

Home on the range

Bill Albert

He studies himself carefully in the small bedroom mirror. The nose is ample, but not too big, no Semitic drop at the end. The lips are not too full, the hair brown and straight. Maybe the eyes. No, the eyes are alright as well.

He puts his hands up to the brim of his hat, presses the curling straw edges upward. Just right. It almost never rains in the desert so he had to use hot water to make the front of the hat droop. Now it sags, dips down, shading his eyes from the sun. It looks battered, hard days on the range trailing the dusty cattle herds. The bootcut Levis are sharp and clean, worn a slightly lighter shade of blue, but not too faded. That's for beach bums. Malibu guys. He sits down on the bed and pulls on the rough-out Tony Lamas. Three whole weeks boxing groceries at the Safeway for these. The toes are already getting shiny, losing that too-new look, the nap of the leather flattened forever. The white shirt sets off his tan, the red packet of Marlboros showing through the top pocket. He stands up and fastens the silver buckle of the leather belt. He squares his shoulders, hooks his thumbs in the top of the Levis, leans back on one leg. Nonchalant. Hard. Beautiful. He's ready.

'Get him, a regular cowboy. Oye! If your grandfather could only see you. This is what he came to America for?! This?! So his grandson should be a cossack?'

'Jesus, Grandma, will you get off it! This isn't Russia, it's Palm Springs. 1958 not 1898. That's ghetto talk.'

'Ah right, Harreleh, ghetto talk, ghetto talk. What do you know about the ghetto? Huh, my Hopilong Kessidy, my Roy

Rogers? Now he wants to tell me about ghettos! Mr. Big Shot Cowboy!'

'Ya know what I mean, Grandma. Come on. Please.'

'I'll make you a nice sandwich? Even cowboys...'

'No Grandma, thanks, we'll get something on the way.'

He goes outside to wait for his friend. April, 8 o'clock in the morning and already into the mid-70s. The sky burnt blue, Mount San Jacinto looming and granite clear over the desert. He can smell the warm sand and the blacktop road. It is clean, familiar. He squats down on his haunches, takes out a cigarette and puts it in the side of his mouth. Even though there is no wind he cups one hand around the book of matches before he folds over a match with his thumb and strikes it against the rough brown strip.

She looks out through the window at her grandson. Squinting against the glare off the white sand, she remembers white winters in Berdichev. Poorer winters in the Bronx, four flights up, radiators leaking steam and knocking, his mother already an American girl then.

'No Yiddish, mother! English! I speak only English.'

And she had learned English. It had been necessary. But as she watches her grandson, sitting on his heels in the desert sun like a Mexican, she feels once again how alone she is, how a whole world disappeared when she got off that boat. At least his mother had understood Jewish.

A white Chevy pickup stops. He uncurls upwards slowly, walks over and gets in. The leather seat is warm against the backs of his legs.

'How ya doing cowboy?'

He smiles and nods at his friend Rob.

'OK, partner, OK. How they hang'n?'

'Never better, boy. Never better.'

The ritual over, they lapse into silence.

He likes being with Rob in the pickup. It smells of oil, dust, old leather and horses. Sitting up high above the road, above the cars, arm hanging out the window, hot breeze against the skin, Hank Williams on the radio, they own the morning. Anything is possible.

'Where we goin' today?'

'La Quinta. A roping is all. Maybe some bulldogg'n. OK?'

'Sure, fine, just fine.'

'Gotta pick up the trailer and the horse.'

They drive down Sunrise towards Smoke Tree. At the junction with Highway 111, a black box with three colored lights dangles on thin wires above the middle of the road. It's brand new, the first traffic light in Palm Springs. They stop behind a battered VW and wait. Rob stares up at the red light.

'How about that,' he says, rubbing the side of his nose with this forefinger. 'A God damn traffic light. Just like the big city. God damn! I mean to tell you boy things are a changin'.'

She hears the rushing noise of the air cooler from the back of the small house. It gurgles, rattles and bangs. Always there, keeping away the desert heat. Her hand to her breasts she feels the thudding of her heart.

'Mom, we'll come to visit. We'll send Harry down on the Greyhound to visit. It's not so far. A hundred miles. Lots of people retire there.'

'Jewish people?'

'Sure, Mom. They've got a synagogue and everything. You'll see. It will be fine. Really it will.'

They pull off the road into the stables. The dust spits up from the pickup's tires, thickens into clouds and swirls over the wooden fences and the horses. A black mare pulls its head back, shies away, canters a few feet then stops. Legs planted in the sand it swishes its tail against its rump.

The brown clapboard stalls and the tackroom are set back against a tall stand of eucalyptus. The boys drive into their shade and stop.

It's quiet. No dudes from the hotels. They'll come later, after they've had their breakfasts by the pool. They'll come in their stiff Levis, crisp western shirts, and unaccustomed boots. Rob and Harry will lounge against the fence and watch them from under their pulled down hats. Dudes.

