

STAMPEDE, OR HOW HE LOST A GIRL NAMED LOU

The mountain crest was cool with an early morning chill and the shoulders and elbows of the cowboy's flannel shirt were worn thin as tissue, yet he wasn't the least bit cold. He didn't shiver, not even once. But he was tired. His lined face barely showed it, but he was very, very tired. His eyes searched over the valley, and without turning asked, "You need more?"

The man next to him pretended to move a yellow stub against the small pad in but said nothing. The pencil was only sign of life between them for several moments, but then the cowboy's leg stiffened. He shifted weight to his left leg, creases in his levis found another familiar pattern, then it was still. Now even the pencil was quiet.

The cowboy murmured, "You need more?" quietly, but the words came only with the force of repetition, for he'd already forgotten having asked before.

The older man stayed with guile and moved the pencil again. Except for the hat he looked like one of the cowboy's older hands, in faded dungarees and worn blue shirt, and a grizzled face given to minimums of expression. Then again, his job was just to ask and listen, then make decisions, while the cowboy was only here to answer, until there was nothing left.

"Maybe," the old man finally said.

Quiet settled back over them. The cowboy took a deep breath, then tilted his head to let his Stetson shade the morning sun. The light had just reached them, and stretched past to begin its crawl down the opposite mountainside.

The cowboy woke a little. "Need more?" he said a third time. He turned, and repeated it with his eyes. The look was barely set before the pains hit.

He winced, though the ache was sharp and stabbing and would've made others cry out. He tightened and tried to focus on the woman, but the pains struck more deeply now. The skin

around his eyes and mouth came taut, he clenched his hands to fists and pulled the fists against the sides of his legs. When that wasn't enough he turned away to hide himself.

“I can use a little more time,” the other man lied.

The cowboy jerked a nod but stayed flexed away. The pains went on several more moments before the old man did anything about them. He knew when it was time. He finally said, “Would you look at that?” his voice quiet, measured, and helpful. “Down there.” He stepped forward and pointed into the valley.

The two men stood in thick grass dotted with crags of dark spotted granite, along a ridge that curved gently down to the edge of a forest, then dropped two thousand steep feet to a meadow at the valley floor. The morning light already showed endless shades of fresh green everywhere below, hiding all but a few signs of what had lived and died before. Only gray bits of hulking, knotty trunks, root pieces of upturned stumps, and gnarled, thicker branches which age and nature had broken from upstream hillsides lay along shoulders of the broadly twisting river, partially enveloped by green and purple reeds that rippled in slow waves.

The cowboy caught the old man's finger in his periphery, and through clenched eyes followed its direction. He saw a slitted glimpse of the valley below, and what was in it, and that was enough. The view immediately its work.

There's movement there, he thought to himself, and at once his misery began to ebb. His eyes opened further. A few seconds passed and he began to straighten, a few more and he hitched himself up and stood, still more and his head returned to an upright position, beaten but mostly in line with his chest and shoulders. His right hand adjusted the Stetson again, then he leaned forward for a better look, having already forgotten the pains. *There's movement there!* he whispered.

And there was. Some of the dark forms far below, in the marshy rushes beyond the river. Moving forms. The cowboy squinted, trying to focus, then saw it once more. *There's something alive*, he thought. He leaned further forward and began picking them out. Large shapes. Several. Some dark, some light, some spotted, some slightly taller than others but each the same basic size and form. They were scattered and at random angles to each other, and some were...*raising their heads*.

They're horses! The thought jumped in his mind and spread still more relief. He moved his lips thoughtfully together, then nodded, confident in the assessment.

The old man let him drink in the effect, knowing the ground ahead would be more difficult than that covered. There remained the matter of the man's wife. It comprised the last weight bearing memories. He studied the cowboy peripherally with hints of admiration and concern. He'd warned at the very beginning how hard it would be, but when asked if he were ready the cowboy had instantly agreed. "*You bet*," he'd said. "But how is my girl?" he'd asked intently.

"I can't say," the old man replied right away. He wouldn't give anything, not even about the cowboy's wife.

"Is she all right?"

"I can't tell you that," the old man said firmly. He hesitated. "Are you still ready?"

"You bet," the cowboy said again, but now so softly the words were almost tender. The old man sighed at his resolve. The cowboy had made no complaint, asked no explanation, and sought no relief. Not once. What remained was all that mattered. His only response when asked were the same two punctuating syllables.

You bet.

