When Billy Scales picks the barstool next to mine, he’s already dated every woman in Ouray County, Colorado, and I’m a stranger who looks like fresh game. After all, I’m not wearing my wedding ring. I stashed it in my coat pocket moments before I walked through the True Grit’s screen door.

As Billy settles next to me, he says hello to the other folks eating supper, nods at the barkeep, calls her Dolly, and shakes salt into his Sierra Nevada. A neckerchief is knotted around his throat, and a copper and turquoise bracelet has dyed his wrist green. His cowboy hat tilts upward, cocked high on his forehead. Dust has settled into the crinkles of his face; dirt, or maybe manure, is caked under his fingernails. After he finishes his first beer, he tucks a plug of tobacco behind his lower lip and uses the empty bottle as a spittoon. His sidekick, Egan Anderson, looks tired and still wears his spurs, but he has showered and smells clean after their day on the trail.

I think about my husband, back in Texas, eating supper alone. He wouldn’t like this cafe—its log-cabin design, the rolls of True Grit toilet paper sold as souvenirs, the John Wayne movie posters, and the mounts of deer, elk, and antelope nailed to every
wall. He wouldn’t like me sitting on a barstool near two strange men. And when I think about that ring in my pocket, its absence on my finger, my right leg jostles as if it suffers nerve damage, and a feeling, strange but familiar, rumbles in my stomach. I didn’t eat much dinner. Maybe I’m still hungry. Or maybe it’s guilt. I haven’t been able to tell the difference in a long time.

I prop the book I’m reviewing around my plate like a fort. “There’s a deadline,” I tell the barkeep.

The two cowboys ignore me as well and fire up a debate about the number one college ball team. Wearing a Cornhusker’s sweatshirt, Egan orders some buffalo wings then defends adamantly Nebraska’s program. “No one can stop their offensive linemen,” he says. “They’re machines.” His brown hair, long and wispy, poufs around his ears like Shakespeare’s, but his Vandyke is Western, scruffy and thick. He catches my eye once. His mustache crooks into a grin, but he looks away.

Relishing the role of devil’s advocate, Billy disputes his buddy’s faith in Nebraska though he doesn’t know jack about college ball. His comments about the Cornhuskers pick up speed. He’s building toward a punch line, an answer akin to wisdom but full of bullshit, too. “Nebraska’s women are homely as feed sacks. No wonder the men play ball so well. When they’re tackling their opponents, they think they’re wrestling women. They think it’s foreplay.” Billy’s face, ruddy from the sun, swells into a grin, and his eyes squint, eclipsed by his round cheeks.

While Egan continues the debate, the barkeep leans over her sink and refills my glass of pineapple juice. “Honey, you want a box for those leftovers?”
Her question snags Billy’s attention, and he and I stare at my plate: a half-eaten burger and some fries.

Though I arrived in this mountain village eight days ago, old Texas ghosts keep peaking around corners and spooking me. Back on the cap rock where my husband and I lived, eating in restaurants was tricky. If a waiter brought me a drink refill, my husband accused me of flirting. If male patrons sitting at a nearby table glanced at our plates to see what we ordered, my husband swore they were staring at my dress—the blink of knee, the glimpse of shoulder. He checked the credit card receipts and told me I’d left too much gratuity. “You’re not very frugal,” he said. And always, he criticized the way I packed our doggy bags, complaining loudly so others heard.

I slide my plate toward the barkeep and tell her I don’t want the scraps.

Billy studies me the way locals puzzle over the tourists, the way—I think—a hard-working man questions a woman who wastes good food. He tilts his head back and looks down his nose like he needs bifocals. Then he leans in, over my shoulder. His breath skims my neck. “What happens to the cow?”

I stare at him.

He points at the book I’m reviewing, *A Hell of a Place to Lose a Cow*. “What happens?”

I close the book and ponder its jacket, which doesn’t picture any cattle though the title is right there. “I haven’t seen her. Apparently she’s been lost since page one.”

Billy’s eyebrows perk up. He looks at the place where my bookmark is inserted. He smoothes his mustache then tweaks the tips of it. “You’re halfway finished. Where’s the cow?”
I’m the one who wanted a summer vacation from marriage. I wanted to remember how simple living was before the vows—before the anger, the rules, the fear—but at this particular moment, I’m sharply aware of how well-trained I’ve become. It’s the familiar way I hunker down while this Colorado cowboy, teasing or not, drills me with the same question, again and again, though we both know I don’t have the answer he wants to hear. Friendships require wit and conversation, but when a woman has been guarded for so many years, she expects talk to start with trouble and end with her apologies. She learns to keep quiet.

