

BLACKTOP WASTELAND

A NOVEL

S. A. COSBY

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For my father, Roy Cosby

*Your reach sometimes exceeded your grasp, but once you got
a hold of that steering wheel, you drove it like you stole it.*

Ride on, wild man. Ride on.

*A father is a man who expects his son to be as good a man
as he was meant to be.*

FRANK A. CLARK

ONE

Shepherd's Corner, VA
2012

Beauregard thought the night sky looked like a painting.

Laughter filled the air only to be drowned out by a cacophony of revving engines as the moon slid from behind the clouds. The bass from the sound system in a nearby Chevelle was hitting him in his chest so hard, it felt like someone was performing CPR on him. There were about a dozen other late-model cars parked haphazardly in front of the old convenience store. In addition to the Chevelle, there was a Maverick, two Impalas, a few Camaros and five or six more examples of the heyday of American muscle. The air was cool and filled with the scent of gas and oil. The rich, acrid smell of exhaust fumes and burnt rubber. A choir of crickets and whippoorwills tried in vain to be heard. Beauregard closed his eyes and strained his ears. He could hear them but just barely. They were screaming for love. He thought a lot of people spent a large part of their life doing the same thing.

The wind caught the sign hanging above his head from the arm of a pole that extended twenty feet into the air. It creaked as the breeze moved it back and forth.

CARTER SPEEDE MART the sign proclaimed in big black letters set against a white background. The sign was beginning to yellow with age. The letters were worn and chipped. The cheap paint flaking away like dried skin. The second "E" had disappeared from the word "SPEEDEE." Beauregard wondered what had happened to Carter. He wondered if he had disappeared too.

"Ain't none of y'all motherfuckers ready for the legendary Olds! Y'all might as well go on back home to your ugly wives and try and get some Tuesday night pussy. For real though, y'all ain't got nothing for the legendary

Olds! She does 60 in second. Five hundred dollars line to line. Huh? Y'all mighty quiet. Come on, the Olds done sent many a boy home with his pockets lighter. I done outrun more cops than the Duke boys in the Olds! You ain't just beating the Olds, homeboy!" a guy named Warren Crocker crowed. He was strutting around his '76 Oldsmobile Cutlass. It was a beautiful car. A dark green body with chrome Mag rims and chrome trim that ran across its surface like liquid lightning. Smoked-out glass and LED lights emitted an ethereal bluish glow like some bioluminescent sea creature.

Beauregard leaned against his Duster as Warren pontificated about the invincibility of the Oldsmobile. Beauregard let him talk. Talk didn't mean anything. Talk didn't drive the car. Talk was just noise. He had \$1,000 in his pocket. It was all the profits from the last two weeks at the garage after most of the bills had been paid. He was \$800 short on the rent for the building that housed his business. It had come down to a choice between the rent or glasses for his youngest. Which wasn't really a choice at all. So, he had reached out to his cousin Kelvin and asked him to find out where the nearest street race was being held. Kelvin still knew some guys who knew some guys who knew where the money races could be found.

That was how they found themselves just outside of Dinwiddie County ten miles from the fairgrounds where legally sanctioned drag races were held. Beauregard closed his eyes again. He listened to Warren's car idle. Under the sound of the boasting and dick swinging, Beau heard an unmistakable ticking.

Warren had a bad valve in his engine. That left two possibilities. He knew about it but thought it was an acceptable defect that could be overcome by the sheer power of his motor. Maybe he had a nitrous boost on it and didn't care about one funky valve. Or he didn't know it was bad and was just talking a lot of shit.

Beau nodded at Kelvin. His cousin had been milling through the crowd, trying to drum up a big money race. There had already been four contests, but no one was willing to put up more than \$200. That wasn't gonna cut it. Beau needed at least a \$1,000 bet. He needed someone who would look at the Duster and see an easy payday. Look at its stripped-down exterior and assume it was a pushover.

He needed an asshole like Warren Crocker.

