

Pinkie, a black man, rescues a girl from rape by the town's football star. Angry townspeople blame him for the school's ruined season. His wife is later murdered. Pinkie inherits a farm and discovers precious water but he is murdered for it. Despite uncaring authorities, Pinkie's friend, the town's Deputy Sheriff, struggles to solve the murders. When an oil well fire threatens the town, the people lay a pipeline to Pinkie's wells to fight it.

NONESUCH BOOM

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ELMER KELTON

Author of *The Year it Never Rained*.

Multiple winner of the “Golden Spur” award,

March 6, 2005

Dear Bill:

I read your early draft of *Nonesuch Boom* while on a weekend trip to the Panhandle. I enjoyed it.

The story is episodic, taking several long leaps in time, but you are telling about the course of people’s lives over a long period and I was intrigued by the big gas well blowout late in the story.

Good Luck,

Elmer Kelton

NONESUCH BOOM

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Although the setting for this novel is based on an actual town, the story and its characters are fictional and strictly a product of the writer's imagination. It is a work of fiction and is offered without apology to any event or individual it appears to mirror. Any similarity between any events or persons, living or dead is coincidental.

NONESUCH BOOM

By
William M. Barnes

9

“Wipe yer danged feet. Don’t you be trompin’ mud on my porch.”

El Paso John had a belly full of the oil field trash pouring into Ruby’s Cafe. He didn’t care that his daughter thought she’d died and gone to Heaven with a cash register strapped to her butt. John had seen the boom and by God, he didn’t like it.

Truck and mule traffic through Nonesuch got worse every day. Drilling rigs and pump jacks dotted the sparse countryside.

Mumbling to himself, John swept viciously at the mud-streaked porch. “I done picked up a peach-basket full of beer and whiskey bottles already and the morning ain’t half over.”

He looked up the street toward the Fernando Pobre. Three drunks who had torn up Charley Roundtree’s pool hall sat chained to the light pole where Wayne left them last night. A couple of deputies from the county seat at Barstow started loading them onto the open bed of a pickup for their trip to jail.

Angus sat on the bench watching John sweep. John had gotten over his tiff with Angus about Pinkie and reluctantly allowed him to reclaim his place on the bench. “What’s got you so dad-burned riled-up, John?”

“Goddoggit, Sonny. It ain’t rained fourteen drops since they dragged the first rattletrap rig in here. This danged oilfield bunch must manufacture mud. They haul more water for them steam engines of theirs than they do anything else, and they must slop most of it out right in front of Ruby’s. It’s ’27 al over again.”

“Aw, you’re bellyaching like an old woman. Next thing you know, you’ll be puttin’ lace on your drawers and squattin’ to pee. They just

moved the third rig in two years through Nonesuch and you call it a boom. Throw that broom down and let's go drink coffee."

"Nah, I gotta get this porch clean or Ruby will make me wash dishes or somethin' else."

Just as Angus started inside, Hog Jaw Porter and Dacey Rogers ambled up, laughing.

"What makes you fellers so cheerful?" John demanded.

"We're gonna be rich."

"Doin' what?"

"Workin' on some wells," Dacey explained.

"What kinda wells?"

"Them new oil wells out on old Sal Slayton's place."

"Why the hell would they hire you?"

Hog Jaw shrugged. "Damn 'fi know. This feller asked a bunch of us if we knew anything about layin' pipe. I told him I smoked a corncob, and he put me in charge."

"How much it pay?" John demanded.

"Seventy-five dollars."

"A year?"

"Hell no; a month."

Angus swore. "Man, there ain't that much money in the world."

"Uh-huh!" Dacey countered. "I get seventy-two dollars and fifty cents. I figger I'll be makin' enough money to pop the question to Linda Jean by Christmas."

"See what I mean, Sonny? I seen this same thing happen back in '27 when they drilled them wells right here in town." John jabbed Angus in the ribs. "This damned boom is corruptin' everything."

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“Come in and have some coffee, John.” Dacey motioned. “Hog Jaw’s buyin’”

“Don’t want no coffee.” John continued sweeping.

Wayne strolled out onto the porch, removing a piece of breakfast bacon from a jaw tooth with a toothpick.

John looked up the street and suddenly threw his broom down.

“What’s the matter, John?”

John pointed at two huge trucks coming up the highway. “I seen that woman once over in Big Lake and I don’t want no part of her.” He disappeared around the corner.

The trucks pulled off the highway between Derrick’s Lumber Yard and Shucks Wilcumb’s Heppy Seffy Laundry.

Each truck carried a weathered, clapboard house, its sheet iron roof streaked with rust. A heavy-set woman and a large, muscular young man stepped down from the trucks and stomped across the highway to the café. Wayne removed his hat. “Mornin’ ma’am. Welcome to Nonesuch.”

