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HOLDOUTS OF THE SNOWDRAGON BAR

by J. J. Stein

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COMING BACK



I

Then it happened—a scream shattered the sacred rising. Tethered horses froze in place with ears erect, holding in their frosted breathing. The sun impaled itself on the mountain's jagged edge, bursting there, pouring off the precipices and flooding the meadow in blinding shock. Even the impish stream hushed its incessant prattle, waiting for another sacrilege to occur.

Soon it came. A male voice this time, coughing and groggy. "What the hell!?"

"Get out! Get out!" shrieked the woman.

"Whaffor?"

"Goddammit! Do what I say!"

The stream lapped against the sand and clump grass nervously peeking at the horror beyond the top of the bank. The horses snorted, hiding their heads and aching ears in a mist of crystals. Their legs shuffled in the dust as if tiptoeing on cactus spikes.

"Oh, Lord Jesus!" croaked the man, unexpected knowledge entering his voice.

"Get outta there! Get outta there, by god!" the woman wailed.

The tent between the horses and the stream caught a shard of sunlight. The walls began to thump and sway as if convulsed by the wound.

"Take it easy, please!" the man pleaded.

"Get outta the goddamned way!"

"Okay! Okay!... No, not that!"

"Watch out!"

"Don't do it!"

"Move your ass!"

"Ohhh, shitt!!!"

And then: KABAAMMM! KABAAMMM! Two gunshots blasted out of the tent and ricocheted off the canyon walls heading for the sun. A tiny cloud appeared below the early orb like a virgin tear. The tent went into a desperate slouch. The horses stopped their dancing, balancing their hearts between inflated lungs. For a moment time was crushed in the astonished grip of silence. Then the stream, accepting judgment from the sky, pushed away from the bank, softly weeping.

An arm jutted out through the tent flap. It clutched an oozing rattlesnake in its hand. With a roundhouse swing the arm hurled the snake through the air like a circus streamer. It landed with a thud beside the fire pit. Then the tent flaps parted all the way and a full-grown man in red long johns crawled out on his hands and knees. Rio Corda they called him when he was born. Now, thirty-seven years later, he had greasy sleep-matted hair, two months of wild red beard, and blood on his hands.

He rose stiffly to his feet, rubbing away the ringing of the gunshots from his left ear. When he removed his hand, blood remained on his earlobe. He looked at the dead snake dully, then at the cast of the sun and finally at the skittish horses. His lips pursed and his head rocked in recognition of this sudden morning. Barefoot, he padded across the cold earth toward the stream.

"You didn't have to shoot it, ya know," he said back over his shoulder. "Shoot the tarantulas or scorpions. But don't shoot the snakes."

Behind him a slim woman with stringy blond hair and baggy gray long johns ducked out from the depths of the tent. An 1852 cap and ball .44 dangled easily at the end of her right arm. Her name was Sarah Wendelin and she was a dead shot with whatever weapon she had in hand.

"You shoot the tarantulas," she said. "I'll shoot the snakes." She dropped the oversized pistol onto a tarped duffle bag outside the tent. Then she dug under the tarp, pulled out a heavy woolen shirt and shook it up, down and sideways with surprising force, taking no more chances with cohabiting creatures. Beginning to shiver, she wrapped herself in the shirt quickly and followed Rio down to the stream. "You told me you used to hunt rattlers just for the fun of it," she said.

Rio was on his knees again, this time splashing frigid water onto his face with evident pleasure. "That was in California," he said between ablutions.

"Ah... So, California makes a difference?"

"All the difference in the world."

"Of course," she said, peevisly. "Wash the blood off your ear."

Sarah looked across the stream and soggy meadow up to where the sun had finally risen free of the mountain. She stepped downstream several paces to where a shaft of sunlight cut through the trees and warmed her body. "Sometimes I wonder how a guy with so many brains can make so little sense." She looked back at Rio, but he had an ear full of water just then and only returned her look with a toothy grin.

"Oh, pooh!" she said, kneeling down to splash water onto her own face. She recoiled quickly from its coldness, rubbing her hands together and pulling the wool shirt more tightly around herself. "God! It just keeps getting colder. That's why the snakes are coming in."

She eyed Rio again, who seemed not to care a whit about the cold or the snakes. He was a mountain man in heaven. This was his special place where he thrived on dangers and discomforts with the kind of twinkle in his eyes that made her feel he was engaged in a natural seduction. The only things that bothered him were the spiders. Thank goodness for the spiders.

Rio got up from the stream shaking himself like a wet happy dog. "Some people," Sarah said to herself, smiling at his joy. Then she measured her voice well, speaking as if the words were just a passing thought, knowing full well that once she spoke them, no matter how much sense they made, they would still ring of weakness. "Rio," she paused, "what do you think about starting down?"

