These Three in Texas

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INT. TEXAS DINER (1927) (LATE MORNING)

Which appears very ordinary for this period and region, though quite darker inside than the scorching sunlight. Fairly quiet.

FADE IN on DEL, medium built man who just hit forty-five; oily, faded flannel shirt, jeans, and Stetson, sits at a booth. He gazes out the window, eyes parted some. Lit cigarette between fingers, arms crossed over table. Light guest count. With a strong voice:

DEL (V.O.)

As da year nineteen-fourty-nine came to close, my daddy got hisself layed by da heels into da county jail fur four days--in da State penitentiary an extra forty years. High speed pursuit lasted fifteen minute, an' he even didn't hurt nobody.

(beat)

Some time after Jim's closed fur business, my daddy broke da glass pane on da front door, nabbed two bottles'a liquor, "hell why not make em three, we're here ain't we," an' booked out.

(beat)

Reckon I furgot to say he had his car half mile ways from Jim's! He ran through near ever grimy street to get home. An' then when daddy made it to his street—dat is, our street—round da bend sat a patrol car. Just sat, mindin' its own. Daddy took on a runnin' to da front door. "Ain't no coppa takin' my liqa" he says.

Na member 'im bangin' on da front door, yellin at it, "Open up goddamn it!" But we was a sleepin'. 'Course Mama was a light sleeper, then I reckon she musta heard 'im first time but out'a fe'a lay there a minute, maybe two.

(beat)

Da deputies says dat maybe suh-mh' came loose from his tinker, or he coulda been that man who ran from da nut house they was broadcastin' to us weeks ago. Reckon that's a point... Got out'a bed, looked out da winda an' saw 'im hide one'a da bottles behind da broom our nigger used to sweep da porch with.

He takes notice of the clock. 11:59

DEL (V.O.)

Wale, noon's time my daddy gets out of da penitentiary an' back into free society. S'bin forty years.

(beat)

I nevers 'plained how he got all them years. Was cause'a two thangs. Da law-yers fur da State says they got da evidance Jim's shop been robbed heavy an' two, top of it, a ten-year'ol girl got kilt. Hell that don't sit pretty fur my Pa, I reckon. But dat sho ain't like my Pa, I reckon also. Thang was, my Pa don't even have a gun, or a knife, or any kinda weapon on 'im dat hapless night. This neva made sense who kilt that girl. Da law-yers says he smashed da ligour bottle over her nut, sometin' or other. Daddy dropped off through all dat litigation.

They was like buzzin' bees in da court, prolly gave 'im an ache' in da head...sho gave me an ache' in da head...

He looks up at the clock: 12:01

DEL (V.O.)

Uncle Cordell offered his services as a private investigator. He came a knockin' one rainy night. Mama an' I was grubbin' supper. Knocks took da wind out'a da nigger. He stepped inside pourin' all da rain water out from his hat on da carpet when he inter-duced hisself. He was speakin' how he'd been more than willin' to offer hisself fur an anal investigation -- s'what he called it -- of this here unjustly matter dats accorded my daddy. An' as a man of good religion, he oughta do it with-out charge, given to it with-out interfurance with da law.

(beat)

Mama gave em some of dat money she lay aside fur my future schoolin'. "With-out charge, ma'am!" he'd say an' kinda grinned. He grinned a lot, now dat it's commin' back. Turned it down once, twice, three times. He called hisself a brotha, an' a servant of his imprisoned brotha, an' that he ought'na an' would'na take our money.

(beat)

'Bout five minutes passed an' he done took it in da course'a explainin' suh-mh' I couldn't understand. By da look on Mama's face, I reckon neither d'she.

(beat)

Wale at any rate, we nevers heard more'a him. I asked Mama 'bout it once an' she just kept on starin' at da socks she was a knittin' fur daddy...Was gettin' cold dat time... I learned suh-mh valuable. Nevers trust a man with a handlebar moustache.

His smoke's cut short. He fishes another cigarette through the open slit in the box in his shirt pocket. He gives the clock another glance: 12:03

Then snaps the cigarette on his lip, picks up the lighter on the table and set fire under the stick.

DEL (V.O.)

Daddy, he cursed 'bout twices -shouted matter'a fact -- says, "Goddamn it son, I ain't even haves a brotha." Turns out, I really oughtn'a trust a man with a handlebar moustache. Then 'bout two months passed, I saw Uncle Cordell...I mean da Cordell-fella, his pitcher in da paper, an' showed Mama, an' it says he kilt some girl down in Edinburg. Mama says she don't recognize da man in da pitcher. Was I ever at sixes an' sevens! I showed da nigger an' she says da same...Reckon then I mighta been drinkin'.

