



GUNS, HEARTS, and APPLES

Sierra Rose Little

Laura took a deep breath and raised her pistol. If she wasn't concentrating so hard, she would have been aware of the gasp of the crowd, seated in a horseshoe on wooden risers in front of her. These shows always had an element of danger. A horse might get spooked and trample a stage hand, or an axe might be thrown just a bit too far, but Laura wasn't trying to think of that.

She lowered the gun and pulled out a medium-sized mirror out of a leather pouch attached to a belt around her waist. She flipped a strand of her curled hair over her shoulder with the gun with a feminine flourish. The laughter of the crowd was dead to Laura's ears as she extended the mirror out and angled it until she could meet the eyes of Henry, her husband. He was standing behind her with an apple in his hand.

He sent her a wink and balanced the apple carefully on his head.

Laura wrapped her arm around her chest so that the gun rested on her left shoulder and her arm was ready for the

recoil. She took another breath, this time holding it as she adjusted mirror and gun to aim.

The wind picked up and the apple toppled on its side. Simultaneously Henry attempted to adjust the apple and Laura squeezed the trigger.

Immediately she knew everything was over.

The recoil of the gunshot jerked her arm, which she had over tensed in her surprise. The pistol and mirror dropped to the floor and Laura ran to her fallen husband. Her legs lost the will to support herself as she got close. Blood spurted from Henry's head like a swarm of termites spontaneously evacuating their mound and his eyes were wide and unfocused, much like the deer she once shot in her youth under the guidance of her father. His chest moved up and down in vain and his jaw clenched and released in sickeningly silent screams that were the last evidence the life that once inhabited the body.

There would be no father to comfort her with unwavering affection, no husband by her side, no children in the coming years, laughing and playing

Cowboys and Indians until the sun goes down. Laura was completely alone.

And then she wasn't.

Stable hands, brave audience members, even Bruce, who did rope tricks and always wanted sharp shooting tips, were approaching Laura, talking slowly, some reaching for concealed weapons. Bruce's hand was at the rope coiled by his hip, at the ready.

Laura scrambled up from the dirt and ran toward the opening of the horseshoe on shaking legs.



"Apple?"

Laura looked up from her sewing to meet the eyes of the newest greenhorn, a stunt rider with an ego matched only by that of his horse. He was wiping the apple on his loose shirttails.

"No thanks, Henry. Appreciate it."

Henry shrugged and chomped into the apple, wiping juice off his chin with his wrist. He fixed her with a strange look, chewing slowly and thoughtfully. The look reminded Laura of when she was little and meeting new people make her anxious to impress them, but unable to form a proper sentence.

"Now we've been on the road for a month now, give 'r take. Fresh food's hard to come by. Why don't cha eat an apple instead of just shootin' them?"

"Why give the Lord an excuse to throw me out of this paradise?"

The answer was more than a little

sarcastic. They were on their way to Omaha, and the scenery had been less than inspiring. Laura liked things a lot more west and a tad north but why would anyone go see a cowboy show if they were a cowboy themselves?

"I try to be a good Christian and all, but that story never sat well with me," Henry mused. "Whenever I see a fellow fixin' to do something stupid, there's always a woman at his heels tryin' to make him see sense."

"Ever hear of a woman that wouldn't see a snake and run straight away?" Laura smirked.

"Didn't you shoot a rattler on the trail bout a fortnight ago?"

Laura threw a proud grin, pulling on the leather cord tied around her neck. The rattle, once used as a threat, made a comforting maraca sounds as it slid up her blouse.

"Cooked 'im with bacon."

Henry gave her that look again.

"You would be the sort to take no issue with eating some poisonous animal but shun something as wholesome as an apple."

Laura was about to shoot a biting response, but then a flash shot into the sky with a bang. The sun was nearly set, but the hunting party found and killed a buffalo. Finally. Henry stood, staring in the direction of the flare.

"You know, some Professor in Chicago is going around telling everyone that the days of the cowboy are over. Do you reckon it's because of or in spite of what we do?"

"I don't think I'd want to know either way."

Henry chuckled. "You really are an odd apple."

He turned and walked to where the horses were tied and was off to help butcher the buffalo of which we becoming few and far between.

Laura squinted in the twilight at her forgotten sewing, vaguely feeling that she and Henry, like the buffalo, are of a dying breed.



The wagons were corralled off to one side of the arena and the horses were in a pen nearby. As Laura jumped the fence of the pen she could tell that the horses were spooked. They obviously knew something fishy was going on. Luckily, however, news of the accident must've reached the stage hand in charge of keeping watch on the horses, and he undoubtedly left to gawk at her husband's body.

