

Just Another Hero

by Ron Earl Phillips

Alma Tucker settled into middle age with the comfort that escapes most women. Her festival queen days gone. Along with her wispy waist and cherry blond hair, replaced by broader curves and graying tresses. She was content with the way age had changed her body. Alma was her own woman.

She gave me a smile as I sidled onto the third stool, just left of the door, along the main counter of Burt's Diner. Burt Tucker had been her husband for all of three days before he shipped off to the Pacific in 1942. Like me, Burt had been a Marine. He didn't return. Alma took what little savings the Twenty-two year man had, along with modest death compensation, and sunk it into the Blue Bell Diner, renaming it for her lost love. She didn't wear any of that grief. Of course that had been almost sixteen years ago. Alma never remarried.

"Well Sam, is it Thursday already?"

She poured my cup of coffee without asking, as I set my hat down on the counter. I reached down in my coat pocket and pulled out a pack of Lucky Strike's. Set them next to the hat.

I smoothed out my mustache, pulling my fore finger and thumb towards the corners of my mouth.

"Thursday doesn't come soon enough, Alma."

I let slide a subtle grin.

"Seven days is too long to go without seeing that pretty face."

She played out a blush, waving away my comment with a thick-fingered hand.

"You keep talking like that honey and you might get more than a pretty face one day."

"Suppose that's a chance I'll have to take."

She chuffed when I shot her a wink.

"So you ready to order? Or you waiting on the General?"

I took a quick sip of the bitter coffee.

"Might as well wait. I think the General enjoys my company."

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"Sam, it's not your company. You're the only one in this diner that hasn't heard all his stories."

"That's probably so. That what our kind do when we get old. Talk about the old times. The War."

I took another foul sip and smiled approvingly at Alma. She left me to get ready for the lunch rush.

It was quiet now in Burt's. Only a couple old timers, Virgil Beachum and Abe Talbert, regular fixtures, sat at the end of the counter. Come noontime, though, Burt's would be filled with Piketon townsfolk and mill workers. All hungry for what Alma and her cook, Junior, had to serve. Junior was an old Blackie from Chicago, a used up boxer. When he couldn't fight any more, Junior found his way to Piketon and took up with Alma. Despite the coffee, the food was pretty good.

It was about ten till noon, I picked up the pack of cigarettes and shook a Lucky free. I reached for the ashtray after the long drag, dropping a spent match. I turned towards the diner's big picture window to watch as Piketon prepared to converge on Burt's.

Across the way was Piketon Bank, owned by the Mill. The manager was Darnell Finley, an affable man, slight build and balding. He was tightly wound and more dependable than I was when it came to keeping a schedule. Finley would have big Jack Morris, the Bank's only guard, shut the doors at five minutes before lunch. Especially Thursdays and Fridays. Thursday morning, the Mill would drop off its payroll and Friday the Mill workers would cash in their vouchers. Luanne Morris, Jack's wife, picked up an extra shift as teller for Finley those days. She also worked lunch at Burt's, working harder than big Jack ever did.

I stub out my Lucky and take another swig of the now tepid coffee. Jack Morris, all 300 pounds of him, steps out of the bank doors right on time, escorting a prissy Peggy Pike and her husband to be, Turner Price, out the door. Miss Pike is the future owner of the Mill, Turner a college boy she entranced when she was away to school in Chicago. Or so I was told. A nice enough boy, but I could imagine she would grind him down into an early grave.

Luanne steps out of the Bank as big Jack goes back in. She gives him a peck on the cheek and starts across this way. I see the General is coming up the walk from the far right window. I turn back to my coffee and grab another Lucky.

The bell on the diner door rings. I don't turn around. I hear his boisterous voice.

"Alma Lou Tucker, what kind of riff-raff you letting in your establishment nowadays?"

Alma didn't bother looking up; she'd become familiar with the General's routine. He thought it was good fun, but it was tired by the third time, let alone the twentieth.

He slapped a hard hand against my back. Feigning surprise, I turned and met the silver gaze of Sheriff Bodwyn Jackson's sunglasses giving him a broad smile.

