

Lyle's Place

I hiked from the cabin by the reservoir to the top of the ridge and down the east side, through Toad Hollow, across the highway, and over the next ridge to Sam's place, packing my guitar so Sam and I could play some music.

On the way home, after midnight, I thought about climbing the ridge before I got to Toad Hollow. I don't scare easily, but every time I walked through the hollow at night, past the deserted cabin, a black, massive shadow under pine trees, I walked with my heart in my throat. I had to work to keep from bolting and running and only didn't because the night was so dark, I might lose the trail under my feet and run into a tree.

Brush grows densely on the ridge. Through the hollow and over the top of the ridge on the old logging road is the only way to go that misses the dense brush. I'd rather walk three hundred yards scared than fight my way through brush.

Then Rod told me some of the history of that cabin.

Lyle lived there in 1970. One summer evening, Ed drove in, and they drank and played cards half the evening. Then they gave up on cards and just drank.

Lyle couldn't find his pocket knife. He accused Ed of stealing it. Ed got mad, and they yelled and cussed at each other. Ed said to hell with you and went out and started to get into his pickup to leave. Lyle caught up with him and killed him with a sledgehammer he'd picked up by the door on his way out. Then Lyle went back in and passed out on the bed.

In the morning, he got up and saw what he'd done and remembered some of it. He walked down the driveway and across the highway to Rod's house and used Rod's phone to call the sheriff. The sheriff came and got Lyle and took him to jail, and Lyle eventually landed in the penitentiary.

I walked through Toad Hollow again. The half-moon hung just above the trees. The dark shadow of the cabin sat silent in tree shadows. Shafts of moonlight penetrated the stand of trees and reflected golden light from window panes in the dense mass of shadow. I wasn't as jumpy as I had been before Rod told me what had happened there. Named and horrible made less fear for me than unnamed and without form.

A drunk driver hit me and busted me up. When I got out of the hospital and got back on my feet enough that I could take care of myself, I needed a place where I could live cheaply and

have a lot of time to heal, where I could begin to learn to walk again.

I found out the cabin in Toad Hollow was empty. I called the owner, and he agreed to rent it to me for fifty dollars a month. Sam brought his pickup and helped me round up my gear and move to the cabin.

Late summer, late afternoon, we carried everything in. Sam walked into the back room and out the back door to where the building for the shower and toilet sat away from the cabin, and then he walked back. "Hey, this place is okay."

"Yeah. It'll do. It's quiet. It looks pretty bare, but I'm going to hang tapestries on the walls and across the doorway into the back room."

"You want to hang them now? I'll help you."

We hung all the tapestries. The place looked bigger and softer and sounded softer.

Sam had brought some good smoke to celebrate moving in. We sat in the kitchen at dusk and smoked a joint. Then we got out our guitars and moved out onto the front porch and played some music. The smell of California red clay and pine and fir trees hung in the cooling air. Sam played more complex music than I could keep up with, but I didn't mind. I cradled my guitar on my lap, listened to his music, and watched darkness settle into the hollow.

Almost every day, I hiked up the ridge behind the cabin, up the old logging road, growing over with pine and fir saplings, leaning heavily on my cane. Near the top of the ridge, a small meadow grew several varieties of wild green grasses, rye and pine grass and timothy, coarse saw grass, and a dozen kinds of wildflowers, tall buttercups, wild iris, elephant heads, Indian paintbrush, queen Anne's lace, blue dicks, blue camas, and death camas.

A small spring spread clean, cold water through the growing green mosses and grass and flowers. On the high side of the sloping meadow, two plum trees and three apple trees grew, near a skeleton of a house that had been abandoned many years before.

I walked around the meadow. Plums ripened on the trees at the edge of the meadow. Bears had harvested fruit, and coyotes, and grey, supple deer, who stood on their hind feet and reached up into the trees for plums in the shadows of dusk. The apples were ripening. I took my shirt off, used it for a sack, and picked as many plums as I could carry home.

I sat in the kitchen and ate plums and watched the day's light leave. The kitchen had windows on three sides, but from the chair by the table, I couldn't see down the driveway.