But the cowboy was no fool. Even being drawn in he sensed the valley, the river and the horses stretched out before him were a hypnotic, a sedation offered as life was ripped apart—and it was his life, for each time his mind fingered some ornament or scar the recollection tore itself away and drifted off, and each time after, the pains came. The old man used distraction to relieve distress, but then each time, for a short while, the cowboy realized what was happening, and was bathed in a melancholy wake.

For the cowboy that was the worst. It required forced movements to hide the effects, for aside from wanting to complete his chores his main concern—and this he tried to hide—was that in this process sadness showed itself so much more readily than he was used to. It had already tightened his jaw several times, saying with no other tell that he was embarrassed.

“We can take our time, Hank,” the old man repeated, and he lied again. “I can use a moment.” He turned pages clumsily enough to make busy noises, but it was only to allow more time for rest.

Hank nodded, barely paying attention. His eyes were on the horses. The sight brought mild excitement into his mind, the excitement brought relief, and the relief brought mental footing. And as it happened his thoughts recovered and moved more ably around the craters to less important remnants, to remember where he’d seen a herd like this, in a place like this.

He’d never lived there. He’d never visited or even once been there, yet he knew he’d encountered it somewhere. His mind finally came to an island left that held the answer, a single scrap of memory in his almost emptied faculties. Its contents opened and floated up, and suddenly he got it.

It’s that picture! he thought.

And it was.

“Christ,” he whispered, “that’s been what....sixty-five years?”

“You were fifteen, sixteen?” the old man asked, pretending interest.

Hank shook his head, trying to recollect. There were so many voids, even within the islands. He tried working backwards. “We had our girl in ‘93. Me and Louisa...I mean Lou. I called her Lou....”

“You got married in ‘92?”

“Right,” he said. His mind came to the same landmark as before. “They’d just hung the fella who shot Garfield. It was...”

“1882,” the old man said immediately.

“Right. So it was six years before I married. My first job...I...was ten.”

The old man smiled appreciatively. “Seventy years ago.”

The cowboy nodded, but his mind was back, hovering over the dog eared page of a magazine on his first boss’ desk.

“You were just a boy,” the old man whispered.

“Just a boy,” the cowboy sighed, contemplating once again how the blissful look he’d been allowed had stuck so long. To those poor young eyes it was a revelation that anything so idyllic existed, for even then he knew not to hope for anything but what could be got with shorter steps. But the image had burst in and stayed. It occupied the foreground of his young mind for weeks, then found a nook from which it wandered in and out like a tantalizing vine, especially through those difficult early years. Maybe it was the contrast with his usual surroundings that kept it there. Maybe it was a clue the world held so much more than he’d yet realized. His mind worked at it from several sides to confirm the impression, then he nodded, sure of it. *It has to be that valley*, he thought, *the one they called ‘Ginia.*

He'd no sooner placed it than the memory slipped off, and sadness began to flow into the new rift. It filled the abyss and overflowed until it fingered other pools already there. The greatest only moments ago had brimmed with sights and sounds of his daughter. But they were gone too now, loving recollections, destroyed, cleansed—even her name was gone now. He kept his back turned to the old man and brushed at his eyes off-handedly, as though ridding a speck of dust.

It didn't for a moment fool his companion. "We can take more time," the old man repeated a third time.

"Sorry." The cowboy said it almost like a cough, feeling caught at something unseemly. He tried by habit to arch a straighter line to the bend in his back, then brushed his face again with the thin sleeve.

"It's fine, Hank," the older man said. He hesitated, then reached up and patted the back of the cowboy's right shoulder. It was clumsy, and dangerously expediting, but that and the sight below helped. Hank's sadness ebbed, but with so many recollections gone his forehead pleated with confusion. Instinct took over. He glanced at the eastern sky and considered by habit how much daylight they'd have, then turned back to the shorter man to pose for the fourth time a question he couldn't remember having asked before. "You need help?"

The older man nodded slowly, wondering how much strength was left. However much it was, it was time. He took a deep breath, then bent them into their final and most important direction.

"How'd you meet Louisa?" he asked mildly, as if the wife of sixty years didn't matter.

"You mean Lou," the cowboy answered automatically.

"How'd you meet her?"

“Through Mrs. Mays,” Hank answered right away. At the back of his mind he’d known this was coming, but now he stopped, trying to grasp what was happening inside. A storm of recollections had broken loose of moorings. They whirled up in disconnected pieces, flew with confusion through his mind, and he clung to the question as he would to a log in rapids. Several moments passed before the tumult settled. They settled to a semblance of order. He studied them, unsure if there was more, then nodded when there wasn’t.

“Where did you meet her?” the old man asked.

“Ar’zona,” he said immediately.

The old man readied his pencil and began the destruction. “Tell me what you remember about it.”

