

## Bright Eyes

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Mary Sue Weston

The night Grover met the woman he pulled up in front of The Silver Dollar Saloon, parked his truck, and pushed the button that played *Yellow Rose of Texas* on the horn. Everybody in the saloon could hear it and they knew the next one that walked down those stairs was a real cowboy. In fact they knew it was Grover Burris because he had been doing that every Saturday night since he got his truck.

Grover had showered and shaved after a long day at the U-Stor-It. He put on his jeans and a western-cut checked shirt unbuttoned to the third button so you could see some hair on his chest and the Saint Christopher medal with the gold-like chain. He pulled on his cowboy boots, put on his hat, dashed some Brut on his face and neck, and hung his key ring with the long chain on his belt. There were 34 keys on it, one for each mini-storage unit plus his apartment and his truck. He didn't really need one for each unit because they were master-keyed, but it looked better to the customers. They liked to think each one was private. He clipped his beeper to a belt loop on the other hip. That was just in case a customer had to get into a storage unit for some emergency. You never could tell. Some woman might have a baby and need to get her baby crib out of there. Anything could happen. No matter what business a man is in, he thought, it can't hurt to have a beeper. For one thing, women are impressed by beepers. They might think he's a doctor or an oil man.

Grover couldn't decide which he hoped women would think he was. He knew he looked like a young Clint Eastwood, with his piercing blue eyes and the way he walked. Looking like a movie star, especially Clint Eastwood, naturally drew older

women to him. Grover didn't mind that as long as they weren't *too* old. In fact he was partial to ladies in their late forties, early fifties, and a little plump. As he always said, he liked some meat on the bone. Ladies that age were easy to please, even anxious to please. They didn't have all the problems that these young split-tails have. They never pushed you to buy them a "friendship" ring, shit like that.

From the beginning, the woman was a puzzlement. She was sitting at the bar looking straight into the mirror. She had on a fuzzy sweater in pale lavender and tight blue jeans. Her hips poured over the barstool a bit, well, quite a bit, but just enough so you'd know she was soft. Her pale blond hair was piled up on her head and caught with a big purple ribbon. She had a mixed drink in front of her with a cherry in it. That told you something. She wasn't local.

Locals didn't drink anything fancy, just Lone Star or Pearl, an occasional Corona. This was Bandera, Texas, not San Antonio. Bandera calls itself The Cowboy Capital of the World. It would be called a one-horse town by some people, but the truth is there are more horses than people. The Silver Dollar was practically the only place in town, saloon-wise. That was before the horse racing track came in. Now it's built up some.

What puzzled Grover was the way she looked at herself in the mirror. Her lips smiled just a little bit, but something as cold as death flickered through her eyes. Grover slid onto the stool next to her. Arky Blue handed him a Lone Star long neck.

Old Arky had owned the Silver Dollar for years. He bought the place and decorated it just the way he wanted it. There were deer heads, stuffed wild cats, old cross-cut saws, a rusty plow, six clocks showing different times, some ancient greasy cowboy boots, hats, and all manner of parts and pieces off of farm machinery hanging from the ceiling and walls.

Grover had known Arky Blue all his life. When he was knee-high he used to come wandering into the bar looking for his mama. He remembered the warm smooth wood on his bare feet, how the sawdust caught between his toes when he crossed the dance floor. A blue haze of cigarette smoke hung over the pool table, and there was always a tear-jerker on the jukebox. A Patsy Cline or an Earnest Tubb.

The woman caught his eye in the mirror, then looked down

at her glass. She dipped a plastic straw in her drink and drew a tic-tac-toe game on the bar with it, filling in x's and o's until neither could win.

"Do you come here often?" he said, knowing very well that she didn't. Knowing it was a stupid opening line but not being able to think of anything else.

"Only when I'm horny," she said, lighting a cigarette. She looked at the ceiling and blew smoke straight up. Smart ass.

Arky Blue chuckled and winked from behind the bar. Grover spit in the trash container at the end of the bar and got out his can of Copenhagen. So it was going to be like that. Well, he was up to it.

"Who do I look like?" he asked, leaning back and squinting his eyes at her.

"Like a near-sighted drugstore cowboy," she said, "with a *faux* Stetson on his head."

