

Title: One Night In Abilene

ONE NIGHT IN ABILENE

4,105 Words

The cattle car clanked rhythmically along the straight expanse of steel track, swaying slightly, side to side, with a motion that lulled him in and out of half sleep. He had gathered enough unsoiled straw from the floor of the car to heap into a little pallet in the corner where he leaned and watched the flat, greening landscape slide by between the wooden slats. It was spring in north Texas. The cool evening air smelled of damp, tilled earth, and he pulled the collar of his jacket up around his neck.

He had ridden the stock car across Kansas and through the Oklahoma Indian territory for two days, heading home for Abilene, having spent the winter in Kansas City working in the stockyards, living hand to mouth. The work in the muddy cattle pens, the gloomy cold, and the perpetual hunger after he paid for his tiny unheated room, all were reasons he hopped the southbound stock train at dawn the day before. The trains usually ran close to empty when headed south. Sometimes they carried a few head of breeding stock for delivery to some ranch, and a lone Hereford bull was the only other passenger on this trip. Once in Abilene the wooden slatted train cars would be packed to capacity with cattle for the long trip back to Kansas City. He had unloaded those arriving trains, pulled the carcasses of weaker animals off the cars, and dragged them away with a team of mules. The stench from their rendering hung over the yards and permeated his clothes. He found he had no stomach for the work.

The sun dropped low on the horizon and its last rays flooded the cattle car with a bright orange glow and faint warmth. He could tell by the flat, sparsely treed terrain that Abilene was not far, and his mother's ranch a day's ride west of there. Then he remembered he had no horse and it would take him a day and a half, or maybe two days, to walk home.

When the train came to a halting, screeching stop near the stock pens in Abilene, a chilly, starry night had fallen. His legs were wobbly after two days sitting on the floor of the train car and he pushed the door open and slid to the ground on his belly, slipping quickly away past the pens full of cattle. The town seemed dead after the bustle of Kansas City with its gas streetlights and side walks where people stayed out well after dark, doing business or pleasure. The main street was deserted, save for two horses tied in front of Miss Verbena's. He fished in his pocket and pulled out a small hand full of coins that totaled less than two dollars, enough for a meal. He hadn't eaten in two days. He skirted a puddle from the spring rain that pooled at the end of the street, and crossed to Miss Verbena's. The saloon was quiet, even for a Tuesday night with the stock pens full of cattle waiting to load on the train. The piano was silent. He scraped his boots on the iron plate situated by the door for that purpose and went in. Two men seated at a table with their drinks looked tired and disinterested, as if they had just come off a long drive. They had probably brought the cattle that were in the stock pens by the tracks. Miss Verbena sat at a table playing solitaire, a pair of wire-rimmed glasses perched on her nose. When she heard him come in she glanced up, and when she saw who it was she dropped the cards she held and turned in her chair. In her old age Miss Verbena had taken

to dressing more like a school marm, with a gingham blouse buttoned at her throat, and her red and gray hair done up in a bun.

“Bob Hagerman?” She half asked and half accused, peering over the top of her glasses.

“Yes Ma’am,” he said, taking off his hat and holding it in both hands.

Miss Verbena dropped her glasses and let them dangle from a length of black ribbon around her neck. She pushed her chair back, got up and turned heavily to face him. “We didn’t figure we’d see you around here again.” Her voice sounded higher pitched and quicker than he remembered, and she looked almost too surprised to see him.

“I been up north,” he explained. “I just rode in on the train from Kansas City.” He felt awkward being in the saloon again, and wouldn’t have been there at all if he weren’t so hungry. “I was wonderin’ if I could get somethin’ to eat before I head out for home.”

Verbena was sizing him up and after a few seconds said “Well sure you can” in a voice that was uncharacteristically hushed. She took a cane that hung on the back of her chair and limped over to the bar. She seemed much older than the last time he had seen her, but that was a year ago. “You hurt your leg?” he asked her.

“Ah, no,” she said bitterly. “It’s the damned rheumatism, but it feels like a horse kicked me in the ass.”

He just nodded and smiled a little with one side of his mouth.

Verbena slapped the bar with her palm and called for Herb in a loud whisper. She repeated the summons two or three more times before the bartender emerged from the room behind the bar, pulling up his suspenders, and looking like he just woke up.

“Sorry to wake you up,” Verbena said scornfully, “but we have a customer. Go make this man a sandwich.”

Without comment, Herb turned to go back to the room behind the bar where liquor, food, and supplies were stored.

“And bring me a lemonade”, Verbena added. She looked at Bob Hagerman expectantly, waiting for him to say what he wanted to drink.

“Lemonade,” he said. Lemonade’s good.”

