

Ghost Town

by Kyle Hemmings

She had just done it in the backseat with the man she decided would be her father. Or maybe it was the cast of his eyes under the dim bar lights. Maybe she insisted that this had to be done, to relive the night under the stars, under a dented roof of a station wagon. His. She insisted that he was a cowboy when there were still cowboys.

He lay there stretched out on the vinyl, the hair on his forearms exposed to slants of sodium lights coming through the windows. He had the face of a Gary Cooper after he could no longer play cowboys or baseball heroes.

I was never a cowboy, he said. His voice was cracked with hard liquor. The words sounded like whispers between the cracks. He said he delivered refrigerators from town to town, sometimes he'd pick up a hitchhiker and they became lost for hours. She could tell it was hurting him to smile, to twitch while reminiscing.

She helped him fit his arms into the flannel shirt. Then, placed her hand over his crotch, stroked it as if she wanted to make it talk. She wanted it to apologize for all the pain it had inflicted.

You're not going to die on me just yet, she said.

He clutched his chest then let his hands slip over his belly.

Don't go calling 911, he said. The pain comes and goes. It's something I've learned to live with.

They both smiled at each other in the sticky silence.

She said You're an old fool with a bad heart.

She imagined pulling the heart from his body, massaging it with firm finger pressure. She would keep it in a glass jar by her bedside. It would beat by some mysterious mechanism when she dreamed.

He asked her what her father was like, what he had done. She had spoke about him for several minutes inside the bar. His tics and superficial mannerisms. From the back seat, they could hear

customers leaving the bar, laughing or chanting songs that made no sense.

She told him that her father had done many things to her. Things she couldn't get into inside the bar. There were other fathers after him but she wore none of their tattoos.

At times, he lifted his head to turn, to look outside the window. She was wedged over his legs, told him there was nothing to see. Just another night in a Western town. In a few years, it might not exist. He closed his eyes then opened them.

With a girl like you, he said, I could be singing hymns at heaven's gate.

She rubbed her hand through his slicked hair, leaned over and tongued the side of his chin.

My father, she said, the original, once tried to hang me with a belt. He wanted to teach me a lesson in respect. Never refuse your father, he said. He was always referencing the Bible or some shit.

He stared up at the roof of the station wagon. I was never a cowboy, he said.

She took off the studded belt to her skirt, placed it around his neck.

It is one way to end suffering, she said, don't you think so?

I guess, he said, but not you murdering me. Might give you a big head. You'd have a lot of explaining to do.

You need a doctor, she said.

I only do home remedies, he said, gripping her arm, then letting go. He turned his face away from her.

Nitroglycerin is for wash-outs.

Not for studs, she said, smirking.

Not at all.

Do you know who you are? she said, easing up on the belt.

You ask hard questions, he said, that one is impossible to answer.

You're the father who slept with me and made me give up everything.

I never asked you for more than tonight, he said. His voice growing raspier.

You're the father who almost hung me by the belt.

His lips, his face were turning colors. She whispered to him that she was intrigued by the thought of doing it with a dead man.

It should be an interesting screw, he said, trying to work up a nervous laugh but coughed instead.

I really should call 911, she said. You smoke too much.

No, he said. He'd rather die without doctors, die on his own terms.

She removed his clothes again, then gripped the belt around this throat.

She said, You were once a cowboy.

He said Whatever.

She said, You taught me how I could travel for a thousand miles and still never leave home.

I never knew you, he said.

You really want to die, don't you? she said.

It wouldn't inconvenience me, he said, if it's on my own terms.

Because you've been hurt too many times to move on. Isn't that right, she said.

Back at the bar, he had alluded to a live-in who playfully pinched his balls in the morning then refused him sex.

His lips opened slowly.

You don't know what a woman did to me. Over the years. A slow poison. A toxin I can't get rid of. I could never live with anybody. I mean, since.

He said he felt like vomiting.

His voice petered out. His head slumped to the side.

She kissed him on the cheek.

She placed her belt back around her waist. She said she was only pretending. About the belt, that is.

He wasn't listening.

She said You were once a cowboy. She said You smell like dust and leather.

She said to please stay away from her. The next time, she would kill him.

