TEXAS SWING

Leonard was reviving Ross McCutcheon's crashed computer when his cell phone chimed. In a low, gruff voice his sister Ellen let him know their mother had died. She wanted the whole family to share in the funeral expenses and be present for the service as well.

The news wasn't unexpected but the torrent of grief that swept over Leonard was. By now McCutcheon, the marketing VP, was impatiently smacking his gum. Despite the anvil in his chest Leonard finished up, then went upstairs to his boss' office and told him he wasn't feeling well. He drove to his Sacramento apartment, canceled a dinner date for that evening, and booked a flight for Houston the next day.

He hadn't been back to Texas in years and it was mainly for Ellen's sake that he went now. Being the oldest, and living closest to their mother—and being Ellen—she'd taken her in as her Alzheimer's worsened and tended to her every need until the end. In Leonard's eyes Ellen was, and always had been, head of the family. The day after the funeral he joined his five brothers and sisters around the oversized coffee table in Ellen's living room. Leonard squirmed as he tried to relate to all that was being said about the deceased. Could these touching, humorous stories truly be about *his* mother?

Only when someone referred to their mother as a bewildering potpourri of contradictions did he nod in agreement. Bandied about were other disparate terms: principled, strait-laced, devout, naive, vengeful, tough old bird. Ellen told how their mother had grown up poor on an East Texas sharecropper's farm; Faith how she'd met their dad, an oilfield roughneck, when she served him a cherry Coke as an eighteen-year-old drugstore soda jerk;

Martin how she considered cornbread immersed in a glass of buttermilk a delicacy to be eaten with a spoon; Sara Lou how their mom and dad loved drinking beer and dancing in honky-tonks. Keith got the most laughs with his story about their mother getting a ticket in downtown Houston for making an illegal left turn. By the time the cop finished with her she'd wet her pants in fear of going to jail.

At mention of that word the room grew quiet and they all avoided looking at Leonard.

After a noisy, sumptuous brunch, they began leaving, some driving, some flying, headed back to their homes in different states. Ellen's husband Deke drove off to his barbershop. Ellen hustled Mark and Susan—excited to be staying at Grandma's an extra week—out to the screened-in back porch to eat homemade ice-cream and chocolate cake and watch the hummingbirds feed. She'd persuaded Leonard to stay over a day or two as well—they had so much to catch up on. Over coffee in the kitchen she talked about their dad and how sorry she was that Leonard never got to know him.

All of this wore on Leonard. He grew restless and told his sister he'd like to drive over to the old neighborhood and see the changes after thirty years. She'd love to go with him, she said, except for the grandkids. She assured Leonard he wouldn't recognize much and asked him to pick up her blood pressure prescription she'd called in earlier to Walmart.

As usual Ellen was right. What had once been woods and fields, rural mailboxes and gravel driveways along a winding country road were now fast food restaurants, housing developments, apartment and office buildings along a heavily-traveled four-lane.

Leonard parked his rental car in the parking lot of a bustling shopping center and

walked to the edge of the pavement, lured by a glimpse through the trees of a rotting foot bridge spanning a sluggish creek bisecting an overgrown park. Recalling a similar park from his boyhood, the familiar concrete picnic tables and rusting swings, he realized the shopping center had to be located on the former site of Fairwinds Trailer Park.

Thus oriented, Leonard envisioned the street layout in the once sprawling trailer park, though minus even a twinge of nostalgia. The "trailer trash" label pinned on them by kids living in houses and apartments still stung. The day he graduated from high school and joined the Air Force had felt like a release from prison. How was he to know that in barely a year he'd be confined to a real prison called Leavenworth?

Curiosity propelled Leonard through the park and out onto the tree-lined streets on the other side. As a paper boy he'd once trudged these same streets, smoking Luckys and pitching rolled papers onto yards and porches. He located the old community softball field, now a used car lot, as well as the grocery store that cashed his mother's Social Security checks, now a Chinese restaurant. James Bowie Elementary School had been replaced by a building supplies center. His best friend's former home was a beauty parlor. Randy Helzer—old randy-Randy—what would he be up to these days? Still hooked on *Dungeons and Dragons*? Still bearing a torch for Linda Ronstadt? Still hiding in his bathroom to ogle the carnal delights in *Hustler*?