Rio looked at her, still trying to get water out of his ear. He stuck his finger in it and shook his head down to the side, then turned and started walking up the bank toward the campsite. The whole effect was as if he thought he heard something, but really hadn't.

Sarah knew damn well he had. She followed him, irritation replacing diplomacy. "Rio, it's going to snow soon. You know that better than I do. We're not prepared for high country snow. And I'm not prepared for one of your survival tests. It's time to go down."

Rio was kneeling again, this time in front of the fire pit, expertly constructing a pyramid of twigs and small branches. When he was satisfied with the design, he looked over at the dead snake for several seconds. Then he stood up and grabbed Sarah playfully around the waist. "How 'bout some roast rattler for breakfast, huh?"

"Rio, I'm serious."

He let his arms fall from her waist and took a step toward the stream, gazing off above the trees toward the mountain peaks. Billowy clouds were beginning to form above them out there against the stark blue of the sky. Sarah hoped one would not melodramatically block out the sun. She needed no more symbolic shadows darkening this particular morning.

"I thought maybe another week," he said softly.

Sarah knew this was Rio's living dream. She understood his reluctance to end it. It made her wonder whether she was being selfish or realistic. She loved it here, too. But it *was* getting cold. The sky was getting that icy look, crystal clear and ready to crack. Everything had gone so well, been so good until now. She hadn't planned the turn this morning took: neither the snake nor the subject of going down. It was all the snake's fault.

Sarah softened. She came up behind Rio, put her arms around him and gave him a gentle squeeze. "Hey, you know, we never made a pact that said 'If I go you go.' We're free as always. You can handle the cold better than I can, so you stay. I'll pack up my stuff and meet you down below."

Rio turned around in the circle of her arms, dipping down until his head was in their hoop. He picked Sarah up against his body so that her eyes were slightly above his own. He liked looking up at her. Somehow all he ever needed from her was freedom. And she never stopped giving it to him. He looked deeply into the eyes of this always surprising female, this total woman. She looked back at him, smiling easily, now. Goddamn if she wasn't some kind of woman.

"We'll pack up today and go down tomorrow," he said.

"You don't have to... Really."

"Lady, I know that," he beamed. Then he kissed her lips gently, and then kissed them hard, slowly letting her down to earth. He loved the feel of her body sliding that way, vertically against his own.

When she was on the ground, she pushed him away slightly to get a good look at him. She wanted to make sure he was doing what he really wanted to. He seemed content. "This way we won't be rushed when we get back. We can have time to savor the returning."

"Yes," he said.

She put her hands up to his face and smoothed his eyebrows with her thumbs. Then she held his head still and examined the whole arrangement of it, especially the eyes. They were so green and clear; clear and bright as the mountain stream he had rinsed them with; untrammelled by the detritus of civilization. He tried to bend forward to kiss her, but she held his head firmly, wanting to linger on his eyes. The smooth way they were set into his head; the way they fit so well at the curves blending into his temples.

After a moment, she stepped back and took his hand. The wool shirt fell from her shoulders into the dirt as she led him toward the tent. It landed beside the dead rattlesnake.

II

Jennifer Berriex preferred to go by the name of Bronco Pete. That didn't matter much because everyone except Rio called her Jenny. At nine years old it was difficult to control such things even for a cowboy. And that most definitely was what Bronco Pete was. A cowboy, no question. She was going to be the best dang bull rider on the western rodeo circuit, sooner rather than later. No dang girly things for her. No, sir!

At the moment she was practicing on Baby, a polled Hereford calf, three months old. Baby seemed a little bewildered as to what was expected of him as he wandered aimlessly around the circular corral with Bronco Pete on his back whipping up a storm. Jenny's right arm was outstretched, swinging back and forth high in the air with her cowboy hat attached to it. Her left hand clutched a roll of Baby's skin between his shoulder blades. She joggled, jerked and twitched her body this way and that with her hat flailing and her mouth going until she almost fell off three times.

Finally, Baby had enough. The calf looked back at Jenny with sad eyes and moored mournfully. That was the signal. For Bronco Pete it

was a huge twisting bronc. Her hat went flying, her head rocked, and, whooping loudly, she kicked up and over into a back flip and landed on her belly in the dirt. The calf looked down at her and mooed again. Jenny was up in a flash, getting out of the way of the rampaging bull. When she was at a safe distance from the placid animal, she picked up her hat, slapped it against her non-existent chaps and looked the mean bugger square in the eyes.

