

“Certain Airs”

The air was chilled but warmed under the smiling sunshine. The grass, still sparse and hibernating, crunched under my boots. Looking behind me small clouds of dirt kicked up with my every step. I tried to walk carefully to not stir up too much to irritate my lungs. If I got too much kicked up Pa would send me back inside for sure. ‘Cory,’ he would say, ‘Now you best just get back inside and help your Ma.’ He thought I was so frail. Although he had good reason to believe so. I can still taste the bitter medicine I practically lived off of in my younger years. My siblings before me were lungers just like I am and they had all died of it. My brother made it the longest to the age 17 before he passed away five years ago. Now that I’m 17 Ma and Pa watch me like a hawk. I can’t blame them for being so mindful and scared but I wished they let me show them that I can live without being held like a little flower all the time. I’ll go when the Good Lord calls me whether they dote over me or not and until that time I think I’ll be fine. Carefully as ever I tip toed through the few patches of dull grass to avoid the sand and dirt that covered the ground.

The bucket swung slightly in my hand. The seed and corn inside of it rustled around knocking the beaten edges of the bucket. The chickens, hearing the rustling of their food, came running from different places, behind the barn, near the corral, and by the silo. Soon they crowded around me soon looking up at me eagerly. They coo’d and caw’d at me to hurry and spill the insides of the bucket on the ground for them.

‘Not here. By the edge of the barn is where the sun is hitting this morning. Won’t it be nice to eat your breakfast in the sun?’ they ran behind me kicking up small rocks and dirt as they rushed. By the side of the barn was a small stool made out of an old tree stump that Pa had dug up out of the field and given to me. It took me about a week to get it where I wanted it because of its weight. Pa tried to do it for me but Ma insisted he let me be and that I could do it myself.

She understood what it was like to be a young girl in a boy’s world. She grew up on her Pa’s ranch, my Grand Dad’s, and wasn’t ever allowed to get out of the yard. Her Ma always made her dress really proper and sit as a young girl should, but she said it drove her almost mad. She would watch her brothers out of the big windows working and having fun outside and said sometimes she would cry. She always made sure to tell my Pa to let me do as I pleased, as long as it was reasonable, even though I was small for my age.

On my recent seventeenth birthday Pa proposed I accompany him into town to get a new dress in case any suitors were to come. I wasn’t too keen on the idea but I agreed to go with him to keep him happy. In town there were many kinds of people. There were people of different color, different languages, rich people, poor people, and any kind of person you could think of. I saw women in big bright dresses with parasails and men in crisp suits walking arm in arm with them. Pa looked at them and then at me out of the corner of his eye.

He wanted me to have a good life and not have to work as hard as he had in his life. He wanted me to be a prim and proper lady that he had married, or at least how she was raised. Pa always said he married a small lady in a fancy dress but that inside she was wild and rowdy. I always loved to hear the stories of the two of them going to markets and searching for land to build their own ranch and Ma getting rowdy with people. I hated the idea of being the quiet woman hanging on a man's arm. Not that I wasn't feminine or enjoying the thought of being married someday it's just that I wanted to be able to take care of myself.

Pa hitched the wagon by the side of Mr. Barton's general store and offered his hand to help me down. I grabbed the side of my skirt with one hand, pulling it out of the way of my feet, and jumped down next to him. I smiled up at him and watched him smile slightly and shake his head, "Come on girl let's go see what we got inside."

