The Muddy Fork

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Another time, another place, it might have been a lover’s moon, a silver coin in a star-studded reticule, but this is South Texas, summer, a hunter’s moon, and the small beasts of the night tread with care. In the low sand hills on the western verge of the Moody Ranch, a coyote howls at the moon as he waits for his mate to push the jackrabbit back through the long circle, and down along the bottoms of the Muddy Fork, an owl, banked on sibilant wings, hoots once, then cocks an eye toward the ground. Not even the snakes sleep in this hot night, and only the feral Durocs, who have no enemy but Pancho MacSwayne, root peacefully under the dying live oaks.

In the distance, the growl of a high-powered engine warms the night as Pancho’s black Ranchero roars down the county road toward home. A mile or so before the bridge, it stops, idles, the three-quarter-grind cam making the engine chortle like a contented beast. Pancho steps out, but before he can slam his door, a scrap of a Bach fugue escapes across a cotton field. From the tool box in the bed of the Ranchero, Pancho lifts a grubbing hoe, with which he quickly digs another pothole, his third of the night, in the thin, patched asphalt of the county road. If truth be known, Pancho thinks he owns the road, knows he would blow the bridge over the Muddy Fork if he thought the county would not build a better one to replace it, as the county had done when Mrs. Edna Moody took the old bridge out. He digs the pothole a little deeper, a bit wider, then presses on toward home, driving by moonlight alone down the narrow, flat road.

When the Ranchero drops off the shallow rise and hits the one lane bridge over the Muddy Fork, gravel scatters, planks rattle, the iron
girders squeal. Someday, he thinks, if he hits it fast enough, the bridge will simply give up and fall into the murky waters while he rides on air and momentum to the other side. But tonight the bridge holds one more time, and he has to punch the brakes so hard that the Ranchero fishtails into the turnoff, where he stops, where he always stops.

This time he kills the engine, pops out the tape, opens a fresh longneck Lone Star with his teeth, then steps easily out to stare at the gate. Two stone pillars flank the cattle guard, and between them rises a double arch of two and one half inch water pipe, the aluminum paint silvery in the moonlight. Between the arches, written in a script of welded chain, it says: MOODY. And from the center of the lower arch, dangling from a chain, hangs an old, worn out rotary bit. When he squints, through his sandy lashes, it could be the head of a deposed king, still crowned, too heavy to blow in the gentle Gulf breeze.

He stretches then walks to the nearest pillar, where he pees, marks his spot like a dog. Then he laughs — what the hell, it is his birthday. Up the rise, the white plaster walls of the Big House glisten like bone. The firepit is dug, the mesquite sawn, the steer dressed and resting in a trough of sauce — like his father, Dummy, before him, today Pancho will barbeque for the Company picnic. Everything is ready, waiting, but still he does not hurry.

As he shakes the last few drops off his pecker, his fingers feel the dried crust of the woman. He lifts them, sniffs, then grins. He could not pass the oatmeal test tonight, should Maudie take a mind to give it. Then he laughs at the idea of Maudie rushing to the kitchen for a handful of dried oatmeal, then throwing it on his dick to see if any sticks. He thinks again of the woman, then of his wife asleep in her father's house. He has never been sure why he has to chase the strange but he knows that he takes it because it is there.

When he walks back to lean against the Ranchero, he listens, thinks he can hear the muffled snouts of the pigs rooting. Any other night but tonight, he would strip, butt-naked but for a jock, barefoot, carrying nothing but a sharpened persimmon spear, then smear himself with mud from a wallow, and crouch beside a trail, waiting. Sometimes he thinks he is crazy to hunt the pigs, but other times it seems the only fun he has in life. He tosses the empty bottle in the ditch, climbs back into the pickup, opens another, and searches through the tapes until he finds the Brandenburgs. He props his feet
in the notch of the open door, gives in to the music, remembers.

After three days out on the rig outside of Palacios, waiting while the crews fished in the hole for a ballpeen hammer one of the roughnecks had accidently kicked in the hole, Pancho was tired. And pissed at himself because he had fired the kid, so he stopped at a truck stop in Victoria on the way home.

