

Kershaw, Knighted and a Cowboy to Boot

Doug Kershaw figured he was feeling as low as he'd ever been, deep night an enemy for starters, his stomach growling for food, a slight breeze nipping a warning at the back of his neck where he'd known frostbite, a sense of loss finding a wide road in his mind.

And the shadows didn't help a bit, the way soft streetlights tossed them into long angles, colors gone, shapes changing, an upside-down world going lopsided again. Even street-side trash barrels, out for next day's collection, leant their forms into shadows almost crossing the narrow alley he had just come out of, loss sort of directing traffic for him. Came a returning thought: Luck and loss, oftentimes at odds, now and then brace one another: in the heart of one shadow he spotted a woman's small pocketbook, without contours or definition, a stray like himself, lost, but belonging someplace on the curve of the Earth, if only after dawn arrived, ownership or kinship established anew.

Before he picked up the pocketbook, he knew it'd be empty of money for sure; no bills, no silver, not a copper cent to grace a pocket, stripped down to a silky lining. Days had passed with neither coin or currency in his hand. Now, for this moment, touch came to the fore. his hand finding a small wallet-type holder with several business cards or *like-about*s. Someone's life story, he granted; Social Security card, driver's license, a formal ID card, a doctor's business card, a larger card from Medicare, an appointment reminder for that doctor, but not a dollar anywhere in that silky lining.

"Ah," he muttered to the shadows, to Eternity for that matter, "probably someone about as broke as me, and lost on this Earth, in this orbit." Early reading in his life provided him with imagination endorsable in seconds. Quick creation brought up the image of a lonely old woman, grayed and straggly of hair, lined with facial folds, gnarled fingers, shaky bones moved by tired muscles, and slowly having drifted into shapelessness. "A bag of a hag," he surmised, knowing his mind was discolored, distorted, and misdirected conditionally by his circumstance, even to the last turn he had made in this night waiting to pass into evermore.

A late listener, sitting a city doorstep, waiting night's passel of secrets, might hear him say, in his garrulous manner, "Night gives up its secrets only with a snap of a bottle opener, by accident, by the threat of dawn forcing the issue, the *Great Taleteller* itself." If asked, he'd spit out dozens of morning's giveaways, like rolling out a carpet toting life's chances gone astray. And there was always a chance of getting fatally struck by lightning or a vehicle in the hands of a drunk, his license gone its way with a previous barrel of drink.

Surprise, though, came to him in the search when his fingers felt a loose plastic card down in the silken folds, saying at the very first touch it was a credit card. Imagination and the found cards and documented life presented him with quick admonition: there could be no way he'd abuse some woman's last grasp at belonging, thrusting her into his world of loss, fading identity, the endless stretching for alms. He'd read too many dark pages about poverty's similar situations the world over on those days when he hid himself from hunger and the weather in a library's warm corner; came back to him Bombay, New York ghettos, crunching flanks in Berlin, Prague's old ruins and new stretches, Cameroon's Doula, Zimbabwe in the Congo, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, as well as his one-time home, West Englewood on Chicago's south side he once thought was the end of the world.

They, in turn, filled him with their nothingness, bored more holes, caused decision in spite of circumstance.

With the hunger tantrums still at work, he'd give her back her identity; not sure if it was his mother he remembered shaking her finger at him or his father, dead these forty years, letting the air carry a last message about being "a good fellow at heart," the request coming in the clearest diction, like an order at the outset of departure, the very day he had left home, the trail from the old house pointing to Chicago's upper echelon proper sitting out there like *Opportunity, Inc.*

In the half yellow light of a street light, he ascertained her name and address, with a minor struggle from e's and c's, as CoraLee Chickler at No. 3A Celtics Circle, Haverhill, MA. 01830. Fortunately for him, and her, obviously, Celtics Circle was the narrow alley he had just passed, and so narrow he figured tenants' cars had to be parked on the back side of the buildings standing tall in the lane.

In the darkness, a harmless threat yet to be marked as a threat, he quickly found 3A in white plastic letters at the door of a three decker building. He *harrumphed* about upper floors displaying similar addresses as he stood in the darkness, when suddenly a voice from an open window said, "What are you doing here at this time of the night? The door is locked and you can't break it in." There was no fear in the voice, an older woman's voice he determined, more interested in his reply than his danger.

As always, he came right to the point; "I found a pocketbook belonging to a CoraLee Chickler beside a trash barrel on the main street." He held up the bag as the music of her name floated from his lips, as calm as a surrender flag. "There was no money in it, but lots of cards, including a credit card," said as if he were painting a clear picture of himself. "I just want to return them. Are you CoraLee Chickler?" His voice carried a sense of hope, and, he thought, the sound of introduction.

"You found her, mister," she replied, and asked, "What are you doing out here at this time of night, and finding something I lost or that might have been taken right off my kitchen table, if you can believe that." It was a quick toss at her neighborhood, he thought, the way it came at him.

He replied in his softest voice, again right to the point, "I live out here, on the streets since my old cellar room went up in a barrel of flames that took everything I owned for the long ride." It sounded, he made sure, that he was not begging; at least he tried for that quick compensation.

"I've been there," she offered, "and was close again except for your good eyes in the dark and the pride of honesty. That's admirable." Her voice had become as soft as his, trustworthy, suddenly mellow of a sort, which made him say, "We should be discussing the state of the world at the UN, at the United Nations. Maybe they'd listen to us."

"I like the way you talk. Have you had breakfast?" Her face was almost lit up with that question, his with surprise.

"Hardly, and no dinner last night either." No sense holding back any information.

The latch on the door clicked, the door swung open, and CoraLee Chickler said, "I'm about to make mine and you're welcome to join me. What's your name?"

