

The Bridge to Nowhere

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In memory of

Ronnie James Dio

Ronnie, it has been an honor for my life to overlap yours, no matter for how short a time. Your music, and the music of those you have inspired, has changed my life and will live with me forever. Thank you, and goodbye.

Where Lyle met Laney was a special place. The year was fifty-nine and the sun was midway through its descent as the late August day came to a close. Lyle was sitting at the edge of an unfinished bridge, legs dangling above the rebar poking out into the air. He was a boy of ten at the time, and he watched the sunset alone. There were two clouds in the sky, both motionless and red. It seemed to Lyle that they must know each other very well to be content that way for such a long time. He smiled and let his mind wander, creating stories of the clouds' lives.

A pebble skittered past him and off the bridge, and a second later he heard footsteps approaching. They were small steps, and the girl was not five meters away when he finally turned to look. Her face was lit up brightly, and Lyle knew that his would be black in front of the sun. She stopped when she realized he was watching her, but he said nothing. She had short dark hair and freckles. Her torn jeans were a bit too short for her, but her shirt was more than big enough. She looked about his age and Lyle didn't immediately recognize her as a girl.

The two of them stared at each other for a while, then she spoke. "Who are you?"

"Lyle."

"Oh," she replied, and paused. "I've never seen anyone here before."

"Neither have I."

The girl walked forward and sat beside him on the end of the bridge, leaving a meter or so between them. "I'm Laney," she said.

Silently the two looked at the sky, the empty plains in front of them, and each other. Below their feet was a sharp ravine, perhaps a dried riverbed. The ground was strewn with old pipes, broken metal parts, concrete chunks and other debris. Most everything in this place was a mess. At some point it had been a military factory, Lyle figured, and had been bombed out in the wars before year zero. Where the bridge went, or why it was unfinished, he never knew.

Near the bottom of the bridge was the factory itself, built into a rock formation and in complete disarray. There were two levels: the top one, which he couldn't reach because the stairs had been broken, and the bottom, which was completely open, save for pillars placed every few meters to hold the structure up. There were window-holes in the top level but there was no glass in them anymore, and Lyle could see light filtering through the broken roof.

The bottom level was far more interesting. It was probably fifty meters

long, with the bare dirt ground at one end and the ravine on the other (and here pipes were poking out and faded steps were still imprinted into the rock). The back wall was solid rock and in front was a sidewalk. Everything was covered in sand and dirt, but beneath that graffiti, though faded nearly to nothing, could be seen in most places. Etched into the sidewalk were the initials MT, a person Lyle often wondered about, and beside that was a lamp post. How it had survived the blast, the boy didn't know, but it still stood tall, a thick cable leading from the light atop to a generator system in the back of the factory.

Inside, the ceiling was dotted with lights, all of which were broken or missing entirely. Near the ravine sat a pair of large metal vats, and beside these was a giant gas tank. Smaller gas tanks were strewn all over the place, and Lyle had even opened one once to find it still had some pressure. Tools of all sorts, scrap metal and shrapnel were also strewn about. Chains hung from the ceiling, as did bits of pipe and electrical cable, and a variety of control panels poked out from odd places, though all were completely dead.

In the middle of the factory floor were two great machines, and these were Lyle's favorite. On the outside of one was an enormous set of gears whose teeth he could climb, and both had openings large enough for him to climb into. These were missing panels and effectively destroyed, but Lyle still liked to pretend he was operating them.

It had been four years since he first found the place, out exploring on his own, and to the best of his knowledge he was the only person to know about it: the rock formations in this area hid it well, and made reaching the area quite a trial. It was nearly an entire kilometer away from any real path, but Lyle was an extraordinarily curious child, and his parents were out gathering food and fuel for the better part of every day, so he had time to spare.

This was one reason that Laney's arrival was a shock. The second reason was that he didn't recognize her, and Lyle knew everybody in his town. Either he had somehow lived ten years without ever seeing her, or she was from Somewhere Else. Turning to her, he confirmed: "You're not from Faulkner."

"No," she said. Her voice was full and reminded Lyle of wind chimes.

"Oh," he replied. He wanted to ask where she *was* from, but there were more pressing questions on his mind. Instead, he observed, "I've never seen anyone else here."

