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Coiled

In fourth grade Mr. Abramsohn, a Mennonite man who drove a beat up Chevy pick-up 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. He had given each student 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 the students put their fingers through the nooses they made and pull the thread to see if they worked. Harold pulled hard, the noose tightened around his index finger turning the tip purple.

During the commercial break Harold took a piss. He went into his room and came back with a length of gray rope. He had bought the rope from Home Depot. The salesman who assisted him asked what he'd be using the it for. "I need it to hang some things, you know, stuff," Harold said. The salesperson looked at him as if he was crazy, then simply smiled and nodded. He pointed to where the rope was and quickly left to help another customer. Harold measured out the length, nine feet for the drop, and an additional four to make the noose. Thirteen feet, an unlucky number for an unlucky deed

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.

Sheriff McCallister spoke 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, 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. Long years at the docks kept his knot tying skills fresh. 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.

The day Elinore left, Harold was watching *High Plains Drifter*. The mysterious stranger had just killed three gunslingers in the barbershop. As he walked down the dusty street, the townsfolk staring at him and at the bodies of 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 sobbing would wake him, but he never moved, never even 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,” Elinore said, “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,” he said, “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 screamed and kicked all the way but none of the townsfolk stopped the stranger, not even Callie’s husband.

“You tried, but you gave up. I don’t see the man I married. I only see a lump. I love you Harold, but I won’t be with someone who won’t live.”

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.

After she'd left memories of Elinore came to Harold without invitation. Whenever he watched his shows, he imagined himself the heroic cowboy coming to rescue, Elinore, the besieged settler from savage bandits. If only he was as brave as those heroes of the west. Instead Harold languished in his recliner, thoughts of Elinore lingering like the phantom feeling an amputee had.

Harold had become the lump Elinore had called him ever since he was laid off from the dockyard. He was surprised it took her so long to leave him really. She had put up with his moping and self-pity for thirteen years. It's not that Harold was a lazy man. He had given his heart to his job, and they spit on him after twenty- nine years of hard work.

For the first few months Harold remained optimistic. He and Elinore clipped want ads out of the newspaper for manager positions, 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 people giving the interview often smirked when they saw how old he was. 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 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 where Harold did little but loaf. He rarely showered, always wore the same stained gray t-shirt and matching sweatpants, a bathrobe and slippers 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 odd jobs around the new neighborhood but Harold thought it wasn't very safe. Harold had asked her to stop working, to stop moving, to become as stagnant as he was. Elinore couldn't do what he asked. She moved on while he stayed mired in the muck of his own sadness.

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.

On a Saturday afternoon in March, not two months since Elley had left him, Harold came home with an armful of groceries. He walked up the stairs to his building. A small boy leaned against the railing, "Hey mister do you need a hand?" Harold shook his head no, put one bag down and fished through his pockets for his keys. He opened the door and knelt down to pick the bag up, then disappeared into the dark hallway of the building. Without a car, and not wanting to pay for a taxi, Harold had to make several trips to the store that week and every time he came home the little boy was at the door. Again and again he asked if Harold needed help and always Harold never said a word, he only shook his head no.

Although spring had started, Baltimore had gotten an inordinate amount of snow the previous night. Harold, in need of more groceries braved the weather. At least it would be his last trip for the month. On the sidewalk, he was careful to avoid any ice patches. When he reached his building the little boy, dressed in a puffy blue winter coat, and a navy wool hat, only his brown face and hands sticking visible, stood at the bottom of the stairs. He rolled a ball of snow between his hands and tossed it from one hand to the next. Harold took each step, one at a time. When he got to the top he put a bag down and fished for his keys like he always did. As he searched his pockets the paper bag tumbled off the stairs, the contents spilling out. Two cans of beans, a package of hotdogs, and buns rolled down the stairs.

“I got it!” The boy dropped his snowball and raced after the rolling cans as they clanged and clanked down the stairs onto the sidewalk, off the curb, into a deep puddle of dirty water and slush. “Here you go mister. I got your buns too,” the boy said holding up the can and plastic bag.

Harold had grabbed the hotdogs off the ground, the buns and cans from the kid and stuffed them into another bag. “Thank you,” he said, his voice a mutter.

“I can help you with your bags if you want mister.”

“Harold.”

“What?”

“Harold,” he spoke up, “you can call me Harold. Thanks for the help.” Harold shoved a bag into the kid’s arms and unlocked the door. “Come on then.” He said and went into the dark hallway of the buildings foyer.

Inside his apartment, Harold told the kid to have a seat and that he'd make them both some hot cocoa. "What's your name kid?"

"Alonso," he said taking his coat off. "Your apartment is almost as big as ours Harold, and I like these posters." Alonso pointed to two posters hung on the wall, both yellowing at the edges and with several pinholes in the corners. One was an original release poster for *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly* and the other was of Harold's favorite western show, *Rough Riders*.

Harold came from the kitchen with two steaming mugs. "Careful. It's hot," he said as he gave the mug with Dudley Do-Right imprinted on it to Alonso. Harold's mug had a black and white picture of The Duke.