He leaned a bit further back, and pointed his finger at her chest. "Guess," he said in a low voice. "Go ahead, *make my day*."

"I got it," she said. "You're a *faux* Clint Eastwood."

"What's this *foe* stuff? What's that mean?"

"Never mind," she blew another stream of smoke toward the ceiling. "It's French."

God, he wished somebody would beep him. She had a ring on every finger and diamonds on her ears. She was educated, he could tell. Probably foreign, too.

"Is it true what they say about French women?" He whispered so close to her ear that her hair tickled his lips. He considered getting Arky Blue to page him.

She looked at him for about four seconds like she was going to say something smart-ass, then she looked at herself in the mirror behind the bar. "Yeah," she said, "it's true."

"Set 'em up over here in the booth," he winked at Arky, took her arm gently and led her to the corner booth.

Pocketknife-carved graffiti covered the table top. *George loves Mary. Grace fucks Toby. Don't mess with Tex.* She slipped her whiskey sour through a straw.

My name is Joy Lynn, what's yours? She looked up and lit a cigarette. Her eyes were green and crinkled deep at the edges. Wisps of hair fell in loose strands around her face and move lightly when she blew smoke rings. He guessed her age at late

forties. Could be wrong though, with all that makeup. Anyway, she was a real lady. He could tell.

"Grover Burris," he said, showing a nice expanse of white teeth. He leaned forward expecting a return smile.

"My husband died last week," she said, looking off into the distance, like there was a distance. Which there wasn't anything but the bar and the animal heads on the wall.

"You want to hear something on the jukebox?" He stood up and pulled some quarters out of his pocket.

"We were married fourteen years."

"What about a Willie Nelson?" he said. "Waylon Jennings?"

"No kids, but he was like a big kid. Great big blue eyes and a baby face." She blew smoke rings toward the boar head.

Grover sat back down. "My mama died a year ago last month," he said, laying the quarters on the table. He had gone out to the little cemetery on the hill in the middle of January. Cold wind blew through the mesquite and burned his eyes. The dirt over the grave had already sunk in six inches. Rock-hard caliche killed the mums he planted right after the funeral. He took a bouquet of plastic lilacs because purple was her favorite color. He forgot to bring a vase so he stuck them in an old RC bottle he found by the fence. He thought of the time just a week before she died; they'd been in the kitchen horsing around. He's razzed her about how old she was getting and she said, *I'll piss on your grave!* At the cemetery he had gone behind her little headstone and urinated and laughed.

But then he cried.

"Play *Stardust*," she said, looking across the dance floor to the jukebox.

"She died in her sleep," he said. "There was a dude sleeping right next to her and he didn't even know she was dead till morning."

"See if they've got a Merle Haggard slow waltz on there."

"I didn't even know the turkey's name. Still don't." He thought of his mother. His first memory as a kid was when he was lying on the floor across the doorway. She came from one room to the other and instead of asking him to move out of the way she said, *don't you look now Grovey*, and stepped over him. He thought *I could have looked up her dress. I could have seen something, but I didn't.* He always wished he'd looked up her dress.

He remembered going to the bar looking for his mama and finding her, cigarette in one hand and beer in the other. *Well lookit here, she'd say. Little Grovey.* She'd let him lick the foam off the top and give him a sip. When she leaned down from the bar stool he could see down her dress, the big soft tits. He wanted her to hug him, to hold him close, to feel the softness, smell the sweet powder sweat. She wore Blue Waltz perfume that came from a small, deep blue bottle with a silk tassel on it. Kept it in her purse.

"I hate having dead animals hanging over the table," Joy Lynn said. She was talking to the boar head. "It makes you feel like *hairs* could be falling in your drink."

"We could move to another booth," he said. "You want to dance?"

"The funeral was day before yesterday," she said, still talking to the boar head. "He isn't cold yet and here I am."

Grover went to the jukebox. He put in a handful of quarters and punched in numbers at random, never even read the names of the songs. What the hell, it was that kind of world.

