

Cowboy

“So you wanted to be a cowboy?” she asked, as we stood waiting.

“Well, yes, when I was a little boy.”

“You’re not too old, it’s still possible.”

“Too much work,” I replied. “And then there’s my aversion to cow poop.”

“So ... now you no longer yearn for that life,” she said.

“Oh, I suppose I do,” I replied, “but not enough to make it a reality.”

“Reality and yearning aren’t the same, are they?” she said.

“No, they’re not,” I replied. “The price of reality is hard work. Yearning is free.”

I looked up at the mountains sweeping down before us. How wonderful and invigorating it would be to hike the trails among the rocks, up and down the glens and through the tiny streams that creased the steep sides flowing down from craggy peaks. No, it wouldn’t, I realized on second thought. It would be a lot of hard work. My feet would get soaked, and then rub against the inside of my socks and I’d have bleeding blisters by the time I got home.

“But you know by now that anything worthwhile takes an effort to accomplish,” she said. “And you have worked tirelessly on the important things in life.”

“Yes,” I answered. “But we don’t always know what’s important.”

“That’s true,” she said.

“Like the Buick,” I said.

She didn’t answer. She had known me for too long.

On warm May afternoons in the distant past, I’d stand daydreaming in the back window of our downtown Catholic high school, busy at the pencil sharpener, pointing and re-sharpening enough pencils to last until college, and gazing out across the street to where a neighboring salesman always parked his yellow 1954 Buick Roadmaster convertible. It was such a beautiful car, a giant throbbing land rocket with deep leather seats that made you want to jump in and tear your clothes off ... if you were a sixteen year old boy. And I’d yearn to take Mary Immaculata O’Toole for a ride in that dream machine, while we played the radio and listened to Johnny Mathis. I didn’t like Johnny Mathis, but I figured Mary Mac would. And in the unlikely event she tore off her clothes, the radio could play The Battle Hymn of The Republic, for all I cared.

Sister Mary Monstrance snapped me out of my reverie with the call of my name. She would endure my grinding away a forest of wood products for only so long. And now, would I please take my seat and attend to academic matters during this last study period of the day.

“How you expect to ever accomplish anything is a mystery to me, young man,” she offered.

“Me, too,” I thought.

“You need to concentrate on what’s important,” said the old nun. I hoped that some day I could.

I returned to my desk, where I sat squirming with eager anticipation for the final bell, like an astronaut waiting for the countdown to reach zero. Then, shot out of my seat to land on the streets of downtown Utica, I would search for Mary Mac. But when I found her, I ignored her. I was too shy to start a conversation. A youthful Casanova stifled by the daunting task of small talk. A price I was evidently unwilling to pay, when I could daydream for free.

“And do you still yearn for her?” asked my wife..

“She was the most gorgeous car I’ve ever seen,” I said. “Beautiful curves, luscious upholstery, and a snappy set of headlights.”

“The girl or the car,” she asked.

“Even after all these years,” I said, “I’m not sure I can separate them.”

“I think you’re trying to provoke me,” she said. “But here comes your horse.”

A wizened old ranch hand ... by the looks of him, the veteran of a thousand cattle drives ... brought the beast around from the barn and casually handed me the reins as if I knew what to do with them. I had always yearned to ride a horse, and here was the moment I’d been waiting for. I never realized horses were so big. How would I get up there?

“He may need some advice,” my wife said to the man, embarrassing me.

“It’s OK, sir,” said the fellow, “not everyone is a born cowboy.”

“I know,” I replied. “I’m a born dreamer.”

“Me, too,” he said. “I’m a retired stock broker.”

I didn’t do too badly on the trail that day. Old Sam, as he jokingly called himself, decided to ride with me and we discussed our portfolios while our horses stopped often to nibble on the grass. I’m still not terrifically sure what’s important in life. But I’m thinking of buying a Buick.

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