

Crosses

by J. Reyome

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There's another one, he thought. There, the other side of the guardrail.

David Bennett was on his way home from work. Traffic on the interstate was at a standstill due to a truck that had gone off the road just before the Brooks exit, and he'd been forced to backtrack, a U-turn on the median that would've earned him a hefty ticket if the Kentucky State Police hadn't already been otherwise occupied. Back southwest then, getting off at Shepherdsville, then towards the river and south onto a county road just east of the Jefferson State Forest, which was familiar territory for him. Then it was down an outlier of the Muldraugh Escarpment--Mitchell Hill--and into Fairdale and onto a four lane that linked onto Outer Loop and thus back to I-65. Home was then just minutes away. Preston Highway would've been less circuitous, but it would also mean driving through the south suburbs, past Southern High School on football night, and plenty of traffic. His route was effective, as near as deserted, and scenic. Plus, there was always a chance he could add another cross to his "collection".

This new one was different, this memorial he'd spotted. It, as all the others had apparently been, was a roadside monument to someone who'd been killed at the site, and he'd seen quite a bit of this sort of thing since moving south. They were all over, and they held a morbid sort of fascination for him. He considered it a peculiarity of the region, as he certainly couldn't recall ever seeing anything like it up north. People there tend to want to forget where things like that happen, he had concluded. Here they make sure *everybody* remembers.

There was an upside to it, he supposed. You see a marker in memory of a crash victim, you remember that someone died at that spot, you know it's probably prudent to at least slow down and mind your driving. So maybe they saved a life or two. On the other hand, some of the monuments were elaborate affairs that really drew the eye off of where it should be, namely, the road. On more than one occasion he himself had found his attention distracted to the point where he found himself grabbing all kinds of steering wheel to get his Chevy back onto the pavement.

This was just such an eye-catching monument. It sat on the left side of the road, just off the westbound shoulder, at the beginning of a gentle left hand bend that eventually became a series of switchbacks climbing up Mitchell Hill. That bit was a hazardous stretch of road, to be sure: beyond the guardrails on either side at some points were drop-offs of fifteen or twenty

feet. Some were more. But here, where the marker lay, the road was relatively flat; the visibility unimpeded by curves or trees. True, if you got behind in your steering it would be easy enough to go straight into the Armco, but even if you did you likely wouldn't go through it. Worst-case scenario, he figured, would be if you missed the guardrail and went down into the gully below, but there was plenty of brush to slow down even the heaviest vehicle before it reached the bottom. Strange.

So was the marker itself. Elaborate, yes. Someone had taken the time to fashion it from wrought iron, with the name "Cherri" at its center. He'd never stopped to look at it closely, but it looked like nice work, and as a welder he was wont to appreciate such things. There were several wreaths, all fairly fresh looking, within a few feet of the ironwork. Somebody thought an awful lot of Cherri, he mused. And it seems they still do.

It was enough to warrant a closer look. He found a safe spot to turn around and reversed course for the second time this day. No big deal; his wife already knew he was going to be late, what matter another few minutes. He was curious, perhaps to a fault. Once he had driven nearly ten miles in pursuit of a tree service truck just to read what was painted on the back of its chipper. Micki had been furious then, but time had turned it into something of a joke. Besides, they both had that inquisitive streak and had explored up and down the hills and hollows of their home county just to see what was down "that" road. In her own way she would understand.

There was something of a pull off here, created no doubt by visitors to Cherri's memorial. He parked himself and walked over to where the ironwork and wreaths were located, down a slight embankment.

He'd thought that it all might be cruder up close, but it wasn't, not at all. In fact, the nearer he drew the more obvious it was that someone dearly loved had died here. The ironwork was an intricate framework done with precision, and yes, from his perspective the welding was flat out gorgeous. On some work like this the joints tended to look like toothpaste, but this was done with care. The framework itself was adorned by lots of filigree and even cut and hammered steel sculptures: hummingbirds, butterflies, and an angel at its top center. All of it had been assembled elsewhere and brought here in one piece, he guessed, then carefully set in place, in concrete, no less. Being as technically it was on the highway easement and thus on state property it was probably illegal, but then so were most of these things he'd seen.

So who was Cherri, to inspire such? He looked around for clues. He was careful not to disturb anything--a mixture of healthy respect and just a trace of superstition--but he examined everything as closely as he possibly could. Somewhere there had to be something that would at least identify her, give a name or something. He wasn't quite sure what he would do with the

information once he found it, but he also knew he wouldn't be satisfied till he did.

The wreaths didn't give much up in the way of clues. He didn't pick any up--he didn't touch anything, in fact--he felt it would be rather untoward to disturb something so obviously solemn and, well, sacred. One wreath, however, did have a barely readable tag on it with a name: Lavandar. A clue? Maybe, but Lavandar was a fairly common name around Fairdale.

He was walking back to his car, having determined to return with his digital camera--he'd taken to keeping a record of all such sites he encountered--when he saw the cross. Actually the back side of it; it was fastened to a phone pole not far from the guardrail and the iron framework. It was the horizontal arms that caught his eye, and as he approached it, he saw what looked like a laminated piece of paper attached to the opposite side of the pole from the cross.

It was what he'd been looking for. Her name, and more.

