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HOME OF CHAMPIONS

by Melissa Price

There's only two things Ada, Oklahoma's, famous for. One's the four-man hanging that went down on Main Street in 1909. Seems the town's top men took the law in their own hands one night in April. Tired of bribed judges and smirking criminals, they broke into the jail and led four murderers, blindfolded, to an old livery stable and hanged every one of them. There's a newspaper photograph, snapped early the next morning, that shows a little boy peeking through a door at the four dangling bodies. Every ninety-year-old in Ada swears the kid is him.

The other thing's football. Officially, the program doesn't start until two-a-day practice the August before junior high. But by then, boys have been scouted from surrounding towns, the good ones shipped to quarterback camps in Norman and Texas. They drink high-protein milkshakes and pump iron at "Summer Playground," a weight room with drill sergeants for trainers. Come senior year, they've got fingers thick as sausages, championship rings wrapped around half of them.

There used to be a barbeque joint—Bob's—the north side of town that held promise as a third claim to fame. People flew from as far away as Canada to dunk Bob's tender ribs in his special, greasy sauce. He died of his own concoction, arteries clogged with clumps doctors swear, to this day, smelled of barbeque.

It was in this restaurant, the summer of 1992, that Bob's son, Lucas, saw Amanda Coffee for the first time in ten years. She was peering at him over a soggy pork-on-a-bun, gray eyes solemn with New York sophistication. Her blonde hair was rolled like a French croissant

against the back of her neck.

Lucas towed the barbeque from his fingers and plopped in the chair opposite her. "How's your food?" he asked, propping his boots on her table.

She stared at his sauce-crusting soles with eyes that seemed, to Lucas, a thousand years smarter than the ones she'd worn in high school. They'd seen the Statue of Liberty and Wall Street and, probably, some pro ball games as well. They didn't follow Lucas around with hopeful adoration anymore. They gazed straight into his own eyes (quarterback-blue) and narrowed slightly. "I thought you'd be famous," she accused.

"That's funny," he said, crumpling a napkin. He drew back and sailed the wad clear across the empty restaurant. It landed with a loud thump atop a can of paper balls. He brushed his hands together and said, "I thought I'd be famous, too."

Thing was, Amanda had fled Ada their sophomore year. She didn't know, yet, Lucas had spent his last two seasons on the bench. She just remembered the smack of his eighty-yard completions, loud as gunshots, halfway up the bleachers. "Nobody ever intercepted your passes," she recalled.

Lucas recrossed his boots. He leaned forward and chipped at a sauce stain with his fingernail. "Yeah, well, after a while, nobody caught 'em too much, either."

Amanda cocked an eyebrow in doubt. If she'd seen Red Conner's finger, scarred and arthritic, she would have believed. Took doctors four hours to reattach the pinkie, and it still stuck out like a queer's when he drank coffee. He was the last to go up for a Lucas Dotson pass.

Lucas took Amanda's empty plate. "You come all

this way to talk about football?"

"I came for the barbeque," she replied, tossing her napkin. "It's not as good as I remember."

"Nothing ever is." He didn't tell her his dad took the secret recipe to his grave. He wanted her to think things slid downhill automatically.

But Amanda was thinking just the opposite. As she watched Lucas walk away, she grew hypnotized by the ripple of muscles in his shoulders. She'd felt them, once, through his thin shirt at a junior-high dance. She twisted open her lipstick, thinking she might like to feel them again.

Lucas's dark hair was freshly combed, the sauce wiped from his boots when he met Amanda at the register. "It's on the house," he said, stabbing her ticket through a poker. "I do it for all my disappointed travelers."

Amanda shrugged and tucked her billfold away. "That could get expensive."

"No more than flying from New York for second-rate barbeque."

"I didn't fly from New York."

"Oh." Disappointment crashed against Lucas's heart; he felt his interest waning.

"I drove." She looked at Lucas evenly, then her cool, gray eyes slid to the door. She followed them.

