That’s the point, Mama. Jimmy’s dead. He’s been dead five days now. It ain’t weighin’ on his mind none whether he’s buried under my motorhome or under a pile of dirt.”

Ray went back in the bus. “I’m gonna find the cell phone,” he muttered. “Get a tow truck out here.”

Nana Rose and Ruby walked around the bus looking for a place where they could see underneath it. Sonny wandered away from the wreckage, back to the tree line, just wanting to get away from everyone, wanting to figure out how come Abby let Ray think she was driving. Wondering if maybe, somehow, he had connected with her, made some kind of impression on her. Abby came over to him. They stood together surveying the scene.

Sonny had to say something. “Thanks for fadin’ the heat with Ray for me. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yeah, I did, Sonny. I had to because you are an ignorant little creep who couldn’t look out for himself if his life depended on it, which it probably does right now. If Ray finds out you did this, he will kill you dead. Me...he’ll be pissed off for a couple of days, but he’ll get over it.”

Sonny flushed at the insult. “Ignorant creep? What are you riled at me for, Abby? It was an accident. It could’ve happened to anybody.”

Abby didn’t say anything. She leveled an accusing finger at his coat pocket. Looking down where she was pointing, Sonny flushed again. Red satin peeked out from behind the torn flap. He covered the pocket with his hand and looked around to find his uncle. Had Ray seen? Ray was standing at the front of the overturned bus, gesturing wildly as he talked on the cell phone. Sonny stuck his hand into the torn pocket, rolled the panties into a tight ball and offered them to Abby.

She recoiled, looking at the wadded fabric as if he were trying to hand her a slug. “You keep ‘em,” she said. “Call them a souvenir of the occasion. One thing’s certain. I’ll never wear ‘em again.”

It took two big tow trucks to get Ray’s bus out of the ditch. When they finally tipped it upright and pried the cargo bay door open, they found Jimmy’s coffin had splintered on one end and the lid had come off. Nana Rose collapsed in tears. Ruby and Abby tried to console her while Ray walked along the scraped up side of his coach, brushing grass and dirt from the seams and rivets.

Sonny crawled into the bay and peered over the rim of the coffin at his dad’s body. Jimmy was jammed up into a corner and his neck was bent, but other than that he looked okay. It was just like him to come out of this unscathed, Sonny thought. There never seemed to be any consequences for Jimmy. Except for dying of course, but everyone had to do that sooner or later. Sonny took the bundled panties out of his own torn pocket and carefully stuffed them into the breast pocket of Jimmy’s funeral suit. He half expected the shiny fabric to flash like the gumball lights on a squad car. Instead it looked like it belonged there, a muted wine-colored pocket square against the black worsted fabric.

Jimmy looked harmless in repose. His pallid face offered no contrast to the pale blue pleats of the coffin's interior. He was not reproachful, not hateful, not angry or even stupidly drunk. He was not any of the things he had been in life, but just like Ray had said, five days dead and nothing on his mind.