

## Alter Road

By Bryon Quertermous

Reverend Ben Dolan was smoking a Swisher Sweet cigar and running his fingers over the outline of a cross he'd carved into his thick, black skin in prison. His son had been missing for most of the day.

Detective Titus Wade was dutifully taking notes. His questions were slow and labored, his large body broiling in the Detroit humidity. The two men were at a warped table in the kitchen of Dolan's small home on Alter Road in the city's south east corner.

"One...more...time," Detective Wade said.

"I don't keep constant watch of my boy in the summer. He has friends in the neighborhood. I never wanted him to be scared of--"

"Do you have...anything to...drink?"

Dolan pointed to the icebox behind Wade and said, "Lemonade and water."

"I was thinking something more...uh..."

"There's whiskey under the sink."

Reverend Dolan gave his story to Wade again, in even more detail, and feeling even more useless. He explained the boy's day down to the amount of milk in his glass at breakfast, how stained his shoes had been, and where the rip on the back pocket of his pants was. But once his son left the house that was it.

Still mostly burnt out and decaying, much of the four miles of Alter Road bordering the wealthy suburb of Gross Pointe Park had returned to prairie land when the abandoned homes were razed, lending Dolan the image of a 19<sup>th</sup> century circuit preacher. The dealers and addicts were still wary of Dolan's motives and the retirees and out-of-work factory hands questioned his methods, but they'd accepted his son and protected him as their own.

"He never came...back for lunch?"

"I was gone canvassing," Dolan said.

"To the junkies?"

"To the people I minister to."

There were several large fingers worth of whiskey in the cup Dolan had in front of him and he cut it to half with his first drink. Detective Wade was more deliberate, rationing his sips carefully.

Dolan had been trained in the prison chapel, not a seminary. He learned from the Bible and some old Chuck Colson tapes, not a tenured or divinely ordained scholar. Real preachers didn't have tattoos or criminal records. They didn't have blood on their hands so they couldn't minister to men who did. Dolan could.

"Have you done anything to any of them? Anything they may have taken the wrong way?" Wade asked.

"I tend to their needs, I'm not making enemies."

Wade coughed and took a swig of the whiskey. He fidgeted a little before pulling out a chair from the table across from Dolan.

"Well, that's not exactly what I hear out there, Ben."

"What do you know, Detective?"

"It's not exactly that I know..."

Dolan slammed his fist down on the table and sent Wade's whiskey soaring onto his lap. Before Wade could organize his thoughts enough to clean himself up, Dolan threw over the table and used it to pin Wade against the wall. Ropes of muscles danced across his arms as he pressed hard on the table to alleviate his frustration.

"Tell me what you know..." Dolan said, consciously controlling his breaths.

Now it was Wade, but in prison it had been the guards. Ben Dolan had a temper and used to indulge its every whim. But a stint in solitary and several beatings forced him to learn to control it. The preacher in him could control it better than Ben Dolan. The Preacher had God's grace. Ben Dolan had his own righteousness and a violent streak.

"Let me handle it, Ben. I'm the cop, you're the preacher."

"He's my son."

Dolan let the table fall to the floor and he sat back in his chair while Wade regained his normal breathing and straightened his uniform.

"We can't have you out there like this. Not this part of you."

"It's not who I am anymore," Dolan said.

"Go pray or something. Do what a preacher would do, not what Ben Dolan the ex-con would do."

"He's my *son*."

"Do what you need to do Ben. But I'll do what's best for the boy."

"I'll find him, Titus," Dolan said softly.

"That's what I'm afraid of."

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They found Bobby Dolan early the next morning. The naked remains of his body were tied in a sacrificial manor to a chain link fence, but most of Bobby Dolan had been spread across Alter Road by wild dogs.

"Get that boy covered up," Wade hollered, kicking away the remaining dogs.

It was just after 10 a.m. and Wade knew Dolan would be up and making his rounds of the neighborhood. Maybe he wouldn't have to say anything. Dolan could figure it out on his own.

