

REFLECTION

A sunbeam from the skylight split their corner table in half, the man in morning sunlight, the woman partially shadowed, the two of them, staring at each other like the rest of the world was invisible. Her face was soft, eyelashes long, eyebrows like French curves, cheeks powdered and tear-stained. He was weathered, not old, a man who had worked outdoors, who had met the blistering sun and knew the pounding rain. Their meeting looked private and difficult, something I'd been through myself, but what caught my eye was in her open purse, close to her foot, a pearl handle gun jammed next to a snap-shut make-up case. She didn't seem the pistol-packing type.

The place was a dive, and how I arrived was just another event in the downhill slide of my life. I'd been driving all night on the Interstate coming from Houston, heading to Chicago. Eyelids were heavy and the traffic fast. About fifty miles outside of Kansas City, a pothole knocked a six-drawer oak chest out the back of my open trailer. The chest was part of a divorce settlement and in the rearview mirror its pieces lay scattered across the road. A woman driving a Ranchero honked and jerked her thumb backwards as if I hadn't noticed. When I finally pulled over, the chest was more than a mile back. With unpaid tickets and a felony arrest for ignoring a restraining order, I couldn't afford another offense. I slammed the steering wheel with my palm and shouted obscenities when flashing lights from a Kansas state trooper raced down the opposite side. I exited at Wellville deciding to head north on smaller roads.

Wellville was five miles off the Interstate, a forgettable place—a gas station, a bar. and a flashing yellow light at a dusty crossroad. Parched wheat fields stretched in all directions. Thinking about coffee—bitter, black and thick—lured me to the Up and Downer, a low single-story clapboard building needing paint and a new roof. A whirlwind stirred up a column of dry dirt as it twirled through the unpaved parking lot. A rusty red pickup sat in front, with an old

Chevy next to it. Black exhaust piped from a grumbling tractor trailer off to the side. I parked out back—in case some nosey trooper wandered by.

Inside the café door, I grabbed a local paper, the front page yellowed. About a dozen Formica tables filled the place, and a counter lined with swivel stools faced a flattop grill. The aroma of sizzling bacon permeated the air. The waitress, carrying a tray loaded with pancakes, looked over and said, “Anywhere honey.” She delivered the food to a foursome on the other side of the room.

I took a seat with an unobstructed view of the parking lot and near the mysterious couple. While the shadows played on that corner space, I opened the paper. ‘Wife Shoots Husband’ was on the yellowed front page. Relationships that end badly leave the pieces scattered, like the flesh of an animal torn apart... or an old dresser shattered on the road. Over the headlines, my furtive glances in their direction soon turned into an outright stare.

The man had thick silvered hair and crackling skin like buffalo hide before it’s sent to the tannery. His eyes lay embedded in their sockets, a nose crinkled and misshapen. His boots had scuffed rounded toes, the hard leather dinged, spur brackets attached to the heels—possibly a roper or rodeo hack. She had a sweet sad face with long light hair falling in wisps down her back. A thin line of blondish fuzz on her upper lip contrasted red lipstick. Her dress fit tight, revealing a shapely body. She wore a cowboy hat and had a gold ring on her left hand. Perhaps she’d come back from a stay in the city. She reminded me of my ex, Dana—our divorce finalized two months ago. Dana wore the same type hat and hated that blondish fuzz.

When the cowboy extended his fingers, the woman pulled back—she didn’t want to hold hands. They looked each other direct in the eyes and it didn’t seem friendly or a meeting for a casual breakfast.

His wide rim skimmer had fallen next to his boot, and it lay there like an obedient dog. The leather crown had a feather tucked into the band and an old coin embedded in front. The hat wore the deep scars of its owner like a fingerprint.

I didn't notice the waitress standing over me until she rapped her pen on the order pad and cleared her throat. "Funny kind of weather," she said.

"Yeah," I replied. "Funny. I'll take one of those Up and Downers... and a coffee, dreadnaught black." She wrote the order on her pad. Her mouth shaped like a side wheeling quarter moon.

"Dreadnaught," she repeated, thrusting her hip out. "Is that one or two words?" She walked to the counter and yelled, "gimme a Downer and last night's coffee." She turned and eyed me. I puffed out a smile.

The couple talked in a low whisper, the conversation secondary to the way their stares locked on each other. The woman sat straight as a board, with her legs crossed in a womanly fashion. His sun-browed hand searched for hers, but she kept her manicured fingers curled by her plate.

