

Watching Westerns With Russell

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I'm on the phone with Lyle Stone and he's telling me he no longer feels suicidal, that he wants to live and find another woman.

"You want to give some lucky woman your love," I tease my oldest living friend.

Although I am pleased that he sounds revitalized, I'm not surprised when he tells me for the second time in two minutes that he was only out of rehab for one hour before he had a beer.

Prior to the call, I'm certain that I value Lyle Stone's life more than he does. I expect a call from his niece any day, with news of her morose uncle's sad end. Or maybe no call will come, and I will hear of it much later and miss his funeral altogether, like I missed Mary's. That will serve me right. I prefer any scenario to the one where Lyle keeps talking about ending his life and expects me, his only friend, to keep listening.

We used to work together as painters. Lyle specialized in industrial work and used a lot of harsh chemical products over the years that complicated health problems that now, with him unemployed and unemployable, will never receive adequate medical attention.

Rapidly declining health and layers of grief crush him. His periodic phone calls cease. I give him no encouragement to keep me posted on his suicide plan. I want no enabling role in his depressed diminuendo.

Three years now since Mary died, and his two brothers, Park and Emmett died, all three in the same year, of liver failure, hep C, and cancer; Lyle dwells on their deaths with every step and every breath. He is too much of an alcoholic to admit any desire whatsoever to be otherwise. He is proud to be an ex-cocaine addict, though. The part of his story he most desperately repeats is the part where he begins dealing coke with Mary and she warns him that it will end them.

“If we do this, it’ll ruin us,” he quotes her prophecy. The fact that it did ruin them is his oft-made point, one key reason for his grief.

He continues to castigate me for missing Mary’s funeral, long after I apologize for not remembering the date.

“Sorry,” I say again, contrite. “My mind’s not a steel trap, anymore.”

“Mine is,” he says.

He’s locked inside his memories, adding glimmers of details to Mary’s funeral, where my absence, unexcused, remains undimmed in his mind.

“Write a song about it,” I say. “Lazy fucker.”

He claims he can no longer hold a pen without his hand hurting. Arthritis. I can’t keep listening. I want to hang up.

On our best days, at our best, we were songwriters, recording demos and playing on each other’s songs. With few exceptions, we wrote separately because Lyle was such a prima donna about his spontaneity. Mr. No Second Takes, he never would agree to change a single line. He’d go off, unrehearsed, and however the original version came out on the tape was the way he

always contrived to leave it. Occasionally, his method yielded moments of undisputed genius, some of which are preserved for the ages on rare cassette recordings.

From the far end of Memory Lane, Lyle reaches back to me for reassurance that I'm still with him.

“What would you do?” he asks.

“Don't ask me that,” I say.

I always lend at least a half an ear to his confidences. Lyle provides me with source material for stories, songs and novels, none of which ever sell. But you never know. He draws from a deep well.

He utters his solemn intent to bequeath to me the briefcase containing his lifelong collection of writings, which he never refers to as poems or songs. I am to inherit his “writings,” to collate, and, if possible, to publish as his posthumous works, or, as I see fit, to archive. His trust in me is unequivocal.

Such largesse takes him an hour to lead up to and conclude, yet his monologue presses on, unhurried, filled with digressions eliding all parameters of space, time and hope. He wants to keep talking about Mary, but he's exhausted all his Mary stories, those he deems fit for my ears.

He even admits to hitting her, “that one time.” The fact that he mentions it at all is a clear sign of his desperate need to keep me on the line. “Not very hard, barely a tap,” he says.

He won't go far down that road. In his sly way, he's trying to keep my attention. He maunders up to the edge of honesty and retreats. In forty years, no more nebulous, self-deluded or redundant storyteller than Lyle Stone has ever laid claim to my attention.

He loved Mary so much more than any other woman. With Mary, he found true love.

Lyle keeps talking about her, even though his thread is broken. Unless I force an end, there will be no end to his maudlin ramble until he winds down from fatigue or runs out of cigarettes, or beer. Lyle cannot tell a story any other way but long.

The last thing I want to inherit in life, or read, is Lyle's writings. I tell him the truth-that no one gives a shit. No one wants to read his musings.

He doesn't, either, he says.

He asks one favor of me. A particular woman he knew fifteen years ago, he wants me to look her up for him on the internet. He has only her name and her old occupation as a nurse. He has no computer and has never learned to use one.

I Google her name and find nothing.

"What makes her the lucky woman?" I ask him. "What did she ever do to deserve you reappearing in her life?"

"That's an odd way to put it," he says. "But if you must know, she was the one woman I did it with eight times in one night."

I am not inspired by that little nugget to solicit details, although its intent is clearly to prolong the conversation. I want to end the phone call soon. I want to lay my burden down. I have other matters at hand far more pressing than lending an ear to his roseate exploits.