"Somebody's got to go get him," a voice behind Wade said. "He's not the kind of guy you want running around angry and confused."

The oldest patrol sergeant, a tall, fat brute named Willard Stevens, put his hand on Wade's shoulder and sighed.

"It's going to kill him," Stevens said.

"And then he's going to want to kill someone."

"Guess God can't totally change a man's heart."

"Not a man like that," Wade said.

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"Have you been drinking?" Wade asked.

Wade was at the kitchen table again with the entire bottle of whiskey in front of him and his holster unclipped. Dolan was sitting on his kitchen counter with a baseball bat and a knife.

Dolan pointed to the whiskey and said, "That's the only liquor I keep in the house."

"We're going to take care of this. Justice will be served."

"I don't want justice."

"Preachers aren't supposed to seek revenge, Ben."

"God isn't supposed to take my son."

"I could feed you some bullshit line about all things working together for good but that's your bag of tricks."

Dolan waved it off.

"As a cop I can tell you bad things happen all the time," Wade said. "To good people and bad. You're not more one than the other considering your past, but--"

"My past has nothing to do with this. You said somebody killed him because of something I did," Dolan said, hopping off of the counter. Wade was relieved when he put down the bat and the knife - until he saw Dolan head for his bedroom. "I'm going to take care of that."

Dolan kept his shotgun in his bedroom.

"I can't let you out of the house knowing what you plan to do Ben."

Wade settled his hand down by his side, close to his gun as Dolan marched from his bedroom loading shells into the gun.

"Relax. It's just for protection..." He paused for a second. "And persuasion."

Wade stepped aside and let Dolan into the kitchen where he picked up the bottle of whiskey. Instead of drinking it though, he put the bottle back under the kitchen sink along with the bat and the knife.

"You don't even know who you're looking for," Wade said.

Dolan held the shotgun over his head without turning to Wade.

"That's what I have this for," he said.

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Dolan didn't go on the hunt immediately. He went to his son. To what was left of his son. After the police let the body down from the fence and scraped up what they could from the street, the remains of Bobby Dolan were transferred to the office of the chief medical examiner for the county to sort out. Dolan would have to bury a spirit, not remains, unless he wanted to wait a year.

Bobby's spirit was on Alter Road. Dolan ran his fingers through the blood stained gravel and grasped at clumps of concrete angrily trying to hold onto any part of his son. The clothes Bobby was wearing hadn't been found so this was all he had left of his son's last moments.

Revenge was not a part of him anymore. He knew it was wrong. Revenge was fed by his temper and his temper was fed by his demons. He needed retribution. Wade would seek justice, which would punish the killers according to the law. Retribution would punish them according to the pain Ben Dolan felt. He was the only one who could give retribution.

But first he had to find the person responsible.

The house closest to the crime scene belonged to Buzz Shepherd, a former jazz piano prodigy and current alcoholic burnout. His daughter Charity was the neighborhood slut but had taken an interest in Bobby Dolan as a friend. Buzz was sitting in a battered recliner in the middle of his yard when Dolan approached, holding the shotgun over his shoulder.

Shepherd didn't stand up or offer his hand to Dolan as he came up beside him. He just pointed to the shotgun and said, "Got something on your mind, preacher?"

"Charity know what happened to Bobby?"

"Ain't seen Charity in a few days. She's off screwing some rich man's boy."

"You see anything then? Hear anything?"

"My hearing ain't so good any more," Shepherd said.

"Detective been by here at all today?" Dolan asked.

"Sent one of his boys by for a sheet after they found Bobby. Wanted to keep him dignified I guess."

"I need to know who did this, Buzz."

"Pray and go along your way preacher."

"Was this supposed to be a message for me? Are people angry about my preaching here?"

"You just trying to save us all from our sins, I understand that," Shepard said.

"There's others though not as understanding."

Dolan swung the shotgun off his shoulder and let it hang at his side.

"Who's not as understanding as you, Buzz? Who did this?"

"God don't smile on murderers. You should know that preacher."

