

JEFF FAIRLESS

Cowgirls

IT WAS AS A SIDE-BENEFIT of a business trip that Frank Zeno was granted the good fortune of meeting his future daughter-in-law in the very early days of her and his son falling in love. His son, Ryan, later told him that they had not yet even kissed before that night. But during their dinner together at a seafood restaurant on the harbour Frank had observed the strong urge they each had to touch the other, and to listen intently, reverently, to each word the other said.

And so he was blessed to see this love at its birth, and to feel its early, urgent desire to grow. He also felt, and did his best to rein in, his own dangerous paternal drive to nurture it.

Late that night he awoke in his hotel room with the boyhood memory of finding a cottonwood seedling rooted tenuously in sandy mud at the edge of Ten Mile Creek. He was twelve that year, and it was his first summer of real cowboying—for pay. He had dismounted his mare and lay stretched flat on his belly across the cool grass, his head extended to a small captive side-pool of the fast-running water.

He held Silver's reins firmly in his right hand as he drank, because she was notorious for running for the ranch yard if given any chance at all. She grazed briskly along the creek bank, and Frank's right arm was jerked sideways each time she ripped a fresh mouthful of grass from the ground. One pull was strong enough to make him push his upper body back from the creek and kneel in the moist grass, looking at Silver, and fight off the unkind instinct to jerk harshly back.

Then he saw the seedling. About eight inches tall, it had six leaves, the two largest ones at the top fully formed in the soft triangle signature of a cottonwood. He recognized that shape because he had played in the shade of the tall cottonwoods in the ranch yard every spring and summer of his life that he could remember. The leaves would flutter in even a slight breeze to shimmer silver and green overhead.

The spring before Frank was born Jack Haney had hung a swing made from a discarded tractor tire from the strongest branch of the tallest tree. Jack had cut the tire across its diameter and attached each end by steel bolts and thick rope. As a child he had swung alone there in the shade on and off for hours, usually as a fighter pilot, alternating these flying sorties with ground-based episodes of toy soldier wars fought across tall grass from opposing Lincoln Log forts. But with his growing sense of manhood now and in the face of his real work responsibilities, he did not use the swing anymore, except when the Haney's niece Cheri was visiting from Salmon. They would sit there in the evenings after supper side by side, pretending casually to one another that there was no other viable spot to sit. The U-shape of the half-tire would flex in on itself when the ropes tensed at the high points of each swinging arc, and press them inadvertently together.

But entire days of his earlier, true childhood had been lived under the protective shade of these cottonwoods, the swing always only a short burst of running speed away from even the outlying edges of the yard, so that from any point in that yard he might, if imagination or boredom required, seek anachronistic airborne protection from Quantrill's Kansas guerrillas or Geronimo's Apaches.

If it was late May or early June the rhythmic springtime gusts of wind would grab the cottonwood branches overhead as he played and throw white clusters of seed into the air. When he heard the wind burst into the branches he would look up to watch the dense cottony puffs dissolve into a faint white mist and spread downwind across the sky, each seed separating from the others to ride its own tiny white parachute into the mountains.

If his mother was not there and if the ranch work had not taken her too far from the house, Dode Haney would bring cold lemonade or bottles of Coke and a stack of Fig Newtons to him on those afternoons. He would hear the screen door squeal on its hinges as Dode flung it open with a quick sideways stroke of her hip, hands full, and left it to bang shut as she stepped stocking-footed down from the porch and into the yard.

She would shout out something like "Okay, flyboy—yer in my sights—ya better jump," if he was in the swing, or "I got ya surrounded, soldier, ya might as well surrender," if Frank was on the ground and immersed in the sounds of his own voice as rifle fire.

This time she placed the tray with lemonade and cookies on the ground next to him, sat down herself, and looked skyward with him.

"Them're the original sagebrush pioneers," she said.

"What are, Dode?"

"Them cottonwood seeds."

The wind gusted again, throttling the branches, and they watched together as a new flight of seeds rose up and eastward. They each took a cold glass from the tray and Frank, still looking up, gulped his lemonade while Dode took short, sharp sips of hers.

Frank's mother was away at the Program in Pocatello again, he thought, or maybe she was in Boise with Walt. He wasn't sure. He wiped lemonade from his mouth with the back of his hand, took two cookies from the tray, and stuffed them in rapid sequence into his mouth.

