

ANGELS IN THE WIND

A Mile High Noir

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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One

“You ain’t from around here, are you?”

The cracked voice wrenched me out of my private fog.

“Depends on what you mean by *around here*.” I said the words without thinking about them. I struggled to grasp the moment.

“Melton. This town. Colorado boonies.”

He was an older guy, maybe late fifties, but it had taken a hundred years to get there. The first thing I noticed about him was his stained red MAGA cap. The second was his skin. It looked like someone poured brown tar over his head and the tar settled into a shiny topcoat lined with stiff wrinkles and flat black spots. His flannel shirt hung loosely over spotted jeans that hugged a bony frame. Pink fingers, crooked and rough, gripped his beer bottle as though the booze came from the fountain of youth, as though it could change a life. Maybe it had already changed his.

I imagined shouting that my ancestors once roamed the arid landscape that swirled in a dusty haze around the town, centuries before any white man trekked through the sagebrush hoping to stumble onto a city made of gold. For an instant I wanted nothing more than to launch into a lecture about how Melton’s city limits sprawled across what had been the border of northern Mexico and that, yes, indeed, when all was said and done, I *was* from *around here*.

“Denver,” I said.

He nodded and smiled, proud of himself.

“I knew it. Yes sir.”

In the past I would have asked how he knew. Or I might have remarked that he’d made a lucky guess, or maybe he’d seen something of Denver in my pickup that leaked oil in the bar’s parking lot.

But I didn't do any of that. I didn't care.

"That's a nasty lookin' welt or whatever on your forehead there," he said.

My guts tightened. I didn't want to say anything, but I had to respond. I didn't have a choice. I shrugged, turned and looked directly at him.

"Don't mean to pry," he muttered. He kind of stumbled backwards, only an inch or so, but I noticed. He looked away. "I'm harmless. Curious, yeah. But harmless."

"Got hit with a baseball bat." The words stuck in my dry throat, but he understood.

I paused, worried that again I was saying too much, that the filter I once had for keeping my personal business to myself was broken. Worried that I didn't know how to act, how to maintain, anymore.

He sucked in his breath. "That must'a hurt."

"Unconscious for a day or two," I continued. "Took a while to get back on my feet. Still can't see right, got fucked-up headaches, and some days I can't think straight." For the first time I saw that the man's forehead was slick with sweat. "I don't like to talk about it."

I returned to my beer.

The sign outside said SAND CREEK SALOON. Inside, a half-dozen gray and grizzled men in overalls and wrecked boots did their best to live up, or down, to all that the bar's name implied. They had to know the history of the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, didn't they? I was sure none of them were Cheyenne or Arapaho. Even if they knew about Colonel John Chivington, the Third Colorado Cavalry, and the killing of more than a hundred unarmed women and children, they wouldn't care.

"Uh, sorry to hear that," the man mumbled. "Baseball's a dangerous game, yes sir."

I almost corrected him. My bashed-in head had nothing to do with a game.

He picked up his beer, turned away and made like he saw someone he knew. He shuffled to the corner where an old-fashioned juke box played a mournful country boy trying to imitate Willie Nelson. The singer couldn't pull it off.

The curious man didn't want to learn anything else about the beat-up Chicano who was out-of-place in the weathered beer joint and who told sketchy stories of baseball bats and headaches while he nursed a Bud Light.

On second thought, I wasn't out-of-place.

"Agustín?"

It took a second for me to respond. Then another tick of the clock to recognize Essie Montoya, the reason I was in the saloon, and why I'd taken my headaches and lost focus to dusty Eastern Colorado.

"Hello, Essie. It's been awhile."

She reached across the space between us and gave me a hug. From my bar stool I awkwardly returned the affectionate greeting. Her body gave off heat from the late summer day outside.

"Good to see you, cuz," she said. "I wasn't sure you'd show up."

I hadn't been a hundred percent sure about that either. My older sister made the arrangements, explained all that Essie needed to know about me and argued for me to take the job. I'd agreed when Essie finally called me. Corrine packed my clothes and toothbrush, shoved me in my truck and waved me on my way.

"Not every day I get a call from a relative I haven't seen for years, and then for that relative to ask about hiring me for a job. I told you I'd be here."

