

TEXAS SWING

The day after his mother's funeral Leonard joined his five brothers and sisters around the oversized coffee table in Ellen's living room. From the big backyard came the gleeful sounds of his nephews and nieces at play. Ellen, being the oldest and living closest to their mother—and being Ellen—had taken her in as the dementia worsened, then later made the funeral arrangements.

They all had stories to relate—all except Leonard—touching, humorous stories told with unabashed affection. Ellen remembered how their mother had grown up poor on an East Texas sharecropper's farm; Sarah how their mother had met their dad, an oilfield roughneck, when she was an eighteen-year-old drugstore soda jerk; Martin how she considered cornbread immersed in buttermilk a delicacy; Roberta how she loved to jitterbug. Bandied about were terms like principled, strait-laced, devout, tough old bird. Keith told the funniest story, about the day their mother got a ticket in downtown Houston for making an illegal left turn, and wet her pants fearing she was going to jail. At the mention of that word they all grew suddenly quiet. Some in the room looked uncomfortably at Leonard, some looked away.

Chaos reigned for a time as they all began leaving, some driving, some flying, headed back to their homes in different states. Leonard was relieved to exchange final goodbye hugs. Ellen had expressed delight when her baby brother accepted her invitation to stay over a day or two. They had so much to catch up on. Her two grandkids, Mark and Susan, were staying as well. At last Ellen hustled them into the kitchen for chocolate cake and ice-cream, and her

husband Deke left for his barbershop.

Feeling at loose ends now that the house was still, Leonard told his sister he wanted to drive over to the old neighborhood and see what he recognized after thirty years. Did she need anything? She asked him to pick up her blood pressure prescription at Wal-Mart she'd called in earlier. She assured him he wouldn't recognize much at all.

As usual Ellen was right. What had once been woods and fields, rural mailboxes and gravel driveways along a winding country road had evolved into garish fast food restaurants, upscale housing developments, apartment and office buildings along a heavily-traveled four-lane.

Leonard parked his rental car at the edge of a bustling shopping center, walked to the edge of the pavement, and stopped to peer through the trees at a rotting wooden foot bridge spanning a sluggish creek bisecting a small park. Recalling a similar park from his boyhood, the familiar concrete picnic tables and rusting swings, he determined the shopping center was located on the former site of Fairwinds Trailer Park.

He tried to recall the street layout in the once sprawling trailer park as a means of pinpointing the grassy rectangle his mother had rented at 370 Fourth Avenue. Not that he was experiencing the faintest twinge of nostalgia. The "trailer trash" label jeeringly pinned on them by smartass kids living in houses and apartments still stung. The day he graduated from high school and joined the Air Force had felt like a release from prison. How was he to know that in barely a year he'd be confined to a real prison called Leavenworth?

And yet he couldn't help feeling a tug at his heartstrings as he roamed the quiet, tree-lined streets beyond the park. He found himself recalling times when he'd aimlessly trudged

these same streets, chain-smoking Luckys while contemplating his imagined future—a *Beau Geste* future lush with adventure and romance—delaying as long as possible going home to a mother who'd start in on him the minute he stepped through the door.

He was able to locate the old community softball field, now a used car lot, as well as the store where his mother had shopped for weekly groceries, now a Chinese restaurant. James Bowie Elementary School had been replaced by a building supplies center. His best friend's former home had been converted to a beauty parlor. Randy Helzer—old randy-Randy—what might he be up to these days? Still hooked on Dungeons and Dragons? Still bearing a torch for Linda Ronstadt? Still hiding in his bathroom to drool over the latest crop of spread beavers in *Hustler*?

Leonard made his way back to the shopping center and headed for the Super Wal-Mart. When the young Hispanic woman at the busy pharmaceutical counter told him that Ellen's prescription wasn't quite ready, he went looking for the computer department. Dawdling before a blank screen, he amused himself by imagining a schematic of Fairwinds Trailer Park overlaying a map of the shopping center. This very spot he stood on could be 370 Fourth Avenue. He pictured his mother outside on her cement patio in front of their blue and white trailer, hands on hips, their fox terrier Bingo at her feet, gossiping with their neighbor Iris Bigelow.

He wandered over to the CD display. His mother had loved playing those old 78s from the thirties and forties, the ones he couldn't resist poking derisive fun at: Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. That strutting bantam rooster of a bandleader with the flashy boots and big cowboy hat, prattling above the guitars, fiddles, and brass. Making those ridiculous *ahhh-haaa!*

sounds that made Leonard gnash his teeth.

