

A Cowboy's Last Tale **by Tony Vagneur**

(a story about Leo "Bubby" Light)

The bright, dancing eyes behind the big, almost comical smile, stuck on the ruddy face of a perennially tanned rancher will never leave my memory. Neither will I forget the soft, attractive features of a city-girl-moved-west, a woman who fell in love with the image of a man astride a horse, working cattle and telling wild tales, a woman who brought such images to life in her quest for happiness.

I suppose if you analyzed it, it could make your head hurt. He got to Denver once a year in the fall, at shipping time for his cows. He rode in the Rio Grande caboose, just 'cause that's the way it was done. That was back in the days when Denver was a true cow town – the rows of stockyards and meat packing houses located over by the Coliseum. Those were party times, and as a poem more or less says, the days when a “good cowpunch could oil up his insides.”

She found his rough life fascinating – the broncs, the wild cows, the mischievous smile and the generations of ranching his family represented in the valley – and it created a romance in her mind that she could not shake. And you have to know that the tender touch of a woman's love, the brush of her soft, blonde hair against his cheek, the pad of her light footsteps through his lonely house, the wetness of her kiss and the sigh of her surrender had to light him up like he was the most important man in the world.

It might have been the whirlwind romance of the area some years ago, something to still be talked about, but routine surgery at a city hospital back home turned into a nightmare for the young woman, leaving her paralyzed on one side. Such rare events are traumatic not only physically, but also mentally, and her recovery required a lengthy residence in the big city, close to her family.

It's difficult, especially when the love affair is new and no real commitments have been made, for two people to continue through an illness of such magnitude, particularly with hundreds of miles between them. But, and as perhaps no one knew, they kept the thread between them alive and didn't let go.

It was different afterwards, to be sure, but two people once touched by the unique vibrancy of a burning passion found it impossible to surrender it to the harshness of reality. In the miraculous continuation of a conversation put on hold 50 years ago, shortly after this story began, the woman recently confided to an intimate lady friend of mine that the relationship was still on, even in their 80s, and that he called her religiously from the ranch every Sunday morning, although he hadn't called for a while now. “Do you think he's OK?” was the tentative query.

As it sometimes happens, an old friend stopped by to see how he was doing, not so much because he liked him, but more from the fact they both belonged to the old-time ranching fraternity, a group so small anymore as to be almost nonexistent, and hell, you've got to take care of each other, if for no other reason than who else will?

It's not pretty, but old cowboys die kind of like their horses – hard and alone, their cries unheard. Oh, his buddy got him to the clinic, all right, bloody head and empty eyes, and

although he lived a couple more days in the hospital, it was, in a sense, a tragedy to move him from the horse pasture in which he fell, for that is where his spirit left him.

She'd give a lot for one more Sunday call, I reckon.