

WEST TEXAS WAITIN'

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***I'm fixin to leave if she don't show her sorry ass pretty damn soon. And after all we been through together, too. It's powerful aggravatin. What's a person to do?*

Sometimes it seems like I've spent most of my life waitin.

That wind's whippin up somethin fierce and I been feelin right puny lately. It ain't good for me to be out in this weather in my condition.

*In case all y'all are wonderin what I'm doin way out here in the back of beyond, I'll try to set y'all straight. First of all, I'm waitin for my girlfriend, Sid. Sid and me go way back. We was in grade school together, all the way through tenth grade.***

Sid was the one taught me how to lift candy bars when ole Luke's back was turned at the Allsup's. I would never have thought of it, bein sort of scared of my own shadow the way I was. Until I met Sid in second grade. Maybe I was waitin for her to move into town before that. I never had no friends till we got to be girlfriends.

Daddy wasn't around much, and a good thing, too. Mama would bring home her paycheck from workin at the fillin station and Daddy would take it all for his Jim Beam. That part of my life was spent waitin for the ole buzzard to git the hell outta there so Mama and me could have some peace. Times was better after the ole cuss took off for good and all.

I didn't see no point to school learnin. And Sid didn't neither. It didn't have nothin to do with nothin. Most days we was just waitin for the bell to ring at the end of the day. The only time I brought home a good grade was when we was readin Thomas Hardy. I kinda felt sorry for

that Tess. I liked the gal in the book with the scarlet A, too. Don't know what that says bout me.

The thing is, I can't help the way I am around menfolk. Mama says I was always that way, but I don't think so. I never thought anything about boys till Pawpaw did that messin with me that one summer.

That was a time of hard waitin, I tell you. Boy howdy. Mama sent me to stay with Meemaw and Pawpaw that summer on account of Daddy was there raising holy hell ever single day. Whiskey bottles piled up on the floor fastern flies on watermelon. She musta thought I'd be safer out on her mama's ranch.

I didn't know how long I was gonna be there, but I waited for Mama to come git me ever single day. I was too young and green to know what to do about Pawpaw crawlin into my bed and fiddlin around, but I tole Mama when I got back to home. Then I never went back there. Didn't have no more bad summers like that. It was pert near that time Daddy took off.

That next year at school, though, I knowed what the boys was after. I was glad it wasn't my first rodeo when SW came at me in the front seat of his car after the movie we went to that night. I give him just a little, but not all of it. He was disappointed, but wasn't nothin he could do, him bein more of a gentleman than Pawpaw ever was. That Pawpaw wasn't my real granddaddy anyway, I want y'all to know. Meemaw had her quite a few husbands, and Pawpaw was number five, I reckon. He was the last one, though.

I had me a little system with the boys. Some flirtin and come-hither work got me lots of dates. And I knew just how far to take things so I wouldn't end up like Becky Lou or Wila Beth, having them babies all by themselves and livin with their folks, probably forever. Workin the guys like that I avoided trouble until I met Harold. He was older, stronger, and I fell for him like rain in a gully-washer. He washed my gully, all right.

In tenth grade Sid and me, the both of us, dropped out of high school, thinkin we were in for better things. Sid to marry a roughneck and me thinkin I was gettin me a cowboy. I swan. I shore thought Harold was gone marry me, with me carryin his brat n all. He said he'd be back after the summer rodeo circuit and we'd tie the knot. He sure nuff did say it, I wouldn't make nothing like that up.

But that summer came and went. Then fall done came and went. And Harold never showed up a tall. That was another time of hard waitin. My heart went into my mouth ever time I saw a shiny blue pickup. Wasn't none of them his, though. And I was swellin up fattern a tick.

Life was good for Sid. I always reckoned that roughneck of hers was dumber than dirt, but he pulled down good money, even if he did come home smellin to high heaven and smeared black as midnight under a skillet, what with the oil all over him.

