

Catch Us If You Can

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On Clyde & Bonnie

Clyde always tells people his name. The rancher whose car he takes, the young boy who stumbles across their picnic, the woman who catches sight of his guns. It's to intimidate, to establish the power he feels he has over them. 'You heard of the Barrow Gang? That's me. Clyde Barrow. I rob banks. I shot those lawmen in Oklahoma and the both of 'em in Joplin.' He wants them to fear him because when they are afraid, they remember but they won't dare tell.

He tells everyone Bonnie's name also and those syllables roll off his tongue with pride. 'And this here is my Bonnie Parker.' His Bonnie Parker, his blue eyed baby. She loves the way her name sounds when he says it. It's like the only thing that matters is her. There's always that small, one dimpled grin pulling at his lips, a little sparkle lighting up his eyes. Her name intimidates them too, and she doesn't like that. She always treats people real nice. Maybe then the image of her as some sort of evil moll with a fondness for cigars will vanish.

They always tremble when they realize who's company they're in. Those bloodthirsty killers from Texas don't give two damns about civilians, right? Didn't they kill a man in Dallas last Christmas because of the pure old thrill? Didn't they shoot that lawman right there in the chest for no good reason? But not one of them have ever been treated kinder in their lives, and that's what they'll remember.

In Hillsboro

Hillsboro, Texas

April 30, 1932

Clyde suggested that he just stay in the car and keep it running while the other two go in and rob the joint. Or maybe they just shouldn't do it at all because the grocer and his wife definitely recognized him when they went to case out the joint earlier. Ted and Johnny didn't like that idea. Ted and Johnny wanted him in there with them. Ted and Johnny thought a few bucks were more important than staying off the Texas most wanted list. Ted and Johnny were fucking idiots. He'd just have to lurk in the shadows and pull the brim of his hat down a little.

Ted pounded on the door, waited a few moments and knocked again. Clyde had a passing feeling of guilt for waking such an old man up so late at night. Ted had just raised his hand to knock once more when someone shouted down from an open window on the second floor.

"What are y'all bangin' about?"

"Sorry, sir!" Johnny responded quickly. "We're havin' a dance a little ways down the street and the strings on one of the guitars all broke and none of us had no spares. We was wonderin' if we could just come in real quick to buy some more?" It was silent for a moment before the old man inside shut the window. The three men smiled at each other quickly. The plan was going well.

The old man pulled open the door and grumbled something about wanting to be in bed and 'damn dances' as Clyde passed by him. The store smelled like old dust and mothballs.

Johnny quickly grabbed a package of guitar strings off the shelf and moved over to the counter before the old man even got there.

“ ‘Fraid I only got a big bill.”

“That’s alright, that’s alright.” The old man took the ten dollars from Johnny and bent down to open the safe. The moment that it was open, Ted jumped over the counter and pulled a handgun out of the waistband of his trousers. Clyde pulled his gun out too, but he hadn’t loaded it. He told the other two not to load theirs either. He’d rather run than fight, if at all possible.

“Don’t do nothin’ funny old man. I want all that cash and we’ll leave quiet.”

The old man, trembling now, started collecting the money from the safe and putting it on top of the counter where Johnny scooped it into a large sack. Clyde glanced up and caught sight of the old woman who was glaring right at him. Shit, this was *wrong*. He’d known it as right from the start. They should’ve just left town when they had the chance and -----

Clyde wasn’t sure what happened, his ears rang from the noise. The old man had keeled over, his dark blue robe slowly turning black in the limited light of the corner store. Ted looked up, fear settling in his scrawny face. “I didn’t mean to -” He sounded choked up, like the words didn’t know how to come out.

They had to leave. Three months out of prison, there was no way in hell he was going back to that place. They had to leave, they had to get out of the state. They can’t arrest you in Oklahoma if you kill a man in Texas. Ted keeps talking, or trying to. Short, stuttering sentences about it all being an accident. An old man was dead, they were the killers. No accident in that. At least, not according to the laws.

