

Long Night

by Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013

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NEAR THE CREST of the hill, where the road climbed into the timber, he raised from the saddle wearily and turned to look back toward the small, flickering pinpoints of light.

The lights were people, and his mind gathered faces. A few he had seen less than a half hour before; but now, to Dave Boland, all of the faces were expressionless and as cold as the lights. They seemed wideeyed and innocently, stupidly vacant.

He rode on through the timber with what was left of a hot anger, and now it was just a weariness. He had argued all afternoon and into the evening. Argued, reasoned, threatened and finally, pleaded. But it had ended with „I'm sorry, I've got my supper waiting for me,“ and a door slammed as soon as his back was turned.

He felt alone and inadequate, and for a moment a panic swept him, leaving his forehead cold with perspiration. The worst was still ahead, telling Virginia.

Wheelock had been in the hotel dining room and he had approached the big rancher hesitantly and told him he was sorry to bother him...

„Mr. Wheelock, I paid you prompt for that breeding. The calf was too big, that's why it died. I did everything I could. If you'll breed her again—“

„I heard the calf strangled. Son, when you help a delivery, loop your rope around the head then bring it good and tight along the jaws, and a few turns on the forelegs if they're out.“ He drew circles in the air with his fork. „Then you don't strangle them to death.“ And he laughed with a mouthful of food when he said, finally, „The breeding fee generally doesn't include advice on how to deliver.“ E.V. Timmons leaned back from the rolltop and palmed his hands thoughtfully as if he were offering a prayer. He looked at the ceiling for a long time with a tragic cast to his eyes. When he spoke it was hesitantly, as if it pained him, but with conviction...

„Buying trends are erratic these days, Dave. Tomorrow, demand might drop on a big item and I'd have a heavy inventory on my hands and no place to unload. It means you have to maintain a working capital.“

Tom Wylie was sympathetic when he told him about most of his stock dying from rattleweed poisoning.

„That's mean stuff in March, Dave. Got to keep your stock out of it. You know, the best way to get rid of it is to cut the crowns a few inches below the soil surface. It generally won't send up new tops.“ He asked Boland if he had seen Timmons. And after that he kept his sympathy.

John Avery was in the hotel business. He was used to walls and space limitations. „If my cows got into rattleweed I'd put fences up to keep them the hell out. You got to organize, boy!“ Avery's supper was waiting for him...

Virginia would understand.

Hell, what else could she do? He saw her pale, small-boned face that now, somehow, seemed sharper and more drawn with their child only a few days or a week away. She would smile a weak smile, twisting the hem of her apron—and it would mean nothing. Virginia smiled from habit.

She smiled every time he brought her bad news. But always with the same sad expression in the eyes. Sometime, in the future, perhaps there would be a real reason to smile. He wondered if she would be able to. Now, with the baby coming...

Virginia had waited tables in a restaurant in Sudan because she had to support herself after her folks died suddenly. She was a great kidder and all the riders liked her. Broadminded, they said. He used to pass through Sudan a few times a year when most of the Company herds were grazed near the Canadian. After a while, he went out of his way and even made excuses to go there. She never kidded with him...

When he told the others about it, they said, „She's a nice girl—but who wants a nice girl? You get bone-tired pushing steers from the Nueces to Dodge; but, son, you can throw off along the way anytime you want—“

It had been raining hard for the past few minutes when finally he led his mare into the long, rickety shed, unsaddled and pitch-forked some hay.

The rain, he thought, shaking his head. The one thing I don't need is rain. He tried to see humor in it, though it was an irritation. Like an annoying, tickling fly lighting on a broken leg.

He walked up the slight grade toward the dim shape of the adobe house, passing the empty chicken coops, then skirted Virginia's vegetable garden, moving around toward the front of the house. He saw a light through a

curtained side window. At the front of the house he called, „It’s me,“ so as not to startle her, then lifted the latch on the door and pushed in.

Virginia Boland stood next to the oilcloth-covered table. She twisted the hem of her apron—she did it deliberately, her fingers tensed white straining at the material—and her eyes were wide. No smile softened the pale, oval face. Her dark dress was ill-fitting about her narrow shoulders and bosom as if it were sizes too large, then rounded, bulging with her pregnancy to lose any shape it might have had before.

Boland said, taking his hat off, „I guess I don’t have to tell you what happened.“

„Dave—“ Her voice was small, and now almost a whisper. Her eyes still wide.