Eventually Leonard made his way back to the shopping center and entered the Super Walmart. When the young Hispanic woman at the pharmaceutical counter informed him Ellen's prescription wasn't quite ready, he went looking for the computer department.

Dawdling before a blank screen, he imagined a schematic of Fairwinds Trailer Park overlaying a map of the shopping center. The very spot he stood on could be 370 Fourth Avenue.

He closed his eyes and called up an image of his mother standing on the cement patio in front of their blue and white trailer, hands on hips, gossiping with Iris Hernandez while their fox terrier Bingo rolled around in the grass. Blinking away the discomfiting vision, he moved over to the CD display. His mother had loved playing those old 78s from the thirties and forties, the ones he poked unkind fun at: *Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys*. The stubby bandleader strutting like a baton twirler in his flashy boots and big Stetson, prattling above the guitars, fiddles, and brass, crowing that ridiculous *Ahhh-Haaa!* that made Leonard gnash his teeth.

"Put on some *Three Dog Night* or *Stones*!" he'd wail.

Without looking up from her ironing, his mother would snap back, "You go jump in the lake, boy."

Her favorite song was "San Antonio Rose"; whenever it played she liked to sing along. Leonard judged her voice to be as strong and true as any voice in the Wills aggregation, though he never told her that. Once when she started singing he couldn't resist clownishly joining in, but his mother misunderstood. Instead of protesting his mockery, she exulted in their impromptu duet. Taking pity on her, Leonard finished the song straight, even erupting with a passable yodel at the end. Many times after that his mother tried to coax him into joining her in a repeat performance, but Leonard would recoil in mortification.

He worked his way along the CD rack to the Ws. Not expecting to find anything by the

neanderthal Bob Wills, he was surprised when he did. Evidently somebody still liked Texas Swing—at least in Texas. He was actually tempted to buy one. But did he really want a reminder of those troublesome years, living in a cramped trailer, his mother scraping by on her meager monthly checks, fretting over every expense, browbeating or strapping him anytime she felt he stepped out of line?

He put the CD back.

But the memories refused to depart. One evening, not long after he turned thirteen, he said to Ellen, "She never straps y'all like she does me, how come?" They were strolling through the park at dusk. Ellen was trying to talk him out of running away from home.

"Because we do what she says," Ellen said. "If Daddy was here, things would be different. *You'd* be different. Mama has her hands full. She relied on Daddy."

Leonard was three when his dad dropped dead shooting eight-ball with some oilfield buddies. A defective heart, the autopsy showed. "What was he like?" he asked Ellen.

She slapped a mosquito. Ellen looked a lot like their mother: petite and perky, yet with an underlying softness their mother lacked. "Well . . . you'd never talk back to Daddy the way you do Mama. You might sass him once, but not twice."

"Was he mean?"

"I wouldn't say that, Lenny. He didn't tolerate nonsense is all."

"Was he mean to her?"

"To Mama? She knew not to give him any guff if that's what you're asking. He never hit her or anything. Hard-nosed is what he was."

"Am *I* like him?"

Ellen paused to consider her baby brother. "Not really. You're more like Mama."

Hearing this rocked Leonard back on his heels. "You think so?"

"For sure. That's a big part of the problem."

"Know how I see it?" Leonard asked. "Mama don't love me like she does y'all."

"That's not true. She loves us all the same."

"Then why is she always on my back, Ellie?"

"'Cause you disrespect her. You do stuff the rest of us never did—smoke cigarettes and pot, skip school to sneak off to those rock concerts, shun God." Ellen started out again and Leonard had to hurry to catch up. "The rest of us, we were easy for Mama. You're a challenge. Mama fears for your future. She's trying to straighten you out for your own good. She only knows one way."

