

AMARILLO

A short story by
Eric Wilder

We crossed the Panhandle at sundown, heading south toward Amarillo. Jim hadn't moved in over an hour. He just stared out the window at crimson light bleeding up from the horizon. Finally, he fidgeted in his seat and folded his arms.

"You know, little brother, this reminds me of a movie I seen once."

Hoping to free him of the blue funk weighing on him since we left Wichita, I said, "Tell me about it."

Jim leaned back against the seat, closed his eyes, and took a long, dreamy breath.

"Don't remember much. A kid trying to make a name for his self shot an old gunfighter in the back. Left him for dead on the edge of the town."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Sheriff waylaid the kid and beat him senseless. By then folks from town had gathered, wanting to string the boy up on the spot. The dying gunfighter wouldn't have none of it. Turn him loose, he said. Let him feel what its like to live life in the sight of a gun."

"What's it mean?"

Jim offered no answer. His eyes had closed and stayed that way until I braked the Ford on the outskirts of town. Not knowing where to go from there, I nudged him, waiting until he shook away his bad dream.

"Teddy Jackson's place. Down the road a ways," he mumbled. "Next to a used car lot."

We passed miles of used cars, cattle pens, and wrecking yards, finally finding Teddy Jackson's trailer house behind a twelve-foot fence topped with concertina. The sign on the gate said Teddy's Junk House. When I stopped the old Ford Jim reached across the seat, leaning on the horn until a woman with a thatch of thick red hair came out of the trailer and shined a flashlight through the windshield.

"Closed up. What the hell you want this time of night?"

"Here to see Teddy," Jim said.

"Well he ain't here. Come back tomorrow."

"I'm Jim Droon and this is my brother. Teddy's expecting us."

The red-haired woman must have known we were coming because the muscles in her face relaxed, and she said, "We won't see Teddy till the bars close down."

Swinging back the gate, she let us drive into the lot, smiling when Jim winked at her. Flushing visibly red even beneath dim fluorescent light flooding the junk lot, she straightened her yellow hair bow.

Darla was her name. She took to Jim right off and him to her. The trailer was a mess, Teddy's junk occupying every inch of floor space. It did not bother Jim. Without asking permission, he sprawled out on a faded sofa older than both of us were. Darla didn't seem to mind and before long they were sharing tequila straight from a bottle. I passed when they offered me a swig. We had not eaten all day and I didn't think hard liquor would help the dull ache in the pit of my gut.

Darla and Jim were in a world of their own so I walked down the hall to the bathroom. When I finished my business, I rummaged through the kitchen, looking for something to eat. All I found was a single can of Lone Star, its top already popped. With nothing better to eat or drink, I sipped flat beer till it got too hot.

"How do you like our little corner of the world?" Darla asked when I returned to the couch.

"It's so -"

"God forsaken?"

"You got it." Jim grinned when I said, "But it reminds me of Kansas, all big and open. We had a tree once, you know?"

Darla rubbed a dark bruise, shaped like a buffalo's head, on her calf. "Only one tree?"

"Yeah and it didn't last long. When Mama was working and Daddy off playing pool, Jim siphoned gas from the tractor, poured it on that tree and set it on fire. Said it bugged him the way wind caused it to brush against the screen door."

Leaning forward on the couch, Darla said, "Hey, Jim, what did your Daddy do when he found out?"

By now, Jim was all grins. "Let little brother tell you. He's better at it then me."

Glancing away from Darla's expectant eyes, I said, "Jim didn't want a whipping so he sneaked off to town, but not until he left the half-empty gas can beside my bed. Daddy come home all sotted up. Found the burned-up tree and can of gas. I didn't know what hit me when he yanked me out of bed by the hair, beating me with the buckle of his belt till I begged him to stop."

"You survived," Jim said. "Besides, that's why you're the little brother, little brother."

Just before midnight Darla said, "Amarillo's a hell hole. Ain't enough life here worth embalming. Been thinking of hitchhiking back to Dallas. Where you boys headed?"

