

GUNFIGHT AT THE JOE/CAKE CORRAL

The blue line of horizon leveled under the first amethyst glance of the rising sun. A speck of squat buildings, littered, grey, puddled and fog-pasty, thrown hastily aside frontage roads along the arterial pulse of the interstate highway, sat, like concrete blocks grown tumourously on the shoulder of the withering town of Clayfield. Proper Clayfield, hobbled in derailed abandonment, had declined with age, shrunken, roof tiles cracked and paint faded, parking meters tilted like mossy monuments in a cemetery. Only the highway pit stops partially mark a rim of its former hub, a dried hand outstretched toward a trickling mirage only a few steps beyond collapse. There the signs glowed their own distinct daubs of colour: Fill-up Gasoline, McDonald's, Wallow Inn Motel, Dairy-freeze, Boot-n-Scout Emporium, Quik-&flee Mart, and the Joe/Cake Corral; the solitary touch of natural being the scraggly prickly-pear cacti in their tended curbs. The Joe/Cake Corral—coffee, coffee plus flavors, doughnuts, Czech-Danish pastries and sweet breads, old-time pound cake, pie, naturally—is a limited semi-chain across the region—also in Hope,

Longview, Honeytree, and Plainsville—that is popular with both travelers and the townspeople; flavorful, convivial, simple pleasure, rest and refreshment in a moment's stop, best coffee for sixty-seven miles. Once in time, only and last coffee—before every pigtrail west of West Virginia and then West Memphis, then West Station, Texas, had become dotted with those Quik-&flee Marts; but still, among those who knew, like scouts surreptitiously marking a trail, a favorite watering-stop from the long road: soft chairs, good drink and food, shined stainless steel, cheerful music. The coffee was strong, well-roasted, and hot. The dewy cool of morning crept away in the ascending sunlight, the sky translucent slate streaked to turquoise; a beautiful spring day aroused itself from sleepiness. The first stirrings of intent travelers have already left behind their empty cups and crumpled paper napkins, have moved on across the prairie grassland; and a second line of wagonloads now protract their destiny along the trail of the freeway. Yearning pull toward the horizons remains strong, even up to this day, gravity-strong—the pull of desire to move past the settled and known then on into the new, the unexpected and open limitless. Only the endless sky above held no intimated threat of fences. And travelers

keep their eyes to the sky. People moved now. Not just securing new territory; still adventurous, but more simply because they wanted to see, moving, wandering, complacentless, young and rootless. Though here, Clayfield's Joe/Cake, so each day is much equally the same; yet each day had its own unique shadings just as saddles are the same shape but if each differently tooled, as the same letter shapes brand up their own different monograms. Daily patterns among the local regulars at the Joe/Cake assemble, comprised of little variation. According to their daily permutations these local Clayfield-er patrons come and go monotonously, order the same standards, often utter the same words. Morning times to the counterpersons dishing up orders inside the stainless steel corral at Joe/Cake the regular townfolk often appear as interchangeable as pre-saddled Pony Express relay mounts. Albeit now their various lives were ever so much deeper than just wearied settlers, braving decades of prairie winters and the sear of droughty summers, but also they are the survivors, the bricks who still pave the streets, who once were young pioneers with dreams of green good untainted lives. Time had moved forward; and they had measured out seasons of vegetable gardens dosed with uncountable coffee

grounds. Not trembled when they saw the old heavy porcelain hotelware massacred by paper cups, nor had they been intimidated by the creeping spread of organic raw sugar and soy milk. They face each new incursion, and they face them firmly. And time still passed. Most minor differences were settled, votes balloted, horses traded, or hands shook; and most who found themselves on their eventual ultimate journey to Restlawn Hill had not died with their boots on but in a comfortable bedstead with fine sheets and a soft blanket. Seven o'clock morning, as usual one of the first of the day's patrons, Trooper Bexar fills his thermos-to-go during a stop in his reconnoiter up the highway to the far reach of his territory before turning and connecting on the north side of central old Clayfield with patrolman Mulrooney usually parked under a shady tree at the crumbling former depot. Everyone is cordial to Trooper Bexar; he is as sturdy as hard earth, as welcome as starlight, always ready to exchange a greeting, always a friend with a ready word. He never ever tipped his trooper's hat, but he does offer two-fingered salute toward everyone, especially mindful of acknowledging his longtime acquaintances. Affording only to spend short moments outside the trooper patrol car while having the thermos