She looked at his badge and smiled, revealing a large gold front tooth. “Why, thank you, deputy. I’m Rosie Masterson. I own them shotgun houses and the trucks they’re settin’ on.”

“Yessum.” Wayne nodded. “We got a lot of ‘em around here. I always wondered why they call ‘em shotgun.”

She laughed. “That’s ‘cause you can stand in the front door of one of these beauties and shoot a shotgun out the back door and you won’t hit nothin’.”

She looked Wayne over and jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “That there goofy-lookin’ kid is my son, Mickey. Buy you some breakfast?”

“Thanks, ma’am. I already ate, but I’d enjoy another cup of coffee.”

“Well, at the risk of being accused of bribin’ a lawman, it’s on me.”

Both mother and son almost blocked out the morning sun as they approached the door.

Tillie Tolliver dried her hands and strutted past Wayne to survey Mickey. She fluffed her beehive and adjusted her starched hankie. She elbowed Wayne in the ribs. “He’s cute.”

Mickey stood slightly taller than his mother. He wore a yellowed undershirt exposing huge, deeply tanned, well-muscled arms covered with tattoos of snakes, eagles, and hearts.

He removed his dented metal hat and revealed a pale, white forehead, contrasting starkly with the rest of his tanned freckled face. Dried sweat plastered his reddish-blond hair to his head. He blushed when Tillie flashed him a smile.

Rosie stood six feet tall and wore a black felt, flat-crowned woman's hat with the brim turned down in back and pinned up in front with a large safety pin. Gray-streaked black hair framed a double-chinned face. Beneath her overalls, she wore a faded blue-flowered blouse with large sweat stains marking the armpits below puff sleeves. Her bare arms were brown and muscled.

Large bosoms sagged around each side of her overall-bib and rested on a prominent belly, made even more prominent by the absence of any kind of a butt. The over-balance made her walk as if her back were in a cast and, despite the counterweight in front, threatened to tip her over backwards.

The breakfast aroma of fresh coffee, bacon frying, and pancakes coming off the griddle greeted Wayne as he ushered the two newcomers to a corner booth. He passed behind the counter, poured himself a cup of coffee and joined them.

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Tillie set glasses of water and silverware in front of the two and flashed some cleavage at Mickey.

“Mornin’, folks.” Tillie pointed to the menu, written on a chalkboard. She leaned toward Mickey and asked, “What‘ch’ont ta eat, hon?”

Mickey blushed again.

Rosie scrutinized the menu. “We’ll have two of everything—hon, except them two shriveled-up grapefruits you’re danglin’ in front of my baby boy --hon.”

Mickey hid his face behind his tin hat. “Aw, Mama.”

Tillie flounced her butt at Rosie and yelled over her shoulder, “Pinkie! Scoop out the kitchen twice and pour gravy on it.”

“Comin’ right up.”

After the food arrived, Rosie and her son each removed one gauntlet glove, revealing a pale white hand with which to hold a fork while the other glove remained on, as if they expected they might have to drop their forks and lift something heavy and greasy at any moment. They ate hungrily.

In answer to a question from Wayne, Rosie explained, “Red Masterson, my old man - God rest his sinful soul - was a driller on a cable tool rig back in east Texas. But bless Johnny, a two hunert-pound crown block squashed him flat and I had this whelp to raise all by myself.” She slapped Mickey on the shoulder, causing him to slosh milk across his chin.

Tillie grabbed a napkin and hurried toward Mickey but a glare from Rosie stopped her.

Wayne noticed Angus McArgil pick up his coffee and move to a table closer to the woman. He cupped his ear with one hand and listened.

“All I had was a beat-up old pickup, twenty-five dollars in cash, and overdue charge accounts at all the stores.

“I talked ‘em outta some more credit and charged some shovels, a few rakes, and a couple of wheelbarrows. Then I went around to the pool halls and hired a few hands. Bingo - instant roustabout gang. And purty soon I bought a couple of Fort Worth Spudders and all of a sudden I was a drilling contractor.

“Hell, I’ve bailed more tool dressers and drillers outta jail than a Desdemona lawyer.”

Wayne glanced toward the rear of the cafe. He saw John peeking through the swinging doors of the kitchen. He suppressed a smile, wondering what there was about the women that scared the little weasel.

Rosie shook her head. “But bless Johnny; I let a feller sweet-talk me into poor-boyin’ a couple of wildcats. Made one pretty good well, too. But oil dropped to a dime a barrel, the damned bank foreclosed, and Bingo - instant broke. Pass the biscuits, son.”

Tillie allowed a breast to brush against Mickey as she refilled their coffee cups.

Rosie cast a warning eye at the waitress.”You wanna quit that while you still got two of ‘em -- *hon?*”

Wayne chuckled softly when he saw Mickey turn his head away from his mother and wink at Tillie.

