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Cypress Grove

By James Sallis

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Turner, ex-cop, ex-con and ex-therapist, has just retired. He's idling away an afternoon on his porch, sniffing sweet rural air near Memphis, when the sheriff drives up and sits beside him. Sipping bourbon, the sheriff mentions that all the afternoons are good "here in God's country"; then he shares news that turns the countryside secular and deadly in a hurry.

It seems a teenaged couple had parked on a driveway in an unfinished subdivision when, just as they start fogging the car windows, the girl sees what looks like a scarecrow hanging in the carport with a wooden stake in his heart. The sheriff sure could use the help of former big city detective Turner.

In the blink of a jaundiced eye, Turner agrees to help even though "the last thing I'd wanted was ever again to be part of an investigation, to have to go rummaging through other people's lives, messes and misdemeanors."

As we learn from background chapters alternating with the those relating the murder investigation, Turner has earned his jaded reclusiveness. In eight years as a cop, he'd drawn his gun three times, and each time someone died. The first time, it was a slimeball rapist who'd just wounded Turner's partner, which earned him a too-hasty promotion to detective. The last time, it was his own partner, accidentally, but in a way close enough to negligent that neither he nor we are sure how far to exonerate him. In prison, he'd killed a man who was about to stab him for refusing to join a white supremacist faction, which drew Turner's incarceration out to 11 years.

Leaving prison presented its own anguish, since freedom's just another word for the petrifying responsibility of having to make choices: "The world's a terrifying place when you first come back to it.... Been a long time since you had to make choices.... Ordering a soft drink can paralyze you."

An earlier police partner, though, had taught him a valuable lesson. Advising how to get cooperation during an investigation, he'd said, "What you got to do is put on their lives, way you do a robe or an old shirt. You stand outside looking, no way you can see in, no way they're gonna trust you." For six years, Turner employed this lesson in empathy as a mental health counselor. Then, a client commits suicide, ending this second career. In even deeper backstory that never gets explored are a son and daughter who grew up without him.

So, as the sands now gather in the bottom half of his glass, Turner's earned the rest and peace the sheriff's request has just taken away.

If there is one element in this masterfully composed novel that might be called a flaw, it is that we find ourselves caring little about who drove a stake through our poor victim's heart. Even Sallis seems to care little. His interest lies elsewhere than in the wit-matching puzzle at the heart of the detective genre. It lies higher.

If, at the end of a crime novel you find you've enjoyed it immensely yet don't care all that much who done it, you have likely experienced literature rather than a mere genre piece. An artist makes the easy decisions first. Each time Shakespeare sharpened a quill for a new play, his first task was deciding: "Plutarch? Cinthio? Holinshed? Whose story should I steal for this one?" The art lies not in plot, but in character, language, thematic depths explored. These are what engage Sallis.

Turner is an appealing misfit easy to identify with: "I never felt at home, never found a place I fit. Like you can use a wrench that slips, a screwdriver that's not quite right. They're close, you get the job done. But it makes things more difficult the next time. Threads are stripped, the screwhead's chewed all to hell." His gift for metaphor proves delightful to listen to: "Afternoon light on the lake turned it to tinfoil," "She wore a hat that made you want to hide Easter eggs in it," a female bartender wears "a western shirt straining at the snaps and big hair of the kind one rarely sees outside Texas," and an ex-con's eyes "looked as though they'd been separated at birth and spent their independent lives searching for one another."

Intriguing, too, are a couple of women slipped into the plot to interact with him, evoking just enough sexual tension to hang gently in the background, like a spring mist.

Some characters are barely introduced yet make us wish to see more. Turner mentions a librarian ex-girlfriend: "her mind was agile, the angle it might take at any given time unpredictable; good conversation sprang up spontaneously whenever she was around. Ten minutes after meeting someone, she'd be winnowing her way to the very best that person had." Sarah, the teenager who discovered the corpse, had parked with a boy whose actual girlfriend was named Emily. Sarah tells Turner, "Do you know what a truffle is?...They're tubers. They grow underground, on the roots of trees that have spent years earning their place, struggling for it, working their way up into the light. The tuber lives off the tree and gives nothing back.... Emily is a truffle."

In their own homespun ways, Sallis's characters have a zest for asking metaphysical questions, or answering them unasked. Turner tells a state attorney the victim's family is "still trying to figure out what he was doing here." She answers, "Aren't we all." Told of an escaped mental patient hiding in the hills, Turner observes, "None of us ever get too far from the cave." Even country songs from a nearby radio evocatively echo the motif of loneliness coursing through the text: "Hard as I looked, no one looked like you."

Having recently finished his series of thrillers about New Orleans detective Lew Griffin, James Sallis, a poet in private eye's clothing, has found in Turner a rich new character to hang around with. Let's hope this isn't the last we see of him.
