TEXAS SWING

As Leonard entered the Super Walmart, he glanced up a side aisle and saw Mama. For a moment he could hardly breathe. It wasn't her, of course; just yesterday they'd buried Mama. But the resemblance—at least from a distance—was uncanny. This woman looked younger than Leonard, late thirties maybe, around Mama's age when Leonard was in kindergarten. Thick brown hair, sharp nose, perfect posture. She wore a smart gray suit, not the sort of attire you'd expect on a Walmart shopper. Mama had worn a suit like that—the only suit she owned—to the Baptist Church every Sunday.

Sensing Leonard's stare, the woman's head came up from reading the label on a cereal box and her gaze met his. She looked away, then back again. When she found him still staring, her expression turned steely and Leonard hurried on.

Being back in Texas after so many years had him spooked by shadowy watchers from the past. He was here only to please Ellen. When his sister called to say Mama had died, she was adamant: "I understand how you felt about her, Lenny, but you still need to be here for the funeral. You owe the rest of us that much."

With Mama in the ground, that morning he'd joined his older brother and three sisters around the oversized coffee table in Ellen's living room. Leonard held his tongue as platitudes about Mama were bandied about: principled, strait-laced, devout, tenderhearted, loving—and some he considered fairly accurate: naive, self righteous, tough old bird. The most telling

observation came from Ellen, who, being the oldest, knew Mama best.

"She could surely be a bewildering tangle of contradictions."

Familiar stories followed: how Mama had grown up poor on an East Texas sharecropper's farm; how, as an eighteen-year-old drugstore soda jerk, Mama had met their dad, an oilfield roughneck, when he ordered a ham sandwich and cherry Coke, and a month later they were married. How they loved to go dancing in honky-tonks. How Mama got a ticket in downtown Houston for making an illegal left turn, then wet her pants in fear of going to jail. Everyone laughed at that one, but the laughter quickly faded when they all looked at Leonard.

After Ellen served brunch they began leaving, some by car, some by taxi. Ellen's husband Deke drove off to his barbershop. Ellen persuaded Leonard to stay over a few days, they had so much to catch up on. Her grandkids Mark and Susan—overjoyed to be staying at Grandma's an extra week—took their homemade ice-cream and chocolate cake out to the screened-in back porch where they could watch the hummingbirds feed. Leonard asked Ellen if she cared to drive over and see the old neighborhood.

"I'd love to," Ellen said. "But it's way too hot for those kids. Can you pick up my blood pressure prescription at Walmart?"

It was Saturday and the young Hispanic woman at the pharmacy counter said Ellen's prescription wouldn't be ready for at least another hour. Leonard was curious to see the changes after thirty years and decided to look around outside. Ellen had warned him he wouldn't recognize much. 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.

A glimpse through the trees at a rotting foot-bridge drew him to the edge of the parking lot. The bridge spanned a sluggish creek bisecting an overgrown park. As a boy, Leonard had spent hours playing here. The concrete picnic tables, rusting swings, and scabby softball field brought back memories. Getting his bearings, he decided the shopping center must sit on the former site of Morgan's Trailer Park, which didn't make him feel at all nostalgic. The "trailer trash" label pinned on them by kids living in houses and apartments still stung.

Leonard went on across the bridge and through the park, emerging onto the tree-lined streets on the other side. As a paper boy he'd trudged these same streets, pitching rolled newspapers onto yards and porches. He located the old community building, now a used car lot, as well as the grocery store that cashed Mama's Social Security checks, now a Chinese restaurant. James Bowie Elementary School had been replaced by a building supply center. His best friend Randy Helzer's former home was a beauty shop. Old randy-Randy—what would he be up to these days? Still hooked on *Dungeons and Dragons*? Still hiding in his bathroom with the latest copy of *Playboy?*

Leonard recalled meeting Ellen in the park one evening not long after he turned thirteen. By then his sister was a nurse and she came to talk him out of running away from home.

"I've had enough of her, Ellie," Leonard said, as they walked along a wooded path. "She won't care if I leave."

"Of course she will, Lenny," Ellen said. "Mama loves you. What makes you think she doesn't?"

"She never strapped y'all like she does me."

"Because we did what she said."

"I don't always agree with what she says."

"That's the thing. If Daddy was here, it'd be different. *You'd* be different."

"How old was I when he died?"

"You were about three, I reckon, when he dropped dead shooting eight-ball with some oilfield buddies. A defective heart according to the autopsy. After that, Mama had her hands full."

