



Boomer always said his pick-up would pass everything on the highway but a gas station. And Puresome, who had ridden shotgun with him on several long-range, anti-critter Alfa Strikes to Boomer country, deep in the Hort of Texas, knew it was true. Boomer had grown up in wild, Texas ranch country, where a young man's fancy involved shooting stuff, chousing girls, the occasional sport and not taking no shit from nobody. Nobody.

There was a great deal of stuff to shoot, which fell into categories of stuff you could eat, and varmints, which was anything else that flapped, crapped or crawled and didn't produce farm income. Not surprisingly, Boomer had early on developed into a crack shot and a crafty ambusher. Selling pelts of unwary furry animalitos subsidized many tankfuls of gas

## DEEP IN THE HORT OF TEXAS

that a young, manly man needed to cross vast, Texas distances in search of the illusive good ol' girl at dances or the happy señoritas of Boy's Town. The adult Boomer loaded his own ammunition and could drive nails with it at two hundred yards.

It was only natural he should grow up to be a Naval Aviator.

Boomer had gone off to Texas "A and M" and learned practical stuff — like how to use every power tool Sears had in its catalog. As a member of the Corps of Cadets, he also learned how to spit-shine boots and had a fanatical sense of neatness and order whomped into him by upper classmen. He took to Preflight in Pensacola like a duck to a stock tank.

Eventually, Boomer ended up flying Spads from the libertine West Coast and got to use his ordnance delivery skills against the wily Gomer in the Big War. When his squadron retired their rotating speedbrakes, he went off to *Intruder* school and checked out in the A-6, which earned him a trip to WestPac in a faster, uglier airplane.

But a man can accumulate only so much monkeypod, and Boomer decided he had enjoyed all the Yankee Station he could stand; so he opted to fly multi-colored airliners and with the raggedy-assed Reserves on the side.

When Boomer showed up at the Big Red Fighter Squadron to fly F-8's, Puresome found that he knew him, having enjoyed a surprise dinner with him and his wife in Norfolk when his pal Weed, a fellow Aggie who kept track of classmates, shamelessly invited themselves over. Boomer had initially gone all squinty-eyed with suspicion as Puresome, arcing around at the speed of heat from too much coffee, explained all this, but he did know Weed and vaguely remembered an incident when a stranger ate most of his dead cow and drank all of his scotch. When Puresome volunteered that his Daddy was also a Texas Aggie, Class of '34, Boomer forgave him some for being a New Meskin.

But it was after Puresome gave a thirty-minute performance on the joys of deer hunting to squeamish animal activist and probable tofu-eater Bearnie Bumfrabb, which involved lurid descriptions of battle damage to Bambi and drinking deer juice from a heavy, silver goblet, that Boomer decided Puresome was a "purty good ol' boy."

Besides, as an inheritance from his Daddy, Puresome could speak fluent Texan without moving his lips none, complete with semi-incomprehensible folkisms. So, when Boomer commented that an especially fat waitress at the Ops gut-bomberia "would probably field-dress 180 pounds," Puresome was able to counter with an observation on an obnoxious station TAR commander that "my ol' granny used to say that three-quarters of the people of the world is sons-a-bitches."

And "crazier than a peach orchard boar." And "useless as teets on a boar hog."

And, finally, a bittersweet comment on lost opportunities: "if the cat hadn't stopped to lick his butt, he would have caught the rat."

Boomer understood perfectly.

An unlikely pardner-in-crime was Puresome's pal, Tank, who was a Yankee from Boston. But he didn't talk funny, was certifiably batshit, and, as another reconstituted attack pilot, hugely enjoyed delivering ordnance against little animals and fishes, then eating mass quantities of whatever was left. Like Puresome, Boomer forgave him some for being a furriner. As long as they obeyed **THE CODE OF THE WEST**.

So, after many strange happenings around the air patch and on squadron deployments, Boomer trusted them enough to invite both Puresome and Tank along on a mission to Deep, Texas, site of an annual goat cook-off that brought in pilgrims of religious intensity. Near there, Boomer's spiritual twin, L.W., owned a vast ranch covered in a Serengeti-like profusion of wildlife, where it was customary to open season on whatever happened to be in sight, unless it was something certifiably useful.

As the three rolled out of the antheap of civilization for the four-hour drive to the heart of darkness, the gates of mercy once again clanged closed behind them.

When strip malls faded into the edge of mesquite and cow country, it was Boomer's custom to stop and stock up on a case of cold beer to maintain hydration for the rest of the drive. It was legal in the Lone Star State to drink cold beer as one hurdled down the road provided adequate control was maintained and one's blood/alcohol level stayed short of 90%. Besides, in these moisty, macho days before sensitivity and political correctness, it was manly to drink well and keep on trucking. Also, converting the pickup into an 80-mph happy hour made for mandatory sea stories and quick passage of the hot and dusty highway. Horny toads and armadillos shook in the wake turbulence of a shiny, white pickup that appeared out of nowhere in the heat shimmers and disappeared in a whoostle, not unlike that of great, screaming war-eagles.

Seen through the smoked glass of the truck, Boomer's lips were moving. The parochial, oral tradition of mujers indicated that was how one knew a pilot was lying, but Boomer was revealing yet another aspect of **THE CODE OF THE WEST** to an attentive audience.

"You know how to keep your wife from giving you any crap when you come in late after happiness hour?"

Puresome knew there was no way in hell, but he nodded manfully and prepared to make mental notes. Like other Boomerisms, it probably had practical applications. Tank, though a relatively recent newlywed, probably could get away with anything, thought Puresome, just by being a large object. But he seemed to be listening closely, anyway.

