

“Waylon & Willie & the Boys...”



You walk into the “Texas Tux Lounge”—all Halloween theme-decorated (a month early) with sprayed cobwebs thick in every corner.

You’ve heard all the jokes—how being “deep in the heart of Texas” is an oxymoron, how *down yonder here* the good ole boys think that “Deliverance” is a *luv* story...

At least that’s the way the current lover of your lady’s mother has been spinning it over here, during the car ride—in a Cadillac, what else? Now, seated at a bar table, you’re

approached by a big bubba; he's the Karaoke and music DJ, his wife's the manager. You're asked to play pool in their tournament...*It's just an itty bitty thing, he aw shucks, but we like it....*

They all know that you're a *Yankee*. Beneath the façade of broad grins, heads tipped to one side then the other, the "*Ahm jus a sheetkicker*" pose of false modesty, you know there's this *pain-in-the-neck* pique, some unspoken bitterness each has picked-up along the way and now share in sullen camaraderie. Too many times some deal just didn't go down. Just didn't have the clout of all that downtown Dallas big oil money....

Most of these men married now to some sarcastic reminder of each and every one of those setbacks along the way...From *once-upon-a-time-just-cute-as-all-get-out* blonde little honey—to, of late, being broke down, with no spare, no gas, way out on some deserted, potholed, dusty road....

Like what's going on just to the left of you now—the sweet young thing putting her high heel on the top rung of the barstool, letting the lingerie she's modeling slip, silk rustling away, to reveal a spa-toned, tanned thigh gleaming pearl like in the bar lights...The garter belt, slid to that man-maddening darkness of her crotch, stuffed with fives and tens...

Or the blonde behind the bar, wondering which one of the misanthropes she's serving booze to now she's gonna wind up paired off with—when her looks, along with her dreams, fade into that flat plain of a sunset....

So when Bubba, whom you drew for the first round, says in that good-natured way, "Now, don't beat me too badly, ya'll hear..." You smile, say, "Not to worry...."

Your play is nothing fancy—you leave one of your balls on the table so he can make a

short run and win ...It's double elimination, you see...

Next game you win the coin flip and right to break. As you manage to clear out the couple of cowboys managing to stand—storm-dumb as cattle—directly behind you, taking up your maneuvering room, you notice that your lady is watching you from the rail. With that one quick strong stroke that, unlike most people you've ever known, has never managed to fail you, the pack breaks. The sharp crack momentarily distracts the bar from its karaoke...

You step up, look, fire...

But before you're too far *back in the days*—with a pal taking bets on the bar and

keeping your Johnny Walker Black flowing—you remember where you are and leave one of your balls and the eight near corner pockets.

Your opponent—made soft spoken, and, you feel, respectful— compliments you and sets about the task of clearing the table for a comeback. You stand in the shadows, try your best *aw shucks*, but it ain't flying with the pretending not to watch *good ole boys*. The sound system plays something about *Hank Williams pain* songs and somebody else's *train songs*...

You can feel the constant smoldering—only partially quelled by the bottles of Bud, shots of Jack. They're all thinking *how the hell did this tall drink of northern water wind up with one of our fine fillies*; your lady having made forty without the fate of too many women in this land of down yonder—torn up all too early in the truck stops and honky tonks by rough-handed rednecks rutting in the trough...

Now you step up to the table... An easy roll on that eight awaits you and it really is *back in the days again*...You're in this little rice-growing paddie in Northern California, in town playing pool with the locals. You're the staff member of a nearby *health sanctuary*—one that used to be a hippie commune.

Suspicious *per se*—and not exactly the type that the local Sheriff's Association would accuse of being a ringer when they lose this charity fundraising basketball game. Which they did, just an hour or two before. But, like a hot knife melting butter, you'd been *on*, driving the lane with impunity. Side bets were lost and, as you left the gym, you'd been fingered... Plenty of hostile glares, too—at the guy who'd recruited you, one of the few *Messkins* tolerated 'round here.

