COWBOY

Thomas McGuane

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The old fella makes me go into the house in my stocking feet. The old lady’s in a big chair next to the window. In fact, the whole room is full of big chairs, but she’s only in one of them—though, big as she is, she could fill up several. The old man says, “I found this one in the loose-horse pen at the sale yard.”

She says, “What’s he supposed to be?”
He says, “Supposed to be a cowboy.”
“What’s he doin in the loose horses?”
I says, “I was lookin for one that would ride.”
“You was in the wrong pen, son,” the old man says. “Them’s canners. They’re goin to France in cardboard boxes.”
“Soon as they get a steel bolt in the head.” The big old gal laughs in her chair.

Now I’m sore. “There’s five in there broke to death. I rode ’em with nothin but binder twine.”
“It don’t make a shit,” the old man says. “Ever one of them is goin to France.”
The old lady don’t believe me. “How’d you get in them loose horses to ride?”
"I went in there at night."

The old lady says, "You one crazy cowboy, go in there in the dark. Them broncs kick your teeth down your throat. I suppose you tried them bareback?"

"Naw, I drug the saddle I usually ride at the Rose Bowl Parade."

"You got a horse for that?"

"I got Trigger. We unstuffed him."

The old lady addresses the old man. "He's got a mouth on him. This much we know."

"Maybe he can tell us what good he is."

I says, "I'm a cowboy."

"You're a outta-work cowboy."

"It's a dying way of life."

"She's about like me—she's wondering if this ranch's supposed to be some kinda welfare agency for cowboys."

I've had enough. "You're the dumb honyocker drove me out here."

I think that'll be the end of it, but the old lady says, "Don't get huffy. You got the job. You against conversation or something?"

We get outside and the old sumbitch says, "You drewed lucky there, son. That last deal could've pissed her off."

"It didn't make me no nevermind if it did or didn't."

"She hadn't been well. Used to she was sweet as pudding."

"I'm sorry for that. We don't have health, we don't have nothin.'"

She must have been afflicted something terrible, because she was ugly morning, noon, and night for as long as she lasted—she'd pick a fight over nothing and the old sumbitch got the worst of it. I felt sorry for him, little slack as he cut me.

Had a hundred seventy-five sweet-tempered horned Herefords and fifteen sleepy bulls. Shipped the calves all over for hybrid vigor, mostly to the South. Had some go clear to Florida. A Hereford that still had its horns was a walking miracle, and the old sumbitch had a smart little deal going. I soon learned to give him credit for such
things, and the old lady barking commands offen the sofa weren’t no slouch neither. Anybody else seen their books might’ve said they could be wintering in Phoenix.

They didn’t have no bunkhouse, just a LeisureLife mobile home that had lost its wheels about thirty years ago, and they had it positioned by the door of the barn so it’d be convenient for the hired man to stagger out at all hours and fight breech births and scours and any other disorder sent us by the cow gods. We had some doozies. One heifer got pregnant and her calf was near as big as she was. Had to reach in with a saw and take it out in pieces. When we threw the head out on the ground, she turned to it and lowed like it was her baby. Everything a cow does is designed to turn it into meat as fast as possible so that somebody can eat it. It’s a terrible life.

The old sumbitch and I got along good. We got through calving and got to see them pairs and bulls run out onto the new grass. Nothing like seeing all that meat feel a little temporary joy. Then we bladed out the corrals and watched them dry under the spring sun at long last. Only mishap was when the manure spreader threw a rock and knocked me senseless and I drove the rig into an irrigation ditch. The old sumbitch never said a word but chained up and pulled us out with his Ford.

We led his cavvy out of the hills afoot with two buckets of sweet feed. Had a little of everything, including a blue roan I fancied, but he said it was a Hancock and bucked like the National Finals in Las Vegas, kicking out behind and squalling, and was just a man-killer. “Stick to the bays,” he said. “The West was won on a bay horse.”

He picked out three bays, had a keg of shoes, all ones and oughts, and I shod them best I could, three geldings with nice manners, stood good to shoe. About all you could say about the others was they had four legs each, and a couple, all white-marked from saddle galls and years of hard work, looked like no more summers after this. They’d been rode many a long mile. We chased ’em back into the hills and the three shod ones whinnied and fretted. “Back to work,” the old sumbitch says to them.
We shot three 'cause one was going to pack a ton of fencing supplies—barb wire, smooth wire, steel T-posts, old wore-out Sunflower fence stretchers that could barely grab on to the wire, and staples—and we was at it a good little while where the elk had knocked miles of it down, or the cedar finally give out and had to be replaced by steel. That was where I found out that the old sumbitch's last good time was in Korea, where the officers at the front would yell over the radio, "Come on up here and die!" Said the enemy was coming in waves. Tells me all this while the stretcher's pulling that wire squealing through the staples. The sumbitch was a tough old bastard. "They killed a pile of us and we killed a pile of them." Squeak.