I was jawing to Sid one morning in her nice, yella kitchen, with a brand new cook stove, fridge, aluminum sink, and just about everything, and Sid reckoned as how I oughta just go get him.

"Y'all know he's at his Maw's, doncha?" she said. Sid was fryin up a batch of chicken-fried steak, expectin her man home any minute. "That's where he always holes up come winter."

"Yeah, yer right, he does. She's got those deer leases she always needs help with." I made sure to leave fore Sid's husband got home. He always looked at me peculiar. I'm not sayin he's unfaithful to Sid. Iffin he was I'd tell her. But he does get a look in his eye.

I turned her words over in my mind a couple days later, while I tended bar at the Tin Spur, my job since last spring when Harold ditched me. Not that I knew then he was ditchin me. Thought he was just gonna go off and rodeo, then come back and we'd get hitched. I wasn't old enough to tend bar, but Larry, the owner, wasn't powerful particular. He wasn't powerful

hygienic, either, or I mighta gone after him.

***The reason Sid and me thought to meet up here, at this cross-roads, is because nobody much comes this way. She's supposed to bring him to me, the second thing I'm waitin for, then I'll get the deed done. And nobody to stop us out here back of Evan's Corner. Used to be a general store and something of a settlement here, but it's all long gone. Weren't enough water to sustain a bunch of homesteaders.*

Evan's Corner is just a coupla dirt roads crossin each other out yonder in the mesquite. Steers and cattle egrets is all I can see now where the settlement used to be.

*Feels like a blue norther's comin this way. Nothin about it on the weather this mornin. C'mon, Sid. We're freezin our asses off out here. I'm bout to have a conniption.***

The more I pondered what Sid said that day, to just go get him, the more I thought I'd better do it. Junior wasn't gettin any smaller and I'd sure like to get hitched before I had him. Which was any day now. Then Junior'd have a Daddy and I could quit tendin bar. It was gettin mighty tedious tendin that bar. Men always pokin and feelin, no matter how I dodged. And the bun in the oven didn't stop em none, neither. Creeps!

I knew Harold done hisself proud on the circuit that summer. Folks at the bar talked about who took the purses and I heard about Harold takin more than a few. I figgered we could probably at least get us a single-wide, maybe even a double. Meemaw and Pawpaw were dearly departed and their land sat empty. I wouldn't go inside that trailer where I spent that summer. Ever. But we could set up our own trailer on the other end of the land. Harold would have room to keep horses, steers, whatever he wanted.

Maybe this was what I'd been waitin for all my life. It sure was a purty picture.

So I psyched myself up and hauled my ass, and Junior too of course, out to his mother's spread, way out on that far farm-to-market road, of a Monday afternoon. I didn't have to work that night. All the way drivin out there I was thinkin about what precisely I would say to Larry when I quit at the Spur. I would go in the next night and do it if Harold and I came to a meetin of the minds that day.

I lumbered outta my truck, swingin that big ole belly in front of me like a fifty-pound sack of feed. The paint was peelin off the trailer and the tires on the roof had collected enough dirt to where things was growin up there. I sniffed and could smell the trash fire out back, still smokin a little, but mostly out. After I made my way up onto the wooden porch I banged some on the metal screen door, but the TV was on so loud there's no way she coulda heard me.

So I swung the screen door open, shoved on the plywood one, and walked in. I like to scared Harold's maw half to death.

"What you doin here, missy? Harold ain't here." She sprang up offa that ole saggy couch and come at me. I backed out the door, onto the stoop, and she follered me out, leaving the screen door blowin in the wind.

I stopped and turned around. That witch wasn't gonna drive me away without any answers. "Well, where is he then?"

She squinched up her eyes at me like I was smellin bad or somethin. What gives her the right? I ask y'all. And her suckin that filthy cancer stick.

"You go on now. Git outta here." She stood at the top of the steps, took a drag on her butt with one hand, and waved her other scarecrow arm at me to go down. "Whatchall want with him?"