Mrs. Barton showed me all of the fabrics for dresses he had. They ranged from reds, to yellows, and blues. I grew tired of looking at the fabrics and thankfully Pa was much more interested with talking to Mr. Barton to notice I was dragging the decision out. Mrs. Barton went in the back to grab more options when I spotted her. Out of the general store window I saw a woman getting off of her horse. She had on a dusty brown hat that covered her face from the sun with a hawk feather stuck in the band. Her hair was long and blonde and pulled into a tight braid that swung around her shoulders while she hitched her horse. The main thing that caught my attention wasn't what she was doing but what clothes she had on. She didn't have on a pretty dress or even a working dress, but britches and chaps. They were rough and worn from a lot of wear. The leather of her chaps was worn darker in some places from long exposure to the sun. Her shirt was a dulled grey color, maybe at some point was black. Her vest over her shirt was fitted and grey with small white stripes going down it. As she pushed through the store's door I could hear the sound of her spurs. I was mesmerized with her dark boots. Even though they had dirt on them from riding I could see the designs carved into the leather. Her spurs were shining silver and had similar designs on those as her boots. I was too enthralled with her intricate boots to notice the pistol hanging on her hip in her holster. It shined brighter and was cleaner than anything else she had on. It looked like she'd been riding long and was tired. I wondered how she kept her pistol so clean while everything else was covered in a layer of dirt including the area of her face that wasn't covered by her bandana.

'Can I help you?' her voice echoed into my ear startling me. Her steely grey eyes looking at me from across the store. She wasn't much taller than me but carried herself with an intimidating air. I felt my face flush and felt embarrassed for staring.

'No ma'am I'm sorry I just,' glancing down at the floor I mumbled 'Never seen a lady in britches before.' Her laugh was a sing-song noise and rung like bells.

'Honey don't ever look down from anyone's gaze, and there ain't no reason a lady can't wear britches. At least I haven't heard a good reason yet,' she handed a small list and a hand full

of coins to the shop boy. I'd never seen someone so freely give that many coins, or coins at all really. I thought of a million things to ask but none of them sounded good enough until I blurted one out, 'Your Pa let's you wear britches and come to town by yourself?'

She leaned her elbow on the counter and smiled at me. She looked exactly how I felt I was on the inside, rugged but welcoming at the same time. 'I don't reckon my Pa would've let me do a lot of the things I do, but he's been gone for ten years Lord rest his soul. I'm just coming through to get some supplies and head on out,' she tipped her hat up exposing a large scar on her forehead near her hairline. She turned away when she realized I looked at it. Her horse outside looked trail worn and tired. She looked the same way but tried to hide it well.

'Aren't you gonna rest your horse? He looks mighty tired and so do you,' I walked over near her and looked around her shoulder to see her face.

'I don't rightly trust inns since I don't know any of the keeps. You gotta be weary when you're a lady in this world. Well woman rather than a lady I suppose.' The shop boy set a few items in a brown bag and typed on the brass buttons of the register.

'You can stay with my Ma and Pa and me! I mean you and your horse look mighty tired. My Ma would like to have the company of another lady since we're the only ladies on the ranch. I'm sure you've got a lot of stories to share as well,' I could imagine hearing her stories of her adventures through the vast west and even up into the plains. I could imagine being like her and trailing my way across the country making my own rules and helping strangers when they needed it. In a perfect world I wouldn't have to worry about taking medicine and I could freely roam as I pleased but in reality I was a little lunker and I had to stay put on the ranch.

She smiled at me and pulled her bag off of the counter, 'You remind me a lot of myself when I was your age. Listen girl you be careful in this world and you do what you can to take care of yourself you hear? This world ain't no place for a lady and you gotta do what you can to protect yourself and the people close to you. You hear me? I appreciate the offer honey but I have a place to get to as soon as I can,' she pat my shoulder, 'What's your name?'

'Coralline but my Ma and Pa call me Cory.'

'Be careful in this world Cory,' she turned and pushed the door open.

'Wait what is your name? In case I see you again I'd like to call you by your name instead of feeling like a stranger.'

'It's changed so much over the years I don't rightly remember it. You just call me friend if I ever see you again, alright?' she pulled her hat down to cover her face and loaded the items in her saddle bags. Off she went.

That day I didn't get a new dress but I got Pa to buy me a new wide flat brimmed hat.

I sat on the stump watching the chickens peck at their grains. I pushed my hat up to let the sunshine spread across my face. I leaned back against the barn and must've fallen asleep because when I opened my eyes all of the chickens were gone and the sun was higher in the sky. I heard commotion coming from inside of the barn. I rubbed my eyes with the back of my fists and let the noises fill my still awakening ears. As my ears adjusted to the sounds I heard Jorge speaking quickly in Spanish. His voice was shaking and wavering. Another unfamiliar voice boomed at him and told him to keep quiet. I felt my blood run cold and my body freeze. I'd heard of rustlers before but never had anything like that happened to us. I sat stone still and listened to the voice longer.

