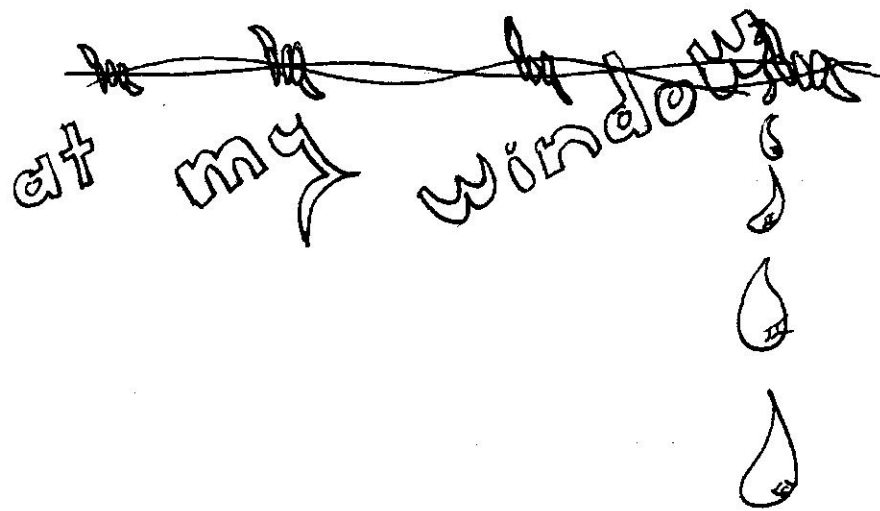


Barbed wire



By A.R. FOOTE

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My name is Cliff Western. I'm a convict at Henley Crossing jail. A few months ago I did something very stupid and now I'm behind bars. All I've got to look forward to is a six by eight cell, three squares a day and barbed wire at my window. The psychiatrist is here to see me again. They all think I'm crazy and my shrink wants to send me to the looney bin. I'm not crazy. I will be though if they don't let me out of this place.

It all started about three months ago. I received a letter from that I'd sent to Jeremiah Toombs some months earlier. It was stamped "Return to point of mailing". Although the return address was clearly written on the back it had been opened. I called his daughter, Jessy, to ask if she'd heard from him. She told me that no one had seen or heard from him in over a year. This was a worry for me, so I decided to go to Bullrock and see if he was ok. Packing a few things in a carry all, I went to the railway station and bought a ticket. There was only one train each day. It left at one p.m sharp. I felt a real sense of urgency. As I waited for the train to arrive. Something was terribly wrong with Jeremiah. I could feel, it in my bones.

The ride was long and tiring. I tried to catch forty winks but the clickety clack of the wheels served to keep me awake. Although my eyes were closed I could still see the people in the carriage looking at me as if I didn't belong. As the train approached Dilltown, a tall dark haired man with a handlebar moustache boarded the train. He carried a black briefcase and wore a long black coat. I watched him for a while he looked strangely out of place. After all here we were on the way to nowhere and out in the middle of nowhere and he was dressed up like some banker from the city. A young woman sat beside him in the carriage. They were not together and throughout the whole trip neither passed so much as a comment or even a casual glance. They just stared out the window as the beautiful countryside passed by. It looked

lovely beneath that dazzling blue sky.

A few hours later the train pulled into Bullrock. I got off the train and walked through the station. The dark man got off too. There was only one real street in this town and it was on that street that I expected to find the general store. Always a good source of information or gossip. Kicking my way along the dusty street, I ~~made my~~<sup>went</sup> way to the store. There were two old geezers sitting on the porch drinking beers from the bottle. Neither of them so much as looked at me as I approached them. One said to the other, "Shame about the weather", staring wide eyed and straight ahead. "Yeah..., sure is a shame", replied the other man. I looked up. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. The train whistle blew signifying its departure and I looked quickly back to see it leaving the station. I wondered where the man in the long black coat had gone. I saw him getting off the train but he didn't go past me. I also noticed that the woman was no longer on the train either. It struck me as a bit odd but I didn't think much of it. I walked into the store. The man behind the counter looked at me strangely, almost as if I wasn't there. I asked for a coke and a pack of cigarettes. He handed them to me and I passed over the money. I told him that I was looking for Jeremiah Toombs. His face went white as a ghost. "We're closed", he said. I turned and left. The two old geezers on the porch had gone. All that remained was the two rocking chairs tossing to and fro on the porch. I looked up. The street was lined with olden day buildings. A wind had come up and the sky clouded over. Nothing but dust and tumbleweeds graced the scene as they swirled and tossed frantically, controlled by the wind. It was as if I'd stepped back in time a hundred years in an instant. I decide to find him myself. It was only a very small town and shouldn't be too hard.

As I walked along the main road I became aware of the fact that I was being watched. I looked around but couldn't see anyone. I knew they were there all the same. A small side street came up and I had the feeling that that was the place to look for Jeremiah's house. It wasn't much of a walk and as I reached the small rise at the top of the road I stopped to look at a small white house. I recognised it at once from a photograph Jeremiah sent me. It was set well back off the road. The light was an eerie goldy dusty glow and rather dim. I could just make out the shape of someone moving inside the house. A tall dark figure, walking quickly across the grass to get to the house. I was becoming conscious of the smell of burning flesh. That smell is unmistakeable. Since it was so windy it was hard to tell where it was coming from. I arrived at the front door. Something caught my eye and I turned to see what it was. It was the man in the long black coat. He was walking away from the house across a golden yellow field of hay into the bright white skyed distance. I knocked on the door. There was no answer. I knocked again. Still no answer so I opened the door and walked slowly inside. The house was as neat as a pin. The pot belly stove raged, pumping heat through the house. There was no sign of Jeremiah though. That smell of burnt flesh, pungent and disgusting was incredibly strong throughout the house. I figured that Jeremiah must be there somewhere. I wondered who the man in the black coat was, and where was he going? Why was he at the house? There was a fresh pot of coffee on the pot belly so I decided to stay and wait for Jeremiah. Since I couldn't find him at the house I figured that he must have gone out somewhere. Several hours went by and there was still no sign of him. A distant ghostly train horn could be heard although there was only one train each day and it was long gone. It made me shudder. The light was all but gone outside. I thought back to the last time that I had heard from him. I had received a letter from him asking me to come here; the letter I got back was one in which I told him that I had a new job and wouldn't be able to make it.