The waitress brought my coffee. I sipped bitter black, my gaze traveling across the vaulted ceiling down the back wall to where they sat. The woman reached down to her open purse, sliding her hand over the weapon, like the reassurance one gets from petting a dog, then pulled out a tissue, but didn't snap the purse shut. She wiped a tear, then twisted the plain gold band off her ring finger, laid it on the table and pushed it toward him with the tip of her glossy red fingernail.

It was the same style gold band I'd given Dana, ten years back and two kids later. I had slipped it onto her finger—for better... or whatever. Dana didn't finish her nails or have fancy

hair. She had a temper though. A year ago, she threw the ring at me in a fit of rage. It bounced off my shoulder and rolled under the kitchen table. It might still be there.

The cowboy talked low. I could imagine the drawl, the excuses, the if only's and what ifs. I'd been through all that. Sun streaming from the skylight thrust her side of the table in light. Her chin quivered, but she listened saying nothing.

I gazed out the window watching a John Deere with six-foot tires roll down the road in front of the café, leaving a blaze of dust behind. No cops, no traffic. The waitress got my attention when she clunked down a bowl of grits, eggs cooked sunny side up, then flipped downside and fried in bacon grease—they smelled like pig.

She pointed at the headlines of my old newspaper. "Pretty sad."

"Yeah," I replied. "The reporter got it all wrong."

"Listen honey, no one gets marriage right."

I raised my cup and she poured another steaming Joe. Her glance bounced from my hand to my eyes. I had seen that look many times. My right hand reacted to the muscle tension of my forearm; fingers made of silicone held the cup steady. Prosthetics are amazing these days.

"Hey, you a vet?"

"Why?" I asked.

"Free coffee."

"I'm a veteran of marriage," I replied.

"Ha!" Her mouth turned to an upward crescent. "That gives all us married types purple hearts, don't it?"

The cook called order up, and she walked back to the counter.

I angled my chair, forked greasy eggs, and kept one eye on that corner table, the other on the road in front of the café. Out the window the rusty red pickup stood like an old hobbled mare who had seen her days. In the window's distorted reflection, the woman cradled her head in her hands. I turned toward their table to find her tears falling on golden pancakes. The cowboy sat silent watching her like a kicker watches over a wounded steer. He caught her finger tips, pressing them tenderly—it wasn't desperation, it was affection. She pulled away. If there was something special between them, it was now a dream of what they once had, which stirred a memory.

Dana's fingers were long like hers but not painted fancy. We'd go drinking at Hoppers, a local bar where the music was too loud and the ropers would come to get drunk and dance with the women. That night, Dana drank beer, I drank Coopers, a local whiskey, straight up. When a young roper's eyes cruised over her body, I covered her hand with mine. She pulled it away. I seized her fingers, like catching a jumping bull frog. "Let it be, Tanner. I ain't in no mood to hold hands." she said. When she tried to take her hand back, I twisted her fingers together, tight. Our eyes met, hers defiant as hell, mine were alcohol stupid. I wouldn't let go. She didn't budge, just glared, pulling to free her hand. I squeezed tighter. She jerked her hand trying to get her fingers back. I pressed like a vice clamping down on a piece of pipe. I could feel those tiny finger bones crack and crunch under the pressure. She didn't let out a sound, her eyes iced over, never left mine. Then I twisted those fingers so hard my hand shook and my teeth clenched. She buried the pain in the sneer on her lips. When she slammed a steak knife into the wooden table, next to my wrist, I let out a long breath, slugged my drink, and released her fingers. They were red and purple and she couldn't uncross them. She poured her cold beer over her wound soaking the burger and fries on her plate. Then she pushed away from the table, said she had to go to the

women's room. I ordered another round and waited. She never came back. I searched the bar but she'd cabbed it home. I got drunker, then went home myself. Dana didn't show up till the next morning, a bandage around her hand. I'd broken two fingers. She called me pathetic. I said all marriages have their spats. Too much had happened between us to make any apology believable.

When I woke from my memory, I'd been staring at the cowboy's table the whole time. He must've sensed some kind of danger because he swiveled about with such speed our eyes met like a Joe Lewis fist in the face. His bright blues, devoid of fear, pierced through all the lies my own eyes were hiding. I felt naked, caught in the act of my voyeurism. His power made me shiver, a sweat broke under my arms.

My head dropped, eyes following a line to the floor, to her open purse. The glint of that pearl handle pistol placed so inconspicuously you would've thought it was a piece of jewelry. Like a snake slithering across the floor, my gaze retreated back to my own table, the residue of the cowboy's glare still on my skin. I picked over the eggs, the grits turned to thick paste. A sad, sour feeling welled from the pit of my stomach. Dana and I kept a similar gun in that top chest drawer, under her pink panties. I gave it to her for home protection when I was on the road.

