

TRIAL RUN

By Connor de Bruler

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This is a writer who improves with each story. His technical facility impresses but it's his dialogue that blows the roof off. It's some of the best we've read and if you're a writer who finds convincing dialogue a challenge, (and what writer doesn't?) read Connor de Bruler. The conversations he lays out are phonic organisms: the vocals dip and slide, rise to rest on aural plateaus, then break and fall apart, only to start all over again. All his writing is Southern deep, Southern dark and disturbingly humane. (Font size is author's own.)*

Trial Run

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It looked like a house of cards; a two-story motel just off the interstate, red doors on white frames. Each curtain-drawn window faced the on-ramp to the Fairview Road Bridge in the foothills of South Carolina. A young hustler--good-looking, no meth rot evident in her face--left the room with a 7-Up bottle in her hand.

Luanne snapped a few pics through the gap in the steering wheel with the P900.

Vaquero got antsy and lit up a Camel Crush. She was hungover and couldn't handle the smell.

"Put it out," she said.

V cracked the tinted window and tossed out the cig.

"That ain't Sprite or Mountain Dew she carrying," he said.

“No, it’s 7-Up.”

He scoffed.

“You’d think we was in Houston how much lean this guy peddles in a day.”

“Why? They like the drank out in Texas?”

“Where you been at? It’s the Third Ward all day.”

“They got wards out there like in New Orleans?”

“You ain’t been?”

“To Texas? Never.”

“You missin’ out.”

“On what? More humidity?”

The girl stood at the edge of the street and leaned against a splintered, tar-covered telephone pole.

She snapped another pic with the Nikon.

“How come you take so many photos of random shit?”

“Keep the client happy. Remind him I’m not wasting his time.”

“Bunch of garbage photos isn’t admissible in court.”

She laughed.

“Nobody’s goin’ the court with this stuff. Half my shit doesn’t even go to a lawyer. This is the minor leagues, kid. Last year I had a client who killed his husband. A month before that, a runaway outbid her own mother for me *not* to find her.”

“Shit,” he said. “*His* husband?”

“That’s all you got out of that?”

A red jeep pulled into the parking lot and cruised up beside the telephone pole. She snapped photos of the exchange. The buyer handed the girl the money and a fresh bottle of real soda.

“That’s clever,” V said. “So you don’t see her without a drink in her hand.”

She snaps a final pic and puts away the camera.

“Is that who I think it is in the car?”

V reaches for the binoculars.

“Back seat. Smokin’ a Black and Mild. That’s her.”

Luanne starts the engine and takes a swig of her coffee and then chases it with a belt of Gatorade.

“You sure you don’t want me to drive?”

“I’m sure,” Luanne said.

The tires crunched across the gravel as they followed the red jeep along the street and onto the highway bridge. She allowed a minivan to merge ahead of her.

“Don’t lose him.”

“I can still see him.”

The jeep took the first exit onto a secluded backroad through the bright sun-splashed foliage and she followed.

“You’re getting awful close,” V said.

“Everyone rides each other’s ass on these little country roads. You hang back thirty yards you end up looking suspicious.”

“I don’t know,” he said and placed another cig between his lips without lighting it.

“Get out my camera and get their license plate.”

He took the Nikon and snapped the plate.

“Better not be blurry.”

He snapped the plate again to make sure.

“How’s that one look?”

“I don’t know how to work this thing,” he said, tapping menu options.

“Don’t worry about it.”

She took another sip of her coffee.

The red jeep pulled onto an isolated property overlooking a scum-covered pond that might have had alligators back in the 1960s before nature was beaten into submission and scarcity became its main attribute.

Luanne floored the gas as soon as the jeep turned as if she had somewhere to be. She parked out of sight on a patch of high dogfennel and killed the engine.

“I’m gonna smoke a cigarette,” V said, unbuckling his seatbelt. He stepped out into the weeds, slamming the door behind him.

She reached into the glove compartment and took out the Ruger LCP and the half-pint of vodka. She unscrewed the cap and took a swig.

It started with a call around nine o’clock in the morning; still too early to think. She sat on her swivel chair in the dark corner of her apartment dining room, a blank excel sheet on the four-year-old laptop screen in front of her. After reaching for the liquor cabinet, she threw a liberal splash of bourbon into her coffee. The cell phone vibrated across the desk. She caught it before it dropped off the side and answered it.

