Widow

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

The very light of heaven was slowly fading from his brain, as his penis shrank and slipped out from inside her. Something about her lit a fuse in him – his mind flashed and emptied every time. Nebraska Daly had done his share of fucking, across 5 states and 3 territories, but this was something else. This must be what love is, like in the story books.

He opened his eyes to look at her. She was the very image of the woman every cowboy dreamed of – shiny red curls across the pillow that she could twist into a top knot in an instant, strong smooth jaw, and eyes … eyes that were hungry for life. It spoke of a woman who could handle everything that life threw at her, and throw back her hair and laugh.

Her deformity only added to her glory. Any other woman would hide herself away with a deformity like that, but not Rebecca. When he would glance at it and wonder why, she would laugh.

“What’s the matter Big Boy? Have you never seen a girl with a penis before?” she would grin at him, and make him feel stupid, but the truth is he never had seen that on a woman before.

The first time, she had tied a little ribbon around it. She introduced it to him – she said - “This is little Becky and she will be watching little Neb the whole time to make sure he sends me to nirvana.” He didn’t know what that was, but he = always did, or so she said. She said that God had blessed her with a single entrance down there, but one that gave her all the pleasure she needed.

There would be no children, but Nebraska Daly had his fair share of those. She said it gave her no cause for regret. She said – “There is only so much of me that I can give, and for now I am all yours, and nobody else’s”. She was as good as her word.

Her story was a strange one, and it was one that he would never tell to a soul.

The man that she once was, had been born in Oklahoma and raised on a small farm, by only his father in his later years. He knew about hard work and all the perils of the west, but he was a dreamer and he was smart. He had a hankering to visit the great city of Chicago in the north, or New York in the East, and to experience cultured things. It was tragedy that allowed him to do that. His father died from a snake bite and there was debt on the farm that required him to sell it. He took the little money left and head to civilisation.

It turned out that it did not suit him. He could imitate the locals well enough but he found their lack of basic honesty galling, and the smell of the city seemed foul when you have been raised among the perfume of sagebrush.

He had little money left but he decided to return the new half of the country to seek his fortune anywhere in the west except Oklahoma. He booked a seat on the Butterfield stage coach from St. Louis, Missouri through to Fort Worth. Back then the towns on the Butterfield route turned into forts west of the Ozarks – Fort Richardson, Fort Belknap, Fort Griffin, Fort Smith, Fort Phantom Hill, Fort Chadbourne. These all sound like outposts against savages and outlaws, and some were.

On the same coach was a lady only a few years older than himself, recently widowed- Mrs. Rebecca Morrison. She had booked the entire coach for herself but when it was disclosed that the man at the station had a valid ticket, and with him appearing to be a gentleman of refinement, she allowed him to come aboard the vehicle – to keep her company.

“My husband was a substantial rancher in Texas,” she said. “God rest his soul, in the knowledge that his body seldom rested in all his labors. We broke the ground between us, but as soon as we were set up with enough money I chose to return to the East Coast for my health and my sanity.”

It appeared that this widow was a demanding type and that the rancher would be well rid of her. It later emerged that there were no children of the marriage. Had there been perhaps she would have stayed at her husband’s side, but there weren’t so she didn’t.

But married they stayed, and so the ranch now belonged to her, and she was headed there to claim it and to sell it. She had papers in a satchel bearing her signature already. But there were no other things of value.

“Sir, I know the west and I know better than to travel with cash or with baubles that can be stolen by bandits,” she said. It was to prove prophetic.

She was a talker and he was a listener, and so he absorbed much of what she had to say, and retained some. The thought crossed his mind that she had everything that he would want in life but sought nothing more than to be rid of it for cash to spend in the places such as he had just fled. But he nodded and said little other than niceties.

There were stops on the way and he would take time to talk to the diver and his shotgun man, sometimes referring to a conversation with the widow and even imitating her imperious and condescending nature.

“Hell, you even sound like her,” the driver said. “You are an accomplished mimic, Sir.”

