SEVEN OX SEVEN

A STORY OF SOME WAYS IN THE WEST

Part One ESCONDIDO BOUND

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PREFACE

THIS STORY WAS BORN in the almost casual suggestion of my brother-in-law Brian Meyer, of Montana Blue and the Big Sky Cowboys, that we make a Western movie. I considered that a movie would require a soundtrack, and a soundtrack could require Montana Blue. Entertaining no illusions about the odds against a screenplay being made into a movie, I made up my mind that I would never have a chance at beating those odds, as some had done, without first writing one. Thus, I set to work. It was 1992.

Some time after I had finished the manuscript, I bought a book to help me format the work into a screenplay, and after an initial attempt, I decided that for all that it would take for me to do so, I might as well write the book. Here, before me, lay the challenge I had wished for and feared ever since I was a boy who used to pray, "Lord, let me write, and write well, and bring people to You through my writing." As a boy I had imagined writing a book, but never without a pang of anxiety that such a task was too overwhelming for me to start, let alone finish. Overwhelmed or not, I realized that I was still young and single enough to fail, but old enough that if I did not do it now, I might never do it. It was time to jump in, and I found a receptive ocean in research.

The Wisconsin State Historical Society Library provided unique access to that ocean of research, and I took advantage of it. In that first period of research and writing in Wisconsin, certain historical figures and places rose up out of my reading as central to my story: Henry Ossian Flipper, Charles Goodnight, Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, Palo Duro Canyon, Dodge City, San Antonio, El Paso. Though some of these people and places would later drift to the edges of my story, I realized, in early 1995, that to these places I must go.

By August I had my papers, books, and other belongings packed, cataloged, and stored; my modest savings pulled together (about twenty percent of it sacrificed for the purchase of a Macintosh powerbook); my 1988 Dodge Aries (with over 100,000 miles on it) packed with what I thought I would need. After a brief stop at my sister's in St. Paul, Minnesota, where I brought in every item from my car, weighed it on her bathroom scale, itemized all of it, and cut out a substantial portion, I headed west.

Into and across the Great Plains I ventured in that August of 1995, trying to make some sense of what I was doing, allergies itching and watering my nose and eyes, as the heat and glare of a torrid summer pressed themselves upon and into the Aries, while attempts at air-conditioning were met with the screams of a chafing belt running over an immovable pulley. Nighttime brought some relief in a three-person dome tent at places like: Lake Shetek State Park, Minnesota; Bruce Park, Creighton, Nebraska; Branched Oak Lake State Recreation Area, Nebraska; Perry State Park, Kansas; Covered Wagon RV Camping, Abilene, Kansas; Afton Lake Park, Wichita, Kansas; Gunsmoke Campground, Dodge City, Kansas.

Places and events punctuated the trek and informed my mind: Murray County Fair in Slayton, Minnesota; the Exel Inn in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, which I had helped construct sixteen years before, earning money for my freshman year of college; Ashfall Fossil Beds State Historical Park, Nebraska; a providential incident outside Lincoln, Nebraska, in which I pulled off the road to look at my map and watched as a hay bale fell off an approaching truck at the spot where my car would have been had I not pulled off; Homestead National Monument, Beatrice, Nebraska; Pony Express Historical Marker; Blue Rapids, Kansas, the site of a baseball game between the Chicago White Sox and New York Giants in 1913, in which Jim Thorpe played; Marysville, Kansas, with the Original Pony Express Home Station, No. 1; St. Mary's, Kansas, the site of the Jesuit Mission to the Potawatomi Indians, St. Mary's Academy and College and Seminary, and the first cathedral between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains; a great insect hatch at Perry State Park, Kansas, that encouraged me to put up my tent in record time and dive inside to escape the plague, but not before discovering, with the ranger, a truly

impressive specimen of the mighty dobsonfly; the Treasure of the Czars exhibit in Topeka, Kansas, which impressed me with, among other things, its depiction of the nature of the relationship between church and state in Russia before Peter the Great; the Kansas State Historical Society; the Wild Bill Hickok Rodeo in Abilene, Kansas, the first professional rodeo I had ever seen, set in an idyllic evening cooled to seventy-some degrees by a wafting breeze, which fanned the stands where I sat thoroughly at home among families of middle America, taking my cue on what made for a good or bad performance from the quiet-mannered grandfather in the cowboy hat sitting in front of me; the Cowtown Museum, Wichita, Kansas; Dodge City, Kansas with Old Dodge City and the Kansas Heritage Center; a praying mantis stalking and striking a cicada in my campground outside of Dodge; Fort Larned National Historical Site, Larned, Kansas; the awe-inspiring German and German-Russian Catholic churches, long served by Capuchin-Franciscan Friars, in Liebenthal, Pfeifer, and Victoria, Kansas, where St. Fidelis was dubbed the Cathedral of the Plains by William Jennings Bryan. It was within this sanctuary that, after lighting candles and praying, while making my way to the exit, I stepped into a beam of sunlight that had filtered through the stained glass and immediately felt light and warmth flush through me in an affirmation that sustained me through inevitable questioning about this project over the next several months and years.

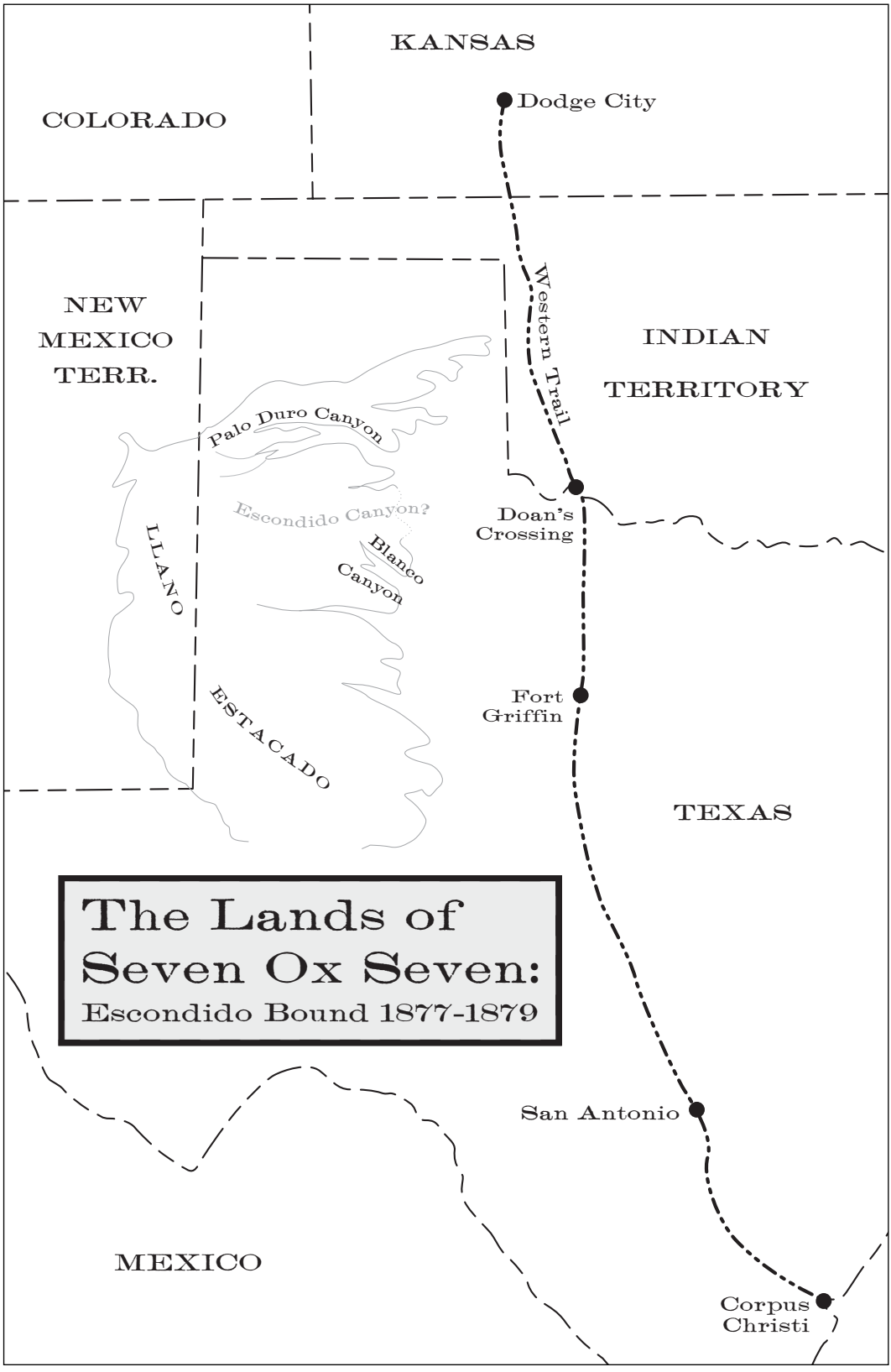
After a rejuvenating stay with good friends in Denver, where I attended Mass in the fourth cathedral since leaving Minnesota, I set out for Texas for the first time in my life.

