

Wide Open

Marsha Armstrong

“Girl, do you really think you’re big enough to put me into that cell?” She asked, crooking her thumb like a hitchhiker at the dark steel bars behind her.

I leaned across the short space between our chairs, ran a paper match over the rough edge of the purple matchbook and lit the end of her unfiltered cigarette. She drew the smoke deep into her lungs and then blew it into my face.

“I don’t have to, I’m just here to watch Jim while he does it,” I replied, shaking out the match. The jailer, Jim, leaned on the wall behind me, close to the narrow door leading back into the hallway that connected the women’s section of the jail to the sheriff and deputies’ offices.

The woman placed her elbows on her knees, rested her chin in one manacled hand, closed her eyes, and savored the smoke.

Tanned russet as the hides of the Herefords, The woman pushed through the sage and the greasewood into the desert every spring and rounded up every fall. She might have weighed in at around 120 pounds – maybe, a reed-thin body of hard muscle, sinew, and bone where worry and work had whittled wrinkles running deep at the corners of her mouth. But I saw that the lines near her eyes curved upward, and for a moment I caught sight of her leaning on a saddle horn, reins loose in her hand, lifting the hat from her head and wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her arm, smiling up into the wide open blue desert sky.

The Great American Desert begins on the southern slopes of central and eastern Oregon and runs all the way to Mexico. On its northern border the ponderosa pine disappear into sagebrush and lava rock. The streams that don’t drain into the Deschutes, the Malheur, the John Day, or the Snake run their course out into the flats of Lake, Harney and Malheur counties. This inland flow creates large pockets of dusty white or dirty black, sour alkali where only greasewood and salt grass grow. Some patches of ground near the creeks and along the slow river banks remain sweet enough for grass hay, but the hardy people who run cattle in that harsh open country also rely on rare sprinkles of rain to green up the wild brush and sparse, coarse grass of the desert floor. Steens Mountain and the Pueblo Mountains rise high and welcoming from an otherwise flat horizon. Deep canyons and steep rocky draws offer injury or death for unsuspecting hikers and riders unfamiliar with the rugged terrain. The woman who now sat across from me came out of a clan of proud Texans who had settled near the Nevada line right after the Civil War. They were as hard and unchanging as the land.

I heard Jim leave the doorway. He returned with two heavy white mugs of black coffee and sat them on the oak interview table next to me before taking up his spot by the door. The woman opened her eyes, wiped at the dried blood under her nose and nodded at me as I handed her a cup.

“Did I put him in the hospital?” she asked with a sideways half grin.

“Nope.”

“Shit.”

“Don’t know who’s luckiest, him or you. Since he limped home tonight you might get to go home in the morning.” I slid down in my chair, winced at the pain in my ribs, and stretched my legs out in front of me. It had been a long night.

“Who’s the judge?” she asked.

I looked over my shoulder at Jim, raised my eyebrows in a question. He folded his arms across his chest.

“Tommy,” he said.

His answer made us both smile.

Minute bits of old dust drifted through the glow of the yellow florescent light mounted in the center of the dirty white plaster ceiling. I studied the cobwebs hanging among the conduits that ran around the tops of the walls, new adaptations in a building erected 35 years before electricity arrived in the stores along boardwalks lined with hitching posts. The

interview room had once been a cell.

She watched me over the steam of the coffee and through the smoke. She took one last long draw and dropped the butt onto the gray cracked cement floor and put it out with the sole of a worn silver-toed boot. Her eyes dared me to complain. I could see that her skinned knuckles were beginning to swell so I offered some ice. She declined.

I sipped my coffee and looked at the spatters of blood that danced over her shirt between the roses and the pearly white snaps. Some from her nose, I reckoned most of it from various places on Officer Carey. One shirt pocket hung from a single remaining corner, both elbows split into shreds, and the tail hung out over dark blue denim jeans where a rug-burned knee poked through a new hole. A bruise began to paint her left jaw, and a small dark knot rose between her short auburn curls and her eyebrow. In a couple of days she'd look like a raccoon when gravity took the blood in that knot down around her eyes.

I knew she'd sold her cows and came to town with some money in her pocket for supplies, money for winter hay, a new shirt, new jeans, three months of food, fuel for the truck, and a little bit left over for a few beers at the Big Horn Club, but not enough for new boots.

The bartender's statement indicated that the woman had played a couple games of pool then sat at the bar with her beer. The boys from a Bureau of Land Management summer temporary crew thundered in around nine o'clock and took up the rest of the bar stools. Most of them weren't locals, "So they never considered the end result of bitching about the Taylor grazing rights and the ranchers whilst they was sittin' right next to one, I guess," he'd said.

He described how she'd finished her beer, ordered another one and then bought three rounds for the crew, but kept nursing the one in front of her. When she finished her beer she left the bar stool and picked up a cue stick and racked up the balls. His statement ended there.

