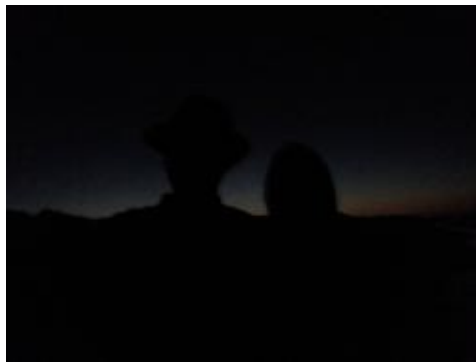


Courier's Fantasy

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An express rider recalls a late night encounter.



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Pyramids of stacked glasses sparkled like Church windows behind the scruffy-faced bartender toweling off empty mugs between orders, occasionally making drinks for deep-pocketed patrons upstairs. For those whom couldn't differentiate between a bar and a church, I guess that made him Jesus for the night; the night which would brightly melt into morning in a couple of hours, in the way a shadow of a frown brighten with a smile. The polished mahogany surface of the bar was wet, exceptionally rife with rings of spilled ale where patrons had sat and drank. I ran my hand through the rings to moisten my dry, calloused skin. Life had taken its toll.

I looked at my glass mug judgmentally, then back at the gal flaunting lingerie on-stage. Her pale skin was at high contrast with the black netting she wore. Her hair was frizzy red, dull in comparison to her bright red lips. She blew kisses at every whistle thrown at her and aimed winks at each raucous holler. Mugs slammed discordantly as men stood and sat in excitement, plashing foamy golden ale onto tables in the commotion one of the only times anything gold went unnoticed by them. In the corner, a piano player played fiercely as if he were squashing spiders with his fingers, until he glanced drunkenly over at the showgirl, hinting at a backstage relationship.

Smoke crawled around the rustic candelabras lending some soft light, filling the wood-paneled ceiling like an upside down ashtray, seeping in spells from the upper balconies where rich tycoons hid themselves in private boxes that were as large as hotel rooms. Rarely did they approach the rail to get a better view of the stage, except when the girl shed another layer and I could spot shiny chains of golden pocket watches draped over the rails, fortunately their fat guts disallowing the bastards to lean; if they did, I hoped they fall and money spilled out of their lavish pockets, inciting another Gold Rush.

Twirling the foamy crest around, it hit me. I hadn't seen a decent woman since her. I depressingly paid my night's tab, left the saloon and headed for my hotel across the street. After stumbling upstairs, having tested the balusters, I was ready to crash on the bed when I saw the moon. Moonlight drenched the bed with the cold semblance of frost, pouring dryly inside my hotel room through the curtain-less window that overlooked the street. I collapsed onto the bed and listened to gunfights erupt outside to flurries of drunken voices. I couldn't restrain the memory, so I let it play out, remembering that beautiful night and the strength of the moon, and my luck, oh and her.

* * *

Riding for three hours took a toll on my leg. I kept looking at it, imagining a rash, an infection. I wanted to examine it, but the desert heat was unkind to strangers who stop for even brief periods of time. Determined, the sun had chased me through mountainous clouds, between rocky canyons, and it nearly blinded me with its lurid reflection in jerky glitters as I'd crossed a score of rowdy creeks; those creeks which moved over rocks like invisible tongues were licking the water, tickling it to create that kind of innocent movement while the sun shone blindingly, achieving those chaotic, molten glints like mica had been inserted there by hand, by God.

Fearing I would be unable to make the last leg of the journey the following morning, I stopped early along a stretch of woods. Besides, I was a bit ahead of schedule. After I pitched a primitive tent, standard for express riders, I gathered some fallen limbs and built a teepee structure for a fire. I could see the main trail from my camp. Nobody had braved the journey behind me.

When I'd gathered the firewood, I stumbled onto soft warbling like that of a tamed brook and remembered the name for river in Spanish: *el Río*. In the mood for studying my Spanish, with night just a dark mark

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in the sky over some smoky purple haze, red rockmountain ranges along the outlying desert, I started the fire early. A pale white moon stuck out in the western blue sky as an apple with a chunk bit out would in a basket. I read and spoke to myself for two hours, lonely as God.

By nightfall pink-red embers were all that glowed amongst the black wood, not another flame hissed in the encircling gloom inevitably converging, so I left to get more timber. Thankfully I had my lantern, but no axe. In my experiences, wood is bountiful along waterways where fallen trees and drift wood are marooned on the banks. Pursuing this, I headed back to where I heard the noise of a brook. An army of black bayonets poked the greater amethyst canopy around me, where it appeared stars were the pointy silver tips of bayonets poking back, yet I moved slowly to avoid their sting.

Farther and farther I scoured, hearing the distant warble, finding just dry darkness. I gained distrust for simple objects that day had encapsulated as innocent and bright, which now obscured my quest. My efforts brought me to a line of prickly bushes eclipsing a shallow ravine, a rather dark entanglement, through which something silvery shone as it moved in rushing grains under the rising moonlight. Enough light was held in the ravine to sustain visibility, so I set my lantern down and found a small passage in the bush-work. Moonlight glamorously flaunted itself on the old brook, slipping across the surface in silvery wrinkles with foamy white patches of current extending from dark rocks. On the far shore a cluster of tall pines ended in points that rendered them the appearance of row-houses with steep roofs, with all the lights turned off. I approached it in awe, enchanted by the debonair beauty, which I imagined was like the cities of the east such as New York and Boston.