Texas. The great state of Texas, so much so, one senses, that only by superior constraint does it condescend from its earlier nationhood to fit that classification, and then, never without the adjective. It is that big. I've seen it. I've seen the land, traveling from one place to another to research and write my story, and in my work as a field tech, driving one thousand miles every Monday and Tuesday to trap and count boll weevils for the benefit of the native production of cotton. I've seen its treeless prairies, its rugged escarpments, draws, and canyons. I've seen its red dirt and felt the sting of it in my eyes and seen it climb skyward to color dust devils in their dance across the parched land and through the arid heat. I've seen its skies, because one sky's not big enough for

Texas: blue blue skies; then with some white of clouds, massing to blue and gray; then purple, pink, yellow, black, red, orange, all at once; then suddenly a sunburst through all that mess of cloud color, and more color, organized this time, in a full rainbow off to the side. I've seen its prehistory, learned of its rocks, seabeds, animals, people. I've seen its history, old enough to be nearly as big as any other on the continent. I've seen its people; I've met them: cowboys, farmers, ranchers, townsfolk. I've met their spirit.

I speak of west Texas, now. It's the Texas the world knows, has read and written about, and watched on the big and little screens. I've seen parts of the rest of it, too, but west Texas is big enough; leave it to Texas to have even more.

I went into Texas a stranger to it, and left, a friend. I lived four big, full years there, even, at times, when its vastness, solitude, and quiet emptied me out, empty enough to need filling by its Creator, my Creator, who seeks to super-fill us all. He gave me good friends there; a wife, a marriage, a family there; and He allowed and, I hope, inspired me to write this story there, a big story, as anything less out of Texas just wouldn't seem right.


KANSAS
COLORADO
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Corpus Christi

"A Wide Open Gate"

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Chapter One

MEETINGS IN DODGE CITY

From the end spring new beginnings.
—Pliny the Elder

A wide open gate was Dodge City, Kansas. Through that gate passed the beeves of the prairie. The original beeves, the formidable American bison called *buffalo*, passed through in pieces, having been killed, skinned, and sometimes butchered, according to the demand of the time, based on the needs, tastes, and fancies of people far from the prairie. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, newly arrived at the end of summer 1872, greatly facilitated the supply for that demand and, thus also, its prerequisite, profligate slaughter. In a few short years, the annual shipment of the pieces of hundreds of thousands of buffalo dwindled to the pieces of tens of

thousands of buffalo, mostly bones, and thereafter was negligible, and then no more.

But close not that wide gate. The beeves of the prairie take a new form, less formidable, though formidable enough. These are the beeves of the long horn, originally introduced to the Americas by the Spanish, centuries before, grown innumerable on the Texas plains during the absence of men called away to a momentous civil conflict to determine the integrity of a nation, a people. The settlement of the great conflict freed the men to return to the plains, where they gathered the longhorns and sent them north, then east, nourishment for a country only beginning its long convalescence after a long fever, which had finally spiked and only recently broken.

Thus, the longhorns went east, and civilization came west, though by the term *civilization* is not meant so much a state achieved, as a process continuing. One dictionary lists these definitions for the word *civilize*: "to bring out of a savage state; to introduce order and civic organization among; to refine and enlighten; to elevate in social life." A strong case can be made for a civilizing process in Dodge of this period, along the order of the first two definitions, though the methods used in the process may argue against the latter two definitions in the eyes of some purists.

On the western edge of this peculiar civilizing wave rode the title "cowtown," or "cattletown," according to preference. This title and its corresponding reputation rode west through Kansas with the railroad. It rode just ahead of developed agricultural settlements and their quarantine lines against Texas fever or splenic fever, a deadly bovine disease caused by a tick carried by Texas cattle, to which they were immune but more domesticated livestock were not. The tick's complicity being then unknown, all blame fell at the feet of the cattle. Hence, the quarantine line was established to keep Texas cattle away from the domesticated livestock. Consequently, as agricultural settlement moved westward, so did the quarantine line. As the quarantine line moved westward, so did the cowtowns. The cowtowns (Abilene, Ellsworth, Wichita, Caldwell, Dodge, and others) all served as gates to the cattle tramping in and rolling out. And just as at one point each was opened, so at one point each was closed. The gate opened longest was Dodge.

With the cattle came the men—cattlemen, buyers, drovers, and cowboys (herders, cowhands, cowpokes, cowpunchers, trailhands)—to whom Dodge proved a wide gate indeed. To the cowboys, in particular, Dodge offered its own broad way, which contrasted sharply to the strait way that had brought them there. From the deprivation of the trail—deprivation of food, drink, shelter, sleep, comfort, cleanliness, and feminine companionship—Dodge offered abundant relief in fine foods, strong drinks, clean rooms with clean beds, baths and shaves, available women, and convenient gambling.

By July 1877, Dodge had already witnessed a great influx of cattle and men. This influx brought its share of challenges, not the least of which was law enforcement. In one incident, the famous William Barclay (Bartholomew) "Bat" Masterson had been jailed for "affectionately" interfering in the arrest of one Robert Gilmore. Masterson, a former policeman himself, fought Marshal Larry Deger, Policeman Joe Mason, and "half a dozen Texas men," as the Dodge City *Times* of June 9, 1877, described the incident, until the marshal could "draw his gun and beat Bat over the head until the blood flew," after which Masterson was finally wrestled to the calaboose. Later that year, Masterson would defeat Deger in the election for the sheriff of Ford County and make a name for himself by tracking and capturing train robbers, among other things. Lately returned to Dodge was another celebrated lawman, who had served as a powerful assistant marshal the previous season, Wyatt Earp, a man who Masterson would later claim was "destitute of fear," with "unshakable courage." Of Earp's return, the Dodge City *Times*, July 7, 1877, reported:

> Wyatt Earp, who was on our city police force last summer, is in town again. We hope he will accept a position on the force once more. He had a quiet way of taking the most desperate characters into custody which invariably gave one the impression that the city was able to enforce her mandates and preserve her dignity. It wasn't considered policy to draw a gun on Wyatt unless you got the drop and meant to burn powder without any preliminary talk.

The need for such lawmen was but a single feature of the complex character of Dodge City, Kansas, in July 1877. The aptly named Front Street was the face of Dodge City, and both sides of that face need be considered to render an accurate account of the character of Dodge. The street lay sixty to ninety yards wide and was referred to as "the Plaza." Down the middle of the Plaza ran the tracks of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe. It is somehow fitting that, of the two, the northern side of the face received the greater share of sunlight, because, though the northern side may not have been the last bastion of purity, the deeds wrought on the southern side were more often of the kind to avoid exposure to the light of day.

The "Deadline" separated north and south at the railroad tracks. Law enforcement turned a blind eye to the happenings on the south side of town, save for serious gunplay or murder. North of the Deadline, on the other hand, the law, including the forbiddance of weapons, was enforced, if not always perfectly or to the satisfaction of the town's residents.

