

the HARLEQUIN

Ron Rash

Double Yellow Line

“It’s my fault, my mistake,” Karen says. “I let us get involved before the divorce was final.”

Our mistake, I almost say, but instead look out my office window at Janice, the other secretary. She takes her afternoon dose of coffee from the microwave and returns to her desk. Behind Janice’s desk, a poster proclaims Safer Is Always Better. I’m reminded of something Johnny Higgins told me years ago.

“I told Janice I’m checking out early,” Karen says. “It’s not like I can get any work done.”

“I still think you should call Sheriff Atkins,” I tell her, “or I can call him.”

Karen shakes her head.

“If the law’s at the house this time, Carl said he’d not phone again. He’ll just show up one night.”

“You think he’s watching for them near the turnoff?”

“I think he’s parking on a logging road and walking the ridge trail,” Karen says. “Both nights that deputy was with me, I could feel Carl waiting in the woods. Now I know he was out there. I think he walked in at dusk and stayed there in the dark, all night.”

Karen looks up. She’s pretty in so many ways – high cheekbones, long blonde hair, trim figure, but it’s her eyes that give her a special beauty. Blue, but a blue that lightens as you look deeper into them, drawing you in. I tell her again that she can stay with me but she says no. The phone rings and I look out my window and see Janice pick up. She writes something on a notepad and places the phone in its cradle.

“It’s not him calling back,” Karen says. “He’ll not say another word until we’re face to face. There won’t be a day I don’t expect him to show up, whether it’s my place or your place or the office or even that shelter. If it doesn’t happen tonight, it’ll just make things worse. If what he’s about is hurting me, he’ll do it here same as up there. I’m worn down, Bobby. Seeing him is the only way to end this.”

Karen’s left hand is closed, thumb rubbing the side of her index finger. It’s something she does when she’s nervous, and she’s done it a lot lately. She steps closer and leans her head into my shoulder, arms at her sides as though too tired to lift them. Karen has hardly slept in a week and she’s not eating. I know she’s probably right about Carl. He isn’t going to let her be, let us be. But I also know that’s the way he had to be for Karen and me to ever get together – handsome and athletic but such a bastard that she’d not care so much if a guy has acne scars, never athletic, a bit clumsy, just as long as he

was steady and predictable, wasn't bad tempered or abusive.

"What time did he say he'd be there?"

"After dark," Karen replies, lifting her head. "He said that would give you plenty of time to get there too, if you decide to come."

"What if he decides to show up early?"

"He won't," Karen says. "He'll wait until he's sure the law's not coming."

I tell Karen I'll be at her place by six. She takes a step back and raises her left hand, settles it on my face, her fingertips on my forehead as if checking for a fever.

"What we have together, it's a rare thing, Bobby," Karen says. "We'll get through this."

I lock my office door and tell Janice that I'm leaving early too.

"The paint crew has a question about the road at the high school," Janice says.

"Tell them to keep it double-yellow," I tell her.

"So you won't be going out there?"

"No, I'll check it tomorrow."

Janice nods and picks up the phone as Karen and I walk outside. It's one of those early fall days when there's a stillness in the air, the sky such a pure deep blue you wonder how it could ever cloud over again. Karen drives out of the parking lot ahead of me. At the stop sign she looks in her rearview mirror. Our eyes meet and she holds the gaze. Despite what I told her, she probably has some doubts whether I'll come. She finally lowers her eyes and turns right.

I turn left and soon see the paint truck in front of the high school. Tim Rainey's seated in the back with the tanks. His job is to make sure the sprayers are emptying right. One day we'll switch to thermoplastic, but for now Tim spends all day watching the yellow paint and glass beads pour onto the blacktop. It's easy work, especially compared to being on the patching or ditching crews.

