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The Cowboy Tango

WHEN MR. GLEN OTTERBAUSCH HIRED Sammy Boone, she was sixteen and so skinny that the whole of her beanpole body fit neatly inside the circle of shade cast by her hat. For three weeks he'd had an ad in the Bozeman paper for a wrangler, but only two guys had shown up. One smelled like he'd swum across a whiskey river before his truck fishtailed to a dusty stop outside the lodge, and the other man was missing his left arm. Mr. Otterbausch looked away from the man with one arm and told him the job was already filled. He was planning to scale back on beef-raising and go more toward the tourist trade, even though he'd promised his uncle Dex, as Dex breathed his last wheezes, that he would do no such thing. Every summer during his childhood Mr. Otterbausch's schoolteacher parents had sent him to stay with Uncle Dex, a man who resembled a petrified log in both body and spirit. He had a face of knurled bark and knotholes for eyes and a mouth sealed up tight around a burned-down Marlboro. He spoke rarely; his voice rasped up through the dark tubes of his craw only to issue a command or to mock his nervous, skinny nephew for being ner-

vous and skinny. He liked to creep up on young Glen and clang the dinner bell in his ear, showing yellow crocodile teeth when the boy jumped and twisted into the air. So Dex's bequest of all forty thousand acres to Mr. Otterbausch, announced when a faint breeze was still rattling through the doldrums of his tar-blackened lungs, was a deathbed confession that Dex loved no one, had no one to give his ranch to except a disliked nephew whose one point of redemption was his ability to sit a horse.

It was true that Mr. Otterbausch rode well, and because he liked to ride more than anything else, he quit his job managing a condo building at a ski resort, loaded his gray mare Sleepy Jean into a trailer, and drove up to pay his last respects. By the time the first rain came and drilled Dex's ashes into the hard earth, Mr. Otterbausch had sold off most of the cattle and bought two dozen new horses, a breeding stallion among them. He bought saddles and bridles, built a new barn with a double-size stall for Sleepy Jean, expanded the lodge, and put in a bigger kitchen. When construction was under way on ten guest cabins and a new bunkhouse, he fired the worst of the old wranglers and placed his ad.

Sammy showed up two days after the man with one arm. She must have hitched out to the ranch, because when he caught sight of her she was just a white dot walking up the dirt road from the highway. His first impulse when he saw she was only a kid was to send her away, but he was sympathetic toward the too-skinny. Moreover, he thought the dudes who would be paying his future bills might be intrigued by a girl wrangler in a way they would not have been by a man with a pinned-up sleeve who tied knots with his teeth. Mr. Otterbausch maintained a shiny and very bristly mustache, and his fingers stole up to tug at it.

"Can you shoot?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said.

“How are you with a rope?”

“All right.”

“And you ride good?”

“Yup.”

He dropped a saddle and bridle in her arms and showed her a short-legged twist of a buckskin, a bitch mare who had recently not only thrown Mr. Otterbausch but kicked him for good measure, leaving a boomerang-shaped bruise on his thigh. When Sammy pulled the cinch tight, the mare flattened her ears and lunged around, her square teeth biting the air until Sammy popped her on the cheek. The mare squealed and pointed her nose at the sky, then stood still. Sammy climbed up. The mare dropped her head and crow-hopped off to the right. Sammy tugged the reins up once and drove with her seat and sent the mare through the gate into the home paddock. In five minutes, she had her going around like a show pony.

“Hang on there a minute,” Mr. Otterbausch said. He went and threw some tack on Sleepy Jean, rode her back to the paddock, and pulled open the gate for Sammy. “Let’s try you without a fence. Head down the valley.” Mr. Otterbausch pointed toward a horizon of dovetailing hills. The buckskin cow-kicked once and then rocketed off with Sammy sitting up as straight as a flagpole. Her long braid of brown hair thumped against her back. Sleepy Jean was plenty fast, but Mr. Otterbausch kept her reined in to stay behind and observe. Sammy rode farther back on her hip than most women, giving her ride some roll and swagger. It was a prickly, gusty day and the buckskin was really moving, but Sammy didn’t even bother to reach up and tug her hat down the way Mr. Otterbausch did. By the time they got back to the home paddock, both the horses and Mr. Otterbausch were in a lather.

“You want the job?” he asked.

Sammy nodded.

“How old are you?”

She hesitated, and he guessed she was deciding whether or not to lie. “Sixteen.”