Into this Dodge of early July 1877 rode one more cowboy. He rode a large bay, which, despite its slow gait, held its head up and stepped high, its muscles taut, betraying an affinity for less restrictive service. The man held a more relaxed posture than did his mount, though not without a hint of the same strength and readiness. He was tall and lean, though well proportioned. He had a well-cut face with blue eyes under dark brows. He wore a dark beard of a few weeks' growth, and light brown hair stuck out from under his weathered, broad-brimmed hat. The intense overhead light of the early afternoon sun bleached out much of the color that remained in his faded clothing: the hat; a light-colored, collarless shirt; a red bandanna; and pants and boots that had originally been very dark in color. Still, the sun could not bleach out the dirty, dust-covered, and sweat-stained character of these articles.

The cowboy rode north on Bridge Street under this bleaching light, which did not seem to shine down from above so much as to saturate the very air in its intensity, along with its companion heat, which rendered one's clothing hot to the touch and gave one the feeling that any object, including oneself, could readily burst into flames at the slightest provocation. North from the Arkansas River he rode, within this atmosphere of light and heat, and of fine yellow dust, in which

"Meetings in Dodge City"

72-77

She was about in her mid twenties and much prettier up close, almost too pretty to be real. Her features were fine, almost delicate. She needed no cosmetics, nor did she wear any. Her skin was of a darker hue than average, but it was a soft, light-brown hue with almost a glow to it. It was flawless, except for one small, faded scar, on her cheek under her left eye, that almost added to her beauty due to the contrast. The light from the wall lamp, which brought out the glow of her skin, also deepened the natural redness of her lips, and caught her chocolate hair, too, highlighting the soft strands that fell loose over her neck. The light caught her dark eyes, as well, and sparkled in them: those eyes that now looked into Tom's own.

"Would you like to sit down?" she asked, and Tom indicated that he would. The light hand again took his and guided him to two chairs at a small table against the far wall, just off the dance floor, miraculously empty and secluded, given the crowd that filled the hall. She slid into the chair on the far side of the table, and Tom took the other. And they looked at each other.

She tried to hide a slight smile, of straight white teeth, as she looked down at the table and lightly pursed her lips. Without looking up, she asked, "Would you buy me a drink?"

Now it was his turn to smile, remembering where he was, and with whom, and what her duties would be. "I would."

She stood up and said, "I'll get them; you don't even have to move."

He stood up anyway and said, "Thank you," as he reached into his pocket for a coin. She moved in close to him and looked up at him from under long, dark lashes, and, taking the money, said, "Um, it's a little expensive; it's a dollar a drink."

She did not look at him when she said it, obviously practiced at providing this information in a way that was both direct and least likely to cause embarrassment to the buyer.

"Oh," Tom said. He fished back in his pocket, trying not to show his shock at this price compared to the two-drinks-for-a-quarter that had been in effect at the bar. He brought forward the two dollars required and handed them over.

The woman received them with quiet tact, but in taking them, she noticed Tom's hand and took gentle hold of it, once the two dollars

had been delivered. "What happened to your hand?" she asked him, with apparent concern, as she held his hand softly in her own.

Tom looked down at his hand. It had swollen quite a bit, so as to make the knuckles indistinguishable. It had also begun to color purplish red, and a small, fresh scab had formed where the impact had broken the skin. Tom had been conscious of stifling a slight wince when he had dug into his pocket for the money.

"It's nothing," he said, as he hastily pulled his hand away.

She looked at him for a moment. "Would you like a brandy?"

"Sure," Tom responded, not really considering the question but just being agreeable with this lovely woman.

"I'll be right back," she said, and she was gone. Tom slid back into his chair, conscious of how this woman's sensual attractiveness had overwhelmed him in a way.

He was just recovering his emotional equilibrium when she returned. "There you go," the voice said, as she slid back into her chair, placing his drink before him and hers in front of her. She sipped from her highball, which Tom correctly suspected to contain little or no alcohol. He watched her drink, enjoying every movement she made. Even the way she inconspicuously licked her lips and the way she straightened her neck were treats for a cowboy not long off the trail.

He took a drink of his brandy and noted how watered down a one-dollar drink tasted.

"My name is Julie." Her perfume wafted in with the name.

"I'm Tom."

"You've been watching me, Tom."

"I have been a bit," he admitted. "I've also flattered myself to believe that you've been watchin' me a little, yourself."

"That's true." She smiled a little and looked down with the admission.

The silence grew a little too thick for Tom. "Are you from Dodge?" he asked her.

She looked up and said, as if stating what she already expected him to know, "Well, . . . not originally."

Now Tom looked down, with a light smile, and nodded his head, as he realized the unlikelihood of a person Julie's age being from a town not yet five years old.

She looked sheepishly at him and laughed lightly, with him, at his embarrassment. She finally said, to alleviate that embarrassment, "I moved here from Wichita over a year ago."

"Where from before that?"

"My, you are full of questions, aren't you? I should be asking you the questions."

"Are those the rules?" he asked her, looking more intensely into her eyes.

She looked down, at this reference to the professional nature of their relationship. In truth, in making the comment, Tom was probing that professional nature to see how deeply it ran and to get a sense of just how much of the attraction, on her part, was professional.

After a moment, she raised her eyes to look at about the place where Tom's right elbow rested on the table. "I'm from a farm in east Kansas," she said, as if offering a confession.

"What brought you to Dodge?"

She looked down again and hesitated. Then, without raising her head, she looked up at him, from under those generous lashes, as she pondered whether to further expose herself. What she saw in him and felt from him did not dissuade her. She stretched out her arms and spread her hands on the table and looked at them as she continued.

"When I was seventeen, I left home with two of my brothers." She pulled her arms and hands back to herself and assumed a more matter-of-fact air than that which had characterized her side of their budding romance up to this point. Looking at him, she felt drawn to talk about herself in a way she did not often do with men. Before she knew it, she was telling him her story. "They were going to Wichita to make their fortunes in the cattle trade. That was in late 1870, and the next year the Santa Fe Railroad only came as far as Newton. Those were some rough times. There was a lot of wrangling and conniving with Park City, but finally the second bond issue for the railroad was passed, and the quarantine line was held back, and in May of 1872, the railroad came, and Wichita became a cowtown. My brothers did well."

"So your folks let you go?"

"Well, there wasn't much they were going to do to stop me," she let him know. "I wasn't going to marry the boy down the road and spend the rest of my life on a farm. I wanted to see city life, to meet

interesting people. I've danced with rich men and mayors and gunmen and lawmen and even a congressman, since then," she said, intending to convey that she had danced with a variety of interesting or powerful men, though, except for her use of plurals, in the Dodge City of that era, it would not have been outside the realm of possibility to have said this and have danced with only one man. "I've visited cities like St. Louis and New Orleans and Chicago. I've received letters from all over the world. My parents knew they either had to let me go with my brothers, or some day I would go alone. Besides, I have three sisters at home to help out."

"And to marry the boy down the road?"

She checked him with a glance. "That's up to them."

They both looked down, and neither of them said anything for a moment. Tom finally broke the silence. "So, what do your brothers think about your workin' in dancehalls?"

"They don't like it. They quit talking to me when I started in Wichita. They let me stay at their place long enough to find decent lodging in the respectable side of town, but they haven't spoken to me since."

She looked at Tom. "Don't get the wrong idea; I'm just a dance girl. I don't do anything I'd be ashamed of, anything indecent, like some of these girls, but according to our religion, even dancing isn't allowed. They think I'm an evil woman," she admitted, returning to the subject of her brothers, her brow furrowed slightly, "but I earn my money honestly with my pay and gratuities and dancing fees. And I can't help it if men give me presents and won't take them back."

At this explanation of how she earned her money honestly, Tom found himself subconsciously staring at her highball, which was little more than tea, that had cost him a dollar.

"So, there's a fee for dancing?"

"No, not here, but I've worked in places where there was," she said. Suddenly, she seemed to recover something in herself, and she looked again at Tom in the way she had before they had got onto the topic of her life. She leaned forward on her elbows as she stretched out her hand across the table to rest it on Tom's, and opening wide her dark eyes, she coyly said, "Besides, for you it would be negotiable."

"Hmm," Tom considered that, as the soft hand and dark eyes made consideration of anything else increasingly difficult. Though

feeling fairly negotiable, himself, he was not so far beguiled as to keep the talk of dancing fees from bringing a little reality back into this budding romance.

Tom smiled. "Well, you sure are pretty," he said, as he felt himself falling, in a way, into those dark eyes.