To complicate matters further, you've going through one of those bad breakups with, as Sir Mick liked to sing, a *woman of wealth and means*...The type that somehow, *back in the days*, you were always bumping into, a woman with a siren's call as dangerous as the *Symplegades* themselves. Breakups like boulders, clashing—but through the grace of the *Argos* dove's tail feathers, perhaps, made survivable...Matters maybe not easily translatable to *C & W* parlance, but something to which you could attest *the pain being the same damn thing*...

One night, at your resort, you were looking up at the pure, perfect full moon—and a huge black sky pricked only by distant starlight. Coyotes, padding the old mining roads, wailed in the distance. So you drove the twenty or so miles into this town, the closest sign of life to your resort. Perhaps in some cosmic balance to your resort's health food regimen, you wandered into one of the four dives keeping the local population of several hundred

happy and started tossing down double Scotches...

So on this night you're in a good mood—that male victory thing of still being young and *oh so cocky*. Your *amigo*, who's amazed at not only your court play but too how you match his *cerveza's* with Scotch, is even having a good time.

When this guy appears at your side, breaking into your conversation, and challenges you to a game of pool, you accept.

*I hear you're good*, he sneers. Nearly a foot shorter than you, nonetheless he's got quite the swagger on (*maybe military, fly boy?*) As it's always the little lapdog types barking the loudest you look to the bar, where four of his buddies—corn-fed and beefy, hard little eyes in those puffy cheeks—are sucking down longnecks.

*Wanna play for a twenty?* His voice pipes like a banged-up flute. And he's twirling the quarter for the break flip over and over in his left hand, in his right, lightly bouncing the cue.

You tell him, *Sure*. As bar tables go, it's not bad, so you can shoot softly, trust the table to roll fairly straight. You call *heads*, win the break.

Before you know it you're looking at an easy corner shot on the eight. He's been kind of prancing about in your field of vision as you shoot, pretending to compliment you but seeking to distract. He pulls a twenty-dollar bill out of his jeans, lays it down on the table and snarls, *Make it yer dead...*

That night, maybe you were fueled by one too many Scotches. You step up and look down, out past the cue, then up at his jagged blue eyes and scruffy blonde hair glowering at

you. But you focus on that one pure point shining for you, on the black curve of the eight ball, then tap the cue—soundlessly it rolls, as if on a rail, over the bill, the eight dropping dead center into the pocket.

You pick up the bill, stash it in your shirt pocket. Your eyes and arm raise in time to catch the pool cue suddenly swinging your way.

When he launches himself at you, a half turn of your body, grab and assist to the back of his plaid Pendleton sends him sprawling. But the two goons, pile on you from behind, knock you down to the dank stench of the dark, dirty floor...Before they can grapple a hold you stand, feeling just a few scrapes and nicks, as an angry Mars breathing heavenly fire.

Even your *amigo*—slinking into his beer at the bar—is afraid to look at you. You dust yourself off, sling your coat over your shoulder, and, all senses forced alive, walk out the shithole's door...

**S**o now you're deep in the so-called heart of Texas, and, *yeah, you're still playing bubba's game of pool*. Guess that you could tell them of your having been one *bad hombre* in the old days, but down here, fifteen hundred miles from any *homies* in either direction, you know it wouldn't do much good...

You see, you're really one of the ancients. You're of the Celts, a people whom the mountain people used to kidnap, during the Roman Empire, and force to work the Halstatt salt mines. In those days most Celts traveled the old "silk routes" in small bands.

Many of the men over six feet, like your self; riding in chariots drawn by star gazing horses, they feared nothing. Yet, when the narrow mountain passes were blocked—by the four-foot *Lilliputians* native to the xenophobic interior—the Celts' usual strategic advantages were nullified. Bound tightly with thick cord, starved and beaten, these *Gullivers* were put to slave labor, mining salt for trade to the Empire, until—one eventual day—they'd go berserk and were killed...

Down here in Dallas, now, with your lady, you do the tour. Through the newly burgeoning arts district, downtown—the Hard Rock Café, with all the 5'10" wannabe supermodels in hot pants, tossing teased blonde hair and pouting at the shiny new Cad's cruising past...