The waitress was not much to look at — mostly bone and lank hair, scuffed flats and a sickly pink nylon uniform — but neither was Pancho. He was short, five-six, with bowed, runty legs trying to carry the chest and shoulders of a much larger man, and except for a close-cropped fringe of bright red hair from ear to ear, he was bald. His nose did not seem to point the same way his face did and his worn teeth were stained with snuff, but he was the head hog, the number one honcho of Moody Drilling and Production Company. Charlie Dunn up in Austin made his boots, at three hundred dollars a crack, and a Mexican tailor named Galindez down in Corpus made his western shirts, and he never left the house with less than a thousand cash in his Levis pocket. So when he looked at the waitress — Mona, her nametag said — she looked back.

Something about the way she worked caught his eye, the calm motion of her hips as she carried four plates of chicken fried steaks to a table of truckers, the smooth strength of her hand as she poured a steady, glittering stream of sugar from a bent can into a bowl. She carried herself like a much prettier woman, as if she knew her own secret value. And when he asked her what time she got off, she answered "ten" and looked him in the eye. He waited for her.

In the motel room, though, immersed in the sea-green street light seeping through the drapes, she seemed all knee and elbow, smelled stale and sour, and even her bush felt like steel wool. He could not get it up no matter how hard he tried.

"Guess you're gonna have to go down on it, lady, just to get it up," he said, and realized that these were the first words spoken in the room.

"Honey," she said, "I don't know you from Adam's off ox."
"Right," he answered as she climbed out of bed to dress. "Sorry."

After they were dressed, he kissed her by way of apology, tender
and easy, and her mouth opened under his, and he was enveloped in the flood of her breath, the smell of worn tile floors and old grease, of bad teeth and long hours afoot, his hands clutched the tired stringy muscles of her arms, worked at the knots in her back. Then he lay her back down on the bed, took off her shoes, and softly rubbed her feet, her aching calves, the backs of her knees, her skinny thighs, and when he kissed her crotch, the hair was soft and wet, like burying his face in warm, dewy Bermuda grass. They made love like old friends, then talked until they went again.

Ah, he thought, resting in her arms, cuddled against her meagre breasts, too often like this. He went looking for a piece of strange and found some kind of love he could not name. To hell with it, he thought, blessed are those night-time seekers in foreign beds, those ricochet lovers. Poor Herman, the husband horned while he worked morning tower on a drilling rig out by Mission Valley, poor Maudie sleeping alone. Pancho pressed his lips into the stubble of her armpit, then his tongue. She giggled. They shared a warm beer as they dressed in the dim grotto of the room.

Outside the air conditioned room, the night struck them warm and damp as a tired coonhound’s breath, and they had to walk across a carpet of suicidal crickets to get to his pickup. They held hands like teenagers as Pancho drove her home to a clapboard house with peeling paint hidden behind a forest of oleanders.

“Is it really your birthday?” she asked, one hand on the door handle.

“Damn straight.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said calmly. “Show me your driver’s license.”

While she peered at it in the dash lights, Pancho lifted a hundred dollar bill out of his billfold, and when she handed his license back, he tried to slip her the folded bill.

“What’s this?” she asked, confused, half-angry.

“Lemme give you a birthday present,” he answered lamely, knowing he had already ruined the moment.

“No thanks.”

“Please.”

She glanced at his face, her eyes damp and hurt.

“Why?”

“A hundred bucks don’t mean shit to me,” he said, “and I know you
can use it.” Then he added, “Please. As a favor to me.”

“You any kin to that MacSwayne who used to be married to Mary Helen Heard up here?” she asked, the money still held out in her hand.

“Some,” he chuckled.

“You?”

“Me.”

“I’ll be damned,” she said, curling her fingers partially around the money. “Me’n Mary Helen were in the same grade all the way through school. How come you got divorced?”

“She couldn’t fuck for shit,” Pancho said, and Mona laughed as she closed the bill in her fist.

“See you around,” she said, smiling, then she slipped out of the pickup and skipped through the oleander hedge, her pink uniform glowing warmly against the night.