It was another missing girl. Another case where drugs figured heavily into the decision making of the mark. The client was male and sounded down-to-earth and more than comfortable talking to a private investigator like it had happened before. His name was Bill Tycho. He was an ex-redneck millionaire with a contracting firm that built golf-club mansions across the state. His daughter was an underage prostitute and oxy user. Seventeen years old.

“So what’s the problem? You can’t afford rehab, a little spot out in Missouri where she can suck off twenty-year-olds and pet horses?”

“Last rehab I sent her to in Florida almost killed her. We’re gonna try an outpatient program this time under my roof. No horses. No other junkies.”

“You know my rates?”

“I do. And if you jerk me around on this and bleed the clock without bringing her back, I’ll make it hard for you to spend my money.”

“I’m gonna have to stop you there,” she said. “I can tell you where she is. I can’t bring anyone to you.”

He paused.

“How about triple the rate?”

The SOB knew her weakness was money. That’s why he found her and not some seasoned ex-cop with a law degree. He needed a low-life to do his dirty work. If she was going to take somebody in, she’d need a partner. That’s where V came in.

She met V back in Greenville at her ex boyfriend’s place. A bald, security-guard type had kicked in the door to the apartment the same night she was tossing the place for the eight-hundred he still owed her. Her ex was a low-level weed and shroom dealer with a gallery of sketchy friends he allowed in and around the apartment from noon to midnight. For anyone looking to find deadbeats south of Earl Street, his crash pad was the main stop. The bald guy must have seen her silhouette in the window. When he kicked in the door, he demanded that she tell him where V was. He called him by his last name: Lawful. The irony wasn’t lost on him.

Luanne was in the middle of robbing her ex, pulling the wrinkled bills from a hiding space beneath the upturned couch.

“You’re a bounty hunter. State law says a private citizen doesn’t have to tell you anything.”

“What are you doing here anyway?”

Again, she recited state and federal law.

“Is he hiding here?”

She showed the bounty hunter the stolen cash and the ransacked state of the apartment.

“Does it look like I live here?” she said, pointing to her crowbar beside the window.

He holstered his sidearm.

“You got a mouth on you, bitch.”

She counted out eight-hundred dollars and stuffed it in her wallet.

“I got what I came for. You can knock yourself out and wait for whoever.”

She attempted to slide past him.

He blocked the door frame.

“You ain’t going nowhere.”

He pushed her against the wall and closed the door with his foot. His face was inches from hers.

“You think you can stand here and make a fool out of me.”

She struggled.

He put his hand over her mouth and wrestled her to the floor.

She tried to kick his groin but he pinned her legs with his knees. He brought all of his weight down on her as she screamed.

A shadow moved across the wall and crowded the entranceway. With a swift knock of the crowbar, the bounty hunter was out cold.

She would later tell the prosecutor that the bounty hunter, Eric Currman, would have likely raped her that night had Vaquero Lawful not saved her. Her testimony didn’t help him much and he went to state prison on a five-year sentence anyway.

They cut him loose after two. Overcrowding.

She drove down to the state capital and caught him outside the prison with her business proposition.

V didn’t have anywhere else to go except for the bus stop.

“Not everyday a white lady offers you a ride and a meal while talking about making *you* money. Especially not the day you get out of prison,” she said as they drove north on the highway.

“You wouldn’t know how things turn out for me,” V said.

She took him to a diner and bought him a cup of coffee and a plate of pancakes and told him about the job and gave him a flat rate she could pay him for helping her.

“It doesn’t sound at all legal,” he said. “And I just got out of prison.”

“It’s not like we’re gonna pimp her out or hold her for ransom. Her dad wants to help her out. She’s a minor. He has a right to get her back.”

“If he’s going through you then he’s hiding something,” V said. “And I ain’t worried about the morality factor. I’m worried about the fuckin’ legality factor. I just got out. Five minutes ago.”

She bit off a piece of bacon.

“Yeah, you’re right. You just got out. You got no place. No money. No job. You know? You saved my life so I thought I’d cut you in on this thing and get you started. A thousand bucks might get you out of the South at least.”

“A thousand bucks? Maybe. And how much you makin’? Three? Four?”

“I’m making what I’m making. We’re talking about you.”

“We’re talking about what I can do for you,” he said. “We’re talking about this being a potential trial run for a longer partnership.”

