

Someplace Else

By Justin Porter

1

When the cops beat down the door of the woman's apartment, Bridge already had his shoes on and his gun out. The first man through and the one wielding the sledge caught a round each.

He caught the wind.

As Bridge dropped out the window and walked to his car, he imagined she was still screaming in bed, uncovered, while the cops yelled swear words and tried to stop the bleeding. He slid behind the wheel, the engine rumbled and he sped south. Driving to where everybody in trouble wants to go and most never reach.

He didn't stop when the car did, just got out and walked, the moon for company and his boot heels on the highway for music. A cop car drove by slow and the minute they'd passed, he wiped off the half-empty gun and tossed it into the dust at the side of the road.

When the first few truckers picked him up and nobody tried to get cute with him, he was a little surprised. Even a little disappointed. He smiled to himself, every car in America, stocked with one sex offender.

A few of them wanted to. Spent the miles making small talk and licking their dry lips, trying to figure out if he was worth it. He might have been beautiful, but so are the tigers in the zoo. And you're not about to go up to one of those and offer to blow it in a men's room off the highway in exchange for a few more miles down the road and a twenty.

Not more than once anyway.

2

Bridge stopped in a diner and ate with the contents of a wallet he'd taken from a driver last night. The man hadn't even blinked when Bridge reached under his ass, took his wallet. As he took the final bill, he'd said that nobody would ever know the man just rolled over and let it happen.

"Trust me, this money is worth a lot less than your life. I can tell. So just let me take it and we can both go on our way. I think that would be best."

The diner was shabby, but the cooking hamburger scenting the air was sweet to Bridge, and the feel of green was even sweeter. He sat down and ordered. The woman behind the counter had been pretty. Not over the hill yet, more like on top of it and looking around.

When she leaned too close to ask him if wanted anything else, he laughed to himself and offered her a honey-slicked smile and downcast eyes.

That night she swayed above Bridge in her trailer. He cupped her flat and low-hanging titties in his palms and did long division in his head.

Her husband worked the graveyard shift, a security guard at a local construction site. When he came home cranky, bored, frustrated and horny, he attacked Bridge. But he was too heated to pull the gun they gave him for work. When he lay cooling, Bridge bent down to collect it.

Bridge turned; saw her staring at him from her bed. He dressed; tucking the cock she eyed with hunger into his left pant leg and slid the pistol behind his belt, disgusted by the desire in her eyes.

He didn't bother buttoning his shirt until he was outside.

3

His momma had named him Bridge, after some song about troubled water. He never knew what she meant or even heard the song until he was away from her for good.

His daddy was half shadow and half dream. Built out of dry palms laid on foreheads, the smell of aftershave and a mother's stories.

"Your father is watching over you."

Like his father was dead.

These assurances would leave the boy staring with dread into the shadows in his room – the back third of the trailer, separated by a sheet.

Much later, when Bridge was a man and drunk one night, he told a girl he was conning that his daddy knew he was no good, knew he'd never stay, so he put all the loving he'd been able into one night. Gave his woman the condensed version.

As the girl slipped out of her shirt and reached behind to undo her bra, she asked Bridge what condensed meant. He gathered her close and said he would show her.

A month after Bridge's mother failed to see her timely bleed, his daddy was smooth gone like the devil himself was coming. The only sign he'd passed; an open screen-door.

At ten, Bridge wasn't the smallest kid in school as long as Ruben Fowler was there.

A bully, Joe, took Bridge's hat. The only one he had and one of the first things his mother gave him that he could remember.

Bridge lay against the locker, the back of his head still sore from the combination lock he'd struck. He snorted and swallowed blood. Watched Joe walk away with his hat. Everywhere around him there was laughter.

Bridge waited for a week. Watched.

When he knew Joe's tos and fros almost better than Joe himself, he hid.

With a rock.

He'd only meant to give himself an edge, but then Joe was unconscious. Didn't even see what put him on the ground. Bridge took his hat back and before he left, cracked the bully's ankle with the rock.

He got his hat, his respect and suspicious looks.

Joe got some nice heavy crutches and a permanent limp.

At 14, he woke to his mother screaming. He pulled 200-pound Boyfriend-Number-Who-Knows, off her by the hair and heaved him away, stepping between them.

He was drunk and convinced that, "she was just playing hard to get again."

Again?