Hank hesitated a moment, shifting his mind’s grasp to a logical starting point, stared back down at the valley, and began to speak.

“Mrs. Mays. Isabel Altura Mays. I was out of work again. Couldn’t find nothin’.” He breathed in more of the chilly air, then nodded at the propriety of this beginning. “Was wonderin’ if we’d have to try for California, but not far outside Tempe there’s a town called Apache Junction. Know where it is?” he asked, feeling better of his footing. Before the old man could respond he answered his own question by verses practiced countless times for customers. “You go east of Tempe, just past Mesa and Buckhorn to get there. Folks sometimes find themselves all the way to the Flats without knowing they’ve passed the place, but then they’d be near the Superstition Mountains and mightn’t care. There’s a dirt road, but you could miss it if you...”

“How’d you meet Louisa...Lou?” the older man interrupted, thinking he’d already lost his way.

“I was getting to that,” Hank said, glancing back at him. He settled himself back and let the momentum of story carry him on. “Mrs. Isabel Mays was a big black woman in a old white house in Apache Junction, set back up from the road, had a porte cochere and long white columns on a porch where she’d sit an’ have tea ever’ mornin’, lookin’ out at the horses on one of her pastures. Her fields were ‘bout the only thing what weren’t red around there...” He took in a long breath and went on. “She were a big woman, Mrs. Mays, six foot, probably over three hundred pounds, with voice like the north wind,” he said, and his tone underlined the words. She ran *The Buffalo Equine Ranch*, a home started for old broken down horses and kept up for runaway whores. Her daddy was Buffalo soldier, good with horses, could take any stock not bound up with colic and turn ‘em around ‘til their own dam wouldn’t recognize em. He’d turn ‘em ‘round and sell ‘em, but that ended when he died, because she loved them horses. Couldn’t let ‘em go. Liked sittin’ out there on the porch jest watchin’ em’like they was *pets*,” he said, and his face showed confusion at the extravagance. “When I got there she had almost sixty of ‘em, every last one of what had been broken down stock made good again. Appaloosa, buckskins, roans, palominos, sorrells. And what he’d done with stock she did with women—girls who’d been beaten, slaved, runaways, women with nobody to help ‘em.” He let an admiring quiet interrupt, but before it wandered into sentiment he took another breath and went on. “Ever’body ‘round there heard her voice, and felt her touch. That woman had a considerable effect on folks ‘round there, includin’ my wife.” He glanced towards the smaller man to make sure the connection registered.

It had. The stub of pencil had begun a short scrawl.

“One Tuesday mornin’ Mrs. Mays and her women was out on her porch in a rockin’ chair sippin’ tea with mint leaves in it, and this dirty li’l kid comes walking up her drive. She

gets all of herself up and looks down at me, and with her deep voice yells ‘What you doin’ on my property, boy?’ like I was all the way down by the road, when I was standin’ right there at the foot of her porch. And I’m a li’l nervous because there’s half dressed women starin’ at me and she’s yellin’ at me, but I says nice as I can, ‘I’m here to help you out, Ma’am’.”

“So she yells out, ‘What the hell kind of help you think I’d need, son?’ like she’s mad and happy at the same time. I nodded toward her pasture down by the road where there were horses grazin’ and asked her back ‘Do you want to lose some of your horses, Ma’am?’”

“‘Well ‘course not,’ she hollers, and squints there without knowin’ what she’s seein’. ‘Why’d you think that, boy?’ she yells.”

“‘Because Ma’am,’ I says, ‘you got some fence rails down what run along the road.’ And I pointed down where there was couple sections of fence that was busted out onto the street, like some horses might’ve broken through. She looked that way like she was tryin’ to tell if I’m lyin’, then aimed her eyes at me over her cup while takin’ a sip of tea. She put down the cup and wound up again: ‘So why you telling me this, boy?’ So I said, ‘I’ll fix ‘em for you.’ And one of the women asked, ‘What kinda pay you want?’” and another of the women said, “And from which of us you gonna want it?” and they all laughed. And I said ‘thanks but I’ll do it for free, and if you like my work you can give me a job’ and the other said somethin’ ‘bout me not havin’ a very mannerly reply to a lady’s offer, but I said I’m just lookin’ for work...any work.” He glanced down to make sure the other man was listening.

He was, intently.