(beat)

Promised daddy dat Mista Cordell would get his. An' what's go'n happ'm, daddy'd says, decides da Lord.

(beat)

'Bout dat high speed pursuit...When da deputies come near daddy fur a rou-teen questionin', he rushes to da wheels an' get inside an' try to get 'er runnin' but she'd just cough an' die out. They try to get 'im out but he run out da other door full split. One'a da deputies run after 'im, yells at da other, an' he kinda run back an' furth, at sixes an' sevens I reckon, but sure enough he get back to da patrol car an' turns da sirens on, an' pursues my daddy. I see 'im round da bend an' da other deputy's yellin' at 'im. So he get to da deputy an' pick 'im up an' do after my daddy...Lasted fifteen minute.

The door from the street opens. Del turns to it.

A tall, lanky gentleman in his fifties, donning a bowler hat and Western gentleman's suit and boots, crosses to the register. A curved wooden tobacco pipe hangs at the corner of his lip. A handlebar moustache combed to a T. This is UNCLE CORDELL.

DEL (V.O.)

Later I finds out suh-mh' real darn interestin' 'bout dat Cordell fella. Be damned when you hears it.

Del gets up. Cordell sits himself at the counter beside the register and gestures to a man down the counter, taking care of another customer.

Del walks past Cordell and veers to the washrooms, disappears.

CORDELL

(formal)

Please, very black and very fast. I have an important train to catch.

The man behind the counter, PIFF (55), nods and obliges with his request.

DEL (V.O.)

Mista Cordell, so says da papers, was a confidence man. We came only later to find this 'bout 'im an' his monkey business. A nigger worked with 'im -- jointly -- an' he was da fireworks. Folks says he could talk like a white man could preach a sermon. Mighty dandy nigger. Wore like a gentleman. Den sometime later, caint member da year, nigger was tied to a tree an' impaled through da stomach wit'a jimmy bar. Nailed like pitchers. An' he was alive too. Yep, sho was. Not a soul in town had any idea who done it to 'im. Some says Cordell done it -- did 'im dirt -- an' some says some niggers done it. All da niggers hated d'im. They hated 'im and they spit on their hand then slap it across his face. Anyways, he died days later.

The front door opens and a man walks through. He is a hard lived old man of late sixty, shoulder length grassy, oily hair, the color of wet sand, full on grassy beard growing out of his lower face. Eyes carry bags; nails carry dirt.

He drags his feet across the tiles headed to a stool beside Cordell.

DEL (V.O.)

Daddy, bein' all wet behind da ears, put dough into dat monkey business.

The old man sits beside him.

OLD MAN

Mornin' Mr. Stranger.

Cordell turns, and stares dubiously.

DEL (V.O.)

And dats wheres it all 'gan ta fall apart at the seams.

Cordell's face lights up:

CORDELL

(Maundered)

Son of a fuckin' sea cook! It's Sam fuckin' Wells. God's only son! (Takes the pipe out of his mouth -- coherent) I tell all my sons that Sam, I

cross my heart.

SAM

I reckon you do, Frank.

CORDELL

Gee, it is simply mighty fine to hear from you, brother. Mighty fine. So tell me...what's been?

SAM

Got out.

CORDELL

(Beat)

Got out?

SAM

The pen.

Piff arrives with Cordell's coffee. Cordell takes it.

CORDELL

Ohhhhh! Right! The penitentiary! Congratulations is in order, brother! Yes sir. I salute you.

(Does so)

You made it out in one piece I see.

The one up north has got cannibal fellows. It has been rumored but...

(grins)

it is believable. And Mary... you are feeding the woman I presume?

SAM

Not in the pen.

CORDELL

Oh, yes, naturally.

SAM

Or from the pen.

CORDELL

No, I certainly would not assume.

SAM

But she's doin' wale I reckon. (grins)

CORDELL

(grins back)

...Mighty right! Yes. Well you know, brother, my family is fed by the sweat of my brow. So I took a job in Montana but what do I want to bore you with those details, no... But every place, brother, every place I have been on God's good land I have been turned over like a beef patty. So naturally, these circumstances forced a man of my religion to turn to means -- good Lord I said it again, forgive me --

(Looks up)

Lord. Forgive me.