Crocker had already won one race, but that had taken place before Beauregard and Kelvin arrived. Ideally, he would have liked to watch the man

drive before he made the bet. See how he handled the wheel. How he navigated the cracked asphalt on this stretch of Route 83. But beggars can't be choosers. It had taken them an hour and a half to get out here, but they had come because Beauregard knew no one in Red Hill County would race him. Not in the Duster.

Kelvin moved in front of Warren as he was preening around his car. "My man over there got ten friends that say he can be doing 70 in second while you still trying to drag your ass out of first," he said. He let his booming voice fill the night. All the chatter ceased. The crickets and the whippoorwills were working themselves into a frenzy.

"Or is all you do is talk?" Beauregard asked.

"Ooooooh shit," someone from the crowd that had gathered said. Warren stopped strutting and leaned on the roof of his car. He was tall and thin. His dark skin appeared blue in the glow of the moonlight.

"Well, that's a bold statement, motherfucker. You got the paper to back it up?" he said.

Beauregard pulled his wallet out and fanned ten \$100 bills out like a deck of cards in his large hands.

"The question is, do you have the balls to back it up?" Kelvin said. He sounded like a Quiet Storm DJ. He grinned like a lunatic at Warren Crocker. Crocker tucked his tongue into the inside of his cheek.

Seconds ticked by and Beauregard felt a hollow opening blossom in his chest. He could see the gears working in Warren's head and for a moment he thought he was gonna pass. But Beauregard knew he wouldn't. How could he? He had talked himself into a corner and his pride wouldn't let him back down. Besides, the Duster didn't look that impressive. It was clean, and the body was free of rust, but the red candy apple paint was not showroom ready and the leather seats had a few rips and cracks.

"Alright. From here to the oak tree that's split down the middle. Sherm can hold the money. Unless you want to go for pinks?" Warren said.

"No. Let him hold the money. Who you want to call it?" Beauregard asked.

Sherm nodded at another guy. "Me and Jaymie will call it. You want your boy to go too?" he said. He squeaked when he talked.

"Yeah," Beauregard said. Kelvin, Sherm and Jaymie hopped in Sherm's car. A primer-covered Nova. They took off for the split tree a quarter mile down the road. Beauregard hadn't seen any other drivers since they arrived.

Most people avoided this stretch and used the four-lane highway that snaked its way from the interstate up through Shepherd's Corner proper. Progress had left this part of town behind. It was abandoned just like the store. A blacktop wasteland haunted by the phantoms of the past.

He turned and got in the Duster. When he started the car, the engine sounded like a pride of angry lions. Vibrations traveled up from the motor through the steering wheel. He tapped the gas a few times. The lions became dragons. He flicked on the headlights. The double yellow line down the middle of the road came alive. He grabbed the gearshift and put it into first. Warren pulled out of the parking lot and Beauregard took a position next to him. One of the other guys that was in the crowd walked up and stood between them. He held his arm up and reached for the sky. Beauregard glanced at the stars and the moon again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Warren put on a seat belt. The Duster didn't have seat belts. His father used to say if they ever wrecked the only thing seat belts would do was make it hard for the undertaker to get them out the car.

"You ready?" the guy standing between them yelled.

Warren gave him a thumbs-up.

Beauregard nodded.

"ONE, TWO ... THREE!" the guy screamed.

The secret ain't about the motor. That's part of it, yeah, but that ain't the main thing. The real thing, the thing most people don't want to talk about, is how you drive. If you drive like you scared, you gonna lose. If you drive like you don't want to have to rebuild the whole engine, you gonna lose. You gotta drive like don't nothing else matter except getting to that line. Drive like you fucking stole it.

Beauregard heard his Daddy's voice every time he drove the Duster. Sometimes he heard it when he was driving for crews. In those moments, it offered him bitter pearls of wisdom. Nonsensical chatter that reminded him not to end up like his Daddy. A ghost without a grave.

Beauregard slammed the gas pedal to the floor. Wheels spun, and white smoke plumed up from the rear of the Duster. G-forces pressed against his chest, crushing his sternum. Warren's car jumped off the line and the front two wheels left the road. Beauregard jammed the car into second as the Duster's front wheels grabbed the road like a pair of eagle's talons.