Lucas locked the register, shut off the lights and closed down. Amanda's red convertible was the only car in the lot, save for Lucas's black extended-cab. The mud on his tires reminded him of last night's joy ride down at Sandy Creek. He'd shared a keg with the guys—"Survivors," they called themselves, leftover teammates enduring Ada together. "Home of Champions!" they'd sung drunkenly, sloshing their cups together in a delirious toast.

Sunlight pinged off of Amanda's hood, shooting the

hangover back to Lucas's head. He walked toward the convertible and climbed in. "Just ignore that stuff in back," Amanda said.

Lucas poked through it and found cameras and lenses and a dozen black-and-whites of people who looked familiar. "Who's this?" He tapped a finger on the singer's thick lips.

The car hummed to life. Amanda glanced at the glossy and said, "Steve Tyler, from Aerosmith. Put it up." She backed out, ignoring the fact that Lucas had pulled out a fresh pile of photos. As he shuffled through her work, she felt a satisfaction she thought she'd outgrown.

He shoved the prints under her seat. Staring forward, into the wind, he said, "So you went to New York and got all famous."

"*I'm* not famous," she corrected. "The people I shoot are famous."

"Well," he mumbled, "it's almost the same."

That's the deal. There's a whole population from Ada that's almost famous. Half of them still wear championship rings, and another fraction's in jail, serving time for petty crimes. You do what you have to do to make the papers. Worst thing to be is invisible.

Of course, that was clear opposite Curly's thoughts as he watched Amanda speed up to his trailer. He cursed and let the blinds fall. He was jerking on his boots, calculating an escape, when Lucas's voice shattered his plans. One second, he was mentally ducking through a loosened floorboard; the next, he was glowering from the porch at his abandoned childhood buddy. He spat over the railing and wiped his dirty mouth. "I musta died and gone to hell," he said and slammed back in the trailer.

Amanda switched off the ignition. "I owe you a meal," she confessed. "I came for more than barbeque."

Looking sideways, Lucas cringed at the stained sheets and tattered Levi's drooping from Curly's clothesline. The trailer park was a maze of outdoor laundry, poverty on a clothespin. Lucas sighed and climbed from the car. "You're in for another letdown. From what I hear, Curly's gone downhill with everything else."

"He's still my big brother," Amanda clipped. She hurried up Curly's rickety steps without looking back.

Lucas gaped after her. He'd clean forgotten about that, which isn't as strange as it sounds. When Amanda and Curly were kids, it was nothing for their mother to leave one of them sobbing at the supermarket. She'd be shelving Cheerios at home before it hit her she hadn't seen Curly since their fight in the cereal aisle, or Amanda was being quieter than usual. Those two just didn't belong together is all.

But together they were—for the first time in going on a decade. Curly quickly buckled his belt and, shirt still flapping open, snapped on his black Stetson. With all those red curls, he looked like Tom Sawyer—only stretched—after a shopping trip to Tener's Western Wear. He tipped his hat at Amanda. "I's just leavin'."

"Hi, Curly," Lucas said, blocking the doorway.

Curly froze. He'd escaped violent death seven times—generally with breathing room—but couldn't see daylight past Lucas's shoulders. Lucas was swelling right before his eyes, his chest wide as a yardstick now, his shadow, no doubt, cooling concrete all the way to the highway. Curly blinked, and Lucas shrank back to regular size, though a hazy outline reminded him of all Lucas could be.

Curly melted into his boots and spilled over onto the floor. He glared up over the shredded knees of his Levi's. "All right," he said finally. "You two tell me what's what."

"I'm taking you to New York," Amanda said. "It's



ILLUSTRATION BY HENRY MUENCH

your turn with the folks."

Curly could not hold his sister's gaze. Ten years, and she still reminded him of the good china, the good crystal—things he might ruin if he got too close. His eyes darted to Lucas, who coughed and said, "I'm just along

for the ride.”

“You know I killed a man, don’t you?” Curly warned.

A small smile curled Lucas’s lips. He stepped completely inside, letting the screen bang shut. “I heard you killed more like eight.”