"South," Jim said.

"How far south?"

"Till the wheels burn off that ol' Galaxie."

"San Antone," I said. "Jim says it's like paradise. Jobs for everybody. Beautiful weather."

I did not miss the glance Darla shot Jim. "Well, don't take everything you hear too seriously, kid. San Antone's okay, but for my money the place to be is Dallas, any time."

Shaking my head, I said, "We're going there for sure. Jim says they pave the streets with gold."

Darla laughed and she and Jim kept right on drinking till the bottle was empty. About two-thirty we heard brakes screeching outside the fence and I sensed it was Teddy, coming home from an all day drunk. We watched him stagger out of his dented blue Biscayne. When he saw Jim, recognition flooded his ratty eyes.

"Jimmy," he said, latching his arms around Jim's neck. When he kissed him on the mouth Jim didn't flinch, but I saw a strange look flicker and die in Darla's green eyes.

"Get in this house," Teddy said, steering Jim back toward the trailer door. "Who's this you brung with you?"

"Little brother," Jim said.

"Looks bigger than you," Teddy said. "Darla, I'm starved. What's to eat in this place?"

Darla stalked off to the kitchen, returning with a bowl of stale rice soaked in red sauce I had somehow missed. She didn't bother heating it up and Teddy didn't seem to mind, eating it straight from the bowl without offering any to me or Jim.

"Jim and me spent time in McAlester," Teddy said. "Hard time. Jim kicked the shit out of a guard." A wicked grin spread over his skinny face. "What a man your brother is. What a man."

"Shit, Teddy. You're the one," Jim said. "You always had a plan. The rest of us were just doing time."

"A plan is what I got right now," Teddy said, edging closer on the sofa.

Teddy had finished the red rice. Now he filled a shot glass with tequila. Darla had passed out on the couch and Teddy sipped his drink, staring at Jim. "There's a bank in town, ready for the breaking. You boys interested?"

Jim said, "Maybe. At least in hearing what you got to say about it."

"End of the month payroll," Teddy said. "Probably forty thousand dollars, or so. Twenty each."

Teddy paused as Jim reflected on the amount he had mentioned. Leaning closer, he said, "I drive. You walk in, hand them the note, collect the money and walk out. I'll pick you up on the corner. Nothing to it."

Not believing what I was hearing, I waited for Jim to laugh, or at least change the subject. He did neither.

Instead, he said, "How many guards?"

"Just one," Teddy said. "That's the beauty. They got all the money in the world and no security. We'll waltz right in, take what they got and hit the road without a hitch."

I tried to catch Jim's eye but he glanced away. Considering Teddy's scheme, I guessed.

"When?" Jim finally said.

"Tomorrow. Right after they open up."

"Won't give us much time to case the place."

"That I already done," Teddy said.

"You think about it," he said, patting Jim's cheek before sauntering off to bed in the next room. Darla rubbed her eyes, blinked herself awake, and followed him. Jim kicked me off the sofa, wrapped his hands behind his head, and grinned.

"You wouldn't rob another bank, would you Jim?" I asked.

"Not me, little brother, us."

"If Teddy wants to rob a bank, let him do it alone. He don't need you."

"Teddy's just a driver. He can't pull this job alone. Besides, Teddy and me shared a cell in McAlester. He's smart and knows how to make things work. If he says this is a good bank to rob, then I believe him."

"If he's so smart, why did he wind up in McAlester in the first place?"

Jim ignored my question and said, "We need Teddy to drive and I need you to back me up."

"But what about San Antone?"

Jim stared at the ceiling, smiling his crazy smile, and said, "This is San Antone."

"No way. You promised Mama and you promised me. I won't let you screw your life up again."

Jim's eyes had closed but I knew he was listening because of that grin on his face I had seen all my life.

"Quit your belly-aching, little brother," he finally said. "Neither of us is going to rob anything. I was just kidding."

"You sure?"

