

Kansas

by B. E. Hopkins

For Christ's sake, you think you're not the hundredth person today asked me that? Just about everyone in town's asked me that. Well, it's a mess. Sure, it's a real goddamn mess. But I'm fine, I tell you. I mean, I got shook up a bit—I'm shook up even now a little, I guess—but I'm fine. And I don't wanna talk about it again tonight, all right? And that's all I got to say...

Don't get me wrong now. It ain't like Charlie Dean's my best friend in the world or something, but it ain't like I don't know him either. I known him for years he been coming in here. He lives right around the corner, come in every now and again to have a beer and, you know, chew the fat, maybe play a game of pool or such like. Mean pool player, too. That son of a bitch pool-sharked me first time ever I played him. Went double-or-nothing with me, saying he'd give me his pants if I beat him. Next game, he done beat the pants off *me*, son of a bitch. Yeah, he can sure shoot pool.

But he can shoot the shit even better than he can pool, talk about all the places he been and such like that. You know, every night he come in here, he'd walk over to that jukebox there and play the same damn songs. Nobody else in this place ever plays them

songs but Charlie. Most of them come in here listen to more modern stuff or whatever. You can always tell Charlie come in though. He always puts on his songs—“Walkin’ After Midnight” then “Crazy”—then yells about how there’s no good music in that goddamn jukebox but for Patsy Cline before ordering up a beer and a shot of Jack Daniel’s. In a single night, he might listen six or seven times to them two songs alone. He says he does it to keep the other guys from playing the horseshit they like, and I don’t blame him. All the same, I can’t stand Patsy Cline more’n five times a night at most. More often than not, by the end of the evening you’d find him back there in a booth or up here leaning against the bar here all drunk and shooting his mouth off about his days back out there in Kansas, and before long he’s practically crying listening to goddamn Patsy Cline, and singing along, barking like an old hound dog. *Ca-ray-zeee*—just like that, you know? And he’s all, *Caa-ray-zee, fuh feelin’ sooo blue*, and all like that. But he’s funny about it. He’d get up all drunk on his stool once he start hooting and shouting about “That velvet-throat bitch, Patsy Cline, howlin’ at the moon!” and how he wants to holler at the sorrowful moon along with her. Goddamn, he can be downright eloquent when he’s drunk...

Only ten o’clock, you say? Dammit, I better slow down. I tell you, I been putting them back practically all day long—much more’n usual. This morning when I got finished up, I went home, slept for two, three hours at most. Come in at five this evening, tired as all hell—took a shot of the ol’ Kentucky bird just to get me seeing straight. I got to close again tonight, too, since I told Young James—that’s my employee helped me out last night and this morning cleaning up... We call him Young James so as to not confuse him with his pa who’s in here almost every night. I gave him tonight off to rest from last

night and all, so I got to close tonight myself where's normally he'd be closing. I guess I been shook up all day, though, 'cause I been back here drinking more'n normal. Usually I have a few behind the bar here, but today I think I had well more'n just a few, you know what I'm saying? I swear, I so much as look back there and my hands practically set to shaking again—and I say to myself, "That calls for another." But I'm gonna be here tonight till two or three at least, so I best slow down drinking... How 'bout another for yourself there, friend?

James Senior was here last night, too, though he left pretty early. Says his wife gets ornery when he comes in past midnight on a school night. That's what he calls a weeknight, a school night. It was real nice of him to come in this morning to help me out. Gave me some advice, just in case... It's a little known fact, but James Starkey holds a law degree. You wouldn't think he knew a spot about the law—some of the trouble he's got himself into the past few years. It's true, though, he has a bona fide law degree. But I guess tarring people's roofs is just as profitable as law round here, specially when you're skimming some off the top for yourself. But that ain't none of my business how he conducts his affairs. Anyways, he gave me some good solid advice.

