Phantom Silver

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his shirttail. He sat against his motorcycle seat and turned the chamber round and round, hearing every click. Then he got cold without a coat and covered the gun again and crammed it down his pants. He looked at me weird. He said, “Ready?”

Max tried to sleep but couldn’t. He got up and put on a robe and took a double-barrel shotgun from the closet. He took two shells from one of the boxes in a drawer. He sat in a stuffed chair by his brushes, lowered the gun butt to the floor, and leaned forward until his eyebrows touched metal. Then he tripped both triggers.

Poor Rex was just about to climb the stairs when he heard the shotgun noise. He just stood there quiet until I took his hand and pulled him away and we walked over to the lunchroom. Ron was there in a booth in the back. He’d had the pork tenderloin. We sat in the booth with him and as usual he told me how pretty I looked. Rex just sulked, he was so disappointed.

“You should be happy,” Ron said.

“Do I still get the money?”

Ron nodded. He was grinning around a cigar. He pushed an envelope across the table.

Rex just looked at it. “Then I guess I am happy.”

“You should be.”

Rex stuffed the envelope inside his coat pocket. Then everybody was quiet until I spoke up and said, “I just can’t stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he’s going to get it. It’s too damned awful.”

Rex looked at me strangely. Ron knocked the ash off his cigar. “Well,” he said, “you better not think about it.”

Phantom Silver / William Kittredge

The great white horse rears above the rolling horizon, which is golden and simple in the sunset, and those sparkling hooves strike out into the green light under the dark midsummer thunderclouds. Far away there is rain, and barn swallows drop like thrown rocks through clouds of mosquito near the creek. A single planet and then stars grow luminous against the night, and the great horse is gone. Moths bat against the screen around the veranda porch, and we are left in that dreamed yesteryear where the masked man rides away, leaving his silver bullet behind. The light is cold in the early morning, and the silver bullet rests on the mantle like a
troy. Only in the morning is it possible to think of that masked man as old and fat and slow and happy.

They were all brave and unmasked in that beginning, before the Cavendish gang burned down the crew of clean-shaven Texas Rangers, and left him for dead and alone, all his comrades sprawled around him and killed. They had ridden into an entrapping box canyon, and the rifle fire crackled from the surrounding rims. They were ambushed; horses reared and screamed; the good men fell, and in only a few beats of the heart it was over. The Cavendish boys walked the stony ground amid the bodies, and smiled as if they would live forever.

But he was not dead, only scarred.

Tonto found him, saved him, and revenge became his great obsession, revenge and justice. They were notions that served him like two sides of a coin.

Right then, like a stone into gold, he changed. He rode that white stallion named Silver, he disguised himself behind that mask, he traveled with his dark companion, the Indian named Tonto, and they began their endless conquest of wrong-doing. There was ranch after ranch saved from eastern bankers and monied second sons from Baltimore. Always another gold shipment to be rescued. Another sod-buster and his family to be protected. Another evil law-man to be confounded. Another wagon train to be jerked away from the clutches of circling savages—anyone would have grown weary, or even bored. How many rustlers died, how many homesteaders' wives stood in the doorway of plain unpainted cabins with that silver bullet still warm in their hands while they wondered aloud who that masked man could have been, while the great stallion reared, before the Lone Ranger and Tonto galloped away?

And now, why is the great stallion running alone?

Do we believe the real beginning of this end could have been only boredom? Could there have been a mortal family, a strong-handed father and a mother who could split wood and still stay a woman, two children, a brother and a sister, all of them having come west to Texas after the Civil War? Could they have been living happily in a juniper-log cabin alongside the Brazos River before that summer morning when Comanche came down like slaughtering, screaming rain? Of course.

They thought they were safe. The Comanche had been corralled for seven years on the Oklahoma Territory, eating mainly on dole meat, and the father was a slow-spoken German other white men did not deal with easily, and so left mostly alone. But there on that bright morning was the truth, Comanche out of season, and killers. But look away from that cabin and the killing for a moment.

Down there in the bullrushes near the water of the Brazos there was an-
other morning sort of time, there was the dumb blankness of eyes rolled back to their extreme station, the hardness of lean hipbones under the flesh, handholds as this brother mounts his sister from behind, the younger brother, the older sister, her skirt tossed up where they were down there on the matted grass, hidden from the house by tules and nodding downy cattails, the sister on her knees and elbows and the brother plugged in from behind, going weak and dizzy that morning with her and afraid the screaming he heard so distantly might be her or even himself, but that was foolish, they were practiced and wouldn't. He stopped, crouched over her, listening, and she thrust herself back against him.