"I got you beat, you good for nothing lump of old meat!"

With that, Bronco Pete climbed to the top of the corral fence, straddled it and surveyed the kingdom she had conquered. Far off in the south pasture she saw them making a path through the herd of fat cows: two horses with riders and an old pack mule.

"Rio!" she yelled, vaulting off the fence and racing across the compound to the main house. "Dad! Dad! Rio's back! He's coming across south pasture!"

Calvin Berriex stepped out onto the front veranda carefully placing his tan sweat-stained Stetson over his gray hair. It was a lovely view he saw out there, watching his ferocious little daughter charging at him, screaming hell-bent for leather. At that moment there was no question in his mind that this everlasting little dynamo was going to break every bull from Tucson to Calgary.

The dynamo clambered up the steps, grabbed Calvin's hand and tugged. "Dad, Rio's back! He's come down from the mountain. Come on!"

When it finally registered what she was so excited about, a broad smile further brightened Calvin's craggy face; a glow adding to the overflowing affection he had for this indomitable child. His smile widened even more as he looked out beyond the compound to the riders heading their way through the cows.

"C'monnnn!!" Jenny pulled her father down the steps.

As they rounded the edge of the barn, Jenny left off tugging Calvin and made a mad dash. "Rio!" she shrieked.

"Bronco Pete!" Rio returned the call as Jenny was already flying toward him through the air like a rag doll shot from a cannon. He fielded her in midair, swinging her up behind him onto the saddle.

"Pretty good, huh?" Jenny said, referring to her acrobatics.

"Getting there," Rio said, nonchalantly.

"Getting there!" she punched him in the ribs. "Wild Bill couldn't do it any better."

"I'm with you on that one," Sarah chimed in, riding alongside. "It was terrific."

Jenny looked over at Sarah as if she were a foreigner speaking another tongue. She managed to say, "Thank you," coldly, and then turned back to her special courtship of Rio. She jabbed a finger into his spinal cord, "Okay, Mister, hand it over!"

Rio's hands went up in the air. "I figured you'd get the drop on me, Bronco, so I stashed the loot at the Overland. You'll have to blow the bank to get it."

"I don't buy that one bit, Mister. Cough it up!"

"But I'm telling you the truth, Bronco. I ain't even got tobacco spit on me."

"We got the snakeskin," Sarah said, trying to join in.

"Hey, that's for my hat band," Rio said, all playfulness leaving his voice.

"I shot it!" Sarah said.

"I skinned it!" Rio returned.

"I don't want it!" Jenny squealed, solving the standoff and feeling left out. "And I don't want the rattle, neither. I got twelve of those already." Jenny began to pout as she listened to the horses' hooves crunching the high grass. Worry soon overcame her funk. "Don't you have anything for me?"

"Well, I don't know," Rio teased.

"Come on," she whined.

"Ask him about the gold dust," Sarah whispered over to her.

"Gold dust?" she said, not very enthused.

"Gold?!" Calvin arrived and joined in the holdup. "Hand it over fast, Mister!"

"How'd you find out, Bronco?" Rio trembled in mock terror. "I should know better than to try to fool you and your mean looking sidekick here." He pulled a small apothecary jar out of his vest pocket and held it in the air over his head. "Take it. Please, take it. Just let me get out of here alive. Okay, Bronco? Please!"

This wasn't what Jenny had in mind at all. She took the jar and inspected it queerly. Her finger dropped from Rio's fifth vertebrae without a word.

"Can I live, Bronco? Can I?" Rio implored.

Utterly disappointed, Jenny finally said, "What am I gonna do with gold dust?"

Calvin tried to salvage the homecoming. "Maybe you could give it to your poor old pa for Christmas."

"Aw, that ain't no fun." Jenny's disappointment was palpable.

"I guess not," Calvin said.

"You got problems, kid." Rio kicked his right leg up over the saddle and jumped down to greet Calvin. They shook hands and grabbed forearms like there had never been more pleasure in such contact.

"You old coot!" Rio said.

"Ya goddamned hermit!" Calvin replied.

"Ain't nuthin' wrong with hermits."

"Exceptin' they never takes a bath."

"And wash off Mother Nature? Never!"

"That's why youse a hermit."

"What about coots?!"

"Them's the cleanest creatures under God's eye. And they ain't no communists, neither!"

"No communists! Now you're talking! Coots and hermits, they ain't so dumb!"

"No dumber than turkey poop," Sarah piped in with a final judgment.