There was a photo of her on the paper. She was pretty. A little round in the face, but in an attractive way. Young, obviously. An impish smile. Somebody who liked to have fun, he concluded. Maybe a little too much; maybe that was why her life had so abruptly ended here.

The text beneath the photo read:

Cherri Ann Lavandar
Born March 7, 1982
Died September 23, 2000

*Born too late
Taken too soon
Missed so much
by so many*

Just eighteen, he thought. That's so sad.

A tear rolled down his cheek. He didn't know Cherri Lavandar, but now they had something of a connection: he had visited her memorial, knew a little about her. She had died here, and someone, likely more than one, to be proper, had thought enough of her to put all of this here: a cross on the phone pole, the ironwork, the wreaths. And a total of five of those; despite the time and the weather it appeared that there was every one for every year since the date of her death, and they were all still here. Apparently I'm not the only one who won't touch stuff left at a place like this, he mused. Or maybe I'm the only person outside of family who's ever stopped.

So he knew who Cherri was. Cherri Ann Lavandar. Mystery solved. At least he could pay his respects each time he happened to drive by, which was more often than he really cared to considering how things could get out on the freeway.

But of course that wasn't the end of the story. It *should've* been, but it wasn't.

The next day (Saturday, blessed Saturday) found him at the Fairdale branch of the Free Public Library going through microfilm copies of the Courier-Journal, looking for the name Cherri Ann Lavandar. It was a common enough name in southern Jefferson County, but not so the spelling thereof. It would be easy enough to ferret out information on her.

Oh, and there *was* information to be had. Apart from the obit, there had been stories on her in the C-J, as well as the Fairdale paper as well. And in her school newspaper. Salutatorian, Student Council member, cheerleader, athlete, actor, singer, even co-editor of the paper. Cherri Lavandar had been all those things and more. Future unlimited, it seemed. Until September 23, 2000, that is.

It had been an accident, of course. She was the passenger in a car heading up to Brooks for a pre-college party. *To* the party, not *from*. No alcohol involved, though probably there would've been later. How it happened wasn't exactly explained, but as near as he could tell the car had slewed off the road and struck a phone pole, the same phone pole with the cross on it.

She had been sitting on the unlucky side of the car.

She was the only one injured. Fatally, it turned out.

There were pictures. Cherri at a computer, on stage signing, her senior photo, and the same "glamour shot" that had been on the laminated page tacked to the phone pole behind the cross. And shots from the funeral in a packed church in Jeffersontown, J-town to the locals. He now knew as much about her as anybody in the county short of her family, and certainly more than anyone giving her monument a casual glance as they passed by on their way to or from Louisville.

But...why? Why had he felt so curious, almost driven, to learn about this person who to him was nothing but a name on a bit of iron next to Mitchell Hill Road outside Fairdale? Was it just by-product of that morbid curiosity that made him keep a running inventory of the roadside monuments, or did the interest run deeper? Yes, she *was* a fascinating character, but she was also *dead*, and when she'd died she'd been half his age. Now he was in his middle forties, and it was...unseemly, perhaps, for him to be spending his weekend researching a dead teenager. Yet here he was. And it had been over three hours now, he was supposed to be running, and he hadn't so much as

set foot in Iroquois Park, his stated destination when he'd left the house this morning. There would be questions. And his wife had that peculiar knack of the couple long-married of knowing when her husband wasn't telling the whole truth, even when it was a particularly innocuous lie.

Best not to say anything, he thought, checking back in his research materials and leaving the library, heading towards home. It was a nice enough day; if he was going to run, the trails of the Jefferson State Forest would be as good as locale as any. Besides, it was closer, he loved trail running, and *and you'll pass Cherri's marker on the way* yes. Yes he would.

The run was wonderful. He had always enjoyed a jog through the woods. He couldn't run as fast as he might on the park roads, but there were more hills here; more, and steeper. It was a good workout. The marathon was just a few weeks away, and hill work would do him good. The colors were beginning to change too, the sun through the trees lending a burnt orange cast to the scene, a perfect setting on a brisk fall day.

Cherri would like this

He wasn't quite sure where the thought came from, but it stopped him in his tracks.

I'm too old for this sort of thing, he thought, shaking his head and setting up the next hill at a dead sprint. The thought was quickly banished by the effort, and when he got home his haggard appearance and sweat-stained clothes forestalled any questions, save, "Where were you really? Your shoes are dirty."

He always told Micki she'd missed her calling. Should've been a detective, not a teacher. "I was at Jefferson," he said. "Just didn't feel like mixing with the masses at the park."

She nodded. "I guess the place was probably lousy with runners."

And that was it. No further interrogation. That was unusual.

Also fortunate. It meant he didn't have to explain the extra stop he'd made just before getting home, the five minutes or so he'd spent off on the north side of the county road, paying what he thought was going to be his last visit to Cherri Ann Lavander's memorial.

It was brief. Just a few minutes to stop and pay his respects, and to leave a small bouquet he'd picked up at a corner stand. Just another bundle to add to those already there, he thought, but that's okay. Maybe she'll know somehow, somewhere, that someone cared enough to learn about her. Wasn't that the point of the monument anyway? To keep a memory alive?

He got out of the car carrying the flowers almost furtively, hoping no one would note his presence and think he was some sort of weirdo. He wasn't so

sure himself that he wasn't. But as he crouched next to the pole and lay the flowers at its base, he couldn't help but cry. A little.