Ruby rushed up to the table. “I’ll take over here, Tillie. You go help Pinkie.”

Tillie slowly forced her eyes from Mickey’s and did as she was told.

Rosie poured catsup over her eggs. “I salvaged enough to keep these two trucks and buy a few shotgun houses, and Bingo - instant landlady.”

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She stirred four spoons of sugar into her coffee. "You got any more of them chilé peppers?"

Ruby held out a restraining hand to Tillie. "I'll get 'em."

Wayne watched John creep closer.

Rosie dipped a jalapeño in gravy and popped it in her mouth. "When the rigs come in to start drillin', the hands that work on 'em and their families gotta have places to live. We got thirty rent houses now. When the boom comes, we move 'em in." She chewed, turning her head to spit the seeds on the floor.

Two farmers entered and sat down at the counter. Tillie took the pot and poured them some coffee.

Rosie went on. "Rent's thirty-five a month, cash on the barrelhead. Don't very many people beat ol' Rosie out of no rent money, neither."

"How long is this boom gonna take to get here?" Ruby asked. "I need to know when to buy more beef and taters."

John blurted out, "Hell, I thought the sumbitch was already here..." He covered his mouth with his hand.

Rosie glanced up and spied John. "Well, shit-o-dear. I seen that cute little feller over at Big Lake once. I'd like to clean him up and take him home with me."

Ruby laughed. "If you can catch him, he's all yours."

John whirled around and collided with Pinkie, causing him to drop an armload of dishes.

"Hey John," Pinkie yelled. "What's got into you? Where you goin'?"

"El Paso!"

Ruby yelled, "Not before you pay for them dishes, you won't."

She turned back to Rosie and asked, "When's the real boom, I mean the 'knock down shoot-em-up, kiss my rich ass kind'a boom.'" When's that kind'a boom gonna get here?"

"Hard to tell, hon - maybe quick, maybe never. That Santa Rita No.1 that started the Big Lake boom took twenty-three months to drill. They ran six strings of casing, and dropped twenty-six strings of tools. That caused twenty-six fishing jobs before they drilled the sumbitch down to thirty-two hundred feet in the San Andres formation. And thar she blew! That was nearly fifteen years ago.

"Of course you folks ain't got nothin' like that around here yet. I hear all you've got is some little stuff. That field up the road at Loyalty's pretty good. Maybe one day you'll hit it big.

"Not long after the Santa Rita come in, there was a big Clearfork discovery up at Westbrook and them fools over in Midland built themselves a sixteen-story skyscraper. They called it the 'Petroleum Building'. I reckon they thought the whole oil patch would be chompin' at the bit to rent office space from 'em." She wiped egg yolk from a plate with half a biscuit.

"But the very next year, Dad Joiner's Daisy Bradford No.1 came in. Every driller, muleskinner, whore, bootlegger, lawyer, and preacher and the rest of the oil patch rabble lit a shuck to East Texas. They was storin' hay in that fancy Petroleum Building within a month." She speared another jalapeño and poured syrup on it.

"But that's all changed now. The Goldsmith field and the Sand Hills discovery brought most of the rigs back and the oil field scum with 'em. Includin' me and Mickey." She chuckled.

"They's always plenty of stragglers and drifters to rent to. Besides the regular drillers and tool dressers, there's rig builders, muleskinners, pipe liners, welders, truck drivers...."

"Whereabouts you headed now?" Wayne asked.

"Next boom, hon. Lots of drilling headed this way. I tried to get into the rent bidness over at Wink but somebody else beat me to it.

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Didn't ya'all hear about that new discovery on the Slayton Ranch just a couple miles west of here? I hear they named it the 'Nonesuch Yates Field.'"

In the kitchen, Pinkie rang a cowbell, the signal that the two farmers' orders were ready. Tillie carried steaming plates of ham, bacon, and scrambled eggs to them. She flashed Mickey a smile on her way back to the kitchen. He nodded this time but his mother evidently missed this exchange.

Rosie poured syrup over half a biscuit. "I got the closest I could get to the boom. We got an option on land right there two miles north where that old 'rag town' of Loyalty is. Nothin' there now but tents, but when we get through, it'll be Heaven. We're gonna call it, 'The Estates of Loyalty.'" She swallowed the biscuit and wiped syrup from her chin with her gloved hand.

"But that's the old Shipley Field. Isn't it all drilled up?"

"My grapevine tells me the company that drilled it is gonna start a workover program and deepen a copuple to see what's there. It'll help and I'm gamblin' on a deeper pay." She burped loudly and wiped her mouth with a corner of the tablecloth.