Clyde moved to aim his gun up at the now widow who was still sitting on the stairs. Not breaking his focus from the woman, he gestured for the two other men to get out of the store. They obeyed without hesitation. Clyde followed them out, his gun still trained on the woman until he was right up against the door. He turned on his heel and pushed the door open before jumping down a few steps.

Silver Tongue

Dallas, Texas

January 5, 1930

“Who’s that?” Clyde sounded more cautious than curious.

“It ain't nobody, Clyde.” Clarence scoffed. “Damn, put a price on man's head and all the sudden he thinks he's important or somethin’.”

If Clyde’d had it his way, then he wouldn’t have even been near the house, but Clarence had convinced him with pleading eyes and a sad story about how his sister had just broken her arm. Clyde had only agreed because he knew that if it was Marie or Nellie who’d broken her arm, he’d be back home in a second no matter how much the laws wanted to get him. He’d just glanced around and caught sight of a figure who seemed to be stirring something just inside the screen door.

Edith lightly punched her brother in the arm and turned to Clyde. “That’s my girlfriend, Bonnie Parker. You should go in and say hi.”

Clyde, thankful for any excuse to not be out on the street for the Dallas deputies to find, hurried inside. The woman must not have heard the door close behind him because she didn’t seem to realize anyone had joined her in the kitchen until he spoke.

“Bonnie Parker?” She jumped a little and turned to see who’d said her name. She took a moment to look him over before deciding, as many people did, that Clyde was harmless. She smiled and he watched it travel up her face, forcing some parts of her cheeks to cave into deep dimples and her small nose to crinkle all the way up to her impossibly blue eyes that sparkled

in just the right way. There was a fire in her eyes that made him smile too. She was short and blonde and gorgeous and perfect.

“I’m Clyde Barrow.”

“Why are you in my sister-in-law’s kitchen, *Clyde Barrow*?” He liked the way she said his name.

“I just stopped by to meet you, course.”

“Well, I hope that wasn’t any kinda - “ She paused as if she was trying to find the right word. “*inconvenience* to ya.” Her voice was high and melodic and her smile seemed to be permanent.

“Not a bit. I can always make time for a beautiful girl like you.”

“You got a silver tongue, Clyde Barrow. Anybody ever tell you that?” Clyde shrugged and moved to lean against the counter to the left of the stove.

“Nah, most folks get distracted by my smile. Ain’t nobody pay much attention to my words.” She laughed at this and turned away from him, to look at what she was stirring. “So, Bonnie Parker, what are you makin’ me?”

“Hot chocolate. You ain’t one for small talk, are you?”

“Don’t gotta be. Like I said most - “

“Get distracted by your smile, I know. You’re awful confident.”

“Gotta be if want a chance with someone as gorgeous as Ms. Bonnie Parker. You must have just about a thousand bachelors at your door every day, huh?”

“Try Mrs. Bonnie Thornton.” Bonnie held up her perfect hand to show a little gold band on her ring finger. Clyde’s face dropped immediately. He moved to stand straight again and

moved away from her. He didn't claim to be the smartest man in the world, but he wasn't dumb enough to try to take out some other man's wife.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't know you got a husband."

She looked at him for a long moment, as if trying to decide something. "Only legally."

"Only legally?"

"That's right. He ain't comin' back and I wouldn't want him if he did."

"Good. Me and 'legally' don't always get along anyway, Bonnie *Parker*." She smiled that smile again and Clyde was sure that this woman was the end of him. Nothing else in this world could make his heart skip a beat like that smile.

Rattlesnakes

Eastham, Texas

Fall 1930

Days are filled with itchy cotton uniforms a few sizes too big and beatings for wearing the ill fitting clothing. Days run together until Wednesdays and Sundays are essentially the same. Days are humid and skin sticks to cloth. There is no escape from the heat. Days smell like horse shit and cigarette smoke.

