

Waiting For Billy Star

by Tom Reamy

Out here the wind is almost always blowing off the caprock. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter, whipping sheets of sand like torn veils across the black asphalt of the highway. People out here don't have much time for the gentle things; the sun is too hot and the land is too dry and stingy. But they all remember Susanne Delacourt, even after ten years.

The record is still on the jukebox. I don't know why I left it there, but I wouldn't take it off now. It's just a recording of a hokey old song that was popular back then called "The Tennessee Waltz." Occasionally someone will play it; then a quiet settles over the place, weather-worn faces will soften, ranchers and oilfield workers will gaze into their beer lost in remembering. Even the travelers who never heard of Susanne Delacourt will sense something and fall silent.

When the record is over, they'll look at each other and smile, sharing a sweet memory. Then a waitress will rattle some dishes and the talk will start and the moment is gone.

I'm no different from the rest of them—the ones who knew Susanne Delacourt. The wind was blowing that evening, cold norther coming off the caprock, working itself into a full-scale sandstorm. The sun wasn't quite down; an orange bloom in the dust haze to the west, but the cars going through town already had their headlights on. The cars barreling down the flatland highway slowed reluctantly when they came to Caprock, Texas. It wasn't large enough to be much more than a hindrance to those hurrying on to Snyder or Lamesa.

The jukebox finished a record and, in the momentary quiet before the next one began, I could hear the sand flicking against the window. Harley Boone put his ticket and quarter beside the cash register and slapped the toothpick dispenser, rang up the dime for the cup of coffee he'd been nursing for half an hour talking to the other loafers and gave him his change.

Harley stuck the toothpick in his mouth. "You wanta change jobs with me tonight, Wade?"

Harley was a pumper who had to make the rounds of a dozen wells every night and he wasn't looking forward to it that weather. I put my hands behind my head, leaned back on my stool trying to look as contented as possible, and grinned. My performance was lost on him; he'd already turned to watch Susanne fill coffee cups.

She smiled at him. "Good night, Mr. Boone," she said and took the tray to a table full of young cowhands in tight jeans, trying their best to look like Paul Newman in *Hud*.

Harley watched her with a pensive little smile on his leathery face. He seemed to undergo a transformation; his beard disappeared, the permanently grease-filled creases on his hands faded, his coarseness sloughed away and he was young again and trim and handsome with a lifetime of promise ahead of him instead of a lifetime of indifference behind him. But it was only an illusion, a self-induced and contagious state of mind generated by the presence of Susanne Delacourt.

She affected all of them. Those young cowboys she was waiting on, so arrogantly aware of their own sexuality, acted like Sunday school children around Susanne. It hadn't been quite like that when she started working for me six months earlier. Everyone knew about her and Billy Star.

Billy Star wasn't his real name, of course. He apparently had the notion the name made the object; if he changed his name to "Star" he would become one. But he was only a second-rate rodeo rider. No one could understand why she loved him, no one could see what was so special about him. He was no better looking, no smarter, and certainly no kinder than any other young cowboys she served coffee, but she loved him.

They had come in that night six months earlier to eat. He'd been riding in a rodeo at Lamesa and hadn't done too well. They were driving through to Fort Worth and he was already a little bit drunk. He was feeling rotten because of the rodeo and he talked a lot. So everyone knew he wasn't married to Susanne but that she was living with him. Then, when she went to the lady's room, he paid the check, got in his five-year-old Imperial, and left her.

Everyone in the place just looked at each other in stunned silence. Then they watched the door of the lady's room un-
she came out. She looked at the empty table, then went to the window and looked at the empty parking space. She did
cry or get hysterical or ask questions. She just stood there for a moment looking out the window. The people turned back
their plates in embarrassment. Then she sorta squared her shoulders, came to the cash register, and asked me for a job.

I hadn't really needed another waitress, but I hired her anyway. I even let her have one of the rooms over the cafe. The
place had been a hotel back during the oil boom in the 1920s, but when I bought it I had closed it up as more trouble than
was worth.

Susanne probably had twenty propositions the first night she worked. She'd been living with a rodeo cowboy who had
ditched her, after all, so most of the young bucks and a few of the older ones didn't see any reason why they shouldn't try
his place. But she just smiled the way she does, not offended, and said she was waiting for Billy Star to return for her.

It took barely a week before everyone loved Susanne Delacourt—and hated Billy Star for what he had done. And
one could understand why she still loved him or expected him to come back. I even asked Maurine Eubanks, the other
waitress, but she just gave me a pitying look and muttered something about "men."

Headlights flashed on the window and I looked out. It had grown completely dark and the sand was so thick I could
barely see the neon lights of the Caprock Motel across the highway. The two state troopers got out of the patrol car,
shivered in the cold wind, and rushed to the door.

Just then the jukebox started playing "The Tennessee Waltz" and I looked over at Susanne. She was slicing fresh-baked
pies with a wistful expression on her face.

The door rattled open letting in a blast of icy air. Pete Rankin's belly hung over the belt of his uniform making his gun
crooked. "Wade," he said and pulled off his black leather gloves. Davey Boyd grinned at me and looked at Susanne.

She held up the hot peach pie and grinned. Pete and Davey sat at the counter, their leather holsters creaking from the
cold. They came in every night at the same time; that's why Susanne had the peach pie ready.