Laura was careful to be sure that the horses she led out of the pen were Laura's or Henry's. She cooed softly into their ears, but walked them briskly toward her wagon. As she approached she could make out a figure standing in front of the wagon.

"You don't want to do this."

It was Sarah, Bruce's wife and Laura's maid of honor.

"Henry's dead." Didn't that explain everything?

"I know sweetheart but running away isn't going to change that." Sarah

stepped between the horses and put a hand on Laura's tight fist. "We'll get you through this."

"Do you know how Bruce looked at me?" Laura's voice cracked out of her like shattered glass. "Do you know how they all looked at me?"

Sarah swept her up in her arms. Laura let her own arms fall limply at her sides, and slumped into her friend's embrace. The horse took hesitant steps towards each other in response to the lessening slack. This time she spoke, her voice was calm.

"I'm going to go back home." She brought an arm up to Sarah's shoulder, almost as if she were hugging her back. Almost. "If you or anyone else follows me, I will shot you without warning."

Sarah stiffened at the cold steel blade unexpectedly at her neck. Slowly, but mercifully the knife was removed and Laura stepped away from the quivering woman.

"I could use a hand getting these horses hitched."

"What are friends for?" squeaked Sarah.



"Laura, wake up..."

Laura rolled over on her side, and finally opened her eyes. It was not yet dusk, but she could still make out her father's silhouette, tall among the slumbering lumps that were her and sister.

"Come on Laura," her father said, seriousness in his voice. "The deer will

be going out to drink soon.”

Laura sat up in her bed and stretched, and her father left the room to make some coffee. She savored the warm bed for just another moment before jumping up into the cold morning air to dress.

By sunup they were sitting behind rocks on a hill overlooking the stream, waiting for the deer to come to drink.

“Indians used to use this blind, before the white men came. All the men would sit behind here and wait, chipping stones into arrowheads and telling stories to the younger hunters.

“They taught them how to kill a deer without wasting arrows. When you shoot with arrows, you have to pierce the heart. Shoot the deer anywhere else, and you’re down an arrow and your dinner’s run off. If a hunter mortally wounded a deer but it got away, they’d follow the trail of blood until they found the body, all the while teasing the guy who didn’t get a clean kill. You bet he shot true next time.”

A doe stepped out of the brush, listening cautiously, before going to drink. Laura raised her gun.

“There’s nothing else but you and the target. You shouldn’t feel the wind on your skin, or have any clue what color the leaves on the trees are,” her dad whispered.

The deer suddenly straightened, listening. Laura fired.

The doe toppled into the stream with a splash.

Anne walked out onto the porch when she spotted Laura and their dad walking toward the house with bags of freshly butchered deer meat.

“Laura was supposed to milk the cows before she left.” Anne scowled at her father.

“I’m sorry, sweetie, the deer were calling. Hope you didn’t kill that hen today.”

“Well, no. Laura was supposed to.”

“Laura, I suppose you should milk those cows before one of ‘em bursts an udder.”

“Go on Laura,” Anne bossed. “After that the pig needs fed.”



Anne wasn’t going to be happy. Laura already knew that. She’d take one look at her unwashed hair, dirty show clothes, and tell her to go back where she came. She’d scowl and tell the children that Laura always imagined Anne would have to go do some chore that required them to be somewhere else. She’d say she told her so.

Laura thought about her childhood home sporadically while touring, usually when the weather was miserable, or when she fantasized about her and Henry settling down in one place and starting a family.

This was not her home anymore. This stark realization occurred right in front of its oak door. You don’t knock on the door when you come home. You walk right in.

As she waited for someone to answer her knock, a panic nearly overtook her. She wanted to run away, but there was nowhere else to go.

The door opened.

"Laura?" John, Anne's husband opened the door further. "Come in, come in."

Laura stepped into the threshold, taking in the simultaneous familiarity and dramatic changes to her childhood home. It seemed strange to see photographs on the walls of the old house.

"John, who was it?" Anne's voice came from the kitchen. It smelled like she was roasting a chicken.

"I think you should come in here."

Anne walked out into the main room, distractedly wiping her hands on her apron. She stopped short when she looked up to find her sister standing there, looking like a dirty prostitute and wearing a look of guilt that even the most stern chiding couldn't summon.

"Laura," Anne took a tentative step forward. "What's happened to you?"

"I grew up," she shrugged. "Scatched out a living, fell in love, got married..." Laura crossed her arms across her chest. "It's all gone." Tears spilled out of her suddenly like a canteen that spontaneously sprung a leak. She knew what Anne was going to say.

