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Exposed

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Benny Kent closed the door and shook off his jacket. He hung it on the hook before walking to the dressing table where he pulled out his diamond stickpin. His mirror image mimicked his every move. As he laid the pin precisely between the pot of rouge and the hairbrush, the diamond caught a glint from the candle's flame.

"It all began with a horse," he said, not looking at me, fingering his cuff links, "a bet about a horse. Leland Stanford, you'd know him as one time governor of California and man behind Southern Pacific, but he was a gambling man, too. Owned racehorses and wanted to prove that a horse could have all four hooves off the ground at once. Imagine that. A horse, suspended in mid air. All that brawn—the power, the fight, the muscles and flanks. How could such a creature hang above the earth for any length of time?"

Benny Kent placed his cuff links next to the stickpin and handed me a strip of film, what he called "celluloid". I held it carefully above and away from the flame.

"Folks were skeptical," he continued. "Not Stanford. He was convinced of it. He'd seen these graphs drawn by a Frenchman named Marey, but graphs weren't enough. Stanford needed proof. A photograph. 'Because a camera', he said, 'cannot lie'."

Looking away from Benny Kent, I examined the celluloid. The candlelight, wavering, revealed a horse and rider. The dancing orange glow mocked them, caught and frozen on the strip of film, the same picture repeated, slightly different. A hoof raised more here. The tail lashing up there. A haunch muscled out, now in.

Benny Kent resumed. "No one had been able to do it, to capture motion on film. Stanford wanted the best man for the job, and that was Eadweard Muybridge, a man famous for his stereographs of the Yosemite Valley. It took Muybridge six years to get the proof, but two years of that time he spent south of the border, helping people forget he'd killed his wife's lover. He was acquitted—justifiable

homicide—but a man who could kill made folks in Stanford’s circle nervous.”

Benny Kent removed his vest and silk tie, and then, went to work on the buttons of his shirt. His thin, slender fingers were deliberate and easily managed to slip each button through its hole.

“Muybridge returned to Stanford’s stud farm in 1876, and two years later he’d figured out how to get a series of cameras to shoot in sequence. It had to be fast to capture motion, one going off on top of another, but he did it.”

Now bare-chested, Benny Kent checked his reflection in the mirror, not like a woman, but surreptitiously. His chest was smooth and clean like his face, his belly hardly a paunch as if his body immediately consumed whatever he fed it.

“It was Marey though who took Muybridge’s project to the next level.” Benny Kent leaned against my dressing table. “He saw Muybridge’s work when it went to Paris and decided to make a single camera that could take all the pictures. That invention made possible what I’m doing here with Mr. Tilghman. What started as the pictures of motion have now become moving pictures.”

“Well?” He opened his palm, requesting the strip of film.

“It takes the wildness out,” I replied.

Benny Kent looked down at me, then sneered. He ran a finger over one eyebrow. “Get undressed.”

“Tell me.” I spoke to his bent frame as he sat to pull off his boots. “How did he kill him?”

“Who?” He unbuttoned his trousers.

“Muybridge. How did he murder the lover?”

My question stopped his hands mid motion. He looked at me, his pants just below his knees. “That’s not the point.”

“How did he?”

“I don’t know.”

I got up from the bed and walked behind my screen. “What use is your story to me then?”

When Benny Kent walked in earlier that evening, he wore dark glasses over his eyes. I’d wondered if he was blind, but he didn’t walk with his ears like the young children at the school. He took sure steps and came directly to the bar. Mill stopped talking to William who was taking a break from his piano playing and waited.

“Say,” Benny Kent said slow and easy. He removed the glasses, folding and placing them on Mill’s gleaming oak bar. “I hear a man can get something substantial here. That true?”

“Depends.” Mill leaned on the bar with arms spread wide, his left shoulder slightly raised. He looked like one of the lawyers, trying to decide which tack to take with the jury. William hid a grin and said nothing.

Benny Kent turned around to face the rest of the room. He planted himself against the bar too, propping himself up on his elbows. Trying to be friendly he was. “Nice place you got here, Mill. Everyone said you had the cleanest, nicest place in town.” I watched him quickly scan the customers at their tables. We had some of the most prominent men of Guthrie in for dinner tonight, which meant a town meeting later at the courthouse. It also meant Mill had to be careful. Course, quite a few of the prominent men were known to take something substantial now and then, but Mill couldn’t put them in a tight spot, or they’d have to make a show of it. No one wanted to see the Guthrie Saloon shut its doors; it’d be like losing a piece of history since Mill had been operating almost from day one. Besides, people loved Mill. They respected the way he managed his place. He kept order and had an eye for beauty.

