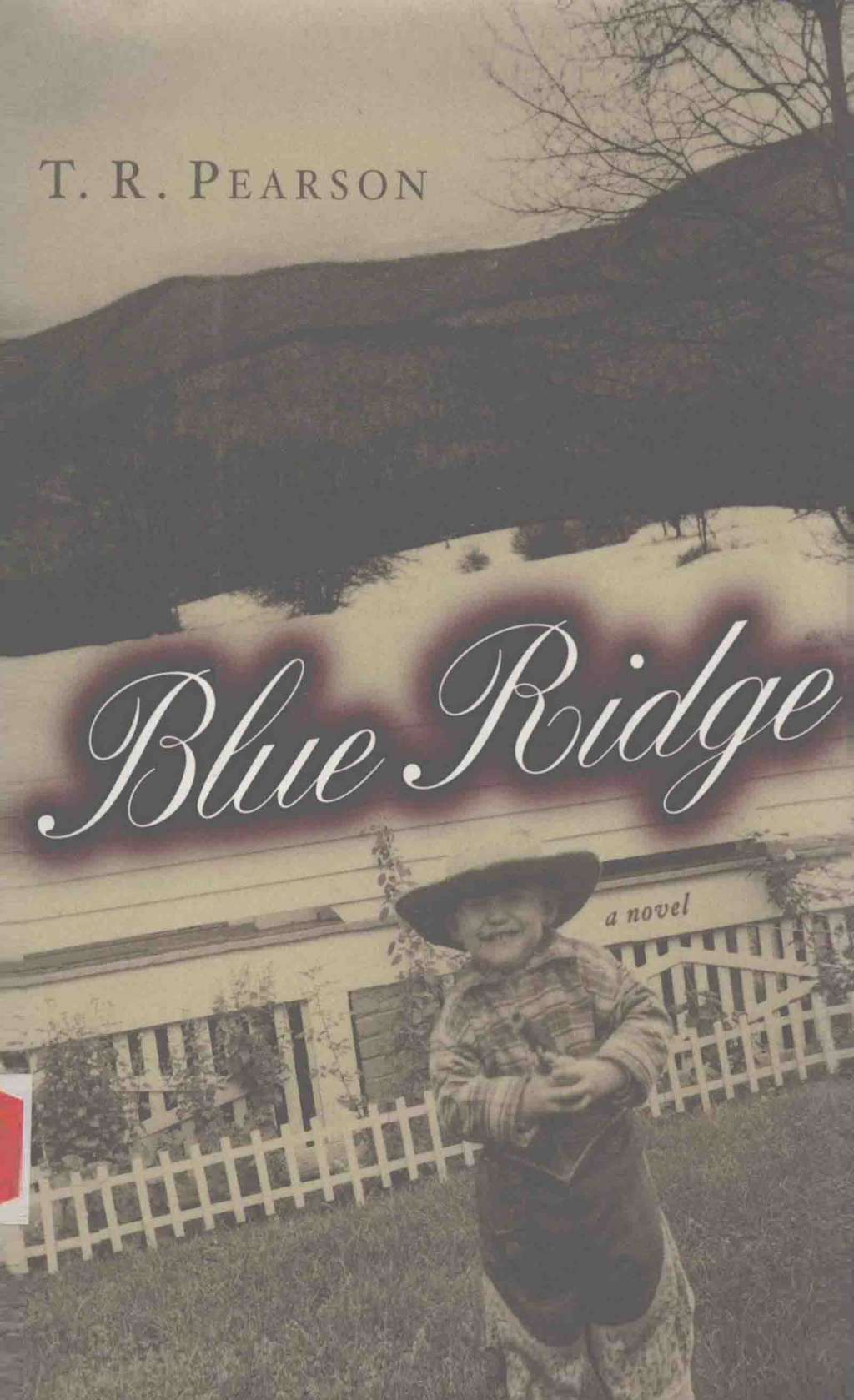


T. R. PEARSON

Blue Ridge

a novel



BLUE
RIDGE



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VIKING

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B L U E
R I D G E



75 years



ALSO BY T. R. PEARSON

A Short History of a Small Place

Off for the Sweet Hereafter

The Last of How It Was

Call and Response

Gospel Hour

Cry Me a River

For Joy
with gratitude

B L U E
R I D G E

1



He was still two hours shy of Knoxville by the time he stopped, well past midnight at a motor lodge along the interstate. The place was rampside and overgrown, twenty dollars a night. Ray roused the night manager, a whiskery old coot in a beltless housecoat and tartan undershorts, and filled out a guest card in the puny eyesore of a lobby which was dominated by a decorative electric fireplace—red fiberglass brick, brown fiberglass logs, a lightbulb for a flame. A gaudy chintz settee with a hideous dust ruffle sat beneath the lone window. A vase on the wormy side table was shoved full of dusty artificial magnolia blossoms.

