

Lonesome Highway

Nan Mahon

There was no moon at all and only a few stars gave distant light so that Charlie felt as if he were driving through a vat of dark molasses.

He leaned forward as the car twisted the two-lane mountain road, its headlights bouncing into the night.

“I told you not to come this way,” Jeanne said. “Specially since you was so late picking me up.”

It had been a long time since they had seen any other cars. Maybe they were climbing the highway to nowhere, Charlie thought, his head throbbing a little from a whiskey hangover.

“California map said this is a good road,” he said. “Cuts off a lotta miles.”

He didn't mention that he chose this road to avoid any police cars that might be checking for his license plate in case they had found Johnny Jack's body in that motel room down in Placerville. The two of them had spent the summer playing country music in cheap bars across the Sacramento valley, drinking and raising hell, Charlie on guitar and Johnny Jack on piano. Late last night they started swilling Southern Comfort straight from the bottle and got to arguing and fighting about Charlie wanting to take Jeanne on the road with them, him havin' just met her and all. Charlie dimly remembered shoving Johnny Jack backward, so that he fell against the dresser, hitting his head on the way down. Anyway, Charlie figured he must have passed out, because he woke up a few hours ago and found Johnny Jack like that, laying on the floor with his eyes wide open. It scared Charlie pretty bad so he grabbed his guitar and got out of there, picked up Jeanne and headed east.

Careful now, Charlie kept close to the wall of rock on the right and away from the drop-off across the road, glad he was not heading downhill. They curved around a snake bend and the car began to miss and hesitate. So did Charlie's heartbeat.

“Shit,” he said.

“What's wrong? What's happening,” Jeanne put her hands on the dash and peered through the windshield as if she could spot the problem.

He steered the faulting car off the road and felt the right wheels drop into a soft, shallow ditch just as the motor died. The black silence moved in around them.

“What now?” she asked.

When Charlie didn't answer, Jeanne dug into her oversized handbag, pulled out her cell phone and pushed a button, but no light appeared.

“No service. What now?” she asked again.

Charlie sighed and opened the door. “I'll walk up ahead and see what I can find.”

“And leave me here alone?”

“You want to come? Up to you.” He looked at the battered instrument case in the back seat. “Better bring my guitar along if you do, might get stole.”

A blast of heat came through the open door along with the quiet blackness. Jeanne hesitated.

She looked at the high heel sandals on her feet.

“Maybe I should stay with the car in case someone comes along that can help.”

“Suit yourself.” Charlie shut the door and heard the click as she locked it behind him. The sound was unnerving for some strange reason but he didn’t look back as he started up the asphalt.

No night birds sang, no crickets called and not even a coyote howled. There were only his hollow footsteps and labored breath as Charlie walked. He had gone about a mile, he guessed, when he heard the motor behind him and saw the beam of headlights. A pickup truck passed, stopped just beyond him and waited.

Charlie approached the pickup, an old Ford with blue paint that was only a memory, and a rusted-out right front fender. He pulled open the door and a raspy voice told him to get in.

Charlie climbed up on a bench seat covered with what might have once been a colorful Mexican blanket. A rack hung in the back window with a shotgun resting in it. The dash was topped in dust; country music, Bob Wills, Charlie thought, sang from the radio.

“Thanks for stopping,” Charlie said. “My car broke down back there. Maybe you saw it coming up.”

“Nope.”

The old man wore a straw hat with the sides curled up to a point in front and gray hair hung out over his ears. His skinny frame was dressed in a western shirt, blue jeans and boots.

“Name’s Harley,” he said, raking the gears as the pickup began to rattle on up the hill.

“My name is Charlie Jones. I sure appreciate your giving me a lift. Is there a gas station or someplace I can get help or make a phone call?”

“Place called The Wayside just up the road.”

Harley reached down between his legs and brought up a six-pack of beer bound together by plastic at the top. He handed it to Charlie.

“Tear us off one.”

Charlie took two cans from the plastic and gave one to Harley who flipped the tab holding it against the wheel and steering at the same time.

Charlie pulled the tab from his can and took a big pull; the cool liquid felt soothing to his throat. Harley lifted his to his lips, drank it down, crushed the can with one hand and threw it out the window.

“I’m a country singer,” Charlie explained. “Got a week’s gig in Reno startin’ tomorrow night. Need to get my car back on the road.”

Harley’s only response was to take a drag from the stub of his cigarette. “Rip me off another,” he said.

Charlie handed a beer to Harley and they were quiet for a while as Ernest Tubb sang *Waltz Across Texas*.

“You live up here, Harley?”

“Sometime.”

Charlie was about to ask what that meant when Harley swerved off the asphalt and bumped across the dirt to the parking lot of a roadhouse with a flashing neon sign that lit up the darkness. The Wayside was a plank building in a clearing of pine trees, chaparral brush and boulders.

Honkey-Tonk music came roaring out into the night.

Without a word, Harley got out of the pickup, threw his empty can into the brush and walked to the door. Charlie got out and hurried after him.

Inside the building, dancers crowded the floor and the long bar was filled with drinkers. Laughter and chatter competed with the five-piece band on a small stage. The piano player was a dead ringer for Johnny Jack. He caught Charlie's eye and grinned so that a shiver went down Charlie's spine.

"Do you know where the phone ... " Charlie turned to Harley, but he had disappeared. He sighed and started toward the bar when a blond woman in tight jeans and a cowboy hat intercepted him. She grabbed him and started dancing in slow, grinding movements. Charlie smiled and danced with her.

When the music stopped, Charlie made his way to a bar stool and someone shoved a beer in his hand. The blond stood beside him, rubbing against his shoulder, kissing his ear. Behind the bar the Coors beer sign flashed and the cash register rang while the band broke into a rendition of *Crazy Arms*. The blond pulled Charlie back onto the dance floor.

"I have to call ... "

"Oh, later, honey. This' our song."

Crazy Arms gave way to *Johnny B. Good* and *White Lightning* then slowed down to *Help Me Make it Through the Night*. Charlie and the blond kept dancing, people pressing fresh bottles of beer in his hand when the old one went empty. All the while that piano player kept looking at Charlie with that sardonic grin. Damn, if he didn't look like Johnny Jack.

Then the music stopped in the middle of a phrase, the lights went out and the people disappeared. Charlie was instantly sober and bewildered in the empty darkness.

The door opened and two men stepped inside. The beam from their flashlights found Charlie standing alone and stunned in the middle of the room.

"California Highway Patrol," one of them said. "Your name Charlie Jones?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm Charlie."

"Got your girlfriend out in the patrol car. We'll take you down the hill. The police in Placerville have some questions for you."

"But this place ... "

"Been abandoned for years."

"But, there was just ... " Charlie saw a smile pass between the patrolmen. "How'd you know ... how'd you find me?"

The officer motioned with his flashlight for Charlie to come with them.

"Every once in a while people break down on this lonesome highway and we find them up here."

Charlie walked to them, saw the patrol car in the empty parking lot, heard the monotone of a dispatcher over the radio. A full moon was rising to lighten the dark and he could make out Jeanne in the back seat of the cruiser, his guitar propped up on the seat beside her.

"Do you officers know of a guy named Harley?"