"These are for you, Cherri," he said softly. "I know now. And I care."

If nothing else, he thought, I won't pass this place without a second thought any more.

Driving along the highway and seeing someone walking along the shoulder isn't all that unusual. It happens all the time. A car breaks down, its unfortunate owner hoofts it to the nearest exit for gas or the use of a pay phone. And though it's illegal, nomads still frequent the interstate. If nothing else they end up getting a free ride out of the county, or, if they're lucky, they're taken to the nearest lockup, fed, and turned loose. It might be the only decent meal they've had for a while. God knows it's probably the best they can do in times like these.

But to see a group of men...no, more like a *mass* of them; that's not just unusual, it's downright bizarre. When David saw the unusual gathering along I-65 south--he was on his way to Elizabethtown to run an errand for a Micki--he was first bemused, then surprised. Not that they were there, but that no one driving past seemed to be inclined to stop to see what was going on. Or even look at them, for that matter. As he passed them at a reduced speed, he looked at them and decided perhaps they were a work crew, maybe a merry band of vagrants still enjoying their three hots and a cot at the county expense and doing a little highway cleanup as payback. They *were* all dressed in the ghastly black and white striped jumpsuits. But they sure didn't seem to be working...not that this would come as any great shock. It was hard to tell how many there were, standing close together as they were, pretty much shoulder to shoulder.

And come to think of it, that's what he found most unusual. A county work crew along the shoulder of the interstate, no caution signs announcing their presence, and the lot of them all collected together as if they were chained to one another. They didn't do chain gangs in Kentucky to his knowledge, but this *was* Bullitt County. Guess you never know, he thought, and he didn't spare it too much further consideration till he was on his way back home from E-Town, headed back northeast, and saw the black and white clad figures to his left.

They were still there.

At 4 PM, on a Saturday.

Horns shrieked behind him as he jammed on his brakes and slithered off onto the shoulder in a dense cloud of rubber smoke and scattered gravel dust. Once he'd finally come to a stop and composed himself, he turned around to look behind him, across the road.

No, he hadn't been seeing things. The cluster of distinctive jumpsuits were visible across the median, though the bodies were somewhat...indistinct.

Still there. In the exact same place, five hours later. Either it was an unbelievable coincidence--and he wasn't inclined to believe in that sort of thing--or there was something very strange going on.

Even stranger. His eyes weren't what they used to be, but he could clearly see that the group of men--and they were all men--had their attention focused as intently on him as he had his on them. And some of them were waving.

No, not waving. *Motioning.* As if they knew he'd seen them and wanted him to come across the road.

He could imagine how that would sound to Micki. *Uh, honey, could you come pick me up? I've been, well, mugged...no, on 65...No, I stopped for them...a bunch of guys on a road crew...*

He put the car back in gear and drove another few miles, then he pulled over again, a bit more sedately this time. There were two State Policemen standing alongside the road, near a monument to a couple of their fallen comrades. David remembered the incident well; it had been something of a local sensation.

Somewhere around Brandenburg in Meade County a Deputy had pulled over a DUI and had him cuffed and in the back of his car. Unfortunately the suspect was something of a contortionist as well as hugely drunk and had ultimately managed to not only get his hands in front of him, but to squeeze past a loose barrier between the front and rear seats. He'd driven off to the consternation of the Deputy, who ran to a pay phone and called 911. The car (lights and siren still going) was spotted headed toward the Interstate, and that's where the State Police had intercepted him, doing a hundred plus on the wrong side of the road. A roadblock was futile; he just crossed the median and headed back north. Just before the Snyder Freeway, he'd encountered a cruiser and a blessedly short game of chicken later, there were two demolished cars and three equally mangled bodies. A monument had been placed next to the freeway not long thereafter, and it was here that the two State Policemen were standing.

Out of respect more than anything he stopped to check on them. He'd come from a civil service family, so he did whatever he could to help those like him. Perhaps their car had broke down and they'd walked from up the road, stopping here to pay their respects before they finally were picked up. He hadn't seen any cars, and why they hadn't used their radio to call for help was puzzling, but that didn't really matter. They were Police, and they needed help.

"Hi fellas," he said as he climbed out of the car. "You need a lift? I'm heading towards Okalona, but I'd be happy to take you wherever you need to go."

They stared at him for what seemed a very long time in what appeared to be total disbelief. Then they looked at each other, then, back at him. For a moment they didn't say anything, then the one on the right, stocky and with a thin mustache, quietly said, "You see us?"

"Uh, yeah," David replied, confused at the question. "I see you just fine. Am I not supposed to?"

"Wow," the other officer murmured. He was compactly built, a smaller if tougher looking version of his partner. "Wow."

"I'd have never believed it," the first said.

"Me neither," echoed the second. "It just didn't seem it'd ever happen."

David narrowed his eyes. "Okay, you guys. Let me in on the joke. What's going on? Do you need help or not?"

The first officer nodded, almost violently. "Help. Oh yes, we need help all right. Do we ever."

That was when David looked at their name badges. Officers Spence and Andrews. The names were familiar.

Well they ought to be, he thought. They're the same names as on the cross over there.

"You relatives?" he asked, nodding toward the monument.

"Yes sir," the second officer--Spence--said.

"Not exactly," Andrews corrected. "See..."

Abruptly, David *did*.