You even take a look at the damned grassy knoll, where Japanese tourists have their pictures taken atop...The scratchy voice of some homeless guy with a sandwich billboard advertises the nearby JFK museum...

Then you do the sultry, long drive out of town—navigate a hodgepodge of rippling reflective mirrors, curves and triangles tossed together any which way around the octopus-drunk freeway tentacles, still under construction, at it's center. Find some flat open country—a long two-lane road over the heat-miraged horizon to some place called Texoma. Little town—one gas station, boarded-up houses weathered permanently grey.

Far cry from downtown Dallas, from all the oil money on Turtle Creek Drive—big riverside park, elegant wrought-iron benches placed about the carefully cultivated expanses of green. Architectural marvels of mansions well set back behind the brick walls, security-camera'd gates...

Turning down the Red River graveled road, to where a lake had been created by the

Army Corps of Engineers, you're glad to be beneath the bank's willow trees. Out of the heat. It's so peaceful here, you don't even mind it when your lady asks you to bum a cigarette from three cowboys—drinking a case of beer in the cab of a nearby pickup truck.

A bit later you're at a low slung roadhouse where your lady claims, as it's Sunday, they give out free beer. *It's like a religion here*, she says, with that easy smile of hers—the one you fall asleep in the peacefulness of night looking at, her head cradled in your arm.

Country karaoke as well. Some zoo songs in the book the waitress brings you—along with request slips. Big wide-screened television that flashes the bouncing cue ball lyrics for the cowboy-hatted and booted guys who kind of stumble up, mid-afternoon beer buzzed, to the mike, plop their plentiful bellies down on the stool, and proceed to butcher, what you're seeing, maybe for the first time, is some guy's tender and eloquent words of love...

When your lady's teenage son finds a “Beastie Boys” song, “Licensed to Ill,” and raps it out to polite applause you shoo him and her to the door, load up the California-plated Volvo—too much of a curiosity in this parking lot of pickup trucks with shotguns rear-window racked—and head on back to Dallas. ..

This night, back at the “Texas Tux Lounge,” you remember--your play at the table wins some fancy silk lingerie, risqué enough to make your lady blush, and you excuse yourself and retire ...

When your lady's mother wants you and your lady to go country line dancing to the break of dawn, you look at how tired your lady's face is beginning to look, decline politely and head home...



The next day you're back on the road again. The big reconciliation between mother, having called from her "deathbed," and daughter never really happened. And the step-dad's all grumpy about *this, that & the other thing...*

When you'd driven down, the sun danced all day along the straight line of tarmac stretched to the horizon...

On this the return trip, a hint of fall now nips the air. Though the Volvo's done this trip half a dozen times, the engine's hum doesn't seem so certain. Sure enough, in the middle of West Texas, three shipping days from the Dallas Volvo dealership, the water pump goes...

Back cruising through the night, the engine's temp staying low, the bright carnival lights of Las Vegas—*lost wages*, as Steely Dan sang—appear on the horizon.

**O**n the way down you managed to bypass this town, looking at sprawling new subdivision after subdivision carved into the desert, casino after casino honeycombed with gleaming semis, weather-beaten RV's, cars, trucks—all like worker drones around this sterile hive, some monument to however long shot it may be...

So you coast the Volvo past the Venetian citadels, mini-Eiffel Tower, even half of a huge Harley-Davidson, hurtling through a wall, V-twin engine hanging over the strip. Slow cruise in the midst of the tourist pack, taking in all the other bizarre icons of this baroque pastiche. At the Palms Casino you turn into the parking lot. Your lady, you see, claims it's

the best shot...