Anyway, Charlie and Elder James get on pretty good. One time the two of them sat right here next to where you're at for about five hours at a stretch watching TV. This is back before the big-screen got busted. Damn, I gotta get that thing fixed... Ed Banner broke it—I guess it's more'n six months gone by now—damn near kicked the screen in. "Fixin' it," he says. Anyhow, the two of them, Charlie and James Senior, are sitting here getting drunk together, and I'm down the other end of the bar there talking to Sam Wyatt, come in here to get away from his bitch wife. Two of them used to fight like cat and

dog—Sam and his wife, I mean—but that’s a whole nother story... Now, them two down here get the idea I ain’t watching what the hell they’re up to and start sticking their mouths right there under the Coors Light—that’s the nearest one they could reach—taking a mouthful at a time, thinking I ain’t seen ’em stealing my goddamn beer. My word, they thought they was the cleverest sons of bitches that night—till I done kicked them both out and told them never come back. ’Course, I let them come back after about a week, figuring they was just drunk and acting stupid, and I know I been drunk and done stupider things than they done that night. I don’t how long after that—oh, maybe a couple or three months—the two of them stopped talking to each other. It was months before they said a whole word to each other. It blew over though. We find them in here one night, both getting drunk. None of us was sure if they meant to make up or kill each other, but soon they’re back there singing Patsy Cline and fighting over who was the sorrier son of a bitch. Young James practically had to carry his pa out the bar that night—and we had to borrow Jake Nicodemus’s wheelbarrow, cart Charlie home.

Yeah, you see a lot of that kind of behavior in a place like this. I could tell you some stories, hell... Alcohol makes a man get silly as a woman, get you weeping and sobbing over a damn sad song, standing there arm in arm with the guy you called a bastard just an hour before. No harm in that, though—I reckon alcohol brought as many people together as it’s split up... I think I hear that Turkey gobbling back there on the shelf right now, matter of fact! You need another?

I guess even so, if I was to listen to Patsy Cline right now I might get a little teary myself. It’s a damn shame is all. A goddamn shame. Boy, I tell you, he come in here last night, though, he was fired up. More’n the time him and Ed come in, finish a bottle of

Old Number Seven between them. Yeah, he was real fired up last night, and ready to drink. Talking up a storm! Thing about Charlie, though, is you never see him get in a fight or try to hurt nobody. Drunk as he sometimes gets, as much as he shoots his mouth off now and again, you never get the feeling he's gonna do nothing. You know, he talks, but there's nothing to it. So when he come in here all fired up and talking shit, nobody thinks nothing of it. No harm in a guy like Charlie. I gave him his regular straight shot of Jack and bottle of Bud. Then Jake Nicodemus and Hal Coode and him all start comparing battle scars and such like that—stuff a bunch of guys are like to brag about while they're getting drunk and ignorant. Jake pulls the bandage off his thumb show everybody how he damn near cut his thumb off on the band saw the other day. "Ain't nothing but a cat scratch," Hal says. Near pulls his pants off to show us his bullet hole—like we ain't seen that enough times, we gotta see it again. Man, is he ever proud of that bullet hole! And Charlie there just starts laughing at the both of them, lifts up his shirt all clumsy like and says, "Shit, that's nothing. Take a look at this!" And he shows them his "string o' pearls"—that's what he calls it, a big old scar running up his belly almost clear round to his back. "Jesus H. Christ!" Hal yells, knowing he been bested. And Charlie just kind of smiles—like this, right?—and he runs his finger along the scar to show them just how long and white and ragged it is. And them other two can't keep their eyes off it, thinking how cut up a man must look when he gets his belly cut up that good. And Charlie starts in to telling his story about how that scar got there.