Back in the early eighties, we shared an apartment for six months that turned into a haven for drunks. Our mutual friend, Tommy Sharpe, and his dad, Russell, stayed there off and on with us. Lyle's first encounter with Russell set the tone for the next six months.

Tommy and his dad were painters from North Carolina. They had the hill country accent and the storytelling gift.

Russell rode a bus down from Burlington to visit his son. Tommy warned him not to come. He told him he'd turn him right around and send him straight back home on the bus. Tommy had no residence of his own. He slept on a couch at two lesbians' house. Russell was drunk and took the bus to Florida, anyway.

I drove Tommy to the bus station to pick up his dad, a wiry, nimble, bright-eyed fellow, quick with a joke, and hard-headed. He wasn't about to get back on that bus and go home.

At first, the girls welcomed Russell, fussed over him and let him paint their house, but after a couple of weeks, once Russell drank all the liquor in the house, including all their cooking sherry, they put their feet down and told Tommy he could stay, but his dad had to leave. Tommy tried to put Russell back on the bus, but Russell wasn't ready to go home, yet.

That's when Tommy came to me asked if Russell could stay the night at our new place, a big downstairs apartment, a half a block from the ocean with two big bedrooms, a huge living room with three couches and a screened in front porch with another couch on it.

“Don’t let the girls humiliate my dad,” Tommy said. “Please.”

Without consulting Lyle, I gave him the green light. I knew Lyle wouldn’t mind once he understood the situation.

I had only just moved in and Lyle had yet to spend a night there. He was still trying to patch up his broken relationship with his ex-girlfriend, Doris, with whom he suspected I had conspired to betray him. Lyle blamed me for their breakup and for everything else in his life that, inexplicably, in his eyes, was beginning to go wrong. The galling injustice of his ouster from the sanctuary of his girlfriend’s apartment had blackened his heart and encrusted his resolve to despise me forever.

The house was dark when Lyle came in that first night, blistering with rage at my unconscionable deceit. He carried eleven cans of a twelve pack of Bud under his arm and when he tripped over Russell’s shoes, he stumbled to one knee and two cans fell out and hit the hard wood floor.

I heard the commotion and turned on the kitchen light. Lyle’s eyes blazed at me.

“Lyle, that’s Tommy’s dad,” I said. “His name’s Russell.”

Russell said, “How about one of them beers?”

Lyle handed him one of the cans that had dropped. He took the other for himself and they both tapped the tops of the cans with their fingers.

Tommy emerged from under a blanket on one of the couches. “I’ll take one,” he said.

Lyle handed him a can, and said, “You living here, too?”

“No,” Tommy said. “Just hanging out. Dad’s going back to North Carolina tomorrow.”

“The hell I am,” said Russell. He popped the top on his can and sucked up the foaming overflow.

Lyle and Tommy did the same. Beer hit the floor, the first of many spills.

Lyle said to Russell, “You can stay. I don’t care.” He looked at me with feigned disregard. He said, “You could have told me.”

I shrugged, “I was going to.”

My smugness in those days knew no bounds. I had done only one good deed of any caliber in my first thirty years, and this was it. I had facilitated it with such finesse that my hand appeared invisible in their imbroglio.

The end result was that Doris felt empowered. After years of unhappiness, she had succeeded in extricating herself from a toxic relationship with Lyle Stone, while Lyle floundered on in a vast sea of delusion. His tormented heartache could not be cured by any woman’s tender mercies, and Doris no longer felt any tenderness at all toward Lyle, or any shred of mercy.

Whatever they had once had together was long past its expiration date. Anyone could see that, except Lyle. He was determined to fix things, to fix Doris’ attitude. He never saw himself as the problem.

All I had to do was throw him a lifeline. I found the apartment and told him about the six month lease. I didn’t have to talk him into it. He wrote me a check for the deposit.

I offered him a means of escape and he put his trust in me. I thought it a grand bit of meddling at the time. For once, things turned out right. All I had to do was endure a six month lease with a furious roommate.

Lyle's fury didn't last much more than six minutes. Although his masque of anger took on its own façade, it fooled me not. He still nurtured his resentment, but by the time Lyle and Russell had finished those first beers, the house was christened a house of drunks and Lyle had begun to move on into the next phase of his life.

He never accused me outright of having sex with Doris, although we both knew that was the nameless grudge he held against me. I never deigned to volunteer a denial. In that game, I remained several steps ahead of Lyle. I knew he would rather believe himself the victim than to admit to ever raising an angry hand against Doris. Many years later, he admitted to searching through the manuscripts and notebooks in my room for clues linking me sexually with Doris.

