

An Even Exchange

By David Smith

Evergreen, Wyoming is ten miles west of Muddy Gap, about halfway to Whiskey Peak. The nearest real town is Rawlins, about fifty miles to the southeast. In those days you could ride a horse or take a buckboard wagon to Muddy Gap and get drunk or buy a sack of feed or flour, but to do any real shopping to stock up you had to go to Rawlins, which meant staying overnight in one of the saloons that had rooms upstairs. Hard to get much sleep with all the fornication going on, but you did your best. Most of the time, when you got back home to Evergreen, you were about too tired to unload what you had bought. Sometimes you'd just put a tarp over the wagon and leave it to the next morning, after some decent sleep in your own bed.

Not many people out there in those days. The land wasn't much good for growing things; too rocky. The few folks there had small ranches with horses, cows and chickens mostly. A few pigs. Folks would have a vegetable garden and would try to put up enough beans and tomatoes and okra to see them through the long and bitter winters. It was pretty much a full time job just cutting and chopping enough wood to keep the house warm. Sometimes winter would last almost six months. Things got awful slow.

Tom and Becky Hawthorne had been there for twenty-five years, and the experience had done nothing to mellow them out. They had raised three children, but one had got killed when a horse kicked him in the head. That was hard. The other two had left the ranch and moved away. One was in Rawlins and the other in Fort Collins. They both had kids of their own now and were way too busy to make the long haul to visit them. They tried to visit the daughter and grandchild in Rawlins when they went in for supplies.

The only society in Evergreen was the only other family there, the Tompkins. Eva and Clement Tompkins had been there even longer than the Hawthornes. The Tompkins place was no grander than the modest homestead of their neighbors; neither was much to write home about, to be honest. Not much more than log cabins on piles of rocks, with a barn and a stable out back. Split rail fencing around the main house and a corral for the horses. Some wire fencing around the vegetable patch. Each home had a dog who was the most active feature of the place, but even the dogs had slowed down in recent years.

On Saturdays, the two couples would get together, if no one was sick. The Tompkins had never had children, so the Hawthornes tried not to talk too much about theirs. One time Clement suggested playing cards but his wife said it was sinful, so he backed off. There were a couple of books of fairy tales that Tom and Becky had read to their children when they were young, and there was an old copy of *Robinson Crusoe*, but other than that there was just the Bible, and all of them were sick of it. So on many of these long evenings, and especially in winter, there wasn't a

whole lot to do except cook dinner, clean up, and sit by the fire with a glass of whiskey or elderberry wine. They would talk about the weather, or whose horse was pregnant, or the price of feed, but that was about it. You might say the subject matter was circumscribed.

One night in the late seventies Tom had an extra glass of whiskey and began to notice that Eva Tompkins was not a bad looking woman, all things considered. True, her hair was going gray pretty fast these past few years, and she had no idea how to put it on her head to her advantage, but there was a nice symmetry to her face, especially in profile, and when she bent over the fireplace to poke at it he couldn't help but notice that there were certain curves in the top of her gingham dress that might be worth exploring if a man ever got the chance. Plus the sound of her voice was soft and pleasant, even if she did like to quote scripture too damn much.

And believe it or not, Becky Hawthorne had begun to notice a few things about Clement. Like the way he stood tall in his boots and the resonant baritone of his voice when he told one of the twenty-two stories that he told again and again. He liked telling stories, and she liked listening to him. After a while, she would fix her gaze on his eyes when he was telling them, and he would look right back at her without missing a beat, since he had memorized all of his tales many years before and didn't need to even think about them while he spoke. So he started thinking about her, and she started thinking about him, more and more as time went on.

That left Eva. Eva was pretty straight laced, but up against that hard fact was the unrelenting force of staggering boredom that slowly and steadily cut through all four of these poor souls just like the Colorado River cut through Arizona to make the Grand Canyon. And as the years rolled by, this boredom and sameness in their lives had actually bored right through them and had come out the other damn side, so to speak. At night, the dreams they dreamed even got weirder and weirder, with nakedness and cannibals and fantastic beasts and the whole lot, even if they hadn't had any extra whiskey before bed. After a while, the mind just craves such things and will make them up if it has to.

Well things went on this way for several years, and with each passing year each husband got more and more tired of his wife, and each wife got more disgusted and exasperated with her husband, as has commonly been observed in long marriages, and even in some that weren't all that long.

