

WOMEN[®] Writing the West

Presents

The LAURA Short Fiction Contest Awards



In 2007, President Elect Kathleen Ernst presented a seed of an idea to the WWW Board of Directors. Her proposal, a short story contest, offered a threefold foundation: showcase WWW members' writing talents, celebrate the short story form, and add another benefit to membership. Unlike the WILLA Literary Awards, only WWW members would be eligible to enter their previously unpublished story featuring a female protagonist, and set in the American West, past, present or future.

During the contest's first year in 2008, President Elect Sheila Wood Foard guided the new project. Twenty-five members submitted entries, and the quality was such that Final Judge Susan Stoltz, of Women Out West Magazine, elected to include two Honorable Mentions in addition to the top three winning stories. Winners were recognized at the 2008 WWW conference in San Antonio, Texas.

Approaching its second year, the WWW Short Story Contest gained a new name: the LAURA Awards. Mirroring a part of the traditions of our WILLA Literary Award, named after one of America's foremost authors, Willa Cather, the Short Story Com-

mittee decided to give the contest a recognized name, as well. In honor of Laura Ingalls Wilder, the contest was christened the LAURA Award.

Once again, WWW members enthusiastically embraced the contest, and in 2009, another three Winners and two Honorable Mentions were awarded at the Los Angeles conference.

Spurred by members' recent requests to have an opportunity to read the winning stories, and eager to showcase the extraordinary talent of our members, the WWW LAURA Committee decided to present a collection of the winning stories in an online journal, available at the WWW website: www.WomenWritingtheWest.org.

So, sit down, pull up to your computer, and take a trip with us through the American West. We have a hunch Ms. Wilder herself would be mightily entertained!

(Editor's note: although there are ten winning stories, only nine appear in this publication. Cynthia Becker, 2009 First Place winner, and 2008 Third Place winner, elected not to publish her 2008 story in this journal as she has since revised it.)

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Fear Of Horses

By Carol Buchanan



All Claire had to do was deliver two bottles of champagne to a guest cabin for a celebration, but that meant walking past the new round pen where the brown horse circled, neck stiff, head over the green steel rails.

Claire could not pass for the fear that coiled and rattled in her way, and struck: Teeth bared, hooves shod in iron and driven by all his weight, the horse charged, splintered the rails into swords that pinned her to the ground in her own blood.

Someone played the piccolo obbligato to “Stars and Stripes Forever.”

A piccolo? No, rather, someone was whistling.

Sweat rolled down Claire’s ribs. She clutched the ice bucket to her chest, and felt its welcome chill. Breathe deep, her psychologist would say. Exhale. Inhale.

The horse stood as far from Claire as he could, one ear toward her, white at the corner of his eye, the other ear and eye turned to the whistling.

Mac, her brother-in-law, walked over from the barn. “They’re waiting for that.” Meaning the champagne. He stopped on the horse’s side of the round pen.

The horse shifted a few steps away from Mac, which brought him closer to Claire. His ears pointed at one, then the other, as if choosing between dangers. He swung his hindquarters toward Mac, kept one ear, and one eye, toward Claire.

Claire tried to speak, but the attempt ended in a croak.

“You don’t need to be scared of him. He’s as scared of you as you are of him.”

“He’s afraid of me?” It made no sense. Why should the horse fear her? He was so big.

“He’s scared of everybody.” Backlit by the sun going down behind the western hills, Mac was a silhouette of a Montana cowboy, rolled hat brim, wide shoulders, long legs in jeans, but essentially invisible to her. As

always, from the time Tina, after a summer jaunt to this very dude ranch, brought the owner’s son home to Minneapolis and introduced him as her fiancé. Their parents had smiled bravely at their prospective cowboy son-in-law, and friends bet the marriage wouldn’t last six months. Claire grew up amid city opportunities, a brilliant blue dragonfly sort of life, but her marriage crumbled into rancor and left her in the ruins of her life.

“But he’s ten times my weight.” How could an animal so large be afraid of anything?

“He doesn’t know that.”

“He doesn’t know how big he is?” During the last month, in all the dinner conversations about horses, Claire had not heard this.

“Horses don’t have any sense of relative size. I’ve seen an Arabian dominate a Percheron.” Mac leaned on the railing. “He’s too scared of people to be useful. I’m sending him to the sales in three weeks.”

“I hope he isn’t as scared of his new owner.” A sunbeam like a searchlight transformed floating dust into sparkles and melted the horse’s brown coat to bronze. “He’s so beautiful.”

“Yeah, he’s a looker.” Mac’s voice was thick with regret. “I gotta sell him, though.” “Why?”

Mac sighed. “When I bought him, I thought he was just hard to handle because we were new to each other. That can happen until the horse and you get a feel for each other. But it’s been six months, and I still can’t trust him. He’s just too spooky.”

“Couldn’t Scotty work with him?”

“Scotty? No, I don’t pay Scotty head wrangler wages to waste his time with no-hopers.”

“But, who’ll buy him?”

“The cannery.”

“What?” Claire wasn’t sure she’d heard right. “That’s awful!”

"Damn it, I can't afford to keep him around. Every animal on the place has to earn its keep, and if he kicks one of the guests, I'll be sued." He made a gesture of hopelessness, and the horse shied toward Claire.

"I thought we didn't slaughter horses for food in this country."

"Not any more, but they can be shipped to Canada or Mexico. If he's lucky it'll be Canada. If not, Mexico, where they'll stab him a few times –" Claire screamed Stop! Stop! But the words could not escape the grip of her larynx, and his relentless voice continued, "– then cut his throat, and hoist him up by the legs on chains to bleed out. Then, they'll carve up the carcass."

The fear struck from the edge of her mind; the ice bucket slid out of her hands, and darkness like smoke settled over her.

* * *

"You idiot! You know how she is! How could you – you heartless fool!"

Lying on her bed, Claire listened to her sister holler at Mac, whose deep rumble came through the closed door as easily as Tina's shrill tones. "Hell, you never know what'll set her off. My God, being around her is like working in an egg factory. She oughta wear bubble wrap!"

Booted feet stomped across the board floor. A door slammed.

"Drat that man! MacInnis!" Lighter steps receded, and the front door cut off Tina's voice.

Claire's room, her sanctuary, had light blue walls hung with cheerful prints of lupine and columbine, and dark blue curtains imprinted with yellow daisies. Lying on her bed, she studied the lupine, smelled the pine-scented air. Smells had colors for Claire, and the scent of pine was a yellow-green just slightly darker than lime. The sun had set, and she left the curtains open so she could watch the Swan Range, the mountains that loomed up behind the house, fade into night. Slow tears trickled across her temples.

She slept. And dreamed a horse wore bubble wrap. The first knife slicing through the plastic startled her awake.

"It's not happening to him," she whispered, the therapist's litany of reassurance. "It is not happening here, it is not happening now." The shape of Mount Eneas,

tallest of the Swan Range, with its sharp peak like an ocean wave blown back, reared against the star-filled sky. Stars and mountains, she thought. Reminders of the everlasting. Not like the countless lightbulbs shining in the windows of skyscrapers. When next she awoke, pale dawn outlined Eneas in gold, and the ranch was already busy.

Her heart surged in her ribs, as she felt the horse's terror at the end, the horror of the knives. She had to do something. Impossible to go on living with his bitter end always on her conscience. She could keep him safe if she owned him. She would buy him.

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* * *

Only small sounds came from the kitchen; the coffee pot burbled, Tina's slippered feet slid across the vinyl floor, the refrigerator door thumped. At the doorway, Claire stood watching her older sister slice oranges in half with quick, deft, impatient motions. What would she say about the champagne?

Inhale. Exhale. Claire went in with the fear stretched along the edge of her mind. "Good morning."

"Good morning." Tina did not look up from her task. "Feeling better?"

"Yes. Thank you." Claire did not know where to put her feet. "What can I do?"

"You did enough last night. Both bottles broke. Fifty dollars a bottle." She did not look at Claire, but placed an orange half in the juicer and closed the top. The machine growled, and juice spurted into a glass.

"Oh, no! I'm so sorry, I'll pay for it."

Tina tossed the empty orange peel into the garbage. "That's not the point. Our guests weren't happy, and unhappy guests don't return or recommend the ranch."

"What can I do to make up for it?"

"Nothing. You'd only make it worse."

What could she say to that, that wouldn't lead into a childish argument? I won't. You will. Her hands dangled at her sides; Claire put them in her jeans pockets.

Over the machine's grumbling Tina said, "You've got to get over this fear thing."

How many times had people told her that, as if it could be shed like a winter coat? Tina was colorblind to fear, like someone who couldn't see green, and could not – refused to? – understand that the fear would not slink out of her life when Claire ordered it, Go! Claire's earlobes tingled, and she wondered why until she recognized her old reaction to being annoyed. Annoyed? After fear's rattling had driven away every other feeling? She was annoyed! Did she dare show it? Talk back to Tina? Did she dare?

Claire said, "I can't promise to be cured by 10:30 a.m. tomorrow. Healing doesn't happen on a schedule."

Tina's head came up, and her hard look jabbed at Claire. "Whatever. That's not the point. Being here isn't doing you much good. You've replaced other phobias with a fear of horses. Maybe you should live in town."

"Are you kicking me out?" Where would she go? What would she do? Claire put bread into the toaster and picked up two glasses of juice.

"Oh, of course not. When you came, I said stay as long as you want, and I meant it. But you're not improving much."

What was the point of repeating that healing couldn't be planned? Claire put the juice glasses on the eating table. Over her shoulder she told Tina, "I want to buy that horse."

"You what?" Tina dropped an orange half on the floor and bent to pick it up.

"I want to buy him. Turn him out with a herd. Or find someone to straighten him out."

"Oh, a horse therapist?" Tina mashed the orange onto the juicer's point.

Claire's ears burned. "You mean we're alike, that horse and I? I won't be cured, and he can't be trusted." She poured coffee into a metal travel mug; the pot clanked against the rim.

"Talk to Mac about the horse. He's in the shop, fixing the chain saw." Tina pulled down the handle and the juicer snarled.

* * *

Below the house lay the ranch yard with the shop, and across from it the barn. Scotty, a lean, compact man of about fifty,

trimmed a pinto's hind hoof. Downhill from barn and shop, the round pen overlooked a short natural drop-off, below which the guest cabins stood along the shore of the private lake. The overhead shop door opened into a hammered darkness, and Claire, waiting for Mac to notice her, locked her knees to stop from fleeing the machine-gun noise.

"Feeling better?" Mac came out and threaded the bows of his sunglasses over his ears.

"Yes, thank you." Wishing she could see his eyes, Claire smiled at her reflection.

"I'm sorry I caused trouble."

"Oh, you're no trouble." But his guarded voice and tight smile spoke of bubble wrap.

"I'd like to buy that brown horse."

"No, sorry. I can't sell him. Not to you. He can't be trusted."

"What if I just turned him out?"

"To eat his head off with no return? Look, this ranch feeds seventeen people and puts our boys through college. It wouldn't pay."

And did they think she also needed more time than would pay? "I understand that, but would you rather he went to Mexico?"

"Hell, no. No horse deserves that, but I can't sacrifice us to a horse."

"What, then?"

He considered her without speaking while Claire dangled from his silence.

"Here's the deal. You prove to me this horse could be reclaimed. Before the sales. That's three weeks. And I'll give him to you."

"How? I'm no wrangler. I've never worked with a horse before."

Mac gazed over her head, toward the brown horse eating hay. "OK. I guess that's fair. In the barn, in the feed room, there's a garbage can filled with hay cubes. If he'll eat one of those from your hand, he's yours."

The teeth. Long and yellow. One end bites and the other end kicks.

"From my hand? I can't!"

"Didn't think so." He turned uphill, toward the house. "You coming to breakfast?" When Claire shook her head, he walked on, paused after a few steps. "Remember what I said about Scotty working with a no-hoper."

Claire sipped coffee, tried to think what to do, while the fear slithered from the edge

of her mind into a coil. The brown horse whinnied to the pinto, and Claire had a sudden thought: Just who did Mac think was the no-hoper – the horse? Or her?

* * *

The barn door opened into a great darkness. Must she go in? Sweat trickled down her temples, and she reminded herself to breathe. She tasted the smell of hay on her soft palate, another green smell but with more blue in it.

What did it matter if the horse went to Mexico? He was only one horse. Yet she understood his terror of the knives.

"Anything I can do?" Scotty, who was not paid to waste his time on no-hoppers. Eyes on a level with her own, at five feet, nine inches. An uncommon horseman, Tina had said, whatever that meant, but he had about him a kind of calm authority. His status earned him a cabin of his own among the trees and meals with the boss's family. But he was not her sort, not at all, in his faded jeans and scuffed boots.

"Can you give me courage?"

He smiled. "I think you have plenty of that." He led the pinto into the barn, slid open the back door, and went on out without closing it. Sunlight shone in.

The fear coiled more tightly and its tongue flicked out. Stepping into the barn, Claire waited for her eyes to adjust. Bales of hay, this summer's early first cutting, were stacked high along one side, yet there was room for twice as much more; on the other side, empty box stalls opened into turnouts whose doors were closed. Two small doors set into the back wall led into the tack room and the feed room. She would have to walk the length of the barn through to the feed room.

The fear hissed and its tail shook the rattles. In the feed room rats and mice scurried for food in dark corners and the barn cats crouched, waiting. She would have to put her hand into a dark can. What if a rat bit her? The fear struck.

Not knowing quite how she got there, she stood outside the barn in the sunlight, gasping, gripping the coffee mug. She pulled in air as if she were hollow to her toes, and let it out as if this one exhalation must last her all day. And again, inhale. Exhale. Inhale.

If she ran now, the horse would suffer

the knives, and it would be all her fault. Exhale. Inhale. The fear's rattling ceased. Go, she told herself, into the barn, through the doorway to the feed room, turn on the light. Despite the coiled fear, her feet obeyed until she stood in the feed room. The barn cat, an orange tabby, crouched between two plastic garbage cans, tail twitching, and peered upward at one of them. On the lid she read "Hay C –" but the rest of the word had been chewed away. A rat. In that can. The fear rattled, and a voice screamed at her to run run run, but she clenched her jaw and pulled up her left foot, set it forward, teetered on the rim of her balance and picked up the right foot, moved it ahead of the left, and the rattling grew louder, but she did not pivot, did not run, but walked forward. Save the horse, she told herself, and lifted the chewed lid. A mouse bolted, up and over the edge, and Claire, unable to utter a sound, heard behind her a scramble of paws, a squeak. The rattling stopped. Grasping two hay cubes, she was surprised at how large they were, two inches cubed. Pouring her cold coffee onto the concrete floor, she put the cubes into the mug and took two more, juggled cubes and mug while she replaced the lid, and walked – she did not run – to the open door, pressed the light switch, and still walking, not running, left the barn. The fear glided to a far corner.

*I did it, I did it, she sang to herself.
One small step, such a simple thing,
to get a couple of hay cubes for a
horse. But large, exhausting.*

I did it, I did it, she sang to herself. One small step, such a simple thing, to get a couple of hay cubes for a horse. But large, exhausting. She ought to eat something and rest, but she knew she would not come back. Not today. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe.

She walked around to where Scotty was filing the front hoof of a pregnant mare.

"I got hay cubes to feed the brown horse," she told him. "I've never hand-fed a horse before."

Scotty finished filing the hoof, stretched the foreleg out, and set it down. "Horses use their upper lips like hands, but they can't see right there, so they can't tell the

difference between fingers and treats.” Taking one of the cubes, he cupped his hand around it. “This way you could you get pinched.” He opened his fingers so the cube lay on the flat of his palm. “Hold it this way and you’ll be all right.”

* * *

When Claire neared the round pen, the horse moved to the far side. His high head, swiveling ears, white-rimmed eyes, and fluttering nostrils, told her of a fast-moving brain sorting through the sounds of guests getting ready for the day’s pleasures, the smells of bacon and coffee, and her approach, all translated into: Flee. Run. But the rails held him.

Claire set the mug on the ground, took a cube, and felt it hard and scratchy on her palm. Her hand twitched, threw off the hay cube. She made herself scoop it up, lay it on her palm. Commanded her arm to ignore the coiling fear, ordered it to push the hand through resisting air into the pen. “Please don’t let him bite me,” she prayed. “Please don’t let him bite me.” Eyes tight shut, she leaned her forehead against the cool top rail. “Please don’t let him bite me.” Submitted herself to the horse’s large yellowish teeth. Listened to the blood pound in her ears. Heard flies buzz around her hat, hooves shuffle in the dirt. Hooves? Her eyes snapped open, and her inner voice screamed: Run.

The horse moved to the flake of hay, a rectangular chunk perhaps four inches deep torn from a bale, and ripped a hunk off. His farther ear rotated to follow sounds, while the near eye and ear focused on Claire as he chewed. His tail swiped at flies. White no longer showed in his eyes.

He did not charge.

The fear uncoiled, and her inner voice quieted, but Claire gripped the rail to hold herself there. “We’re alike, you and I,” she murmured to the horse. “We’d both run if we could.”

Having eaten the hay, he nosed about in the dry sunlit dirt, nibbling up stray stems, leaf fragments. Claire had never watched a horse use his upper lip. Like we use our hands, as Scotty had said. “You have a delicate touch, don’t you?” Claire relaxed her grip on the rail, stretched her fingers to ease them.

The horse raised his head and pointed

his ears at her, then went back to his search.

The water trough, in the shade when Claire arrived, held an edge of sunlight. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, and withdrew her hand, circled her arms, bent and touched her toes, stretched backwards until she nearly toppled over.

The horse retreated to the far railing, where he watched, ears aimed at her, picked up his hooves and set them down as if rehearsing flight.

At the barn, the wranglers – Tina’s and Mac’s sons – helped the guests prepare to set out on their day-long trail ride into the Flathead National Forest. Scotty saw them off with final instructions to the boys, and Claire wondered that he did not go with them. As they rode away, they waved to Claire, but she could not release the rail to wave back.

* * *

Tina, walking down to the guest cabins with cleaning supplies in a bucket, paused. “I don’t believe this. I just don’t believe it. You must really want to save this horse.”

His retreat from Tina brought him closer to Claire; ignoring her, he watched Tina and whuffed through his nostrils.

“It’s a horrible death.”

“Maybe. But for you to – I didn’t think you’d do it. Maybe you weren’t as scared as all that?”

The hand holding her to the rail showed the knuckles white. Claire said, “I want to run.” She confessed her doubt as if it were a theft.

After a pause, Tina said, “Prove it to yourself. Toss him the treats and go eat breakfast, then come back.”

“No.” Claire shook her head. “I might not come back.”

“All right, then. I’ll bring you something.” Tina walked back up to the house, and Claire rested her head against the top rail. Why should her sister’s kindness bring her to tears?

* * *

Claire fought her need as long as she could. All the way to the house she muttered, “You will go back,” while the fear gathered itself into coils and its tongue flicked out, scenting victory. Afterwards, she closed the front door behind her and stood on the porch, breathing slowly and muttering, “I am going back.” To drown the

fear’s rattling, she raised her voice: “I am going back,” and descended the steps.

The horse lifted his dripping muzzle from the trough; he watched her, but did not move away as she circled the pen to her place. Someone had brought a stool, bottled water, and an old book on gentling horses. Putting her hand and the hay cube through the rails, she wondered who it could have been, and the fear slithered to the edge of her mind. The horse cocked one hip and let his head droop; he stood inside the rim of shade. Closer to Claire.

* * *

When Mac came, the horse ambled away, into the sunshine. “He’s not as scared. He’s getting used to this.”

Claire spoke to her reflection. “I’m tired.” “I don’t doubt it. This is tiring work.”

“It is?”

“Yup. Just ask Scotty. I see he brought you the Tom Dorrance book. It’s a classic.” He added, “You’re doing fine. Keep it up.”

* * *

The sun nudged the shade toward Claire, and the horse shifted with it. When Tina came to ask if Claire wanted lunch, the horse lifted his head and moved into the sunshine. “No, thanks. I’ll stick it out a while longer.”

“Suit yourself.” Tina patted Claire’s shoulder. “I’ll bring it to you.”

Claire wanted to thank her, but the words could not squeeze through her tight throat.

The afternoon sun shone, and there was no shade. Claire perched on the stool and watched her shadow lengthen across the pen. She had seldom been so weary, except in the aftermath of the fear’s bite.

Scotty walked up, carrying a saddle on his shoulder, moving with no hurry in him, and the horse stayed where he was.

“You could rest awhile,” Scotty said. “The dudes should be back any time now.”

“I’m not finished yet.” Claire’s arm ached, and her neck ached. She wished she could rest, but the fear waited, and what if it struck so that she couldn’t come back?

“You’re doing well, working that horse.”

“Not really. I’ve just been keeping him company.”

“With a horse like that, getting him to come as close as he is now, that’s working him. It’s not a matter of bucking broncs.”

“What is it then?”

“It’s giving him back his confidence. Letting him trust you.”

“I’ve been here almost all day and nothing’s happened.”

“That’s not true.” The man lowered the saddle and let it rest on the ground, leaning against his leg. “Look how close he is.”

Out the corner of her eye Claire saw the horse’s nose was only about five feet away. “You’re right. When I started this morning, he was pressed against the opposite rails.”

“You’ve done good work. You’ll have him eating out of your hand pretty soon.”

“How soon?”

“That’s up to him. When you work with horses, you change over to horse time.”

