

Ron Rash

Last Bridge Burned

When the woman knocked on the locked glass door a few minutes after midnight, Carlyle was startled because no car or truck lights had swept across the storefront. He'd taken the .38¹ from its place behind the counter. He did not go to the door but sidled to the window behind the register. The woman was barefoot and a scrape above her left eye seeped blood, her right forearm scraped and bleeding also. Though it was October, she wore only frayed jeans and an oversized black t-shirt. The clothes looked slept in. *One day you'll learn trouble finds a man easy enough without you inviting it in.* Carlyle was sixteen when his exasperated father told him that. By the time he'd finally followed the advice, Carlyle had lost three jobs and two wives. This woman at the door had trouble written all over her. He searched the shadows near the exit ramp for accomplices. The woman knocked again, softly, and Carlyle stepped around the counter, the .38 tucked in the back of his jeans. He stepped in front of the door and pointed at the "Closed" sign.

The outside lights and gas pumps were turned off, the register emptied, but Carlyle still needed to sweep. He kept the gun tucked in his jeans and picked up the broom, worked his way around the shelves and did not look up. In the ten or so minutes it took, there were no more knocks on the door. He set the broom back in the closet. All that was left to do was turn off the radio and inside light. Then, as he did every night after closing, Carlyle could sit in the dark on the store's back porch before going home. He'd smoke a cigarette and watch headlights pass below on the interstate². After a day of dealing with people, their soft yellow glow soothed him, as did the sound of the vehicles themselves, a sound like approaching rain.

But now, as the words of the song on the radio reminded him, he had glanced at the door and seen that the woman was still there.

*On a late-night east of Nashville
My last bridge burned, my money gone
The kindness of a stranger
Showed me a way to go on.*

That night when he'd gone to the door and pointed again at the "Closed" sign, she did not raise a middle finger or curse him, as even regular customers often did when he pointed to the sign. The woman wasn't even looking at him, chin down and arms clutched to her chest. She looked abandoned, like the dogs that appeared from time to time, dropped off by city folks who'd tired of them. Cats too were abandoned, but they always seemed to find a way to survive, but the dogs stayed close to the exit ramp. They simply waited.

"What do you want?" he'd asked after unlocking the door.

"I don't know," the woman finally answered.

Her long hair was stringy and disheveled, the eyes red-veined and glassy. Drunk or drugged, Carlyle knew. She reeked of cigarette smoke, amid it a whiff of perfume. Younger than he'd thought too, thirty at most, but a hard-lived thirty. She was shivering.

"You don't know?" he asked.

"I was with some people, in a car and they pushed me out of the car," she said, raising her eyes.

"Why'd they do that?"

"I think we were having some kind of argument," she said, looking toward the exit ramp. "What state am I in?"

A damn sorry one, Carlyle thought, then told her North Carolina.

"I was hoping Tennessee."

¹ a gun

² a highway

"That's forty more miles, at least on the interstate," Carlyle answered.

45 "I was headed back to Nashville."

"That's where you live?"

"I guess you could say that."

"Those people you were with," Carlyle asked. "You expect they'll come back for you?"

"No, I'd say that bridge is burned."

50 His arm was weary from holding the door open.

"I guess you can come in for a minute," he said.

"I can't buy anything. I don't have any money."

"I'm not asking you to," he answered, "but I ain't holding this door open but a few seconds longer."

55 The only light came from a single bare bulb overhead, but it was enough to find the hydrogen peroxide on the back aisle. Carlyle twisted off the plastic top and handed her the bottle.

"For those scrapes," he told her, and pointed to the bathroom. "There's paper towels and soap in there."

She went to the bathroom. Soon he heard the water running, the squeak of the soap container.

60 In a few minutes the toilet flushed and more water ran in the sink. She came out and handed Carlyle the bottle. Carlyle brought a chair from the back porch and set it beside the back wall. She sat down in the chair, neck resting against the wall as she closed her eyes. Quickly her breathing steadied. What was he supposed to do now, Carlyle wondered, lock her in for the night, take her home and put her in his house's one bed?

65 But she'd get the wrong idea, or not think the idea was wrong at all. As hard-riden as she looked, there was a prettiness about her, nice enough body inside the shirt and jeans. For a moment Carlyle imagined himself in bed with her. And then what? She'd wake up and find a man almost sixty next to her. Inviting in trouble, because the best outcome would be her disgust. She might demand money before leaving. Or worse, not leave and drag him back into the life he'd finally escaped. He could see it all unfold, empty whiskey bottles and dope dealers coming around, her needing to *borrow* money before disappearing for days only to return. No, that wasn't going to happen.

70 Carlyle went out on the porch, keeping the door open so he'd hear if she woke. A firefly sparked as if a reminder and he lit a cigarette. The cat came out of the weeds, expecting an open tin of sardines placed on the top porch step. Finding none, it disappeared again. For an hour Carlyle watched the lights on the interstate, hoping a pair might sweep toward the exit ramp in search of what had been left behind earlier. But the lights stayed on their usual paths. *A muddy heart*, that's what his second wife Teresa told him once. She'd actually said moody, Carlyle realized later, but muddy seemed right and the last eight years had been an attempt to settle that sediment inside him.

