

New Fiction from Michael Loyd Gray: “The Song Remains the Same”



Dalton bought a used F150 in Kalamazoo with oil rig money and drove north to a trailer he owned south of Mancelona. It squatted on ten acres that were his along a creek. It was way out in the boonies, very secluded at the end of a long and winding lane behind a tree line. He let two chucklehead

brothers, Dace and Lee Morton, live there. They had been a couple years behind him in high school.

The Morton boys sold weed, but Dalton didn't give a shit. That was their gig and not his. Live and let live. He was just the landlord. They were good about keeping the place up and if they got caught, it had nothing to do with him. He would just point out that he arranged the rental by phone and took his payments by wire down in Florida.

He hadn't been there in three years. That was back in 75, just after Saigon fell. Some days, Vietnam seemed like a long time ago. Some days, it didn't. And some days, but not so many anymore, it seemed like yesterday.

Dalton flashed his headlights on and off a few times. It wasn't some pre-arranged signal, which the two chuckleheads would have forgotten by now, but he knew not to just barrel up the lane and startle them. He figured they kept a few weapons, and they weren't the brightest bulbs around. And they were perpetually medicated. Drugs and guns – what could possibly go wrong?

He gave them some time to get sorted and then he eased slowly up the lane, flashing his headlights again for good measure. No cop would come up like that. He knew that and knew they would, too.

Dalton pulled on up to the trailer and got out and stood next to the truck for a moment, to let them get a good look. A flashlight beam from one of those big camping lights got switched on him. It lingered on his eyes. He put a hand over them after a few seconds.

“Okay, dickheads—knock off the fucking searchlight shit.”

“Jesus – that you, Dalton?”

“No – it's fucking Yosemite Sam.”

“Yeah, that’s Dalton,” a second voice said.

There were two young, pretty girls inside with Dace and Lee. Both blonds. No surprise there. Barely over eighteen, by the look of them. No surprise there either. They were stoned to the gills. Again – no surprise. Weed dealers always had a pretty girl or two hanging on, mooching weed and speed in exchange for sex. Not quite customers and not quite girlfriends. A sort of entourage born of necessity and practicality.

The trailer reeked of weed, but it was otherwise clean, orderly. An empty pizza carton was on the coffee table. He wondered who delivered this far out. A bong was propped against a sofa. He had been right that the Morton boys would keep the place together. Dace switched the stereo back on. Dalton recognized Zeppelin right off, but it was an older album – Houses of the Holy.

Dalton signaled for Dace to cut the volume some, so he could be heard, and he dialed it back to background music.

“How are you, Dalton? Long time no see.”

Dalton nodded.

“That album is, like, five years old,” he said.

“We’re just getting around to it,” Lee said.

The blonds had glassy stares.

Dalton nodded again. Dace passed a joint and Dalton took a hit but declined the second time around. He didn’t mind cutting the edge from the long drive, but he wasn’t interested in getting baked until he had a good lay of the land.

"Lee," Dace said, "why don't you fetch old Dalton here a cold brewski."

Lee smirked and went to the kitchen.

"Don't mind if I do," Dalton said.

"Long trip?" Dace smiled.

Dalton leaned back and sighed. Lee came around the corner and handed him a cold Pabst. Dalton took a healthy swig.

"The train up from Florida," he said and took another swig. "Then the drive from Kalamazoo. Yeah, it's been a long, strange trip."

He wondered if they got The Grateful Dead reference.

"New truck?" Lee said.

"A new old one," Dalton said. "Just bought it in Kalamazoo."

"Staying long?" Lee said.

"Forever and a year."

He drained the rest of the beer and Lee got him another.

"You worked up a thirst," Lee said.

One of the blonds abruptly said, "Can we turn the music up?"

Dace patted her thigh.

"Hold on, baby. We're having a little talk here with our old pal Dalton."

"Who's Dalton?" she said. Dace fired up another joint and handed it to her. The two blonds passed the joint back and forth and giggled.

"I need a place to crash tonight," Dalton said.

"Well, *your casa is your casa*," Lee said, sniggering.

Dalton didn't like the sound of Lee's voice. Never had. The boy had always struck him as barely north of retard.

"You come at the right time," Dace said, a quick frown aimed at Lee.

"Why's that?"

Dalton leaned forward.

"We're going on a road trip tomorrow." Dace grinned. "The four of us."

"Is his name Dalton?" one of the blonds said. To Dalton, they really did seem interchangeable.

"Where to?" Dalton said.

"Chicago."

"How long?"

"Four, maybe five days."