The cowboy looked back into the valley and went on in a lower voice. “I’d never repaired no fence before, but since you can gen’ly figure out how to fix what’s broke by looking at what ain’t, and I needed to eat, so I figured I’d offer. So I said ‘If my work’s good maybe this place

could use an extra hand?" He paused, thinking back. "She already had four or five fellas working the place but not quite enough hours in the week for 'em. So she figer'ed 'hell, why not' and waved her hand and shouted 'Hell, why not!', and I fixed them sections and repainted the whole stretch by lunch." A little pride flowed into him. "Before you know it I was one of her hands—I mean that very week I'd got myself a job. Good one, too."

The tip of his jaw had elevated itself with the last words, but he caught it as a brag. When it was collected and put away he dropped his eyes back to the valley. But for a breeze rustling the long grass it was quiet again. The silence went on several moments, then the old man asked it again.

"So how did you meet your wife?" he said gently.

The cowboy leaned back on his heels and his eyes flickered softly. He turned. "You know what they did with 'em in the morning?"

"Who? With what?" the old man asked him.

"Mrs. Mays, the women," Hank replied, "with them horses."

The shorter man sighed, then shook his head dubiously. "Did your wife see it?"

"That's what I been gettin' to," the cowboy said, his voice with sudden edge. "First time she and her friend Laura came was the stampede..." He bit his lip.

"Go on."

"Lou was in school when this new girl came, child who wasn't right—I mean disfigured...Laura had a bend to her, and had some voice thin' wrong with her that made her sound strange, and kids being what they are she became the target for all their aim at that damn school, 'til Lou come along. Lou wasn't never like other kids, she protected Laura, and the two became friends. Well Laura loved horses, and Lou heard 'bout the Mays' herd, and since it was

Washington's birthday and they didn't have school Lou brought her out to see."

The old man's face showed confusion, but he nodded him forward.

The cowboy took in a long, slow breath, turned towards the valley and went on in low tones. "It was one of them mornin's fog lays 'round like an ole' blanket, thinner in some spots, thicker in others. Mrs. Mays and the women came onto the porch just on top of the fog and set themselves down with cups of hot tea, then Mrs. Mays hollered up to the barn. A minute later me and her other hands come outta the barn, each of us with two or three haltered horses. From the porch you could see our heads and the horses' heads sticking up through the fog, but not much else. We took 'em to the gate and let 'em loose in the top of the pasture what went down to the road, then went back for more. We were back and forth between the barn and pasture lettin' more and more of 'em loose 'til her whole herd was up there, with their heads and maybe the tops of their backs poking up out of the fog," he said.

A small bit of smile was back. He turned towards the old man. "Those horses were old, but when they were let out all together they were like kids. At first they'd look 'round, not sure what to do with bein' let loose. Then they'd get excited at bein' back in a herd, and start snortin' and millin' around, mostly just sayin' hi, but hi weren't enough for 'em all. After a bit one of 'em would stretch out and trot a rickety mornin' trot for a ways, and 'nother'd follow and try to kick him—just playin'—and then run off a little ways, and the one what was kicked would catch up and bump the other and run past him, and the other'd say hell no you don't and start after him before he could get more than a couple lengths ahead. Suddenly they'd be runnin' even though they were in a mist where they couldn't see well, 'cause they all knew the ground; runnin' like they were young again, runnin' just 'cause they still could. Then a half dozen others'd think now just a damn minute and run after 'em, and maybe a second later all the rest of

sixty horses would think they might be left behind, and suddenly they weren't wonderin' what to do no more, and it wasn't sixty differ'nt horses no more, it was a herd, every last horse at a dead run, pourin' down that pasture like a great big river, movin' faster than you'd ever thought old horses could go, racin' off in a charge mostly hid under the mist."

His right hand slapped softly at the side of his levis once, then again, as memory of the stampede flooded through for the last time. "The women stood up on that porch holdin' their teas and me and the hands stood there and watched, and listened—'cause you could hear 'em even when you couldn't see 'em under the fog; all them horses would make thunder you could hear a mile away."

A foreboding crept into his voice. "But after a short piece of admirin' all this I hear Mrs. Mays and some other women yell. So I look over and Mrs. Mays dropped her tea and is standin' up on her toes, shakin' and pointin' like she's angry or scared or both. And we look and I got more scared that moment than I ever remember. She was pointin' down past the horses towards the road where I'd fixed them sections of fence first day I was up there." His voice choked. He stopped and looked down. The old man studied his face sadly. It was drained of color. He took another deep breath, then went on as if guilty about all of what had happened.

"I seen two women—well, they were twelve or thirteen—down there sittin' on the top rail, peekin' out like mice over the top of the fog down there, watchin' and listenin' to the horses, excited and happy, but perched right where them horses is headed, right where I fixed them rails, neither of 'em understandin' a train's headed their way." He bit his lips tightly together, then forced himself on. "Neither Laura or Lou'd ever been there in mornin's, didn't know they ran like that, and didn't know they'd stopped to watch right where them horses were likely to break through the fencin'."