"I'm not going to murder anyone Buzz. I just need-"

"Not talking about you. Them, us, me. God ain't got no place in Heaven for us. You're just wasting your time here."

"Paul was a murderer before God saved him," Dolan said. "David was an adulterer and murderer and God called him a man after his own heart."

"Those are Bible stories. That don't mean-"

"I'm a murderer Buzz."

"You gonna be again if I tell you what I know."

Dolan pumped the shotgun.

"I've been forgiven once, Buzz. I'll be forgiven again."

"The Keegan boys been talking about running you outta town," Shepherd finally said. "Every man you save is one less junkie for them to fuel. You and Jesus screwin' with their customer base."

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The Keegans were a white trash family who lived up the road from Dolan on the northern side of Jefferson Avenue. But they also kept up a battered trailer in the abandoned Lakeside Trailer Court.

Once a working man's lakefront paradise on the Straits of Detroit, the trailer park had fallen into ruins in the seventies as the working men fled Detroit's city limits for safer, whiter lakefront property and was now nothing but a junk yard of rotting trailer

pieces and campers along a creek that butted against the million dollar mansions of Gross Point Park.

The ready supply of vacant buildings and isolation made Lakeside the perfect spot for cooking crystal meth. The government wouldn't set foot anywhere near the place, the city police pretended it didn't exist, and it was within a short distance of the major drug areas of Detroit and the highly profitable Gross Pointe schools where meth was a hot party drug.

Dolan parked his car next to the burned out shell of a house on Riverside Boulevard across from the park's entrance. A fallen tree blocked the main entrance to the park, so Dolan climbed over it then hopped off into knee-deep weeds. He had to stomp the weeds down with feet for a few yards before he found a rough trail leading back into the park. Slashing and stomping his way through a weed-infested park in the middle of an urban prairie, Dolan noticed he could still see the gleaming towers of the Renaissance Center at the end of the water.

The Keegan structure was a faded pink Airstream wedged between three walls of a narrow aluminum sided trailer home and a beaten down wooden trailer held together by only a few slates. Old Lady Keegan was in an electric wheelchair and had a dented and bloodstained baseball bat in her lap as she approached Dolan. A mangy rottweiler with torn skin and a tense posture circled Keegan, silently gauging the threat level. Dolan ignored the dog and made eye contact with the old woman.

"What you want God Man?" Mother Keegan asked.

"I need to talk to your boys."

"That thing supposed to scare me," she said, pointing to the shotgun with her bat.

"Somebody killed Bobby."

Keegan let a slight smile slip from the corner of her mouth.

"Looking for revenge then?"

"Information," Dolan said.

"Bullshit, God Man," she said, bursting into a full laugh.

"I need to see Aldo and Dean."

The laughter stopped and she stared at Dolan for a second before turning toward the trailer.

"They're too dumb to do something like that," she said. "Look somewhere else for...*information*."

"I'd still like to talk to them," Dolan said, bringing the shotgun up to his waist with both hands.

Keegan glanced at the gun this time and put both of her hands on her bat. The dog looked up at her, then at Dolan, then back at her. Dolan wondered how much time he'd have to get to the house after they heard the shot. Getting by the old woman wouldn't be a problem, she'd go for his legs or chest with the bat and that would be an easy dodge. Dolan eyed the dog and sighed as he swung the shotgun up and pulled the trigger.

The dog was the only one who didn't know what was coming so he still had a confused look on his face when the buckshot ripped it off. Mother Keegan swung long at Dolan's chest as he kicked at her chair. If the boys didn't hear the gunshot, or didn't think it meant anything, their mother's shrill string of obscenities, projected alternately at Dolan and the dog, put them on notice.

Dolan almost said a prayer for the dog before stopping himself. Instead he did the sign of the cross. He wasn't Catholic, but he liked the symbolism of it. It made him feel like he was acknowledging his violent action without wasting a prayer on a creature without a soul.

When the boys bolted out into the yard, Dolan was in front of the door. Aldo, the taller of the two, had blazing red hair and a heavily modified assault rifle. Dean had curly blonde hair and an axe. The first thing they saw was their elderly mother reaching for a baseball bat in the dirt. Then they saw the dog's body. And finally they saw Dolan.