As Ray shifted about to hand over his card, the all-weather carpet crunched like cellophane underfoot. The night manager read the thing at arm's length.

“Mr. Ray Tatum. I’m going to need an address of some sort.”

“I just left a job in Mobile. I’m headed for one in Virginia.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Hogarth. Up around Lexington.”

“All right, then.” That gentleman produced a golf pencil from his bathrobe pocket and licked the lead in advance of making a laborious notation. “Now,” he said, “about this dog of yours.”

Together they watched Monroe sniff a settee bolster. She was black with gold markings and inordinately wirehaired, a squat and unbecoming marriage of terrier and retriever.

“Me and the missus don’t have much use for dogs. I’m going to have to charge you. Say ten.”

“Dollars?” Monroe made a tentative exploratory lick at the fiberglass hearth, sniffed the logs and eyed suspiciously the sixty-watt inferno. “I didn’t have to bring her in, you know? Could have just left her in the car.”

Monroe shifted about to consider a choice bit of decor on the far wall, a paint-by-numbers rendition of a schooner under full sail heeled over in the wind. A geometric wave in four graduated tones of gray broke across her bow. Monroe grumbled, lowly, deep in her throat.

“Don’t,” Ray told her.

She glanced at him as she weighed his wishes and made her canine calculations, as she determined that she would prefer, in fact, to bark—at the painting and the settee, at the plastic flowers and the wheel-hub lamp, at the cheesy electric fireplace. She bounced on her front feet, yapping.

Ray had already hoisted his canvas duffel from the floor by the time the night manager had settled on a course of action,

had moved to unceremoniously rip Ray's guest card into pieces. "I think he's half crazy."

As Ray swung open the lobby door, a little bell attached to the jamb gave a tinny tinkle. He paused to indulge in brief but baleful study of the room. "Just opinionated," Ray declared and followed Monroe into the lot.

She waited by the driver's door of Ray's thirdhand Grand Marquis and, once Ray had opened it for her, bounded gracelessly onto the seat. Ray pitched his duffel into the back among his boxes and sacks, his lone piece of sky-blue hard-sided luggage. Monroe circled twice and dropped onto her folded beach towel with its seahorses and sand dollars, its undifferentiated dog grunge.

"Nice going."

Monroe snorted and shut her eyes, comfortable, content, altogether impervious to censure.

Ray drove through the night, fueled by acrid convenience-store coffee and orange Nabs, kept himself awake with blasts of air from his wing window and late-night radio at full volume—bilious talk for malcontents, lite variety, twangy country ballads, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. The sky was just brightening to the east as Ray pulled into a rest stop north of Abingdon, Virginia, where he dropped open the glove-box door and drew out his service revolver, a nickel-plated .357 wrapped in an oily rag. Monroe had her nose in his back, shoving him, before he could swing fully out of the sedan.

They wandered a grassy hummock between the car lot and the truck lot in the chill June air. Long-haul drivers napped in their cabs, their running lights lit and their engines rumbling.

A young man raced in off the interstate in a chopped-down pickup, jolted to a stop and lurched out from beneath the wheel to relieve himself in the lot.

“See that?” Monroe ignored Ray, circulating slowly, sniffing each tuft of fescue with scrupulous deliberation. “For the love of Christ, pee!”

A groggy semi driver crawled out of his sleeper and onto the passenger seat of his cab. He rubbed his eyes and stretched, wiped the night’s condensation from his side window with his sleeve and spied a man in the grass by the drink-box shed with a shiny revolver in hand, watched a scrawny black mongrel urinate at gunpoint.



To hear him tell it, Lowell had connected again. With a waitress this time. Blond. Lithesome. An employee of the ersatz saloon in the clutter and scree along the bypass where the cuisine is all batter-dipped but for the cheesecake and the patrons are frankly encouraged to leer. He described her to me—the hand-tooled boots, the willowy legs, the brief denim shorts, the gauzy cotton tank top snug against her downy skin.