“Make his just a regular lemonade,” she said to Herb. “He’s not a drinkin’ man.” Miss Verbena motioned for him to follow her back to her table where they both sat in silence for a few moments. She drummed her long, red fingernails impatiently on the table, and finally she said, “So what brings you back here?”

“I figured it was time to come home,” he said simply, not wanting to share any more with her. He just wanted to fill his stomach and go.

Herb brought thick slices of ham between pieces of stale bread, and Bob ate it eagerly. Verbena watched him wolf the sandwich down and asked, “You want another one?”

“I don’t have much money on me,” he replied as he finished off the lemonade.

“You can owe me,” she said. Then she called to Herb and told him to bring Bob some more ham, and to fry up some eggs to go with it. She drummed her red nails on the table. “What do ya hear from your folks?” she asked with feigned indifference.

“Nuthin’.” Even if he had heard from his folks he wouldn’t tell Verbena about it.

Impatient with his terse answer she took a moment to think of her next question. “You got a horse?”

“No.”

She snapped back “You gonna walk home?”

“I recon so.”

She turned her head to look at the landing that led upstairs, then back to him. “Well you’re in luck,” she said in that hushed tone. “It’s a pretty night out. You could be home for supper tomorrow.”

Herb brought a plate of ham and eggs and Bob finished it off, stood up and emptied the coins from his pocket onto the table. Miss Verbena picked out two quarters and pushed the rest back toward him.

“Good seein’ ya Bob,” she said as she shoved the coins into a pocket on her skirt, trying to hurry him along. She gathered from his calm, disinterested demeanor that he was ignorant of things that had happened while he was gone. She got up from her chair and led the way to the door, her cane thumping on the wooden floor. She opened the door and pointed his way through it with the cane. “Tell your mama I asked after her.”

“Bob Hagerman!” The voice stopped him in his tracks, running down his spine like a lightning bolt and welding his feet to the floor. He had to give his head a shake to clear it before he turned around. Myra stood on the landing wearing a blue dressing gown.

Miss Verbena backed up a few steps, her cane thumping quickly, not sure if Bob was going to pull a gun and shoot Myra, and maybe her too in some pent up rage. But he didn't move. He just looked confused. Neither of them spoke for what seemed a long time.

Finally, after looking at the floor and the ceiling, Bob said in a soulful voice “Myra, what're you doin' here?”

Miss Verbena saw that there was no anger in Bob, only hurt, and she limped over to her table and fell into her chair. She took a handkerchief from her skirt pocket and wiped her forehead. She hollered for Herb to bring her another lemonade.

“Now Bob,” she said in the most compassionate voice she could muster, “Myra didn't have much choice but to come back here after you high-tailed it for God knows where.”

The two weary cowboys who had been sitting at the corner table took the opportunity to slip out the front door, escaping whatever melodrama might play out.

When neither Bob nor Myra spoke, Miss Verbena explained “She couldn't stay out at the ranch with your mama, now could she Bob. If she wasn't good enough for you, she sure wasn't good enough for Eugenie.”

“Where's your baby?” Bob asked Myra, remembering the dark skinned baby girl Myra had delivered that was so painfully not his.

“Dead,” Myra said coldly. “She got sick right after you left. Your mama nursed her for a week, but she died anyway.” Myra’s voice softened and cracked. “Your mama said she was just too little. We buried her out by your daddy.” Myra slumped to sit on the stairs and lean against the wall.

Bob found himself a chair. His head spun. He had figured it all out over the winter in Kansas City and decided to forgive Myra for the sin of having another man’s baby. After all, he knew when he took her out of Miss Verbena’s what she was, or at least he thought he did. He had been mad at his mother too. Since he’d been old enough to think about marrying, his mother had hinted that the girls who worked at the saloon in Abilene, selling drinks and themselves to cowboys, were poor victims of circumstance who no more wanted to be there than in hell. And since there were no other marriageable girls within fifty miles, Bob went to Miss Verbena’s the spring before, after driving a herd of cattle to the stock pens. He had been there on other trips to Abilene but Myra was new, with curly brown hair, blue eyes, and a shy kind of laugh. He decided quickly to marry her, and he had to give Miss Verbena a hundred dollars to let her go. When he took her home his mother treated her like a daughter, and within a matter of days he loved the pretty, quiet girl. During the cold, lonely nights in Kansas City he remembered how happy they had been for a while, waiting for the baby to come. And his mother had been right. Myra would sooner have been in hell than stay at Miss Verbena’s, or so she said. He figured he would return home to Myra’s loving arms and raise the dark haired little girl as his own, or at least try. He hadn’t figured on Myra deserting *him*.