"She strapped me right in front of Randy," Leonard said. "My best friend saw me shamed."

Ellen nodded. "I heard about it. She was upset that you smarted off to her in front of Randy."

"I'm big enough I could yank that belt away and use it on her."

"True enough. And don't you ever try it."

"I can't forgive her for what she done."

"That's too bad," Ellen said. "One day you'll regret it."

Following basic training near San Antonio, Leonard was sent to a base near LA. Being

part of the California scene made him feel worldly. He was in that mode when, to earn a few extra bucks, he sold a small amount of meth procured from a sergeant to a buddy who turned out to be an informant.

Leonard confessed to what the baby-faced lieutenant handling his defense assured him was a minor infraction. Along with the sergeant and several other enlisted men, he was court-martialed. He was eighteen, new to the base, with no real friends to vouch for him. He was dumbfounded when the prosecuting officer labeled him a key participant in a major Air Force drug ring, a crime made all the more reprehensible because the base was part of the Strategic Air Command.

Leonard was tall and solid, sharp featured with heavy-lidded eyes and a bent nose from playing football. His size and cocksure demeanor elicited little sympathy from the panel of officers gathered to judge him. He was sentenced to five years. He was released for good behavior after the worst year of his life.

A bad conduct discharge crushed his dream of attending college on the G.I. Bill. Crushed his self image. He was ashamed to face his family, especially his mother. "Your daddy was awarded a Bronze Star at Inchon, a Purple Heart at Pusan," she wrote in one of her letters. "Now you got him twisting and turning in his grave."

After prison he lost contact with them, all except Ellen. For a time he hitchhiked around California, washing dishes, bagging burgers, sweating buckets in dusty, heat-drenched fields, thankful to be free. Until one day he lucked into a job in the shipping department of a small manufacturing company near Sacramento.

The company happened to be in the process of computerizing its operation. Leonard was fascinated by computers. The big-hearted divorcee who ran the department took him under her wing and taught him a lot, not just about computers. She told the upper brass Leonard was a natural, with an inborn knack for troubleshooting the often recalcitrant machines. They gave him a chance to put his talent to work. Over the years he earned a reputation as a technical guru that made him invaluable to the company and restored his self respect.

He told himself it didn't matter if he never saw his mother again. If it didn't matter to her, why should it matter to him? Ellen promised him it would matter someday. To understand his mother, she said, he first needed to understand himself. Leonard wasn't sure what she meant by that.

But the longer he and his mother were apart the more confused he became about where the blame lay. He could fault her obstinance for their alienation, which he did, but he couldn't ignore the opposing force of his own obstinance.

"What do you want from her?" Ellen asked him at some point.

It was a question he'd often asked himself, and for which he now had a ready answer: he wanted to hear his mother tell him she forgave him. He wanted her to reach out and tell him she loved him. He believed, having paid for his sins, he deserved a full pardon from his mother—even an apology.

"Why can't she call or write and admit the wrongness of some of the things she did?" he asked Ellen.

"She might ask you the same thing," Ellen said. "And tell me this—when was the last

time you told Mama you loved *her*?"

Leonard couldn't answer that question off the top of his head. And he doubted it originated with Ellen. He had to suspect she'd discussed him with his mother just as often as she'd discussed his mother with him.

At last the day arrived when the maturity and wisdom of middle-age freed him to concede that his mother had done her best by him, considering her circumstances. He was now prepared to confess this to her in the hope it would give them a fresh start. And so it was with a massive gush of magnanimity that he phoned Ellen.

"It's time to end this," he said. "Put Mama on the phone."

But Ellen sadly told him he was a little too late. "Mama can hardly talk these days, Lenny. And even if she could talk she wouldn't know who she was talking to."

He was in one of the main aisles when he noticed a woman in a side aisle who looked remarkably like Miss Swarthout, the English teacher he'd had a crush on in high school. As she set a box of Cheerios in her cart their eyes met. With a jolt Leonard realized she was younger than he was.