This seemed close enough to the truth. “You’re not some kind of runaway are you? You should tell me so I can decide if I want the trouble.”

“No one’s coming to look for me.”

“Where’re your folks?”

“Wyoming.”

“What do they do there?”

“Chickens.”

“They won’t have the cops after me for kidnapping?” Trying to set her at ease, Mr. Otterbausch chuckled. The girl did not smile.

“No sir.”

“Just a joke,” Mr. Otterbausch said. “Just joking.”

Sammy lived in the lodge until Mr. Otterbausch had a cottage built for her in a stand of trees off the east porch, on the far side from the guest cabins and the bunkhouse. He’d hoped when she was transplanted to another building she would be less on his mind, but no such luck. All day he was mindful that she might be watching him and considered each movement before he made it, choreographing for her eyes a performance of strength while he moved bales of hay or of grace as he rode out on Sleepy Jean in the evening. He tried to stop himself from wringing his hands while he talked to her because an old girlfriend had told him the habit was annoying. Every night his imagination projected flickering films of Sammy Boone onto his bedroom ceiling: Sammy riding, always riding, across fields and hills and exotic fantasy deserts, always on beautiful horses, horses that Mr. Otterbausch

certainly didn't own. He liked to imagine what her hair might look like out of its braid, what it would feel like in his fingers.

Sometimes he allowed himself to imagine making love to Sammy, but he did so in a state of distracting discomfort. The bottom line was that she was too young, and he wasn't about to mess around with a girl who had nowhere else to go, even though she had a stillness to her that made her seem older, *old* even. He told himself he loved her the way he loved the wind and the mountains and the horses, and it would be a crime to damage her spirit. Plus, she showed no interest. She treated Mr. Otterbausch and the wranglers with a detached man-to-man courtesy. Sometimes she could even be coarse. She called the stuck latch on a paddock gate a "cocksucker," and she told a table of breakfasting dudes that the stallion had "gone out fucking" one Sunday in breeding season. When she ran into Mr. Otterbausch, she never talked about anything beyond solid concerns of trees, rocks, water, and animals. If he tried to ask her about herself, she gave the shortest answer possible and then made herself scarce.

"You have any brothers or sisters?"

"Some brothers."

"Where are they?"

"Don't know. Got to check on Big Bob's abscess. Night, boss."

TEN YEARS PASSED this way. Sammy stayed skinny but muscled up some. She started to go a little bowlegged, and her forearms turned brown and wiry. The dude business worked out well. Mr. Otterbausch made enough money to keep improving the ranch a bit at a time and also to put some away every year. Out on a ride he found a hot spring bubbling beside a creek, and he dug the pool

out bigger, lined it with rocks, and put in a cedar platform for the dudes to sit on. Dudes, it turned out, loved to sit in hot water, and the sulfurous pond drew enough new business that he added three more cabins and built a shelter way out on the property's north edge for use on overnight treks. The guests called Sammy a tough cookie, which irked Mr. Otterbausch, as when anyone said the distant, magnificent mountains were like a postcard.

Since the beginning, Sammy'd had the job of taking the best old horses up to a hillside spot called the Pearly Gates when their times came and shooting them in the head. The place was named for two clusters of white-barked aspens that flanked the trail where it opened out into a clearing. Mr. Otterbausch guessed that Sammy got on better with horses than people, and he figured she gave them a proper goodbye. When the wranglers saw Sammy come walking back down from the hills, they knew to keep out of her way for a while. She left each carcass alone until it was picked clean enough, and then she went back and nailed up the skull on one of the pines around the clearing if it hadn't been dragged away somewhere. Not many horses were lucky enough to go to the Pearly Gates. Most of the ones who came in from winter pasture lame and rickety were sold at auction and ended up going down to Mexico in silver trucks with cheese-grater sides, bound for dog food. But worthy horses came and went over the years, and their skulls circled the clearing past the Pearly Gates like a council of wise men.

Mr. Otterbausch went up there sometimes to get away. He would sit beneath the long white skulls and look up through the aspens' trembling leaves at a patch of sky. The dudes paid the bills, and he knew they had as much right as anyone else to enjoy this country, but some days they seemed as profane a blight on the land as oil derricks or Walmarts or fast-food billboards. They strutted around, purposeful and aimless as pigeons, staring at the

mountains and the sky and the trees, trying to stuff it all into their cameras. Wherever he was, Uncle Dex must have been royally pissed off.

