

THE LAST BRIDGE

A NOVEL

Teri Coyne

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ONE

TWO DAYS AFTER my father had a massive stroke my mother shot herself in the head. Her suicide was a shock—not the fact that she killed herself but the way in which she did it. It was odd that my mother chose such a violent end to her own violent life. For someone who had endured years of torture at my father’s hand, I thought she would choose a more quiet way of leaving. Perhaps she would take pills and put herself to bed in a silk nightgown, or she’d walk naked into the ocean at sunset. Instead, she cleaned the house, changed the linens, stuffed the freezer full of food, and blew her head off with my father’s shotgun.

Ruth Igby, the ugly neighbor down the road, passed the farm several times that weekend and noticed the garage door swinging open. Ruth assumed my mother was at the hospital taking care of my father and took it upon herself to close it. As she got closer to the house she noticed a light was on in the kitchen and thought my mother was home. There was a strong glare coming off the snow that had accumulated into large boulderlike masses against the sides of the house. Ruth couldn’t see anything until she shielded her eyes with her left hand and pressed her face against the side window. What she saw made her fall into the screen door and tear it loose from the top hinge. She grabbed the mesh for balance and ripped it from its frame, leaving it flapping in the wind.

I didn't ask Ruth how she got my number or if she had called the others. I listened to her sedated slur, compliments of the town doctor, Joshua Kramer. "Not your Dr. Kramer," she said. "His son. Remember Joshy?"

I didn't answer.

"Even in the end your mother didn't want to make a mess. She taped garbage bags to the walls of the kitchen and covered the stove with a drop cloth. She was always thinking about you kids."

"Right," I said.

I can't imagine what my mother was thinking that Thursday afternoon in February as she pulled open the utility drawer and searched for the masking tape. Was she humming or listening to the radio? Was she thinking about Paris? Or heaven? Or her kids? Did she perform her final act the same way she washed the dishes or mashed potatoes? Was it part of her weekly to do's? Did she scratch "Kill yourself" off the list, between "Call about furnace" and "Buy toilet paper"?

When I was a little girl I asked my mother what she saw before she fell asleep. I asked in the hope she would say she saw me. She said, "I don't see anything. I'm too tired." She was always so god-damned tired. She moved through the chores of her life like she was sleepwalking. It's no wonder she chose to end her life. What didn't make sense was the timing. Why would she do it now that she was so close to being released from her life sentence with my father? Maybe that was the problem. Maybe she couldn't imagine a life without torment.

I wish I could ask her what she saw before she pulled the trigger. I don't need her to say she saw me. I want to know she saw something. That she felt something. And that it felt like freedom. And then, if I could, I would ask her what that felt like.

I drove through the night, stopping only to pee or to replenish my stash. I had been driving for ten long hours before I started seeing signs for Wilton. The illuminated exits rolled by like months being

torn from my life's calendar. Ten years had passed since I had seen or spoken to my mother. I only wished it had been that long since I had thought about my life here. I felt the craving again, like hunger but more urgent. I reached under the passenger seat and grabbed the bottle of bourbon I hid for emergencies. I took a long hot swig and pulled off the highway and onto County Road 48.

I found the farm easily. I could find our house of horrors in the middle of a blinding snowstorm.

I turned left onto the dirt path that led to our driveway and saw the big white house standing on top of a rounded hill skirted by snow-covered fields. A few of the green shutters had fallen from their hinges, and in spite of what looked like a new paint job, the place was daunting, like a man standing with his arms on his hips daring you to knock him over.

Hal White, the local sheriff, was leaning against his patrol car sipping a jumbo cup of 7-Eleven coffee and chomping on a doughnut when I pulled up. I had called ahead as Ruth had instructed and asked him to meet me. I got out of the car and lost my balance from too much sitting and drinking. I steadied myself and popped a Tic Tac in my mouth. Hal tossed what was left of his coffee into my mother's prized geranium bed and headed toward me. I hadn't seen him since he tried to feel me up at a high school football game the year everything ended. I thought of his callused hands grabbing at my bra as he wiped his sugarcoated fingers across his regulation starched sheriff's pants.