Strikingly handsome with thick brown hair, olive complexion and longish nose, she had piercingly intelligent eyes. She wore a smart gray suit, not the sort of attire you'd expect a Walmart Saturday shopper to wear. Leonard's smile had the effect of erasing the woman's smile. Momentarily her attention returned to the cereal shelves, and when she glanced back to find Leonard still staring, she frowned.

Leonard spun around and hurried off.

He killed some time in men's clothing before wandering into the toy section. With Mark and Susan in mind, he was looking over the vast array of toys when the three boys came along.

The oldest boy was maybe ten or eleven, the other two seven or eight. Their similarity in build and features, their stylish haircuts, prompted Leonard to peg them as brothers. Lanky, bright-eyed, clean-cut, they exuded mischievous energy. From the look of their clothes and brand-name sneakers, they came from affluence. Led by the oldest, they stormed past Leonard, ignoring him as they manhandled every other toy in the aisle, then tossed it back with contemptuous giggling. If a toy missed the shelf and landed on the floor they left it there.

An elderly woman pushing a cart rounded the corner and shuffled down the aisle. Tall, with a dignified bearing and a smooth, brown, skull-like face, she wore a long flowered dress that came to her ankles and hung loose on her gaunt shoulders. Huge round red earrings dangled from equally huge ears. The matching red silk scarf wrapped around her head was meant, Leonard suspected, to conceal a bald pate.

Arriving at her cart, the oldest boy pulled up in mock annoyance as if she'd purposely impeded his progress. The other two boys plowed into him in the manner of Keystone Cops.

"Watch yoself, children," the woman said, almost under her breath.

The older boy gave the cart an indignant shove and staggered backward a few steps in clownish recoil.

"Y'all be careful," the woman said, a little louder.

The boy's impish eyes grew large. He fluttered his hands to sham terror, drawing shrill

tee-hees from the other two.

"Move on out my way now."

The two younger boys started to go around. But the older boy stood firm with feet spread, stretching out both arms to restrain them and block the old woman's path.

She shook her head in weary disapproval. "Y'all move on out my road, hear?"

This brought to the boy's face a look of cunning malevolence. Leonard was now abreast of them. The old woman waited for him to pass. Seeing she was about to yield territory that was rightfully hers, Leonard's ire rose.

The old woman's cart was full of groceries and a number of cheap plastic toys. Reaching into the basket, the boy grabbed a red, white, and blue rocket ship the size of a cucumber. Making a zooming sound he sent the rocket sailing down the aisle. In dismay the old woman watched the toy crash and go clattering along the floor.

As the boy reached into the basket again, Leonard grabbed his throwing arm and yanked it back. With a startled yelp he gawped at the large man towering over him.

"Go pick that up," Leonard ordered. "Put it back in the cart. Then apologize to this lady." He held onto the boy's arm a moment longer before releasing it.

Massaging the spot where Leonard's fingers had sank into his flesh, the boy pooched out his lower lip and minced meekly over to the rocket. He bent down as if to retrieve it, then took off like a sprinter leaving the block, chortling over his shoulder.

"Fuck face!"

The other two boys darted past Leonard in hot pursuit.

Leonard went over and picked up the toy.

"Thank you, suh," the old woman said.

"You'll need to replace it." Leonard showed her a crack in the plastic.

"I do thank you kindly."

Still fuming, Leonard made another tour of the store, keeping an eye out for the boys, hoping to see them in the company of an adult and report their behavior.

Then he had another, troubling thought.

What sort of parents would they have?

He sometimes regretted not marrying and having children himself. Until he seriously considered the challenges of being a parent and was forced to acknowledge the ironic truth—he'd raise his kids the way he'd been raised. Acceptable as parental discipline might've been in his mother's day, anything resembling it these days was generally viewed as harsh, even criminal.