Jim passed out on the couch, the only answer to my question a coyote, somewhere down the road, howling at the moon. Propping my shoulders against a wall, I closed my eyes but mental meandering prevented sleep until almost dawn when Jim nudged me awake with his foot.

"Get up, little brother. We're going into town and get something to eat."

My gut ached. So did my head, but during the long night I had somehow convinced myself it was all a joke. When my stomach growled I remembered my hunger and the bacon and eggs Jim was promising.

Teddy, Darla, and Jim were not quite ready to go so I chewed on a piece of cardboard until they killed the last of the tequila. Temperatures had dropped below freezing during the night and we had to push the Ford to start it. The ride to town seemed endless and we found the streets deserted when we got there - like winter on Mars.

Jim and I sat in the back seat of the Galaxie, Darla riding shotgun, as Teddy circled the block. They both looked strung out and it worried me. Maybe it was just last night's Lone Star but the atmosphere in the car made my gut feel like slag lead. Finally, Teddy stopped and let us out.

"I'll park this heap around the corner," he said. "Just come running."

Darla reached through the window, giving Jim a hug and frantic kiss and waving as Teddy pulled away. Drawing me like a magnet, Jim drew a deep breath, patted his chest and started down the street,

"Why aren't they coming with us?"

"Cause Teddy's lazy and looking for a closer place to park. Cafe's just down the street and I ain't waiting."

When we rounded the corner, I looked in both directions for the pancake house but did not see it. Instead, a bank door beckoned and I realized Jim had suckered me. Grabbing the front of my pea jacket, he shoved a big revolver under my belt and pushed me through the front door.

"Don't do this," I said.

Jim grabbed my shoulder, cupped my ear and whispered into it. "All you have to do is stand right here and wait on me. I'll do the dirty work and no one will even know you're involved."

"I'd follow you to hell. But robbing a bank -"

"You never robbed a bank before?"

"Jim, you know I ain't"

Jim's eyes began to glaze. "It's pure sex, kid. Pure sex."

Now my knees were shaking, my heart thumping against my ribs. Across the room, one fat guard propped up the wall, drinking coffee from a plastic cup. Jim strolled past him, straight to the nearest cashier where he pulled out his pistol and stuck it in the woman's chest. Outside the bank I had felt like I was about to puke. Now, time began passing like a slow motion Technicolor pan across the room. As if I weren't really there, but knew I was.

"You're too young to die, beautiful," Jim said to the scared woman. "Put your money in this sack and signal your boss over here, now."

The young woman's body stiffened like a chopped stump. Color drained from her face and saliva drooled from the corner of her mouth. Looking at her, it made me wonder if she would piss her pants before I did.

"Don't shoot me," she said. "Please!"

"Put the money in the sack," Jim said, his words growing progressively louder. "Then call your boss over here."

The woman's voice was also growing louder and had become noticeably shaky when she called to a well-dressed man beside the open vault.

"Jeremy, over here."

With a glance of disapproval, the young banker in a blue suit approached the booth. He had no chance to comment on the cashier's disrespect before Jim stuck the pistol in his face and eased the two of them down the row. Jim followed Jeremy and the woman into the vault.

I glanced at the big clock on the wall and waited. Although it seemed like forever, less than five minutes passed before Jim strolled out of the vault. He was alone. Slung over his shoulder was a heavy-looking bag and I thought we were home free. Instead, fate suddenly dealt us aces and eights.

Jeremy or the cashier must have tripped an alarm from inside the vault. A siren began wailing and people started screaming and throwing themselves to the floor. The fat guard pulled his pistol and dropped to his knees, fanning the bank. Jim was almost to the front door when the man yelled for him to halt. Without waiting for

a response, he began shooting. His pistol erupted, my heart counting three explosions.

The first bullet caught Jim in the shoulder, spinning him around. The second took off a hunk of his right ear and the third struck him square in the belly. I watched helplessly as he staggered back against the wall, pluming blood painting a crushed rose across the front of his jacket.

