

PICTURED HERE, BRUCE McGRADY WITH HIS USUAL DRINKING PARTNERS IN HIS CALIFORNIA BUNGALOW IN 1983. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, WE SEE: BRUCE McGRADY, ROBERT DUVAL, SAM PECKINPAH, KEVIN COSTNER, CLINT EASTWOOD, WILLIE NELSON, JIM HARRISON, THOMAS MCGUANE, SAM ELIOT, AND LATIN CROONER FERNANDO MUSCOTINO, PLAYING A GAME OF EUCHRE.

—*SMOKY AS THE DEVIL*:  
THE AUTHORIZED  
BIOGRAPHY OF BRUCE  
McGRADY

## Chapter Twelve

Beyond the speaker at the podium, through the glass walls of the football stadium's MVP lounge, the sun smeared the Rocky Mountains into a watercolor. How many old timers did we owe that landscape to? Hatch owed them two essays and a cash prize, as it was. The haloed girl at the podium spoke in a cheerleader's singsong that pulled Hatch out of his revelry. Hatch glanced at Cassidy across the table's fine cloth, fine china, and ramekins of fluffed butter. She smiled and nodded as if to say, don't be nervous, which reminded Hatch that he was in fact feeling very nervous, his throat was tight, and he had to piss though his mouth was dry and his beer glass was long empty. Something about Cassidy's intuition, her ability to recognize the feelings, and thoughts he thought he kept well-hidden, was unsettling. He'd been drifting off over that many colored landscape so

vibrant as to promise that night was not a dark thing at all if only you lived west. West of the Imagination. That had been his mother's favorite book.

Hatch's mother couldn't be here. She was dead, after all. But Hatch's father didn't have that good an excuse. He was just afraid to fly.

That the crowd was growing restless and worrisome, was lost on the young woman reading and Hatch alone. He listened to her stride into densely packed paragraphs and wade through the rubble of deconstructive analysis. The target: The Mythic Hero of the American West. Despite the lack of obituaries, Macho was dead in the postmodern world. She spoke with an inflated chest and at times her stronger points lifted her onto the balls of her feet, bringing to Hatch's attention the bronze filets of muscle just above her knees.

He slumped in his seat just beneath and to the right of the gleaming podium, a would-be man of the hour. He bubbled over with laughter at the thought of the podium, the microphone, and then the energy it would take to stamp everything in this world with the words, This Is Not A Phallic Symbol. But still he felt the growing usurpation of the young woman's shadow, and suddenly wanted her to be quiet already.

Cassidy eyed his eyes suspiciously to be sure they did not linger too long on the speaker, and Hatch, in turn, shot a glance at the awards donor buttering his flaky roll and ogling Cass when she was too distracted to maintain defensive eye contact.

Help, Cassidy mouthed, then grinned at the donor who, a little too late, looked away and, shameless, plopped half the roll into his mouth, relishing it with upturned eyes. Hatch shrugged Cass's way. The man was just being a man. He didn't know Cassidy's context. If she weren't in a relationship with Hatch, she might enjoy the attention.

Perhaps she did, and she was going for the twofer: attention from one male and intervention by another on her behalf; which, Hatch was having a revelation, was proof of implied ownership by the latter male that she could then deny, refute, and resent. The trifecta.

Hatch tuned into the speaker who'd only raised her voice as her argument climaxed. Hatch, now, understood the particular torture through which she was putting the guests at this art awards banquet for which he was the grand prize winner. Her thesis, distilled out of academish, was that the Western Male, as promoted by the films of western icon Bruce McGrady, hindered the progress of American culture. What she did not know, and what Hatch was only now discovering by browsing the program, was that her enemy and Hatch's hero, Bruce McGrady, had been booked last minute as the event's keynote speaker, but was running a little bit late.

The MC, a smallish man wearing an impeccable grey suit, now waited nervously near the double doors, checking his watch. Guests in the room were growing red in the face, bald foreheads beaded with sweat, equally awaiting and wishing for further delays to the arrival of none other than Bruce McGrady. Delays that would last as long as it would take this sweet girl to make her point and not one moment longer. Bruce McGrady, the star of *Justice on the Plains*; *Red Sun, Pale Moon*; *The Sinner, the Saint*; and *Smoky as the Devil*, to name a few. For Hatch, the tension in the room, the young woman's rhetoric that was sounding a little too true, the anxiety over meeting an idol from his own hometown, and finally, the idea of sitting with that idol through dinner, was enough to force a dumb return to his brooding over a sunset coming to its end outside of windows he was after all quite lucky to look through.