"Don't you quit now," she said.

But he did. He had. The screaming he heard was not really screaming, not fearfulness, that came later, but high-pitched joyous whooping and kiy ing, and now he could hear the horses, the hooves beating down the hard-packed wagon road. Sure as hell there were lots of them, and riding hard.

"Don't you stop," she said, but it was too late for that, already he had fallen back away from her, turning, knowing there was no way to see anything from where they were, that was why they were safe there on those hidden mornings down near the river. Already he was frightened, and later he would sense she had always been stronger, had always cared more than he did about what was going on right at the time; later he would understand it was an undivided mind that gave her what proved in time to be the strength of her indifference.

"Dammit," she said. "Then get yourself together."

What she meant was for him to pull up his pants and tuck in his shirttail, and to do it quietly. It was she who kept him quiet and crouching there those next hours as the smoke from the burning cabin and the barns rose thin and white into the clear sky, after the first bellowing from their father and their mother's frantic shrieking, after the horses had gone away, as the smoke dwindled and twilight came and the frogs called to one another in the quiet. It was she who kept him crouching and hidden there, until the next day they were saved, at least saved in the sense that they could walk away, they were not killed and not captured, not bloody and hairless like the bodies of their father and their mother.

She was sixteen that summer of 1867, and he was two years younger, and for a few months, after they had walked those miles upstream to the nearest homestead on the Brazos, toward the Palo Pinto, they were pitied and fed. Then October began to settle into fall, and in November the green-headed mallards and the Canada geese and the Sand Hill Crane began coming south, circling and calling as they settled toward the river. The clump of pink-blooming roses on the south wall of the cabin froze, the tamarack hung darker red against the gray hillslopes and the big cotton-
wood flared yellow one morning in the sun, but the real cold came all in one day the week before Thanksgiving, weather a line of shadow on the morning horizon, the air greasy and hushed all that day, then at twilight a hard northerner wind and driven sleety rain. But they didn't leave until after the Thanksgiving meal, goose and all the fixings. It was she who decided.

"We are going," she said.

By Christmas they had hooked wagon rides south to San Antonio, and she would no longer let him touch her. "If we had been going to stay there we would have stayed forever," she said, and after the beginning of the new year she took to leaving him alone for days while she went around to the taverns on the banks of the San Antonio River, and she came home with money. She had her blankets in the room they shared, and she would not let him come under them with her. "You have done me what damage you could," she said. It was not that she did not love him, she explained, it was simply that the damage was done. He took to breaking horses for a livery stable. He had always been good with horses. He could not remember his parents, they had gone away into those scalped bodies the Comanche left behind, he could not think about them at all, and the thing he hated most was the notion of horses he had loved being driven north toward the territories by those savages.

Three summers later, when he was seventeen, she left him behind altogether. "You are man enough," she said. "You take care of yourself like I am going to take care of myself." She was loading just a few things into saddle bags, rich-looking carved-leather bags provided by the tubercular-looking white-haired man she was with, a man who wore one quick gun and claimed to be a medical doctor, although no one had ever known him to cure anything. "We are going to settle in the north," she said, talking about her reasons for traveling, as though the white-haired man meant nothing. "He is going to do some work," she said, talking about the eastern Wyoming Territory around Laramie. "Things are cleaner in the north," she said, before she rode off alongside her man. "But you stay around here. You can be what you want to be around here."

By the next summer he was riding with the Texas Rangers, all of them young and clean-handed and shaven, except for the older ones with bushy mustaches, and he was thinking about the man she had ridden away with, going north to some trouble centering around the long-horned cattle being driven that way out of Texas in the great herds, thinking about how he was going to learn this law business clean, getting set for another one-day meeting with that white-haired medical doctor. He could not stop thinking about her with that man, in his bed, on her knees and her elbows as she had been
when the Comanche struck. He knew she was that way with the white-haired man, and he watched them in the darkness and kept his hands off himself, getting ready.

Then, in the spring of 1876, it happened, the Cavendish gang did them in, left him there shot in the face, thinking him dead on the rocky dry riverbed, and he changed, like a stone into gold.