He took her hand and led her onto the dance floor. She put her head against his shoulder. It was a slow waltz, Merle Haggard's *My Favorite Memory*. He held her body so close he could feel her nipples through the fuzz on her sweater, her warm breath tickled the hairs on his chest. Her cheek was damp. She smelled like Blue Waltz, but he knew it wasn't something cheap. He was glad he'd put on plenty of Brut. You could make slow love to that song. He didn't know whether to put his tongue in her ear or not. She was a real lady. He looked up and Arky Blue was watching them. They exchanged winks and Arky took another round over to the booth.

When they went back to the table Joy Lynn sat down and Grover eased in beside her instead of across from her like he had been. He told a few of his favorite Aggie jokes. She laughed a lot, laughed pretty loud really, for a lady. Then she asked to be excused so she could go powder her nose.

She was in there a good while and when she came back her eyes looked kind of red like she'd been crying; she sniffed and dabbed at her nose with a Kleenex. But she smiled a nice easy Sunday-morning smile.

"Let's go get a cup of coffee," Grover said. "How about it, sugar babe?"

"Okay," she said. Pretty easy for a lady.

They stepped out onto the night street. He could smell barbecue from across the street. Best barbecue in Texas. A neon sign blinked red and white. An old dog wandered down the sidewalk, looked in the door at the Silver Dollar, and walked on. The moon was just a sliver of light overhead.

"Your car or mine?" she said.

"Yours," he said, thinking about his old truck. She probably wouldn't want to ride in it, low on gas anyway.

It was one of those long Cadillacs, a dark red convertible. She got in and pushed a button and the top went down. When Grover got in he felt like a million dollars and half of it spent.

"Where to?" she said. "What direction?" Her eyes were dancing. There was some kind of craziness bubbling just below the surface. He didn't know if she was laughing at him or what. For a couple of seconds something told him he ought to get out and forget it. She tapped her long red fingernails on the steering wheel, waiting. She put her hand on his knee and gave it a soft squeeze. What the hell. He pointed down the road to the right. She pulled a bottle from under the seat and took a long drink, Johnny Walker Red, and handed it to him.

It was about the worst stuff he ever tasted. He coughed and spit it out on the road. Joy Lynn laughed. The sound of her laughter trailed after them as she went from zero to fifty-five before they got to the first light, the only light in town.

"Where you from?" Grover asked.

"San Antonio," she said, lighting a cigarette. She turned on the radio. *Fair skies and seventy-eight degrees*. Jerry Lee Lewis singing *When Two Worlds Collide*. The purple bow flew from her head and her long hair rose with the wind like a pale silver cloud. He wanted to touch her, just touch her hair. He didn't know where they were going. It was Medina Highway, he knew that, going toward Medina Lake. Not another car on the road. A good thing, too, what with her going about eighty miles an hour, crossing the yellow line, hell, straddling the yellow line.

"He was eighteen years older than me," she said. "He was long past my prime. But I loved him. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah," he said.

A half-grown deer started across the road and froze in the headlights. She whipped around it on the left, spinning gravel into the night behind her.

"How would you know what I mean, cowboy?" she said, tipping the bottle to her lips. She was shouting her words into the wind. "You're just a babe. You don't know anything yet."

"I know enough," he said.

They rode in silence for ten minutes, silence except for the radio playing sad songs, cheating songs, *fair skies and seventy-eight degrees*, and the wind whooshing around the car at eighty. He should have stayed at the bar and talked to Arky. He should have waited around for one of the regular honky-tonk specials that always showed up. Hell, he could have the forty miles to San Antonio and had a blast at The Bluebonnet Palace. Women outnumber men ten to one, crawl all over you.

"You know what I'm going to miss the most?" She slowed for a bright-eyed armadillo waddling across the road.

"What?"

"Sleep," she said. "I haven't slept since he died. I can't sleep alone in that king-size bed. I've got three king pillows, one on each side and one under my head, but I can't sleep. I drink scotch till I can't hold a glass, then I close my eyes. I dream. I wouldn't call it sleep. I dream that I am holding a gun to my temple, a thirty-eight Special. I have one. Slowly, I pull the trigger. There is a bright light; a blinding light, and then warmth and blackness spreads across my brain. Peace."

She had slowed to thirty-five. Her hair fell around her shoulders, tangled, like spun glass on a Christmas tree.

