

## These Boots

by Sarena Ulibarri

He didn't recognize me. Why should he, after twenty years and two kids? Mine probably wasn't the only bed he'd been chased out of over the years, a good-looking man like that. But as soon as I saw him ambling down the aisles at Boot Barn, walking like he was kicking tumble weeds out of his way, I knew it was him. And when he looked me in the eyes and asked where we kept the belt buckles, it was all I could do to answer without stammering. There was no doubt I knew those eyes, even surrounded by white eyebrows and crow's feet. It was him, alright: Chancy Savage.

When I got off work the wind was howling and stirring up the snow in such a fit I could hardly see the road. The two-mile drive across Laramie felt like a tedious trek through the countryside. At home, I checked my voicemail as I stripped off my extra layers. There was a message from my daughter in Austin, but I barely even listened. My mind was far away, back in time before my daughter was born, before I'd married her no-good father and left Wyoming.

I crouched on the floor of my bedroom closet. There was the box, tucked into the back corner, where it had always been, in every closet I'd had over the years. I opened the lid.

A pair of dusty old cowboy boots, size eleven, the red leather faded to a sort of muddy brown. I ran my finger along the stitches of the left boot. Tears pushed at the backs of my eyes, but I pushed them right back. I'd already spent too many tears on that first love.

I had just graduated high school but I was still seventeen, a whole summer before my eighteenth birthday. Chancy was twenty-one, a ranch hand working for my father. It started with flirtatious comments at the dinner table, when I was just another woman taking care of another man, making sure he had enough potatoes and a second steak if we had it to get him through the afternoon. And then one day he followed me into the hen house when I was collecting eggs, and there, amongst the clucking and squawking of the hens he pressed me against the door and kissed me with a passion I can still feel

tingling on my lips, twenty years later. I dropped my apron, breaking the eggs I'd collected, put my hands around his thin waist and everything else disappeared.

Over the next few months, things got hotter and steamier than those paperback romances I sometimes stole from my mom's bed stand. A few nights I even snuck him into my room. He climbed in through my window, extra quiet so no one in the house would hear us.

But one of those secret nights, someone heard something, or maybe they'd known all along and decided enough was enough. Chancy had taken his boots off, and I was running my hands along the seat of his Wranglers, and that was when the door burst open. No knock, no warning jiggle of the locked handle. My father put his shoulder to the door, breaking the weak wood, and there we were, the ranch hand and the boss's daughter. My father lumbered across the room and Chancy leapt up spry as a cat and slid out the window.

Twenty years later on my bedroom floor in Laramie, I looked at those boots and felt just as much heartache as I did when he didn't come back and my father refused to look me in the eye. I had to take it on rumor that Chancy made it out of the county without harm.

There was a dead spider in the boot box, which I tipped into my bedroom trash can. I put the lid back on the box and then stood in the center of my living room. Just stood there, holding it. If that really was Chancy I saw at the store, and I knew it was, maybe I could give these back to him. Maybe it would bring him back into my life and we could start up where we left off. Maybe he could make me feel seventeen again.

It was silly, I knew, but I carried the boots out to my car trunk. I shut them in there and then stood with my fingers on the freezing surface of the car. Probably I'd never see him again, but if I did, here was proof that he'd have to remember me.

Just a few months after Chancy took off I ended up marrying Johnny Cornthwaite, a boy from school. Ever since we were kids, Johnny had been telling anyone who would listen that someday he

was going to make me his. He was joining the Army, and when he came home from Basic Training at the end of the summer, wearing that green uniform and looking different than any other man in Wyoming, I took the chance to go with him.

Wyoming was a step back in time compared to the world I saw when I followed Johnny out to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It was invigorating at first, not to have to drive thirty miles to the nearest store or spend all day doing chores. In some ways, things weren't so different. We still got up at four a.m., though after a few years I let Johnny go off to PT on his own and learned to sleep in. The Retreat bugle replaced the dinner bell; overseas deployments replaced cattle drives. I had two babies in the first three years, both born and raised in North Carolina, just spitting distance from the Atlantic Ocean. My kids grew up playing video games instead of riding horses, eating processed hamburger instead of fresh steak, and I got homesick too damn often.

Johnny was transferred to Fort Hood, Texas when the kids were teenagers, and it wasn't long before I found out those staff duty nights Johnny always had were just a front. One of those typical former beauty queens, ten years younger and twenty pounds thinner than me. Johnny moved out and I waited just long enough to see my daughter off to the University of Texas at Austin, then I high-tailed it back home.

I'd left Wyoming as Ellie Jones, daughter and sister, and transformed into Elizabeth Cornthwaite, wife and mother. When I came back, everyone still called me Ellie. Ellie Cornthwaite, some strange hybrid of my two selves. Wyoming was a hybrid now too. Even the cowboys had cell phones, and my aging mother spent her delirious days in front of a television. When I left, we didn't even have a TV.

The day I saw Chancy at Boot Barn was also my mother's birthday, so after I stashed the boots in my trunk, I drove the lonely thirty miles out to the family ranch to her party. I'd made a pot of beans, and it cooled on the passenger seat, sloshing with the bumps of the road. My brother owned the ranch

now, and my mother was slowly dying in a rocking chair while the world went on around her.