There came along a single Indian, a man without a tribe, the rider on the paint horse, the good dark man named Tonto, who found him and nursed him, and he recalled that long-ago morning the Comanche struck and knew this was a different life. As he recovered, he knew childishness was behind, that somewhere in the dark kindness of this new companion there was a force he would hold always steady against that, until now, he had thought he loved: her white flesh in the sunlight that morning while she crouched with her skirt thrown forward.

For a long while things were so easily clear, there was this dark new friend and there was the great white horse, and both were sides of what was right, like the Indian and buffalo on the United States nickel. And the mask, the silver bullets, were emblems of the need to be austere and distant if you were to be great and right. He understood emblems were only emblems, ways of getting the work done, even though the mask covered that dark purple scar, the twisted hole that had been his nostrils before the Cavendish gang shot him down and rode away, thinking he was dead, seeing as he looked drowned in blood.

And what luck that he could shoot so perfectly without any sense of aiming, the silver bullets being after all part of him, the way he thought, the shooting more a business of balance and intent than anything he understood, the bullets just going where he thought they would, as though he could see a pistol in the hand of some craven man and shoot it away with only a thought.

Those were the legendary wandering years, when he did not think about his sister. There was plenty of time; time was a trapeze that only swung you back and forth. Those were the years our union advanced in its skip-step way toward the Pacific, and the meeting of fresh water with salt tides in the Golden Gate, the years our passenger pigeons were clubbed out of trees and Indian children were clubbed out of bushes as the nation made ready for the clubbing of Cuba and the Philippines and China. The Pony Express riders mounted their quickly saddled horses at a run while savages burned the way stations behind them; all but the impounded remnants of our sixty odd million buffalo were slaughtered for their tongues and humps and hides and bones; the long-horned cows wore their way north to the grassy plains of Montana and Wyoming, surviving stampede while the light-
ning flashed, surviving quicksand on the Platte, only to perish in the snowy blizzard of 1885. The horse-drawn stages scattered dust between towns like Helena and Butte, Goldfield and Tonopah, carrying treasure in their strong-boxes and enticing weak black-hatted men into banditry; the railroads came, building their graded roadbeds inexorably up through the passes, over Don-
ner Summit and through the Marias in the northern Rockies; the nester fought the cattle barons; the cattle men fought the sheep men; the rich fought the poor; the barbed wire went up and fought the wind; the sod-
grass was plowed under; the streets of Carson City were paved with brick that had served as ballast on sailing ships from China; Joseph and Looking Glass fought off tourists in Yellowstone, which was already a National Park, before losing everything they had suffered for in the Bear Paw Moun-
tains. Somewhere far away the last visionary chiefs were dying. Crazy Horse was dead, and what there was to defend was somehow over as the first popping of the internal combustion engine began to be heard. There was nothing right left to do most of the time, nothing at all to do, and our man who began down on the Brazos was not yet fifty years of age, still quick-handed as he had ever been, and bored.

In 1912 Tonto found a woman and stayed in Grants Pass, Oregon, amid blossoming spring apple and cherry trees and what the masked man called wine-berries. The woman had come west as a child from the plains after her toes were frozen off in the aftermath of the great Ghost Dance massa-
cre on the Pine Ridge Reservation of South Dakota in December of 1891. “We were like animals,” the woman said, “so they let us run.”

The earth shook San Francisco, where he knew she was, where she had to be, that most sin-filled and elegant city, with water all around. The trench warfare began in Europe, and he was too old. Over there they fought each other from craft in the air, he would have liked that, it seemed right, and he was too old. Then the war was over and he started toward the coast, rode the white horse through the mountains of northern New Mexico, along the old trails that had been graded into roadways, wintered alongside a lake in the Sierras, and in spring drifted down to the valley towns of California, wondering what next, trying to stay furtive now, hiding out, taking his time on his way to San Francisco, perfecting disguises.

He was growing old, alone with the white horse, almost seventy and get-
ing ready for San Francisco, thinking of her hair, the dark marks of age on her hands, which would be like his. The man she left San Antonio with was no doubt dead, but she would have another. There would be something. In some elegant house on one of those hills she would be pouring tea from a silver service, pouring steadily, her hands not shaking at all. He would lift the delicate cup made of fragile English porcelain, and perhaps she would smile.
In those days they still had room for horses.