A rasping man's voice broke the silence, 'I don't wanna hear your blubberin' I just want answers. I know you can speak some kind of English now listen here. I'm lookin' for somebody and I need you to hush up and remember as best as that little brain 'a your's can. Have you seen any girl running around here? Thin little thing, long blonde hair, beety little eyes? She talks like she's somethin' special. Now think back. You seen anything like that? Know if you're hidin' her you'll have a lot of explainin' to do.'

I knew he was talking about the girl from the store. My mind raced to a thousand different things at once. I heard a yelp come from the house. My mind immediately jumped to my Ma. If they had Jorge they must have had Pa too. I was the only one left to handle this. My blood started racing through my veins and heated every inch of my skin. My hands shook like they did when I woke up early to feed the cows in the winter time. I knew I had to do something and fast but I couldn't get my mind to focus on one thing. I thought back to what the woman at the store at told me, 'This world ain't no place for a lady and you gotta do what you can to protect yourself and the people close to you. You hear me?'

I took a silent deep breath and let my mind fall blank. I remembered Pa had a pistol in the box on the wagon around the back of the barn. I knew I'd have to be quiet to get back there. I took another breath and held it deep in my lungs. I lowered myself down to the ground slowly. I lay on my stomach to avoid breaking sunlight through the slats of the barn wood and letting them see my shadow. I pulled myself by my arms and pushed off of my knees. Through the dirt I made my way slowly toward the edge of the barn. Once I got around the corner I would be able to stand since there was thicker wood on the back with no spaces on the sides to see through.

The dirt under me stuck to my arms and shirt. My white sleeves, now brown, were full of dirt and scratching gently against my arms. I rounded the side of the barn and pushed myself quickly to my feet. I scrambled to the wagon's box and pulled it open. The old scuffed silver pistol lay like it was waiting just for me. Ma used to take me out behind the barn or around the pasture to teach me how to shoot while Pa would be working with the herd so the pistol felt

familiar in my hand. I took another deep breath trying to calm my nerves and steady my hands. I wrapped my hand around the handle of the pistol and looked up to the open barn loft door above. Tucking the pistol in the belted band of the thick old working skirt I had on I pulled my dirtied sleeves up past my elbows and pushed my hat down firmly on my head. Quietly I stepped my boot onto the first rung of the ladder toward the loft and began pulling myself up one rung at a time.

Once at the top of the ladder and pulled myself onto the loft and laid flat in the sparse hay. As quietly as possible I laid still and listened to the voices below. There seemed to be two other people other than Jorge and the main unfamiliar voice. They laughed at the sound of the man hitting Jorge and Jorge's struggling English. I felt my blood boil all over again. Jorge was a Mexican man that Pa had hired years ago when I was a little girl to help with the cattle on the ranch. He spoke very little English but through the years had picked up what he could from me trying my best to teach him. I would sit and listen to him sing soft Mexican songs while he cleaned out the horse stalls or fed the cows. He was a small simple man that wore a wide brimmed hat to block his brown face from the sun. He kept a small metal locket on a chain around his neck of his wife and daughter that still resided down in Mexico. He would tell me about them in simple broken English and tears would well up in his eyes. Now as I listen to him being beaten by the strangers I felt my hands shake, now not with fear, but with anger.

I kept still listening to the voices below trying to place where they all stood. The floor of the loft had several knots in it with holes just wide enough to fit the barrel of the pistol. I could try to shoot through it which would result in me injuring and possibly killing one of the men or missing completely and giving up my position and losing my advantage and opportunity to help Jorge at all. I weighed the options and decided that was too risky. A hundred thoughts rolled through my mind again. I moved my arm to look through one of the knots in the floor when my elbow bumped into a thick rock on the floor. It was probably left over from Pa and Jorge bringing in the hay to store up here but I wanted to believe that the Lord himself had set it just here for this moment in time. Without another thought I picked up the rock and threw it as hard and as quietly as I could at the wall across the barn from me. It barely made it but hit one of the wall's boards with a thud. The voices below me fell silent. The man ordered one of the others with him to go see what the noise was. That's when I saw him. A frail man with sparse brown hair on his head. He had on a dirtied yellow shirt and his gun raised as he walked toward the door slowly. The voices below me continued talking again quietly.

