

Hard Times in Van Horn

Reece gets off the train in Van Horn, picks up his duffle bag from where it had been thrown onto the wooden platform kicking up a little cloud of dust, and walks a few blocks to West Texas Bank and Mortgage.

Once inside, he leans his duffle against the wall, takes his hat off, and looks around just as his oldest friend, Dub, gets up from his desk and starts toward him.

“Reece look at you, welcome home, Buddy. It’s good to see you.”

They smile, shake hands, and back slap, then Dub leads Reece back to his desk where they sit down across from one another. On Dub’s desk is a name plate holder with J.W. Simmons, engraved on a strip of brass. Reece picks up a church fan from Dub’s desk that has West Texas Bank and Mortgage printed on one side and Van Horn Baptist Church printed on the other side, and fans himself with it. Hanging on the wall beside the desk is a big, black and white calendar advertising cattle feed, and open to September, 1953.

“Well I’m glad you’re home and all in one piece, that’s the good news. The bad news is... I’m terrible sorry that we lost your Dad.”

“Thanks, I know, just a few more days and I woulda been home. What kinda timing is that? I was gone for three years and... I was at Fort Irwin going through the discharge process three days ago when they called me in and told me. And he wasn’t all that old. But then he’d never been the same since Momma died.”

They sit in silence for a minute then Dub says, “Well I might as well tell you so you’re not too shocked when you go out and see the ranch. The place is in bad shape, and in more ways than one. You know it hasn’t rained in some parts of Culberson County since before you left, and where it has rained it wasn’t enough to make a difference. After you got drafted your Daddy went downhill physically and wasn’t able to keep the place up. Yesterday, I rode out there and looked around and it’s a sad situation, fences down, windmills broken, not a cow in sight.”

Reece leans forward, puts his elbows on his thighs, and flips his hat around in his hands. Then he leans back, and says, “You said, in more ways than one, what’s that mean?”

Dub looks down at his desk, and sighs, “I hate to be the one to have to tell you this, if my boss, Mr. Macy, was here I’d have you go talk to him at this point.”

“What is it?”

“Your Daddy took out a loan to buy feed two years ago and was never able to pay it back. He put the ranch papers up for the loan and now that he’s passed away the bank can foreclose on the ranch.”

“Why didn’t he tell me? I coulda sent him money.”

“I don’t know, pride maybe.”

“How much is it?”

“With interest it’s up to seven thousand now.”

“Aw Hell no! I thought I was doing good coming home with a thousand saved up. Seven thousand? How long do I have?”

“I explained your situation to Mr. Macy yesterday, he knew your Dad, but he said he has to go by the rules, and that the best he could do would be to give you a month from the day your Daddy passed away.”

Reese gets up and paces around, “Before I left we’d gone from one cow per thirty acres to one cow on fifty acres. What more could we do?”

Dub shakes his head, “I know, I know. A lot of ranchers around here should have hauled their herd to a feed lot and gotten rid of them before it was too late but, I guess they kept hoping that it would rain, and...”

They sit in silence for a minute then Dub tries to change the subject, “I put some grain out for Scout when I was out there yesterday, he looks good, probably because he’s an Indian pony.”

They both laugh at the reference to the fact that years ago Reece named his new horse after Tonto’s horse because he thought that an Indian pony was a special breed of horse and not just a horse that belonged to an Indian. It didn’t make sense anyway; Tonto’s Scout was a Paint and Reece’s Scout is a Morgan.

Dub says, “I’ve got to finish something here and then lock up why don’t you go over to the Café and I’ll join you in a few minutes?”

The Café hasn't changed, there's still the five-foot tall, wire, book display rack beside the register with four vertical rows of paperback books. The rack can be rotated to reveal a row of Western, Romance, Detective, and Science Fiction paperbacks for twenty-five cents each.

Reece picks up the disheveled, customer copy of the *El Paso Herald Post* from the counter and sits in a booth beside a dusty window where someone has used their fingertip to draw a heart outside in the corner of the window. He orders a hamburger and a Coke and looks at the paper while Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys can be heard performing *Across the Alley from the Alamo*, on a radio in the kitchen.

Later, they get in Dub's car and drive around the corner to the main cross roads in town. Dub stops at the intersection and says, "You know what they say about this intersection..."

"Yeah, you can stand in the middle of it, point in any direction, and it's 120 miles."

They go a few miles North and then turn off the hard road and go for a few more miles on a dirt road.

They pass a field with a couple of boney-looking horses, and Dub says, "Remember when we were in high school and all the guys were either into cars or into horses? You were either a mechanic or a cowboy."

"Yeah, I remember the girls were interested in the guys with cars 'cause they could take them out on dates, and they thought the cowboys were old fashioned, living in the past."