I heard a number of times he come in here with that story. He starts out telling how he used to live out in Kansas before he moved down here, how he spent his childhood out on the flat prairie lands and all that. He went in all kind of details—

describing to them what the corn look like out there, putting pictures of busted up old silos on the long horizon in their heads, telling them how the clouds roll cross the empty sky, and such like that. Hal Coode starts laughing, asking him about twisters and such, and Charlie told them about twisters, too. Then he says, about the time he was round nineteen, twenty years old, he been together about a year with a girlfriend of his, Sally. She's a sweet pretty little thing, he tells them—eyes blue as the Kansas sky, and just like that Kansas sky, big and clear but for when a cloud seem to pass over them unexpected. Now, I'm quoting him on that—about her eyes being like the sky. He always told it that way, planting a picture of Sally's big blue eyes in your head—kind of haunting, now I think on it, but kind of hokey, too. That's just what Jake said last night, matter of fact—he starts laughing at Sally's big blue Kansas sky eyes, calling them hokey, but Charlie just look at him real serious and Jake shut up and let him keep on with his story. One night, Charlie tells them, him and Sally spent some time drinking over at the bonfire with a bunch of friends, and afterwards he walked her back home. They're walking along some dark dirt road, drunk and holding hands and whatnot. They start kissing then and end up lying on top each other in the gully there along the road, rolling around in the dirt and all together. He just about thinks he'll make it with her there along that road— Well, all a sudden sweet Sally breaks down crying—soft like, sobbing or whatever and pushing him away some. Charlie asks her what's the matter and Sally says she don't wanna talk about it, forget about it. But he keeps on asking her, trying to be gentle and caring towards her. They set along that road for a few hours talking—smoked a whole pack of cigarettes between the two of them—and eventually he coax it out of her. None too surprising once she tells him, he says, but it's different hearing her say it, knowing it then

for sure. He'd noticed lots of times she got bruises on her back and such, and he always wondered about them. But then again she's a kind of rough-and-tumble country gal, and it's no surprise she gets a little black and blue pushing cattle or doing what all they do out there in Kansas. But there it is—she tells him all about her pa, how that black-hearted son of a bitch been beating and abusing her in all kinds a ways ever since her mother passed on however many years before. And now she's spilling it all out to him, all the details, and he's holding her there along that dusty road in the dark, tears in his eyes, telling her be quiet now and just let him hold her. Well, now he don't know what to do. He tells her come back with him back to his house, but she says no, she's gotta go home less she get it real good once she does go back. And Charlie says he's gonna take her away then real soon and all like that, but she just kind of laughs—not being mean, but just 'cause she knows he ain't got money to get either of them nowhere.

So he walks her home. The front porch light is on. He don't say much, figuring there ain't much else to say. She tells him don't worry—he tells her go inside and get to sleep, he'll think of something. He starts to walk away, but then he stops. Charlie notices her pa's bedroom light in the window's still on upstairs. That's when he sets to thinking. 'Course he been out all night drinking, listening to his girlfriend cry and all, so it ain't the best thinking he ever did. But he gets an idea, crouching there along the road looking up at the window. Soon enough, that light goes out. Charlie waits a little longer, then sneaks back up the house, and real quiet starts climbing up the side of the porch, up to that dark window. Right there aside the window once he slips in, right there lying in bed snoring up a storm is Sally's old man. He stirs a little in bed, and Charlie near shit himself, he says, but he waits a sec and takes a good long look at the bastard. Then, he says, there's

no waiting to decide—he just jumps on him, hands round the old bird’s neck, choking him near to death. But that old boy still has some kick left. He reaches over, grabs a paring knife or other such type of small knife he keeps on his bed stand next to his drinking glass and his comb and whatnot, and starts swinging that sucker like mad trying to get Charlie off him. Ends up cutting him up along the side near round his back, like I said. Charlie’s screaming and kicking, grabbing at the old man’s hand to get the knife away. Well, Charlie wrestles him to the ground and gets the knife out that old withered fist, and shoves it in the old man’s side. He starts howling and shaking, but soon enough stops and just lays there.