Billy sips his Sierra Nevada. He sees my eyes well up, a good cry coming to the surface. He glances at my leg, twitching under the bar. Like Gus McCrae in *Lonesome Dove*, Billy has rickety manners but knows how to cozy up to women in a primitive sort of way. For certain he knows when it’s time to make one of them smile.

He pulls a can of Skoal from his shirt pocket, taps the top before unscrewing the lid, then spins his stool toward Egan, looking for help. “There’s no cows, the little woman says.” He stuffs some chew in his mouth then points at my book. “I’d have bought that, expecting cattle.” He’s teasing again, roping his buddy into the tangle of another debate, steering me away from sorrow. His voice rises in pitch. His hands wave in the air then slap the pine bar in mock exasperation.

Egan’s mustache is speckled with barbecue sauce. He licks it clean while he ponders the situation. “False advertising is illegal,” he finally says.

I’m smiling now, the urge to cry gone. I take note to include in my review the absence of bovine if I don’t encounter any by the last page.
Billy and Egan take my smile for an open door and start talking about their day pushing cattle from the valley pastures into the mountains for summer grazing. It was Egan’s first drive, and his day has been a lot like the book I’m reading—an annoying absence of lost cows.

“I rode my horse behind the herd,” he says. “Not one cow strayed. Your ass gets saddle-sore pretty quick when there’s nothing to jog your mind off it.”

“You ride?” Billy asks me.

“I’m not good with horses. It’s an inherited problem.”

“Ride with us,” Billy offers. “You ride three times a week—” he holds up two fingers and what is only the nub of a thumb, “—and by summer’s end, you can help round cattle off the mountains.”

There isn’t any reason to think I’m capable of riding a horse, much less herding cattle down steep trails. My father, a city-dweller, taught me that God invented pickups because man wasn’t meant to stay in the saddle. My granddad, a rancher, warned me that a horse could kick the life out of you. As proof, a colt once planted an angry hoof in his forehead. The scar that furrowed his brow always made my granddad look like he was fretting over the price of hay or the threat of hoof-and-mouth disease. And because he had little trust in horses, my granddad wouldn’t let me sit one unless he was walking alongside, holding the reins. How, I never learned, do you make a horse turn?

Add to my lack of skill the fact that I’ve already agreed to work weekend shifts at the local V&S Variety—though I’ve sworn to my husband I’ve run to Colorado because I need space to write. I can’t keep squandering my time. I ought to be more frugal.
Because there’s still a chance I’ll go home. And if I do, I better have something to show for my absence.

But despite all my logical reasoning, here’s what comes out of my mouth: “Sure. I’d love to.”

Five minutes with Egan and Billy, and I’ve learned how to bluster. These cowboys—the hardscrabble types so tough they own only the necessities (toilet paper, milk, wire-cutters to mend barbed fences, hatchets to shatter winter ice, and guns loaded and well sighted-in)—ought to alarm me, but here I am pretending their cowboy games are a harmless diversion. I don’t recognize this woman so eager to play with strangers, so undaunted by some consequences though she’s still afraid of packing leftovers incorrectly. My husband wouldn’t recognize her either. If he reads this tale later, he’ll demand to know where his wife is.

“I better go,” I say, standing up.

“You’ll need to scratch together a cowgirl costume, Dolly.” Billy tugs on my pant leg and stares at my sandals, the ones with leather daisies arching over my foot. “You’ll definitely need decent shoes.”

I study his outfit. He’s wearing a sturdy denim jacket, filthy jeans, ropers with frayed shoelaces and grimy soles and rusted spurs. He hasn’t asked for my name but is simply calling me Dolly, too. He spits into his beer bottle. By this point, four empties are parked on the bar in front of him.

This man shouldn’t be any trouble for me. He’s nothing like my husband, a film scholar who carries a briefcase to work and wears Perry Ellis slacks, button-down tailored shirts, and matching silk ties. Nonetheless, I slip the business card Billy offers
inside the pocket of my leather jacket—without mentioning my marital ties back home or the wedding ring hiding inside the same pocket.