



2014 Honorable Mention

On the Fringes *by Randi Samuelson-Brown*

By the time the train reached the wilds of Nebraska, my husband and I were barely on speaking terms. Plain and simple, our marriage wasn't working. Neither was he. Charley was called a confidence man—but he didn't inspire too much confidence in me.

True to both of our natures, we had grown restless and broke. The newspapers were full of tales suggesting easy money out west. "Easy" was our type of gamble—a promising move for those on the take. Despite the strain between us, we had agreed to move west together. Toying with the idea of separation—I felt it possible that Cheyenne might be the place where our paths finally split.

Our departure from Sioux City had been messy and loud.

We couldn't pay our rent, our landlady's husband hated Charley, and we had to beat a retreat to the train station in an undignified and haphazard manner. We took our clothing, and one or two small items that might, or might not, have belonged to the room. Charley purchased our tickets while I stood at a distance keeping watch. But no one cared.

Tickets in hand, Charley guided me to a waiting train bound for Wyoming. Barely had I settled into my seat before he was twitching and checking his watch.

"Wait right here," he said. "I forgot something."

I started to argue, but he gave me a look—the one that said I was treading on thin ice. Tired of struggle, I turned toward the window frustrated by angry tears. Tears could be misconstrued as either a sign of weakness or proof that I still cared. Either would suit Charley fine, but both interpretations were wrong.

Charley bounded out the train door. It goes without saying he crossed the tracks where he wasn't supposed to. He dashed into the station, coattails flapping behind him as he ran. Maybe this was his way of saying good bye, leaving me in the lurch. The conductor's sharp whistle sounded.

Of course, Charley had the tickets.

Doors to the compartments started slamming shut, but still no Charlie. My nerves jangled, but it was usual. Being tossed off a train would be a new experience.



As the locomotive belched steam and cinders, Charley re-emerged from the station building and hurdled back to the train as it started to pull away. It was a notable, thundering entrance that captured everyone's attention, and that suited him just fine. A showman to the last, he lived his life close to the wire.

I didn't ask any questions, nor offer any remarks. It was one step short of ignoring him.

We were miles from home and moving farther. On purpose and with intent. Make no mistake about it, we were headed into a lawless land—or so we hoped. Sioux City and its abattoirs were not the west we had wanted. The stench of the cattle and slaughter would not be missed. I hoped it didn't stick to our clothes. Charley and I had been molded by the mills of Massachusetts so should have been used to the decay, but the animal pens were something different. For a strange second, the image of a slaughter-bound steer crossed my mind. The feeling probably indicated a new life, but it didn't feel fortuitous. Although the sky above was a searing blue, the color gray circled the train, and it was more than spewing coal smoke. I had seen a similar haze before, before a neighbor got hurt in the mill. He had to change jobs after that and became a security guard.

It was possible something might fall dead.

I was born into a family with the second sight, an unfortunate blessing which skipped every generation or two. Divination was held as a sign of the devil's work, but secrets were fair game. People paid to keep them quiet. Once I started predicting the content of letters, or that a dog would

drown—and it did—well, I passed into the fringes of respectability. Once I learned to keep secrets, my grandmother taught me to divine fortunes. Fortune telling is nothing more than intuition and noticing details. Desperate people would seek me out and press coins into my hands. And I would weave warnings and stories, but not always the ones they wanted to hear.

I should have read Charley, as a man and a con, a bit better than I did.

Now the con was sitting across from me. He wiped some sweat from his forehead, shrugged it off. “Aren’t you going to ask me anything?”

“You’ve told me to stay out of your dealings.”

“I got some money back off of our tickets,” he bragged.

I didn’t ask how he had pulled that off, but it was a good thing. We needed money but he didn’t usually sweat.

Sioux City slipped away into farm land as the train gathered speed—the barns and cultivated fields grew farther apart as the land opened up. Fences were disruptive, misguided gestures in that wild expanse. The mountains were out there somewhere, far beyond the line of site, secreting gold and silver. It was possible that I could practice my trade in the gold camps, sensing out pockets of ore. Hopeful for the first time in weeks, the West seemed bound to offer a good new start.

Charley fell asleep after the conductor came through to check our tickets the first time. He looked feverish from those erratic hours he kept. He was nothing like my father, a steady man who worked in the mill. I met Charley over an illegal shell game at the back of my father’s local when he looked up from his table and gave me a wink, before relieving a “customer” of his money. My father warned me to steer clear. My mother advised me to set my sights on a millworker with a steady job and pay. But I had never wanted a millworker. Charley was made of more glamorous stuff and he made money without effort.