“Like psychiatry,” Claire said, and wished she could recall the words. What would he think, knowing she’d seen a shrink, spent months in counseling? But he merely stood there, in a silence oddly still, as if not expecting her to say anything, but it would be all right if she did. The horse’s reddish brown hide shone like an old penny, and she smelled dust and horse and man. No after shave or men’s perfume, just him. She thought about the color of honesty’s smell, and decided it was blue.

The horse lifted up his tail, defecated, and the sharp, sweet smell of manure stained the air.

Claire blurted, “You know what? Horse poop smells better than people –” and stopped, too embarrassed to go on. How crude.

The corners of Scotty’s mouth folded upward in a smile. “You’re right, it does.” His voice choked. The horse stretched his neck and lifted his upper lip, baring his long teeth to reveal the pink upper gum and the underside of his lip. The fear coiled, but Scotty said, “Horse laugh,” and that made Claire giggle, and then laughter came with tears spilling from the corners of her eyes, until she and Scotty were laughing together. The fear slid away.

Wiping her eyes, Claire said, “Imagine, sharing a laugh with a horse.”

“He has a sense of humor.” Scotty pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket and blew his nose.

“He does? Horses can have a sense of humor?”

“Some do, some don’t. They like to play

and have fun.”

“I have so much to learn about horses.” She picked up the horse cube she had dropped and held it out to the horse.

“You always will. It never ends.”

The horse walked over to the trough, touched his upper lip to the water’s surface, and sucked as if he’d crossed a desert.

“There,” said Scotty, “that’s progress, too.” He took off his hat and combed his fingers through his blond hair, replaced the hat. “You were saying – ?”

Claire thought back to remember what had been so important. And scary. “Healing happens on the patient’s schedule, not the shrink’s.” Scotty’s sunglasses rode in his shirt pocket, and she could see his eyes, with the crow’s feet at the corners from much smiling, she thought, or looking into long distances.

He said, “Yup. Just like with horses. Faster or slower depends on the horse. And how trustworthy the trainer is.”

Footsteps sounded behind them, and Claire wondered who, but she didn’t want to look away from Scotty to find out. “Who decides that?”

“The horse.” He made stay back motions to whoever was coming.

In a quiet like time holding its breath, Claire felt a vibration through her feet and along her veins that made her turn her head and meet the horse’s deep brown gaze just a couple of feet beyond the reach of her hand. Everything at the periphery of her vision ebbed away, and she seemed to stand alone with the horse.

He stretched his neck, and his upper lip, and his ears came forward. “You’re safe with me, I’d never hurt you, you’re fine with me, I’ll take care of you, you’re safe with me.” The horse took a step, and Claire did not know that her voice murmured over him in a cool stream of words. Her hand quivered so that she both feared dropping the cube and feared not dropping it in time to avoid the big teeth. The horse took another step, his mouth now within reach, and the fear hissed, as with a delicacy she never expected in so large a creature, he lipped the hay cube from her hand and put it between his front teeth. Biting it in two, he let one part drop to the ground, where it tumbled to Claire’s side of the railing.

While he chewed, Claire knelt, so slowly

that the rails divided the horse into frames: topline of high withers and back, tangled mane, a scar on his shoulder, straight forelegs like pillars surely too slender for his body, black hooves chipped around the edges. Rising as slowly as she had knelt, she offered him the treat.

The horse’s weight went to his hindquarters, and his hocks bent, as if to spin and run. He reached out for the second half, but he was not close enough to take it. Into his eyes came a question so plain Claire seemed to hear him: Dare I trust you?

Yes, Claire told him, speaking thought to thought, you’re safe with me.

He leaned toward her and gathered the half cube off her palm, and his touch was a light kiss of his whiskers. Claire turned her hand over and let it dangle. Now, if he wished, he could bite it, but she knew he would not.

The fear slid away.

“I’ll be damned.” Mac stood a little distance behind her. His voice sounded shaky. “Never thought I’d see that.”

“You did it.” Tina stood beside Claire, and the horse withdrew a few steps. Her sister squeezed Claire’s arm. Her eyes were wet.

Claire grasped Tina’s hand lying on her arm. Maybe someday she’d tell Tina that if they hadn’t doubted her, challenged her to save the horse, she might not have defeated the fear, and known this soaring feeling. Was it joy?

“What’s his name?” she asked.

“Fraidy Cat,” said Scotty. “He needs a new one.”

“Up to you,” Mac said, “he’s your horse.”

The horse watched Claire.

“Darius,” said Claire. “His name is Darius.”

Descended from Montana pioneers and homesteaders, Carol Buchanan is a non-fiction writer and student of Montana history who turned to historical fiction in *God’s Thunderbolt, The Vigilantes of Montana*, which won the 2009 Spur Award for Best First Novel.

A Night At The Theater

By Cynthia Becker



“Did you hear the news?” Gilly Jiles burst through the cabin door with her copper hair bristled like a scrub oak and her bonnet bobbing in the air. “The train is coming to Leadville—the first one on the new railroad.”

Mama did not turn from stirring a pot of stew. She shook her head and released a deep sigh before speaking. “I am sure that must be quite the talk of this unruly town but how many times must I tell you, ‘A young lady does not enter a room like a stampeding horse.’” Mama bent to open the firebox and shoved a few pieces of wood into the low flames.

“Yes, ma’am.” Gilly yanked the binding strings from her neck and dropped her bonnet on the nearest wooden chair. “The train comes two weeks from today.”

“At least we will be spared another spine-cracking stagecoach ride when we go home to Joplin.” Mama turned from the stove and gasped. “Just look at your hair! Get the comb and brush so I can untangle that mess.”

Gilly bounded across the plank-floored room in five steps, tossing a comment to her older sister on the way. “Lizzie, bet you don’t know who will be guest of honor on the train.” Gilly slipped behind the dark green curtain that hid the sleeping area she and Lizzie shared. She scooted between the

narrow beds to reach the corner shelf that held their few toiletries and returned with the bristle brush.

“Is it anyone we’ve ever heard of?” Lizzie held the heavy iron with one hand and shifted white fabric on the ironing board.

Gilly said the name slowly, relishing the sound of the words. “Mr. President General Ulysses S. Grant.”

“Oh, no!” Lizzie clunked the iron into its cradle. “Now we’ll have to listen to Papa tell all his dreadful war stories again.”

“Just be thankful your father came home from the war in one piece.” Mama pulled a chair from the table and waited for Gilly to sit.

“Papa will be so excited about General Grant coming,” Gilly said. “It’s my news; I get to tell him.”

“No need to worry. I will be off to work before he comes home.” Lizzie’s black skirt rustled as she slipped into the freshly pressed shirtwaist and held out her arms for Gilly to work twelve tiny buttons into their slots along the tight-fitting sleeves.

“Just think, Papa knows a man who was President of the United States,” Gilly mused as Mama picked and tugged at her hair.

When Papa tromped through the door a short time later, Gilly squirmed from Mama’s grasp to repeat her announcement.

“Now that is big news!” Papa grabbed

Gilly and swung her around in circles.

Mama laid aside the brush and turned to open the oven. The sweet aroma of cornbread spilled into the room.

“Will General Grant come to dinner?” Gilly asked.

“I expect the folks who arranged this visit have made all sorts of fancy plans to entertain the General.” Papa rolled up his sleeves and poured water from the pitcher into the metal basin.

“Will you and Mama be invited?”

“No. We aren’t in the socializing class with the mine owners and rich folks,” Papa said.

“When will you get to see him?”

“We can all go to meet his train.” Papa gave Gilly a wide grin then plunged his face into the water and began to scrub away grit from the mine.

The next fourteen days passed like waiting for Christmas. Gilly pestered Papa with questions about General Grant which prompted retelling of all the stories Lizzie hated.

On the evening the General was due to arrive, Papa came home early. Gilly watched from the doorway of her parent’s tiny bedroom as he pulled his old wooden trunk from under the bed. He lifted the lid, felt along one side and retrieved a brass belt buckle, the one remaining bit of his Union Army uniform.

Gilly could hardly sit still through supper and argued when Mama insisted the girls wash the dishes before leaving to meet the train. It was dark when the family set out to walk nine blocks to the end of Third Street where the train would stop in an open meadow half a mile from the yet-to-be completed depot. The late July night was mild but a blanket of clouds hovered over the high mountain community.

“I believe the whole town has turned out tonight,” Papa said as they neared the gathering place.

Gilly could not believe her eyes. Bonfires lit the entire length of the street. Their golden glow tinted the clouds and the sea of people. Uniformed Colorado Cavalrymen on horseback sat tall above the crowd. Their silver buttons and buckles and bayonets sparkled in the firelight. The men of the town’s three fire companies stood proudly beside their polished water wagons

and hose carts. The air was alive with voices. To her right, Gilly heard an off-key rendition of "Just Before the Battle Mother." To her left, a cluster of men sang "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again," accompanied by three fifers. Fragments of other tunes rose and fell over the din of the crowd, competing with street vendors hawking pretzels and beer.

Gilly waved to school friends but stayed beside Papa as he led the family through the crowd, greeting neighbors and shopkeepers, miners and cowboys. Whiffs of manure, cigar smoke, and whiskey drifted on the air. Gilly's mouth watered as they passed a great iron kettle sizzling with grease and popping corn.

At twenty minutes past nine o'clock, a train whistle sounded in the distance and a single spot of light appeared at the far end of the valley. Like the lamp of a miner emerging from a pit, the light slowly grew larger as it approached the town. The crowd pressed close to the line of black carriages waiting beside the railroad tracks. The great engine lumbered to a stop in a wheeze of mist, clank of metal, and screech of brakes. The crowd cheered and waved. A brass band struck up "The Battle Cry of Freedom." Other bands joined in while gunfire salutes cracked from a nearby hillside.

"Can you see him yet?" Gilly clasped Papa's shirtsleeve as she stretched on tiptoe.

"Yes. There he is!" Papa wrapped a strong arm around her waist and hoisted her up.

From their place deep in the crowd, Gilly saw several men in dark coats and top hats step onto the platform of the last rail car and wave to the crowd. She could not tell which was General Grant. Followed by two women and a small boy, the visitors stepped to the ground and disappeared into the carriages. The crowd shifted to clear a path as the drivers urged their horses forward.

Papa lowered Gilly to the ground. Like most men in the crowd, he straightened his back and snapped right hand to forehead in salute as the carriages rolled past.

"We'll follow them downtown," Papa said. "I've heard General Grant will make a speech."

"Mama and I are going home," Lizzie an-

nounced. Mama held out her hand for Gilly to join them.

"I'll watch out for her." Papa's voice was firm. Mama opened her mouth but walked away without argument.

Gilly clutched her shawl close and clung to Papa's hand as the crowd pulled them along the street toward the center of town.

A great wooden archway wrapped in fresh boughs of pine and spruce spanned Harrison Avenue. A painted WELCOME PRESIDENT sign dangled from its center.

A great wooden archway wrapped in fresh boughs of pine and spruce spanned Harrison Avenue. A painted WELCOME PRESIDENT sign dangled from its center. Every building for three blocks was decorated top to bottom with red, white and blue bunting and streamers. A light breeze fluttered the multitude of flags. Gilly had never seen a flag so large as the one atop the Tabor Opera House where Lizzie worked. From surrounding mountainsides fireworks exploded in echoing booms and showers of colored lights.

This is more exciting than the Independence Day celebration, Gilly thought.

They moved into Chestnut Street where carpenters had built a raised platform in front of the Clarendon Hotel. The dark-suited men were climbing steps onto the platform. Gilly was so far away she could not tell which one was General Grant. Several men made speeches that she could not hear. Only the uproar from the crowd identified General Grant when he stepped forward to say a few words and wave goodnight.

"I never got to see what General Grant looks like," Gilly grumbled as she walked home beside Papa.

"You will have other opportunities," Papa said. "He is spending four days in town."

The next morning Gilly volunteered to do errands for Mama and a neighbor who had a new baby. Once free of home, she slipped downtown to look for General Grant. She never saw him.

When she heard the General and his wife would attend a Saturday night dinner party, Gilly begged Mama to let her stand outside the hotel to watch him leave. Mama's horri-

fied response rang in her ears: "No daughter of mine will stand about on the street after dark where drunken cowboys and painted women are gambling and carousing."

Papa read aloud long articles in *The Carbonate Chronicle* describing General Grant's activities. Gilly absorbed every detail of his tours through the mining district, the banquets he attended and speeches he made. She sulked all Sunday afternoon because she had not seen any sign of the town's famous guest while walking to and from church. At supper that night, Lizzie mentioned that General Grant would be Mr. Tabor's guest at the Opera House on Monday night.

Gilly leaned toward her sister with a pleading look. "Can I sit in the ticket booth with you Lizzie, just to see General Grant?"

It was Mama who responded, glaring across the table at Papa as she spoke. "You know I objected to allowing Lizzie to work at that theater. But you approved. Gilly is only eleven, far too young to be exposed to such disreputable people."

"Now, Lucy." Papa's voice was slow and soothing. "Gilly is not asking to watch the performers on stage. She simply wants to see the General arrive. After hearing me talk about him all her life, she is naturally curious. One day she will tell her children about the night she saw a President of the United States in person."

"Of course, Edwin." Mama pursed her lips and crossed her arms over her bosom. "You always know best."

Papa ignored her sarcasm and turned to Lizzie. "Will Mr. Tabor mind Gilly coming along?"

"I suppose not, as long as she promises to stay out of the way."

The next evening Gilly perched beside Lizzie in the small booth in the theater lobby. She watched Lizzie pull printed paper slips from slots in the wall and collect silver dollars in payment, listening for the solid ring on the countertop that confirmed the coins were not counterfeit. When the lobby filled with people and Lizzie was too busy to notice, Gilly slipped out. She took a position at the top of the stairs and watched top-hatted men and jeweled ladies climb the steep steps from the street. The lobby was soon deafening

with their chatter.

It was almost show time when Lizzie's employer, Mr. Tabor, climbed the stairs deep in conversation with a man wearing a knee-length coat and carrying a top hat. Gilly was sure this must be the General. His dark beard was streaked with grey and his vest strained the buttons across his middle. He looked much older than Papa.

Still talking with Mr. Tabor, General Grant stopped in the midst of the crowded lobby and reached into his pocket. Gilly saw something small and shiny fall beside him and wobble on the floor. She left her post to squeeze between people until she stood just behind the General. Squatting down among a forest of legs, she spotted the object lying beside a lady's high heeled

Gilly balanced one hand on the floor, leaned forward, and stretched her other hand to grab the object. Before she could attempt to stand, General Grant stumbled against her.

white shoe. Gilly balanced one hand on the floor, leaned forward, and stretched her other hand to grab the object. Before she could attempt to stand, General Grant stumbled against her. Gilly lost her balance and rolled onto her side at the General's feet.

Startled, General Grant looked down. "What are you doing on the floor, child?" He held out a hand and pulled Gilly up. "Are you hurt?"

"No," Gilly said. "I..."

Mr. Tabor interrupted. "Aren't you the ticket girl's sister? You have no business bothering our guest." He turned to the General. "I do apologize, sir. We are not in the habit of letting children roam among our theater patrons." Mr. Tabor took the General's arm and guided him toward the red-carpeted stairs leading up to the theater.

"But, sir," Gilly followed and tugged at the General's sleeve.

"What do you want?" The General sounded irritated when he looked down at her.

Gilly held out her open hand; a gold cufflink lay in her palm.

General Grant raised his right arm. A matching cufflink glittered against his

starched white shirt. He lifted his left arm; the sleeve dangled loose.

"So, you were on the floor to retrieve this for me." The General plucked the cufflink from Gilly's hand and fixed it into his left sleeve. "Thank you. I would hate to lose this gift from my wife." The General smiled. "And what is your name young lady?"

"Gilly, sir. Gilly Jiles. My Papa served with your Army in Tennessee. Corporal Edwin James Jiles. He talks about you a lot and that battle with the funny name, Cat-a-ga-ga."

"Chattanooga?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Well, I am always pleased to meet the daughter of one of my men. Is your father here tonight?"

"No sir."

"Are you attending the theater program?"

"Oh, no sir. I just came to get a look at...to see you up closer than I could the night you arrived."

"Well, Miss Gilly Jiles, you have performed a great service. Would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the theater?"

"Oh, yes." Gilly's face broke into a wide smile. Just as quickly the smile disappeared. "Mama says theatrical performances are not proper for young ladies."

"Perhaps your Mama would not mind, just this once, if you accepted my invitation. It will be my way of thanking you for returning my valuable property." He offered his arm.

Without a second thought, Gilly laid her hand on the General's sleeve and climbed the wide steps that led to the forbidden theater. She looked over her shoulder to see Lizzie staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed from the ticket booth.

Gilly's heart raced as she entered a dark corridor at the top of the stairs. The General led her around a corner and her eyes popped wide in amazement. The walls were red. The window and door frames, the molding around the ceiling, and ornaments on the walls were gold. The entire room shimmered in a soft haze created by polished-brass gas lights. Every seat was filled and all heads turned to see General Grant enter the theater. Gilly had not looked into so many staring faces since she

fell out of the stagecoach the day she arrived in town.

Mr. Tabor led the General and Gilly down an aisle that sloped toward the front of the grand room. A painted forest scene decorated the stiff curtain hiding the stage. Two elegantly dressed ladies waited in a cluster of seats surrounded by a low partition draped in red, white and blue bunting. The General introduced Gilly to his wife and Mrs. Tabor, then told the saga of his cufflink.

Mrs. Grant laid a gloved hand on Gilly's arm. "Thank you, dear. The cufflinks belonged to my late father. I would have been so upset if my husband lost one."

While the Grants took their seats, Gilly perched on the edge of her chair. She traced the ornate cast-iron arms with one finger and ran her hand over the thick red velvet cushion. Scooting into sitting position, she leaned her head back and looked up. Delicate flowers and smiling cherubs floated on a pale blue ceiling.

There must be magic in this place, she thought.

The gaslights dimmed while the stage grew brighter. A man stepped from behind the curtain to center stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen," his voice boomed, "welcome to this evening's program of the Tabor Opera House. We are honored to have with us a special guest, the former President of the United States and hero of the late war, General Ulysses S. Grant."

Everyone in the theater stood to applaud. The General rose and bowed to the crowd. Gilly peered into the elaborately dressed audience. She recognized no one and saw no children.

The General returned to his seat and the crowd quieted. The announcer continued. "Tonight we are proud to present the military drama *Ours*." The curtain rose to reveal three soldiers seated around a campfire.

Gilly turned to watch the General. The glow from the stage shaped his face in bronze highlights and dark shadows. He leaned forward, so focused on the actors and their words that Gilly thought he might spring onto the stage and lead the action at any moment. She wondered if this was how Papa had seen the General during

the war.

Before long, Gilly's eyes grew heavy. The General's face blurred and she no longer heard the actors' voices.

Applause and piano music jolted Gilly from her nap. She opened her eyes to see the curtain coming down. She yawned.

"I believe I have kept you out too late," General Grant said as he leaned close to her ear.

"Is the play finished?" Gilly struggled to sit up straight.

"No. This is just the first intermission but I think it is time I escorted you home." The General stood, took Gilly's hand, and led her out of the theater. The ticket booth was closed and there was no sign of Lizzie.

Outside, people in working clothes overflowed the wooden sidewalks and spilled into the streets where horses and donkeys were tied to railings. Tinkling piano music and loud voices poured out of a nearby saloon. Mr. Tabor's fine black carriage stood waiting. The General waved away the driver, boosted Gilly onto the seat and took the reins. She gave directions to her home as the two high-stepping horses trotted along the dirt street.

"Did you enjoy the theater?" General Grant asked.

"Oh, yes sir. I have never seen anything so beautiful."

"Next time you might enjoy a variety show rather than a stuffy play."

"Not if my Mama knows about it." Gilly shivered.

The General felt under the seat, found a

lap robe and tucked it around Gilly. They rode in silence. When the General reined the horses to a stop in front of the Jiles cabin, Papa opened the front door and stepped out. The moon shed just enough light on the dark street for Gilly to see the stern set of his mouth.

Her heart raced as General Grant escorted her toward the cabin. She took a deep breath and swallowed hard.

The General stopped directly in front of Papa. "Corporal Jiles, but for your daughter's quick thinking, I would have lost a valuable possession tonight. It was a very special gift from my wife. As a reward, I invited Miss Gilly to accompany my wife and me to the theater. She most graciously accepted. I hope you will forgive me for not asking your permission first."

General Grant held out his open hand. Papa seemed dazed and hesitated a moment before accepting the offered handshake.

"It's good to see you again, Jiles. Battle of Chattanooga wasn't it? I always enjoy the opportunity to thank one of my men for his service. It is soldiers like you, Jiles, who won the war for our great nation." General Grant pulled back his shoulders and snapped his right hand to his forehead in a precise military salute.

Papa stood straight and returned the gesture.

"Good night, soldier." The General winked at Gilly as he turned to march away.

Gilly moved to stand beside Papa. They

watched in silence until General Grant's carriage rolled out of sight.

"I'm sorry, Papa. I only wanted to see what your General Grant looks like," Gilly said.

Papa wrapped one arm around her shoulder. "When I stepped through this door tonight I was fit to be tied. Coming face to face with General Grant was the last thing I expected. I don't quite understand how you brought him to our house but this is a night I won't forget. Did you hear him call me by name?"

"Yes, Papa." Gilly saw a glint of tears brimming in his eyes.

Papa sighed. "Right now, we have to face your Mama and she has worked up a head of steam to let loose on you."

"She probably won't let me out of her sight until Christmas," Gilly said.

"Whatever punishment she has in mind, you will have to live with. For now, you walk through that door like you have been thoroughly scolded. Look at the floor and go straight to bed. I'll be right behind you."