And just that quickly, he dashed back to the car, got in, and sped off. Straight home.

Now, David Bennett was not a drinking man. He wasn't a teetotaler by any means, but he also wasn't the kind to just toss a shot back casually, or even when his nerves needed calming. That considered, David now sat on one of the kitchen chairs, his trembling hands clutching a tumbler of George Dickel's finest. A tumbler that had started as three fingers and was now down to one.

Micki sat opposite him. She'd listened to his story, first with a disbelieving grin, then, as she absorbed his emotions, a look of concern. "Listen Davey," she said softly, "I believe you when you tell me you saw those guys. But I..." She paused, searching for words that would calm, not provoke. "I'm just not sure how real it was. I mean, you've been under a lot of stress lately." It was a statement, and a true one at that. "You haven't been sleeping a lot." Right again. "And you've really been pushing yourself on this

'Halloween' run training. With all that, don't you think it's at least possible that you might've just...well, *imagined* that you saw them?"

David took another swig of Dickel. "I don't know," he admitted, his voice gruff from the whiskey.

"So it could be it's like a...oh, like a waking dream. I've heard of such things. You think you're awake, and you even interact with what's going on, but you're really asleep." She looked at him, then added, "Sort of."

"I was driving, Micki. How could I be asleep?"

"Well, didn't you tell me you once drove all the way from Jeffersonville to Cave City once and don't remember any of it?"

It was true. Once, coming back from a trip to Indianapolis to watch time trials for the "500", he had driven straight home non stop following a late party, and had overshot his exit by about seventy miles. One moment he remembered being on the JFK bridge over the Ohio--less than ten miles from home--the next, he was seeing the signs announcing Cave City was the next exit.

He sighed. "I guess it does make a twisted kind of sense at that."

"Anyway. You need to take a day off to see to this. I'll make an appointment with Dr. Mina for you for first thing in the morning. You talk to her about what's been going on and I bet she'll have the answer. And if she doesn't, she probably knows somebody who does. Agreed?"

He nodded reluctantly.

"Really?"

"Yes, yes, I'll go," he murmured. "Really."

He did. And Dr. Mina Camden was more than sympathetic. Even more so when he told her that he'd passed no fewer than four more people standing next to crosses on his way to her office. She listened quietly, then wrote him a prescription for Halcion and Xanax. "You need to get some sleep," she said, voice betraying a desire for treatment more intensive than just medication, perhaps hospitalization, maybe an extended stay. "Not rest. Sleep. Take a day off work. Take two."

He did that too. The drugs made it easier, of course. He spent most of the two mandated days in a drug induced stupor, a pleasant vegetative state in which he could've probably accomplished a lot around the house, he just didn't *want* to. Better drugs than I could've ever gotten for recreational use, he thought with an almost content sigh. Beats DK's homegrown stuff all to pieces. And it's *legal*. Cheaper too.

Which was all well and good, but the people were still there once the high dissipated and he ventured back out into the real world. And more and

more they knew he saw them, some of them even waving to him like the road crew had a week ago.

A week. Yes, it had been that long since he'd dared venture south down 65 because he knew he'd be passing that sinister lot. But eventually it became unavoidable, and he fairly trembled as he crested the hill over which he knew he'd see them.

Yes. They were there. There looked to be eight, maybe nine of them, standing as they had before in a group, as if they were bound together like electrons to an atom. They didn't notice him at first, but eventually a couple of them began waving, one of them quite frantically.

He slowed down and came to a stop about fifty feet from them, staring at them through the windshield.

It was no work crew, he knew now. Work crews wore orange outfits. These men wore the stripes of convicts in transit. And following some additional time spent at the library he knew their story too, knew there was a cross right *there*, there where they were, a cross marking the spot where the van transporting them to the penitentiary outside Somerset had broken its driveshaft, which had then arced up and punctured the fuel tank. The spilling fuel had been ignited by sparks from the bouncing end of the shaft, and the van went up in flames. The driver and the guard riding shotgun had managed to dive from the inferno, but the passengers, chained to their seats, had no chance. Despite the heroic efforts of the driver and guard, who were severely burned themselves, eight men died.

Horribly.

And as he watched them waving at him with increasing desperation, he knew what he was going to do next. Knew it, and dreaded it. He got out of the car and walked toward them.

Their excitement seemed to reach a crescendo as he approached, then ebbed as he stopped about twenty feet from where they stood, tightly massed, along the shoulder of the road. Cars passed, some perilously close. He knew the drivers could see him, but not the little group he was looking at.

"Best be careful," a tall, slender man with thick black hair said in a nasally voice. "They drive like idiots down through here."

"They see our cross and they just kinda edge over," another allowed. "But *they* don't see us."

"But I do," David muttered. "Why do you suppose?"

"Don't know and don't care," the skinny one, obviously the leader, said roughly. The name Blackwright was stenciled on his uniform. "And don't matter. What matters is what you can do to help us."

"And that would be...what?" David asked.

Blackwright nodded toward the cross. "Get rid of *that*," he said.

David looked startled. "You...you want me to take that cross out of here? Your memorial? Why?"

"It keeps us here," a voice called from out of the group.

"That's right," another echoed. "As long as that damn thing is here, so are we."

David took a few steps backward.

Onto the freeway. A horn blared wildly. He jumped and found himself in the arms of the group of men, who saved him from a skinning at least.