The trees on both sides of the road were shimmering blurs as he tore down through the night. He glanced at the speedometer. 70 mph.

Beauregard hit the clutch and shifted into third. There were no numbers on the gearshift knob. It was an old 8-ball his Daddy had fixed to fit on top of the shifter. He didn't need numbers. He knew what gear he was in by feel. By sound. The car shivered like a wolf shaking its pelt.

90 mph.

The leather-covered steering wheel crackled in his grip. He could see Sherm's car up ahead idling on the side of the road. He shifted into fourth gear. The motor went from a roar to the war cry of a god. The duals were the trumpets that heralded his arrival. He had the pedal flat against the floorboard. The car seemed to contort itself and leap forward like a snake about to strike. The speedometer hit 105 mph.

The Duster had passed Warren like he was mired in glue. The old bisected oak tree was rapidly receding in his side mirror. He could see Kelvin pumping both his fists in the rearview mirror. Beauregard popped the clutch and downshifted until he was back in first. He slowed down even more, executed a three-point turn and headed back to the old convenience store.

Beauregard pulled back into the parking lot with Warren right on his heels. A few minutes behind him were Sherm, Kelvin and Jaymie. Beauregard got out, walked around to the front of the car and leaned back against the hood.

"That old Duster got some get-up-and-go!" said a heavysset brother with a wide nose and beads of sweat gathering on his forehead. He was leaning against a black and white Maverick, Ford's answer to the Duster.

"Thanks," Beauregard said.

Sherm, Jaymie and Kelvin got out of the Nova. Kelvin trotted over to the Duster and held out his left hand. Beauregard slapped the palm without looking.

"You whupped his ass like a runaway slave," Kelvin said. A deep laugh erupted from his chest.

"That bad valve fucked him up. Look at that exhaust. He's burning oil," Beauregard said. A plume of black smoke was trailing from the exhaust of the Olds. Sherm came over and handed Beauregard two wads of money. His original thousand and Warren's roll.

"What you got under the hood on that thing?" Sherm asked.

"Two rockets and a comet," Kelvin said. Sherm chuckled.

Warren finally got out of the Oldsmobile. He stood by the car with his arms crossed. His face was twisted into a snarl. “You giving him my money after he jumped off the line?” he asked.

The boisterous crowd became deathly quiet. Beauregard didn’t move off the hood, didn’t look at Warren. His voice cut through the night like a razor.

“You saying I cheated?”

Warren uncrossed his arms, then crossed them again. He swiveled his large head on his thin neck.

“I’m just saying you was two lengths ahead before he got to three. That’s all I’m saying,” Warren said. He put his hands in the pockets of his baggy jeans. Then he took them out again. He didn’t seem to know where to put them. His initial bravado was evaporating.

“I ain’t gotta cheat to beat you. By the sound of that leaky valve, your motor gonna seize up tighter than virgin pussy any day now. Your driveshaft and rear end too heavy. That’s why you pop up when you take off,” Beauregard said. He pushed off the hood and turned to face Warren. Warren was peering at the night sky. He was studying his feet. He was doing everything except looking at Beauregard.

“Yo, man, you lost. Just take the L and admit the Olds ain’t as legendary as you thought,” Kelvin said. This elicited a few guffaws from the crowd. Warren shifted on the balls of his feet. Beauregard closed the distance between them in three strides.

“So why don’t you tell me how I cheated again,” he said.

Warren licked his lips. Beauregard wasn’t as tall as he was, but he was twice as wide. All broad shoulders and wiry muscle. Warren took a step back. “I’m just saying,” he said. His voice was as thin as crepe paper.

“You just saying. You just saying but you ain’t saying shit,” Beauregard said. Kelvin got between them.

“Come on, Bug, let’s go. We got our money,” he said.

“Not until he takes it back,” Beauregard said. A few other drivers had crowded around them. Kelvin thought they were two seconds away from chanting “Fight! Fight!” like they were back in school.

“Yo, man, take it back,” Kelvin said.