“Coulda been,” Curly mumbled. “Coulda been.”

“You’re such a liar,” Amanda snorted. “You can’t even kill a butterfly.”

“Why would I want to?” Curly unfolded into the air, willing his thin frame to stretch higher than its six-foot boundary. When he stepped forward, the ceiling fan thumped his Stetson clear into the kitchen. Amanda glanced at the hat, then her brother, a good nine inches under the blades. She went to retrieve his Stetson.

Curly and Lucas gazed at one another in silence. You threw away some pretty important things as a teenager. Wasn’t either one of them going to reach in that trashcan first. They sank to opposite chairs and waited for the stare to break.

In the kitchen, cupboards slammed. “Spam?” Amanda marveled in disgust. She moved to the refrigerator, surveyed the carton of beer, the two jars of Vlasic pickle juice. She marched into the living room and lifted her brother’s chin, replacing his hat. “Your kitchen,” she announced, “has the nutritional value of a breath mint.”

Slowly, Curly peered around her, then shoved her away completely. He hadn’t blinked; neither had Lucas. And they knew that about one another. Their gaze seemed tangible, taut as fishing line. Amanda chopped a hand through it and exclaimed, “You two haven’t changed a bit! You’re just alike!”

Simultaneously, the men flew up, across, into one another, snapped from the string that had held them at bay. Curly stabbed a finger deep in Lucas’s chest and snarled, “You’re just a wanna-be hero! Ain’t nothin’ in

you is still in me.”

Lucas drew back his fist and gritted his teeth. Years ago, he would have thrown the punch without thinking. But that was before the motorbike crash, when his arm was still regular. What doctors had done to that limb, in the name of football, changed everything. Lucas lowered his arm—which could slice more than pinkies at close range—and breathed, “You’re just a wanna-be outlaw.”

“I killed a man!” Curly shouted as Lucas slammed out of the trailer.

The humid air pressed down, harder, on Amanda and Curly. They always felt so crowded when left alone together, like there was room for just one in all that silence. “You need to quit saying that,” Amanda murmured, “about killing somebody.”

“You need to quit denyin’ it’s true,” Curly retorted and burst outside.

Across the porch, Lucas stared forward, ignoring Curly. Curly followed his gaze to the Indian kids slouched low in Amanda’s seat. He glared silently, then leaned forward and shouted, “Scram!” The kids popped like brown spiders out of the car—a tumble of legs and hair and dark, beady eyes. They separated into three small boys who scampered, barefoot but unflinching, across their hot, concrete yard. At the door, the biggest, around nine, looked back. You could see it in his grimy face, that car was some sort of chariot.

Curly pointed his finger, like a pistol, at the kid and snapped, “Bang!” The boy flew backwards into his trailer, good as shot.

Lucas gazed at the neighbor’s banging screen. “Curly?” he finally whispered. “You really kill a man?”

Slowly, Curly nodded. “Yesterday, I did. Yesterday,” he repeated, to make sure Lucas heard.

“You kill eight?”

Curly grinned. "Mighta took credit for that many."

The two men sank to the porch's top step. They stared straight ahead, at the sun's dusty backside, the good half flipped toward town. "That man you killed," Lucas said, "was he anyone important?"

Again, Curly cocked his finger-pistol, this time at the sun. He aimed with a squint, then slowly lowered his hand. "Pretty much. He was—whadayacallit?—head of surgery."

White ripped through Lucas's bones, settling in his elbow. The pain faded quickly, with the memory. Boldly, Curly reached out and traced Lucas's scar—a thin, neat zipper sealing giant mistakes. He jerked his finger away and shot another bullet, recklessly, nowhere. "We almost made it out of here, old buddy," he said into the emptiness. "We just almost did."

"You've had a dozen chances," Amanda dismissed, suddenly on the porch. She'd gathered Curly's denim wardrobe, jeans worn thin as the paper sack they were in. "This is your last."

She had it all wrong, though. You get one shot, and if you blow it on a wet highway, you become who that leaves you. After that, you're just running away. "I got business here," Curly said.

