

Story Road
by
Mark Cornell

Mark Cornell
Chapel Hill, NC
310-738-0796
markcornell53@yahoo.com

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Characters:

CLEVELAND, 40s, a singer/songwriter

ELLIE, 15, his daughter

Setting:

A truck stop. Wyoming.

Time:

Now.

Late spring. A truck stop interior. A tired, old place. About 4:47 in the morning. Quiet, except for the occasional moan of wind. Off right is an entrance to a cheap restaurant. Off left is a stale convenience store. A sign - "Big Wheel Truck Stop of Wyoming." Two old benches sit center stage. ELLIE, 15, in a nice dress, her face overly made-up, sits on one of the benches. Her hair is made up, her lips with lipstick. But she's nervous. She hears the hiss of breaks and low rumble of a big rig arriving in the parking lot. Stepping down stage, she tries to get the trucker's attention. It does no good. Then, off-stage:

CLEVELAND

Ellie?!

In comes CLEVELAND, 40s, in a hurry, out of breath. He's in cowboy boots and jeans and a wrinkled T-shirt that he clearly slept in. His hair is wild. There is a huge sense of relief when he sees ELLIE.

CLEVELAND (cont'd)

Oh, my God...

He goes to her, but she crosses away. He stares at her, stunned, catching his breath.

CLEVELAND (cont'd)

I've been looking all over for you! What are you doing here, Ellie?

ELLIE

What does it look like I'm doing, Dad?

CLEVELAND

Are you...are you running away?

ELLIE

I don't want to do this anymore.

CLEVELAND

Do what anymore?

ELLIE

This! Following you around as you play your music! What do you think I'm talking about?!

CLEVELAND

And hitching a ride from the nearest trucker is going to make things better?

ELLIE

I have no idea. But I do know it'll be different.

She sits, defiantly.

CLEVELAND

I have to make a living for us, Ellie. I'm sorry this is not the life you imagined.

ELLIE

This isn't even close, Dad.

CLEVELAND

I have to take gigs wherever I can get them now. I'm doing the best I can.

ELLIE

Hello? Your songs suck, Dad.

CLEVELAND

Gee thanks.

ELLIE

Like big time suck.

CLEVELAND

Don't spare my feelings or anything.

ELLIE

I mean, you can play the guitar a little bit and sing a little bit, but your songs suck.

CLEVELAND

(sitting next to her)

They don't suck. How could they suck? I've been writing songs all my life.

ELLIE

That's the problem, Dad. You've been doing it all your life and you still suck at it.

CLEVELAND

Well, it's just taking me a long time to get good.

ELLIE

You're never going to get good, Dad.

CLEVELAND

Wow, you're on a roll here.

ELLIE

I'm sorry. You're 46. You're not going to wake up tomorrow and write a great song. You're not.

CLEVELAND

What if I do?

ELLIE

You won't.

CLEVELAND

What if I do?

ELLIE

You will if the song is about delusion.

CLEVELAND

Nice. You have such faith.

ELLIE

I'm a hardcore realist.

CLEVELAND

Is that what you call it? (beat) And because you think my songs suck, you decide to get up in the middle of the night, sneak out of our motel room, walk across the parking lot, and take up with the first maniac on eighteen wheels?

ELLIE

It's not just because your songs suck. There was also a cockroach in our bathtub. And he had friends. Lots of them.

CLEVELAND

So?

ELLIE

So? I got up to pee and it was like a jail break in the bathroom.

CLEVELAND

It happens.

ELLIE

Well, shit, Dad, it doesn't have to happen, does it?

CLEVELAND

It does where we're staying.

Angry, she gets up and crosses towards the other bench.

ELLIE

That's my point, Dad! I can't do the sleazy motel thing anymore! I can't do dinner at Wendy's anymore!

I can't do the long driving, and the car having problems, and the looking for laundromats, and the weird smells, and the always needing a shower, and the dive bars where I have to sit in the dark and sell your stupid CDs and read those stupid home school books, which, if you hadn't noticed, are geared towards wacko Christian kids, Dad!

