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Eight Coils

It was seven o'clock, and *Rough Riders* was about to come on. Harold leaned over in his recliner chair and felt for the remote on the end table. He pushed aside old mail, bills that said past due, peppy invitations for donations to police charities, and promises of pleasure-cruises. Finally unburying the remote, he pressed the power button. The TV clicked on. It flickered for a moment then lit the room in a white and gray glow. The Technicolor image of a cowboy holding tight to the reins of his horse appeared and giant gold letters faded in, "Rough Riders."

Harold echoed the narrator, "When the west was wild and in need of taming, when hope seemed distant like a glimmer of gold in a stream, when fear ran rampant through the streets as outlaws set the rules, only the Rough Riders, a group of courageous and brave men, could help! Tonight's Episode, 'Hang 'Em High!'"

Harold chuckled at the cheesy introduction. The corny plots and mediocre acting never deterred him from watching. When he was eight, he'd watch cross-legged, not three feet from the TV. He wore a cowboy hat too small for his head and two plastic six-shooters around his waste. It was the only time his dad had let him stay up late when he was little. When he found out the Western Channel on cable was airing reruns, he watched them daily. Westerns were his favorites—*Bonanza*, *The Lone Ranger*, *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Tombstone*. There were few

westerns Harold never saw no matter if it was good or bad. If it was a western, Harold watched it.

“You never did like variety, Harold,” Elinore had said. “I need variety, not the same hum-drum life I’ve been living with you.”

“Isn’t consistency good enough?”

“There is a fine difference between consistent and boring Harold.”

“Thirty years we’ve been married, doesn’t that count for anything?”

Elinore put her hand to his face. “You have been good, but you have no spirit. You just sit on that damned chair watching cowboy movies all day. You aren’t impetuous anymore. I need that and Steve can give it to me. Goodbye.”

No sunset farewell, no shooting at dawn, or hanging at the gallows, his ladylove pleading to the judge for mercy. Elinore simply left, a suitcase in one arm, divorce papers in the other, and two boxes full knick knacks at her feet she didn’t want to leave behind.

Memories of Elinore came to him without invitation. Anything triggered them, a street sign, a magazine cover, or a commercial that had two people holding hands. It didn’t matter that it was selling gloves; the romance in the actors’ eyes was enough to make him think of her. Thoughts of her lingered like the phantom feeling an amputee had.

“Screw her.” Harold turned the volume up; gunshots rang out from Johnny’s Colt .44. Indians wearing tan moccasins whooped and shot arrows from behind a plastic oak tree, its shiny leaves reflecting the studio light.

Without veering his sight from the TV, Harold opened a pizza box on the end table, spilling off more mail and a picture of him and Elinore at his boss' Christmas party. They were smiling and wearing red and green matching sweaters with images of holly sewn onto them. Harold still had a full head of hair and there were only hints of gray. Elinore wore big Harry Carey glasses, slightly tinted and giant gold-hoop earrings. She had taken the frame with her when she left. The picture fell to the floor and slid towards the open window to Harold's third floor apartment.

Harold took a bite from the stale pizza slice. Crumbs fell onto his tank top and boxers. The crust was hard. The cheese was cold and the sauce tasted tangy-sour. He chewed several times before swallowing—his jaw sore from the effort. He waited a moment then had another bite.

Outside, a couple yelled. They fought over kids or drugs. Harold didn't know or care. Sirens from a police car, nope an ambulance, sped down Saint Paul Street. Had the weather been cooler he would have closed the window, but Maryland weather was always fickle, and while it was near the end of September, they were in the middle of a heat wave. Harold simply turned up the volume. Clopping hooves and shouts of "Hyah, hyah!" as cowboys whipped their horses, urging them to go faster, drowned out the city.

"Who's your favorite character in *Rough Riders*?" Harold's mom asked as she tucked him in.

"Sheriff McCalister! He don't take no guff from them varmints," Harold said, mimicking the show's dialogue.

“That’s right. The Sheriff doesn’t put up with those outlaws.” She smiled and kissed his forehead. “Goodnight my little cowboy,” she said before turning off the light.

Harold said goodnight. When his mom shut the door he jumped off his bed, grabbed a flashlight and the dime novel his Uncle Gary had bought him when he went to Tombstone, Arizona. The book was thin, not more than fifty pages. The paper and cover were brown, and it was bound with string. The title, printed in bold, black ink, was “Buffalo Bill and the Dakota Kid.” Harold lay on his stomach, blanket over his head and read the book, the soft yellow glow of the flashlight filtering through the fabric.

Harold took a piss during the commercial break. When he came back Sheriff McCalister was speaking to his men about Johnny Miller, cattle rustler and murderous outlaw who preyed on the decent folk in and around Jubilee. “We’ll hang him at noon tomorrow, and there he’ll stay as an example of what happens to law breakers.” The sheriff said. The Rough Riders had finally caught Johnny when they cornered him and his “Injun” cohorts in Dead Man’s Canyon. “We’ll hang him alright, hang him high!” Deputy Cody said; the rest of the Rough Riders nodded their heads, some saying, “Dang straight.”

“Hang him high,” Harold said. On his lap he fiddled with the cord of rope. It was thick and rough to the touch. Fibers came off when he slid his hand down its length. He brought it up and looped it, forming a “U.” He took one length and, as he watched the show, began wrapping the one side around the other. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight times he wrapped one length around the loop. He pulled the rope, making sure the coils were tight, and then tied it off. He put his arm through the loop and pulled.

The coiled cord came down, closing in tight around his arm. He loosened the hangman's noose, took his arm out and continued to watch the show.