Benny Kent’s eyes watched Josie and Helena circle the tables. They wore aprons over their dresses and tied up their trains at the calves to keep from tripping. Benny Kent stared at Josie’s ankle when she leaned over to pick up Jim’s plate. He cleared his throat and looked over his shoulder at Mill. The pomade gleamed in his black hair. “You heard about Tilghman filming out at the Dunn ranch?”

Mill nodded.

“Well, I’m Benny Kent, cameraman.” He turned around and offered his hand to Mill. He ignored William.

“Nice to meet you,” Mill said.

“We’re gonna be filming in town soon.” Benny Kent turned back to watching Josie. “I thought I’d come in for the weekend to scout things out. Course, I could use a bit of relaxation, too. Tilghman never lets up.”

“That sounds about right.” Mill noticed me standing at the far end of the bar. He ticked a grin.

“He sure pays well though so, you know, money’s no problem.”

“Glad to hear it. Nothin’ worse than being broke.”

William stubbed out the cigarette he’d been quietly smoking. “What’s up with the fancy glasses?” he asked. I came around the bar now; I wanted to hear this.

Benny Kent turned away to pick up the glasses. When he turned back to show them to William, he saw me and hesitated. He smiled as slow and easy as when he'd first spoken. I wasn't wearing an apron.

"They're for my eyes," he said, handing them to William but staring at me. "Cause of all the filming I do. Gotta protect my assets from the sun."

I fingered the glass pendant of my necklace. "That's a strange way to think about the body. Benny Kent, cameraman."

"Is it now?" He smiled again, a tight smile without showing teeth. He took up my hand. "How do you think about yours?"

Mill placed a glass of milk before Benny Kent with a dull thud. "Why don't you take a seat, and one of the girls will bring you dinner."

I took my hand out of Benny Kent's sweaty palm—he was overdressed for September's weather—and picked up his dark glasses. "This way, sir." I seated him across from the pharmacist. When he reached out for his glasses, I hooked them over the deep v-neck of my dress. He just smiled.

Later, after we cleared the tables, set up the screens to make our "back room," and extinguished all the lamps but those out on the boardwalk, I passed out glasses of bootleg while Josie and Helena sang duets to William's piano. Mill brought the last of the lanterns in. The light kicked at the shadows and retreated, kicked and retreated, until he set it down on the piano and adjusted the wick. Josie's and Helena's dresses pooled at their feet now. The aprons were gone, and they'd put on heavier makeup. Helena had put kohl around her eyes, Josie had given herself a beauty mark, and I'd stuck two ostrich feathers in the knot of hair at my nape. I felt Benny Kent's eyes follow me. I had yet to speak with him again. He was more patient than most men, waiting for his shot. But I hadn't made up my mind.

A couple of ranchers had come in to play poker; their game was quiet and serious like their lives. Not just anyone could play cards here. Mill knew one of the quickest ways to trouble, and attention from the law was a card game gone sour. But Tom, Everett, Gary, and Joe had been playing in the back of the Guthrie Saloon ever since Oklahoma chose statehood and prohibition seven years earlier. They sipped their bootleg slow and spit their chew carefully into glasses to keep Mill's floor clean. One night on the way out, Everett even said he was glad the crazy women of the temperance union had won prohibition. "Lot easier to concentrate on the game without all the ruckus." Mill laughed at that and clapped Everett on the shoulder. "Better let your horse find the way home tonight, Everett. I think you're drunk."

Though the room would fill up soon—once the town meeting let out—the present calm pleased me. Coaxed by the voices of Josie and Helena, the light danced with the darkness, a smooth do-si-do. Mill

and I'd devised some paper shades to dim the lantern light. The lamps on the boardwalk made it hard to see very far into the saloon, but we took this extra precaution. Through trial and error, we figured out how close we could get the shades to the heat without burning them. This was the subtle negotiation of so much out here on the prairie. The risk that makes life worth living lies in the fire; you gotta gamble your safety to learn anything.