"Pizza at Giordano's," Lee said. "Wrigley Field and all that shit. We get to sing Take Me Out to the Ballgame."

Dalton and Dace rolled their eyes. Dalton knew Lee was an idiot. So did Dace. Still just a happy-go-lucky high school kid, really. But he would probably not grow up beyond assistant weed dealer. And he would probably turn up dead in a ditch someday. Dace was the brains of the outfit, but that wasn't saying much.

"Taking the train down to Chi-Town," Dace said. "Like real tourists."

"So, a pleasure trip," Dalton said.

"Some business, too. There's a vehicle to drive back."

"Of course." Dalton figured Chicago was their source of supply. It made him think of Seymour, of Vietnam, but he managed to shake the images away. "How much product you got on hand now?"

Dalton was mostly just making small talk, but he was curious, too. It was his trailer.

"Just what we need for recreation," Dace said matter-of-factly. "We never keep any amount here."

He had a smug look. Dalton figured that was to let him know he knew his business.

"Smart." Dalton sipped his beer. "You never know who might pull up the lane."

"You did," Dace said, grinning.

"Sorry to bust in on you unannounced."

"Don't say bust, man," Lee said, attempting the joke.

Dace glanced at Lee.

"Lee, why don't you take the ladies outside for a little snipe hunt, so me and Dalton can talk."

Lee nodded and took them out. They held hands and stumbled, nearly falling to the floor.

"What's a snipe?" one of the blonds said.

"Bye, Dalton," the other blond said, waving.

After they were gone, Dace said, "She'll keep you company, if you like."

Dalton grinned but shook his head.

"That's mighty generous of you, Dace. But maybe another time. I'm wrecked from the road."

“Anything we ought to know?”

“Like what?”

Dace leaned forward.

“Like, why you ain’t on an oil rig in the Gulf, making good bread.”

“I made enough for a while. Three years of it.”

“How much is enough?”

“My needs are simple. And now I have cheap wheels. You ever even seen an oil rig, Dace?”

“Can’t say I have.” He expertly rolled another joint. “But I have bought a few oil filters in my time. Other than Chicago, I ain’t never been farther than Detroit.”

“You ain’t missed much,” Dalton said. He decided he could partake after all. Dace handed it to him and he fired it up. He wasn’t going anywhere. No plans to operate heavy machinery, including his brain. His only tangible plan was to stay off that asshole Seymour’s radar. He didn’t know if that was possible. But it was a theory that needed to be tested. The future—whatever was in it — was limited by Seymour’s radar screen.

After the joint, Dace turned up the music just enough to be heard clearly. Zeppelin was playing “The Song Remains the Same.” Dalton nodded and kept time and thought, yeah, that’s life. It tends to usually stay the same. You had to break out to have a chance at all. Breaking out meant finding a door. If there was one. Life was often just four walls and no door.

“You’re not here for just a joint,” Dace said. “Not after three years.”

Dalton thought a moment, which wasn’t easy because it was

primo weed and it cooked inside him pretty well. He could see himself just turn up the knob and groove to Zeppelin rocking the trailer on its foundation.

"I might want to build a little something out here, by the creek," he said after a long pause. "A cabin, maybe. But livable."

"You got enough for all that?"

Dalton mulled how much he'd made on oil rigs. And then there was the money from Seymour. The payoff for keeping quiet about something they'd done in Nam involving drugs, which made Dalton indebted to Seymour. Accomplice was a better way to put it, but he was too tired now for that shit.

"Yeah, I reckon I can swing it."

Dace nodded but looked slightly skeptical.

"How do you figure to make a living? No oil rigs around here."

Dalton shrugged.

"I could sell a few acres, if I need to. One step at a time."

"And you don't need dope dealers as neighbors."

"It ain't that."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, Dace, I'm sure. And I'd do you a deal, for taking care of the trailer."

Dace thought in terms of deals, related best to deals.

"What kind of deal?"

Dalton went to the kitchen and got a beer to buy time, to make sure he knew what he was doing. He brought Dace one, too.

"To getting evicted," Dace said, holding up his PBR.

"I'd give you the trailer," Dalton said abruptly.

"Say again?"

"Just haul her to a new location out in the boonies somewhere. You could be back in business in under twenty-four hours."

"For real?"

"Sure. We can put a hitch on my truck to do it."

Dace eased back in his chair and mulled it. He smiled.

"Mighty white of you, Dalton."

"Well, shit, I'm feeling especially white, I reckon."

"When do we do it?"

"Not for a while," Dalton said. "No hurry."

"Winter's coming, Dalton. Comes early here in case you forgot that down in sunny Florida."