"Toldjaso," Blackwright said to the trembling David. "Easy there, my friend. I know this is pretty freaky. It would be to me too."

"But you gotta do something for us," one almost pleaded. He looked to be no more than eighteen. "We've been here like this since the accident, and that was..."

Twelve years ago, David thought, regaining some composure. The accident was twelve years ago. "I don't get it," he said. "Why can't you leave?"

"Don't know and don't care," Blackwright repeated, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "What I do know is that's what's keeping us here, and if you get rid of it, we'll be able to go."

"Where?"

Blackwright looked thoughtful. "I don't know that either, and maybe for some of us it's just as well. Me in particular. But I reckon I've had enough time to make my peace. Either way, it's better than having to hang out here for eternity with these guys."

"Up yours, Tommy," someone snorted.

"So," David said, "you want me to get rid of that cross, so you can...cross over, I guess?"

"Something like that," Blackwright nodded.

"Will you do it, mister?" The young voice again. "Please?"

He couldn't very well say no, bizarre as it all seemed. "All right," he said. "But I can't do it now. Too many people would see. I'll come back after dark. You mind waiting till then?"

"Ain't as if we was going anywhere," said Blackwright with an obvious grin. Then, to the rest: "Boys, we're fixin to move on."

There were cheers from the group. "Better bring a truck and a chain," someone called. "Damn thing's buried deep, I know. And it's in cement."

"One good steady tug ought to get it out," Blackwright said. "It's solid but it's not *that* solid."

He didn't dare set an alarm. He never rose before eight on a weekend, and Micki would surely know something off the wall was going on. There would be unpleasant questions asked, and another demand to see Dr. Mina, a

visit he knew in his heart would culminate with an enforced stay at a psychiatric hospital. Not at all what he wanted. The same scenario would also probably be the result were he to be caught in the act of what he intended, so he would have to be careful all around.

The chain made more noise than he was comfortable with, but there was no sign of movement within the house; Micki's white noise generator effectively masking the sounds of his loading and leaving. Fifteen minutes later he was at mile marker 119, where the men were waiting.

"So what do I do with it once I get it out?" David asked Blackwright. "I can't be seen tooling down the highway with...*that* in my truck."

"I ain't exactly sure," Blackwright admitted. "Seems to me all you'd need to do it get it out of the general vicinity. You could drive a few miles down the road and dump it, I guess."

"And once it's gone, so are you?"

The man--such as he was--shrugged. "It's the only thing keeping us here's all I can figure. I reckon we'll know in a few minutes, huh?"

"I reckon." David hooked the chain to the truck's hitch and dragged the other end to the shaft of the cross, wrapping it around the bottom and cinching it tight. "I'm not sure where this thing is going to go once it comes out," he said to the group, "so watch out."

"Like it's going to hurt *us*," one of them laughed.

"Oh. Yeah." He climbed into the truck. "All right. Here goes."

"Wait a minute," Blackwright called. "What's your name?"

"David. David Bennett."

Blackwright gave him a wink and a thumbs up. "We owe you, bro. Wherever we end up, you'll be welcome, trust me."

Ummm...okay, David thought uncertainly, bringing the truck forward just enough to take up the slack in the chain. Then he dropped it into its lowest gear and began to pull.

It was tougher than he had expected; the thing really had been set well. But after a few minutes relentless pulling he noticed he was moving forward slightly, and the cross seemed to be going down. More gas, and there was a rending sound from the ground behind him, and the cross dropped from sight in his rearview. A little more throttle, and he pulled up the shoulder with it tagging along behind him like a pet on a leash.

He shut off the truck and got out.

The men were gone.

He smiled. Godspeed, he thought, wherever you're going. And what the heck. Nice to know I'll have a few friends wherever I end up going.

The cross was heavy with its stout wood and concrete base, but he managed to get it worked up into the bed of the truck. He drove up towards

Brooks, got off onto a county road, and unceremoniously shoved it off into a ravine.

He made an excuse to go to E-Town the next day, and drove past the site. No more cross, no more men. He smiled, a smile which stayed for most of the day till, on his way home, he came to the memorial for the two fallen State Policemen. Now it was *they* who waved frantically at him. He stopped, got out, and walked over to them. "I suppose you'll be wanting me to get rid of *that*," he said to them, nodding toward the cross.

"We kinda hoped you would," Spencer nodded.

"Yeah," Andrews agreed, "especially seeing as you did it for the cons up the road."

"You knew about them?" David asked, surprised.

"Well, sure we did," Spence said. "Not much goes on along around here we don't know about, at least so far as that sort of thing goes. Not like we have any choice, I mean. Don't ask me to explain it, I don't know how it works, but I know about *all* the folks hung up down here. I don't know where they all are, but I know there's lots of us. And they all know about the cons."

"Yes sir," Andrews said firmly. "All of 'em."

David walked over to the monument. It was significantly stouter than the one set up for the convicts. "Gee fellas," he said thoughtfully, "I don't know that I'll be able to help you. I mean, this thing is *huge*. Built to last."

"But it's wood," Andrews said. "And wood can be cut."

"Is that all I need to do? Just cut the thing down?"

"Can't hurt to try," Spence said hopefully.

