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You Could Have Fooled Me

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A distinctive Western Oklahoma voice

You Could Have

I've been runnin' this Shamrock station since 1942--a' course there's been a gas station on this corner almost as long as Sweetwood's been a town. That's why my Shamrock don't look as fancy as those in big places. I guess the guy that built it didn't have no special brand--he just sold gas.

Right across the street from me is the Rutledge Hotel. It was built in 1948, and Jap and Iris lived on the first floor. It's kinda unusual for a small town like Sweetwood to have such a good hotel. Actually, lots of us have worked to keep customers comin' here. Salesmen like Sweetwood because it has a nice clean place to stay, and Granddad's Restaurant--it's a good place to eat. I always keep good help here.

It was on account of the Rutledge Hotel that Sweetwood got acquainted with Gayland Cole. Now, he's one funny bugger. I don't mean funny in any comical way--it's just that for some reason folks always laugh at him. But it's not the same way they laugh at Dean Coleman.

Dean's funny, now, but he don't always mean to be. Like just the other day, a bunch of guys was in here and they got to talkin' about findin' minnows. Dean, he always likes to be in on ever'thing, so he said there was minnows up at Diamond Slough. "I bet there's a million of 'em," he said. And he thought a minute and says, "Hey, I bet there's more'n that, I bet there's five thousand!" A' course they all laughed--Dean, too--but he hadn't no idea they was laughin' at 'im.

But Gayland--he's not like that--he's smart. At least, he's book smart, and he can do lots of things most people in Sweetwood can't. Oh, I was gonna tell you why he moved here.

Jap Rutledge built that hotel, and he and Iris worked like dogs to make it go. Well, Iris died in 1952, and Jap tried it alone--he hired a few locals, but their heart just wasn't in it--hotel work is hard. Finally Jap got his sister--Marie Cole--she was a widow--to come up here and live with him. So Marie and her son moved in and Jap took one of the suites right off the lobby.

Well, that was quite a boost to Sweetwood society. Marie was a matronly sort of good-lookin' woman, and a great one for playin' bridge. And Gayland--it'd been a long time since there'd been a older-type bachelor in town. It seemed like there for awhile he was always swishin' around all over the place. A' course, he was good lookin'--slim as a stove pipe, so clothes looked swell on him. He got invited to ever' social event the ladies around here could think up.

You know, it just occurred to me. He always got invited places, but I don't remember him ever invitin' any of the local girls out. But I guess when you're that popular, it just sort of slips your mind to ask them out--no need to, really, since you naturally got your pick.

There was a salesman in here one day--it was after Gayland had been here quite awhile--he was a Shamrock rep, and he had got into town late--actually early in the mornin' it was--so he had to ring the night bell in the hotel lobby. When he come over

here the next mornin', he was madder'n a hornet. Said he hadn't slept a wink--said he worried about what that kook downstairs might do.

I said I didn't know of any kook in town, much less across the street at Jap's place. Turned out he was pretty irritated at Gayland.

"When I rung that bell, he come prissin' out wearin' pajamas, fer God's sake! Silk ones at that. And a red bathrobe with gold fringe on the belt."

"Well, maybe folks where he comes from wears pajamas." I told him. "Around here, I reckon they're mostly for girls."

"I didn't think much one way or the other about 'em til the danged fool asked me if I'd like to go to his room for a cup of tea."

"Now that was polite of him."

"Polite, hunnh," he says. "I ain't goin' to no man's room and sip tea! Not even at high noon--much less two in the mornin'. And him wearin' that shiny bathrobe with gold fringes hangin' off it."

I just dropped the subject--mad as he was, and all. Once he pointed it out, havin' ice tea already made up in the middle of the night is kinda funny, though.

Well, around Sweetwood, like they would anywhere else, I guess, some people liked ol' Gayland, and others couldn't stand him. Some said they didn't like him on account of the way he walked. Of course, he was a little prissy when he walked--I used to watch him crossin' the street comin' over here from the hotel, and he did have a funny little twist. But he always reminded me more of a racehorse--the way he picked his feet up and put 'em down.

Really, I sorta liked havin' him around the station. His teasin' sorta livened the place up. Like Dean Coleman--he was so fat, and Gayland was always lightin' into him about that. And then one time ol' Dean did have a heart attack and the doctor told him he had to take some weight off. So Dean, real serious like, asked Gayland how he thought he should go about takin' it off.

"Why don't you try Metrecal?"

That was about the time that stuff first come out, and every woman in town was drinkin' it. Dean, he thought about it awhile, and then he says, "Do you take it before meals or after?" We all thought that was pretty funny. A' course, lookin' back later we all felt pretty bad about makin' fun of him when ol' Dean had a heart attack and died.

After Gayland and his mom had been here a few years, he finally got him a job. There didn't seem any real need for him to work since Marie was pretty well fixed after her husband died. But I guess most fellows like to have their own money. So he started teachin' at that boys' school between here and Allis. A lot of the fellows hurraed about that, but I figured a job's a job. And if a guy's qualified to teach drama and stuff like that, why it oughta be all right. It must be hard puttin' on a play,

Fooled Me

By Joanna Thurston Roper

though, with nothin' but boys--a 'course, I wouldn't know--the only plays I ever see are the senior plays here in Sweetwood--I always patronize the hometown kids--but they say those aren't real drama. But those kids dressed up like hillbillies and such are pretty funny.