"I was so worried!" Anne hugged Laura tighter than they had ever

hugged growing up. "I missed you so much."

"I'm in big trouble," sobbed Laura into her shoulder, unable to stop. "There was an accident and now Henry's dead and I don't know if I was followed out here..."

"We'll help you, Laura," John assured her. "That wagon outside is yours, right? I'll bring it around back and feed those horses. They look mighty tired."

"As do you," Anne rubbed Laura's cheek with the corner of her apron, staining it brown with dirt.

Anne drew Laura a bath and sat on stool next to the tub, facing away.

Laura squinted in the twilight at her forgotten sewing, vaguely feeling that she and Henry, like the buffalo, are of a dying breed.

Laura told her the whole story. How when their father died she didn't want to go to the funeral, and face the neighbors who would heavily imply that now he wasn't around it was time to start wearing dresses and try to find a husband. How she wanted to do something in his memory, so she showed up to a Wild West show and shot the ash off of the manager's cigar, prompting him to hire her on the spot. How Henry joined up and they fell in love and got married in California. Then she told her how he died.

"Am I going to hell?" Laura finally said.

Anne sighed. "You know I always made it my business to raise you, ever since mom died. I used to think I that if I made you do your share of the chores, and had you go to church every week, that you would grow up to have the perfect life.

"But sometimes I think that God don't give a hoot about what choices you make in life because he already decided to send you to the devil when you die, or at least make the world of the living hell. If that's the case, I wish I wouldn't have made the two us grow up so fast. Maybe then you wouldn't have left at fourteen. You wouldn't believe how quiet this place felt with you gone."

"After I left, I always figured you and John would fill the place up with little workers to help you around the house."

"John and I tried. We did. After the third stillbirth, I couldn't really keep trying in earnest."

John rapped lightly on the door.

"There's someone here for Laura."

"At least I got to see you one more time," Laura sighed, stepping out of the tub and wrapping a towel around herself.

"We could hide you in the attic. I'll have John tell them you left." Anne was frantic.

"No. If it's who I think it is, he's not gonna leave you alone."

Laura pulled on one of Anne's dresses, pausing to note that it was

than she expected, especially after traveling for weeks without any proper food. She sent John to the wagon to fetch one of her pistols.

Outside of the house was another wagon, and Bruce leaned on one side of it, chewing his tobacco and staring at the house in front of him.

"You sure know how to piss me off." Bruce spat on the side of the road.

"Your wife should have told you that I'd shot whoever follows me."

"She did. I didn't give a horse's balls. You killed my best friend."

"He was my husband."

Bruce backhanded her. Laura touched her cheek, stunned.

"A whore like you couldn't be a wife to Henry. I tried to tell him, but he had lost all sense. I knew you were gonna damn him, just like Eve damned Ad--"

Laura spat in Bruce's face. They simultaneously drew their pistols.

"I loved him! You were just mad you had one less person to get piss drunk with."

They pulled back their hammers. Click click.

"He deserved a proper woman."

"STOP!" Sarah screamed, jumping out of the wagon.

They pulled their triggers.



Henry and Laura were climbing into their tiny bed in the wagon. It was a cold night, and they had not found any firewood or even buffalo dung

for a proper fire and so they turned in just as the sun set. Not really tired, but weary of the cold, they crawled under the covers and snuggled together for warmth.

"Do you ever get tired of this life?" Henry asked.

"When I haven't been able to get a good bath in weeks and the mosquitoes are biting, and my best petticoat gets ruined in the middle of nowhere, yeah. I've been touring a long time, and sometimes I just want to live a boring ol' life like my sister must be, popin' out a few kids to keep me busy."

Henry kissed Laura on the cheek. "I'll build you a little white fence for a garden, and plant an apple tree round back."

Their lips met and soon after neither paid any mind to the cold.



"Laura...wake up."

Laura opened her eyes and a world of pain crashed in around her. Anne was holding her hand and wiping her forehead with a damp cloth.

"Wha—"

"It's a right piece of luck you're still alive." Anne said quietly.

"Oww..."

"Good eye that girl had."

"Ooh..."

"Sweetie." Anne squeezed Laura's hand, prompting her to swallow the pain. "John and I thought long and hard. About telling you."

Laura saw now that Anne was crying. "Anne..."

"Sarah could tell. She could tell that you were pregnant."

Laura instinctively brought her hands to her belly, wincing at the pain the movement caused.

"When Bruce shot you..." Anne swallowed hard. "It's gone."

"And Bruce?"

"He died instantly. Shot him right in the heart."

Anne looked down at her sister. Laura's eyelids fluttered and then closed as she drifted back into a fitful sleep.