

New Fiction from Peter Obourn: "Wild Horses"

Lee Harkness was supposed to meet this guy Smitty at a bar called Marty's on 14th Street at a specified time. Lee was late because it was his first time in Dallas. He had trouble finding the address.

"You're late," said Smitty.

"No shit," said Lee.

"Relax, have a drink." The guy backed right off, told him to relax—it was okay to be late.

Lee sat in the booth across from him. Lee had never seen a real gangster before. Smitty had a flat wooden face. His expression didn't change, even when he talked. Smitty got up and walked to the bar. He was short—a lot shorter than Lee—not short like a dwarf, just short. Smitty got them each a shot and drank his in one swallow. Lee sipped his.

Smitty handed Lee a photograph. "Keep it," he said. "That's Reggie. His real name is Reginald. Sounds like he's some smart guy that went to college or something, doesn't it, but he's not. Well, actually, maybe he went to some college for a while, but he's stupid. His name should be Judas. That windbreaker—he'll be wearin' that.

"He ratted on my brother, Tim, just to save his own skin." According to Smitty, Timmy got his knees broken—never been the same. They called it *capping*, and Smitty didn't know then what it meant, but he did now. "Reggie says he saved Tim's life—kept them from wasting him. That's bullshit. Timmy kept a little money out of his collections. Reggie found out about it. I told Reggie I'd take care of it and he said OK. Then he ratted. Nobody does that to me.

They had six shots of bourbon each, then a few beers. They both got drunk, but Lee felt good—together.

The guy Smitty was all broken up about his brother. Lee had a brother—ten years older—sold cars—pretty wife, very pretty, and a little girl—took Lee in for over a year after his first arrest, then threw him out, for nothing.

They never discussed the job itself. He thought this guy Smitty would ask stuff like had he done this before or go over the plan, the details. Lee was prepared for that—prepared to tell about his experience—but he didn't get the chance.

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Lee did have the necessary qualifications. He was trained to kill and he had. When he was on active duty in Afghanistan he didn't see a lot of action but had seen some. There was one horrible time when his unit got ambushed and he lost three of his close buddies. Somehow, he got through it. His unit was attacked, starting with rockets fired at their unit. At first, all Lee and his buddies could do was defend themselves and try to stay alive. Most of them did. The enemy just kept coming, but the unit was in their station and had a lot of powerful stuff to fight back. After it was all over, they went out to make sure the enemy was gone. They found twelve bodies, which to Lee looked just like his buddies. They didn't have uniforms or anything, but they were all just young guys like Lee.

After the battle they could have some counseling and Lee signed up for that. He told the chaplain that the worst part was when they had to go out and look for bodies. The chaplain asked him if he thought he had done anything wrong and Lee had said, "No, I believe in everything we are doing and what our country stands for and how important it is for the people in Afghanistan to be independent and free, but it was still hard to take."

It was necessary to park his car at his mother's trailer in Albuquerque. She made him nervous, talking all the time.

"You need to call your brother. Talk to your brother. You look tired. Are you taking drugs? Why are you here? Why do you need to leave your car here? You never call; then, all of a sudden, you show up and expect me to be glad to see you. I don't even know where you live." She went on and on.

He looked away. She looked older and tired, yet somehow she was holding it together. Like today she had lipstick on, but it ran into her new wrinkles. She was actually wearing a dress, white with lumpy shapes of random sizes. The pattern reminded Lee of the side of a cow. Apparently she had a job somewhere now. He tried to imagine who would hire her.

"Are you listening to me?" she said. He looked up. "I'm telling you about on the bus yesterday. I saw her get on and kept my eye on her the whole time. She wasn't even sitting near me. I knew she was one of them. She didn't move, but I forgot to watch her reflection in the window across from her seat. That's how she did it. I should have known. She got off the bus and I looked down and my purse was open. I never leave my purse open, and twenty dollars was gone. Those Puerto Ricans can do that. They don't even have to be in the room."

She'd straightened out a little. It seemed there was no man around; she wasn't drinking, but she still talked too much, and she was still crazy.

His mother said that Rosemary had been asking about him. "Tell her I can't see her right now," he said. "I have to go and do a job. I'll call her as soon as I do the job."

"What job?"

"Never mind. Just tell her what I said. She won't ask."



photo by Andria Williams

Rosemary never asked him anything. That's why he liked her. She just talked about herself and he didn't listen, but the sound of her voice calmed him. He liked to lie next to her and shut down so only the sound of her voice was left.

