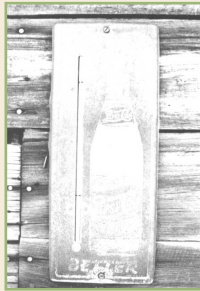


Cowboys



Li Robbins

paperbytes

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Cowboys

THAT JOKE I told about country music didn't go over so well. You know, the one that goes, "What happens when you play a country song backwards? Give up? You get your wife back, your truck back, your dog back."

Of course as Pete pointed out to me later, it wasn't so funny for Doug, since Maggie only left him three months ago. Sometimes I just don't get these things right. But then you never know, or I never know, what's okay or not in Jackson Springs.

Every now and then I can't believe that I'm here in Jackson Springs, Kentucky. Married. It seems like one minute I was serving donuts at Tim Ho's, riding up and down the 401 in Len's old Corvette (green,

kind of like someone puked pea soup all over it, but a great car; the one where everything before Pete happened) the next I'm a wife who's told not to worry – at least he doesn't say “your pretty little head” – about work since there's plenty of money coming in, and then come summer there's extra cash from the rodeo.

He's a fill-in clown, Pete. The kind that rides alongside the bucking bronco after the cowboy has slapped down into the mud and the horse is still twisting around in aggravation from the bucking strap. The clown distracts the horse so he doesn't stomp all over the cowboy, and then gets that strap off fast. Pete's getting pretty good at it.

When I met him he was just working at the Ramada, Assistant Manager. I was on a little road trip with my girlfriend, Tina. Tina and I and ten days of freedom from our boyfriends. They didn't like it. Tough, we said. Len wouldn't let me have the Corvette, of course, but Tina had her Dad's big old Buick, the one with the license plate XFMRS. You were supposed to be able to tell from that they were farmers once,

before they retired.

WE DIDN'T LIKE Memphis so much, except for Graceland. Even Graceland wasn't that great. The house was a lot smaller than I thought. And they kept saying things like "This is where Lisa Marie may have ridden her tricycle." I mean, did she or did she not ride her trike around that pool? Couldn't someone just ask Priscilla?

Anyway, once we'd done Memphis we decided to get out of Tennessee and head over to Kentucky. I've always liked horses, and Tina's always liked cowboys. Funny I ended up with one – a cowboy I mean – and she's back in Canada with an accountant.

Kentucky was a good idea. Those rolling hills, the stone fences, and horses, horses, horses. The grass was a disappointment – it looked green to me – and there weren't any mountains. I love mountains and I thought Kentucky had them. Otherwise, I just loved it. Tina got restless after our second trip to Churchill Downs, though. I pointed

out I had to spend a whole day at the Elvis Mall so she could get every last souvenir she said she really needed, but that didn't matter to her. When Tina wants to go, you go too.

Her idea was to hit all the bars in Louisville. Only problem was, all the bars in Louisville really suck on a Wednesday night. And there weren't any cowboys, just guys in tennis clothes and, at one place we went into by mistake, dresses. But the people were really friendly. They kept buying us drinks and saying, "Y'all are from Canada? My, my," in this way that seemed right out of a movie. I remember the first bar we went into there was a nice bartender who laughed like crazy when I asked what kind of bourbon they had. "Y'all are in Kentucky now, honey."

But Tina wanted to get laid by a cowboy. The closest we got were two guys who wore tight Levis and cowboy boots. They turned out to be mechanics, from Cleveland. Tina was pushing one of them my way and I had to take her to the ladies to try and slow her down. The guy looked like a ferret to me. "Tina," I said, "I'm not sleeping with Ferret Boy.

And if you want to get laid by some mechanic you're not doing it in our motel room."

She was pissed, but also drunk, so she couldn't get it together to corral the other one into renting a separate hotel room. He and Ferret Boy were sharing a room too. The one good thing was, they told us about this rodeo and fair in Jackson Springs. They'd been to it that day and it sounded like fun. Horse races, rodeo, barrel racing. Anyway, finally I managed to get Tina away from Ferret and friend, and we ended up in our motel room eating Doritos and watching reruns of *The Brady Bunch* at 3 A.M.