"Me neither," she said. "But I only first came here yesterday."

Lyle had been at home yesterday, learning about maths and spelling from his mother. If Laney had gone to the bridge, she would have been alone. Probably. “Just you?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “I followed a bird. It’s a game I play.”

“Followed a bird?”

“No,” she admitted. “I fell some of the way. But I knew how to find my way back.”

“Did you tell anyone?”

“No!” she shouted, then looked a bit embarrassed and lowered her voice. “No, I didn’t want to get in trouble for going off on my own.”

“That’s good,” Lyle said. “I don’t want people to come here.”

“Me neither,” she replied. “This place is wonderful. I think it wants to stay a secret.”

And that was how Lyle met Laney. Two years passed like this, and the two of them became close friends. They never told anyone else about the bridge, or about each other. It was their special place, and they kept it that way. Something about the wreckage was both strange and beautiful, and the two of them shared it. The feeling it evoked was one of sadness, deep but not despairing, heavy but not a burden. They talked about it sometimes, but neither could find the words to describe it. “I think it’s what makes us human,” Lyle suggested one time. Laney agreed, and that was the last they ever spoke of it.

A year into this relationship, the two decided to try and get into the top level of the factory. They had tried this before, but it was a far more challenging task than it first appeared. Laney had managed to get on top of the biggest gas tank, and could almost reach the hole where the stairs had originally connected to the top level. Lyle passed her a long pipe, which she reached out and tried to jam in the opening.

As she stretched her arm, the two heard a groaning, followed by an awful creaking sound. The tank shifted and Laney looked down in fear before the entire thing toppled over. She and the tank both went off the edge into the ravine. It was an impossible fall, and Lyle knew it. He cried her name over the clatter of the falling tank, then everything was silent.

What felt like an eternity passed before Lyle opened his eyes. His breath was shallow and heart was pounding. Cautiously, he walked to the edge and peered over. The tank had fallen all the way, but Laney had stopped only a few meters down, motionless in an awkward position. “Laney!” he said again, but there was no response. He fell to his knees and wept.

A minute later her eyes fluttered open. “Lyle?” she asked weakly, and his tears stopped for a moment before rushing back again.

Five days passed before Laney came back. Lyle thought she would never return. He didn’t expect she had collapsed on the way home, though the thought crossed his mind. More likely she had told her parents what had happened and they had forbidden her to go out again. Any day now a group of her townspeople would show up, demanding to know what this place was and what had happened.

But this never happened. For five solid days, Lyle came out and found himself alone with his thoughts. He decided those days were the worst of his life. The worst so far, at least.

When Laney came back she was alone. She smiled warmly and said her back had been hurt and she’d needed to lay down for a while. No more exploring, either. She winked as she said this last part, and Lyle knew she had snuck away to come out again. He laughed.

Two months later they figured out how to get up to the top level. Lyle stole some rope from home and over the course of two weeks they built a ladder strong enough to hold them, and propped it against the staircase opening. It didn’t feel strong, but it held.

Inside the top level was almost nothing. There were desks in two corners and a table in the middle. Broken lamps and torn papers littered the floor, but all the writing had been washed out to whiteness. The two of them picked up some chairs and sat at the table for a few minutes, looking around. They ran to the windows and looked out at the world. From up high, you could see all around. Behind them was still the rock face, and wrapping around that was the path they had taken to get here.

Southward (or what Lyle thought was southward) there was more rocky ground, then a forest started about a kilometer away. It was tall and imposing, and nothing could be seen beyond it. Finally, staring into the west, was the bridge. It climbed steadily, flattened out and ended abruptly, facing nothing. On the other side of the ravine was rocky grass, which stretched as far as the eye could see.

As Lyle leaned out the window, he heard Laney behind him cry “Look!”. He turned to look and saw her standing in front of what appeared to be an upright piano.

“I’ve never seen a piano before,” he said.

“Neither have I.”

“Do you know how to play music?”

“No.”

“Me neither.”

The two of them stared at the piano for a bit, then Laney reached out to press a key. Nothing happened. She tried a few others, with the same result. Lyle raised a fist and brought it down hard on four keys at once, and a muffled, toneful *whumpfh* came out. He tried again, and the sound was a bit clearer.