Heavy feet stomped up the steps onto the front porch, insistent hammering on the door. I got up and opened the door. Darkness spread through the hollow. A huge man came into the cabin. I either had to step aside or get knocked down. I said, "Hey," but I stepped back.

"Hey yourself. I used to live here. What the hell are you sitting in the dark for?" He snapped on the light. "I want to have a look around."

He reached under his shirt and pulled a large automatic from under his belt and pointed it at me, chest high. "Don't give me no shit. I killed one son-of-a-bitch here. It'd be easy to kill another."

I sat down and put my hands on the table.

He pulled at the tapestry in the doorway, turned the light on in the back room and tugged at some of the tapestries covering the walls. "Ain't that Jack-shit fancy? This place ain't like it was when I lived here. Don't say nothin' about me being here, or I'll blow your head off for you." He pointed the pistol right into my face, up close. "Now don't you forget."

He walked out the door and slammed it behind him. A few minutes later, I heard a car start down at the end of the driveway and pull out onto the road.

After a while, I hiked up the hill behind the cabin in the dark. It was a wild walk. I lost the function of the cochlea of my inner ear in the wreck, so I'm missing part of my sense of balance. If I don't have a visual reference, I can't hold plumb. I reeled and staggered up the hill like a lonesome drunk. I fell several times, when I stepped down with one foot farther than I thought I would. I didn't realize I was out of plumb until I headed for the ground. I tried to catch myself with my cane, but that just added a wilder swing to my fall, and I landed hard on my right side and rolled onto my back.

Lyle could have showed up at Lovelock by the time I get there. He could be sitting there with his pistol in his hand, saying, "What'd you come here for? What'd you come here for?"

I lay on my back in the pine duff after I fell. Stars shone bright in the cold sky above me. I put my hands in my jacket pockets and thought about sleeping there, right where I was. If I kept going, I could spin out of balance, miss the catch with the cane and fancy dance head-on into a tree. I found my cane and crawled a ways, but the ground was too rough on my knees, and I got up and walked again. I took it slow and made it to the gravel road, and then it was easier going, because the road is flat. I hiked up to Lovelock and called the sheriff from the phone in the bar.

He said, "No, Lyle didn't escape from prison. He's out on parole for good behavior."

I said, "He isn't behaving too good. Must be that packing a big automatic and making threats is a violation of parole. Looked to me like he's getting himself cranked up to kill somebody."

He asked me where Lyle went, and I said I didn't know. "I heard him drive away down the road."

When I got back down the hill, I walked past the cabin, down the driveway, across the highway, and talked to Rod. He said, "I don't really know Lyle. I knew him before, a little, when he lived in the cabin, but he didn't carry a gun then, and he didn't threaten people. Prison changes people."

"Or killing someone changes people."

"Or both. Once I would have said Lyle was no danger to anyone. Now, I don't have any idea what he might do. Sounds like you'd better start packing a weapon yourself."

"I don't own so much as a slingshot anymore."

"I'll loan you this .357 magnum."

I picked it up and looked it over. I opened the cylinder and dropped the bullets out, then closed it, handled it, aimed it, cocked it. I eased the hammer down and handed it back to Rod. I picked up the bullets and gave them to him. "I don't want it. The more weapons there are, the more likely something's going to go off."

"Just make sure it's this one first."

"Thanks. You keep it. I can't see getting into a shoot-out."

"If you change your mind, it'll be here."

I couldn't sleep that night. I kept wondering what Lyle was doing. It would be easy to borrow Rod's revolver and keep it handy. I haven't forgotten how to shoot. The instant his gun was in his hand, Kabloom, make a flower of his brain. Self-defense.

I tried to lay aside all the violent images that grew from that thought. What did I ever do to him?

He probably couldn't pick me out of a crowd. Coincidence. Nothing personal.

I listened to the night. I tried to separate all the sounds and identify them. I lost the hearing in one ear when I fractured my skull. I have constant noise in that ear, tinnitus, they call it. I can't tell what direction sounds come from, nor how far away they are. Sometimes I can't tell if I'm hearing something or if it's a sound created in my inner ear.