Warren twisted his head left and right. He wouldn’t look directly at Beauregard or the crowd gathering around them. “Look, maybe I was wrong.

I'm just saying—" he started to say but Beauregard held up his hand. Warren's mouth closed with an audible plop.

"Don't say 'you just saying' again. And don't say you was wrong. Take. It. Back," Beauregard said.

"Don't let him punk you, man!" someone yelled from the crowd.

Kelvin turned and faced Warren. He spoke in low tones. "Don't let these boys get your face fucked up. My cousin takes this shit seriously. Take it back and you can go home with all your teeth."

Beauregard had his hands down by his sides. He clenched and unclenched them at steady intervals. He watched Warren's eyes. They kept peering around like he was looking for a way out that didn't entail taking back what he said. Beauregard knew he wasn't going to take it back. He couldn't. Guys like Warren fed off their own arrogance. It was like oxygen for them. They couldn't back down any more than they could stop breathing.

Headlights lit up the parking lot. Then blue lights flashed off the weathered exterior of the SpeedDee Mart.

"Ah shit, it's the sex lights," Kelvin said. Beauregard saw a red unmarked cop car parking diagonally across the SpeedDee Mart exit. A few guys were walking slowly toward their cars. Most of them were just standing still.

"Sex lights?" the sweaty brother said.

"Yeah, cuz when you see them, you're fucked," Kelvin said. Two deputies got out of the car and pulled out their flashlights. Beauregard held up his hand to shield his eyes.

"So, what we got here, fellas? A little night racing? But I don't see no NASCAR signs. You see any NASCAR signs, Deputy Hall?" the deputy that wasn't Hall said. He was a blondish white guy with a chin so square he probably had to study geometry to learn how to shave.

"Nah, Deputy Jones, I don't see no NASCAR signs. Why don't you boys get out your IDs and have a seat on the pavement here?" Deputy Hall said.

"We ain't doing nothing but parking here, officer," the sweaty brother said. Deputy Jones whirled around. He dropped his hand to his gun.

"Did I ask you a goddamn thing? Get your ass on the ground. All of you get out your IDs and get on the ground." There were about twenty of them in the crowd and about fifteen cars. But they were all black and the two cops were white, and had guns. Everyone pulled out their wallets and sat down on the pavement. Beauregard sat on a sprig of scrub grass that had broken through the

concrete. He grabbed his driver's license out of his wallet. The cops started at opposite ends and worked their way to the middle of the group.

"Anybody got any warrants? Child support, assault, shoplifting?" Deputy Hall asked. Beauregard tried to see what county they were from, but they kept the light in his eyes. Deputy Jones stopped in front of him.

"You got any warrants?" he asked as he took Beauregard's license.

"No."

Deputy Jones shined the flashlight on Beauregard's license. There was a patch on the deputy's shoulder that said POLICE.

"What county you from?" Beauregard asked. Deputy Jones shone the flashlight's beam in Beauregard's face.

"Fuck You County, population of one," Deputy Jones said. He handed Beauregard his license. He turned and spoke into the radio on his shoulder. Deputy Hall was doing the same thing. The whippoorwills and frogs and crickets had resumed their concert. Minutes ticked by as the two deputies conferred with whoever was on the other end of their radios.

"Alright, fellas, here's the deal. Some of you got warrants. Some of you don't. But that don't matter. We don't need y'all tearing up and down our roads here in Shepherd's Corner. So, we're gonna let you go on down the road. But to discourage you from coming back, we gonna get you to pay the racing tax," Deputy Hall said.

"What the hell is a racing tax?" the sweaty brother asked. Deputy Jones pulled out his gun and put the barrel against the sweaty brother's cheek. Beauregard felt his stomach tighten.

"Everything in your wallet, fat boy. Or do you want to be a victim of police brutality?" Deputy Jones asked.

"You heard the man. Empty your pockets, gents," Deputy Hall said. A soft breeze began to blow. The wind caressed Beauregard's face. The scent of honeysuckle traveled on that breeze. The deputies filed up and down the men sitting in a row and grabbed the money out of their hands. Deputy Jones came to Beauregard.