Both Calvin and Rio looked at Sarah as if she'd committed a breach of social order. Then Calvin said, "Rio, I believe this girl done found us out. I told you the smart ones were trouble. Fun, but trouble... Come to think of it, boy, you look a damned sight better this year than you did last. I'd say the trouble has done you some good... How ya doing, Sarah?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, Cal, hermits ain't no can of sweet peaches. Just a can of worms, they are. Just a can of worms."

"Trouble. Nothing but trouble," Rio said, looking back at Sarah. Then they all laughed, glad to be with each other again: people who chose their people carefully and mostly did without until they came together when the hunger showed. They laughed not so much because they were so funny, but because they were just plain happy.

They laughed as a way of hugging, of feeling good and speaking love. All except darling Jennifer who didn't find any of it funny at all.

"What am I gonna do with dumb stupid gold?!" she shouted petulantly after jumping off the horse.

Rio whirled on her with wild crazy eyes. He swooped down over her, bringing those eyes suddenly up close to hers, forcing her to back pedal. "Have you ever heard of a golden enema, my dear? Because Broncoroo, you sure as hell are bucking for one!" Then he lunged at her, missing on purpose, as she tore out across the compound for the safety of the barn.

Her last audible words were, "Ugh! Awful!" Which caused them all to laugh even more.

III

The relationship between Calvin Berriex and Rio Corda went back only eight years, but it seemed more as if Rio was flesh of Calvin's flesh, blood of his blood. Sarah had never seen Rio so animated or loose in human company as when he was with Calvin and Jennifer. There was something private about it, which made her feel like an outsider. But it made her feel good just the same.

The story as Sarah knew it from Calvin (it was a constant that almost everything she learned about Rio's past, she learned from other people) was that Rio had turned up one summer eight years ago asking to rent a horse for three months. Calvin was not in the horse rental business, but it happened he was in need of a hand to do some fencing and to ride range on the irrigation ditches. So, they struck a bargain: if Rio would help out for six weeks, he'd get his horse for another six. The pact ran true to form for the next seven years with never a break in schedule or a change in terms. For six weeks Rio would ride the ranch with Calvin, unplugging the dams and repairing the fences; shoeing the cattle from one pasture to another, branding the calves and tending the alfalfa. The barn would get a coat of paint and sometimes the main house would, too. The tack would be maintained, the horses brushed and the chicken shit shoveled out of the coop. There was never enough time to do it all.

It must have been a mark of the immediate kinship between the two that Rio never questioned that Calvin cared more about the doing than what actually got done. The facts were that this was a small spread for Calvin, more an excuse for living here and working the range in the old way than anything else. His other two ranches were the real producers and they were manned by foremen with BSs in animal husbandry or some such thing from Fort Collins or Logan; and with managers who held degrees like himself in agribusiness from Cal Poly, San Luis.

The ranching business had gotten big and complicated and pushy. Because of Calvin the land his parents had homesteaded had prospered beyond all their dreams. But all that size and technology didn't create a world Calvin much cottoned to. So, after a lot of dying occurred, Calvin gave the business over to the managers and became an old coot in his own private corner. The managers knew Calvin was a wise old coot, however, so they played it straight with him and his fortune kept growing. Sometimes late at night when everything seemed most unreal, he would wonder about all that money, why he bothered putting it in the bank, what it meant to him and what the hell he was going to do with it. He thought of it the way Jenny thought of her gold dust.

None of this was known to Rio at first. All he knew was he had struck a bargain with an eccentric rancher, who, save for a spunky young wife and a little baby girl, seemed all alone in the world. It was a natural match. They got the ranch back in shape every summer like two wild-eyed pioneers and spent the cool evenings sipping cognac and jawboning about contraptions, gadgets, and gimbals: old things that could be rigged by a man himself to solve a problem and create another. Like the Revolutionary War cannon they devised to shoot chicken shit over the bean field. It would scare the birds and fertilize the land all in one. But that gave rise to the problem of coming up with a mechanical loader because Jenny wasn't old enough to work full time yet. God, that made them laugh (and fall in love, Sarah thought). It was always good times.

Then the six weeks would be gone and Rio would get his horse and be off to the mountain again on schedule, not looking back. The only things that had changed in eight years were that Calvin's young

wife had been gone when Rio returned the second summer, Jenny had gotten older and, this year, Sarah had come along.

All of that was only a small part of the story, however. There was the other part, the part about Calvin that Sarah learned from Rio since Calvin, like Rio, was not given to telling his own tale. Over the years Rio had come to know a lot more about Calvin than Calvin thought. It was hard not to. As reclusive as he was, Calvin was an important man in the district. Everyone in the area knew a little bit about his history, his bad luck and his impenetrable force of will. There wasn't a soul who didn't relish the telling of it. It never failed that whenever Rio came into the feed store or food store, he would be primed by customer and proprietor alike with information about Calvin in hopes that he would return the favor with juicy new tidbits. (These townfolk would be forever unforgiving of Rio's lack of social reciprocity.) The most intimate of all was the part about Calvin's young wife, the part that Calvin never mentioned after she was gone. That first summer, however, she, herself, had not shied from reveling in tidbits.

