No Sympathy

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Stephen Howler had had many names in his life, and almost as many faces. It seemed he changed with every new town, every new job. The times in between he drifted in and out of existence, scarcely even aware of himself. His long, lamentable life was characterized by interminable periods of walking down lonesome highways, boot-heels click-clacking on dry concrete, until he found a fresh start and a new set of choices. If anyone had known him for any significant part of his life, they would surely attest to his having seen too little in too many years.

Before the trumpets started, Stephen Howler was click-clacking his way from somewhere tragic to somewhere clean, singing a little suicide song to himself, pausing only to occasionally throw the pebbles from his suede pouch at high-tension towers that ran alongside the highway, leading him somewhere quiet and beautiful like a post-modern set of bread-crumbs. The first glimmers of dawn were lighting the sky behind him; at length the shadows began to open, and his gait quickened.

Empty pastures seemed to guard him at the sides, protecting him from the early-morning scavengers that had once been his friends. Fewer and fewer allies every night, it seemed. A few yards up the road, a coyote was locked in a death-struggle with a rattlesnake. Each was captured in the other’s jaws. By the time Stephen Howler passed their corpses, he had begun to sing a new verse. The sun was shining.

Sometime before eight in the morning, an old flatbed pick-up with rusted-out wheel wells and a squeaky transmission eased alongside him.

He stopped walking and peered into the open window. A short-haired girl whose face looked to be no more than seventeen, but whose eyes revealed a much more mature understanding, was driving. Stephen Howler gave her solemn regard, especially noting the absence of her left hand. “You see something you like?” she said.

“How far is it to the next town?” he asked after a long, studious pause.

“Gorge de Loup, 18 miles. You need a ride or what? It’s gonna get hot out here.”

“Thanks anyway, but I’m afraid it’s not up to me. I have to
walk most places."

The pretty, one-handed girl nodded curiously, and Stephen Howler continued marching. The old pickup groaned into gear and rolled on past him over the hills.

It was six hours later, during the hottest part of the day, when Stephen Howler finally reached his new home. He realized bemusedly that he didn’t even know what state he was in. It didn’t matter.

Gorge de Loup was a town, like many others in the American West, that had once been greater than it was. It had not slipped as far as some poor other places that were now totally forgotten, but the people there were about as hopeful for the future as cancer patients. The entire town was mostly visible from a central park that was also a memorial to a courthouse that had once stood there, once burned there, once killed sixty men there. Stephen Howler stood in the center of the square, breathed in the air, and decided that it was as good a start as any.

Almost immediately he noticed the pretty one-handed girl coming out of a liquor store, carrying three sacks full of bottles with remarkable ease. Stephen stood across the street and watched her deftly open the door with her stump hand by reaching through the open window, the outside door-handle apparently being disabled. She threw the sacks in the passenger seat and climbed in. Seconds later, the ancient pickup was started and heading back down the road Stephen had just walked in on. Stephen reached into his suede pouch and chucked a stone at a crow.

The people walking around seemed to pay no particular attention to him. He was not surprised. After all, every town has its sins to atone for.

He walked into the liquor store. The smiling old woman behind the counter was standing smartly with her hip leaned against the back wall. Her short gray hair was tied in a ponytail, with two tufts just above her ears. Her right hand was in a cast.

"Good afternoon, ma’am."

"Hello there, son. Don’t believe I’ve seen you around here before."

"That would make sense, considering this is the first time I’ve been by here in person."

"What, you sent your agents?"
“Well, I do have many, and they’re everywhere,” he said with a wry smile.

A smile crossed her face. “What can I do for you?”

“Tell me, who was that one-handed girl who just came out of here, and is she old enough to buy all that booze?”

“What are you, the cops?”

“I can assure you, about as far from it as possible.” Stephen Howler was playing with a book of matches on the counter. He was holding it closed between two fingers while his other hand flicked the book six inches into the air in a tight, vertical up-and-down. Left in his other hand was a lone match that flared to life as the pack was ripped from it.

The woman’s eyes were fixed on his hands and the burning match, hypnotized. He shook it out and her attention was restored to the conversation. “Anyways, she’s twenty-two nowadays. Hard to believe.” She spoke slowly and deliberately. “I remember when she was a pup. Her mom died having her. Her dad never did get over it.”

“What’s her name?”

The corners of the smile faded. “Who’s asking, anyways?”

“I’m just curious.”

The old woman studied him for moment, and apparently deemed him safe enough. “Lajeune is her name. Samantha. She’s got real soul, you know. It’s a shame her dad turned out the way he did. She deserves better.”

“Well, thanks much, ma’am,” he said. The little bell over the door rang when he left. He walked back to the town square, sat down, and began to dream without sleeping.

“Name your fear,” he said to her that night by the fires. She rolled against him, chilly from the sweat beaded on her flesh. “What?”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Snakes. I hate them.” She held up her stump. “Rattler. I was six and she just clamped on and didn’t let go. I was in a coma for three days. They had to amputate.”

“Do you feel incomplete?”

“No...Yes...I don’t know. Should I?”

