

FRONTIER DAYS

On hot summer days like this Bobby could think of nothing better than taking his box of comics outside and lying on the grass in the shade of the big cottonwood tree. Only one thing might add to his bliss—a strawberry milkshake. Before she drove to the bank, his mom had made a pitcher of lemonade, but he felt too lazy to get up and go for a glass. A milkshake would be worth the effort, but not plain old lemonade.

Bobby had declined to accompany his mom. The last time they went to the bank, his dad's check—mailed from some oilfield town in Oklahoma—had bounced. Like a rubber ball, his mom said, which meant they didn't get any money. Then his mom's face turned red and she started cussing his dad in front of everyone. Bobby was thankful his dad wasn't there to hear her.

This time, when his mom returned from the bank, she was all smiles—a good sign. She got out of her car and crooked a finger for him to follow her into the house. Bobby put the *Spider-Man* comic he was reading back in the box and took the box in with him. When his mom opened her purse and handed him a twenty, he could hardly believe it.

“Tonight you can light up the midway, honey pie,” she said. “Mama's little man deserves a treat.”

This was months after his parents argued late into the night over things Bobby didn't quite understand. Oh, he understood certain words well enough—gambling, cheating, lying, jealousy—but most of the other stuff he blocked out, not wanting to know.

After the yelling and cussing stopped, his dad packed a suitcase and drove off in his truck. He didn't even tell Bobby goodbye. His mom cried for two days. Now Bobby was relieved to see her looking chipper again, even though he missed his dad more than ever.

But twenty dollars!

His mom earned barely enough waitressing at Smiley's Café to pay the bills. The check his dad sent from Oklahoma must've been a beaut. Could it mean he was trying to make up? Could it mean better times were coming?

"Now don't go blowing it all on those stupid rip-off games," his mom said, brushing her hair before the mirror. "And lay off the greasy junk food. You don't need any more pimples or pounds. Make it last—hear me now?"

"Can't you come too, Mom?"

"Not this time, babe. Things to do, places to go." She opened her makeup kit. "We're running low on everything. Might even get a new hair-do at Louise's if she can work me in. Treat myself to some tamales and chili at Pancho's. Maybe a movie. You run along and have a good time."

The bleachers for Saturday's rodeo had emptied out by the time Bobby got to the midway. Now that he was eleven, most of the rides seemed tame. He still liked the bumper cars and the Tilt-A-Whirl, and he loved the carnival atmosphere. He took pleasure in the rousing music, the jumbled scents, watching the people. Everybody seemed happy. He just wished his mom and dad were here. If the three of them could be together again, downing burgers, fries, and cotton candy, shrieking in mock terror on the Ferris wheel, this warm

summer night would be perfect.

He broke the twenty on a paper boat of nachos and a Pepsi. As he ate, he wandered along with the crowd, taking it all in. If a pushy barker summoned him, waving a ball or a ring, pretending they were old friends, Bobby remembered his mom's admonition and looked away.

More than once he circled back to a scary-looking ride called The Kamikaze. His dad would want to try this—his dad liked most anything that involved risk. “How about it, son?” he'd ask, ruffling Bobby's hair. “What say we go for broke?”

Bobby was about ready to do just that, when he heard two boys arguing. The younger boy, short and crewcut with big ears, looked about Bobby's age. He was all for riding The Kamikaze, but the older, taller boy wasn't.

“You're such a damned pussy,” the smaller boy said. Then he noticed Bobby. “Hey, dude, how about it? Wanta take this sucker on?”

The boy's direct manner made Bobby bristle momentarily. “I will if you will.”

They both squeezed into one of two cage-like pods. Each pod was attached to a giant hammer that swung back and forth in opposite directions, arcing higher and higher, until the occupants were suspended upside down at the very top. After a nerve-wracking pause that sent all the blood rushing to Bobby's head, the swinging began anew. When it finally stopped, Bobby felt queasy. The other boy, Butch, showed no ill effects.

Bobby learned that Butch and Keith were brothers who lived in Los Angeles and were vacationing in Cheyenne with their parents. They'd been to the rodeo that day; they were going again tomorrow. Bobby envied them. He had very few friends. Those he did have weren't real

friends, especially when they called him names like bubble-butt, fat-ass, lard-bucket, and worse. Butch and Keith treated him like an equal. The three of them went on a few more rides before Butch suggested they bug out and do something really fun.

“Like what?” Bobby asked.

“Ever been window peeping?”

The very thought of peeping in people’s windows made Bobby uneasy. He kept that to himself, though, not wanting to sound like a pussy. “Sometimes, man,” Butch said with a bawdy cackle, “you luck into some crazy shit.”

Bobby led them away from the rodeo grounds and through the vast parking lot to a quiet residential area. Window peeping involved sneaking into the yards of houses, keeping low, ducking behind bushes or trees in search of a lighted, curtainless window. For the most part there wasn’t much to see. At one house they spied on an elderly man and woman seated on a sofa, eating popcorn while watching baseball on TV. At another house they watched a boy and girl hunched over a card table, working on a large jigsaw puzzle. At still another house they looked in on a burly bald man with his feet on a hassock, drinking beer and talking on the phone.