new job and wouldn't be able to make it there. In his letter to me, he seemed afraid. Frightened by something that only he could know, see or feel. That was why I'd decided to come here when I had the letter sent back to me. I couldn't wait any longer. I decided to walk back to town. It was about six pm. Still early although the light had faded away by now. In the dimness I could see that one or two people ~~still~~ sat on their porches in the dark. They stared blankly ahead of them as I approached the town. As I drew near to them, they got to their feet quickly and went into their homes. I couldn't help but notice the speed at which the blinds drew shut. And there was that pungent odour again, burning flesh, and the man in the long black coat. What did it mean? I couldn't figure it out. Since I could find no one to ask about Jeremiah, I turned and walked back to the house. Opening the front door and walking in I noticed that the pot belly was going still and there was a fresh pot of coffee on the top. An older man and his wife were there in the house. They walked out from the kitchen as I entered.

"Can we help you?" said the man.

"Yes, can we help you?" repeated his wife.

They stared at me in the oddest way, not blinking once. I told them I was looking for Jeremiah and they wasted no time in telling me that they had never heard of him before telling me to leave.

I looked past them out the kitchen window into the darkness. I could see the shape of the man in the long black coat flickering in the occasional light as the moon as it escaped through gaps in the clouds and found him.

I did as I was asked and turned to leave. Picking up my bag from the living room floor I noticed something. That smell was all over the place again. I turned back to look at them and they were gone. I caught only a quick glimpse of the man in the long black coat disappearing out the back door, closing the briefcase as he went.

I felt inside me that those people wouldn't be back, so I stayed the night.

Next morning I went to the station to board the train home. This place had really got to me and I'd not been able to find my friend. For some reason I was not in the least bit surprised when the man in the black coat boarded it as well. This time though he sat two seats behind me. The whistle blew as the train left the station. I couldn't help noticing all of the townspeople standing there watching the train leave. The wind, the dust and the tumbleweeds still tossed and flew wildly about the town. A shiver ran down my spine as I caught sight of the woman who had come here on the train with me, and the man in the long black coat. She stared at me through unseeing eyes as if hypnotised, yet I felt her presence and I felt her dread. I turned my head to look back inside the carriage. I felt someone was looking at me. Turning my head slowly I jumped with fright as my eye caught sight of the woman sitting back in her place. The place in which she had been sitting on her way here, ~~to this strange place.~~ She ~~just~~ stared right past me. ~~and~~ It was a very uncomfortable feeling. As the train approached half moon junction, I had the tremendous urge to get up, and talk to the man in the long black coat. The train was moving at about fifty miles an hour as I stood up. At precisely the same instant, the man in the long black coat stood up and moved to the back of the train. We walked through several carriages before ending up on the foot plate at the back of the train. He turned to face me. His eyes were black. All black. I looked into them with fear. This man was not of this world. I had to know what was in that briefcase that he carried with him. It was a compulsion. I felt an unbelievably evil force coming from within this man. Who was he? What was he?



His face was featureless except for a moustache and those terrible eyes. I reached out for the briefcase and was aware of another presence behind me. I turned to look quickly. It was the woman. I was now between them both. As they stared unmovingly at each other I made a grab for the briefcase <sup>and</sup> snatched it away from him. At that instant, he collapsed to the floor. That smell was there again. I looked down at his form lying there. A slight wispy fog arose from him as he lay there. It grew in intensity over a few seconds and then began to subside. As it vanished, he was gone. I turned back to the woman. She was gone too without a trace. I wanted to open the briefcase. I looked at it for a moment then tried the latch. I opened it slowly to look inside. It was the strangest thing I ever saw. There were many small faces inside, all alive and moving. Their mouths opening and closing as if calling out some unheard message. Terror gripped me to my very essence as I realised that one of the faces was that of Jeremiah. The man who I had come here to find. I opened the briefcase fully and set it down on the floor. The moment it hit the floor it began to emit an eerie green glow. I could smell burning flesh again as the glow grew in intensity. Fireballs began firing from the glow. Each one that was fired out left a gap where a face had been. These were the spirits ~~that~~ the man in the long black coat had collected. The last one to leave was Jeremiah. As the last fireball flew, I reached out and caught it. Instantly Jeremiah materialised. We were at the back of the train when he appeared. There was nowhere for him to go except off the back. He hit the tracks with a splashing ripping motion. Jeremiah was killed outright. A few seconds later I saw a bright red fireball rise into the air from where his body lay. Sadly I turned around to walk back into the carriage. Two men stood there ~~as~~ast. They saw Jeremiah fall from the train. They thought that I had pushed him because that was how it appeared to them. I was arrested for his murder and now I am in jail. No one will believe me so here I sit with a broken mind, and barbed wire at my window.