"Sheriff, you shouldn't sneak up on a man like that."

"Call me Body. How many times do I have to ask you that, Sam? No formalities among old sea dogs." Patting me on the back again, before removing his sunglasses and taking a seat next to me.

"Sure thing Body. Old sea dogs."

I half rolled my eyes.

The Sheriff of Piketon had been drafted in 1940 into the United States Navy at the age of 17 where he spent his wartime service working galley detail and hanging on war stories told by Marines, like myself, to be told as his own later. By the time I hit the shores of Guadalcanal the General had rotated back to the States. Back home to Piketon.

I puffed my Lucky and offered the Sheriff a smoke.

"Thanks. No, I've got a pack of Marlboro here."

He patted his chest pocket. A proud Marlboro Man.

"So, you been up Dayton way? That's on your route isn't it?"

He needed. I nodded.

"Yep. I only stop there twice a month though. Not as friendly as Piketon. Why you ask?"

"Heard on the wire they had them some trouble. Wondered."

Alma poured the Sheriff a coffee. I place hand over my cup stopping an inevitable second cup.

"Body is trying to juice you. All week he's been talking about a bank robbery up in Dayton. Going on about two guy's hitting the bank like he were there and seen it all. Body would surely die if anything happened here in Pinkerton. We're barely big enough to run drunks in on Saturday night."

"Hush, you. We're talking."

She chuckled.

"Oh, big man talk. I better let you at it."

She waddled away, thankfully taking the coffee pitcher with her.

"Sorry, Sheriff. I hadn't heard. I'm due up that way next week. I'll poke around for you."

The bell rang over the door again.

I glanced over and saw Luanne from the corner of my eye. She wasn't alone.

"Sheriff."

I whispered.

"What's that?"

His voice just a little too loud.

Pointing behind me without looking or giving the gesture away, I whispered again.

"We've got trouble."

Luanne stood at the door with two men. Barely men, hiding behind the woman with handkerchief's over their faces. One gripped her arm firmly, holding her tight. Taller of the two, he looked to be in charge. The second with a slighter build held a shotgun and locked the door behind them.

At the sound of the click, the Sheriff turned.

"Don't you move, you old coot."

"Son, do you know who I am?"

"The fuck I care?"

"Watch the language, boy. I just think you've made a mistake. No one needs to get hurt over a mistake. Right?"

The Sheriff's calm surprised me. I really figured he was all talk.

"The only mistake is you won't fucking shut up."

Pushing Luanne down to the floor, the tall one raises his revolver that was pressed against Luanne's back, pointing directly at the Sheriff.

"Do you really want to do this?"

Sheriff Bodwyn Jackson stepped off the stool, raising his arms up in a non-reactive motion. I could see what he was doing. Positioning himself for better reach at his gun, to draw down on the two men first if need be.

Tall man wasn't buying it.

"You can keep your hands up. I'll take that side iron."

He stepped forward, reaching out a long arm.

"I wouldn't do that, Stretch."

He turned to me, gun still pointed at the Sheriff.

"Why's that?"

"Like the Sheriff says, you have a chance to step away. Not let this happen. It's not going to end well."

"Maybe not for you folks."

He shook the gun before shoving it under the Sheriff's chin.

"What's the plan? You robbing us kid? Before lunch?"

I pointed to the clock on the wall. Outside, I could see a crowd starting to gather.

He looked down to his own watch and then around the diner. I could see the wheels spinning.

"Fuck. God, fucking, damn it."

"Bobby?"

The shotgun boy's voice quivered.

Tall one spun around with gun still tucked under the General's chin, seeing the growing crowd.

"The fuck. Don't use my fucking name you stupid shit."

The Sheriff knocked the gun away; Stretch reacted, jerking his finger closed around the trigger. The deafening blast fired wild next to the Sheriff's head and stopped in Alma's fleshy chest. Blood erupted as silence filled the room.

Cupping his ears, the Sheriff was kneeling on the ground. Junior, out of hiding, cradled a gasping Alma. Tears streaming down the man's black face.