From the trailer park he took a local bus into Albuquerque and then another bus to Dallas, arriving in Dallas by Greyhound, as instructed. The Greyhound was supposed to be AIR-COOLED. "Doesn't that mean," he asked, "that, perhaps, it should be cooler inside the bus than outside?"

"That depends on the outside temperature," said the driver, who had a bad attitude.

Lee knew he couldn't push the driver's face in; he couldn't even argue with him. "Keep a low profile," the guy who hired him had said, and Lee needed the money. So he had to sweat it out, which literally meant he had to sweat on the bus all the way from Albuquerque. He stayed in the motel in Dallas for two days watching television until Smitty called.

He didn't even let the maid in. "Suits me," she said.

Reggie Johnson was putting on his white windbreaker. "Will you be warm enough in just that?" asked his wife.

"It's just a short meeting with some guy," he said, giving her a quick kiss. "It's still summertime, for Christ's sake. I won't even be out of the car. Be home in time to tuck the kids in."

As agreed, Reggie parked his black BMW under the third streetlight on Oak Avenue north of Lincoln and waited. He had told Smitty to set up a meeting with the assistant police

chief. He hoped Smitty hadn't screwed it up. If all went well, they would control the whole east side, with the cops in their pocket. He shuffled his newspaper to study the standings in detail. The Yankees were three games behind Boston with twenty to play. They would make a run for it. If the odds were right, he liked the bet. Personally, he gave New York an even chance. Boston always faded.

Lee had the pistol in his left hand, hidden under a coat draped over his right arm. The guy Reggie was just sitting in the car, in his windbreaker, reading the newspaper. From behind the car, Lee walked casually up to the driver's side window until the gun was pointed at Reggie's left ear. All he had to do now was pull the trigger.

Reggie turned suddenly. "Where the hell did *you* come from?" He looked at the coat over Lee's arm.

"Um," said Lee, "Could you tell me the time?"

"Yuh, sure. It's seven-thirty. Jesus, you scared the shit outta me."

Lee walked away from the BMW. He left Reggie to wait for a meeting that would not happen. In the middle of the bridge, he stopped and looked around, then he dropped the pistol into the river. He watched it fall and make a small splash. He wouldn't be getting the ten grand. He would be getting nothing. His gun was gone. The bus was late and it was hot, but he didn't sweat on the ride back to Albuquerque. He relaxed, watching the desert go by. One time he saw wild horses, off in the distance—at least he saw the cloud of dust they made. He decided it was definitely wild horses.

When he got back to his mother's trailer, the first thing she said was, "I got to feed the squirrels." They sat on the front step of the trailer and held peanuts out. Squirrels came and took peanuts out of Lee's hand. Nervously, they would take three each time, putting one in each cheek and then somehow

stuffing the third one in their mouths.

He looked at his mother. She smiled. She had the same black and white dress on. He decided it looked okay on her. She even had on a necklace, just a silver circle on a chain, which sort of matched her soft gray hair.

A squirrel grabbed a peanut. "Funny critters," he said.

"Sure are," she said. "What put you in such a good mood all of a sudden?"

"Nothin'" he said. It was dusk, that time when the birds call each other. "It's been a rough week—but it's over." He handed a squirrel his last peanut. "Mind if I stay here a while?"

"Suit yourself," she said.

"I'll protect you from those Puerto Rican women."

"Who?"

He took the photo Smitty had given him out of his pocket. "See this guy?" He handed it to his mother. "I thought maybe he looked a little like my father."

"What are you talking about? You never even seen your father."

"I know, Ma, but you know, he looks about the right age to be."

"Yeah, well, your father did have a jacket like that, but he didn't look anything like this guy."

Lee took the picture back and tore it in half. "Well, anyway, yesterday, I saved this guy's life."

"Really?"

"You could say that."

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He went to see Rosemary. He lay next to her and listened to what she had been doing since he saw her. It took a while.

"Are you glad I'm here?" he said.

"Yes," she said.

"You know, I couldn't do that job, so I'm broke."

"That's okay."

"But I saw wild horses and found out something important."

"What's that?"

"I found out who I am. It's not the person I thought I was."

"That doesn't make a lot of sense, Lee."

"Yes, it does, Rosemary. It makes sense." He reached for her hand.