



7-15-1983

Not Worth a New Rope

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Recommended Citation

Moran, Kyle (1983) "Not Worth a New Rope," *Westview*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol2/iss4/6>

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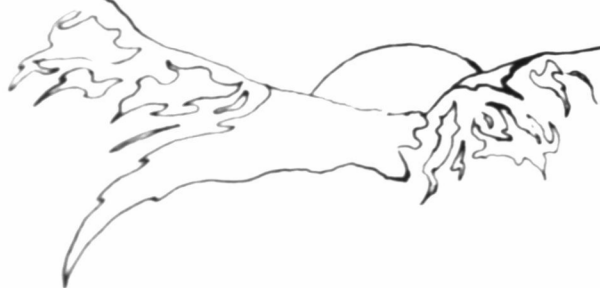


MEMORIES

NOT WORTH A NEW ROPE

BY KYLE MORAN

— a nostalgic expose from ranchland



WESTVIEW

ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN BENNETT HILL

I get the feeling sometimes when they look at me that my mother and two sisters marvel that I turned out worth shooting. And my dad used to have the habit of saying, in keeping with his ranching background, that someone unworthy wasn't worth being "hung with a new rope." I have often wondered when he looked at me incredulously if he might have been thinking the same thing about me. For I, that serious family man of today, am that same brat who at the age of 9 used to fly into a rage if anyone — especially my sisters — walked into a room where I was taking a bath, but who nevertheless often streaked all over the house and yard in their presence. I'm the same one who opened fire at close range with a B-B gun on the upper thigh of my older sister. She still carries the scar 38 years later. And I'm the one who always read all the love letters my other sister received — I'm also the one who as a 4-year-old one day covered my face and body with soot because I had heard that dead people turned black. Then I fell down dead at my mother's feet hoping she would be remorseful about a spanking administered a few minutes earlier. But the trick I played on my maternal grandmother is something that none of my close relatives will ever forget.

Since I always was and still am today very close to my mother, I suppose that I resented my grandmother's interference in our lives. Grandma lived with my family much of the time between my eighth and eleventh years. Since she was not only senile but also epileptic, Mom stayed at home with her most of the time. I didn't accept my mother's dedication because I didn't like the way Grandma kept Mom away from my school activities. And worst of all, Grandma was a complainer.

It may have been Grandma's bad nature that caused me to concoct a scheme that would give her something to complain about. My plan involved an adult-male costume, which during those days was no problem because Mom had stored my deceased grandfather's and uncle's clothes in our shed room. Therefore, on the day I decided to dress up and play the role of the druggist George Johnson, I had a choice of attire. I chose a dark-brown suit and a terrible-looking black hat. I reasoned that I wouldn't need a beard — that Grandma wouldn't know the difference anyway.

A person who wasn't acquainted with our farm would probably park on the highway that passed our property and walk down the lane, so that day I walked down the lane leading to our farmhouse. Our cornpatch which grew between the house and the highway completely concealed the house from passers-by. I had left the house, had run into the cornfield carrying my costume, and had changed clothes between a couple of rows. I knew that Mama was down by the well dressing fryers for lunch, that my dad was in the back field plowing, and that my sisters had gone down the road to visit friends. So Grandma was in the house alone, probably reading her Bible.



I knocked on the kitchen door. Through the screendoor, I could see Grandma squinting at God. Creaking to the door, she peered out through her wire-rim spectacles. "Who's there?"

"How-do. Is that you, Miz Mullins-Martelie?"

"Yessir, it is. With whom am I talking?" Grandma had a refined way of speaking. As all of us grandchildren had been told, she came from good Southern stock, and she had once been the champion speller of her native Tennessee. She seemed a bit taken aback because she wasn't accustomed to being called by her first name.

"Why, Martelie, It's George Johnson. I haven't seen you lately, and I thought I'd try to collect the two dollars you've owed me since Will was sick. Now I don't mean nothin' by it, Ma'am."

"Anything by it," Grandma muttered. She was so used to correcting her grandchildren that she thought nothing of correcting an outsider.

"Yessum. I just thought this might be a good time to see you. Do you have the money, or would you like to pay it out?"

"Yes, Mr. Johnson, I have the money. Money is no problem to me. Loneliness — that's the problem. Will left me well fixed. I'll get your two dollars." For the first time I felt sorry for Grandma, and I started to turn and run down the lane.

Grandma went back in the shadows of the kitchen. I knew very well what she was doing and that she would have no qualms about fishing out her little tobacco sack full of money from around her waist underneath her dress and the three or four shimmies she always wore even during hot weather. In her senile state, she would think nothing of thrusting away and pulling up those layers in order to find that valuable sack.



After a while she returned to the door. "Here you are, Mr. Johnson. From now on you can just bill me by mail. Elmer goes to town about once a week. I can give him the money, and he can pay the bill for me."

"Thank you, Martelie. I do appreciate your business."

"Hummph! Old reprobate!" I heard Grandma say to no one in particular as I walked down the lane.

Back in those days, I never knew how Mama found out the things she did about me, but by lunchtime she was brandishing a peachtree limb at me and telling me that I had to apologize to Grandma and give the two dollars back to her.

The apology was difficult to make, but Grandma — slightly out of character — only laughed about it. I never did realize until many years later what a terrible thing I had done — even though it was only a childish prank.