

# LLOYD MCNEIL'S LAST RIDE



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AUTHOR OF *HOW LUCKY & THE TIME HAS COME*

# **LLOYD MCNEIL'S LAST RIDE**

**A NOVEL**

**WILL LEITCH**



HARPER

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# Dedication

*To my family*

# Epigraph

Parenthood offers many lessons in patience and sacrifice. But ultimately, it is a lesson in humility. The very best thing about your life is a short stage in someone else's story. And it is enough.

—Michael Gerson

I never saw any of them again—except the cops. No way has yet been invented to say goodbye to them.

—Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye*

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**Alive**

## 1.

**M**y God. It really is so beautiful.

How have I never noticed how beautiful this is? How have I never even *looked*?

I had to stop. It bowled me over. I had pulled my cruiser over on the side of the freeway, right on I-85, one of the busiest interstates in the country, with pickup trucks and Teslas and big loud Harleys zipping by, all missing me by just a few feet. I didn't put my lights on. I didn't stop a motorist. I really hadn't planned on doing anything at all. I was just looking up, like it was a normal day, and then I saw it, right there in front of me, and it was so beautiful that I had no choice but to swerve to the side of the road and stop.

I mean, look at it.

Millions of years ago, there was a cell, and that cell turned into a bacteria, and that bacteria became a fish, or something like that, I think I remember it being a fish, and then the fish pulled itself out of the sea and started walking on two legs, and then after a while it became a monkey, and, well, fine, so maybe I don't have all the exact details of human evolution right, what do you want from me, I grew up in the American public school system in the 1980s, you're lucky I can put my finger on our country on a map. I'm doing my best.

The point is that billions and billions of things had to happen over the scope of space and time for human beings to even exist in the first place. And then human beings had to be different from animals, smarter, or at least more inventive, they needed to be able to reason and use logic and understand object permanence and learn that they will someday die and invent tools and make machines—machines like wheels. Then they had to turn those wheels into moving vehicles, and then they had to create engines, and then they had to harness energy to power those engines, and all that led

to cars. Cars! When they had cars, they needed roads for those cars to drive on, because now people could go from their homes to their jobs from many miles away, but only if they could create a complex series of roads, and exits, and side streets, and ramps, and everything they might need to allow people to get from one place to another. They needed materials, they needed asphalt, and concrete, and metal, they needed all of that to make those roads, and then they needed scientists and geologists and architects to tell them where to build the roads and how to keep them from falling apart. And they needed to do this *in every single place on the planet*—everywhere, all of the time. They spent thousands upon thousands of work hours, millions upon millions of dollars, huge swaths of their entire lives, figuring out a way to help humans move themselves around. We have built roads that rise hundreds of feet into the air to carry dozens of machines that are heavier than any animal on earth.

We were once fish! And now we can make this!

It's incredible, right? Look at it. They call it Spaghetti Junction. Its official name is the Tom Moreland Exchange, where I-85 meets I-285 in Atlanta, a spiraling, labyrinthine octopus of highways and on-ramps and off-ramps and speed limit signs and EXIT ONLY THIS LANE that will take you anywhere you want to go. Want to go to downtown Atlanta, or through, all the way to Selma and Montgomery, Alabama? I-85 South will take you right there. I-285 will take you to Truist Park so you can go see a Braves game in the suburbs, or you can keep going to get on I-20, which goes as far west as Scroggins Draw, Texas, if you've got a hankering for Scroggins Draw. I-85 North gets you all the way to Virginia. From those places you can just keep driving, as long as you want, until you hit water. Or you can stop at an airport, oh yes, that's another thing we humans have done, we've created *machines that soar through the sky*. You can go to Paris, or China, or Antarctica, or Timbuktu, shoot, someday we're all going to go to Mars. This road will take you anywhere.

And we made it. Some guy drew a picture of it, and a bunch of other guys found all the other parts to put it together, and a whole different group of guys got hammers and screwdrivers and cranes (cranes! Machines that lift the heaviest things miles into the sky that you can control with a joystick!) to build it, and they did, they built it, and anyone who has ever been in this city, this crazy gorgeous city, Atlanta, my Atlanta, anyone who has been here has used it, and they've never once stopped to think about it, how it's a miracle that it exists, how it's a miracle that any of this, that any of us, is here at all—you, me, the president, the guy on television dancing while trying to sell you all these sandwiches he made just for you, just for all of us.

