

A Letter to Hausdoerffer Regarding a Boy's Memory

Dear John,

For some reason I cannot shake the memory of a man I only knew for less than a month. I met him the summer I turned twelve; he lived with us and he shared a room with me. My grandpa hired him to help with the ranch, moving cattle and supplying the sheep camp during the summer months. His name was Billy. We found out, only a week after he left, that he was also a murderer.

The sheriff came to our door, a July morning, there had been rain the night before, one of those feminine rains whose wispy fingers left the earth dark and wet; the sheriff asked if we had heard from or seen Billy. It was obvious from the five police cars in the driveway that Billy had done something serious. We learned the blurry and somewhat specific details of a supposed confrontation with a man from Tres Piedras, a single gun shot, a body stuffed in a culvert, a stolen two-tone Chevy pulling a two horse trailer, also stolen. Immediately I knew the gun he had used, a lever action .30.30, a Winchester I had fired many times in Billy's company.

He first appeared toward the end of May. We were working in a makeshift corral at the base of San Antonio Mountain. At the edges of the corral the lambs were writhing in pain, bleating half-heartedly into a constant wind. Our faces were caked in dried and finely filtered sheep shit, dirt and blood from the work of castrating and then docking the tails of our most recent crop of lambs. To the uninitiated it was a brutal scene set against tangles of chamizo and gnarled trees that surrounded the woven wire corral. It was the wrong month to do this work, but we had always done it in May, the wind from the west, angry with its purpose of melting snow and lifting the entire earth into some horrible remolino of memory and dust. There were nearly 500 tails and bits of ears at our feet; the lambs suffered at the edges of the corral, their testicles pinched with a green rubber the size of a Cheerio, some of their tails cut just at the tip of bone, ears docked, half of the left ear completely removed and two notches cut into the underside of the right ear. Each lamb received their own variation of the process. Male lambs, los borregos, had their tails cut with a sharp knife, their nuts bound with the green rubber tourniquet which would shrivel them to dangling husks in a month or so, only their left ear docked. The female lambs, las hembras, received the green rubber on their tail, just an inch or so from their culito, for breeding purposes; both of their ears received the knife. This is where we first met Billy; he rode out of the trees on a paint horse and came into camp. I cannot recall who looked the most frightening, us, the fallen and pain riddled lambs, Billy's horse or Billy, but I do remember feeling sorry

for his horse whose ribs were obvious and countable, hooves unshod, legs cut and scratched in more places than any of us could count.

Billy's accent was obvious and undeniable, Texas. He told us how he had ridden the horse all the way from Texas; his voice was such that maybe he expected us to disbelieve his story. My grandpa was never one to mince words, and for that I still resent and love him, but we knew it was his place to speak first.

"Someone should make you walk from Texas without eating," as he gestured toward the reduced to nothing horse that in some former life must have been quite beautiful.

We hired him because we needed help moving the animals to the high country, at least that is the excuse we used, but in retrospect, from this rise of memory, I now believe that my grandpa loved something about that horse's spirit and he simply wanted to nurse the paint back to health in the meadows that comprise the bottomlands of our ranch.

Billy was another story all together. I imagine that he had never been beautiful. His hair was the color of rain-wet straw and he was only a shadow above five feet tall, his eyes were a muddy blue I had never seen before or since, and half of his right arm was missing. For whatever reason, I knew better than to ask about his stump of an arm. I can speculate that he was not born that way because of the scars just below the still functioning elbow, but I would have liked to have known the specifics of Billy's arm, if he buried it, if there was anything left to be buried, if it was a combine in Kansas or a sawmill in Mississippi or just a drunken west Texas back road car accident that claimed his arm. My family in the intervening years has Christened Billy, quite unoriginally I might add, as the One Armed Bandit.

I cannot shake this one particular image, the way he shouldered his rifle, the way the barrel rested in the small crook of elbow at the terminus of his devastated arm. This, most likely, was the last thing the man from Tres Piedras saw before Billy murdered him and drove off in the dead man's truck.

Now as I am writing this, as with almost everything I write, I think of my hometown; as for my community I can tell you this, Antonito is a temporary place for most people and for a few of us it is home, permanent as blood or powerful memory. This place, temporary as it may be to some, is my home. It is the work of writers to save, with our dreams and imagination, what others relegate to the forgotten. I don't know that there is anything redeemable in Billy, but I know that he treated me well and thanked us every time we fed him. More importantly, I see him now, as well as his horse, as this metaphor of sorts for my community. There are some that view us as the horse, formerly beautiful and

worth saving and there are others that see us as Billy, never beautiful and only remembered for those unforgivable things that we have done.

I do not know what became of Billy beyond the immediate days after he murdered the man from Tres Piedras. I know they caught him in Reno, still driving the stolen truck and trailer. His paint horse must have been in tow, but there is no mention of the horse in the article. For weeks after the murder, my father was a vigilant guard of his family, and I still remember how he rushed into my room one morning after something accidentally thudded against the wall; he was there to protect me, and I still love him for that gesture.

Finally, after the trial and Billy was sent to prison, my family home returned to its normal day to day routine; we no longer locked the door and my father no longer slept with a rifle by the bed. A peace prevailed and we seemed to mostly forget about Billy, the One Armed Bandit.

I can't tell you exactly why he came to me every time I considered this letter. I tried to omit him, but he was always there. He came out of the trees on his beaten yet still beautiful horse, just as he had 28 years ago and demanded, somehow, that I include him in this letter. In my thoughts of him, I also see him fishing, the two of us pushing through the willows on the banks of the Conejos River. He casts with his good arm and then tucks the rod under his other arm and reels the shiny spinner to shore, his fat horse following us up river and occasionally nudging his owner in the simple gesture that always means love. These are the postures I remember him in. In my thoughts of Billy he turns to me at a place where the river forks in three directions; he looks back over his right shoulder and he smiles at me. It isn't a smile of happiness or some innocent joy. It is a smile of knowing. It is a smile that tells me, even this man, this particular memory, this seemingly worthless moment, all of this, is worth saving.

Much Peace, your amigo,

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