“If only I could afford to buy the ranch that she wants to sell,” he said in reply. “But this journey will cost me all I have left, once I have bought the three of us a round of drinks in every stop on the way.”

But he did buy his share, and there may have been a little more left, but it would soon be of no account at all.

It was before they even cross the Red River that the stage was held up. There were only two bandits but they were determined and murderous. A Sharps rifle dropped the shotgun with a bullet to the heart, and he fell from the stage with his gun, forcing the driver to drive hard rather than stop. Killers of one will kill another, that was for sure.

But the point of attack had been well chosen. There were rocks and no passage for wheels on either side and a log placed across the track. The horses stopped of their own accord as the bandits approached. Our hero stepped out of the door opposite the approaching desperadoes and the driver tossed down to him his second pistol, while he stepped on the yoke behind one of his horses for cover.

The bandits dismounted at a distance, while the marksman of the two waited for his shot. The driver raised his head and was shot clean through it. Both of the outlaws then demanded that the carriage be vacated, but by this time our passenger was skirting around behind the coach.

The widow stepped out and commenced shouting at the thieves, claiming that she knew better than to carry valuables in the hellish place and suggesting that they search the coach and then let her on her way. She provided sufficient distraction for our passenger to get around behind the man with the buffalo gun.

In the meantime the other bandit had groan tired of the abuse that he was receiving from the widow and simply shot her in the head with his pistol. Seconds later a second shot ran out behind him and his partner in crime lay dead. The widow’s murderer spun around, facing the sole survivor of the stage, with his gun held at arm’s length in a steady hand. The brigand had no time to take better aim, but in attempting to he was the fourth to die that day, staggering back and onto the body of the widow.

The story is unclear at this point as to when and why the decision was made to resurrect the widow. But for whatever reason, of the four bodies that lay in the dust that day, the survivor chose to bury just one – the lady. It may be that he felt she deserved that honor, and while doing so discovered that she was exactly the same size and shape as him when freed of her corsetry. Or it may be that earlier as the sun beat down and the flies gathered, he has time to think about what he has said of the widow’s ranch, and the fact that she had been away so long from Texas.

There were no children so what would become of the ranch? It was like the corpses that lay about him – dreams destroyed by death. He had a dream and no ability to realize it. The bandits had no treasure because the only treasure on the scene was in the satchel, and that had no value without the widow, and the widow was dead.

They had crossed the other stage only hours before, but there would be another southbound stage the next day, or the day after that. There was time to do what had to be done. It was just a question of looking trough the widow’s belongings to see whether his crazed idea might have any chance of success.

Now, most men my have little idea about what miracles a woman can work at her toilet, but in this case there must have been some intimacy with the fairer sex to know such things. The widow had thought to bring with her on her journey, even if she thought it might be short, other traveling clothes and even evening attire, and a trunk full of cosmetics and remedies including “Fletcher’s depilatory pomade” a powerful caustic that could not only remove hair but rough male skin.

As for hair where it was needed, chance had afforded him a thick head of hair that was overly long, and the widow having less, had a variety of hair pieces in her shade of red, and the hair dye to match.

Also by chance there was a stream that allowed for all of these things to be applied and for the body to be cleansed and prepared. Once that was done all that was required was for the new widow to shelter from the sun, plan her take and practice the speaking voice that would deliver it.

When the next stage did finally appear, she was there standing alone among the carnage.

“I have cried my tears already,” said the widow, as the crew and passengers of the next coach surveyed the horror. “I am the only passenger. God knows how I survived. I don’t,”

The three bodies were tied onto horses and dead horse was uncoupled from the coach. The widow was offered a place on the clean coach with other passengers while some of their number agreed to follow with the attacked coach and her baggage.

The widow had the chance to speak of her journey with others, which really was the story already received repeated like a tame parrot, in almost the same voice as the woman buried near to where the stage was held up. Nobody thought for a minute that she was anything other than what she claimed to be – the widow.