Nights are worse. 500 men of all ages and attitudes crowded into mattressless three tier bunk beds all choking back sobs and tending to open wounds as best as they can. Guards abandon the weak as soon as the field work is done. They let the prisoners police themselves. Questionable morals and strong wills make the rules here.

On his first day, Clyde is pistol whipped twice. Once from stopping the guards from beating Ralph to death and once because one of those guards got bored. Ralph is expected to work alongside him the next day. Ralph's face is swollen, the welts on his back are bleeding through his uniform. He's beaten again for staining the fabric.

Clyde speaks to Ralph once the sun hits the horizon. They were chained together on the drive from Waco, Ralph is four years younger than him. They are here for the same reasons, small time robberies and brutal judges. Ralph escaped a few months ago; the guards don't like him for making their jobs hard.

They talk for hours at night, it makes time go by a little faster to imagine what they'll do after they get out of this hellhole. They talk about what kind of places are the easiest to rob,

what kind of cars are the best to get away. Clyde talks about Bonnie and his family, he misses his sisters. His brother is across the river in Huntsville right now. Life is a lot better over there. He visited his brother last December, right after he got arrested. They had big cushy mattresses and spent their days cleaning or cooking. Heaven compared to this. Clyde talks about building a house not too far from West Dallas, it's a rough place to live but he's never known anything else as home. Ralph talks about his folks too, they're up by the Oklahoma border. Neither man can really understand why they're in such a hell. "We're just like a couple of schoolboys locked up with murderers and rattlesnakes." Ralph's face slowly starts to resemble what it was in Waco. Stress has aged him quickly.

Clyde can't sleep, he stares at the two bunks above him and prays. Metal springs dig into his back until he shifts his weight and feels over oxidized iron scrape skin away. Sweat infects the scratches and burns until he moves again. A vicious cycle.

Clyde works as hard as he can, trying to block out the pain and fear threatening to swallow him whole. His head is just barely above the water. He has two letters from Bonnie hidden in his waistband, both promising to wait for him. Sixteen years and she'll still be waiting. Or so she says. She hasn't written since June. He gets moved to a different building after two weeks. The guards don't like that he and Ralph are friends.

He is assigned to a new bunk, this time he's on the third tier. It's a precarious place to sleep, the bunks weren't designed like this, the prison just ran out of space and started building up instead. He is given a blanket by the man who sleeps below him, something to sleep on to keep the metal from cutting into his skin any more. The man is decades older, time has gouged his face into a rough topography of age and anguish. He doesn't have hair except

his eyebrows and a few grey wisps that define his jawline. He introduces himself as Aubrey, he's served 20 years of a 128 year sentence. "Murder," he explains, "I killed the judge's kid."

Even with something to cushion the bedsprings, sleep isn't easy to come by. A train is just under five miles away, the sound of it blasting the horn and chugging along the tracks at all hours is a constant reminder of the outside world, of how close freedom is. The few men who make a run for the train are shot by the guards who sit outside the buildings, drinking around a campfire. When Clyde does sleep, he dreams of his parents and his siblings. When he was little, he hated sleeping in the bed of the Chevy truck his dad had. He'd started stealing tires to help pay for a home so he'd never have to touch that damn Chevy. What he wouldn't give for that truck bed now.

The guards don't believe him when he reports Ed Crowder. He's a *model* prisoner—he pays them off. Ed is nearly a foot taller than Clyde, he towers over most everyone else as well. He has dark hair, smoothed straight back with spit and sweat. He can hold smaller men down, bend them to his will. The guards never believe the victims.

Just one week into the new bunk arrangement, Clyde is attacked nearly every night. Just past the last column, over by what is supposed to be a bathroom but is really just two leaky showers and a metal bucket that isn't cleaned often enough. No one helps him, no one can. Anyone who touches Ed Crowder is locked up in a small metal shack for a few days and then beaten until their face is so swollen they can't see anymore. The guards only protect prisoners that give them pay.

