Homestead

A Western Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

In those parts the cold hits hard when the final red glow of the setting sun has gone. A clear sky sucks up the heat, and before the stars take on their glow there is a blackness that requires a rider to trust his horse. It was likely her that carried him close enough to see the dim light in the distance.

“Come on Rosie, let’s see if we can borrow some shelter for the night,” he said. The horse spluttered an acknowledgement, or seemed to. A man must use his horse for conversation on long rides.

The starlight revealed the house as he drew closer. It was not new but well built, with a second storey and with an outhouse and washhouse joined to the main structure. The main windows looked to have been brought in rather than built to take glass.

The light was a single lamp. It’s warm glow dragged him off his horse and on to the porch. He knocked on the door.

The door opened and the light behind left the figure in silhouette, but it was a woman. A tall woman.

“Good evening Ma’am,” he said. My name is Homer Sandilands and I find myself without a place to camp tonight. I wonder if you might have a barn or some such where I might rest up for the night?”

“You are most welcome stranger, now come inside out of the cold.” Her voice was deep and husky but had the lilt of a woman who was of a warm and pleasant disposition. “We have a barn out back, but we are having a late supper – why don’t you join us? Just soup, but with meat in it, and warm.”

He could smell it by then. He followed her into the light. He could see that her hair was tied up in a cottage loaf bun and that she appeared to be wearing a corset even though it was a simple workday dress.

“This is Jack. Say hello to Mr. Sandilands, Jack”. From her place over the stove she motioned towards the young man seated at the table, a bowl of soup in front of him, a spoon in one hand and a look of hostile suspicion on his face.

“Hello,” the boy said, as if he was used to following instructions.

“Good evening to you, young sir,” said Homer cheerily, placing his hat on the table. And to the lady he said – “And thank you Ma’am for your hospitality. May I know who my hostess is?”

“I am Laura Howell,” she said, turning with a steam bowl of soup in her hands. “A widow. And Jack Pawson here works the farm with me.”

She was striking. That seemed like the right word. A strong face, but smooth and softened as if she had bathed in milk, and kept it from the harsh sun of farm work. But her hands looked strong, and big, but they placed the bowl with a true delicacy, right under his nose.

He almost fainted from the smell and would have raised the bowl to his lips had she not placed the correct spoon beside the bowl. Jack was using one too, and there was one resting on her bowl.

“Where are you headed, Mr Sandilands,” she asked.

“I am a travelling locksmith and clock repair man, but I seem to have miscalculated the riding time between towns,” he said. “My horse led me here in the darkness. It must have been the smell of the soup.”

“Please enjoy it,” she said.

He took a spoonful in the manner he had learned as a child, and he blew on it a little to cool it before taking a sip – without slurping.

“This is very good,” he said. “If I can offer you any of my services in return, please let me know.”

“We have little need for locks and clocks out here,” she grinned.

“I am a gunsmith as well. Any fine machine work. I can only carry small tools.”

“I have an old Sharps rifle with a jammed hammer. Such a gun still has its uses. You should have mentioned that first.”

“I have the skills, but I am no lover of firearms,” he said.

“You may well be a complex person in a very simple land,” she said.

He smiled. She was speaking of herself, surely.

“Jack, now that you have finished will you do your rounds before taking to bed?” She did not look at the young man. It seemed that she knew that he would rise to her call and do whatever he asked, even though it seemed that his distrust of the stranger was persuading him to stay.”

“Maybe I should show Mr Sandilands to the barn first, Laura?”

Homer could see the look on the young man’s face. He was hopelessly in love with the older woman. Only a fool could not see it.

“Let our guest finish his supper and be on your way,” she scolded him with a smile.

He left. Homer looked at his hostess across the table.

“He doesn’t know, does he?” he said.

“Know what, Mr. Sandilands, or may I call you Homer?”

“It would please me if you did.” He took some more soup. “I mean young Jack does not know that you are a man.”

She appeared a little shocked, as Homer would have expected. But then her smile returned. She said – “Women are entitled to their secrets, especially women like me.”

“I must say that you are a very attractive woman,” said Homer. “I have seen exotic ladies such as yourself in the dancehalls of San Francisco and other places besides, but none could hold a candle to you. But you must have a story to tell – like how you came here, and how you came to be a widow.”