He closed his eyes a moment, then went on morosely. “They had no idea. They was just happy ‘bout how pretty the horses were and excited when they herded up and started running. The horses mostly disappeared in the fog but they could hear the thunder and feel it through the fence and their feet, but that just got ‘em more excited. They still couldn’t figer’e it out, just stood there at the fence, catching sight of the tops of the herd where the mist were thinner and the horses’ heads an’ backs would be flyin’ ‘bove it, but then they’d disappear into a thicker patch where all they could see was that mist with the rumble gettin’ kinda louder and feel it rattlin’ the fence a li’l more and more, but they just got more excited ‘bout it.” He shook his head somberly. “You could see when the light went on. Even where we were you could see their li’l eyes get real big and white, and know they knew it was already too late, that there was nowhere to run or hide with a herd comin’ down on ‘em so fast.”

Despite countless retellings the story tightened the cowboy’s jaw. He took another breath and turned back sadly to the valley. “Course when Mrs. Mays and the others yelled everyone started running, chasin’ through fog after the thunder and Mrs. Mays is running down from her porch, and we’s all wavin’ and hollerin’, but they couldn’t hear us over the noise of them horses. I came outta a thicker piece of fog just as the horses come out of one maybe fifty feet from the fence, still at a dead run headed straight for Lou and her friend. Lou had got down and tried to grab Laura but Laura slipped, and fell into the pasture. Then she got to her feet and stood there, watching them charge,” he said, and it brought him to a stop.

He let the old man feel a pause he’d repeated here each time the story had come out before. When satisfied at its length he glanced back, with a faint smile. “But...then the horses turned.... They cut right like they were tied to a big wagon wheel, with the outside edge pounding and snorting not three foot from that li’l girl, rattling the fence all but to pieces and

shaking the ground beneath them, ripping up clods of dirt and grass everywhere, sixty horses moving at full head of steam just a few feet away, the wind and hooves and flying earth and breathing hard all mixed in, and I looked,” he said. He shook his head as a parent does at the inexplicable actions of a child. “Laura’s on her feet, *laughin’* as the horses roared by. Lou was yellin’, callin’ her, but Laura couldn’t hear. She’s just laughin’ and pointin’.”

“Then them horses tore off in the other direction just as fast, headin’ up top. And I got down there and was about to say somethin’ sharp, but Laura mades some kind of sound I couldn’t unnerstand and Lou smiled and pointed and said, ‘Look! Look!’ in the sweetest voice, and we all turned and watched them horses running back through the fog, takin’ their thunder along with ‘em, ‘til the first ones reached the top of the hill and slowed and stopped, and the rest slowed and stopped, and now they were all just standing ‘round like it wasn’t no big deal, wadin’ in fog, nickering and snorting and sweating right about time the same time the sun came up behind the hill and stretched ‘cross the top meadow, and lit the steam coming off the tops of their backs, and lit the little clouds of their breaths from behind, and lit their manes and tails like a pretty picture, and suddenly it was a good day already.”

He sighed more deeply. “First smile I ever saw of Lou’s, and it caught me, ‘cause her smile had a power,” he said, shaking his head. “And her li’l friend Laura,” he said, his voice filled with tenderness, “That girl smiled as big a smile as ever came outta’ her,” he said, “a cracked smile from that broken body of hers.” He took in the valley again and dropped his voice reverently. “I never could understand Laura, but Lou could, and she told me Laura used to say the world didn’t have much prettier things than horses, especially when they were moving but even when they ain’t, and if ever there was anything that proved it, it was that morning. It was a sight,” he sighed wearily.

A last bit of admiration floated across his face, then the memories began to break apart. He flinched with the process, then forced out more in a whisper. “It was a sight,” he sighed again. A piece drifted beyond reach of his mind, and the rest followed, and as the last shred slipped fully away it was quiet, but only a moment. Then the pains struck. He clenched himself and groaned. They hit more deeply and he bent down and moaned.

The old man stood back and waited as the process went on. As soon as he could he stepped closer and put his hand on the cowboy’s arm. At once the misery began to recede. It subsided, the misery slowly disappeared, leaving the cowboy breathless and confused. He looked up with a bewildered expression.

“Look there,” the old man motioned. The cowboy followed his direction, but as he did his lips began to form sounds. “It was a sight,” he said again softly, but the words came out with only the force of repetition, for he’d already forgotten the story, and would never remember it again.