Usually Sammy rode out alone when she wasn't with the dudes, but Mr. Otterbausch was happiest when he could make up some excuse for the two of them to ride together. Around dusk, after the dudes and the horses had been fed, he would seek her out to check on this or that bit of trail or retrieve a few steers that he had purposely let loose the night before. Those evenings, when the sky was amethyst and Sleepy Jean's mane blew over his hands as they loped along, it seemed that his longing and the moment when day tipped over into night were made out of the same stuff, aching and purple. While they hunted around for lost steers, he talked to her, telling her all his stories, and she listened without complaint or much comment, though sometimes she would ask "Then what?" and he would talk on with new verve. He worried that she would fall in love with a dude or with one of the wranglers, but she never seemed tempted.

He wanted to believe it was self-restraint that kept him from falling on his knees and begging her to love him, to marry him, at least to sleep with him, but during the rare moments when he told himself he must, if he did not want to spend the rest of his life in agony, confess his feelings, he knew the truth was that he was afraid. She was a full-grown woman now, not some helpless girl. He was afraid she would leave, afraid she would laugh, afraid he would not be able to survive all alone out on the blinding salt flats of her rejection. He might have gone on that way until he was old and gray, but when Sammy had been at the ranch for almost ten years, Mr. Otterbausch called the girlfriend he kept in Bozeman by Sammy's name one too many times. "God damn it!" she shouted, standing naked beside her bed while Mr. Otterbausch

cowered beneath the sheets. “You have called me Sammy for the last time, Glen Otterbausch! My name is LuAnn! Remember me?” She grabbed her breasts with both hands and shook them at him. “LuAnn!”

He drove home, tail between his legs, and took a bottle of whiskey out on the front porch. The sun was dropping toward the hill-tops where he had first ridden with Sammy, and he sat and looked at it. He didn’t actually like whiskey, but it seemed to fit the occasion and was all he could scrounge from the two guys who happened to be in the bunkhouse when he stopped by. The dudes came in for dinner and then were herded off to campfire time. After the lodge fell quiet and the sky was fading from blue to purple, Mr. Otterbausch went over to Sammy’s cottage and knocked on the door. Her dog, Dirt, barked once and fell silent when she said, from somewhere, “Dirt, hush up.” She answered the door in her usual clothes, except she was barefoot. For a moment, he stared at her pale toes, which he’d never seen before. Then he looked beyond her, over her shoulder, saw a rocking chair with a Hudson’s Bay blanket on it. A skillet on the stove. He caught the smell of fried eggs. Dirt sniffed around his boots. The dog had simply appeared one day, walking up the dirt road like Sammy had, and she had acted like she’d been expecting him all along. Because Dirt was shaped and bristled like a brown bottlebrush, the joke with the wranglers was that Mr. Otterbausch had turned one of his old mustaches into a dog for Sammy.

“Boss?” she said. One hand was up behind her head. She was holding back her hair.

“Sorry to disturb, but I’ve got a favor to ask. Mrs. Mullinax—you know her? the lady from Chicago?—says she left her camera up on the lookout rock. I said I’d ride up and check, and I was

wondering if you'd come along. Two eyes better than one and all. Or I guess it's four eyes. Better than two." He laughed.

"It's getting dark."

"We'll be quick."

"All the guys are busy?"

"It's campfire night, and C.J. and Wayne went to town." Still she hesitated, he hoped not because she sensed his nervousness or smelled whiskey on him. "I thought you could take Hotrod. Give him some exercise."

"He don't get enough exercise with all that fucking he does?" But she shut the door in his face, and when she came back out her hair was in its braid and she had on her corduroy jacket with a woolly collar. "Dirt, you stay," she said.

Mr. Otterbausch was drunker than he thought and had to hop around with his foot in the rawhide stirrup before he could pull himself up in the saddle. As soon as he did, Sleepy Jean spread her back legs and lifted her tail to squirt some pee for Hotrod, who flipped his upper lip up over his nostrils and let the scent bounce around his cavernous sinuses.

"Slut," Sammy said to Sleepy Jean, reining Hotrod away from her.

On the lookout rock, with the valley dark below them and the stars coming out to one-up the small twinkling lights of the lodge and outbuildings, Mr. Otterbausch waited for the perfect moment, the moment when Sammy was standing with her hands on her hips and saying disgustedly, "I don't see any damn camera," and he swooped in and got her by the braid and kissed her hard on the mouth. She hauled back like she was going to punch him, but she remembered not to punch her boss right when he remembered to let go of her braid—soon enough but a little late. He fell to pieces

with apologies and tried to drop down on his knees to beg her to forget the whole thing but somehow tipped back onto his butt instead, and then he figured as long as he was down there he might as well go whole hog.