Amanda crossed her arms. "I'm not leaving until you get in that car."

Slowly, Curly lifted his head and stared at the shiny vehicle, backed right into the setting sun. He could see what the Indians had—a perfect getaway car, sleek, topless, the color of lipstick. He forced his gaze away, toward the neighbor's overalls, bland and shapeless on the line. "Amanda," he sighed, "you'd best make yourself comfortable then."

"Fine." She dropped his clothes with a thud and squeezed a seat between Curly and Lucas. Wasn't three minutes, her leg overlapped Lucas's, the gulf between sib-

lings far wider than the fractured concrete that separated them. They sat like that for maybe an hour. Their thoughts could have filled a Sears catalog, but they flipped past each one silently, like a page without toys. Suddenly, Amanda shot up and announced, breathlessly, "I have to go." She hurried to her car without looking back.

People who briefly return to Ada learn this: A gong goes off deep inside you, and you've got to leave then. No matter if your plan flight's next week or, as in Amanda's case, you've paid up the motel for two more days. Another couple of hours, and you're destined for the city cemetery, a lifetime passed.

Lucas scrambled after Amanda. At the car, he glanced back guiltily. "She's my ride," he apologized.

Curly merely nodded and tipped his hat. His eyes followed Amanda's convertible right over the sinking sun. Eventually, her engine faded into the generic hum of night, and he was able to breathe. He stood, stepped around his paper luggage and walked toward his Harley. He rode into town with his Stetson pulled low, a football clenched tightly between his thighs—like he was eighteen and still gave a damn about tomorrow.

There are nights in Ada when stars multiply right before your eyes, a spill of silver glitter that makes heads jerk up and hearts pound. Anything can happen. You can kick a football all the way to heaven. You can kill a man.

Lucas kissed a woman with New York license plates, and his soul electrocuted.

Amanda pulled away, unaware of the jolt. "It is different," she murmured, "than I thought it would be."

"It was only a kiss," Lucas pleaded. "You haven't given me a chance."

"No." Amanda pointed forward. "I mean the foot-

ball stadium. It's smaller."

Lucas measured the peeling structure against what he'd seen as a boy. "It looks bigger on Friday nights," he defended. "That's what you're remembering."

"Maybe." She touched his lips to quieten him. "Your kiss was nice."

Lucas forced his gaze to Amanda's eyes and swallowed at the need there. She wanted him. He could take her back to the restaurant and have her right on the table she ate off. But she wasn't crazy like he was. He barely knew her, couldn't love her—wasn't even sure he *liked* her—but she was everything. He freed her hair, already loosened by the wind, and buried his face in it.

His mouth was on her breast when Curly's Harley roared by in the distance. You knew it was him, just like you know John Wayne's horse before it gallops onto the screen. Lucas tore his tongue away and glanced over his shoulder.

"Lucas?" Amanda whispered. He turned and trembled at the stardust in her tangled hair, the permission in her eyes. He battled the night's tricks. Never mind what it felt like. Amanda Coffee would drive back to New York and take the same photographs whether she'd had him or not.

He untangled himself from her arms. "We shouldn't," he insisted, "There's no future in it."

"Shhh. It's okay." She covered his mouth with a kiss.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember passion for passion's sake—the only kind he'd known. The Harley rumbled past again, and he gave up. He climbed out of the car and hopped onto the hood.

Amanda waited a moment, then joined him. "You should bring Curly to New York," she suggested. "You could stay for a visit." Urgently, she grabbed his elbow, eyes dancing with excitement. "You could *live* there."

For a split second, he *could*. The trip launched a decade ago—aboard Curly's motorbike, with a New York photo as their only map—could be completed. But when he tried to picture it, all he could see was Ada's last stop sign, wet as blood in the night...his right arm reaching through the wind to slap the sign good-bye...and finally, his fingers stained with barbeque, everything settles.

"I have a restaurant to run," he replied shortly. After all, people still travel to Bob's for the memories. It didn't matter what they ate. When they left, it was yesterday lingered in their mouths.