You need to talk with Johnny Higgins, my supervisor had told me my first week with DOT, figuring an older traffic engineer like Johnny to be a good mentor. So one afternoon I drove over to McDowell County to meet him. Years out in the sun had splotched and creased his face and neck, but he was trim in the belly, his eyes quick and clear. He'd come around his desk and grasped my hand, said he'd heard good things about me. We sat down and made some small talk and then he asked about what I'd learned at NC State. I recited what had been drilled into me – that *The Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices* was your Bible, and you always deferred to it. So if the manual said you needed a sight line of a thousand feet at 55 mph for a passing lane, you measured the distance as carefully as a football umpire measuring for a first down. One inch over a thousand and it's a passing lane, one inch shy and it's double-yellow. That way if a cluster of white crosses appears beside a stretch of road you line single, no relative can blame you. All you have to do is turn to page 43 and prove you did it by the book. Johnny had nodded like he'd

heard it all before. Then he'd leaned back in his chair and told me it wasn't that simple.

I cross the railroad tracks and park, cross the street and enter Yarbrough's Pawnshop. Trey Yarbrough's on a stool behind the counter, a trumpet in one hand, a rag doused with polish in the other. The radio's on, some Nashville cowboy singing about horses and whiskey. There are no windows, and the fluorescent lights give off a disconcerting brightness. Maybe it causes customers to feel exposed, so less likely to haggle. Or maybe it just makes everything shinier, newer looking, like the polishing. Trey holds the trumpet out so I can see it better.

"Interested in a trumpet?" he asks.

"No," I say, "a pistol."

"Damn," Trey says. "I knew folks want you to raise the speed limit on Clayton Road, but I didn't figure it to come to a shootout."

"Someone tried to break into my shed the other night," I tell him. "I figure he might come back."

Trey sets the trumpet and rag on the counter.

"Any idea who it was?"

"No."

"Probably one of them meth heads," he says. "They'll do anything for that shit. One came in last month with a hearing aid. I asked where he got them and he said his Daddy had died yesterday. I told him to get the hell out of here."

"What do you think I ought to get?"

"Some would tell you a .22 because it's the cheapest, which is fine if you just want to wave it around, maybe shoot at the sky to scare him off." Trey leaves his stool and walks over to the glass case that holds the pistols. He slides the case open and takes a short-barreled revolver off the green felt. He places it delicately on the counter and nods for me to come over.

"A .38 special is what I recommend. First thing is reliability. You could douse a .38 in a mud hole and it'd still shoot. There's no springs, slides, safeties, or magazines. Plus, it'll fill your hand enough that the asshole won't miss seeing it."

"How much?"

"Two hundred for this Rossi and I'll throw in a box of cartridges."

"Okay," I tell him, and pause. "I know there's supposed to be a waiting period, but this guy, he could back tonight."

"Yeah, I know," Trey says. "I can take care of that, as long as you keep quiet about it, but you still have to fill out the paperwork."

"Of course," I say.

Trey swipes my credit card and gives me the receipt to sign along with the paperwork. He goes to a shelf behind the register and gets the cartridges, sets the red cardboard box on the counter.

"Hollow points," he says. "They spread wide as a dime when they make contact. If you do have to use it, you want something that'll stop him cold."

Trey puts the gun and bullets in a brown bag, hands it to me.

“You ever shot a pistol before?”

“Just rifles and shotguns.”

“It’s not all that different, aim and fire,” Trey says, “but it’d be a good idea to shoot a few rounds to get used to it. A pistol’s got more kick than you might think.”

I take care of the paperwork and hand it to him.

“One more thing,” Trey says. “If you do plug the son-of-a-bitch make sure you drag him into your house. It’ll bloody your floor some but save you a lot of hassle when the law shows up.”

Outside, it takes a few moments to adjust to the natural light. I set the gun on the seat, another link added to a chain of lengthening possibilities. I’m due at Karen’s in forty minutes so I turn around and head back out of town. All the while I’m trying to think about something besides tonight. As I pass the county maintenance office, I see the paint crew pulling in. I’ve never been too popular with them. Part of it is inevitable – my having a college degree, at thirty-six being younger than most of them. But it’s also the way I check up on them. If there’s a gap in the lines or if a passing line is a couple of feet too long, I make them get it right. Going out of my way to find fault, nitpicking, they want to believe. I’ve heard them mutter tight ass, worse things after I’ve shown them what’s wrong.

Tim Rainey’s the worst of them, especially since two summers ago. One afternoon Tim told me that we didn’t need a double-yellow, said he could prove it by the sight line. When I told him that he hadn’t taken into account a side road, Tim answered that he wasn’t used to folks doubting him. Maybe it was the hot day or the fact that he did less than anybody else on the crew, but I told him he should be used to people doubting him since the bank had repossessed his truck last month. If Tim knows what’s happening with Carl, I’m sure it gives him pleasure, especially knowing if I hadn’t bent the rules myself I’d not be in this situation.