I put my hand on the lid to steady the pot as the car rattled across the cattle guard. The wind had died down by now and the ranch house glowed in the darkness, still a mile away. It reminded me of the lighthouses in North Carolina. It seemed an appropriate image, the lights warning, “danger, rocky area, stay away.” But I followed the light and parked with the other cars in front of the house.

Everybody was there. My sister, my two brothers, and their whole passel of kids and grandkids. My great-aunt was there, and cousins I hardly knew. I'd left Wyoming with Johnny when I turned eighteen and only came back twice. Once for the holidays when the kids, my kids, were eight and ten. The other time for my father's funeral.

Mom sat in her chair in front of the TV while everyone else zipped around like bees in a hive. I crossed through the living room into the kitchen, where my brother's wife Maggie and my sister Becca wore aprons and stirred big cast iron pots.

“Where should I put this?” I asked, lifting the beans.

Becca turned to me, tapped her spoon on the side of the oversized pot, then licked her fingers as she moved things around on the table to make room. I set it down, nearly knocking over the gravy boat. Becca lifted the lid and scrunched her nose at the steam.

“What is this, pinto beans? Well, them boys will eat anything.” She went back to the stove. Maggie brushed past me. I backed into a chair to let her through, then promptly took myself out of the kitchen.

Mom almost fell asleep three times during dinner, but we did manage to get her to focus on the birthday cake. The kids cleared all the dishes from the table, and then Becca and her daughter carried out the cake as everyone sang “Happy Birthday.” Mom smiled at the cake. She clasped her hands in front of her face and drew her shoulders up by her ears. I could see gaps where her gums had shrunk away from her gray teeth. I don't know how many candles there were. It sure wasn't seventy like it

should have been, but it was enough that smoke drifted up from the cake as the little candles flickered. Everyone clapped when the song finished. Mom took a breath and blew on the candles, a weak blow that sent spittle down her chin and only bent the candle flames. All the kids lent their breath too, turning the flames to smoke. Maggie cut the cake and passed it out. The room buzzed with noise. In the chaos I slipped out the kitchen door, leaving the din behind me. I sat on the couch for a few minutes, skipping the cake and giving my head a rest.

I sat on the couch for awhile, listening to the sounds from the kitchen, and then decided to just leave and drive back to Laramie. I doubted anyone would notice I was gone, or care if they did. I dug my purse and coat out of the pile on my old bed, shut the door behind me and walked out onto the dark porch.

My car's dome light was on. For a second I worried that I'd left the door open all night, but then I saw my sister's rear end poking out of the passenger door.

“Hey,” I yelled, “What are you doing in my car?”

Becca backed out, holding an armful of papers and napkins and fast food bags.

“Is this a car or a moving trash bin? Honestly, Ellie, is this how people live back east?”

She stuffed the trash into a plastic bag on the ground beside her.

“You've got no right,” I said. She pulled out another fast food bag and I snatched it from her hand. “You've got no right.”

“Oh, come off it, Ellie,” she said.

“Come off it?” My voice seemed to echo through the whole ranch. “Leave my stuff alone!”

I threw the bag at her. The crumpled paper hit her in the face and fell to the ground. She opened her mouth in surprise, then scrunched it shut, pursing her lips. She looked just like Mom when she used to yell at us as kids. She dangled my key ring in front of me. I snatched for the keys but she pulled them away, turned and lobbed them toward the hen house. She stomped toward the house,

taking the trash bag with her.

It took awhile, but I finally found my keys in a bush. The burrs cut my hand as I pulled them loose. The drive back to Laramie disappeared in a haze of angry thoughts, imagining all the rude words I probably wouldn't be able to say to my older sister's face no matter what she did to me. My nose started to run and I reached over to the passenger seat but she'd taken my tissue box.

Then it hit me and I pulled the car over to the side of the road. Maybe she hadn't gotten to the trunk. Why was I so stupid, why was I carrying those boots around in my car trunk? They should have stayed in the back of the closet where they belonged.

I walked around to the back of the car, put the key in and popped it open. The trunk was empty.

I was so mad I could barely see as I drove way too fast back to the ranch, not even slowing down to cross the cattle guard, feeling the rattle and shake of it through my teeth. I parked diagonally and slammed the door.

The trashcans were on the side of the house, where my brother could load them into the back of his truck to drive out to the dump.

I opened the trashcan. Nothing but the acrid smell of rotten vegetables. I opened the second one and there, underneath the balled-up fast food bags, underneath my half-empty tissue box, there was the boot box. Lid askew, covered in potato peels. I brushed off the garbage and lifted the box out. As I closed the trashcan and stashed the box under my arm I realized two of my youngest nieces were watching me, their faces pressed to the slats of the porch railing, wondering what crazy Aunt Ellie was up to. Maybe I owed them an explanation, but hell, what would I say? I threw the boots on the passenger seat and drove back to Laramie.