Miss Verbena pounded the floor loudly with her cane and yelled at Herb to bring her lemonade. She hiked up her skirt to her left knee and rubbed it with both hands, relieved that Bob didn't look like he was going to hurt anyone, but annoyed to have to deal with him, and concerned he might want his hundred dollars back. Herb brought her lemonade and she swilled half of it and sat the glass down hard. She made a grunting laugh and said "You Hagerman men, wantin' to make silk purses outa sows ears."

Bob sat with his head in his hands and he must have seemed an easy target to Verbena, who was feeling even more emboldened than usual after two of her lemonades. When he didn't respond she sent another barb his way.

"Your daddy couldn't even speak good English, not that I ever heard him say very much. Mostly he kept his mouth shut, like he was dumb or somethin'."

Bob heard Verbena's taunts buzzing in his head like a fly around his dinner, distracting him from the issue at hand, which was his wife. He swatted her away without letting her light, and got up and went over to where his wife was sitting on the stairs. "Why'd you come back here Myra?" he asked her again.

She didn't look up at him, unsure of what his intentions were. "You left the ranch because of me. I shamed you."

Her voice, soft and sweet and sniffly, touched the place in his heart that had been empty without her. She looked so small and fragile leaning against the wall, weeping softly, and he had a sudden urge to pick her up and carry her out of the saloon, but he didn't.

“Can we go upstairs for a little while?” he asked her. “We need to talk.”

“I get ten dollars for that one,” Verbena chided him. “And you ain’t got ten dollars.”

Myra turned her face even closer to the wall as if she were going to crawl into it. Bob straightened up and turned to look at the belligerent old madam.

“This here is still my wife, and I just want to talk to her.”

Miss Verbena let out a loud, hooting laugh. “You thinkin’ of takin’ her back?” When Bob didn’t answer she repeated the question, only louder. She downed the last of her lemonade and wiped her mouth on her sleeve. “She’d make a fine wife for ya, Bob Hagerman,” she said sarcastically. She tapped the table with one long, red fingernail while she reloaded. “She’s way more friendly than your mama was. Your mama was lazy and never made me a red cent. That’s how come I sold her to your daddy.” Verbena leaned in her chair and hooked an arm over the back, relishing the cruelty of the story she was telling Bob. “I guess he couldn’t talk English good enough to spark any girls, so he came here to buy one. And I had those two lazy, skinny gals your grandpa left here. That man paid one week’s board on them two, and said he’d be back, but I never saw hide nor hair of him again.”

Verbena’s buzzing fly lit square on Bob and gave him a sting. He sat on the stair next to Myra, but now he was looking at the crone who was doing her best to drive him out of her saloon with his tail between his legs. When he didn’t say anything, Verbena turned to look right at him.

“That’s right Bob, your mama, Eugenie, used to be one of my girls. And her sister too.” She pointed a long, crooked finger at him, “That would be your aunt Polly. She was with me till she died.” Verbena chuckled. “She made me a few dollars.”

She had his full attention. “You’re lying,” he countered.

“I’m a lot of things, but liar ain’t one of um.” Verbena was pleased with his response. She was getting under his skin. She figured he didn’t have a gun, and probably wouldn’t use it if he did.

“That’s right,” she repeated. “Your mama and her sister both worked for me after their good-for-nuthin’ daddy deserted them here in Abilene.”

“I don’t believe it.” Bob’s head was swimming and he leaned himself against the banister and closed his eyes.

“Why do you think Eugenie, your mama, was so happy to take a gal from my place into her house?” Verbena was on a roll. One or two more jabs and she figured Bob Hagerman would be out the door, on his way back to wherever he came from, as fast as he could go. In a voice that feigned comfort she said “That’s alright Bob. You Hagerman men just like your women good and broke in.”

He felt sick, like he was going to throw up, and he bolted for the door. Miss Verbena smiled like a Cheshire cat, pleased that her hundred dollars and her best girl were safe. She banged her glass on the table and hollered for Herb to bring her another lemonade.

Outside the moon had come up and hung like a bright, round lantern over the trees at the end of town. He ran down the wood-planked sidewalk, past the storefronts that