Gilly's hand trembled as she reached for the door handle.

Papa's voice was low behind her head. "No matter what Mama says, you gave me a gift tonight beyond anything I ever dreamed."

"A Night At The Theater" is a chapter from Cynthia Becker's middle grade novel-in-progress. Her biography [Chipeta: Ute Peacemaker](#) (Filter Press, 2008) received a 2009 WILLA Finalist Award.

In The Flesh

By Suzanne Lyon



Pam Gordon didn't know much about death. She, and most everybody around her, was too young, too healthy, or too lucky to die.

Up until last week, that is. Last week her husband, Ned, only forty-nine years old, keeled over in his office parking lot, dead from a heart attack. Didn't feel a thing, the doctors assured her. One second he was standing there alive, and the next second he was standing there dead. Never even had time to put out his arms to arrest his fall, judging from his smashed sunglasses and broken teeth.

Pam wondered how this information was supposed to make her feel better. Was it a good thing that Ned had had no inkling of his own death—no time to regret leaving behind a wife and child to cope for themselves? If it had been her, she would have wanted a few seconds to say a little prayer asking God to watch out for her loved ones. But if Ned had been granted those few seconds of awareness, she doubted he would have used them to pray. He probably would

have used them up worrying that Pam would forget to turn off the sprinkler system before the first frost.

She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue, distressed that she would have such uncharitable thoughts about her dead husband, particularly on the day of his funeral. As she dressed in the requisite black widow's weeds, she stared at a picture of Ned on the dresser. She'd snapped the picture just a month ago. They had gone on a hike into the foothills and climbed a rock formation. To the east lay the plains, the white peaks of Denver International Airport barely visible through the brownish haze. To the west the snow-capped Rocky Mountains leapt to the sky like the jagged lines on a heart monitor. Ned had taken her picture, then placed the camera on a rock and bent down to look through the viewfinder.

"I'll set the timer and get one of both of us."

"Oh, don't bother," Pam had said. "I'll just take one of you by yourself."

"No, that's okay. This'll work."

But Pam had grabbed the camera and leaned back. "Smile!" She took his picture.

"Why don't you want one of both of us?" he'd asked.

She'd shrugged. "No reason. Go ahead, if you want."

"No, it's too late." Turning his back, he'd taken a long drink from his water bottle.

She had wanted to ask him what he meant by that, but had let it pass. Things had been strange between them recently. Sometimes, to her chagrin, Pam found that being alone with her husband made her uncomfortable.

Staring at his picture, she suddenly realized why. She had been afraid he would ask her the Big Questions. Are you happy? Do you love me? They were questions she had asked and answered for herself a million times. Was she happy? Happy enough. Did she love him? She loved him enough.

She had come to terms with those an-

swers and had found meaning and purpose in her partnership with Ned. But she doubted he would have understood that. Or maybe he understood it all too well, and that's why he had never asked the Questions.

* * *

Some time ago, long before Ned's death, Pam had agreed to attend the opening of a gallery that was going to show some of her paintings. The gallery owner was an old friend from college and when she heard about Ned she called to tell Pam it was okay if she didn't feel up to coming. But Pam saw no reason not to go. Her son was back at college, and God knows she craved a little time away. For six weeks she had been busy dealing with lawyers, accountants, insurance administrators, well-meaning friends and relatives. She needed a break. A road trip by herself to Elk Valley, the beautiful little ski resort town that was home to her friend's gallery, would be perfect.

Pam backed the car out of the driveway, navigating the familiar roads of the housing development and the shoppette-lined suburban streets with unconscious skill. As she merged onto the interstate she reflected on how she was handling this crisis in her life. The grief counselors would probably tell her she was right on schedule—done with the shock and denial stage, moving on to the anger stage. What a funny way to grieve someone, Pam thought, by getting angry at him. But she couldn't deny that's how she felt at times. It wasn't over anything hugely important; Ned had left their affairs in order and the family in good financial shape. It was over little things. Why, for instance, had he never told her where to find the key to their safety deposit box? Why had he never shown her how to change the temperature setting on the fancy new digital thermostat? And where, in his otherwise complete and well-organized files, were the maintenance records for their cars?

In her more logical moments, she realized this anger wasn't really directed at him, but at herself for never bothering to ask him these questions. Why had she been willing to be so dependent?

She exited the interstate and headed west, slowing down as the road twisted and

turned up toward the first pass. Her thoughts turned to the reason for this trip—the gallery opening. An art major in college, Pam had only recently returned to her painting. She was serious about it, intending it to be more than a hobby. Her still lifes were gaining a small following in local art circles, but she had never before placed her work in a commercial gallery. Tracy, her friend, was doing her a big favor by showing her work. While Elk Valley was not exactly Denver or Santa Fe, it nevertheless catered to an upscale crowd, so it was very likely her paintings would be noticed at this opening, maybe even purchased.

Cresting the pass, the park spread out below her, a flat-bottomed bowl dotted with grazing cattle and surrounded by mountains colored with dark pines and light, summer-green aspen. She descended gradually, keeping her eye out for the turn-off to a place she had spotted on the map, a National Wildlife Refuge where she planned to get out of the car and stretch her legs.

Following the brown Park Service sign, she turned onto a county dirt road. About a mile in, a weathered old barn sat leaning into the wind. Her artist's eye noted the picturesque setting, complete with split rail fence and fifties-era tractor. One mile further in, a small turn-out appeared. She parked in front of several interpretive signs, stepped out and stretched, turning 360 degrees to take in the view. This was what she loved about the West—vision that ended only at the horizon. In this vast space the world was reduced to its elements—air, water, sunshine, earth. Life seemed almost simple.

A gravel-covered, looped trail began and ended at the turn-out, and Pam briefly

This was what she loved about the West—vision that ended only at the horizon. In this vast space the world was reduced to its elements—air, water, sunshine, earth. Life seemed almost simple.

considered taking it just for the exercise. But she had promised to meet Tracy at five, an hour from now, and Elk Valley was at least an hour away. She climbed back behind the wheel and turned the key.

Dead silence.

She tried again with the same result. No chugging, no grinding, nothing but silence.

“Dammit!” Dropping her head back on the headrest, she considered how perfectly consistent this turn of events was with the current course of her life. Never before, with the exception of a couple of flat tires, had she been stranded by a car breakdown, and when it finally happened, it would, of course, be miles from civilization, with no husband available to call for help.

In disgust, she popped the hood and stared at the engine knowing full well that she couldn't tell a carburetor from an alternator. She got back in the driver's seat and gave the key one more twist for good measure. No good.

Unfolding her map, she considered her options. The tiny town of Lincoln looked to be about fifteen miles away. She could call for a tow and, with any luck, get this thing fixed and be in Elk Valley later tonight. She punched in 911 on her cell phone and waited. After a full minute, the phone beeped and the digital read-out informed her “No Signal.” She tossed the offending instrument onto the seat. She'd have to walk for help. Stomping to the rear of the car, she lowered the tailgate, looking for her hiking boots.

She raised her head at the sound of a car coming. Down the dusty road rumbled a pickup truck, headed toward the highway. Pam briefly considered the danger of running into a stranger out in the middle of nowhere, but under the circumstances she had no choice. She raised her hand and hailed the truck.

It slowed and pulled into the turn-out. Out of the cab stepped a tall man, at least 6'2", wearing jeans, scuffed boots, a tan work shirt, and matching tan cowboy hat with sweat stains. He had strong features, thick eyebrows and a full mustache. For a second, Pam thought she had been rescued by Tom Selleck, in the flesh.

“Having trouble, ma'm?” He came nearer, close enough for her to pick out eyes as blue as the Colorado sky.

She swallowed, suddenly conscious of the rings of sweat under her arms and her wind-snarled hair. “Yes. I stopped to look at the signs and then my car wouldn't start. It's completely dead.”

“Well, let's take a look.” He peered under

the hood, lifting a hose here and there. “Everything looks okay. Let's try to jump it.”

“You've got jumper cables?” Pam asked, belatedly realizing how foolish that sounded.

He smiled, rolling up his shirt sleeves as he reached into the back of his truck. His right forearm sported a tattoo of an eagle. “Yes, ma'm. Never know when they'll come in handy.”

He hooked up the cables, revved his engine for a minute, and then gave her a thumbs up. She turned the key. Nothing. They let his truck run a little longer and tried again, but it was clear the car's battery was as dead as highway roadkill.

“You're going to need a tow,” he said, unhooking the cables. “I'll give you a ride into town.”

Pam's heart leaped at the same time a protest came automatically to her lips. “If it's not too much trouble. Don't go out of your way for me.”

He tossed the cables back in his truck and gave her an amused look. “You're from the city, ain't ya?”

“Why do you ask?”

He let down the hood and wiped his hands on his jeans. “No reason. You want to take anything with you?”

Pam grabbed her overnight bag, locked the car, and climbed into the pickup's cab. She turned up her nose at the smell of stale smoke emanating from an overflowing ashtray.

“Listen,” Pam said as he pulled back onto the road. “I was headed for Elk Valley. Do you think I could get a tow there?”

“Probably, but it'd cost you a pretty penny. You're better off taking it to Tuck's Garage in Lincoln. He's the best mechanic this side of the hill, and he won't overcharge you either. Actually, he's my nephew, but I ain't trying to drum up business for him. He's just a darn good mechanic.”

The cowboy extracted a cigarette and lighter from his breast pocket and lit up. Pam cracked her window even though the air conditioner was running full blast. He glanced over at her and then stubbed out the cigarette in the dirty ashtray.

“Guess you ain't a smoker. There's not many of us left these days.”

“I don't mind,” Pam lied.

He let it pass with a small smile. “My name’s Dyce Tucker.”

“Pam Gordon.” She shot him a curious glance. “Dyce—that’s an interesting name. Like the dice you throw?”

“Short for Fordyce, my mother’s maiden name.”

“Why don’t you go by Ford instead of Dyce?”

He chuckled. “You’re the first one’s ever asked me that. So why were you off the highway, if you don’t mind my asking? This little county road ain’t on the way to Elk Valley.”

She told him how she’d wanted to try a new route, see some new scenery. That she was on her way to a gallery opening.

“An artist, eh?” He looked impressed. “What do you paint?”

“Mostly still lifes. You know, I’d love to paint that barn over there.” They were passing the scenic old barn she’d noticed earlier. “Look how it’s framed by the fence and the mountains in the background. It’s perfect.”

“You don’t say? That’s my barn.” He looked at her almost shyly.

“Really! This is your land?”

“Yes, ma’am. Everything you see right up to the Wildlife Refuge. That old barn’s on the site of the original homestead. My Dad built a new house and barn a few miles on down the road. I was thinking about tearing down that old barn, but guess I can’t now. Not until you’ve painted it, anyway.”

Their eyes caught. Pam laughed and nervously ran her hand through her hair “So...,” she tried to regroup. “Your family must have lived around here quite a while.”

“My great granddaddy homesteaded here almost a hundred years ago,” he said proudly.

“And here you are carrying on the family tradition. Did you ever want to do something else?” What on earth possessed her to ask that? Like it was any of her business.

He was quiet for a moment and she thought he’d taken offense. But when he answered he sounded thoughtful, not angry.

“Ranching ain’t an easy business to be in. Never has been and never will be. But it’s in my blood. It’s who I am, not just what I do.”

Pam was stunned. Was this guy for real?

Were there still men in the world like this? Tom Selleck looks, Boy Scout manners, John Wayne fortitude—thank God he smoked, otherwise he’d be distressingly perfect.

Were there still men in the world like this? Tom Selleck looks, Boy Scout manners, John Wayne fortitude—thank God he smoked, otherwise he’d be distressingly perfect.

They pulled into town and made arrangements to pick up her car and bring it to Tuck’s. Pam hoped Tuck would be able to fix it quickly so she could still get to Elk Valley that night.

“Well, Dyce,” Pam turned to him, her stomach tingling strangely. “I can’t thank you enough. You really saved me.”

“My pleasure.” They shook hands and for just a second after letting go, he stood there. But then he touched the brim of his hat, climbed in his pick-up, and drove off.

* * *

The only thing wrong with her car, as Dyce had predicted, was a dead battery. But Tuck didn’t have the right replacement on hand and, as it was now after five o’clock, the auto parts store was closed. At her look of disappointment, Tuck offered to call the store’s owner and ask him to open up, but Pam didn’t want to seem like an impatient, demanding bitch from the city, so she declined. First thing in the morning would be good enough.

Lincoln’s one motel was a block away from the garage. She checked in, took a shower, made phone calls to Tracy and the B&B in Elk Valley where she had planned to stay that night, and fell asleep on the surprisingly comfortable bed.

When she woke, it was dark outside and she was hungry. She started to look for a phone book and then laughed at herself. Lincoln’s main drag was only one block long—it shouldn’t be hard to find a place to eat.

Amid several boarded up store fronts, the Teapot Bar and Café seemed to be the only option. Pam took a seat at the bar and ordered a beer and hamburger, glancing every now and then at the TV suspended in a corner, currently tuned to a college football game.

“Who you rootin’ for?”

An excessively hairy individual slid onto the stool next to her—full beard, eyebrows that grew together, even the backs of his hands were covered with thick black fuzz. He wore a stained “Kroger’s Feedlot” cap and his shirt and jeans hadn’t seen soap in a decade or two.

Pam fought down another flash of anger at Ned. If he hadn’t died, he’d be sitting next to her now and she wouldn’t have to deal with this pond scum. Guilt immediately replaced the anger, and a sudden stab of longing.

Her hamburger arrived. She set about spreading mustard and ketchup, studiously ignoring the next-door neighbor. Someone fed the jukebox and the Stones’ “Start Me Up” came on.

“All right, good tune,” Mr. Hairball drawled. “Can’t beat the Stones, man. Ain’t that right?”

“Mmm,” she mumbled, taking a bite of her burger.

“You can tell a lot about someone by the music they like. I mean, there’s Beatles people and then there’s Stones people. Most women are Beatles people, but I think you just might be a Stones lady. Am I right?”

Pam kept eating, hoping he’d take the hint.

Mr. Hairball high-signed the bartender. “Buddy, give the lady another beer.”

“No, no.” Pam set down her half eaten sandwich. “I’m finished. I was just leaving.”

“Don’t leave on my account,” a familiar voice loomed behind her. Dyce Tucker took the stool on Pam’s other side and nodded amiably to Mr. Hairball. “George, how’s it going? I see you’ve met my friend, Pam Gordon.”

George looked from Dyce to Pam and shook his head. “Just my luck,” he groaned and slid his beer down to the other end of the bar.

“Was it something you said?” joked Pam, noticing with some consternation a definite increase in her heart rate.

Dyce smiled and ordered a shot of Jack Daniels with a beer chaser and another beer for Pam. He lowered his voice and leaned toward her. “You might not believe this, but my friend, George there, actually has a Ph.D in music history, or musicology, or something like that.”

"Get out of here!" Pam stole a glance at George who was staring stupidly at the TV. "What happened?"

Dyce shrugged. "Too many drugs, not enough ambition, who knows? He hit bottom, came back to Lincoln and hasn't ever left. He ain't a bad guy. Tell the truth, he's almost typical. Lincoln's best kids go away and don't come back. It's only the losers who stick around."

"But you've stuck around, and you're not a loser!"

Dyce laughed. "Thank you for that, ma'm. Don't get me wrong. There are plenty of good folks in Lincoln, plenty of smart ones, too. But kids have a lot more choices now than they used to. I can't really blame them for moving on."

Pam sipped her beer, not sure what to say.

"How's the burger?" he asked, taking them back to safer ground.

"Great! But I'm full, can't eat the rest. Do you want it?" She pushed the plate toward him.

"Maybe just a fry or two. Guess Tuck couldn't get your car fixed right away."

"First thing in the morning, he said."

"You staying over at Jessen's Motel?"

"Only place in town!"

"That it is."

Dyce tore at the label on his beer bottle, letting his gaze stray to the TV. He suddenly seemed uneasy. Maybe he regretted having run down his home town in front of a stranger. A Beatles tune, Yesterday, cycled on the jukebox. George scowled and stomped out the door.

Pam grinned. "According to George, there are Stones people and then there are Beatles people. George is a Stones guy, all the way."

"Mind if I ask you a question?"

"Beatles, I've got to admit."

Dyce smiled, picked up a fry, and then dropped it back on the plate. "Are you meeting your husband in Elk Valley?"

Pam was taken aback. "No, no, I'm not. Why do you ask?"

He nodded at her left hand which still sported her gold wedding band. "It's none of my business, but looks like you're Mrs. Gordon, not Miss. I just thought for something special, like this gallery show, it'd be natural for your husband to be there."

"It would be," Pam agreed. "And he was planning to be there. But, you see, Dyce, my husband died a few weeks ago."

He stared at her and she could see him running through all the possible responses, all the things she had heard ad nauseum for the last six weeks. But he settled for a simple, "I'm sorry." He didn't look away, didn't fidget, didn't seem to expect her to say more. Which is why she did.

"Heart attack. Very sudden. We were married for twenty-two years. We have a son." For a minute she thought she might start to cry, but it passed and she was able to smile at him, and he smiled back.

He asked her if she wanted another beer, but she said no, so he asked if he could walk her to her motel.

"Now that you know all my secrets," she said, pulling on a sweater against the chilly high country air, "how about you? Wife? Kids?"

"No wife. One kid. A daughter. She goes to the state university. She's studying to be a vet."

"Terrific! Will she come back to Lincoln when she's finished with school? Seems like there'd be lots of business for a vet around here."

"There is, and old Doc Rivers is fixing to retire soon. But she's married already, and her husband's a city fella. Kinda doubt they'll ever want to live in a small town like Lincoln."

"Well, all we can do as parents is launch them. It's up to them to decide where they'll land." Did that sound too preachy? And what did "no wife" mean? Shivering, she pulled her sweater closer.

They reached the door to her motel room. Pam had her key out and was mildly surprised when he held out his hand for it. She gave it to him. He opened the door, handed the key back to her, and stepped aside.

"Good night, Pam. Good luck with your show tomorrow."

"Thank you. And thanks for getting me out of that jam at the bar. I guess you've rescued me twice today."

"Hell, I'm feeling downright noble. Take care."

He extended his hand and as she reached to take it, her foot slipped off the heel of her sandal. She pitched forward. Dyce's

arm came around her, steadying her. He set her right and stepped away.

"Okay?" he asked.

She nodded, grateful that the darkness hid her burning cheeks.

Once again, he touched his hat brim, said "goodnight," and walked off.

Pam closed the motel room door and leaned against it, pleased despite all good reason that he had said "goodnight" and not "goodbye."

* * *

Elk Valley hosted a summer-long music and art festival that was just winding up so there was a good-sized crowd in town. All the artists showing at Tracy's gallery opening sold well, including Pam who sold two pieces off the floor and made contact with several prospective buyers.

It was close to nine and Tracy was preparing to close up when Dyce Tucker walked in the door. His work clothes from the previous day had been exchanged for pressed black jeans, a blue cotton shirt, and Western-cut sports jacket. He was hatless, revealing a full head of dark hair, just going gray at the temples.

He spotted Pam who had her back to him, going over some paperwork with Tracy. Hands in pockets, he began ambling through the nearly empty gallery.

Tracy looked up and called, "Let me know if I can help you."

"Thank you, ma'm."

Pam whirled around. "Dyce!" Once again, she felt the blood rush to her cheeks. "How nice of you to come. I didn't expect that."

"Well, there ain't much happening in Lincoln, even on a Saturday night, so I thought I'd see what a gallery opening is like."

Pam wondered if it would be possible to duplicate the blue of his eyes with her palette. She felt herself grinning giddily as she introduced him to Tracy.

"Where are your paintings?" he asked. "They all sell?"

Pam laughed. "No, not quite. They're over here." She led him around a corner to where her still lifes hung. Her heart pounded as she tried to gauge his reaction to her work. Head cocked, brow furrowed, he studied the paintings. Pam had never been so nervous. Finally, he proclaimed

them “real nice.” Feeling acute disappointment, she started babbling, telling him how she had sold two pieces and gotten a promise from an art dealer in Denver. He continued to stare at her work, a puzzled expression on his face.

Tracy came to her rescue. “Listen, a bunch of us are going to go get a drink at The Prospector just down the street. You two are welcome to join us.”

Pam shot Dyce a questioning look.

“Sure, why not?”

Tracy locked up and the group started walking together. Pam and Dyce brought up the rear, lagging behind until the others were a block ahead. She stopped and put her hand on his arm.

“You probably don’t want to listen to a bunch of artsy talk, do you?”

He smiled apologetically. “Not really. But that’s fine if you want to.”

“Actually, I’d rather just talk with you. Maybe there’s somewhere else we could go.”

“I’ve got an idea.” He ducked into a liquor store and came out with a six pack of beer.

“Will you be warm enough outside?” he asked, eyeing her sleeveless arms. She nodded, but he took his jacket off and settled in on her shoulders anyway.

He turned down a side street and led them to the river that ran through town. Perching on boulders, they each took a beer and sat silently, listening to the water tumble and fall over slippery, moonlit rocks. Pam looked up and drew in her breath at the magnificent night sky.

“Everything is so clear up here,” she murmured. “During the day you can see to the horizon, and at night you can see all the way to Heaven.”

Dyce reached over and took her hand. Their fingers intertwined and they sat companionably, not needing to speak. But after a moment, uncomfortable feelings of guilt wormed their way into Pam’s heart. This was not right, holding hands with a man, feeling attracted to a man, mere weeks after burying your husband. There must be something wrong with her that she could want Dyce so soon after losing Ned.