Harold had bought the rope from Home Depot last week. The salesman who assisted Harold asked what he'd use it for. Harold said he needed to hang some things, "You know, stuff." The salesperson smiled and nodded, pointed to where the rope was and left to help another customer. Harold measured out the length, five feet for the drop, and an additional three to make the noose. He went with nine feet just to be sure. Having extra wouldn't hurt, having too little might.

Harold first learned to tie a noose in fourth grade. Mr. Abramsohn, an Amish man, who drove a beat up Chevy to school instead of a horse and carriage, and who had preserved deer babies in jars of formaldehyde in his cabinet behind his desk, taught the class to make a noose one day. He was tall, had curly black and gray hair although he was balding, and a long beard that almost made him look like Santa Claus. He gave students a piece of thread over a foot long, and he taught them that while eight coils were good enough, some nooses had thirteen. Harold cut the rope, paid for it at the cashier, and went home. It was getting late and nearly time for *Rough Riders* to be on.

Every day he played with the rope, made and unmade a noose. He'd sit on the end of his bed after he made it and stare through the tan loop. And every day he'd throw the noose to the floor, put his hands over his face, and sob until he fell asleep.

Harold was retired. He lived off his pension from the brick factory and he never went out except to buy food. He loafed around in his one floor apartment in a row house, rarely showered, always wore the same stained tank top and plaid boxers, a bathrobe if it was cold, and every night at seven o'clock he turned on the television to watch *Rough Riders*.

The whole town had come to see Johnny Miller hang. He had killed young Billy's dad in a bar fight, ravaged young Christine, and stole off with over two thousand dollars from the First Bank of Jubilee. Johnny was defiant even at his own execution. He spat curses at all the people who came to see him hang. He had yellowed teeth and the beginnings of a beard that made his face look dirty. His clothes were dusty and he had a sweat stained kerchief tied around his neck.

"Son, you're gonna be in a world o' hurt soon. It's gonna be a quick drop and a short stop for you." The hangman chuckled and walked to the back of his stage, his boots thudding on the newly cut cedar planks. Still laughing at his own joke, the hangman fingered the lever that would bring Johnny Miller to that sudden stop.

Sheriff McCalister walked up the gallows and tipped his hat to the crowd. He unfurled a rolled up document and began reading, "John Augustus Miller, in accordance with Judge Frelance and the people of Jubilee and the state of Oklahoma, you are hereby sentenced to death for the following crimes against man: cattle theft, horse theft, rape, and murder. On this day of our Lord, April 18, 1876 you are to be hanged. May God have mercy on your soul." He rolled up the paper and walked to Johnny. "Have you any last words?"

“Only a few sheriff. I’ll see you all in hell!” Johnny laughed, spitting at the crowd. Sheriff McCalister shook his head. He signaled to the hangman who pulled the lever. With a loud creak the trapdoor fell and Johnny went with it. The camera panned up, showing the rope, with no slack, twist and turn as Johnny struggled. The crowd shuddered, all anger seeping out of them as they witnessed Johnny’s grotesque end.

“A short drop to a quick stop and it’s over,” Harold said. He walked to his window; saw the fallen picture of him and Elinore. Swooping his arm down, he picked it up. He touched Elinore’s face with his index finger. “Screw you,” he said, tossing it down. Harold snatched up the rope from the recliner. He tied one end to the balcony and put the noose around his neck. There was four feet of rope between the noose and the knot that tied it to the rail. Harold grabbed hold of the railing tight. His knuckles blanched and the metal creaked. He took two quick breaths, in out, in out, and put one leg over the railing, followed by the other.

He sat for a moment on the balcony, facing busy Saint Paul Street. He looked at the couple yelling below. The woman held a baby, and the man threw his arms in the air. She shoved him; he shoved her; the baby cried. A city bus’ air breaks hissed when it stopped at the light, obscuring Harold’s view of the couple. A man wearing no shirt, shaking his head, and talking to no one around him, walked into the street, paying no mind to the oncoming traffic. He wobbled as he walked and made it to the sidewalk right before a Honda almost clipped him. Harold turned his head to his apartment illuminated only by the white gray glow of the TV. Empty take out boxes littered the table and unread mail was strewn about the floor.

He faced the street again, took on more breath and said, “Screw all of you.” Harold pushed off the railing. Harold smiled because for a moment he felt like he was floating. Then the jerk of the sudden stop came. The wind was knocked out of him and Harold tried to take in more breaths, but he couldn’t as the noose tightened around his neck. His eyes bulged and his head throbbed. Harold struggled, he tried putting his fingers in between the rope and his neck, but the noose just tightened.

He pumped his legs as if to hop on the air, back up to his balcony. One of his knee-high socks kicked loose from his foot and fell to the sidewalk below. The other sock scrunched up around his ankle. Harold’s gasps came slower and slower, his breath stuttered, and his body, aching for air, convulsed. His face turned bright red, then purple, red again then pale white. He felt his bowels release and he pissed himself. Shit and piss mixed together as it ran down his leg, dripping off his foot.

Harold’s legs stopped jerking, his arms dangled at his side. He stared across the street with eyes that had no shine behind them. His tongue hung out of his mouth as if he were trying to touch the rope around his neck with it. Wisps of his gray hair blew in the hot September breeze.

The theme music to *Rough Riders* played to the dark, empty apartment. Harold’s neighbor from the floor below banged on his door. She yelled for him to turn the TV down or she’d call the cops. The credits continued rolling, and in the background was the shadowed silhouette of Johnny Miller hanging on the gallows, his spurs reflecting the sun’s last rays.