You park the car, herd your group into the rest of the crowd—all eager to pay homage to this modern *Wheel of Fortuna*...You're thinking about back in the days of ancient Empire... Those *Annals* you'd once read come alive; you're seeing one of the white-toga'd ruling elite—having just heard of some inferior's pre-arranged ill-fortune, he shrugs, palms upward, and looks helplessly to the skies, pretending to bewail *Fortuna's* beclouded wind of bad luck ... *Ah, what can one do about Fortuna and the Fates...*

You shrug jacket tighter and head towards the big glass doors. The water pump, your lady's necessities (French Vanilla cappuccinos and cigarettes) ate up the return budget. You know you've got to win. Dumbstruck as the others milling randomly about, you clutch your last ten in your pocket as a lucky rabbit's foot. You sit down at the blackjack table and toss that bill down for a hand.

You look around at all the bland faces drawn tight—not cool, not sophisticated, not having fun, just uptight. The dealer acts like a refugee from an Interstate truck stop—her raspy voice calling everybody *honey*.

More than her voice grates at you. Too much on your mind, all the work you're going to face upon your return; matters all dropped for your lady's spur of the moment emergency trip. You're wondering how the things once simple in your life—stuff you used to be able to take for granted, or maybe even the stuff some normal citizen does, going about that *sit back and enjoy the movie!* the fool's been told is his or her life—all somehow have gotten so impossible...

First hand your two face cards beat the dealer's eighteen. But you and your lady's sigh of relief settle into a pattern of *little up, little down...*

Fatigue catches up with your lady—you can't remember a road trip as exhausting as this one—and she goes back out to the parking lot to sleep in the car. You pace yourself with the free Scotch and settle down to *get into the groove...*

As you chuck the “counting cards” system a college friend showed you, *back in the days*, and rely on sheer instinct your chips begin to fill your well...

You're trying not to think about a conversation you had a few nights back—sitting outside, under the stars, sipping beer with your lady's ex-husband. Personable guy, but one always with a con going.

He was telling stories about your lady's *used to be* wilder days. One time she supposedly took off with a bunch of Hell's Angels when she was with him in a bar—he said he had to go bang on the door of the clubhouse to, the next day, get her back. He claimed, too, that she'd ruthlessly spent all of the little chunk of oil money his daddy had given him... *Yessiree, that woman goes through money and men like water...*

By the time you've met her, she's gone through a painful divorce and then to school, finally—getting her MFA in San Francisco...

Now she's that artist you so love—hiding out behind her Wayfarers on your trips up the coast to Mendocino. Reminding you of what the gonzo journalist Hunter Thompson once said, to an aspiring writer, *Son, crazy is a term applied as a compliment to artists... Insanity, well, that's a legal term...Make sure you know the difference!"*

And she's the artist with such deep colors of vision—most important, the space between. The resourceful one, who, before she met you, upon having had her brushes and paints stolen by a fool mistaking more, proceeded to paint the canvas she saw in her head

with sticks as brushes...

Now you look around at all the tits and ass threatening to flop out of flimsy outfits, all the squint-eyed men flashing, in grubbly little pinkie-ringed hands, clips of bills, chips, as some kind of ritualistic license to not only ogle but to purchase what obviously is new inventory and all that fatigue you haven't been able to afford over the past few months hits you—as too many piles of cascading bricks, blows mapped and marked out by some damn little fool without a clue...

A new dealer arrives. He flashes a grin of silver-capped teeth and arranges his card shoe. His eyes have that now familiar look of the dead, of having gone *past the point of caring*. But not to that point of being at peace.

Maybe peace is another one of those illusions in this land of *tis of thee*. *Does anyone feel it anymore?* After passing all those Marilyn look-alikes, hiking fluffy, little-girl dresses, on the neon-heated sidewalks you know that, for a price, they promise the matter, *but isn't it, or maybe, didn't it used to be, more?*

All the jumbled, overcrowded morass begging for attention out there on the main drag sweep past. You can't help but notice that this new dealer looks like somebody you've seen in a movie. But not, say, *Gary Cooper on a white horse*. No this guy looks just like the snake-skin-cowboy booted, knuckle-tattoo'd thug in Quentin Tarantino's *Wild at Heart*—the unadulterated evil that got such a kick out of tearing up Lulu & Sailor. No matter how pathetic their life already was...