Dode's long legs were bent, knees up, in front of her; and her stockinged feet nested in the grass. Frank saw the brown edge of freshly dried cow shit at the cuffs of her Levis. She'd picked this up while sorting heifers out of the cow herd after lunch. He had heard her sharp, efficient shouts and the short replies of Don, Dusty and Jack as they worked the cattle in the corrals at the far side of the ranch yard.

She turned her angular upper body toward him now and put her lemonade glass back down on the tray. Each lens of her thick-framed eye glasses had tiny flecks of dirt here and there, accumulation from the day's work so far. She tossed her head to clear stray strands of her bobbed brown bangs (a "butch cut," his mother called it) temporarily from her field of vision. Her grin became a full smile and her silver incisor glistened.

"Now you be sure and be honest with me," she said. "I don't want no lies. Are them cookies any good at all, or not?"

She gave him her sharp little laugh: "Ya Ha!"

"Pioneers?" Frank asked, pushing escaped cookie crumbs back into the corners of his mouth.

"You betcha," she said, looking back at the sky. "Them cottonwood seeds are headin' out in all directions, all alone, no idea where they're goin'. With no more than one in five million of 'em gonna last anywhere for long. That's what my Dad called 'em. 'Sagebrush pioneers.' Called himself that, too: him and Doc—'sagebrush pioneers.' Had it put on his tombstone, over to Leadore. I'll show ya next time."

She took a Fig Newton and nibbled it thoughtfully.

"But Dad did last where he landed quite a while, I guess," she said. "Got himself rooted in pretty good, I'd say; and Doc did too, I think, somewhere or other."

They heard Jack shout something unclear from the distance; a searching call for Dode. She stood up, winked, and tousled his hair.

"Don't you worry so much, Frankie," she said, looking into his eyes. "It's gonna be fine. Everything's gonna be good."

He wondered now, kneeling by Ten Mile Creek, if the one-in-five-million part was true. This seedling had ended up here, rooted, ten miles or

more from the ranch yard, and Frank had found it, pretty well by chance. He had never found one before, or at least he couldn't remember finding one. Maybe this was the one in five million.

He asked himself if there was something he should do to make the seedling more likely to survive. It was safe now at least for a while from cattle trampling across it for a drink: he and Dusty had just pushed the steers through to the Clear Creek side of the fence. But lack of moisture, it seemed to him, was likely to become a problem. He knew that the creek would slowly recede from this bank and that by the middle of August there would be only a trickle of it left running, yards away from the seedling. The grass here would be brown and brittle by then.

He stood up, brushed off his Levis, and looked down at the seedling. Because he was still two years away from the complete loss of all religion, he searched his memorized record of an altar boy's portion of the Latin mass.

"Domini Sanctus," he said finally, and mounted Silver.



Now he lay in a Halifax hotel bed, forty years later, with his neck muscles tense and the cottonwoods shimmering brightly in his awareness. He was one thousand miles away from his home, in this city of his son's new love, and that home was itself three thousand miles away from where he had been born.

Over the past two months—since the biopsy results—his memory had begun to work for him in this way. A storehouse of allegories, just the right one sent spontaneously at night to awaken him and remedy his various hopes and worries.

He returned slowly to sleep.

He was up early the next morning to meet Marnie for a tactics breakfast in the hotel restaurant. There were only a couple of issues left to settle from the meeting the day before, and Marnie had them well in hand.

"Mostly it's a chance for Ian to have a presence," she admitted, nibbling at her crisp bacon. "And it'll be about schedule. Ian has built his career around schedule." She winked at him and sipped her coffee with emphasis. "No-one does schedule like Ian."

"Schedule is good," Frank said.

"Then you're Ian's man!" she said, with AM-radio enthusiasm. "Which is good, because he will need to kick your butt a little, too. That's the other way Ian has built his career. Kicking supplier butt in open meetings. Good for many points, as you must surely understand."

She smiled and said again, “You’re Ian’s man,” her green eyes twinkling.



It was their project, Frank and Marnie’s, conceived last November over drinks in Vegas during SuperCom, where they’d met, that meeting sparked by the network application demo his team had run on the trade show floor. In the bar, a gin-and-tonic in one hand, Frank had begun a variation of his standard “stairway to vision” chart—“incremental investment, incremental functionality, incremental value, incremental revenue . . .”—with blue ink on a blank page of the thick trade-show program book when Marnie rushed in with black ink to complete it.