The next day Tina was so hungover she really didn't care what we did. I drove XFMR5 and a few hours later we rolled into the muddy parking field. Tina took off her Ray Bans. There were cowboys everywhere.

Suddenly we were starving – must have been the fresh air and hangovers. We devoured barbecue, which in the South means any kind of

pork smothered in a tangy sweet sauce, and sat in the bleachers watching quarter-horse races on the track. The people in the next row kept turning around to look at us, maybe because we were wearing these little sun dresses and most of the other women were wearing jeans and t-shirts. The man sitting next to me asked, “Where’d you get them *hates*,” and it took him three tries before I realized he was talking about our sombreros.

We also did kid stuff, like riding the merry-go-round and having our faces painted, though Tina wiped hers off right after. I told her the cowboys were looking, with or without paint. And they were. I felt like an exotic tropical bird or something, with all the stares we were getting. Tina kept nudging me in the ribs and saying “That one? Mmm, no, that one.” We just flirted our way through the day.

Once it got dark Tina wanted to hit a bar, and I was up for it too. Six years of Len was maybe one year too many, although I was just starting to admit it. Tina hadn’t been faithful to Brad since they met. Once,

when they were having a fight, he asked her when it was she first knew they were having problems. She thought for a minute.

“The time we met after my first night-school class,” she told him. He was so hurt and mad – they hadn’t even started going out when Tina was in night school. But Len, good, faithful Len, always trusted me. I didn’t let him down, much. Until Kentucky.

At the rodeo a couple of cowboys told us the action that night was at a little country-music bar out on the highway. One of them had a t-shirt that was like an American flag. He said he didn’t wear it in the ring because that would be sacrilege, having it unfurled in the cow shit. That’s how he put it, unfurled. I bet he would have recited the pledge of allegiance right on the spot if I’d asked him. They wanted to escort us but we said, “No, thank you, we’ll see you there later. Maybe.” They weren’t cute enough for Tina.

The bar didn’t have a name even, but they’d told us to look for a blinking red neon cowboy boot, with the spur out. On the way into the

bar, a guy hanging out in the parking lot said, “Hey, I bet y’all are from Canada.” It took us at least five minutes before we realized he’d seen the license plates on the way into the lot. Duh.

“Don’t it break your heart, your achy breaky heart.” Three women in identical blue jeans were line-dancing by the pool table. Every now and then, one of the guys would bump into them with a cue, but the women didn’t seem to mind. They just kept on with that delicate little *shuffle, kick, shuffle*. I see a lot of women like them down here – big butts and tiny little cowboy boots. It’s cruel to say it, but they always remind me of heifers dancing on the hooves of their cowboy boots. We sat at the bar. Tina complained, not quietly enough, “Don’t it break your head, your achy breaky head,” which the guy next to us overheard.

“Hello darlin’s, where y’all from?” and he was off and running, talking nonstop about a fishing vacation he had in northern Ontario once, they flew him in and then they forgot to pick him up. He had to walk a half a day wearing a bathing suit and eating Cheese Whiz. “I don’t

blame Canada though, I sure don't."

The bartender was a little wrinkled lady, probably in her late thirties but looking fifty. After the first beer Tina asked her for a bourbon. "We just have setups, honey. Beer and setups. You gotta go to the liquor store for bourbon." So then we were careening around in XFMRS to get to the store before they closed, and back to the bar with a mickey in a brown paper bag.

"Is this legal?" I asked as I poured straight out of the bag. Doris the bartender laughed, and passed me my setup, which meant a soft-drink. She nodded to the end of the bar. There was a babyfaced guy hunched over two beers, and a brown paper bag with Old Forrester peeking out.

"He's a cop, honey. Off duty. Way off duty."