When the knock came, I was whispering about Benny Kent with Mrs. Dix, our seamstress and local suffragette. The women of the temperance union, who fought alongside her for the vote and couldn't do without her handiwork, snubbed her company in every other way. Mrs. Dix was anything but prudish. She'd made the dress I wore tonight—it was the color of Indian turquoise, made out of taffeta. I'd never seen anything like it. Mrs. Dix had said New York was taken by color these days. She liked to talk about New York intimately, about the work of her “sisters” out East. “When I saw this material, dear, I knew I had to order it for you. So striking against your red hair.”

Everything stopped at the sound of the knock. We wouldn't have heard it at all if William's song hadn't ended. I looked at Mill who was frowning. He smoothed his moustache and rubbed his chin before skirting around the screen and heading for the door. No one comes in through the front after dinner.

“Sheriff Tilghman!” Mill's voice carried a grin. Everyone but Benny Kent relaxed.

“Now, Mill. You know I haven't been sheriff in years.” Their footsteps approached. Tilghman's boots knocked against the floor. Here was a man whose presence announced itself.

“Heard you were Chief of Police in Oklahoma City though.”

“I quit that a year ago on a promise to Zoe. Don't worry.” Tilghman rounded the screen, speaking over his shoulder to Mill. I ran a hand over my belly to settle it. Everyone stood up. Except for Benny Kent. “I'm not here in any official capacity.”

Mill laughed. “You're always welcome no matter what. It's been years.”

“Too many,” Tilghman replied. “Sometimes I wish I'd settled in Guthrie like you, Mill.”

Tilghman was soon surrounded. The ranchers quickly pumped his hand, proud to see the legend face to face. Mrs. Dix tried to get a word in about the state of politics, and Josie and Helena circled like moths around a flame. I hung back. William struck up a tune. I fought a sudden temptation to wear Benny Kent's glasses.

Stories about Tilghman turned the room rambunctious, especially as the number of patrons increased. Everyone relaxed into the festive air. Men sprawled on chairs, Josie and Helena danced when William

played in between stories, and Mrs. Dix brought out her banjo and played along. The charge was electric. I hadn't felt such enthusiasm since the day Guthrie celebrated statehood or the day, years earlier, when Tilghman brought the outlaw Bill Doolin in. That happened to be the same day Mill had chosen for my birthday. Standing on the balcony outside my room waiting for the train, I'd watched people throng the street below. I'd never seen so many at once. When Mill came out and stood behind me, he said there were probably five thousand people down there. I craned my neck and blinked in the sun.

"You ever seen so many folks before, Mill?" I couldn't make out Mill's face, only the darkened shape of his hat. He hunched down balancing on his toes and placed a hand on my head. I rubbed his sandpaper cheek. His brown eyes shone soft like the coat of a well-groomed mare.

"Oh, once. Seven years ago now. Believe it or not, on the day of the first land rush there were more. You know how the night sky sometimes wears a veil of thin clouds?" I nodded. "And you only see the brightest stars? Well, that's like today. Compare it to a clear night when the sky is black velvet with all those diamonds tumbled out. That's how many folks wanted a piece of Indian Territory in 1889."

I lifted my hand from where it had come to rest on Mill's knee and covered my eyes, squinting tight. I pictured the big night sky, how beautiful and terrifying. On those clear nights, I always felt so small till I remembered where I was—in Guthrie, with Mill. Seemed belonging allowed for more beauty and less terror.

Mill stood up. I heard his knees creak. He adjusted his hat and looked down the railroad tracks. "You know, Mr. Tilghman?"

I nodded. Of course I did. Everyone in Oklahoma did, and with the US Marshal's office in town, Tilghman passed through Guthrie all the time, and each time, he made a point to stop by the saloon. He'd lean up against the bar drinking a glass of milk and chat with Mill. I never saw Mill relax with anybody the way he would with Tilghman. I didn't relax though. When I was really young, I'd hide behind the bar gripping one of Mill's legs, curious and shy. Later, I'd just watch from a distance. I didn't understand the pull Tilghman had on me, but everyone gravitated toward him so I just figured he had magic. Maybe he learned some from the Indians when he tracked them. Folks said he was the Indians' enemy and friend. That took some kind of magic.

Before leaving, Tilghman would seek me out. I'd watch my shoe scuff the floor while he said, every time, "Another inch at least, Mill." They'd laugh and Tilghman would tousle my hair. "And so beautiful." My head tingled long after he left.