"Empty those pockets, son."

Beauregard looked up at him. "Take me in. Arrest me. But I ain't giving you my money."

Deputy Jones put his gun against Beauregard's cheek. The harsh smell of gun oil wafted up his nose and stuck to the back of his throat.

“Maybe you didn’t hear what I said to your friend over there.”

“He ain’t my friend,” Beauregard said.

“You want to catch a bullet? You trying to commit suicide by cop?” Deputy Jones said. His eyes glistened in the moonlight.

“No. I just ain’t giving you my money,” Beauregard said.

“Bug, let it go,” Kelvin said. Deputy Jones shot him a glance. He pointed his gun at Kelvin.

“He’s your friend, isn’t he? You should listen, Bug,” Deputy Jones said. He grinned, exposing a row of crooked brown teeth. Beauregard pulled out his roll of money and the one he had won from Warren. Deputy Jones snatched them out of his hands.

“Good boy,” Deputy Jones said.

“Alright, fellas, go on and get out of here. And don’t come back to Shepherd’s Corner,” Deputy Hall said. Beauregard and Kelvin got up. The crowd dispersed amid a smattering of muffled complaints. The night was filled with the howl of Chargers and Chevilles and Mustangs and Impalas coming to life. Kelvin and Beauregard climbed into the Duster. The cops had moved, and cars were leaving as fast as they legally could. Warren was sitting in the Olds staring straight ahead.

“Move along, Warren,” Deputy Hall said.

Warren rubbed his hands across his face. “It won’t start,” he mumbled.

“What?” Deputy Hall said.

Warren’s hands flew away from his face. “It won’t start!” he said. Kelvin laughed as he and Beauregard pulled out of the parking lot.

Beauregard turned left and headed down the narrow road.

“Interstate is that way,” Kelvin said.

“Yeah. The town is this way. So are the bars,” Beauregard said.

“How we getting a drink with no money?” Kelvin said.

Beauregard stopped and backed the Duster into the entrance of an old logging road. He killed the lights and let the car idle.

“Those weren’t real cops. They didn’t have no county insignia on their uniforms. And that gun was a .38. Cops haven’t carried .38s for twenty fucking years. And they knew his name,” Beauregard said.

“Motherfucker. We got played,” Kelvin said. He punched the dashboard. Beauregard glared at him. Kelvin ran his hand over the dash, smoothing down the leather. “Shit, sorry, man. So, what we doing here?”

“Warren said his car wouldn’t start. He the only one that stayed behind,” Beauregard said.

“You think he was the snitch?”

“Ain’t no snitch. He in with them. He stayed behind to get his cut. None of us was from here that was racing. I’m thinking somebody like Warren gonna want a drink to celebrate,” Beauregard said.

“All that shit he was saying about you cheating was just a show.”

Beauregard nodded. “Didn’t want me to leave. Give his crew time to get there. He ran a few races to get people in. Probably was checking for how much money was on the table. Then when I dropped that grip, he texted them.”

“Son of a bitch. Huh. Dr. King would be so proud. Whites and blacks working together,” Kelvin said.

“Yeah,” Beauregard said.

“You think he really coming this way? I mean he can’t be that stupid, can he?” Kelvin asked.

Beauregard didn’t speak. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. He figured not everything Warren had said and done was for show. He really was a conceited ass. Guys like that never think they can get caught. They always think they’re one step ahead of everyone.

“I used to run into guys like him when I was driving for crews. He ain’t from around here. He sounds like he from somewhere north of Richmond. Maybe Alexandria. Guys like that can’t wait till they get home to celebrate. And he wants to celebrate. Cuz he thinks he won. He thinks he fooled us good. He wants to get to the nearest place that sells alcohol and get his drink on. He’ll be by himself cuz his partners can’t go walking around in their fake uniforms. He’ll be in there talking big shit like he was before. He can’t help himself.”

“You really think so, don’t you?” Kelvin said. Beauregard didn’t answer. He couldn’t go home without that money. A thousand wasn’t enough to pay the rent but it beat a blank. His instincts told him that Warren was gonna go into town and get his drink on. He trusted his instincts. He had to.