Shotgun boy broke the silence.

"Man, Bobby. We fucked up. You fucked up. We ain't ever getting out of here."

Bobby smacked him across the head.

"The fuck we aren't. Pull down those shades," thrusting a finger towards the windows. "We don't need to be their fucking side show."

He walked over to the Sheriff, kicked him in his stomach before taking the gun from the Sheriff's holster.

"Stupid fucking Johnny Law."

Another swift kick caught the Sheriff across the face. His nose exploded.

Shotgun had all the shades drawn.

Stretch wildly pointed the two revolvers at Junior and me. The Sheriff and Luanne weren't a threat. Neither were the old men in the corner.

"Bobby Cantrell, you really going to shoot me? Is that you're do-less cousin, Donny Reed?"

The two looked at me confused. The Sheriff even shot a glance, trying to hold back the gush of blood.

"Don't remember me? Do you?"

I pulled up a jacket sleeve. Showing them a tattoo I shared with only one other man, Topper Cantrell, Bobby's father, my brother.

I could see those wheels turning again. Guns lowering.

"Uncle Pike?"

"Been a while, hasn't it? Last I saw you, you were what? Ten? So how's your Daddy?"

Bobby eyes dropped.

"He got sent back up to Leavenworth. They killed him this time. Didn't have you watching his back."

"It happens kid. Even to a son-of-a-bitch like Topper."

I saw his eyes change, but it was too late. My Derringer was already pointing at his head.

"You haven't been using that brain of yours too well today, Bobby. Why don't you give me the guns?"

The crowd outside must be in full bloom. I could hear them rustling at the door and against the windows, trying to peek inside.

"So what's it going to be?"

"Donny, shoot him."

I shook my head. The bullet slammed into Donny's skull before Bobby registered the sound of the blast. A second shot was ready and pointed at Bobby.

"I'm glad your Daddy's dead. He won't have to claim your miserable body."

Before he could say anything, I pulled the trigger a second time.

That quieted the crowd outside for the moment.

I dropped the Derringer beside Donny and took the two pistols off of Bobby.

"They weren't bad kids. But they sure turned into stupid men."

I looked down at the Sheriff. The old sea dog had wet himself. All talk after all.

I laughed.

"A man should know better to rob the till before it's full of money. That's the problem with kids nowadays. They don't work a job, they just grab. Take. A man plans."

The Sheriff righted himself, the crimson tide mostly at bay. His shirt looked like his chest had burst, hands dripping with blood.

"Sam, whoever you are? I don't know what this is all about. But you saved us for sure."

"Ah, shit General. We're just old sea dogs."

I shot him twice in the chest with Bobby's gun.

He dropped, chuffing.

Without a blink I turned the gun on Junior and Alma. Junior got one in the neck and another in the head. The shot for Alma was to put her out of her misery. Couldn't let that big old heart of hers keep her going. Alma's face wasn't so pretty.

I tossed that gun over towards Bobby. What a killer Bobby turned out to be, three with two shots each.

The old men and Luanne huddled in the corner. I lifted the General's gun. One shot each. The Sheriff was a shit shot, shooting three civilians. Damn shame.

After the last shots, the crowd was finding its spine. A window shattered.

A minute past Noon, my stomach growled. Damn.

I picked up my hat and pack of smokes, slide out the back, taking Donny's shotgun with me. No one's been brave enough to cut around the back, so I shuffle three blocks to a used car lot.

The townsfolk were all converged on the apparent shootout. They'll probably declare the General a hero after years of laughing behind his back.

Todd Tyler, my wheelman, is waiting there like we planned if things got hot and we were separated.

"Pike, you OK? I saw the crowd in front of the diner."

"Ran into some bad luck. Just bad luck. This town's a dead end now. Let's scoot."

I tossed the shotgun in the back seat. Tyler threw her into gear and we roared on down the road.

I lit up another Lucky. What a morning, I thought, taking a long drag.

"Let's go check that bank down in Princeton again. It's a promising coal town."

"Sure thing, Pike. That Dayton money should hold us a while."