The place was filling up, and it seemed like half the people who came in wanted to talk to us. One man, must have been sixty, dressed in a crumpled suit with a bolo tie sat down beside me and said, "If

anyone gives you any trouble, you just come to me.” Then he slipped off the barstool onto the floor. By that time the band was playing, so nobody paid any attention. The line dancers were two-stepping with the pool players in front of the bandstand. Almost everyone was at least forty, and most of the guys had beer guts. Tina scanned the room for young blood.

“This is the action?” she asked.

The fishing-trip guy told us there was another bar down the road, at the Ramada. He pulled his jeans up over his gut as he told us, like if he hid his stomach we might ask him along. He said they played dance music and it was Ladies Night too. Tina said, “Oh good.” She was getting restless, so we got ready to go. On the way out, it was like we were leaving a family party.

“Oh, are y’all really leaving?”

“Hey, the night’s still young, and so are you!”

We just kept smiling and saying, “Sorry, it’s been wonderful.” Until

one chick, the only other woman in a dress, a tight spandex mini, twirled around on her bar stool and asked, “Y’all leaving?” in a deep drawl. And when I said, “Yes” she kind of snorted and said, “I don’t mind.” I guess we were on her territory. After that, we scooted out to the car, and headed over to the Ramada. I tried not to think about the penalty for drunk driving in Kentucky.

Ladies Night at the Ramada turned out to mean there were little clusters of women more dressed up than at *Red Cowboy Boot*, and a whole lot more men, all ages, cruising. As soon as we sat down a big paunchy man came up and asked me to dance. I didn’t like the look of him, or maybe it was the gust of beer breath that made me say no thanks.

He asked why not, so I said, “I pulled a muscle in my leg,” which I thought was a nice way of letting him down gently, but he looked mad and said, “I didn’t see you limping when you came in.” He stomped off. Tina danced with a guy we called Tom, since he looked like Tom Cruise, a little bit. His real name was Cain. “Pentecostals,” he explained.

Tom and Tina were pressed up close – I could see where that was going, and just when it was starting to make me feel lonely a man politely asked me if he could sit and chat. I wanted him to say, “sit a spell,” but no one actually says that in Kentucky. You also can’t get mint juleps down here, except at Derby time. Oh well, you have to let go of some of these ideas, I guess. This guy was the Manager of the Ramada, and he genuinely seemed to want to talk – he didn’t try and hit on me at all. Then along came the Assistant Manager, and yeah, there was that little flutter when we were introduced. Pete is cute, too cute, I thought then. The kind that’s bound to have dozens of women chasing him, and an ego as big as the rest of him. But it didn’t turn out that way. After a while, Joe, the Manager, went back to work and Pete started talking about the horses he was raising, and asking me questions about what I liked and didn’t like about the States. It’s not too often a guy asks you questions about what you think or feel. Along with his looks, it made me feel downright threatened.

I told him about the time we had at the other bar and he laughed, said that was the bar his Dad owned. He asked me if I'd seen his Dad, and described him to me. Unfortunately, the man he described fit the bill of the older man who'd slithered off the barstool onto the floor. I told him, and he stopped smiling.

"Shit," he said. "That means he's off the wagon. Shit God almighty. I've gotta get over there." It turned out Pete's car was in the shop, so the next thing I knew I was speeding back to the *Boot* with this worried handsome man beside me, and Tina and Tom necking in the back seat.

By the time we got there, his Dad was on his feet again, weaving around the dance floor, with his hand half way up some woman's shirt. She was pulling away, another guy stepped in, fists up, and Doris the bartender yelled at Pete, "Get him out of here fast!" I stood there, open-mouthed, as Pete rushed onto the floor, dragging his Dad away, with the other guy, the woman's boyfriend I guess, being held back by his friends while she yanked up her shirt to fasten her bra back again. A

bunch of younger guys were laughing and egging the boyfriend on.