"Hey, Cat," he said, walking with a policeman's swagger, as if the gun were between his legs and not at his side. "Sorry about your mom." He took his hat off and tossed it in his hands. He was as wide as he was tall and had a pebble-colored beard that clung to the edge of his jaw like gravel on the side of the highway.

"Thanks," I said. Cat is my nickname. It's short for Alley Cat. My real name is Alexandra but my family used to call me Ally. Then my sister, Wendy, called me Alley Cat and then just Cat. After a while, I was known in Wilton as Cat.

“Listen, why don’t we do the coroner first, then you’ll have time alone in the house. I’ll drive.” He climbed into his car and pushed a pile of folders and crumpled-up paper from the passenger seat to the floor. He leaned across the seat and opened the passenger door. “Sorry about the mess. This is the only place I get to live like a bachelor!” He smiled, revealing a gold cap on one of his inner teeth. I leaned into the car and tried my best to focus on Hal and not the crap he was trying to make disappear.

“I’ll be right with you. I have to use the bathroom.” I started for the house. The screen door was leaning off to the side with torn mesh waffling in the breeze.

“No!” Hal shouted, running after me. I stopped and felt the crunch of ice under my feet. For the first time since I got out of the car I realized I was not dressed for the harshness of the weather. After I got the call I threw on a ratty old sweater and a pair of dirty jeans and slid on my cowboy boots. My feet were so cold I wondered if I had remembered socks. The air against my cheeks felt like small brittle twigs scratching me. I wrapped my arms around myself and felt colder. Hal ran up in front of me, blocking my way to the door.

“Don’t do this alone,” he said, dangling the keys in front of me as I tried the door.

I stepped aside. Hal tried a series of keys until he found the one that fit. The door still stuck and required a shove before opening. A rush of heat carried the ghost smells of coffee and cinnamon cake.

“I guess Ruth told you there wasn’t a lot of cleanup. Your mother made it easy.” I was waiting for him to say that he wished all suicide victims were as considerate, but he didn’t.

I stepped into the tiny mudroom facing the kitchen. Hal walked in and dropped the keys on the table that was covered with the same rooster-patterned oilcloth that had been there when I was a kid.

The room was alive. The clock above the pantry ticked, the radiator on the back wall hissed, and the floorboards creaked. Water

dripping from the faucet into the sink clotted like horses walking on pavement. The sounds pressed against me like one heart resting on another, syncopating.

The morning sun poured through the window over the sink, highlighting the spot where the yellow linoleum was worn thin from all the hours my mother stood washing dishes and looking out onto the fields. White flecks of dust swirled in the light. My mother called them fairies.

“Let’s go,” I said. I stepped into the kitchen to wave him out. My need to leave overshadowed my need to pee. I was calculating how much bourbon I would need to come back later and stay. I wondered if there would ever be enough.

“She left this.” Hal reached across the table and picked up a piece of lilac-colored stationery inside a ziplock bag and walked toward me with his hand out.

“I don’t want to touch it if it’s evidence.”

“Your mother did that to . . . keep the blood from getting on the note.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said as I shook my head. “She put her suicide note in a ziplock bag?”

“Pretty considerate, huh?” Hal said.

“I was thinking along the lines of pretty sick,” I replied, pulling the zip open, leaving one side yellow and the other blue. I thought of the commercials challenging the many uses of the special “green” seal and wondered if Glad would get a chuckle out of this one. “Yes, folks, if you were going to blow your brains out, which bag would you choose for your suicide note?”

“I’ll give you a moment,” Hal said, quietly brushing past me for the door.

I looked up at the empty room, and then at the letter safely ensconced in its protective coating, and thought that a trip to the coroner would be easier. “Let’s go,” I said, dropping the bag onto the table while taking as few steps into the room as possible.

I offered to follow Hal to the morgue in my car but he insisted

on driving. “This way we can catch up,” he said, flashing a gold-tinted smile. This was the first time he actually acknowledged that we knew each other.

“Great,” I said, wishing I had put a small bottle of something in my purse.