“Sammy,” he said, looking up at her dark shape, “I’d like to give you the ranch.”

“What?”

“The ranch. I’d like it to be yours as well as mine.”

“What for?”

He began to sense he’d made a wrong turn, but he was too drunk and panicked to do anything but press on. “Well, I’d like to marry you. We could run the ranch together. It’d be yours too. Wouldn’t you like that?”

She kicked a rock that went rattling down into the darkening valley. “You think you can buy me with the ranch?”

“Of course not.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Don’t want what?”

“The ranch.”

He felt a hopeless burst of hope. “But you do want . . . the rest?”

She waited for a minute before she answered, and he felt so nervous he thought he might faint. But she said quietly, “No.”

“You’re sure? You’re not being stubborn? I didn’t mean it like a bribe. I swear, Sammy. I meant I’d give you anything.” Behind them, Sleepy Jean, tied to a tree, squealed at Hotrod, who was tied to another. Mr. Otterbausch tried to stand up but sat back down. He found he was wringing his hands.

Hotrod whuffed at Sleepy Jean and pulled and pranced at his tree. Sleepy Jean squealed again, lifting her tail. Sammy took a step back from Mr. Otterbausch. “I just don’t love you,” she said. “I wish I did, but I don’t. It’s one of those things. I’ve thought about

it. I've tried to get myself to, even, because you're the most decent man I know and you'd treat me good, but I'd feel like a liar."

"I don't mind," said Mr. Otterbausch, raising his voice over Sleepy Jean's.

Sammy whirled around on the mare. "God damn slut horse, stop your yelling!" She stepped close to Hotrod and, as she was pulling his cinch tight, she said, without turning around, "I'm real sorry." She untied the stallion, punched his neck when he made a lunge for Sleepy Jean, climbed on, and rode away. Mr. Otterbausch sat and watched the moon rise huge and yellow from behind the horizon. He felt woozy, exhausted, tremulous, like a survivor of a terrible collision. He did not know whether he was more afraid of Sammy leaving the ranch or of her staying. Eventually he rode down and finished the whiskey and avoided Sammy pretty well for three months, after which time everything went back to normal and stayed that way. More years went by. He loved her and tried to conceal that he loved her; she pretended not to notice.

HARRISON GREENE WENT OUT to his uncle's ranch once he was very certain his marriage was over. He was a man of great patience, a bird-watcher and a fly fisherman, and the ink on the divorce papers had to dry for a whole year for him to be certain he was really divorced, even though by then Marjorie had already been living with Gary-the-Architect for eight months. So he gave up the lease on his sad bachelor apartment, sold most of his possessions, and drove west, pulling his horse Digger in a trailer, Illinois unrolling in his side-view mirrors. Harrison made his living from larger-than-life paintings of animals and birds. They were perfect down to the last follicle. His life, lived slowly, had eventually bored Marjorie beyond her tolerance, which is why he was surprised that

she chose to shack up with Gary of all people, a man who sat in a cantilevered house and made silent, minute movements with his pencil while, across town, Harrison made silent, minute movements with *his* pencil.

“I think she’s really gone,” he said to his uncle on the phone.

“Well, yeah, you think? Ha ha ha,” Uncle Glen said. Harrison remembered why he had never particularly cared for Uncle Glen. The man was annoying.

“She’s moved in with this architect,” Harrison continued. “I don’t know. Anyway, I was thinking, it might do me good to come out to your place for a while. I’d pay, of course.”

“No need for that. No need at all. Do you still paint?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe you can make a few paintings for the lodge. You still have that horse?”

“I thought I’d bring him along.”

“He’s a beauty. If you wanted, you could just pay me with that horse. Ha ha ha.”

“Ha ha ha,” said Harrison.

“All right. Call when you’re coming.”

The first thing Harrison saw when he drove up the road was a woman riding an ugly Appaloosa. Her braid and the shape of her waist gave her away as a woman, but she rode like a man, back on her hip. When the Appaloosa let go a series of bucks, dolphining up and down along the fence, she slapped him lazily back and forth across the shoulders with the reins and sent him streaking off at a gallop. As she passed, she tipped her hat to Harrison.

“Who’s that girl?” he asked his uncle after he had settled Digger in the barn.