So too, when she arrived at the offices of the Attorney whose name appeared in the papers in the satchel she held close. Jeremiah Kempson ushered her in with relief – the widow had safely arrived and the matter of the Morrison Estate could be resolved, and the ranch put up for sale. He had hinted that it would happen and there was already strong interest and the prospect of more business.

“Welcome back to Texas, Mrs Morrison,” he exclaimed with excitement. “Or, as we will be working together in this, may I call you Rebecca?” He had come to the town more recently so he had never met the women before, and he learned that few could recall the woman who chose to live elsewhere.

“Mrs. Morrison will do.” The reply was imperious – business-like, you might say. “I have already signed the papers you sent, but doubtless there will be more?”

The widow had practiced with a pencil on the back of papers that she would keep. She could imitate the signature as well as the woman herself, should it be needed. Any uncertainty in her hand could be easily explained by her fragile condition, having recently face horrific tragedy.

“Yes, Ma’am,” said Kempson. “Just a few, but perhaps after we lunch together?”

“No thank you Sir,” came the firm but polite reply. “I would like to return to our ranch as soon as possible. I am travelling light and I would prefer not to stay in town. Besides, I have come all this way to return home, and home is where I am headed.”

“You surprise me, Ma’am,” he said. “I was led to believe that the ranch had ceased to be your home when you left it, and that you would prefer to stay at the hotel here in town. I can assure you that the property is unsuitable for any woman, let alone somebody as refined as yourself.”

“You are clearly not aware that my husband and I built the first homestead with our bare hands,” said the widow, holding her hands out. They were strong but not as they were, having not been used for hard work for some time. They were small for a man and not large for a woman.

“Allow me to escort you,” said the lawyer. “I will have my trap bought around.”

And so they proceeding at a good trot to the ranch that was not too far away.

“I must say that you appear much younger than I expected,” said the lawyer as they made their way along a well maintained roadway.

“Well, thank you very much for saying so, Mr. Kempson, but alas the Birth Certificate does not lie.” She patted the satchel of documents. “The truth is that my late husband’s hard-earned cash gave me access to expensive skin treatments, and I am sad to inform you that my hair is not really this youthful color.”

“Well, it is very becoming, I assure you,” blushed the lawyer. He imagined that on her return back east with those looks and with the money from the ranch, she could have her pick of men. That fact reminded him of his own position, which he fiercely hoped to improve with this transaction.

“Here we are Ma’am,” he said, as they approached the collection of buildings that was the Morrison Ranch. “I suspect a lot has changed since you left. I hope that we will find Mr. Daly in the office to show you the work that has been done since you left. Perhaps you will remember Mr. Daly? He will be one of the few who was here before began travelling.”

The widow felt her stomach clench. Stupidly she had given little regard to this situation, although now that seemed stupid. Of course there would be staff at the ranch who knew her – or rather the person she ought to be.

“She wondered for a moment if she might turn tail and have the attorney take her back to town. She would say something like – “I’ve seen enough. I never liked this place anyway. I couldn’t wait to leave. Let’s go back to town and sign the papers. I am done with this.”

But the truth is that she had seen too much. The house on the hill was still some distance away, and was grand in the style of well-to-do ranches in Texas, but it was the other buildings – the barn and the bunkhouse and the yards were all close but down wind from the ranch house which was built for the view of a working farm, bigger and tidier than any farm that poor boy of the land could ever imagine.

“Take me to the house,” she directed, but the way there the track passed by a small cabin and she ordered him to stop. He helped her down as he had helped her up – respectful of a wealthy woman client.

There was no doubt what this place was. She felt it. It was confirmed by the fact that it was older than the other buildings, and she could see that some of the boards were pit sawn by hand. And on the porch hung a swing – a chair roped to the porch roof, and a simple inscription was punched on it with a nail – “For Becky”. It was her place. This was the cottage where it all started. There was love here, once. She felt tears run down her cheeks.

“There is no need for you to knock this place down,” said Kempson. “I am sure the new owner will make all the necessary changes.”