I batted the smoke away. I knewed she was blowin it at me on purpose. "I just need to tell him about this precious youngun." And here I rubbed my belly like there was some little angel in there. I rolled my eyes, too. "It's hissun."

"Ya don't say." Well, hell, yes, I DID say. Didn't y'all hear me, woman? "How you know that? How y'all know it's Harold's?"

I thought about this. She was sayin I didn't know whose brat this was on account of me sleepin my way through every cowboy in the rodeo. And that just plain weren't true. I'd been faithful to Harold for months now. After all, I'd been waitin for him to keep his word and marry me.

She got her a smirk on her plug-ugly mug and flicked her ash on my shoe.

Okay. That was the last straw. I shoved that old woman down them steps, closed the door to the trailer that she'd left flappin open, and high tailed it outta there, throwin dirt back on her with my tires. But I didn't know where Harold was. Damn.

A tumbleweed rolls across the road. I'm shiverin here just thinkin on it. She produced a prodigious amount a blood for such a scrawny old woman. I had to take care not to get into none of it when I stepped over her. I poked her some with my toe, but she just laid there like a lump. I figgered she was dead.

I went back to town and conferred with Sid some more. She'd heard, just that morning while gittin her hair done, that Harold was stayin with some skank out to the lake. It was that shacky lookin tarpaper place, the one Sid and me had always wondered about. We never knew who owned it, but some woman, older than us but not a bad looker, turned up every now and

then and we'd see her takin out the garbage and such.

Sid and me formed another plan. This one had to work. I couldn't afford to wait no longer. Junior was due in less than a month. I knew Harold would be all right with it eventually.

And now I wait here for him and Sid to show. I turn to the preacher. He just got here, but he already looks cold, too. That norther is comin on strong now, a huffin and a puffin. The mesquite's wavin in this wind and the cattle're bunchin up together, gettin ready for a good blow.

He looks at me with sad, kind eyes. "I don't think Harold is coming today."

"Why not?"

"I've talked with him recently, and he's grieving his mother's death, you know."

"I know that. He'll git over it, though." Won't he? I kin make him fergit, I know I kin.

"If he really does want to marry you, it would be a lot better to wait a bit. And to do it somewhere else. Are you sure this is what Harold wants? A wedding in this lonely place?"

"There! There he is!" I jump up once, land hard on account of the baby weight making me all swole up. Then I grunt and quit doin that jumpin stuff. "Harold's comin. I knew he would." Still, I can't keep from teeterin my heels up and down. Sid's bringin him. It's gonna work. Junior's gonna have him a Daddy. I haven't smiled so big in a long time.

The reverend looks hard at the vehicle throwin up the dirt road plume, comin towards us. "That doesn't look like Harold's truck."

Well, if this don't beat all. It ain't Harold's truck. His shiny blue truck. Or even Sid's little Toyota.

It's a cop car. No lights and siren, but a cop, sure enough. That smoky jerks to a stop like there's a house afire. Then the cop gits out real slow like, saunters over to me, and reads me some Miranda crap. He says Sid done tole them all bout me pushin Harold's maw down the steps. My fingerprints are on the screen door, my footprints in the dirt, and my tire prints on the road.

If that don't beat all. Sid was supposed to dope Harold up and bring him on out here. That was our plan. She was gonna slip some stuff in his coffee when he come over to see her husband. Of course Sid's husband didn't invite him, but Sid made Harold think he did. Harold had called while I was there and said he was gonna come over.

That's when I went and called Pastor Thomas and tole him we decided, all of a sudden like, to git hitched out at Evan's Corner. I tole the preacher it was our special place. And, in a way, it was. It's where Junior got his start, in the shiny blue pickup.

The plan was for Sid to get him woozy, offer to take him to the emergency room, and git him into her car and drive him out here. See, Sid could be our witness then, too. She weren't supposed to send some cop. Sid is definitely not my friend no more. But it's no use pitchin a fit.

Guess my waitin's over. Waitin for Harold, that is. But the cop is kinda cute.

THE END

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