

CASS TELL

coward
MAN

a short story



Cass Tell – Short Story

Coward Man

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“Who are you?” I commanded. The kid was maybe eight or nine and he was squirming like a Georgia snake trying to get out of my grip.

“Let me go,” he said.

“Tell me your name.”

“I ain’t telling you nothin’,” he insisted.

He was long and skinny. I put an arm around his chest, lifted him up with one arm and carried him kicking out of the barn. In a way I liked his spunk.

We got out into the light and I set him down, still holding him by the arm. He had a dirty t-shirt, cut off shorts and was barefooted. He reminded me of me when I was a kid.

“What were you doing in there?” I asked.

“None ah yur business,” he said.

“Look kid. This is my property and if you get hurt in there I could get into deep trouble.”

“I ain’t gonna get hurt,” he proclaimed, still trying to pull away from my hand on his arm. “And yur hand is hurtin’ me.”

“Let’s make a deal. You tell me who you are and what you were doing in there and I’ll let you go.”

He glanced at the barn and then at my big hand around his skinny bicep. He shrugged and said, “Okay.” Then he looked west toward the trees.

“I’m waiting,” I said.

“I was building a fort.”

“In the barn?”

“Yup.”

“Sounds interesting, but I don’t think you should be in there. So, what’s your name?”

“Billy Barnes.”

“Where do you live, Billy Barnes?”

“That ain’t fair,” he cried out.

“What do you mean?”

“You said if I tolt you what I was doing in there, and my name, then you said you would let go ah me.”

The kid had a point, so I released my grip.

Like a fox out of a cage the kid bolted, his bare feet kicking up dust. In a few seconds he disappeared down a path through the woods.

I chuckled, stood there for a minute and then turned and went back to my house knowing I had a lot of things to do. I had been away for over six months and was just getting settled in. The rodeo circuit had taken up all my time and I had seen a lot of America over the past months. I was an advance man for a rodeo company, always showing up to a place a few days ahead of the big show, checking to see that all the pieces were in place and then moving on just as the cowboys and horses hit town.

It was a lonely job and I was getting tired of it, five years on the road, coming and going from this place.

I was forty one years old and something in the back of my mind was telling me it was time to step off that rodeo treadmill and get back to my property and do something with it.

I have one hundred acres of beautiful land on the north side of Wheeler Lake just across from Decatur, Alabama. The lake is huge with beaches, walking trails, and lots of camping grounds. It’s a fisherman’s dream, one of several reasons I bought the place.

About half my property is covered with trees and shrubs and the rest is for farming. When I bought the place the only structure on it was the old barn built seventy years ago. Then I put up a new barn where I could securely keep a tractor and a 1977 Lincoln Continental Convertible that was bought from a down on his luck country western signer. I also built a large ranch style house on a rise looking down at the lake.

What I liked about my place was that it was isolated, a perfect place for a song writer, which I once was. Nashville is a couple hours away, which is the heart of the country music industry. I had contacts there, which were increasingly dwindling.

During my 20's I wrote a lot of country western songs and envisaged myself to be a singer until a horse kicked me in the throat and shortened my signing career. To be honest, I never could carry a tune for a hill of beans, but the horse gave an excuse and it made a nice story.

I ended up selling some of my songs to famous country western singers and some of the songs made it to the top. By the age of thirty five somehow the inspiration was gone and my song writing career had ended.

I used royalty money to buy my place thinking the solitude would help, but nothing triggered the creative juices I had when younger. For some unknown reason I could no longer create new tunes on my guitar and write new lyrics.

After months of puttering around the place I thought that joining the rodeo circuit might give new ideas, but it turned out to be a five year dry spell. I figured the song writing days were finished.

Now I was back here and wondering what to do.

I went into the house, made a sandwich, poured a glass of lemonade, went out on the porch, sat in a rocker and enjoyed my lunch on a quiet warm day.

Billy Barnes came back to my mind and I wondered if he had been playing here before. He made me laugh when I thought of his feisty spirit and the speed he had when tearing down the path.

Just beyond my property to the west there were a few houses, more like cabins. My guess was that he was from one of them.

I was tired after so many months of travel and could feel it in my bones. While my place would provide the quietness and rest I needed, I was feeling lonely and empty, wondering if I should get back on the rodeo circuit or try and do something in the music industry in Nashville. Those thoughts didn't please me.

If not the rodeo circuit and with no inspiration for a new song, what should I do next? I didn't have answers and that disturbed me.

In no time at all I was asleep in the chair.

* * *

In the depths of a dream I sensed movement and that woke me. I opened my eyes and saw three people walking from the woods in my direction. It was Billy Barnes, a girl of perhaps six or seven years old and a woman. I guessed she might be around thirty.

They walked mid way between the forest and my house and stopped. The woman spoke with a loud voice, "Billy said you been rough with him."