The summer day was cool that close to the ocean as he came up the old mission road, the El Camino, into the Mission District of San Francisco. Off west the Twin Peaks were green with forest and above them the gray fog stood like an arrested wave. The Pacific was over there, and he had never seen the ocean, never seen real waves coming from Asia. The solid ground felt precarious, like it might tip, as though it could slip away without the strength of the continent spread around. He wished he were back on the solid ground of the interior, and smiled at himself, wishing he had come here years earlier when he was not old, when he would have liked this walking on eggs, this vast uneasiness, so much more important to confront than some fool with a model 1873 Colt revolver. So he stabled the white horse, in those days when there was still room for horses, in a barn on the swampy ground of the upper Mission, and he rode an electrified trolley car out toward the ocean, to see what it was.

It was like he was invisible, disguised as an old man with a shot-off nose that was impossibly ugly to look at. The black man in the livery stable had treated him like a customer, and the people crowding around him on the trolley car talked and laughed like nothing at all was the matter, like this was what they did all the time.

As though his wound were only a matter of accident. Four seats down there was an old woman with an enormous goiter on the side of her neck, and no one looked at her either. Except for him, he watched her, and once she looked up and caught him and smiled.

They passed beyond the Twin Peaks, beneath the fog and out onto the grassy dune-land that descended toward the sea, and it was necessary to walk. The trolley-line ended, and a board walk went on. He strolled, feeling he was coming toward the edge of what he had always been. But it wasn't. It was heavy with dampness, the fog thick around him, the waves gray and white the little way out he could see, but it wasn't like the edge of anything. He took off his boots and left them in the sand, and walked down to the water, which was cold as hell lapping on his blue-white feet. He backed out and rolled himself a cigarette, pulled a few drags of smoke, and flicked the cigarette into the water. It was like being at the center of something, standing barefoot on warm damp ground beside the house where you have always lived in the center of Kansas. He fired one shot out into the very center of that gray circle of oncoming water and fog and smiled at himself because there was nothing there to disarm.

Of course she wasn't up there in those hills, in some rich man's house. He knew that. She would not have gone that way. Down on Market Street, the next day after he slept in the stable beside the white horse, that was where she would be. She would understand that much, and be in the right place,
down there with the injured, where arrogance was equal to foolishness. Over the years she would have figured it out. She would have left the white-haired man before he died, she would have gone right and poor.

But she was not there. This day he went without his guns, without his mask and the gun-belt stocked with silver bullets. The white horse stayed where it was stabled, munching oats calmly as if this were not a new world, and he walked the barrooms, expecting to see her laughing and quarreling, maybe selling flowers on a street-corner. That night he stayed in a room which smelled of urine and ammonia, slept on sheets that smelled of old nervous sweat, not really sleeping, just resting there and dreaming, feeling she was nearby somewhere, knowing she was there, close by, waiting. But she was not. He walked the muddy streets toward the outskirts of the city as a common man, and she was not there.

At least he had not recognized her.
So it was her turn.

He went back to the only things there were: his mask, his silence, those guns, the great white horse. No matter what the comforts of nearby water, he would not be a common man. Trussed out in his black leather gun-belt, so she would see, he would be what he had always been, so totally prepared for whatever happened he had always been able to see the moment of his own death: the lurking coward, the high-powered rifle and the shot from behind, the loud after-crack echoing where the Staked Plains fall off the Cap Rock in west Texas, swallows flushing and turning through the afternoon, deer in thickets by the river lifting their heads after the impact, as the darkness closed and the far-away silence began. These last gunless days of searching in this city, where even the sound of the last rifle shot would be lost amid the cobbled streets, as he went aimlessly where she might be, that moment of dying had seemed closer.

But he would not die dumb and amiable. So he made inquiries. Who was the most evil and wretched man in this town? She would see, he thought, as the great horse cantered on the bricks. He would not be a common man.

There was no worst man, but there was the man who owned the worst men. There from far away we see the city on the hills in the sunlight of that morning, the water gleaming around the ferry boats, the sidewalk crowds along Market Street and the trolley cars clanging, the square black automobiles and the masked man on his white horse riding proudly between the stone buildings, up from the Mission and then down Market toward the building where the ferry boats were docking. The white horse prances and his mane blows in the sea breeze. The masked man stops before an Irish tavern, and calms his horse. In through the gleaming clean windows of the tavern he can see faces peering out, old men and old wo-
men, and great depths. In his deep, steady voice he calls out the worst man in San Francisco, an old Chinese gentleman with a white thin beard and hundreds of killer functionaries, both white and oriental, some brutal, some cunning. The masked man sits his horse with his hands poised at his guns. At least he will not die amiable, that old magic will bring down one or two before he goes, even though the deer along the Brazos will never hear of it. But the old Chinese gentleman comes out alone, wearing a long brocade gown decorated with silver and gold thread, and he holds his hands together before him, as though praying.