Julie looked down modestly. Then she brightened up, raised her eyes, and said, "Now, what about you? Where are you coming from?"

"I'm up from around Corpus Christi."

"How long are you staying?" she asked, leaning forward onto a pretty hand, the graceful fingers of which fell lightly on the side of a pretty cheek.

Pondering the question while trying to get a bearing on his situation, Tom looked off to his left across the room, and as he pondered, he realized that his line of vision had fallen upon a familiar face. There, at a table across the room, sat Miss Molly of Luke Stuart acquaintance, the dancehall girl who had begun to read Luke's letter from Elizabeth earlier that day.

"Well, I'm just not sure," he said, betraying his distraction, as he kept his eyes on Molly. Then, leaning closer to Julie, he asked her, "Who is that girl, at that table?"

Julie turned to follow his line of vision. "Which one?" she asked, unable to hide her bewilderment at this abrupt turn their conversation had taken.

Tom clarified, "The girl with the red hair at the end of the table."

"Oh, that's Molly." Looking back at Tom, and then down, Julie said, with a tone that suggested she had taken some offense, "Would you rather sit with her?"

"No, no," Tom responded, turning quickly back to face her. "From the minute I first saw you, I knew that I'd like to spend time with you." Julie relaxed and looked up, and Tom continued, "But, I'm just curious about her. Do you know much about her?"

"She came here a couple . . . a few weeks ago from around Caldwell, I think. She's a widow with four kids. Her husband was a farmer, and he was killed in some accident or something. She doesn't talk much about it." Leaning closer, Julie intimated, "I don't think she's going to last very long here, though. She complains about taking

money to dance with the men and get them to drink and play the games. She says that's not what a lady would do, but she stays for the money. I just figure that's what the men want to do anyway; why can't I let them talk to me and dance with me and buy me drinks, if it makes them happy, and I make a little doing it?"

Tom smiled a little and looked down.

"But that's not why I came over to talk to you," Julie clarified.

"Oh."

"No, I just wanted to meet you. I could tell you were different."

"You could?" Tom responded without much inflection.

"A girl gets to know."

"I suppose she does."

Julie continued, "I'm just a dance girl, you know, nothing more than that. It's just a job."

Tom smiled wistfully at her, as reality further encroached upon their tête-à-tête. He leaned into her a bit, and asked her, "Would you like to walk with a gentleman in the cool of the evening?"

"Do you mean tonight?"

"Yes."

"It would be pretty out tonight," she mused.

"It would," Tom agreed, watching her.

But Julie's mind was not made up. She glanced around at her surroundings, and was gratified to find that other men looked at her in a way that made it clear that they envied Tom's present position. Some of them looked at her with more than just that envy, some looked with a desire that might have frightened less experienced women. Julie had learned the power she possessed as an object of such desire. Tom knew that, as he watched her glance around. She looked back at Tom, glanced back out at the crowd, then looked again at Tom. Then she leaned toward him, took his right hand in both of hers, and, with a quiet animation, said, "Well, why don't we stay here and get to know each other better. We can talk and dance all we want."

"Uh, well . . . ," Tom pondered aloud. Then quite suddenly he said, "No," as one who has made up his mind. "I'll not be stayin' longer."

"Why not?" she responded, taken aback.

"Because I really don't belong here."

"A Family Tradition"

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"Yes ma'am," Tom said, as he sat in a chair on the side of the table to Luke's left. Luke sat at the end of the table toward the back of the house, and Zachariah sat across from Tom on the other side of the table. (Tom could look beyond Zachariah and over the counter against the wall and out through the windows at the range beyond.) Elizabeth took her seat at the other end of the table from Luke. Rachel sat to the left of her mother on Zachariah's side of the table. Robert lay fast asleep in a cradle on the floor against the wall at his mother's end of the room.

Now, with all seated for the family meal, the Stuart family participated in a tradition that had been handed down in Elizabeth's family of devout Baptists for generations. Just as had her father and his father before him, so Elizabeth called for the Bible to read from God's own Word before partaking of the gifts they had received from his providence.

"Zachariah," Elizabeth said, "would you fetch the Bible, please?"

"Yes ma'am." Zachariah left his seat and retrieved the Bible from the buffet under the china cabinet and carried it toward his mother.

As Zachariah passed Luke, Luke reached out and caught him by the shoulder and said, "I'll take that, Zack."

As Luke took the Bible and began to page through it, Tom watched Zachariah stare intently at his father, then look at his mother in surprise, then back at his father, and then slide back into his place, still looking. Tom glanced down the table at Elizabeth, whose own expression betrayed a myriad of emotions constraining themselves in potential, shifting, mixing toward appropriate display.

Meanwhile, Luke paged without looking up, and then he stopped. He laid open the Sacred Scriptures, and he read. Before his family, from the Sacred Scriptures, Luke Stuart read: "'And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'"

It came forth deliberately, though somewhat haltingly, as Luke concentrated on that which he had practiced.

Tom heard and watched him read what he had heard and watched him read many times before. He looked at Zachariah, who watched his father work through the sacred words, worthily proclaiming them in his concentrated effort. He looked at Elizabeth, who leaned all the way back in her chair now, her arms crossed across her breast, her one hand

raised to her mouth, holding it, tears pooling in the bottom of her eyes, through which she took in this vision of her husband.

"'A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves. . . .'"

And the tears overran their pools out onto Elizabeth's cheeks, down, down, and Elizabeth raised her apron to her eyes to wipe them. She sniffled, and Zachariah looked from his father to his mother, and stared, his brow furrowed, and then back to his father with the same intensity.

Little Rachel, alarmed at watching her mother, said, "Mama, why are you crying?"

Elizabeth, holding her apron up to her face, pulled in a stuttering breath and turned a tearful smile on her daughter. She held her finger to her lips, to still her child during the reading of the Word of God, and then reached out to her and rested her hand on her small head, and then slowly stroked her hair as she looked back to her husband. Rachel spoke not another word, but she too turned to watch and hear.

"'But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,

"'And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. . . .'"

So Luke read, and he read, and all watched and listened and heard.

"'Go, and do thou likewise.'"

And Luke closed the Sacred Scriptures, without looking up, and after a little wait, he began to slide the book toward Zachariah. But Elizabeth rose quickly from her chair and hurried over to take up the Bible and return it to its place on the buffet, where she stood, with her back to the room, wiping her eyes and nose with a kerchief. She turned and came to Luke's chair and bent down and hugged him and kissed him on the cheek as he sat. Luke raised his arm to embrace her too, but she pulled away and left the room. Rachel immediately left her chair and ran out of the room after her mother.

Luke sat staring at the table as Tom did the same, neither saying a word. Zachariah stared at his father, now and then looking at Tom or at something else, but mainly stared at his father.

Elizabeth's husband, the head of the household, had read from the Scriptures before supper; her husband, whom she had often in the past

"A Plan Shared"

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"We'll have somewhere around three hundred head of cattle, a merino ram, and some Mexican ewes. We've got hogs and chickens. We've got a wagon, and we're fixin' to get a bigger one, for haulin'."

As Luke spoke, he watched Tom, trying to read some kind of reaction, positive or negative, to what he was saying. Without seeing any, Luke continued, "I know it probably sounds loco, Tom, to leave all this, this whole setup, but I just want to get out on my own, to make my own stake, to be able to start somethin' and make it grow."

"You're young enough to fail," Tom said without looking up from the table.

"What's that?"

"You're young enough to fail," Tom repeated. "A fellow I worked with years ago said that to me when I was considerin' settin' out on a venture."

"Did you fail?" Luke questioned.

Tom raised his eyebrows again without raising his line of vision from the top of the table. "No," he said, "I wouldn't say that." He smiled lightly and added, "But things didn't turn out the way they were expected to." Tom considered this for a brief moment, then abandoned that consideration and raised his eyes to Luke's. "Of course," he added, "I didn't have a family." So saying, Tom glanced from Luke to Elizabeth. Elizabeth looked down.

"Why the Panhandle?" Tom asked, turning back to Luke.

The Stuarts again raised their eyes to each other. Then Luke looked back at Tom. "Well . . . uhm," Luke began, "well, uh, Tom, it sounds kind of strange, but I've got to, uh, to ask you to promise not to say anything to anyone, especially if you don't become our partner."