Now, after this part of the story, Charlie stops and looks at Hal and Jake—like this—and lets it set there a few minutes. Letting them kind of feel what it was like, the old man not moving off the floor. Charlie looks at them real serious, with a kind of frightful look in his eye, and Hal says, “Sounds to me that old man was asking for it,” and Jake there nods and says uh-huh. He don’t know if he killed the old man or no, Charlie tells them, but he ain’t about to stick around find out. He’s just about to jump back out the window when Sally come in the bedroom, shrieking and screaming when she sees her pa lying dead on the floor. Charlie comes back in, trying to calm her down. She near claws out his eyes as he’s pushing her back out that room. He tells her to get him something, he’s cut up the side and needs to wrap it. It ain’t too deep, but it’s long and it’ll leave a nice long scar. He runs himself and gets a towel from the toilet and wraps himself up to sop the blood up and such. Then he finds Sally standing there looking down at her pa on the floor, a fear in her eyes like he never seen, and he says to her, “Sally, don’t look at your pa that way...” But she turns on him and starts hollering again and

clawing, saying she's gonna call the police. Even threatens to run down and get her pa's gun. He looks at her, gauging if she means it, and he reckons she does. When she starts off down the stairs, he figures he best not wait to find out. He checks the old man's pants slung over a chair there by the bed, steals his wallet and his keys and near jumps out the window and off that porch roof when he hears her footsteps pounding back up them stairs. He gets in the old man's truck and drives off down that dusty road. It's near dawn now, Charlie says, telling them—to put the picture clear in their heads—how clear and empty the Kansas sky was that morning, how there wasn't nothing along that long horizon but the slightest bit of yellow sunrise off in the distance. Careering down that old dirt road, he says—he gets downright poetic once he's got a few in him—that's the freest moment of his life. That big sky and long road in front of him drove the thought of getting caught clear out his head, and he just laughed at the way the long horizon dipped at the ends—almost like he was looking at it from outer space or something, seeing the way the horizon curves down there a little at its edges. And here's how he finishes up—this is a nice one, innit?—he says, “That moment, I reckoned I knew all there is to know. I don't know it now, but looking out over the hood of that truck, I thought for sure I did. That's the first,” Charlie says, “the first and only time I ever felt really real—really alive...” Yessir, that's a nice one.

He tells them then, he drove clear across to Wichita before getting to a doctor. Too late by that time for stitches or such like—besides, he already near bled to death, and now the bleeding for the most part stopped. So they just put some stuff on it, told him keep it clean and try to see he don't rip it open any. Scarred up real nice, too, all knobby and white. That's what he calls it, the string o' pearls across his belly. It kind of looks

like a string of pearls, too—by God, and it truly does. Might as well be, for all it's worth to him. He loves that scar, and I'd say he got more mileage out of that story goes along with it than I did in my eighty-seven Ranger.

'Course, it's too bad that story of Charlie's is a load of horseshit—and I know 'cause he told me the real story. Now, I figure there's a lot about Charlie people are gonna be saying—there ain't no reason keeping this a secret. I don't know if he ever told anyone else round here the real story about that scar of his, but I'm gonna tell it to you if you wanna hear...

Now the true story behind that scar is he got it when he was working on a ranch somewhere along the Missouri border—and there was some other pretty farm girl working there alongside him. One time he got her to go on a date with him, and for the occasion he borrowed a truck from a friend of his to go into Atchison, what was the nearest town near there. He takes her into town to a movie and such, and maybe after that they go somewhere else, I don't know. Anyway, he gets her all drunk and takes her back home in his friend's truck. They get out the truck and they're talking there, and he tells her all confident and all to come in his place for another beer. Now, he told me, after all he done—real nice meal and taking her up to Atchison—she says she's real appreciative and all but she don't wanna move too fast and all like that. So he's all let down she won't come in with him for another beer and he says to her, "Honey"—I forget what he says her name was. I don't know he could recall her name, matter of fact... "Honey," he tells her, whatever her name is, "I ain't gonna take advantage of you or nothing"—even though he'd been trying all night to get her drunk so he could get in her pants. But anyway—then she's all, "Thanks, anyway. I should be getting home," and she gives him a little kiss and

