

ESCONDIDO

Little Lloyd Watkins cranked his truck air conditioning up to high and glanced at the dashboard clock. 10:15.

Still morning, he thought, *and already a scorcher*. Annoyed, he scanned the desolate landscape that lined the 12-mile trek between his ranch and town.

“Why do I keep trying to scratch a living out of this godforsaken place? It’s hotter than hell,” he said to himself. “Everything either bites you, stings you, or sticks you. Rattlesnakes. Scorpions. Cactus. It’s all burned up by the end of May. Hell, we’re in the middle of nowhere. Why’s Escondido Springs even here?”

He often fantasized about escaping the dusty south Texas border town. *I could leave Brenda. Leave the ranch. Leave Escondido Springs. Hell, the whole place is built on a lie*, he thought.

Indeed, a lie was the foundation of the town’s history. In the late-1800s, a bunch of unscrupulous land developers conjured up the place hoping to attract white folks who didn’t know what *escondido* meant nor exactly how well hidden the springs were. There weren’t any. Their scheme fell apart quickly but a small seedling took hold and, with ranching to prop it up, a town of 2,013 souls pushed itself up like a weed through caliche.

Now, more than a hundred years later, Escondido Springs supported a café adjacent to a forlorn little bus station, a funeral parlor, a grocery store with a dusty pharmacy in the back, a school, and a taco stand over in Mexican Town. A few kids hung around after high school, but most left for bigger cities and better opportunities. Not much ever changed in Escondido so, when the twenty-first century rolled in, no one seemed to notice.

Shortly before noon, Little Lloyd stepped into the Bluebonnet Café, removed his banged-up straw Stetson, and transferred a fair amount of sweat and dirt from his forehead to his sleeve. The double glass doors were oddly dwarfed by his oversized body—almost as wide as it was tall. Ceiling fans whirled above red plastic tablecloths. He spied Ben and some guy he didn't know seated in the back corner of the almost-empty dining room.

Ben waved him over to the table. "What are you doing in town in the middle of the day?"

Little Lloyd strode across the room. "Had to come in for salt blocks." He looked over his shoulder at a wrinkled woman perched behind the cash register. "Miss Margie, what's the special?"

Somehow, the long string of ash never fell as her cigarette bobbed up and down. "Chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, and corn. Flour or corn tortillas and a jalapeño on the side."

"Give me that and a sweet tea," he said as he pulled out a chair.

"Corn or flour?"

"Surprise me," he said.

"Little Lloyd Watkins, I want you to meet Howard Frazier." Ben gestured toward the slender young man. "Howard's doing a little internship with us at the funeral home. Just started this morning."

Little Lloyd set his hat in the vacant chair and extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, Howard. You'll have a good experience with Ben. I've known him his whole life. He'll take good care of you."

Howard peered up through coke-bottle glasses. "Little Lloyd? You don't look very little to me," he paused and swallowed, "Sir." The fire whistle blew. "Uh oh."

Ben looked at Little Lloyd. “City kid.” Then turned to Howard. “They blow the fire whistle at noon every day, so folks know it’s time to close up for lunch. We just beat the lunch rush. Later on, this afternoon, we’ll have the five o’clock rush minute. You just can’t get entertainment like that up in Dallas now, can you?”

Margie placed three plates on the table as several town’s people plodded in. A few waved from across the room but most stopped by the table to say hello, discuss the heat, and find out who Howard was. A covey of brown skinned people wandered through a side door. Howard looked at Ben and frowned.

“The bus station’s next door,” Ben explained.

Howard grimaced. “People actually come here?”

“Nope. They’re on their way to someplace else,” Ben said.

Little Lloyd cut into his chicken fried steak. “You managed to find us, Howard. How did that happen?”

Ben answered before Howard had a chance to speak. “Howard’s Cathy’s nephew. Hey, do you know how to tell when a family of pink flamingos moves into the neighborhood?” He paused. “By the little plastic Meskins they put out in the front yard.” Ben slapped his hand on the table and laughed at his own joke.

“Very funny.” Little Lloyd said. “Don’t give up your day job.”

Ben reached for the salt. “Drove by the high school this morning. Coach had the boys out there for two-a-days. Do you think we’re going to have a team this year?”

Little Lloyd nearly spit mashed potatoes on Howard. “Are you kidding? Ben, you might make a comedian yet. What have you been smoking?”

“Well, it’s been a while since we had a winning team. Don’t you think we’re due?”

“Due? I don’t think that’s how it works, Ben.”

Ben turned to Howard. “Little Lloyd here played on the best football team Escondido’s ever had.” He looked at Little Lloyd. “Remember when Charley Ortiz made that 85-yard run in the bi-district game? When was that? 1973?”