Calvin's story was truly one of bad luck for a hard man. And being a hard man didn't make the bad luck any easier. Like Rio, he was difficult to reach, so the few who managed to do the reaching became very precious indeed. Although ruggedly handsome, Calvin, like many ranch-raised male children, found dogs, horses and cows simpler to deal with than women. Even his years at Cal Poly had not changed him much in that regard to the severe frustration of many a willing young coed. He came to manhood in an era when sex was not nearly so free as in more recent times, so when he left the Institute the possibility of learning about such things became even more remote. Incredibly, he attained the age of thirty-eight, still a virgin. Though many may wonder about basic drives and call up stories about the habits of cowboys, farmers and shepherders, these thoughts when related to Calvin would quickly wither of their humor. He was a private man; a hard piece of the land and a private man. That's all.

After college he returned to the land and parlayed his parents' holdings into one of the finest most productive spreads in the state. He worked untiringly and forever side by side with his father, a sinewy French Basque with no education, a volatile temper and phenomenal land smarts. They never talked much, but a river of pride

flowed between them. This kind of respect, faith really, complete and utter faith in another human being, was the special kind of love that Calvin unconsciously came to understand, baling hay or counting head.

Calvin's mother was another work horse. A large woman from the old country, it was from her that he got his size and his softness. As uneducated as his father, she had a gypsy's hold on the universe, full of descriptions magical and lovely. She could chop wood and make so many olive trees spring up fully laden from the places where the flying wood chips landed. She insisted on cooking with a wood burning stove and on washing clothes with a basin and scrub board long after such methods had become fading memories. As a child, Calvin remembered her large forearms with the rolled-up sleeves pushing a pair of overalls up and down on the scrub board, or pushing up and down in the same way on the huge mound of bread dough she kneaded into shepherders bread every Thursday. He remembered how she'd form little figures out of the dough, figures of horses and cows and men, telling him how God had first made life out of bread, how He baked all His creations until they had become giant and fragrant and golden brown.

"Is that what we're made of now?" he had asked her.

"No child, of course not," she answered with brown bouncing eyes. "We're made of meat. That's why we've got to bathe, because meat begins to stink in the sun." She had laughed with that one; thrown her head back and become beautiful with laughter; the very freedom of life. Her happiness, her laughter, always made his heart soar.

"But what about the bread people?" he had asked, thinking they were so much nicer. "What happened to them?"

"Why they were too beautiful and too soft for this world," she answered as if giving him a serious lesson of life. "And they couldn't stand the rain. It made them all soggy and gooey, and it turned them into mounds where giant olive trees grow. God finds a purpose for everything, child. That's why he made us dark stinking Basques to pick his heavenly olives." And she howled again, full of the juice of life she created every day.

Like any gypsy, her stories always changed as she poured them out with joy into the ear of her only child and audience, giving him

access to visions few men ever see. (He remembered once how God had actually eaten his bread people by mistake because they smelled so good. It was another lesson of their unfitness for this world.) And if the townsfolk knew she was crazy, it meant nothing to the Berriexs, for most of all Calvin remembered how his father treated her like an angel of rare brightness. For his father, she was the very source of celestial light.

Calvin lived with his parents in the main house until he was thirty-five. Then they died, together—a freak and hideous accident. They had been winging their way through the countryside near Craters of the Moon in the new red Cadillac convertible Calvin had bought them for Christmas. It was a Sunday after Halloween. The harvest was in and the air crisp as an iced bucket of lettuce. Driving fast was his father's passion. It was his passion to have his large dark and crazy wife sitting beside him with her long black hair streaming in the wind, her laughter celebrating the sky. "My gypsy and my red chariot," Calvin heard his father once say, opening the door for her to his speed machine.

On this Sunday a crop duster, old Antton Alzate, out for a Sunday spin in the sky himself, saw the red flash streaking the blacktop below him. Antton had come to America with Calvin's father. They had homesteaded together, fought over the land and lost their friendship. Calvin's father had stuck with the land and made it work. Antton, on the other hand, had backed off into the chancy world of crop dusting, over the years becoming addled and crazed by the numerous crashes and subtle poisons attacking his system. It was also known he never forgot his grudge.