Clyde can't ever focus, he can't think to even fight. He just freezes. He stares at a single spot on the floor until Ed pulls himself away and heads back to bed. Clyde spends those nights

sitting under the shower as it trickles cold water over him, knees pulled against his chest and he prays.

“Heavenly Father,” His voice is harsh and hushed. He doesn’t want to wake anyone up, but he has to say his prayers out loud. He doesn’t know what else to say, he can’t rationalize what he’s been thinking. He can’t begin to ask forgiveness for wishing someone dead. He can’t turn the other cheek and God must hate him for that.

“Heavenly Father, please forgive me.” His lips are rough and chapped and hurt when he moves them. He wants to explain what he is going to do, what he is going to ask Aubrey to help with. He wants to say it isn’t his fault. He wants to ask forgiveness, but since he step foot in this place he isn’t totally sure if God ever really listened in the first place.

Clyde writes a letter to Bonnie. He spills his guts, he explains what’s been going on. Not going into detail, only alluding to the torture he is enduring behind bars. He confesses his love for her and promises never to end up in a place like this again. He promises never to leave her side. He proposes through writing, he doesn’t want to live another moment without her in his life. She doesn’t respond.

Aubrey doesn’t take long to think about things before agreeing to help Clyde. He’ll take the blame, he says he doesn’t want to see anyone else to get hurt. Except for Ed. Aubrey sneaks a knife from the belt of an unsuspecting guard and hides it in the waistband of his pants. It’s a smooth maneuver, he only walked past and the weapon was his. No one thinks anything of it, the guard assumes he dropped it in the field somewhere.

Clyde cuts a small hole on the inside of his pocket, just big enough for a length of pipe. There are piles of them just outside the buildings, the left overs of a plumbing system that was

abandoned before being set up. Clyde bides his time until there are no guards looking and sneaks a length into his pants. The metal is heavy, threatening to tear his itchy cotton even more, and scratches against his thigh with every step. He hides his weapon in the cover Aubrey had given him.

Clyde doesn't try to get any rest, he'll be able to sleep much better when Ed Crowder is dead. "Heavenly Father -" His voice catches in his throat. "Please understand." When he was a child, school wasn't necessary. Hunting was an option. Field work was just helpful, but church had always been a *must*. His mother had told him when he was very little that God would forgive his every sin. No matter what he did, God would still love him.

He hopes that is true.

Clyde sneaks out of bed just past midnight. The guards outside are drunk off their asses now. They won't be much help in here. He passes by Ed Crowder's bunk. Clyde's heart pounds so hard he can feel it in his throat. His fingertips. His ears. He swallows down a bubble of anxiety and with it goes bile which continues to threaten an appearance. Ed is following him now. Big lumbering steps just behind him. He keeps his eyes to the front. He keeps focusing on that last column. He listens to hear the shower drip. He tries to hear movement that isn't his. Ed is right behind him. He rounds the corner. Ed does too. Ed's hand reaches out. Clyde grabs the pipe. Ed doesn't have time to react.

Blood decorates the drab grey of the cement walls, some even hits the ceiling. Clyde's face is hot and he can't tell if he's angry or crying. He doesn't stop swinging until well after Ed stops gurgling. He drops the pipe and it clatters to the ground. He throws up.

Ed doesn't look the same, despite the disfigurement of his face. His eyes stay open, they'd always had a murky gray look to them. Now they looked off. In one instant it was clear to Clyde that these were the eyes of a man who could never laugh again. His parents and sisters would never hug him again. He could never fire his favorite guns or drive his favorite cars. Blood would never again pump through his veins. He would never get angry and break something or be happy and smile. He would never hurt another young man. Clyde was the last.

Aubrey rounds the corner next, the guard's knife already digging into his arm. It's Aubrey's idea to make it look like self defense. He says something to Clyde, Clyde doesn't register it. Clyde just nods and wipes his face with bare hands. He can't tear his eyes away from what used to be Ed Crowder.

