



## The Storyteller

Carol Opperman

The crisp autumn air was a sure sign that it was time to move the herd to market. The cattle drive was about over. The old man who had stood tall once, sat on his paint pony with a wretched curve in his back brought on by years of sitting in the saddle. He sat now with his leg slung over the horn watching the cattle graze. His ancient Stetson ringed with sweat clung to his head as it had for as many years as he had been a wrangler, and he was uncomfortable without it. His smile was still as charming as ever, and his eyes looked like they had been plucked from the clearest Montana sky. He had worked the herds since he was a young boy with his dad back in Omaha. Alone now with no one but the other cowhands to call family, he was known to them simply as Old Man.

The old man's sidekicks were Sam and Luke, who watched him carefully these days, as he seemed to be even slower than in the past. He had no desire to go into town on the days off from the ranch, but he was comfortable to sit in front of the bunk house fireplace, arms folded across his chest, and watch the fire until the flames died down to mere embers. Then he would stiffly walk to his bunk and rest for the night, only to get up in the morning and begin yet another grueling day on horseback. When the others would stay in evenings, they coaxed him to talk about the days of his youth; the memories would come pouring out of him, and he would entertain the younger men with his tales—some humorous, some full of adventure.

Now as he sat watching the cattle, the old man thought again of his youth, of the days with his father on the open range and the days with his wife and child. He thought of all that had been lost to him, and he longed for the days when he was happy in the arms of his beloved Lori—long since gone. He longed for his son who died as a baby. He longed for the day when he would no longer mount the paint, and he could rest.

After the drive ended, the old man, Sam, and Luke headed for the high country of Oregon's Blue Mountains where the snow would fly soon. The hunting was good there. Passing Prairie City, the old man stopped his truck long enough to pick up supplies for the trip. Sam and Luke watched as he stiffly got out of the truck and headed for the Safeway store.

"Lots to look at in there," Luke remarked to Sam.

"You needing something from inside?"

"Naaa," returned the younger, "Just wondering what he's gonna get, I guess."

"I expect he'll just get some grub." A silent moment passed between the two.

"You're following him pretty close these days," Luke said to Sam while he watched a hawk circling in the sky over the store.

“I know that,” Sam returned with a bit of edge in his voice.

“Sam, do you ever wonder what the old man thinks about? I mean he’s so quiet and all. I wonder what he must be chewing on sometimes.” Sam turned to Luke, “Nope, I figure if he wanted me to know, he’d tell me. I think maybe you should just leave him alone.” Luke bristled at the last remark. It seemed Sam was always trying to tell him what to do; it annoyed him without his knowing why.

Later in the afternoon the men had reached their destination. They set up camp beside Snow Creek and started a fire. The evening meal had long since been devoured, and the three sat by the fire watching the flames dance. They had laughed about the antics of the youngster while on the drive and how he had fallen from his horse. The old man smiled and crossed his arms as always and tucked his hands under his arms. It was his way of resting and keeping his aging hands warm in the chill of the night air. Sam broke the silence, “Old Man, how about one of your yarns?” The old man sat on his horse blanket, shifted his bony weight and stared into the flames. Silently and without much thought, he kicked a rock toward the fire with the heel of his boot. His ragged white mustache twitched as he searched for the words to begin. “Well, I remember a time back in Omaha when my dad and I were on a drive...” The old man’s voice was low and soft. It had the smoothness of old whiskey, and his words trailed into the night air and were lost forever, only stopping long enough to land on the ears of his spellbound listeners.

The next morning Luke made his way out of his sleeping bag, relieved himself, and made his way to the campfire. Hopping from one foot to another in the cold mountain air, the young cowboy searched the site for the old man.

“Where is he?” asked Luke.

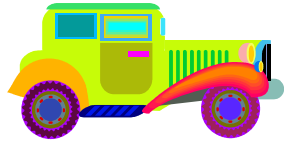
“Boy, I want to talk with you.”

Puzzled, Luke turned his attention to the old man’s tent. Starting for the tent, Luke mumbled, “It’s long past time for him to be up.” “Luke.” Sam tried to stop the boy, but it was too late. The young cowboy had entered into the silence of the tent where he found the old man—still in his sleeping bag, still in his red plaid shirt, arms crossed, but he was gone. Sam stepped to Luke’s side and placed his arm around the young man’s shoulder much as a father would do. Luke looked at Sam, “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I knew; he didn’t know how much longer he had, but he wanted to be with you. He said we were the only family he had.” Sam wiped the tears from his own eyes as he pulled a blanket over the old man’s head—a gesture of respect and kindness. The two stood in the silent place wishing they had somehow captured the time with him. Each was lost in his own thoughts.

“Come on, boy,” Sam said. “We have work to do for him.” Slowly, Luke turned and followed Sam out of the tent. They stood for a long while. Sam edged toward the gear still lying out in the morning mist. Luke followed. It was time to strike camp and take the old man home. The longing for his family was over; he was with them at last.

**Nitro**  
Carol Opperman



I am from a town of antique car shows,  
From a town of loud trains,  
And the burning smells of chemical  
plants.

I am from a tiny bungalow where  
A rose bush bloomed from spring to  
fall,  
Fragrant with soft pink flowers.

I am from a town of broken streets  
Where deep water stood during  
heavy rains  
And boats dotted the front yards.

I am from a home, warm and full of  
memories  
Of Christmases with brilliant lights,  
A family anxious to give and receive,  
Good meals—  
Brown beans, pork chops, fried  
potatoes and corn bread.

I am from a town so old even the  
oldest of us  
Has no memory of its beginnings.  
A town whose houses simply sprang  
up overnight, so they say.  
A town of class distinction.

I am from a town, a house, a home,  
A family full of treasures and  
memories.



**The Cemetery at Virginia's  
Church**

Carol Opperman

The obelisk stands ancient,  
And points to the sky.  
A son pays tribute  
To his father—"an honest man."

Drooping arms of giant evergreens  
Mourn and mark the path to freedom.  
A simple sign.  
A bridge to nowhere.

"Free at last, free at last. Thank God,  
Almighty, free at last."

Rocks protrude from the earth.  
No pattern needed, sunken graves;  
Trees and mountains stand guard.

Wild roses mark the sites.  
The pioneers lie sleeping,  
Waiting for the Resurrection

The old, the new, the ancient of days  
Flagged by road signs.  
Coal trucks zoom past.

Who knew you were here?