"I've had those posters a long time. I have more in the bedroom and along the hallway. Always wanted to frame them but never could afford to." Harold stirred his cocoa, mixing the marshmallows.

"I like westerns too. My mom hates them though. Too violent she says, and mean against women."

Harold laughed, "Yeah my wife didn't care much for them either."

"Oh? Where is Mrs. Harold?"

"Elinore, her name is Elinore, and she left."

"Oh," was all Alonso said.

As scowl replaced the smile on Harold's wrinkled face. He put his mug down and walked to the door, opening it. "Thank you for the help Alonso, but it's time for you to go."

Alonso scratched his head, his fingers pushing aside the short curls of his dark hair to get to the itch. He got up and grabbed his coat. "But I'm not done with my hot chocolate. Can I at least finish it," the boy pleaded, his brown eyes as big as a baby deer's.

"Just bring the mug back tomorrow. Go on now, git."

Harold closed the door behind Alonso and locked it. He sat down on his recliner and put his hand to his forehead. He was stern but the boy shouldn't have brought up Elinore. "How could he have known," he said to himself. "He's just a stinkin' kid."

That next afternoon a soft tapping sounded on Harold's door. Alonso stood there, mug in one hand and two videotapes in the other. "I brought your mug back, and these." He lifted up the tapes. They were both westerns, *El Dorado*, and *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. "I figured we could maybe watch them seeing as how we both like westerns."

Harold paused at first. He hadn't had any company since yesterday and before that since Elinore had left. He had gotten accustomed to being alone, being a slob, wearing the same clothes for days on end. Only when he had to get something from the store would Harold attempt to clean up. "Sure," Harold said, "that might be nice." Harold took the mug and movies from Alonso and ushered the boy inside.

"I even brought some popcorn," Alonso said. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded bag of Pop Secret microwave popcorn.

Alonso sat on the floor and ate popcorn poured onto a paper towel. Harold sat in his recliner and ate from the bag, the flap of loose skin that hung from his chin jiggling as he chewed. He leaned over and began feeling through 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.

They watched *The Outlaw Josey Wales* first. Harold always liked this film. It was about revenge. Clint Eastwood as Josey did a fine job, Harold thought, correcting the wrongs done to him, his family, and his friends. Harold longed to go to the places in the movie, the green woods of the Missouri Ozarks, and the high dry plains of Utah. But couldn't afford to go. Instead he just pretended he was there whenever he watched a western.

After the movie, Harold looked at his watch. It was almost 7 o'clock. "Time for *Rough Riders* Alonso. We'll have to watch the other movie another time."

"Never heard of *Rough Riders*."

"Well then, you're in for a treat. Go tell your momma where you are though, don't want her getting worried."

Alonso scampered out the apartment and ran down the stairs then came back up just as quick. "My mom says I can stay but only for the show."

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. Alonso laughed as he watched Harold puff out his chest, "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 deflated and his voice died to a murmur, the strength 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!””

A one-street town with two rows of buildings: a howling dog wanders across the road, a crow picks at the ground then takes off in flight as a man on a horse charges the horizon. He whips the flanks of his horse, urging it to go faster. A cloud of dust trails beating hooves. “Hyah!” the cowboy yells as he speeds through the quiet town. Calm resumes for a moment, but then the sound of more hooves is heard. Four cowboys all wearing badges and riding black steeds appear on screen. Ominous music plays, and Harold knows that the fleeing man will be receiving the swift and harsh justice of the west.

“Who’s your favorite Harold?” Alonso asked.

“Sheriff McCallister. He don’t take no guff from them varmints,” Harold said, mimicking the way the actors talked.

Alonso laughed. Harold smiled too. It had been so long he thought he almost forgot how.

After the show Alonso left. Harold turned on the lights and went to his bedroom. The happiness he felt from watching *Rough Riders* with Alonso soon faded as the emptiness of his apartment became all too apparent. Harold missed the smells of Elinore’s cooking, heavy with garlic and onions. No matter how thick the scent of simmering vegetables got in the apartment, she always smelled of sweet violets. Harold grabbed the noose from under the bed. Every day he 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.

"So why did she leave Harold?" Alonso asked one Saturday after the two of them returned from the Charles Theatre where they were having a "Western Weekend." It was early May. Spring had hit Baltimore full on the head. The air was warm but cool breezes swept down the streets. Cherry blossoms sprouted filling the air with a sweet heady scent. Robins, returning from their winter haunts twittered and flew around looking for materials for their nests. The boy took a bite out of his ham and turkey sandwich, the lettuce crunched as he bit down, and a gob of mustard fell onto his plate.

"I don't know. Maybe I hurt her I guess. Not physically though, but here." Harold put his liver spotted hand to his chest.

"My dad left too, when I was younger. Mom says he was no good, always drinkin' and always out of work. She says we're better off."

"Yeah? What do you think?"

"I don't know, I think so. I was too young to really remember. What about you? Are you better off without your wife?"

Harold looked at Alonso. "Now why you have to go and ask a question like that?" He slammed his hand down on the folding card table that served as the dinner table.