"We got crews over there now, diggin' holes for outdoor crappers, stringin' light wires, and layin' gas lines along the ground. Ain't no use in buyin' the lots, the town won't be around no longer'n it takes for the next boom to start and the renters move on. We'll foller them ever-which-way they go. We just pay ground rent of a dollar a month."

Tillie replenished everybody's coffee. She set the pot down, drew a swatter from her apron, and smacked a fly off the corner of the table next to Mickey, allowing one hip to brush him.

He blushed again.

Rosie chewed on a sausage and cast a steely eye at Tillie that made Wayne shudder.

Ruby must have seen the look. "Tillie, go help Pinkie."

Wayne asked, "What'll your renters do for water?"

"Same as what ya'll do around here, haul it. See the little tank on the roof of that house?" Rosie pointed. "It holds about five barrels of water. My trucks will bring it in twice a month from Monahans at thirty-five dollars a tank full."

She pointed to a small outhouse chained to the truck's tail end. "That there's the outdoor 'facilities' for our standard models."

"What kind of facilities does the 'deluxe model' have?"

Rosie laughed. "Ain't no 'deluxe model.'"

She devoured the final sausage and sopped up the last of the gravy with the last biscuit. "We gotta go. We got twenty-eight more of these portable palaces and they ain't gonna haul themselves. Come along, son."

Mickey cast an eye at Tillie and put on his tin hat.

Rosie paid the bill and started for the door. "See y'all next boom."

Wayne called, "When's that gonna be?"

Rosie stopped, glanced around the cafe and chuckled. "When coyotes fly, drillers paint their toenails, and pissants bark at the moon."

She looked back at Mickey who was whispering something to Tillie. "Mickey! I ain't tellin' you again. Come on."

"Kids!" She shrugged and tossed a couple of extra dollar bills on the counter. "Coffee's on me. Ya'all have a good'un."

The trucks disappeared up the highway toward Loyalty.

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Ruby Watson's Café contained hardly enough customers to keep the place open. A typical Nonesuch Christmas Eve.

If anything were to happen in Nonesuch this night, it wouldn't happen in Ruby's. Banyon's drug store closed an hour ago but a few bubbly Christmas carolers still wandered about. The 'Fernando Pobre' pool hall was the only other place open. An occasional truck blew through town, stirring up the dust.

A squeaky ceiling fan stirred the smoky air as Wayne sat at the counter, nursing black coffee and dreading the rest of the night.

Bobbie Louise Battlement smoked a cigarette and sat alone, chewing on one of her red braids as she waited patiently for Tillie Tolliver to get off work. El Paso John snored in a booth in the back and Pinkie worked in the kitchen, washing up the last of the supper dishes.

"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" played for the thousandth time on the jukebox but added precious little cheer to the dreary atmosphere of the place.

Wayne held his cup out for Tillie to pour more coffee. "Is that the only Christmas record you got, Ruby?"

Ruby slumped glumly at a table, filling salt and peppershakers. "Yeah - I'd like to shoot that damn reindeer and make venison chili outta him." She threw a pinch of spilled salt over her shoulder.

Wayne chuckled. "Silent Night would be a lot more appropriate song for this place."

Behind the counter, Tillie Tolliver admired herself in a mirror as she applied another layer of bright red lipstick and adjusted the huge lace hanky adorning her pink uniform. She hummed along with the record and teased her beehive hairdo with a rat-tailed comb.

“Aw cheer up, Ruby – it’s Christmas.” She popped her gum between sentences. “Why don’t you go to the Ace-o-Clubs in Odessa with me and Mickey tonight? Dip Messinger and Bobbie Louise are double-datin’ with us. The Wink Westerners promised to play all night ‘til the sun comes up. Come on, you might meet a feller.”

She pulled a checkered cloth from one of the tables and covered John with it. He grunted and rolled over without missing a snore.

Ruby tossed another pinch of salt. “Nah. The last time I went shoppin’ in one of Santa’s all-night workshops, I landed a damned elf and brought him home with me. The lump in his Christmas stocking turned out to be taffy and the sumbitch stayed till Easter.”

Bobbie Louise swished one of her braids at Ruby. “Too bad you didn’t keep him ‘til July Fourth, Ruby; maybe his lump would’a saluted the flag.” Her freckled face beamed as she cackled and her belly bounced like a tub of vanilla pudding.

Wayne finished his coffee and stood up. “Well, guess I’d better check to see if the ‘Pobre’ is still standing. He fished a nickel from his pocket.

“Keep your money, Wayne.” Ruby waved a hand. “Coffee’s on the house, Merry Christmas.”

Tillie laughed. “Better take her up on it, Wayne. Ruby don’t offer free coffee on the house every day.”

Bobby Louise spoke. “Wayne, you tell Dip to go easy on the beer. You know how he gets sometimes and we’re goin’ to Odessa soon’s Tillie gets off.”

