

UNTITLED

A Mystery

by

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ONE

C.C. "Cueball" Boland was a pool hustler who owned his own pool hall just a block off the Strand on Galveston Island. He was also a retired Dallas cop who gambled moderately on poker, drank a fair amount of whiskey when the situation seemed to call for it (which it frequently did), and never failed to notice a pretty girl. Which is to say that he had all of the usual male vices and a couple he had cobbled up on his own. One vice he didn't have was philandering because his wife, the former Myrna Hutchins, had been the center of his erotic universe since sixth grade. Nor could he ever be accused of disloyalty to friends. It was this last quality that had gotten him into the deep, dark, and odiferous several times since his retirement eight years earlier. Or as Myrna often said, "C.C. is the only man whose learning curve is a straight line."

Myrna said a lot of things like that, the kind of one-liners Groucho Marx would have smiled at and nodded to in admiration, and to his credit Cueball was one of those rare

men who listened. It was Myrna's dry wit and uncanny sense of proportion that had snapped him to her long before the raging hormones of his early teens took charge of him, body and soul. The two were forged together into a far stronger alloy than either could ever have been separately on a night of heat and fury during a heavy petting session gone into overdrive in the back of Cueball's uncle's 1938 panel truck. From that moment forward the two headstrong, fiery-tempered youths would carry the same torch for one another long after the home fires of their closest friends died to ash.

Separately or together, though neither would have admitted it to each other or anyone else, the one defining characteristic that fit both of them could be summed in one word: passion.

It was Cueball's sense of loyalty that gathered to him a smattering handful of long-time friends, those few who had proven equal to the engulfing depths of his devotion. One of those friends was Micah Lanscomb.

Micah came into Cueball's--and consequently, Myra's--life from the rain, both literally and figuratively. Lanscomb was soaked, thin and weathered, and wore an impenetrable and taciturn demeanor. He was a head taller than his fellows and his shadow came before him, a palpable, ineluctable thing that parted idle chatter like the wake of a great ship transversing middling waters. If the person

meeting him were pressed on it he would say that the tall man was engaged in weighty matters, which, on the face of it, was the simple truth.

The pool hall was already quiet that evening. The jukebox was being given its requisite thirty minutes to cool down, the plug disengaged and held against the wall by a racked billiard cue. The repairman who'd fixed the turntable motor and charged Cueball sixty bucks for the service call had advised a cooling down period each night--just one more thing Cueball could add to his religious regimen.

Outside the storm freshened, diminished, and came on again with a howl. The wet stranger stood there, dripping on the bare wood floors. The storm had brought him.

"Help you?" Cueball asked.

"I don't have any money," the stranger said, "but I'm hungry and I'll wash dishes and clean the place up to cover it."

Cueball closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath and turned and opened his eyes again to peer for a few moments at his reflection in the long mirror that hung on the wall behind the bar. What he saw there was a nondescript gray man of sixty-two years, with brushy gray hair and a face that people found to remember even when they were looking right at it. He was five ten and weighed a hundred and

sixty-five pounds, which made him neither tall nor short, neither stocky nor skinny, and the clothes he wore were usually as unmemorable as the body they covered. A writer friend had once told him that there was something about him reminiscent of the flicker of old black-and-white film. Quick celluloid images at the corner of an unfocused eye like those long-ago RKO newsreels from childhood afternoons spent at the quarter matinee.

He turned back to the man and stared at him for a few moments. This was, beyond doubt, the kind of person he'd always resolutely avoided--gaunt, hollow, needy, empty. A man like the thousands of others who wander this great and turbulent land looking for the one un-namable thing that might fill them, the undefined Holy Grail of their rootless existence. Yet there was a tiny something besides emptiness in the man's eyes--something that said there was a story there worth hearing. And Cueball Boland was a listener to stories and storytellers.

Cueball shrugged. "Pete," he said quietly. "Put a rib-eye on the grill and turn on the fryer. I do believe this poor guy could stand a square meal."

"Much obliged," the man said.

"Want a beer?" Cueball asked.

"Naw. A coke, maybe."

Cueball's hand had been resting on the cooler. He slid back the door, reached down and pulled up a bottle, maneuvered it under the church-key out of habit, his pale gray eyes locked with the stranger's. Cueball didn't bother to give the man a smile. The fellow was beyond caring about petty things.

He took the coke and wandered over to a table, sat down and stared into the darkest corner of the room, oblivious.

And so Cueball went and joined him.

TWO

Micah Lanscomb's story would come out, fully told, over a five-year period after that first night, and it would take the better part of a full case of Johnny Walker Black Label to coax it forth. That first night the tall, dripping stranger entered, the last of the Gulf storms for the season had swept across the bay dumping warm and plentiful rains on the island that backed up sewers and made travel a hazard.