We hauled the mineral horseback, too, in panniers—white salt and iodine salt. He didn't have no use for blocks, so we hauled it in sacks and poured it into the troughs he had on all these bald hilltops where the wind would blow away the flies. Most of his so-called troughs were truck tires nailed onto anything flat—plywood, old doors, and suchlike—but they worked good. A cow can put her tongue anywhere in a tire and get what she needs, and you can drag one of them flat things with your horse if you need to move it. Most places we salted had old buffalo wallers where them buffalo wallered. They done wallered their last—had to get out of the way for the cow and the man on the bay horse.

I'd been rustling my own grub in the LeisureLife for quite some time when the old lady said it was time for me to eat with the white folks. This was not necessarily a good thing. The old lady's knee replacements had begun to fail, and both me and the old sumbitch was half afraid of her. She cooked as good as ever, but she was a bomb waiting to go off, standing bowlegged at the stove and talking ugly about how much she did for us. When she talked, the old sumbitch would move his mouth as though he was saying the same words, and we had to keep from giggling, which wasn't hard. For if the old lady caught us at that there'd a been hell to pay.
Both the old sumbitch and the old lady was heavy smokers, to where a oxygen bottle was in sight. So they joined a Smoke-Enders deal the Lutherans had, and this required them to put all their butts in a jar and wear the jar around their necks on a string. The old sumbitch liked this O.K. because he could just tap his ash right under his chin and not get it on the truck seat, but the more that thing filled up and hung around her neck the meaner the old lady got. She had no idea the old sumbitch was cheating and setting his jar on the woodpile when we was working outside. She was just more honest than him, and in the end she give up smoking and he smoked away, except he wasn’t allowed to smoke in the house no more, nor buy ready-mades, ’cause the new tax made them too expensive and she wouldn’t let him take it out of the cows, which come first. She said it was just a vice and if he was half the man she thought he was he’d give it up as a bad deal. “You could have a long and happy old age,” she said, real sarcastic-like.

One day me and the old sumbitch is in the house hauling soot out of the fireplace, on account of they had a chimbley fire last winter. Over the mantel is a picture of a beautiful woman in a red dress with her hair piled on top of her head. The old sumbitch tells me that’s the old lady before she joined the motorcycle gang.

“Oh?”

“Them motorcycle gangs,” he says, “all they do is eat and work on their motorcycles. They taught her to smoke, too, but she’s shut of that. Probably outlive us all.”

“Looks to me she can live long as she wants.”

“And if she ever wants to box you, tell her no. She’ll knock you on your ass. I guarantee it. Throw you a damn haymaker, son.”

I couldn’t understand how he could be so casual-like about the old lady being in a motorcycle gang. When we was smoking in the LeisureLife, I asked him about it. That’s when I found out that him and the old lady was brother and sister. I guess that explained it. If your sister wants to join a motorcycle gang, that’s her business. He said she even had a tattoo—“Hounds from Hell,” with a dog shooting flames out of his nostrils and riding a Harley.
"Well, you're a pretty good hand. What's a pretty good hand doin' tryin' loose horses in the middle of the night at some Podunk sale yard? Folks hang on to a pretty good hand and nobody was hangin' on to you. You want to tell me what you done?"

I'd been with the old sumbitch for three years and out of jail the same amount of time. I wasn't afraid to tell him what I done 'cause I had started to trust him, but I sure didn't want him telling nothing to his sister. I told him I rustled some yearlings, and he chuckled like he understood entirely. I had rustled some yearlings, all right, but that's not what I went up for.

The old man paid me in cash, or, rather, the old lady did, since she handled anything like that. They never paid into workmen's comp, and there was no reason to go to the records. They didn't even have my name right. You tell people around here your name is Shane and they'll always believe you. The important thing is I was working my tail off for that old sumbitch, and he knew it. Nothing else mattered, even the fact that we'd come to like each other. After all, this was a God damn ranch.

The old fella had several peculiarities to him, most of which I've forgotten. He was one of the few fellas I ever heard of who would actually jump up and down on his hat if he got mad enough. You can imagine what his hat looked like. One time he did it 'cause I let the swather get away from me on a hill and bent it all to hell. Another time a Mormon tried to run down his breeding program to get a better deal on some replacement heifers, and I'll be damned if the old sumbitch didn't throw that hat down and jump on it, right in front of the Mormon, causing the Mormon to get into his Buick and ease on down the road without another word. One time when we was driving ring shanks into corral poles I hit my thumb and tried jumping on my hat, but the old sumbitch gave me such an odd look I never tried it again.