Tillie grabbed Wayne by the arm and whispered, “If you see Mickey, remind him that Dip and Bobby Louise are goin’ with us tonight so he’d better get that truck of his ready to root ‘n toot just as soon’s Ruby....” She cast an obvious eye in Ruby’s direction. “....let’s me off.”

She squeezed his arm tight. “But for God’s sake, don’t tell his mama. She thinks he’s home asleep.”

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“Okay, Tillie. I’ll tell him. Hell, Rosie sure is protective of that boy.”

Wayne stepped out the front door. A cold wind blew out of the north. He buttoned his coat against the chill.

Wayne always hated cold Saturday nights, especially cold Christmas Eve-Saturday nights. Since the oil boom hit, it seemed every roughneck, roustabout and driller in the county showed up in town on a Saturday night, determined to drink the place dry and demolish it. Christmas just made it worse.

Jimmy Pontrimle’s pickup sat parked with its hood up. “What’s the trouble, Jimmy?”

“Damn starter. Happens all the time.”

Wayne heard the shouts of a fight coming from the pool hall. He raced down the street and peered through the open door. “Aw, shit! Dip’s at it again.”

Wayne had a fear that a good fight might make the flimsy structure fall down.

The nervous crowd became quiet when Wayne entered. Men stepped back and made room for the town’s only law enforcement officer to break up a fight they all feared to touch. They watched silently as Wayne made his way across the floor to the two combatants.

Dip Messinger’s giant right arm encircled Mickey Masterson’s neck. The big driller glanced up. He smiled and broke the silence. “Hey Wayne - Merry Christmas.”

“Hey Dip - same to you.” Wayne leaned over and whispered in Mickey’s ear. “Hey Mickey - Merry Christmas. I thought you two were friends. You know you’re goin’ to Odessa with Dip and Bobby Louise tonight, don’t you?”

“Hey Wayne - Merry Christmas. I’d shake your hand but I’m kinda busy. Oh sure, me and Dip are friends – I doubt if Dip’s in the mood for a double date tonight, though.”

Wayne picked up a flattened metal oilfield hat from the floor. “This yours?”

“It used to be. Dip kinda took a dislike to it but that’s okay. I needed a new one, anyway.”

Wayne tossed the demolished hat to a bystander who looked nervously around and dropped it.

Wayne surveyed the room and looked back at Dip. “Bobbie Louise says tell you to go easy on the beer and be ready to light a shuck to Odessa. Big dance over there tonight, I hear.”

“Yeah, we’re double-datin’ but this won’t take but a minute.” Dip pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket with his free hand. “Got a match?”

Wayne lit Dip’s cigarette and looked closer at Mickey. One eye was swollen shut. Blood dripped from the young truck driver’s nose onto Dip’s massive arm. “How’s it goin’, Mickey?”

Mickey mumbled. “You know - win a few, lose a few.”

“It looks like you’re kinda deep into the losing part right now. You okay? Want a cigarette?”

“I reckon I’ve been more comfortable. Mind if I smoke, Dip?”

“Sure, Mickey. After all, it’s Christmas.” Dip handed over a cigarette. “Light him up, Wayne.”

The crowd began to relax.

Wayne felt the tension draining from the room. “How’s the world treatin’ you, Dip?”

Dip took a drag, exhaling politely over his shoulder. “Can’t complain. Need a job, is all.”

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"I hear SwallerDollar's lookin' for an evenin' tour driller. Turn ol' Mickey loose and we'll talk about it."

"Evenin' tours are for married men. That's when I shoot my best pool." Dip tightened his hold. "Right, Mickey?"

"Sorry, Dip. I wasn't listenin'. The girls are waitin'. Hadn't we better go pick 'em up?"

"Shut up. It ain't polite to change the subject when me and Wayne's talkin'."

Wayne took another glance at Mickey's battered face. "Mickey don't look too good to be goin' on no double date with you, Dip. If you're interested in that job, I'll put in a good word for you - maybe get you on mornin's or daylights. But if you was to hurt Mickey it might hinder you a little, gettin' that job - the law being what it is and all."

Dip drawled, "Aw, I ain't gonna hurt this kid. Me and him's friends. I just want to get his attention, that's all."

"I think you done that. Now let him go."

Dip rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "Cain't do that, Wayne. He ain't apologized yet."

"It 'pears he cain't hardly talk now, much less apologize. What'd he do to piss you off, anyway?"

"He called Bobbie Louise fat, that's what. Nobody says that about my girlfriend."

Mickey tried to speak. "Uh, Dip. I didn't say...." He gagged, lost his cigarette.

Wayne glared close into Dip's face. "I'm sure Mickey didn't mean it. Now dammit, I told you to turn him loose!"