housed the rail office and the dry goods store before he leaned over the side and lost his dinner. He was hot and sweaty, and the cold night air felt good on his clammy skin. He was suddenly weak and shaky as a newborn calf, and he sat down on the edge of the boardwalk. The full moon cast long shadows of the buildings, the hitching rail and water trough, its light almost bright enough to read by, and he took notice of it, not yet able to sort out the tangle in his head. After a few minutes he heard padding foot steps and assumed it was a dog until he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“It ain’t like she said.” Myra kneeled behind him, her bare feet sticking out under her frilly, blue dressing gown. “Your mama told me about it, how her daddy brought her and her sister to Abilene from Missouri, and put them up with Miss Verbena ‘cause it was the only place back then. He left um ‘cause Polly, your mama’s sister, was sickly. He went off to stake a piece of land and he never came back. Your mama figures Indians got him, or somethin’.” She waited for a response, but there was none. “She said she never told you ‘cause she was ashamed of how she come to marry your daddy, him paying Miss Verbena for her keep, and takin’ her off. She didn’t even know him.” Again she waited for him to say something, and again he did not. “She was only fifteen years old, Bob. No folks around, and Verbena trying to put her to work. But she wouldn’t do it. That’s how come Verbena let your daddy take her.” She slid around to sit beside him on the step. She took his hand, opened his fingers, and placed a small stack of folded bills in his palm. “There’s your money back. I took it outta Verbena’s cash box, a little bit at a time, when she was too drunk to notice. It ain’t stealin’. It’s just makin’ things right. I was

gonna give it to Miss Eugenie whenever she came to town. I didn't expect to ever see you again."

"I didn't expect to see you *here*," he said. Sitting so close he could smell her scent, like the air smells in the springtime when all the wild flowers bloom. He held the money out for her. "Keep it." When she didn't take it, he put it on her lap.

"Bob," she said, barely louder than a whisper. "I wasn't as lucky as your mama. You know how I came to be here, and no one offered to take me away, until you did."

They sat silent in the cold night as the moon climbed above the trees, and Myra began to shiver. There was no sound to disturb their thoughts except for the occasional lowing of a cow in the stock pens. He took his jacket off and put it around her shoulders, got up, and went and stood in the middle of the empty, dirt street. His body cast a long, thin shadow in the moon light. He looked around at the storefronts on either side of the street; locked up, dark, and quiet as death. Myra thought he was going to start walking, headed in the direction of home, but he didn't. After a while he said, "I'm sorry your baby died."

He sat back down beside her. "Do you know what happened to my mama's sister? Verbena said she died."

"Your mama told me that Polly was older than her by two years, and she was kind of sickly. Miss Eugenie always felt guilty because your daddy picked her instead of Polly. Polly stayed at Verbena's for two or three years before your mama heard she died."

Bob put his face in his hands, trying to make sense of it all. "Why did she tell you all that? *I* never knew. I figured her and Daddy got married in Missouri."

“She wanted me to know she didn’t think less of me, about comin’ from Verbena’s. So was tellin’ me she understood.”

When he didn’t say anything, she added, “Men don’t know what it’s like for women with no kin folks.”

Two riders approached from the end of town where the livery stable was, their horses plodding as if still half asleep. When they came up to Bob and Myra, sitting together on the step, one horse spooked at the unexpected shapes in the moon light. He jumped sideways and nearly unseated his rider, who cursed and asked who the hell was prowling around in the dark. When Bob stepped out to apologize for scaring his horse, he saw that the riders were the two weary cowboys who had been drinking in the saloon earlier. The one whose horse spooked recognized Bob and Myra, and said “You ain’t finished your business yet?” a touch of humor in his voice. “You best get on with it boy. This night’s about over.” They rode away laughing.

Dawn was starting to lighten the sky above the trees to the east, and Bob was cold, hungry and tired, but not anxious to leave Myra. He was remembering why he loved her. “Maybe we could try this again” he said to her, and pointed out, “You’re still my wife.”

“You don’t have to Bob.” She looked at her lap.

He looked up and down the street, and at the big, yellow moon about to be overtaken by daylight. “Give me that money,” he said. She handed him the bills and he counted them: one hundred dollars. “You go get your things before anybody wakes up. I’m

goin' down to the livery to buy us a horse." He stuffed the money down into his pocket.

"You ain't gonna be bought and paid for any more. You've got kin."

She sat on the step looking at him in disbelief.

"Go on now," he urged her. "Go get dressed and get your stuff before old Verbena gets wind of it." With that he turned and strode off down the street in the direction of the livery stable.

The old man who kept the livery was up and about, feeding his stock when Bob got there. The best animal he could get for a hundred dollars was a big bay with shaggy fetlocks and bobbing ears that looked more plow horse than cow pony, but Bob figured he could use a heavy work horse at the ranch. He borrowed a saddle and bridle, tacked the mare up, and hurried back to the saloon where Myra waited out front dressed in baggy men's trousers and dragging a gunnysack. As Bob hoisted the sack over the mare's neck and situated it in front of the saddle, Myra whispered that she had taken some canned peaches from the storeroom for them to eat later. Bob swung up into the saddle and took Myra's arm as she climbed up behind him. With the sun not yet in the sky, he turned the mare west and tipped his hat to the banker, on his way early to work. With any luck at all they would be home for supper.