She pulled her hand away and gripped Dyce’s jacket closer around her.

“It’s too soon, isn’t it?” he said.

She closed her eyes. Her heart answered No! but her head answered Yes.

“I really like you, Dyce, but...I’m confused.”

“I understand.” He stood and picked up the sack of beer. “Come on, it’s cold. I’ll walk you back to your room.”

Reluctantly, Pam followed him up the bank. The street in front of her B&B was deserted. As they neared the picket fence surrounding the little gingerbread cottage, he took her elbow and turned her toward him.

“My wife left me five years ago,” he said, without preamble. “She couldn’t take the solitude of the ranch any longer, so she moved to L.A. and married a film producer. At first, I didn’t want her to leave, but then I realized I didn’t want her to stay because she was so unhappy. I didn’t want to live with someone who was completely miserable. I love the ranch—it’s my life. But there’s room in my life for something, or someone, else. I wanted you to know that.”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. He turned to go.

“Dyce, your jacket!”

Slipping the coat from her shoulders, she hugged it to her. “Dyce, you didn’t like my paintings, did you?”

“I liked them fine. But they were, I don’t know, too...still. Don’t take this wrong—somehow they didn’t seem to have much life to them. They just didn’t seem like you.”

Slowly, gently, he stroked her cheek, brushing his thumb over her lips, then took his jacket and walked off into the starry night.

* * *

A week later, Pam sat in her studio staring at a blank canvas. One of the dealers she had met at the opening had asked her to prepare some more pieces for him to consider, but she couldn’t seem to get started. She couldn’t seem to do anything but think about Dyce. She had looked up his phone number, but every time she started to dial, she hung up.

How could she pursue him? It was unseemly. What would her family, her friends, her son think if she took up with some Marlboro Man so soon after losing Ned? Besides, he wasn’t her type. He smoked, he

had a tattoo, he said “ain’t”, for God’s sake.

But...he had gorgeous blue eyes that looked at her like she was a mystery he needed to solve. He was a gentleman. And he had something in his life that gave him purpose—the ranch. He wasn’t some dumb cowboy. He was a man of substance.

Everyone told her she needed time to heal. That in a year or so she could start to make decisions about her life. But maybe Dyce Tucker wasn’t something she should only allow in her life after she had healed. Maybe Dyce had been sent to help her heal.

She reached for the phone, but before she could pick it up, it rang.

“Hello?”

“Pam?”

It was him! “Yes?”

“It’s Dyce.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I was wondering, would you like to come paint my barn?”

Pam’s eyes flew to the blank canvas. Suddenly, she could envision exactly how she would fill it up.

“Yes, Dyce, I’d love to paint your barn.”

Suzanne Lyon is the author of four Five Star Western historical novels, including [A Heart For Any Fate](#) and [Lady Buckaroo](#). She is the 2010 WWW President Elect.

Guadalupe Canyon

By Cinny Green



Inert afternoon air settled over Guadalupe Canyon, but Carmen ran along the trails overlooking the rift, pacing herself to the rhythmic crunch of talus under her shoes. The only other signs of life were a slow soaring falcon and a skittering yellow lizard.

It was her job to check the trailheads and campsites in the Guadalupe Canyon Wilderness of southern New Mexico. She did it swiftly and efficiently at the end of each searing day and then reported to the visitor center. She ran down the West Rim Trailhead, jogged up to the cinder block building, but stopped to catch her breath before she went inside. Carmen put her palm on her chest and felt a steady heart-beat. She gave her torso a little slap and knew this tough, dry place gave her strength.

But certainty can evaporate faster than a drop of water in the desert, and when she walked to the glass entry doors, Carmen felt instantly transformed from substance to vapor. A uniformed man with three stripes on his sleeve sat in the lobby. The man looked at her and frowned.

Carmen spun and ran back to the trail, the summer heat slapping her face. Behind her, the doors slid open.

“Where’s she going?”

“Not sure, staff housing is the other way.” Carmen recognized the smoker’s growl of the park director, Jack, who had come close to being a friend.

“Call her in,” the soldier ordered.
 “She’ll be back soon enough. Look around you, Sergeant. Where’s she gonna go?”

“But I have to talk to . . .”

Carmen sprinted around a bend in the path. She felt the desert air part in front of her and close behind her, shutting out what she didn’t want to hear.

Guadalupe Canyon was a small, protected wilderness, only 10,000 acres in the mountains above the Chihuahuan desert. Carmen knew she wouldn’t encounter a soul. The mountains were too challenging to climb in the heat, and birdwatchers came only in the spring and fall.

Carmen ran back down the West Rim Trail, sweat breaking off her forehead, drying before it dripped down her temples. Around a bend she swung left off the trail, into an arroyo outside the park boundary. She stumbled forward a few steps in the sand, regained her balance, and kept moving like a flash flood. To stop was to stagnate and evaporate.

The bed of the arroyo held tufts of blue grama grass and yellow desert daisies. Carmen sidestepped them knowing a single footstep could undo the plants’ tenuous hold. The sergeant in the visitor center was like a foot trying to rout her out, and Carmen was not going to let that happen.

Carmen ran faster, reveling in her fitness in spite of her fear. After combat duty in Iraq, she had gone to a doctor at Fort Ben-

ning, Georgia, complaining of weakness and a persistent cough. She took the requisite tests and the doctor informed her there was a spot on her left lung.

“We should biopsy it,” said the doctor, his face like a wilted plant. “Then we’ll operate, do chemo, hope for remission.”

Carmen had whispered, “But I’m only twenty-six.”

The doctor looked at her record and shrugged. “You were stationed near the Balad Burn Pit north of Baghdad, correct?”

“Yeah, with a transportation unit.”

“Dirty business, that,” the doctor said, snapped the report closed, and scheduled her for the biopsy.

Carmen never showed up for the procedure, and she now did the same thing she had done then: She flew into desperate forward motion, trying to outrun her death sentence. She had vanished in downtown Fort Benning, moved steadily west through Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas, finding temporary jobs, any document she needed, any identity available for the right price. She was stunned at the simplicity of living under the radar. Here in New Mexico, she finally thrived in the desert’s uncluttered integrity, an extreme contrast to Iraq’s sands covered with incinerating garbage, flaming oilfields, and refuse from the depleted uranium “smart” bombs. She felt purposeful as a ranger in the wilderness, protecting her solitude in work, ready to run as soon as she saw someone like the

sergeant.

Dodging agave spikes like a slalom skier, Carmen chanted, "Go, go, go," in sync with her feet. The gulch suddenly fanned out and she emerged on an overlook above Guadalupe Canyon, which wound south into Mexico. She started down the shale on the west facing bajada, but the sun burned just above the horizon and made it difficult to look straight ahead. Carmen sat down below an outcrop of volcanic boulders to think before continuing into the canyon. She shaded her eyes and looked down at her feet. Between her dusty trail shoes, a bajada lupine was covered with purple blossoms. She spread her feet farther apart, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

Carmen never coughed any more and had boundless energy. She had felt half sick most of her life; first in grimy Southside Chicago as a kid, next at boot camp in the dank heat of Georgia; and then driving a truck in and out of the burning war zone, where billowing gritty smoke seeped into the cab and caused the small cloud in the x-ray of Carmen's chest.

After three years in the wilderness, she imagined the bowl between her ribs as clear as glass, because the Chihuahua Desert was free of the oily metal stink of the city, free of suffocating southern humidity, free of airborne assassins. This place had cleaned her up, and every cell felt alive.

Carmen leaned back against the rock until the sun dropped down into Arizona, ten miles to the west. She had run nearly twelve miles now and badly needed a drink of water. Scanning the landscape for one of the old windmills that marked a cattle tank and a well, she caught some movement in the scrub northwest of the bajada. She cupped her hands around her eyes to see more clearly. Something scuttled from a saltbush to an ocotillo. There, another movement to the right from a giant yucca to a mesquite. Two people. Then a third in a cowboy hat lunged flat onto his belly under a chamisa bush, leaving just the heel of a boot sticking out. Three people who did not want to be seen. People heading north. Mexicans.

Jack's voice suddenly echoed down the slope. "You can see the canyon from here." Carmen pinned her back to the boulder, heard the flick of a lighter, and smelled his

cigarette. "Puerta Blanca is about ten miles southwest. Usually the coyotes drop the illegals in Arizona. Then they head west along Guadalupe Canyon Road."

"We tracked them this way."

"Sergeant, I'm just saying this is not the way they usually go. Why would they? No jobs in the mountains, are there? Just some lizards and pretty birds."

The soldier wasn't military police. Carmen let out a long silent breath. He was border patrol, following the illegals who had chosen the hardest, driest route with no ranches, no streams, only a few hidden springs or water tanks.

"Where is your ranger? We saw her footprints."

"I have no idea. She runs all the time. Loves it." Carmen almost grinned. Her boss knew her pretty well. He added, "She'll be back for some water."

Carmen's thirst suddenly bit the back of her throat. She scanned the horizon again and spotted the top of an old windmill looking like a pinwheel on the southwest side of the canyon. She listened for the men above her but their voices were muffled back in the arroyo. She stood and peered around the boulder. No one was on the top of the bajada. She lightly punched the stone. She couldn't let *La Migra* question her about why she fled. He might suspect her of smuggling Mexicans, do a background check, and eventually figure out that she was an army deserter. She hated to run out on Jack like this, but now she had to keep going.

Carmen couldn't see the boot heel under the chamisa so she assumed the Mexicans had moved on. She didn't want to cross paths with them, but her thirst was a more powerful motivator than caution. And, she rationalized, in wilderness you could pass someone twenty yards away and never know they were there. Only vultures, coyotes, and bobcats always knew.

She sidestepped downward, cursing the pebbles that rattled down the slope. After a few steps, she let gravity take over and scrambled the 100-foot descent into the canyon. A rattler shook nearby but Carmen just kept moving fast. She crossed the Guadalupe Canyon riverbed and traversed the opposite side back up to a plateau. From a highpoint, she spotted the blades

and sail of the windmill and headed generally south, winding along the canyon edge.

A full moon slowly rose over the mountains. Carmen briefly stopped to stare at the egg-yolk yellow sphere but was lured on by creaking gears and followed the sound down into a draw. She salivated when she saw an old stock tank and rushed up to it, almost flipping over the edge into a foot of scummy water. The organic stench made her gag.

Carmen righted herself and went around the tank to a faucet on the pump's outlet pipe. She yanked on the valve but it was rusted shut. She grabbed a rock, grit her teeth, and pounded and pounded on the valve handle. The metal rang out as loud as a bell, echoing up the canyon until it shocked her out of her frenzy. Carmen slumped against the tank and muttered, "Dumb shit. It would have been so easy to get a bottle of water before I ran like a stupid rabbit. Stupid. Stupid."

Something snapped behind her in the draw. She spun around and saw a man in a western hat about twenty feet away, then another man to his right, and a woman next to him. The Mexicans had followed her, probably looking for water, too.

They stared at each other in the moonlight. The Mexicans looked her over carefully. The man in the hat let out a long breath, clearly relieved that Carmen, wearing blue cargo shorts and a t-shirt, wasn't border patrol. He tapped his chest and said, "Carlos." He pointed at the others and said, "Oscar y Nacha."

Carmen nodded and paused. She hadn't used her real name in a long time, but what would these people care. She tapped her own chest. "Carmen."

They looked at her with curiosity. Oscar asked, "*Latina?*"

Carmen shrugged and shook her head. "Gringa." It was a familiar question because Carmen was a Spanish name, her skin was olive, and her curly hair was black, but her mother was born in Chicago and the family only spoke a little Spanish urban slang. The most Carmen knew about Mexico was a torn, sepia photograph of a grandfather standing in the Sonora Desert. He wore a western hat like the man now in front of her. And the only real Spanish Carmen heard was from her grandmother who lived

with them briefly when she was small.

The moon became smaller as it rose behind the Mexicans, and its light was cooler, whiter. The two men slowly moved closer. Carmen backed away from the tank.

Carlos put up his hands. “*No tiene miedo. ¿No hay agua?*”

Carmen shook her head. “No water. *Mala agua.*” She pointed at the tank.

Carlos swung his arm in a wide circle and asked, “*¿Donde hay agua?*”

Where. Carmen imagined the wall maps hanging in the visitor center and the wavy cut of the canyon up to Guadalupe Spring and south to the Arroyo Spring. She pointed left, away from the moon, and held up one hand with three fingers. “*Agua. Three miles. Tres.*” Then she pointed right, south, wavering two fingers uncertainly. “*Dos.*”

“*¿Y La Migra donde está?*” asked Oscar.

Everyone on the border knew *La Migra*: Border Patrol, like the officer at the visitor center who had just turned her life upside down again. Carmen pointed back across the bajada towards the wilderness area. The woman gave a little sob and held her hand to her face. Carmen looked at her for the first time. She was young, maybe a teenager. She dropped her hand and Carmen saw a large round sore on her cheek the size and color of a small red carnation. Even—or especially—in the moonlight it looked wicked and painful.

“*¿Que pasa?*” she asked and gestured at the girl’s face.

The Mexicans stood in cold silence. Anger seeped from them like blood. “*Químico venenoso,*” Carlos said and then spat in the dirt.

Carmen wasn’t sure about the second word but the first was something like chemical. She frowned in confusion.

“*Ella es maquiladora. Partes de computadores.*” Carlos held his finger and thumb a quarter inch apart.

A factory worker. Little computer chips. And Carmen suddenly flashed on the drain cleaner in her mother’s bathroom. Skull and crossbones. Danger Poison. *Peligro Veneno.* Carlos had said, “*Químicos venenosos.*” Poisonous chemicals.

Carmen trembled—from dehydration, exhaustion, and three years of anticipating the military police she thought she saw

today. Now she was caught between her own poisons from the US Army and theirs from Mexico. It didn’t matter that the Mex-

Carmen trembled—from dehydration, exhaustion, and three years of anticipating the military police she thought she saw today. Now she was caught between her own poisons from the US Army and theirs from Mexico.

icans were chased by border patrol and she by MPs. Carmen and this Mexican girl were both pawns in a game neither could win and each could only run from.

She stared at the terrified girl, wanting to say something. But what could she say that wasn’t too painful, too insurmountable, too terrifying, too achingly true? Nacha hid her face in her hands, misreading Carmen’s look. Compassion rose up like hot syrup in Carmen’s throat. She had felt this helpless fury a hundred times in Iraq, and again it burned beyond her endurance. She turned and stumbled away from the stock tank. Carmen couldn’t face this. As fugitives, as Mexicans, as victims, they mirrored the sense of loss she fought every hour of every day.

Carlos called out after her, “*¿Donde va, amiga?*”

Without looking back, Carmen followed the draw back into Guadalupe Canyon. She couldn’t feel her legs; she just hoped they would hold her up until she found the Arroyo Spring. Must be a couple of miles, she told herself, again trying to visualize the wall map she’d looked at so often. The moon was over her head, and her shadow bounced along the boulders and plants, like her own ghost was tailing her. Occasionally she smelled the rank odor of a bobcat or saw eyes glowing from crevasses along the riverbed. Spooks, she scolded herself, knowing they could be real.

Carmen walked on, trying to find the dry creek bed on the east side of the canyon that would lead her to the Arroyo Spring. She lost a sense of time and distance. Twice she turned up two small washes but they immediately ended in sloughs of giant boulders. She retraced her unsteady steps and continued plodding and lurching through the night, clutching a muscle spasm in her side. She came to a third trib-

utary and stopped, but its little ravine was so small that she fell to her knees in resignation, no longer believing that she would find water, that she would evade the long reach of the army, or that she would outrun the spot on her lung. She could not bear this loneliness another minute. Carmen crumbled onto a bed of fine sand, falling unconscious before a sob escaped her throat.

The mold of her body in the silt felt luxurious when she awoke. She licked the grit on her lips and smelled something so soft and exotic she thought hopefully, “I must have died.” Then the vision of her flight, her fear, the girl, and thirst flooded her mind. Carmen moved her aching knees and realized she was quite alive. She hoisted herself up on her elbows with a groan. The moon bathed everything in exquisite contrast of shadow and light. Carmen rolled over and stared up at a dry twiggy cactus that appeared dead except for several large, pure white, trumpet-shaped flowers with glowing petals. She knew what it was: the night blooming cereus. She felt a rush of intoxicated joy at the sight of these blossoms, rarely seen in the wild because the plants were scattered loners and no one knew exactly when the thorny branches would bloom.

Carmen rested back in the sand and her thoughts ambled with the same easy motion as her running on the wilderness trails, as the moon slipping through the night, and as the life cycle of the blossoms. The mountains loomed above the ravine, born eons ago and still vital, whereas the flowers and scent would be gone before dawn. Her own life span was a breath compared to the ancient stone yet bountiful next to the transitory cereus. She lay there filled with calm, no longer suspended between poisons but between one wonder and another.

As morning light filtered into the sky behind the Guadalupe range, Carmen saw orange and gray thunderheads roll above the cliffs, draping the summits in vapor. She smelled cool moist air and a rumble announced the summer monsoon.

It began to rain softly. Carmen stuck out her tongue and let the raindrops patter over her mouth, eyelids, arms, and bare legs. The rain came harder with thunder and lightning. She luxuriated in the shower

until she heard a sloshing sound. Thinking an animal might be cavorting nearby she sat up. But there was no animal, just the now unmistakable roiling sounds of a flash flood in Guadalupe Canyon. She struggled to her feet but her stiff limbs moved a second too late. A wave tumbled around a bend, dunked Carmen under, and then popped her to the surface. Remembering her survival training, instead of fighting the dirty brown torrent, she let her limbs float, used her feet to thrust her body around boulders that peeked above the froth, and twirled in the small whirlpools as she bumped downstream spitting out mouthfuls of gritty water. As soon as she was sure she wouldn't drown, she whooped like a kid in a water park.

A half-mile down the canyon, the quickly dissipating flood took a turn west and washed Carmen up on an embankment. It stopped raining. A little bruised but no longer thirsty, she got to her knees

...she got to her knees and grinned, thinking the desert kissed you one minute, then smacked you the next.

and grinned, thinking the desert kissed you one minute then smacked you the next. She shook the water off her clothes, stretched her back, and straightened her shoulders. It was time to make choices before something else like a flash flood, MPs, or Border Patrol made them for her.

First, drink enough to get to another source. She was hungry, too, but that would have to wait. Carmen brushed some leaves and dead bugs off the surface of the stream and, cupping her hands, scooped up a few handfuls of water. The thirsty Mexicans, she imagined, were doing the same at Guadalupe Spring, and now were also refreshed, now also making hard decisions dedicated to saving the young woman named Nacha. She leaned down and drank more. Carmen looked downstream and thought about going to Sonora. But she didn't know much about getting around in Mexico. She wondered if Carlos, the man who looked like her grandfather, knew how to get documents and jobs in the US? How

to get medical help for the sick girl? Carmen did.

She grasped a handful of small quartzite pebbles from underwater and shook them together in her palm while she thought. Carmen tossed the pebbles back into the stream, one at a time. The water was so still she could see their ripples overlap. Running. Poisons. Water. Loneliness. The desert. Suddenly she wanted to talk to the Mexicans again.

She stood, turned north, and headed back up Guadalupe Canyon.

Cinny Green is a writer, editor, and avid backpacker in Santa Fe, NM. Her new book [Trail Writer's Guide](#) (Western Edge Press 2010) has just been released and she offers writing/hiking workshops to groups all over the Southwest. Contact her for more information at edit@thema.us.

The Second Time Through The Door



By Carol Devlin

I climbed the lopsided wooden stairs and stepped onto a creaky sidewalk made of ancient, hand-hewn logs. The sign I saw before crossing the street said “Hotel”, and arched across one of a series of huge five-foot square windows that made up the front of the building, were painted the words “Coffee Shop.” I’d been walking around town a couple of hours and looked forward to a break. Though it felt good to walk after so many hours in the car, I was tired from the long trip from western Kansas to Evergreen for a conference next week on why pioneers interrupted their wagon trips across country to make their homes here. What pulled them away from continuing to California? School was out for the summer, so I had arrived early to do a little sight seeing.

The door of the grand old hotel stood open, and tables inside next to the windows, where I could relax and watch the locals, beckoned—if any of them came down this far. *Today must be a light shopping day because the only pedestrians are a couple of blocks away and no vehicles are parked in front of the hotel.* The paved street ended at the beginning of this block with a noticeable drop off to bumpy ruts and no curbs. And to tell the truth, the hotel looked old and out of place—not at all in keeping with the shopping area. A hitching rail stood in front of the wooden walk.

Evergreen’s a nice little town, and I like the fact that this glimpse of the old west has been saved. I wonder what it was like to live here in its western heyday. I can picture myself gracefully lifting my long skirt to glide up the stairs to the wooden walk. Shoot, I wouldn’t mind living here now.

However, with my attention on the word

“coffee”, I hadn’t realized the wooden sidewalk had an overhang to protect it, and now, couldn’t see the hotel sign above. I craned to look in each window and open doorway as I walked along looking for an interior that suggested a hotel.

“Ah, this must be it.” I spied a table surrounded by coffee drinkers engrossed in conversation. They appeared to be the only inhabitants as I passed several more windows through which I could see the rest of a large room filled with easy chairs and tables. “Here it is, ‘Coffee Shop.’”

An ad at the service station for a small room in the home of Mr. Becket had caught my eye when I first arrived in town today, and the idea of staying in a private residence near Main Street appealed to me.