For another ten minutes they played with the piano, then Laney said that she'd better get home. Her parents had started letting her explore again, but they didn't like her to stay out too long. Plus, they were growing concerned about that *boy* she was seeing. She told this to Lyle with a giggle, and he smiled. Maybe she was old enough for her parents to think such things, but as far as he knew, neither of them was.

Two weeks passed before the two of them met again. Lyle was there almost every day, but Laney had schoolwork and family to tend to.

When Laney arrived, Lyle had opened the piano and was beating dust out of it with an old rag he'd found. “Look,” he said excitedly. “It makes sound!”

Sure enough, the piano made sound. It was a soft, creaking sound, hardly musical, but the kids were excited all the same.

Four years drifted by. Neither Laney nor Lyle went out to the factory as often as they used to, but they still met up two or three times a month. Both had kept its location a secret, though Lyle's parents knew both about it — and about Laney. For her part, she started taking music lessons at home and figured out how to play the piano. Lyle thought she was amazing, but the ancient instrument had seen better days, and she didn't like to play it.

Lyle arrived home one day in the spring of sixty-four to find his mother standing at the doorway waiting for him. Her eyes were sad and they filled him with fear. “We need to talk,” she said.

“What's up?”

“How was Laney today?”

“Fine, I guess,” Lyle replied, confused. “She was worried about something at school. A project or something. I dunno.”

“Oh,” his mother looked relieved. “Let me just show you a picture real

quick, then.” She showed Lyle a newspaper clipping. “Do you know this girl?”

“That’s Laney,” he said. “But that’s a very old picture.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Lyle’s mother looked into his eyes, and hers brimmed with tears. “She died, honey.”

“What?”

“She died four years ago.”

Lyle smiled cautiously. “No,” he replied. “I just saw her today.”

Lyle’s mother sighed. “I bought an Eliot newspaper today. She was on page 2. They found her body a week ago.”

Stunned, Lyle let his mother continue. “She fell, honey. One day four years ago, she didn’t come home. Nobody knew what had happened.”

“No,” Lyle repeated. “They must have the wrong picture or something. It must have been somebody else.”

“It looks like she was climbing on a methane tank and it toppled over,” his mother continued. “Did that ever happen?”

“No,” he lied. He was nearly shouting. “You’re lying to me.”

“I’m not lying,” she asserted. “I’m telling the truth. She’s gone, honey. If you’ve been seeing her, she’s only in your head.”

“You’re lying!”

Lyle left, fighting back tears. It couldn’t be true. Laney was the only person he had in the world, and he knew he had just seen her that day. But still, it bothered him. Sometimes he’d think she was *too* perfect, and he’d felt more than once that she was too good to be true.

As he ran, Lyle felt his heart beating heavily. His vision blurred as his eyes filled with tears and went out of focus. The pain in his lungs and persistent *thump-thump* of his heart filled his mind and slowed his thoughts. Overhead the sun shone brightly as stray clouds drifted lazily apart, warming his neck. That, and the pounding of his footfalls, kept him grounded in reality, though his mind felt like it was going to fly away. Finally, he stopped.

He had set out to the factory, and had made it more than half way. The terrain here was uneven and rocky, and he was well-hidden from view of the town. Crying and exhausted, he let his legs give out, and fell to the ground. As the cold rock assaulted his warm skin, he watched his blurry vision shrink and fade to black.

Eight days later, he opened his eyes. He was in his room, the clock showed eight-thirty and it was a Tuesday morning. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Eerily alert, he climbed out of bed and got ready for school. Downstairs, he ate breakfast in silence. His mother was not fazed by his presence. Clearly, wherever his mind had gone last week, his body had kept up appearances.

Also, Laney was gone. The thought no longer cut into him like a red hot blade, but instead was cold. It simply was. Lyle blinked, expecting tears, but none came. He felt dead.

After school, he hiked out to the factory. It looked the same as it always did, dusty and deserted, but today it felt much larger, much more menacing. Lyle shuddered, and weakly called out, "Laney?"

There was no answer.