Then she said, “We’re the only Telco in the world with an end-to-end infrastructure sophisticated enough to support this kind of application. So don’t fool yourself.”

Her eyes focused firmly on his, unblinking.

Over that first slowly sipped drink they roughed out the functionality for each projected step of network implementation and then, through three more drinks, they discussed more philosophical issues, including that point of deployment in the network where they (pretending for a moment that they would be given a say in this decision, Marnie chuckling while Frank held his stir stick like a wand to conjure magic honesty from executives, one by one) would allow Marketing to call the application “Network Aware.” They both took such definitions seriously, they pledged, although a casual observer of their meeting at this moment would not have judged them serious about anything.

Ian, Marnie’s boss, was a well-rooted member of the English engineering diaspora who had been cast to Canada during the seventies’ storms of welfare-state inefficiency. He had since grown robustly beyond his skill set to an indifferent position in executive management. Amiably important and greasy-haired, Ian was, as Marnie had promised, good with schedules. Late the previous afternoon he had found a misplaced cross-team dependency in the project plan “by means,” as he related to the meeting, “of a really rather casual glance through the time lines.” After which he became worried, as one would expect, that there might be more such problems, and so he had reviewed the whole thing in considerable detail, which burdened his evening, of course, but fortunately he still had only this one oversight to report.

It was a valid find, as Frank readily admitted, and because the error clearly belonged to Frank and his team, and Frank’s embarrassment

was clearly evident, Ian could demonstrate both of his core career skills simultaneously, a fortunate confluence that shortened the meeting. Ian's whole display took only just over sixty minutes, Marnie beaming, red-faced throughout from her barely contained desire to tease Frank.

Afterwards in the hall, in the afterglow of both Ian's appeasement and a signed Shared Product Prototyping Procedural Agreement ("the SP3A"), Marnie shook her head playfully at Frank and, bouncing on her toes in compensation for height, landed an athletic shoulder briefly on his right pectoral. They laughed, chatted, and agreed to a time for next week's teleconference.



"It went well", Frank told Ryan when they met for lunch at The Black Friar's on Barrington. "They signed up to the prototype, which is a good start."

"Hey, Dad! Way to go!" Ryan said with enthusiasm, manfully putting aside the topic he really wanted to talk about. They had each ordered a beer and Ryan's fingers nibbled impatiently at one of the cardboard Kilkenny coasters the waiter had set between them.

"She's wonderful," Frank said, pre-empting Ryan's question. He thought again of her black hair and intelligent eyes, and of how she had reached her elegant long arms out to touch his shoulders while leaning forward sincerely to accept Frank's good-night kiss on the cheek.

That must be what daughters feel like, he thought.

Ryan spoke continuously about her as he drove them along the edge of the Bedford Basin and then inland to the Halifax airport. They had talked until three that morning, he said, chastely over the telephone, and they had touched at least once with insight on some aspect of everything that had ever been important to either one of them. She had just started medical school and was feeling a little vulnerable about that, and all Ryan could tell her, he said, was that there was no person in the world that he had more faith in than her. Period! It had just come out like that, and at first he was afraid she might freak because he realized that really what he had told her was that he loved her, but she just seemed to take it at face value and Ryan thought it had even made her feel more confident.

"Do you think she likes me?" he asked Frank.

"Oh, yes, Ryan; she likes you."

"Because it could just be that she's being kind. She's very kind, and very polite."

“Well, yes, Ryan, but an intelligent and resourceful young woman like that one would have found a kind and polite way to say goodnight to you long before three a.m. if she had wanted to. I guarantee it.”

“God, Dad, I hope you’re right.”

Ryan left him on the departures curb after a long hug and the inevitable question: “You feeling okay?”

“Wonderful. Peak of health. Which is one of the weirder things about it.”



He arrived home by taxi shortly after Jeannine had arrived from her office. She had taken the time before work to put two bottles of Orvieto Classico into the fridge to chill and was working on a plate of cheeses, salami and sliced baguette when he came through the door.

“Hey, mister, welcome home,” she shouted back to his greeting. Her lightly accented English carried to him the essential attribute of a fine perfume. He found her in the kitchen and they kissed. Frank put his hand on the small of her back and kissed her again and then put his nostrils to her neck and breathed her in.

