

The Cowboy of My Heart

by Allen Plone

I.

The cowboy of my heart rides high in the saddle. Behind him, the long tail of his speeding palomino, golden — like the hair to the girls I was later to want so desperately — stands straight out from his sweating, muscular haunches. It's time. The cowboy drops the reins. The horse, aware of the subtle change, takes control, running easily, smoothly. The cowboy cross-draws his matched pair of long-barreled, pearl-handled Colts, standing up in the stirrups for a better shot. He know the sharp smell of gunpowder for what it is; the odor of retribution. The bad guys fall, one by one. He's won again.

II.

The Roadmaster's wide tires cut across the wet pavement with a satisfying hissing sound, swerving puddle to puddle, sending up waves of water, disturbing the reflected world. Trigger knew where he was headed, didn't need me tugging at his reins. The heaviness of the twin pearl-handled Colts a comforting pull on my pants. No one was a faster draw or more accurate.

III.

God says we're the chosen people. Let him choose someone else for a change. Seven hours a day of school isn't enough? I need *Schu!* Every afternoon at three-thirty, Saturdays after service and Sunday morning. Sunday morning was lox and bagels and very little teaching. Hebrew school. A place to learnt eh history of my tribe; to speak and read a language I was never going to need on the range.

What cowboy spoke Hebrew? Can you imagine Roy or Wild Bill reading from the Torah? *Baruch atah adonoy*, partner.

The synagogue, Beth Emeth, is about six miles from my house. Maybe another bunch of blocks if I go directly from school. Along the mains street, Cotman Ave., a really old-fashioned deli with a wooden pickle barrel out front is the first stop. You hitch your mount to the steel bar that holds up the awning, dip your hand into the barrel and find the ripest, most pungent, forest-green pickle you can. If a good one is floating on top, ignore it. Deep down, where you can't ever see, that's where the big ones are. For a nickel.

The smell of brine and garlic, like the smell of horse manure, is an acquired taste. For me it was sweet, evocative, sensual. A man can be judged by what he finds delightful in smells. Trigger snorting the wind can sense the way things are. Indian trackers examing the spoor of an animal, then lifting their head, pointing. It's all in the nose. That organ which so often has come to stand as the symbol of my people.

IV.

If you wander two of three blocks to the south, you're in Saint Timothy's neighborhood. Most of the kids there went to Catholic school. A long line of old-style Irish priests, before and after Pope John XXIII, sell the line that the Jews killed Christ. When I was four, my friend Jimmy O'Malley, whose back yard joined mine, told me he couldn't play with me ever again 'cause I killed his Lord. At four? Maybe once in a while I gave my younger sister a smack she didn't deserve, but kill anyone? I cried for days. No one could console me or explain it to me. Jimmy and I never played together again.

Going into those blocks was like Roy or Gene going into the badlands. You knew something terrible was going to happen; you just didn't know where or when. So what hero could resist? I often took the shortcut that went right through the heart of the enemy territory. Several times I had been chased, usually by a couple of kids, who spotted the *yarmulke* attached to the back of my dark semitic hair with, of all things, bobby pins, and, assuming they had found easy prey, came after me on foot. Trigger was always up to it, easily outrunning them. Even as I stood up, let go of the reins, turned to shoot, they disappeared behind the nearest cover.

V.

The day was clear, East Coast clear, with white clouds high in the blue. Crisp, invigorating, alive; the kind of day that makes a man want to do heroic things just so that he can be worthy of the sky. Trigger was newly shod, having recently run over a nail ruining his back tire. Maybe not newly, since I had only patched his old inner tube. But he felt frisky. He wanted to run, break free, gallop with abandon; with no place to go, no time to be anywhere. I let him have his head. Looking up towards the sky, I began to yodel. Me, Trigger, the streets, the sky, the Indians who lurked behind stones and watched with grudging respect as we flew by, all one. And there I was, suddenly, and without dread, in the badlands. I laughed out loud at fear, spit in the eye of danger as Trigger rode smoothly on and on. Right past St. Tim's schoolyard. Just so they knew, I drew my pistol and fired into the air. Into the schoolyard, around and around, circling, then out again, running faster than ever.

VI.

At first I didn't see them. They must have known a short-cut I didn't. Right in front of me. Blocking my path. One standing on the ground, two on their bikes. They had me clearly in their sites. Trigger, sensing the danger, slowed, looking for cover or a way out.

But there was none. None except to go forward, towards and through the danger. So that's what we did, aiming at the one standing. Trigger picked up speed, flying, faster than anyone thought possible, blurring my vision with his gallop. Closer. Close. Right at them.

No one made a move to stop us. We were too powerful, too strong. Then I felt it hit me. And the names. "Jew bastard." "Dirty kike." "Christ killer." The cold wet spit on the side of my face began to burn.

Setting his back legs, Trigger came to a sliding stop. I felt cold and hot at the same time. Somewhere between crying and rage, somewhere between seeing and blindness. I turned my bike around and walked back to the one who had spit on me.

"You spit on me!" My voice sounded high and tight in my throat.

"What are you going to do about it, Jew boy?"

"Big turd! Really big since there's three of you...!" No curse word I knew matched my need to condemn them at that moment. Then they started laughing. I pushed the one standing.

"Okay, *goy*, If it's so funny meet me in front of Solis-Cohen after school tomorrow."

I got on my bike, trembling with rage, holding back tears. I turned to them.

"Let's see if you dumb *shkuties* show up!"

VII.

The next morning I dressed carefully, making sure that I had my twin pearl-handled cross-draw authentic Wild Bill Hickock guns with me. I had told no one about the event, not even my best friends. Certainly not my mother who probably would have insisted on meeting me after school and walking me home. I didn't know if they'd show up, didn't know what would happen if they did, but I did know, perhaps for the first time, that whatever happened, it was my responsibility. I had to face up to them. Strangely, I wasn't afraid. I had what later in life I might recognize as a heightened awareness of the things around me.

As to be expected, the day dragged interminably. At recess, I finally told Fink, my best friend, about the possibility of three *goyim* showing up after school. Ever the good friend, he both expressed his alarm and his willingness to support me, if not get into the fight. That was okay by me.

VIII.

The bell rang, ending the last class of the day. I gathered up my books and headed for the door. Several of my friends were staring at me. No one had said anything, but I could sense that Fink had told them about the fight. They hung back, watching every move I made. I saw them watching as I walked down the hall towards my locker. I saw them watching as I opened the locker, took out my pair of Colts and carefully strapped them on, making sure they were slung low enough for a comfortable fast draw. I saw them watching as I walked out the front door, alone.

They were there. All three of them. They were standing next to their bikes, breathing hard, having just come from school, too, and not wanting to be late for the showdown. The biggest one laughed at the guns strapped to my sides. The other two joined in, pointing at me.

“Okay, *putz*, let's go over the hill.” I heard myself saying. My voice didn't quiver.