That was enough of a delay for Dolan to get a good shot at Dean's head with the butt of the shotgun. The axe was a wicked variable he needed to dispense with immediately. Dean grunted and dropped the axe at the blow, while his brother pulled the machine gun toward Dolan.

Aldo got off a burst of fire that cleared Dolan, but he stopped short of firing again when he saw Dolan had the axe in one hand and the shotgun pointed at the back of Dean's head.

"Drop the gun," Dolan wheezed. "I just want to-"

"Where you been Detective?" Old Lady Keegan interrupted.

Dolan looked behind the old woman and saw Wade standing with his hand on his gun.

"They didn't kill Bobby," he said.

"I'm gonna kill you now though," Aldo said, spitting at Dolan's feet.

"Shut up Keegan," Wade said. "And put that gun down."

"Ma?"

"Do it," she said.

"I'm just looking for information," Dolan said, still holding his gun to Dean's head.

"He killed our dog," Dean said.

Mrs. Keegan looked at Wade and nodded toward the rottweiler's headless body.

"Jesus, Ben," Wade said.

"I was just trying to-"

Before Dolan could explain, Dean backed against him and rammed his elbow into Dolan's gut. He fell backward and dropped the gun and the axe. Dean hit him again and knocked him to the ground while Aldo grabbed the axe. Mrs. Keegan watched but didn't move. Wade ran toward them and tackled Aldo during his downward swing of the axe and sent it off course. Dirt exploded around Dolan as the axe cut into the ground next to him.

Mrs. Keegan circled the group in her chair, picking up the shotgun and the assault rifle while the men rolled around on the ground. When all three finally managed to scramble away from each other, she let out a piercing whistle that focused all attention on her.

"Get him out of here," she said to Wade.

Wade grabbed Dolan by the arm and dragged him to his feet.

"He'll take care of the dog," Wade said.

Mother Keegan snorted and handed the rifle back to Aldo as she wheeled back to the shack.

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“You’ve never even met the boy who killed Bobby,” Wade said.  
Dolan was sitting in the passenger's seat of Wade's cruiser in the parking lot of police headquarters. The shotgun was unloaded and in the backseat.  
“Boy?” Dolan asked.  
“Nineteen, twenty-years-old tops.”  
“I don’t under-”  
“He was screwing Buzz Shepherd’s daughter and-”  
“The rich man’s boy.”  
“Yeah, he's from over the bridge in Gross Pointe. How’d you know that?”  
“Went to see Buzz before I called on the Keegans.”  
“Well apparently Charity’s been paying attention at church because she told this guy screwing around was a sin and she cut him off,” Wade said.  
“And he killed Bobby for that?”  
“He's also one of the Keegan’s top customers.”  
“They made him do it.”  
“Don’t go thinking anything stupid, Ben.”  
“What’s his name?”  
“He’s being taken care of.”  
“With his daddy’s money?”  
“He’ll be tried and brought to justice,” Wade said.  
“With his daddy’s money?”  
“I just thought you should know we got him.”  
“He’s in jail...right now?” Dolan asked.  
Wade shook his head.  
“His dad’s bringing him in tomorrow.”  
Dolan's lips flared and his pupils swelled.  
“Dammit, Ben. Don’t get that look.”  
“Chunks of my son are on the side of the road and on a slab in the morgue and this kid gets another night at home with his television and video games?”  
“I should put *you* in jail for what you did to that dog.” Wade said. “It’s my duty to protect any suspects until they are convicted.”  
“I’m not going to do anything.”  
“One of the patrol officers is going to follow you home.”  
“Fine.”  
“And sit outside your house,” Wade said.

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Dolan used the drive home to contemplate his next move. Within minutes, one of the younger officers was coming up behind him. Dolan waved back at the deputy, who ignored him, and continued home. He was glad he didn’t know the killer - the suspected killer’s - name. This way he couldn’t do anything rash.