“What girl?”

“The one on the Appy out there.”

“Most people don’t spot her as a girl right away.”

“There’s the braid.”

“Don’t go telling Sammy she rides like a girl. Ha ha ha.”

“She doesn’t. Anyway, women ride fine. It’s not an insult.”

“You don’t remember Sammy?”

“I’ve never seen her before.”

“Sure you have. She’s been here fifteen years. Guess you didn’t notice her when you had Marjorie with you.”

“I don’t see why I wouldn’t have.”

Uncle Glen took him by the arm and turned him away toward the lodge. “You’re in here. Next to my room.”

Right away Harrison started tagging along on Sammy’s rides, bringing up the rear in a gaggle of dudes but never losing sight of her hat and her braid beneath it. At first she paid him no notice, but he waited and after a couple of weeks he knew she must have at least gotten used to him because when he rode off to investigate a birdsong, she would whistle for him up the trail. Once she dropped back beside him to say Digger was the best-looking horse she’d ever seen, and when he offered to let her ride him she said, “Yeah? Serious?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“The Otter hogs all the good ones.”

Harrison had a lot to say about Uncle Glen. How he laughed at his own jokes, which weren’t even jokes. How he had a habit of saying something to your back as you turned to leave a room. How he was so jumpy that Marjorie had called him human itching powder. How Harrison longed to rip that preposterous mustache from the man’s face. But he said, “I’d think he’d want you to ride them.”

She looked alarmed. “Why?”

“Because you’re a great rider.”

She seemed relieved. She shrugged. “The Otter rides good, too. They’re his horses. Marty, sit up straight there,” she shouted at a dude in a bolo tie who was drooping back in the saddle. “No potato sacks.” The dude looked back over his shoulder, wounded, and she trotted up to the front of the line.

Harrison found with the passing days that Sammy was staking a larger and larger claim on his thoughts. He rode with her as much as he could, and in the evenings when he went out in the paddocks with his sketchbook, he found himself only half concentrating because he was listening for her footsteps behind him. She often came out to see what he was drawing. Sometimes he sent her out on Digger, and it was a glorious sight. He made sketch after sketch, and afterward she would say “That was all right” and rest a hand flat on the horse’s neck, leaving a print in his sweat. At night in his bed with Uncle Glen’s snores coming through the wall, Harrison filled imaginary canvases with Sammy and Digger done in big, loose brushstrokes, more active and alive than his usual Audubon-gets-huge stuff. Having something other than Marjorie to think about was welcome. There was nothing in Sammy to remind him of Marjorie. Marjorie was beautiful. She had delicate wrists and shoulders, and her veins showed through her skin like the roots of baby flowers. Sammy was strong and awkward with weathered skin and a braid too long for a woman her age. Marjorie was busy and jumpy, a jingler of change and a tapper of toes, which made it pretty rich that she called Uncle Glen hyper. She had never sat all the way back in a chair in her life, and she undercooked everything out of sheer impatience. Sammy, on the other hand, might have been reincarnated from a boulder. Marjorie would laugh and laugh and laugh, and her laughter was like birdsong. Sammy’s laugh was the sound of air being let out of a tire.

Uncle Glen, it became clear, was nursing a crush of his own on Sammy. God only knew how long that had been going on. Long enough that his feelings, which Sammy clearly did not return, seemed to have congealed into some notion of ownership on the old guy's part. He was always popping up wherever they were, making strange non-jokes that only he laughed at, rubbing his paws together and staring at Sammy. When he could, he'd ask Harrison to do him a favor and ride out to check the fence line at the far edge of the property while Sammy took dudes in the opposite direction, or he'd send Harrison into town to buy a bucket or a sack of bran mash or some such when Sammy was due back in from a ride. After Sammy started riding Digger, Uncle Glen complained suddenly of an arthritic hip and turned the choicest of his horses over to Sammy. He'd watch her ride from the porch with a glass of something clear sweating on the arm of his chair.

Sammy must have known that the boss had a thing for her. If she felt anything for him, it stood to reason that they would have gotten together years ago. Maybe they had. Maybe Sammy broke it off but Uncle Glen was still carrying a torch. Anything was possible. Harrison examined Sammy for traces of an attachment to Uncle Glen—it would be unsporting to interfere with a long and fraught lead-up to love—but he detected only practiced tolerance in her treatment of him. Once, from the window of Digger's stall, he had watched Sammy as she stood with her arms folded on the home paddock fence looking at the horses. Uncle Glen came up beside her and folded his arms on the fence too. Their hats bobbed as they talked, and Sammy pointed down the valley. Uncle Glen looked, but at the side of her face instead of where she was pointing. Then Glen scooched a few inches closer to Sammy and then a few more, until their sleeves were touching. After a moment, Sammy inched down the rail, away from the insistent brush of Glen's plaid shirt.