I sat up slowly and pulled my own pistol out of my waist band. Carefully I raised it and braced it with both of my hands. I aimed it at the man and felt my heart beat frantically. I almost closed my eyes and I almost simultaneously pulled the hammer down and pulled the trigger but I remember the woman at the store. I forced both of my eyes open and watched as the man fell to the ground. A stain of red spread quickly on the back of his shirt. He gasped and writhed in the floor instinctively pulling the trigger of his pistol shooting across the floor of the barn making a

hole in a bucket full of water. The sound of pouring water and the commotion of men's voices filled the barn.

I kept my pistol raised and my arms straight. Another man ran out from under the loft and looked around until he saw me. I pulled the trigger again before I could think. It shot through his shoulder luckily and he dropped his pistol. He stood gripping his arm and cursing me alerting the other man before I aimed for his forehead quickly. I blessed my Pa in that moment for the pistol lessons he had given me.

'What you gonna do girl? Kill us all? Get down here and gimme that gun girl you know better,' the gruff man's voice sounded like a saw through rough wood. I heard Jorge pleading me to run but I knew if I left now it would only result in the death of me and my family. The man stayed under the loft making it impossible for me to get a shot at him, 'What's your name girl?'

'I reckon girl will do just fine,' I laid flat looking through the knots in the floor to see if I could get a good look at him. My vision, blurry with adrenaline, focused on a tall thin man with dirty blonde hair under a black hat aiming his pistol right at me. I jumped up quickly as the shot rang out and cut straight through the brim of my hat leaving my left ear ringing and my face burned from the all too close bullet. I curled into a ball in the hay rubbing my hand over my ear and shaking my head to regain my senses. The man hollered out but I couldn't make out what he was saying.

'What are you too scared to come out and face me like a man?' I knew I must've been screaming since I couldn't hear my own voice. I lifted myself up to my knees and looked out at the barn floor. I saw Jorge be pushed out into the open floor with his hands tied behind his back. Blood was caked on his face and still streaming out of open wounds on his face. His right eye was barely open enough from the swelling to see me. Another shot of adrenaline and anger filled me.

Between the ringing and the sound of my own blood pumping through my veins I heard the man call out, 'You want me to face you like a man? A little girl? I don't know what's got into y'all female's heads these days thinkin' you're all high and mighty. If you put a bullet in me this here Mexican of your's is goin' with me,' he walked out from under the loft with his pistol pointed directly at Jorge. He stepped behind him and kicked him down to his knees shoving the barrel of his gun into the back of his head.

'You're a pretty little thing to be so stupid,' he smiled at me and spit tobacco juice on the ground next to him. I raised my pistol up at him but as I did I heard the hammer of his pistol pull, 'Ah. Not so fast. I don't mind to put him down. I may let him go but you gotta answer somethin' for me. Where is she?' he held Jorge still by his thinning hair.

'Who?' I kept my pistol aimed at him while my mind raced.

‘Girl don’t play stupid I ain’t got no time for games. Where is she?’ he pulled Jorge’s hair tighter making him cry out.

‘I don’t know what you’re even talkin’ about! I’m the only girl on this farm?’

‘Don’t you lie to me girl! You got a hat just like her’s and you act like her too. Now where is she before I put a bullet in him and you,’ his brows furrowed under his hat brim. My thoughts raced back to the girl I saw at the store.

‘She rode through here awhile ago but didn’t stop. I reckon she’s headed north by the looks of her ridin’ now let him go,’ I looked at Jorge as he writhed in his restraints and begged me to flee from this.