And with the officer outside his door, any plan he would make would be moot anyway. So when he arrived home, Dolan pulled the bottle of whiskey from underneath

the kitchen sink and sat down at the table. Then he started thinking about Charity Shepherd.

What if she was in danger now? This could be about more than just his son. If he took care of the kid from Gross Pointe before he could hurt Charity that would be a good thing. Right? He couldn't save a soul if the body was dead. But he knew he was just rationalizing. He drank some more whiskey and recited the Lord's Prayer to himself.

*Our father who art in heaven...*

Where are you when we need you on Earth?

*Give us this day our daily bread...*

If we aren't butchered before the day is out.

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors...*

Damn.

*And lead us not into temptation...*

Damn. Damn.

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"Where you going, sir?" The officer asked him, when Dolan went for his car. The shotgun was still with Wade and that was the only gun Dolan had in the house so instead he had a hunting knife in a leather sheath tucked into the waist of his pants.

"Hello, Officer," Dolan said, leaning into the patrol car's open window.

"Not going anywhere stupid are you, Preacher?"

"There's lemonade in the fridge and whiskey under the sink if you're interested, Officer..."

"Officer Meade," the patrolman said as he got out of his car and looked Dolan up and down.

"I don't have a gun on me," Dolan said.

"Where you going, Preacher?"

"Preaching. I still intend to do God's work here."

Officer Meade thought about that for a bit and remained silent as he followed Dolan to his car and slid into the passenger seat. They pulled out of Dolan's driveway and followed Mack Avenue south to Alter Road then over the bridge.

"She's probably not even going to be home," the officer said after a few minutes, when he figured out they were headed to Charity Shepard's house.

"Then maybe we'll go somewhere else next."

There were no cars in the driveway but Buzz didn't drive and Charity had her own car. Dolan and Meade proceeded slowly and quietly to the porch and were next to the door when they heard the muffled scream. Meade rushed forward to be the first in the door, but Dolan held him back. Dolan raised his hand and pulled the knife from his pants. Glaring at the knife, disappointed he hadn't spotted it, Meade waved Dolan forward.

There was only the one short scream and the house was silent again as Dolan and Meade ascended the stairs. Buzz Shepherd's house was old and had been expanded from a one-room shack to a four-bedroom house over the years with little thought to appearance or common sense.

The first bedroom they passed was a spartan room that could have been pulled from any flophouse, the second bedroom was a formal guest bedroom. In the third bedroom, at the back of the hall, Charity Shepherd's naked and bloody body was tied to her bed. The deputy went to Charity and radioed for help while Dolan searched the rest of the house.

"This isn't about my son now anymore," Dolan said, returning to the room when his search came up empty.

"So let it be preacher. It's not your revenge then anymore either."

"The kid's going to go free if we don't do something."

"You don't know that. You don't know he did this."

Dolan ignored Meade's protests and went back down the stairs to the porch. This wasn't his problem anymore. He knew it. Dolan in him knew it.

*For if you forgive men your trespasses, the heavenly Father will also forgive you.*

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Wade was at the Shepherd house in short time. Charity was dead and there was no hurry to clear the house because Buzz said he wasn't coming home. He said they could burn the place down with his daughter and the person who killed her in it. Shepherd called her a whore and a curse to his family.

"She was one of my people," Dolan told Wade. "This isn't just about my son anymore."

"You keep saying that, Ben. But you aren't listening," Wade said. "You don't have any witnesses. There's no evidence. Unless the kid confesses, he's going to go free."

"Buzz needs you now. Go talk some sense into him. Tell him about his daughter and Jesus. Deal with his soul and I'll deal with his daughter's murder."

"And it's that easy for you?"

"There's nothing you can do here, Ben."

Dolan didn't say anything and he wasn't running scripture through his head anymore. He didn't like where it got him. Or what it got him. Then he remembered something Wade said.

Dolan left and Wade sent another officer to follow him home. With that officer in the kitchen having a drink, Dolan rummaged through some boxes until he emerged from the bedroom with a Bible, a bottle of malt liquor, and a look on his face that made the officer nervous.