Pancho felt so good on the way home that he was five miles out of Vado on the county road before he remembered to stop to dig a pothole. When he did, the hole was as big around as a tire and six inches deep, a real spring breaker. That’ll teach the bastards to use my road, he thought as he grinned across the wide, flat fields of milo and cotton toward the brushy smudge that marked the Muddy Fork.

Instead of parking in the driveway, Pancho eased the Ranchero around the rock fence and the curving line of salt cedars to the firepit behind the Big House. In the bright moonlight, he saw Mr. Vernon Moody — junior, though nobody had called him that in nearly sixty years — sleeping in a lawn chair beneath the huge old live oak, a tree so large that it took three men to reach around the trunk. An uncorked bottle of Jack Daniels, three-quarters empty, rested between the old man’s legs.

“Off the wagon, huh?” Pancho muttered to himself as he stepped quietly out of the pickup.

Washed in the moonlight, the old man looked dead, but Pancho did not even bother to check. He was convinced that the old bastard would live to be a hundred. A hundred, hell, a thousand. The old man was a tall, rawboned piece of work, dressed as always in the summer in cavalry twill khaki pants, a white cotton long-sleeved shirt with a silk tie hanging loose at the neck, a Panama styled like a banker’s
Stetson, and the only pair of lace-up cowboy boots Pancho had ever seen.

He glanced at the old man once more, then took off his shirt, and went to work at the pile of mesquite logs, dropping them into the pit with the same smooth, easy rhythm he had learned by watching his father, had had to learn watching because his father was deaf and dumb.

When he finished stacking the pit, Pancho paused to brush the drops of sweat off his hairy shoulders. As if to compensate for his bald pate, Pancho's chest, shoulders, and back were covered with a red furry pelt. It had been a long time since he had been ashamed of his hairy body, but he still remembered the shame occasionally, and before he opened another beer, he put his shirt back on. Then he dumped a gallon of gasoline on the hard wood, stepped back, popped a kitchen match with his thumbnail, and flipped it toward the pit.

The gasoline went off with a great, roaring whoosh, flames leaping twenty feet into the air, and it brought Mr. Vernon Moody right out of his slumbering chair. He caught the open bottle, though, before it hit the ground, and Pancho heard the gurgle and plop as the old man took a long hit of bourbon.

"Gonna kill yourself, old man," Pancho said.

"Fuck you, weevil," the old man answered, then hit the bottle again. "I'm celebrating."

"Thanks. I didn't know you cared."

"What?"

"Cared enough to celebrate my birthday."

"To hell with your birthday, boy," the old man growled, "Galen's coming home, my boy's coming home."

"Shit, he's been home for a month — where the hell have you been?"

"No — he's home to stay."

Pancho took a long pause to think about that while he dipped a new pinch of snuff into his lower lip, then he spit a sizzling splat of juice into the fire.

"We don't need no fuckin' hippies 'round here," he said finally.

"He's my son," the old man said, "he don't need no reason to be around here. This is his home, boy."

"He ain't no more blood kin than I am, you old bastard."

Mr. Moody tilted the brim of his hat back from his eyes and stared
across the fire at Pancho, shook his head, then said, “Someday, boy, you’re going to remind me of that one time too many, and I’m going to run your ass off this place.”

“You best bring a sack lunch, old man, and a dozen friends ‘cause you’ll be at it for a piece of time,” Pancho said, then added, “No, I guess since you ain’t got no friends, or if you do the old farts are either dead and buried or shitting in a bedpan, you best hire some help.”

Mr. Moody sputtered, sipped at the whiskey, then grinned slyly. “Where the hell you been, boy? Maudie Mae cooked up a real big feed for you, boy, and you didn’t show up. She is, to say the least, somewhat pissed.”

“Don’t make a gnat’s ass difference to me,” Pancho said, “Besides, she just fixed Mexican food to impress Galen and all his fucking hippie friends — I didn’t want me no hair in my birthday taco ...”

“Hippie, hippie, hippie,” the old man chortled. “Get off my ass. I saw you out by the pool smoking that marijuana cigarette with that big titted little girl — what the hell is her name anyway?”

“Her name is Purple.”

“What?”

“You heard right, old man — Purple — and just ‘cause I smoke a little dope with big titted little girls don’t make me a hippie. You’re just jealous, that’s all.”