CLEVELAND

They are?

ELLIE

My math book's title is "Let Jesus Teach You Math!"

CLEVELAND

The guy at that bookshop in Omaha said they were inspiring.

ELLIE

I'll bet!

She sits on the other bench.

ELLIE (cont'd)

I'm tired, Dad. I'm really, really tired.

He gets up and crosses to her.

CLEVELAND

It's not all bad out here, Ellie. We have freedom, to do whatever we want, whenever we want to.

ELLIE

I don't feel free.

CLEVELAND

Ellie, there are beautiful things out here.

ELLIE

Like what?

CLEVELAND

There's the desert sunsets, and the giant redwoods, and the mountains, and the open prairie, and-

ELLIE

That's total loser postcard stuff. I can get that shit on the internet.

CLEVELAND

There's you and me being together.

ELLIE

That is so lame, Dad.

CLEVELAND

It's actually not lame. It's the opposite of lame. Being together is precious and you know it.

He sits next to her. Beat.

ELLIE

You mumble in your sleep, by the way.

CLEVELAND

What?

ELLIE

And you leave your guitar picks, like, *everywhere*. And you let people push you around too much. And you continue to introduce me to other musicians even though I've told you a billion times I don't like it.

CLEVELAND

You're my daughter.

ELLIE

And I know you think my meanness masks some internal pain, but it doesn't. This is how I've always been. Ta-da!

CLEVELAND

It isn't how you've always been.

Beat.

CLEVELAND (cont'd)

You look nice, by the way.

ELLIE

I know.

CLEVELAND

Where'd you get the dress?

ELLIE

There's a clearance rack by the beef jerky display.

CLEVELAND

And the perfume?

ELLIE

It's hand sanitizer.

CLEVELAND

And the lipstick?

ELLIE

Like I don't have my own lipstick?

Beat.

CLEVELAND

Wonder what time it is.

ELLIE

It's 4:52 am. And 17 seconds.

(gesturing)

There's a clock next to that elk head. It even has a second hand.

CLEVELAND

You hungry?

ELLIE

Maybe.

CLEVELAND

(rising and crossing towards
the restaurant)

You want to get something at the restaurant here? It's open 24-7.

ELLIE

They closed it to truckers only. But there's an apple fritter in that glass case over there that's been staring at me for, like, 20 minutes.

CLEVELAND

(checking)

Wait. I don't have my wallet on me.

ELLIE

Doesn't matter. I cleaned out your wallet. Here's a five. Can you get me that apple fritter?

She retrieves a five from a place in her dress.

CLEVELAND

Jesus, Ellie. You stole money from me, too?

ELLIE

Hey, I left your credit cards. I could have wiped you out.

He snatches the five from her and walks downstage to the unseen glass case.

CLEVELAND

You don't want this apple fritter.

ELLIE

Yes, I do.

CLEVELAND

It's got mold on it.

ELLIE

Oh, my God.

CLEVELAND

Sorry. The other donuts don't look much better. There's a tub of mac and cheese here.

ELLIE

Are you serious?

CLEVELAND

OK. What about this Caesar salad? Hold on, there's kind of a fly situation going on-

ELLIE

Forget it! I'm suddenly feeling sick.

He gestures towards their motel, as if he's walking out, and she should follow.

CLEVELAND

I think I have a couple of Pop Tarts back in the room.

ELLIE

I never want another Pop Tart as long as I live.

CLEVELAND

Me, either. (beat) I'm sorry, sweetie. For everything.

They look at each other.

ELLIE

How did you find me anyway?

He sits next to her again.

CLEVELAND

Well, you weren't in the lobby of the motel, or outside anywhere, or the Steak 'n Shake, the bar is closed, and there's nothing else out here but this truck stop.

ELLIE

There's always nothing else out here.

CLEVELAND

It's Wyoming. It's sparse.

ELLIE

And really windy.

CLEVELAND

I know.