Lyle turned to leave. Before he took his first step, however, he heard a pebble skitter across the ground behind him. Tentatively, he turned to look.

At first, nothing. Then, from behind the factory, where she'd always arrived from, Laney appeared. Lyle laughed in delight, then caught himself. He knew she wasn't real. But on the other hand, she was standing there, clear as day. A single tear leaked from his left eye. "Laney?" he called.

"Lyle!" Laney started running.

"Laney, Laney," Lyle exclaimed. It felt good to say her name. "Where have you been?"

"I was terribly sick. I would have told you, but I barely had the energy to open my eyes each morning."

"They told me you were dead."

Laney laughed out loud, but stopped when she realized that Lyle was serious. "Lyle, how could — that doesn't make any sense."

"My mom found a newspaper article from years ago, saying you'd fallen. She thinks I've been imagining you ever since."

Laney's eyes were suddenly fearful. "You don't believe her, do you?"

"I don't know," Lyle replied truthfully. He didn't *want* to believe her, that was for sure.

"Lyle, look at me."

Lyle looked at her. Her eyes were deep green, with small lightning bolts of red creeping out from the sides. Her face and hair were dusty, but Lyle could still see her freckles. She breathed slowly, and Lyle could see her chest rise and fall in his peripheral, and feel her breath warmly breeze around his neck. She blinked once, slowly, then blinked again. Neither said anything.

Laney opened her mouth to speak, then changed her mind. Boring into Lyle's eyes with her own, she moved her face closer to his. He replied in turn, without knowing why. Then she kissed him.

When she pulled away, Lyle's eyes were closed. She studied his face, searching for a response. At first, there was nothing. Then he opened his eyes, looked at her for a second, and hugged her more tightly than he ever had before. He was crying now, and making no attempt to hide it.

"I thought you were dead," he said, voice cracking. "I thought you were gone."

"It's okay," she said, groping for words.

"You have no idea — you have no — I was so afraid. I was so afraid I'd lost you, but I didn't. You're here. You're safe. You're safe."

Laney held him tightly, smiling slightly despite the situation. As much as she felt for Lyle, it felt nice to know she was loved. She held onto the feeling. In that moment, there didn't seem to be much else to hold onto.

They stayed like that for several minutes, and when they were done they walked to the end of the bridge and sat at the edge. At first they tried talking, but they both found they had nothing more to say. So they sat in silence, and watched the sun go down.

When Lyle got home, he didn't mention Laney to his mother.

The next day, after school, Lyle went out to the factory. Laney was upstairs, waiting for him at the piano. Her eyes were closed and she faced the middle of the room, reaching behind to play *F-B-A* over and over again. It was a little eerie, especially given the piano's off-tuning, but when Lyle entered she stopped and opened her eyes.

"Let's go," she said.

"Sure," Lyle replied. "Where?"

"Away." She was looking sideways at the floor as she spoke, quietly as though she was only talking to herself. "Away from places where people hide you from the world, where they keep you quiet and make you sneak away to see the sun." She looked up to Lyle and added: "Where they tell people you're dead."

It took a moment for Laney's words to sink in. "What —" Lyle began, but stopped as he realized he had no idea what to ask. Instead he said, "Where?"

"The forest to the south. Past that there's another city, where we can start new lives. It's only a few kilometers, and we'll be free."

"I don't know," Lyle replied. "I don't think I can do that."

Laney walked away from the piano, rubbing her forehead. “Lyle, I can’t keep coming here,” she said. “Please, leave with me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“People notice when I disappear for hours, you know. They’re asking about the factory, and if I tell them, it’ll be ruined. Either I stop coming back, or the two of us leave forever.”

“That seems a little drastic.”

“Okay,” Laney sighed. “Goodbye, Lyle.” She walked past him, taking one last look at his face — there were tears in her eyes — then climbed down the ladder and out of sight.

Less than a minute passed while Lyle contemplated what had just happened, then he cried “Laney!” and ran after her. After nearly falling down the ladder, he ran out to the road and called her name a few more times. There was no response. She was gone. Forever.

“I’m right here,” Laney said from behind him. Lyle turned to see her sitting on the edge of a vat, looking hurt. “Though, I don’t know why,” she continued. “You were going to let me go.”