So later that night David returned to the same stretch of interstate, armed with a chainsaw this time. No handsaw; that would be quieter, yes, but slow, so slow. And this was hard wood.

"Bear with me guys," he said to Andrews and Spence. "This is the first time I've used this thing." He'd got it for Christmas a few years ago from Micki, when they first put in the wood stove, but frankly it scared him to think of using it, and he'd always bought their wood pre-cut. Micki never let up on him about that.

Starting it was an adventure in itself. "You pull that thing like it was your...", Andrews began, only to be hushed by Spence. "Sorry."

"Take your time, David," Spence said quietly. "Those things can be a bear. Mind you pull those goggles down."

"How did you know my name?" David asked, looking up from the saw as he put the protective eyewear in place.

Spence shrugged. "Like we know everything else, I guess. You told those cons, so now we all know."

"Well then," David said, giving the starter another pull, "maybe you can fill me in on the details of how you came to be here and why I'm the only one seeing you."

The saw came to roaring life in David's hands, who was so startled he almost dropped it. It almost sputtered to a stop before he managed to rev it back to life.

"I'm not sure how much we can tell you," Spence admitted, "but maybe the others can fill you in."

"Yeah," Andrews added. "You can bet on that. There's a lot more where we came from. Well, not exactly, but you'll see."

That's what I'm worried about, David thought numbly as he edged the blade into the wood slowly, carefully, notching out the shaft so it would break the right way. It wouldn't do to have it fall onto the freeway. Never mind that it would be a traffic hazard; he just didn't care to be caught, and the more time that passed between the felling of the cross and its discovery, the better.

There was a cracking sound, louder than the saw. That's it, he thought, it's coming down now. And it did as he gave the shaft one more good slash to make sure it was completely severed. It topped pretty much in the direction he'd hoped it would go, then, almost as a bonus, it bounced and rolled down the embankment to the side of the road. There was barely enough time for Spence to call, "Thanks, David," with a deep note of relief before the officers were gone, and David was loading the chainsaw into the back of the truck and disappearing into the night.

It didn't take long for the memorial to be missed, less than a day and a half, in fact. But by then David Bennett had loosed eleven more "bound spirits", and from each of them he had learned just a little more about how they'd come to be in the predicament they were.

Accidents, all of them. They didn't have to be in cars, though most of them were; one of them had been a frontiersman whose wagon had rolled onto him immediately adjacent to what was now I-65. But they were *all* accidents, people who had died before it was...their time, so to speak. In each case someone had memorialized their passing with a cross set up at the spot they had been killed. Sometimes it was a makeshift sort of thing; an etching in the back of a tree, a cross in reflective tape on a guardrail. Sometimes though it was amazingly elaborate, as was one under a highway viaduct where the memorial was actually airbrushed onto the concrete abutment. That had required David to rent a sandblaster to remove. But *just the crosses*; nothing else mattered. Why? Because, in the words of one freed

spirit, "People set a lot of store in the power of a cross. It don't matter whether you was a Christian." David could tell by the man's tone that he hadn't been. "It's all in the symbol, see? It's *their* faith, concentrated in that cross, that keeps me bound there." He concluded with understandable bitterness: "If they'da knowed, they wouldn't put the damn thing up in the first place."

At first it had seemed there were so many of them, David could hardly imagine actually doing it all by himself. But he was making a dent, certainly, and each successive soul was just so...eager, that it seemed like he was on a mission, and a valiant one at that. It was a goal, something noble, an ambition to fulfill, something he had lacked all his life. A direction. A purpose. You can't just play with computers and expect to be anything, his grandmother had told him years ago, and now it turned out that she had been right, right even beyond her own imaginings.

But there would be a reckoning. David knew it almost from the moment he'd cut down the monument to the State Policemen. Somebody's going to notice it's gone, he'd thought, and then things will get hot.

Oh, they did. Really hot.

It wasn't long in coming. Early the next morning Micki came into the bedroom with breakfast on a tray. That was strange enough; they'd been married for fifteen years and he'd never gotten breakfast in bed before. Of course they had a waterbed and it wasn't very practical, but nevertheless.

She handed him the tray--complete with one of her cherished tulips in a vase--and sat down on a chair next to the bed. She looked like she had something on her mind, something serious. He was tempted to ask, *what did I do now*, but that wouldn't have been very tactful or even wise, not with a hot breakfast on his lap. Instead, he smiled, kissed her when she leaned over to him, and began to eat.

She waited till he was finished. Then she handed him the paper.

It was the day's top headline. "KSP I-65 Memorial Vandalized", the Courier-Journal blared. As well it should, he thought solemnly.

Micki sat with her hands in her lap, looking either sad or confused. Maybe both.

"You did it," she said. It wasn't a question.

He didn't say anything, but he did nod.

"Why?"

"You know why," he said. "I told you."

"That business about seeing the dead people next to the road?" Her voice rose in pitch, but not volume, as she spoke. It was how she reacted when she was scared. "Davey, I thought you talked to Dr. Mina about that stuff, and it was all settled."

"Settled how? Do you think a few days' rest and some pills were enough to stop it? Well, surprise, it wasn't."

She looked hurt, and immediately he was remorseful for his curt reply. "Don't you know she's probably seen this too, and she's going to go straight to the cops about it?"