Low and behold, as I had predicted, viable wood lay abundantly about the banks. I searched around for suitable pieces. My search took me farther downriver. Seeing piles of driftwood, I crouched to feel how wet some wood was when a stick snapped, echoing suddenly from the opposing bank. Instinctively, I paused and gazed at where I thought the sound came from. Something moved and I made not a sound as I noticed it. I expected a caribou, or deer, even the apparition of a buffalo wouldn't have stunned me. Yet she did.

Two legs brought a body out from the dark pine grove, evolving into the vague image of a woman as it entered the reach of moonlight. By the way the woman walked I could infer that she wasn't civilized, nor trained in societal manners. And when she began singing, this was confirmed. Beneath the moon she sang sweetly, in a language I did not know but could vividly imagine the meaning by closing my eyes. In fear of startling her, I quietly leaned back against the banks behind a pile of brush. A blanket was wrapped around her body. She laid it on the ground as she edged toward the brook.

Her hair, black and slightly curly, fell as beautifully as a waterfall over her curvy body. From her knees to her bosom she wore a tattered cloth that evinced the qualities of animal fur. In one smooth motion, she kneeled by a shallow pool of languid water wallowing before it filtered into a lower shelf downriver, her head down, admiring the reflection. With cupped hands, the woman scooped up water, gently splashing it in her face, and then drank some without slurping, to my surprise.

By then I had forgotten about the firewood. All day I had been deprived of human interaction, with the only words I had spoken mattering to myself. I took my eye off the woman for a second while I searched for the bundle of wood I'd collected. Large splashes returned me to her, stomping, playing in the water. Playing in a way I considered dancing. She sang more and acted, almost I daresay, crazy, to me.

When she drew closer, hopping gracefully on an island formed by the recent drought, I surmised, I saw her partly illuminated face for a brief moment, but it left a permanent image in my memories. A building desire emerged from within my thoughts, of joining the woman, of seeing her full face, so tan and ideal for smiling, again. It was an aimless, unending smile that she unforgettably carried. Innocently, to my disbelief, she began to undress. Each second revealed more and more of her body: her modest bosom, her dark brown nipples. And

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then, all clothes aside, nothing covered her at all. She moved happily, freely and naked, with a thick patch of black hair below her belly button.

Just the quiet confidence she greatly exhibited undressing evoked her adamant belief, her certain trust, that the seemingly perverted moon was but a friend, united with her. I couldn't look away. Her naked body grasped mine in a lustful clutch, holding me at the gates of heaven. She waded into the shallow pool before her. She had muscular thighs and sharp curves, a plump rear that made her upper frame seem skinnier save but for her bosom.

She swam around the black-silver pool, singing to the crowd of saints on the ghostly moon, when I lost sight of her hair as it meshed with the overwhelming suppleness of the dark, liquidly mirror consuming her nudity; 'twas a black creek she swam gently amongst, a shallow pool formed by a dam upriver, exhibiting the unproven clarity of water mirroring its immediate surroundings. Around slight ripples she caused, that the moon seemed to surf across by growing thin, she captured the beauty of the world, evoking childhood innocence, the better side of humanity. She, swimming nude and unashamedly so, portrayed the very guiltlessness of Eve before her downfall. For every rough patch there is a shallow pool such as this, in life. There my pain was lulled by the sudden halt of the world, just as the river was dammed, confined to a natural calmness.

My buckle suddenly felt too tight, so I loosened it. She played with the water, cuddled with the face of the moon. Her soft laugh in the night was as surprising and hopeful as a flower grown in the hellish depths of a mine. I wanted to know her name. No, I had to know her name. And, if I couldn't, I would name her. I crept on my knees toward the water and laid flat. She was no more than 25 feet away, oblivious to my presence.

Within a short while, I ogled as she emerged wet and shiny like a goddess who had just swam laps in the enormous, white marble-lined, column-infested temple pure blue-green pool of Zeus. Shivering in the cool air, she grabbed her hair like a rope and squeezed the somber water out, then sat down cross-legged as many natives often do. By her face I believed she was praying, in a focused state of mind. In that time of silence chirping was louder, but not enough to surpass the beat of my heart.

Gunfire erupted in the street. My eyes opened; she was gone. Six shots, eight shots; luckily the duelers had had enough shots in the saloon to empty their chambers, missing the other in the process. A loud splash concluded the gunfight, of one shooter who'd mistakenly fallen backwards into a horse trough along the street. Uproarious laughter accompanied the black solace. Curious men, shadowy figures, crowded in the morning yellow lamplight pouring out on the street from the swinging doors of the saloon. The commotion followed back inside thereafter. Any dispute that had existed was evidently solved by overt humiliation. I wish wars were resolved without bloodshed.

I was sincerely awake, sitting up in bed, wondering how I would ever see that night so clearly again. Hopelessly wishing I would see her another time, whether in reality or a dream. I reached for the Bible in the drawer next to the bed; some occupant had taken it and left a half empty bottle rye whiskey. I looked up at the moon as the clear-brown liquid moved in front of my face and funneled burningly into the dry chasms of my throat. Then I said a long prayer.

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