It's a road in the sky that will take you anywhere. It's a miracle.

And we made it.

My God, look at it. How have I never looked at it before?

Why aren't you here with me looking? Why isn't everyone? Why don't we just *look*?

## 2.

**D**r. Lipsey was asking me about Georgia football. That's the last thing I remember from before. I'd known about Dr. Lipsey's personal, uh, issues for a while—the women, the drugs, the “investment opportunities”—but so much of it always came down to the gambling. Dr. Lipsey was, to put it mildly, a degenerate gambler.

“Big game for the Dawgs this weekend,” he said from across the desk, sweating a little. He was always sweating a little. “That line hasn't budged a bit. I thought there'd be a little late money in on the Rebs, but it's holding steady. You heard anything? Isn't your ex from up there in Athens? She's heard anything?” He was always sweating a little and he was always looking for information that might make him whole again.

“I don't think Jessica is scouting any practices, sorry,” I said. Jessica hated football, always had, which is why Bishop hated it too.

Dr. Lipsey had called me that afternoon, on my off day, on *his* off day, which he made a whole deal of telling me was something he never does, and he said he wanted me to come in immediately. I'd thought it was something bad—why would he call if it weren't something bad?—but starting our appointment with another gambling question had eased the weight on my chest a bit. Maybe he really did just want some info on the Georgia–Ole Miss game? He was forever in the hole.

“Just bet on Kirby, I guess,” I said. “You know I don't watch much football.”

“Right, you're more into that *Euro* football,” he said, tapping his fingers on his ornate marble desk. I'd always thought his desk was too fancy for a doctor. That was much more of a hedge fund guy's desk. “Well, if you hear anything, lemme know. That line is super fishy.”

I looked at him. The maw in my stomach growled and stretched. “So, uh, what’s up?”

I hadn’t told anyone I was here. I hadn’t told anyone, about any of it.

The headaches. The headaches had been coming for a couple of months, but they’d gotten bad in the last few weeks. At first I thought they were just typical hangovers, maybe just a little bit worse because I’m old now and everything’s a little bit worse. But then they were still there even when I didn’t drink, and then these little spasms started happening, these sharp lightning bolts, first behind my right eye, then my left, and then they were just firing all over the place. I tried to ignore it.

But the bolts got stronger, and larger, and they were happening more often, so often that even my partner had noticed. We were making a coffee run when one of the bolts fired so hard that I nearly drove the car off the road—he’d had to grab the steering wheel so I didn’t plow over a stroller on the sidewalk.

“You should, like, call a doctor or something,” he’d said. We’ve only been partners for a few months—Officer Anderson is his name, nice kid, earnest, even knew some of Jessica’s family up in Athens—but I did think it was a tad too early in our relationship for him to be giving me medical advice. But that night, I fell asleep on the couch watching an old soccer replay and woke up with the room vibrating blinding white light as someone tried to carve a hole in my eye socket with a coping saw.

So that was when I called my old friend Dr. Lipsey. And after a day in a long white tube, there I was, in his office, at his desk, with the marble top, and a real-time crypto stock ticker, and a signed photo of him and some tattooed UFC fighter.

Dr. Lipsey gave me a very serious look—a serious look I’d never seen from him before, a serious look I hadn’t thought him capable of making. He licked his lips and took some papers out of his desk drawer. He clicked his tongue. He was sweating more now.

“Well, Lloyd, I gotta tell you . . . it ain’t good,” he said.

The maw twisted and snarled. I felt a hot sensation at the back of my throat.

“Well, that’s straightforward,” I said, and I was impressed I was able to sound out a word with so many letters in it.

Dr. Lipsey shuffled the papers around, collated them a bit in his hands, and then took out an X-ray. I thought he might have one of those light fixtures on his wall, the ones you can turn on so you can see the X-rays more clearly, but he didn’t. It was just a printout of an X-ray. It looked like some kid photocopied his butt.

“Well, Lloyd, this,” he said, pointing with his pen to a dark blob that looked like every other dark blob on the paper, “is exactly what we were hoping not to see. And the tests, well, they brought back exactly what we were hoping they wouldn’t.” He popped a Nicorette in his mouth. It’s strange to be told you’re dying by someone who’s chewing gum.