She had on a cotton dress with a blue and yellow flower print that flowed attractively on her figure. She had blue eyes and thick auburn hair that hung past her shoulders. Her hair glistened in the sunlight.

The little girl had on pink shorts, a clean white t-shirt with an image of a teddy bear on it and she had red tennis shoes with no socks.

The mother and the girl were quite a contrast to Billy who looked like a Southern back-woods boy.

"He was in my barn," I said.

"What do you expect," she said. Her hands were on her hips, nice hips I noticed.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What are kids going to do around abandoned places? They are going to play," she asserted with a determined voice.

"This place isn't abandoned." I was starting to feel upset that she was on my property and accusing me of deserting the place.

"No one has been here for months and the old barn was wide open."

"There are private property signs all over the place. Don't you get the point?"

"Even so, he's just a kid and you have not right to manhandle him."

"Come on lady, you're overreacting, Ms. Barnes or whatever your name."

"It's Judy Barnes and I'm not over reacting. No one is going to mess with my kids."

I could see where Billy Barnes inherited his will power. This was like trying to deal with a Brahma bull. "I

just don't want him to get hurt," I said.

She stared at me for a moment with black eyes and her expression reminded me of a Spanish girl I had once known, a temperament that had been wonderful to be around. Judy Barnes said, "Okay, he won't be on your property again."

She spun around, took her children by the hands and marched down the path.

* * *

For several days I thought about Judy Barnes while doing work around the property. Her sudden appearance and our confrontation had unsettled me. I'd just try to live and let live hoping I wouldn't have problems with her again. At the same time, she was a good looking woman and her image stayed in my mind.

The property needed care as I had been traveling and had neglected it for six months. I got out a rototiller from the new barn and turned up the garden and planted vegetable seeds. I painted one side of the house that was suffering from sun exposure, and I did some repairs on the old barn, fixing the door so it could be locked. I replaced a broken line on a barbed wire fence even thought about buying some calves to put on the property.

All this was making me nervous. I had never been one to settle down and everything I was doing had a feeling of permanence.

I realized years ago that I was a coward when it came to permanence and especially with relationships. In fact, after a silly breakup with my high school sweetheart I hit the road and that's when I got the inspiration for my first and biggest hit.

The song is titled 'Coward Man' and it goes:

Had a fight in the night,
It was too easy to run,
To the bar,
Met her there,
Then we were gone,
Running free a day or two,
Then this one left me,
All alone,
Can't go home,
And my heart ain't free.

And the refrain,

Cursed be the coward of a man,
Who wanders from his home,
Can't work it out with the one he truly loves,
Years of sorrow after sorrow it must be,
For the cursed coward of a man,
Who wanders from his home.

The song was a country western tear jerker, and with its slow melodic rhythm backed up by a twangy steel string guitar it had taken the nation by storm. It is considered a classic and that's lucky for me. I still get good royalties from it. That doesn't mean fabulous wealth, but that song and the others provide a steady flow of livable income.

I was hoping I could get back into song writing but it was like being in a fog with no compass.

* * *

One day while replacing some boards on a picket fence, I saw something red. It was Billy wearing a red t-shirt and he was standing by a tree.

I looked at him and said, "How you doing Billy?"

“Fine,” he said, scraping his foot on the ground as though he was drawing a line.

“You want to help?” I asked.

“Nope, I can watch?”

“Have you ever hammered a nail?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“You want to learn?”

His eyes brightened. “Sure.”

“Come on over here and take this hammer,” I said.

Billy ran to me and took the hammer and held it with two hands. It was too big for him, so I found a smaller ball-pein hammer from the tool box. I took a board, put it flat on the ground and held a nail.

“I’ll show you first, and then you can do it, but you gotta be careful to not hit your fingers with the hammer. By the way, my name is Sam Parker and you can call me Sam.”

I drove the nail into the board and then he took one and tried. After several bent nails he got the hang of it and then I let him nail a board to the picket fence.

A great smile came over his face like he had just tamed a bucking bronco.

Over the coming days he showed up every morning and we did odd jobs around the house. We changed a pipe, painted the picket fence, and fixed the wiring on a broken lamp. We changed the spark plugs on my tractor and constantly talked.

He was full of questions asking about everything from electricity to rodeos. I taught him a few chords on my guitar.

He was wide eyed when I enumerated my one and only experience of riding a bull and he laughed like a chimpanzee about the part when the rodeo clowns saved me.

Billy sat spellbound when I described different places I had seen and things I had done like visiting the Grand Canyon, the Pacific Ocean and Yellowstone National Park, and even the professional sports events I had attended. I told stories about country western singers I had known, about their songs and lives.

He was curious about everything.

On the fourth day I asked him what his father did.

He became quiet and said, “I ain’t sure.”

I set aside some pliers I was holding and asked, “Why is that?”

“He ran away when Sally my sister was a baby. We ain’t seen him for a long time. Last heard he was in California or somewhere over there.”