He opened one of the bottles and was pouring them each a glass when Jeannine said, “Well, aren’t you going to tell me about this girl?”

He thought for a moment about the right words to use. “She’s the real thing,” he told her. “A cowgirl.”

“A cowgirl? I haven’t heard you call anyone that since you first tried to get me into bed.”

“What do you mean by ‘tried’?” He handed her the glass and bent to kiss her neck. “And it was an honest assessment—you are a cowgirl.”

“I’m Quebequoise, Frank.”

“And a cowgirl.”

“And Ryan’s new friend in Halifax is a cowgirl, too?”

“No question.”

He described her bright eyes and quick smiles and what Frank thought it would be like to have such a daughter.

“And so now that we know for certain that you are completely smitten, and that you have found us a daughter, tell me what Ryan thinks.”

“Oh, Jesus; what Ryan thinks! Let me give you a prediction.”

“Can’t you just tell me straight-up?”

“This is straight-up. Within three days from tonight we’ll find that we can’t reach Ryan. He will mysteriously disappear. We’ll leave messages on his home phone and with the Journalism Department but these messages

won't get returned even though after four or five of them he'll be feeling like a guilty son. We'll consider calling the police except we'll remember my prediction and stop ourselves. Her parents will have the same experience but because we don't know them and can't call them to give them my prediction they might actually send the police. If the police find them at her place then we'll have to hope that her parents are open-minded and that Ryan is polite with the authorities and doesn't mistake anything that anyone might say as an insult to her. Their friends will still see them during this time but only in passing and at points of absolute necessity like the grocery store or laundromat and certain can't-miss classes. These friends will notice that they each have a wonderful glow about them but that they could use more sleep. Then after about ten days or so Ryan will call and tell us that they are in love."

"So he's in love with her, is what you're saying, but as usual with more words than necessary."

"He's in love with her. Completely, absolutely, obsessively, passionately. But not blindly."

They ate casually from the plate of cheeses and meat, drank more wine, and brought one another up to date on other matters. Jeannine's group was in turmoil because Tracy was determined that what Thomas had said was sexist. Jeannine had no choice but to take it up with the equity tribunal.

"I thought Thomas was just an overbearing asshole," Frank commented.

"Exactly."

"But there are no asshole tribunals."

"Exactly."

Jeannine was happy for him about the prototype and they considered the chances of this one actually becoming product. "Maybe one in twenty," Frank said.

She touched his leg and his arm as he talked and radiated the kind of caring interest that she had always shown in his things, although for weeks now there had been just enough added tenderness to make him wonder if he should be more worried about his health than he was on most days. Her touching became reciprocal and prolonged. She took his hand and led him to their bedroom, with Frank pretending naïve confusion regarding her intent. They made love in the dim light that entered through their open door and Frank kept the dark question of post-treatment for once successfully at bay.

They chatted some more in calm intimacy, the spaces between Jeannine's comments increasing as she fell slowly to sleep beside him. He lay

on his back then and let the worry come to him in what he judged to be a therapeutically manageable package. He reviewed the circumstances of the discovery. Some people in white coats in a lab somewhere had described his blood as having crossed a line, after which people in another lab declared that deranged cells found among the flesh they had ripped live from his prostate were in the early stages of body treachery.

He was not worried so much even at first about dying—an unlikely outcome, as he understood it—but, in his typically masculine way, he did worry about the eventual impact of any treatment on making love to Jeannine.

But since then, with Jeannine's help, the long list of things that he would rather die before losing had grown markedly shorter. She was fully asleep now, one hand resting on his shoulder. Outside their bedroom window the wind picked up and Frank heard it rustle the branches of the giant maples that sheltered their back yard. During any kind of warm weather he and Jeannine spent hours under the shade of those maples, either gardening or reading or simply sitting together on the deck in their large matching Muskoka chairs. In spring they could watch the mourning doves gather nesting material and listen to the bright red male cardinals flaunt their presence competitively with sharp songs sung from the highest points in the trees. In June the maples shed their seeds by the thousands, these flying away across their yard and over neighbouring roof tops so convincingly like prototypic helicopters that Frank was certain da Vinci had studied them.

Jeannine breathed steadily in her sleep and he moved closer to get the sense of her breath moving warmly across his chest. He slowly calmed himself. His chances, overall, were pretty good. Far better than one in five million.