Mr. Becket had rattled on this morning after I’d rented the room. “Our little town is growing by leaps and bounds. I think you said you’re a school teacher? We’re in need of a schoolmarm. Look around and if you’re at all interested, I can put you in touch with the right people. Seems like once people come to visit, they never want to leave. If you get a chance, visit our hotel on Main Street and take a step back in time, it’s got real character—especially to someone like you. It’ll grab ya.”

This has to be the place Mr. Becket mentioned this morning. I opened the screen door, stepped inside to the mouth-watering aroma of cinnamon rolls, freshly roasted beans and brewed coffee. Large glass jars of coffee beans lined the wall behind a long, ornately carved wooden bar, but the counter of the heavy bar was bare as were the shelves where cups, plates and coffee makings might have been stored at one time. An antique coffee roaster sat between



the bar and the door just entered. *No beans roasting now though.* This didn't appear to be the area for the coffee service.

I turned to look at the other patrons to ask where they'd bought their coffee and to my surprise, the entire room was unoccupied. It occurred to me I'd not heard voices when I entered. *The animated group by the window didn't pass me on their way out, but maybe they took the stairs at the far end of the room to an upper floor. This might still be a working hotel with rooms above.* I stared at their empty table a moment then looked around at the large room with its high ceiling.

An unstocked liquor bar, separated from restrooms by a small alcove, lined the wall opposite the windows. The doorway of the alcove provided a glimpse of soda-fountain-style tables covered with red and white checked tablecloths. Chairs with wrought iron heart-shaped backs and padded seats surrounded the tables. I stepped through the doorway and was surprised to see that the back wall appeared to be mountain rocks. I moved closer and realized water seeped out of the rocks and disappeared under the wooden floor. *A brilliant idea! They used the mountain as a wall. Great atmosphere. A cozy place to sit and visit with a friend.*

I turned to face the large room. The interior, authentic 1800s, boasted wood and brick walls and floor and gave the old place a homey, earthy smell. It surely must have been a favorite meeting place for the locals in the past. The rough wooden floor had a few wet places rapidly drying around the edges as if it had just been mopped.

Faded, worn, once-magnificent Oriental area rugs were strategically placed and surrounded by outdated furniture. Comfortable overstuffed wing-back chairs faced oversized wooden benches with padded seats of well-worn leather, corduroy, suede and velvet in faded colors of tan, dark brown and burgundy. Low, hand hewn coffee tables in the center of each grouping, invited coffee cups and small plates filled with homemade pastries, cake or pie during a time long gone when the locals gathered to visit and catch up on the news. The groupings, designed to provide imagined privacy, created an atmosphere for intimate conversation in small groups. *Today,*

though, I'm the only visitor and there's no coffee or food service, only silence.

Along the front of the room large windows overlooked the street, which now teemed with pedestrians, and several cars lined the space out front. An eerie chill swept over me as I stood blinking, gaping through the windows at the sudden change.

I returned to the screen door and stood watching the people, each bent on a mission, greeting each other and scurrying cheerfully along. The day was beautiful with a sky the color of deep blue to which mountains are privy. A refreshing, gentle breeze, laden with the fragrances of pine, snow melt in the stream that ran behind the buildings across the street, and a mix of cooking odors from the cafes a couple blocks away, greeted me.

I turned my head, scanned the room once more and debated whether or not to rest in one of the inviting chairs. A thin folded newspaper on one of the tables drew my attention and I took a step toward it, but I really wanted a cup of coffee and a little something to eat to steady my nerves. I looked down at the threshold for sure footing, pushed the screen door open and stepped onto the log sidewalk as it emitted a groan.

I looked up and felt my head swim momentarily. The street and sidewalk were empty. *What the heck is going on?* I glanced back at the empty coffee shop then headed for my car. I stopped short in front of the big window beside the coffee drinkers still engaged in animated conversation. I stood less than a foot from the glass watching them, but they didn't notice me.

What in the world? I'm getting out of here. The trip had been long and the high altitude had to be causing hallucinations. I drove back to Mr. Becket's.

"Howdy Ms. Anna. I hope you're enjoying our little town. How's that new car performing at this altitude? Surely is a fine machine." It centered me a bit to hear a familiar voice, but I needed to lie down.

My room was small but clean and pleasant, and the sound of water rushing over the rocks of the little falls in the creek just outside soothed and relaxed me. I splashed water on my face from the small sink in the bathroom, sipped a little water from my

cupped palm, and glanced at my pale reflection in the mirror. I fell across the bed, and in spite of being shaken by my experience, fell asleep almost immediately.

Hunger roused me early the next morning and after showering, I felt refreshed and ready for a mountain breakfast. Mr. Becket suggested a café in Kittredge with "the best breakfast around." Another beautiful day with that blue sky, puffy white clouds and cool, pure mountain air. I shut my eyes, tipped my face to the warm sun and inhaled one long, deep breath, savoring the fragrance of the earth, until I thought my lungs would burst. *What a way to start the day!* Yesterday's adventure felt more like a dream than reality, and I vowed to prove to myself it had been just that.

But first, breakfast and a cup of good strong coffee. Coffee. That's what started the whole thing. Today would be different. I drove my 2009 Mercedes along the winding road that followed a picturesque bubbling stream through the beautiful pines to Kittredge.

Breakfast hit the spot like no gourmet meal I could remember. My mother cooked like that. It bolstered me, and my imaginings from yesterday caused me to smile. Today should be interesting.

Evergreen, bustling with people dressed in shorts and other summer attire, had scarce parking, but my timing was perfect and a spot opened, as if reserved for me, right in front of the hotel. A quick glance at the windows told me the big room was empty—no coffee drinkers by the window this morning, and they probably weren't there yesterday either. The old steps groaned as I bounced briskly up them and the sidewalk creaked under my weight as I made my way to the door of the coffee shop. My hand swept forward, pulled toward the handle of the screen door as if it

I touched the handle and a feeling of shifting into slow motion swept over me.

were a magnet. I touched the handle and a feeling of shifting into slow motion swept over me. I watched through a dream, the door open with no effort on my part.

My head cleared, I felt strong, relaxed, and surprised to be standing in front of the coffee bar. The feathers of my new hat matched my new skirt precisely and I felt elegant. I couldn't wait for Elsie to see it.

"Anna! Good to see you this morning," my friend, Ed, greeted from behind the bar. "You look like you could use a cup of coffee."

I tipped my head and smiled. "Yes, thank you, and would you please bring one of those fresh-from-the-oven cinnamon rolls that Elsie just brought out of the kitchen to Jake?"

Ed poured two cups of bubbling, black coffee, and placed a fork and cinnamon roll, on a small plate. The coffee roaster tumbled happily, emitting a little smoke along with an aroma, so thick I wished I could eat it, from roasting beans. The bar and shelves were fully stocked with an array of pastries and dishes. Steaming tin pots of fresh coffee perked on the burners of the wood-burning kitchen stove in the center of the wall behind the bar. I scanned the room and Jake motioned for me to join him. Several of the regulars, scattered throughout the room enjoying conversation or the newspaper, raised a hand in greeting which I acknowledged with a smile and nod as I swept past. Elsie arrived with the tray and set the breakfast items on our table. She looked at my new hat and dress, raised her brows, made a silent oooh with her lips and nodded. I knew she would like them.

"Elsie, you outdid yourself again this morning." Jake laughed eyeing the giant warm cinnamon roll laden with vanilla icing and a scoop of real butter pudding around it on the small warm plate. "Just when I think you can't top your last batch, you do."

Elsie beamed and chuckled. "I'm never satisfied, even though these are the best in town, and just keep trying new ideas." She placed a courtesy copy of the small, local newspaper on the table and moved to other customers.

Jake settled himself in his big, cushy, wingback chair covered in rich burgundy velvet. He took that first life-giving sip from the steaming cup and smiled at me. I settled into a chair opposite him and savored my coffee.

Jake surveyed his chair and gave the seat a little bounce. "I like these new chairs—very comfy, and this burgundy brightens the room a little. Ed and Elsie are turning this into a show place." He took a huge bite of his cinnamon roll, careful not to let butter drip on his silk vest, savored the warm treat and swallowed. All business now, he looked at me. "I hear there've been a few more strikes reported around Dry Creek."

"I heard that too. That'll sure boost the economy. People will be pouring in here to mine gold. We're going to need every cabin you can build. Thank goodness our new schoolhouse was built to accommodate growth."

They turned their heads in unison toward the window as a man in shades of gray walked past glancing at the coffee drinkers seated at a table beside it. A look of anticipation crossed his face as he continued along the creaking sidewalk, opened the screen door and stepped inside.

He stopped short and his smile changed to a blank look as he surveyed the bar and room. He surveyed the room again. His gaze fell on a copy of the newspaper on one of the tables, then he turned and walked out the door. His mouth gaped a little as he surveyed the street then he rapidly retraced his steps down the sidewalk, stopping short when he passed the window by the coffee drinkers. He stared at them a moment, then trotted down the stairs to his car.

My gaze followed the man out the door onto the new, hand-hewn, covered sidewalk, completed just last week. *It's quite an improvement and will be greatly appreciated when the snow flies this winter. The ladies will be happy to have the hems of their dresses protected from the dirt and mud. Yes, our little town is becoming quite modern and growing by the minute. My class this fall will be the largest yet.* I nodded at the thought and returned to my coffee.

Jake watched the car drive away. "Mr. Becket says that guy's an architect. Exactly what we need now with the news of more strikes," Jake shifted his weight and picked up his cup. "What we really need is another doctor. I'll mention that to Mr. Becket."

"We've got to get more people living here first so there's someone to doctor. But, yes, we can certainly use an architect."

"Maybe he'll join us tomorrow if he

comes through the door the second time. Like you did, Anna." He winked and smiled. "I've got a cabin ready for him if he joins us."

He picked up the thin newspaper from the coffee table, scanned the front page, and pulled on the front of his shirt collar to loosen his string tie.

"Hey! Look at this!" He had unfolded the paper and now turned the single sheet this way and that. "Amazing! Fully printed on both sides. Now, that's a newspaper. We'll have one like Denver if this continues. Let's see what's so newsworthy today, April 22, 1888."

Carol Devlin is the author of the humorous, heartwarming memoirs, [What Do You Do With The Yolks?](#) and the award-winning beading book, [The Little Coin Purse](#). She lives and writes in the mountains of Colorado.



The Ranch

By Linda Sandifer

The old Chevy pickup truck bounced along the gravel road, spewing a column of dust that stretched all the way back to the pavement a quarter of a mile away. Tess Hardin knew she was driving too fast for the conditions. If Josh, her husband, hadn't up and died a year ago, he'd probably tell her to ease her foot up off the gas pedal. "You're rattling my teeth so hard in my head, woman, they're all going to fall out. And I need every one I have left."

She smiled, feeling she could almost hear him scold in that teasing way of his. She glanced at the empty passenger side of the truck's bench seat. Josh had had her drive him around a lot those last few years because his eyesight had gotten poor and his reflexes hadn't been what they once were. The eyesight had been fixed with glasses, but Josh's cowboy pride hadn't allowed him to wear them in front of anybody but her.

With the expertise of a person whose seven decades of life have mostly been spent on gravel roads, Tess dodged another pothole and navigated a series of washboards, keeping the old truck from going into a sideways skid and off into the borrow pit. Actually, Tess had lived more than seven decades, but she deduced that once your hair turned gray and the lines on your face settled into each other, there wasn't much point in squabbling over two measly years.

She dodged one pothole but hit another. The jounce threw her up off the seat a good four inches. Her blue heeler dog, riding in the back with his front paws up on the edge of the pickup bed, nearly toppled over the side. Old Blue always risked his life in the back of the pickup because he liked to



catch the wind in his face. Tess didn't fault him for that. She understood his love for the wind. It was something always present, always keeping a person company, pushing a body along, never encouraging one to idleness.

When she had first moved to the ranch as Josh's young bride, she had hated the lonely sound of the wind keening across the sagebrush hills and valleys of this Idaho backcountry. Winter had been the biggest adjustment. During those months, the wind seldom stopped blowing, even on good days. During storms, it would sweep across the open land at hurricane force, stripping the snow from hillsides and carrying it for great distances until it piled up into monstrous drifts in the roads, corrals, and around the calving sheds. All the places it wasn't needed or wanted. Tess hadn't seen much vertical snow since she'd been here—fifty years to be exact.

Years ago, Tess would never have missed the wind, but she supposed she had grown accustomed to its company and to its various voices; its wail, its laughter, its sigh. She thought she might even miss it now when she was gone from here. Gone from the

ranch.

There was one thing she could say, though. Things were a lot easier now than they had been fifty years ago. She'd seen a lot of changes. Witnessed a lot of history. Now that most of civilization's conveniences had arrived, more people were moving out of town to live here. The people buying the ranch had big plans for the place. They wanted to renovate her yard—landscape it—they'd said. They were a real nice couple, but the woman didn't see a need for the big plum bush in the back yard. It was going to be yanked out first thing and replaced with something more exotic.

Tess had to remind herself that it wasn't her yard anymore. If the new lady didn't want to make plum syrup and jelly, it wasn't for Tess to contest the matter. She'd handed it all over the day she'd signed her name to those papers. She did hate to see those plum bushes go, though. She'd planted them a few years after she'd moved here. Her two oldest daughters had been toddlers, and they'd helped her. Because the bushes were going to be gone soon, too, Tess had decided to take a couple of cuttings to her neighbor, Gwen Kirk, along with some veterinary supplies she wouldn't be needing anymore.

The Kirk place came into view around a willow-lined bend that skirted Deer Creek. Tess lifted her foot off the gas pedal and reached for the gear shift on the floor. Easing it down into second, she roared into the yard and into the midst of a mob of yapping dogs. There were only three, but they carried on like a pack of transplanted Canadian wolves on the scent of a newborn calf. They came rushing out like they were going to eat the pickup and Old Blue, too. Then they recognized their visitors and took to wagging their tails. The alpha male lifted his leg and marked the front tire.

Tess threw the truck door open. Old Blue simultaneously bailed out of the truck to go romp around with the other dogs. He didn't get company of his own kind very often so he always made the most of it when they went visiting at Gwen's. "Now, don't go running off after rabbits or porcupines," Tess warned. "I ain't gonna be here all day. And if you aren't here when I'm ready to go, I'll leave you behind."

Gwen had heard the dogs, seen the dust, and was out on the porch, ready to greet Tess. "I thought you'd be in such a hurry to head out of this hard, old country that you'd just skip one last visit. I guess you're all packed and ready to go?"

Unfortunately, yes.

That's what Tess wanted to say. Instead, she nodded and leaned across the seat to lift the plum starts from off the floorboards. Their roots were wrapped in a wet towel so she had to be careful not to lose the dirt protecting them.

"You've always liked my blue plums, Gwen, so I thought you might like to see if you can get a few of them to grow over here. The new owners of the ranch think they're an eyesore and plan to rip them out and put in some fancy trees. I didn't bother to tell them only certain things are strong enough to survive up here, and when you discover what those things are, you don't destroy them. But they'll learn quick enough, same as I did. I brought you some vet supplies, too, for the cattle. Somebody ought to make use of them."

"Aren't your buyers going to raise cattle? That's a lot of land to sit idle."

"A few to train their horses with, but they mostly raise horses. The expensive kind that bring ten thousand dollars a piece—or more—depending on how big the fool is who's buying them. Can you imagine spending that kind of money on one horse that might step in a badger hole and break its leg?"

"They won't put those kinds of horses out on the range, Tess. They probably won't let them out of the corral."

"Whatever they do with them is fine by me. I'd rather see nothing on the land than a dozen subdivisions and Burger Kings." A wistful look entered Tess's eyes. "I remember Josh used to catch wild mustangs and break them. He always was a hand with a horse. If it had a brain at all, he could turn it into a first-rate cow pony. Don't get me wrong about the new people. They're real friendly and you'll like them."

Gwen snorted. "What'll young people want with an old man and woman pushing eighty? They won't go five miles out of their way to visit, I can tell you that. If they come, it'll be to see Sam and Nell, who are probably closer to their age. No, it's going

to be lonely just knowing you aren't over there anymore."

Tess wouldn't let Gwen make her feel guilty for leaving. She felt guilty enough all on her own.

Gwen said, "Have you got time for a cup of tea? I've got your favorite—Earl Grey."

Relieved that the subject of her departure was temporarily on hold, Tess followed Gwen into the house and deposited the vet supplies by the door. Then she settled onto a kitchen chair and let Gwen play hostess, all the while thinking there were a lot of things over the past fifty years that she and Gwen could recollect for old times' sake, but dwelling on the past only filled a person with rue. No matter how much talking you did, you weren't going to bring any of it back. She preferred to turn the memories into lively stories for her great-grandchildren. The children liked hearing about the old times almost as much as they liked their computer games. They liked the stories even better if they could crawl up on her lap and listen to them before bedtime. But they wouldn't be coming to the ranch anymore on those long summer visits, and she wondered if the stories would mean as much to them when told from her new little house in the valley.

As if Gwen had read her mind, she said, "What in creation are you going to do to keep busy down in that valley, Tess? You'll be lost if you can't get in your truck and drive around the ranch every day."

Tess smiled in a flippant way and lifted her shoulders in the semblance of a shrug. "Oh, I'll find plenty to do. There's a great back yard, all fenced in. I can raise flowers and a few vegetables. I think I'll even plant that herb garden I've always wanted but never had time to mess with. And I'm going to plant a few of the plum cuttings, too. I imagine I'll have time to read all those books I've collected over the years. I'll do some sewing. You know, things like that."

Gwen chuckled. "You hate to sew, Tess."

Tess acknowledged that truth with a grim set to her lips and a nod of her head. "There was always something less tedious to do, for sure. But I'm looking forward to being closer to my kids and grandkids."

Feeling the conversation shifting to her departure again, Tess drained her tea cup

and set it back on the dainty china saucer. “Well, I’d better be going. The Blakes said they’d be arriving around three, and I still have some packing to do.”

In truth, she had everything packed. Her daughters and sons-in-law had helped her move the furniture and boxes a few days ago into the new place. She thought about the house she’d bought. It was so much smaller than the ranch house, and the backyard was no bigger than a postage stamp. Not even big enough for Blue to have any space to roam. She had felt like a stranger in that new place, a visitor. There was something empty about that house. Maybe it was because none of its memories were hers.

“Are you going to be happy down there?” Gwen asked, her dark eyes too wise, too knowing. She reached across the table and covered Tess’s hand with her own. “Honestly?”

Wasn’t it just like Gwen to cut to the chase?

Tess looked down at their hands, both old and gnarled from all the years of hard work. They weren’t the hands of ladies.

Tess looked down at their hands, both old and gnarled from all the years of hard work. They weren’t the hands of ladies. “I would have stayed here ’til I died, just like Josh, but my daughters were worried about me up here all by myself. Afraid I’d get sick or injured and there wouldn’t be anyone around except Old Blue. He’s a smart dog, I’ll grant him that, but he hasn’t mastered dialing 9-1-1 yet.” She paused to present a wry smile, then continued on a more serious note. “But, I’m healthy as a horse. It’s not that. I was more concerned about the ranch falling into disrepair. Josh worked so hard over the years to make a nice place of it. It wouldn’t have been fair to him to let that work be for naught. The Blakes are the sort to take pride in what they have, and I know they’ll keep the ranch up. They have three sons to help them with the horses. They might be able to pass the place down to one of them, the way you and John have done your ranch. You’re fortunate that Sam wanted to take over and stay here with

you.”

“Yes, but it’s been rough on his wife being from a big city and all. Things are easier than they were when we came here, but these young people—they don’t know how to rough it.”

Tess thought about her own children all taking off in different directions. None had wanted to stay on the ranch. Her oldest daughter, Meg, had settled in the country, or, leastwise, what people in the valley considered the country to be. The house Tess had bought was just two miles from Meg’s, and her nearest neighbor was within shouting distance. Too close. Much too close.

“I remember you hated this place in the beginning,” Gwen said, startling Tess with the statement and forcing her to remember that it had been the truth, once upon a time.

Indeed, she would have given her eye teeth to leave this country as a newlywed. It had been such a shock from what she’d been used to in the valley where she’d been born and raised in a little house just outside of town—not much different from the one she was moving to. Funny. Life had come full circle.

But that old shack she and Josh had lived in for ten years would have tested anyone’s strength to the limit. It was cold and so drafty that the snow blew in through the cracks and collected in little drifts on the floor. She had packed so damned much wood to the stove trying to keep the babies warm. Josh had gone off to do work in town during those years to make ends meet, and she’d been left alone with the children and the livestock. The loneliness during those frightening blizzards when Josh couldn’t get home to her for days had nearly driven her crazy on more than one occasion, but she had forced herself not to succumb to the wind’s incessant howl. She had learned to block it out. And then, one day, she had learned to lean into it, to find comfort in its constancy. She’d learned to determine the coming weather by its pitch and ferocity, and by its rare moments of utter silence.

“You hated it, too, Gwen,” she countered, not giving away her own solemn thoughts. “Don’t deny it.”

“Yes, it took some getting used to. Do you remember that time a bunch of us

were trying to get home from town in that blizzard and were stuck up on Monte Pass in zero visibility?”

“Oh, yes, I remember. The wind nearly blew us all into Wyoming that night. You started to cry and you cursed John for bringing you to this godforsaken place. You threatened to divorce him if he didn’t move you back to town.”

“We were all ready to move out that winter,” Gwen admitted.

“I can’t imagine what sort of people we’d be now, though, if our lives had taken a different road.”