My parents were less than complimentary.

It wasn’t long before people started talking about me in terms of looseness, and Charley in terms of crookedness. Within a few weeks we were caught in a compromising situation in Charley’s rooming house by his landlady who failed to knock. Although both of us were almost fully clothed, that was not the story that got passed around.

My mother said she would die of the shame, but she was still standing.

Looking back at how things turned out, I should have stayed standing as well.

The train progressed onward, swaying and clacking. Light bathed the plains in changing hues as the sun dropped, the

golden shadows lengthened and the greens blended into purples. Clouds caught the reclining radiance in blushing streaks of orange and rose, punctuated by angry brush strokes of deep gray. Those underpinnings of gray were another sign of death, splitting into smoky tendrils that twisted and tangled like threads on a loom. Looking back, the massive looms in Lowell maimed and mangled, but Charley had promised escape and

freedom from such constraints.

A s l e e p , his breath made a wheezing sound—in and out, in and out—laboring.

Unfortunately, Charley’s promises didn’t always ring true. His version of freedom usually involved skipping out on bills. I recalled our early days, and regretted that the blood which ran high soon started to cool.

Unfortunately, Charley’s promises didn’t always ring true. His version of freedom usually involved skipping out on bills. I recalled our early days, and regretted that the blood which ran high soon started to cool. It would have been better if Charley had drifted away to another town with another game, but instead he proposed. Reputation in tatters, I had accepted. The lasting result was not a child, as some feared, but a marriage neither of us was suited for. Two months after we married, we pulled up stakes in Lowell and headed west to Sioux City, our destination based solely on the romance of the name. When we disembarked, the stench almost made us change our minds—but the train was pulling out and we hadn’t money for new tickets.

In Sioux City, we located a battered boarding house on the wrong side of the tracks, which was the right side for us. We could almost afford it. Furnished with a dented bedstead, two mismatched chairs, a gimp-legged table and a basin, we thought

it would only be temporary. And so it was. Still in love with Charley, that second night I gathered flowers found growing alongside a drainage ditch. Gaudy in hues of pink, blue and yellow, and hard to pick with toughened vines, I yanked them out by their roots and put them in a chipped glass that came with the room. They didn't last the hour. Their heads drooped and their leaves curled, scattering petals like so many paint splashes across the unclothed table, while I waited for Charley to come back from his reconnoitering—another unexplained absence that lasted hours.

I left the wilted flowers in the glass, but he never noticed the reproach, or if he did, he ignored it. He often ignored me.

As was typical, in Sioux City, Charley found his footing first. Crooked games were always in demand, and this town proved no different. Charley found his element while I tried to find honest work as a clerk in a store. That didn't pan out. The manager took one look at my raggedy clothes and said there were no positions available, which was a lie. In our courting days, Charlie told me I would have as many fancy dresses as I wanted. But dreams collided with reality and I would have gladly settled for a dress that hadn't been mended five times over. Dejected, I returned to our room. There was no one to talk to.

The adventure I sought was impeded by want. Every now and again, Charley would flash coins and bills and the complexion between us brightened. For a day or two there wouldn't be the harsh words or the unspoken accusations. But Charley's easy earnings got easily spent in bars and such where he preferred the sporting lads to the company of a wife. I knew I was becoming the least of Charley's concerns and felt homesick, not to mention cheated.

In Sioux City, I got the distinct idea that he found me dull.

Bored, I started dropping hints of my fortune telling abilities to anyone who seemed willing. My first Iowa customer was our landlady. We sat down at the rickety table and she held out her open hands. The configuration of the lines was of scant consequence; her hands were calloused, rough and red from constant cleaning and work. Her shoulders were rounded from bullying. Anyone could have seen how it was with her, but people paid me because I was a professional.

"You work too hard," I purred. "Your husband has proven a disappointment. He should be kinder." She nodded, easing closer. "But what I see here," I pointed at one cluster of etched tracks, "is that he will die an ugly death sooner rather than later. It will have something to do with bad feelings and alcohol."

Startled, her eyes grew wide. "Praise the Lord. Do you promise?"

Bull's-eye.

I strove to look grave. "The details are blurred, but your lot will improve. At any rate, it won't get worse."

Daily I had seen him drinking in a bar two streets over where

the gutters streamed. He was a nasty man with a florid, beery face and a foul mouth. It was only a question of time until he keeled over or someone shot him.

The landlady gave me an extra tip. When she left, I sat there for a moment and stared at the palms of my hands. People said you couldn't tell your own future, but that wasn't exactly true. I could see where mine was going. But there was no sense in jumping the trigger.

