

'One of America's great writers.'

RODDY DOYLE



The

FROM THE AUTHOR OF LEAN ON PETE

HORSE

WILLY VLAUTIN



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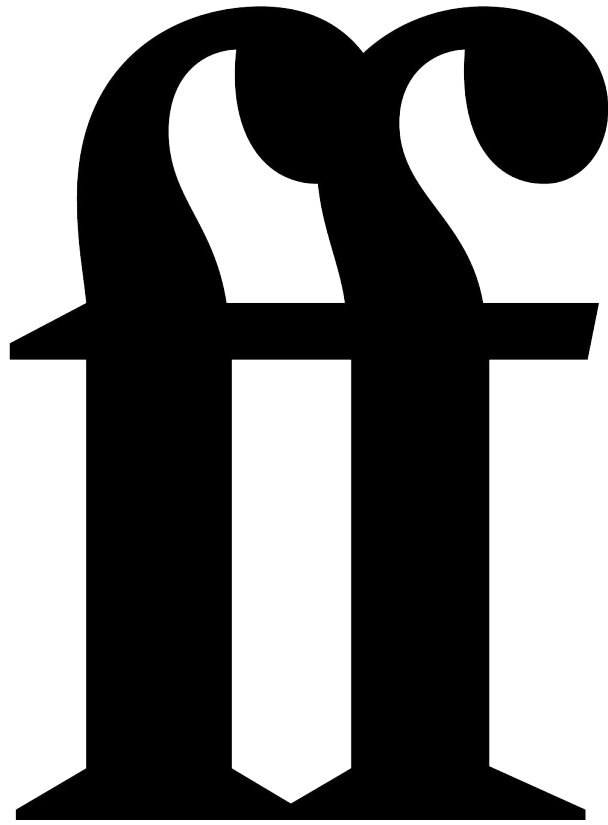
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HORSE

WILLY VLAUTIN





WILLY VLAUTIN

The Horse

faber

For John Doe

In memory of Dallas Good

‘The only way to get through school is to disappear into a song. Just hum it to yourself and you’ll be okay. If you hate being home, hate it here, just disappear into a song. It works, man, I’m telling you it really works.’

– A fifteen-year-old friend of my brother’s talking to me in my mom’s house when I was eleven.

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About the Author

Also by Willy Vlautin

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1

The board-and-batten walls of the single-room shack that was the assayer's office rattled from the wind, and the fire in the stove was dead. From a twin bed, Al Ward, sixty-seven years old, bone-thin, with gray hair and blue eyes, looked out the window to falling snow. He pulled the blankets and sleeping bag over his head and tried again to sleep but sleep wouldn't come. In the darkness he asked himself the same question he asked every morning. If he were in Reno, eating breakfast at the Cal Neva, would he order coffee, French toast and bacon like a normal person or a Hornitos on the rocks? The same question and always the same answer: tequila on the rocks with a beer back.

He pushed off the covers and looked at the empty woodbin. The shack was frozen because he had a cracked woodstove that burned too fast and he hadn't brought in enough wood. But that was the way of mornings. Tequila instead of breakfast and Al staring at the empty woodbin, cursing himself until his bladder forced the day upon him.

The days on the derelict mining claim were always the same. He'd bring in firewood, drink coffee and eat breakfast, work on a song, take a nap, drink more coffee, and then set out on the same walk he took each afternoon. Dinner at dusk, which at this point was four p.m., and afterward he'd play guitar until he grew tired. He'd then get back in bed and read ten-year-old issues of *National Geographic* and *Sports Illustrated* by the light of a propane lantern and chase radio stations on a small battery-powered radio.

A day and a night.

The clock next to his bed read 6:33 a.m. Why couldn't he sleep until noon like he had most of his life? If he could, then half of his day would be over by the time he opened his eyes. But in old age he had trouble sleeping. He slept in fits and woke early, exhausted but awake. Everyone said getting up was easier the older you got, but that hadn't been the case in his life. It was a brawl each morning just to get his feet on the ground.