Then Keith clumsily bumped the side of the house and startled a German Shepherd lying nearby. The man slammed his phone shut and clambered to his feet. When he started for the door to let the barking dog out, the three boys took off. Bobby stumbled into a lawnmower in the darkness and would’ve gone sprawling, but Butch was there to keep him upright.

They ran for several blocks before stopping to rest on a different street. Bobby was so

excited he nearly pissed himself. The brothers loved it when he staged a mocking burlesque of the burly man's outrage. Butch pulled out a pack of Marlboros and passed them around.

Bobby had never smoked before, but he lit up like he knew all about it. He tried not to inhale; it took all his self control to keep from coughing. He couldn't remember ever having so much fun.

Like comrades in arms they went on down the street, scuffling and hooting, blowing smoke in each other's faces. They were drawn toward the sound of country music. Bobby told his new friends the music came from the Hitching Post Inn, a motel bar that featured a live band every night during Frontier Days. Not that long ago his mom and dad had enjoyed dancing at the Hitching Post. Some nights they woke Bobby when they came home. They'd have a last beer at the kitchen table and rehash the evening: any standout dancers, the quality of the band, maybe a fight they witnessed. Bobby liked listening in. After a dance they could sound drunk with happiness.

Butch and Keith crossed the street. Bobby was following when the bar door burst open. A cowboy stepped out holding a bottle of beer. He wore a white Stetson, brightly colored shirt, tight Wranglers, high-heeled boots. One of the rodeo cowboys, Bobby guessed. A tall, slender woman joined him, also wearing boots and jeans. Her mop of reddish-blond hair glistened in the neon light. Unaware of the three boys, the couple made their way along the sidewalk. The woman said something in a low voice that made the cowboy laugh and playfully slap her bottom.

Bobby threw down his cigarette.

Standing on tiptoe, the woman tongued the cowboy's ear. The cowboy reared back and yowled. Then he did a Dwight Yoakam jig right out into the street, twisting smartly on his bootheels. He hoisted his beer above his head as he sashayed back to bump hips with the woman, prompting her to let loose with a Leann Rimes yodel. The cowboy draped one arm across her shoulders and they stumbled around the corner of the restaurant.

Butch and Keith threw their smokes down. Butch winked at Bobby and made hand signals like a squad leader directing an assault. Bobby hung back. He felt a little sick. But when Butch shot him a fierce glance and pumped his fist to signal double-time, Bobby felt compelled to continue on.

The Hitching Post Inn was one of the largest and most historic motels in town. They were in the older section, made up of individual cabins separated by parking slots. The cowboy stopped before one of the cabins to chugalug his beer. Parked next to the cabin was a bright red pickup. The cowboy pitched the bottle away and fumbled a key out of his pocket. After an awkward grumbling minute spent trying to open the cabin door, he dropped the key. The woman knelt and fished around on the ground, laughing all the while. She found the key and unlocked the door and they went inside.

The three boys crept closer to hunker down under the large front window. The drapes were open, the glass covered with a gauzy white curtain. In a few minutes the outside light went off, followed by an inside light. The remaining light was situated over a sink in the center of a long counter adjacent to the bathroom at the back of the room. Keith took the right corner of the window. Butch took the left corner. The center was reserved for Bobby.

Butch rose in a squat to take a peek. He gave them a thumbs up to indicate he could see right through the curtain. With a smutty leer he slid his right forefinger back and forth through his circled left thumb and forefinger. Keith grinned and got up on his knees to have a look.

Bobby knew he was next. He was down on hands and knees trying to catch his breath. His whole body trembled. After a minute, Keith drew back from the window and lifted his chin for Bobby to make his move. Bobby felt frozen in place.

All at once his eyes burned and the sour taste of vomit seared his throat. Looking wildly around, he spotted the beer bottle. He grabbed it and scrambled to his feet, bent on breaking it over Keith's head. But something clashed with this thought and instead he hurled the bottle at the window. The plate glass exploded into jagged pieces. Butch and Keith jumped back, gaping at Bobby.

Then they all ran.

Bobby ran in a different direction from the two brothers. He never wanted to see them again. Away from the broken window he ran, away from the cabins, away from the Hitching Post Inn, across the railroad tracks. He'd never been able to run very fast, but now he couldn't stop running. His face broke out in a sweat that mixed with his tears. His lungs ached. His fat thighs cramped. Warm piss soaked his crotch. But still he ran. Until at last he collapsed in a gasping heap beneath the big cottonwood in his own front yard. He shut his eyes and covered his ears with both hands, trying to squeeze back the terrible sounds that seemed to be coming from someone else's throat.

Sometime later his mom's car pulled up at the curb and woke him. By then he was stiff

and cold. His mom got out and came over to help him to his feet. For a moment she held him by his arms and looked closely at his face. Her breath smelled strong. Bobby refused to raise his eyes to meet hers.

“C’mon inside now,” she said at last, in a tender, weary tone that was foreign to him.

“I’ll scramble us some eggs, babe. Then I reckon we better talk.”

END