More downtrodden women started appearing at my doorway—friends of the landlady with equally hard lives. Over time I started getting nervous because I couldn't promise that all their husbands would drop dead, money would come their way or that their children would survive. Sioux City was too small and life was hard at the best of times. The women were bound to make comparisons. About that time, I smelled perfume on Charley's shirt that wasn't mine.

A few months later, we ran out of money and Charley looked edgy. The landlady offered me credit, but I declined. It was time to move on. Charley scraped together enough money for two tickets to Cheyenne. He claimed he had a cousin who ran a boarding house for railroad workers, and that there was a position waiting for me. He intimated that I would help to run the place and he would try his hand at whatever he found. I figured his romance had soured and that some angry husband might be after him.

As for the boarding house, I wondered who this "cousin" of his was.

So we headed to Cheyenne. I marveled at the new vistas from the train as the gentle knolls gave way to the hills of western Nebraska. The

space seemed fearsome, the sky bold and relentless with miles and miles of undulating land, and long grasses bent and dancing in the stern wind. It was a strange, empty land that would breed cruel, empty men. I thought about the fortunes and got spooked. Charley slumped in the seat across from me with his eyes closed, his hands tucked under his arms. I rested my face against the cool glass and wondered what our chances were. Charley's games were rigged. Life could be that way, too.

Conductors came by after we pulled out of each and every town, and in their presence, Charlie started acting off-color. We were almost to North Platte when yet another conductor came by and asked to see our tickets. Charley handed them over.

"You were supposed to get off in Cozad," the conductor said, his voice carrying.

Charley sat up straight, made a show of looking at the tickets. "The tickets I bought are for Cheyenne," he lied and then coughed. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and black cinders settled into black, greasy streaks in the creases his forehead.

"You don't look well," the conductor said to Charley, but looked at me.

I obliged by acting flustered, as if ill-health had caused the mix-up.

The conductor lowered his voice. "He might have typhus."

I tried to appear concerned.

The conductor was going to say something about the tickets, but changed his mind. "It might be best if you get off at the next stop. He shouldn't be traveling like that."

Then he moved on, checking the other passenger's documents, one by one.

Charley ran his fingers through his hair. "That was close," he said, leaning back in his seat, eyes glittering. His shirtfront was grim, the collar and cuffs smudged with dirt and perspiration. Then he fell into a kind of trance, eyes half-open, head leaning against the window. When he moved, the glass was smudged.

Restless, I got up and went toward the water bucket at the end of the compartment. People gave me unfriendly looks, unhappy with the "facts" they had overheard, that Charley was sick and that our tickets meant we should already be off the train. I had grown hardened to disapproval. I met their looks straight on, but I didn't blame them.

The train rolled on, over more miles of straight track. The blaring light of day was upon us, washing out colors into a flat, brownish white. Charley's shallow breaths rasped. According to the conductor, the train would stop at North Platte. Untying the purse strings looped around my wrist and knotted for safety, I congratulated myself on being careful. I wouldn't put it past Charley to pick my pocket these days. Inside, I counted twelve silver dollars and thirty-seven cents,

careful not to let prying eyes see.

"We're getting off at North Platte," I said.

"No, we aren't. We're going to Cheyenne," he replied, eyes closed.

I was tired of him calling the shots. "People know we should have gotten off in Cozad," I said in a low voice. "We'll get a hotel room so you can rest."

He opened one eye and stared at me. "We don't have the money for new tickets." He handed me the tickets we already had. The destination was listed: Cozad.

"Ain't nothing new there," I replied.

He took the tickets back and rubbed them between his palms, causing the ink to smear. He was banking on the fact that no conductor would want

to touch the sweaty tickets. I wondered if I wanted him to die, and decided not. Maybe I just didn't

want to be his wife any longer.

The wheels clacked on—a metal heartbeat that almost matched my own. It was possible that Charley's heart might stop outright on the way to Wyoming. Looking at his skin turning a greyer hue, it was possible. Life on my own might be hard, especially in the West. But then again, it hadn't exactly been a picnic in Lowell, either.

As the train pulled into North Platte, I pulled my case off of the rack. "I'm getting off," I told him. "You can do as you please."

He shot me a nasty look, but didn't argue. He went to stand and almost fainted. I grabbed his case. When the train stopped, we got off and stepped onto a dry, dusty platform. Gusts blew up eddies of swirling dirt that danced around my skirts. The sky felt close. Next to the station was a hotel,

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a rude affair made of clapboard nailed together at random with the name, "Metropolis" painted in red paint on the side. God, how the wind blew—but at least it dried Charley off a bit.

