

Summer Rose Special

The sun came up over Cottonwood Butte, and the day went from warm to hot in a hurry. Any activity stirs up dust, and the dust makes it harder to breathe the hot, dry air, but I can't sit still. I walk around in the house until Cindy's giving me funny looks and about to ask questions, so I make an excuse to walk down the hot and dusty street into town and then around town here and there, like I'm thinking about buying a few things but not quite ready to spend money. People talk to me, and I give them short answers and walk away. Maybe they wonder about me, but I don't say much.

Mainly what I do all morning is listen for the train. It's scheduled in at 11:00. The first time I hear the whistle blowing, way up in the mountains, just coming out of the pass, it's a little after eight, but there isn't really any train yet. It's just my jumpy nerves, creating the sounds I'm straining to hear.

I talk sense to myself. I don't want to let my restlessness walk me into being too tired, so I walk back to the house, boots all dusty with red clay gone to powder in summer heat. I sit still when I can, but I'm up and down a dozen times, and I hear that train whistle blow two dozen times before it really does blow, way up at the end of the valley, echoing from the mountains, when the train steams down the last long stretch along the river into town.

I get myself settled down, because the train is coming, and I know Travis is on that train, but that doesn't mean things are going to happen right away. Once the train pulls into town, it's going to take Travis a while to find me. I don't plan to hide, but I'm not going to go meet him either.

I'll wait and see how Travis plays his hand. He won't come looking for me first thing. He'll circulate around town, visit old friends, maybe go brand some calves for somebody or push some cows, work a while.

If he doesn't already know I'm here, he'll hear about it, and eventually, he'll come looking for me.

I could let my restlessness speed everything up. I could meet him at the station. I could wait for him to get clear of the people milling around and

then step out and say, “Hey Travis, how’s my old friend? They say these past fifteen years haven’t slowed you down at all. They say you keep improving with practice.”

They say his hair has gone grey, and he’s thinner. I know Travis. He’d just grin that deep, friendly smile of his, and he’d be flexing his fingers already, without thinking about it, and getting his wrists loosened up, ready to go, because he knows me, too.

He’d probably say, “Well, we sure could find out, couldn’t we, Johnny? Wouldn’t take long to find out, would it? You been keeping sharp and fit and fast?” He’d emphasize that last word a little. That’s what he always said when I was learning what I could from him.

He’d say, “Faster, Johnny. You can do it. Faster and smoother. When your hands, your fingers, your arms know what you want well enough, they’ll move without you having to think about it. You think it, and your hands have already done it. Practice it slow and smooth over and over, and when it’s smoother than roses in sunshine, speed it up, faster and faster.” So I practiced and practiced, until my ears rang and I was worn out, but I still couldn’t match his speed.

He was so fast and so smooth and so relaxed, he made it look easy and graceful. Watching him, you’d think, “Hell, that’s so easy, anybody could do it,” until you tried it.

I hear the train pulling into town, moving slower and slower and then stopping at the station. I think I’m staying cool and relaxed, but Cindy says, “You’re jumpy as a cat. What’s bothering you?”

She’ll hear it some time. Might as well be from me. “Travis is on that train.” She just looks at me. “I’m going to practice some more.”

She says, “More than fifteen years, and now he shows up. Is he looking for you?”

“That’s not why he’s coming to town, but you know he’ll look me up.”

“And what will you do when he does show up?”

“It’s up to me, Cindy. He won’t start anything unless I do. Oh hell, Cindy, you know me. You know what I’m going to do. I’m going to be ready, and I’m going to tell him to fill his hand.”

I’m good enough to do it, or I’m not good enough. Intense practice this late in life isn’t going to help much. But I still practice a lot every day. Not enough to get too tired, because I don’t know when he’ll show up, but

enough to stay supple, smooth, and fast.

And I get to where I'm not so scared anymore. Not so you can see it. Not so scared I can't work with it. I don't want Travis to see me scared. I don't want my hands to shake or sweat. My hands have to be ready, loose and easy. It's as much a matter of how I feel, what I believe I can do, as have I practiced enough.

This afternoon, I sat in the big wicker chair on the front porch, smelled the roses Cindy planted when we moved here, relaxed and at peace. It was the first time in two weeks that Travis wasn't the main thought in my mind.

I looked up, across the top of the porch railing, above the roses, above the fence. Travis walked across the road toward the front gate, puffs of dust from under his boots. In through the gate, turned around to shut it, up the walk. The sun set back of Greenhorn mountain. Just like they said, his hair is grey, going to white. He's lean, and he moves easy as a cat.

He says, "Long time, Johnny," and reaches to shake. I stand up, and we shake hands. He sits down in the other wicker chair, and I sit down again, and we both smell the roses and look at the summer evening.

Cindy's inside the house, with the window open, quiet and listening.

We sit for a while. We let the evening cool down around us. Then he tells me about some of the people he's seen that he knows I'd like to hear about. Everybody's getting older and slowing down. Some old friends are dead now. Most of them, I've heard about, but some I haven't.

We're quiet for a while again, thinking about the way the years go by. Then I can't wait any longer. I say, "I see you're packing a new outfit. I'd like to have a look at it. Plenty of time to talk any time, but it must be time to fill your hand."

And he did. He unbuckled the case and lifted the top and brought out that pretty thing, reflecting light every which way. I whistled. "A Dove. Oh, my, that's so pretty. I bet that's as old as my Hummingbird. I'll get the Hummingbird, and we'll see how they sound together."

Fine. They sounded really fine together. We tuned up and played some basic patterns. Then we worked into some songs, and Cindy came out and sang with us.

San Antonio Rose, The Yellow Rose of Texas, My Wild Irish Rose, Bunches of Roses all over My Coffin, and then songs we'd made up

ourselves and some of our favorites from when I was learning from Travis.

And it was great. The years have mellowed us both. He wasn't trying to out-virtuoso anybody, and he wasn't trying to teach me; he was willing to work with what I could do. I was more able to work with what he was doing than I was fifteen years ago.

We slowed down and hunted through strings for something we could play and sing together. Travis looked at me and said, "You've learned a lot."

I couldn't think of anything to say. He looked at Cindy, standing behind me. He said, "You've both been practicing." There's history there, but Cindy puts her hands on my shoulders, and I know it's going to stay history.

Cindy hummed, and I took it up on the guitar, and Travis helped me build a dependable rhythm, and we rocked that front porch with the log driver's waltz. "...I'm not sure that it's business of yours, but I like to waltz with the log driver."

The song rolls out into the hot summer evening. We sing the last chorus, and I hear Mrs. Jones singing with us from her kitchen to the left of us, and Jackson joins in from his side of the fence, raspy, but fitting right in. "...Burling down, down the white water. That's where the log driver learns to step lively..."

Roses in the summer evening air. The full moon rose above Cottonwood Butte.

Steel string guitars and human voices ring against summer dust.