Tom gestured "fair enough" with his face and said, "All right. I give you my word."

Luke and Elizabeth looked into each other's eyes once more, a little longer this time. Then Luke looked back at Tom. He had made up his mind. He leaned back in his chair and opened what he had to say with a question, "You heard about Charlie Goodnight and the Palo Duro Canyon?"

"Yessir," Tom said with a nod. He had first heard rumors and then had heard more of the story while in Dodge City. Goodnight, a seasoned cowman known for, among other things, the Goodnight-Loving

Trail, had begun drifting some sixteen hundred head of cattle out of Colorado in 1875, settling into winter camps on the Canadian River in eastern New Mexico. From there he had continued drifting his herd east along the Canadian River. Eventually, on the intelligence of a Mexican mustanger, Goodnight had located the extensive Palo Duro Canyon on the eastern edge of that great plateau of the high plains called the Llano Estacado, the Staked Plains, and had moved his herd into it in the fall of 1876.

"Well," Luke continued, "there's another canyon, some ways south of the Palo Duro, not near as big, but plenty big enough. It has all the grass and springs and creeks and timber the Palo Duro has, and all the protection in winter, being nearly as deep. There's even fish in the creeks. All kinds of game: buffalo, deer, antelope, . . . bear, turkey, . . . quail."

"How do you know about it?"

"A *vaquero* just south of here, a sheep *vaquero* named Sean Grady, and his wife, Maria. They came this way from New Mexico. Even though he's been herdin' sheep for years, seems he's done just about everything else, includin' minin' and herdin' beeves. Pretty interestin' fellow. And Maria's family were what they called *ciboleros* and *comancheros*. The *ciboleros* were Mexican buffalo hunters, and the *comancheros* were traders that used to trade with the Comanche and Kiowa, Cheyenne too, I think," Luke explained, as Tom nodded his head as if to indicate that he knew this. "They used to trade up in the region called the Quitaque," Luke continued. "Maria heard tell of this Escondido Canyon, or Cañon Escondido, which was real hard to find. That's why they called it '*escondido*,' because it means 'hidden,' or 'mysterious,' or somethin' like that. Weren't many *comancheros* that ever really saw it."

"What makes you think it's real then?" Tom queried.

"Well, Maria's father did see it. He was privileged because he got on real well with some chief or some such. He claimed there were mesas that stood at the canyon's mouth, and they made it look like there was no canyon at all. Besides that, there are two smaller canyons on either side of it, some miles off, that confuse people. They think they're the same one, so it's like the land in between doesn't even exist.

"Supposed to be that even that explorer, uh, that Spanish explorer, uh, . . ."

"Coronado," Tom and Elizabeth said at the same time.

"That's right, Coronado," Luke said, looking back and forth between Elizabeth and Tom. "Supposed to be that he or one of his men wrote about the canyon in his diary or journal or somethin'. Said it was real mysterious, hard to find and just mysterious, haunted, or somethin'."

"Haunted?" Tom asked with surprise.

"Well, that's what Sean said, or somethin' like that," Luke explained.

"So, he's read this journal or diary?"

"Well, no, I don't think so, but he heard tell of it somewhere along the way," Luke said, looking down and feeling less secure in his presentation after Tom's questioning. But Luke had more information to bolster his presentation and his security in it. "Besides," he continued, "Sean's half-Apache. His mama was Apache, and he claims that long ago, over a hundred years ago, or two hundred years ago, or somethin' like that, the Apache used to control that area up there, until the Comanche pushed 'em out. He says there's probably ghosts up there, because if an Apache is just plain bad or mean, like a traitor or a witch, or if he dies an untimely death or is killed by violence, his ghost doesn't go to the happy place, the happy hunting ground, you know, . . . heaven, I guess," he said, glancing at Elizabeth with a shrug. "He sticks around to bother people. Anyway, Sean says that is probably why people cannot find the canyon; it's, uh, . . . well, he said it's haunted, but he used another word too. How did he say it, Elizabeth?"

"Enchanted," his wife said without conveying any of the enthusiasm for the story that was animating Luke.

"That's right, enchanted."

"But," Elizabeth added, "*haunted* is probably the more accurate term for what Sean describes."

"And you want to move there?" Tom asked, noting his friend's fascination for the unexplained, for the supernatural, for a good ghost story, common enough among the people Tom Schurtz had met in his life.

Elizabeth spoke up, "We're Christians, Mr. Schurtz. We do not partake in pagan superstition." She paused for a moment and added, "Are you superstitious, Mr. Schurtz?"

"Andy Too?"

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And they bought ammunition and a Sharps .50 rifle, a buffalo gun, for which they expected to find good use in the land to which they were destined.

During their time in San Antonio, Tom confessed and attended Mass. He also wrote and posted a letter to Whittacker Dallen, to let him know of his partnership with Luke and that he would not be returning to work for him. And he did something else. On the afternoon of their second day in the city, while he and Luke were separated for Luke to attend to purchases stipulated by Elizabeth, Tom wrote another check, of a substantial amount, for a purpose that would have surprised his new partner. This he sent in a letter to his brother John in Wisconsin.

THE ROUNDUP that followed the men's return from San Antonio yielded the Stuarts 307 head, with Herman substituting older calves for those few newly born, to the consternation of calves and mothers alike. These older calves would not slow up the drive, as would the new ones. The roundup also gave Luke one last opportunity to work with cousins and neighbors who had become true friends.

On the afternoon that they finished the roundup, the men did not disperse and go back to their separate homes. Instead, they all rode from the branding pens to the Stuart home. Here the women of their families, many of whom had been preparing their meals throughout the roundup, had already gathered with intentions of having a celebration, to give the Stuarts an appropriate sendoff for regions north. And celebrate they did, German style (with a little Irish thrown in), with food, beer, music, and dancing. Luke even enjoyed one or two of the home-brewed lagers, with no opposition from Elizabeth, under the circumstances. Those same circumstances allowed Elizabeth to let her husband whirl her around the floor in a polka, on more than one occasion, despite her usual scruples against dancing. Men, women, and children were coming and going from the house, dancing where they could, in the living room or on the porch or in the yard. Food kept flowing from the kitchen, as did beer and coffee.

Later in the evening, after many of the children had finally succumbed to sleep upstairs on beds, mattresses, or on the floor, and as

the adults continued their revelry, Luke, standing next to Tom in the kitchen as Tom helped himself to a cup of coffee, gave Tom a light backhanded blow to his arm. Tom looked around at him. "Tom," Luke said, and he nodded toward the door to the backyard. He then sauntered to the door and out of it, looking over his shoulder to make sure Tom was following.

Once out in the yard, Luke led the way to the raw picket fence that closed off their yard from the range, and he leaned against it. Tom pulled up next to him and leaned against it, too.

"This is some place, wouldn't you say, Tom?" Luke began.

"Yes it is."

"You know, Zack was just a baby when we moved in here, and Rachel and little Bob were both born here."

"Hmph."

"All this land, Tom," Luke said, as they looked off to the south through eyes adjusting to the light of the moon and stars, "I've been over it all, time after time. And these folks," he continued, nodding over his shoulder, "you don't find these kind of folks every day."

"No," Tom agreed. "No, you don't."

Suddenly a quiet voice invaded their musings. "Luke, Tom," said the voice, and the two men turned their heads to look upon Andy Grady, who had come up silently behind them. The men straightened up from the fence and turned around to face the seventeen-year-old. He was tall, like his father, square-shouldered, though not as broad. He was not as dark as his older sister, Teresa. He had lighter eyes, too, somewhere between brown and green, and high cheekbones. His hair, cut by his sisters, was short, unlike his father's.

"I want to go with you," he told them.

Tom and Luke glanced at each other, then looked down, as each considered.

"Your folks know you want to go?" Luke asked him.

"My dad does."

An expression of understanding came over Luke's face. "That's why your daddy said Zack might have some help trainin' his puppy. You plannin' to bring ol' Rita?"

"I am," Andy responded, referring to his own Border collie, several litters and six years older than Charlie. Rita was short for Senorita.

