

7 A Man Called Horse

The ninety-year-old Hispanic woman was plopped on the seat like a discarded beanbag chair, her aged muscles no longer able to contain the flesh; the seatbelt—even with an extension—was desperately cutting into her lap. She mumbled incoherently and when she finally lost control of her bowels, Ranger Johnson almost lost control of his stomach. It was a Monday morning flight. It wasn't supposed to be crowded but when he checked in and asked to upgrade to First Class they had told him they were sold out. The governor was a cheep bastard; he should have picked up the tab. Instead, Johnson's knees were sandwiched between the seat in front of him and the woman spilling over into his personal space. Three hours was an eternity in hell but mercifully, the plane finally landed, bouncing twice before settling onto the sticky tarmac in Nassau.

In First Class, the governor's stepdaughter stood with her friends, joining the fray pushing toward the exit. Johnson reached for his cell phone.

“Don't get too far a head of me.”

Without turning back to the economy seating, she waved her hand above her head and hung up.

Spoiled bitch, he thought.

By the time he had made it through customs, the bachelorette party had already met the limousine and he was left alone to catch a cab driven by a Rastafarian-looking dude

who tried to be too damned friendly and tried too hard to push ganja on him. Johnson shot him a glance into the rearview mirror and that was the end of the conversational attempts.

The road from the airport was bumpy and he was thrown about as the cabby attempted—usually unsuccessfully—to dodge potholes that seemed to appear out of nowhere. Sporadic shanties gave way to mini-mansions; gated to keep those in the shanties from getting too friendly. The road meandered to the outskirts of Nassau and into the city on the lazy sea. They inched through the traffic congestion, passing the British Colonial Hilton and then curving into the Straw Market—a conglomerate of canopies where the locals sold woodcarvings and tee shirts and other paraphernalia that tourists expected. Then, finally, they were free of the traffic and climbed up the toll bridge to Paradise Island. The cabby pulled in at the tollbooth.

“One dollar, man.”

“All I have is a five,” responded Johnson.

“That’ll work.” The cabby paid the woman and then rolled forward.

“Hey, my change.”

“Every-ding’s cool, mon.” The cabby smiled as he pushed the four dollars into his breast pocket. Welcome to paradise.

Johnson’s room in the pink castle of Atlantis was modest but luxuriously outfitted. He threw his bags onto the floral-printed bed and opened the sliding-glass door and walked onto the balcony. His view overlooked the marina—not the expensive side that faced the ocean—though this view didn’t disappoint either. Multimillion-dollar yachts bobbed on the gentle water, docked alongside the chic shops and restaurants. People scurried about, self-

absorbed in a make-believe world.

Johnson watched the people below, becoming intoxicated by the sea breeze and a touristy steel drum band playing outside of a bar on the boardwalk. He wished he could play along with his cornet but he doubted he would last long on the balcony before a complaint. Now, however, he decided he should change and find the resort's gym. He needed to punish away the memory of the retched woman who had no control over her existence and the stench that remained seared in his nostrils despite the clean ocean air.

Pumping iron was his instrument for his body allowing his mind to remain clear and focused. The cornet was his instrument for the soul, allowing the energy of love, lust, and the ultimate question of why to burst forth; it became the extension of a song trapped in his heart and the music flowed from his soul into an outwardly captivating story. He spoke through the instrument like whispering wisps of fog gently floating in the breeze and then crashing through the barrier with the clarity of a cold spring in the Texas Hill Country.

Horace was his given name and Horse was what was assigned to him and, as time passed, he embraced it. Long story short: It began when he was a deputy sheriff for Orange County in Texas. At two in the morning, he had answered a call on a domestic disturbance occurring in an apartment building located along the Union Pacific tracks heading out of the town of Vidor. As he walked up to the rusting door of unit 6, the door flew open and a man crashed through, barely ducking around Horace. As Horace re-affixed his attention to the open doorway, a robust woman threw a five-pound cast iron skillet at her retreating common law husband and caught Horace dead on in the face. His teeth were shattered; cartilage cracked in his nose and his lip was split open like a canyon retreating into a

brilliant red sunset.

After six months of reconstructive and orthodontic surgeries, the passion of Horace's existence still flowed from his cornet but the sound was no longer as pleasing to his discerning ears. Though he was still exceptional, his dream of being the next James Shepherd was shattered. That hurt him more than the loss of his future as a NFL star while in college, and the work he had put into both dreams seemed flushed away by a flying offensive tackle and a wayward iron skillet.

After the set backs, the Texas Rangers opened a mystique that intrigued him and so, with a pronounced lisp that the doctors assured would disappear with time, Horace joined the Texas Department of Public Safety with his eye on gaining one of the rare and coveted positions in the Rangers.

When he reported to duty at the first posting, a veteran walked by and Johnson introduced himself, Horace becoming *Horath*. The DPS trooper grinned as he passed, "You go on and talk like that, sweet pea. You're making me hard with that lisp of yours."

"Fucth ya and the horath ya rode in on."

It was one of those moments that will live forever in the water cooler gossip and after that, he was simply a man called Horse.

After eight years pounding the highways of Texas, he earned his spot, the spot that signified to the world that he was an elite cop. No, not really a cop for the Rangers were the defenders of civilization, the last line between what is right and what is chaos on the still existent Texas frontier.

One Ranger, One Riot became their motto after Captain Bill McDonald was

dispatched to Dallas in 1896 to break up an illegal heavy weight prizefight. Fearful of a full invasion from the Rangers, the Dallas mayor met the train to head off a potential bloodbath. When McDonald was the only one getting off, the mayor anxiously asked, "Where're the others?" McDonald looked down at the man, squinted, spit some tobacco juice on the dusty platform and proclaimed, "Hell! Ain't I enough? There's only one prizefight."

As a result of the image of lone horsemen riding the range, the Rangers define themselves as such:

A Ranger is an officer who is able to handle any given situation without definite instructions from his commanding officer or higher authority. This ability must be proven before a man becomes a Ranger.

Horace "Horse" Johnson was the embodied definition of a Texas Ranger.

Four months ago, he was walking from an apartment building in Houston's east side after a drug bust and as he turned, his boot caught the edge of a curb and he spilled backwards, chipping his tailbone. Instead of going on full medical leave, he asked to be assigned to any duty he could be cleared for and he was sent to the governor's mansion. An offensive tackle, an iron skillet, and now an errant curb landed him in The Bahamas. *Goddamn*, he thought, *why am I here?*