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Bolo Tie

I have a bolo tie that belonged to my grandfather. I have taken it out from my jewelry drawer and am thinking I would like to wear it one day. It has a dark brown leather cord, the color of bourbon. The centerpiece is a silver silhouette of a cow skull, a turquoise oval mounted in the forehead. Bolo ties are supposed to be for men. He did not have any grandsons, so, as the oldest of his seven granddaughters, I inherited his tie. My mother says my wearing it would be tacky, but I disagree.

It would look better on someone thinner; most things do. My grandfather was always very thin, but I could make it work.

If I were to wear it, I would wear it over a white button-up shirt. The buttons would be mother-of-pearl. White, not the gray luster of abalone, so they would not distract from my bolo tie. The brown cord would tuck under my collar, and I would leave the top two or three buttons of the shirt undone.

My jeans would be faded and low slung, clinging to my hips. These would also look better on someone more slender but are a necessary part of the overall look.

My boots would be leather, but not cowboy boots. Cowboy boots would be too expected. They would have a slight heel, an ode to the cowboy boot, but lace up the front. They would be the same bourbon color as the cord of my bolo tie.

We would march, me and my bolo tie, down the stairs and through the kitchen, past my mother. Her scornful comments on my masculine jewelry would flutter past us like startled birds, and we would storm through the front door and out to my car. It is a '97 civic, but I would pretend it was an old Thunderbird and I was Thelma or Louise. I will have to watch the movie again to decide which one.

We would crank the key and drive. No, not drive. Run. We would run, and dust would billow in our path, announcing how incredibly fast we were going and how deeply significant our going was.

The air would smell like sun and clay and exhaust. We would go and go for days. Some days I would drive very fast. Like there was a magnet in the floor pulling my foot down hard on the accelerator. Some days I would drive slow, allowing other cars

“and their spears into pruning hooks”

—Isaiah 2:4

I baulk to baptize him with any sound

that feels too familiar on a queer tongue to honk and pass and send me obscene gestures for not having somewhere to be as urgently as they did. I would laugh and smile into their scowling eyes and pity their urgency. My fast days would be full of adrenaline and my slow days would be full of deep contemplation. I would be every kind of wild you never thought me capable of.

I would not wear a dress once. Hell, I wouldn't even brush my hair.

I would try to find a rest stop when I needed to pee, but there would be long stretches of desert with no stops, and I would just use a bush on the shoulder. Over time I would grow so comfortable on the road it would feel like my home. I would own it, and it would own me. I would pull to the side and drop my jeans right there, sometimes not even bothering to go out of sight. Passing cars would honk or yell or whistle, and I would smile and wave.

We would go for hours, days, weeks until the money we had ran dry.

At this point, the bolo tie would whisper to me to open the glove box, and I would, and I would find a gun.

"Where did you get a gun?"

"It doesn't matter," the tie would say.

It would be an old-fashioned Colt revolver. A six-shooter just like what Doc Holliday used. It would be heavy and cold in my hands. The weight of it would be intoxicating.

"How did you get it in there without my noticing?"

"You ask too many questions."

I would know what the bolo tie wanted me to do with it.

We would stop at a dusty gas station.

"I can't do this."

"Of course you can."

"I really can't. I've never even seen a gun before."

"Shut up. Breathe," the tie would say, "now go."

The money from the register would take us for two more weeks. I would be used to the hot breeze in my hair, the hum of the car's engine through the day, a different dingy motel room each night.

We would sometimes talk about what we left behind and about who we had once been, but never about the future.

Of course, there would be days when I would miss everyone back home. That is to be expected. I suppose I would even cry sometimes. But there is no life without regret. Without sadness. No life is tearless, and surely no adventure worth doing is a purely dry one.

After enough time passed, I would forget why I left in the first place.

“Did I hate it there?” I would say.

“Sometimes, yes, but not most of the time.”

“Why did I go?”

“You had to.”

“Did they make me leave?”

“No.”

“Then who did?”

“I did.”

We would be silent for many hours. Sometimes days, sometimes weeks. My skin would brown in the sun, and my lips would be cracked like the dry clay earth. Cigarette smoke would stain my teeth and fingernails and give a charcoal undertone to my voice.

On one of my slow days, I would stop at a railroad crossing as a train passed. It would be a long train. Infinitely long. I would stand so close I could feel it trying to pull me on board, and my bolo tie would flap against my chest threatening to break free.