Luke and Tom looked at each other again. Luke had known Andy for years. Tom had known him since the beginning of the roundup. Both men saw the potential Andy had to be an asset to the venture. Their looks communicated the mix of emotions each was experiencing in reaction to this request. Luke looked back at Andy, and Tom looked down.

"You are pretty good with horses, aren't you?" Luke asked him.

"I'm all right."

"You know we won't be able to pay you much," Luke made clear, "maybe shares or somethin'. This is all pretty sudden. We'd need to think up some kind of payment for your work."

"That's all right with me."

Luke nodded at the ground a little more and chewed on Andy's answer and even more on the main question under consideration. Finally, he said, "All right, Andy, I'll tell you what. You go on home tonight and talk with your folks. You get their blessing, both of 'em, and you make your good-byes. Then you come on back here tomorrow night, and we'll let you know whether we'll take you along or not. And there's no guarantee we will. Now, we'll be loadin' those wagons tomorrow, and pullin' everything together so as to leave early the mornin' after. You be here tomorrow night, and if it's all right with your folks and with us, you can stay over and head out with us in the mornin'. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Andy said. Then he shook hands with Luke and Tom and started walking off toward the south, a whistle bringing his dog Rita from the barn to his side.

"Andy," Luke called out to him, "take ol' Stonewall for the ride home."

"All right," Andy replied, and he redirected his course toward the barn, where he would saddle the gray he had ridden for much of the roundup. "Thanks, Luke."

"That's all right. We'll see you tomorrow night."

"All right."

As Andy drew out of earshot, Luke said to Tom, "What you think about that, Tom?"

"Well, he is good with horses, cattle too, a natural. He'd be a real asset. But he is young. Still, he's no younger than I was when I left home."

"And it could be a real opportunity for him."

"Griffin Night"

201-207

Andy was just an innocent succumbing to persuasion and bad example. Tom knew where he stood.

"Uhmm, well, we better get goin', then," he said.

Luke nodded, as he caught the reins of his horse. Then he climbed into the saddle without spilling a drop of coffee. As he rode out to circle the herd, Tom and Andy caught the reins of their own horses, mounted up, and slunk out of the campfire's glow into the night.

"You think she's pretty mad?" Andy asked quietly, when he judged they were out of earshot.

Tom turned his own look of censure on the newly corrupted, who had remained comfortably silent until now. "What's it matter to you, Silent Sam?" he said before he turned back to look down the trail toward Griffin.

Andy accepted this rebuke with good humor, not completely avoiding a smile. He knew that Tom would bear the brunt of Elizabeth's disfavor and that Tom's annoyance with him would only be temporary. He could see the humor in Tom's current state of disgrace, all things considered. He knew that the state of disgrace could not last long, considering that Tom was a decent fellow, after all. Beyond all that, he, Andy Grady, just eighteen years old, was riding into one of the most notorious frontier towns at night, with an experienced and trusted friend, hundreds of miles from his parents and family. He thought that he had good reason to smile.

The moon had risen and was nearly full, and its light dispersed through thin, white clouds that lent a sort of glow to the night. The men's eyes adjusted quickly to this lower light, as they made their way toward Government Hill. As they rode, Tom's uncertainty about the wisdom of his decision deepened. The reality of Fort Griffin, particularly the reality of the Flat at night, began to impress itself more forcefully upon his mind, crowding out any haziness concerning its true character. The disapproval of Elizabeth registered more forcefully in his mind as they went, especially as he questioned more and more the impact that Griffin might have on the young Andy. Tom knew Griffin. He knew trail towns. He knew that he could enjoy them but guard against being fully seduced by them, that he could be in them but not of them. But what about this impressionable young man in his charge. Tom knew that Andy was a young man of good sense, but others of

good sense had been known to lose it. Did Andy really need to be exposed to the vices of Griffin, however guarded that exposure might be? Did he need to be exposed to them while more or less under Tom's guardianship? An uneasiness began to rise in Tom's stomach as concerns about complicity in Andy's corruption rose in his mind. There was Elizabeth, too, in his mind, inflicting her silent rebuke.

They reached Government Hill and started around it. As they did so, a group of cowboys from a ranch in that region rode up behind them at a dead run and passed them with little reduction in their speed. Their six-shooters were drawn, and no sooner were they around on the Griffin side than they began to shoot those .45s into the air, "shooting up the town," a custom among many such visitors to the Flat, and one that did nothing to put to rest Tom's doubts.

Tom and Andy rode around the base of Government Hill until they found themselves at the top of Griffin Avenue, where they stopped and took in the scene. Horses crowded the hitching rails all down the street. Wagons were parked anywhere they could fit, but done so as to allow at least enough room for people to pass by. And pass by they did, in wagons, on horseback, and on foot, in a hodgepodge of humanity that all but defied description. These people, of widely varied descriptions and backgrounds, moved ill-defined within the moon's low light, until definition and color would fall upon them as they passed into the brighter light pushing out through the doorways and windows of the nightlife establishments, out, out, to where it dispersed in the fair light of the moon. Sound pushed out with the light to meet the lower sounds of the street, those of the wagons and horses and mules and oxen and the farther sounds of the woods and plains, those of the coyote, owl, and the wolf. Out from the inside pushed that sound of lighted night, the sound of piano, fiddle, mandolin, of gambling devices, of clinking glasses, and even a gunshot, now and then, and just the sound of people gathered, that hubbub of individual voices and personal sounds, blended into a sonance of its own, continuous though pointed and pitted by the varied contributions of the many. And there were the many, composed of the individuals, coming and going, men and women—the buffalo hunters, the cowboys, the soldiers, the surveyors, the dandies and gamblers, the Tonkawa and other Indians, the dancehall girls, the laundresses and

cyprians—all of them moving within the light, within the sound, within the light and sound of the Griffin night.

On the edge of that light and sound, Tom hesitated. He could not wait long. Andy had looked long enough at the scene of the Flat. Now he looked at Tom. It was time to move into the Griffin night. Tom could not avoid it. He nudged his mount forward, and with the possibility of corrupting an innocent weighing heavily on his conscience, he started their movement down Griffin Avenue into the Griffin night. But there was hesitation in his night horse's advance, as the black mount sensed the hesitation in his rider. Horse and rider both experienced a tension of moving forward while at the same time holding back. Then, suddenly, the tension broke with a jerk of the reins, and horse and rider turned abruptly to the right.

They turned into the wagon yard of the Occidental Hotel, with Andy following. Tom swung down from his night horse, Othello, and headed toward the dining room. There he found Mrs. Smith and introduced himself. She was sure she remembered him from the summer before and now more clearly remembered Luke from that time, as well, as Tom and Luke had visited Hank Smith's bar (of a more respectable character than the saloons of the town) together. In response to his inquiry regarding respectable social events in the Griffin area for that evening, Mrs. Smith informed him that there had been a wedding that day at the Higgins ranch, north of town, between a Miss Laura Higgins and a Mr. Barney Kendall, and that it was a huge affair, and that she regretted that her duties had kept her from attending. She assured him, though, that she intended to attend, if even for a short while, the infare to be held two days later at the Kendall ranch.

These infares were a type of reception for the bride by the family of the groom and could even rival the wedding celebration in terms of "feasting and dancing." But Mrs. Smith made it clear to Tom that the Kendall family would have quite a task ahead of them to rival the wedding celebration prepared by the Higgins, but still, if any family could do it, those Kendalls could, they surely could.

More to the point, Mrs. Smith assured Tom that the Higgins would be glad to have Tom and Andy as their guests at the dance, and that, should any question arise, they should merely say that they were guests of hers, as she had been duly invited. With that assurance and with

directions to the Higgins ranch, Tom thanked Mrs. Smith and departed from her and returned to the yard, where he mounted Othello.

The usually inscrutable Andy could not hide the curiosity that now showed on his face. Tom glanced at him and said, "Follow me."

Tom could have been more prudent in his choice of a route out of town, so as to completely avoid exposing Andy to the Flat, but he was so relieved at the alternative he had discovered for that evening, that a ride down Griffin Avenue hardly seemed to present a problem, considering the possible scenarios for that night presented to his mind just moments before.