In wool socks and long underwear, he put on sweats, tennis shoes, a canvas coat, and walked outside carrying a plastic milk crate. Snow and wind blew into him and he made four trips to the shed to fill the woodbin. He started a fire and poured water into a saucepan from a two-gallon jug sitting on a shelf above the sink. He lit a Coleman propane camping stove and set the saucepan on it. The counter where the stove sat was made of two-by-fours and plywood and had a stainless-steel sink that drained through a PVC pipe down under the floor into a washout of mine tailings below. The assayer's shack had no electricity or running water. The toilet was an outhouse behind the shed.

On another shelf was a ceramic dish that held a silver wristwatch and two rings: a silver horseshoe with fake rubies that he put on his left index finger, and a silver horseshoe with fake diamonds that he put on his right. He took off his sweats, set them under the covers of the bed, and dressed in a pair of Levi's and a black-and-red-plaid Pendleton wool shirt. He brushed his teeth and, when the water had heated, made instant coffee.

A butterscotch-blond Telecaster sat under his bed, and leaned against a wall was a classical six-string guitar with a dented back that he'd gotten from a thrift shop in Las Vegas. At a Formica table near the woodstove, he worked on a song called 'The Night the Primadonna Club Burned Down', the lyrics written in a spiral notebook. There were a dozen of these notebooks stacked in a cardboard box in the corner of the room. Above the lyrics he had scribbled *Uncle Vern, Swimming in the River, Vern and Gail, Primadonna Club*, and a list of dates he had worked on the song.

*

As a kid his uncle Vern had been a goofball with no real rebellion or anger in him. In high school he'd played football in the fall and run track in the spring. He got decent grades and had a steady girlfriend named Shelby Rosen. When he graduated, his father helped get him on a line crew with the Southern Pacific Railroad, a union job he both liked and felt lucky to have.

During his first working year, he lived at home and slept in his same childhood room. When the second year came, he took a vacation to Tempe to see Shelby at Arizona State. He asked her to marry him at a Mexican restaurant called El Charro in Phoenix, and she accepted. The plan was that

she would finish that term of college, they'd get married, and she'd get her degree in Reno. Vern came home so excited that he rented them a one-bedroom house off Wells Avenue, moved in, and waited.

But he had never lived on his own, and as the year passed he became increasingly lonely. He began going out with a coworker to the bars and casinos of downtown Reno. Vern, who had never had a sip of alcohol in his life, began to drink. When Shelby returned to Reno that summer she ended their relationship after he had arrived at three of her family functions intoxicated. That following winter he was terminated from the Southern Pacific Railroad for drunkenness. His bosses had given him three warnings and had sent him to a company doctor. His bosses liked him, but the doctor deemed Vern incurable and he was let go. By twenty-three he had been fired from a half-dozen jobs and began the life of a day laborer. By twenty-six he had lost both parents and settled into washing dishes in casino restaurants and living in a weekly motel east of downtown called the Sandman.

A mile from that motel, Al and his mother lived in a duplex she owned on Humboldt Street, they on one side and a tenant on the other. Each unit had a bedroom, a bathroom, a kitchen, a living room and a basement. Their basement was Al's bedroom, a cramped concrete box of a room with a utility sink, a dresser, a desk, a bed and two small windows below the ceiling.

During the summer, when Al was a kid and out of school, Vern would stop by and they'd go to the river to swim. On the way they would buy two quarts of beer and a bottle of Orange Crush and go south of the River House Motor Hotel to a place on the Truckee River shaded with cottonwood trees and a deep pool for swimming. His uncle would be haggard and undone. He'd sit on a flat rock at the river's edge and speak in rambling half-thought-out sentences. But after the first quart and the first swim, he'd begin to recover. A window would appear, a clarity would come, and Vern would again be himself.

'Tell me what you did yesterday.'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'I just walked around downtown,' Al said.

'All day?'

'I guess.'

‘Who did you see?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Did you see Jimmy the Broom?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Does he still have a black eye?’

Al nodded.