He came out of his coat and brushed it half-heartedly before throwing it to a chair.

„I saw all of them, Ginny.“

„Dave—“

He looked at her curiously now across the few feet that separated them... There was something in her voice. And suddenly he knew she wasn’t saying his name in answer to his words. He moved to her quickly and held her by the shoulders.

„Is it time? Are you ready now?“ She shook her head, looking at him imploringly as if she were saying something with her eyes, but she didn’t speak.

She didn’t have to.

„Hello, Davie boy.“ The voice came from behind Virginia.

He stood in the doorway of the partitioned bedroom with the curtain draped over his shoulder. The white cloth dropped to the floor showing only part of him; damp and grimy, trail dust streaked and smeared over clothes that had not been changed for days. A yellow slicker was draped over his lower arm and his hand would have gone unnoticed if the long pistol barrel were not sticking out from the raincoat.

„Been a long time, hasn’t it!“ he said, and came into the room carefully, lifting the slicker from his arm to drape it over a straight chair. „I almost didn’t recognize little Ginny with her new shape.“ He grinned, winking at Boland. „You didn’t waste any time, did you?“

Boland stared at the man self-consciously, feeling a nervousness that was edged with fear, but he made himself smile.

„Jeffy, I almost didn’t recognize you,“ he said.

„Wait’ll you see Red.“ His head turned to the side and he called to the bedroom, „Red, come on out!“

Boland looked toward the curtained doorway and then to the dirtcaked figure next to him. „I wouldn’t have known you by sight, but your voice—“

„You didn’t forget that Cimarron crossing two years ago, did you?“

„Of course I remember,“ Boland said. „You saved my life.“ He tried to show friendship and appreciation at the same time and smiled when he said, „What are you doing here, Jeffy?“

„You’re a regular babe in the woods, aren’t you?“ His head turned again. „Red! Dammit!“

He hesitated in the doorway, leaning against the partition, and then came into the room, straining to move his legs and holding his arms tight to his stomach as if his insides would fall out with a heavy step. He was as filthy as the other man, but his grime-streaked, bearded face was sickly white and his

jaw muscles clenched as he eased himself down onto the cot which stood against the side wall nearer the two men.

He leaned back until his head and shoulders were against the adobe, then blew his breath out in a low groan. He held his right elbow to his side protectingly, and from under his arm a dark, wet stain reached in a smear almost to the buttons on his shirt.

Boland looked at Jeffy who was leaning against their small table with his arms folded and the pistol pointing up past his shoulder and heard him say, „Red’s sick.“

He glanced at his wife who was holding her hands close to her waist and then he moved closer to the cot. „How are you, Red?“

The man shook his head wearily, but didn’t speak.

Leaning over him, Boland said in subdued surprise, „That’s a gunshot wound!“

Jeffy came off the table now and pushed Boland away from the cot.

„You want to know everything,“ he said, and glanced down at Red.

„Keep your eyes open. You’re not that bad hurt.“

„What’s the matter with you!“ Boland flared. „He’s been shot clean through.“

Jeffy shrugged. „Tell him something he doesn’t know.“

Boland turned on him angrily. „What happened! If you’re going to dirty up my house, you’re going to tell me what happened!“

„You’re forgetting about that Cimmaron crossing.“ Jeffy smiled. He was near forty with a thin, wizened face made lopsided by a tobacco wad; and now he took off his shapeless hat to show a receding hairline and a high, white forehead that looked obscenely naked because of its whiteness. He looked at Boland’s wife, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

„Honey, he ever tell you how I pulled him out from under the cows? Deep water after a flash flood and they was millin’ in the stream—“ He grinned at her as if there was a secret between them. „You’d still be shaking your tail in that Sudan hash-house if it wasn’t for me.“

„Saving my life doesn’t bless anything you’ve got to say to my wife.“

Boland had felt the temper hot in his face, but he calmed himself. Now his voice was lower, but there was an edge to it still.

„And it doesn’t give you leave to walk in my house with your gun out and start pushing everybody around. I know you’re in some trouble. With your dirty mind and Red’s drinking it could be almost anything. Now I’m telling you, Jeffy, start acting right or move on.“

Jeffy shook his head sadly. „That’s some way to talk after all the time Red and me and you bunked together.“

„What did you do, Jeffy?“

There was a pause and his face became serious. „Held up a man and Red shot him when he went for his gun.“

„Where’d it happen?“

As suddenly as he had become serious, his face grinned again and he said, „You always did have a long nose.“ He looked over to the cot and said, „Red!“ surprising the man’s eyes open.