Heads down, we leaned toward the structure and started walking against the wind. When we reached the steps, I set the cases down and looked up at the door. The hotel was two stories, with an upper balcony that sagged. We would have to make do.

"Wait here," I said.

Charley sat down on the step with a thud and held his head in his hands, crumpled.

The outer door opened straight into a roughhewn room with uneven walls. There was a scrawny man in shirtsleeves behind a plank counter.

"A lick of paint might help," I said, my voice startling him. My criticism startling me.

"I doubt it," he replied, sizing me up. He didn't seem too friendly.

"Do you have a room for tonight?" I asked. The clock on the wall showed seven minutes past three.

"Are you a hussy?" He asked.

"Certainly not," I snapped, but felt intrigued. "Do I look like one?"

He shook his head in a half-apology. "Had to throw one of them kind out last week. Things were getting out of hand."

It was possible for me to go even lower. "So my husband is waiting outside with the luggage."

The man still seemed on the fence, but finally he relented. "In that case, two dollars."

"It seems awfully quiet. Are we the only ones here?"

He shrugged. "In a couple of hours this place will be lively enough. If you want the room, you pay in advance." Probably more than a few guests had run off without paying and hopped a train. I slid two silver dollars across the counter.

The hotelman took a key off of a hook behind him. "Room number four. It's up the stairs and down the hall to the right. It's away from the tracks."

I didn't thank him. I went outside and summoned Charley, who lurched to his feet and grabbed the cases in an unsteady way. Back inside, the hotelman was busy and didn't look up. That was lucky. Charley looked contagious.

Room number four in North Platte was akin to the room we left behind in Sioux City: another view, perhaps the same mess. Charley peeled off his coat and boots, and crawled into bed. The interior was worn but almost clean, although the window could have used a scrubbing. I opened it an inch or two. There were privies and a spigot out in the yard. Charley lay like a lump in the bed with his back toward me. I took two steps and put my hand on his head—not in a tender manner, but like I was pressing a steak on a pan, testing the heat. It was hot.

"You've got the cholera or something like it," I told him, picking

up the pitcher to get water.

"Bullshit," he mumbled.

"Probably not," I said, leaving the room and passing downstairs to fetch water from the pump.

As luck ran, the hotelman wasn't at his post. I wondered if I looked like a prostitute—a real one. Hard to tell. Telling fortunes and being the wife of a con certainly paved the way. Prostitutes had freedom because they had their own money and there was no man to boss them about. They wore fancy dresses—I had seen them before. Ending up in North Platte could be fate. And if Charley died, that would be one less decision to be made.

The iron pump handle in the yard felt good and honest as I primed. Water came out and cascaded over my fingers for a moment while I stared out at the horizon. The wide open spaces allowed for possibilities, the vastness easy to get lost in, if one chose. The waving grasses beckoned. Anyone could disappear, if so inclined. I wouldn't be the first—nor the last.

Reluctantly, I reentered the hotel, my worn-down boot heels tapping out a staccato on the stairs. The hotel sure had a hollow feel to it. Maybe guests would start arriving, men with money to spend.

In the room, Charley was tossing in the bed, springs groaning with each shift. I poured some water into a glass and the rest into the basin, where I soaked one of Charley's socks. I wrung it out and pressed it to his forehead. It seemed to help, but he still didn't look too great. Pulling the lone chair over to the window, I watched the horizon, mesmerized. Eventually I removed Charley's watch from his vest and set it in my lap. An hour passed, then two, which melted into three. The colors changed

as the shadows lengthened. Trains came in and pulled out. A few stragglers headed toward the hotel.

Every so often I stood up and changed the sock on Charlie's head, and offered him a sip of water to drink. Eventually my stomach started to pinch. "Can you eat," I asked.

He grunted and turned over.

At six-thirty I went down into the hotel dining room. There were a couple of men dispersed at random tables. They looked up instinctively as I entered before dismissing me. It felt almost insulting.

I asked for a bowl of soup and some bread, which I took to the room on a tray.

"Ever the dutiful wife," I thought, bitter. A prostitute would have sat down at a table to see what happened. Maybe drank some liquor. I wondered how much money prostitutes actually made. It wasn't like I didn't know what they did, or how to do it.

Back at our room I turned the knob and pushed the door open with my foot. Charley wasn't moving. I set the food down on the table. If he were dead I would just leave his body where it was. I needed a timetable.