"Heavenly Father," Aubrey looks at Clyde as he speaks. Clyde can't continue his thought. "Forgive us." Aubrey adds the ending for him.

Clyde spits at the body and heads back to his bunk. For the first night since he arrived at Eastham, he sleeps well.

The guards don't know what happened, they chalk it up to a prison brawl. Clyde's sister asks him if he knew the guy when she comes to visit a week or so later. She'd read something about it in the newspapers. He says no, and he doesn't know the killer either. He slept through the whole thing. His sister doesn't believe him. Ed got stabbed fifteen times.

In the winter, Clyde gets assigned to log cutting with Ralph. A random assignment. They have to run the three miles to their stations as fast as possible, anyone who makes it there after twenty minutes has to stand on a barrel with only one leg for hours on end. They

all get new uniforms for the winter, the itchy cotton a little bit thicker. Makes it easier to sleep and harder to work. There is nearly no wind, only sweltering sun and hard labor.

Working with Ralph makes it feel a little faster, they joke and plan their escape from this place. Ralph already has, he's one of the only ones in the country to have escaped this place. Too bad he got caught.

Bonnie writes him back for the first time in a long time. He gets the letter on New Years Eve. She apologizes, she's been seeing other men. She apologizes, she doesn't like any of them. She apologizes, she's been writing to the governor on his behalf. All he did was steal a safe and a few tires. He might have escaped when he was being held in Waco, but he didn't deserve sixteen years.

He doesn't care if she's been seeing anyone else, all he wants is his blue eyed baby. He begs her to come down to see him. She can't get off work long enough. It doesn't help that her mom hates him. She writes to him about her family. Her nephew is about to turn two. She writes about her husband, he's sent her a letter from prison. He's in Huntsville with Clyde's brother. She says she told Roy she's moved on, apparently Roy says he's happy for her.

Clyde stops shaving once he's been at Eastham for a year. He doesn't really care anymore. His brain feels awful, his head is always pounding, he barely gets sleep. The sleep he does manage is haunted by Ed. It switches, his dreams can't seem to decide if what Ed did is worse or if it's the sight of him dead. His throat burns like he's about to throw up every morning, but no matter how long he gags nothing happens. He wants to see his mother.

He never has been able to grow a very good beard, just a few whiskers on his chin and a few more up by his ears. Other than that, his face is perpetually smooth. It helps him convince

people he's four years younger than he is. Judges are more usually more lenient on eighteen year olds than they are on men in their twenties.

It's the end of January when Clyde can't take it anymore. He tells Ralph to hit him in the foot as hard as he can with an axe. Ralph thinks he's joking; He's not.

"Damn, Clyde. It's been three days, I thought you would'a changed your mind about that by now." Ralph still looks so shocked. It doesn't seem like such a ridiculous request to Clyde.

"Now listen, they ain't never gonna be able to tell it was anything more than an accident. You do this for me and -- hell, I dunno. I'll do whatever you want."

Ralph glances around to see if anyone is watching them and lowers his voice. "I don't wanna cut your damn foot off, Bud."

"I can't work out here no more, Ralph. I can't keep up. I ain't this strong. I just wanna go home to my mama." Ralph looks at Clyde for a few long moments. They both have dark eyes, makes it easier to tell what they're feeling. At least, that's what Bonnie said. For the first time in a year and a half of knowing him, Ralph looks like the scared kid that he is. Ralph agrees and glances around again, he doesn't want to get blamed for hurting someone intentionally.

Nothing has ever hurt quite this badly. The shock shoots through his entire leg and he keels over with a shout. A circle of prisoners crowd around him, but it's quickly broken up by a few guards on horseback.