„I’m not going to tell you again. Keep your eyes open.“ He lifted his slicker from the chair and shrugged an arm into it. „Pull your gun and hold it on them, while I take a look around. I might even go all the way toward town, so don’t get jumpy if I’m gone a couple hours.“

He started for the door, buttoning the slicker with one hand, then looked at Virginia. „Honey, you have some coffee on for when I get back. Like you used to.“ He grinned at her showing tobacco-yellowed teeth and shook his head reminiscently. „You sure used to throw it around in that cafe.“

She looked away from him to her husband. Neither of them spoke.

„Your joining society’s changed you, honey. There was a time when we couldn’t shut you up.“ They heard the rain when he opened the door, then the sound was closed off again and he was gone.

In the room’s abrupt silence Red drew his pistol, but his hand fell to the cot and the fingers closed on the handle loosely. He did not cock it.

Looking at him, Boland tried to picture him killing a man. Neither he nor Jeffy were ever good citizens, he thought. But they never robbed or killed before. He had worked with them for a couple of years when he first started riding for the T. & N. M. Cattle Company and he had not particularly liked them then; but his dislikes were based on small, personal things—Jeffy always making dirty remarks, and Red getting sloppy drunk any chance he had. Both had been lazy and never did any more than they had to.

And now—they had to flop themselves right on top of his other troubles.

Virginia moved over to the stove and lighted the fire under the coffeepot. She said to him, „Are you hungry, Dave?“

He shook his head. „Not very.“ And I’ve got to worry about Ginny on top of all of it. And then he thought: or, are you feeling sorry for yourself?

„Are you?“ Her head nodded to the man on the cot.

„I don’t think I’d hold it.“

Boland asked him now, „When were you shot, Red?“

„Yesterday, in Clovis. Somebody musta recognized me and told the marshal. He hit me by surprise.“

„Right after you killed this man?“

„Hell, that was months ago in Dodge. We been hiding since. Went into Clovis yesterday for grub and somebody seen us.“ He was breathing easier and went on, „We lost them last night. Damn marshal hit me by surprise—“

Boland said, „I suppose you were drunk in Dodge.“

Red grinned sheepishly. „Fact is, I don’t even remember shootin’ the man.“

„But Jeffy told you you did.“

„Yeah, Jeffy said I was actin’ mean and—“

„And lost your nerve and shot him when you didn’t have to.“

Red looked surprised. „Yeah. That’s just what he said.“

Boland waited, watching the man think it over. Then, „You starting to get any notions in your head?“ It occurred to him then for the first time. He had been thinking Red was a damn fool hiding all that time because of Jeffy—unless his face was plastered all over the country. Otherwise, how would anyone in Clovis have known him? Then it hit him: a reward!

Virginia moved past him holding the coffeepot and a porcelain cup.

She handed the cup to Red. „Try some coffee. Maybe you’ll feel better.“

„I don’t think I’d hold it.“

„Well, try, anyway.“

He held the cup over his lap in his left hand and she leaned closer to pour the coffee. Suddenly she moved the pot to the side and emptied the scalding coffee on Red’s gun hand.

His hand went up as he screamed and the gun flew over the foot of the cot, and in the instant she pushed the palm of her hand over his mouth forcing his head against the wall and muffling his scream.

Boland came up with the gun. He did it without thinking; and now, as he leveled it in Red's face he looked at Virginia with disbelief in his wide-open eyes. They followed her as she moved across the room, replaced the coffeepot on the stove and returned to stand awkwardly near the cot. She bit her lower lip nervously, watching the man. The violent motion had ripped open his wound and now it was bleeding again. He hugged his arm to his side, groaning, with his scalded hand held limply in front of him.

Virginia's head lowered closer to his and she said, „I'm sorry,“ embarrassedly.

For another moment Boland continued to stare at her, but now with curiosity in place of surprise, as if he wasn't quite sure he knew this woman he had married.

He handed her the pistol. „Want me to cock it?“

„I can do that.“

„If he budes, shoot him quick.“

He moved toward the door and hesitated momentarily before turning back to Virginia. He kissed her mouth softly and looking into her face as he drew away, her features seemed not so sharp and pointed.

