

Seth Feierstein
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Hold Tight the Reins

“Son, you’re gonna be in a world o’ hurt soon.” The man’s stink came in waves and John would have moved if he could have. “It’s gonna be a quick drop and a short stop for you.” He chuckled and walked to the back of his stage. His boots thudded on the newly cut cedar planks. Still laughing at his own joke the hangman fingered the lever that would bring John to that sudden stop.

The thick noose scratched and pinched John’s neck as he looked around the town square. He squinted through the sun’s bright light. High noon. He’d read great western heroes died at high noon. He laughed at the irony. Looking over the people of Love he saw their lack of it. There was no one there to plead his case to cry over him. Men with grime-covered faces broke from their toil in the nearby silver mines to watch the sheriff carry out what he told them was justice. Their shovels and picks rested on dusty shoulders. Women and children stopped their shopping and playing to come see the “bad man who done wrong be dealt with,” as John heard an old-timer getting a shave on the barber’s porch heard the day before. Women twirled their parasols, and fixed loose curls. Boys stopped kicking a ball to watch.

Hangings were town affairs. It was not different here in Love, Oklahoma than it was in Tupelo, Mississippi John thought. Folks there gathered around the square then too when someone was getting ready to swing, but his momma never allowed him to go. “It’s not right takin’ pleasure in someone else’s suffering.” She had said.

John wondered what curiosity possessed people to break their routine to bear witness to his end. And then he heard some of the more brazen speak their minds, “To the gallows with him. Hope he rots in hell! Cattle rustler. Thief. Murderer!” John flinched as each verbal attack hit him. He was none of what they called him yet he was, though he never meant to be. Unable to face their accusing eyes, he cast his down.

Sheriff Connelly huffed his way up the stairs. In his thick hands he held a rolled piece of paper. He tipped his hat to the masked hangman then to the gathering crowd. Unrolling the paper, he cleared his throat and began to read the litany of John’s wrongdoings. “John Augustus Miller, In accordance with Judge Frelance and the people and state of Love, Oklahoma you are hereby sentenced to death for the following crimes against man: racketeering, cattle theft, horse theft, petty theft, and murder. On this day of our Lord, April 18th, 1876 you are to be hanged. May God have mercy on your soul.” He up rolled the paper, and walked to John. “Have you any last words?”

John saw dark circles shading the Sheriff Connelly’s eyes. His wheezing breaths were wet and sweat trickled down his forehead. “No Sheriff Connelly. I do not believe I have anything to say to them folks out there. Many reckon I did wrong, but I only did what I had to, to survive. None of you would have done less. I made my piece with the Lord and I’ll leave it in his hands whether I enter the gates of Jubilee or am damned to an eternity of hellfire. I do have one request of you though, Sheriff. Take the letter from my pocket and make sure it gets sent to my momma back in Tupelo. She should know about my end and I don’t want it to come from no stranger’s mouth.”

Sheriff Connelly reached around John. He lifted his bound hands and took the letter from his pocket. "I'll mail it right off." He wheezed his way off the gallows and joined those at the front of the now large, but silent, crowd.

No carriage or rider rode through Main Street. The off-pitch clanking piano from the Gentlemen's Saloon was quiet. A hot wind swept through the street stirring up dust and loose scrub. A dog barked in the distance. John looked again at the bright sun then back at the crowd. Sheriff Connelly looked in the hangman's direction. He nodded once and looked down.

John felt like he was floating.

"That's it son. Hold onto the reins. Don't let go. Sit straight but stay relaxed."
"Like this daddy?" John smiled. He rode the brown and white speckled horse in circles his body jumping up and down to the rhythm of the horse's trot. He looked at his dad who smiled and encouraged him to keep hold the reins, to not go too fast.

The sun was setting behind the river birch trees, and clouds of may flies wisped around the corral. John kicked at the horse's sides spurring it to go faster. The horse shook it's head at the pressure to its side and surged forward. John lost his grip on the reins and fell backwards bumping off the horse's rump.

He fell forever.

The jerk of the sudden stop was unexpected after the fall. The wind was knocked out of him and he tried to take in more breaths but he couldn't. His eyes bulged and his head throbbed. The noose tightened.

John's dad grabbed him up and ran into the house. John remembered him yelling for his ma to bring water and a towel. "Oh my poor boy." John's dad said as he held

him. He murmured it, over and over like a mantra that would make John better. "Oh my poor boy." The feeling of being held was one of the few memories John could ever recall from that day.

In October of 1861 two officers knocked at their door. John answered. The soldiers asked to speak with his mom but she had gone to town. They gave him a letter and asked he give it to her. Curious, John opened and read it. His mom had to call for him for supper. "Before it gets cold John." She hollered. When he didn't come she wandered to the barn, back to the hayfield, and finally to the corral. She saw John riding the speckled horse. It had been two years since he had that accident. His mom sidled up to him. When she got him to stop the horse she saw his tears and the crumpled yellow envelope in his hand.

John pumped his legs as if to hop on the air, back up to the gallows platform. His gasps came slower and slower, his breath stuttered and his body, aching for air, convulsed. His face turned bright red, then purple, then red again.

The crowd soon lost any feeling of animosity or curiosity when John dropped and soon the town square was empty. Judge Frelance decreed John would be left hanging for the entirety of the day, as a reminder to all who entertained the idea of a life outside the law. Main Street was quiet. Those who walked did so with their heads down. None said hello, they just tarried on their way going their activities as if nothing were really wrong but they didn't seem quite right.