I didn’t know what to say. It sounded like something straight from my song Coward Man. “So, you and your family are on your own?” I asked.

He nodded. “My gram looks out for us because ma works at a department store in Decatur.”

“It’s good you got your grandmother and your mom,” I said.

“And Sally too,” he added.

“Yeah, Sally too,” I said.

“You got a family?” He asked.

“No, never got around to it, but I’ve always thought it might be nice.”

Billy paused and then a little grin appeared on his face and I could see that his mind was working. He didn’t say anything but I sensed that his strong will power was at play.

In the early afternoon we took two fishing rods from the house and walked down to a lake inlet and caught several large mouth bass.

When we got back to the house I cleaned the fish and put them in a plastic bag for Billy to take home, and then reached into my pocket and pulled out a ten dollar bill and handed it to him.

“What’s that for?” He asked.

“A worker is worthy of his labor,” at least that’s what it says in the Good Book.

“What’s the Good Book?” He asked.

“The Bible.”

“Oh,” he responded.

“What that means is that if somebody does work, then they should get paid for it. You been working real hard, so I want to give you some money for it.”

Billy exclaimed, “But that wasn’t work, it was fun.”

“Well, sometimes work can be fun. In fact, that’s the way it should be.”

He took the money and put it in his pocket and headed in the direction of the path. Then he stopped, turned around and said, “You ever been to the movies?”

“Sure,” I stated.

“Wanna go? I think there is this neat movie at a theatre in Decatur.”

I thought about it. “Yeah, that might be fun, and I’ll treat you to a hot dog after the movie. Let’s check it out.”

“Maybe Sally can come too?” He asked.

“That would be nice, but I think you better ask you mom?”

“I’ll ask her,” Billy said. He looked at the ground, dragged his toe and drew a line. He looked up at me and with a soft voice said, “Maybe ma can come too?”

I smiled. “That would be nice.”

He had a big grin and he turned and sprinted down the path.

* * *

That evening there was a knock on my door. I opened it and Judy Barnes was standing there. I noticed she came up to my shoulder. She wore pressed cotton pants and a pink blouse. There was the faint smell of shampoo or a light perfume.

She said, “Mr. Parker, I want to apologize for the way I treated you the other day and also to thank you for the time you are spending with Billy.”

“Oh no, Ms. Barnes, I’m thankful for Billy’s company. It’s great to have a pal around the place.”

We stood there for a moment and then I said, “May I invite you in?”

She hesitated then said, “Yes, thank you.”

We walked into the living room and motioning to the couch. I said, “Please take a seat. Would you like something like a tea, coffee, beer, wine?”

She smiled. “Maybe tea.”

I prepared some Earl Grey tea, poured two cups and then sat down. “Please call me Sam,” I said.

“And I’m Judy,” she said.

We talked for a while about life in Alabama and I described what I had been doing, and then I said, “Billy invited me to see a movie. I checked it out and there is a children’s animated movie that’s playing. Is that okay with you?”

“That would be very nice,” she said.

“And he wondered if Sally and you could come along.”

She laughed. “I would love that.”

Me too, I thought, but I didn’t say it. “How about Saturday in the afternoon?”

“I’d look forward to it.”

“And would it be okay if we asked Billy’s grandma to join us?” I asked knowing we could all comfortably fit in my Lincoln Continental Convertible.

A beautiful smile broke out on her face.

* * *

Four months later I am still at my property with no plans to leave. Billy hung out with me through most of the summer and then he headed back to school where he’s getting good grades. On weekends I can’t get rid of him.

And I can’t get Judy out of my mind. We’ve been seeing a lot of each other. I love her and I love her family. I bought a large diamond ring and tonight I have invited her over for a candle light dinner and then I will pop the big question. I’m nervous.

My little spy, Billy, has informed me that it will be smooth sailing.

It looks like the Coward Man Sam has found redemption and I’m thankful for that. This is where I belong.

The amazing thing is that I started to write songs again. My agent in Memphis already sold one and I'm now working on more.

* * *

One of the new songs was commissioned by a popular country western singer and for some weird reason she insisted that it contain the words, 'love' and 'shooting star'. That's a tough challenge, for what words rhymes with love, other than dove, shove and above? And to fit that with shooting star is even more of a puzzle.

But surprisingly the words are coming. It will be a wonderful country western tear-jerker, full of soul and emotion.

These past years were lonely and I now know that's what killed my creativity. All it took was an energetic little bare foot boy to show up and then his mother opened the door of my heart. In fact, I sense another song is emerging.

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The End

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Author's Notes

Thanks for reading my short story 'Coward Man'. It's a sweet story about a man caught in loneliness and how a feisty, strong willed boy brings friendship. And through that the man finds love. The story is a reflection on how much we need relationships and the importance of family.

If you liked the story, there are other free short stories on my website at www.casstell.com. Or, check out 'A Smile Forever' which is a novelette about the power of love at first sight.

Cass Tell