And there was more color to her skin. He moved to the door anxiously, but glanced at her again before going out.

The rain had worn itself to a cold drizzle and there was no moon to make shadows in the blackness. He moved around the house slowly, cautiously, and hugged the adobe as he passed the garden. His pistol was in the saddlebag hanging in the barn-shed and now he thought: why in hell didn't I bring it in! No, then Jeffy would have it now. But he wouldn't know it was in the saddlebag. I've to get the gun—and then Jeffy. But where is he?

He reached the back of the house and crouched down in the dead silence, looking in the direction of the barn-shed. He waited, listening for a sound, and after a few minutes he could make out an oblong, hazy outline. He thought of Virginia now and he didn't feel so alone. Even the business of the afternoon, when it crept into his mind, didn't cause a sinking feeling, and he went over everything calmly. It puzzled him, because he was used to feeling alone. He thought of the reward again...

He arose abruptly and sprinted across the back section toward the barn. He ran half-crouched, even though it was dark. At the side of the doorway, he pressed his back to the wall and listened. He waited again, then slowly inched his head past the opening. It was darker within. He stepped inside quickly and as he did, felt the gun barrel jab into his spine.

„You must be dumber than I thought you were,“ Jeffy said.

VIRGINIA BACKED toward the table slowly, her free hand feeling for the edge, and when her fingers touched the smooth oilcloth she moved around it so that now the table was between her and the man on the cot. She did not take her eyes from the sprawled figure as she reached behind for the chair. There was a flutter of movement within her and she held the pistol with both hands, sitting down quickly. She trained the front sight on the man and saw it tremble slightly against the background of his body.

He closed his eyes suddenly, grinding his teeth together, and when he opened them they were dark hollows in his bloodless face. His mouth opened as if he would say something, but he blew his breath out wearily and moved a boot until it slid off the cot to the floor. His teeth clenched as it hit the flooring.

He brought his left hand over to the wound, his face tightening as his fingers touched the blood-smear of shirt that was stuck fast to the wound. It was still bleeding and now a dark stain was forming on the light wool blanket that covered the mattress.

She watched the stain spreading on the blanket where it touched his side and again she felt the squirm of life within her. She felt suddenly faint.

She remembered the afternoon her mother had given her the blanket and how she'd folded it into the chest with her linens and materials.

She had seated herself on the chest then and clasped her hands contentedly, listing her possessions in her mind and thinking, smiling: now all I need is a husband. She had giggled then, she remembered.

For the bed, they used Dave's heavy army blankets. The cot served as a sofa and deserved something bright and dressy enough for the front room.

Red lifted his boot to the cot, and stretched it out tensely, and as the heel slid over the blanket a streak of sand-colored clay followed the heel in a thin crumbling line. And then she no longer recognized the blanket. It became something else with this man sprawled on top of it. It became part of him with his blood staining it. And she saw the man and the blanketed cot as one. The wound was in the center. It was the focal point.

His face grimaced again with the pain and he groaned.

She said softly, „Haven't you done anything for it?“

He was breathing through his mouth as if his lungs were worn out and there was a pause before he said, „I stuffed my bandanna inside till it got soaked through, then I threw it away.“

She stared at the bloodstain without speaking. Then, suddenly, she laid the pistol on the table and went over to the stove.

Red watched her pour water from a kettle into a shallow, porcelain pan before reaching for a towel that hung from a wall rack. His eyes drifted to the gun on the table and his body strained as if he would rise, but as Virginia turned and moved toward him, he relaxed.

She caught the slight movement and stopped halfway to the cot, her eyes going from the man to the table. She hesitated for a moment, then went on to the cot where she kneeled down, placing the pan on the floor.

She poured water on the wound and pulled at the shirt gently, working it loose. When it was free she tore the shirt up to the armpit, exposing the raw wound. It looked swollen and tender, fire-red around the puncture then darkening into a surrounding purplish-blue.

She looked into his face briefly. „Didn't your friend offer to help you?“

„He had to worry about getting us out.“

„After he got you in.“

Red said, irritably, „I've got a mind of my own.“

She held the wet cloth to the wound then took it away, wringing the strained water from it. „Then why don't you use it?“ she said calmly.