“Put on some Three Dog Night or Stones!” he’d wail.

Not bothering to look up from her ironing board, his mother would snap right back, “You go jump in the lake, boy.”

On a whim he worked his way along the CD rack to the Ws. Not expecting to find anything by the neanderthal Bob Wills, he surprised himself when he did. Evidently somebody still liked Texas Swing—at least in Texas. He was actually tempted to buy one of the CDs. But why? Would he ever get around to playing the damn thing? Did he truly need to be reminded of those troublesome years growing up in a cramped trailer, his mother’s constant nagging, scraping by month by month on her meager Social Security checks? Getting strapped every time he looked at her sideways?

He put the CD back.

One evening, not long after he turned thirteen, he asked Ellen, “How come she never straps y’all like she does me?” They were strolling through the park at dusk. Ellen was trying to talk him out of running away from home.

“Because we do what she says,” Ellen said. “We wouldn’t think of talking back like you do. If Daddy was here, things would be different. *You’d* be different. Mama has her hands full. She relied on Daddy.”

Leonard was three when his dad dropped dead in the midst of shooting eight-ball with his oilfield buddies. A defective heart, the autopsy showed. “What was he like?” he asked Ellen.

She paused, slapping at a mosquito. Ellen looked a lot like their mother: petite and

sparkly, yet with an underlying softness all her own. “Well . . . you’d never sass Daddy the way you do Mama. You might sass him once but that’d be it.”

“Was he mean to y’all?”

“Mean? Never. He wouldn’t tolerate nonsense is all.”

“Was he mean to her?”

“To Mama? She knew not to give him any guff if that’s what you’re asking. He was never mean. Hard-nosed is what he was.”

“Mama gets mean with me, Ellie.”

“Cause you disrespect her. Scare her. You’re the baby, she loves you but worries she spoiled you. You do stuff the rest of us never did—smoke cigarettes, smoke pot, skip school, sneak off to those rock concerts, shun God. Mama blames herself. The rest of us, we were easy for her. You’re a challenge. She fears for your soul. She feels an obligation to straighten you out for your own good. She only knows one way to do it.”

“She strapped me right in front of Randy. My best friend saw me shamed.”

“You smarted off to her in front of Randy. You embarrassed Mama as well.”

“It’s something I can’t forgive her for.”

“Then you’ll regret it,” Ellen said.

Following basic training near San Antonio, he was sent to a base near LA. Being part of the California scene made him somehow feel more worldly. He was in that mode when, 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 willingly confessed to what the baby-faced lieutenant handling his defense

assured him was a minor infraction. Along with the sergeant and several other enlisted men, he was court-martialed. He was eighteen, new to the base, with few friends to vouch for him. He was dumbfounded when the prosecuting officer labeled him a key participant in a major Air Force drug ring, a crime made all the more reprehensible because the base was part of the Strategic Air Command.

Leonard was tall, hard-muscled, sharp featured, with heavy-lidded eyes and a bent nose from playing football. His roughhewn cocksure demeanor elicited little sympathy from the dour panel of officers serving as jury. He was sentenced to five years. He was released for good behavior after the worst year of his life.

A bad conduct discharge crushed his dream of attending college on the G.I. Bill. Crushed his self image. He was ashamed to face his family, especially his mother. “Your daddy was awarded a Bronze Star at Inchon, a Purple Heart at Pusan,” she wrote to Leonard. “He served honorably. Now you got him twisting and turning in his grave.”

He lost contact with all of them after prison, convinced it was their doing. For more than a year he hitchhiked around California, searching for something he couldn’t quite define, washing dishes, bagging burgers, sweating buckets in dusty, heat-drenched fields, relishing his freedom as never before.

One day he lucked into a job in the shipping department of a small manufacturing company near Sacramento, a company that happened to be in the process of computerizing its creative department. Leonard was fascinated by computers. By hook or by crook he got to know the key participants. He soon discovered he had an inborn knack for troubleshooting the often recalcitrant machines. Establishing himself as something of a technical guru made him

invaluable in his job. Being invaluable to someone restored his self respect.