“And I do mean straight out of the melon patch,” Lowell assured me. “That girl was just plain gifted.”

I was perched on the end of Lowell’s credenza, looking out his office window. He has a view of the entire professional park, from the auto glass shop out by the traffic signal clean across to the chiropractic center on the rise before the woods. With the leaves off the trees, I could even make out a little of the Roanoke skyline—the DoubleTree hotel, the boxy retirement high-rise,

the thicket of burger signs on stalks where the interstate runs through.

“My fork had some crud on it,” Lowell told me. “So I asked her for another one, and she did like this.”

Lowell raised a hand and beckoned to me. He was clear across the room, had rolled himself over to the shelving by the door.

“Come here.”

Lowell motioned again from his desk chair. He gave a slight accommodating shove that rolled him halfway to me before he braked himself with his shoe heels.

Lowell has taken to riding his desk chair in a recreational sort of way, backward usually with his right foot for a tiller. He keeps a can of lubricant in his file drawer for the casters, and with a trifling push off the wall by his coat tree, he can pass into a hallway, span it at a headlong clip and clatter across the threshold into my office—those occasions anyway when I have failed to see him coming and have neglected, consequently, to swing shut my office door.

Lowell laid his hand lightly to my forearm. “‘I’m so sorry.’” His voice but a breathy whisper which might have been a little stirring from a leggy blond waitress but proved unsettling from a pudgy actuary.

“And hell, I mean I was looking right down her shirt. Could see clean to her belly button.” Lowell set in on a tour of his office, rolling backward and musing lasciviously while, for my part, I retreated to his credenza by the window. “I wish you’d seen the way she smiled at me. We had this thing, me and her.”

I could see down on the grounds the new girl from reception, the brunette with the ever-evolving coiffure. It’s up. It’s down.

It's braided. It's teased. It's curled. It's straightened. And always, somehow, it's ill-suited and unbecoming.

I watched her stalk along the circular path through the water garden—provided, that is, that a quarter-acre of hardpan that's host to a puny vinyl pool, a pair of orange koi and a couple of scraggly beds of creeping juniper can actually qualify as a water garden, even if that is what they call it upstairs. Of course, they also insist that the food in the cafeteria is "Mediterranean."

She was smoking a little ruthlessly and clutching herself against the February chill. Ribbons, I noticed. Pigtails.

"We're going back tonight," Lowell said.

"You and Erlene?"

He nodded.

While I watched that girl flick her smoldering butt into the water feature, Lowell prattled on about his leggy waitress as if he were wholly wanting in crippling romantic impediments, as if he weren't afflicted with an actual wife, a combover and a gut. Some fellows get crud on their forks and probably do go home with a waitress, but Lowell is the sort condemned to fresh flatware instead.

Lowell was busy concocting, it appeared, prospective suave maneuvers in his head when he glanced across the hallway toward my office door and called out, "He's in here."

I was expecting Ronald from downstairs. Hotshot, underwriter, cologne addict and full-time medical miracle—both brain-dead and gainfully employed. Ronald is evermore stopping by with questions, usually pretty much the same questions he stopped by with the week before. Ronald takes no notes, has no memory to speak of, no grasp much of policy provisions or

standard insurance English. Apparently, he succeeds instead on dopey charm and a near debilitating miasma of British Sterling.

Over by Lowell's window, perched on his credenza, I was steeling myself for the confectionary onslaught of Ronald's cologne when I caught sight of the uniform sleeve, the holstered Glock, the unnaturally shiny oxfords.

"Mr. Tatum?" He said it just generally into the room.

He was of the standard police build and type. Strapping, I'll call it, and square-headed, with high-school football in his background and probably a little juvenile thuggery.

"Over here."

"Mr. Paul Tatum?" He read my name from a scrap of paper. I nodded. "Could I speak with you, sir?"

He gestured for me to join him in the corridor and retired from the doorway. Lowell grinned at me as I passed, winked, and asked loudly if I was knocking over liquor stores again.

Officer Hayes, his tag read, and he had assumed already his veneer of professional sympathy by the time I joined him—the slight smile, the downcast glance, the undermining insincerity. "I'm afraid I have some bad news, sir."