She sat down on the bar stool next to me and wiped her face with a bandana she dug out of her jeans.

"Hot out there, ain't it?" I said.

"Yeah, especially when you walk into town." She stuffed the bandana back into her jeans. "And here you are. Agustín Corral. In the flesh. Just like you promised on the phone."

"Gus, please. Not used to Agustín."

“Man, that triggers the memories. When you and your sisters visited us, when we lived in Pueblo, you were Gus. You hated the name Agustín. We were all just kids.” She shook her head as though it was impossible that we were those children. “Seems like a long time ago.”

Essie was related to me on my mother’s side of the family in some weird complicated Mexican way that had been explained to me, more than once, by my mother and then by Corrine. I never quite grasped the connection. Essie, short for Esmeralda, was my “cousin” and I left it at that. I hadn’t seen her since my mother’s funeral, years ago. When she called me at my office and said she and her brother wanted to hire me, I said yes without giving it too much thought, especially with Corrine’s pressure. Not only was she family, but I was in bad shape from the beating I’d suffered at the hands of my infamous baseball client. I was tired, sore and disoriented. I wanted out of overcrowded Denver. I had to get away from the city’s too-hip art and restaurant districts, noisy craft beer joints, an overpriced lifestyle and the raspy dying gasps of the hometown I’d once known. Goodbye Cow Town. Hello . . . what? Denver was mutating and I didn’t want to be a witness. I couldn’t get anything done, which meant I couldn’t make money. Maybe I was through as an investigator. I was a stranger in the only city where I’d ever lived, and I didn’t like the feeling.

The sparse and monotonous plains of Eastern Colorado offered a destination where I might find my bearings. No distractions, no stress. My only obligation would be to do the job, whatever it was, for my relatives. When that was finished, I could move on or stay put. By then, I figured, I’d have it together again. I’d be my old self.

That’s what I tried to convince myself of during the four-hour drive from Denver to Melton and the Sand Creek Saloon, where Essie said we should meet.

“Strange place for a business meeting. Or a reunion,” I said.

“Yeah, I know. But it’s always open, which is rare in Melton. And George works down the street. He’ll be here soon. Hope this is okay.”

“You live close?”

“About three miles out of town.” She shrugged thin shoulders and gave me a twisted grin as if she were going to say something silly. “Guess I’m stuck here, with my mother.”

Corrine told me that Essie made a living as a bookkeeper for various ranchers and other Melton businesspeople. She also did taxes and helped with applying for licenses and permits. There wasn’t much of an economy in Melton, or for a hundred miles around, but Essie apparently had a finger on most of what little commerce did exist.

Essie had cared for her mother since she was in high school. Felisa Montoya was a half-blind, sometimes wheelchair-bound woman that Corrine described as a hellraiser when she was younger, all “piss and vinegar.”

“And your brother?”

“For sure he’s not going anywhere. Part owner of the shop, raising two kids, and he’s on the Town Council. He thinks Melton is perfect.”

George had left Melton once, when he joined the Army and did his duty in Afghanistan. I always thought he would ditch the small town for the city, but it hadn’t played out that way.

“Well, not quite perfect. Right?”

She nodded. “We wouldn’t need you if it was.”

“Who’s the old guy by the jukebox? Looks like the cat dragged him around for a day or two.”

She turned her head in the direction of the twangy music and smiled, then frowned. “That’s Werm. Melton’s town joker. Harmless. Kooky, but harmless.”

“Worm?”

She laughed. “Werm. W-E-R-M. I don’t even notice the name anymore. His real name’s Wermer Wilson Tanney. The Tanneys

have lived in these parts since Colorado became a state. Poor Wermer . . . he's been Werm since his momma brought him home from the hospital in Lamar. The family has money, but you wouldn't know it talking to Werm."

She looked past me and smiled.

A thick hand grabbed my shoulder and spun my bar stool.

"Gus. Long time, cuz."

George Montoya grinned as his fingers dug into my bicep. His oil-stained coveralls covered a lanky tall frame. He had the same thin body shape and pale skin as his sister. Same golden-brown eyes, same thick black hair that curled into a ponytail. Same farm kid look. Sunburned, dusty, hard-working.