"That's what happened to me after my daddy came back from Nam." Grover pushed the button to recline his seat and leaned back. "I mean about sleeping; not sleeping, that is." He remembered how it was when his daddy was sent to Viet Nam. He was six years old. He was glad. Get the son-of-a-bitch out of the house; have his mama all to himself then. Cold mornings he'd wake up just before daylight and go out in the yard to take a piss. The outhouse was too far; spiders and booger men stayed there at night. Then he'd come back in and sneak to his mama's bed; crawl under the flannel sheets and snuggle up to her back. *You're getting too big to sleep with your mama, she'd say.*

*Daddy's bigger than me, he said, and he slept with you.* Then she

turned over and hugged him up close and laughed. He hoped it would never end. But then Daddy came home. He wished the Viet Cong had blown his fucking head off. The way his daddy backhanded his mama, knocked her across the kitchen and into the wall, he didn't deserve to live. Then he left out for Denver with a chick he met in San Antone.

"How long do you think I can go on like this?" Joy Lynn said, slowing the car to a crawl. She pulled onto a side road and rocked along, bouncing over stones and through dry creek beds. Bright eyes appeared and disappeared behind cactus and mesquite. She had a catch in her voice. If she cried he was going to get out and walk back to Medina Highway and hitch a ride with the next vehicle. He couldn't stand a bawling woman.

"I don't know," he said. "This road probably leads to the lake."

"Hey, cowboy," she said, "you want to go with me?"

"Sure, where we going?"

"The lake, Medina Lake."

"We'll be there any minute now," he said, "unless we get lost out here."

"I know where we are, I've been there," she said. "We've got a boat down there at the marina. No, I have a boat. It's mine now. He is dead."

"What are we going to do?" A moonlight boat ride would be something to tell the guys about at work Monday. He wished he'd brought his tackle box.

"We're going to fly off the pier at sixty miles an hour."

"Into the lake?" Shit. He should have known better. He knew there was something weird about her.

"You know the last time I dreamed?" She was staring straight ahead like in a trance. "Of course you don't. How could you? I saw a lake. It was Medina Lake. I saw a figure, a wispy, gray figure. It was beckoning to me. *Come on over to this side of the lake, Joy Lynn*, it said. You know what that means, don't you? No? How could you know, cowboy? It was death." Her voice kind of trembled. "Or it was my husband. Calling to me. The lake was glassy, you know? There was a fog, like mist coming up, hovering just over the water. Still, you could see the reflection of the trees, the hills. It was in color but the figure was gray." Her eyes were dark and wild. She looked over at him and laughed. "You're not afraid of death are you, *Mister Eastwood*?"



Grover decided he'd have a chug of that scotch after all. It burned his throat and brought tears to his eyes, but he swallowed it. His life was passing before him. He remembered when he and his mama flew out to his granddaddy's funeral in California. It was the first and only time he'd been on a plane. He looked down on the clouds and thought how it would be to jump out the window and land on them. He wondered would he bounce, or would he just drop through and land in the Grand Canyon or somewhere. His mama said Granddaddy had gone to heaven, way up in the sky. And here he was up in the sky. Where was Granddaddy? He peered into the sunset and thought he saw him. "Lookit there, Mama," he said, "it's *him*." But she said it was just another plane or something, a bird.

Joy Lynn turned onto another highway. The tires spun rocks across the road as she pulled out. "This is it, Clint baby," she said. "I'm going to make your day."

From the top of the hill he could see some lights on the marina, the road running straight down to the pier. He heard the roar of the engine as she stomped on the accelerator. She laughed.

He grabbed for the steering wheel. The car jumped a gully and a tree came at them.

When he opened his eyes he was on the floorboard of the car with his legs all cockeyed. The car wasn't moving. It was quiet except for the crickets and a slow pinging in the engine. The smell of oil and gas was heavy in the night air.

There was blood dripping from his nose. The stars and a sliver of moon hung just above his head. He smelled blood, and Brut. He tasted tears and blood rolling into his mouth as he sobbed.

A hand with long red fingernails moved against his crumpled hat. Then the woman's voice. "Hey, cowboy," she said, "can't you reach me the scotch? I'm not asleep yet." ❧