Everyone thought something might happen between her and Davey Boyd. They hoped it would; he was the only man
around everyone could agree was good enough for her. Davey was local. He was born in Caprock, graduated from the
school where he'd been a pretty fair football player, then got on with the state police. Everyone had always liked Davey
were a little bit surprised that they still liked him even after he became a cop.

"She likes my harmonica better than me," he said one morning sitting by the cash register over a cup of coffee looking
and very young. Davey could play the harmonica better than anybody I ever heard. He could make it sing sweet and pure
he could make it cry like a broken-hearted woman and could bring a lump to any grizzled old throat.

One night when the jukebox finished a record and didn't start another one, he took the harmonica from his pocket
sitting at the counter and fiddled around with it a while then very softly began playing "The Tennessee Waltz." Susanne
watched him with big sad eyes then, when he finished, put her hand on his in thanks. He looked around and saw everyone
quietly listening and blushed.

Davey Boyd loved Susanne all right, and she liked him probably more than anyone else, but she loved Billy Star.

It was later that night ten years ago, nearly at closing time, when the new International pickup stopped at the cafe. The
sandstorm was howling and the temperature had dropped nearly to twenty. The window was fogged and I had to wipe
to see who had pulled in. I didn't recognize the pickup and I couldn't see much of the man who ran in hunched against the
wind.

The cafe was empty except for me and Susanne and the cook back in the kitchen. I'd let Maurine off early because
hardly anyone had been in since the sandstorm got going good. I was tallying the receipts and Susanne was stacking coffee

cups. The door opened and he came in rubbing his hands together. The cook stuck his head out of the kitchen to see who was and I could tell by his frown he'd already cleaned up.

The man grinned. "Am I too late to get something to eat?" he asked. The cook's frown deepened.

Susanne turned to look. The man's face lit with pleasure when he saw her, then it sorta crumpled.

"Susanne," he stammered. "What ... what are you doing here?"

"Hello, Cliff," she said softly.

"Where have you been? Billy ... Billy wouldn't tell us."

I should've figured he was a rodeo cowboy by the look of him, but I couldn't figure what he was doing around here at that time of year. He and Susanne just stood there looking at each other while the cook glowered at me.

"The kitchen's closed," I said. "All we can manage is a hamburger."

"Oh," he said turning to me, rubbing his hands on his thighs. "That's fine. Give me a couple ... and coffee."

Susanne drew the coffee. He took the cup and went to a back booth. She finished straightening up, glancing back at me occasionally. He didn't look up; just sat hunkered over the table.

When Susanne took the hamburgers to the booth she sat down opposite him and they talked quietly while he ate. He finished but still they talked. The cook looked out at me questioningly and I nodded for him to go on home.

Finally the man got up but Susanne kept sitting there staring at nothing, no expression on her face. He came to the register and paid, then looked back at her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What did you tell her?" I asked, hating him for upsetting our tranquil routine.

He looked at his hands, then back at me. He sighed. "Billy Star," he said. "He's dead."

"What happened? The rodeo?"

"No," he said, and shrugged. "He was drunk. Ran his car into a tree. Yesterday, near Lubbock. His folks live in Lubbock. The funeral's tomorrow. That's where I'm going."

"Is Susanne going?"

"No. I told her I'd take her and bring her back, but she doesn't want to go." He frowned. "She said she'd wait for him here." He sighed again. "I wish there was something I could do."

"I'll take care of her," I said.

He nodded. "Thank you. She's special."

"I know."

He started for the door and turned back. "I'll stop in on my way back."

I nodded. He looked at Susanne sitting in the booth but she didn't look up. He went on out the door. I locked up and turned off the neon sign and watched the pickup back out and head west into the wind.

I went to the booth and sat across from Susanne but she didn't seem to see me. I put my hands on hers. Her eyes focused on mine and she didn't pull her hands away.

"Billy's dead," she said, her voice almost too low to hear.

"I know."

"Billy's dead," she said again, but she didn't cry.

"Is there anything I can do?"

She shook her head.

"Will you be okay?"

"Yes. I'm okay."

"I don't want to leave you here alone. I'll call Maurine. You can stay with her."

She shook her head again. "I'll be okay."

"You know Maurine will want you to stay with her."

"Yes. I'd rather be alone though. I'll be all right. You go on home."

"You're sure?"

She smiled and squeezed my hands. "Yes. I'm sure. You go on home."

So I left her there, still sitting in the booth, and drove the half mile to my house. I called Maurine and told her what happened and asked her to check on Susanne in the morning. I went to bed and lay there listening to the wind and couldn't sleep. The air was dusty even in the house and I felt as if I couldn't breathe. An hour later I got up and dressed and went back to the cafe.

That was the last time I ever saw Susanne. The next morning when Maurine went to her room she wasn't there. The room hadn't been slept in and nothing was missing. Davey Boyd tried to find her for months. I knew he wouldn't, that no one would ever see her again.

When I went back to the cafe that night the lights were turned off, but over the sound of the wind I could hear the jukebox playing. I tried to look in the window but the glass was fogged and I couldn't see. I opened the door as quietly as I could. It was dark but I could see by the lights of the jukebox. They were moving slowly, huddled in each other's arms. I didn't notice me, they were so absorbed with themselves, so I closed the door and left them there; Susanne Delacourt and Billy Star dancing while the jukebox played "The Tennessee Waltz."

The End

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