replenished, but he speaks most cordially and laughs often. Gerta, blonde and round-the-clock affable and especially prone to flights of fancy, the server who most often works the early morning shift, is especially thrilled when approached by Trooper Bexar's requests for fill-ups, as she comes snapped fully awake at the sight of his lean torso in his starchy slate-gray uniform that clings ever so lightly snug. He looks the very embodiment of order and durability and tranquility, so Gerta, as do most of the others who saw him take his ease at the coffee line, envisioned Trooper Bexar like a well-trained, and to her mind quite handsome, quarterhorse with a solidly respectable job to definitively do. The trooper, raising his thermos in a wave as he leaves, opens the door to allow Wilhemina Herle—Mrs. Willie, for short, as everyone knew her—to enter, and shading her eyes from the light with a lifted hand, stand in the middle of the central crossroad to determine this morning who occupied which territory. She was partial fond of this place. Mrs. Willie is as ever watchful as is the dutiful Trooper Bexar; she making it a point to stay alert to the comings and goings of her well-known circle of Clayfielders, their routines and social wanderings, the foibles and preferences that she could note; and the

mental filing away of such for future reference she considers a justifiable privilege of age. The swept and scrubbed polish of Joe/Cake Corral lay in cheery quiet and peacefulness inside the plate glass façade that now began glowing with infusing sunshine, the green peaceful valley beside the ever-flowing coffee river. Even the cat that patrolled the trash barrels in back could spend a great deal of most mornings dozing on the warm tables of the outdoor terrace in the front. Mrs. Willie quick to notice Judge Newton has stopped there, ordering up his usual. He eyes judiciously the young apprentice who dispenses a measured cup of black. As well a few elderly gentlemen who stake a daily claim to a table in back are in line, or cluster at the sugar trough at the milk bar. A family with two small adoring children occupies a corner table; and at another gathers the regularly-scheduled assemblage of the ladies' Bible study class of the Glory's Blast Baptist Church. For the most part they, at these klatches, wear respectable and shading hats (some dating back to the antiquity of a flowered age), and carry a lace handkerchief and, assiduously thumbed, a well-cherished copy of the Bible. In this morning's sunrays they chatter jovially, laughing often—as opposed to those some mornings when they must speak

behind the hand in a quieter and evenly serious manner about the seepage of some sins, undeniable, that have clutched at the edges of their community at Glory, or even more than likely at those weak and wanton Episcopalians at Saint Thomas. Gracious sakes alive, better not to think of their ways if it could be avoided; if only they could *be* saved. Mrs. Willie, tugging at her denim jacket, sidled up to the already seated group of ladies and pulled the protective lid off her cup of coffee, steamy vapor rising out of it and nearly scalding her nostrils. “Oh, Mrs. Willie, you’re here. Good morning,” said Mary Lee. They all “good morning”-ed, almost a choral unison. “We were just about to discuss the good Samaritan.”

Mrs. Willie sat, loosing the scarf about her neck, “Never a subject too old or tiresome, or relevant.” The class ladies, in silence, took a moment, rearranged their ankles or refolded a corner of their handkerchiefs. The silence rumbled on like a low and distant thunder. Nearly unanimous in the assembled accounting the group earlier on had rather ambiguously affirmed—no proverb, nothing like a commandment, most certainly nothing anything official-like as a declaration from high—that it was rather better, perhaps safer, to take

Mrs. Willie's comments at their face value rather than delve too inquisitively into how tinged they might be with some ironic petulance; and Mrs. Willie hungered almost always, most un-Baptist-like, for a good discussion with argument. She leaned back in her chair. She folded her fingers into a church-and-steeple. "Yes," Mary Lee continued on, "it's Luke 10." Heads bow to their coffee cups as Mary Lee reads from the text the familiars of the millennia-old story. Sun poured from diminished clouds and into the windows, as if certaining that all remained well. A young girl wipes down the tables while the other counterpeople go about their duties measuring and pouring and straightening and polishing, the corral fixtures a gleam, the pastry glazed, the coffee aromatic and steaming, music of a mellow morning insinuating from the speakers, the tingling piano of Art Tatum or the soft baritone of Luke Bryan. Caffeination is the order of the day's purposeful rapture. Morning's life is a peaceful plateau reposing in bounty, the bounty of fatted cattle placidly grazing.