“I’m not hiring a partner,” she said.

“You’re hiring me for a single job. That’s like hiring a partner. We’ll call it a trial run. What’s a thousand dollars gonna do for me? Huh? Might get me as far as Washington D.C. where I can freeze to death on the street. I don’t need to get out of the South. What I need is an opportunity and what you need is a sober person to do the heavy lifting. Am I right?”

She smirked and leaned back in the booth.

“Am I that bad?”

“Nah, you hold it together ok. But I’m trained for this. My pops was an alcoholic.”

She paused for a moment.

“Alright. A thousand flat and a trial run to go into business together.”

They shook hands.

V didn’t see her swig the Vodka, but he did see her stuff the miniature pistol into her back pocket.

He blew mentholated smoke toward the trees.

“You got you a throwaway?”

“Just in case,” she said, locking the car.

“The hell? Keep the door open.”

“I got equipment in there. I don’t want it open.”

He tapped his ash into the weeds.

“What if one of us has to get inside in a split second and you got the key in your pocket?”

“You ever done anything like this before?”

“I’m just giving you a for instance. Look where we are, who is gonna steal your camera out here. They can’t even see in the car with your tint job.”

She took out the key and unlocked the doors.

“You ready for this?”

“Sure,” she said.

V threw his cig onto the road and they approached. The property was tucked back into the cooler woods behind a narrow, cleanly-paved driveway. The house might have looked nice a few years ago, a modest vacation spot in the country, but the active rot of the opiate life had worn the place down: beer cans in the uncut lawn, a sweet chemical smell from the padlocked shed, foundational beams shot up by a .22 rifle.

“This is some Chainsaw Massacre bullshit,” V said. “This guy has guns. You know it’ll be crazy firepower. And all you got is a pea shooter the size of a burner phone.”

“.380 ACP can still kill a man outright.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“The caliber of the bullet,” she said.

They surveyed the house for a few minutes and tried to see beyond the windows. The place was dead quiet. Luanne stepped to the back porch and looked through the mosquito screen. The kitchen was a mess, of course. The TV was still on; internet porn looped on a laptop playlist and linked by an aux cord. The sound was off. She took out a credit card and unlatched the screen door. The second door, the glass door to the kitchen, was unlocked and she stepped inside. Moving fast, she entered the hallway and saw the girl splayed out on the bed, still clothed, a cup of dirty soda on the nightstand. The girl caught a glimpse of Luanne in the hallway through her promethazine haze and did nothing. She just stared at the ceiling. A toilet flushed in the bathroom.

She retreated around the corner as the older man walked into the hall. She winced. She had no plan.

The man inched toward the corner.

The girl laughed.

He looked back.

“The fuck you laughin’ at?”

Luanne stood behind him and drew the pocket pistol.

He stopped dead as she pressed the barrel to his neck.

“Don’t move. Don’t say a word.”

“You here from Cantrell?”

“Interlock your fingers on the top of your head,” she said. “I’m not a drug dealer and I’m not here to rob you.”

“Then what the fuck are you doing in my house?”

“Get on your knees.”

He ducked low and rammed his shoulder into her stomach. She dropped to the floor, firing a shot at the ceiling.

Just like old times, V jumped in at the last minute and incapacitates him with a right hook.

“You trying to get someone killed?”

“I...don’t know what to say,” she said.

“You’re still drunk aren’t you?”

“I’m a PI, not a kidnapper,” she said. “Come on, get the girl and let’s go.”

V walked into the bedroom and threw the girl over his shoulder. They ran out of the house and into the foliage toward the parked car. The girl didn’t fight back.

“Where are we going?”

“Your cleaning up,” Luanne said.

“Yay, sobriety,” the girl said sarcastically.

They pushed through the rhododendrons branches and hustled over to the car. She opened the backdoor for V and he sets the girl inside.

“Get in the back with her.”

“I know what I’m doing,” V said.

She ran around to the driver’s seat and started the engine. The dark sedan peeled out of the weed patch and down the narrow country road. She chugged her coffee as she drove.

The girl started to laugh.

“What all are you on right now?” V said.

“Don’t engage,” Luanne said, glancing at them through the rearview mirror.

“It’s cool.”

Luanne pulled her cell phone out of her jeans and dialed the clients number. Driving with one hand, she waited as the cell rang for a full minute. The contractor finally answered.