At Boot Barn the next day, one of my co-workers asked if I was going to the rodeo. Big rodeo wasn't 'til July, but University of Wyoming hosted a regional competition that brought in some of the

best young cowboys in the state. We'd had a lot of extra business from the rodeo, kids from Sheridan needing to replace their spurs, families from Cheyenne coming in for new hats.

I leaned against the cash register and fidgeted with my name tag.

“Yeah, maybe I will,” I said, knowing that I wouldn't.

“Isn't your boy in it?” my co-worker asked.

I laughed, shook my head. I thought about my son down in Austin, with his baggy jeans and baseball cap, his North Carolina accent and dirty mouth. I love my son, but he's no cowboy.

A group was gathering at the karaoke bar after the rodeo, she told me, in case I couldn't find them in the stands.

After work, I went home. I watched TV. I called my daughter, but she was out on Sixth Street with friends and I could barely hear her over the noise. I asked where she got her fake ID, but she didn't hear me, or pretended not to, so I let it go and said goodbye.

This was the first time in my life I'd lived alone, and that night my tiny townhouse felt so vast and vacant. I sat on the couch and stared blankly at the television screen, not even seeing what was on. Then the image of my mother in her chair flashed into my mind and I stood up like there was a snake in the couch. I turned off the TV and walked around the townhouse a couple times. I started cleaning things that were already clean, straightening things that were already straight. I looked at the clock. The rodeo should be almost over by now. I went to the closet, put on my nicest fringe shirt and the turquoise hat I loved but was always embarrassed to wear, then checked the Internet to find out where the karaoke bar was.

The boots were still on my passenger seat, and I felt a stab of shame as I buckled my seatbelt. When I got back from the bar, I'd stuff them back in the closet. Or maybe I'd throw the damn things away.

At the bar, I bought a Coors and stood awkwardly in a corner. My co-worker spotted me and

threw her arms around my neck like we were best friends. She introduced me to her son, who had placed 2<sup>nd</sup> in tie-down roping. It was awkward, but after a little while I started to relax.

Then there he was on the karaoke stage, belting out a Garth Brooks song. He was obviously drunk. His voice cracked and broke, and he wobbled in circles around the little stage, tripping on the microphone wires. The people at my table laughed and I stared down into my beer bottle.

It was a long three minutes, but finally Chancy stumbled off the stage. I excused myself from the table to get another beer.

I lost sight of Chancy for a few minutes, but then I saw him flirting with some younger girls at the end of the bar. Just like Johnny, I thought. Nobody gonna look at me when there are thin young things like that running around. I got my new beer and decided I'd go home when it was done.

Back at the table my co-worker told me, "That idiot who was on stage just came over here calling my boy a cheater. Can you believe that?"

I shook my head and felt my face flush. Across the room I saw him stumble into some men by the bar and spill their drinks. I drank my beer faster.

My car was parked behind the bar. I took off my stupid turquoise hat and searched in my pocket for my keys. I had just unlocked my car when three men pushed a fourth out the back door of the bar. It happened so fast, just a few kicks and punches. They took the man's hat and boots, left him on the ground and went back into the bar laughing.

I looked down at my hat and whispered, "Please, don't let that be Chancy."

But it was. Of course it was. He was the only one in there making a drunken fool of himself. He sat up, wiping blood from his face. I walked toward him.

"You okay?" I asked.

He grunted some dismissive answer and pushed himself off the ground. Once on his feet, he swayed and I rushed over to hold him up, swooping under his arm. He leaned into me. I guided him



toward my car.

“Let me give you a ride home, 'kay?”

“Home's Gillette,” he said.

“Well, where are you staying?” He didn't answer. “Where're you staying, Chancy?”

“Best Western,” he mumbled.

I opened the passenger door. Awkwardly I pulled the boot box out and guided him in. He slumped into the seat. I looked at his socked feet and knew what I had to do. I opened the box.

“Here, put these on.”

I handed him one of the dusty red boots. He fumbled with it. Impatiently, I knelt down and pushed the boot on, then helped him on with the second. He pulled his legs into the car and I shut the door.

I drove in silence for a few minutes. When I couldn't take it any longer, I said, “Chancy, you left those boots in my bedroom twenty years ago.”

“Did I now?” he said.

I wanted to ask if he was married. I wanted to ask if he had kids in the rodeo. I wanted to ask a lot of things, but I didn't, and by the time I looked over at him again, his head had slumped against the window. At the motel I had to wake him up. I sat in the car and watched him walk away, tottering on those old red boots. The box was gone too, left in the bar parking lot. I didn't go back for it.

I had the next day off and when I woke up, there was nothing I wanted more than to go out to the ranch. It was snowing again. My tires sprayed the slush like waves crashing on a North Carolina beach.

I let myself in through the front door and was surprised to hear three kids shriek “Aunt Ellie!” and run toward me. My sister-in-law Maggie poked her head out of the kitchen.

“Oh, hey! What're you doing here?”

I shrugged and patted the kids' heads. Breakfast smells filled the house. I peeled away from the kids and went into the kitchen.

“Need help?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said and handed me a stirring spoon.