“You’re never going to guess who I married.” We pulled off the dirt road that led to our farm and the Igbys’. “Do you want a hint?” he said, turning onto the main road of town. Murphy’s Five and Dime was now a Kmart Express. Benny’s coffee shop was a Dunkin’ Donuts, and the sidewalks that used to be so wide you could ride a bike down the middle without knocking anyone over had been turned into parking spaces. Main Street had turned into the main strip. Outside the 7-Eleven, which used to be Sammy’s Stop-n-Sip, kids in clown-sized pants rocked back and forth on skateboards, bummed cigarettes from one another, and coerced strangers to buy them beer. Some things don’t change.

“Ginger LaCooke,” he said, and then looked at me like the name was supposed to mean something. I shook my head.

“Don’t you remember Ginger LaCooke?”

“Nope,” I said, staring at the boarded-up Tastee Freez, where my sister, Wendy, had her first French kiss and I had my first French custard.

“Ginger LaCooke was on the cheering squad. She wore the mascot uniform for football games, remember?”

“Yeah,” I said, resisting the memory. “Are we almost there?”

“It’s ahead,” he said, pointing to a squat cinder-block building in the distance. “I’m sorry, here I am going on and here you are—”

“She was one of the Purple Possums.”

“Huh?” He pulled into the parking lot of the county coroner’s office.

“She was the Head Possum, the one with the powder puff on her ass.”

“Oh, right. Yeah,” he chuckled. “Good for you, you remember!”

“Yeah, good for me,” I said, getting out of the car. I sighed,

imagining what ten years and a shotgun had done to change the look of my mother.

I was cold despite the wall of heat bearing down on me as we entered the county morgue. Hal had called ahead to tell the coroner we were coming. He was waiting at the door and introduced himself as Andrew Reilly, County Coroner, like he was auditioning for the role. He didn't shake my hand so much as cradle it. I guess that was meant to comfort me but, like his introduction, it seemed like something he read you were supposed to do. The only thing comforting about him was his voice. He had an even, relaxed tone that could lull you to sleep.

"She's down this way," he said as our footsteps echoed in the gray hall. Hal was trailing a few paces behind, as the corridor wasn't wide enough for three people and his hat. "I know this must be difficult. What I usually tell people in these circumstances is to . . ." Andrew Reilly, County Coroner, rattled on about what one could expect, as if one can be prepared. He was tall and flush with the orange color of a winter tan, not in the least bit crusty and bald, like I figured someone who hung out with corpses would be. Hal followed us so closely I was afraid he would slide up my ass if I stopped suddenly.

The end of the hall was punctuated by two silver metal doors. We stopped together as Andrew stepped forward and pushed a button that opened them. He led Hal and me into a small puce room filled with empty metal tables. "Your mother's over here," he said. I followed the movement of his arm as it arched toward her table as if he were a *maître d'* uniting me with my dinner partner.

For a moment, hearing someone say, "Your mother's over here," I thought she was waiting for me in a chair, with her purse resting on her lap.

"Hey, Mom," I would say, and smile the smile I saved for her and my school picture.

"Miss Rucker, over here," the coroner whispered to me, guiding me gently by the elbow.

She was in a bag.

As I looked at the zippered closure I thought about how much she would approve of the container. Instead of “Ashes to ashes,” the preacher should say “Ziplock to ziplock.”

“As soon as you can identify her, let us know,” the coroner whispered as he unzipped the bag and pulled down the sides. “Your impulse is to look at her face, but try not to. It’s in bad shape.”

In bad shape? The woman put a shotgun in her mouth and express-mailed her brains to heaven. I think her face is in worse shape than bad. Christ, he made it sound like all she needed was a little powder and lipstick.

I didn’t have to look at her face to know it was my mother. I didn’t even have to look any farther than her left hand that was dangling off the metal table. I nodded and turned away.

“That’s her,” I said.

“How do you know?” the coroner asked.

“The wedding band,” Hal answered, looking at me for confirmation.

“The tip of her ring finger,” I said.

Both men looked closely. “Ah,” they said in unison as they noticed my mother’s finger was missing the first joint and nail bed.

“Was that a birth defect?” Hal said.

“No . . . marriage,” I replied, searching my bag for a cigarette. “My mother tried to leave my father once. He found her, brought her home, and cut the tip of her finger off. He told her if she ever tried to leave again, he would cut her hand off. Needless to say, she never left after that. Anybody have a light?”