Little Lloyd didn’t look up from his plate. “72.”

“Almost 30 years ago. Seems like yesterday. Boy, that was a good game! Almost won it too. Man, if you would’ve made that touchdown— ”

“Howard, I believe you’ll find that Ben likes to stroll down memory lane.”

Margie appeared out of nowhere. “More tea? Buttermilk pie?”

“No thanks, Miss Margie, but you can have these tortillas. These damn things give you brain damage.” Ben placed a five-dollar bill on the table and looked around the room. “Howard, you’re skinny. You might want to have a piece of that pie while Little Lloyd and I step outside for a minute.”

They stood on the sidewalk in front of the white stucco café. Main Street would have been completely empty if not for Little Lloyd’s truck. They watched heat dance above the asphalt and gazed at what used to be the Ford dealership across the street. A sign that read “Going Out of Business Sale” sat in the window of the furniture store next door.

“My God. That kid’s driving me nuts.” Ben grimaced. “He’s about two hours into this internship thing and he’s been up my ass all day. I went to pee this morning and he banged on the door wanting to know what I was doing. Then, we’re planning Mrs. Askew’s funeral, so we had to meet with the Baptist preacher. Howard asks how old she was. Well, you know she was

old as dirt. I said, ‘97,’ and he said, ‘Good Lord!’ Jesus. I didn’t know whether to bow my head or hit him.”

“How long’s he going to be around?” Little Lloyd asked.

“Three. Long. Weeks. Cathy’s the only reason I took him on. Happy wife, happy life, and all that but damn . . .”

“Ain’t that the honest truth.” Little Lloyd looked at the sidewalk. “Keeping Brenda happy’s . . . well . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Hey, listen, Eliseo Sanchez called me early this morning.”

Little Lloyd looked down the street. “Yeah?”

Ben’s voice softened. “Sofia died late last night.” The two men stood in awkward silence for a good minute or two. “Anyway, they’re bringing her back here for burial. She was way the hell up in Chicago.” Silence. “I mean, I know it was a long time ago but . . . I thought you’d want to know.”

Little Lloyd stared at the lifeless buildings across the street. “I heard she had cancer.”

The quiet weighed heavy between them.

“Do you want me to let you know when the service is?” Ben asked.

“Nope. Best not,” he said as he opened the door to his truck.

He sat alone in his pickup and stared. She always called him Lloyd. Not Little Lloyd. Just Lloyd. He thought about her deep black eyes that shined like onyx. What Ben didn’t mention was that, after Charley’s big run, Little Lloyd fumbled the ball on the next play and cost them the game. Sofia was the only one in town who wasn’t pissed off at him. “It’s just a game,” she had said.

He closed his eyes and allowed himself to drift. Her quick, contagious laughter. The miles they drove along the back roads, unseen, listening to his Eagles cassette.

Desperado. Right.

The night he drove her out to that old pumpjack, and they danced in the dark. Her thick black hair. The curve of her back. The feel of her skin.

His eyes darted around the sidewalk then the street. His mouth was dry, and his heart pounded the same way it had that night in April of '73. He had stood outside the ranch house window and heard his parents convulse over the news his mother had learned at the United Methodist Women's Prayer Circle.

"Lloyd Watkins, do you want a brown grandbaby? Do you? Because I sure don't," his mother's voice shook. "I simply will not have it, Lloyd. I won't." She continued, more sternly. "It's a sin for the races to mix. You know that. And it's a sin to have sex outside marriage. Oh Lord. What will people think, Lloyd? We have to think about his reputation. You have to take care of this right now."

"I'll have a talk with Eliseo," his dad said.

"Talk to Eliseo?" Her voice rose. "You'd better do more than just talk, Lloyd Watkins. I said take care of it."

"Ima Jean, I said I'll fix it!"

Ben had told him to see her on the sly, but Little Lloyd couldn't bring himself to defy his mother. A couple of months later, the class of 1973 graduated and scattered like a dandelion seed head so that was that.

He shook his head and started his truck. *Another lifetime*, he thought.

Little Lloyd bounced through the pasture then stopped at a rare shady spot next to a broken windmill and honked his horn. A string of hungry cattle appeared over the knoll. He released the tailgate, cut open a few sacks of cottonseed cake, and dropped a couple of salt blocks on the ground.

His eyes surveyed the barren countryside. Bits of frilly green lace hung from Mesquite branches, but the Johnson grass was dead and brown, and the water tank was completely dry. The bluebonnets and Indian paintbrush that had sprinkled the countryside several months ago were long forgotten. A little green mocked the cattle from behind cactus needles and he made a mental note to return and burn the pear. He removed his hat, ran his sleeve across his brow, and checked his watch. 3:25.

Damn, it's gotta be over 100, he thought, and humid.