The waitress walked to their table and laid the bill on their table then headed to the foursome across the room. The cowboy reached for his wallet. The woman held her head in one hand, the other dropped to her side and slid into the purse. Pushing past the gun, she probed the bottom, coming up empty handed. On the second try, her fingers slid around the implement, grasping the trigger. I held my breath when she cocked the hammer and lifted it to her lap, slipping the weapon under her napkin. I sat riveted, the climax of a murder-mystery unraveling before me, one I didn't want to see.

The cowboy's lips mimed words I yearned to hear. His eyes never left hers, but held her within the intensity of their own light. The waitress asked if I wanted more coffee. I held up my cup just to get rid of her. When she left, I glanced out the window. Two cops had pulled in and parked next to the rusty red pickup.

The woman laid one hand over the napkin covered gun; the other hand wiped a tear. She seemed to have aged ten years. The cowboy's head tilted as he pushed the ring in her direction, his mouth still moving. She shook her head, lips pursed, forearm muscles restrained. I had no desire to see the ending of the drama—bullets don't always go where they're supposed to. I grabbed my hat and headed for the register.

My fingers nervously tapped on the counter by the door waiting for the waitress to total my bill.

"You all right, mister? You look upset. Your meal OK? Coffee's free."

"Yeah, thanks. Coffee was fine." As I fumbled in my left pocket for a few bills, my car keys crashed to the floor. I slapped a couple of fins on the counter and waved off the change. When a hand tapped my shoulder, I jumped, swiveling about. The cowboy's face hovered inches from mine. The lines on his cheeks were more like crevices, eroded by wind and parched dry.

He raised his hand, a home rolled cigarette pinched between his fingers and my keys dangling. His lips parted — "these yours?"

I could see my reflection adrift within his irises, and it scared me that I no longer had a rudder. I acted as though I didn't understand English.

"Thanks," I stammered. The door swung open and the two cops clomped in.

The cowboy struck a match, lit the home-roll and took a long draw, then let go a cloud that puffed white and smelled of sage. He leaned back with his elbows against the glass counter.

One cop tipped the leather rim of his hat and said, “Mornin’.”

The cowboy gave him a side-eye glance and replied by taking another puff.

“We’re looking for an out-of-towner, pulling a trailer.” the cop said, scanning the room.

“You seen anyone like that?”

The cowboy inhaled smoke like a toilet sucks water down a drain. “Can’t say that I have, officer.” Smoke trailed from his nose.

The cop eyed me as if I were guilty. “Who are you?”

My heart leapt into my throat. I was about to say, passing through, but the cowboy spoke first.

“He’s with me.”

The cop gave me a once over. His partner was already ordering at the counter. He raised a finger to his hat and ambled past, the holster hanging from his wide leather belt creaking along the way.

The cowboy took another drag and handed the waitress a twenty. “Keep it,” he said.

He took easy strides back to the corner table, hard heels thumping the painted cement floor, and I wondered if he knew what was waiting for him. She sat like a ballerina, her pose stiff yet graceful. The cowboy stood facing her, his back to the cops. The woman unfolded the napkin, grasped the gun and pointed it upward at his heart. He didn’t flinch, absorbing the confrontation with silence. If she was going to finish her mission, she would do it in front of witnesses. The world balanced on the quarter inch movement of a finger. For a long second, he waited, every action measured.

My heart thumped like a racehorse on a dirt track. The waitress behind the counter followed my stare to their corner table. Her mouth dropped open when she saw the gun. Her

hand went for the bell on the counter. I caught her wrist. Her eyes panicked. Putting my finger to my lips, I shook my head slightly. A sudden sound could set off a chain of events no one wanted. The foursome at the table with pancakes had stopped eating, their forks suspended in the air. The cops sat at the counter with their backs to the drama, laughing with the cook.

The weapon shook in the woman's hand. His mouth moved like a silent movie. He stood ready to receive whatever punishment she wished to allot. Straightening out her arm, she raised the barrel, the muzzle about a foot from his chest. The bullet wouldn't bother to lodge in his heart, it'd pass right through him and hit one of the cops on the other side of the room. He remained steady. Eyes unswerving. Her finger was tight around that trigger. If she twitched, the damn thing would go off—even if she didn't mean to. With quivering lips and tear flooded eyes, she looked down at the gun... then over at me. Her glance was more like the glare of a prison searchlight. But it was her grief that was blinding. Before I could duck, or drop to the floor, or even puff out a breath, I heard a gun go off. When I looked down at my outstretched arm, I saw the flesh and blood of my right hand. Tears welled and pain ripped through my body. I no longer stood in a little café in Wellville, but in my own kitchen.