“Yeah?”

“We got her,” she said. “We’re coming to you.”

“I’m on a job. I’ll text you the address.”

When the text came through, she handed the phone to V.

“Put that into the GPS.”

The girl laughed the whole way to the building site.

She slowed the car as they approached.

“Where are we going?” the girl said.

“We’re taking you to your dad,” V said.

She peered through the windshield.

“That ain’t my dad.”

V said nothing.

Luanne glanced at him through the rearview.

“Don’t say anything,” she said. “Let’s just get paid.”

V looked at the girl.

Big Bill Tycho waited for them beside his white pickup with his arms crossed. His employees loitered around the frame of the house, smoking, spitting seeds, and drinking from their water bottles. Luanne parked the sedan sideways across a patch of raw clay.

Two of his enforcers opened up the back seat and pulled out the girl. V stepped out after her and another man patted him down. The same man frisked Luanne and she showed him the Ruger. Tycho didn't say anything the girl was inside the back of the white truck.

“Well, you outdid my expectations. I'll put in a good word for you.”

Luanne kept staring at V who didn't say a word.

“I guess you want to get paid then?”

“That's usually how this works,” she said.

He reached into his dark khakis and took out a bank envelope.

“Here, count it. I won't be offended.”

V wiped his brow with his shirt.

“So who is the girl anyway? If she isn't your kid?”

“Shut up,” Luanne said.

“I'm just askin'. I wanna know what I did this for.”

Tycho looked at Luanne.

“Who is this guy anyway. Your muscle?”

“You don't need to worry about it. We're paid, so we don't care who she is,” she said, and gave V a look.

V kept his eyes on Tycho.

The men around them went silent and circled the sedan.

Luanne counted the money.

“We're good,” she said. “Let's go.”

A man with a white hard hat sat down on the hood of the sedan.

“You didn’t say you were gonna have a partner on this,” Tycho said.

“I needed to make sure it got done right.”

“That wasn’t part of the contract.”

“What’s the difference? It’s the same amount of money.”

Bill Tycho winced and adjusted his belt.

“What’s the difference? I paid you for discretion. Now I got another guy in the mix.”

“He’ll keep his mouth shut.”

“It don’t sound like he’s keeping his mouth shut to me,” he said and turned to one of his employees.

“Dale, this man sound like he’s keeping his mouth shut to you?”

The one called Dale shook his head.

“No, sir. Sound to me like he’s asking a bunch of questions.”

V kept his eyes moving as they argued. He stared at the passed-out girl in the back of Tycho’s truck, at the worker sitting on the hood of the car, at Dale as he smiled and stared back into his eyes.

Luanne acted like she was stuffing the envelope in her back pocket as she reached for the Ruger.

A hefty man to her right reached into his toolbox for a jet black .357 magnum.

She drew the pocket Ruger and fired.

Bill Tycho dropped to his knees with a bullet to the gut.

V lunged for the nearest man and tackled him to the red clay.

The mangum’s report echoed through the site.

Two of them pulled V away by his arms.

Luanne fired again. The bullet glanced off an exposed septic tank and pierced the passenger window of Tycho’s truck and the girl was dead.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *It's been a dark few months, personally and globally. Maybe by the time you find this story, things will be different. I was driving back to the swamp from the upstate when I saw the Palmetto Inn from the highway and the*

first sentence of the story came to me in an instant. I wrote it into my computer a day or so later, unable to forget it. I let it sit for some time until one morning, through all the haze and pain and abandoned notions for the future, I sat down and just banged out the whole story. I already knew the characters and the setting. I touched it up and sent it to my grad-student sister in Tuscaloosa and she pointed out a few problems. I worked on a second draft until I was finally happy with it. It's a crime story. Crime, pulp, noir, hardboiled...whatever you want to call it....it's an interesting genre in the sense that you can create a sense of supremely fantastical conflict without sacrificing brutal honest realism.

*I've got a new novel out on multiple book platforms now: **Last Junction**. If you like this story consider purchasing one of my books.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Connor de Bruler lives in South Carolina. He is the author of five novels: *Tree Black*; *The Mountain Devils*; *Goodbye, Moonflower*; *Olden Days*; *Last Junction*. An excerpt from his novel ***Goodbye, Moonflower*** was published in Issue 5.