As Lanscomb's tale had it, straight from the horse's mouth, in 1968 he left his home in East Texas and made his way westward to that mecca of the children of Aquarius, the intersection of Haight Street with Ashbury.

After weeks of hanging out with flower children, smoking dope from tall bongos between intermittent readings from Frodo's passage of Moria and Gandalf's consequent fall, he pondered on the passage of his own life and the direction of a country that had lost its God, its compass, and was merrily and busily meandering through the dark labyrinth of inner conflict and endless introspection toward an inescapable collaboration with apathy. He awoke each morning with the

secret knowledge that those around him were full of crap to the degree they had "something to say", which was not surprising given the fact they were, by-and-large, overgrown children, many of whom had been kicked violently from conservative nests as being awkward and unfit offspring.

Experience was what Micah was looking for. Experience with life and living, and there seemed little evidence in the cool Southern California atmosphere of rebellion and irresponsibility that anyone else was on the same quest.

And so the quest turned inevitably inward. The drugs became harder drugs and the effects of them ate gradually and happily away at the pillar of his inner strength, but no more so than the ocean waves beating against the cliff face at high tide. Sex with the flower girls became more exotic and in the same instant less fulfilling.

His first disaster came during a group camp out on the beach at Malibu. During a particularly disturbing acid trip, one of the girls that had been traded around was brutally murdered. Micah had heard the screams in starlit darkness while wrestling with eerily-shifting reality. The stars overhead had become streaky, violent arcs. The sand beneath his bare feet sucked away at him as if drawing his life-force outward away from his heart. At first the screeches were that of a peacock from the neighbors' yard back home and in

his distant childhood, but soon they became something else entirely. By the time he gathered himself enough to launch forward to investigate, there was only the still and lifeless body, savaged and torn, beneath the cold glare of a cheap flashlight. He hadn't loved her. No one had loved her, to his knowledge. And Micah Landscomb hadn't saved her. She was as much Kitty Genovese as she had been Susan "Sun-energy" Glover of the long-willow legs and blond, Galadriel tresses. And she was dead.

He walked away that night. Walked away from California.

Death very nearly found him in a jailhouse in a small Nevada desert-town at the hands of a sheriff's deputy who didn't care to stomach his smell. The deputy had tried to use him for a punching bag. Micah took the blows one-by-one up to the moment he realized the man wasn't going to stop until his target ceased breathing, at which point Micah reached out two long and wiry arms past the deputy's flailing limbs and applied an exact amount of pressure to his carotid artery, relieving the animal of consciousness long enough to liberate himself from jail, town, and the sovereign State of Nevada.

Eastward he walked, over the mountains and across the plains. He swam the rivers, camped out with the ragged

flotsam of humanity, and stopped when the Atlantic lapped at his ankles. There being no further place to go, he came home to Texas.

His father was dead and his mother had remarried and moved off to Ohio. The town of Wilford was a husk of its former self, but it was the only home he had. The home place was still standing there empty. He took up residence, renting the place from his neighbor at a hundred dollars a month, and got a job at the County Jail.

Within five years he was the County Sheriff.

In 1979 he attended a symphony concert at Sam Houston State University, seventy miles away, the ticket having mysteriously found its way into his pocket. The highlight was a Julliard Harpist named Diana Sulbee. He watched her from the first row, enchanted with her beauty and with the way she merged herself, body and soul, with the music that flowed as clear and crystalline as a cold mountain stream from her precious, slender fingers.

After the concert he asserted his way backstage and into a brief private conversation with her. He asked her to dinner and she accepted immediately. They were married five days later before the Justice of the Peace in Wilford.

For two of the briefest and most beautiful years of his life, Micah Lanscomb was happy. That happiness was shattered

when he found Diana brutally murdered in their bed one evening when he came home off duty. Within forty-eight hours the killer was dead, having taken his own life when his cockroach-infested apartment in Conroe was surrounded by thirty or so law-enforcement officers.

It was penance, this Micah knew, for having let Susan Glover die that dark California night all those years before.

After the funeral, which was the largest gathering ever seen in the isolated and insular little town, and after everyone had left but the grave-digger, Micah pressed the keys to his truck into the bronzed hands of the Mexican laborer and walked away, yet again. South and East.

He walked until he met ocean once more, and below the Galveston seawall in the turbulent, storm-tossed and raging waters of the Gulf, purged himself of everything, both ugly and beautiful and very nearly drowned in the bargain when a rip-current pulled him further out to sea. But he knew, instinctively, anything good that comes must be paid for, and sometimes the price is dear.

The man who emerged from the waves and the rocks was a different man, at home in his own skin for the first time in his too-long life. And it was that man upon whom Cueball Boland would, in precious and careful doses over the course of time, ladle out his trust and his devotion.

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