‘Shit, I can’t believe someone would hit an old guy for sweeping a sidewalk. But that’s people for you.’ Vern looked at Al and smiled. ‘Man, I’m stuck washing dishes, and you got no job, and you get to walk around downtown all summer seeing people. You live the life.’

Al nodded.

‘Why are you so quiet, then?’

Al shrugged.

‘You get in trouble?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What did you do, cough too loud?’

‘She’s never happy with anything,’ Al whispered.

Vern took a long drink of beer. ‘Yeah, I know that.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, you know what they say about chicks who get on the straight and narrow?’

Al looked at him. ‘What do they say?’

‘That they leave every bit of their goodtime in the backseat. I mean the only friend your mom’s got is a nun, and you know them. They wear the black-and-white underwear, and they spend their time looking for people like you and me to beat up on. That’s the truth... Shit, Al ... your mom ... well ... someone grabbed her goodtime and ran off with it.’

Al dove into the river and swam around and then got onto a rock across from Vern and lay in the sun. But by then Vern was halfway through the second quart and the window began to close. By midday a new quart would be bought and Vern’s words would slur, his sentences would fall apart, and his logic would again fade. By evening he would be incoherent and stumbling drunk.

He was nearly beaten to death in an alley off Virginia Street when he was twenty-seven. His wallet and room key were stolen, the hearing in his right ear was damaged, his face battered. He never again looked the same. There was still a handsomeness to him, but the beating had aged him. His

youthfulness, the hope that he might pull out of it someday, began to disappear.

Two years later the phone in the duplex rang at three a.m. It had never rung that late before. Al's mother was on the phone less than five minutes. He could hear her footsteps in the kitchen afterward and could smell coffee brewing. He put on his clothes and went upstairs. His mother was in her robe smoking a cigarette, crying. Vern had been found robbed and beaten to death in an alley behind the El Cortez Hotel. Whoever had done it had taken his wallet, his boots and even his wool coat.

*

After months of him working on "The Night The Primadonna Club Burned Down," it had become the imagined romance between Vern and a cocktail waitress named Gail, named after the alcoholic actress Gail Russell. In the song she worked at the Primadonna Club, and it was there that she met and fell in love with Vern. They rented a house and moved in together. But one night the club's owner attacked her in a coat-check room. She came home sobbing, her uniform ripped and her underwear gone.

Vern waited a month and then robbed and burned the Primadonna Club to the ground. He and Gail left for San Francisco by train and lived in a suite at the Fairmont Hotel. They were never caught, never went broke, never became punch-drunk, and were always in love. Al wrote and crossed out lyrics and finally leaned the guitar against the table and fell back onto his bed. Jesus, he missed Vern. If there was one person besides Maxine he had never recovered from losing, it was him.

Vern had been Al's best friend and besides Mel, later on, his only father figure. He was an undependable drunk but he had never judged or criticized Al. He had always just seemed happy to see him. His whole face would light up when he did, like it was the best thing in his life just to see Al.

*

Outside the snow continued. Al got up and stood next to the stove. He took off his Pendleton shirt and jeans and hung them from nails on the wall next to his bed. The rings were set back in the dish on the shelf above the sink, and he put on a pair of thick mechanic coveralls, his boots, a canvas coat

and a bright orange ski cap and went outside.

2

The mine was in the high desert of central Nevada at 6,500 feet. It was thirty miles from the nearest ranch and fifty miles from the nearest town, Tonopah. On the porch outside the assayer's office, a rusted Chevron thermometer read ten degrees. Al went down the porch steps into an already darkening day. Snow dusted the canyon walls and gravel road, the wind blew, and he began the same walk he did each day: a mile to the remnants of the last miner's house and back.

In the early 1900s more than three hundred men had worked and lived at the mine. They had built makeshift homes along the canyon walls. Over the following decades the mine had opened and closed four different times before being decommissioned in 1956 and left abandoned.