" Doug Kershaw, and I could say 'the third' but that would be pretentious of me and they of the past might not want me to share the linkage." A small laugh accompanied the explanation.

"I like that in you," she added, as she swung the door wide and pointed inside. "I have three eggs left I can scramble and bread to toast, but that's the limit."

"My mother used to do that, and make the toast on the top of a black iron kitchen stovetop.. It'd smell up the whole flat and I still know it the minute I smell it."

"I like you more," she said, walking ahead of him into a small kitchen, her walk upright, decidedly smooth, not colored by any infirmity the elderly often bear. A sense of warmth made a penetration in him, even as he wondered how deep it went. She seemed comfortably warm, healthy and still of a decent figure in her night robe.

After a delicious meal, neither breakfast nor lunch in the setting, but a street man's sudden banquet, she said, "I usually grace a meal this early in the day or this late in the morning." *The Muse* frolicking on her face, "with a glass of wine and I'd be pleased to have you say the words if you can find them."

"Madam," he replied, holding up a glass the likes of which he had not held in that hand for a dozen years, "you are mistress of wisdom, wit and worthiness, and it is to your everlasting salvation and Earth escape that I pledge this to be my last drink of the day for this poor soul you have saved for a fortunate night off the streets and alleys of this abominable city."

He might have cursed instead, as she sipped a mere sip of wine from her similar glass, (him thinking she was not at an ordinary task) but as he took his first sip of sparkling wine, she drained off her glass in one fell swoop and loaded up again, and then his glass after he followed her lead.

"I am so lucky to have heard you in the night. It has been an absolute joy to have you here. You will not know how much I appreciate your words." He tried but could not read her face, but the scored lines and wrinkles he had first seen there, imbedded, had somewhat undone themselves.

In a slow enchanting move, she leaned forward and filled his glass again. "My name as revealed," she said in a curious but coy tone, as if she was admitting the wine was playing around with her mind, her mouth, and her words, "is CoraLee." The smile was an infectious comma dropped into her conversation. For dear moments he dwelled on it, hearing it swirl around in his head, well past the function of his ears.

Her name was the last word he heard that made any sense.

He woke, not knowing how much time had passed, struggling for recollection, the taste of wine sitting in his mouth, in the back of his throat, remembered by an elegance touching his whole person, the edges of his body, all his limbs, with its one last shot into some kind of finery long since known. .

Waking fully at last, his mind clearing from its sudden elegance, he found himself bound hand and foot by rope to a monstrous iron bed, as if a Scout Master had tied the knots himself. A name fought to be said, and his mind, for the longest time, refused to say, CoraLee, hiding out as it did, way off in a corner of darkness, dawn making its slight announcements at low angles to Mother Earth.

An astonished feeling of cleanliness powered about him as he realized several other conditions come down upon him and his usual street-and-night-patterned body: he was naked, he was clean all over, his beard trimmed, hair trimmed, body slimmed, an erection in place like an Old Ironsides mast in the Navy Yard, and comforting and discomfoting sounds of morning noises and odors passing to his senses from another room.

The first image hitting him did not come from the alerted senses, but from a pocketbook on the street. And then came CoraLee, into his mind and suddenly at the door of the room, her voice sending her own announcements, "Your breakfast is here, Mr. Douglas Kershaw. We'll get your teeth brushed for you by your own free hand, as we'll see. You'll eat and wait upon my friends of The Club. Today, dear, dear man, we're going to play *cowboy or knights' pleasure*."

The words were stressed and dressed for attention. "We're going to ride you and perhaps, and most likely, you'll get to ride us, the fair dames of the organization, but we'll have you know, you are not our first cowboy or our first knight errant or knight amour, most likely not our last, which will be up to you as much as up to us, and I am sure, we are sure, there'll be no yelling for escape from you, not after you see the flanks of the ranks." Notice, he did, that she tittered at rhyme and its deployment and he became pleasantly enticed, the knotted ropes notwithstanding.

She beamed as she placed the meal, including a large mug of aromatic coffee, on a short-legged table promising to be placed over his chest, as she added, "I'll free up one hand so you can feed yourself, but only after you get a glimpse of my dear dear friends at their very best. You can view their womanhood as they study your manhood and particularize their own immediate fancies." Her smile had gathered a realm of joy.

The small bed table was placed over his chest, one hand was freed as she effortlessly untied the knot on his left wrist and iron bed, at which point she said, with a rush of delight in her voice, "Come on in. ladies, and meet Mr. Douglas Kershaw, new at the ranch, new at the table and the stable," the rhyme still at work with ease.

Bound Doug Kershaw, one hand free, his body saying food was most important at the moment, halted all his intentions as three women, each one naked, entered the room, solid smiles leaping to encompass their faces, mouths agape in sudden appreciation of a new conquest at their bidding, his erection bold as brass and his eyes full of his own quick measurements of them, the newcomers. They were not 18, not one of them, but they were not 80 either, structures obviously delightful, two of them meticulously shaved at the crotch and the third with an old-style setting calling for its own attention, and each one of the newcomers smiling a solid smile in this hour of acceptance, as CoraLee said, "We only have a few hours, ladies, after he eats, so let's not mess up the affairs or the pairs." The giggle was repeated in her throat and the smiles widened on each face of four ladies of the morning, gluttons at their own table newly set.

Douglas Kershaw, street person, in a sudden new identity, life re-opened, never having driven a herd of cattle north, never into a momentous world-shaking battle in Europe or Asia, never having ridden a horse like an Arabian, a Morgan, a Mustang, a Steeldust, an Appaloosa, an Andalusian, a Pinto, a Courser, or even a Great Horse, but caught up by the most glorious images of John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Tom Sellick, Sean Connery or Richard Harris, all mounted at their absolute best, took his coffee first.