It was not over. The fat guard rushed forward, jamming his pistol in Jim's face. Amid screams of the people in the bank and sirens wailing outside, he prepared to pull the trigger. I had already started for the door, but I could not leave, knowing I had to save Jim. Use the gun he give me. Yanking it from my belt, I pointed it, closed my eyes and pulled the trigger.

All my luck had ebbed sometime the day before. Catching sight of the weapon in my hand, the fat guard squeezed off a round from his pistol at the exact instant. His bullet burned a hole through my leg, igniting sharp pain just below my right knee. My bullet lifted him off his feet, crushed him against the wall, robbing his breath until no life remained in his eyes. He was dead and it was me that had killed him.

Somehow, reality fazed me less than intense pain surging through my leg. Steadying Jim before he collapsed to the floor, I fought back my nausea, wondering what weird anomaly of life caused blood to gurgle from my brother's mouth while letting his eyes remain clear as Amarillo's cold December sky.

"Get us out of here, little brother."

Trembling bodies lay sprawled on the floor, blocking our path to the door. I stepped over, through and between them, hauling Jim to the front door, the bank's alarm still screaming bloody murder, distant sirens blaring as we stepped outside.

Down the street, Teddy and Darla waited in Jim's Galaxie. Teddy saw us first, slamming the car into reverse, burning rubber all the way down the road until he reached us. Amid all the confusion a crow cawed, somewhere overhead. For a moment, I thought we was back home in Kansas.

"Teddy, Jim's shot. Help us."

The front door opened and Darla bolted out, rushing toward us like an excited chicken, wrenching the moneybag off Jim's shoulder

instead of helping me with him. The car door slammed behind her, old tires screaming as they burned rubber around the corner and disappeared.

"Bastard," Jim said, weak from loss of blood. "Get me out of here. I swear I ain't doing no more hard time."

The crowd gathered on the sidewalk scurried out of our way as I moved us along with no idea where to go. Then it appeared before us - a cross topping a church steeple and red brick fencing a churchyard. I dragged Jim through the gates.

"Inside," I said. "The priest will give us asylum."

"Dumb shit," Jim said. "We're bank robbers. There's no asylum for us."

I pulled him forward anyway. By now, my right leg was numb from the knee down and my head felt as if I had taken two dozen fast circuits on a broken tilt-a-whirl. Fighting the urge to throw up, I pushed through the heavy oak doors, into the main chapel of the church. We made it to the third pew before I collapsed.

"They're coming," I said.

Jim's laugh surprised me. When he spoke, I had to lean closer to hear him.

"You know, little brother, last night I dreamed about that movie again - the one where the kid shot the old gunfighter."

Blood had soaked my jeans and I felt faint and sick but Jim's throaty voice swam inside my head like a trapped goldfish. In response to his question, I could only nod.

"The gunfighter just lay there in the dirt," he said. "Half dead, but staring at me as if I was a cockroach he wanted to stomp. So were the sheriff and all the town folk."

"Just stay quiet and the priest will get you a doctor. You'll be fine."

Ignoring me, he said, "It was me, the dirty bastard who shot the gunfighter in the back." He laughed and coughed up blood that foamed down his chin and neck. "This morning when I woke up, I could still feel the noose around my neck."

Jim slowly massaged his neck as more blood gurgled from his lips and a cold glaze crept over his blue eyes.

"Hang on. They're coming for us now."

"Too late. I'm gut shot, little brother. Maybe I'll see you back in Kansas sometime, and maybe that old gunfighter again, somewhere along the way. Gotta go now. Daddy's coming. Take care of him for me, will you?"

Jim's body went slack in my arms as the church's heavy oak doors swung open and I gazed up helplessly at the dozen men pointing angry pistols and rifles at me, and through the portal, I could see hazy clouds dulling the pink winter sky.

A chill breeze, leaving a pall in my heart, gusted down the aisle. It whistled like Daddy's belt, causing me to remember the sting of its buckle. Hard and cold as it flailed long red whelps across my back.

END