“Laney,” Lyle sighed. “I have a family. I can’t run away.”

“They told you I was imaginary, Lyle. And you believed them. You *still* believe them, don’t you?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Do you expect them to believe *you* when you tell them I’m still real?”

Lyle was quiet.

“Let’s go,” Laney said, and hopped off the vat. She walked past him, across the road, and set off towards the forest. It took a few seconds to work up the courage, but Lyle followed.

Five meters in, it was clear that this forest was far darker than it had appeared from the outside. It was bordered with dense shrubbery, thorns and tangling branches, but most of this disappeared once they were into the forest proper. Now there were only trees, and a lot of them. Far above, their branches reached out, covered in millions of needles that blocked out the sun. It wasn’t difficult to see, but the late afternoon sun felt like evening.

Laney was surprised as well. “Do you have a compass?” she asked nervously. Lyle pulled a compass out of his pocket and showed it to her, and all her nervousness vanished. “We’ll be fine,” she assured him. “Just keep on south.”

This they did for a solid hour in silence. As near as Lyle could tell, the forest was giving no signs of thinning out. There was no end in sight. “How

many kilometers did you say we have to go?" he asked.

"Twenty-five."

"You said 'a few'."

"Oh." She gave him a small smile. "My bad."

Ten minutes later they came upon a stream. Overhead, the trees had thinned out, letting the waning sunlight in. The water was flowing too quickly for them to wade through, and it was too far to jump. "Let's stop here and rest for a bit," Laney suggested.

Lyle agreed, so they took a break. He tried drinking some stream water, figuring it was moving too quickly for anything bad to accumulate in it, but after a few minutes he began to feel sleepy, so he stopped.

He took some time to let his head clear, then stood up. "Let's head on," he told Laney. To the east the stream had a few narrow patches, so he set off in that direction, hoping to find a place to cross. He did, though it took a good fifteen minutes, and even then he'd needed a running start to make the jump. Laney followed, proving surprisingly strong for her size.

The wind was picking up now, and even through the thick trees a strong breeze swept around Lyle and Laney. Above them, in the thick of the needles, they could hear a harsh howling, and the trees around them were making gentle groaning noises. As they walked, the noises increased in volume, but fortunately the wind on the ground was much less severe than it sounded.

Another hour went by, and though they were sure they were near the end, the sky was darkening and the pair grew concerned that they wouldn't get out with daylight on their side. The wind was spotty now - often a minute or two would go by in complete silence and then a sudden gust would catch them off guard. With the last of these, there was a loud *crack* and a branch swung out into Laney's face.

As the branch hit the girl, Lyle saw her flicker out for an instant and the branch passed right through her. As it skittered to the ground, she flickered out again a couple of times and then was gone. Lyle blinked. It was becoming difficult to see now and he wondered if this was some strange optical illusion. "Laney?" he called tentatively.

There was no answer.

All of a sudden he became very afraid. He fought to stay focused as his head began to swim. Dizzy, he sat down on a rock and rested his head in his hands. No doubt Laney had run off to see something interesting and would be back in a moment. All he had to do was wait. Wait and calm down.

Ten minutes passed in silence. The wind had stopped. Laney never

appeared. Lyle had fallen to the ground and started to shake as the dizziness peaked, but by now he had calmed down. His panic had faded and changed to exhaustion. For the first time since he had set out, it occurred to him that his mother had been right all along. When he thought that, the panic returned and he shut his eyes tightly.

Oh, no, Lyle thought. Oh, no, no, no. How did it come to this? I'm lost and confused and insane and alone. Nothing's real anymore. Nothing's real. Nothing is real except that I'm going to die here. I'm going to shut my eyes and that'll be it. That'll be it. This'll be it. This is it.

Without knowing exactly when, Lyle's thoughts slowed down and he began to dream. He and Laney were on the bridge, their legs dangling over the edge. "Do you think we'll remember this when we're old?" he asked.

"Of course," she smiled. "Maybe we'll still come here sometimes."

"I hope so," Lyle replied, then they were quiet for a while.

"Let's try to get upstairs," Laney suggested, standing up.

"We built a ladder, remember? We already know how to get up there."