80 But things were getting stirred up again. Carlyle decided to leave the woman where she was and go home. He'd leave the door unlocked, and if she took a few things, a coffeepot, or the radio, a grocery bag stuffed with goods, so what. She couldn't haul off a three hundred pound safe bolted to the floor. When Carlyle went back into the store, though, her eyes opened. They were no longer glassy.

85 "Could I have something to drink?"

"I got water and soft drinks in that cooler," Carlyle answered. "There's coffee too."

"I was thinking something with a bit more kick to it."

"I don't sell alcohol."

"Not even beer?"

90 Carlyle shook his head.

"Why not?" she asked. "I'd think it would cost you a lot of business."

"It cost me more having it around."

"Coffee then."

Carlyle went behind the counter, poured out what remained from the morning, and made a fresh

95 pot.
A car came off the interstate ramp but did not slow or pull in.
“They aren’t coming back,” she said.
“Is there someone you can call to come get you?” Carlyle asked. “Not them, I mean, but someone else.”
100 She pondered the question, then shook her head.
“Not that would come this far.”
The coffee was ready and Carlyle filled a styrofoam cup, handed it to her. He usually didn’t drink coffee this late but poured himself a cup.
“Thank you,” she said, when she’d finished the coffee.
105 She set the empty cup by the chair and closed her eyes again, slouched a bit more in the chair.
The radio still played, low but discernable. The news came on, followed by Patsy Cline³ singing “Crazy”. The woman’s eyes remained closed but she softly sang along. She had a good voice.
“That’s my theme song,” she said, opening her eyes when the song ended.
She seemed to want Carlyle to respond but he didn’t.
110 “I guess I need to go,” she said, and this time did get up.
“Go where?” Carlyle asked.
“Nashville. I got evicted from my place, but that town’s like a seesaw. Somebody’s always going up if you’re going down. So I’ll find a place to crash.”
“How do you plan to get there?”
115 “Walk down to the interstate and hold out my thumb.”
“Barefoot?”
“I got here that way.”
“There’s a bus station in Asheville,” Carlyle said after a few moments. “I’ll take you there.”
“I don’t have money for the ticket.”
120 “I’ll buy it.”
For the first time, she looked at him suspiciously.
“What do you expect in return?”
“Nothing.”
“Nothing?”
125 “Look,” Carlyle answered. “You can hitchhike or walk or take the bus. It don’t matter to me, but if it’s the bus we go now.”
“Okay,” she said.
Carlyle went down the aisle nearest the door. Amid a shelf thick with ball caps and sunglasses he unearthed a pair of green flip-flops.
130 “Here,” he said and as she put them on he took some bills from the safe.
They drove east on I-40⁴. Hardly anyone else was on the road except for an occasional eighteen-wheeler. The woman closed her eyes and leaned her head against the window. It was better that way because with the darkness he could pretend she wasn’t in the cab. [...]
The sun had just begun to rise as they came into Asheville. The station was in the part of town
135 the tourists didn’t visit. A few homeless folks lay curled up on the sidewalk, a few more folks who were clearly selling either their bodies or drugs. They looked up briefly but when Carlyle didn’t slow their eyes drifted elsewhere. The space under the awning was vacant so Carlyle pulled up close to the door. He put the truck in neutral⁵ and told her to get out and find out the price of the ticket. She came back out and told him forty-eight dollars. He took out three twenties, held them out the
140 window.
“I guess you want me to swear I don’t spend this on drugs and liquor instead,” the woman said as she took the bills.

³ Patsy Cline: (1932-1963) American country singer

⁴ a highway

⁵ the engine running without the vehicle moving

“Look,” Carlyle answered. “That money is yours now so you decide what to do with it. I’m tired and I’m going to get a couple of hours sleep before I have to open up.”

145 “I’m grateful,” she answered. “I really am.”

Carlyle nodded, his eyes straight ahead now. He opened his mouth to speak but decided not to. “What is it?” the woman asked.

He’d almost told her that if you live long enough, you become what you’ve done, but he decided a man who didn’t take advice shouldn’t give it. Besides, she’d learn that lesson on her own.

150 Carlyle drove off without a glance in the rearview mirror. When he got back to his house he didn’t take off his clothes. He lay in his bed awhile, but was too restless to sleep. Carlyle made some coffee and sat on the couch in the front room, staring at nail holes in the walls where pictures once hung. Then he got up and drove to the store.

155 That had been two years ago and Carlyle had not made the connection until he heard the voice and song’s lyrics on the radio. A google search on a library computer confirmed it. The same face but more filled out, healthier. Carlyle had read a couple of articles about her, how she’d been sober almost two years and loving life again, the usual AA stuff about hitting rock bottom and needing a higher power. Now she and her song were certain to get CMA⁶ nominations, perhaps even one for a Grammy. The seesaw was tilting upward for her.

160 Though it changed nothing in his life, not really, Carlyle told himself later as he set an open tin of tuna fish on the back porch steps. After all, his life was settled. No ups, no downs. Be grateful for that, he told himself. The cat came out from under the porch and began to eat as Carlyle watched the headlights tunnel into the night.

(2018)

⁶ Country Music Awards