

Poverty Knob

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Cody McCowan's Little League teammates lived in brick homes on quiet streets in town, but Cody lived alongside a busy highway in a small wooden house with a sign on the mailbox that read "Poverty Knob." Cody's dad, Pete, loved to tell folks that his family "lived out on U.S. 281 at Poverty Knob. About five miles south of the nut house."

Cody's mom, Becky, even played along, hanging a hand-painted wooden sign in the den that read, "Poverty Is No Crime." Cody saw the word "poverty" on the wall every day, but he didn't understand what the word meant. He once asked his mom, but she dodged the subject, telling him what poverty wasn't, not what it was: "It means that we aren't rich."

Despite what Becky claimed, the McCowans didn't have cattle at their doorstep—but heifers did graze in the pasture that surrounded three sides of the family's fenced-in backyard. The small yard was home to Cody's mongrel dogs, Watson and Other Dog, and Cody spent hours in the yard with the dogs, chasing them over and around the electric water pump that sat in the yard's center.

Stacked concrete blocks encased the pump, and a piece of tin that was baling wired to the blocks kept the rain out. But during storms, the tin would blow off, and rain would short out the pump, leaving the family with no running water. As far as Cody's

mom was concerned, the pump shorting out wasn't any great loss, because the pump supplied the house, not with clean city water, but with water from a stock tank.

Circled with mesquite trees and only six or seven feet deep, the stock tank was about a hundred yards from the McCowans' house. The tank was home to a few water moccasins, and the landlord's cattle waded and wallowed in it. Although the tank was the house's only water source, the McCowans didn't drink it. Pete hand-toted drinking water from the ranch where he worked or Becky filled up a five-gallon plastic bottle when buying gas. The tank water was for washing and flushing. And bathing.

Cody knew that his mother hated bathing in tank water, especially after a rain when the run-off churned up the tank. Cody and his parents took these baths in brown water, water so dirty that it left a ring in the tub. Cody didn't mind, but his mother did. Sometimes his mother refused to bathe, claiming that she could get cleaner rolling in dirt.

At night Cody's parents didn't laugh much, especially when discussing the family car: a pea green '63 Chevy station wagon. When his mom had trouble with the car, she would catch his father just as he walked in the backdoor.

"Hi, honey," said Pete.

"Close the door. You're letting flies in." Becky crossed her arms and leaned against the kitchen counter. "It's 9 o'clock on a Saturday night. Where have you been?"

"Had a sick mare we had to doctor."

"The car wouldn't start again. I had to raise the hood and use the screwdriver, right in the middle of the street." Becky dropped her head into her hands and rubbed her temples.

"Sorry."

“Is that all you can say? It’s embarrassing when people stare at me.”

“Are you sure they’re not staring because you’re pretty?”

“Good try.”

Cody’s dad wasn’t kidding. Becky McCowan was pretty. Even beautiful. When Cody and Becky visited the ranch, Cody noticed how the men stared and smiled at his mom and how his dad enjoyed the attention she got. Pete told the other ranch hands that his wife’s body “would make a train take a dirt road.”

Becky McCowan drew stares at the grocery store also. Even though she bathed in brown water, Cody’s mom was still prettier than the town women in their fancy clothes. She had long blond hair, hair that Becky refused to wash in the brown tank water. Twice a week, Becky washed and rinsed her hair over the sink in carried city water.

“I swear sometimes I don’t know why I married you,” Becky said. She wasn’t through arguing.

“Oh you know why you married me,” Pete said with a grin.

“Good gosh.” Becky tilted her head toward Cody. She tried to suppress a smile, but couldn’t.

“Hell Cody knows that you’re the prettiest woman in Castro county, don’t you son?”

“That’s not saying a hell of a whole lot, and I’m still mad about the car.”

Dirty from working the mares at the ranch, Pete ambled through the kitchen, his Levis stuffed into his knee-high, red-topped boots. Becky turned back to the dishes in the sink, so Pete took that opportunity to slap his wife on the rump as he passed by.

“Quit it.” Becky spun around, pointing a finger at him. “I’m still mad. You can’t charm your way out of everything Pete McCowan.”

Cody had seen his parents act like this before. And talk like this. Cody wasn’t sure what poverty was, but he knew what his parents did in bed at night. How could he not? He’d been raised on a farm, and the noises that his parents made late at night when they thought he was asleep were impossible to ignore.