Mr. Moody shifted in the lawn chair, his bulk making the dowel joints creak, then tilted his hat brim back over his eyes. Pancho tossed the empty bottle into the pit, waited until it popped softly, then went to the cooler for another bottle.

“Mind if I have one of your beers, boy, this expensive whiskey is about to give me the acid indigestion,” the old man said quietly. Pancho got two beers, and when he opened them with his teeth, Mr. Moody complained, “Goddammit, boy, you’re going to break off a tooth someday doing that.”

“Well, don’t matter. We got that new company dental insurance, so I’ll be covered.”

“You know, I’m not convinced we ought to be spending all that money we do on these insurance plans,” the old man said, calm now, doing business. “The next time I’m down at the office, I’m going to look at the books on this.”

“You ain’t been to the office in three, maybe four months, you old bastard, and besides, all this insurance stuff works. Shit, we got a
better plan than Mobil or Exxon, and when we get a good hand, we can sometimes keep him even though we have to pay shit for wages.”

Mr. Moody grumbled a bit, but finally stopped. Then Pancho said, “And speaking of hands — I had to fire that Hartsell boy you made Boomer hire.”

“You what?”

“I run the kid off the location.”

“Where the hell do you get off firing somebody I hired?”

“Anytime you wanna run this junkhouse motherfucker, old man, you just let me know.”

“You ought not fired him without asking me, boy, his Daddy and I go way back.”

“Listen, I been three days fightin’ mosquitoes up at Palacios while we were fishin’ for a goddamned ballpeen hammer that kid kicked in the hole,” Pancho said. “I was supposed to be one day while we ran a sidewall core, not three days fishin’ for a goddamned hammer.”

“Running whores in Nuevo sounds more like the truth,” the old man grunted.

“I figure that hammer only cost us about thirty thousand dollars, give or take a thousand, so I run the kid off.”

“Ought to run you off,” Mr. Moody said, then shook his head and raised his face into the firelight with a broad grin. “I called the tool pusher on the mobile phone, boy, and he said you left the location about eight o’clock. I’ve never known it to take you five hours from Palacios to the house, not the way you drive. Shit, you keep that one lawyer working full time on your speeding tickets.”

“Well, I did stop there in Victoria at the truck stop to talk to that waitress . . .”

“The one with that high, hard nigger ass?”

“Other one.”

“The skinny one.”

“How was it?” the old man asked, leaning forward in his chair so far that the whiskey flirted with the neck of the bottle.

“We just talked — that’s all.”

“Talked, my ass . . .” Then Mr. Moody jerked himself erect in the chair as if he had just remembered something very important. “Goddammit, boy, you are married to my only daughter. Seems to me that you could either keep your pecker in your pants or your mouth shut. I don’t know why Maudie Mae puts up with you — shit I
don't know why I do."

"Me'n Maudie been married less'n three years, old man, and you and me been runnin' whores since I was a nubbin, and I done seen how you behaved both times you had wives around the house, and hell I seen you sneakin' 'cross the river to shack up with Sonny's Momma way back when, so don't you give me no lectures, you old bastard ..."

"You think Sonny knows about that," Mr. Moody interrupted seriously. "It sure makes me nervous having him around. What the hell's he doing down here anyway?"

"Well, sure he knows. Hell, he knew at the time," Pancho said, "we used to talk about it all the time — and I don't have no idea what he's doin' down here, except I know that Galen's payin' him a thousand dollars a week just to be here ..."

"Well, I wouldn't miss him if he was gone," Mr. Moody huffed, then settled back into his chair and fell promptly asleep.

"Old farts need naps," Pancho muttered.