But the closer I looked, the more I could tell that George was not a well man. His brown eyes were bloodshot and framed with dark circles and wrinkles. The black hair had gray streaks, making him look old and tired, although he wasn't that much older than me.

I stood up from the bar stool and gave him a proper *abrazo*—a family hug. We talked and smiled self-consciously. Then George motioned with his head towards a booth and Essie and I followed his lead.

"A private eye, eh?" George asked. "An investigator. How'd you get into that? Last I heard you were working for a lawyer, like a paralegal. I always thought you'd end up as a lawyer, or a teacher. You talked a lot as a little kid."

Essie and George laughed, and I smiled the best I could. Usually it was Corrine who reminded me that I hadn't lived up to expectations.

For the next ten minutes I relived my recent history, from my release from prison until the day my baseball client killed his brother and almost finished me off. As I talked, I saw in their faces and eyes that, again, I said too much. I couldn't stop. I tried to lighten the mood by explaining that the best thing about prison had been books. I read hundreds of books, I said. My vocabulary

had improved, my perspective about the world had changed. I learned about the world beyond the limits of Denver's Northside, where I was born and grew up. Hell, I made prison sound like the best thing short of a college education. When I saw that they weren't impressed, I let my story roll out without considering what impact my words might have. I talked about the ice-fishing caper with the Mexican cop and the shoot-out in the mountains. I went deep, too deep, into my Cuban disaster and the bloody night when the baseball star pounded justice and revenge into his disloyal brother and whacked me dizzy just for being in the way.

Next, I brought them up to speed on how my sisters were doing. Corrine was political and radical and troublemaking as ever, Maxine still in the music business but settled down with her wife, Sandra. I assured them that Corrine and Max were in better shape than I. Not a high bar, but it was something. I realized too late that they didn't want to hear that.

"You okay now?" Essie asked. She tentatively reached out and placed her hand on my shoulder. "Maybe you should just kick back. Take a vacation."

"Tell you the truth," I answered, "I'm not a hundred percent. Maybe seventy-five. I take painkillers for headaches and something stronger for my mental state. But doing some work out here, away from Denver, it'll do me good. And I want to help with whatever you're dealing with."

Essie looked at George. He nodded.

"Actually," she said. "Corrine suggested we talk with you. I was in Denver a few weeks ago and I stopped by her house. When I told her what was going on, she said she thought you could help us. She did say you were still recovering, but she also said she had no doubt that you were up to it. I talked it over with George. And here we are."

When Corrine said she'd volunteered me for a job, I protested for a minute. I wasn't as sure as my sister about whether I could handle life, much less an actual job. Corrine and I eventually

agreed that I should get out of Denver. And she gave me background about our country cousins.

“Hey, Montoya. You want anything to drink? Or eat?” The bartender hollered at us from across the room.

“Gus?” George asked. “They got good burgers here.”

I hadn’t eaten since I’d scarfed a doughnut during rush hour as I maneuvered out of the Northside and merged onto I-70 East.

“Yeah, sure. Burger sounds good.”

George shouted back at the bartender. “Three burgers and two Cokes and another beer.” He paused. “And cook them good, Freddy. Last time the burger mooed when I bit into it. No blood on the plate.”

“Yeah, up yours, Montoya,” the bartender answered.

Everyone was all smiles, so I assumed an inside joke had played out in front of me. Maybe it was a ritual whose origins dated back years.

“Corrine told me a little bit about the trouble with your son,” I said. “What’s going on?”

He looked down at his lap and shook his head. “Yeah, my son, Matías. Mat.”

He raised his head. No more joking. His eyes dulled in the hazy light of the bar and for an instant I expected tears to glide down his face. I understood why he looked used up.

“He’s run off again. He’s done that before, but he’s always come back in a few days, a week at the most. He’s a good kid, but he’s got issues. A lot of kids do these days.”

His voice was shaky as he talked, and it was easy to see the stress caused by the fact that he needed to explain his missing son.

“He’s a good kid,” Essie said. “We all know that. The whole town knows that. This past year has been different, though. He wasn’t running away last year. This time he’s been gone too long...” Her voice trailed off.