But a week after I'd sat with the woman at the jail, he and I ran into each other at a baseball game. "I saw the set of her jaw and the look in her eye. I shoulda called you all then," he said, shaking his head. "But I knowed her all her life. She started ridin' afore she could walk and could rope, shoot, and ride better than any hand by the time she was nine year old. I guess I just wanted to see it play out, and now I'm sorry about that."

He explained how locals from the mill and the mine had trickled in and the place started filling up and how she'd stood alone at the pool table waiting for the crew to finish their drinks and order more. Then she'd asked them if they ever had a job where they had to work and she told them she'd had to borrow against the ranch to pay her taxes so they could sit on their asses and ride around in pretty lime-colored trucks and shoot their mouths off about people who worked for a living.

"She never raised her voice. Quiet like; lookin' from one of them ta the other when she talked. The whole place went real still. One of the crew slid off his bar stool, staggered over and picked up a chair. She hopped up on the pool table with the cue stick in her hand. That's when I picked up the phone."

It had taken Officer Carey and me less than ten minutes to reach the parking lot in front of the Big Horn Club. A mop of curly blonde hair falling over his red neck, Officer Carey had carried his six foot frame and formidable prejudices all the way from Macon, Georgia. As far as Officer Carey was concerned, a woman belonged at home, bare foot and pregnant, slaving over a sink full of his dirty dishes. He didn't take well to me riding next to him in the black and white Plymouth and made it part of his daily litany to tell me so. I didn't like it much either. Especially on nights. Night shifts, even small town night shifts, are risky. Partners need to trust one another. Partners need to back up one another. He was convinced no woman had the physical ability to back him up. All ninety-eight pounds of me was convinced he'd leave me wide open just to validate his testosterone-infused opinions.

I stepped out of the car, put my night stick through the ring on my belt with one hand and my hat on my head with the other. I had visions of Carey leaning over me in my hospital bed saying, "See, I told y'all she couldn't cut it." The door

to the bar stood open and we watched people hurry into the shelter of their cars. A couple of cowboys drifted out, tipped their hats to me, “Ma’am,” they said in unison, ignoring Officer Carey.

Two boys in yellow BLM fire shirts and green Nomex pants stumbled out the door – one cupped his nose with both hands, the blood running through his fingers. The other one bent nearly double and held his left arm tight over his ribs and moaned. I tapped the mike clipped to my Kevlar vest and told dispatch we needed the ambulance. Breaking glass, furniture cracking, people cussing and hollering, – it sounded like the fun was well under way.

Now anyone with any sense knows that nothing stops a bar fight short of a fire. Wading into one is damn foolishness. It’s best to stand by, make sure no one has any deadly weapons or mortal wounds, let it play itself out, then calmly and politely load up the humble and apologetic miscreants and haul them home or off to jail.

Officer Carey however, headed for the open door with his usual strut and swagger.

By seven o’clock, Jim, the woman, and I had finished a pot of coffee, a pack of cigarettes and three hours of staring at each other. Jim’s wife showed up with breakfast burritos and beans which the three of us shared sitting at the wobbly legged oak table in the interview room. At 7:45 I drove the woman to city court and we waited in the long, pine-paneled hallway outside the courtroom.

The hinges on the front door squeaked and we watched a bent-over old man, leaning heavily on his cane, thump his way toward us. His fedora sat atop auburn hair cut close to his scalp, his paisley tie tucked neatly into a vest that hugged a thin concave chest above high-waisted, razorpressed slacks, the sweet smell of Old Spice announcing his approach. He checked his pocket watch, tipped his hat, “Good morning, Officer Douglas. Good morning, Sylvie.”

“Good morning, Your Honor,” I replied.

“Tommy,” the woman said.

The city clerk arrived at 8:05 and the woman and I stood in front of the bench and waited while the judge lectured the clerk on the importance of arriving at court in a timely manner.

“Young man, if you aren’t fifteen minutes early, you’re late. I’d hate to be the first temporary judge in this here town to rule the city clerk in contempt of court.”

He turned his attention to the woman, “Where’s your lawyer?”

She shrugged. He looked at me.

“What’s the charge?”

“Cited for disorderly conduct, Your Honor,” I said.

The clerk handed him the court’s copy of the citation bearing my signature.

“Disorderly conduct?” He mumbled and shuffled the papers on his desk. “I called Officer Carey this morning,” he said. “He didn’t have a lot to say.”

I watched the shadow of a smile begin play at the corners of her eyes but she squinted like her face hurt and bit her lower lip.

“EMTs said one BLM boy has a broken nose and one has a broken arm,” he said.

“They were leaving the bar when Officer Carey and I arrived,” I said, handing the bartender’s statement to the clerk. The judge held out his hand.

He pulled his reading glasses further down on his nose, read the statement, removed his glasses and rubbed his face with both hands.

“Sylvie, Sylvie, Sylvie. What would our mother think?” he asked with a long sigh. He looked long and hard at the woman.

“They insulted me. They needed teachin’.”

“And Officer Carey?”

I rubbed my ribs.

She glanced at me and grinned. "He needed teachin', too."