“You come in,” he says in his quavering voice, gesturing at the masked man.

“You come in with us,” he says.

“You shake your hands at your sides,” he says, “and you feel the sun on your back, and the great knot will untie itself.”

“Feel the warmth,” he says, “move your fingers.”

“Twist your head on your neck, and feel the cracking as things come loose. Feel the movement of each finger, the warmth of the sun and the coolness of the sea.” The Chinese gentleman begins moving his hands up and down at his sides in motions like those of newborn birds, the deep sleeves on his embroidered gown flapping as if he might at any moment fly.

As if his body were at last doing what it wanted with him, the masked man found his fingers flexing and unlocking and his head slowly turning from one side to the other, lifting and falling as he twisted and the small old bones of his upper spine began to crack apart from one another. “Feel the movement of each finger,” the Chinese gentleman says, “and the aching in your joints as it all comes loose.”

Like a child out on that street astride his great white horse, as his arms begin to lift and his fingers feel like feathers, the masked man knows it is important now, in this old age, to risk foolishness. Something new has begun, and the heavy revolvers at his sides will never again be part of what he is; he feels light and only encumbered by these trappings of greatness, the guns and heavy silver bullets in the stiff leather belt. “Step down,” the Chinese gentleman says, “and accept this present from an old man.” From the folds in his gown the Chinese gentleman produces an orange, which he holds as a gift toward the masked man.

“They are the sweetest and oldest in all the world,” the Chinese gentleman says, “the golden apples of the orient. In the south of China they are like fire amid the emerald leaves.”

Thus the masked man comes to stand in the cool and cavernous darkness of the tavern with his fingers feeling like feathers, and a China Orange before him on the hardwood surface of the bar. “The outside is golden,” the Chinese gentleman says, “and the inside is sweet.”

The people crowding around the masked man are old, and they are talk-
ing as old people will, standing in clusters and sometimes gesturing, sometimes talking angrily, but talking. A fat old woman with bright red lipstick and a pink flowered dress, who could never have been his sister, rubs at his neck, digging her thumbs into the knot he feels now between the blades of his shoulders, and there, as the masked man stands twisting his head on his neck, listening to the cracking of small bones loosening themselves from one another, he knows the knot is coming undone, untying him from what he has always been, and the guns at his side are more and more a heavy and foolish weight.

“You stay here with us,” the Chinese gentleman says. “We know there is nothing to be done about any of that out there.”

“Tell us,” the Chinese gentleman says, “what all that was like, out there.”

The masked man carefully lifts his guns from their holsters and places them carefully on the worn mahogany surface of the bar, and alongside them he places a silver bullet. “Everybody knows,” the masked man says, “what it was like out there.”

The masked man orders a drink, a round for the house, for what he calls his friends, and an Irish bartender in a stiff collar sets him up a bottle of whiskey and accepts the silver bullet as payment. The masked man peels off his mask and stands barefaced beside the aged Chinese gentleman and does not feel mutilated as he sips his drink and listens to this society he has joined, the old Finns and the French and Britishers around him talking, the cackling of old men, old women telling of childbirth after raising the drinks he has bought to toast him silently. “There was a morning,” the masked man says, “down by the river, when the Comanche came . . .” No one is listening. The masked man begins to peel the soft glowing China Orange, stripping the peel away in long spooling motion and then separating the sections and aligning them before him on the bar before eating the first one. The juice is cool and rich and sweet. For him it is over. In the time left he will spend a lifetime of silver. He will be ancient when the great fires blossom over Dresden and Japan, after the millions died, and he will not know he should care. Now the salmon die in turbines and he does not know at all.

But there was a moment when great silence descended, and beyond the Staked Plains and the Cap Rock of west Texas, where the swallows flushed and turned through the afternoon, deer in the thickets by the Brazos lifted their heads. In that silence down there amid the bullrushes by the river, a girl crouched on her knees with her skirt thrown forward, and her flesh was so perfectly white under the fresh morning sun. “Don’t you stop,” she said. And for us there is still that great white horse rearing above the rolling horizon, which is golden and simple in the sunset, those sparkling hooves striking out into the green light under dark midsummer thunderclouds. Far away there is rain, the stars growing luminous, and the white horse always running.