Antton nosed his Steerman biplane down and ran side by side with the Cadillac. He looked over at the Berriexs and tipped his baseball cap ceremoniously. He appeared bizarre and demented. Calvin's mother waved, but his father slammed down the gas pedal. Antton tipped his cap again, banked right and up circling above them doing a loop-the-loop and then a diving figure eight. Calvin's father drove like a maniac, his gypsy wife wondering curiously at him. Antton flew down the road, did a twisting loop and then came back head on for them just off the blacktop. At the last second before he swerved the Cadillac off into the ditch, Calvin's father saw Antton's

manic eyes and his body shuddering at the plane's console as if he was strafing them with machine gun fire.

Antton disappeared over a hill. Calvin's father backed out of the ditch, got out of the car, opened the trunk, loaded the shotgun and brought it back to the front seat with him. He started up driving again, only very slowly this time, waiting. Calvin's mother was no longer laughing. Seven miles passed before Antton came back over the hills. This time he was skimming the road behind them. Slowly, slowly, he came up on them until his propeller was beating the air above their heads. Then, approaching hysteria, he pulled slightly ahead, hit a lever and sprayed them with Parathion, full force, full face. It is not known how blind Calvin's father was when he fired the shotgun.

When they found the Cadillac on Route 22, it had crashed head on into Antton's biplane, which was nose down into the asphalt, its tail like a burning cross in the air. Calvin's parents had not died from the crash, however. They died of convulsions from the poison. The real accident had been that Calvin's father and Antton Alzate had come to America together.

Calvin buried his parents on the land and two days later started driving. His expression never changed as his brown and white pickup passed through Challis, Lowman, Payette, Prairie City, Umatilla, Wapato, Paradise, Yelm, and Humptulips. At Kalaloch he stopped and stayed five hours. The flat black gray beach at the edge of the continent, the ocean rollers, the sandpipers, the water-smoothed logs that had escaped the mill and made it to the unremitting sea, and the mounds of river rock battered smoother still, were all what the great new absence felt like inside him: smooth, bleak, cold and eternal. The ocean, the sky, the flat beach bending beyond the northern horizon were all the blackest of gray. He sat on a log those long hours staring blankly until he realized he had been watching a solitary sandpiper much of the time. In and out with the waves, in and out searching on fragile little legs. With what seemed a silly smile, the persistent feathered creature skittered in and out with the threatening ocean. The persistent fragile creature. The relentless ocean.

Calvin turned his truck around and headed home. By the time he returned, he had travelled close to two thousand miles. He had been gone three days, had not slept, and had not changed his clothes. He pulled the truck into the barn, fed the chickens, the dogs and the goat;

rubbed down the horses, looked after the cattle, spread some hay and took a bath. Then he slept.

When he woke up, he fixed the well pump that had been clattering for weeks, put up the storm windows, oiled the barn doors and met with his three foremen to plan the winter layover. He smiled, he talked, he joked and went about business as business demanded, but never mentioned the accident or Antton Alzate or talked about his parents again. Not until he met Ellen.

Almost two years after they died Calvin woke up one morning trembling all over. He saw the sandpiper going in and out with the ocean waves. He was cold and he was burning, and the room was very strange. A young woman came up to him and welcomed him to the land of the living. She had strawberry hair held in one long loose braid and bright blue eyes. She smiled a lot. Her teeth were so white and clean. He kept shivering.

"What happened?" he asked, sounding at first like a screech owl.

"You drank bad water," she smiled.

"Up at the ditches?"

"You should know better," she smiled.

"I was thirsty."

"A deer was dead upstream," she smiled.

"Must've been rotted clear through," he shivered.

"Poachers," she said, frowning now.

"How do you know?"

"Some from the men who brought you in. The rest just because I know."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've been around."

Calvin held his eyes on her for a moment. Even holding his eyes open and steady took a supreme effort that made his head ache. Finally, he exhaled with a long sigh, "You're just a child." He expected the conversation to end mercifully with that.

But she came right back at him, smiling, "And you're just an old man."

That made him lift his head all the way up off the pillow to look at her closely, an act that made it pound like hell. "What's your name?" he demanded.

"Ellen," she smiled.