Dalton nodded.

"Maybe I break ground first, before a freeze. Get a foundation down for spring."

"Cool." Dace passed the joint to him. "So, what's Florida really like?"

"Hot."

Dace nodded and waited to hear more, but Dalton just passed the joint back and leaned back into the sofa, glancing at the ceiling a moment, exhaling smoke.

"Sometimes," Dace said, "me and Lee think about shifting business down to Florida."

Dalton raised his head and smirked.

“That would be like opening a McDonald’s on a whole block of McDonald’s, my friend.”

Dace nodded and looked disappointed.

“It was just a thought.”

“Uh-huh.” Dalton knew Dace lacked enough drive to make such a move. And Lee had no drive at all. They would live and die as the weed kings of Antrim County. And probably in a low, short trajectory.

“But, man – thanks on the trailer.” Dace sipped his beer and then offered a hand. They shook vigorously. “You always done right by us, man. I appreciate it.”

“Esta bien,” Dalton said, not immediately aware it came out Spanish. “No sweat, Dace.”

“You speak much Mexican?” Dace said.

“Spanish, Dace.”

“Pardon my French.”

“Yeah, I know a little. From the rigs.”

Lee and the blonds came back in, and it took a minute for the blonds to get situated on a sofa and fire up a joint. Dalton partook in that one, too. He figured he was now sort of on vacation. Or something close to it. A lull of some kind. A lull away from that fuck Seymour. Calm before the Seymour storm? He couldn’t discount that. But it was okay to get good and baked and let Zeppelin drill a hole in his head.

“Lee said you got a Purple Heart in Vietnam,” one of the blonds abruptly said to Dalton.

“Did he?”

"That's what the man said."

"Must be true, then." Dalton put his hand over his heart. "But it doesn't feel purple."

"Did it hurt?" she said.

Dalton looked at Dace and rolled his eyes. Dace chuckled.

"Naw," Dalton said. He didn't think a serious war story was the way to go with the blond. It would just be more than she could relate to. But he rolled up his sleeve anyway and showed her the long scar. He didn't know why.

"Just a bee sting, really," he said.

She ran her finger along the scar.

"A bullet did that?"

"I guess so."

"You're not sure?"

She was baked even worse than he was.

"Yeah, I'm sure. A bullet. Bob the bee bullet."

"That's gnarly," the other blond said. Dalton hadn't heard anyone use that word since he rolled through California on the way back from Nam. He'd spent an interesting week in Frisco with some hippies in Haight-Ashbury. He learned right off that the locals hated the name Frisco. Only outsiders used it. Travel was always an education. Florida was where he learned too much about that bastard Seymour.

The other blond leaned closer for a look at the scar.

"Lee says you got a Bronze Star, too."

"Lee's quite the encyclopedia," Dalton said.

"What's a Bronze Star?" the blond said.

"A medal, for being brave," Lee said.

"Were you brave?" she said, grinning. She touched his elbow lightly.

"Not at all," Dalton said. "It's just bullshit."

"If it's bullshit, why'd you get one?"

"They pass them out like candy."

"But you must have done *something*," she said.

Dalton sipped his beer and studied her face a moment. The lighting was dim, just a soft -bulb lamp in a corner and the lights from the stereo, and he couldn't quite make out her features.

"I guarded the rubbers," Dalton said.

Dace and Lee laughed. The two blonds looked confused.

"Rubbers?" one of them said. "Somebody had to guard rubbers?"

"Yeah—we had a whole warehouse of them."

"Bullshit," one of the blonds said.

"No, it wasn't. Couldn't just let the enemy get them, right?"

"And who again was the enemy?" one of the blonds said.

Dalton realized it no longer mattered which one it was. Keeping track was irrelevant. And history? Fuck history. Americans didn't know history.

"The VC," Dalton said soberly. "Victor Charles – the Vietcong."

"That sounds nasty," a blond said.

“Didn’t they have their own rubbers?” another blond said.

Dalton and Dace laughed loudly. Lee brought beers from the kitchen.

“What’d I miss?” Lee said.

“Alice wanted to know why the VC didn’t have rubbers,” Dace said.

Dalton looked at the two blonds and wondered which one was Alice. He ought to have paid attention at that point but said to himself, fuck it. We are now all baked in an oven and turning brown. Go ahead and spread cinnamon on us.

A blond squeezed Dalton’s knee and he figured it must be Alice. Or one of the other blonds. He nearly laughed at loud at the notion of a room full of stoned blonds.

“Primo weed,” he said to Dace, who nodded confidently.