"No, I don't think she will," he replied, his voice moderated. He knew Dr. Mina Camden well enough to realize she would know right away who was responsible for the felled cross. On the other hand, he also knew she wouldn't tell anyone, at least without at least trying to make contact with him. "Confidentiality and all. But I expect she will be calling, and sooner rather than later."

It took less than twenty minutes. They waited quietly, David sipping at his coffee till the phone rang. Micki answered it, then handed the receiver to him. "Dr. Camden," she sighed.

"You've seen it, I suppose," he said.

"David, what have you done?" the doctor asked, her voice tremulous. "You've got not just the State Police in a killing mood, but the families of all the victims of that van crash. Yes, I saw that too, and I knew. So do they. And there's some unsavory folks there, you can be sure. Now everybody who's ever posted a memorial alongside a road will be looking for *you*, David. And every one of them will want your blood."

He was silent for a moment.

"Haven't you got anything to say?" she said, sounding about as distressed as Micki.

"What do you want me to say? That I'm sorry? Okay, I'm sorry I set those people free. They seemed happy enough. I don't expect anybody to understand what I did. But as far as I know, nobody knows it's me except for you, me, and my wife, and unless you've already..."

He stopped. The line was silent.

"You didn't," he said softly, setting the tray aside.

"David, I *have* to. Confidentiality goes out the window when it comes to the commission of a crime, and especially when it's reasonably heinous, like this."

"But who did I really hurt? The families? If they knew what they'd done, putting those crosses up..."

"Listen to yourself," the doctor pleaded. "Listen to what you're saying. David, you're not rational. You need treatment. I want you to meet me somewhere, somewhere neutral, where I can arrange for you to be..."

He quickly thumbed the disconnect button.

"She's going to rat me out," he said to Micki in a hushed voice, climbing out of the bed. "I don't believe it. She's going to rat me out. There's got to be something...oh, I don't know, unethical about that."

Micki looked astonished. "Is it anymore unethical than cutting down memorial crosses? For god's sake, what did you expect, Davey? What you did was awful! What's the difference between you doing this and somebody going to a cemetery and knocking over all the headstones?"

He actually knew the answer to this, if his sources had been reliable. Cemeteries were more for the living than for the dead, someplace for families to gather on anniversaries and such, the headstones a means by which to mark the presence of a person on the earth. Yes, there were crosses here too, but it wasn't the same: the souls had long since departed the bodies. They *knew* they were dead, unlike accident victims, or murder victims for that matter. They were confused at first, they lingered, and if they were unfortunate enough to have someone place a cross at their location before they finally shuffled off to whatever plane was their next destination, why, too bad for them, right?

But then there was him. "You cared," one had told him. "You cared enough to see, and that's all that matters. And once you see, you don't stop seeing, until..."

"That's it," he said suddenly, snapping his fingers. "That's it. That's how I stop this."

"What are you talking about?" Micki said, looking even more worried now.

"How I stop seeing them." He took her by the shoulders. "I *stop caring*. That's all there is to it. So I have to stop caring."

"But how? If drugs and therapy don't help, what will?"

What indeed? He stepped across the room, looking around aimlessly, eventually fixing his gaze on a painting Micki had done for his birthday a few years ago. It was a really beautiful piece, something along the lines of a Neiman only more stylized and abstract. It took some study before one realized it was of two men on bicycles angling through a downhill turn. She'd painted it from her memory of seeing David and his close friend Jeb Stuart racing down Mitchell Hill on fall afternoon.

At the thought of that day David smiled. They'd never told Micki just how close they'd both come to a serious accident that day. Oh, but that had been close. Not for the traffic, which was usually a factor on the road, but for the gravel they'd hit about two thirds of the way down. David, toward the center of the lane, had been able to avoid it, but Jeb's rear tire had hit it and slewed luridly, tapping David's rear just enough to send him into a slide from which he probably wouldn't have recovered if it hadn't happened right at the apex of a

turn, which gave him just enough extra pavement to straighten the careening bike and lean into the next turn. If it would've happened another quarter mile down the road, it was just as likely he would've gone into the guardrail, right at

Cherri's monument

It wouldn't be *that* simple, could it?

Well, why not? Where it all started, it could almost certainly come to an end. He had *started* caring there; he could just as easily stop. He would free her, and that would be it. She would be the last.

Maybe, he thought, maybe.

He looked over at Micki, so small, so lost.

"I know now," he said. "What I have to do. I know."

"But Davey, what does it matter? She'll have the cops after you any minute now!"

He shook his head. "No she won't. She'll talk a big load, but in the end, that's all it is, a load. She doesn't want her name involved in this anymore than I do, believe me. She'll stay mum."

"So what do you do?"

He looked at the picture again, straightened it on the wall, then again. "Wait until dark."

There was little talk till nightfall, when he got in the Chevette. Micki followed him outside, begging him to come back in, to talk with Dr. Camden, who had called four times between the morning and evening and who was on the phone again, calling from the road, on her way to their house.

"Alone," Micki pleaded. "She says she's alone, and that she didn't tell anybody..."

"Told you so," David said, smiling up at her. "Listen to me, Micki. Once I'm done with this, it's over, I won't see any more people, and eventually the whole thing will die down. The police and the families, yeah, their dander'll stay up a while, but eventually they'll just put up bigger and better memorials and they'll be happy. And so will I, because I know the people that were trapped there are free now. But it can't end till / make it end. And I'm choosing to do that. Now."