Just outside the wash house, where the dressed steer lies in a trough constructed of two length-wise halves of an oil drum, Pancho MacSwayne struggles in the false dawn with a portable engine block hoist. The steer is already spitted on a piece of pipe, and the chain and hook already shoved through a split beside the backbone, but Pancho is drunk, and the hard rubber tires of the hoist seem to turn and lock no matter which way he tries to push across the sidewalk, like a petulant child with a grocery cart, even when the wheels flip sideways, he shoves harder. Finally, his shirt soaked, he steps back, then walks away. There is still no hurry. He goes back to his pickup for another beer, but instead his hand snakes into the glove box for the vial of crystal. He has managed to leave it alone for nearly a month in spite of the long hours he works, the pressures that come every summer when Galen comes home, but now he thinks he will not make the day unless he has a line. Very carefully on the small mirror, he chops a health-line, pausing often to glance at the old man. When he snorts it, the almost pure methamphetamine crystal fills his sinus cavities with fire, as if his face had been cut off with a sword then cauterized with a piece of white hot angle iron, but he dips a palm-ful of ice water from the beer cooler and snorts that too. Not that it puts the fire out, but
the water banks it for a bit, and after the pain comes the lovely clarity.

He gets another beer, stuffs it in his back pocket without opening it, then goes about his business. He does not fight the hard rubber tires but guides them to his will, hooks the steer to the hoist, then runs the endless chain until the dripping meat lifts clear of the trough. Even with the weight, he glides across the lawn toward the pit, slowly but surely, then positions the spit above the forked poles, and lowers it into place. The electric motor and the long chain are already waiting beside the pit, but after he unhooks the hoist, Pancho takes the spit handle in both hands, and turns and turns, like his father did, watching the sauce and the fat fall sizzling into the fire, little puffs of flame lifting off the coals. He turns and turns and watches the fire, remembering a time before he could remember, feeling his father's hands in the iron handle, turning and turning softly the meat against the fire.

It has been said that on the day he was born, Pancho's father kept turning the spit until the steer was ready to carve before he went down to the board-and-batten shack, down the hill from the Big House where Hannah had just given birth to a boy-child she had already named Francis Troy MacSwayne, after the romantic sergeant in Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*: when Dummy went down, his job on the hill was done.

The birth had been hard, the labor long, and the veterinarian attending had long since shook his head and given both mother and child up for dead. But Hannah was tougher than that and with her own hands she positioned the child and forced it out. The left elbow, though, or the arm — something was dislocated or broken, and the screams of the child could be heard all the way up to the long tables where the employees of the Company sat over pitchers of warm beer waiting for the beef, was heard, that is, by all except the father.

When Dummy went down, he only knew the child was crying by the screaming 'O' of the mouth, the crooked arm, and those rough, horny hands that coaxed tomatoes the size of oranges and watermelons the size of pigs out of the Moody garden plot, those hands straightened the arm, gently as one might lure a bean vine around a string, and the child stopped crying. They said a hush fell over the tables, that lanky men with white circles from new haircuts above their ears, that pale wives, embarrassed under home-made marcells, they all fell silent with the knowledge that the child had died.
and even the happy booming of Dummy's fists against the shack walls seemed to them the cadence of grief.

When Dummy came back up the hill a few minutes later, his son cradled in his large, rough hands, it was told that all the folks stood and cheered. Everybody except Mr. Vernon Moody and his wife, Edna, victim of four miscarriages already. Mr. Moody sat heavily in his chair, Mrs. Moody took herself to her room, and two weeks later Mr. Vernon Moody went up to the Baptist Orphanage in Waco and brought back a son, whom they called Galen, named after Mrs. Moody's father up in El Dorado, Arkansas. For years it was rumored that Galen was a bastard issue of Mr. Moody's, and like rumors, it never completely died. And, as often happens after an adoption, Mrs. Edna Moody carried a baby to term, and eighteen months after Pancho, as Mr. Moody insisted on calling the child, here came Maudie Mae.

As Pancho turns the smoking steer, he understands, remembers, misunderstands, thinks this the beginning of the story.

After a bit, he nails the electric motor's base to the ground, hooks up the drive chain to the gear welded on the spit, re-greases the forks, checks everything twice, even the old man sleeping in the chair, then heads toward the Big House. For reasons he refuses to understand, he needs to hug his wife, to fall to his knees and beg her once again for a child. Perhaps he will confess the crystal and the Mexican girlfriend, Rachel, in Vado who supplies him the speed, perhaps he will finally confess to Maudie that he loves her more than he loves the ranch, perhaps — no, he will not confess the waitress in Victoria, whatever her name was.