But that’s what he told me.

The word was *glioblastoma*. It was an oddly rhythmic word when I heard it aloud. It sounded like some ’70s concept album from Pink Floyd or something, or the Who maybe—*Roger Daltrey presents “Glioblastoma!”*

Glioblastoma, Dr. Lipsey would explain, is a brain tumor. “But that doesn’t quite do it justice,” he said. Here I had been my whole life thinking that the worst thing that could happen to you would be that you’d get a brain tumor. Apparently there was a word that rendered the term *brain tumor* insufficient.

Dr. Lipsey explained that a brain tumor is scary, obviously, but that we know what to do with tumors. Tumors even have their own verb: *Excise*. You *excise* a tumor.

“Don’t think of it like that,” Dr. Lipsey said, chewing his gum like a cow, or more like Burt Reynolds, actually. You cannot excise glioblastoma. It is, as Dr. Lipsey said while clenching both his fists and pushing them into the air, *aggressive*. He said it with a little more relish than I would have liked. He put some real mustard on it.

“*Aggressive*,” he said. “Think of it like a superaggressive weed. No, no, more like a tree . . . hey, did you ever see the movie *Evil Dead*?”

“I have not,” I said, and still he chewed.

“Well, there’s this tree in *Evil Dead*, and it’s an evil tree, which makes sense, it’s a tree in a movie called *Evil Dead*. It’s not a nice tree. And it has these branches, you know, like trees do. Well, these branches expand, like they’re fingers that just keep growing. That’s what glioblastoma is. It’s like the root of a tree, with branches that grow really fucking fast.”

He extended his fingers when he said this and made this weird rictus grin, and for a moment I thought he was going to shake them and yell “Jazz hands!”

Dr. Lipsey picked up the photocopy that he called an X-ray and pointed to what was apparently the front of my skull.

“So right now, the glioblastoma is right here,” he said, poking the spot with his pen again. “But because it doesn’t grow like a normal tumor, we can’t just cut it out and plop it in a pan.”

“Do you really plop those in a pan?” I don’t know why I asked that.



“Well, maybe *plop* isn’t the right word, but point is, you can’t just scoop it out,” he said, putting his hand over my photocopied skull and spreading out his fingers. “It grows too fast, and it gets all over everywhere. By the time we’d get in there, it would already be over in this part of your brain, and then this one. And even if we could get in there in time, the thing about glioblastoma is that it has all different kinds of cells, which means whatever we’d zap it with would work on some kinds of cells but not other kinds.”

He wiggled his fingers over the paper, and then put his other hand behind the paper and wiggled *those* fingers.

“So it just grows and grows and grows, Lloyd, really fast, stupid fast.” He flattened his palms on each side of the paper and slammed it down violently on the marble table. “And then it’s everywhere.”

I stared at the paper. Dr. Lipsey had ink all over his fingers. Everything he was telling me made sense, and it certainly seemed very bad, but it still felt like he was talking about someone else—like the photocopied skull he was pointing to was a theoretical photocopied skull. It wasn’t *my* photocopied skull.

“So, uh,” I said, and I realized that though there were surely a million questions I should be asking, I couldn’t think of one. I had this odd urge to just respond with nonsense words. *Banana. Aardvark. Nittany. Corset. Gerrymander.*

Dr. Lipsey took his hands off the paper, swiveled his chair back to face me, and leaned forward.

He was no longer chewing. He loved all his job gave him—the money, the huge condo in Buckhead, the Jag, the pretty young girlfriends, the membership at the River Club in Sewanee, the ability to fund what I was pretty sure was a rather serious cocaine problem. He was a doctor—a neurologist! Being a neurologist is a pretty goddamn good life. You get whatever you want in this world when you’re a neurologist.

But this was the shitty part of the job. You could see it in the little fret line in the middle of his forehead. This is why his hair was already so gray.

“You . . .” He paused. “Well, Lloyd, you really should know that if this is a glioblastoma, and I believe that it is, you . . . you don’t have much time.”

Just over his left shoulder there was a picture of him on a golf course somewhere with the governor of Georgia, both wearing baggy golf shirts that were still too small for them. They looked like goobers. I stared right at it, as if, if I looked close enough, I would be somewhere else, someone else.