He started the car, shifted into gear. "No!" Micki shouted. "No! You will *not*, David, don't you do this..."

She tried to grab the car by the window frame. Gently he pried her thin fingers off as he raised the window. "I won't be far away," he said. "Let me do this. It won't take long."

Then the window was up, and he was pulling out of the driveway, and down the street as she chased him, sobbing, "You come back to me, Davey! You come back to me! Come back to me!"

Had he heard her, he might've promised. But perhaps it was just as well he hadn't.

He pulled over at the wayside adjacent to Cherri's memorial and walked the rest of the way in. Better to have the car parked there, he thought, just in case Dr. Camden does send the cops after me.

There it was, the iron framework, the wreaths, the poem tacked to the back of the phone pole. And at the base of the pole, sitting cross-legged, was Cherri Ann Lavandar.

"You came," she said with a smile. "I knew you would."

She didn't look that much different from her picture. A bit thinner, perhaps, but then cameras tend to put weight on a body, he thought, a little less than rationally. A clear mind wasn't exactly on his palette right about now. She held out her hand and he helped her to her feet.

The warmth struck him. Warmth, and solidity. Yes, Tom Blackwright had felt the same way. Just as if he was a living being instead of something just north of decay. She wrapped her arms around him, hugged him. Now *that* was a strange feeling, but only because the last woman to hug him besides Micki was his mother, and she'd been underground for many, many years. A foreign feeling; not unpleasant, just unfamiliar.

"I know what you've been through," she said, her face pressed into his chest. "I know, and I want to thank you, not just for me, but for all the others. You figured it right too. I'll be the last."

"Thank god," he sighed. "Then let's get this over with."

"Not yet," she whispered, hugging him. "Just another minute. That's all I want, just another minute."

"Sweetie, they're liable to be after me in another minute."

She shook her head. "No. Nothing like that." She looked back up at him, and now she was crying. "I just wish it could've been some *other* way, you know, it's just not fair..."

He sighed. "No, it's not."

"...but there's got to always be one somewhere," she murmured through the tears. "At least that's what I hear. Maybe it won't be so long..."

"Never mind," he said firmly. "It'll all be over in a minute, and you'll be on your way." He circled the pole, looked up at the cross. It was higher than he'd guessed, nothing he could just reach up and pull down. If he'd known, he could've brought a small stepladder, hell, a milk crate would probably do...

...but no matter. He was ready for it to be over, and he knew she was too. Besides, he'd always been adept at climbing trees, and what was a phone pole but a limbless tree? He wrapped his arms around it, braced with his feet, and began to scramble up. A few feet would do it...

Then he was fact to face with it. The cross, looking more brown than red in the darkness. A little higher, and then he could take an arm off the pole, grab the cross and pull, and if one hand wouldn't get it, why, two certainly would, he'd always had strong arms...

He was just beginning to pry the cross loose when he saw the lights dancing among the trees, heard the engine. His mind barely had time to process the approach of the car before it was there, and then it was *there*

The driver had seen him. A six foot three man in jeans and a t-shirt stands out well enough in headlights, even more so apparently when he's climbing a phone pole. It was a curiosity at least. Enough that the woman behind the wheel had missed the apex of the turn and was now headed off the road, the jostling causing her to put just *that* much more pressure on the accelerator.

For her everything was now going at 78 speed. For David Bennett, it was all slow-mo

the car, hitting the pole with a horrible crunch of glass and rending metal

the airbag deploying, denying him the look of surprise--that's all, just surprise--in the driver's eyes as she was saved from serious injury

the car now edging just slightly sideways by momentum

and through it all, the familiar wooden squeaking of nails pulling from within dense wood.

He never let go of the cross. Not as it finally came free, not as he fell from the pole, sideways, toward the car, not as his body landed at the foot of the pole, and not as the car finally completed its wild gyration, pinning him against the pole.

His last cognizant thought as a living being was, *gee, I hope she's not hurt.*

She wasn't. He was.

"Oh David," Cherri said, almost hysterical now, leaning toward him between the car and the pole, "I'm so sorry, so sorry, but there *has* to be one, has to be *one*, and you cared enough, I just wish I could..."

She held out her hand. He raised his as much as he could.

Her hand grasped his, tried to pull. Then the pull stopped and her hand disappeared, along with the rest of her.

"I just want people to remember him too," Preston had said as he climbed up the ladder. "It wasn't his fault he was...*different*."

"Crazy as a loon, you mean," David's sister Caitlin said grumpily. It certainly hadn't been *her* idea to be here. But her son--David's nephew--had insisted, and had built the cross himself, out of a couple of pieces of wood from a picket fence crudely nailed together and spray-painted red. Then in gold paint, on the crosspiece, the word *love*.

Love.

The greatest power of all, imbued in a simple, handmade religious symbol young Preston knew little about. Love, abiding and strong, more than strong enough to bind the confused essence of David Bennett to the spot.

Time passed, and kept passing. David had lots of time to think, to consider what Cherri had meant when she'd said, *there has to be one*, and now he knew, was glad that the cross, *his* cross, was so high Micki would never see it, knew she would not be that *one*, knew he would wait as long as it took.

Long enough for a crudely made cross to weather enough to fall off on its own. Or, perhaps, as long as it took for someone he didn't care about to care enough about him.