That smile. The light in her face. It reminded him of a laughing star; of a gypsy. When he woke up again, she was gone, and by the time he left the tiny ten-bed hospital, she had not returned. He went back to the ranch and worked as usual, but somehow something in him had cracked. The typhus had done it. Her face kept smiling to him through remembered nights of fever and chills. The nights by himself now on the ranch became long and cold. He tossed around in bed during the small hours and had to force himself to make meals, wash dishes and bathe his body when those things needed doing. The days were manageable, but the nights kept getting worse, lonelier and more tiresome. He considered it a phase, spasms that would pass or be easily ignored. But he was dealing with an unfamiliar commodity, something he had never let in the door before. Only now, somehow, it had gotten inside the house with him, gnawing at and pestering him constantly. His covers were a mess in the morning; his eyes swollen and bloodshot. He stopped shaving. His clothes began to stink. Winter was coming again. Who gave a good goddamn? The wood pile was short, the hay unturned, the chicken coop dirty and the chickens angry. The days had turned sour. Even the sandpiper had disappeared from his dreams. The only happy thing left among the long and endless hours of emptiness was that silly young woman's smiling face.

It was an ugly Tuesday afternoon in November when he growled, "Enough!" He got up from lying on the couch, threw all the empty beer bottles in the trash, collected the filthy dishes scattered everywhere, washed them and wiped down the kitchen counters; then showered and looked in the mirror. His hair was long, his beard full and unkempt. After a long time of staring at himself, he took out the scissors and razor. Then he put them away again. For a time, the wild hair would stay.

When he found her, she was stitching together a cotton crazy quilt by lantern light inside a house tent at Craters of the Moon. She looked to him like a vision; like a gypsy. He looked to her like a hairy mess. "Sasquatch, come in!" were her first words.

Their courtship was absurd. Ellen was twenty-four years old and a vocational nurse at the hospital when she was not assistant ranger at the national monument. Calvin, on the other hand, was approaching thirty-seven and totally lost for the first time in his life.

It was he who played the child. He was shy, embarrassed, awkward, plodding and buried under the belief that he was too old. Whenever he gave voice to such worries about himself, she agreed with him implicitly, always adding, however, "But then again, you're filthy rich." That would make him mad and her laugh, and then him laugh. And then he'd look into her eyes like an unsure child, finally patting her on the shoulder when somehow he found there whatever it was he needed.

It was a year and a half before he stopped patting her on the shoulder or the back of the head. He stopped basically because she had had enough of all that patting and ravished him. What an eye opener that was for both of them. She had thrown him down on the bed saying, "I don't believe it! I don't believe it! You watch the cows, don't you? How 'bout the horses? Or surely the sheep? The dogs, please dear god?!"

He tried to say something like "That's different." But she cut him off at the pass crying, "Mercy! Mercy! Shut your mouth and take off your pants! What is that belt buckle, a chastity shield?"

"But Ellen..."

"Shut up and just do it!" she yowled, rolling him over like a walrus and tugging at his shirt. "This ain't easy for me either, Cowboy, 'cause you're gonna either hate me or marry me after this is over and I'm not sure I want either!"

"Ellen, I want to marry you now. You don't have to do this!"

"We!! Cowboy. We!! This is something we do together, if you didn't know. It's supposed to be fun and games and oohhh so naturale. And, oh yes, we have to do this. And not just once, neither!"

What a time it was: he lying there stark naked with a woman stark naked, she all cold with goose bumps, and he stiff as a dead man everywhere except where he should be; lying there side by side, looking at the ceiling.

"Do something before I freeze to death!" she screamed, utterly frustrated.

"You want a blanket?" he asked hopefully.

"Calvin! You're a man, aren't you? Think, man! Think! Use your head. No better yet, use your hands, your arms, your legs, your body. Only don't pat me anywhere or I'll chop your balls off for good!"

"Ellen!"

"Calvin! Look at my tits! Look at my snatch! It's clean. Clean things are nice. Especially when they're warm. You can make it warm, Calvin. Just, for God's sakes, touch it!"

He froze stiffer and even more flaccid at the same time. "Oh, Christ!" she screamed, climbing up on top of him, grabbing his hands and rubbing them over her body. "I better never have to do this again. I feel like a leper with a blind man."

It took a while. About three months. But Calvin eventually got the hang of it. And he liked it. He really liked it. He even thought he was getting pretty damn good at it, too. Good enough to get married, anyway.

"I told you so," she said to that one. "I just knew it!"

"Ellen, I mean it. It has nothing to do with sex."

"Well, if it doesn't, then you can shove off for sure, señor."

Okay, okay. I'll admit it has something to do with it."

"You're getting warm, Pablo. But how the hell old are you, anyway? Huh?"

"Thirty-nine. I'll be thirty-nine next month."

"Yeah, and I'm twenty-six. Twenty-six! Just about ten years too old for you."

"Ellen, I'll grow up fast. I promise. I can do it. Look how fast I picked up sex."

"Ughhh!" she humphed.

"Well, I'm really not so young in all things, Ellen."

"Anyway, you're rich."

"Yeah, look at it that way, girl. I'm rich."