The sound would fill my head with machine noise and empty it of thought. I would inhale all the thousands of places the train had seen on its journeys. They would smell like smoke and pines, ocean and grass, mountains and plains, and dense, dirty cities. I would soak all of this in and exhale my own journeys back.

When money ran out again, we would stop, and again I would open the glove box. I would no longer need encouragement. I would be an old hand at it.

I would often find myself nursing a Johnnie Walker at an old dive bar, a Marlboro Red hanging from my sunburned lips. Never the same bar, always the same whiskey.

Sometimes, when the spirit took me, I would linger until a man piqued my interest. I might dance with him to the sounds blaring from the beat-up jukebox or the beat-up live band. We might play a game or two of pool, or darts.

“This one,” the tie would say.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I am.”

“I don’t know if I like him.”

“You like him.”

I would let the chosen man get us a room and a bottle or two for the night.

Once sleep found him, I would slip back into my jeans and my white shirt, which would be stained with dirt and sweat and scotch, and slip the contents of his wallet into mine and we would be off again, the tie and me.

If the man we chose talked nice to me or touched me in a way I liked, I’d leave him enough cash to cover the room and some breakfast and just take the rest. If he were rough, though, I’d take it all. If I really didn’t like him, I’d take his clothes, too. I’d tell each of them a different name. For each man, I’d be a brand-new woman. For Joe I’d be old-souled Rita, for Bill I’d be tomboy Jane, for Tom I’d be sweet little Rosemary. There would be as many names, as many men, as many new me’s as I wanted.

I would eat at whatever sun-baked diner I came across. No brand names, no cameras. I would be a ghost on the lam.

One night I’d get a room with a man wearing a hat, just so I could steal it along with his cash in the morning. An old cowboy hat that could shade me from sun and sight. It would be dark brown, like my boots and my skin and my bolo tie and my liquor.

Some nights I would lie across the hood of my car, soaking in the warmth of the engine as the night fell cool and dark around me, and look up at the infinite stars until my eyes would no longer obey. I would wake to the sun on my cheeks as it rose.

Whenever I came across a river, I would stop to wash my clothes. Sometimes I would get in with all of them still on, sometimes I would take off everything but the bolo tie and let the cool water strip my naked body clean. I would beat the stains from my clothes on the rocks. Yellow-onion pit stains. Beat. Beat. Greasy gray collar, smoky brown cuffs. Beat. Beat. Piss-dribbled panties, mud-crusting jeans, ragged-seamed bra. Beat. Beat. Beat. The silver on bolo tie would tarnish, the turquoise would bleach in the sun, and the leather would lighten and grow soft, nearly indistinguishable from my skin.

After a night at a bar I would leave alone, swaying back to my motel. The dirty streets would glow from neon signs, and the warm, gritty breeze would rock me like a mother’s arms.

“Let’s do it,” the tie would say.

“Do what?”

“The thing?”

“What thing?”

“You know what thing.”

In the small dark shop, I would sit in the black vinyl chair and roll my sleeve up to expose my bicep. A large man with a beard that looked like steel wool and eyes the color of copper would run a wet razor over my skin and wipe the area with alcohol. He would lean in, steadying my arm with one hand while the other ran the needle gun into my skin. I would grit my teeth against the pain.

I would turn my bared arm to the mirror. A cow skull with a turquoise stone in its forehead. The empty eye sockets would gape back at me with significance and understanding.

“It’s permanent.” I would say.

“Yes, it is,” the tie would say.

“It’s perfect.”

“Of course it is.”

Then one day, after weeks, months, years of this outlaw life, the bolo tie would tell me it’s time.

“Time for what?” I would say.

“You know.”

“I don’t think I do.”

“You do,” the tie would say.

I would get behind the wheel, and we would turn around, me and my bolo tie.

When we arrived back at the house, it would look the same as the day we left, but the bushes by the front door would be larger.

Before I got out, I would take off the weathered bolo tie with my weathered hands and place it gently in the glove box.

I would walk the porch steps and ring the bell. Glancing back, I would see that my Thunderbird was an old Civic again. The woman who opened the door would have graying hair and more creases around her eyes and lips, but she would still be my mother.

I would hardly be recognizable, too, but a mother always knows her child.

She would cry and wrap her frail arms around me. We would hug and cry together, and she would take me inside, where I would rest my travel-worn bones, and she would make me tea.

I set the bolo tie, with its shining silver and vibrant turquoise stone, gently back in my jewelry drawer. Someday I will wear it, but not today.