No such sexual component existed. Doris and I were friends before either of us had ever met Lyle. He knew she had told me the truth. When I called him on it, he ridiculed me vehemently for believing her, "a fat girl," as he put it, for taking her word above his own. For me to believe Doris and my own lying eyes over his protestations of innocence, he took as a grave betrayal of our sacred friendship.

I betrayed no one. And nothing was sacred to me, anyway. I was twenty-nine and past caring what Lyle considered sacred. I kept a promise to Doris, to help her get free of Lyle. I paid the cost in consequences. For choosing sides, I ended up with Lyle as a lifelong friend, instead of Doris.

Looking back after thirty years, that six month lease went past in a flash.

Russell was no trouble. He was content to have a roof over his head. His painting career was over. He started collecting cans along the highway for recycling.

Lyle's own father had committed suicide when Lyle was fourteen. Over morning Budweisers with Russell, our resident father figure for drunks, Lyle couldn't help but note the sunny contrast between Russell's indomitable personality and Lyle's own darkened memory of the garden hose attached to the muffler of his father's car.

None of that bears directly on Lyle's recent phone call, except as an introduction to Russell Sharpe, our mutual friend's father, of whom tall tales were told.

Later that decade, in his own good time, Russell Sharpe returned to his home in North Carolina. Tommy eventually followed his father home and took up residence with him again in their little house on Kilby Street where Tommy had grown up.

Russell was well-known in every detox facility in the state of North Carolina. He had been a guest in one of them fourteen times. He was about to go in again if the Sharpe family could find one that would admit him one more time.

I visited Tommy in North Carolina several times over the next few years. While there I'd watch westerns with Russell and listen to his stories. Russell's teeth were gone, but he was always entertaining, despite the thickness of his accent and the garbled quality of his slurred speech. It wasn't hard to tell that most of his stories were all about sex.

Russell still collected cans, his own cans. He had six cases of generic beer stacked under the windowsill next to his chair. He drank beer all day and watched the western channel,

keeping the curtain in the window partway open so he could watch the street and the television at the same time.

An old woman walked back and forth several times past his house down the sidewalk, mumbling out loud and shaking her head.

Russell said, “She wants my cock. Twenty years ago, I fucked that woman thirteen times in eleven hours.”

There was a French girl in his wartime tales who hated Germans and killed nine of them. She and Russell were holed up in the barn, fucking in the hayloft, when a truck full of Germans arrived at the farmhouse. How she killed them all, Russell didn’t offer details, but afterward, they resumed fucking. “Russell,” the French girl said, “you are a fucking machine.”

Russell liked to drink a beer while mowing his lawn, but he had fallen off of his riding lawnmower once too often. Tommy had to remove the front wheels and hide them. When the grass got high, Tommy put the wheels back on and cut the yard himself.

One day while Tommy was cutting the grass, I was inside watching westerns with Russell. A black and white classic was showing, an adaptation of William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust*.

Russell didn’t appear to be paying much attention to it. I assumed, because it isn’t exactly a western. Set in Mississippi in the 1940s, a black man is wrongly accused of murder. Russell talked about the French girl all through it. He didn’t seem to take any interest in the film at all until the final scene when the exonerated hero pays his lawyer’s fee and stands waiting by his desk. The lawyer asks what he’s waiting for.

“My receipt,” Russell answered a half-second ahead of the actor.

Russell endured detox one last time. Soon after, he was gone. I missed his funeral, too.

So, thirty years later, Lyle starts touting his virile eight bagger and I’ve had enough. I have things to do. I need to get off the phone. There are only so many hours in a day.

“Lyle, I gotta go,” I say, my voice rising while he continues to talk, “I gotta go, I gotta GO! I GOTTA GO!” He keeps talking until I hang up on him.

Hours later, I remember that old woman walking back and forth in front of Russell’s house. I call Lyle back and leave a message with his niece. Later that night, Lyle calls me back.

I say, “Lyle, you remember old Russell, Tommy’s dad. When I was up there in North Carolina visiting Tommy, around 1992, Russell would sit there by the window all day, drink beer, watch westerns, keep an eye on the street. An old lady from down the block walks past his house and Russell says ‘Twenty years ago, I fucked that woman thirteen times in eleven hours.’”

I can’t help chuckling over that line. I notice Lyle’s not laughing. “I just wanted to tell you that Russell had you beat,” I say.

Lyle replies in a somber tone, a tiny bit disconsolate. “Yeah. He did. Russell beat me.”

“Not that eight’s not respectable,” I say. “We all have our personal best.”

“Respectable?” he says. “You have no idea what I went through.”

“Nor do I want to know,” I say. “I just wanted to tell you about Russell. I don’t have time to talk about it.”

“Thanks,” he says. “You little bitch.”

I know he’s trying not to laugh. It’s not up to me to keep him laughing, but I do my part.