Thus, with Andy trailing behind—trying to take in as many of the sights as possible—Tom rode toward the crossing of the Clear Fork of the Brazos River at the end of Griffin Avenue. The two men rode past the various saloons, gambling houses, and dancehalls, passing one of the most notorious, the Beehive, before which Andy slowed down to read the infamous poem posted outside:

> In this dive we are all alive,
> Good whiskey makes us funny,
> And if you are dry
> Step in and try
> The flavor of our honey.

As he read, a tall man, of about Luke's or Tom's age, passed behind his horse, while crossing the street, and strolled toward the Beehive. He had been gambling at Shaughnessy's saloon, on the corner of Fourth and Griffin Avenue, and was ready to try the Beehive's tables. As the man stepped into the light from the Beehive's windows, Andy could see that he was finely dressed in a well-tailored gray suit and a clean shirt, obviously starched and pressed, with a carefully tied cravat around his collar, and that his blond hair was neatly barbered and combed. This man was John Henry Holliday, a Georgia-born dentist, well trained for that occupation at the Pennsylvania College of Dental Surgery in Philadelphia, and in five years of practice, first in Georgia, then Dallas, and since then in various frontier towns. He would have been a handsome man, and had been considered one when he was younger, with his blond hair, blue eyes, and nearly six-foot frame,

except that now there was a hollowness about him, in his pallid, sunken cheeks and his thin body, that bespoke consumption. And consumption did have its grip on "Doc" Holliday. The consumption of tuberculosis had brought him west to Dallas. Then other consumptions had set in, gambling and alcohol among them. The gambling had begun to consume him when business had been slow in Dallas and he had put into practice, in the local establishments, gambling lessons he had learned from a young mulatto woman who had been a servant in his uncle's household. It was probably concurrent with the planting of those seeds of the gambling consumption that his consumption of alcohol began to consume him. By the time of an earlier visit to Griffin, two years before, his bill for liquor at the Occidental had been nearly six times the amount of his bill for room and board.

Holliday would remain for a few months on this visit to Fort Griffin, during which he would begin a friendship with Wyatt Earp, who would stop in Griffin while hunting an outlaw. Earp was a friend of John Shaughnessy, who owned the Cattle Exchange Saloon where Holliday would be dealing faro by the time of Earp's visit. It was in that establishment that Wyatt Earp would become acquainted with Doc Holliday.

Doc would also come to know "Big Nose Kate" Elder, also known as Kate Fisher, but whose given name was Mary Katherine Harony. The two would pair up, and later, when Doc would be put under "house arrest" in his room at the Planter's Hotel for a stabbing that appeared to be self-defense, Kate would set a shed ablaze to divert attention, draw a gun on the man guarding Doc's room, and flee with Doc, eventually to Dodge City in early 1878. There Doc would develop his friendship with Wyatt Earp and his brothers. Doc's association with the Earps and with Kate Elder would last the rest of his life, the story of which would develop into a notorious mix of indistinguishable fact and fiction.

Tonight, though, when Doc Holliday was still just another temporary resident of the Flat, one who practiced dentistry in his room during the day and played the faro and poker tables at night, he was heading into the Beehive Saloon. He may very well have been looking in to see if he could find the mysterious Lottie Deno present at the gaming tables. The beautiful, well-dressed, well-mannered, redheaded, black-eyed

Deno, who had a certain association with the Beehive, was known to be an exceptional gambler, and, as such, to prefer the gambling houses to the saloons, as she was not known to drink. She was seen almost exclusively in the gambling halls, the store (when in need of provisions), or on the way to or from her shanty near the river, where she received no visitors. In the same silent manner in which she had come to town, she would leave one day, after her "sweetheart" had been killed by deputies after his arrest. Some time later, law enforcement would enter her abandoned shanty to find it well furnished and to find a note instructing them to sell those furnishings and to give the money to someone in need. She would eventually settle in New Mexico, where she would marry and, after her husband's death, join the Episcopal Church and distinguish herself in acts of philanthropy.

Ah, but that was yet to come. For now these characters were temporarily set in the town of Griffin, just as Andy was. But they, for their part, moved into the Griffin night, as he, in the company of a true friend, passed through it.

Yes, he and Tom passed through. Beyond the shanties at the edge of town, they left Griffin behind and entered the waters of the Clear Fork of the Brazos River and came up out of the waters on the other side, heading north.

Locating the Higgins ranch was made considerably easier than it might have been due to the light provided by the lanterns and fires that lit the great affair and, even more so, by the first of three fiddlers who would play in shifts until dawn the next day. Tom and Andy rode up into this music and light, dismounted, and tied the reins of their horses to a picket line not far from the house.

As they approached the party, they could see that there was little need to be concerned about being invited. People were everywhere about the grounds. Officers and their wives were in evidence, as were many cowboys and ranchers, and even some buffalo hunters, and nearly every woman of good reputation within a fifty mile radius and beyond. Closest to the house, the yard had become an extension of the dance floor inside, where men and women danced to square dances, waltzes, quadrilles, polkas, and the schottische, notwithstanding that the inside dance floor had been expanded by removing a partition from between the two front rooms of the large stone house and moving all the furniture outdoors.

As they approached, Tom was drawn to the linen-covered tables set up next to (or, more likely, moved to make room for) the outside dance floor. Though the tables had been well picked over, there was still plenty left of the original seventy roasted chickens and the dozens of turkeys and the barbecued beef and the boiled hams. Indeed, a woman was replenishing the meats as they approached. Pies, too, covered a substantial portion of the tables, along with custards, and cakes—enough cakes to last, with the coffee, until well after dawn.

Tom stepped up to the table and was intercepted by an older woman in an apron holding a coffee pot, which she had filled from a wash pot of coffee in the fireplace in the kitchen.

"Coffee?" she said as the men approached.

"Yes, ma'am, thank you," Tom said.

The woman picked up two cups from the table and filled them and handed them to the two men.

"I'm Mrs. Higgins, mother of the bride," she said, unable to hide a little of the fatigue that had begun to set in after days of preparation and, already, one long day of celebratory work. "What ranch you boys in from?"

"Well, ma'am," Tom said, as he and Andy tipped their hats, "I'm Tom Schurtz, and this here is Andy Grady. We're drivin' through with a small herd to start a ranch west of here. Mrs. Smith at the Occidental directed us your way, sayin' that we could attend as her guests."

"Oh," said Mrs. Higgins, with a wave of her hand, "there's no trouble at all in that. As you can see, there's plenty, and the more the merrier."

Saying this, she did scrutinize Andy a little bit, but gave it up. Andy's Irish, Apache, Mexican ethnic mix, especially with his hair cut short, as it was, left people with little certainty about whether he ought to be excluded from their company or not, though it was enough to draw their attention. His striking good looks, as well as his height and his erect posture and his quiet (though not bashful) demeanor, had a way of quashing prejudice, especially on the part of women, before it had much time to develop beyond a hint. These attributes worked that way on Mrs. Higgins.

"And there are plenty of eligible girls that are looking to do some dancing, so don't you all be shy," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am; we won't be," Tom assured her.

"I'll Miss You"

442-443

She sighed at this and turned back to sit forward in the swing, turning her face away from him to wipe her nose and eyes.

"We don't know each other that well, Molly," he nearly pleaded. "We haven't spent that much time together."

"And how can we, Tom?" she asked over her shoulder, and she wiped her nose again.

"I don't think we can," he said.

Still turned away from him, she shook her head and in a feeble voice said, "We poured our hearts out to each other in our letters." She shook her head again, and finally she let the tears flow. Tom fought the desire to put his arm on her shoulder and pull her against him. He did so with the growing commitment to the knowledge that this was not his place and that he must not waver and offer a surface salve to Molly's, and his, gaping feelings, a temporary solution that would only serve to exacerbate those feelings and the confusion that surrounded them.

Besides, what Molly had said made Tom wonder if that were not part of the problem. He did not feel like he had poured out his heart. She obviously believed that he had and that she had to him. There was that different perception of intimacy that would undoubtedly affect the most intimate of human relationships.

She cried, and he fought the desire to hold her. Eventually she began to stop, and eventually they just sat together, the only sound between them being Molly's sniffles and occasional quiet staccato breaths necessary to regulate her breathing after her crying. Tom wanted to say something to soothe her, but something deep and firm within him prevented it. In honesty, there was nothing for him to say or do.