But as angered southwestern wind can send the dust storm howling across the skies the grit of disturbance can blow descendant upon the most secure valley, men who are intent upon their own

selfishness scour the innocent corners of earth, seeking riches or vengeance or fearfulness. Some are of that disturbing persona by inclination, be it because of their youth's directionless questing or the habitual pangs of their ageing into a later decline. The doors swung open. The passel of youths all dressed in darkest blue and black, three in a train, saunter in; they look about, their eyes glancing every possible nook of the visible space; they then scattered in different directions to tables and shelves and displays. Only moments had ticked by. Their movements appeared random, but soon were apparent that they were strategically placed. Mrs. Willie had watched with offhand interest when they had entered, her empathy in the good Samaritan flagging, but as at the time she thought them just another bunch of rowdy kids her mind returned to the softly exhortative voice of Mary Lee.

Only when things began to happen at the corners of her eyes that she again stared beyond a first glance at them. First was a rustle of noises, sliding of jackets, a slither of zippers and of shoes slipping against the shiny tile, a hiss of low voices; all suddenly discordant under the speakered-in music of morning jazz. They stood spread like a sudden expectantly watching war-party along a ridge; the other docile

patrons surprisedly roused to squint at them aligned as if their backs to the sun. These intruders stared, hungered and brazen as wolves, at the wrangled clot of customers, who froze shushed, stunned like glazed-eyed cattle. One of the marauders shouted, for he drovered like their leader, his voice a thin treble lisp, "All right. Nobody move." Nobody did. Only Mary Lee's eyes rolled upward, the posies at her shoulder quivered, and she slumped in her chair, by minute increments slipping downward underneath the table. The leader of the fidgeting gang accounted her descent, then said again, "Nobody move." His hand slithered, uncontrolled, to draw a gun from its resting place; and lethal as a rattlesnake he pointed the gun now in a whirlwind of myriad directions. His eyes pierced cactus-thorned hard onto the crowd of despondent attacked. In their astonishment they could only stand mute and petrified, as though herded into a blind canyon. Then the only sound remained the heedless pipe of radio, Odetta's voice longing for *Cool Water*, Ella singing about her baskets, an occasional gurgle of steam. With a signal wag of the gun Ella was quieted as well. The treble of the boy intruder directed all to huddle in the center of the grove of tables while his cohorts stormed behind the counter searching

out the cash jars and the safe; one who had masked himself went from customer to customer lifting their wallets and jewellery into a brown bag.

Mrs. Willie, stunned by the extraordinarily sudden brashness, stood by her frustrated table, taking in the rocky scene in a shock as if smacked across the face. Regaining her breath amidst surprise, she, in a sudden turn, stepped once and faced straight the leader of the gang. He recoiled, more nervous, yet determined; she stared straightaway into his eyes, as he moistened his lips with a flicking tongue. “Young man,” she inquired steadily, “what do you think you are doing?”

“What you mean?” he sputtered. “I told you all ‘don’t move’.”

“I move when I please”, she said evenly, “And you are perpetrating rather a mistake here, and scaring a lot of people.” The rangy cohort continues to collect wallets, but now it is the honcho kid’s turn to gasp, stunned, roped in his own tenseness, unable to adequately process what his next ploy might be.

“You’ll have reason to be scared if you do anything tricky again, old lady.”