Sheriff Connelly finished his rounds, making sure all was well in his town. Love wasn't very big, nothing more than a cow-stop on many ranchers' cattle routes really. But those herders brought in money when they bought feed and gambled at the saloons.

Mumblings of silver in the nearby hills also brought in some folks, but most who set to making their fortunes by mining came back with little more than flecks in their pockets and dirt on their face.

The sheriff entered the jailhouse, a small building with two cells and an open area that served as a waiting room and office at the same time. He sat in his chair and tossed John's letter on his desk. He turned the yellow envelope over in his hands and read the address out loud, "Abby Miller, 104 Rider's Way, Tupelo, Mississippi."

"Why the hell not." Sheriff Connelly opened the letter, slow so he wouldn't rip the envelope. He took the parchment out and unfolded the pages. Leaning back on his chair, he propped his legs on his desk and squinted his eyes in the low light of the jailhouse.

Dear Ma,

I know I should have wrote you earlier but things got complicated. There were times when I'd be away from towns for months on end. I hope you ain't too sore at me, I know you always said I didn't love you because I never wrote but that just ain't true. You and Melody are my life and I'd have given you the world if I could. I bet that sweet sis of mine is all grown up now. It's been too long ma.

I wish I could have come home to you in Tupelo, but I just couldn't. I'm gonna come clear with you, Rufus wasn't exactly telling the truth when he said we'd be working cattle up and down the Texas, Oklahoma border. Sure we spent endless nights out on the range and I tell you those stars were never so clear as out in those black nights on the plains. I heard coyotes howling and snakes rattling away. It was beautiful ma.

Our boss though, he was a nasty man by the name of McAlister. I thought I was hired to do honest work but I found out McAlister's definition of that wasn't mine. Daddy always said honest hard work beat a liar's easy street method any ole day. McAlister's cattle were stolen from other ranchers, small-timers who moved west after the war to start something new for themselves. I found this out when Rufus got too drunk one night while we was playing cards. He never could hold his whisky, and he never could hold his tongue when soused either.

Daddy always taught me to do what was right, but I have done so much wrong mama, and I was afraid to leave because of what McAlister and his men would do to me. You should have seen what he'd done to one of his men accused of pocketing money on the side.

Every night I prayed to the Lord for a way out and in March that day came. Rufus got soused again, but we weren't in a saloon, we were out on the range. It was just the two of us. I took my chance ma. I hightailed it out on my horse. Rufus found me though outside of the town I'm writing to you from. He pulled his gun on me, said he had to take me to McAlister. I rushed him. Rufus always was bigger than me, even when we were little back in Tupelo. I didn't think I had a chance, but he'd gotten fat out here. We wrestled on the ground stirring up the dirt, spooking the horses.

Neither of us had good control of the gun when it went off. If it weren't turned his way I'd be in the ground where he is now, but that don't matter. I'll soon be joining him.

My words are startin' to fail me. I wished I could have been a better son. I shouldn't have left you and Melody back in Tupelo. I've got regrets ma, but there ain't

nothing I can do but say I love you. I'll read psalms in the morning and pray the Lord will forgive me.

John Augustus Miller

April 16th, 1876

Sheriff Connelly finished reading the letter. He took his feet off his desk and stroked his mustache. "Damn fool kid." He said to himself. "Ought to have stayed in Mississippi with your ma and sister."

A silver bell rang as the jailhouse door opened. A tall man in a black hat and black suit came in. His hair was dusted with gray and his skin was pale as though he'd never spent time on the saddle during the bright afternoons.

"Please don't get up sheriff. I just came to see you about that boy you hanged today, John Miller was it?"

Sheriff Connelly stood up. He slipped the letter into a desk drawer. "Yes that was his name. What of it? You a relative?"

The man smiled, "Oh no, just a former employer." He extended his hand, "McAlister is the name. I run a cattle outfit near these parts."

Sheriff Connelly paused. He eyed McAlister. "Pleased to meet you," he said.

"I was just wondering if he had any personal affects on him?"

"No, just his gun, some money, and anything else you'd expect to find on a cattle runner."

McAlister grinned, "Well then, be sure to send that boy's body back to Tupelo. He never stopped jawing about his home or his mother." McAlister put some coins down on the table and tipped his hat. "For your troubles."

"No need for that, we can take care of it." Connelly replied.

"For your troubles." McAlister said again. He leaned on the desk. "Miller was one of my men and while he also killed one of my men, I tend to take care of my own. So see to it that you have no trouble in doing this for me."

"I see. Thank you."

"Good day sheriff."

Sheriff Connelly nodded. McAlister left and through the window Connelly saw him climb into a black carriage. The driver, a grizzled, but lean man with dusty clothes and a tousled beard, whipped the horses and they jolted forward.

The sheriff stood in the doorway and watched the carriage ride off. He went back inside and took the letter from the drawer. He walked across the street to the general store and gave the letter to the clerk. "Mail this straightaway." He said plunking the coins McAlister gave him into the clerk's hand. "For your troubles." The sheriff was out the door before the clerk could protest he gave to much money.

A silver light glinted into the sheriff's eyes. He put his hand to his brow like a visor and closed his eyes to slits. Again the light caught his eyes. Sheriff Connelly searched up and down Main Street until he came to the town square. There, he saw John Augustus Miller swinging on the gallows. His boots clacked together and his spurs reflected the sun's last rays.