"What was he like?"

Ellen slapped a mosquito. She looked like Mama when she brought up that scowl, though with an underlying softness that Mama lacked. "Well . . . you'd never talk back to Daddy the way you do Mama."

"Was he mean?"

"No, not mean, Lenny. He didn't tolerate nonsense is all."

"Was he mean to her?"

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

"Am *I* like him?"

She cocked her head. "No, not really. You're more like Mama."

Leonard gasped. "Honest?"

"Sure. That's part of the problem."

"I think the problem is Mama don't love me like she does y'all."

"Oh, Lenny, quit sayin' that. She loves us all the same."

"Then why is she always on my back?"

Ellen stopped and looked at him. "'Cause you do stuff the rest of us never did—smoke cigarettes and Lord knows what else, skip school to sneak off to those rock concerts, talk back, shun God, disrespect her." She walked on and Leonard hurried to catch up. "The rest of us, we were easy for Mama. You're not easy, Lenny. She's trying to straighten you out. She only knows one way."

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

Ellen grunted. "I heard about it. You embarrassed Mama when you smarted off to her in front of Randy."

"I could've yanked that belt away and used it on her. I'm big enough."

"Then you'd have me to reckon with. You don't want that."

"I can't ever forgive her."

"Well, Lenny, that's regrettable. It surely is."

He made his way back to the store and went looking for the computer department. Standing before a blank computer screen, he imagined a schematic of Morgan's Trailer Park overlaying a map of the shopping center. The very spot he stood on could be 370 Fourth Avenue.

He pictured Mama standing on the cement patio in front of their trailer, hands on hips, gossiping with Iris Hernandez, while their fox terrier Bingo rolled in the grass. He could see Mama ironing and listening to her old 78s from the thirties and forties. Leonard liked to poke fun at *Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys*, because he knew Mama loved the group. She'd been to see a live performance once and liked telling Leonard about 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-Haaaa!*

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

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

Her favorite Bob Wills' song was "San Antonio Rose," to which she always felt compelled to sing along. Leonard judged her voice to be as strong and true as any voice in the Wills aggregation, though he never confessed this to Mama. Once, as she was singing full bore, he clownishly joined in. Instead of protesting his mockery, Mama exulted in their impromptu duet. Leonard took pity on her and finished the song straight, even erupting at the end with a passable yodel. After that, Mama tried coaxing him to do a repeat performance, but Leonard only recoiled in mortification.

He went over to the CDs and worked his way down to the Ws, not expecting to find anything by the neanderthal Bob Wills, surprised when he did. Evidently somebody still liked Texas Swing—at least in Texas. He was actually tempted to buy a CD. But why should he want a memento of those miserable years? Living in a cramped trailer, Mama scraping by on

her meager monthly checks, fretting over every bill, strapping the hell out of him if he stepped out of line?

He put the CD back and dawdled in men's clothing before wandering over to the toy section. With Mark and Susan in mind, he was looking over the vast array when the three boys appeared. The oldest boy was ten or eleven, the other two seven or eight. From their similarity in build and features, their stylish haircuts and brand-name sneakers, Leonard pegged them as brothers. Lanky, bright-eyed, clean-cut, they exuded mischievous energy. Led by the oldest, they stormed past Leonard, ignoring him as they manhandled every other toy in the aisle, tossing some aside with contemptuous giggles. If a toy missed the shelf and landed on the floor they ignored it.

An elderly woman pushing a cart rounded the corner and shuffled up 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. Large red earrings dangled from equally large 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 comic recoil.

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

The boy's impish eyes grew large. His hands fluttered to sham terror, drawing shrill tee-hees from the other two.

"Move on out my road, you hear?"

The two younger boys started to go around. But the older boy stood firm, feet spread as he stretched out both arms to restrain his brothers and block the old woman's path.

She shook her head in weary disapproval. "Y'all move on now."

Leonard came abreast of them and the old woman waited for him to pass. Seeing she was about to yield territory that was rightfully hers, Leonard's ire rose. On top of her groceries lay several cheap plastic toys. A malevolent look darkened the oldest boy's face as he reached into the cart and grabbed a red, white, and blue rocket ship the size of a cucumber. He made a zooming sound and sent the rocket sailing down the aisle. In dismay the old woman watched the toy crash and clatter along the floor. The boy reached into the cart again, but Leonard grabbed his throwing arm. With a startled yelp he gawped at the large man towering over him.

"Go pick that up," Leonard said. "Put it back in the cart. Then apologize to this lady."