Beyond the city limit sign, the road ascends in a vertical curve. A dead coyote is on the road edge, a crow eating its fill before a 10-45 crew scrapes the carcass up. A mile later there’s a lookout on the right. Though I hadn’t planned to pull in, I do. I walk down a path to the picnic table where Karen and I sometimes eat our lunch.

From her first day, Karen did the job better than the secretary on maternity leave, and that doesn’t happen very often with a temp. Other things surprised me as well. She didn’t dress sexy or wear a lot of perfume. No jewelry either, no ring. When one of the men came in the front office and told an off-color joke or flirted, she, unlike Janice, didn’t laugh or flirt back. There were no photographs on Karen’s desk, no mementoes. A lot of the men thought she was stuck up, but as the weeks passed I saw they were wrong. Karen was just quiet, even a bit shy, not one to reveal much about herself. During lunch time she usually stayed at the office. She’d been at work two weeks before I heard one of the dump truck drivers claim he’d played high school baseball with the guy who’d married Karen right after graduation. The

driver said they'd split up a while back, though he wasn't sure when.

It's against state policy to date someone in the same office, but since Karen was a temp I didn't think it would really matter, especially since, at first, I doubted we were dating. I'd ask if she had lunch plans and if she didn't we'd go to a restaurant or get sandwiches and come here and use the picnic table. I steered the talk more to subjects like work than anything personal. I didn't try to take her hand or kiss her, afraid if I did she'd tell me I had it all wrong. Then one Friday Karen came into my office and said she'd like me to come up to her place for supper. I need you to know something first though, Karen had said, and told me her divorce wouldn't be official for two more months. At first I thought she was warning me that they might get back together. No, that's not going to happen, Karen had said.

I get back in the truck and stare at the mountains unfolding to the west, almost all of it national forest. A Cessna crashed there in the late nineties and the plane wasn't found for six years, then only because a bear hunter came across it. There's no telling what else is still hidden in there. I pick up the .38 and thumb back its hammer. I squeeze the trigger, a dry snap, then open the box of cartridges and place six rounds in the cylinder. Once loaded, the pistol feels no heavier than when it was empty, and that doesn't seem right to me. A loaded gun ought to feel pounds heavier than an unloaded one.

A camper with Ohio plates pulls in beside me and I put the pistol back in the paper bag. One night Karen was showing me some family photographs and turned to a group shot at a family reunion. Karen didn't say it was Carl who had his arm around her but I knew, especially when she turned the page a little too quickly. Later, when she walked into the kitchen, I'd looked at the photograph again. But I wasn't so much looking at Carl as at Karen. She was leaning into Carl's embrace and smiling, a real smile, nothing forced.

I pull out of the overlook and try to think about something else. Soon I pass a smear of hair and guts. Maybe another coyote, that or a fox or bobcat. Whatever, it's too far from town for the crew to bother with. I think about turning on the radio but instead try to imagine best-case scenarios, that Carl doesn't show at all, or if he does he stands in the yard and curses or cries a while and then leaves. It could happen that way. But I also remember what Karen said about their last night under the same roof. Carl had never physically abused her, but that night he clenched his right fist and pulled back his arm and threatened to punch her if she said another word. After a few moments, he'd lowered his hand, walked out of the house, and drove off.

The road is straight for a quarter mile, about as long a single line as you'll find in this county. I come to the stop sign and turn right and the road becomes nothing but curves and switchbacks. I slip into third gear. At first there are a few trailers and farmhouses but the grade steepens and there's nothing but outcrops and trees. Pressure builds in my ears. The road straightens briefly and I come to a crossroads, on one side Jenkins' Mini-Mart, opposite it Blue Mountain Realty. Neither building was here five years ago, but once they were I changed a two-way stop to a four-way. The locals say lowering the speed limit to 25 would have been enough, that the four-way has

caused more wrecks than it's prevented, but I went with the manual. Johnny Higgins would have left it a two-way, I'm sure of that.

