The Robbery

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The Robbery
By Randy Kohltaufer

Our white house and red barn sat 5 miles out of Eskridge, Kansas. Our house wasn’t big, and as far back as I could remember my life was punctuated by my drunken father stumbling home to rest a spell before he took off on another alcoholic binge. Sometimes he’d be gone for weeks, so ever since we were old enough to walk my brother Ernest and I had become the “men” of the house. When the Great Depression came things became rough. My mother worked tirelessly to supply the bare necessities for our family, and we kids worked at any jobs we could find in order to make a few pennies; back then we could buy skim milk for two cents a gallon, and a loaf of bread for a nickel.

When I was a young teenager, my mother had somehow been able to scrape enough money together to buy me a small .22 caliber rifle. I had been wanting one for a long time and she had known it. This gun was my pride possession and I kept it hung from two nails which I had pounded into the wall of my room. Every day after work I would take that gun down and head out across the fields. Those days I would carry a bag of bottles and cans with me. There was a small cluster of little trees not too far from the house and it was there that I played my games. I would place the bottles and cans in the limbs of the trees. Then, walking off twenty paces I would turn and stare down my prey. I would imagine I was one of those cool-eyed cowboys that I would listen to on the radio down at Van’s filling station. Calm and composed, I’d quickly pull my rifle up and draw a bead on the cans. Bang! The can would fly out of the tree and I would snicker and spit just like the cowboy on the radio. I was the coolest character in the West. I had gunned down at least 100 bad guys in my imagination. Finally, after finishing off the last hombre, I would gather my things and head home a weathered old cowboy coming in from the range.

One particular night it was raining something fierce. On these type of nights it had become sort of a tradition for me to stop in and warm myself while visiting with my good friend Van who owned and operated the gas station about 1/4 a mile down the road from our house. Van was about fifty years old, and spending time with him made me yearn for the day when my father would return without a liquor bottle wedged in his hand. Old Van and me would sit around the station listening to radio programs, talking about baseball, and enjoying a couple of Coca-Colas that Van would supply from the cooler. On this particular night I had just left the station and was heading for home when a car passed me without its headlights on. It was moving slowly toward the station and as I peered through the pouring rain I could see two men in the car. For a moment, I didn’t think anything of it, and then my young mind began to run wild. I began to imagine the two men were robbers and poor Van was to be their victim. Finally, my curiosity got the better of me and I wheeled around and headed for the station at a run. A minute later I stood on the road panting and closely observing the scene that I now encountered at the filling station. The car had indeed pulled up to the station and just as I had feared there seemed to be a robbery in progress. Squeezing my eyes in order to see through the darkness and rain I gaped as I saw one man standing behind a pole outside of the station, in his right hand he held a revolver. My thoughts racing, I turned and ran toward home as fast as my feet would carry me. As I ran I could only think of one thing “I’m not gonna let ’em kill Van.”

I reached the front porch of my house and took the first three steps in one jump, busting through the front door my words began to spew from my mouth in uncontrollable emotion. “Maw, there are robbers at Van’s station! One is standin’ behind a pole as a look out. I’m gonna go down there and shoot ’em in the back. I’m not gonna let ’em kill Van!”

My mother, tired from another long day, looked at me sternly. “You’re not going anywhere, young man.” she said. “If there is trouble down at the filling station it’s for the law to handle. You’re too young to go running around sticking your nose into men’s business.”

“But Maw! You don’t understand, Van could be gettin’ shot right now! It’s just not right. He’s my friend.” I felt the tears begin to well up behind my eyes.

My mother flashed me a vicious look. “I said no, boy! Don’t you dare stand there and tell me what’s right and what’s not. I’ve seen my share of wrong, and now I’m telling you to stay put!” From the look in her eye I knew there would be no more discussion about the matter so I went storming into my room.