But Glen closed the gap, and Sammy retreated, and like two halves of one caterpillar, they made their way down the fence, about four feet in the twenty minutes as Harrison watched. Their hats kept bobbling the whole time, and he supposed they weren't even aware of their slow tango.

Harrison found his uncle in the ranch office, sitting at his desk paying bills. "I'm going to take Sammy into town tonight," he announced. "To go dancing."

Uncle Glen ran a finger through the condensation on a glass that sat on his blotter. "Sammy would rather die than dance. If you knew her, you'd know that."

"There's no harm in asking," Harrison said. "If she'd rather, we can just sit in a bar."

"Go ahead and ask then. But be careful she doesn't kick you in the teeth. Ha ha ha."

"I didn't need permission. I was just telling you as a courtesy."

As Harrison turned away, his uncle said, "She's a dead end. Better men have tried."

"What men?"

"Just some guys here and there."

"What do you mean 'better'?"

"Just she doesn't seem to want all that."

"All what?"

"All I'm saying is she's had other offers, and she's turned them all down."

Harrison brought a sketch of the dog Dirt to Sammy's door. Dirt was ancient and blind now, running low on teeth, and Harrison drew him like that, floppy-lipped and milky-eyed.

"It looks like him," Sammy said when she saw it. "Ugly old geezer." She held the paper carefully, balanced on her fingertips.

“It’s your night off, isn’t it? Let’s go get some drinks.”

She glanced up at him, her hand creeping over her shoulder to her braid. “Fine,” she said. She shut the door in his face and came out again in five minutes. She looked like she always did, but he smelled something that was neither dust nor horse and might have been perfume.

In town, they found two barstools at Jed’s Antlers. She ordered whiskey, and Harrison followed suit. They sat and watched a few couples dancing the two-step to a band that played in jeans and boots on a shadowy stage in the corner.

“I’ve never been here,” she said.

“All these years? There wasn’t anyone you’d let take you out?” She snorted.

He said, “Uncle Glen would have been up for it.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Look at him. Always sniffing around you like a guard dog, growling at people like me.”

She shook her head. “The Otter’s all right. He’s a good boss.”

“Some people say that I’m too slow about things. But old Glen’s been biding his time for, what, twenty years?”

“Fifteen,” she said. She caught herself and scowled.

“You’d think he’d get it together to try something on you.”

“You know what,” she said, looking him in the face, “I owe the Otter real big, and he could have tried harder to make me pay him back, but he never did.”

“Are you off men in general or just the ones around here? You’d be doing me a favor to say.”

Her hand went up to her braid. “I guess just the ones round here.”

“Why did you say you owe him?”

“He helped me out when I was young and didn’t have anyplace to go.”

“Why didn’t you have anywhere to go?”

“You know. Sad story.” She examined her whiskey. “What about you? You got a sad story?”

She had never asked him anything personal before. He knew it was unfair, but he felt intruded upon. “I guess,” he said. “Not the saddest in the world. My wife left me for an architect. That’s why I came out here. She said I was too deliberate. No, she said I was boring.”

“Sounds like a bitch,” Sammy said.

“She was. Sometimes.”

“I guess I meant the situation.” She lifted her glass at the bartender.

“Not that things were perfect,” Harrison said. His drink was only half gone, but the bartender, without asking, topped it off. “She moved in with the architect, this guy Gary. God knows she can’t stand to be alone. She acts like only unlovable people are alone.” He thought for a moment about what he had said and then nodded in agreement with himself. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s right.”

Sammy watched the dance floor. He wondered if she was listening, but she said, “Seems to me some people are alone because it’s easiest. That don’t seem so different from finding an architect because that’s easiest.” She sipped. The whiskey was cheap and went down like a buzz saw, but Harrison wouldn’t have guessed it to look at her. She didn’t grimace at all.

“What’s your sad story?” he asked. He had been playing with a matchbook, but he dropped it and touched her wrist lightly with his fingers. He felt the way he did sitting on a barely broken horse—one wrong move and she would bolt.