"I'm sorry Harold." Alonso said, his voice quiet.

"No it's me who should be sorry. I ought not to be sore at you Alonso. You're a good kid. No, to answer your question, I'm not better off. There isn't a goddang day I don't miss her."

“You know you talk like the cowboys on the TV. You sure you’re from Baltimore?” Alonso laughed. Harold hadn’t realized he’d started to talk like the cowboys he’d been watching for so long. He joined the boy, his aged low raspy laugh mingling with the high-pitched laugh of youth.

Alonso continued to visit Harold whenever he could. The old man enjoyed the boy’s company. In the summer after school had let out, Alonso went to Harold’s almost every day. When the city had grown hot and the air was as thick as the foam on a glass of Guinness it was hard to move, but on a cooler evening Harold taught Alonso how to make a Hangman’s noose. The two practiced with his mom’s purple yarn she used for knitting.

“You be careful with that,” Harold said as Alonso left. “No trapping animals or torturing your ma or sister.” Harold waved the boy off for the evening. It wasn’t until two weeks later that Harold saw Alonso again.

“My mom says I can’t visit you anymore.” Alonso stood in the hallway. Harold saw him look back towards the stairs and he saw a shadow, the arms resting on black transparent hips. “It’s not your fault Harold, she just thinks I shouldn’t be spending so much time with you is all.”

“I, I understand I guess. If you need anything just let me know ki . . . Alonso.”

Harold was alone again. He’d gone back to his routine, barely going out, rarely showering and wearing the same threadbare clothes day to day. Alonso had been his link to the good things, like Elinore before him, and somehow he’d manage to even screw that up. There were times when he fingered his phone and almost dialed Elinore’s sister’s number where she was staying, but he always hung up. He was scared. He wanted

Elinore back, but the fear of her rejecting him instead of coming back to him with arms extended always stopped his dialing.

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. Clipping 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.

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. 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.

Alonso banged on Harold's door. "Harold! Harold, you gotta turn down the TV. My mom says she's gonna call the cops if you don't turn it down. Harold can you hear me? You gotta turn it down."

The banging on his door startled him. Harold almost let go of the railing. He almost took that sudden drop. His heart raced and his face lost its color. Sweat started to bead on his forehead. When he heard Alonso's voice he carefully climbed back onto his balcony. He looked at the ground far below him. The couple still argued and cars sped by. No one would have noticed him drop. He took the noose from around his neck and let go. When it dropped its length the jerk rattled the balcony's railing. The noose dangled in the wind.

Harold went to the door and opened it a crack. There stood Alonso, the boy who helped him with his groceries, the boy who liked westerns as much as Harold. He wore a red and white striped shirt and jeans with kneeholes.

"Harold can you turn the volume down on your television? My mom is going crazy.

Harold turned to his TV then back to Alonso. "Yeah, sorry about that kid. I'll turn it down."

"You ok Harold? You need some company?"

"No, no. I'll be all right, just not feeling well. Thanks though." Harold said, scratching the back of his neck.

"Can I come up tomorrow?"

“Tomorrow?”

Alonso made his hands look like guns, “Yeah for the *Rough Riders* marathon. Don’t you remember? You’d been planning on watching the marathon since the network announced it in June. And don’t worry about my mom; I finally convinced her you didn’t mean any wrong when you taught me to tie a noose. I just said it was just fun and games. I had to beg, but she said I could come over.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harold stuttered, “I’ll see you then.”

Alonso said goodbye and skipped down the narrow stairs. Harold shut the door and turned off the TV just as Wyatt Earp slammed a pistol against a crooked card dealer’s face.

Harold looked for the picture he had dropped. He saw the corner of it under his chair. He bent down, his back cracking as he did so, and picked it up. Grabbing the phone he dialed Elinore’s sister. “Chelsea? Yeah it’s me, can I talk to her? What do you mean you don’t think it would be a good idea? She’s my wife; I never signed those papers. Now please let me talk to her.” Harold waited as Chelsea went to get her sister. He hummed the theme song to *Bonanza* as he waited.

“Elinore? I-I just wanted to say I miss you. And I wanted to ask you if we could meet, and maybe talk.” Harold bit his lip. He could hear her breathing, but she didn’t say anything for what seemed like forever. The silence was unbearable. Harold stood on his toes, his excitement rising. He hadn’t spoken to Elinore since she left. Finally, his tension broke with her answer. “You will? Great! I’ll meet you in a half-hour.”

A smile on his face, Harold hung up the phone. He went to the bathroom and turned on the shower. It had been almost three days since his last shower and he didn’t

want to meet Elinore smelling like a rotting buffalo carcass. As he let the water warm, he went to the balcony and again looked out. The noose still hung to the railing, and the arguing couple had apparently moved on. Harold went to his bedroom and grabbed the old Swiss Army knife his dad had given him and climbed onto the balcony. In three strokes he cut the noose free of the railing. It fell to the ground, the tail of the rope streaming behind it, and landed almost in a neatly coiled pile. Harold went back inside and got ready to meet his wife.