He scratched his lightly scarred brow and realized for maybe not the first time in life that the more you wanted something, and the more you got, the more susceptible you were to the pain of loss. His mother'd been dead for a long time and it was too late to prove himself to her. His father wasn't showing up. Now, neither was McGrady. But there was Cass.

Cass, who, even now, was raking her blond hair back to show she was rolling her eyes at him for dragging her along to something so impractical. If it wasn't work that made room in the day for more work that made room in the next day for the subsequent day's work, she found it hard to stomach.

He didn't want to admit to himself that he was becoming easily hurt, sappy and emotional, something that happened increasingly, and with more force, as of late, so he went to the bar and got another beer. The rudeness of his standing while another winner read, was lost on the guests and Hatch both.

But not on Cass, who balked at him, raised a turquoise ringed hand up to her forehead in embarrassment, considered life without Hatch, saw the donor still ogling her, and grinned sourly up at the mountains wishing to be back at her ranch without any man at all.

The speaker said, "The new film subverts the traditional Western ending to reveal its fallacy. Brave man doesn't prevail over weaker, good doesn't triumph over evil: these are but myths that Americans no longer believe."

A white mustache ticked. A black leather cowboy cut coat was adjusted around broad shoulders. A cleanly shaven throat growing too large for its collar, flushed, until a hooked finger was enlisted to relieve it. Another finger tapped a wristwatch depicting the

progress of a train across a circular track. The MC crouched into the support of his tailored slacks in the corner beneath a wall clock, whispering into a cell phone. Hatch propped an elbow on the bar, whispering for two more beers.

The girl finished her reading to scattered, then, once relief spread throughout the room like cool air pushed by a fan, overwhelming applause. Hatch regarded it all from the bar and falsely joined in the general enthusiasm. He surveyed the room, counting heads in the spirit of self-flagellation. He had once felt that his schizophrenic passion for hobbies and topics all and sundry, and his powerful build and dramatic voice, all combined to make him an epic figure in his own right, and anytime he passed a reflective window or large mirror or a polished marble wall, he would glance at it to be sure that his posture was perfect, his stride smooth, and his appearance generally well-blocked within his surroundings. Vis-a-vis, Hatch had read once in Foreign Policy Magazine—it had seemed an unlikely thing to read so he'd read it—that point-five percent of the world's population were descendents of Ghengis Khan. No sooner had he read this than he'd found himself standing at the library counter, hidden behind a tall stack of books on Ghengis Khan.

Now, however, his inflated opinion of himself multiplied all those rising critical voices as he turned the quarter century. Twenty-five through fifty already seemed a matter of momentum. He wasn't the only one ensuring his posture was sound; now he felt the eyes of the world upon his lumbar region, and feared lordosis so much he overcompensated and stood like a man crucified.

Even now, right now, he was unsure he could ensnare the hearts of the desirable women in the room, he was unsure he could best all the men here in a fight mano a mano,

he was unsure he deserved this award tonight, and it was all made worse because in the past youthful vigor, the false but well-meant encouragement of desperately nostalgic adults, and a whole and complete self-confidence immovable as a mountain, had conspired to reassure Hatch that this, and this alone, was true: Hatch had the world by the balls.

But recently Hatch, twenty-five, tall, and handsome, was finding life's continuation past any real climax to be a very real drag. Profound disappointment in life felt like an inescapable and inevitable truth, like a film or novel that ended not with the hero's success, but lingered to depict the onset of early arthritis, genetically predisposed hypertension, and male-pattern baldness. Hatch feared more than anything in this world his first but inevitable bout with impotence. Somewhere in the past Hatch had the distinct impression that if you moved through life with enough gusto, you got to stage your own finale and watch the credits role.

To the bartender distracted with drying wineglasses, Hatch said, "Did you know Ghengis Khan gave up the comforts of the worlds' first air-conditioned structure simply to roam?"

The bartender shrugged a shoulder to her ear.