What would his mother do seeing unruly kids being disrespectful, running amok in public places while their parents pretended not to notice, or worse, smiled with glum helplessness? Would she confront them? Would she give their parents an earful of stern advice? How would *they* react? And what would Leonard say to that boy's parents when the boy complained about the big man grabbing him? Hurting him? Talking mean? Scaring him? If he was anything like Leonard at that age, he'd spin his story like a top. Leonard would be forced to admit he'd lost his temper, gone too far.

Maybe it was best to drop the matter lest he find himself in handcuffs, reliving his worst

nightmare.

On his way back to the prescription counter he ducked into the men's room. He was washing his hands when the boy emerged from one of the toilets. Leonard caught a glimpse of him in the mirror at the same time the boy spotted Leonard and slipped out the door.

Leonard took his time drying his hands, hoping the boy would be gone when he left the men's room. He saw no sign of him as he continued to the prescription counter. He picked up Ellen's pills and was on his way out of the store when he saw the boy standing near the exit. Crowded around him with expressions of concern were his two brothers and a woman—the same woman Leonard had briefly mistaken for Miss Swarthout.

Her cart, brimming with purchases in cloth bags, had been shoved to one side as she addressed a man in a white shirt and black bowtie. He wore a name tag. The oldest boy, who'd seemed composed enough in the men's room, now pointed tearfully at Leonard. The woman looked hard at the man her son was singling out and her eyebrows arched in recognition.

Opening her cell phone, she tapped out a number.

Leonard slowed his pace. His stomach quivered, his legs turned sluggish. He couldn't veer in another direction, that would seem like an admission of guilt. It took immense self control to keep his feet on a forward path. Closing her cell phone, the woman again spoke to the man wearing the name tag. He quick-stepped over to Leonard.

"Sir," he said, "my name is Rankin. I'm the store manager. I'll have to ask you to wait here until the police arrive."

"The police?" Leonard had yet to overcome his fear of the law. He feigned shock as his

mind scrambled to respond. What was expected of him in this situation? Indignation? Outrage? Anger? What?

"The lady called them. The lady over there. Her son made an accusation."

"*Accusation?*"

"Correct."

"What sort of accusation?"

The manager, short and bald with a fringe of blond hair over his ears, pursed his lips before answering. "Were you just in the men's room . . . with that boy?"

This time Leonard had no need to *feign* shock. This wasn't about what happened in the toy aisle. This was worse—much worse.

"I was just in the men's room," he said, straining to keep his voice steady. "I did see the boy, though briefly. I certainly wasn't *with* him, whatever that means."

The manager had trouble meeting Leonard's panicky gaze. "Well, he claims you were. What he's accusing you . . . his mother is quite upset."

Leonard's animal instincts, fine tuned in prison, were now on full alert. Customers in the checkout line watched intently as he shifted his attention to the woman. He needed to take some action before the police arrived—before he got sucked into some boiling caldron of chicanery.

He went over to the woman. Her eyes turned a murderous green as she took a step to confront him. Behind the oldest boy's tears Leonard detected a sly smile. He stopped and lifted his hand like a traffic guard.

"He's lying," he said without raising his voice.

The woman blinked. "How dare you!"

"Your son is lying, ma'am."

The conviction in his tone appeared to rattle her, though only momentarily. "Do you think for one minute . . . listen, sir—you listen to me—my son does not lie."

"I'm afraid he does." Leonard gave the boy a sharp look. Shoving his hands in his pockets, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, the boy turned away.

"Why would he lie about something so disgusting?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Leonard said. "I don't care to know since nothing happened. Not a word, not a glance passed between your son and me in that men's room. I repeat—nothing happened, nothing at all."

Her cheeks flushed pink. "Then please explain why he'd accuse a perfect stranger—"

"I'm no stranger. Not to your son." Now she looked confused. Leonard added, "And I think I know why he's lying."

"Oh? Well, maybe you'd care to share that?"

"Why not ask him? Wouldn't it be better if he told you?"

"The police are on their way. Would you rather explain it to them?" Her mouth was set, her nostrils dilated. "I'm waiting, sir."

"Fine, fine, fine. Let's do it then. Your son was rude to an elderly woman. Extremely rude. He was clowning around but he was rude. I reprimanded him. I might've been a little rough . . . I admit that."