ELLIE

(gesturing)

See the sign?

He gets up, looks.

CLEVELAND

(reading)

"All Questions Answered pegboard. 1, Yes, the wind always blows. 2, Snow fences. 3, 183 wind turbines, generates electricity. 4, 8000 feet. 5, Antelope. 6, Bigger town 40 miles west, 60 miles east. 7,-"

ELLIE

You don't have to read them all aloud.

Beat.

CLEVELAND

Were you really going to run away?

ELLIE

Maybe. I can't do this anymore, Dad. I mean, I don't even know where we're going to be tomorrow night.

CLEVELAND

Casper. We're going to be in Casper. I have a gig at the Rodeo Lounge.

He sits next to her.

ELLIE

That's *great*, Dad.

CLEVELAND

Supposed to be a really nice place.

ELLIE

I'll bet.

CLEVELAND

A famous place, too. Simon and Garfunkel played there.

ELLIE

(not believing him)

Really?

CLEVELAND

Yes. And Conway Twitty.

ELLIE

Who?

CLEVELAND

Conway Twitty. *It's Only Make Believe? Hello Darlin'?*

ELLIE

Sorry.

CLEVELAND

Well, they aren't the only names who've played there. Joan Baez. Linda Ronstadt. Muddy Waters played there, too.

ELLIE

Muddy Waters played at the Rodeo Lounge in Casper, Wyoming?

CLEVELAND

OK, maybe not him. Who am I thinking of?

ELLIE

Stop, Dad. Just stop.

CLEVELAND

Look, it's just going to take you some time to get used to the road.

ELLIE

I don't want to get used to the road. I want our old house back. My old bedroom back.

CLEVELAND

We lost the house, honey. You know that.

ELLIE

How could you let us lose the house?

CLEVELAND

There were a lot of unexpected bills and-

ELLIE

It's our *house!*

CLEVELAND

I didn't want to lose the house, either, but there wasn't anything I could do!

ELLIE

(getting up, crossing away)

I want my old friends back! My old life back! I want-

He cuts her off before she can finish.

CLEVELAND

Hopping into a stranger's big rig isn't going to bring them back!

ELLIE

What will, Dad? What will?

CLEVELAND

Nothing! You can't get them back, honey! You can't! You can't get any of it back!

ELLIE

Sounds like I'm not the only one trying to run away.

Rising, he approaches her, desperate.

CLEVELAND

What do you want me to do, Ellie?

ELLIE

I don't know, Dad.

She sits on the other bench.

CLEVELAND

I'm a musician. This is what I do. It's what I've always done. (beat) You want me to go work at Foot Locker? Or Home Depot? Because I'm sure not going to make any more money doing that than doing this. (beat) Have I not been good to you? Have I ever broken a promise to you? Ever?

ELLIE

You've never made a promise to me, Dad. That's the thing. You've never made a promise to me.

He sits next to her again.

CLEVELAND

OK. Then I promise you that I will never, ever leave you.

This gets her attention.

CLEVELAND (cont'd)

You scared the hell out of me, you know that?

ELLIE

I'm sorry.

CLEVELAND

You're *15-years old*.

ELLIE

I know.

CLEVELAND

What if someone did pick you up? I wouldn't even have known where to look.

ELLIE

I'm sorry.

CLEVELAND

What if something terrible had happened to you? I can't lose you, sweetie. I can't.

ELLIE

I'm a shitty daughter, I guess.

CLEVELAND

You're not a shitty daughter. You just made a bad choice.

ELLIE

You make bad choices, too, Dad. (beat) Especially in your songwriting.

CLEVELAND

Oh, we're back to my songs again?

ELLIE

I know I told you your songs suck, but I don't actually want them to suck.

CLEVELAND

You know, that song I wrote about the Mississippi is actually pretty good.

ELLIE

Right, because no one has ever written a song about the Mississippi before. Or the corn in Iowa, which is another song of yours. Or how big Texas is or-

CLEVELAND

OK, I get it. The country is beautiful, Ellie, and I write about it.