Dana had held the weapon with her arm straight out. It was the pearl handle gun I'd given her for self-protection. I stood there like a jack-rabbit flushed out of his hole. Staring down the barrel, I demanded she put the gun away.

Instead, she lifted the weapon and aimed it at my chest. "It's over Tanner," she screamed. Her black eye flourished like mold on her face. Accusations flew in voices that didn't sound like either of us. She held up the restraining order. "Get out!"

I stood like a block of cold steel and put my hand up, palm vertical like a cop directing traffic. “Put the gun down!” I ordered, acting as if I was in charge. I took a step forward, then another. “Put it down, god dammit!”

Her arm stiffened, but her body shook. I’m not even sure she meant to pull the trigger. The bullet ripped through my palm. Hot steel shattered my wrist, coming out the other side. I went down like a floppy doll... hit the hard floor with a thump. Dana’s screaming echoed in my ears. I bled like a goat with its throat cut, pain branding my whole body. In that instant, there was no time and no world.

With flames in her eyes, the woman swiveled back to the cowboy. I held my prosthetic hand up, as if it would protect me from a six-hundred-mile-an-hour steel projectile. It only takes a second to change your life forever. There was no escape from the wily pain in her look, or that moment of outrage. The cowboy had stopped talking.

His soft gaze rested upon her like a fire hose putting out a blaze, outstretched fingers unfolded like the petals on a morning flower. After a paralytic moment, she turned the weapon sideward. Her lips were tight, eyes scorching. She grasped the table edge with her other hand. Stretching out her arm... she released the hammer and placed the pearl handle on his palm. The cowboy was solid like a mountain and didn’t move. He didn’t grasp it or try to hide it. The firearm lay there like an invitation, as if saying, are you sure? — a sacramental offering. Grief streamed from her downturned eyes. Picking up the open purse, the cowboy set it on the table and she fished out a tissue, dabbing her cheeks. He shoved the firearm in, snapped the purse shut, and gave it to her. I let out a long breath and lowered my prosthetic. The waitress put her elbows on the counter, head in her hands, and wept silently.

The woman pushed herself out from the seat, their faces so close I thought they'd kiss, but they didn't. The cowboy grabbed his beat-up Carhart jacket and slipped the ring into a side pocket. Shivers ran up and down my body, armpits dripping like I had just showered.

While the cops ate their tall stacks of pancakes and made jokes with the cook, the cowboy helped his companion into her coat. I was in awe of his respect. At the door, she briefly caught my eyes. I'd seen everything, but she didn't seem to care. I froze. She went through head up, purse slung over her shoulder, talcum and perfume following in her wake.

The cowboy paused in front of me and extended his right hand. I raised mine like a marionette on strings. People don't like to touch a prosthetic, but he shook it like it was real.

The home-roll dangled from his lips; eyes spring water clear.

"Better be careful," he said. "Big storm comin'."

Out the window a giant thunderhead was swirling above, but I don't think he was talking about weather. He put two fingers to the rim of his hat and disappeared through the doorway.

They drove off in that rusty red pickup, leaving a dust trail behind. I sped eastward down back roads where cops seldom travel, hoping to beat black clouds blowing from the west. Farm houses seemed like islands surrounded in an ocean of wheat.

I thought about that ring pushed back and forth across their table and about Dana's broken fingers. I thought about that old chest of drawers we shared for so many years. In front of a sign that read welcome to Missouri, I pulled over and got out. Lit up a cigarette. Cops won't go over state lines. Safety a hundred feet away. A breeze took wispy smoke through fields that gave way to corn. It's all dust if there's no water. My marriage had become a desert. I had told myself she was happy... we were happy, that she had a home and kids and should be grateful. It was all illusion.

Love wasn't an illusion for that cowboy, and I thought how little I knew about it. He had held his hand out asking for more than the weapon. I'm not sure he received a full pardon, but he still had both his hands... and his life. Whatever that cowboy said, it saved him and most likely his woman too. And maybe that's the point. He wasn't trying to save just himself.