"Well, Tilghman," Mill's voice brought me back to the balcony and the crowded streets below. "He's the reason I'm your father."

I looked up the length of Mill and waited. I knew better than to rush him.

I was eight years old.

Everyone smiled silly from the bootleg, even Benny Kent, who'd finally relaxed when he realized Tilghman hadn't come to pull him back to work. The only men not drinking were Tilghman and Mill. Mill never drank while working so he could handle any situation that arose. Tilghman just didn't drink. Instead, while folks swapped stories about him, he'd eaten half of Josie's famous apple pie. Wanting to stay on guard, I sipped my bootleg slow; the room buzzed around the edges like the soft glow from one of our lanterns.

"To catch Doolin, I needed a disguise." The chair creaked as Tilghman stood up to tell the story 'how it really happened.' "So I dressed as a traveling preacher, found me a rumpled Prince Albert and a black derby a size too big." He clasped his hands behind his back and put on a somber, constipated face. The room laughed. People shook their heads and took another drink. "Even shaved my moustache. I'd been on Doolin's trail for three, four years—nothing was too much. Minutes after arriving in Eureka Springs, I saw him. Boy, if he didn't look old, walking with a cane and stooped at the shoulders. I could see why he'd come to the springs for treatment. I could also see his gun. Had to bide my time a bit longer to truly take him by surprise. So I watched and waited. When Doolin entered one of the bathhouses, I figured it was my chance. Catch him with his pants down so to speak."

Laughter erupted again. I smiled and held my fingers to my lips.

"I forced myself to count five minutes, pulled the Derby low on my brow, then went in. As soon as I opened the door, I saw Doolin's cane, just in time to turn away before he lowered the newspaper to see who'd come in. I ambled up to the desk, my heart pounding, and paid for a bath. If Doolin recognized me, he wasn't letting on. I shuffled my way past him through the door marked, BATHS, then froze on the other side and pulled my gun. Nothing happened."

Tilghman pretended he was up against a wall. Then he lifted the toe of his boot.

"Carefully, I cracked the door ajar with my foot. Doolin hadn't moved. His legs were still stretched out and crossed at the ankles. I leapt out and planted my gun on his forehead."

Everyone drew sharp breaths as Tilghman jumped and pointed his gun at Benny Kent's head. Benny Kent shrunk back, raising his hands involuntarily.

"Well, Doolin always said he'd never be taken alive. He shot out of that chair, never mind his cane, and went after his gun. I grabbed for his hand but only caught the sleeve. We wrestled until his arm was about free; he'd have his gun in a second. 'Don't make me shoot you, Doolin.' He looked into my

eyes and hesitated. We both knew it was over. You never hesitate. Slowly he raised his hands in the air. I had my man.”

Cheers and clapping erupted. Benny Kent, who was still cowering in his chair, woke as if from a dream. He shook his head and started clapping too. “Boy, wait till we shoot that scene, Bill. You’ll be famous all over again.”

I circled the group, thinking. Not long after Doolin’s capture, he’d staged a jailbreak. When Heck Thomas and the posse found him outside Lawson, there was a shoot out. Doolin died. Like he wanted, I guess. Would that make it into Tilghman’s movie? I picked up my dress to keep it from trailing along the dusty floorboards. Where do stories really end?

A satisfied hush had settled on the room like contentment after a long Sunday meal.

“Hey Mill,” Helena said. “Tell the one about finding our favorite little red head. The rumors true about her pa being a Sooner?”

My head whipped around so quickly, a feather tugged loose and floated to the floor. No one noticed except for Benny Kent. He leaned over and picked it up. “Trade?” he whispered, pointing to his glasses. My hand went to my chest, and I turned away.

This was my story. Mill and I shared it on slow nights, alone, with good whiskey from Mill’s stash and a single lantern. But Mill stood, rubbed at the back of his neck, and circled the bar. He found himself a glass and held it out towards Helena. She poured him a shot.

Mill knocked back the liquor, cleared his throat, and began.

“I’d never ridden so hard in my life. Soon as the bugle sounded and the cavalryman’s flag ripped the air, I rode low trying to help ol’ Ornerly fly across the prairie. He was a miserable horse with a temper, but that served me well the day of the land rush. It was his wildness made him so difficult—he hated being tamed—so that day, April 22, 1889, I let him go. Didn’t once use my spurs; tried to help him forget I was even there. Only occasionally did I pull on the bit ‘cause I knew where I wanted to go—Guthrie.”