Gwen studied Tess’s face harder than Tess had ever seen her do. “I’m going to miss you, Tess Hardin. I never had to put on airs around you, and you always came up with some off-the-wall remark that would make me laugh.”

Tess knew it was time to go now or they’d both be crying in their tea. She stood up, slowly. “I won’t be but thirty miles away, Gwen. We don’t have to become strangers.”

“No, we surely don’t. We’ll call, and visit. I’ll stop in to see you when I’m in town, although I don’t drive anymore since I rearended that car a few years back and had to go to the emergency room. Nell carts me around now. Is Meg going to come and pick you up this afternoon?”

“No, I’m driving. Meg and Eric wanted me to sell my pickup with the ranch, but I can still drive, for Pete’s sake. Just because Josh is dead, people are beginning to look at me as if I have one foot in the grave with him. I might be leaving the ranch, but I’m not dying.”

They gave each other a hug, not admitting that it wasn’t likely they’d actually see each other again, except maybe at weddings or funerals. But there were no tears, for tears suggested a conclusion, a finality to a long friendship that neither of them wanted to consider.

Gwen walked Tess to her pickup. Tess lowered the tailgate and hollered for Old Blue to, “Get up.” He bounded into the truck bed, not knowing things were changing. For him, too.

The women gave each other one last hug then Tess headed back down the bumpy road, going considerably slower on the return. There was one thing left to do. And it

was going to be the hardest thing of all.

* * *

Tess had a tuna sandwich for lunch, made from the last can she'd left in the cupboard. She gave half of it to Old Blue. She sat out in the porch swing and handed it to him. He looked at her suspiciously; she usually dumped the table scraps in his dog bowl.

When he was done gulping the sandwich, he sat back on his bobbed tail, hopping for more. Tess suddenly felt tired. There was something she hadn't told Gwen. Something she hadn't even told her daughters. She sighed, thinking about the truth of why she was leaving the ranch. She wasn't leaving because she was afraid of dying alone or falling down and breaking a leg. And it wasn't because she couldn't run things here by herself. She could probably keep the ranch operating with a hired hand or two. It might be tight to pay them, but she wouldn't need as much to live on now that she was alone. Nor was it because she was worried about Josh's hard work falling into disrepair, although that was a big part of it, yes.

In truth, she had decided to leave because the ranch wasn't the same anymore with Josh and the children gone. A silence had settled deeply over the land, and along with it a vast emptiness greater than any she'd felt before. The two combined to form a constricting knot that closed tighter around her heart with each new day. She could go down to the corral and feed the horses, patch a little fence. She could even saddle up her gelding, Jack, and ride out to check on the cattle. But it didn't feel right without Josh. It didn't have the same meaning. Keeping it all going didn't matter anymore.

The ranch had been Josh's dream, and she had helped him build it up to what it was now. Not that she hadn't enjoyed it all those years, but the dream had vanished with the cowboy as he had ridden off into the sunset.

Tess sighed and forced her skinny, arthritic legs to a standing position. She placed her hand on Blue's motley-colored head. "Well, come on, old boy. We'll go for one last walk around the place. I've got to tell the horses good-bye."

Down by the reservoir, in the horse pas-

ture, Tess called for the three horses.

Thinking she might have a carrot or some oats for them, they left their grazing to trot over to her and Old Blue. She rubbed their faces and even draped her arm over the neck of each one while she crooned about how much they were going to like their new owners. "They might think you're just inconsequential ponies without papers, but lack of papers doesn't mean you have a lack of breeding and intelligence. They'll see that soon enough. Why, I'll bet that when they need some real work done with the cattle, they'll come get you old boys and leave those fancy critters in their stalls."

After a time, seeing she had no treats, the horses lowered their heads and went back to cropping the lush spring grass. Tess settled on one of the big lava rocks that bordered the reservoir. Old Blue sat down next to her. They remained that way for a while, just looking out across the land and listening to its sounds. In their position, behind the curve of a hill, the breeze was quiet and allowed her to fully appreciate the gurgle of the creek. Overhead, a pair of sandhill cranes flew by, flapping their large wings almost in slow motion and releasing their familiar bugling call as they circled the water, saw her there, then rose back up to the sky. The sounds were all those she had committed to memory. Sounds she would never hear again in the valley.

Someday she'd be back here in spirit with Josh. His body was in a cemetery in town, but his spirit was here. She'd stayed here all these years because he had loved it so much. It had been hard giving her heart to a land as harsh as this one. And she didn't know that she ever had. The land had taken her heart, stolen it, crawled inside of its own volition and against her will. But it had won in the end.

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"Me and Josh conceived our first baby down here," she confided in Blue. "Lord, we were so young and crazy in those days. We came down here one night in the moon-

light to skinny dip. Afterwards, we put a blanket over there near those bushes."

Old Blue followed the direction of her pointing finger with his keen eyes, but confusion surfaced. He couldn't see any cows, or anything else that needed to be chased away, and he knew better than to torment the horses.

Tess put her arm over his ruff. "I wouldn't have told anybody that but you."

Suddenly Old Blue's ears cocked forward and his body tensed. He leaped to his feet, whirling back in the direction of the road. Tess sighed and stood up. "I know. I heard it, too. It'll be the new owners. At least they're on time. Most people nowadays have no respect for time and promises. But the Blakes said they'd be here at three o'clock and, by damn, they're early. They'll be all right, Blue. They'll be just fine."

Blue was eager to get back to the house, but he stayed with Tess. The Blakes and their three boys were just getting out of their pickup when Tess arrived in the yard. Behind the Ford was an expensive gray horse trailer loaded with the last of their fancy horses. Cutting horses, they said. Indeed. They were trained to keep a cow from stepping over a line during a contest. Games. All people wanted to do nowadays was play games. Put those same horses out on the range and they wouldn't be able to stop their own shadows.

Still the Blakes were good people, she kept reminding herself, and they loved this place. Loved it the minute they'd set eyes on it. They would face its hardships and joys, as she and Josh had done, and if they had a solid backbone, they'd still be here when they were her age.

In the end, it didn't matter who owned the land. The land was insensitive to ownership and would survive them all. She and Josh hadn't been the first people on this land, and the Blakes wouldn't be the last.

She exchanged her pleasantries with the couple and answered a few of their last-minute questions. She told them, too, about the drinker down in the east corral that hadn't been acting quite right yesterday, and about a piece of tin that the wind had started to rip off the horse barn last Saturday during that bad thunderstorm. Then she went to the house to get her bags. The Blake boys carried them for her and

loaded them in the back of the Chevy. That truck was going to look out of place in the valley with all its dents and dings and dirt, but there wouldn't have been any point in selling it. There wasn't a dealer in town who would have given her two cents for it. The Blakes wouldn't have wanted it sitting beside that shiny Ford. Of course, the dirt had already settled over the Ford just from coming the half mile from the pavement. It would look like a farm truck soon enough. She was sure that before it was all said and done, her daughters would convince her to buy a car. She supposed that would be all right, but it had to have four-wheel-drive.

She squatted down next to Old Blue and put her hand on the top of his head. A lump formed inside her throat. Her vision blurred. "Now you mind your manners, Blue. The Blakes were good enough to let you keep your job here, so don't disappoint them. I know you want to come with me, and I'd like you to. I surely would. But you wouldn't like it where I'm going. There wouldn't be enough room for you to run. To roam. There might be some stray rabbits to chase, but they'd probably be somebody's pets and then we'd both be in big trouble. You'd get bored in that little yard and you'd find a way out. You'd take to chasing cars. I'd really hate to see someone as smart as you be forced to such an idiotic pastime." She was about to say that she would miss him, but the words wouldn't come out.

"Please come back and see him any time, Mrs. Hardin," the Blake woman said. "We'd love to have you visit. And don't worry about Blue. The boys will take good care of him."

Tess nodded, swallowing down that lump. She said, "I might just do that, Mrs. Blake." But she knew she wouldn't. No, it would hurt too much to come back and see that plum bush covered with "landscaping." It would hurt too much to see that Blue might have forgotten her.

She climbed into the Chevy, suddenly feeling every year her age and then some. She fired up the engine, said a few last farewells. She tried not to look at Blue who was wondering why she hadn't put down the tailgate for him to jump inside. The boys were trying to make friends with him,

but he was watching her and having none of their coaxing to go back down to the reservoir.

"I'm just going to town, Blue, and you know you aren't allowed to come," she said.

Then she put the truck in gear and set off down the road. She looked back in her mirror to see Old Blue running after her, the dust in his face. "Dang dog. Go home," she said out loud even though the dog couldn't hear her.

She could see the Blakes calling to him to come back. What was wrong with him? He had never tried to follow her when she'd gone to town. He'd always known, somehow, that she'd be back. Could it be that his instincts were just as sharp this time?

He chased after the truck all the way down the gravel road, eating the dust rolling out from behind. He started losing ground when she hit the pavement and threw the pickup into third gear. She topped a hill another mile down the road and pulled over to look back. He was stopped in the road not far from the ranch gate. When he saw her stop, he started after her again.

"Don't do this to me, Blue." That lump was back in her throat, too big to swallow down this time. Tears blurred her vision and her lips began to quiver as she tried to hold them back. She could barely see the road. "Go back, damn it. Go back."

She had wanted to sit for a few minutes and look over the land one last time, but having no choice now, she rammed the old Chevy into gear again and hit the gas. It sailed down over the hill like a schooner on a wave, and Old Blue was lost from sight.

She refused to look back after that. She didn't want to see if he was still following. She was going too fast for him to catch up. In time, he would go back. He would get used to the Blake boys, and he would forget her. She might even forget him. After all, he was just a danged old dog.

Linda Sandifer is the award-winning author of thirteen novels, several of which have been translated into numerous languages. She lives on a ranch in Idaho.



Sweet Java

By Maxine Neely Davenport



Cate McCellan pulled her Stetson low over her dark eyes and stared at the sheriff's Humvee like a wolf bitch ready to pounce on a mouse. The vehicle pulled off Highway 149, and slowed to a stop behind her pickup in the back yard of Rancho del Río. From the corral, Cate spurred Blackie toward the house, hoping to stop the driver before he crossed the cattle guard into the ranch proper. She shouldn't be surprised that Sheriff Simpson had hightailed it out here to question her about yesterday's fiasco at the migrant camp, where a hungry bear had smelled grilled fish but made the mistake of trying to eat the cook instead. That lady was now in the hospital with deep slashes on her body.

Cate was sure the sheriff would claim his sole interest in coming to the ranch was to kill the black bear that escaped after the mauling. She knew better. Simpson was running for re-election this fall and the hot issue was whether he was looking the other

way as ranchers hired illegal migrants. While her father had taken advantage of their gentlemen's agreement, he was no longer alive. It was up to Cate to decide employment issues, and her own relationship with the sheriff was as prickly as the cacti scattered across the foothills. She pulled Blackie to a halt and slid to the ground behind the gate leading to the back yard where the sheriff was parked.

"Howdy, Sheriff. What brings you out this morning?" she asked as she led the horse around the cattle guard. She worked to keep her voice neutral, but her dislike for the man showed in the tightness of her lips. Simpson's pleasant demeanor vanished. "Well, I'm surprised you weren't expecting me, young lady, considering what happened on your ranch yesterday." He paused, his eyebrows lifting.

"The bear attack was unfortunate, Sheriff, but no laws were broken. Didn't see any need to get you involved." She kicked dirt

with the toe of her boot. The smell of fresh cookies from Lupe's oven wafted past them. "Got time for a cup of coffee?" she asked, hoping to distract him.

The sheriff chewed that thought along with his wad of tobacco. He spit toward a grasshopper swinging on a purple cosmos stalk beside the fence. "Nope," he said, "I'm in a hurry." His nose twitched toward the kitchen like the rabbit's in Lupe's vegetable garden. "But I 'spect it'll be cold up on that mountain." He reached for his thermos. "Maybe I could get a re-fill and some of those cookies to take with me."

Cate sighed. He not only wanted to trespass on her land, he wanted to have a party while he was doing it.

"You're right, of course," he said. "No law's been broken. So I guess you won't mind if we take a little look-see up there. I've rounded up some of the boys to hunt down that bear. They should be here by noon with their horses. That's alright with you." He wasn't asking permission.

She took his thermos and yelled at Lupe to come re-fill it. While that was being done, Cate looked the sheriff in the eye and shook her head. "Sorry, Sheriff. It's not okay. We don't allow hunting on this ranch anymore. There are too many cattle and cowboys who might be taken for wild game. Maybe your boys could ride over to Herb Womack's place. I hear guns going off over there all the time."

Anticipation drained from Simpson's face, replaced by an angry flush. "Guess I'll have to talk to the judge about a search warrant, then. We can't have a man-eating bear roaming the countryside, endangering our citizens." He cleared his throat, making sure his emphasis on "citizens" hit its mark. The sheriff took another juicy shot at the grasshopper, hit him this time, clamped his hat over his head and climbed into his ve-

hicle. He leaned out the window and shook a finger in Cate's direction. "I got orders to make sure the ranchers around here are hiring only green cards. I was a good friend of your Dad's. Hate to have to sic the immigration people on his daughter." He jammed the gears into reverse and kicked gravel as he sped out of the yard.

Cate tied Blackie to the hitching post. Inside the kitchen, Lupe, long time cook and house maid, stopped peeling potatoes and asked what that was all about.

"He came out to hassle me. Wants to turn a bunch of hunters loose on the mountain to find that bear. I told him no, which he didn't like."

Lupe lowered her head, hiding the worry in her eyes. "You haven't seen today's Gazette." She nodded toward the kitchen table.

Cate picked up the newspaper and stared at the headline. "Hispanic's Wounds May Be Gang Related." Her eyes swept over the lead paragraph in seconds. A Mexican woman living in Quail Creek had been found dead with her throat slit ear to ear. Police speculated that her murder was intended to be a message from rival gangs that her family should cease pirating loads of migrants whose transportation belonged to the killers.

"What the hell does this have to do with me?" Cate asked.

Lupe stood winding the dishtowel around her hands. "The paper says it may not have been a bear that attacked the woman in your camp. Gang members may have tried to kill the woman to get back at her family for stealing a load of migrants the gang had dibs on shipping back east. The sheriff said it was strange you got a load of workers in on the same day as the accident." She threw the dishtowel on the counter. "He thinks you're running a stash house."

"That's why he wanted to bring a posse up here — pretending he's hunting a bear, when he's actually looking for a stash house."

Cate hooted. "A stash house! The sheriff knows damn well I'm not harboring illegals. Why would I do that? I have my hands

full raising cows." Her forehead wrinkled as she stared at the newspaper. "That's why he wanted to bring a posse up here—pretending he's hunting a bear, when he's actually looking for a stash house."

She slapped the paper and stood up. "Has Antonio seen this? Where is he, anyhow?"

Lupe's eyes widened. "He and Ramón rode up to count the cattle brought down from the hills for market. Said they'd be home by noon."

Cate grabbed her hat and hurried out to mount Blackie. Her blood was boiling. What if Antonio had hired illegal aliens behind her back? And his nephew—could Ramón actually be a coyote, taking money for leading illegal migrants across the border and talking his uncle into hiring them? Or worse, could he be part of a gang-related smuggling operation using her ranch as a drop off point?

She whipped Blackie into a gallop toward the barn, but slowed when she saw two riders coming toward her from past the soybean fields, dogs chasing ahead of them to greet Cate.

"Cougar! Sadie!" Antonio yelled at the dogs. The noisy animals crouched and retreated behind his horse.

Cate coolly surveyed the men, her eyes resting too long on Ramón, who made no effort to hide his admiration of horse and rider.

"The sheriff just left," she said to Antonio. "He's out here looking for illegal workers, and accusing me of running a stash house. I want to know how the heck that rumor got started."

"Well..." Antonio cleared his throat. "Who knows how them things get started? We took fifteen workers in yesterday, but they all had green cards. I checked 'em. And the story about the gang members slicing up the lady is a bunch of lies. I saw the bear, myself." He looked at Ramón who nodded. "That's right, Ma'am," he said. "It was a bear."

"How do we know the green cards are legit? Maybe we're being set up."

"I shore hope that's not true, Ma'am," Antonio said, "but even if it is, we got bigger problems to worry about right now." He pointed over his shoulder. "Cattle rustlers hit us last night. The fence was cut

down over behind them trees near the county road. Somebody backed up a truck and took off with over twenty head."

"The ones I was selling for taxes? I can't believe it. Where did it happen?" Antonio and Ramón led the way toward the back pasture. Illegal migrants vanished from Cate's mind. Selling the cattle was her last option for raising cash. Well, next to last. Now she'd have to start selling off land.

Surveying the damaged fence, she made a decision. "This job was so damned easy, they'll come back for more, figuring we won't have found out it happened." Antonio looked skeptical, but she went on. "Let's stake it out for a few nights and see if we can catch 'em." Her eyes glinted like the sunlight bouncing off a gun barrel.

"Good idea," Ramón said looking at Antonio. "I can help with that."

Cate squinted beneath her hat brim at the new employee. This man was a puzzle to her. She knew nothing about him, except what she saw—suave, good looking, smooth talking, dressed too nicely to have ever been an illegal migrant. Could he have something to do with the story in the paper? Could she trust him not to inform the rustlers of her plans for a stakeout? What she did know was that catching rustlers required a rifle toting cowpoke, not some dude who looked and acted like Antonio Banderas.

She reluctantly turned her attention to Antonio. "I'll report this to the sheriff. Get a crew together with plenty of guns and ammunition." Touching the rein to Blackie's neck, she let the horse have his head.

At home, Cate called the sheriff, expecting she'd have to eat crow in order to get his help to catch the cattle rustlers. However, she found him more than interested. This was not the first report he'd had of rustlers in the county, using new techniques to make off with a truck load of cattle in a fifteen minute hit. It seemed the rustlers drove up, backed through the fence, set up a quick corral while dogs were sent out to round up twenty head of cattle, loaded them aboard and disappeared to a nearby ranch where brands were changed. The sheriff readily agreed to send two deputies to the stakeout.

The deputies arrived at sundown in the

Humvee, pulling a loaded horse trailer. Ramón and Antonio, jumped into the vehicle leaving no room for Cate. She stood watching the men leave. Not to be out-manuevered, she waited until midnight before saddling Blackie and heading for the back pasture, carrying a thermos of hot coffee and her rifle. She followed stars lying close to the horizon, flickering like fireflies beckoning her forward. A bloated moon shone off and on between feathery clouds. To avoid the noise of Blackie's metal shoes against rocks, Cate guided him over the soft underbelly of the woods. Sighting through her binoculars down the fence row, she could see where the fence had been cut. The Humvee was hidden in the underbrush on the far side of the broken fence. No horses were staked within sight, but Blackie pointed his ears in that direction. Afraid riding closer to the site would elicit a whinny from Blackie or one of the other horses, Cate pulled in and dismounted. She unrolled the blanket packed behind the saddle and spread it at the foot of a large tree near the fence. She poured a cup of coffee, leaned her head against the tree and wondered how long she could stay awake if the night remained so tranquil.

Blackie released a warning snort at the moment a hand covered her mouth.

"Sh-h-h," a voice whispered. Cate tasted blood as she bit the flesh pressed against her mouth. She threw hot coffee over her shoulder and rolled to one side, reaching for her rifle. A heavy body rolled with her. She struggled to get up, but Ramón straddled her stomach. He cursed in Spanish and looked at the hot coffee stain on his shoulder.

"Get off me," Cate whispered.

He released her arms and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe blood from his hand. He didn't move from his position.

"I said get off me."

"I heard you. I'll get off when I have your word that you won't scream."

"If I'd intended to scream, I'd have done it already. Now get off." She gave him a push.

Ramón slowly lifted one leg and rolled to a sitting position beside her. "What are you doing here, Señorita? This is a man's job."

"What are you doing here? You're sup-

posed to be looking for thieves. I'm obviously not one of them."

Ramón chuckled. "Agreed. But the thieves will be easier to capture than you were. For one thing, they won't be throwing hot coffee." He looked at her reproachfully. "I came to send you home."

Cate picked up the thermos and refilled her cup. "I'm not going home, so forget it."

"Did you bring enough coffee for two?" His voice was low and intimate.

Cate fought the urge to respond in kind. She glared at the stain on his shirt. "I had enough for two at one time."

"Bueno. It is my pleasure to share with you." He took the cup from her hand and drank the dregs of coffee in one gulp before reaching for the thermos.

"Help yourself," she said.

"Gracias." He ignored her sarcasm and handed her the cup. "It would be better with sugar, don't you think?"

"I don't sweeten my coffee, and I didn't come prepared to throw a party." She touched the cup to her lips, then handed it back to him. He breathed deeply as he sipped from the cup.

She touched the cup to her lips, then handed it back to him. He breathed deeply as he sipped from the cup. "Ah, you're right. There's no need for sugar after it touches your lips."

"Ah, you're right. There's no need for sugar after it touches your lips."

Cate snorted.

Ramón frowned. "Seriously, this is a very dangerous situation, Señorita. You must go home." He paused. "As soon as we've finished the coffee." He leaned toward her and offered her another sip.

She shot a warning look into his eyes. "I can take care of myself, you know. I've been shooting a rifle since I was six years old."

"I'm sure you can, but you're not so good at sneaking around. I knew you were here from the moment you came over the hill."

Cate sat up, needing to get things straight. "Are you truly Antonio's nephew? I suspect you're a coyote and a thief, responsible for the problems I'm having."

Ramón smiled. "I am neither a coyote nor a thief, but I will tell you a secret if you

promise not to tell."

Cate listened, worried her judgment would be compromised by the moist warmth of his lips near her ear.