Finally, one Saturday night in winter, the Tompkins were over at the Hawthornes, and after dinner the snow started coming on pretty good. A blizzard had been expected, but it had arrived a day or two early. So Clement and Eva stayed over at the Hawthornes rather than try to get back to their homestead four miles away. Tom couldn't sleep and got up to sit by the fire and drink another glass of whiskey before trying again. Clement got up in the middle of the night to use the chamber pot and decided to go on into the kitchen to get a drink of water from the jug by the sink. Later on, he claimed he got lost in the house but that's kind of hard to believe since he spent about a million hours there. In any case, he winds up slipping into bed next to Becky Hawthorne and they start to cuddling. That's when Clement started to get excited, so he tiptoed to the bedroom door and peeked into the parlor and saw that Tom had nodded off in the rocker

and wasn't rocking no more. So he closed the bedroom door very quietly and went back to the bed to see if he couldn't help Miss Becky (that's what he always called her) get more comfortable and find a little bit of goddamn joy in her poor, miserable life. In this he succeeded, by all accounts, and it was a damn miracle that the noise didn't wake up poor Tom and cause a ruckus.

An hour later, Tom woke up and his neck was stiff. That wasn't all that was stiff, either, because as it turned out he had been dreaming about Miss Eva (that's what he always called her). As he grudgingly returned to unwelcome consciousness in his pathetic parlor that was now pretty darn cold since the fire had all but gone out, he rose and trudged back toward his bedroom and noticed the door was shut, which it usually wasn't. He then decided to just sneak a little peek at Miss Eva, because he saw the door to the spare bedroom was still open. When he looked in, he could see that she was in bed all alone; her husband's side was bathed in pale moonlight. Damn, she looked like a goddamn angel. He did a quick mental calculation and figured that Clement must have had an urgent need that was worth going to the outhouse for. No telling how long he might be, but Tom figured this was his chance. So he slides into the bed and no sooner does he get there than Miss Eva mutters something about being cold and comes over and cuddles up to him and starts to rubbing him. Well needless to say Tom's stiffness came right back in a very big way right about then, and Miss Eva soon grasped the dimensions of the problem. She opened her eyes right then and Tom smiles at her and puts his finger to his lips to let her know to keep it real quiet. So she does. He had never even kissed her before but by Jesus it was worth waiting for, and next thing you know that shy and gentle Miss Eva is riding him like she was busting a bronc at the goddamn rodeo at Jackson. It was all they could do to keep from screaming and waking up the whole county. When they were done, Miss Eva gave him a smile like a million dollars and finished with a meek little peck on his cheek like a ten year old girl and old Tom Hawthorne was a fool in love.

A minute later, Eva was sleeping the sleep of angels and Tom figured he'd best make his way back to the rocker in the parlor, stoke the fire, and act like nothing had happened, even though his heart was beating like a bass drum in the Fourth of July parade in Rawlins. He had just settled back into the chair with a humongous smile spreading across his face when he heard the door to his bedroom swing open and someone about Clement's size trying to tiptoe out across the creaking floorboards. Tom pretended he was fast asleep and Clement made his way back to bed with Miss Eva. Ten minutes later, Tom slipped back into bed beside Miss Becky and tried to slip off to sleep, but he kept seeing Miss Eva riding that bronco with that look on her face.

Breakfast the next morning was interesting. Miss Becky made buttermilk pancakes and was singing a little tune that nobody could really identify. Miss Eva cooked up some country ham and was smiling like the cat that swallowed the canary. The men drank strong coffee and admired the women. Everybody had a good appetite and was in an exceptionally good mood. And of course no one said a word about the goings on during the night.

Well believe it or not, this became a sort of pattern of behavior with this particular quartet of aging frontier folk over the next few months. One week they would be at the Tompkins place,

the next at the Hawthornes. Every time, though, the master of the house (meaning the husband who lived there, not that he was the master of anything at all) would pretend to fall asleep by the fire while the other one would tiptoe into the master bedroom; then the host husband would slide right into the guest bedroom to discover and fully experience the earthly delights that awaited him there.