The room let out a whoop of town pride. Mrs. Dix stood up and waved her fist like an Indian brave. In her stout body with her head thrown back, she looked like a man dressed as a lady. I felt betrayed as if she’d been lying to me about something all along. I slumped into a chair.

“Wagons broke down left and right. Folks scrambled out to plant their stakes. All a blur to me. I’d nothing to lose I hadn’t lost already in the damn blizzard of ’86.”

Tilghman nodded, removed his hat for the first time all evening, and shook his head.

“After maybe four hours riding, I saw the flag waving atop the pole. Ol’ Ornery got me to Guthrie then collapsed, his sides heaving, the breath pounding out his nostrils louder than the huffing of the train engine we’d outrun. I brushed back his mane and placed my hand on his neck; his pulse was like to fly right outta him. His eyes rolled, and one of his back hooves pawed at the ground. I pulled my stakes from the saddlebags and turned my back on him to claim my land. When I returned he was dead.”

Mill paused. His eyes dropped to the floor. Then he held out his glass and Helena quickly poured him another shot of bootleg. Tossing back the liquor, he shifted in his chair so the darkness hid half his face.

Then he told us how stakes being driven in the ground sounded like a chain gang working only without keeping time, how tempers flared and claim jumpers threatened decent men, how the tents went up quicker than folks flocking to a revival, how the man to the right of him had been the first to set up, how his scrawny looking horse shouldn’t have beat everyone else to the punch, and how some folks were suspicious and others said, ‘Well, look at it. Beast is sweating something awful. Maybe he got lucky. Or maybe it’s the hand of God.’ Then Mill told about Frederick.

“Here was a man who didn’t believe in luck or God. Looked like Bunyan in his flannel and leather work boots, big but mean. ‘Luck,’ he shouted. ‘No such thing. And God only helps those strong enough to help theirselves. You see that puny bastard hiding in his tent? Ain’t no god helped him get down here. He cheated. The man’s a Sooner!’ The crowd that had gathered rumbled. I placed my hand at my hip ready to draw in case things got crazy and some man took to the idea of jumping my claim. ‘What about his horse?’ someone shouted from the crowd. Frederick kicked at the ground and spit. The brown tobacco juice landed at the back hooves of the horse and sat there. The horse snorted and shied away nervous. But Frederick descended on the beast and yanked at the bridle. The scrawny man hadn’t even removed the bit. Frederick made sure everyone could see, and then holding the horse still, he lowered his head to its sweatflecked hide and gave a lick.”

The room buzzed. I plucked the other feather from my hair and tossed it to the floor. It drifted up before coming down as if to spite me.

“That’s right,” Mill continued. “He ran his tongue along that horse’s flank and spit on the ground. Bubbles popped as Frederick’s tobacco juice landed. ‘Soap,’ he yelled. The crowd descended on the horse whose eyes started to roll. It yanked at Frederick’s grip on the reins, trying to rear up, but Frederick held fast. When the crime had been confirmed, all eyes turned on the tent. It hadn’t been that quiet since the hush fell at high noon, right before the bugle call. Then a voice said, ‘There he goes.’ Half the crowd turned and chased the man who’d snuck out the back of his tent during the commotion.

“Frederick pushed the rest of the crowd back and calmed the horse. ‘I’m claiming this land,’ he said.

Folks grumbled, but no one challenged him. I stepped forward. Don't know why. The man was big as a grizzly.

“Get back on your property,’ he said.

“I stood my ground.”

Mill took another drink. He was warming up now, his voice thick like cream. Behind me, the lantern on the piano flickered and went out. The oil had run dry.

“Frederick barked at the crowd, 'What're you waiting for. Clear this tent. We need room to fight.' He turned to me. A wicked smile grew out of his beard. ‘Knives,’ he said. ‘Wouldn't do to put bullet holes in folk's tents now would it?’ I crossed my arms over my chest agreeing. My heart pounded against my arm quick as ol' Ornery's pulse, but I couldn't back down. If folks knew I was soft, I'd never be able to defend my claim.”

“It was a small tent—two poles and four stakes. Soon as the stakes were pulled, poles collapsed. The canvas falling muffled their thuds. Just as the men were dragging the canvas away, a child started to bawl. We all looked around wildly till we realized the cries came from beneath the canvas. The men holding the tent snapped back their hands as if they'd picked a pot off the fire. Some folks crossed themselves. That's when Tilghman shouldered through the crowd and said, ‘Anyone claiming this stake is responsible for that as well.’ Even then everyone knew Tilghman's reputation as a buffalo hunter and Indian tracker. We accepted his word as law.”