The old lady died sitting down. I went in, and there she was, sitting down, and she was dead. After the first wave of grief, the old sumbitch and me fretted about rigor mortis and not being able
to move her in that seated position. So we stretched her onto the couch and called the mortician and he called the coroner and for some reason the coroner called the ambulance, which caused the old sumbitch to state, "It don't do you no nevermind to tell nobody nothing." Course he was right.

Once the funeral was behind us, I moved out of the LeisureLife, partly for comfort and partly 'cause the old sumbitch falled apart after his sister passed, which I never would've suspected. Once she's gone, he says, he's all that's left of his family and he's alone in life, and about then he notices me and tells me to get my stuff out of the LeisureLife and move in with him.

We rode through the cattle pritnear ever day year round, and he come to trust me enough to show how his breeding program went, with culls and breedbacks and outcresses and replacements, and took me to bull sales and showed me what to expect in a bull and which ones were correct and which were sorry. One day we's looking at a pen of yearling bulls on this outfit near Luther and he can't make up his mind and he says he wished his sister was with him and he starts sniffing and says she had an eye on her wouldn't quit. So I stepped up and picked three bulls out of that pen, and he quit sniffing and said damn if I didn't have an eye on me, too. That was the beginning of our partnership.

One whole year I was the cook, and one whole year he was the cook, and back and forth like that, but never at the same time. Whoever was cook would change when the other fella got sick of his recipes, and ever once in a while a new recipe would come in the AgriNews, like that corn chowder with the sliced hot dogs. I even tried a pie one time, but it just made him lonesome for days gone by, so we forgot about desserts, which was probably good for our health, as most sweets call for gobbing in the white sugar.

The sister never let him have a dog 'cause she had a cat and she thought a dog would get the cat. It wasn't much of a cat, anyhow, but it lived a long time, outlived the old lady by several moons. After it passed on, we took it out to the burn barrel and the first thing the
old sumbitch said was “We’re gettin a dog.” It took him that long to realize that his sister was gone.

Tony was a Border collie we got as a pup from a couple in Miles City that raised them. You could cup your hands and hold Tony when we got him, but he grew up in one summer and went to work and we taught him “down,” “here,” “come by,” “way to me,” and “hold ‘em,” all in one year or less, ’cause Tony would just stay on his belly and study you with his eyes until he knew exactly what you wanted. Tony helped us gather, mother up pairs, and separate bulls, and he lived in the house for many a good year and kept us entertained with all his tricks. Finally, Tony grew old and died. We didn’t take it so good, especially the old sumbitch, who said he couldn’t foresee enough summers for another dog. Plus that was the year he couldn’t get on a horse no more and he wasn’t about to work no stock dog afoot. There was still plenty to do and most of it fell to me. After all, this was a God damn ranch.

The time had come to tell him why I went to jail and what I did, which was rob that little store at Absarokee and shoot the proprietor, though he didn’t die. I had no idea why I did such a thing—then or now. I led the crew on the prison ranch for a number of years and turned out many a good hand. They wasn’t nearabout to let me loose until there was a replacement good as me who’d stay a while. So I trained up a murderer from Columbia Falls, could rope, break horses, keep vaccine records, fence, and irrigate. Once the warden seen how good he was, they paroled me out and turned it all over to the new man, who was never getting out. The old sumbitch could give a shit less when I told him my story. I could’ve told him all this years before when he first hired me, for all he cared. He was a big believer in what he saw with his own eyes.

I don’t think I ever had the touch with customers the old sumbitch had. They’d come from all over looking for horned Herefords and talking hybrid vigor, which I may or may not have believed. They’d ask what we had and I’d point to the corrals and say, “Go look for yourself.” Some would insist on seeing the old sumbitch and I’d tell
them he was in bed, which was pritnear the only place you could find him now that he'd begun to fail. Then the state got wind of his condition and took him to town. I went to see him there right regular, but it just upset him. He couldn't figure out who I was and got frustrated 'cause he knew I was somebody he was supposed to know. And then he failed even worse. The doctors told me it was just better if I didn't come round.

The neighbors claimed I was personally responsible for the spread of spurge, Dalmatian toadflax, and knapweed. They got the authorities involved and it was pretty clear that I was the weed they had in mind. If they could get the court to appoint one of their relatives ranch custodian while the old sumbitch was in storage they'd get all that grass for free till he was in a pine box. The authorities came in all sizes and shapes, but when they were through they let me take one saddle horse, one saddle, the clothes on my back, my hat, and my slicker. I rode that horse clear to the sale yard, where they tried to put him in the loose horses 'cause of his age. I told them I was too set in my ways to start feeding Frenchmen and rode off toward Idaho. There's always an opening for a cowboy, even a old sumbitch like me if he can halfway make a hand.