The onset of maturity spurred him to examine his ambivalence toward his mother. Hard questions dogged him: Why did he reject his mother's values? Why was it no amount of strapping by her or paddling by the principal at James Bowie Elementary or quiet lecturing by Ellen could tame his mutinous disposition? Why did it take learning to survive among the hardcore at Leavenworth to accomplish this? Could it be that his mother had done her best by him, considering their circumstances? And Ellen? And Mrs. Swarthout, one of his more attentive grade-school teachers? And Mr. Burnside? Could it be that *he* was the problem all along?

The day finally came—as Ellen always assured him it would—when he decided it was time to sit down with his mother and have a heart-to-heart in hopes of clearing the air. But by then his mother no longer recognized him.

He was in one of the main aisles, looking over the meat display, when his attention was drawn to a woman in a side aisle who looked remarkably like Mrs. Swarthout. Placing a box of Cheerios in her cart, she looked up at him and he saw she was younger than he was.

She was strikingly handsome, with thick brown hair, olive complexion, longish nose, piercingly intelligent eyes. She wore a smart gray suit, not the sort of attire you'd expect a Wal-Mart Saturday shopper to wear. Mrs. Swarthout used to dress like that. Leonard's smile had the effect of erasing her smile. She refocused her attention on the myriad boxes of cereal and when she glanced back to see him still staring, she frowned.

Leonard spun around and went on his way.

He killed some time in men's clothing, searching through piles of jeans for the right

size, only to conclude he didn't really need another pair of jeans. He continued on to the toy section, thinking he might find something suitable for Mark and Susan. He was looking over the vast array when the three boys came along.

The oldest boy was maybe ten or eleven, the other two seven or eight. Their similarity in build and features, their stylish haircuts, suggested a close kinship. Brothers, Leonard thought. Lanky, bright-eyed, clean-cut, they exuded mischievous energy. From the look of their clothes and brand-name sneakers, they came from affluence. Led by the oldest, they stormed down the aisle past Leonard, ignoring him as they manhandled every other toy within reach, then tossed it back with contemptuous laughter. If a toy missed the shelf and landed on the floor, they ignored it.

An elderly woman rounded the corner and shuffled down the aisle in the boys' direction. She was 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 loosely on her gaunt shoulders. Huge round red earrings dangled from equally huge ears. The matching red silk scarf wrapped snugly around her head was meant, Leonard suspected, to conceal a bald pate.

When the oldest boy reached her cart, he pulled up in mock annoyance, as if the insolent cart had purposely impeded his progress. The other two boys plowed into him in the manner of Keystone Cops.

"Watch yourself, children," the woman said, almost under her breath.

The older boy gave the cart an indignant shove and staggered backwards a few steps in clownish hyperbolic recoil.

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

The boy's impish eyes grew large. He leered and fluttered his hands to sham terror, drawing shrill giggles from the other two.

"Move on out my way now."

The two younger boys started to go around. But the older boy, standing with his feet obstinately spread, stretched out his arms to restrain his brothers and block the old woman's path.

She shook her head in weary disapproval. "Y'all move on out my road, hear?"

At this mild rebuke a look of cunning malevolence slithered from the boy's sneering mouth up to his mocking eyes. Leonard was now abreast of them. The old woman waited patiently for him to pass. Seeing she was about to yield territory that was rightfully hers, Leonard felt his ire rise.

The old woman's cart was full of groceries and a number of cheap plastic toys. Reaching into the basket, the boy grabbed a red, white and blue rocket ship the size of a cucumber. Making a zooming sound between his teeth, he sent the rocket sailing. In dismay the old woman watched it crash and go clattering and skidding down the aisle.

Seeing the boy reach into the basket again, Leonard grabbed his throwing arm and yanked it back. The boy yelped in surprise and gawped at the large man towering over him.

"Go pick that up," Leonard ordered. "Put it right back where it belongs. Then apologize to this lady." He held onto the boy's arm a moment longer before releasing it.

Massaging the spot where Leonard's fingers had sank into his flesh, the boy pooched out his lower lip and minced meekly over to the toy. He bent down as if to retrieve it, then took off like a sprinter hearing the starting gun.

“Fuck face!”

Chortling over his shoulder, he romped away. The other two boys darted past Leonard in hot pursuit.

Leonard went over and picked up the toy rocket.

“Thank you, suh,” the old woman said.

“You’ll need to replace it,” Leonard said, showing her a crack in the plastic.

“I do thank you kindly.”