"No," Laney corrected. "Not yet."

Lyle didn't know what to make of this response, so he stood up to go with her. As he started to walk down the bridge, she did the same, but in the wrong direction. He realized this a moment too late and turned to watch her step off the end of the bridge and drop out of sight. "No!" Lyle cried, and ran to the edge.

Laney was laying on her back, far below, surrounded by rubble. Her arms were outstretched and her eyes were closed. It looked to Lyle that she was only sleeping, but even from here he could tell that her chest was not moving. A deep sadness filled his heart, and he climbed over the edge slowly. He dropped a meter or so and hung from the rebar poking out of the end of the bridge.

Looking down, he could see that the drop was too far for him. Looking back up, he also knew there was no way he could climb back up. So, he let go. For a second he felt the wind rush past his ears. It was making his eyes water, so he shut them tightly. Then his feet touched ground and he opened them in surprise.

It was dark now, and had Lyle's eyes not been closed before he wouldn't have been able to make out the trees around him. When he became awake enough to realize he was back in the forest, he also realized that he was in a dead sprint. Unsure why he was running, he kept with it, dodging obstacles in the near-darkness. He managed to do this for about five seconds before a

rock slipped under his foot and he lost his balance.

Lyle fell backwards and his leg slipped forward. The ground below it disappeared and he dropped, landing on his butt and bouncing down a ravine. He felt his leg hit a root and tear open, and his body bent into all sorts of awkward positions, but he was too shocked to feel any pain. At the bottom, his head hit the ground with a deep *whumpfh* and he blacked out.

He felt a small hand on his face. Its touch was cool and held its place until he opened his eyes. A voice was saying “Wake up, Lyle. Please wake up.”

When he finally looked, the voice and the hand belonged to Laney. She was young — the age she had been when she had died — and her face was filled with concern.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Am I dead?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Are you?”

“Yeah,” she said softly. “I fell. You know that.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To help you get out.”

“Where did you come from?”

Laney thought about the question for a moment, then replied: “Where does the bridge go?”

“That doesn’t help me,” Lyle replied. “The bridge was never finished.”

“That’s the best I can do,” Laney said. “No language on earth has the words to answer your question.”

“Oh,” Lyle replied. His entire body hurt, and his eyes were heavy, so he let them fall shut.

“You need to get up,” Laney said forcefully. “You’re going to die here if you don’t come with me.” Lyle knew her words were true, but he didn’t think he had the energy to pull himself up. His eyes began to close, so Laney reached out and grabbed his arm. She pulled, and with her help Lyle managed to get himself into a standing position.

His right leg hurt like mad and he could feel blood running down it. However, when he lifted his pant leg to look, he found the cut to be far smaller than he’d expected. As for the pain, it was likely just a bruise. He grimaced and bore it.

With Laney's help, he got himself out of the ravine and back onto level ground. "You'll need to get that cleaned up," Laney pointed out. He nodded. "I'll be fine."

It took a full day for the two of them to get out of the woods, Lyle limping and Laney helping him. For the most part the ground between the trees was clear, which was a help, but as the sun came into view, so did sharp bushes and shrubs. The final stretch involved more than a little bushwhacking, and neither escaped uncut by thorns. On the other side, though, was a grassy field, warm sunlight, and a breeze free of the pine smell Lyle had come to hate.

As they stepped through the field, a town came into view. It was still a few kilometers out, but it was clear that they would make it. The two of them stopped walking and stared. "We made it," Lyle said, and laughed. "You did it!"

Laney grinned, but was glancing uncomfortably around her, surveying the long grass that reached her waist. She was still a few paces behind Lyle, and was quite definitively stopped.

"Let's go," Lyle urged, stepping forward. Laney didn't move.

"Let's go," he said again, but Laney still did not move. "I can't go with you," she said slowly, deliberately. She seemed to be considering her words very carefully, as though she was trying to find a way around them. "I have to go back."

"Oh," Lyle's face fell.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

"Will I see you again?" Lyle asked.

There were tears in her eyes, and she rushed forward to wrap her arms around him. She held him tightly without answering.

"I love you, Lyle," she whispered.

When he woke up, she was gone.