I leaned over his shoulder to look in his face. Not only was he alive, he was sweating. The fever had broken. He must have sensed me leering over him, for he turned and said, "I feel like death."

I had been counting on it.

After dark, people continued into the hotel. Sounds of loud men's voices and women's laughter carried in the air, accompanied by an off-tune piano. I laid in the dark beside Charley and hoped he wasn't contagious. Eventually I slept, but kept wondering about the clientele. Through the night there were bumpings, people coming and going. Some were drunk, some were disorderly. All seemed free and easy.

The next morning Charley was awake before I, and sitting in the chair.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Alive," he replied. "What kind of place is this?"

"One that doesn't get started until night, it seems." I swung my legs off the bed, set my feet on the plank floor and looked at him. "And we always have to pay in advance."

"To hell with that," Charlie replied.

"The man was clear."

"I need to wash up," he said, grabbing a clean shirt and a change of underclothes. "If I see that man of yours, I'll have a word."

He came back twenty minutes later. "I've got a good feeling about this place," he said.

"Did you pay for tonight?"

"Of course I did," he replied. "But it might be best to keep to our room as much as we can today."

In other words, he was lying.

That evening Charley had made almost a full recovery. We went

to the dining room together at seven o'clock and Charley made the most of our entrance.

"Why, look what we have here Maude! It's a regular restaurant," he said, more to the patrons than to me.

One man snorted. "I suppose you could call it that," he said.

Charley winked at him and chose a table next to his. "So what do people do for entertainment 'round here?" he asked, leaning toward the guest. "Cards or anything?"

The man nodded, looked at me kind of sharp. "Not for the ladies," he said, "but once they clear out."

Charley looked eager. Plotting. He ordered for the both of us in a fast manner. I was given ten minutes to eat before getting ushered out of the dining room.

"It obviously turns into a gaming den once all the ladies leave," he whispered.

In our room I sat sentry at the table, watching the trains pull in and out and admiring the stars. The volume downstairs was rising. Finally, I went to bed and tried to sleep.

Charley came in when the hotel stopped rollicking.

"What were you doing," I asked.

"Making one hundred and fifty-seven dollars," he replied, cocky.

The following morning, a sharp knock came on the door—more than likely something to do with money. It was the hotelman. Between his fingers he held a telegram. Charley snatched the envelope and tore it open, reading the words with a concentrated hunger. A smile formed, half contrite. He shut the door in the man's face.

"I've had a better offer of sweetness and money," he said, waving the telegram around like a prize. It was from a woman—the one whose perfume I had smelled weeks ago.

"How did she find you here," I asked.

He looked at me straight. "I wired her yesterday morning. I always told her I would be in Cozad. You, however, were supposed to be in Cheyenne."

The truth hit hard, unexpected. The tickets had been for Cozad all along. He had meant to jump off the train, leaving me continue to Cheyenne without even a good ticket. He no longer seemed so handsome or charming.

Charley shrugged at me, like an inconvenience. "So much for your fortune telling abilities . . ." Then he laughed.

I was being discarded with nine dollars and thirty-seven cents to my name. He didn't even know I had that much. A shiver traveled down my spine. Maybe I could throw a curse upon him.

He considered me, not caring what I thought. "It's not that bad, Maude. I will give you fifty dollars while you figure out what you want to do. That's a fair sum. It's not like there are children involved or anything, and God help me, you've turned into a nag."

Of course that was how he viewed it. I was no longer fun and that other woman was. Even better, she had money.

He flung a wad of bills down on the bed and hurriedly stuffed his belongings in his case. He had a train to catch; he wanted to get the hell out. At the door he paused. "Aren't you going to cry or say something?"

I hated how I stood there wringing my hands, helpless. "Why did you ever marry me," I asked.

He pushed his hat back on his head, considering. "You have a certain cut about you. But the charm has faded. And I thought we could pull some scams with wealthy widows, but you lack nerve."

He had tried to talk to me about that once, but I maintained a fleeting sense of honor, dented though it might be.

I stepped up to him and pushed him into the hallway, hard. Then I slammed the door shut and locked it. I could feel him hesitate, but that only lasted a brief moment. He walked away and didn't even say goodbye.

To my shame, I started to cry in silence, wracking with sobs. Through the window I caught one final glimpse of the man I called my husband. He ran to the train station and never looked back. The spring in his step was unforgivable.

And that was how I came to be left behind in the West.

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fifth-generation Colorado native fortunate to have a father who favored western bed-time stories. She went on to become a history major, and finds herself drawn to the more off-beat accounts of western settlement. She is married and lives in Denver.