(Back to Sam)

Circumstances left to thy heavenly father have bless-ed me with the gift of gab and the road to spreading the good word of the Lord is bright, bright, bright with opportunity! Bright enough to blind a silly sinner, as the old man says.

(grins a beat) Are you ready?

SAM

...Fur what?

CORDELL

For what?! To get on that road, brother! Now, there is no point in walking on it all alone. Notably now that you left the penitentiary. Listen, with the hand of Jesus by your side, no longer will you turn to transgression. I guarantee it. I guarantee it so much I would lay money on it. Gladly. What do you say, my dee-vout brother? I got a bible laying inside my briefcase, full of blessings and alleluias.

SAM

Maybe not 'day, Frank.

CORDELL

(Leans in)

Would like to know what it smells like?

SAM

Wale...I reckon yous tell me anyway.

CORDELL

Like that morning newspaper, brother. Fresh as fish and ready to be read.

SAM

Pappy all-ways used'is paper in the can.

Cordell doesn't know how to respond.

SAM

Frank, how 'bout you lemme say suh-mh'...you know...it been forty years. You member?

CORDELL

Yes, naturally I remember.

SAM

An' two, I told'ja I'd find'ja.

Beat then Cordell bursts into laughter:

CORDELL

Brother, I tell you. You are five inches short of a clown but you sure stole his tricks. Bravo, my good man, bravo!

SAM

S'right, Frank.

CORDELL

Well, what is the plan my dee-vout brother? Would you like to lay the law on my wrists and drag me out to the penitentiary?

SAM

Frank, Lord decides what's go'n happ'm.

Cordell sips from his coffee.

CORDELL

That is correct.

Sam waits for him to set the cup back down, eyes following the motion.

SAM

Ya kilt da girl, didn't ya?

A beat.

Cordell turns to Sam.

CORDELL

(grins)

Sam, huh-huh, you devil...

(chuckles)

Have I told you the story about the fox and the hare?

No answer.

CORDELL

Well, it goes like this -- oh! You don't mind if I tell it, would you?

No answer.

CORDELL

Splendid! The fox is a carnivorous animal that must feast on little creatures to survive. It wanders the woods, digs its home in the ground, so on , so forth. But, when its little stomach begins to growl, it hunts. It must. And to remedy the growl, it feasts on a furry little animal such as a hare. Now, brother, here comes the hare. Minding its own little business, hopping along dandelions, eating a veggie here, eating a veggie there. And then comes the fox. The fox sees the hare. And the hare knows the fox is watching. It feels the fox...and waits. Why doesn't it run? Why should it?

Do you think the hare is going to have a conversation with the fox, explain its way out of the fox's delicious feast? No, no. It will be eaten. It will stay put and will be eaten by the vicious carnivore, the fox. That's how God made the world, brother. You've got your hares and you've got your foxes. It's not because you're afraid I'm going to kill you. See, you are afraid... But you can't stop it. You simply can't.

(Cordell sips from the mug)

A beat.

SAM

Ya kilt da girl.

CORDELL

(grins and snickers)

...Sam --

SAM

I ain't finished! Ya kilt da girl, an' you took those cases'a liquor, an' you kilt'er cause she saw ya when you was on it. Ain't dat right? Could'na let'er alone. An' sure enough ya done took me for an apple.

Cordell mulls it over.

CORDELL

Perhaps it happened as you suggest. But Sam, look, what is the difference? You are here, I am here, we are gay and -- oh, you will have to pardon me. I have an important train to catch. I must not be late now.

From behind Cordell we see Del, revolver lies across his palm. He places his free hand on Cordell's shoulder.

DEL

Time's come Mista Cordell, fur Pa an' yous to take'a pistol an' settle.

Cordell's looking at the pistol in Del's hand, tense-faced.

SAM

Lord decides what's go'n happ'm.

A beat.

CORDELL

(chuckles)

Sam!

SAM

Pik it up.

A beat.

CORDELL

(dead pan)

...All right.

Reaches for the pistol in Del's hand.

SAM

Outside Frank. Foaks work hard 'round here. Less don't have 'em clean up our mess.

CORDELL

...Yes. I suppose you are right.

Cordell drops his hand over the pistol, looks up at Del for a beat.

Del puts his hand over Cordell's.

DEL

C'mon. Door's dat way.

Cordell, while not liking this at all obliges nonetheless.