What I decided, if he was going to kill me, that's what he was going to do. I'd already decided I wouldn't shoot him. There probably wouldn't be any way to stop him if he decided to do it, so why worry about it?

Clouds covered Toad Hollow that night, and it rained hard. The sound of rain on the metal roof covered all background sounds and soothed me into a deep sleep.

When I moved into Toad Hollow, Earl, the sheriff, stopped by. He said, "I see you with some of the dopers up here, so I think you might smoke the stuff too." He looked at me, but I didn't say anything. He said, "You're a grown man, so you do whatever you want to, but I want to tell you, you give any dope to any of the kids around here, if I can't put a law onto you, I'll take my badge and my gun off, and I'll stomp the shit out of you."

I thought of saying, "Physical threats are highly unprofessional, Earl, and they could put you into a dangerous corner. You smoke so many cigarettes your circulation's going to hell on you, and you're getting old, and you have trouble staying on your feet. I could lay your head open with this cane and finish you off on the ground, if it ever came to trading push you for go-to-hell."

But I said, "Earl, you're way out of line."

"I might be. I don't know anything. I haven't seen anything. I just want you to know how the law works up here on the ridge."

That was a while back. This afternoon, Earl drove up the driveway again. He had a little trouble getting out of his pickup. He adjusted his pistol on his hip, got his feet working, and walked up onto the front porch. "Lyle won't be coming around giving you any trouble. They slammed the door on him. He shot two men in a bar in Marysville. One of 'em's dead. The other probably will be."

"They'll just parole him out again."

"Not til I'm long dead and you're many years older."

"Sit down, Earl. I'll get you a pepsi, or I can make some coffee."

"You got a cold beer?"

"Sorry Earl, I don't have any beer."

"Well, I got to go on up the road anyway. Thought you might want to know about Lyle."

"Thanks for letting me know, Earl. I'll sleep better."

But I didn't. Not for a long time yet. Some nights, I wished I had pain pills, opium, alcohol, anything to lay me out cold, cut me loose from the pain in my bones and guts.

I walked up the hill and across the meadow and around and around the meadow in moonlight, trying to walk down the rising pain and the restlessness it drove me to. Two owls talked back and forth on the side of the mountain, "Hoo, hoo-hoo." from somewhere close, and the answer, from farther away,

“Hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo,” deep tones, with a slight tremolo. I gained on the pain and the restlessness, but I didn’t have the stamina to keep walking. My knee hurt and started giving out on me.

I headed down through tree shadows and open moonlight on the grass. I went in the front door. Moonlight diffused in the two rooms. In the shadows of the soft light, I saw a body hanging by the neck from the exposed ceiling joists. My heart slammed into the back of my breastbone. I turned on the lights, and nothing was there. Everything was as it should be.

I remembered my boiling rage when I realized how badly injured I was, when I first came into consciousness, when people were trying to put me back together. I thought, why the hell didn’t they leave me there? Any animal injured that severely would have died. Why be human? I should have had the right to choose.

The choice had been made for me. I was alive. I was already beginning to heal.

All of that was before I made it through a cold winter in Toad Hollow, with snow on the ground. That was before I discovered the sense of isolation and despair that sometimes hit me had a bottom to it. I’d go to the bottom and then start back up, whether I willed it or not, whether I thought I cared about living or not.

Roxanna and I weren’t lovers anymore. That ended before I got busted up, and getting busted up helped keep it from rekindling. I didn’t have any income. I couldn’t get around very well. I didn’t want anyone close to me when I was in pain. But for a while that winter she showed up almost every week-end, got out of her car, and said, “Let’s go dancing.”

The first time she pulled in and said that, late in an afternoon when cold rain drove down through the trees in a hard wind, I said, “Are you nuts? I can hardly stand on my own two feet without a cane, let alone dance.”

“You told me once the only thing that could stop you from dancing would be death. You don’t look dead to me.”

I had said more than that. I didn’t remind her. I knew she remembered.

So we went dancing. I could dance as long as I didn’t come down hard on my injured leg. It gave me a new style. Sometimes my balance deteriorated, but Roxanna caught me until I could put it back together, and that became part of the dance. She said, “You’re gonna start a new fad. Two weeks from now, everybody on the ridge’ll be doing the ‘Catch me honey, I’m headed for the floor again.’”