"I am here to spy on the coyotes and to find out if gangs are involved in the transportation of illegal migrants. I thought I was perfectly suited for the job until tonight. Nobody told me I'd be chasing cattle rustlers, or be distracted by a beautiful woman who carries a mean rifle."

As he spoke, a truck came from West 149 and slowed down near where the cattle had been loaded the previous night. The two jumped to their feet. The truck pulled a double-level trailer with metal rails that allowed air to circulate through the lower half to keep the animals cool. The top half was enclosed with metal walls, obviously not meant to carry animals.

A pickup parked on the side of the road. Two men jumped out. With a short whistle and pointed arm, one of the men sent Australian cattle dogs scrambling under the fence, across the pasture toward where the cattle were bedded. Another pickup arrived and men piled out and began assembling a metal corral as if by magic.

Ramón picked up his rifle and hurried away, yelling over his shoulder. "Get cover behind a tree. There may be shots." He disappeared through the woods, leaving Cate standing with her rifle. She rushed over and lay down behind bushes that hid her from the corral. One of the drivers maneuvered the back of the truck to the fence, where another gate opened to the truck bed. No more than five minutes had passed when bawling cattle, herded by the dogs, appeared over the rise. Two of the thieves whistled and pointed toward the corral and the dogs circled the herd straight for the gate.

Cate frowned as she watched the last of the cows being crowded into the truck. What were the deputies waiting for? She took aim at one of the tires on the truck. She'd be damned if thieves were driving off with another load of her cattle.

As she watched, a cigarette flipped out the truck's window, the engine roared and the driver changed gears as the last cow crowded into the truck. He gunned the engine.

Behind the truck, the remaining rustlers

ran to disassemble the corral and load the dogs. Suddenly, Antonio and the deputies slipped from the woods near the truck and all hell broke loose. Bullets began zinging over her head. Cate heard yelling and the thieves raised their hands above their shoulders. The deputies dismounted, running forward with their handcuffs. In the melee, black smoke shot from the exhaust of the truck and it began to move. Cate's hand rested steady as she aimed at a front tire of the cattle truck. She fired and smiled as the tire flattened. She reloaded and punctured the other front tire. The truck continued to move, and she aimed for the windshield. Abruptly the truck stopped and rolled back into the bar ditch, jackknifing until the gates twisted and popped open spilling cattle through the corral into the pasture.

"Don't shoot." Ramón was yelling, running toward her. She searched for him in the dark.

"Open up that top section," Antonio yelled. "There's banging on the walls."

Cate watched, astounded, as bodies piled out of the top truck bed. They were migrants, pleading for mercy, begging for water. Fighting nausea, Cate leaned against the tree. The smugglers had been hiding their human cargo in the upper chambers of cattle transport trucks, and putting stolen cattle in the bottom. Her finger tightened on the trigger of the rifle. The bastard smugglers should be lined up and shot.

Cate shivered. This should prove to the sheriff that Rancho del Río wasn't running a stash house. But what about Ramón? Did it also prove he wasn't a coyote or one of the rustlers? She had to know. She ran toward the truck, flailing through branches and underbrush until she stumbled, piling forward over a soft, yielding body. She hit the ground on her elbows, rolled over, and faced Ramón. Her hand slid over his chest and stopped on a wet, sticky mess on his shoulder. She raised to her knees and screamed. "Antonio!"

* * *

The following day, Cate let the screen door slam behind her as she went to see why the sheriff had pulled up into her driveway again. Maybe she was going to be arrested. She nodded as he pushed his

weight out the Humvee door and slid to the ground. The broad grin under his mustache matched the sparkle in his eye.

"Mornin', Miss Cate," he said. "I've got good news. Thanks to your stake out, we've discovered how the smugglers are transporting the illegal migrants across the country—using cattle trucks. Who would have thought it?" His laugh rattled toward the clouds. He paused to allow Cate time to admire him and his news sufficiently.

She smiled and nodded. "Did you find out where the first load of my cattle went? And when I get them back?"

The sheriff's grin faded. "No, but the guys rounding up the cattle are talking. We gist need to follow up on their information. It'll take a few days."

"And Ramón. Antonio says he's doing well. Have you found any links between him and smugglers?"

"No, Ma'am." His eyes stretched large. "I'm not at liberty to reveal who he works for, but you can rest assured he's legit." He was obviously pleased with his secret information.

"Good job, Sheriff," Cate said and waved goodbye as she returned to the kitchen. She really should visit the victim of the bear attack in the hospital and while she was there it would be neighborly to drop by and see Ramón. Probably he'd be tired of hospital coffee by now, she thought, so she poured some of Lupe's freshly made brew into a thermos. She screwed the lid on, then carefully removed it. She reached for the sugar and measured several spoons full into the wide mouth. Nothing wrong with throwing a party now and then.

Maxine Neely Davenport is the author of two novels and a collection of short stories. Read excerpts at www.davenportstories.com. A feisty lady lawyer is her latest heroine, coming soon.



Popcorn

By Martha Egan



JULIE

“Mommy, can I have a horse?” Julie asked.

Rita Hamblin turned from the sink where she was washing dishes. “Ay, m’hija, do you think you’re old enough to take care of one? They’re lots of work.”

“I know,” Julie said. “I’ve been helping Mrs. Morris at her stable for almost a year.”

Rita handed her a plate to dry. “You have to feed a horse twice a day and make sure she has water, brush her, and ride her or walk her. Daily. Not just when you feel like it.”

“Yes, yes!”

“And you still have to do your chores—keep your room clean, do your homework, wash and dry your own clothes, help me with cooking and cleaning and taking care of your little sister. That’s a lot of responsibility for a ten year old.”

“Please, mom? I promise I’ll take very good care of her. Girl Scouts’ honor!”

“We’ll think about it, m’hija.”

Mrs. Hamblin scrubbed a frying pan. “Horses cost a lot of money, Julie. Especially with your dad gone, we have to watch every penny.”

“I know,” Julie said sadly.

* * *

Every day, Julie looked at the photo Grandma Lula had taken of her family at Rita’s graduation from nursing school. Rita stood next to her tall, handsome husband, Jesse, who held Flor in the crook of his arm and Julie’s tiny hand in his huge, strong one. Flor was two years old then; Julie was five. The yellow polka-dotted dress Julie wore in the picture was too small for her sister now.

Everyone was grinning, so proud of Rita. It was a beautiful June day, and nothing bad would ever happen to them. Except it did. Jesse Hamblin, a Captain in the New Mexico National Guard, was killed in the Iraq war almost exactly a year after the pic-

ture was taken.

Julie couldn’t recall her dad’s face, but she remembered funny things about him. How his brushy black moustache tickled when he snuggled with her or kissed her goodnight. The big Wellingtons he would leave by the back door when he came in from the barn. How tiny her dainty shoes looked next to his. He had a loud laugh you could hear from the other end of the cornfield. Julie remembered his smell—something like denim, a little musty, and a bit like alfalfa.

She had a clear memory of the day he came home with his Army haircut. The thick black hair that his cowboy hat smashed down had been replaced by an ugly buzz cut. Rita cried when she saw him. She pounded her fists on his chest and yelled at him. “It’s a stupid, unnecessary war! The Iraqis have done nothing to us! I don’t want you to leave! We need you here!”

As her parents argued, Flor began to wail, and so did Julie. She’d never seen them fight before. It scared her. She ran out of the house and hid in the barn where she couldn’t hear them.

Captain Jesse Hamblin was one of the first members of the New Mexico National Guard to come home in a coffin. When the Marine guard handed Rita the folded flag at the cemetery after the funeral, Julie noticed that her mother looked angry, not sad.

* * *

Rita talked to her parents. Lula and Ben Robles had been ranchers, but when Jesse and Rita got married, her parents gave them their ranch in Nambé, and moved to Santa Fe, about half an hour away.

“Julie really wants a horse. She’s been nagging me about it for weeks. Just what I need—another expense.”

Her mother smiled. “You were horse-crazy at her age too. Remember? You pestered us until we finally gave in.”

“You’ve got that two-acre irrigated pasture and a barn,” her father said.

“You’re no help, Dad,” Rita said.

“Is Mr. Mendoza still planting alfalfa in your big field?” Ben asked.

“Yes,” Rita said.

“Well, you can get hay from him in trade.”

Rita frowned. "You're completely useless! I thought you'd help me tell Julie no."

Her parents grinned. "Doesn't she have a birthday coming up?" Lula asked.

* * *

Grandpa Ben talked to his pals at the Horseman's Haven, where he and other retired ranchers met every morning for coffee. "Does anyone have a horse for sale?" he asked. "I need one that's bomb-proof for my granddaughters. Like you can shoot off a cannon next to him and he won't move."

"I have just the one you're looking for," Chip Madera said. "Popcorn. Until my girl left for college last year, she was her horse. She's very gentle. Eight years old. She'd be a perfect babysitter for your granddaughters."

They met at Madera's corral. He whistled the horse over. She was white with black, brown, and gray speckles everywhere. Her tail and her mane were dark gray, almost black. Grandpa Ben inspected her carefully. He lifted her feet and looked in her mouth. "Take her for a spin, Ben," Chip said. "She has a nice, smooth gait." He put a bridle and saddle on her.

Grandpa Ben rode the horse around the field, first walking, then trotting her in a large figure eight. The horse was calm and well-trained. He rode her back to the corral and dismounted. "How much?" he asked.

"How about a hundred dollars?"

"That's a pretty good deal."

"Well, Popcorn's worth a lot more. But I know your girls will take good care of her."

"Does that include all her gear?"

Chip laughed. "You drive a hard bargain, Ben. OK. A hundred dollars for everything."

* * *

On Julie's birthday that May, Grandpa Ben and Grandma Lula drove to the ranch in their pickup very early in the morning, while Julie, her mother, and sister were still asleep. Grandpa Ben quietly unloaded Popcorn from the back of his truck and put her in the corral next to the barn. Grandma Lula tied a big red ribbon around the mare's neck.

They knocked on the ranch house kitchen door. "Happy Birthday, Julie!" they called out.

The little girl opened the door, rubbing her eyes. "Isn't it a little early for a visit?"

"Oh, we still keep ranchers' hours," Grandpa Ben said. "Up with the sun in the morning, down with the sun in the evening. Aren't you going to invite us in?"

Rita came into the kitchen. "Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad," she said and kissed them both.

"Can I make you some breakfast?"

"Thanks, dear, but we've already eaten," Grandma Lula said.

"Say," Grandpa Ben said to Julie. "Do you have a couple of bandannas?"

"Bandannas? Sure." She came back with two red kerchiefs and her sleepy eyed sister.

Grandma Lula folded one bandanna and tied it over Julie's eyes. "We have a surprise for you."

"A surprise!" Flor was instantly awake. "I love surprises!" She jumped up and down.

"I think we'd better blindfold you too," Grandpa Ben said. He put the kerchief over her eyes and led her outside.

Flor continued to jump up and down, holding her grandfather's hand. "A surprise! A surprise!"

The grandparents led the blindfolded girls toward the barn.

"What is it, Grandma?" Flor asked.

"What's the surprise?"

"You be patient. We're almost there," Grandma Lula said.

When they got to the corral, Grandpa Ben and Grandma Lula faced the girls toward their house, and took off the blindfolds. "Now, before you turn around, see if you smell something," Grandpa Ben said.

The two girls sniffed the air and wrinkled their noses. "Pee-you!" Flor said. "I smell horse poop!"

Julie began to scream. She spun around and ran to the corral. "A horse! A horse! My very own horse!"

"Well, not exactly," Grandpa Ben said. "You have to share her with your sister. And your mom. But there's plenty of horse to go around. Her name is Popcorn."

"Popcorn! Popcorn!" Flor cried. "She's so big!"

At the sound of her name, the horse trotted up to the railing.

"She's beautiful," Julie said. She reached out to touch the mare's velvet nose. "Oh, Grandma and Grandpa, thank you, thank you!"

* * *

Although Rita was a good rider, she

wanted her girls to take riding lessons from their neighbor, Mrs. Morris, who was a professional horse trainer. She had already taught Julie the basics on her horses in exchange for help mucking out their stalls. The girl had learned to trot hands free. She had also learned how to behave around the sometimes skittish animals, moving without startling them. She knew how to keep their feet clean, picking the pebbles and manure from around their frogs. She loved combing the horses' manes and tails. She could coax them into opening their mouths for a bridle bit, and get them to stand still when she saddled them.

At home, Julie and Flor shared responsibilities for Popcorn. They took turns feeding, watering, and walking the mare around the pasture with a halter and rope. The horse and the girls got to know each other. Julie taught her how to bow and count to three.

* * *

The girls walked down the road to Mrs. Morris's for Flor's first lesson. Rita thought it was better if they went without her, at least at first. Flor had never been on a horse and she was a little nervous. Mrs. Morris promised her she'd be fine, and lifted her onto the bare back of an old campaigner, The General, a plodding, 27-year old sway-backed gelding. As soon as Mrs. Morris let go of her, Flor slid right off the other side of the horse. She landed in the dirt of the arena, and began to cry.

Mrs. Morris dusted her off. "Everybody falls off at first," she said.

The little girl was afraid to get back on. But Mrs. Morris picked her up and set her on General's back again. "Hold onto his mane. Try to find your seat. Wiggle your butt until you feel comfortable on his back. Like you're sitting in a chair. We'll stay in place for a bit, then we'll walk him very slowly.

Soon Flor was comfortable on the old horse. "I'm up so high!" she said as Mrs. Morris led The General around the ring.

She quickly learned to walk, then trot the horse without a saddle or bridle. When Rita didn't have to work at the hospital, she came to watch her girls take their Wednesday afternoon riding lessons. "I'm impressed! You're learning so fast," she told her daughters. "You're so beautiful sitting

up tall in the saddle. Real cowgirls. I wish your dad could see you.”

Mrs. Morris put a bridle and saddle on The General for Flor. At first, she bounced around in the saddle and nearly fell off when he broke into a trot. But she learned to grip the horse’s sides with her legs and turn him gently with a touch of the reins. She became fond of the old horse. Sometimes she visited him when she didn’t have a lesson. She brought him apples and carrots. He nickered when he saw her.

Rita didn’t think her older daughter was quite ready to ride Popcorn, and asked Mrs. Morris to give her lessons as well. Julie worked with even the most difficult of Mrs. Morris’s horses. She walked, trotted, cantered, turned, and backed them up without relying much on the reins. After a month, Mrs. Morris felt Julie could ride Popcorn.

Flor was sad that her older sister was able to do more than she could on a horse. She was especially bummed that Julie was getting to ride Popcorn first.

“She’s got longer legs, pumpkin,” her mother said. “And she’s had more experience. You’ll get there. Just be patient.”

Mrs. Morris showed Julie how to walk Popcorn around three oil drums in a barrel-racing pattern. The horse seemed to know the drill without Julie using the reins. One day, Popcorn sped up on her own and loped around the barrels. Julie was thrilled.

Flor sat on the fence with her mother watching her sister ride. “Aw, I want to do that!”

“You will, very soon,” Rita said.

“I just have to be patient—right, mom?”
“Exactly!”

* * *

Mrs. Morris and other teachers in the Española Valley held rodeos every month that summer with their students. Julie became an excellent barrel racer and won several races in her class. She hung her ribbons on the mirror in her room.

Flor won a couple of ribbons, too, at mutton busting, staying upright and riding a sheep longer than the other kids.

* * *

In a couple of years, Julie was thirteen and a very good rider. “There’s a rodeo up in El Rito next Saturday,” she told her mother. “Can we go?”

“We’ll see,” Rita said. “I was supposed to

work the day shift, but maybe I can trade with Francine.”

That Saturday, Flor stayed in Santa Fe to make chocolate chip cookies—“from scratch!”—with Grandma Lula. Julie and her mother drove Grandpa Ben’s truck toward El Rito with Popcorn in the back. The horse leaned her head over the top boards on the sides of the truck. She enjoyed the ride, with the wind flowing through her mane and across her face. It was a beautiful, sunny, early fall morning.

Rita took her eyes off the road for a second to adjust the radio when Julie suddenly let out a piercing scream. A car crossed into their lane and was heading for them. Rita slammed on her brakes and tried to turn out of the way. But it was too late. There was a horrendous bang, a loud crunch of metal, and the sounds of breaking glass. Then screaming and moaning and people yelling.

* * *

When Rita awoke, she was in a hospital bed. Her right leg was in a cast above her knee, and she had a terrible headache. An IV tube ran from the back of her hand to a bottle that hung from a pole next to the bed. Lula and Ben were there, their hands holding hers. “Thank God you’re awake!” Lula said. Tears slid down her cheeks.

Rita opened her eyes wider. “What happened? Where’s Julie? Is she OK?” The words tumbled out of her mouth.

Lula and Ben looked at each other. “She’s OK, hija,” Ben said. “Your fellow nurses are taking excellent care of her. Don’t worry.”

“What happened?”

“A drunk driver hit you head on. Of course, he’s not hurt. It was his fifth DWI.”

Rita moaned and fell back to sleep. Later, she woke up just as her friend, Francine, came in. “Okay, Francine, tell me about Julie. Don’t sugarcoat it. I need to know how she is—the truth.”

Francine took a deep breath. “She’s in a coma. But the doctors are pretty sure she’ll wake up. Her vital signs are good. She’s a strong kid. She has a broken arm and a broken leg, and we had to remove her spleen.”

Rita turned her head and began to cry. Soon, she was asleep. That afternoon, when Francine stopped by again, Rita said: “I want to see her.”

“She’s not a pretty sight. Her head’s bandaged; her eyelids are puffy and all colors of the rainbow; she’s got scratches everywhere; she’s as white as the sheets; and her arm and leg are in casts.”

“I don’t care how she looks. She’s my daughter.”

* * *

In a week, Rita was able to go home to her parents’ house in Santa Fe. One of them drove her into Albuquerque every day to see Julie. They held her hands; they talked to her; they played her beloved Beatles tunes on her iPod; they read to her from her favorite books. Sometimes they brought Flor, who put her own stuffed animals in her sister’s bed. But there was no response. Julie lay quietly, not moving, silent, her eyes closed.

“Don’t get your hopes up, but her eyelids are fluttering and she’s muttering bits of words. It sounds like she’s saying ‘popcorn, popcorn!’”

After Julie had been in a coma for a month, Francine called Rita from the hospital. “Don’t get your hopes up, but her eyelids are fluttering, and she’s muttering bits of words. It sounds like she’s saying ‘popcorn! popcorn!’ We sometimes microwave popcorn here at the nurses’ station. Do you think she smells it?”

“I’ll be right there!” Rita said.

POPCORN

Popcorn heard screaming and a huge explosion before everything went black. When she woke up, she was lying on her side in a field next to the highway. She slowly got to her feet, and shook her head. It was hard to see clearly. Something sticky was running into her eyes from her forehead. She saw that the pickup truck she had been riding in was turned upside down, its wheels still spinning. A red car was pushed into the front of it in a heap of crumpled metal. The wooden slats that had held her in the back of the truck were in pieces, scattered all over the road.

From all directions, people ran toward the vehicles, yelling. Popcorn was terrified and shaking all over. Her head hurt. There was blood on her legs. Then she heard sirens, loud, terrifying wails, coming closer

and closer. She raced across the field onto a dirt road that led away from the highway as fast as her sore, scratched legs could carry her.

A huge metal bird with a swirling thing on top of it flew toward her. It sounded like someone loudly beating a horse blanket. Whap! Whap! Whapwhapwhapwhap! The thing stirred up dust on the roadbed. It swooped barely thirty feet over Popcorn's head, and she went even faster, fleeing the racket. She ran and ran, up into the mountains. When she could no longer hear the awful noises, she slowed to a trot, then a fast walk. Up, up toward the piñón trees and mountain peaks she went, her sides heaving. She became so tired she could go no further, and stopped to rest in a grove of aspens. Soon her heart quit pounding so fast, and she was breathing normally. Walking on, she came to a small stream that flowed down the mountain between large rocks. She was very thirsty, and waded into the stream, stooping to sip the clear, fast-moving water. Its coolness helped soothe the cuts on her legs.

She began to graze on shoots of green grass growing by the brook. The sun set behind the forest. As darkness fell, Popcorn stood under a large cottonwood tree, closed her eyes, and slept for many hours. Before she knew it, the sun rose over the mountaintops.

For days, Popcorn followed the stream up into the mountains. Birds flew from tree to tree, singing happily, and calling to each other. The sun felt warm on her back. There was plenty of grass for her to eat and water to drink. Her head hurt less, and the wounds on her head and legs began to heal. During the nights, she heard many strange sounds, but she wasn't afraid. Back on the farm with those little girls, she used to hear coyotes yipping in the night and owls hooting, and smelly skunks and other animals digging in the dirt near her corral.

One day, as she was drinking from the stream, she heard an animal snort behind her. She quickly turned around. A large, powerful looking dark gray horse slowly walked toward her, carefully lifting his white feet in the tall grass. His color reminded her of the storm clouds that cover the sky during the summer rainy season. The white spot on his forehead made her

think of a cloud too, a white puffy cloud. Nervously, she backed away from him. He stopped. She stopped. The two horses regarded each other for some time.

Popcorn heard hoofbeats. Two dozen horses appeared along the ridge ahead and halted when they saw her. There were paints, bays, and black horses of all sizes and colors. Many of the younger ones were the same shade of gray as Thundercloud. Some were old and scarred, their tails and manes matted with burrs. The large gray horse whinnied to them, and one by one, they came down the hill. The young ones were bolder than their mothers. They walked up to Popcorn and sniffed her. Gradually, so did the others.