"Well," Amanda relented, "come for a visit them." She looked at her watch. Quickly, she dug through her purse and thrust some money at Lucas. "Here. Make sure Curly gets a flight to New York. You're the only one he'll listen to."

There was some truth in that. But so often—as was the case here—the only person you'd listen to is the last one who'd tell you what to do. "Sure," Lucas lied. "Okay." He slid from the hood and stuffed the money in his pocket.

Behind him, Amanda's car door slammed. "Hop in."

Lucas spun in the dark. The sky was a strobe light, blinking the world into slow motion. Amanda's smile spread out in fractions, and her hand had to travel a million miles to pat the seat beside her. Lucas closed his eyes. "No, really. I could use the walk."

She started her car and pulled up beside him. "You'll visit then?"

"Sure, Amanda. Sure, I will."

She squeezed his hand once, quickly, then drove away. She broke highway speed in town and never looked back. It didn't matter, though. Ada followed her right to her New York doorstep.

Lucas sat in the parking lot and waited for Curly. It wasn't five minutes, Curly's bike rolled to a stop at Lucas's boot tips. Curly grinned at the fear in Lucas's eyes. "Don't ride 'em too much, huh?" he laughed.

Lucas scrambled up and slapped the dust from his jeans. He met Curly's gaze evenly. "Don't get much chance."

Of course, that was nothing Curly could understand. He cut teeth on a Harley handgrip. When he swung off his bike, you could hear his soul rip, like Velcro. He pitched the football to Lucas. "I heard all these stories. I want to see you throw."

It's amazing how a ball can change some men. Lucas dropped ten years right there on the pavement. He scrambled around it, like it was just another linebacker, and sailed the football clear to the visitors' bleachers. He brushed his hands together and grinned.

Curly spit over his shoulder, right on Lucas's past. "I heard you could throw it to the moon," he said, unimpressed.

"Maybe I wasn't aimin' for the moon."

They laughed and ran like boys toward the field. When they dropped from the fence, Lucas caught Curly's shoulder. "Whydja come back?" he huffed. "You know, from New York and all?"

There's some questions just demand a lie. You can't be mean as Curly and have someone feeling sorry for you. You can't say you fled New York—where your parents thought you wanted to be—because the scowls followed you, anyway. "Crowded city." Curly shrugged. "Wasn't room for me and Amanda both." He raced away, before Lucas could argue.

They climbed the bleachers and sat on either side of the football. Lucas picked the ball up and spun it nervously. "Curly?" he whispered. "Whydja have to kill him?"

Curly winced. His sister was right: He couldn't kill a butterfly. But when Amanda drove into town the day before, the sky fell down on him. Felt like that surgeon—who'd fixed Lucas to throw to the moon with no one there to catch—was squatting right on his windpipe. "I don't know," Curly sighed. "I just went crazy, I guess." He grabbed the ball and trotted down the bleachers. "C'mon!"

On the field, Curly stopped under a floodlight, squinting up. He tossed the ball to Lucas. "Bust it," he dared.

Lucas—who'd never broken anything but a town's heart and Red Conner's pinkie—grinned. He drew the ball back and flung it. The light shattered, and a thousand stars winked out.

Curly brushed the glass from the ball and carried it to the next light. He handed it to Lucas. "Bust it," he ordered again. This time, Curly shot the light with his finger when the ball struck. "Bang!" Another thousand stars gone.

They broke every light in that stadium, and wasn't a star left in the sky. Their laughter froze, momentarily, as a siren approached. Curly grabbed the football from Lucas. Lucas grabbed it right back. Ten years was too long to hold something that wasn't yours to begin with.

The siren passed, and Lucas dug out Amanda's money. "Here," he insisted. "You might need this."

Curly turned his back on the money and sank to the field. Another siren screamed. "Curly?" Lucas whispered. Curly looked back. Lucas pointed at the sky. He drew back his arm and threw that football with everything inside him.

Maybe it reached the moon, and maybe it didn't. Thing was, it never came back. That's all that mattered.