“He’s been gone for a month,” George said. “Alicia . . . my daughter Alicia?” I nodded. “Alicia and me . . . we don’t know what

to do. We've talked with his friends, the people at the ranch where he was working for the summer, everyone who knows him. Nothing. Nobody knows nothing. Or at least, they're not telling us."

Corrine had described Matías Montoya as "a troubled boy." She'd explained that George and his wife, Cindy, adopted him when he was about three. "He's been in trouble with school and the cops," she said. "Especially after Cindy died. Nothing serious, but George must've had his hands full. I wouldn't be surprised if Mat's gone for good this time."

"If he's on the road, I doubt I'll find him," I said to Corrine. "He could be in Mexico by now. Teen-aged runaways usually aren't found unless they want to be found. And I'll be getting a late start."

"But maybe you can find out something to give George a little hope," Corrine said. "Or some relief. Essie said her brother's a mess. If he knows the kid is alive, that might be enough."

And what if he's dead? I thought.

"Can you help?" Essie asked.

Her question jerked me back to Melton and the Sand Creek Bar. "I'll do what I can," I said. "You reported him missing to the police?"

"Sure," George said. "When he'd been gone for a week. The local Chief here, a guy named Rob López, sent out bulletins to other police departments, talked to some of Mat's friends, stuff like that. I guess Mat is in a national database of missing kids. But López can only do so much. He's the one real cop we have, and he's part time. His help, the guys he calls deputies, are volunteers. Freddy, the bartender, is one. It's not like López set up search parties or anything like that."

"How did Mat manage when he took off before?" I asked. "Does he have a credit card or . . .?"

"No," George said. "He usually has money from work. He's worked at odd jobs since he was twelve. Now he's a regular on Leroy Bannon's ranch. Mat carries around a lot of cash. I've told him to put it in the bank, but he's stubborn. A couple of times,

when he did run out of money and couldn't get back home, he called, and I picked him up. I haven't got that call this time."

The bartender brought us three greasy hamburgers with greasy potato chips. He made a second trip with our drinks. My hunger had peaked, and I swallowed the burger in four bites. I finished off my first beer before I restarted the conversation.

"I'll talk to some of the same people you already talked to," I said. "See if anything pops out. Alicia can help, I assume. She knows his friends, where he used to hang out. And, uh, maybe . . ."

"Maybe she will tell you things about Mat that she wouldn't tell her father, or me?" Essie asked.

"It's possible. Teenagers, you know. Anyhow, I'll do what I can. But, well the truth is that if he doesn't want to come home, there's not much anyone can do. What is he, seventeen?"

"Yeah," George said. "But he looks older and he tries to act older. He's always been bigger than the other kids his age. But he's still a minor. He has to come home if I say so, right?"

A flash of hope in his eyes briefly outshone the worry lines on his forehead.

Essie answered for me. "Not really, George. He can claim to be emancipated, live on his own. He can even make it legal."

"Why would he not want to come home? I don't get it."

"Were you two okay?" I asked. "I mean between the two of you. Fathers and sons don't always get along. Were you arguing about something, maybe he thought you were too strict or . . .?"

"No, nothing like that," George insisted. He pushed away his plate and stuck a toothpick between his teeth. Almost immediately he spit out the toothpick to continue talking. "I understand he's a young man, not a boy. That's how I treat him. Man to man. I don't impose rules or curfews or anything like that. He has his responsibilities, his chores, work around the house, sure. But that's it. He's self-sufficient, independent, probably too much, and that's my fault. And yet, every time he ran away before, he didn't have a reason. He just had to get away, he would say. We'd argue, both get

pissed, but it didn't last. That's why I don't understand. My own son, and I don't understand him."

"Nothing new about that George," I said. "My father didn't understand me. I'd bet yours was the same with you."

At the back of my muddled brain I remembered that when I was seventeen, I believed I had to get away, without reason, without logic. Just go, man, go. It wouldn't have surprised me if someone had said that it was in our family blood, even though Matías Montoya was adopted. Maybe all the Corrals and Montoyas were nothing but troubled runaways, searching for something we couldn't describe, yearning for something we weren't sure existed.

If that were true, God would have to help George Montoya and his son find their own peace because there would be nothing I could do.