Still fuming, he made another tour of the store, keeping a watchful eye out for the boys. If he saw them in the company of an adult he intended to submit a full report on their behavior.

But hold on a minute.

Whoa now.

What sort of parents would they turn out to be?

Hard to tell these days.

He sometimes regretted not marrying and having children himself. Until he thought seriously about the challenges of being a parent and acknowledged the ironic truth—he’d raise his children the way his mother raised him. Acceptable as her way might’ve been in her day, now it was judged criminal. Every time he saw unruly kids being disrespectful, running amok in public places while their parents pretended not to notice, or worse, smiled with glum helplessness, Leonard grew more firmly entrenched in his belief that the pendulum had swung too far.

What would he say to that boy’s parents when their son complained about the big man grabbing him? Hurting him? Scaring him? Talking mean? If the boy was anything like

Leonard at that age he'd spin the story in his favor. Leonard would have to admit he'd lost his temper, gone too far. Worth the risk? Probably not. Best not to pursue the matter further lest he find himself in handcuffs, reliving his worst nightmare.

On his way back to the prescription counter he stopped by the men's room. He'd just turned away from the urinal to wash his hands when the boy emerged from one of the toilets. Leonard caught a glimpse of him in the mirror at the same time the boy spotted Leonard. The boy quickly slipped out the door.

Leonard took his time drying his hands, hoping the boy would be gone by the time he left. There was no sign of him as he left the men's room and went to the prescription counter. He picked up Ellen's pills and was on his way out of the store when he saw the boy again. Standing near the exit, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Crowded around him with rapt expressions of concern were his two brothers and a woman—the same woman Leonard had briefly mistaken for Mrs. Swarthout.

Her cart, brimming with purchases in cloth bags, had been shoved hastily to one side. She pointedly addressed a man in a white shirt and black bowtie. He wore a name tag. The oldest boy, who'd seemed composed enough in the men's room, now cried and gestured accusingly at Leonard. When the woman looked hard at the person her son was singling out, her eyebrows arched in startled recognition. Opening her cell phone, she tapped out a quick number.

Leonard slowed his pace. His stomach quivered, his legs turned sluggish. He couldn't veer off in another direction, that would seem a clear admission of guilt. It took immense self control to keep his feet on a forward path. Customers in line at the checkout booths watched

with interest. Closing her cell phone, the woman again spoke to the man wearing the name tag. He quick-stepped 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?” Leonard had yet to overcome his fear of the police. He feigned shock as his mind shifted into overdrive. How should he act? What was expected of him in this situation? Indignance? Outrage? Anger? What?

“The lady called them. The lady over there. Her son made an accusation.”

“*Accusation* you say?”

“Correct.”

“What sort of accusation?”

The manager, short and bald with a fringe of thin blond hair over his ears, pursed his lips before answering. “Were you just in the men’s room . . . with that boy?”

This time Leonard had no need to *feign* shock. 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, feeling a little lightheaded, straining to keep his voice steady. “I did see that boy, though briefly. I certainly wasn’t *with* him, whatever that means.”

The manager had trouble meeting Leonard’s panicky gaze. “Well, he claims you were. What he’s accusing you of . . . his mother is quite upset. Looks like it’s your word against his.”

Leonard’s animal instincts, fine tuned in prison, were now on full alert. Things were moving too fast. He shifted his attention to the woman. He needed to take some action before

the police arrived—before he got sucked into some boiling caldron of chicanery.

Behind his tears the oldest boy was barely able to disguise a sly smile. As Leonard went over to the woman, her eyes turned a murderous green. She took a step to confront him.

Leonard stopped and lifted his hand like a traffic guard.

“He’s lying,” he said firmly, not raising his voice.

The woman blinked. “How dare you!”

“Your son is lying, ma’am.”

The conviction in his tone appeared to rattle her, though only momentarily. “Do you think for one minute . . . listen, sir—you listen to me—my son doesn’t lie.”

“I’m afraid he does.” Leonard gave the boy a sharp glance. Shoving his hands in his pockets, the boy looked away.

“Why would he lie about something so disgusting?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Leonard said. “I don’t care to know since nothing happened. Not a word, not a glance passed between your son and me in that men’s room. I repeat—nothing happened, nothing at all.”

Her cheeks flushed pink. “Then explain to me why he’d accuse a perfect stranger—”

“I’m no stranger. Not to your son.” Now she looked confused. Leonard added, “And I think I know why he’s lying.”