“I really want to know why there were so many rubbers,” Alice said. “Is that all you guys did over there?”

Dalton chuckled and then got a few, fleeting images from Vietnam, and it all kind of swept over him suddenly and he shivered.

“We put them over the barrels of rifles,” Dalton said calmly, after a pause. The images had slipped away. He had a swig of beer.

“That’s what you called your cocks – rifles?” Alice chuckled. “You guys always think with your dicks.”

“Wow!” Lee said, shaking his head.

“We put them over the rifles to keep water out, to keep them dry,” Dalton said quietly, seriously.

“You mean real guns?” Alice said.

"Yeah." Dalton finished his beer. "As real as it gets."

Silence set in among them for a minute, just Zeppelin low in the background. The album had been started over and Dalton again heard "The Song Remains the Same." There was a lesson in that if he could think well enough to say it. He stood, a little rubbery in the legs.

"I could use a blanket or two, and a pillow," he said.

"Lee, get the man some blankets and a pillow," Dace said quietly. Lee came back from the bedroom with them, and Dalton slipped the blankets under an arm and clutched the pillow. He turned toward the door.

"We got a spare room, Dalton," Dace said. "It's your trailer, man."

Dalton glanced back.

"I want to sleep outside. By the creek."

"Your call," Dace said.

"What if it rains?" Lee said and Dalton thought of many nights it rained in Vietnam.

"I want to hear the water rush by," he said. "And see the moon."

"Okay, man," Dace said. "Your wish is our command. Lee, help him with that door."

Dalton stepped out and walked toward the creek. Crickets performed an amazing symphony, and he was so baked he felt he could reach up and touch the moon.

He dumped his bedding under a tree hanging over the water and he propped himself against a boulder and listened to the ripples in the creek. It was a lovely sound that seemed as strong and loud as Niagara Falls.

“Good damn weed,” he told the creek. “You should try some.”

In a few minutes, Alice showed up and handed him a beer. He figured he had room for one more beer. Just one. She didn't say anything. She played with a curl of hair next to her ear and grinned, looking down at him for a few seconds, and then she sat beside him.

“So,” she said, drawing the word out like it was taffy, “are you all fucked up from that shitty war.”

She was direct. Dalton liked direct.

“Are you asking if I'm crazy?”

“Well, not *insane*,” she said. “I didn't mean *that*.”

“Good to know.”

“There's all sorts of fucked up,” she said.

“True enough. Are you asking if I'm a violent asshole –shit like that?”

“Well, are you?”

“Make love, not war,” he said, chuckling.

“That's just a saying.”

He held a hand up, making the peace sign right in front of her face.

“Peace, love, dope,” Dalton said.

“You're avoiding the subject.”

Dalton drew his knees up under his chin and listened to the water.

“No, I'm not crazy. Or violent. The first couple years back in the world, I had trouble sleeping but that worked itself out.”

"Nightmares?" she said.

"A few. But they finally went away. Just up and went."

"Why?"

He shrugged.

"One day I just reminded myself they couldn't send me back to Nam. That door was closed. Locked. Game over. Things perked up some after that."

"What did you see?" she said.

"In Nam?"

"No, in your nightmares. What were they like?"

Dalton tried to remember one of them clearly, which was hard at first because it had been a while. Only hazy fragments came to him. Jagged pieces of the puzzle.

"I really can't remember much now. Maybe that's for the best."

"But surely you remember something?" she said.

He sighed and looked up at the moon for a moment. It looked the same as in Vietnam. The moon was the moon was the moon.

"I remember little things."

"Like what?" she said.

"Smells."

"Just smells?"

"And the fucking heat."

"Good," she said. "This is progress. What else?"

"And how birds stopped talking to each other when someone was coming, and the jungle would go as quiet as a graveyard."

“Good,” she said. “We’re rolling now. What else?”

“I remember the fucking drippy humidity. It was like a steam bath.”

“Like down in Florida?”

“Yeah, but nobody was shooting at me in Florida. And we had AC.”

“And now you’re home, safe and sound.”

“That’s the rumor.”

They watched the water, moonlight kissing the surface, and for a long time, neither of them spoke. The weed and alcohol and fatigue from the road now weighed him down and he felt himself slipping away. A benign darkness descending. He wanted to talk more with Alice. Lovely Alice. But she was now just a dark face in the moonlight as his eyes fluttered. The booze and primo weed did their anesthetic duty and tugged at him, pulling him deeper, and then he smirked before he sank for a while into the peaceful abyss.

Dalton was reasonably sure he wouldn’t dream about Vietnam.