Johnny's been dead six years, but if he were still alive, I don't think he'd be surprised I had changed the sign. That day in his office he'd smiled wryly, pretty much acknowledging he knew what I'd do. I suspect Johnny also realized that my doing so was temperament as much as education. Like a lot of people who go into engineering, I loved the vocation's certitude – how something could be measured once or a thousand times and it always came out the same, how you could decide on some rules, and even if they were somewhat arbitrary, once those rules were set all you had to do was follow them.

The intersection shrinks in my rearview mirror. I enter a curve a teenager took too fast last winter. There's a white cross on the shoulder, beside it an Atlanta Braves ball cap and a vase of plastic flowers. The men on the mowers raise their blades when they come to such memorials and the road oil crews work around them as well, in part because several crosses mark wrecks involving their own kin. The district supervisor claims seeing them makes drivers more cautious, but as I come out of the curve I wonder if all the poems and photographs, the ball caps and graduation tassels and football jerseys, glamorize recklessness as much as warn against it.

The vertical curve sharpens, the truck struggling even in second gear. The shoulder narrows and there's a battered guardrail on the right side that needs to be replaced. I pass a Beware of Falling Rocks sign. Granite outcrops loom overhead. Usually it takes a hard rain for a boulder to break loose, but not always. A rock the size of a Volkswagen came down one afternoon last winter and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. It landed where one of our crews had filled in a pothole that same morning.

You've got to consider the terrain, and part of the terrain is the people in it, Johnny Higgins had said. He told me if a 55 mph stretch was ten feet short of a thousand, but there was no place to pass for five miles, a traffic engineer should take that into account because a double-yellow line could cause an impatient driver to try passing in a riskier spot. You should decide which is more likely to cause a head-on – those ten feet or those five miles, he said. It comes down to whose safety you care more about, your own or someone else's.

The road levels and the shoulder widens. The speed limit is back to 45 but I'm doing only 35. I check my rearview mirror. No one is behind me so I don't speed up, instead give myself a little more time to change my mind and turn around. That first evening Karen invited me to her house she'd put candles on the table. Emmy Lou Harris sang low in the background, clear signs this could be more than friendship. I'd stayed the night and after that I did the same every Friday night. Sometimes during the week we'd go to my house, which was closer, and spend our lunch hour in bed. I'd dated another woman for a year in my late twenties, but like several shorter relationships nothing came of it. There was always something missing, some disconnect. Considering my track record, it was easy to think the same would happen

again, but after two months it was all good. We hadn't said a word about living together or marriage, but I was beginning to think it could happen. One night I got up the nerve to tell Karen I was falling in love with her. I've already landed, baby, she'd replied, and it's a good place to be.

Then Carl called one Friday night when I was at her house. Maybe it was the way Karen kept her voice low, or her saying it wasn't a good time to talk, but he knew someone was with her. He called a buddy in Sylva and found out Karen and I were dating. The next Monday Carl phoned her at work. He told Karen he was coming to visit her that night and that I should be there too. I'd gone with Karen to the courthouse. There was already a restraining order against Carl, and Sheriff Atkins sent a deputy to watch the house that night and then the next time Carl threatened to come. But he didn't show. Sheriff Atkins said he couldn't send someone out every time Carl called. It didn't help that Carl no longer lived at the address Karen had given the sheriff. If we don't know where he is, we can't do much, Sheriff Atkins had said, and suggested Karen go to the women's shelter in Asheville.

The road curves left and then right, coiling and uncoiling the same way a snake crosses a stream. I pass an abandoned gas station and an overbrimmed dumpster. All the while the double-yellow line unfurls ahead of me. I think about Karen telling me what we have is a rare thing, but I also know she had to have felt the same about Carl and her once, thought she'd landed in a good place with him. A battered green trailer appears on the left, after that a logging road and a farmhouse, beside its barn an old redbelly tractor and a chain harrow. It's strange but it's like I'm noticing everything on this road, really noticing it, for the first time. Then I look at the speedometer and see I'm going only twenty.

I come to the gravel road that leads to Karen's house. I turn off the blacktop and gravel pops and pings beneath the truck. I drive a few yards, then press the brake and shift into neutral. As the engine idles, I look through the windshield at the mountains. This time tomorrow they'll be exactly where they are now. Something will remain unchanged, and I try to find some comfort in that. I lay my hand on the gearshift knob and ease off the clutch.