He made as if to sweep Bridge aside and Bridge swung his right hand twice. Once at the man's arm and again at his face. Blind swings, guided by either providence or prodigy. It helped that Bridge was holding a box-cutter.

The man reared back, blood spattering, ran out of the house and right to the police.

His mother was holding her dress together with one arm and him close with the other, whispering, "My Bridge, my Bridge," when the police slammed into the apartment and snatched him away.

Bridge did his first bid for aggravated assault.

Two years inside.

4

Trouble hit him outside of Tuscon.

A Mexican busboy with a knife caught him trying to run on the check. Bridge had gone to the bathroom and slipped out the back. The busboy was emptying the garbage. Bridge felt heat and a tugging across his stomach. He knew he'd been cut but never saw the knife. He knew he was looking at skill. He'd sold the security guard's gun in town for a hundred dollars. He reached into his pocket, scrambled out some money and staggered away, pressing a hand to his gut.

Pain and fear had him so that he barely knew which way he walked.

Or how long.

When dizziness set in, Bridge figured that maybe that hadn't been the cleanest knife this side of the Rockies or anywhere. He lifted his shirt and saw a jagged mouth drooling red. He dropped the shirt and kept walking while the sun yawned and struggled to hit the sky.

That's when he noticed the man beside him.

Bridge was startled and scared but didn't let it show. It must be the ache in my side, he thought, that's the only reason I'd let somebody get this close.

Bridge slowed to let the stranger walk ahead.

The man slowed down as well.

Bridge sped up, pushing his left leg through the pain in his side like a man slogging through knee-deep water.

The man sped up.

Bridge turned, his right hand raised in a fist. But stopped when he saw the stranger.

His eyes met a head that was all spread teeth and brim pulled low. Unreasonable fear struck through Bridge and he dropped his fist.

"Howsit?" the stranger asked. His teeth chewed the word and spat it out.

He kept walking and Bridge found himself keeping pace.

There wasn't another word between them.

Bridge felt like the heat was baking him away. Like bits of him were evaporating. He walked through the pain in his side and the squint in his eyes. The sun was dropping behind the mountains. Bridge didn't see the stranger leave, just noticed the lack of him. Hot and cold ran through him in sharp, hard waves.

He stopped and lifted up his shirt, the mouth was dry and crusted now.

He hovered his hand above it and felt heat from the inflammation. He dropped the shirt and walked on.

The sun punched out for the day.

He saw a light in the dark ahead of him. As he got closer he heard the crackling of fire.

Burning car wreck?

No. A small fire and the stranger sat near it. He waved Bridge over to the fire without looking directly at him.

“C’mon, it’s a cold night and the road ain’t any warmer ahead than it was behind you.”

Bridge sat down, warmth caressed his face. The stranger seemed more normal with an ordinary, weather-beaten face.

He turned his head to the road. The dust and desert plants jutted up towards the moonlight, reaching in vain for silver light that held no nourishment.

“What’s your name?” the man asked.

“William,” Bridge lied.

The man stood and brushed off a palm against his pant-leg. It probably came away dustier. As handshakes went, it was a good one. Bridge winced as he withdrew his hand, the angle pulling at the lips of the wound, making it smirk, if not grin.

“You okay, William?”

Bridge shrugged.

“I didn’t catch your name?”

“It’s Tam.”

“Weird name.”

Bridges world did a somersault. He sat heavy, the ground felt like an easy chair.

“So?”

“Got hurt outside Tucson.”

“What happened?”

“Busboy stabbed me while I was trying to run out on the check.”

“Dedicated busboy.”

“How many busboys you know that slick with a blade?”

“Don’t know any. With knives or otherwise,” Tam paused in thought.

“I think I just startled him.”

“And he just did what he does, huh?”

Bridge nodded.

“You hungry?”

Bridge looked around.

“There a McDonald’s nearby I missed?”

Tam chuckled.

“No, I thought I’d cook.”

Tam gestured at the fire and for the first time, Bridge smelled cooking meat and saw that something was suspended above the fire, roasting. Six feet long, Bridge saw himself, naked and stretched across the blaze, his bottom half blackening as the fire licked at it. His skin was split in places as his inside swelled, the skin grown too brittle to stretch.

“You should turn me, so that I cook evenly,” Bridge said.

“What?” Tam asked.

Bridge shook his head and saw that it was a dog spitted across the fire. He wiped at his forehead and felt sweat. Fuck, I’m in a bad shape.