He started to turn toward the Igloo water jug in the bed of the truck, but a flash of red caught his eye. Then something white just behind it. He grabbed binoculars from the cab and saw two women stagger out of the brush.

“My God,” he whispered. He waved his arm, and they ran toward him.

“¡Señor! ¡Señor!” A woman in a torn red shirt waved and cried. “¡Ayuda! ¡Por favor!”

The woman in a dirty white dress stumbled, fell, then struggled to get up. He darted the 50-or-so yards to them and helped the woman to her feet. That’s when he got a close look at her, terribly sun burned and filthy, and thought, *my god, she’s just a girl.*

He turned to the other woman and pointed toward the truck. “Agua allí.”

She ran ahead to the pickup, then returned and offered her friend water. “Ay, gracias, señor. Gracias.”

They rested on the tailgate and sipped water.

“¿Amigas o hermanas?” he asked but already knew by their faces. *Sisters*, he thought.

The young woman in red said, “Blanca,” and her eyes filled up.

“Blanca,” the girl in white said.

“Blanca? You can’t both be named Blanca.”

“No, señor. Nuestra amiga.” Her voice shook. “Blanca . . . esta muerta.”

Dead. He rubbed the heel of his palm into his closed eye. “¿Dónde?” he said.

They pointed west. “Una milla, más o menos.”

He squinted into the sun and sighed.

They stared, wide-eyed and quiet until the one in the red blouse spoke up. “¿Nos va a entregar?”

“Turn you in?” He paused. “I don’t know. No lo sé.”

The three-some studied each other in silence then the dam broke. Graciella and Maria were sisters, 16 and 17 years old, traveling with their friend, Blanca. They had paid a coyote for safe passage from their village in central Mexico, but he abandoned them at the border. They wandered, lost, for miles through the heat and thick brush without water. When Blanca collapsed, they stayed with her as long as they could but, to save themselves, they had to move on.

“Nos salvo.” Graciella said. “Muchísimas gracias.”

Maria nodded. A tear chased a line of dirt down her cheek.

“¿Adónde vas?” He said.

“Houston,” Graciella said.

He tilted his head.

“Tenemos familia allí.”

He eyed the shaky cups of water in their dirty hands. Considered the impenetrable brush. Felt the unforgiving heat. “Get in,” he said.

They wound their way through thick scrub brush and finally stopped at the unkempt ranch house where his wife refused to live. Little Lloyd took his lunch there occasionally, but ghosts from his childhood were all that were left there now.

A porch swing dangled on the front porch. The screen door squeaked open then banged shut. He led the two teenage girls into the house, flipped on lights, and turned on the window units.

The living room was empty except for a sheet-covered couch and Ima Jean’s old Singer sewing machine. To the right, a dinette table and two cracked vinyl chairs filled the center of the kitchen. A couple of hotplates sat next to a microwave and an empty alcove gaped where an oven once stood. Faded flower wallpaper peeled behind the white icebox.

“I’ll be back,” he said and turned to leave, then stopped. “Regresó pronto.”

Little Lloyd drove by the funeral home, saw the Sanchez family gathering outside, then parked around the corner and tapped on the back door as he opened it.

Ben looked up from his desk and raised his eyebrows. “I thought you didn’t want to know about the service.”

“I don’t. I need to tell you something. Ben, there’s a dead body in Seth Ward’s front pasture.” He paused. “If I was a betting man, I’d guess she’s a teenage girl but that’s all I can tell you. Don’t ask me any questions.”

Ben rubbed his forehead and sighed. “That’s the third one in the last week. For the life of me, I’ll never understand why these people try to cross this time of year.” He paused. “I’ll go get

her.” He looked up at Little Lloyd. “The Sanchez family’s out there. You know that, right? They’re here to make Sofia’s arrangements.” He paused again. “I assume you’re not going to go strutting out the front door.”

“Nope,” he said as he exited out the back.

He stopped at the grocery store and Abuelita’s Tacos then headed back south.

The ranch house was cool and, except for the hum of the air conditioners, quiet. He peered through the half-open master bedroom door. The girls’ legs were draped across his parents’ double bed, their breathing, deep and slow. He placed three sacks on the kitchen counter and gazed out the window. A timeworn windmill stood before a brilliant sky, now in shades of orange, pink, and purple.

He’s stood guard over this place as far back as I can remember, Little Lloyd thought. The day’s weight bore down on his shoulders. Sofia’s dead. Sofia. Is. Dead. It doesn’t seem real. I wonder what her life was like in Chicago. I heard her kids have done well. I hope she was happy. He sighed. And those two Mexican girls asleep in there . . . Why didn’t I go straight to the Border Patrol Office instead of the funeral home?