In time, she said, "It's getting late."

"It is."

"Tom," she said, without looking at him and with some embarrassment at needing to resort to this truth, "I've had other callers."

A twinge of jealousy sent a rush of blood to Tom's head, making her even more attractive in her attractiveness to other men, but he fought to push all that away, knowing that justice demanded no less. He looked at her, her face still turned slightly away. She was even more pretty in her sincerity and honesty than she had been in her vulnerability alone. Something inside him ached for her. He fought against his attraction to her, again heeding the demands of justice.

"I'm sure you have," he responded.

"I've turned them away because of you, but I can't wait forever, Tom," she said, turning to face him.

"I know."

"I don't know if you'll be coming back," she said, still seeking even a hint of some commitment.

"That's right."

She took a deep breath and sighed, looking out down the length of the porch and out into the night beyond. "So, I should not hold out any hope, then?"

"It wouldn't be fair for me to ask you to."

She mixed a sigh with a slight, hollow laugh.

That triggered some of the words Tom had been holding back. "Molly, you are one of the finest women I've ever known. You are lovely and gracious, intelligent and kind, but I just don't know yet, and it wouldn't be fair of me to ask you to wait."

Molly cried quietly, and Tom swallowed to keep control of his own emotions.

Finally, Tom said, "There is no reason for me to stay here any longer, Molly. I'll finish up my business tomorrow and leave the day after."

She nodded her head without looking at him or saying anything, her posture indicating her emptiness.

He stood and she stood with him. She wiped her eyes and nose, emitting some sniffles as she walked him to the steps.

Tom said, with sincerity commensurate to the void that would be left in his life, "I'll miss you, Molly."

That sincere sentiment released some of the reserved emotion within them both, and suddenly they found themselves hugging each other tightly.

"I'll miss you too, Tom," Molly said into his chest.

Then they pulled apart, and she reached up and kissed him softly. He embraced her again and kissed her, but she turned her head and pushed away from him and hurried into the house and closed the door.

Tom stood and looked at the closed door for a moment, then turned and walked down the steps and down the walk and out onto the street and into the night.

"Goin' Fishin'"

475-478

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THE NEXT DAY WAS SUNDAY, which arrived with a stiff breeze that periodically gusted into a wind and then settled back to a breeze sufficient to keep the flies to a minimum, which suited Tom and Zachariah just fine, as, after the morning worship and a light meal, they saddled their respective mounts, climbed aboard them, and, according to previous arrangements, pointed them in the direction of the fishing hole. Zachariah sported a carved pole that he had been whittling with results beyond those to be normally expected of a child his age and advanced beyond those that had graced the pole he had previously given to Andy. These results were achieved with a knife that his father had sharpened a little beyond what his mother would have allowed, wielded by a youth with the developing skills of a craftsman. Tom chose a stick along the way and rigged it out upon their arrival at the spot.

They had agreed that Tom would try a worm and Zachariah a doughball, and they arranged their rigs accordingly and tossed their lines in. It was not long before each had caught a fish and Zachariah, a second. Tom strung each fish through the gills and mouth with a thin line he had brought along for that purpose, and jabbed the stake on the end of the line into the ground, and slid the fish into the water.

As Tom was stringing Zachariah's second fish onto the line, Zachariah scrutinized the fish and said, "Uncle Tom, how do those fish breathe in the water? Why is it that they can live in the water, but if we stay under the water, we'll drownd?"

Tom looked back over his shoulder as he crouched by the edge of the pool. Then he looked back at the work in his hands, finished stringing the fish, and then eased the tethered fish into the water. He rinsed the fish slime off his hands in the water, and drying his hands on his pants and moving himself back into his fishing position, he said, "You know, that's an interestin' question, Zack. A lot of men have been askin' that same question for a long time and tryin' to figure it out.

"Now, if I remember it right, a fellow by the name of Priestley discovered that in the air is this element called *oxygen*. And a fellow by the name of Cavendish discovered that water is made up of this oxygen and another element called *hydrogen*, combined to form what they call a compound. Then there was this other fellow named Lavoisier who

pulled a lot of this information together and expanded on it, so much so that he has been called by some, 'the father of modern chemistry.' At least that's how I remember it, though I may be a bit off, as it has been some time since I studied the matter."

He looked at the six-year-old Zachariah, who stared at him.

"Anyways," Tom said, "there's this element oxygen in the air and in the water."

Zachariah continued to stare at him.

"You can't see it. It's invisible," Tom explained.

"Like God?"

"Well, it's different from God, but it is invisible: we cannot see it, in a way like how we cannot see God. But it's not like God, because God is spiritual and oxygen is material (gaseous though it may be), and God made oxygen, and nobody made God." Tom looked at Zachariah, who was looking at him.

"But let's leave God's invisibility out of this for now; we can talk about that another time. Now, this oxygen is in the air, but we can't see it. It's what they call a gas."

"What's a gas?"

"Well, do you know how when your mama boils water, steam rises out of the water?"

"Yessir."

"Well, that steam is a gas. It is water as a gas."

"But I can see it."

"Well, yes you can, at first," Tom conceded, "but as the steam spreads out more, you cannot see it anymore. Anyways, in a way, oxygen is like that steam, except that it is an element and not a compound like steam, but we won't get into that. What we know is that in the air are different elements that you cannot see. When we breathe, we pull in those elements, and our lungs take oxygen out of the air and put it into our blood, so that we can use it, because we need it, like we need food and water, only we need oxygen even more.

"The fish need oxygen in their bodies, too. So, God has given the fish gills." Tom slipped back down to the water's edge and pulled out their catch. He held up one of the catfish and pointed out his gills. "You see, Zack, the water has oxygen in it, just like the air does. These

gills on the fish take oxygen out of the water, like our lungs take it out of the air, and the fish can breathe then."

He put the fish back into the water and moved back into his place and said, "Funny thing is, our lungs can't get oxygen out of the water; so if we stay under water, we'll drown, even though there's oxygen in there. And the fish's gills can't get oxygen out of the air, so they will suffocate if they are taken out of the water."

Zachariah looked back out at the water. Then, after a minute or two, he said, "How did those men find out about oxygen if they could not see it, Uncle Tom?"

"Well, Zack, I don't remember all the particulars, but they observed closely the world around them and did a lot of thinkin' about what they saw, and they did what you call experiments."

"What are experiments?"

"Experiments are . . . , well . . . , they are tests, of a sort, where you set somethin' up to try to find somethin' out."

Tom looked over at Zachariah, who sat looking at him.

"Well," Tom said, "it's like what we did when we first got down here. We wanted to see what the fish were biting, so you put out a doughball, and I put out a worm, and you caught the first fish, and you've caught more than I have. So what have we learned from that experiment?"

"We learned that the fish are bitin' better on doughballs."

"That's right. Today they are. We don't know about tomorrow. You have to be careful not to take more than an experience or an experiment has to teach you. Like Mr. Mark Twain says, once a cat sits down on a hot stove cover, it will never sit down on a hot stove cover again, but it will never sit on a cold one either."

"Who's Mr. Mark Twain?"

"He's the fellow who wrote the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* that we've been readin' these nights."

"Oh."

A pause followed this remark from Zachariah, during which he looked back out at the water, as did Tom, though Tom continued to glance at Zachariah now and then. He was unsure about what impact any of what he had been saying had had on his young partner. He was

also concerned about whether he had confused the boy and about what kind of questions might arise for the boy's mother from what he might have gleaned from what Tom had said.

"Uncle Tom," Zachariah said after a few minutes, "what experiments did those men do to find oxygen?"

"Well, you know, Zack, I can't rightly remember. But they were very clever, as those were clever men. In fact, I believe it was Lavoisier, if it is the same man, who said somethin' about forgiveness once that has stuck with me over the years. I believe he said, 'Forgiveness is the scent of the violet that clings to the heel that has crushed it.'"

"What's that mean, Uncle Tom?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Zack, I think some day you'll figure it out. We all get our share of chances at that. I've had plenty in the past, and I know there are plenty more to come."

Tom could hardly know the chances that awaited him.