He is transferred across the river to Huntsville. They have the infirmary. He charms all the nurses, he has a silver tongue and a good smile. He tells them he was in the Navy, he even

shows them his anchor tattoo. It's been five years and he still can't admit that they rejected him. Too sickly, they'd said. Too lucky, his mom said.

A nurse tells him he was pardoned after he'd been in the infirmary for a week. "Apparently it's been in the works for months. Someone's been writin' to the governor on your behalf." They give him crutches that are too big, even at their shortest setting. They tell him he'll have a limp for the rest of his life, he has a feeling the crutches won't help that.

The static cold of early February washes over Clyde when a nurse opens the door for him. The thin fabric of the infirmary uniform they'd given him doesn't do much to help fend off the stubborn chill. He moves quickly, trying to put as much distance between him and this hell hole as he can. Dull green sprouts randomly from the thin dusting of snow on the ground, both colors desaturated by the sunless sky. The snow crunches under Clyde's weight, the faint noise paired with his light breathing are his soundtrack to freedom.

His older sister stands just a few yards away, she leans with her back against the door of her husband's car. Nell smiles, the grin stretching across her entire face. It has been two years since they'd seen each other without the weight of prison on their shoulders. She starts forward, walking fast to greet him with a tight, bone-crushing hug.

"Hey now -" Clyde protests, she cuts him off with a soft smack to the back of his head. They stand for a few moments, silently sharing the relief of his release. Nell pulls away first, her hands stay firmly on his shoulders. She doesn't seem ready to let go just yet. She's adopted an expression of worry, like their mother's.

"Why have you got crutches, Bud?"

“Axes are heavy.” Clyde shrugs. She scowls, she knows him too well. “And - injuries mean you don’t gotta work.” She sighs, a little too dramatically.

“Alright then. Wyatt’s taking us out shopping for you. Says you deserve some new clothes.” Nell nods to the car where her husband sits, waiting for the both of them to hurry up. Clyde hadn’t met Wyatt yet, not officially anyway. They had seen each other in the visitor’s room and once at Christmas dinner a few years prior, but never more than vague glimpses and pleasant conversation.

“Damn, really?”

“Well, yeah. I told him all about your tie collection.” She was teasing him. Shared love of music and fashion were the things that drew the siblings together.

“Has he seen your hoard of magazines?”

“I’m waitin’ for the fifth anniversary to drop that on him.” They both laugh, the sounds high and loud. Finally, after two years, Clyde feels relaxed.

They make their way to the car, slowly in Clyde’s case, and settle in. Clyde almost insists on driving, he’s enjoyed it since the day he could see out the windshield, but he instead looks down at his heavily bandaged foot. It’ll probably be a minute or two before he drives again.

Wyatt smiles politely at Clyde, the smile doesn’t reach his eyes. The dark color stays flat and distrusting. “Hey Bud.” He nods at the sound of his moniker. It feels foreign coming from a stranger.

Nell talks the entire way back to Dallas. For nearly three hours she talks about what’s happened since Clyde’s been locked up. Someone had killed the family horse in a hit and run.

Their oldest sister convinced their parents to sue and finally buy a house. Still too small for seven kids, but most all of them had moved out by now anyway. Their dad had turned it into a refilling station, he wanted Clyde to be a mechanic there. Wasn't much money in filling people's tanks in West Dallas, but fixing up engines was as profitable as ever. Buck had escaped from prison a year or so ago, just walked out and stolen a car when no one was looking. His wife made him turn himself back in. Clyde couldn't pay much attention to her, his focus was mostly on watching the countryside fly by his window. He'd been waiting for this day for years.

Wyatt doesn't go into the store with them, he just hands off some money to Nell and waits for them to return. Nell sticks by Clyde's side as he moves slowly, taking in every display. He picks out a silk shirt with a matching tie and Nell rolls her eyes.

"Oh, don't get that. Only gangsters wear silk shirts."

Clyde looks at the shirt for a moment longer and imagines himself on the same level as Al Capone or John Dillinger. He gets the shirt anyway.