“I’ll walk to the house from here,” she snapped at her driver.

“I’ll go down to bunkhouse to find Daly,” he volunteered, but she ignored him. She chose not to step into the cottage, perhaps because more stolen memories would lie within. The house ahead was fairly new, perhaps built to lure Becky back to Texas. But he was dead before she was ready to make the journey. What had happened? Had she ever loved him? This place was like a monument to his widow. That would be her.

Once inside her suspicions were confirmed, or soon would be. It was clear that the dust covers had laid in position for months or even years. The huge kitchen range looked unused, and the taps and drains dry. The old man had lived in the cottage they had once shared, where the porch was her refuge. Now this whole house was for her.

“Ma’am?” She turned to see a man standing in the doorway, with his hat in his had and he sandy hair showing the shape of the hat he had doffed. She turned and looked at the stranger. He looked at her strangely, as if she were a stranger.

“Ah Mr. Daly,” she said. “It’s been a long time.” She could see the figure of Jeremiah Kempson standing behind the roughly dressed cowboy

“It has been that, Mrs. Morrison,” he said. “A lot has changed. A lot here, and a lot with you as I can see. And please call me Neb like you used to. But now I am thinking I can’t call you nothing else except Mrs. Morrison.”

She smiled. It seemed that for whatever reason, they had reached an accommodation.

“The place looks good, Neb. You have done a great job. Doubtless you will be staying on?” She stepped closer to him. He was bigger than she first thought, strong looking but not thick set.

“I can only hope, Mrs. Morrison,” he said. “Word around is that some other large ranches are interested in the land and stock, and they would have no need of me.”

“I haven’t yet decided whether I will sell,” she said, looking to Kempson for reaction. He looked suddenly panicked. “Let’s get the property in my name first, Mr Kempson.”

“We could do with more stock, Ma’am,” said Neb. “And we need do some work on irrigation. We could sell the small strip of land South of river to raise money. Crossing the river is hard, and our neighbor there needs access to the water. They would pay a lot for it, and we would lose nothing.”

“That’s sounds like smart thinking, Neb,” said the widow. “Let’s work on that. And perhaps you could find somebody to help me prepare the house for occupation? I am moving in.”

“I’ll help you myself,” said Neb. “We have a lot to talk about.”

The bed had never been slept in by her late husband, but she found it as comfortable as any she had ever slept in, but all the better when she was not alone.

The thing is that in that time and place a woman like the widow was in need of a man, and Nebraska Daly was just the man she needed. He was simple in some respects, but he was smart too. He knew that she was not the woman who had left, but he knew that knowing that was an asset. He knew that the property could carry more stock with the dam and that the sale of land they never used would pay for it. He knew that it was his interests to build a close relationship with the widow.

And close relationships can turn into other things, as the widow was to learn. They both wanted sex. It was not as if the widow needed to make much of an adjustment to receive it. It was months later, when her role as a woman was as firmly cemented as were her feet upon the land – the farm she had always dreamed of.

As she lay in bed that morning, she realized that she had something else she had dreamed of – a lover. Maybe not the lover imagined many years before, but she had come to realize that Nebraska Daly was the lover she needed. That was why she had asked him to band her like a steer. It was her commitment to him.

“The sun is up,” said Neb. “And as your husband used to say, a man not out of bed before dawn has no place on this property.” He kissed her on the mouth before he rolled over to find his boots.

“My husband? You can’t really believe that?” she smiled at the man who she had fallen in love with. “You cannot believe that I am 56 years old and was once married to the man that you worked for?”

“I like to believe in what is right,” said Neb. “I believe that the sun rises daily and rain falls when it can, I believe that the grass grows and cattle grows upon. I never thought I would say it, but now I believe in true love, and all of these things I believe in because my life depends on them. And the life we live depends on you, my darling, and the fact that you are the widow.

She rolled over and stopped him from pulling up his pants.

“Marry me,” she said. “But fuck me first.”

The End

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