As the weeks went by, it became harder and harder to pretend all this excitement wasn't really happening. The whole situation had become completely ridiculous. Once or twice either Clement or Tom had seen the other coming out of the wrong bedroom and had to pretend he hadn't seen it. They did not even crack a smile even though it was all they could do not to bust out laughing.

Finally, on the long way back from their annual Christmas trip to Rawlins to see their daughter and their grandchild, Tom said to Becky that he felt the time had come to discuss things. He asked her point blank if she fancied Clement and she said right out loud that she did. Then she asked him flat out if he'd like to be with Miss Eva and he did not hesitate to admit that it was so. Being a strong woman, Becky offered to have a word with Miss Eva but Tom felt it was his duty as head of household to negotiate the deal. Becky shot back that she wondered exactly which household he thought he was the head of these days, but neither one of them wanted to get into a knockdown so they both let it pass.

The next day Tom rode over to the Tompkins place and surprised Clement out in the barn banging on some horseshoes. He just about broke his thumb when his hammer slipped when he noticed Tom in the doorway, but he shook it off. Clement could see right off that Tom was a bit anxious, and started to worry that the little arrangement that had developed might be in jeopardy. He asked Tom if he wanted to have a seat or to have something to drink. Tom asked if Clement could spare him a shot of whiskey even though the sun was still high in the sky and Clement said that not only would he do that but that he would join him as well. Ten minutes later they were both in rockers on the small front porch of Clement's house and sipping a poor man's bourbon. Eva could see the signs that she'd best make herself scarce for a while and said she would be out in the hen house gathering eggs. She too was worried that a good thing might be about to end but decided she would hope for the best.

Having been the one to ride over, Tom figured it was up to him to speak first. "Clement, you know I have all the respect in the world for you", he began.

"Not that I deserve it", Clement answered. "And you know I feel the same about you, Tom."

"We've been good friends and neighbors for a long time now."

"That's certainly true and I'm damn grateful of it."

"But it looks like we've got ourselves a situation now."

"I'm afraid we do."

“And I’d hate for anything to come between us. You know that.”

“You’re speaking for both of us, Tom.”

Tom took a big gulp of whiskey and cleared his throat. The moment had come. “So I just have to come right out now and ask you: Would you like to be with Miss Becky?”

Clement rubbed his forehead and took a pull of his drink. “Well Tom, I’ll answer that and I’ll tell the truth, but first I got to ask you something: Would you like to be with Miss Eva?”

Each man waited for what seemed like an eternity, then both blurted out the word “Yep!” at the exact same moment.

“Damn! That’s a relief”, said Clement. “I figured you’d come over here to call it all off.”

“And I was afraid you’d say no!”, answered Tom.

Clement got up and brought the bottle out and refilled their glasses. He was proposing a toast when Miss Eva walked up to the porch from the chicken house with seven eggs in her apron.

“What are you two rascals up to, drinking in the middle of the workday like a couple of teenagers behind the barn?”

Clement decided it was his duty as husband to have a private word with his wife under the circumstances. He asked Tom to excuse them for a moment while he took Miss Eva into the kitchen and out of earshot. Two minutes later she ran back out onto the porch and pulled Tom out of his rocker. She was beaming like a bride on her wedding day.

“Kiss me, you old fool!” she said.

Tom didn’t much like being called an old fool right after negotiating the most successful deal in the history of modern matrimony, but he didn’t let that stop him from enjoying the big hug and kiss that he got from her right now. Clement lingered in the parlor for a minute to not spoil their moment. Then he came out and offered Miss Eva a glass of elderberry wine. They all toasted.

“To happiness!”

They agreed that the four of them would be together at the Hawthorne house that Saturday and that on Sunday they would start to discuss what Clement called “the practicals.” By that he evidently meant who was going to live where and when they would move and such details as that.

A great sense of relief and fulfillment and downright joy filled Tom as he rode the four miles back to his homestead. He had come within a whisker of offering Clement an extra two hundred dollars since he had just sold a mare, but he had wisely determined at the last minute

that the offer of such an additional inducement might imply that his wife was not in and of herself a sufficient element of the bargain, and he knew from long experience that once a seed of doubt is planted it can quickly grow into a nasty underbrush of resentment or outright unhappiness.

And now at last the deed was done. And four aging frontier folk could now see their way clear to contentment in their golden years. Tom watched the sun go down behind Whiskey Peak and light up the largest deck of orange clouds he had ever seen.