Oh, and he taught debate, too. Now, I never have seen a debate. What it sounds like to me is an argument--you just divide up in teams and argue, and ol' Gayland was probably good, much as he liked to argue. As a matter of fact, they'd go off on weekend trips and debate teams from other schools.

After one of those trips the boys got to makin' snide remarks about how much fun Gayland must be havin' on weekends now. Me, I don't know how they figured that--bein' cooped up in a motel with a bunch of onrey boys--now that would purely try my patience.

Speakin' of arguin'--I used to wonder if he argued the Bible with them school kids as much as he did the boys here at the station. Well, not all of em'--he never could get much of a rise out of anybody unless Buster knew his Bible.

I never figured out why Gayland was so keen to argue about the Bible because he was an atheist--anyway that's what he said. I never figured somethin' I didn't believe in was worth arguin' about.

And the things he picked to harp on--marryin', for example. Him not even married and always tellin' Buster that all those Bible scriptures--and he could quote 'em right--anyway, they sounded right--weren't even good sense, much less true.

I remember one in particular--the one where Paul said it was better to marry than to burn. I remember that because ever' dadgum' time he brought it up, the fellows would start snickerin' and leavin'--or else they'd go back to the grease room where they'd laugh and slap their leg. It didn't bother me that ol' Gayland didn't want to get married. A 'course I didn't need him tellin' me that all the time. It was pretty obvious since he never dated any of our local girls--not even any over at Allis so far as I knew.

But anyway, the boys got the biggest bang out of him arguing that gettin' married wouldn't keep a fellow from burnin'. I told them fellows that I knew guys right here in Sweetwood that was married and still chased after anything wearin' a skirt. They all thought that was real funny--said Gayland wasn't likely to go chasin' any skirt. A 'course I didn't think so, either. He had him a good job, and his mother was well fixed, and he stood to inherit that. So I really didn't think the whole thing was all that funny.

One time that caused a big stir in Sweetwood was the summer Marie went to Europe. I don't remember anyone in Sweetwood ever goin' there before. I sort of wondered why ol' Gayland didn't go, too--I know I would 've if I'd had the chance. But the boys just laughed and allowed that Gayland would find more interesting things here. I couldn't imagine what in the world he'd find in Sweetwood that he hadn't already found.

"Oh, he'll find something he likes," ol' Leroy Murphy said. "Yeah," I agreed. "He's one funny bugger." And they laughed like I'd said something real funny.

The first thing you know, Gayland had this guy visitin' him. He introduced him around town as his cousin from Houston. I'd never heard Jap mention havin' any kinfolks in Houston--so I figured it must have been on his dad's side. None of us around here ever knew Edward Cole--that was Marie's husband. Jap--he wouldn't talk much about that cousin. I guess long as Gayland helped tend the hotel right, Jap didn't mind him invitin' company in.

That guy's name was Ralph Johnson. I don't mind tellin' you there was just somethin' about him I purely didn't like. He had this limp handshake, but then he sort of held on 'til you had to pull your hand away. And when he talked to you, he got right up close. There wasn't any use of that. I told the boys at the station I just wished he'd stay out of here. I was a little bit irritated.

But ol' Leroy--he's a real clown--he got up and prissed over to the water fountain walkin' just like Ralph--only exaggeratin' a little bit--then he turned around and raised one arm up to his chest and let his hand dangle kind of silly like and says, "Oh, Ralphie's a good boy. He don't mean no harm." A 'course, I had to laugh with 'em--Leroy always had a way of makin' things out funnier'n they were.

But the thing that blew my mind, as the kids say, happened after Marie died. Well, really, it wasn't anything that happened exactly. I couldn't have been more surprised if--well, I just can't think of anything in the world that would've shocked me like that did. I wouldn't even believe it if it hadn't come from an inside source--not Jap--he wouldn't talk about it--this was someone who worked there. A 'course, I wouldn't name any names, but everybody around Sweetwood knows anyone that works anywhere in town, and you can't go tellin' a lie about folks and get away with it. Same way with the truth--if somebody tells what's true, there's no need goin' around tryin' to deny it. Well, I declare I was shocked.

A 'course, everyone sympathized with Gayland when his mom passed away. It was sad, and it was kinda sudden. But sooner or later, everyone sorta expects to lose their parents. But ol' Gayland couldn't get over it--he moped around here for weeks complainin' how he couldn't sleep nights and all. Well, I thought that was understandable. But then this come up, and I declare I didn't know what to think.

What it was was that Gayland went to sleep ever' night with his mother holdin' him--can you imagine that! Now, I don't mean like a man and his wife--I mean like she was a-cuddlin' him so he'd go to sleep.

After all those years I'd known ol' Gayland, I just couldn't hardly believe it. You could have fooled me. I purely don't understand how a grown man could sleep with his mother. I just purely don't. ♠