“Finish your soup and if you like I will tell you that story,” she said.

Homer Sandilands looked at her and reconsidered a little. That young man Jack did not seem so foolish after all. There was something about Laura Howell that stirred his loins, even though she had confirmed that all was not as it should be. There was a fierce and hungry look in her eyes that Homer found pulling him towards her.

“I came out to these parts with Thaddeus Malone, known as Ted,” she began. “He was a fine man – big and strong and resourceful. He was the perfect pioneer. I was his companion in those days. I know that many will disapprove, and you may too, but we were in love. I believe that love does not look at what is between your legs but what is in your heart. He believed that too. But for all intents and purposes back then we were partners, with a grant of a tract of land and driven to turn it in to a productive farm.”

“As you say we lie a good distance between two towns, so we had a good parcel of land and two places to give us a market and supplies. We came with seed and grew some produce, but we had land enough for livestock provided that we had water and could hold them in with good pasture. Ted put in a dam in the hills to the west. He was smart enough to build it with only a few sticks of dynamite and then shifted rocks by oxen and his own hand, while I attended to the crops.”

“We sold goods and bought in a herd and that grew by our good management. With water we could take on neighbor’s stock too, for a fee. We did well. We built this house, Ted and me. It has another suite of rooms upstairs for me, but we shared a bed down here, as we always had. He was always my husband, but I was not his wife. Still he would tease me by ordering corsets and dresses, but in those days I still dressed as a man.”

“Although it seemed impossible to believe that it could happen to a man like him, Ted grew sick. There was a tumor growing inside him and it would kill him, but it took years. Ted a decided that the best way to protect me was to make me his wife. At the time we did most of our business with the town to the North but we shifted to the town to the south of us, where you rode from. There they only know me as his wife, Lauren. That is who I am. So if you get to where you are headed, maybe it is best to say very little about this household.”

“And what about young Jack?” said Homer. “Where does he come from?”

“Ted found him somewhere. He was a young man looking for work. He worked with Ted while Ted could work. Right beside me he watched my man suffer and die. He held me when he did. I am grateful that somebody was here to do that, more than he will know.”

“He is in love with you,” said Homer.

“I know,” she said with a trace of a sigh. “But he loves a woman, so he can never have me in the way he would like. I would not want him to.”

“He is young,” Homer agreed. “A man of experience would know that women come in many forms.”

“Are you a man of such experience, Homer?”

“I would like to think so,” he said. He pulled a handkerchief from somewhere in his clothes and wiped the last of the soup from his mouth, in the fashion of an East Coast dandy. “I have acquired many skills in my time. I am not of a heavy hand, but finer skills are my trade. Perhaps you might allow me to demonstrate. You said that you had a rifle you might like me to look at.”

“Although it is jammed, I keep it under my bed,” she said. “Let me show you where.”

He rose with her. She led the way, taking a lamp and lighting it with a taper placed in the coals of the fire. There was a door on the other side of the staircase that opened to a large bedroom. He saw a large photographic portrait on the wall – Lauren in a fine dress stood behind her husband, a very large and handsome man who needed no introduction. He was one of those men who had built the West by his own strong arms and sweat from his brow, and he chose to love who he loved. Ted Malone sat seated before his strong beautiful wife.

As Homer stood there, she shut the door behind them and turned a key that he knew by the sound had not been used for a while.

“Let me show you that weapon”, she said.

“Leave it,” Homer instructed firmly. I can look at it in the morning. And as it happens, I have brought my own.”

His pants were on the floor – both pairs. She held up the lantern. Homer was not as big a man as Ted, that is in all but this one very visible respect.

“As you can see I have a nice home,” she said. “But I don’t have all I want. Something is missing.”

“Sure this is a mighty nice looking homestead,” said Homer, helping her to get undressed. “And there is a mighty nice-looking bed in a mighty nice looking room. And a mighty nice looking woman about to lie down on it.”

“I am hoping that you might stay for a while,” she said, stroking his erection, then using it to drag him to the bed. “The truth is that I have missed the company of a real man.”

“Well, he is here now,” said Homer.

Outside the locked door, young Jack Pawson listened in pain to the squeals and grunts, and wondered why this stranger could have been favored over him.

The End

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