Massaging his arm where Leonard's fingers had sunk into his flesh, the boy pooched out his lower lip and minced over to the rocket. He bent down as if to get it, then took off like a sprinter, yelling over his shoulder:

"Fuck face!"

The other two boys darted past Leonard in hot pursuit.

Leonard retrieved the toy.

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

He showed her a crack in the plastic. "You'll need to replace it, ma'am."

"I do thank you kindly."

Still fuming, Leonard made another tour of the store, searching for the three boys, hoping to see them in the company of a parent and report their bad behavior. Then he had a troubling thought: what would their parents be like? If someone reported any child of Mama's behaving that way, they'd get a thank you and the child would get the belt. But as acceptable as a good licking might've been in Mama's day, these days it was viewed as harsh, even criminal. How would that boy's parents react to Leonard's complaint? What if the boy countered with his own complaint about the big man grabbing him? Talking mean? Scaring him? Hurting him? It sounded like child brutality and Leonard would have to admit to it. As an ex-con he stood a good chance of being sent back to prison.

After talking to Ellen that night in the park, he hadn't run away from home. The day after he graduated from high school he'd joined the Air Force. Following basic training at San Antonio, he was sent to a base near LA. Being part of the California scene changed him. Mama would've said he got too big for his britches. 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.

"You'll probably get busted and fined. Then you can get on with your life."

Leonard was court-martialed, along with the sergeant and several other enlisted men. He was eighteen, new to the base, with no real friends to vouch for him. The prosecuting

officer was a chinless, cat-eyed man named Harper, who kept jabbing his finger at Leonard as he labeled him a key participant in a major Air Force drug ring. The crime was made 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. He drew little sympathy from the panel of officers gathered to judge him. When they gave him five years he turned to his lawyer in shock. His lawyer could only look back helplessly.

After the worst year and a half of his life, Leonard was released for good behavior. A bad conduct discharge crushed his dream of attending college on the G.I. Bill. Crushed his self esteem as well. The letter Mama sent him didn't help. "Your daddy was awarded a Bronze Star at Inchon, a Purple Heart at Pusan," she wrote. "Now you got him sobbing in his grave."

Leonard never wrote back.

He hitchhiked around California, washing dishes, bagging burgers, sweating in dusty, heat-drenched fields, thankful just to be free. In time 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. Computers fascinated Leonard. The big-hearted divorcee who ran the department took him under her wing and into her bed. Displaying an inborn knack for troubleshooting the often recalcitrant machines, Leonard soon earned a reputation as a technical guru.

He told himself that Mama had written him off, along with the rest of his family, and he shouldn't care. But deep in his heart he harbored the dream that one day he'd return to Texas

and move her out of that trailer and into a home of her own, a dandy little cottage paid for in full, with a nice spot for a garden. That would be his revenge.

When the big day came he called Ellen in a fever of magnanimity. She was delighted to hear from her wayward brother, but informed him regretfully that Morgan's Trailer Park had been sold to developers.

"Mama moved out of her trailer a while back, Lenny. She's living with me now."

"All the more reason," he said, "to want a real home of her own."

"I-I don't think so."

"Is Mama there?"

"Yes . . . she's here."

"Can I talk to her?"

"Well . . . she don't talk much these days. She has Alzheimer's, Lenny. If I'd known where to reach you . . ."

"*Alzheimer's!*"

"Mama don't even know us. She sure wouldn't remember you after all these years. Even if you did buy her a house, she couldn't go live in it. Not on her own. But it's still a lovely thought, dear."

Leonard checked his watch and decided Ellen's prescription should be ready. On his way to the pharmacy he ducked into the men's room. He was washing his hands when the boy emerged from one of the toilets. Leonard glimpsed him in the mirror at the same time the boy spotted Leonard, then slipped out the door.

He took his time drying his hands. He picked up Ellen's pills and was on his way out of the store when he noticed the boy standing near the exit. Crowded around him were his two brothers and a woman—Mama's lookalike. Brimming with purchases in cloth bags, her cart had been shoved to one side. She spoke animatedly to a man in a white shirt and black bowtie, wearing a name tag. The oldest boy, who'd seemed composed in the men's room, pointed tearfully in Leonard's direction. The woman looked at Leonard and her face clouded with recognition. Grabbing her cell phone, she tapped out a number.

Leonard's legs turned sluggish. Veering off in a different direction would look like an admission of guilt, but it took immense self control to keep moving toward the woman. She put her cell phone in her purse and again spoke to the man wearing the name tag. He hurried 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?"

