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Coiled

It was seven o'clock, and *Rough Riders* was about to start. Harold sat in his aged, olive recliner. He leaned over and began feeling through the piles of unopened mail for the remote control 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. Unburying the remote, he pressed the power button. The TV flickered for a moment then lit the room in a white and gray glow. The Technicolor image of a cowboy appeared; he held tight the reins to his horse and rode towards the setting sun leaving a cloud of dust in his wake. Giant gold letters faded in, "Rough Riders."

His voice booming, Harold echoed the narrator, "When the west was wild and in need of taming, when hope seemed distant like the glimmer of a gold nugget in a stream," Harold's voice died to a murmur, the strength in his voice faded and his lips barely moved as he continued introducing the show, "when fear ran rampant through the streets and outlaws set the rules, only the Rough Riders, a group of courageous and brave men, could help!"

"Tonight's Episode," the narrator said, "'Hang 'Em High!'"

The first western Harold saw *Apache Rose*, a Roy Rogers film. He was eight and had gone with his father. He was awestruck by the bucking horses, hardened cowboys blazing their guns at their enemies, and always getting the gal. When his parents bought their first TV—a heavy gray box with a small screen that hummed when turned on as if

getting ready to introduce the evening's entertainment—Harold would sit cross-legged not three feet from the screen, eagerly waiting for his favorite shows to come on, all westerns. *The Riflemen*, *Gunsmoke*, and *Wagontrain*, Harold watched them all, but *Rough Riders* was his favorite because it was grittier than the others. Villains rarely got away and it showed the harshness of the wild west—deranged Indians scalping innocent settlers, banditos raping and pillaging, and the land. Of all the villains shown in *Rough Riders* mother earth was the meanest. Drought, floods, twisters and disease, it seemed to Harold that her harshness drove men to evil, and only the Rough Riders, a band of four lawmen, could make things right. Every episode they wrangled in those crazed individuals or stopped another natural disaster with nails and hammers, ploughs and shovels. When Harold watched *Rough Riders* he always wore a cowboy hat that was too small for his head and two plastic six-shooters around his waist.

Dusty trails, gunfights at high noon, outlaws and Indians fighting over cattle, land, love, or money these were the things that attracted young Harold to westerns—*Bonanza*, *The Lone Ranger*, *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Tombstone*—over the years he had watched them all. If it was a western, Harold watched it. But one of his favorite scenes came not from *Rough Riders* but from *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly*. It was near the end of the movie, Harold marveled at the repeating guitar and piano echoing in the vast graveyard as Tuco ran from grave to grave, driven by greed, searching for the tombstone of the Unknown Soldier that held two hundred thousand dollars in gold. The landscape of the circular graveyard, where thousands of bodies lay in the dry earth, was bleak. In the middle a vast expanse of nothing but dried crusted earth, but outside the circle of death were green fields, trees and snowcapped

mountains. Life and death, bordered only by a loose fence of stone markers, had made Harold cry.

“Who’s your favorite character in *Rough Riders*?” Harold’s mom asked him once as she tucked him in.

“Sheriff McCallister! He don’t take no guff from them varmints,” Harold said, mimicking the show’s dialogue.

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 soft yellow glow of the flashlight filtering through the fabric.

Almost thirteen years ago, back in the spring of 1992, Harold’s boss told him that the new owners of the dockyard were making cutbacks and he was to be let go just two years shy of his planned retirement. “At least you’ll get your pension,” his boss had said.

“Yeah, but you know they won’t give me all. How will I be able to support Elinore?” Harold left the only job he had known for the last twenty-eight years carrying a cardboard box in his arms filled with pictures, some papers and a browning Wandering Jew that had hung from his office ceiling.

For the first few months Harold tried to be optimistic. He and Elinore clipped want ads seeking new managers out of the newspaper, and he called old friends to see if they could set him up with an interview or give him a lead on a job—any job it didn’t matter. Despite all his efforts, Harold couldn’t find work. Of the few interviews he was

able to get, the person in front of him often smirked when he walked in. Harold knew his age was a factor, and when they looked over his resume and saw his lack of education, it didn't matter how much experience he had. Being sixty-three and holding only a high school diploma counted more against him than his twenty-nine years of experience. When Harold started at the dockyard it didn't take him long to get promoted. Now however, there were people out there who were younger and more educated.

Harold and his wife lived meagerly off his pension. They sold their house and moved to an apartment. Harold loafed around the apartment. He didn't know what to do with himself. He rarely showered, always wore the same stained gray t-shirt and matching sweatpants, a bathrobe if it was cold, and every night at seven o'clock he turned on the television to watch re-runs of *Rough Riders*. He never left home even with Elinore unless she pleaded with him. Elinore worked as a house cleaner for a while, cleaning the two tenants' in the apartments below for fifty dollars a week, but it wasn't enough.

The day Elinore left, Harold was watching *High Plains Drifter*. The mysterious stranger had just killed three gunslingers in the barbershop and as he walked down the dusty street, the townsfolk staring at him and at the three men he killed, Callie, a hot-tempered blonde, bumped into him. "Watch where you're going!" she yelled.

"Harold we need to talk." Elinore said standing between him and the TV. It sounded as if she'd been crying but Harold acted as if he didn't notice. She had been crying a lot the last few weeks. Often time her sobs would wake him. Harold wouldn't move, never put his arm around her to comfort her. He only stared at the ceiling, clenching his jaw.