I threw myself onto the bed in both sorrow and rage. I knew that if I could just get down to the station with my gun I could save Van. My mother didn’t seem to care that my best friend was in terrible danger. I looked up at the gun hanging on the wall. It might be too late already. It could already be over and Van could be... dead. I shuddered at the thought that it might be true.
the thought. What did my mom know about man stuff, anyway? She hadn't seen me gun down the bottles and cans from the trees. I could be back down there in minutes, aim my rifle at that one behind the pole and BANG! It would be just like shootin' a bottle from the tree. That was it. I couldn’t stand it. I grabbed the gun from its resting place. I hurried to my window and silently slipped out into the pouring rain.

Again I was running. I held the cold rifle in my right hand and ran so hard my lungs were burning after the first 50 yards, but I pushed on, the adrenaline pumping through me. Finally, I reached the station. I peered through the rain and breathed a sigh of relief as I noticed that the man was still behind the pole. “That has to be their lookout,” I thought. There was an old broken down Ford in the lot. If I could get behind it, I would have a perfect shot at both the man behind the pole and anyone who might try to leave the station and get back into the robber's car. Quickly, I moved toward the car as fast and as silently as I could. “He’s not doing a very good job, for a lookout,” I thought to myself, as I noticed that the man was facing the other direction and intently watching the front of the store. I flopped onto my knees in the mud behind the old Ford. This was it. I could take out that man with a single bullet to the head. I raised my gun. Squinting I used the sight to draw a bead on the man’s head. I moved the gun around a bit looking for the best area to strike the man’s head. Finally, I found it. It was just the right place. All I had to do now was pull the trigger and that man would cease to exist. That thought stuck in my mind. My hand began to quiver. I tried to imagine a bottle in a tree. It didn’t work. There was a man in my sights, not a bottle. My finger tightened on the trigger. “Just pull it! I screamed to myself. I have to save Van!” But I didn’t. I knelt there in the rain and the mud holding a firm grip on the trigger. My stomach began to ache and I started to feel sick. Finally, I lowered the gun. I began to bawl like a little baby. I dropped the gun in the mud and sat with my back to the Ford.

“I’m sorry, Van.” I said to myself. “I can’t do it. I let you down.”

Just then I heard a voice. I turned back around and faced the filling station. It was coming from the man behind the pole.

“Hey, you in there! This is the last time I’m gonna tell ya. This is sheriff Tate out here. I got my gun aimed at the door. You boys try anything but comin’ out with your hands up and I’m sure as Hell gonna kill ya where ya stand! I’m in a Hell of a bad mood about being out in this Damn rain, so I’d just as soon ya come out shootin’ so I don’t have to deal with lockin’ ya up. I’ll just have Larry Dean come over and throw ya in his hearse. I hear he needs the business anyway...”

“Okay. Okay. We’re comin’ out, just don’t shoot!” A voice hollered from inside the station.

My stomach turned. I sat in the mud on hands and knees and vomited. I had almost killed the sheriff. I kept retching until there was nothing left in my stomach. I had almost ruined everything. I rose to my full height and noticed that two frightened young men were moving out of the station with their hands up. The sheriff stayed behind the pole and gave them directions to get down on their knees. Van now stood in the doorway of the station watching the scene. As I turned, I thought I saw him looking at me. But it was dark and raining, and I couldn’t be sure. I slowly walked home hoping the sting of my mothers wooden spoon would calm the horrible feeling that pounded in my heart.

Almost twenty years later, I was living in St. Louis when a package arrived one day. The note that came with the package read:

Dear Mr. Gilbert,

My father Van Swanson died last Wednesday. He often talked of you and thought highly of you. His will instructed me to send you this package in the event of his death. I wish you the best of luck. God bless.

Samuel Swanson

I opened the long narrow box and looked inside. Sitting there in the box, shiny as the day it was bought, was my old rifle I had left in the mud that night. Sitting on top of the rifle was a card. I opened it. “Thought you might like this back someday. Thank you for your concern. I’m proud of you. Love Van” I read to myself. I felt a tear begin to form, and decided I better get some nails. After all, I had a gun to hang up.