Fifty tables for the fiftieth anniversary of the award. Six persons to a table. Torn, Hatch hoped Bruce McGrady did not make it at all. More and more, Hatch wanted as few witnesses to his life as possible. He drank both beers, ordered another from the leather-vested bartendress thinking thank god no one has tasseled fringes on their jackets. He was growing increasingly hornery about such things—on the lookout for artifice worse than his own—and listened to the bartender pour the glass full.

He stared at the tile above the urinal, listening to his endless piss when the door opened and a towering blur of a man strode on hammer-heeled boots to take the urinal beside him. The guy was wearing, of all things, a fringed western-cut coat. Hatch tried very hard not to look, considering the surroundings. Besides, Hatch was intimidated. Hatch was tall, maybe even the same height as this man, but something about the man was more present.

The man winced through unbuckling his belt, sighed in relief, said, “Nicest football stadium toilet I’ve ever seen.” The voice, Hatch would have recognized anywhere. It was that unequivocal lope through gravel, a line delivered by Bruce McGrady.

Hatch didn’t know what to do. Treat him like a normal guy? Or would that be insulting? It could set the actor at ease. But it could just infuriate him. Hatch could make a joke. But what if it fell flat? Hatch definitely, under the circumstances, could not shake the man’s hand.

Hatch decided, finally, that he should say something casual but humorous in response to the actor’s remark. He settled on, “Better than those troughs they usually have. You don’t want to wear your dress boots round those things.”

But moments and moments had passed while he’d been deliberating, and McGrady had somehow teleported to the sink where he took a moment from scrubbing his hands, his whistle dwindling, and said, “You say something, son?”

Hatch, desperate not to seem crazy, depressed the cold handle on the toilet and took a sour moist breath before saying, “Those trough pissers. They . . . You can get your



shoes pretty wet if you're not — it's just, at games, people drinking — you're in danger of, well, dampness.”

McGrady studied in the mirror the sweep of his own majestic mustache. Full, grey as a foxfur. “Huh. Well. I hadn't thought of that.” He pressed the big silver button that set the hand dryer to screaming.

A younger Hatch had taken McGrady's life story as proof positive that a young man could live a life of legend if one was willing to reinvent oneself again and again. Legend, yes. But Hatch didn't care about fame, just experience. McGrady had a Condo in Hollywood and a ranch in Montana, he'd been married once to a co-ed, once to a teacher, once to a model, and now to a Mexican diplomat. Hatch saw all this play out again because he had to wait for a lifetime before the dryer quit and he could speak.

“We're both from there!” Somehow, the way Hatch said it, it might have seemed he'd had two lifetimes to wait. “I mean, you're from my hometown.”

McGrady tipped back his grey flat-brimmed Stetson. “I'll be damned.”

“You ever been to that film festival they hold for you?”

“I mean to.”

“They'd flip. The whole town would go bananas.”

McGrady shifted uncomfortably and readjusted the brim of his hat to shade his eyes from the harsh fluorescent lights. “That's not much motivation, I'm afraid.” He nodded in Hatch's direction.

“Yeah. I guess that would get weird, huh?”

The actor nodded again, but with more force, trying to point at Hatch without pointing.

Hatch looked around. A fly settled on the fluorescent light above him. The water ran in the urinal to his left. Most noticeably, the tongue and buckle of his belt hung down either side of the gaping fly of his jeans. He fastened himself up. “I gotta get out there.”

“Me too. I’m giving the award.”

Hatch clapped his hands together louder than he’d planned, then shoved them in his pockets. “I’m getting it.”

McGrady stopped with his hand hanging on the open door, and studied Hatch from first one, then another angle. In the end he sighed both angles away as insufficient. “Hunh.”

“I wrote an essay on some real old cowboys from around here.”

“*Real* ones?”

Hatch gulped, but McGrady smirked ironically, and Hatch went on. “A few old timers from the eastern slope. One whose wife killed herself, she hated the lonesomeness of the ranch so bad. Another took a bad fall and can’t ride anymore.”

“If I may say so,” McGrady said, “that’s depressing as shit.”

That line...

Hatch’s eyes lit, his scarred brows formed a violent arch to one side, and he thought, disconcertingly, of tacky fringed western jackets not unlike the one Bruce McGrady wore.