"Okay, Wayne." Dip dropped his cigarette to the floor and crushed it out with his boot. He rammed Mickey's head through the sheetrock wall.

"He's loose."

Mickey's head was out of sight. His feet dangled, toes barely touching the floor.

Wayne shouted, "You okay, Mickey?"

"Got a little headache is all, Wayne. Fresh air's good out here, though."

Wayne waved to the crowd. "Somebody run outside and give Mickey an aspirin." He frowned. "You'll be sorry you done that, Dip."

Dip grunted. "I'm about as sorry as I'm gonna get, Wayne." He doubled Wayne over with a ham-sized fist to the mid-section.

Wayne dropped to the floor like a rock, gasping for breath.

Dip grabbed the nearest onlooker and threw him through the backdoor. He charged into the knot of men and took one in each hand, knocking their heads together.

"Whatcha mad at them for, Dip?" Wayne inquired between painful gulps of air.

"They laughed when Mickey called Bobby Louise fat." He waded into the scrambling crowd, tossing some aside, backhanding others.

Wayne scrambled to his feet, rushed up behind Dip and swung a blackjack with all his might. The blackjack simply bounced off Dip's head. Dip wrenched it from Wayne's hand, bit off the strap and threw it against the wall, destroying a Budweiser sign.

Wayne landed a hard right on Dip's iron jaw and yelped with pain. He clutched his fist as Dip gave him a left-handed smash to the chest.

Back on the floor and holding himself with both arms, Wayne decided to rest for a moment.

Dip stomped across the hall. Everyone backed away as he ripped open the icebox, pulled out a beer and bit the cap off. He drained the bottle and heaved it through the front door.

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He bit part of Fernie's ear off and tossed him against the wall. He flipped a pool table over and sat on it, breaking cue sticks and picking his teeth with the splinters.

Everybody, including Fernie hurriedly vacated the pool hall, leaving just Dip, Wayne and Mickey with his head still stuck through the wall.

Wayne lay on the floor and analyzed the situation. His shirttail was out - his hat, gun, and one boot were missing. He had no idea where his badge was. He was certain his ribs were broken. Mickey was helpless and this monster was pissed at both of them.

Wayne's fumbling hands found his handcuffs, lying on the floor beside his leg. Wondering how he'd ever be able to use them on Dip, he stuck them in his belt.

Slipping in the back door, Pinkie cautiously watched Dip who was pre-occupied with breaking cue sticks and building a teepee with the fragments between Mickey's dangling feet.

Pinkie slipped over to Wayne and whispered. "You look like one of Doc Greely's circumcisions. You okay?"

"I been better. What's he doing? I'm afraid to look."

Pinkie glanced up. "He's puttin' paper under a stack of kindling. Wayne! He's buildin' a fire. Don't get up. Wait right there." He started toward the back door.

Wayne was nervous. "Where you goin'?"

"I'm goin' to the café for my lucky gloves," he whispered. "I'll be right back."

Wayne sat up slowly and looked around. The place was empty. Dip continued to concentrate on his project. "Whatcha doin', Dip?"

Without looking up, Dip pulled a box of matches from his pocket. "I'm fixin' to barbeque Mickey's ass."

“You can’t do that, Dip. You’ll burn the place down and you might hurt Mickey. Besides, we’ll all die.”

“Nobody’ll get hurt, Wayne. Mickey might get a little uncomfortable though.” He lit the kindling.

Wayne debated whether to stand up and continue the fight. He decided to wait for Pinkie.

The fire began to crackle and Mickey’s legs twitched. “Hey, somebody,” he yelled. “What’s goin’ on in there?”

Pinkie re-entered through the back door, wearing ordinary black leather gloves. Again Dip didn’t notice him.

“Anybody see you?” Wayne whispered.

“Nah, the alley’s deserted - Main Street too, except for some carolers. Everybody who was in the pool hall musta got scared sober and went home.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“I’m gonna lock the front door.”

While Dip went for more kindling, Wayne rushed to remove Mickey’s bloody head from the hole in the wall.

“Why’s my butt so hot?” Mickey asked.

“Shh!” Wayne slapped at a smouldering patch on the seat of Mickey’s pants as he rushed the dazed young man out the back door. “Can you walk?”

“I think so. Who’s that in there with Dip?”

“Nobody you know. Now go down to Doc’s and get patched up. Your head’s bleedin’.”

Wayne slipped back into the pool hall and locked the door.

Dip returned to the blaze and dumped the wood on it. He didn’t seem to miss Mickey. While he stared at the fire he’s built, Wayne tiptoed over to the beer case and opened several bottles.

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Pinkie approached the huge driller and shouted, "Merry Christmas, Mister Dip."

Dip whirled around. "What'chu doing here, boy?"