“Never mind.”

Tam watched him.

Bridge shook his head. “You killed a dog?”

“Its a coyote, actually.”

“How’d you get close enough?”

“You just have to know how to ask.”

“I knew a guy in prison.”

“Oh yeah?”

“He claimed he’d been a shaman. His skin wasn’t any redder than mine but he said he killed for his tribe. He had a thing about coyotes.” Bridge pronounced it “kai-oats.”

“So?”

“He’d have killed you for this.”

“That so?”

Bridge nodded.

“Good thing he’s not here, huh?” Tam said and smiled.

Bridge remembered the way the man’s hands had felt, tearing at Bridge’s shirt, trying to hold on, while Bridge muscled him over the railing of the top tier.

“Yeah, good thing.”

“Here,” said Tam, and Bridge saw that he was extending something skewered on the end of a large hunting knife. Bridge took the meat with his hand and bit into it. It was so dry he thought he might have to drink the dust under his boots to wash it down.

“Big knife,” Bridge muttered around a mouthful.

“Don’t worry, I cleaned it after the last time.”

Bridge chuckled and worked the meat with teeth. If he chewed it to small enough pieces they’d roll down his throat maybe.

“Is it good?”

“A little dry.”

“Not much out here that ain’t.”

Bridge grunted, his vision waving the fire back and forth.

The world narrowed to yellow, red and the black. He chewed and chewed and listened to the fire. He felt the heat bathe his face and twice he had to remind himself not to lean too close. The flames looked hungry. Hungry like him. But he was eating. The flames could talk and they were telling him to come closer and cool off, just cool all the way down. Melt from ice and...

“You know that wound’s about to kill you, Bridge.”

He looked up at Tam, tearing his eyes away from the fire.

“My name is William.”

“If you say so, boy,” Tam answered from no place across the fire, because there was no fire anymore. And no space in which one was made. He came back to himself sitting in the dirt with a scrap of tire between his jaws. His mouth was dry and tasted of rubber. He looked around at the darkness. He looked down at the tire and saw the

precious moisture of his saliva and dents from his teeth. He dropped it, wrapped his arms around himself.

He was cold. And alone.
And probably going fucking nuts.
He passed out.

5

A huge yellow dragon screamed past him, its backdraft pulling at his shirt, the noise waking him. It sped down the road on six black round legs.

Professional Movers written on the scales along its square side in big black letters. It faded from sight, the red eyes on its back watched Bridge without love or trust.

Bridge thought it moved very professionally.

“Best not eat me today, dragon.” He winced and looked at the skin beneath his shirt, the wound angry and oozing. More inflammation than yesterday and besides, it just felt worse.

“I think I’m spoiling,” he chuckled and got to his feet. Better to die on your feet right?

The landscape stretched in every direction like a very dusty cat. The desert seeming to grow even before the eye, like it was trying to keep everything at its center at once. He took a step and more followed, as steps are in the habit of doing. It wasn’t until he had passed a third mile-marker that he again felt somebody walking beside him.

“That you, Tam?” he asked without turning.

“You know it, boy.” Tam must have been walking exactly in step with him, because Bridge couldn’t hear the man’s footfalls.

“Where’d you go last night? You left me sitting there eating a tire.”

“Sorry about that, boy. Had something to attend to. Besides, you needed your sleep.” Tam chuckled and coughed, an awful emphesemic sound.

“Tam?”

“Yeah, Bridge?”

“You’re not really here are you?”

“Weird question, boy.”

“But are you here?”

A carcass long dead caught at Bridge’s feet like it was telling him to wait up. He stumbled and Tam caught him, in arms strong and welcome.

“That answer your question?” Tam said, grunting with effort as he steadied Bridge back on his stride.

“I guess.” Bridge ran his hands over his face and licked at his teeth, checking for damage.

“Dammit, boy, you didn’t fall.”

“Who are you?”

“Can’t you guess?” Tam grinned, all teeth and hat-brim, his features hiding in the shadows like killers waiting for him to turn around.

“Is this the afterlife?”

“Not quite. But if you squint you can see it over there by that rock.”

“Are you the devil?”

Tam laughed, an old man’s sound, but run through with steel.

“Not exactly.”

“Jesus?”

“No. More like a guardian angel.”

“Are you here to guide me to Heaven?”

Bridge felt a strong hand grip him around the upper arm and steer him.