McGrady coughed hard enough to send his legendary mustache afloat momentarily. He let the door swing closed without having walked through it. Hatch knew that McGrady knew that Hatch recognized the deadpan delivery of the character Chip Bates, reformed brothel owner.

Hatch sees two flamboyant faux-hawked men in capris pants step into frame, carrying handbags from which they pluck and study precisely tiny cosmetic tubes before applying makeup to McGrady. Hatch has to duck away from the lowering boom mic, a furry caterpillar descending into the already cramped headspace of the bathroom. The lighting shifts, dims, goes lacey on McGrady's face, and the tile of the bathroom wall recedes. Around them, all is dark. McGrady is lit dramatically now, a pistol in his hand, and he and the makeup men are replaced by a prominenuitly featured black square, chalked writing indicating scene, set, and date, and a downward descending arm to the word "Action!" from somewhere distant, resonant; an echo from a stall perhaps?

Hatch, hesitant, eyeballs the furry boom mic. Anywhere else he looks he's blinded by lighting, then dutifully tells McGrady that he can't bring himself to kill anybody anymore. Bruce reminds Hatch that these are bad guys we're talking about killing here. To which Hatch says half-heartedly, not even them. Hatch, remembering the scene down to the cigarette burns in the film's corner, clutches the Colt revolver to his chest and proclaims: "I lived a big life, I done a lot of wrong things just to say I did them. I did a lot of them to say I was like you. Well we may be in the right now, but hellish or heavenly or limbo, I seen too many dead." Hatch lowers the pistol.

"If I may say so," McGrady says, stamping out a cigar, "that's depressing as shit."

Hatch says, "Isn't it all? I mean the whole damn thing."

And McGrady spins the chamber into the colt, looks the audience in the eyes and says, "Not all. Just that I don't have no one to share this good killing with."

The chalked black board slaps closed. “Cut!” The lights return; bright, fluorescent, bathroom lighting once again. The furry boom mic rises out of sight. They are alone in there with the knowledge that the movie’d been a recent box office failure.

Hatch trudged through the awkward silence. “I got some funny parts, too.”

“Give me a for instance.”

“So this guy whose wife killed herself, she did it in the bedroom with his hunting rifle. Her big toe on the — all that, you know? Anyway, he can’t sleep in the room anymore. You know. Sentimental reasons. So he sleeps on the dusty old couch that’s stuffed so lumpy it pains him all day working. His back gets stiffer each day. His neck starts locking. He’s plagued by daydreams of all the chickens in all his life he’s ever wringed their necks. He starts joking that the only thing that feels good anymore is his ass in the saddle and his heart, which still beats for his lost love. His true love. His dead wife.

“But one day he finally decides that between sleeping in that bedroom that smells and creaks and breathes of death, or just re-stuffing the couch, interior decorating ain’t that bad. He takes his fishing knife to the threadbare paisley. But instead of old cotton or feathers, he finds it’s stuffed with wads and wads of bills and rolls of coins she’d been saving up to run off without him. She just didn’t have the guts to leave him, in the end. He says, get this, *Damn*. See, he couldn’t even be mad at her. *She won’t change ever*, he says. *I slept on that money for months. Even dead, she’s just a pain in the neck.*”

Bruce blinked at Hatch once, twice.

Hatch cleared his throat.

The fly buzzed off the fluorescent light above them and found a place to dance with itself on the mirror.

“Well,” Hatch said, “it is better written down. Or even better, hear him tell it.”

“What happened to him?”

“The ranch stopped turning profit. Sold it off acres and cattle and horses at a time. Eventually he moved to L.A. and started selling ad space on billboards out there. Doing alright. That one on Sepulveda for the gentlemen’s club causes all those crashes? That’s his.”

“No shit? I’ve seen that one.”

“Yeah. He sends us dysfunctional ones to use as shade screens for the horses out at the ranch.”

“Didn’t know a billboard could get dysfunctional.”

“Guess there’s dysfunctional everything.”

There was a knock on the bathroom door, then the MC’s sharp face peeked in and reminded both men of the time, retreated.

“I’m looking forward to reading your work.”

“I’m reading it here.”

“That’s right.” McGrady patted Hatch’s shoulder. “Of course.”