Tilghman lifted his hat from his lap and tipped it slightly before returning it to his head.

“Now Frederick had no faith in God, but he believed in the devil just a little. Before I could say a word, the claim and the baby were mine.”

Chairs creaked as everyone turned to look at me.

When men look at me, I know what they see. They see my body and some of them, the more sober ones, see a pretty face. I don't mind; I like my body. The soft dough of my thighs for kneading. The fruit of my breasts, berries to linger on. The rise and curve of my belly, smooth like the rind of a melon. Some men miss this, aiming only for their own release. But for those who want to know about what they see, I show them how to turn the natural violence of sex into pleasure.

But that's my body; the rest I keep for myself.

Slowly, I drew the glasses from between my breasts. I unfolded the wire rims. I put them on.

The room went dark at first. Then the lanterns were pools of light and everyone a silhouette. A throat cleared.

“I, uh...” It was Tilghman’s voice, but I’d never heard him hesitate before. “I went tracking him.”

Feeling dizzy, I sat up. My right hand reached out, groping for the wall.

“Who?” That was Josie.

“The father.”

I leaned forward to catch my breath. Suddenly I remembered the last time Tilghman had been in town—I was probably twenty—he’d left the saloon without seeking me out.

“You never said...” That was Mill.

“I know, I know. The time never really seemed right, I guess.”

“Well?” Mill again.

Tilghman cleared his throat once more. “He wasn’t hard to track, that’s for sure. By the next morning, he’d barely gotten five miles from Guthrie, knew nothing about covering his trail or didn’t care enough to try. Poor man was dying of thirst. He begged me to spare him. I told him not to worry; I surely wasn’t there to kill him. I offered him water and explained that I’d help him get a plot on the outskirts of Guthrie where he could raise his baby girl.”

“‘You kidding?’ The man had laughed crazy like a wild horse being tamed. ‘They’d lynch me for sure.’ I told him I’d take care of that. The man took a few more swigs of water, then squinted up at me. Somewhere along the way, he’d lost his hat. His face and neck were burnt red from the sun. ‘Why you want to help?’”

“‘You have an infant, don’t you?’

“The man looked down at the dirt. ‘Don’t know nothing ‘bout raising a kid. Wife died a week before the rush. That’s why I crossed the border and hid,’ he said, looking up. ‘Figured I had no other chance.’

“‘Come back then. I’ll help you explain.’

“The man picked himself up and brushed the dirt from his pants and shirt. Reaching behind, he gently patted at the burn on his neck. ‘No.’”

“He spoke so quiet I wasn’t sure I’d heard him. Hands on his hips, he gazed at the northern horizon. ‘No, I can’t.’”

Before Tilghman could say another word, I stood, suddenly, startling everybody. “Benny Kent, cameraman,” I said, removing the glasses. “Take me upstairs.”

He shot up so quick, his chair tipped over. I heard the silence all around the crash as it struck the ground. Helena stood up, but I turned on my heel before she could say a word. I lifted my skirt and tapped my way up the stairs. The last words I heard before Benny Kent followed me down the hall to our rooms were from Tilghman, apologizing.

Oklahoma is flat prairie. There is nothing to break the horizon once you are out of town. Tabula rasa. That’s what the philosophers call it or so I was told by a man traveling from the East. He said it’s like a clean slate, a place to invent yourself. I don’t agree, and he didn’t stick around to prove it. “Hollywood,” he’d whispered. The way he said it I knew he’d spent many nights inventing himself there. Sometimes I think of him and hope he is the man he wanted to be. But my hope is like a prayer because I felt fear in him. He didn’t have the boldness of the cameraman; he doubted himself before he’d even started.

That’s the thing I think this prairie land does—forces you to face yourself. When I walk out of town and the dirt road is hard and dry, cracked because there’s been no rain, and the sweat starts beneath my breasts and rolls down my belly, and I know because I cannot feel it that there is no wind, only heat—then, it is me and the sun, the light bouncing off pools of nothing, pools of silver nothing. I do not believe they are water; I understand the illusion and refuse it. No, I’m not a blank slate; I am everything that I have done or that has been done to me. That cannot be erased. But the largeness of the horizon, the scoop of sky that at night sparkles terribly, the night sky far, far bigger than I, there is a kind of invention in that. Maybe I could I grow beyond who I am, but I would never want to diminish who I’ve been.