starts walking back to where she lives. He stands there a few minutes watching her go, cussing to himself about what he done wrong and such like. Then, he says, he remembers he took off like a shot after her, and he caught up to her quick and kind of grabbed her there in the dark. She must a thought he was coming after her to do her wrong—well, you know what I mean... to rape her or whatever—but he swore he hadn’t thought of that, he was just drunk and clumsy and it was dark and he kind of ran into her hard and knocked her down. Well, hell, if that little girl didn’t nearly scratch his eyes out thinking he was gonna jump her bones out there in the field. He said she was the prettiest thing on the farm, and he’d a liked to a got with her, but that he wasn’t trying to force her to do nothing. When she run away fast as she could, he took off on after her again. She leapt over the fence at the end of the yard and kept on running, but Charlie, when he tried to clear it, he caught himself up on the crossbar and landed on the post there. Cut up his side—like you know already—split him right across the belly, near round to his back. And “Goddamn,” Charlie said to me, “that girl was an angel,” he said, smiling thinking about her. For all she thought he was trying to rape her, she still had the heart to help him off that fence and get him to a hospital.

Kind of ridiculous compared to the one he always tells, innit? I guess that’s why he stuck by the horseshit version. He told me the real story, I just shook my head. “You sure had me going all them times you told me about pretty little Sally and all that,” I told him. “It’s kind of sad to hear none of it’s true.” But, no, he tells me, it ain’t *all* a lie. “Go on believing in Sally,” he tells me, “‘cause she’s real as ever.” They were together a good long time out in Kansas—more’n a year. And he near made it with her along the roadside, and she cried and told him all he says she did. Only part ain’t true is what he

said about climbing up that porch and killing her pa. But he thought of doing it, and he stayed looking up at that window a good long while that night before he left. Come dawn, it wasn't off into the sunrise he drove, but just walked back up the road to his house, ate breakfast, and fell asleep half the day hung over. Few months later, the old man got sent to jail anyway, and Sally moved down to Biloxi to live with aunt of hers or something like that. But Charlie left Kansas before all that—hitchhiked around and such like a young man does when he's got no better place to be than out searching. Though I guess, much as he didn't say it, he might just as well been trying to get away from himself as find whatever he thought he was looking for.

He's never told me how he ended up here—just mentioned now and again different places along the way, a different girl or friend of his he thought he should write a letter to or give a call... I guess telling me the real story got him thinking about that part of himself again—and he told me then he ain't ever been more ashamed of anything more'n not having killed Sally's son-of-a-bitch pa. Ain't that a kick in the teeth! Nothing such a shame to him as that story not being the real truth. And I asked him why he told the real story then. He says he guessed he just wanted someone to know the real version. He was a little drunk that night, listening to Patsy Cline—near crying in his beer thinking back on all that, tell you the truth—and he says he just wanted someone to know how he never felt such a coward as then and how after that, he felt almost scared of his own cowardice. How under that big blue empty Kansas sky, what reminded him of Sally's eyes and all that, how he couldn't take the emptiness out there. Got to the point, running away from his himself, he was walking along a riverbank and found a dead dog by the water—and, he says, looking at that dog, flies buzzing around it and all, he almost wished

he could trade places with it... Don't know why he went and told me all that—none of *my* business—but I guess, like most people, he just needed any ol' person tell his past to.

Well, that's Charlie's string o' pearls for you. And now I think I'm gonna set myself up with another. How about you now? You look like you could use one more yourself.

Was I telling you about that? Well, hell, no harm telling you once I started, I guess. I guess I had enough tonight to loose up my tongue some—and truth to tell, I guess talking about it ain't so bad after all. What was I saying anyways?

Oh, yeah. So he come in here last night loaded for bear, telling his scar story to best Hal Coode's bullet hole. They set around telling stories and such for a few hours here at the bar. Charlie was cheerful till after he done near killed that bottle of Jack himself but for the four or five shots James Senior had before he left round about eleven thirty or so, get home to his old nag. They were right in the middle of it, too, when James left—Charlie'd got all riled up talking about getting out of town, moving along to God knows where and all like that. For a while, James there had him going, saying he's gonna lend Charlie the money he needs to help him take care of some of what's keeping him here. I'm plenty sure people're talking all over town about Charlie's trouble—but that ain't none of mine, discussing his business to people barely know him. Ain't none of mine, what trouble Charlie might a been in. Hell, tell you the truth, I never really asked in the first place, though anybody could see he was troubled by something. Truth to tell, only thing I think I really know about Charlie is that fence post story. But James Senior got him all hopeful—and the Jack got him dreaming some—so he got a little sore when James up and says, "Well, I better be getting home—it's a school night." And Charlie,