EXT. TEXAS DINER (NOON)

We see that it is small from the outside. The sun scorches the country road and the few vehicles parked about. The road stretches the horizon, lifeless.

Del is behind Cordell, watching his every move. Sam is making his final steps at the "marked" spot, some twenty feet away. A holster at his side, pistol in it.

He turns slowly to face Cordell. Del moves his eyes from Sam to the back of Cordell's head, leans in:

DEL

(sotto voce)

Play right Mista Cordell.

Cordell gulps. Del steps back and to the side, eyes peeled on Cordell with hand over holstered pistol.

DEL

Play right.

Cordell's eyes draw near on Del -- poker faced. He's going to play it right, alright. Sam's eyes are on Cordell.

Cordell's head turns slowly from Del to Sam. The standoff has begun. Sam runs slowly his tongue across his upper teeth, eyes drawing near.

Some folks exit the diner. Del's eyes shift to them then quickly back to Cordell. He motions with his hand:

DEL

Inside foaks...Watch inside.

They turn and go back in, not saying a word.

A beat.

CORDELL

(sotto voce)

What will you do when I kill your Pops, boy?..Will you shoot me?

DEL

...'F I want.

CORDELL

Mmm-hmm... You know, he is an old man. Are you betting yourself he would not miss?

DEL

I ain't.

CORDELL

Play it right, boy. If your Pops misses, you will not shoot.

Del doesn't respond.

CORDELL

(In his normal voice)

Gentlemen. I regret that we did not settle this much much more formally-

Cordell's hand races for his pistol, Sam's too.

BANG BANG.

Both are standing inert. Then Sam takes a step forward and smashes to the ground. Dirt rises.

Del's eyes shift to Sam then back to Cordell. He doesn't say anything. Cordell turns to face Del, holstering his pistol.

CORDELL

Well... It appears the show has come to a close. I will be on my way now.

Del remains inert, takes two beats.

CORDELL

(Picking up his briefcase)
I have got an important train to catch.

Then takes a step forward.

DEL

Show's ain't ova, Mista Cordell.

Crosses to the "marked spot" beside his father's body. Cordell watches him. Del turns around.

DEL

Daddy ain't takin' his dirt nap by hisself.

Cordell drops the case to the ground. Dirt rises. Their eyes, drawn together, kept on each other. Show's still goin'.

Long beat between them. Nothing but the soft wind.

Tiny beads of sweat run from their foreheads down their faces.

Suddenly:

DEL

Mista Cordell.

CORDELL

Yes sir.

DEL

Bullet's comin'-

BANG

Smoke trails out of Del's pointed pistol. Cordell keels over. His body smashes the ground, lifting dirt which after two beats, thins in the cool air.

Del keeps on Cordell without a single blink. The wind whistles.

The diner door CREAKS open. Del ignores it. He turns to Sam, and bends over the dead man's corpse. He grabs Sam's shoulder with a single hand and turns his around. His father's eyes look blankly at the sky.

The voice of a sixty-year-old local drawls:

OLD MAN'S VOICE

Sun, we done called da Sheriff. He be here any minute naw.

Del reaches under his father's corpse and grabs it by the armpits, lifts it and drags it away.

OLD MAN

Sun..!

Del moves toward a pickup.

OLD MAN

He belong to yuh?

DEL

Uh-huh.

OLD MAN

...Wale, wheres yuh go'n 'a take 'im?

Del looks up, stops, and looks at the man.

DEL

Home.

(Continues)

OLD MAN

Wale...

(Thinks)

Wale, what's he go'n do there? Sheriff's go'n come --

DEL

(Throwing the corpse in the back of the pickup)

He's dead so he prolly ain't go'n do much.

OLD MAN

Wale...den whata-ya wanna'm fur?

DEL

(Stops)

S'cuse me?

OLD MAN

Sun, whata-ya wanna'm fur?

DEL

(thinks)

Mean like money? Naw, I ain't
sellin' 'im. Sorry.

Del starts for the driver's door.

OLD MAN

Mean whata-ya wanna do 'im fur?

DEL

...I'm go'n bury 'im. Nuh-in' else I doin' to 'im.

The old man gapes dully. The pickup turns over.

OLD MAN

...Wale...Wale, reckon that's a point.

The pickup makes out of the lot. The old man gapes at it, as it rumbles down the empty road and condenses to a dot we slowly --

FADE OUT:

THE END