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

"About me?"

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

Leonard looked past Rankin at the woman. He felt sick. 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, trying 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 eyes. "Well, he claims you were . . . with him. His mother's quite upset."

Leonard's animal instincts, fine tuned in prison, were now on full alert. He told himself he needed to do something before the police arrived. He needed to say his piece before this monstrous lie gained momentum and he got sucked into a boiling caldron of chicanery. He went over to the woman. Up close she didn't look at all like Mama. Behind the oldest boy's tears Leonard detected a sly smile.

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

The woman blinked. *"What?"*

"Whatever your son said about me is a lie."

"How dare you!"

"Your son is lying, ma'am." The conviction in Leonard's tone appeared to rattle her.

"Do you think for one minute . . . listen, sir . . . you listen to me—my son does not lie."

"I'm afraid he does."

The boy shoved his hands in his pockets and turned away. Customers in the checkout line watched them with interest.

"Why would he make up something so disgusting?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Leonard said. "I really don't care to know, since nothing in fact happened. Not a word, not a glance passed between your son and me in

that men's room. Nothing happened. Period. Nothing at all."

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

"I'm not a stranger. Not to your son. And I believe I *can* explain why he's lying."

Now she looked confused. "Oh? Well please do."

Leonard nodded at the boy. "It would be better if you asked him."

"The police are on their way," the woman said. Her mouth was set, nostrils dilated. "Would you rather explain it to them?"

Leonard hesitated.

"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 very rude. I reprimanded him. I might've been a little rough . . . I admit that. He's getting back at me—"

"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 checked his watch. "This happened a while ago. In the toy department. She may have left the store."

"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 who knows her children would."

Her gaze shifted from Leonard to her oldest son.

"Your other two boys witnessed everything," Leonard said. "Ask them too."

The two younger boys stared at the floor. Leonard turned to the oldest boy. "Young

man, this is serious stuff. You know as well as I do you're lying about me. Try to understand—your lie could ruin my life. Is that what you want?"

The boy rubbed his nose and shifted his weight from one leg to the other. The woman kept glancing at the glass doors.

"Please!" Leonard begged.

"Wait here," she said to him, making it sound like an order.

She took the oldest boy by the hand and nodded at the other two boys to follow. They hurried to the tunnel behind the lines of linked shopping carts, away from eavesdroppers. Leonard watched her questioning the oldest boy, then the two younger boys. His heart thudded against his chest.

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—nor the offense. Only that he'd rushed home after school, sobbing crocodile tears, swearing the teacher had made the whole thing up. Mama waited, jaw clenched, for him to finish his elaborate lie, before ushering him into the back bedroom. Without a word she took his daddy's leather belt—kept hanging in the closet for just this purpose—and gave him a harder whipping than he'd got from Mr. Burnside.

When the two cops arrived, the woman went to meet them in the vestibule between the sliding glass doors. Commanding their attention, she gestured nervously, smoothing her hair, smiling, shaking her head. The cops treated her with deference. Not once did they look Leonard's way.

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. Then they all turned and came toward Leonard: the cops, the mother, her three sons.

Leonard tried to swallow and couldn't.

The woman avoided Leonard's eyes as she nodded to Rankin and retrieved her cart. Walking stiff and straight, chin up, making her oldest son push the cart, she hurried out of the store.

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

"Good Lord," Rankin said. "She didn't even apologize."

The cop shrugged and walked away.

"That was awful," Rankin said to Leonard. "That kid should be horsewhipped."

Leonard left the air-conditioned store and the muggy heat enveloped him like a wet dishrag. He put Ellen's medicine in the rental car and locked the door. He felt too shaky to drive. He crossed the foot-bridge into the park. The trees closed in overhead and it felt cooler in the shade. More people were enjoying the park now. A large, boisterous family readied a table for a picnic; a group of teens tossed a Frisbee; several people walked dogs. The swings were empty and Leonard sat in one he recalled as his childhood favorite. Probably it wasn't the same swing, but as beat-up as it looked it could've been.

A soothing calm gradually settled over him as he glided back and forth. The scent of fresh-cut grass hung in the air. He felt safe here. Safe and thankful—thankful to be free.

Mama's trailer was only a short walk, just over there. Just beyond those trees. She'd be fixing lunch. Playing her records. Bingo would be curled up on that old brown sofa.

He caught himself humming a nameless tune.

No . . . not nameless.

He began to sing and he could almost hear Mama join in.

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

END