“Hey Tina,” I said. “There are cowboys here.” It was true: in the two hours we’d been gone the talent had changed. But Tina was glued to Tom, and I was hoping like hell Pete would ask me to help him get his Dad home and then, well, the rest would be history. Which is pretty much what happened. Pete shouldered his Dad into the car, and then after a ten-minute drive down the highway, carried him into his trailer, and to bed. After that we sat and had a whiskey. Pete washed out some coffee mugs – not a glass in sight – and we sat and drank and talked. “What about your girlfriend?” he asked. Another point in his favour for asking. Though I knew Tina would make it back to the motel just fine on her own, or more likely with Tom. Then, with Pete’s Dad snoring in the next room, we got down to business.

The next morning we had bacon and eggs at THE SIP ’N’ BITE. Pete’s friends Maggie and Doug owned the place. Doug kept giving Pete that shit-eating “you dog” kind of grin that men have when their best

buddies get laid, but Pete ignored him. He held my hand, and looked into my eyes. Maggie looked irritated when Doug came up to us for about the fourth time to talk about nothing, and shooed him away so we could get back to our hand-holding.

“What about your boyfriend?” Pete asked.

“What?” I asked guiltily. How did he know about Len?

“Any girl as beautiful as you is bound to have one.”

A line, but a good line. So I told him about Len, and how there wasn't much left to the relationship other than memories and familiarity. *Here's where we always go for beer on Friday, that's where we used to hang out when we were twenty and first going out, your aunt is my mother's second best friend ... all that stuff.*

WE SPENT THE better part of the next three days in bed or eating breakfast. I don't think we had dinner once. Then it was time for me and Tina to head home, she'd had her fill of Tom, so to speak, and

besides, we both had jobs to get to. On the last night Pete proposed. What can I say? There we were at his place, a nice bungalow right on the river, though he was real bachelor, socks and potato-chip bags all curled up with old TV GUIDES and dust bunnies. I was putting on my dress, mostly so he could take it off again, and he said, point-blank, “Would you marry me?” When I hesitated, he outlined the whole plan. Maggie needed a waitress at THE SIP ’N’ BITE. She could pay me under the table, I could help him with the horses. Besides, what did I have that was so great to take me back to Canada? He had a point.

Of course, I had to tell Len. And Tina wasn’t about to drive all that way home herself. So back up the highway to Canada, a lot quieter than when we drove down. Tina was upset.

“The whole point of going away was that so we could be together, not so you could end up leaving me for a man.”

I felt bad, but what could I do?

We slunk into town, not talking much, and I spent about a week

breaking up with Len. Tina came around by the end of the week; we cried and talked about her coming down for Christmas. And then I was on a plane, flying into this new life of mine I've had for six years now.

I stopped working at THE SIP 'N' BITE once Pete started being a clown and wanted me to "enjoy life," as he put it. Like I couldn't enjoy life serving up bacon and biscuits to truckers and cowboys. He couldn't enjoy it, more likely. Tina did come down once, but it wasn't the same. She'd gone blonde, and had a new boyfriend she actually was in love with. She didn't even want to go out to the bars.

Maggie and I've become good friends, though. Especially since she broke up with Doug. Last night, when Pete and I were driving home from Doug's, after the guys sat around watching the game and I told all those country-music jokes to try and liven things up, I broke the news. Gently, I thought.

"Pete," I said. "Maggie and I are thinking about going on a little trip together. Maybe up to Canada, Calgary or someplace like that.

We'll probably just go for a couple of weeks.”

He kept his eyes dead ahead on the road. “Not in the 4 by 4 you're not,” was all he said.

I leaned back against the headrest, imagined the drive, the highway unwinding, taking me to someplace new. It's been six years since I've been away. Calgary has mountains. Next to horses, I've always loved mountains best.

About the Author

LI ROBBINS is a writer and radio producer based in Toronto. You'll find her work in *The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Life*, *Elm Street*, and other publications. You can hear her radio work as a producer and occasional on-air person on the airwaves of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Li is originally from Bethesda, Maryland, and has a fondness for the American south and for horses, but not for cowboys.