A sudden gust of wind kicked up and the worn-out old sentry rocked, shuddered, and complained. His tail pivoted. Blades churned and groaned. He shouted at Mother Nature as if yearning to break free.

Little Lloyd turned and looked toward the bedroom. *I’ll turn them in tomorrow.*

After the Sofia Sanchez debacle, Ima Jean Watkins had taken a more assertive role in her son’s love life and Brenda Butler checked all the right boxes. She was white, and pretty, and

ostensibly mousy. With Brenda, Little Lloyd would have a “suitable” wife and Mrs. Ima Jean would still be in charge. So, in 1975, a week after she graduated high school, Miss Brenda Butler became Mrs. Little Lloyd Watkins and immediately began fortifying her newfound status. She moved her membership from the First Baptist Church, which she rarely attended, across the street to First Methodist. She accompanied her mother-in-law to the United Methodist Women’s Prayer Circle every Tuesday and joined the choir. She got her hair done at the beauty parlor every Friday like all the Important Ladies in town. And within a year, Brenda calved the ultimate marriage insurance—a little Watkins’s heifer. But try as she might, all these years later everyone still remembered it was the oil field that brought Brenda Butler to town and, well, she wasn’t really “from here.”

Little Lloyd came through the back door and saw Brenda on the phone in the kitchen. He turned to the bootjack next to the washing machine and removed his boots.

“How are you doing? Are you doing okay? . . .” Brenda barely paused. “Do you have a cold? You sound like you have a cold . . . Well, good. So, you’re doing alright then. They had to put Mrs. Thomas in a nursing home . . . You don’t remember her? Oh now of course you do. You know. Robin and what’s the other one’s name? Little fat boy. I forget . . . You don’t? Well, I guess they’re both older than you are. Anyway, they’re both up in San Antonio so they took her up there to be closer to them. Do you get Wheel of Fortune out there in California? I watch that just about every evening . . . When are you going to come see us? . . . Yes, yes. I’m sure you’re really busy with your research and your dissertation and all.” Brenda stared at the wall and blinked. “Well, your daddy just walked in so I’m going to go. Come see us sometime. I’ll talk to you later. Bye-bye.” She turned to Little Lloyd. “That was Ellie.”

“I figured.”

She glanced out the window at the dark. “Why are you coming in so late?”

“Had to come into town then go back out. Ran me late.”

“I heard Sofia Sanchez died.” Brenda’s eyes followed him as he moved through the kitchen. “I heard they’re bringing her back here for burial. I guess they’ll be camped out up there at the funeral home for days. You know how they are.”

He turned and faced her. “How are they, Brenda?”

“Well, they sit up there and cry and carry on. Rattle those beads like that’s going to make some kind of difference.” She rolled her eyes. “They eat up there and everything. And when it’s all over, the place looks like well,” she whispered, “the opposite of heaven.”

“I’m going to take a shower,” he said.

“I also heard your truck was seen parked at the funeral home.”

His socked feet padded softly down the hallway.

She put her hand on her hip. “Little Lloyd Watkins, you’d better not embarrass me.”

He closed the bathroom door.

Early the next morning, Little Lloyd set another bag of Abuelita’s Tacos in the ranch house kitchen. The sound of running water came from the bathroom. Graciella stood in the doorway and combed through pitch-black wet hair.

He retrieved a foil mound from the paper bag. “¿Comida?”

She reached for the taco, and he noticed a tidy seam of stitching along her previously ripped sleeve. Water in the bathroom stopped.

She faced him and swallowed hard. “¿Nos va a entregar?”

“Turn you in?” He muttered to himself, “You girls have one life to live. Best not waste it.” He pulled two Greyhound bus tickets from his shirt pocket. “Vámonos,” he said. “The sooner, the better.”

A couple of days later, Lloyd Watkins sat in his truck trying to muster his mettle and softly sang “Peaceful Easy Feeling” along with the Eagles.

He sighed a deep, tired sigh then opened the truck door and mumbled, “I haven’t had a peaceful easy feeling since 1973.”

His new Stetson trembled in his hand as he opened the heavy wooden door. Sunlight streamed through stained glass windows and bathed the sanctuary in rich shades of red and blue and green. He stood paralyzed at the end of the center aisle, swallowed hard, then fixed his eyes on the front of the half-empty church.

An anguished Jesus hung on a cross. The altar. Her casket, closed and covered with flowers. Mourners stared first at him, then at each other. Ben stood off to the side, poker-faced. Lloyd took a seat in the last pew and knelt on the kneeler.

The life we could have had if I had just . . .

He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. He saw her face, that 17-year-old girl who, decades ago, stole his heart. A light breeze moved her hair. She smiled at him, gently waved, then turned and walked away.

He hung his head and wept.