"And you were a cowboy, but you were smart enough to have a friend who had a car."

Reese, "I guess I should thank you for all those double dates I was able to go on because you had a car."

"No problem."

Reece, "You've always been lucky, you had a car, you got out of the war..."

"Hey, I went down and answered the draft, it's not my fault they didn't want me."

"Tell me again."

“I was standing there, butt naked with my clothes in a little pile at my feet, lined-up with about a hundred other guys when this soldier stops in front of me and asks if I’m right-handed. I didn’t know what was going on, I thought maybe they were picking me for some right-handed commando team. I said, yes sir, and he said get your stuff and come with me. He took me to another big room, talked to a Sargent in there, they both looked me up and down, and then that guy told me to put my clothes on that they were sending me home because of the birth mark on my right shoulder. He said I couldn’t put the butt of an M-1 against my birth mark without it maybe causing a problem.”

Reece laughs, “You’ve been putting rifles and shotguns against that birth mark since you were twelve years old.”

“I know! And I started to tell them that but then I thought, who am I to argue with the US Army, maybe they know best after all. I hated missing out on all the excitement, but...”

Reece laughs, “Oh yeah, I’m sure you were disappointed.”

Later Dub says, “Don’t let it get you down when you see the ranch, I’ll warn you it looks deserted, abandoned. And don’t take it personal, there’s a bunch of places around here that the bank has had to foreclose on in the past few years. Van Horn has lost about half its population in the past ten years, and several old men like your Dad have passed away since you’ve been gone. I don’t know if it’s the War, the drought, people losing everything, or what but there’ve been some hard times in Van Horn in the past few years.”

Reece asks, “Who else have we lost in the past few years?”

“Well, old man Lafferty, Mr. Cunningham, Tom Mason...”

“Did any of them owe the bank money?”

“No, those three come to mind because they did business with the bank, getting loans and repaying them, but none of them had accounts. Old man Lafferty couldn’t even sign his name, I’d sign for him and he’d put his thumb print next to it. They didn’t have savings or checking accounts because they’d lived through the Depression and didn’t trust banks. They probably all had money, but it wasn’t deposited with us.”

Reece gets out and opens the gate, Dub drives through, and they drive the last couple of hundred yards to the house. Dub stops the car, Reece gets out and Dub says, "I'm gonna head on back, you coming into town tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Come by and see me."

"Okay."

"Okay, see you tomorrow."

Reece bobs his head up.

Just like before the war Reece falls asleep listening to XELO border radio out of Nogales, Mexico. He sleeps real well in his old bed and the next morning just as he is waking up a splendid idea comes to him.

Later, when he goes out to start the truck he finds that the battery is dead. He disconnects the battery, saddles Scout, and heads for the nearest gas station balancing the battery in front of him on the saddle. When they get to the hard road a family with little kids in a station wagon slows down and they all stare at him; a cowboy on a horse holding a car battery.

The next day he drives the 120 miles to El Paso and goes in an Army Surplus Store where he buys a metal detector just like the one he used in Korea to search for unexploded ordinance.

He uses the metal detector at Old Man Lafferty's house and finds a Prince Albert can behind a loose brick beside the fireplace with two thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills, a few Silver Dollars, and some Mexican Pesos.

At Mr. Cunningham's place while using the metal detector he finds a mason jar buried under a bale of hay in the corner of the barn with a roll of bills with a rubber band around them that counts out to five thousand dollars, and a silver ring with a turquoise stone, some antique coins, and an old picture of a pretty lady.

Tom Mason's ranch has indoor plumbing, but the old privy is still standing out back and that's where Reece finds a tin can wrapped in a piece of leather buried in a corner with a thousand dollars in cash, some gold coins, and a billfold with some other man's identification in it.

When Reece goes in the bank and pays off the loan Dub looks up and says, “Where’d you get the money, Reece?”

Reece says, “My aunt and uncle in Waxahachie heard about Dad and sent it to me.”

Dub leans back in his chair, looks up at Reece with a deadpan expression, and says, “That’d be the aunt and uncle in Waxahachie that I’ve never heard of before, right?”

“I never told you about...?”

“Oh, stop right there, if you don’t want me to know maybe it’s best if I don’t know. Nobody got hurt, did they? I’m not going to be reading something unfortunate in the paper, am I?”

“No, no, it was Aunt Tilda and Uncle Reavis, I never mentioned them to you?”

Dub laughs, and says, “I’ll be outta here in a few minutes, meet you at the Café.”

Reece goes in the café and picks up the customer copy of the newspaper off the counter. Then he sits in a booth, orders a hamburger and a Coke, and opens the newspaper to the Obituaries section.

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