Al passed the fragments of three different brick buildings and then the mine itself, where a yellow engineless 1960s school bus was shoved vertically into the main shaft. On the opposite side of the canyon were the remains of a half-dozen other buildings. Below them, pushed into a gully, was a burned-out 1980s travel trailer that his great-uncle Mel and his dog, Curly, had escaped from one night when its propane heater had caught fire.

It was midday when Al made it to the last structure, a wooden storage shed caved into itself. He took a pocketknife from his coat and notched a line into a four-by-four stud next to over eighteen hundred other small notches. For nearly five years he had done this same walk. Every day he wasn't too sick or depressed or the weather didn't forbid him, he walked.

The woodshed next to the assayer's office was half full of cottonwood, pine and aspen logs. When Al came back from the walk he made three trips filling the bin by the stove. He then carried his spare two-gallon water jug to the spring twenty yards behind the office. Underneath a metal cover he dipped the jug into the four-foot-round concrete pipe his great-uncle had installed. Why it never froze completely, Al didn't know, but even when the temperature was below zero, only a thin layer of ice covered the spring water.

Inside he took off his coat and coveralls, put on sweats, relit the woodstove, and sat in the duct-taped vinyl recliner next to it. In a spiral notebook he worked on the lyrics to a song called 'Black Thoughts I Only See'. Above the title he had written *Mexicali, Dog, The Falling Apart Years, The Wall*. The band he was in at the time, the Gold 'n Silver Gang, had been on the road for two weeks when they stopped at the Little Acorn Casino outside of Campo, California, for a three-night engagement. The morning of the second day the band decided to drive to the border town of Mexicali. The band members, all under thirty, wanted to find a red-light district. Al, who had just turned fifty-six, had no interest and decided to walk the streets of Mexicali as a tourist.

He drank daytime beers, looked in shops, and sat for a long time in a courtyard. For lunch he ate at a sidewalk restaurant on the edge of the tourist area. It was then that he saw a dog across the street. A mutt-shepherd that was brown and black and white in color and had one ear that stood up and one that flopped over. He watched the dog as it lay down in the shade of a white stucco building, panting in the midday heat. Even as cars drove by and people passed, the dog stared at Al and Al stared at the dog. But his meal came and he ate and soon he forgot about the dog across the street.

It was hours later, as he headed toward the border gate to meet the band, that he saw it again. By then he had gone in and out of a half-dozen stores, drunk in two bars, and crossed a dozen streets. He stood near the twenty-foot-tall rust-colored border fence, knelt down, and invited the dog to him. And the dog came. It had mange and was underweight, one of its eyes was clouded with goo, and it had a thick pink scar along its muzzle.

Al spoke to the dog and began to pet it along its neck. The dog licked his arm. Time stopped. It was as though the dog and Al were the only ones alive. The chaos and sadness of the outside world disappeared around them. They were just there, together. But a group of American tourists passed. The sidewalk was narrow and a man with a walker bumped into Al and an obese woman in a pink Disneyland T-shirt, white pants and tennis shoes brushed against the mutt and screamed.

The dog ran off.

Al decided then he would save it. He would bring the dog back with him. So instead of going to the van to meet the band at the scheduled time, he turned from the border gate and headed back into Mexicali. For two

hours he frantically searched the streets and alleys and courtyards, but he never again saw the dog. It had vanished. When he got back to the van, the band members wouldn't speak to him for being so late. He was docked a hundred dollars and put on probation, and they barely made it in time to that night's gig.

Al put down the pen and read the lyrics.

Black Thoughts I Only See

A man finds a dog in Mexicali, Mexico, half dead and starving
He sneaks it across the border hidden in his truck
For months he nurses it back from dying
But the dog has never trusted anyone and escapes the first chance he
sees
The man stays up all night worried and searching
The dog wants to go back to the man but gets lost in the gullies
Three days on the run and he gets shot by some kids hunting
He hides in the brush and cries for the man, the only friend in his life
he's ever seen
While the man puts up flyers in laundromats and stores and always
keeps searching
Black thoughts are again haunting me
Black thoughts I only see
Black thoughts, a bottle, and memories of Maxine

It was dusk when he woke. The day was over. The recliner creaked as he stood, and outside the wind continued to howl. He opened a can of Campbell's condensed chicken noodle soup, put it in a saucepan, added water, and heated it on the Coleman stove. He ate and loaded the stove with wood and got into bed and read *National Geographic* by the light of the lantern.