After the horses had eaten and drunk their fill, they wandered slowly back up into the mountains. Thundercloud, ever watchful, kept them together.

Popcorn followed the herd, but she stayed back from them. Except for the time she had spent in Mrs. Morris's arena, she had never been around so many other horses before.

Flies buzzed around Popcorn's head, bothering her. An old mare backed up to Popcorn's head. Whisking her tail, she shooed the flies away from Popcorn's face. Popcorn got the idea. She moved next to the mare, her head to the other horse's rump, her tail alongside her head. She whipped her tail around to shoo the flies away from the older horse's face. Popcorn realized that the wild horses meant her no harm and she joined Thundercloud's herd.

* * *

She and several of the other mares were dozing under a box elder tree one day when all of a sudden they heard fast hoofbeats and looked up. Two young stallions slid to a stop in a cloud of dirt on the far side of the stream. They called to the mares in the herd and pranced in the grass at the edge of the stream, as if showing off their handsome legs.

Thundercloud leaped across the brook and charged at them. He shook his mane angrily and bared his teeth. Popcorn and the other horses watched in shock. One of the young males bounded forward and tried to challenge him. But Thundercloud reared up and lashed out at the horse with his hooves. He snorted and bucked, spun,

and kicked at the young stallions with his hind legs. They whirled around and ran away.

In no time, peace returned to the meadow. Thundercloud and the others went back to grazing.

* * *

As autumn came to the mountains, the aspens lost their leaves, the grass turned brown, and the evenings grew colder. Winter was approaching. The little rivers and waterholes were drying up. The water was muddy, salty, and increasingly scarce. Thundercloud led the herd to a narrow canyon where there was grass and a spring. A cliff overhang provided the herd with shelter.

When the weather was bad, and sleet or snow pelted the frozen ground, Popcorn and the other horses turned their tails to the wind and hoped for the best. Ice formed on their eyelashes, their breath came out in frosty puffs. The horses pawed the snow, hoping there would be grass underneath, but it was hard to find anything to eat. The winter was long and cold.

The horses pawed the snow, hoping there would be grass underneath, but it was hard to find anything to eat. The winter was long and cold.

Especially on days when she was hungry, Popcorn thought back to her barn and the little girls who brought her flakes of hay every morning and evening. Sometimes they had sweet feed in their pockets for her, or carrots and apples. She remembered their rides along the ditches, the rodeos, and the girls brushing her beautiful tail and mane that were tangled now with thistles and weeds.

It all seemed so long ago.

JULIE

Although Grandpa Ben and his friends went looking for Popcorn in the mountains, they never found her.

"She probably joined a herd of wild horses," he told Julie and Flor. "I know you miss her very much, but maybe she's happy out in the wilderness running free with other horses."

* * *

It took Julie many months to heal. After she left the hospital, she spent five weeks in

a rehabilitation center where therapists helped her regain her language skills and exercise her mending arm and leg. Although she was often in a lot of pain, she was determined to get better, and worked hard. When the doctors said she could go home, she was thrilled. As soon as she felt strong enough, she went back to school. All along, her mother, her friends, and her teacher helped her keep up with her schoolwork.

* * *

A year went by. Julie barely limped any more, and was anxious to ride again. She helped Mrs. Morris exercise her horses, but she missed Popcorn. So did Flor. They began to pester their mother for another horse.

"I'm sorry, girls," their mother said. "But with all these medical bills to pay, we can't afford one."

In late winter, Julie read an article in The Santa Fe *New Mexican* that said the Bureau of Land Management was holding an auction of wild horses and burros in Farmington in two weeks. "Mom!" she yelled.

"I knew I should have hidden that newspaper," Rita said to herself.

* * *

Grandpa Ben loaned Rita his new truck and she borrowed a single horse trailer from Mrs. Morris. On Saturday, she and Julie drove to Farmington. Rita drove carefully, mindful of the horrible accident that had nearly killed them. About thirty miles from Farmington, they felt something on the pickup go bump, bump, bump.

"Rats!" Rita said. "I think we've got a flat tire."

They pulled to the side of the road. Sure enough, the right front tire was a puddle of deflated rubber. Rita found the jack and a wrench and began to change it. She tried to undo the big lug nuts that held the tire onto the rim, but they were almost impossible to unscrew. "Whoever put these things on here must have had arms of steel!" she grumped.

Julie worried that they were going to be too late for the auction, but she knew her mother was working as fast as possible. Finally, Rita was able to get the tire off the wheelbase. She lifted it into the pickup bed and rolled the spare tire to the front of the truck. Julie helped her hoist it onto the rim.

Rita redid the bolts, fastening them as tightly as she could. She patted the hubcap back into place. They got into the truck and drove on.

They arrived almost forty minutes late. The parking lot was full of pickups and horse trailers, tethered horses and burros. When they got to the corral, the auctioneer was selling off the last few horses. They were skinny, old, and very tired looking. Julie didn't want any of them. She did her best not to cry.

Rita put her arm around her daughter and hugged her. "I'm so sorry, m'hija. Today is just not our day. There will be another auction soon."

Julie and her mother were walking slowly back to their truck when they heard a horse whinnying. They looked up. In the next row, a cowboy was trying to load a speckled horse into a trailer. The horse turned toward Julie and her mother, threw back her head, and whinnied again.

"Popcorn! Popcorn!" Julie screamed, running toward the horse.

The perplexed cowboy watched the girl throw her arms around the horse's neck. "Popcorn! She's my horse!" Julie said excitedly.

The cowboy frowned and looked at Rita. "I just paid four hundred dollars for that horse. Papers and all."

Julie burst into tears. "But she's mine! See? She knows me!"

The horse nuzzled her jacket pocket, looking for a treat.

Rita shook hands with the cowboy. "Hi, I'm Rita Hamblin, and this is my daughter Julie. My dad got that horse for my girls. A year and a half ago, we were hauling her to a kids' rodeo and were in a terrible accident. The horse ran away and nobody could find her. My daughter spent two months in the hospital, and we weren't sure she was gonna make it."

The cowboy tossed the halter rope to Julie. "Show me she's your horse."

Julie grinned. She backed Popcorn away from the trailer and said: "Kneel, Popcorn!"

Rita held her breath. The horse bowed her head, bent one foreleg back, and stretched the other straight out in front of her.

"Now count to three!" Julie said. The horse stood up and tapped her right foot

three times. "Wahoo! She remembers her tricks!"

"Dang!" the cowboy said. His face turned red and he kicked the dirt at his feet.

"Can we make a deal?" Rita said to him.

He squinted his eyes at her. "What did you say your name was?"

"I'm Rita Hamblin. We live near Nambé on my parents' old place, the Robles Ranch."

The cowboy nodded. "Is your dad Ben Robles?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Think I met him at ditch meetings when he was on the Conservancy Board. I live in Santa Cruz. I'm one of the ditch riders down our way." The cowboy paused. "You any relation to Jesse Hamblin, Captain Hamblin of the New Mexico National Guard?"

"He was my husband," Rita said. "Julie's dad."

"Thought so," the cowboy said. "Name's not that common around here. I was in Iraq with him. Same unit. He was a fine man. He took good care of his men, saved some lives. His death was a terrible waste." He turned to Julie. "She's all yours, m'hija."

"Well, we'll pay you for her." Rita reached into her purse for her checkbook.

"Nope," the cowboy said. "I won't take your money." He turned to Julie. "But I want to make a deal with you, young lady."

Julie looked from her mother to the cowboy. "OK," she said cautiously.

The cowboy grinned and patted Popcorn's side. "When your horse's baby is about a year old, I'd sure like to have it."

"She's pregnant?" Rita asked.

"Oh, yeah," the cowboy said, shaking his head. "I thought I was so smart, getting two horses for the price of one."

"We'll let you know the minute Popcorn drops her foal, Mr. ..." Rita said.

"Joe Baca, ma'am." He handed her a sheaf of papers. "My address and phone are right here on these BLM horse adoption forms."

Martha Egan has lived in and loved New Mexico since 1974. Her newest title, [La Ranfla & Other New Mexico Stories](#) is her fifth book.

The Caretaker

By Leslee Breene



March 1875: Buffalo River, Minnesota

"We can take no chances, Lars. We have to get Nellie into the house!" With the gust of a stormy night whipping up her skirt, Mama stands over our sick cow. She pulls her heavy woolen shawl closer around her large belly.

Papa strokes Nellie's head, a worrisome look spreading across his face above his full beard. "You want to bring her in the house, Sigrie?"

"Her calf will be born before morning and it will freeze in this bitter night," says Mama.

I shift from one foot to another, knowing Mama would never tell Papa what to do, but this is her job in our family. She is the *budeie*, the caretaker of cattle, and like the other women in our community, she takes it seriously.

She is the *budeie*, the caretaker of cattle, and like the other women in our community, she takes it seriously.

Papa nods in agreement and peers up at the thin layer of slough grass covering the pole shed. The roof started as a thick layer last fall, but our cows have slipped their long, rough tongues between the poles many times for a lick and sometimes come away with mouthfuls.

"Selma, go put some salt in a pan and bring it here," Mama says. "And be quick about it!"

My youngest brother Carl and I run to our small log house, his short legs almost catching up to mine.

By the time I find the salt and put it in a pan, my oldest brother Jens has unloaded a stack of firewood near the stove. I order him to watch Carl and bolt outside into the whirling snow.

Papa has a rope around Nellie's neck. Together, the three of us coax her across the yard by holding the salt pan under her nose. Once through the front door, we shove the poor cow into my room and tie her to the bed post. Nellie and my bed fill the small room. Papa can barely get the door shut.

We hear her bawling and tugging at her rope. Papa shakes his head. "Selma, you will take your *skin-feld*," he says, referring to the warm buffalo robe, "and sleep with the boys in the loft." Mama smiles at me, but Jens and Carl pinch up their faces.

I know we will get no sleep tonight.

By morning the storm has passed and the calf has arrived. Licked dry and with a belly full of milk, he unsteadily explores the house. Nellie is back in the pole shed, and Jens and I have cleaned up the mess.

Mama says the calf can stay in the house for a day or two, "until he's learned to drink milk from a pail."

This delights the boys, but Nellie isn't happy. For the next few days, she makes a racket calling to her calf to come out of the house.

"You should be grateful, old girl. Your calf is alive," Mama exclaims as we watch Nellie from the window.

We make *pot ost* from Nellie's milk. I help Mama boil the colostrum in a large double kettle until it is thick like custard. What a treat it is sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon and extra cream poured over the top!

* * *

Mama brushes my hair before I leave for school with Jens. I sit very still, looking into the oblong mirror on top of the bureau. Her heart-shaped face is peaceful today. She moves the brush through my hair, untangling the long strands. My hair leaps out from my head like sparks from a golden sun ball. It reminds me of our cat Ilsa on a parched August day when the old rooster flew out from behind the house and took her by surprise. The orange hairs on the back of her neck stood up just like mine are right now.

I tell Mama and she laughs out loud. It is the first time she has laughed like that, I think, since dear Lisbet left us last summer.

Mama braids my hair, wrapping it in a circle and pinning it in the back of my head while Jens hollers from the yard to "hurry up!" I know he hates walking to school with his big sister every day. Since he's turned eight, he thinks he can walk by himself.

But I hurry to catch up with Jens. He is tall for his age and can run like a deer when

he chooses. Along the road, deep furrows made by bobsleighs make our walking difficult. Warmer winds tell us spring will be here soon as the melting snow softens the hard earth into mud. I step carefully, trying to keep my high-buttoned shoes from getting soaked through. I am hoping Fru Bergen will let me sit on a bench to dry out close to the long, square stove in the front of the room.

Papa said last week that I am getting too old for school that I will have to stay at home and help Mama when the new baby comes. I will miss learning the new language that is still foreign to my tongue.

* * *

The flame flickers inside the glass globe of the kerosene lamp on the table next to Mama. She rocks in the sturdy oak rocker that her mother sent with her from “the Old Country.” The darned needle in her fingers goes in and out of Carl’s sock as if it has a mind of its own, so many times has she done this same mending—on Papa’s socks, Jens’, and Carl’s. Shadows from her busy hands dance in rhythm against the rough, plastered wall. The rocker creaks.

I am hoping she will play something on the piano like she used to in the evenings. A lively tune would be fun, then a soft one.

I finish washing the dinner dishes in the kitchen washstand. Our cat Ilsa lies beneath the wood stove’s arching belly, enjoying its warmth. Papa has gone out to milk the cows and bed down the horses. Jens is supposed to help him with the milking but he lags behind, playing some silly game with Carl.

When I remind Jens of his evening chores, he and Carl break out in loud voices. They duel with their lath swords, swinging the narrow wood strips at each other. Ilsa jumps up, bumping her head against the bottom of the stove, and scoots back against the wall.

“Boys! Not in the house,” Mama scolds. She starts to get up, then with a sharp cry, hunches forward, her hands grabbing her belly. The mending falls to the floor.

We all stare at her. The boys stand with their make-believe swords held in mid-air.

“Jens,” Mama says when she gets her breath. “Go get your fater. It is the *baby*.”

Jens drops his sword and runs out the front door. Something mean twists inside

me. I feel fear for Mama and this baby that wants to come too soon.

I run over to her. She has stopped rocking and looks at me through pain-dimmed dark eyes.

“Selma,” she says, “fill the big kettle with water... Put it on the stove.”

Young Carl starts to cry and I pull him close to me. I know he is remembering our Lisbet. I tell him everything will be fine.

Papa and Jens burst through the door. I send Jens to the well for more water and I throw more wood in the stove. Papa helps Mama onto their straw bed.

Her face is wet with feverish sweat. We loosen her clothing. I pat her face with the bed sheet. She stares up at Papa. “We must get Kristina Pederson—she will help when the time comes.”

My father starts to go out of the room, but she grasps his hand. “Lars, don’t leave me. I must not lose this baby!” Her head turns on the pillow and her gaze falls on me. Papa looks from Mama to me.

“I will go,” I hear myself say, although I have no idea how I alone will get to the Pedersons on the opposite side of the big lake.

Papa heaves a long sigh. I can see it is a hard decision for him to make. “Selma,” he says finally, “I will hitch up the horses. Do you think you can do this for your mater?”

“I have taken the horses and wagon before, Papa.”

Papa nods. From beneath his thick eyebrows, his blue eyes reassure me. Then he leaves the room.

Carl comes running up to the bed and leans over Mama. “Is the baby coming?” His small face looks so concerned.

“Ja...soon.” She strokes his bent head and draws him closer to her breast.

I stand at the only window in the room, staring out into the dark night. A dim, red light glows from the lantern as Papa hitches the horses to our old wagon. I shiver, thinking that I have only driven the horses once before, last fall to the fields to take Papa and the hired man their lunch. But I am older now, almost twelve, and I must be strong.

I make Mama as comfortable as possible then throw a second woolen shawl around me. Her pains are coming closer now and she holds onto herself. She takes my hand,

saying, “You are my brave girl.”

I lean over and kiss her warm forehead. Papa is calling and I race out the front door.

He helps me up onto the wagon seat. I look down at the horses, stomping in the cold night air, probably unhappy because they were taken away from the more comfortable pole shed. Their broad backs ripple beneath the lantern’s light as Papa hands me the reins. I swallow hard.

Wrapping a heavy *skin-feld* around me, he says, “Don’t worry, Selma girl. I would send Jens with you, but then there would be no room for Mrs. Pederson on the way back.”

Papa steps back and sets the lantern on the ground. “The horses know the road. Just turn right after the three big pine.”

I nod, looking straight ahead.

“God speed,” Papa says to me and gives the big fella on the right a bold smack on his giant rump. “Go boys!”

Then off we fly. The sound of clacking hooves on the frozen earth rings in my ears, makes my heart pound. The northern wind stings my cheeks. We hit the rutted road and I bounce up and down on the seat like a small frog crossing a pond.

Shivering, I manage to pull my shawl up tighter around my head while still grasping the reins tightly. The thought of the baby coming scares me but makes me more determined. I lean forward into the sharp wind, become one with the galloping team and the racing wagon wheels. The constant bobbing of the horses heads, barely outlined in the half moon’s light, lulls me into a momentary timelessness.

Suddenly it is last summer. I see the men with their swinging scythes in the yellow field ahead. They toss up clusters of wild strawberries as they near the meadow. Gleefully, we children hurry to fill our buckets with the sweet fruit. We find more in the fragrant grass along the meadow’s edge.

“Mama will make shortcake!” Jens declares. Little Lisbet stuffs a handful of the red berries into her mouth, and then another. I try to make her stop, but she runs over to Carl. They grin at me, their cheeks full.

Then we are all riding on a load of wheat sheaves stacked in the wagon. Everyone is

jumping up and down, laughing. At two and-a-half, Lisbet, with carrot curls tumbling down her back, can jump almost as high as her older brother Carl.

The wagon hits a bump and lurches to the side—and Lisbet falls. So quickly we cannot catch her. The wagon wheel rolls forward.

“Lisbet!” I scream.

We aren’t far from home. Papa carries her all the way, her still, sweet face cradled against his chest. The boys choke back their sobs. My tears are a scalding river. We know she is gone.

Lisbet is laid to rest beyond the wild plum trees in our small family cemetery. My sister, my heart.

Now I squeeze my eyes shut and swallow over the ache in my throat. “Please let this baby wait,” I pray out loud. “Please let this baby wait.”

The trees become thicker, more clustered, as I near the end of the lake. Taller and taller they grow on either side of the rutted road. Coal-black witches with gnarled fingers swiping at me from beneath

Jens says witches lurk in the woods, waiting for children. But Mama says there are angels in the woods.

their thorny, flapping robes. Jens says witches lurk in the woods, waiting for children. But Mama says there are *angels* in the woods. Some are always with us. Even with our Lisbet when she died.

I hope some angels are with me now, and that these horses get me to the Pedersons on faster legs.

We come to a fork in the road where the three big pine loom. I turn the team off to the right. After about half a mile, I see flickering candle light from the windows of the Pedersons’ log house. A cry of relief escapes me. Reining in the puffing animals, I jump down from the wagon and stumble to the front door.

“Selma!” Kristina Pederson’s round, cheery face greets me on the threshold before I can knock. “Come in from this cold night. How is your mama?” Three little girls cling to her skirts, peeking out at me. Hans, her husband, stands further into the room with their son Olaf. The whole family gathers around me by the fireplace.

“Mama is having the baby!” I splutter out. “She needs you as soon as you can come, Mrs. Pederson.”

“Ja, ja.” Mrs. Pederson calls the eldest girl to fetch her shawls. “And you must be frozen!” She brings me a mug of steaming coffee with lots of cream and sugar in it. I sip the coffee gratefully but turn away a plate of scones. Hunger does not fill my mind—only thoughts of the baby.

In a short time, we are back on the dark road. Kristina Pederson has packed a few things in a bag for my mater. She has delivered babies all over our county, and always knows what to do if any trouble arises. She knows these things from talking to the horse doctor who travels through our county twice a year.

I see what Papa meant when he said there would be no room for Jens on the way back. Kristina’s wide rump takes up more than half the seat! With the wind nipping at us, though, I am glad for her company and her warmth. I settle back on the seat, relieved that Kristina Pederson is taking the reins.

The first thing I see as we gallop up to the house is Carl’s face pressed against the front room window. He is barely tall enough to look out. When he sees us, he begins to hop up and down.

Papa bolts outside and helps Kristina and me climb down from the wagon. “It is good that you could come, Kristina. Sigrie needs you now.”

We hear Mama cry out and we hurry in the front door. Papa and Kristina rush to her. Carl wraps himself around me, burying his face in my skirt.

“Come now, Carl. You must be brave,” I say. We climb up into the loft with Jens.

It is not long before we hear a spanking sound, and the new baby wails. The three of us look at each other. The boys’ eyes are wide with wonder and excitement.

“Do you think it is a boy or girl?” Jens says to me. I shake my head, asking myself the same thing.

With great expectation, we stare at the bedroom door below us.

Finally the door opens and out walks Papa holding a small bundle. We scramble down the ladder, almost falling on top of each other. Jens and I peer into a berry-red face that is opening into a serious yawn.

Carl tries to climb up Papa’s leg. “Let me see!”

“Here, young fella.” Papa bends down, holding the squirming baby under Carl’s nose. “Welcome your new baby sister.”

It is a happy night. Mama says to fetch the cider jug from the pantry shelf, and I do. Standing around the bed, we all celebrate with a toast to the new girl, “Marie Lisbet.”

In the morning, after Papa returns from taking Kristina Pederson home, he goes into the bedroom leaving the door ajar. I look in and see him gaze down at the sleeping baby in her crib, then walk over and take Mama’s brush from the dresser. He sits on the bed next to Mama as she lies back on the feather pillows. Her face is so pale, almost as pale as the bed sheet. She looks up at Papa as he takes her long brown hair in his hand and brushes it. Very softly.

When I see him do this, my heart brims full.

At the front window, I look out into the yard. The boys have finished their chores and are playing Fox and Geese. Spring is almost here. Soon pink and white blossoms will burst from the buds on the wild crab apple and plum trees. This summer, Papa says, we will build the new barn with the help of our neighbors.

But, best of all will be the evenings when Mama plays the piano in the corner and we sing songs from “the Old Country.” I will hold little Marie Lisbet on my lap while I rock her in Grandma’s rocking chair. Mama will sit down at the piano. She will look over at Papa and smile when she first touches the keys. They will feel cool on her fingertips. Her chin will lift and her dark eyes will close. And then she will play.

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