daydreaming there into his glass, looks up all hopeful and asks to make sure James Senior is serious about making him a loan—and James laughs kind of, not mean like but more like he thought Charlie knew they were just shooting the breeze and fooling around, and says, “What the hell you wanna leave this place for?” knowing full well why Charlie wants to leave—what all the people in this town this very day are probably talking about. Then Charlie gets all upset. He’s been drinking and all, and that ain’t no help. And he starts mumbling about James Senior being a son of a bitch, misleading him like he done. I near thought I’d see Charlie throw a punch for the first time in my life, but old James there calmed him down, saying “Whoa, whoa, whoa—why’s Jim Starkey all the sudden the bad guy? Ain’t I helped you out plenty times before?” And Charlie there, all gentleman-like, puts out his hand and shakes James Senior’s hand and apologizes for the name calling and such, and says he’s right, and thanks him. “I guess I’ll be here the rest of my life,” Charlie says to Jake and Hal after James leaves. “Guess I’ll be here the rest of my piece-of-shit life,” he says—he got tears in his eyes and all, and he walk over back there to that booth and set down, holding his head and crying. A while later he come up and ask me for another shot of Jack Daniel’s, and I say, “You already finished one bottle, near got in a fight, and set back there a half-hour crying—I think I gotta cut you off for the evening.” He’s welcome to stay, I tell him, and talk with us all, tell his stories and such, but, I say, “I think you’ve had enough for one night.” He just nodded—looked me in the eyes there and kind of smiled, leaning up against the bar here, and he says, “I’ll stay. If I gotta stay in this town,” he says, “I think I’ll stay right here. Right here with my best friend in the world.” And he kind of smiles at me like this... Jesus, I mean the way

he said it... But I just set to wiping off the bar, talking with Sam and Jake and Hal as Charlie set there at the bar smiling and crying over his empty glass.

About that time, he put on his Patsy Cline for what must a been the third or fourth time that evening and said he had to use the toilet. He walked back to the bar and asked me could I turn the music up a little louder for him. When I said no, telling him I was sick to goddamn death of Patsy for one night, he looked at me so serious—didn't say nothing, just looked at me—I kind of laughed, playing like I was just joking, and I turned the music up a c-hair for him. He went off to the toilet—humming and smiling. He patted ol' Sam there at the end of the bar on the shoulder and said good night to him. "Good night," he said.

Well, ten minutes or more went by and somebody says, "Where's Charlie Dean run off to?" "He's in the bathroom last I seen him," I said. "Less he snuck out again round the corner without paying his bill," Hal said, laughing and telling Jake how Charlie run out a couple times without paying his bar tab. Nobody'd seen him for ten, fifteen minutes or so. I was furious there for a minute, thinking that son of a bitch snuck past me without paying his goddamn tab. Then we hear Jake in the bathroom—he went in there just to see if Charlie had fallen in or something since I said I'd be pissed as hell I find out he left without paying again.

Then we heard Jake hollering loud as hell from the bathroom. "Call the police!" and "Get the police!" and I run in there, expecting to see God knows what...

Bathroom mirror broke. Blood and all that. I don't know. Awful. Goddamn, was it ever a mess. And I just set to shaking—I get all shook up right now just thinking about that sight.

I guess I just realized it right then. The last three or more songs been playing on that jukebox... I swear to God, if it wasn't for that jukebox in the other room, I think I'd a broke down right there in the bathroom. Charlie must a spent all his quarters. I went out and unplugged the goddamn thing, near crying myself—damn son of a bitch—wondering what the hell makes a man go and do a godawful thing like that—

Damn that son of a bitch! Poor son-of-a-bitch Charlie Dean, *God damn him!*