"And where is this person? I'd like to hear it from her."

Leonard looked all around. He didn't see the old woman. He glanced at his watch. "This happened a while ago. In the toy department."

"I see. And how do we know you're not the one lying?"

"Ask *him*. You're his mother. You'll know if he's telling the truth. Any mother would. Just ask him."

Her eyes flicked from Leonard's face to her son's.

"Your other two boys witnessed everything," Leonard said. "All I'm asking is that you get the truth out of one of them."

Still she hesitated. The two younger boys stared at the floor. Would this mother defend her son no matter what? Smothering all doubt in her need to verify a lie? Wasn't that how it went these days?

Leonard turned to the boy. "Young man, this is serious. Your lie could send me to prison. You could ruin my life just because I ticked you off. Is that what you want?"

The boy rubbed his nose and stared straight ahead. Leonard could see he wasn't buying it. The woman studied Leonard, then her oldest son. Finally she looked over at the glass doors where the police would soon appear. "Wait here," she said to Leonard.

She took the oldest boy's hand and nodded at the other two to follow. Seeking a semblance of privacy they went over to the tunnel behind the lines of linked shopping carts. With his tongue clasped between his front teeth, Leonard watched the woman question the oldest boy first, then the two younger boys. His heart thudded against the wall of his chest.

What sort of mother would she turn out to be?

He remembered the first time a teacher marched him to Mr. Burnside's office to be paddled. He couldn't recall what grade he was in—second or third—not even the offense. Only that he'd rushed home after school sobbing over the injustice, swearing the teacher had made the whole thing up. His mother waited, jaw clenched, for him to finish his elaborate lie before ushering him into the back bedroom. Without a word she took his dad's leather belt—kept for just this purpose—from a nail in the closet and gave him a much harder whipping than Mr. Burnside had.

What sort of mother was Leonard dealing with?

When the two cops arrived, the woman went to meet them in the vestibule between the sliding glass doors. For several minutes she commanded their attention, at times gesturing with nervous animation, smoothing her hair, shaking her head, smiling ruefully. The cops treated her with deference. Not once did they look Leonard's way. Several eavesdroppers lingered briefly before moving on.

At last the oldest cop turned to the oldest boy. Seeing the boy's shoulders slump as they conferred, Leonard's hopes rose. Until the cop put his hand on the boy's arm in a fatherly fashion. They all turned and started toward him: the cops, the mother, her three sons.

Leonard tried to swallow and couldn't.

Later he'd look back on this moment and recall being gripped by the same queasy terror he'd felt upon hearing his sentence pronounced following the court martial. The Miss Swarthout lookalike avoided his eyes as she retrieved her cart. Walking stiff and straight, chin

up, she hurried out of the store, making her oldest son go on ahead pushing the cart.

The oldest cop approached Leonard with a bland smile. Tired blue eyes in a ruddy face appraised him sympathetically. "Sir, you're free to go," he said. "Sorry for your trouble."

"Good Lord," Rankin said. "The least she might've done is apologize. That was awful."

The cop shrugged and turned to leave.

"Good Lord," Rankin repeated softly.

"It's okay," Leonard said. "She did enough."

Shaking his head, Rankin walked away.

Leonard felt weightless as he glided out of the store. He could barely restrain himself from skipping across the asphalt like a carefree child. He heard himself whistling some nameless tune.

No, not nameless.

Quite familiar in fact. His mother would recognize it.

Deep within my heart lies a melody, a song of old San Antone . . .

And then he began to sing, surprised at how readily the words tumbled back to him from the past, how easily they rolled off his lips, as if it were once again ironing day at 370 Fourth Avenue.

Startled passersby looked his way. One whispered suspiciously to another. But Leonard kept on singing, pleased with the power of his own voice booming like a celestial choir across the parking lot, deep-throated, in perfect pitch, each word expressed with purest clarity,

meant only for the ghostly ears of an audience of one.

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