I used muscles in rhythm until I was aerobic as hell. Dancing helped me heal, there in the bar, with the band playing

loud music at the end of the room, and the room full of music and the smell of alcohol and cigarette smoke and men and women dancing.

Roxanna got drunk. I drove her home in her car and helped her get into the house and bedded down. I took her babysitter home, and I came back and slept in the back room on the floor by her son's crib. In the morning, I fixed breakfast and ate with Roxanna and Michael. Roxanna said, "I'll take you home."

I said. "It's a beautiful day. I want to be out there on my own." I hitched a ride back up the ridge. I was mostly off my feet that day, as my bones and muscles tried to assess what I'd done to them and adjust. I was ready again by the next weekend.

Mid-winter, powdery snow dusted the mountain in a ten degree wind. By then, Roxanne had helped me through my time of dreams and disturbing images, and I made it on my own.

I'd been getting ready to move to Oregon when I got hit. Nothing would ever be the way I had thought it would be, but by the time the snow began to thaw, I couldn't just mark time anymore. I spent most of what money I had on a car, packed everything, and headed north.

I found it hard to survive after severe injury at the hands of an uninsured pauper. At the worst of times, when I was unable to hold any kind of job, when I was ineligible for any kind of help, in crippling pain, unable to rub two nickels together under a grocer's nose, under a landlord's nose, I dreamed of Lyle.

In my dreams, I tried to subdue blazing fear in the face of a powerful, unpredictable force with a .45 automatic in his hand, ready to fire. In every dream, his threat was also a plea, as it had been that day at the cabin, "Now don't you forget me."

Six years later, I drove through the valley below the mountain. I turned onto the highway up the mountain and drove up to look around. Rod had sold his place and left. I didn't know anyone in the area anymore, but I talked to people at the small store on the ridge and to the sheriff who took over the area after Earl died. I pieced together some of what had happened since I'd left.

The cabin burned down two or three years after I left. I drove up to look. A mobile home sat where the cabin had been. It looked abandoned, with several broken windows and garbage strewn around. Two cats lazed in the yard.

Most of the big pines along the top of the ridge and down into the hollow had been cut and hauled away, nothing left but chain-sawed stumps. Brush grew densely where trees had stood against the sky. There wasn't any clear trail to the top of the ridge anymore.

I drove up to Lovelock, parked my car, and walked into the bar. Someone had redecorated. Mirrors covered most of the walls, that had been tongue and groove knotty pine boards.

The woman tending bar in the middle of a quiet afternoon didn't know much local history. I bought a coke and sat and drank half of it, but I got jittery and wanted to be out in sunshine. As I headed for the door, the woman sitting at the bar smoking a cigarette, cloud of smoke gathered around her head, said, "Come in again." I just waved and walked out into the afternoon sunshine.

I was still on my way somewhere. I drove off the mountain. As I drove toward the valley, in heavier traffic than I'd ever seen on that mountain highway, I thought about what little I had learned. I might never know what had happened to Lyle.

Maybe Lyle was killed in a riot in the penitentiary after he went in the second time. He tried to stay out of it, but he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing personal. Just coincidence.

Or, maybe he killed someone in the riot, and he will be tried and executed by the state, though it will be several years before all the legal processes are finished.

Or, he wasn't involved in the riot at all. Lyle became a devout religious convert and spends most of his time studying and teaching other prisoners. He was in a safe place, studying, during the riot. His mission is to be in that penitentiary, spreading the word.

Or, there wasn't a riot, and Lyle hasn't changed at all, whatever he might say, or whatever he might appear to be. He is waiting, watching the walls around him, and planning his future.

Or maybe Lyle isn't and never was, is a story in my mind, made up to try to help me explain something I eventually saw was unexplainable, understandable only in a way that can never be fully verbalized.

I could investigate and try to find out what is truth, but it isn't the direction I'm going, and I think I will let it slip away from me, as most of my past has already done and move on from here. It will become as Lyle feared, that I and many others have already forgotten him.