“Let’s get out of the road, boy.”

Bridge allowed himself to be led. Soon their boots were kicking up dust. They headed towards a red rock erupting from the sand like a fin. Leaning down in its shade, Bridge whimpered, his wound doubling upon itself. He shifted sideways and leaned on an elbow to ease it. Tam sat on his heels beside him, resting a hand on Bridge’s shoulder. He squeezed in an off-tempo to his words.

“Bridge?”

“Yeah, Tam?”

“You with me, boy?”

“Uh huh.” Bridge groaned, he looked at the dry red patch that spread on his clothes away from his wound.

“You remember a young girl named Maria? Be about five years ago.”

“Not really. Can I have some water, Tam?” It didn’t even occur to him Tam might not have any.

Tam handed over a canteen. Bridge drank greedily. He expected each second would be the one that Tam took it away. But didn’t happen. Bridge drank the canteen empty.

“Remember her, boy? She had a boyfriend. Young man felt rather strongly about what you did.”

“What I did?”

“Her boyfriend tried to protect her. From you. And you killed him. Slammed his head in a car door.”

“I remember now.” She was so pretty, pretty like Bridge didn’t see much and he took her out of the bar. They were just getting friendly when some guy grabbed Bridge from behind, and hit him twice before Bridge got his legs underneath him. By the time Bridge was done fighting back, the girl had run off and the guy was dead.

“That guy attacked me. I guess he didn’t like that his girlfriend wanted to fuck somebody else,” Bridge said.

Tam grunted.

“That’s really the way it seemed to you, isn’t it Bridge?” Tam’s voice held wonder.

Bridge lifted red eyes and glared.

“You calling me a liar, old man?” He glared but couldn’t keep it up. He slumped and fought the urge to cry.

“So you gonna show me the way to heaven, Tam?”

“No, boy.”

“Why not? Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes that’s what happens. But not now.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re going to hell.”

“Why?”

“Even if I explained it, I doubt you’d understand. Let’s just say it’s because of who you decided to be.”

“I didn’t make no decisions. This shit ain’t my fault, what people try to do to me.”

“I know, boy. But you still get a choice what to do when that happens.”

“And I chose wrong?” Bridge’s voice was small now. The sun must be setting, he thought, its getting dark. But he could see the sun was high in its arc yet.

So why does it seem darker? he thought.

“Yeah. You chose wrong.”

“When do I get out?”

“Ain’t like jail boy. I don’t know. That’s up the guy in charge.”

Bridge laughed at that. “Ain’t it always?”

Tam nodded. “But don’t worry none, boy. His heart’s shriveled and black, but there’s no unfairness in it. You’ll get what’s coming but no more. Remember that when it gets really bad.”

“What? That it’s fair?”

“No,” said Tam, his voice hard. “That you deserve it.”

Bridge slumped over, life spent, the rest of him on autopilot until the machine parts quit for good. Tam waited with him for fifteen minutes, watching him die. Then he turned and walked back to the road.

6

Miguel Contreras Guillermo Diaz was at work behind the diner. The sun was ducking behind the distant Rockies. Miguel was doing his least favorite part of his job for the day. Emptying the trash. The diner stayed open all night for the truckers. Sometimes there was a lot of trash. He never talked to the truckers, just watched them with envy from the crack of the door to the kitchen. He wanted to be able to get in a truck and just drive. Always keep moving. Never have to empty trash again, or hear his *abuela* cough that asthmatic hack that had been waking him up all his life.

A red pick-up pulled up near him. He set down one of the empty metal cans from the dumpster and wiped his hands off on his apron. His hand strayed to the knife he kept tucked in his belt, but when the door opened he relaxed.

Tam stepped down from the truck and arched, his back popping. He walked over to Miguel.

“I did like you asked, *jefe*.”

“You did,” Tam said and handed him an envelope.

Miguel opened it. A stack of hundreds was inside.

“*Cono*, man, when you said you would pay me, I never thought...” He trailed off.

“I didn’t say I would pay you, I said I would help you.”

Miguel looked up.

“I was saving that to help my son.” Pointing at the envelope.

“Don’t he need it?”

“Not anymore.”

Justin Porter was born and raised in New York City. His fiction has appeared in Thuglit, Plots With Guns, Pulp Pusher and Big Pulp to name a few. His articles have appeared in The New York Times. He can be reached at six.gun.chimp@gmail.com.