“I see. All right then. All right. Maybe you’d care to share that information.”

“Why not ask your son? Wouldn’t it be better if *he* told you?”

“The police are on their way. I suggest you explain now.” Her mouth was set, her nostrils dilated. “I’m waiting, sir.”

“Fine, fine. Okay. Fine. Let’s do it then. Your son was rude to an elderly woman. Extremely rude. He was clowning around but he was rude. I reprimanded him. I might’ve been a little rough . . . that I admit to.”

Shading her eyes with one hand like an Apache scout, she made a pretense of scanning the surrounding area. “And where might this alleged person he was rude to be?”

Leonard also looked around. He didn’t see the old woman. He glanced at his watch. “This happened over half an hour ago. In the toy department.”

“I see. Well now. Well, well, well. Could it be *you’re* the one who’s lying?”

“*Ask him.* For God’s sake, just ask him. Before you try to ruin my life over some ugly lie, lady, please ask him. You’re his mother. You’ll know if he’s telling the truth or not.” The woman’s restive eyes flicked from Leonard’s face to her son’s. “Your other two boys saw everything,” Leonard said. “All I’m asking is that you get the truth out of one of them.”

Still the woman hesitated. The two younger boys stared down at the floor. Would this mother be inclined to defend her son no matter what, ignoring her intuition? Brushing aside all doubt, no matter how obvious, in her need to verify a lie? Wasn’t that how it went these days?

Leonard turned to the boy. “Young man, I don’t think you realize how serious this is. You’re bent on sending me to prison because I ticked you off. I’m sorry about that. But if you don’t tell your mother the truth . . . when the truth does come out—and it will—rest assured I’ll make it hard on her. I’m talking about a court of law where I’ll fight like hell. Things will get messy. And regardless of the outcome you’ll have to live with this the rest of your life.”

The boy rubbed his nose and stared straight ahead. The woman studied Leonard, then her oldest son. Leonard could tell the boy wasn’t buying it. Finally the woman peered out

through the glass doors where the police would soon appear. “Wait here,” she said to Leonard.

She took the oldest boy by the hand and nodded at the other two to follow. Seeking a semblance of privacy, they went over to the tunnel behind the lines of linked shopping carts. Leonard watched them with his tongue clasped between his front teeth, watched the woman question the oldest boy first, then the two younger boys. His heart thudded against the wall of his chest.

What sort of mother would she turn out to be?

He remembered the first time Mrs. Swarthout marched him to Mr. Burnside’s office to be paddled. He couldn’t recall what grade he was in—second or third?—nor even the offense. Only that he’d rushed home after school sobbing about the grievous injustice Mrs. Swarthout had perpetrated, swearing she made the whole thing up. His mother waited, jaw clenched, for him to finish his elaborate lie before ushering him into the back bedroom. Without a word she pulled his dad’s leather belt—kept for just this purpose—from a nail in the closet. She gave him a much harder whipping than Mr. Burnside had.

What sort of mother was Leonard dealing with here?

When the two cops arrived, the woman went to meet them in the area between the sliding glass doors. For several minutes she commanded their attention, at times gesturing with nervous animation, smoothing her hair, shaking her head, smiling ruefully. The cops treated her with deference. Not once did they look Leonard’s way. Several eavesdroppers lingered briefly before moving on.

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

gesture. They all turned and started toward him: the cops, the mother, her three sons.

Leonard tried to swallow and couldn't.

Later he'd look back on this moment and recall being gripped by the same queasy terror he'd felt upon hearing his sentence pronounced following the court martial. The Mrs. Swarthout lookalike avoided his eyes as she retrieved her grocery cart. Walking stiff and straight, chin up, she hurried out of the store, making her oldest son go on ahead pushing the cart.

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

"Good Lord," Rankin said. "The least she might've done is apologize. That was awful."

The cop shrugged and turned to leave.

"Good Lord," Rankin repeated softly.

"It's okay," Leonard said. "It's all right. She did enough."

Shaking his head, Rankin walked away.

Leonard felt weightless as he glided out of the store. It was all he could do to restrain himself from skipping across the asphalt like a carefree child. He heard himself actually whistling, whistling some nameless tune.

No, not nameless, he realized.

Not nameless at all. Quite familiar in fact. His mother would recognize it. "San Antonio Rose," her favorite.

He made a sudden U-turn back into the store.

Back to Fourth Avenue.

END