While Cody’s dad bathed, Becky lectured her son on his just-received final grades. “You had better get on the stick. A “D” in math and an “F” in geography? Do you want to get stuck in the country in a house like this all of your life?”

“What’s wrong with where we live? I like the country better than town.”

“You and your dad. You’re both crazy.” Becky smiled, walked to her son, and rubbed his back. She closed her eyes. After a few seconds, Becky sighed and walked toward the washing machine that sat at the edge of the kitchen, next to the backdoor.

“Look at that screen. A plague of flies.”

Cody looked to the backdoor where hundreds of flies were stuck, a product of thirty head of cattle lying not ten yards away. He didn’t mind flies. It was fun to see how many he could kill with one swing of the swatter.

“Maybe the car dying in town and these flies are a sign from God. I’m not supposed to live out here with cows, rattlesnakes, scorpions, and a husband who works fifteen hours a day.”

Cody sat at the linoleum table and rubbed saddle soap into his ball glove. He didn’t know what to say or do when his mom got in one of her moods. He distracted himself by balling up his fist and punching the glove.

Becky went back to the dirty dishes. When reached the last dish, she stopped washing and held the plate in her hands, staring out the kitchen window to the north. “I hope that’s not some lunatic up there on the highway.”

Cody got up from the table and stood by his mother at the sink. He spotted the man at the crest of the hill, the knob of Poverty Knob. The man meandered along, staring into the bar ditch. Cody knew that his mom suspected every stranger on the road to be an escapee from the mental hospital up the way. Every so often, these strange people came to their door, and they spooked Becky. Most were just hungry or thirsty and seemed almost normal. Others barely spoke. Once one spent the night in their station wagon.

Lights appeared from the north, and the man turned around, held up a cardboard sign, and stuck out his thumb. A truck topped the hill and stopped for the hitchhiker.

“Thank goodness,” said Becky. “Time for bed, Cody.”

Cody awoke at the front door’s knock and looked at his clock. Who was knocking at 7:15 on a Sunday morning? Why weren’t the dogs barking? The front door opened into the living room, next to Cody’s bedroom. Cody’s parents were farther from the front door, in the corner bedroom next to Cody’s. Cody heard the muffled voices of his parents, and then his dad opened his bedroom door, pulling on his jeans. He smiled at Cody, but said nothing.

Just as his dad passed his bed, Cody heard the click of the doorknob and the creak of the door as it began to open. Pete McCowan ran and threw himself, all two hundred

pounds of ranch-toughened muscle, into the door, slamming it shut. He grabbed and locked the doorknob. Then he looked out through the middle of three angled windows.

“Oh my gosh,” Pete said, opening the door.

When Cody’s dad pulled back the door, Cody saw a woman lying crumpled on the porch. She struggled to get up.

“I just wanted to use the phone. I thought maybe no one was home.”

“Are you okay? I’m so sorry about that.”

“Yes, I’m okay. I ran out of gas.”

Pete helped the woman into the living room, closing the door behind them.

“Hang on. Let me put on some clothes. I’ve got a can in the garage. Have a seat right here.”

Pete left the woman sitting in the living room. He walked into Cody’s bedroom, shutting the door behind him. “Just a lady needing gas. Go back to sleep.”

Cody lay back down but did not go back to sleep. He heard his parents talking in their bedroom. In a couple of minutes, his father came out in a t-shirt, jeans, and his red boots. “I thought I told you to go to sleep,” he said to Cody, passing through the bedroom.

Pete opened the door to the living room. The front door was closed, and the woman was gone. On the seat where Pete left her was a blond wig.

“Becky, get in Cody’s room. Now.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked, wrapping herself in a robe while running into her son’s room.

“That woman’s somewhere in the house.”

Becky grabbed a baseball bat from the corner of Cody's room. "Get behind me Cody." She stood in the middle of the room and held the bat cocked behind her ear.

"Do you see her?" Becky said. She and Cody heard Pete's boots scooting through the rooms of the house.

"I can't find her," Pete said as he rushed into Cody's room. He carried the wig in his hand.

"What the hell is that?" Becky asked.

"A wig."

"Are you sure it was a woman?"

"Not exactly."

With his back to the wall, Cody saw the entire room, and he felt the tension, especially from his mother, who paced back and forth in front of his bed.

"This is nuts. Why can't we live in town?" Becky asked.

"Calm down. I'll protect you."

