

the
Dead Mule
School of Southern Literature



Claire Zulkey

The Hill

Sharkey woke up to a faceful of ice water and not even a "Git up" from Elmyra. This was one of her kinder ways of waking him; sometimes she dumped the coffee grounds on him, and occasionally it was the bacon grease, which he would smear away from his eyes. It depended on what she had in the kitchen and how much she hated him that day.

Sharkey jumped out of bed, throwing his blanket on the chair to dry. He pulled on his jeans, stiff with filth, and his red-checked flannel, reeking of old sweat. He was responsible for his own laundry, which was one of the reasons Elmyra did not have any problems waking him up the way she did. He scratched at the stubble on his face and let out a crackling fart.

"Mornin', precious," he said to Elmyra, who was scowling at the scrambled eggs in the pan.

"The hell with that," she snarled, poking him in the gut with her wooden spoon. "You make me sick."

This was how every morning was for the two of them, every since their shotgun wedding, 35 years ago. Elmyra hated Sharkey even as she let him impregnate her under the lemonade stand at their high school carnival. She hated him as she walked down the aisle with him at 16 years old, belly swollen and nearly busting the seams of her gingham dress, carrying a bouquet of dandelions.

"Fuck you," she said, as she met him in front of the preacher.

There was so much hate in her that it killed their baby before it was born, and she hated Sharkey so much that she decided his punishment must be to spend the rest of his life with her. They ran the Spitshine ranch together, buying and selling horses, and they split their profits, but that was all. They slept in separate beds, cooked separate meals, and took care of themselves, independent of each other.

They had no friends, so nobody asked why they remained together. Elmyra never asked Sharkey what in god's name made him stay around like a goddamned fool. If she had bothered to ask, he probably wouldn't have come up with a good answer. He didn't know why, and he never bothered to think about it. He had nothing better to do.

Elmyra sat down to eat her eggs, splashing hot sauce in them. She cut her own hair, without a mirror, so its salt-and-pepper

spikes stood up in angry shocks from her head. Her eyes were wrinkled from so much glaring, and her mouth too, from so much swearing, but otherwise, she looked not exactly young, but preserved, from so much salt and dry air. She never gave birth again after Sharkey got her pregnant the first time, so she still kept her adolescent figure.

She lit a Marlboro and scrutinized Sharkey as she ashed in his coffee.

"You're a sad sack piece of shit," she informed him. "And you smell like hell, too." His droopy mustache was stained from tobacco juice, and his watery blue eyes stared out bleakly from behind his too-long shag of bangs. Since the rest of the coffee now had her cigarette butt floating in it, he got himself a mug of hot water.

"Today we got to head up to Pike Hill and mend the fence," he mumbled. "Sooner or later some'r the horse'll be gittin out."

"Mmm," she said, absorbed in her own thoughts, whatever they were. The two of them, for as long as they had lived in their shack exactly 200 miles south of the northernmost Wyoming border, never had unnecessary contact with the outside world. They had no television, no computer, no books or magazines or newspapers.

"Waste of time," Elmyra always said, of the newfangled contraptions. Sharkey always said nothing.

They had one telephone that Elmyra always answered, yelling "Yeah?" or "What the hell you want?" depending on her mood. Their usual customers knew better than to call them. They weren't pleasant people, but they had the best horses in the county, and they were fair.

"Other folks'll try and sell you a lame horse and tell you it's good," Sharkey would explain to new customers. "But not us."

"Everybody else is a bunch of motherfuckers," Elmyra would explain. Sharkey would shrug.

Pike Hill was the tallest hill in the county, and a mean one. Going up was rough, with hardly any footholds to dig into, as dry rocks that would scatter down in a shower and send one scrambling. Going down was harder, so steep and slippery that often a body would find itself surfing, belly-down, to the bottom, teeth full of dirt and thorns. No horse in its right mind would decide to mosey up to the top of Pike Hill of its own volition, even if it knew that certain freedom lay behind the lightning-struck fence. However, Sharkey knew that the trip would be easy compared to the hell he would catch if they lost any stock wandering through the hole onto the neighbors' property.

"Hello, Shitface," Elmyra addressed her horse, slapping him on the rear, raising dust. The horse responded to his name by biting

her on the shoulder, leaving a glob of foamy spittle.

"Horse," Sharkey nodded to his usual ride. The white mare stared at him through her milky cataract-coated eyes, and flared her pink nostrils in recognition. They saddled up, silently, mounted, and walked the horses out.

"Looks like rain," said Sharkey, noting the green-gray cumulous clouds gathering on the horizon. "A bad 'un."

"_Looks like rain_" Elmyra mocked him in a nasal voice. "What are you, a fuckin' weatherman? You're a genius, Shark."

Sharkey took a swig of whiskey from his flask and straightened his legs in the stirrups. He was getting arthritic, but he thought nothing of it. Some men would consider retirement, others would think wistfully of the use their bodies had given them through the years. Shark just stretched and thought about the fence. The two of them carried extra planks, nails, and hammers in their packs.

They gritted their teeth as their horses scrambled up the hill, Elmyra swearing quietly under her breath. Were they climbing any other hill, she would have slapped Horse on its ass to send Sharkey running off into the distance, flopping around like a marionette, and chuckle to herself, but she knew that she needed him to help her repair the fence.

"Clouds're getting closer," said Sharkey at the halfway point, feeling the thunder in the distance rumble in his chest.

"You don't say, Einstein. I declare, you're making me sicker every word I hear out of your mouth. I'm going to need an enema after all the bullshit I get from you every day."

"Horses'll be spooked by lightnin', is all."

"Dumbfuck, do you know how that fence got broke in the first place?"

"Lightnin'."

"That's right. I might not know much, but I do know one or two things about lightning, and that is that it don't strike the same place twice. Hear?"

"Hear."

The two continued their climb up. At the top, fat splotches of rain began to mark the dust. The two unloaded the wood, hammers, and nails from the packs and set to work.

"Thar's a pretty fence," said Sharkey, when they were finished.

"A fence ain't pretty," said Elmyra. "I don't know about you, though, but I'm hungry and ready to take a dump, and I don't plan on doing it here. You can stay as long as you want, though. You can live up here for all I

care." The rain was coming down harder, so she had to raise her voice to be heard.

Elmyra and Sharkey swung themselves up on their horses. It would be tricky getting back down before the rain made the dirt downright slick. Sharkey turned around to glance at the mended fence. Elmyra did too, wondering what in damnation the fool was doing this time.

The thought struck them at exactly the same moment. They fixed the fence together and it was a damn good fence.

Out of the sky came a gigantic clap, and, simultaneously, a bright blue flame scorched down and hit one of the nails on the new fence.

"Whoah!" Sharkey's Horse reared violently, the daylights scared out of her, bucked until Sharkey was thrown off, jumped over the fence, and died of a heart attack. Elmyra stared, gaping, until she realized that Sharkey was no longer on top of the hill with her. Horse had thrown him clear off, and he was sliding down the hill, face-first, back towards the barn.

"Sharkey?" she yelled after him, but he was still slipping down the hill like the idiot he was.

"Aw hell," she muttered, and jumped off Shitface. "Git," she said, and slapped him in the rear. Shitface ran off down the hill.

"Aw, hell," she said again. "Fuck you, Sharkey!" she yelled, and dove off after him, face-first, down Pike Hill.

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