I don't remember Dana tying a tourniquet on my arm or shoving me into the van. She drove crazy to the hospital, crying and pounding the steering wheel the whole way. "God Damn you, Tanner!" My arm lay bleeding in my lap, I couldn't move it. The bullet shattered every bone in my palm and wrist. That's how I lost my right hand. The police arrested her for assault and battery, but I didn't press charges. I did something worse. I said nothing. Just like my father, who would say nothing to me or my mother about what his heavy hand had done the night before. Not a damn word, and like my father, I said nothing about the times I hit Dana. I was treated at a small country hospital. She said nothing about her black eye, and no one asked.

I flicked my butt into the wind, kicked the trailer tire, and climbed into the van. The pitter-patter of rain filled the silence as the storm rolled in. My blood stained more than the front seat; it stained my entire life. Even after the shooting, possibilities sprang up right in front of me. She apologized and said she was sorry. We had kids; we'd have to work out custody, we'd have to talk, but for her the marriage was long over. I wallowed in self-pity and gave nothing in return. Not a damn thing. I knew how to go to work, make money, and fix a broken sink. But like my father, I had no idea about how broken I was or her desperation. The shooting tore off the veneer of an already shattered marriage. Yet, I blamed her and promised myself I would never give a pardon. If ever a soul could be darkened, mine had been branded.

I imagined that cowboy's eyes staring at me in the rear-view mirror. It's not often one's mistakes reflect back so blatantly. Things I never admitted to myself filled my head. I pulled

back on the highway. With forlorn eyes, I looked westward... then turned toward Missouri and crossed the state line. My trailer followed like my past, too close and full of sorrowful memories.

Outside, visibility turned to zero. The rain came in sheets down the windshield. I looked over at that empty seat and could see Dana laughing, her head thrown back, her wide smile so infectious saying, "I love you Tanner, don't know why, but I do." That's where we started, never thinking she'd need that pearl handle gun to protect herself... from me. At an intersection between two nameless roads, I slowed to a roll and stuck my head out the window. The cascade of raindrops hit my face like a hundred bee stings, and I cursed the universe and cursed myself. But that wasn't enough. I pulled over to the side of the road and got out. The downpour was heavy, and within seconds every part of me drenched. With both hands on the hood, a cold torrent beat upon my body. I wanted to drown. Her fingers breaking and the soft flesh of her eye giving way under my fist were memories no rain would ever wash away. I raised my face to the sky and prayed for more rain, harder, faster, something that would rip the flesh from my bones. In my stupor, my rancor, my insanity, I fell to my knees, then lay flat on the muddy roadside with my head under the bumper, body pounded by the rain.

A vehicle pulled over next to mine. There was the sound of splashing boots, then a face appeared, her eyes scarcely visible as she crouched down. Water cascaded over a small umbrella that did little to keep her dry.

"You Ok, mister? You need a lift?" Her words barely audible in the thunderous storm.

She held out a hand and helped me to my feet. "No... thank you." I piped a smile. "I'm... my van... is OK."

Rain drizzled down her water-logged blond hair.

“We’re getting baptized,” she said, her hand out catching water in her palm. “You be careful. Flash flooding around here will getcha drowned.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I replied.

She sloshed back to her car. A moment later, her vehicle disappeared into the storm.

Wading back to the driver’s door, I caught my reflection in the side-view mirror. My hair was muddied, water dripped everywhere, and I could see those eyes, the cowboy, staring back. Baptism and drowning aren’t the same thing—they’re both a kind of death—but with baptism comes forgiveness. And that’s what the cowboy had asked for... forgiveness. I was drowning.

I coughed and sputtered and wiped my face with a wet shirt sleeve. Water dribbled from my neck to my shoes. I put my head against the steering wheel, but I couldn’t hold it back. The hurt I caused was too deep to keep it locked up anymore. First in gasps, then in choked out sentences the words came... I’m sorry. I’m sorry I hurt you. So many times... and never said a thing. I repeated it until my chest hurt and my hands white from squeezing the steering wheel. I said it until there were no more tears, no more words, only exhaustion and emptiness remained. Every sorrowful thing I did meant nothing until the moment I felt it in my heart.

When the storm broke, the pitter-patter of rain blew from the trees pelting the van like tapping fingers. I choked back sobs, started the van and watched a sliver of light pierce dark clouds. I thought about that cowboy watching that same beam breaking over the horizon. And maybe he was traveling home and maybe, just maybe, his woman glanced over and saw him sitting there, driving that old pickup, and perhaps she smiled and reached over and touched his hand. And even if she didn’t, maybe she just stared ahead and wiped tears, but she was there... in that seat next to him. And I understood why the seat next to me was empty.