‘I don’t believe ya as much as I believe anything he says but it’s the only lead I got. Put that pistol down and I’ll let him go,’ he looked from the pistol to me and back again. I watched him for a moment and slowly lowered the pistol down and laid it on the loft. He smiled eerily at me again, ‘That’s a good girl. Thank ya for havin’ us. I’ll be seein’ ya girl,’ he pulled the trigger on his pistol. The momentum of the shot bursted through Jorge’s skull and sent his body flying forward onto the dirt barn floor. I screamed out and picked up the pistol as fast as I could shooting without aiming and hitting his right calf as he ran out of the door. I slid down the loft’s ladder onto the barn floor refusing to let myself look at Jorge’s body as I ran out the door after him. He had just mounted his horse and started off while a few other men waited for him up ahead. I aimed as best I could while I ran but couldn’t get a shot in. Aiming once more I pulled the trigger and heard a click of an empty chamber. Between my tears and my cries I watched as the men rode off away from me. I fell on the ground to my knees punching the dirt below me. The thought of my Ma and Pa came flooding to my mind and sent me flying to the house as fast as my legs could carry me. My chest ached and my nose burned as I ran. I busted into the kitchen door wheezing and panting, ‘Ma! Pa! Where are y’all?’ I ran through the house searching all the rooms seeing them looted and thrown apart. In my brother’s bedroom I found them tied and laying in the floor. None of us had set foot in this room since my brother had passed five years ago. His old hat was still sitting on his bedpost. I raced over to them and untied their bonds. The harsh rope was rough against my skin making my fingers bleed from pulling it too tightly to get it undone.

Pa’s face was dark maroon and blue from being beaten. He barely smiled at me, ‘Baby I thought I’d never see you again.’ I untied Ma and noticed her arms were cold while I did. Rolling her over I saw her eyes open and fixed with a deep dark bruise on the side of her face. Her bottom lip was split with one of her eyes blood shot. I looked from her to Pa and felt my body tense up. I thought a thousand thoughts but nothing at the same time. Pa took my hand and grasped it weakly and spoke quickly forcing out as much of a voice as he could muster up, ‘Cory get the house deed from my chest in the room and ride to town. Marshal Robins will take care of ya but you gotta go now. I love you Cory you’ll always be my little cowgirl.’ His gaze fell glassy

and his hand loosened from mine. Now tears fell from my face and my mind sat blank and frozen. I sat still for what seemed an eternity. I broke myself out of my trance and looked over at my parents where they lay. I studied them one last time before softly lowering their eye lids and covering them with the blanket off of the bed. I walked over to the foot of the bed and lifted the lid on my brother's chest. I pushed through a small stack of books, a few work shirts, and a small box of medicine until I finally found what I wanted. I pulled his britches out from the bottom of the chest, pulled them on under my skirt and pulled it off leaving it in the floor. I'd never worn britches before but I knew now was no time to try and wear a skirt and be a lady. I tucked the pistol in the waist band of the loose pants and cinched the belt tighter. Walking to Ma and Pa's room I grabbed a box of pistol ammo. I put on one of Ma's work vests and grabbed Pa's handkerchief off his old dresser and put it in my pocket. Pulling the blanket off their bed I looked over at the chest that the deed was in but turned away and walked down the stairs without it. What good would the deed of the house that my parents were killed in do me? This couldn't be my house anymore. I would never be able to come back here and settle. I had to move on. I walked out to the barn and laid the blanket over Jorge's body. I picked up my saddle of the rail and lugged it outside to call my horse. The corral had been busted open and the animals were roaming freely around the farm. My red quarter horse trotted over to me and stood still while I saddled it. My brother had bought this horse in town the year before he died and I took up caring for it. Ma couldn't bear to ride it so Pa said he was mine to care for now. I lifted myself up onto his back and looked back at the house and studied the land. This may be the last time I'd ever see it so I wanted to remember it exactly. I wanted to remember it from any other day other than this day. I would've remembered it in deep snow, hard rain, a lightning storm, any day just not this day. Turning my back on it I spurred the horse's side and took off in the direction the men had gone. I knew they'd covered a lot of ground ahead of me but speed wasn't my strategy in this, an ally was.

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