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Finding the rich kid wasn't easy. Dolan spent most of the day consulting sources both holy and corrupt and came up with nothing. Then he found out the kid would be coming to him. Sort of.

"I know you're bringing him here for questioning," Dolan told Wade.

They were sitting in Wade's office at police headquarters and the kid's father was on his way to the station with him.

"Go home Ben."

"All I want is my turn to ask him questions."

“You don’t get a turn. You're not a cop.”

“I'm a man of God. He might need counseling.”

“If he asks, I'll provide him with someone. Not you.”

Dolan put his hands on Wade's desk and leaned in as close as he could and dropped his voice to a powerful whisper.

“I deserve this chance.”

“I am not going to let you kill a suspect while I watch. Get out of here before I lock you up in the basement.”

“Search me. I don't have any weapons,” Dolan said.

Wade stood and put his hand casually on his holstered weapon.

“I know what prison men can do with their hands,” he said. “I don’t care if you want to go in there handcuffed and naked only to ask him his favorite color. You will not see him or talk to him or even know for sure that he exists.”

Before Dolan could respond, a small, tense woman entered the office.

“He's here,” she said to Wade.

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Dolan sat on the hood of his car outside the police building and drank malt liquor and read the story of Job in his paperback Bible. By the time the kid and his father emerged from the building several hours later with Wade and a beefy sergeant escorting them, Dolan was drunk, and depressed, but not vindictive.

“I'm out of here,” Dolan said to Wade. Then to the kid: “God have mercy on your soul.”

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The phone call came around midnight and shook Dolan from a fitful sleep.

“Where did you take him?” Wade yelled.

“I don't know what-”

“Don’t lie to me Ben.”

Dolan sat up in bed and let his brain fall into place.

“I came home,” he said. “Right after I saw you last.”

“He's gone,” Wade said. “His dad checked on him about an hour ago and he was gone.”

“Be a shame if something happened to him,” Dolan said.

“What did you do Ben?”

“Really. Nothing. I'm going back to bed. Talk to me in the morning.”

Sleep wouldn’t come though. Dolan knew where the kid was. Not because he had anything to do with it, but because it made sense. The kid might have talked during questioning. He might have let things slip about his involvement with certain drug people. Certain drug people who might have the kid right now in an isolated place and might give Dolan a chance at him first.

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Old Lady Keegan was on the porch when Dolan arrived.

“Thought you might be round here God Man. Probably not looking for information this time, are you?”

Dolan pulled his knife out and held it up so Mother Keegan could see it gleam.

“Holy vengeance or some such shit I imagine,” she said. “But the boys are around back, they'll give you a shot at him if you ask nice.”

Around back of the trailer, the two Keegan boys were standing over a prim blonde boy who was tied to a chair and bleeding from several wounds on his face and arms.

Dolan moved between the brothers and put his arms around them. The kid's face went pale and his eyes widened. He choked back a sob.

“Guess it'll take a preacher to put the fear of God into him,” Aldo Keegan said. “He ain't done nothin' but lie and bitch to us.”

The boys picked up their tools and weapons from the ground and waved off on Dolan.

“Leave us something,” Keegan said.

Dolan nodded and circled the kid, letting him imagine what was coming. When the Keegan boys were back around with their mother, Dolan started cutting.

“Justice is getting what you deserve,” Dolan said, slicing from the boy's arms to his legs.

“Mercy is not getting what you deserve.”

He stopped cutting and took the kid's hand and pulled him up.

“Grace,” Dolan said, pulling away the cut rope and pushing the kid into the dark night. “Grace is getting the opposite of what you deserve.”

*Bryon Quertermous's first play was a shameless rip-off of The Maltese Falcon and was produced when he was 19. He's been shortlisted for the Crime Writers Association Debut Dagger and his fiction has appeared in SHOTS, Noir Originals, Crimespree, Crime Scene Scotland, Hardluck Stories, and previous issues of Thuglit. He is the editor and publisher of Demolition magazine in a debt of literary karma*