"Yeah," she said.

"Yeah, what?"

"Yeah, I do, you imbecile. And it's good goddamn about time."

"Really?"

"You're so dense."

So, Calvin married Ellen, took her to Yellowstone for their honeymoon and began growing up very fast. In ten months they had a baby, Bronco Pete, whom they named Jennifer. Ellen had thus given Calvin yet another giant thing to learn about and told him he'd better hustle on this one because she wasn't going to hang around and be

another ordinary basket case house frau. Amazingly, Calvin turned out to be a wiz with diapers.

Theirs was a storybook romance. Ellen called it "Frigg and the Stumbling Idiot" because Calvin was always stumbling all over himself to do things for her. She began to wonder for real whether this man's passion for her indicated a severe dementia. The problem was he just didn't have the tongue to tell her he was a fool for gypsies. If he had, she would have clobbered him and his heart would have burst with love.

Rio showed up the summer of the second year they were married. All Ellen said was, "Oh, no, not another one." And they all got on famously; even Jennifer, whom Rio nicknamed Bronco Pete because of the way she rode his knee.

When Rio came back the next summer, Ellen was gone. Five weeks passed and Calvin never mentioned her. Although there was a sadness about him, there was also a peaceful glow. He took care of the rambunctious toddler like a gift from heaven and seemed especially grateful for Rio's company. Rio, being who he was, asked no questions.

On the third day of Rio's last week, they were hunting for a stray together in the woods beyond south pasture. Calvin became talkative as they rode. "If I thought it could make it on its own out here, I'd let it be. But it can't. No, it can't. It's way too domesticated. It likes its dinner on time like the rest of us. It just thinks it wants to be free. Free until suppertime."

They rode on in quiet, deeper into the woods Rio now knew so well. He was looking forward to starting off through them again on his way to the mountain and the valley.

"I've given over the other two spreads almost entirely to the managers," Calvin continued after a while. "I go over the books once a quarter. That's enough. They're good boys."

Rio looked hard at Calvin, understanding that he was trying to tell him something. But Rio had never really learned what it was a friend was supposed to do when another friend wanted to talk about feelings. So, he did what he always did, just listened and waited.

A buck with a fine rack bounded through a shaft of light in the trees. It watched them airily throughout the arc of a high leap. Then it was gone. "Now there's a thing of freedom," Calvin said. "It dances

like a gypsy. It makes you laugh, makes you cry, makes you love enough to die."

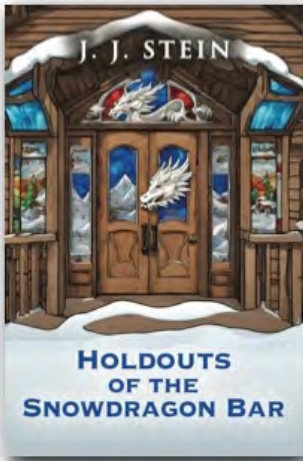
Again, Rio waited for more. But he found the waiting even harder now because the private poetry Calvin had come to was burning his own heart. He remembered Ellen: her bluntness and unexpectedness, her laughter and her pleasure. He remembered a dancing Calvin doing a jig of adoration with Ellen wonderfully clapping. Rio was fighting to maintain a stupid code now and the moment it occurred to him to ask the question he lost the fight. "What happened, Calvin? Where is she? Where's Ellen?"

"She's a gypsy," Calvin answered from way down deep inside himself. He looked at Rio with a sad peaceful glow and smiled. "She's a gypsy," he said.

Rio never mentioned a word of any of this to anyone except Sarah (an unintentional admission of intimacy). But the telling of it to Sarah showed how much he worried about Calvin, worried about him in a way he had never worried about another human being before. Though he refused to understand it, Rio had let love fill a void. He had opened a door on feelings awful and strange when he chose the Berriex ranch for finding a horse. At twenty-nine years old, Rio had gotten a father, a big brother and a goddamned good friend all in one. With those came an ache for things unsaid, needs repressed and time going by. So, Rio in his customary way waited and watched, silently worrying about Calvin. It made Sarah wonder how in seeing what he saw, he was too blind to worry about himself. But maybe she had yet to understand these things.

Ellen had died, of course, falling from the galloping stallion Calvin had given her for Christmas. She broke her freckled neck. It was quick and peaceful; but it was dumb fucking bad luck.

After Calvin buried her beside his parents, he walked down to the barn and shot the poor stallion. He shot it not because he believed it was the horse's fault, nor even because he hated it for what it had taken away from him, but simply because he needed to commit some awful gesture to assure himself he would never ever give Jennifer anything in the world to kill herself with for Christmas.



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