"I didn't know if you would come," Karen says when I step onto the porch.

She hugs me, but even as she does I feel tension as much as relief in her embrace, a part of her looking past me toward the woods. I step back and set the paper bag down.

"What's in it?" she asks, like it could be anything other than a gun, but I suddenly realize that I could have brought money and tried to buy Carl off.

"Something to scare him with," I say, "If it comes to that."

"I don't think it will," Karen says. "We'll have done what he asked. I think he just wants to have his say, then he'll leave us be."

I don't say anything.

"You can still leave, Bobby, I'll not think any less of you."

"No," I answer. "I want to be here."

We sit on the top step. The sun settles on the ridge crest for a few minutes, then begins to disappear. It's like watching a bright-orange fishing bobber tugged slowly underwater. Someone seeing us would think us merely a husband and wife watching a pretty sunset together, or maybe a couple who'd just finished dinner, or set a sleeping baby in its crib. The most ordinary sorts of things.

Karen gets up and turns on the porch light, sits back down and takes my hand.

"We'll get through this tonight," she says, "and then we'll have evenings like this when nothing will be on our minds but how pretty a sunset can be."

She holds my hand a few moments longer.

"I hope all this with Carl hasn't changed your mind about us having a future together."

"No," I answer.

"Nothing good ever comes easy in life," Karen says, "but it makes you appreciate it more when you do get it."

"I guess so," I say.

Karen lets go of my hand. We settle our forearms on our knees and look straight ahead, watch as the trees blur into one another.

Carl doesn't wait until full dark. He comes out of the woods, a flashlight in his right hand. Its yellow beam noses the ground before him like something leashed. He's in jeans, like you'd expect, but instead of boots he wears loafers. His blue short-sleeved dress shirt looks new. I reach behind and set the paper bag beside me. He stops in the middle of the yard and shuts off the flashlight. His other hand is empty.

"Have your say, Carl, and then leave us be," Karen tells him.

"Just wanted to meet him, darling," Carl says. "A husband's got a right to see who his competition is."

"You're not my husband anymore," Karen says.

"Yes, I am," Carl says. "We made a vow before God himself to love only each other till death do us part."

"Let it go, Carl," Karen says. "Please. Let me have some happiness."

"I've never given you any?" he asks, "not ever?"

"I'm not saying that," Karen says. "I'm talking about now."

"If I gave it to you once, I can give it to you again."

"It's too late," Karen says.

"I still love you," Carl says. "Think about what it was like when it was good. Those nights we camped at the river."

Listening to him, you could almost forget he was the same man who'd threatened Karen for weeks. His voice is low and level, intimate, and so is Karen's.

I take the pistol from the paper bag, settle it in my hand. It does feel heavy now, heavy as an anvil.

"Don't point that thing at me," Carl says.

"Then leave," I answer.

“You think some sad sack like you can tell me what to do?”

Karen stands up, one hand raised and moving slightly back and forth, as if trying to soothe the tension from the air. I stand as well. There’s no safety on the Rossi but it’s like I hear a soft click – a door locking me in or maybe out but, either way, forever. Things are happening too fast. Karen’s talking to him, her voice steady. He listens for a few moments. Then Carl’s cursing me again. He takes a step towards me, his right hand clenching the flashlight.

“You say another word and I’ll take this flashlight and ram it up your ass.”

He doesn’t wait for another word but comes at me in long strides, already on the first step when I pull the trigger.

Trey is right. The hollow point stops him cold. There’s no Hollywood moment where he says something or touches the wound and looks astonished. His knees buckle and he falls backward. And it’s like time goes back a few seconds, then forward again, bringing with it what I missed the first time – that I’ve just shot a man.

Karen kneels beside him. She turns and screams for me to call 911. I reach for my cell and then remember there’s no signal this far out. I go inside and use that phone. A dispatcher comes on and I tell her a man’s been shot and where. As I hang up, I look out the window. Karen’s hands cradle Carl’s head. She’s leaning over him, her face inches from his. She is talking to him. I am glad that, for a few more seconds, I cannot know what she is saying.

Thank you for reading! Find more at www.theharlequin.org.