“I don’t see why not. You’re missing something that everyone else has. You’re like me in that way, I guess.”

“You seem complete to me...what’s missing?”
“Nothing on the outside, but something is missing, just the same.”
“Is that why you walk all the time? To get something back?”
“It’s more of a punishment, actually. Self-imposed.”
“What was your crime?”
“I betrayed someone very special. An old friend. But for that I could have been forgiven, I suppose. No, my crime was pride, and still is.”
“So now you walk. What, for humility?”
“Something like that.”
They moved together. The fires burned for hours.
“Name your fear,” she said after awhile, but he said no more that night.

Not night, but afternoon still. Stephen Howler was sitting by a dead crow, making a flat pebble from his suede pouch dance across his knuckles, when a shadow fell over him for the first time in hours.

A familiar pretty voice opened his wounds again. “You’re still here. I would have thought you would have left this afternoon, when I did.”
“You saw me here.” It wasn’t a question.
She did not reply.
“What were you doing with all that booze? Having a party tonight?”
“In a manner of speaking. It’s for my father. He needs it.”
“Back for more?”
“No. Now I need some gas for my car. My dad’s truck is a piece of shit.”
“So why are you still standing over me like I’m a dead body?”
“You wanna come back to my house?”
“Your father won’t mind?”
“He would, but he’s passed out in the bathtub. By the way, what’s your name?”
“It’s not important.”
“Okay,” she said with a shrug, kicking the side of his boot.
“How we gonna get there? It’s a long walk.”

The old flatbed pulled up to the isolated farmhouse about
six miles outside of town with three tin gas cans strapped to the back. Stephen Howler was riding shotgun, and Sam was driving. From the outside, the farmhouse looked like a dilapidated mess. There were no shutters, indeed there were no windows, and the shingles had been pried off the roof. There were at least a half-dozen automobile corpses in a yard that hadn’t been mown. There was a narrow path, made only by footfalls, leading from the driveway to the front door. An old screen door leaned against the side of the house next to where it had once been ripped off its hinges. She, carrying one of the gas cans, led him, carrying the other two, up to the door.

The inside of the farmhouse was like a Salvador Dali nightmare. The first thing that struck him was the smell of vodka. The house had been lived in but not cleaned for years. Flies seemed to swarm everything. Piles of moldy dishes completely buried the sink; Stephen could only tell the sink was there because of the exposed pipes below it. The “living room” was buried under stacks of newspapers, magazines, and unopened mail. Some of the papers had been used for eating surfaces in the absence of proper china, others as a nest for some four-legged invaders. The only remnants of furniture were two wood-and-metal skeletons that had once been a sofa and a recliner. Stacks of newspaper were piled against them. Some of the papers, Stephen noticed, were old and yellow and printed in French. There were empty liquor bottles all over the floor, and under the smell of vodka, he could also detect mildew, excrement, and general decay.

“You can put those down,” she said of the gas cans.
“Daddy’s upstairs. Want to see him?”

Before he could decline, she hooked her stump-hand behind his arm and led him up a rickety staircase, still carrying her can and pausing to show him carefully which steps to skip. The upstairs was just like down, except there seemed to be more flies, if that were possible. Towers and towers of old newspapers were stuffed into whatever corner they could fit, empty liquor bottles were all over the floor, and the smell of rot was in everything.

“My grand-dad used to run the newspaper, like his dad and his dad’s dad, who was one of the first settlers of Gorge de Loup. When Grampa died, Dad just brought in all these old papers. Calls them antiques. He says they’ll be valuable someday.”

She opened the door to the bathroom. There were more bottles all over the place. The smell of booze was overpowering,
but it couldn’t hide the other smell. A crow that was sitting on the edge of the dirty bathtub flew off through a hole in the ceiling. It had been picking bites from a wound in the side of the head of the dead man in the bathtub full of liquor. A miniature host of flies buzzed in and out the hole.

As they stood in silence, Stephen Howler felt curiously unsurprised. “He went too far this time,” Sam finally said matter-of-factly. “He tried to put his grubby hands on me. Can you believe it? I waited till he turned his back, then I hit him with an empty bottle and dragged him in here. He was heavy, but I’m stronger than you can possibly imagine. Then I hit him again. That was right after I saw you on the road this morning.”

He studied her eyes for any sign of weakness, a single tear or something, but she never dropped her constant, unshakable gaze.

“I was gonna cut him up at first, but then I decided to just burn this whole place down.”

She led him down the hall. “This was my room when I was girl.” Compared to the rest of the house, her room was immaculate, except for some insignificant red stains on the carpet. The bed was made, her clothes were folded in neat stacks on a table, and a tiny chair sat in the corner with a stuffed dog with one eye missing in a sinister, wolf-like stare. There were some other knick-knacks scattered around. She began dumping gas on everything, the bed, the carpet, the walls, the sinister one-eyed wolf-dog, awkwardly holding the can in her good hand and balancing it with her stump, until the can was empty. She tossed it on the floor.