Hatch couldn’t believe it. He was connecting. Tapping into something larger than himself and feeling once again that there was nothing he couldn’t eventually obtain, contain, consume, if only he could remember exactly how to get back his old swagger. Then, as if in slow motion, McGrady smirked behind his mustache, gave a wink, and Hatch’s confidence, that elusive coat he’d been naked of in the blustery maturation process, warmed him. He followed McGrady out of the bathroom with his chin up very

high. He believed, once again, in himself. That he was still a very young man, and life a very long opportunity to show the world all the amazing men he could be.

In that lifetime thus far, Hatch had never been lifted to such epic heights, to be loosed over so rocky a depression. McGrady finished a generic speech in two minutes flat, neglected to mention Hatch or the award at all, and strolled tipping his hat out of the room. The swaying fringe on McGrady's coat taunted Hatch into a fury.

Hatch took the MC's lengthy ad-lib introduction as an opportunity to guzzle as much beer and wine as he could, and he was so melancholy the waterline of his spirits would not be thus complimented.

He heard himself called to the stage from a great distance, like he were at the far end of a long hall. He pushed himself still in his chair back from the table, and managed only to move the table a few inches deeper into every one else's guts. The way he took the steps to the podium, you'd have thought he was climbing a gallows.

Leaning on the podium and looking out over the crowd, he saw the people as cartoonish, 2D, then, if focused upon singly for too long, they appeared grotesquely stereoscopic—his viewfinder grew a man up out of a field of rich folks swaying like impressionistic wheatgrass.

The donor resumed his ogling of Cass and Hatch said firmly into the mic, "I've got my eye on you." Hatch squinted and pointed to make clear which eye. People laughed a little.

Hatch told the story of the cowboy turned L.A. ad-space salesman, but inadvertently abridged the entire part about the ranch, the wife, or that he'd ever been a

cowboy. The older couples in the audience furrowed their mighty brows and set loose their jowls in jiggling disappointment. When Hatch saw that he was losing his audience, his thoughts flashed to the exchange with Bruce McGrady.

The lame joke about piss on boots, of all things, had come late and fallen flat. He'd kept the man in the bathroom for too long, cornered him even, and told him a story that had caused the actor to do some work off the clock, forcing a smile. Hatch couldn't be sure, but increasingly resigned himself, that Bruce had reached a hand for the door several times, only to stop when Hatch had not ceased rambling. His thoughts were rambling now too.

Thinking was hard in silence amplified. He gripped the mic and it whistled. "This one comes out of an experience I had riding with a rancher I met working on this piece. We rode across green land in a wet June to a cottage. Or what once, if you squinted just right, had been. Now it was a weathered one room shack in a clearing walled in by tall oak and spruce on all sides."

Hatch was leaning on the podium with the microphone in a headlock. He was speaking clearly, but with a seriousness unbecoming considering the cheerful musicians tuning off in one corner.

"Two windows faced us from the front wall, and they'd once been boarded up from inside. The door, that had once been boarded up too, had fallen in and inside was a lone rocking chair. The wide gaps in the slats of the walls let you peek into the darkness from all sides. It was still, and grey, but your imagination made it creak if you looked away. You found yourself looking at it just to keep from getting frightened. This was where a lone forester had come to rally against a number of men that were chasing him.

“A few nights before, he’d ticketed them for an illegal fire in the wilderness. There hadn’t been a burn out there for years, and it was a high fire danger. The next night, he’d seen their firelight and returned to ticket them again. They’d taken the ticket like a penance, and apologized. The final night he tracked their firelight through the forest only to realize he’d been walking a while and not gotten any nearer to it. After a moment, then another, the firelight was coming nearer him. It became many firelights, surrounding him. Then, they all snuffed out. Anyway, they let him live long enough to write about how scared he was all night.

“All this was taken from a diary I found out there, hidden against the bottom of the rocking chair.

“His body was never found.

“They say all good stories have a mystery in them, even if they aren’t mysteries. Hope that’s a good one.”

Had somebody been inclined to eat the desert only just set out at every table, the sound of their fork on the china would have been a cacaphony, but no one was so inclined. Everyone, it seemed, had lost their appetites. Hatch held to the podium, needing it to achieve some semblance of good posture. He thought, well, the story was *a little* heavy.

Cass, leaning back from her plate already smeared with chocolate sauce, patted her stomach to show that she’d had her fill, grinned around the room at the quiet audience, and then led them into a round of applause.