Pinkie replied, "If you mean, what I'm doing in Nonesuch, I live here. That's what I'm doin' here."

"I mean Niggers ain't supposed to be in a white man's pool hall. What do you think I mean, boy?"

"White men's pool hall is across the street. This is Fernie's pool hall."

"Any pool hall's a white man's pool hall if I say it's a white man's pool hall. You got that, boy?" The fire grew larger.

"Please don't call me boy, Mister Dip."

"I'll say any fuckin' thing I want to - boy!"

Pinkie shrugged his shoulders. "And I reckon, so can I. And I say Bobbie Louise Battlement is a big fat sow!"

A deadly quiet hung over the room except for the crackling of the fire. Dip selected one of the broken cue sticks and moved deliberately toward Pinkie. His heavy steps resonated on the rough, beer-stained floor. "Did I hear you right, boy?" He hefted the cue stick.

Wayne slipped around to the wall and doused the fire with the beer. He stomped out the sparks. Dip didn't notice.

Someone banged on the front door. "Hey, what's going on in there? Let me in."

Wayne slipped along the wall to the door. He whispered, "Just be patient, Fernie. We're negotiatin'."

"But I smell smoke."

"No you don't. Ain't no fire in here - now."

"I can see you through the window but I can't see what's goin' on in the rest of the place. What fire?"

“Do you know who’s here besides me?” Wayne asked.

“No.”

“That’s a blessing. Trust me, Fernie. I’m a lawman.” Wayne turned back to the activity in the room.

Pinkie stood, his feet spread wide, his fists ready. “I reckon you heard me right, Mister Dip. You couldn’t squeeze Bobby Louise into a circus tent without slatherin’ her down with axle grease. And don’t never call me boy again.”

“That done it!” Like a rhino, the enormous driller charged, swinging the cue stick.

Pinkie ducked and, with both gloved fists clinched together, chopped Dip behind the ear. Silence fell over the room as the mighty Dip Messinger dropped the cue stick and froze; his back to Pinkie and facing Wayne. An idiotic smile held his face immobile.

Wayne froze; not knowing whether to run or fight but Dip’s glazed eyes apparently weren’t focusing on him or much of anything else.

Wayne watched in terror as Pinkie carefully circled around the huge man to get a closer look. Dip’s pale-blue eyes were squeezed down to tiny slits and the vacant smile seemed frozen on his terrifying face. His fists opened and closed mechanically like a guppy out of water. Pinkie raised his eyebrows at Wayne and shrugged. “You okay, Mister Dip?”

Dip’s mouth worked but no sound came out. He began to blindly swing his arms in a circle in front of him. A mighty lion-like growl emerged from his lips.

Pinkie approached Dip from the side, took measure with his outstretched left hand. Dip didn’t seem to notice him.

Pinkie reared back and smashed his right fist into Dip’s jaw.

Wayne had seen smooth homerun swings in baseball before but never a follow-through like that. The fist didn’t bounce back like Wayne’s blackjack or like most blows would have. Pinkie’s fist

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continued to the fullest extent of his arm and blew right through the target as if it wasn't even there. Dip's head flew back like it had been hit by a train, spittle flying as he went down hard.

The big driller hit the floor and lay still. Shock waves radiated from the point of impact and shook the building.

Wayne jumped to his feet. "Go out the back door, Pinkie, quick!"

After Pinkie left, Wayne rushed to open the front door. "Fernie! Help me cuff Dip to that light pole out there. He'd better be cuffed up when he comes to or he'll flatten every building on Main Street."

It took all their combined strength to drag the hulk out the front door to the nearest light post. "Who hit Dip, Wayne? Was it you?"

"Can't say as I did."

The little Mexican's eyes narrowed. "Was it Pinkie?"

"You know coloreds ain't supposed to be in the pool hall, Fernie." He pulled Dip's arms around the pole and snapped the cuffs on his wrists.

"Whew!"

Doc Greely had used fourteen stitches and a tablespoon full of Ichthammol to patch up Mickey's head. He taped up Wayne's broken ribs and put a splint on his right hand. Wayne declined Doc's usual offer of liver pills.

When Wayne returned to the Pobre, Dip had sobered up. Bobby Louise draped her arms protectively over him and fed him fruitcake. Tillie and Mickey sat close, holding a blanket around the four of them. They all drank eggnog and sang *Jingle Bells*.

Dip gave Wayne a sheepish grin as he sat on the sidewalk, his cuffed arms embracing the light pole. On his head were imitation reindeer horns, illuminating his bruised face with blinking lights.

Wayne clutched his throbbing ribs and mumbled through his aching teeth. "Everybody okay?"

"Are you speaking to us, Deputy Scrooge?" Bobbie Louise shouted. "Some carolers came by and serenaded us. Then they gave us fruitcake and eggnog. After that, Dip proposed to me and we're getting' married. No thanks to you."