Mrs. Willie pursed her lips, thinking of having to bite them to deter giving this devilish boy, this interloping trespasser, a piece of her mind. She stared him down, unblinking. Hardly beyond adolescence this boy was no more than, although with possession of a gun, a callow punk. His gun was a nickel-plated snub, as, Mrs. Willie thought, so was he, shiny and cold on the outside but a slippery blue oiliness underneath. The gun kept Mrs. Willie cautious, but she was not so afraid of this cub. He did not jitter, quite, as if high on some substance, which would have indicated much more dangerousness and prompted Mrs. Willie a much tighter rein on her skittery tongue. Everyone else remained unmovable. However she had observed in the panicky distraction of her outburst that Gerta, who had been stopped there when the commotion began, had stepped back into the restroom hallway and unobserved closed the door. Mrs. Willie imagined—with a fervor hoped—that Gerta was, at that moment, calling for help; indeed she was on her phone to do just that.

Not often was Providence so kind, nor circumstance as watchful. Trooper Bexar happened at that moment to be cresting the roll of the interstate, contemplating a refill by a pull into the drive-thru, when he

was routed into Gerta's call. More silently than a lone Cavalry scout he swerved into the rear parking area behind the Corral while at the same time confirming Mulrooney's back-up posse. The punks had picked the wrong day for trouble.

“Do you imagine you can threaten us, rob, then just ride out of here?” Her aim was sure. Mrs. Willie continued staring hard into the confused hold-up kid's now damp face, not flinching to pepper him with admonishing questions, the taste in her mouth a curious mix of salt and sweet. The kid wavered as if he wanted to silence her, but could not think ahead as to which action was next. His throat tightened like a noose, his feet rooted to the floor. When Mrs. Willie came to a pause for breath, she held the silence, letting it ricochet about the room. In an instant Trooper Bexar, who had sprung through the door, pistol drawn, flashed his warning, “You're surrounded”. Mulrooney was ready at the other side. “Drop the weapons, and the bag; and drop to the ground against the wall.” When Mulrooney had handcuffed the gang, they were led out and caged into the officer's cars. Their next destination that day was the county lock-up. Mrs. Willie exhaled, and a little too rapidly, and grabbed hold on the counter.

Trooper Bexar pursued one last inspection of the scene, noting details and evidence, making certain no one was hurt. Scraping up the debris was the relief, after the tense moments of a harrowing task the measured and reassuring exhalation while stepping back into normalcy. Everything straightened away, tidy, back in its proper place. Trooper Bexar made a round of the area, seeing that calm again prevailed. He did not lose his seriousness of expression, but inwardly he was pleased. Re-entering the shop knots of the stunned looked his way, saluting him with a countenance of gratitude. The Baptist ladies turned from the wheezing Mary Lee to gush at Trooper Bexar, for a moment, admiring his fortitude and his quickness. The shift manager shook his hand. An older patron pumped it heartily. Mrs. Willie approached him as the gushers reluctantly moved away. Her breathing was easier now. She felt drained to tiredness, caffeine evaporated. In due course, calm was triumphant. Someone signaled the music to sing again. Mrs. Willie touched Trooper Bexar's uniformed arm, and exclaimed, "I more than thank you for being here. Just in time, you rescued us."

Trooper Bexar spoke softly, “It was only right, m’am.” His lip curled, “But you—you should have been much more careful with those boys.”

“Yes. I just get a peevish worked up sometimes. Best should stay back from my wrong side—if I only had the strength I used to have.” She twisted her mouth into a tight pursing. “How about some caffeine? I’ll buy you a tall one.” Mrs. Willie waved to Gerta stationed by the machine behind the counter. Gerta smiled back, and motioned for time. The machine hissed a steamy cloud, an aroma of fresh grounds.

Trooper Bexar looked at Mrs. Willie. “I’ll be buying you one. It’s on me.”

Mrs. Willie smiled gratefully. “Oh, my stars. Why—thank you. I will have another—to calm me down. I can use it.” She squeezed his arm lightly now. It was solid and a comforting reassurance inside the grey twill of his sleeve. “Frankly though, I am a little surprised that an officer of law enforcement buys his own in this shop.” A twinkle had returned to her eyes.

Gerta approached wiping her hands on the apron. Trooper Bexar nodded, “Today I am—for you, and everybody.” He rapped his hand on the counter, one sharp thunk. “Set ‘em up, Joe Cake.”

– J. F. Lowe