Same rotted teeth and gums as the movie when he smiles, says, "Senor, how is Lady Luck treating you tonight?"

“Not bad,” you respond. Truth is that you haven’t counted your chips—old superstition.

You watch him feign clumsiness as he deals—your King and Queen lose to his blackjack. You toss in a couple of more hands without betting. Gathering your chips—they stretch from your thumb to middle finger—you do a count. \$215, enough for a room and gas home. You exhale, for the first time in hours, and rise to cash-out.

But on your way to the parking lot the creep dealer turns back up like a bad penny. Five of them, actually. Four punks on BMX’s— bouncing pool cue bottom half’s off the greasy tarmac—and a fat white bubba. All early twenties, wearing T-Shirts captioned “SECURITY.”

“Where ya goin’, champ?” the fat white boy drawls.

“Home,” you yawn. “Through for the night.”

“Tha’s right you’re through. We been watching you—you must think you’re some Hollywood movie star or *sumpin*.”

The BMX punks chortle.

“Well yer reel done ended.”

You’ve been here before too. And not just *back in the days*. Through your fatigue a lightning flash of a memory strikes. You’re a wee one, sitting on your Irish grandfather’s knee. In between sneaking up the back steps from the basement den to the kitchen to acquire—without your good Catholic gran taking notice—more *warrior meade* for him, you listen, raptly, to his Boston Brahmin brogue intone tales of King Arthur and his Round

Table of Olde....

*And there he stood, lad, on that promontory overlooking the eastern sea of the Motherland. Naked to the waist, midnight blue war clay streaking those high-boned cheeks. Left hand shielding his eyes—brown as the Mother Earth, deeply piercing as a falcon’s—he’d watch the advance boats from yet another Saxon war galley oar in, and, when they’d catch sight of him and pause mid-stroke, why he’d boom out , “Well, are we going to have at it or what? I don’t have all day you know!”*

*More times than not, the boats would put about, return to the war galley, hoist sails and disappear...*

*Now those were tough times, laddie. So many miles of coastline, so few able to defend. The warriors were spread so thin that their scouting was most often only solitary. So having that Celtic presence of mind—as when an old Irishman and his two sons bluffed an entire Roman legion into backing down from seizing a key pass—was most important.*

*Now see yourself standing your high ground in the fading light of day—not wanting to look around behind you, wondering if this time, truly, would finally be the one, on which, you were all alone...*

*But our good King Arthur never gave in to that fear...*

At this point your Grandfather’s eyes would grow large with meaning, his voice would soften, drop in pitch a wee bit more...

*You see, lad, he was not the type to bluff..*

“Hey, this is Vegas, right?” You smile, but it’s slow and real—that of a man with

nothing left to lose.

The littlest one snorts with amusement. “Dang fool don’t even know where he is!”

“You got that mayor who’s a *Mafioso*, right?”

The BMX’s, which have pushed themselves into a circle around you, pull up.

“Yeah, so what the fuck?” Tall, dark sullen one.

“Yeah, well, I got family back in New York, ya know? The real city, not this piece of paper-mache shit you got here.” Eyes warily dart to the big bubba, looking for a signal. “Diamond district, lower Manhattan, They hear I get disrespected here I’m sure your mayor gonna hear all about it, too, *capiche*, you motherfreakin’ little *fronzio’s...* ”

You’ve been in a ready position, hands with palms in, low and loose just in front of you. Big Bubba’s eyes look a little glazed, he’s kind of staring at you and not at you...

You laugh—an easy deep belly release—turn and walk.

1. *You see, like good King Arthur, you never look back...*

I nside that air-conditioned sterility we in this country call a motel your lady sleeps—kind of sprawled about the covers. You’ve been up, sitting in the big, overstuffed chair and doing a little meditation. You rise, unbutton shirt and pants and drape them over the chair. You pull back the covers on the bed, slide your lady in, get in bed yourself. Tears on her cheek, she turns towards you, slides her arms around your waist, says *Hold me...*

*and you do...*

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1. after "Luchenbach, Texas," Waylon Jennings