“I remember when I was a girl, my mother used to take me places. We used to go everywhere we could, and see as many things as possible. We would hide from dad in the house somewhere. Sometimes in a closet, sometimes under a bed. Dad would come home looking for us and we would just giggle. I loved my mom.”

“What happened to her?”

“She...left.”

“I thought she died having you.”

“Who told you that?”

“Someone I talked to today. A woman at the liquor store.”

“That lying bitch. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. My mother and I were happy before he drove us apart. It wasn’t my fault.”
“I didn’t say it was.”

They stood in silence for a few minutes. She shook her head as if to say the issue was closed. “It’s just about dark. This is going to be great,” she said with an unsettling giddiness. “Go downstairs and start pouring those two gas cans out. Get everything.”

Stephen complied, easing his way down the stairs, trying to miss the steps she had warned him about earlier. When he got to the bottom, he looked up to see her smiling down at him knowingly. She dug into her pocket, pulled out a book of matches, and ducked into the bathroom. Stephen heard her utter a few words with he could not understand, and suddenly there was a flash as the alcohol that had consumed Lajeune from the inside now consumed him from the outside in a sickly ironic and fiery ending.

The fires burned for a few seconds before she came out, and then she was bounding down the stairs with a giddy grin on her face, hopping over the bad steps with an athletic grace she hadn’t yet demonstrated. And then she was hugging him and saying curses against her father, and then she was gone and pouring gas all over the shitty kitchen and the shitty table. And he found himself easily pouring gasoline on the furniture skeletons and stacks of newspaper and then she was pulling him out the front door and they were running, back down the trodden path to the pickup, and he was in the passenger door and witnessing the speed of her starting the truck and putting it in gear and driving away, to the end of the drive and down the road to the corner. And then two explosions, first one, then another even bigger, and then the fires burned. For some reason, he was struck by an image of the one-eyed dog being consumed, the foam stuffing melting out through the open eye-hole.

After a few minutes she turned the pickup around and drove back to the end of the driveway, parking so that the two of them could sit in the flatbed and watch the place burn.

From behind the seat in the cab she produced a blanket that she wrapped herself up in. As the fires burned, she stood on the bed of the truck before him, dancing, opening her blanket teasingly, then seductively removing her clothes one by one, until she danced naked in front of him with the fire behind her. All around, coyotes began howling at the fire, which, with its macabre light, was encroaching on their time. Stephen began to sing the song of M. Lajeune, crying out to the vile man’s soul in the night, in harmony with the coyotes. Then she moved in close,
and he wrapped her up.

“Name your fear,” she said after awhile.
He stared into the fires, feeling her young body pressed against him like a vise. “I’m afraid that I’m going to find what I was looking for, and my journey will be done. I don’t know what I’ll even do then.”

“You have power over your fears, you know.”

“I have power over many things, but I don’t always use it. I could repair the rift between me and my old friend, but it would require of me something I am not willing to part with: my pride.”

“He was a good friend wasn’t he? You miss him.”

“He was all that was good. And he once loved me best.”

“You should find him and make things right.”

“You’re right, I suppose. He wouldn’t be hard to track down; he’s still in the same place I left him, I’m sure. Maybe I’ll go see him tomorrow.” And as soon as the words were out of his mouth, he felt something, something new and old to him, that he hadn’t felt in a long time. It took him a moment to identify the emotion, but it was hope. Somehow he knew that the things he had carried with him through the years could be cast aside, as easily as a stone from his pouch. And he realized that old friendships that fall apart only do so because hope is lost.

“Maybe we can go together. I have nothing here.”

“Let me ask you something. Why did you bring me here tonight?”

“Partly because I wasn’t sure I wanted to kill my father until I met you this morning, but mostly because you weren’t afraid of me. Most people are afraid of me the first time they meet me. Maybe it’s because of my hand, or maybe it’s just the way I come across. Whatever it is, they just don’t like me.”

“That’s because they don’t know what they should really be afraid of.”

“And what’s that?”

“There are many things. Fire, now that’s something to be afraid of. It has real power, something most men only wish they had. You know why it has power? Because it doesn’t discriminate. It eats everything in its path. It doesn’t care, it doesn’t stop, and it always wins. It has no heart.”

She moved closer to him. He was counting the stones in his suede pouch.
“What are those?”
“Sort of like trophies, I guess. I’m always losing some, and gaining others. I can never keep count.”

The fires burned. They sat in silence, alone together. Finally, she asked the question that was on her mind. “Could you ever love a girl like me?”

The question was like a stone through his stained-glass window of hope, and he knew what the answer had to be. And suddenly the fires dropped as if they were taking a breath, and Stephen Howler wrapped the strap of his suede pouch around her neck. She didn’t have time for a last gasp or word. She struggled, kicking him and clawing at him and beating at him with her stump. She was right; she was stronger than he ever would have imagined. He had no trouble believing she dragged her father’s dead body from her bedroom to the bathtub. But he was stronger. Finally she was still. The fires came back, and he sang the song of her soul to the coyotes.

He carried her into the fires and left her there forever. Just before dawn, Stephen Howler went click-clacking down the highway again, with two more stones in his suede pouch.