ELLIE

Why don't you write about something no one else has ever written about?

CLEVELAND

Like what?

ELLIE

Something from you.

CLEVELAND

All my songs are from me.

ELLIE

No one cares what you think about the Mississippi River!
They want to know about you! I want to know about you!

CLEVELAND

Me?

ELLIE

Yes!

She calms.

ELLIE (cont'd)

Don't write about what's out there. Write about what's in here.

She points to her heart.

ELLIE (cont'd)

And I know saying that is super unoriginal. And it actually makes me want to puke. But it's true.

CLEVELAND

I have written about what's in here.

He points to his heart.

ELLIE

No, you haven't.

CLEVELAND

Actually, I have.

ELLIE

Dad, I know your entire oeuvre.

CLEVELAND

Oeuvre?

ELLIE

Oeuvre, oeuvre, oeuvre. Don't you read *Rolling Stone*? Your song collection, Dad.

CLEVELAND

I have a song, Ellie. From in here.
(he points again to his heart)
It's a new song.

ELLIE

You do? For real?

CLEVELAND

For real. I'm just a little nervous to sing it.

ELLIE

Why? That's the song everyone wants to hear!

CLEVELAND

Maybe.

ELLIE

Maybe?! You're 46 years old, Dad! What are you waiting for?! Sing that song!

CLEVELAND

(standing up)

OK.

ELLIE

(surprised)

OK? You'll sing it?

CLEVELAND

I don't have my guitar with me, but-

ELLIE

Here? You're going to do it here? Now? At...

(looking up)

...5:05 and 48 seconds in the morning?

CLEVELAND

Sure.

He stands up in front of her.

ELLIE

Uh...OK. I mean, OK. I guess that's fine. You could save it for the stage, but whatever. Go for it.

He pulls a piece of paper out of his jeans pocket.

ELLIE (cont'd)

You keep it in your pocket?

CLEVELAND

Yeah, I keep it in my pocket. I don't go anywhere without it. It's brand new. I'm still working on it.

He takes a deep breath.

CLEVELAND (cont'd)

Here we go.

He takes a moment, looks at her, nervous. Clears his throat. Sings:

CLEVELAND (cont'd)
There is a house in New Orleans

ELLIE
 Dad!

CLEVELAND
 All right, I'm just kidding. Here we go.

He takes a big breath.

ELLIE
 You're stalling.

CLEVELAND
 Give me a break, would you? I'm nervous.

ELLIE
 You're nervous?

CLEVELAND
 Yeah, I'm nervous. I'm allowed to be nervous.

ELLIE
 In front of one person? In front of me? This explains a lot, Dad.

CLEVELAND
 This song is different.

ELLIE
 It better be different.

CLEVELAND
 It is.

He closes his eyes, and begins to mime playing the guitar with his hands. Up comes the slow sound of a guitar. He stops miming (but the music continues), he opens his eyes, looks down at his paper, and begins to sing:

CLEVELAND (cont'd)
*There's a cold wind coming up the hill
 to the room where she lays her head
 Sorrow's running through the walls
 And ghosts prepare to tread
 So I softly knock upon her door
 And I come to hold her tight*

He begins to struggle to sing.

CLEVELAND (cont'd)

*Then our little girl comes bouncing in
To see if Mommy is all right*

He stops a moment, then continues.

CLEVELAND (cont'd)

*Story Road
is where we lived together
Story Road
is where...*

He trails off, unable to finish. He takes a moment to compose himself. He can see she is emotional, too.

CLEVELAND (cont'd)

I don't think I'm ready to sing that song yet.

ELLIE

That's OK. I don't think I'm ready to hear it.

She lurches out of the bench and they grab each other in a strong, and deeply emotional, hug.

ELLIE (cont'd)

I miss Mom so much.

CLEVELAND

I miss her, too, sweetie. I miss her, too.

They cry, grasping each other with everything they have, and not letting go.

Lights fade.

THE END