“How much time?” I heard myself say, still staring at Gov. Kemp’s nipple protruding through his sheer lime-green shirt.

Dr. Lipsey coughed into his hand.

“How much *time*?” I repeated.

“Honestly . . . three months? Maybe four?” he said. “Four might be pushing it.”

“Oh,” I said. I decided I was glad we were talking about someone else.

He stood up.

“Listen, Lloyd, I know this is hard to hear, and we have counselors who can help you, and of course we’ll run some more tests, but this is the situation we’re facing here,” he said. “And we need to be, er, a bit proactive about this. A glioblastoma as fast-moving as yours, well, we’re going to run into some cognitive issues sooner than you might be expecting.”

My eyes finally shifted from the picture to him. “Cognitive issues?”

“Uh, you know, we can talk about that later.”

“But not too much later,” I said. My legs were getting back under me again.

He put his hand out to shake mine. It was time for me to leave, for him to let me do the next part on my own. “No,” he said. “Not too much later.”

I stood up. My vision focused. My head cleared, or at least it felt like it did.

I looked down at the floor. My feet were still there. I was a little surprised.

“So basically what you’re telling me,” I said, “is that I’m fucked.”

Dr. Lipsey chuckled. I didn’t mind. I was not against a chuckle right there.

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re fucked.”

I shook his hand again, and then I left. I didn’t call anyone. I just drove to the precinct, sat at my desk for about twenty minutes, then got in my cruiser and decided to drive. I came to the intersection of I-85 and I-285. I looked up. And then I pulled over. And now here I am.

Are you looking? Do you really see?

### 3.

The hood of the cruiser is still warm. The fan's still running, trying to cool the engine down. It's hot out. I'd say it's unseasonably hot for September, but this is just how hot Georgia is in September now, and will surely remain for the rest of my life, and my son's life, and his son's life. Every year's just gonna get a little bit worse.

How many times have I looked at Spaghetti Junction? Thousands—has to be. I used to sit traffic duty out here when I first joined the force. It's always bumper-to-bumper here, especially if you're trying to get on I-285. The McNeil family house is in the Old Fourth Ward, so I'm not usually up this far north, but Jessica grew up in Athens, so every time we'd go see her family, we'd get stuck right here trying to get back to the city.

How many times did I sit in Bertha, my beloved Big Bertha, my light-blue 1992 Chevrolet Caprice, the indestructible monster I still drive today, right here at this interchange, with Jessica and Bishop sitting silently, waiting out the traffic while not really seeing a thing around me? How much did I miss? How much energy—how much time!—did I waste here? For *nothing*. I did not appreciate the family in my car, and I did not think about how someday we would be a family no more. I did not think about time on this earth and how fleeting it is. I did not think about how it looks up there, the stunning beauty of all that concrete and asphalt and human ingenuity, how truly beautiful it is, how truly beautiful it all is and, I realize now, always has been. I just sat there, caught up in dumb bullshit, paying attention only to things that do not matter, as life and hope—and beauty!—glided right past me.

And now, idiot, it's too late.

“Hey, Lloyd, that you?”

A cop, one who apparently knows me by name, has pulled up behind me, which is probably what I would have done had I come across a man in khakis

and a short-sleeved button-up sitting on top of a police car alongside the freeway in the middle of rush-hour traffic.

He peers at me behind his Oakley sunglasses and cocks his head slightly to the left.

“You all right, man? Uh, what you up to out here?”

I’ve met Morgan a couple of times, Chris is his name, I think, and he is a friendly enough fellow, but it’s fair to say if you were to rank all the people in my life that I’d want to be the first person I saw after I found out I’m going to be dead in three months, he’d be unlikely to top the list.

I turn to him.

“I . . . I . . .” The words will not come. Have I even spoken before? Did I ever know how? I suddenly am not sure.

Morgan lowers his Oakleys. His eyes are kind.

“Ah, Lloyd,” he says, and he extends his hand to me. I take it, and he eases me off the hood. “Let’s get you out of this heat.”

My feet hit the asphalt, which cracks a bit as two pebbles stick to the bottom of my shoe. I look at him.

“Look at it, Morgan,” I say, pointing to that maze of roads in the sky. “Isn’t it incredible? Isn’t it just the most amazing thing you’ve ever seen?”