The stranger squinted and smiled, “If you wanted to get acquainted why didn’t you just say so.”

“I’m leaving you Harold. I think I’ve been a good wife, I’ve tried to help you, but I can’t take it anymore. All you do is sit in front of that damn TV.”

Harold looked at Elinore. As tears ran down her cheeks, her glasses slipped down the bridge of her nose. “I tried to find work, to keep busy, to be happy. I really I did, but they took it all away. No one wants to hire an old man,” Harold said, his voice gravelly as if he hadn’t spoken for days.

Callie burst out, her voice speeding along with her curse, “Acquainted? Why you’d be amusing if you weren’t so pathetic.” The stranger simply laughed and dragged her to the barn. Callie and scream and kicked all the way but none of the townsfolk stopped the stranger, not even Callie’s husband.

“You tried, but you also gave up. I don’t see the man I married. I only see a lump. You’ve been good to me, but you’ve lost your spirit and I won’t be with a man who can’t live. I love you Harold.”

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 at her feet filled with knick-knacks she didn’t want to leave behind, like the wooden jewelry box Harold made her for their first anniversary. Elinore had shut the door on their marriage of thirty-four years. Memories of Elinore came to him without invitation. Whenever he watched his shows, he imagined him the heroic cowboy coming to rescue, Elinore, the besieged settler. If only he could act like

that. Instead Harold languished in his recliner, thoughts of Elinore lingering like the phantom feeling an amputee had.

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. Sounds of ricocheting bullets filled his ears. The Wild West drowned Harold's sorrows one show and movie at a time.

Harold took a bite from the stale pizza slice. Crumbs fell onto chest. 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. Police car sirens were more staccato, like a mother harping at her child to get off the road, while an ambulance siren was slow and droning as if announcing a precious package was on board and everyone ought to make way. Had it been cooler outside Harold would have closed the giant bay windows that lead out to the balcony overlooking the street, 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.

Without veering his sight from the TV Harold opened the pizza box on the end table, spilling off more mail and a picture of him and Elinore at his boss' Christmas party. It was 1976. Harold had just been promoted to foreman the week before. He and Elinore 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 amidst the blonde. Elinore wore big Harry Carey glasses, slightly tinted, and giant gold-hoop earrings. The picture fell to the floor and slid towards the open window to Harold's third floor apartment.

During the commercial break Harold took a piss. He then went into his room and came back with a length of gray rope. Sheriff McCallister 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," he said.

"Hang him high," Harold said, echoing the deputy. On his lap he fiddled with the 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 then took one length and, as he watched the show, began wrapping 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 all eight 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. The salesman who assisted him asked what he'd be using the rope for. "I need it to hang some things, you know, stuff," Harold said. The salesperson looked at Harold as if he was crazy, then smiled and

nodded. He 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 rope wouldn't hurt he thought. 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.

In fourth grade Mr. Abramsohn, a Mennonite 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 the cabinet behind his desk, taught Harold and his classmates to make a noose. Mr. Abramsohn was tall, had wavy black and gray hair although he was balding, and a long, bushy beard that made him look almost like Santa Claus. Mr. Abramsohn had given the class a piece of thread over a foot long. He told them to take one end, make a loop and hold it between their thumbs and forefingers then take one length and wrap it around the loop eight times. When everyone had finished, Mr. Abramsohn had them put their fingers through the nooses they made and pull the thread. Harold pulled hard, the noose tightened around his index finger turning the tip purple.

Every day Harold played with his rope. He'd sit on the end of his bed, make and unmake a noose and stare through the loop. And every day he'd throw the noose to the floor, put his hands over his face, sob Elinore's name and asking, "Why did you have to leave me Elley?" over and over.

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 the people who came to see him hang. He had yellowed teeth and the

beginnings of a blonde beard that made his face look even dirtier than it already was. His clothes were dusty and he had a red, 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 McCallister 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 McCallister shook his head. He signaled to the hangman who pulled the lever. The trapdoor creaked loudly as it fell and in slow motion Johnny fell with it. The camera panned up showing the rope twisting and turning as Johnny struggled. The crowd shuddered; all anger seeped out of them as they witnessed Johnny’s grotesque end.

“A short drop to a quick stop and it’s over,” Harold said. He got up and walked to the open window. Seeing the fallen picture of him and Elinore, he swooped his arm down to pick it up. Harold touched Elinore with his finger. His face became soft for a moment, his eyes glossy. Then he scowled and dropped the photograph. It fell like a feather, rocking back and forth, and when it landed on the scuffed wooden floor it slid

under Harold's recliner, disappearing. Harold snatched his rope. He climbed out onto the balcony. A hot wind blew down the street. Blonde-gray wisps of Harold's hair fluttered in the breeze. The sun, a deep orange, was setting and had almost disappeared behind the buildings across the street from Harold's apartment. The sky was painted bands of blue, purple, orange and yellow. Harold tied one end of the rope to the metal railing, and put his head through the noose. He 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.

Harold sat for a moment on the balcony, facing busy Saint Paul Street. He looked at the couple below who were still yelling. 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 TV's glow. Empty take out boxes littered the table and unread mail was strewn about the floor. The theme music to *Rough Riders* played to the dark, empty living room. Harold's neighbor from the floor below banged on his door. She yelled at him to turn down the volume 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.