The darkness shored up the corners of my room, but the lantern—reflected in the mirror of the dressing table—illuminated the rest: how a pillow had been split, where the feathers had exploded, how the occasional breeze through the window stirred them like the ashes of a nearly dead fire.

I looked up from the floor to the wooden beam standing sentry behind my bed. That’s how I thought of it, this beam that kept the roof over my head. I could see, as if my cheek was pressed flat against the wall, each sliver of wood at attention on the rough-hewn surface.

Benny Kent hadn’t liked my question about the use of his story. He surprised me behind my screen before I’d even taken one shoe off. I noticed his socks needed darning. The toe of his left foot stuck out. He grabbed me by the wrist, brought me round and shoved me back on the bed.

“My story not good enough for you, not like Tilghman’s?” He slapped my cheek and began to work off his underwear. I sat up, but he pushed me back down.

“My dress,” I said. “Let me take off my dress.” He eyed me warily and nodded. I got up demurely, then ran for the door. He caught my wrist again.

“God damn it.” I struggled against his hold while he tossed back the covers of the bed. That’s when one of the pillows dropped to the floor. He swung me onto the bed, picked up the pillow, and started beating at me. I couldn’t help it; I started to laugh. Feathers flew everywhere. Benny Kent tossed what was left of the pillow to the floor. He flopped next to me. Smiling, he traced a finger over my lips. The smell of liquor smothered me as he leaned over, and then, kissed me. He kissed hard like a man who’s only practiced on himself. I put my hands to his smooth chest and pressed lightly to see if he was the kind of man willing to be taught. He broke off the kiss and looked into my eyes.

“What’s the matter with you? You a whore or not? I’m paying you to do what I want.” He pushed himself up and went over to his pants. I sat quickly and gripped the edge of the bed. I saw the feathers stir like ashes. I looked up at the beam, but I no longer felt protected. That’s when I changed my tactics. I decided not to fight.

Benny Kent turned around and threw his silver dollars at me. I raised my arms in defense. One dollar glanced off my skin and landed on the floor where it spun loudly to a stop. Benny Kent grabbed me below the shoulders and yanked me off the bed.

Sometimes you have to accept brutality. Sometimes there’s no choice.

“Count it,” he said through his teeth. Then, I was face down on the mattress listening to the rustle of my taffeta dress as Benny Kent pushed it up over my thighs. I could smell his tarnished sweat on the silver pieces beneath my cheek. He tore my undergarments off.

I tried to let go, to open myself to him, to seek out a corner of pleasure. I slid my hand beneath my body, beneath the dress bunched up around my waist, hoped he was too drunk to see. ‘Cause a man who is mean thinks he can only have pleasure by taking it away from others. I ran my finger over my diamond spot, trying to release the flood that made sex into pleasure, but then he was done. He fell on top of me, breathing heavy right in my face. The smell of bootleg, which I usually enjoy, was masked by the sour smell of his effort. I had to hold my breath to keep from being sick. Fortunately, he was too efficient to remain down for long. I gasped for air while he quickly dressed; I heard his buckle clanking.

Benny Kent left his dark glasses behind. I found them sitting here on the dressing table, their dark circles staring. I finger them lightly. The desire to hide ourselves is a strong one. I recall the strip of

film, how the horse and rider were hidden in a way. What was worth capturing on film—the wildness—was lost in the act of capture.

My cheek is red where Benny Kent slapped me. Mill will want to know the story, but I'll keep it to myself for a time. I need to own it first, to have it speak back to me and show me who I am that I wasn't before. Then, some slow night, when it's just Mill and me, I'll grab a good bottle of whiskey and a lantern, and for the first time it won't be me listening to him.

I run my hand along the curves of the dressing table. Mill made it for me when I would not be dissuaded from my profession. He said I would need the beauty to remind me how good things can be. I told him sex was good, but I didn't refuse the table. It's made of the same oak as the bar downstairs, but Mill sanded it so smooth, it didn't need any varnish. Whenever I open a drawer, the sweet smell of wood fills my lungs. There is nothing to seal away the heart of the oak; I am always reminded that it used to be alive.

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