3

At three a.m. he woke. He turned the radio on and found a Mexican station out of Las Vegas, and Los Tigres del Norte played ‘*Contrabando y Traición*’. It was a tune he knew well, and in the polka sound of the accordion he tried to breathe and disappear into the song’s story: a corrido about a couple, a man and a woman, who sneak drugs across the US border. They drive to Los Angeles and sell the drugs, get the money, and don’t get caught. They win. But the man tells the woman he’s leaving her, that he has another girlfriend in the States. A girlfriend who is his true love. The woman is so blindsided and devastated that she shoots the man, takes the money, and runs.

By the time the song ended, Al was wide awake and his mind fell to the darkness that had plagued him each night at that time for as long as he could remember. He had heard that if you didn’t have a job, if you were alone and at home, the suicide hour was two p.m. The middle of the day, hours before night and the relief of sleep. A time of heat and exhaustion in the summer, and lethargy and loneliness in winter. But for Al, the suicide hour had always been three a.m. The night prison, he called it.

His second wife, Maxine, had told him that when the night prison found her she would force herself to get up and either watch TV or go to the kitchen and eat. She told him that nothing good came from staying in bed and having darkness lead you down one hall and then another and another until you were lost.

But Al knew thinking of Maxine was only another room in his night prison, so he lit the bedside lantern. He put on his tennis shoes and headlamp and went outside to find the sky clear and blanketed with stars. He made two trips for wood, started a fire, and put water on for coffee. He changed into his Levi’s and Pendleton shirt, put the rings on his fingers, and sat at the table with his guitar, a notebook and a cup of coffee. He worked on a half-finished song called ‘The Night Buck Owens Came to Town’. In the right corner of the page he had written *14-14-14, Pontiac*

Grand Prix, 1959–'60, and Me and Mom in the Kitchen.

*

At fourteen Al was six feet three inches tall, his hair jet black and his eyes light blue. His face was dotted with acne and he weighed a hundred and thirteen pounds. His body was his constant embarrassment. Just undressing in PE revealed to all the rivers of blue veins under his skin and the bones of his skeletal frame.

Fourteen was also the year he experienced his first prolonged mental anguish over the death of his uncle Vern. Within a week of hearing the news he became paralyzed in a sort of panic fit that wouldn't abate. He couldn't sleep and had no appetite or energy. Vern had been not only his uncle but also his best friend and only confidant. His mother had refused to talk about her brother, so Al never told her or anyone how broken he was by the loss or admitted the panic and sadness that followed his uncle's death.

Fourteen was also the year his mother's part-time boyfriend, Herb Marks, stopped in front of the duplex in a white Pontiac Grand Prix. From the kitchen window Al and his mother saw him pull up, and Al grabbed his coat and left. Inside, the car was warm and had a white leather interior and clear plastic floor mats covering white carpet. Herb, a bulky bald man with a waxed mustache, owned three auto-parts stores and smoked two cigarettes on the drive to John Ascuaga's Nugget to see Buck Owens and the Buckaroos.

This was years before Buck was 'Hee Haw Owens', but even so the casino's smaller main-floor lounge was full, and the band came to the stage in sparkling blue Nudie suits. Buck grinned his big white toothy smile and said witty things between songs. The Buckaroos played with a sort of controlled abandon and Buck acted like he was the happiest man who had ever lived on earth.

Maybe it was because Al's mother and Vern had always had the country station on, or maybe it was because he'd never been to a live music show before, but seeing Buck Owens that night became a marker for everything after. It wasn't the suits or the adulation that came from being onstage that attracted him. Nor the idea of money or fame. It was that when they played, he disappeared. When they played, suddenly Al wasn't