Minutes ticked by and Kelvin checked his watch.

“Man, I don’t think he—” Kelvin started to say. A car shot past them. A bright green paint job that sparkled in the moonlight.

“The legendary Olds,” Beauregard said. He pulled out behind the Oldsmobile. They followed him through the flat plains and the gentle slopes of

slight hills. The moonlight gave way to porch lamps and landscape lighting as they passed single-story houses and mobile homes. They sailed through a curve so sharp it could slice cheese and downtown Shepherd's Corner came into view. A collection of drab concrete and brick buildings illuminated by pale streetlamps. A library, a pharmacy and a restaurant lined the street. Near the end of the sidewalk was a wide brick building with a sign over the front door that said DINO'S BAR AND GRILL.

Warren turned right and drove around to the back of Dino's. Beauregard parked the Duster on the street. He reached into the back seat and grabbed a crescent wrench. No one was on the sidewalk or loitering outside Dino's front door. There were a few cars in front of the Duster. The deep tribal thump of a hip-hop beat seeped through Dino's walls.

"Stay here. You see anybody coming, hit the horn," Beauregard said.

"Don't kill him, man," Kelvin said. Beauregard didn't make any promises. He got out and hurried down the sidewalk and across Dino's parking lot. He stopped at the back corner of the building. Peeping around the corner he saw Warren standing next to the Oldsmobile. He was taking a piss. Beauregard ran across the parking lot. His footsteps were hidden by the music coming from the bar.

Warren started to turn just as Beauregard hit him with the wrench. He slammed the tool into Warren's trapezius muscle. Beauregard heard a wet crack like when his grandfather would snap chicken wings at the dinner table. Warren crumpled to the ground as piss sprayed across the side of the Oldsmobile. He rolled onto his side and Beauregard hit him again in his ribs. Warren rolled onto his back. A trickle of blood flowed out of his mouth and down his chin. Beauregard knelt beside him. He took the wrench and laid it across Warren's mouth like a gag. He gripped both ends of it and pressed down with all his weight. Warren's tongue squirmed around the handle of the wrench like a plump pink worm. Blood and spit ran from the sides of his mouth down his cheeks.

"I know you got my money. I know you and them rent-a-cops was working together. Y'all travel around setting up races and pop the fools who show up. None of that matters to me. I know you got my money. Now I'm going to move this wrench, and if you say anything about anything other than my money, I'm going to break your jaw in seven places," Beauregard said. He didn't yell, and he didn't scream. He straightened up and moved the wrench.

Warren coughed and turned his head to the side. He spit a globule of pinkish saliva and it landed on his chin. He took a few deep gasps and more blood-spit flowed across his chin.

“My back pocket,” he wheezed. Beauregard rolled him over and Warren wailed. It was a high animalistic moan. Beauregard thought he could hear the soft clicking of his shattered clavicle bones rubbing together. He pulled out a wad of cash. He flipped through it quickly.

“There’s only 750. Where’s my thousand? Where’s yours? Where’s the rest?” Beauregard asked.

“My... mine was a dummy roll,” Warren said.

“This is your cut,” Beauregard said. Warren nodded weakly. Beauregard sucked his teeth. He stood and pocketed the money. Warren closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

Beauregard put the wrench in his back pocket and stomped on Warren’s right ankle right at the joint. Warren screamed but there was no one around to hear except for Beauregard.

“Take it back,” Beauregard said.

“What ... what the fuck, man, you broke my fucking ankle.”

“Take it back or I’ll break the other one.”

Warren rolled onto his back again. Beauregard saw dark patches that spread from his crotch to his knees. His dick was still hanging out of his pants like a bloodworm. The smell of piss wafted up Beauregard’s nose.

“I take it back. You not a cheater, okay? Fuck, you not a cheater,” he said. Beauregard saw tears slip from the corners of Warren’s eyes.

“Alright then,” Beauregard said. He nodded his head then turned and walked back to the Duster.