A giant figure shambles out from one of the stalls. Eyes deep set in wrinkles under a greasy felt hat, massive sloping shoulders, arms like thick clay pipes. He carries a shovel, a toy in his outsized hand. With a plastic bucket he would be ready to go to the beach, build sandcastles. But Domingo has never seen the sea, never been further than Banning to the north or Indio to the south. Half Mexican, half Agua Caliente, he moves slowly through his life, as if waiting for something else to happen. He cleans stalls and from the reservation he watches the town change size, shape, direction, fill up with whites. Whites like the two boys who get out of the truck.

'Hey Domingo! What's goin' on amigo ?' calls Rob.

Domingo looks at him, shakes his head and carries his shovel into the next stall.

'Not a lot I guess,' says Harry to Rob with a laugh.

There had been Jewish people, just like her daughter said. But not like in New York or even Los Angeles. Here in Palm Springs they all had swimming pools, drove big fancy cars, belonged to a golf club. Her neighbors were black people, Mexicans, poor whites, not what she had expected. Not Jewish people.

She puts the dishes in the sink, turns on the faucet and watches the water rise slowly to cover the plates, the egg stains, the bits of butter.

'I've got to make one more stop before we head out. St. Mary's. Ya know my mom and all that good stuff.'

He shrugs.

'Yeah, OK, no problem,' says Harry.

Every Saturday it's the same. Harry has been to the Catholic church more than most Catholics. He's even become used to it, the stillness filled with echoes and murmuring. Only the plaster statues bother him. He doesn't like the washed-out colors or the way they smile. Self-satisfied, exclusive. They make him feel Jewish.

'Does it really help?,' asks Harry, now they're back on the road again. 'Confession that is.'

Rob smiles at his friend.

'Gotta do it son. That's all.'

She looks at herself in Harry's mirror, pushes a strand of hair away from her face. What would Louis think of her now? So far away from their life together. Lost in the American desert.

She bends and picks up a white shirt. Folds it over her arm, smooths it with her hand. She straightens the bed sheets. A

magazine falls on the floor. A naked girl with big smooth breasts smiles up at her. A plastic smile to go with the plastic breasts. She looks at the picture for a moment and then shakes her head, folds the magazine closed and puts it on the bedside table.

They stop the pickup on the far side of the corral and get out. The sun is higher, hotter. They drop the trailer ramp and ease the horse out. Her hooves cut a sharp echo against the wooden platform as she backs down. Restless after the drive she pulls hard on the halter rope, tosses her head angrily.

'Easy girl, easy,' Rob croons at her.

He turns to Harry.

'Walk her around will ya, Harry. Calm her down a bit. I gotta go over and see to getting my name down.'

Harry takes the halter and leads the horse towards the roping chutes on the far side of the corral. Head down he watches his boots sink into the soft ground at every step. He passes a small set of bleachers where a few tourists are settling in to watch the roping. A cowboy and his horse. The picture is simple, for Harry it is almost complete, almost perfect.

She takes the framed photograph down from the shelf. The three of them at the beach, little Harry in the middle, all smiling, defying unhappiness, denying mortality, suspended. She sighs and puts the photo back.

Behind her the TV flickers and drones. Slicked down hair, pencil moustache - Jack Bailey, master of ceremonies on *Queen for a Day*. Poor women, middle-aged and in trouble. Husbands' health broken, down on their luck, kids sick. Telling their stories. At the mercy of the audience and the applause meter. And for the winner? Dinner for two at Mocambos. An automatic washing machine and a year's supply of Tide. A day- trip to Catalina. A complete set of Samonsite luggage.

America.

He puts the saddle on, hooks a stirrup over the pommel and tightens the cinch. After waiting for the horse to blow he pulls it up another notch, drops the stirrup back on the side of the horse's belly

'Ya got her Harry?'

'You're all set to go Rob.'

Across the way they're loading the first calf. It bleats and crashes against the sides of the wooden chute. Eyes wide, saliva flecks on its nose and the corners of its soft mouth.

'You goin' to do the untying today boy?'

A very tall man, broad shouldered, a raised white scar running from his left eye to the side of his jaw, looks down at Harry. He tips up his black Stetson. The top inch of his forehead is deathly white.

'Wayne, how ya doin'?', says Rob

'Can't complain, son.'

Wayne Cooper. One of the five fighting Cooper Brothers from Fallon, Nevada. Father's got a bar there. A rough place. People say Wayne's got some Indian blood, but no one says that to Wayne. A genuine western hero.

'I'd like to get me some of that, hey Wayne?', crows Rob.

The older man turns to watch two teenage girls walk by, their blond hair poking from under their cowboy hats, rounded behinds filling out their Levis, showing how much they love themselves.

The fighting Cooper Brother, the western hero smiles. Then he laughs, thin lips pulled back over too-even white teeth.

'Straight up, partner. Shee-it boy, that quail's ass is tighter than a Jew's wallet.'

Harry pulls the brim of his hat down further to shade his eyes. He looks away and concentrates hard on what's happening over on the far side of the corral where the roping is about to start.