"Sure you will. You let a crazy man in our house. Why haven't you gotten your gun?"

"I didn't want to leave you and Cody."

"You already have. We can take care of ourselves. Go get your damn gun."

"On my way."

Pete left Cody's bedroom and ran toward his. Becky retightened her grip on the bat and peered into the living room. Wanting to make sure that no one sneaked up on them, Cody looked to the left toward the den. Nothing. He glanced at the window and saw someone outside, walking toward the stock tank.

“Mom, someone’s outside. Dad.”

Becky stood her ground in the middle of the room, not moving. Pete came out of his bedroom carrying his .22 pistol. He leaned down on the bed and peered out the window. “Looks like a woman to me.”

He stuffed the gun into his hip pocket and stepped outside.

Cody saw his dad walk past the pump and open the yard’s gate. The dogs ran beside him.

“Get your clothes on Cody. We’re getting out of here,” Becky said.

“What?”

“You heard me young man. Let’s go.”

Cody slipped on his pants and a t-shirt and picked up his baseball glove. His mother grabbed him by his free hand. She led him through the house toward the backdoor. “I’ve had enough of this shit. We’re leaving.”

Cody and his mom stepped out of the house, walked through the yard, and climbed in the car. Becky turned the keys in the ignition. Nothing. “Goddamnit, this is the last time I ever drive this car.” Grabbing the screwdriver from the dash, Becky opened the door and rushed to the front of the car. She opened the hood and shorted out the starter, igniting the engine.

Half way to the stock tank, Pete looked back at Becky and yelled, “Where are you going?”

“I need something else. I’m putting this life behind me.” Becky slid under the wheel and slammed the car door. Tears rolled down her face. She looked at Cody and

said, “Hang on.” Becky revved the engine and threw the car in reverse. Wildly she backed around the fence corner and jammed on the brakes.

Then Becky paused. She didn’t reach for the shifter. She kept her hands on the wheel. Her whole body shook as tears dripped off her chin.

“Come on, Becky,” Pete yelled, still standing in the pasture, his arms outstretched.

Cody clutched the door handle as his mom looked toward his dad.

Becky turned back and stared straight ahead. She grabbed the shifter with both hands and slammed the car into drive, smashing into the mailbox and its Poverty Knob sign.

As the mailbox slid across the highway, the car sputtered and died, coasting to a pathetic stop.

“Unbelievable,” said Becky.

Cody and Becky turned toward the stock tank when they heard the scream. Pete, who had been jogging to the car, turned and sprinted toward the woman. Cody saw that the woman was in the water, thrashing and flailing her arms as she screamed. Cody and Becky jumped from the car and began to climb through the fence. After stepping through, Cody held the barbed wire apart for his mom.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

Cody jerked his head and saw his father standing with his gun aimed at the tank. The woman, now silent, sank into the brown water.

Becky, standing after stepping through the fence, said, “Oh my God.” She ran past Cody toward the tank.

Cody was following his mother when he saw his dad take three steps and dive into the water, red boots and all. By the time that Cody and his mom got to the water, Pete McCowan had fished the woman out and onto the bank, where she lay with her black hair covering her face. Pete lay beside her, gasping.

Cody stared at the woman's body, looking for bullet holes and blood. He saw neither.

The woman started to cry. Soon her whole body shook. She rolled to her side, bringing her knees to her chest, black hair still covering her face.

Becky knelt down, placing her hands on the woman's arm and head. "It's okay. You're all right." As she said this, she looked toward Pete. "What the hell is going on? Why did you shoot at this poor woman?"

Pete sat up, still short of breath. "No. I shot at the snakes that were swimming toward her."

"She must've fainted, poor thing." Becky stroked the woman's hair. "It's over. You're fine."

The woman's crying eased, and she sat up. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Everything's fine. Don't apologize for anything."

"I just couldn't bear the thought of going back to the hospital. I lost my nerve when I saw the snakes. Your husband saved me from the snakes. And from myself."

Pete was sitting with his feet in the air, trying to empty the water from his boots while keeping his wet socks out of the dirt.

"Things can't be *that* bad," Becky said.

“Easy for you to say. You have so much.” The woman watched Cody hold his dad’s boots, while Pete wrung the water out of his socks. “I have nothing.”

Becky followed the woman’s eyes to her son and husband. She sighed.

“Let’s get you up to our house and get you in a warm bath. You’ll feel better then.”