I recall how unnaturally calm I was as I cataloged my family members and acquaintances. Clearly, somebody was dead—my brother maybe in Topeka, or his insufferable wife, or one of their wretched children, or Uncle Trent the dowser and crackpot with the tar-papered cabin on the Cape Fear River, or my cousin Ray, the deputy sheriff in Mobile.

I left to Officer Hayes all of the wincing and the huffing, watched impassively as he ran through his repertoire of compassionate tics. Finally he told me with a shake of his head, "It's your son, sir. He's been killed."

I didn't respond straightaway, didn't quite know what to say. Politely, funereally, Officer Hayes considered the floor tiles until I'd managed at length to speak.

"Who?"

It was hardly the manner of reply Officer Hayes had anticipated and made provision for. He lifted his head and looked dully at me, consulted his scrap of paper.

"Your . . . uh . . . son, sir. You are Mr. Paul Tatum of 3418 Wycliff Road?"

I nodded.

"Johnathan Troy Everhart." He was reading again. "Your son, right?"

"Oh," I said. "My son."

He followed me into my office where I dropped into my desk chair while he remained standing opposite.

"What was it? A car wreck?"

Officer Hayes shook his head. "Homicide, sir."

"Where?"

"New York City, sir."

"You know, he's not really my son," I said.

Officer Hayes considered again his scrap of paper. "They've got you as next of kin."

"What about his mother?"

"Dead since ninety-eight."

"And her husband? That Everhart?"

"Ninety-six." He creased the scrap and shoved it into his trouser pocket. "So, he's not your boy?"

"Well, I guess I'm technically his father, but I never even knew him, only saw him once or twice."

"So he is your boy?"

“His mother and I had a . . . thing. We were like nineteen.” I gestured helplessly. “She wanted to keep the baby.”

Officer Hayes nodded, curtly and disapprovingly.

“I got a picture once around Christmas. I talked to him a time or two on the phone. He stopped by maybe three or four years ago here at the office, but I never really knew him.”

“They need an ID on the body, sir.”

“Isn’t there a wife or something? A girlfriend? A neighbor? A buddy?”

He shook his head. “Why don’t you come downtown and talk to my lieutenant? I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Right now?”

Officer Hayes nodded. “I’m parked out front. I’ll drive you over.”

I glanced significantly at the paperwork on my desktop and groaned as if I were, in fact, professionally put upon and mired up. “Five minutes?”

Officer Hayes nodded again and retired into the hallway. I could hear the squeak of his shiny oxfords, the mechanical shiver of the water cooler just up the corridor as he had himself a drink. Lowell put his feet to the wallboard by his coatrack and gave a shove. He streaked backward across the office, his chair casters chattering, as I stepped around my desk and shut my door.

Officer Hayes had precious little to say to me on the way into town, so I was free to listen to the staticky chatter from his cruiser radio. The professional park and the station house are hardly fifteen minutes apart, but that proved time enough to es-

tablish Roanoke as a lawless fleshpot of the mid-Atlantic. The Roanoke PD was busy rousting hookers from the bus depot. They'd intercepted a man with Connecticut tags hauling cocaine on the freeway, had collected the perpetrator in a pair of convenience store robberies, were closing in on a fellow wanted in a barroom pistol-whipping and had run across a load of unbonded liquor in a paneled furniture truck.

"Is it always like this?" I asked Officer Hayes as he wheeled down the ramp off the bypass into center-city Roanoke.

Like most southern towns of any size, the place looked evacuated—no pedestrians to speak of, little traffic, a few office towers, sandwich shops, vacant storefronts, abandoned warehouses, unlimited parking. Officer Hayes eased up to the curbing before the police station—grimly modern and foreboding, a marriage of steel and raw cement.

"Like what?" he said as he shed his harness and shoved the shifter into park.

He pointed me to an orange plastic chair in an upstairs hallway.

"The lieutenant'll be out in a minute," he told me and indicated with the pitch of his head an interrogation room across the way from where I could hear a pair of fellows lavishing obscenities upon each other.

Straightaway a woman came by and put to me a question. She was some manner of civilian employee with a heat-lamp tan and prehensile fingernails, and she wanted to know if it was my Chrysler Brougham they'd fished out of the quarry.

"I drive a Cavalier," I told her, which she made, for some reason, a note on her palm about prior to lingering to take in with