Red looked at her hard, then flared, „Maybe Jeffy was right. Maybe since you quit swingin' your tail in a hash-house, all of a sudden you're somebody else.“

Virginia's head remained lowered over the pan as she rinsed out the cloth, squeezing it into the water. „You don't have any cause to talk like that.“

She went to the wall rack and brought back a dry cloth and neither of them spoke as she folded it and pressed it gently against the wound.

And as she did this, Red's eyes lowered to the streak of clay on the blanket and he brushed it off carefully. He looked at the bloodstain and said in a low voice, „I'm sorry about your cover.“ He was silent for a moment then said, almost dazedly, „I'm going to die—“

She made no answer and now his eyes lifted to her faded blond hair and then over her head to roam about the room. He was thinking about the soiled blanket and now he saw the raveling poplin curtains that looked flimsy and ridiculous next to the drab adobe. On the board partition there was a print of a girl in a ballet costume, soft-shadowed color against the rough boards. And over by the far wall was the grotesquely fat stove, its flue reaching up through the low ceiling.

He said, „You got it pretty hard, haven't you?“

She hesitated before saying, „We get by.“

„Well,“ he said, glancing around again, „I wouldn't say you had the world by the tail.“

Virginia looked up quickly. There was a rattling of knocks on the door and from outside she heard, „Honey, give that gun back to Red like a good girl.“

JEFFY CAME THROUGH the doorway prodding Boland before him. He glared at Red who was holding his gun on his lap carelessly. „You're some watchdog.“

Red said nothing, but then he gagged as if he would be sick. He breathed hard with his mouth open to catch his breath and then seemed to sag within himself. His eyes were open, but lifeless.

„It's a good thing I tested you out, Red.“

Red was silent for a moment. Then he said, „Jeffy, did I shoot that man in Dodge?“

„I told you you did.“ He looked at Red curiously.

„But I don't remember doing it.“

„How many things you ever done do you remember?“

„I thought I'd remember killing a man.“ Jeffy rolled the tobacco on his tongue, looking around the room.

Then he shrugged and sent a stream of it to the floor. „I'm not going to argue with you, Red. I don't have time.“ He glanced at Virginia.

„Honey, how'd you like to go for a ride?“

There was a silence then, and Jeffy laughed to fill it. „You don't think I'm riding out of here without some protection!“ He looked at Boland. „Davie, would you take a pot at me with your woman hangin' onto my cantle?“

Boland's face was white. For a moment there had been a fury inside of him, but his brain had fought it and now he felt only panic. There was a plea in his voice when he said, „My wife's going to have a baby.“

Jeffy grinned at him. „All the more reason.“

„Jeffy.“

He glanced at Red who seemed suddenly wide awake.

„Jeffy, you're just scaring, aren't you?“

„What do you think?“

He looked at him, squinting, as if he were trying to read his mind.

„You'd take that girl on horseback the way she is?“

„Red, if I had a violin I'd accompany you.“ He started toward Virginia.

And with his movement the gun turned in Red's lap, and the room filled with the roar as it went off. He cocked to fire again, but there was no need. He looked at Jeffy lying facedown on the floor and said incredulously, „He would have done it!“

He let the pistol fall to the floor. „There,“ he said to Virginia. „Keep your coffeepot away from here.“

Boland looked at Jeffy and then picked up the pistol. Virginia smiled at him wearily and sat down at the table, propping her elbows on it. He said to her, „Maybe you better get some sleep.“

„Dave.“

He turned to Red.

„I'm going to die, Dave.“

Boland remained silent.

„Do me a favor and don't holler law until the morning. Then it won't matter.“

„All right, Red.“ Then he said, „I don't want to sound like a gravepicker, but how much have you and Jeffy got on your heads?“

Red looked at him, surprised. „Reward?“

Boland nodded.

„Why, nothin'. What made you think so?“

„You said somebody identified you in Clovis.“

„Well, it was probably somebody used to know us.“

Now that he had asked him, Boland was embarrassed. But, strangely, there was no disappointment and at that moment it surprised him. He grinned at Virginia. „I guess you don't get anything for nothing.“

She smiled back at him and didn't look so tired. „You should know that by now.“

For a few minutes there was silence. They could hear Red's breathing, but it was soft and even. Suddenly, Boland said, „Ginny, you know I haven't been home more'n an hour!“

Virginia nodded. „And it seemed like the whole, long night.“ Her eyes smiled at him and she said, softly, „When you're telling our grandchildren about it, maybe you can stretch it a little bit.“