Wayne didn't know what to say.

Dip's grin revealed a row of tobacco-stained teeth. "I got that job, Wayne. The pusher for SwallerDollar come by a while ago and told me I could be his evenin' tour drikler soon's I get outta jail."

Wayne scratched his head. "I didn't think you worked evenin' tour, Dip."

"He does, now." Bobbie Louise giggled and gave Dip a hug.

Dip blushed. "Me and Bobbie Louise want Mickey to be best man at the weddin', Wayne."

Wayne looked at Mickey's bandaged head and swollen eye. "That okay with you, Mickey?"

Mickey grinned and winked his good eye at Tillie. "Yeah - I reckon weddin's are all the rage now."

Tillie giggled. "Mickey, you devil! If that was a proposal....." She looked at Wayne. "Deputy, if you wanted to do somethin' nice for a change, you'd turn Dip loose so we could all get to Odessa before the last dance. You know - it being Christmas and all."

Wayne stooped over and looked Dip in the eye. "Do you promise to behave yourself and pay for the damage you did to the Pobre?"

"Say yes, Dip." Bobbie Louise shook him.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes sir."

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“And do you promise you won’t drink any more tonight or hurt Mickey again?” Wayne demanded.

“It’s bad luck to hurt your best man before the weddin’.” Dip asserted.

“How about after the weddin’.”

“I reckon that’s kinda bad luck, too.”

Wayne considered this and nodded his head. “Aw hell, it’s Christmas – and by the time you cross the county line, you’ll be Ector County’s problem.” He removed the handcuffs. “You kids drive careful, now. Lotta drunks out, tonight.”

Mickey pulled Wayne aside and whispered, “How come my pants was smokin’ when you pulled me loose?”

“Don’t know, Mickey. Mayber somebody got careless and flipped a cigarette. It musta stuck to your ass.”

“Oh.”

Tillie and Bobbie Louise kissed Wayne, smearing his cheeks with lipstick.

“Wayne, you’re a saint”

Dip pointed to the deep purple bruise on his jaw. “By the way - who hit me?”

“Don’t rightly know. He was just a stranger passin’ through. I didn’t catch his name.”

“Well, if you ever see him again, tell him Dip says, ‘thanks.’” Bobby Louise looked meaningful at Dip until he nodded his head.

Tillie shoved Mickey. “Scoot over, Sugar. I’m drivin’.”

As they started to leave, Ruby came running out of the café, pulling on her coat. “Wait for me. I’m gonna try my luck again.”

The sound of Mickey’s big truck faded away and the street became silent once more.

A loud roar from Jimmy Pontrimle's pickup broke the silence.

"I see you got your starter fixed, Jimmy," Wayne commented.

"Yeah, did I miss any excitement?"

"Nah, just another dull Christmas Eve."

Pinkie wandered up just as Wayne got in his car. "Is it safe to come around here now?"

"Yeah, everybody's gone. Pinkie, what the hell did you hit Dip with?"

"Just my lucky gloves. I used 'em to break up fights sometimes when the white men got too rowdy in the tent show."

"What you got in 'em, dynamite?"

"Shh. Don't tell nobody but there's two pounds of lead shot sewed up inside these gloves. Mister Dip would lose all respect for me if he knew that." He glanced over both shoulders. "Where is he?"

"Aw, it bein' Christmas and all, I let him go. Him and Bobby Louise and Tillie and Mickey went to Odessa."

"I figger I'd better find me another town 'cause folks around here ain't gonna like what I done to a white man."

"Don't you know coloreds ain't allowed in a white man's pool hall? A stranger passin' through hit Dip. You were washin' dishes at the time."

"What about the folks in the pool hall?"

"None of them saw anything, not even Fernie. Would you have the nerve to tell Dip that a black man decked him if you were them?"

"Pinkie let out a nervous laugh. "No."

"Well, your secret's safe with me, buddy. That's two I owe you."

"How's that?"

"You've still got the fish hook, don't you?"

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Pinkie chuckled and pulled out his watch. The hook dangled from its chain.

“Need a ride home? Lotta drunks out tonight.”

Pinkie shook his head. “Thanks anyway.”

“Well, I reckon you don’t need protection. You got your lucky gloves.”

“Reckon not. Merry Christmas.”

###

Pinkie, a black man, rescues a girl from rape by the town's football star. Angry townspeople blame him for the school's ruined season. His wife is later murdered. Pinkie inherits a farm and discovers precious water but he is murdered for it. Despite uncaring authorities, Pinkie's friend, the town's Deputy Sheriff, struggles to solve the murders. When an oil well fire threatens the town, the people lay a pipeline to Pinkie's wells to fight it.

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