"You come stompin' in," Boomer continued, "kick open the bathroom door, whiz like a race horse, and holler 'Gawd...Damm! I could frabb a milk cow!' I guarantee she will go into a goody-protecting mode and be instantly asleep."

Puresome and Tank both hoorawed, but Puresome knew that a collision between **THE CODE OF THE WEST** and the fiery Latin traditions of Tunita Delmundo would result in at least 300 zings per minute delivered at high velocity by the child bride over an extended period of time. It was better to infuriatingly fall instantly asleep and wake up and enter the fight with more mach in the morning.

"Damn straight! erupted Tank, crumpling a defenseless can, "More cold beer!"

And so the miles passed.

"The difference between here and where I grew up, is that Texas has actual natural, born trees that don't have serial numbers," Puresome was saying after the truck had transitioned to dirt roads for a while. The country they were passing was mostly brushy ranch country, interspersed with a few, dusty dry-land cultivated fields. When they rattled over a narrow, wooden bridge spanning a slow, winding muddy river, Puresome shook his head at the appearance of actual, natural water. "Chaps, there are catfish two years old in Eastern New Mes'co that don't know how to swim!"

"The hell you say," said Boomer, "there are catfish in river that could frabb this pickup, and we'll get us some." That impressed Tank, who had grown up around the Atlantic Ocean its ownself and actually knew

something about real boats, bait, and fishing tackle. Visions of L.L.Bean stuff, complicated arrangements of hooks, spoon, and spinners adorned with strips of exotic morsels started dancing in his head.

"Damn!" He exhaled, "I could have brought all my gear. What are we going to use?"

"Well sir," Boomer answered, "we could seine some minnows out of L.W.'s stock tanks, or we could use some home-made blood-bait and rig some trot-lines, but the best way is to throw a wire in the water from an ol'timey telephone we have and crank away. The catfish get all stunned and just float to the top, and we scoop 'em up."

Tank's L.L.Bean vision disappeared with an almost audible "pop!"

Puresome was just as disillusioned, having momentarily hoped for the subtle application of the dynamite method.

At long last, the pickup drove through the stone gates that marked L.W.'s home on the range. Immaculate, irrigated fields lined the road to the ranch house. L.W. did it all — cattle, goats, and pigs, and grew and custom mixed most of his own feed. Puresome wondered what project awaited them, because it was customary to help with the work of the day before festivities were in order. In previous visits, Puresome had helped castrate piglets, lay PVC pipe to suck water out of the winding, muddy river that snaked its way through the ranch, and humped hundred pound feed sacks around. Puresome was always impressed with the practical competence of ranchers, and L.W. was a good one. Boomer gave him the ultimate accolade: "L.W. doesn't spend a nickel unless it will make him a dime."

They found him out by the corral, welding some kind of useful doodad out of scrap iron, all sweated out in the Texas heat.

"Gawd damn, L.W.," said Boomer by way of greeting, "you smell as bad as Ben Moore's ass!"

"And you should know, Phillip," L.W. said, shutting off the acetylene torch and shaking hands. "Howdy, Puresome — you're sure keeping bad company," and "good to know you" to Tank, who was a first-timer. The four stood around, scuffing their boots in the dust and talking, establishing the Plan Of The Day. For a change, L.W. didn't have much they could do, so it was decided that, since it actually was dove season, the visitors would start off by defending a nearby grain sorghum field from merciless attacks by droves of killer doves.

As they walked off, Puresome asked Boomer, "who the hell is Ben Moore?" "Ain't nobody real — just a saying."

Puresome was real happy his name hadn't been arbitrarily selected.

Actually, he thought, Ben Moore's ass was a good example of secret code that Boomer and L.W. shared. They could almost pass as twins, philosophically. They drove the same brand of pickup, same kind of straw and dress cowboy hats, and, having grown up together, shared all kind of outlaw secrets. Their Aggie competency sometimes made Puresome feel very much the city boy, and he was careful to curb some of his more flagrant rocket-man, jump-in-the-middle-of-the-fight-and-kick-ass tendencies and actually enjoy some of the duo's evil plans.

Like once when deer hunting, Boomer had discovered what had to be a wild turkey roost, where the big birds came to sleep in the trees. At camp that night, Boomer and L.W. had miraculously produced miner's lamps that strapped on to their stetsons, and they had all snuck out to the roost with shotguns in hand, and, in a wild fire fight, dealt the great birds a heavy defeat.

The afternoon sky was as unto the sky above Hanoi, and many birds fell to the intrepid gunners. Puresome opened quail season when two bob whites burst from under his feet while he was looking for a downed dove. Later, riding around the ranch in the back of L.W.'s pickup, while he checked on his cows, Puresome and Tank jumped two ducks off a stock tank, sneaking up the bank of the dam and, on the count of three, storming over the top with blazing guns. The same duo accounted for two wild turkeys that L.W. crowded into a fence with his pickup madly bouncing down the pasture road, forcing the heavy birds to fly over the two ack-ack gunners in the back of the pickup, who eventually filled the jinking birds with enough tiny dove-shot that they were too heavy to fly.

Back at the ranch house, they cleaned the game and got themselves ready for the evening. As dusk settled, Puresome produced a half-gallon jug of Canadian whiskey, and plans were made over some drinks to motor off to a steak house of some repute, only an hour or so away by fast truck. This suited L.W.'s sweet wife fine, since she was going to a PTA meeting and didn't want to cook for four outlaws with large appetites anyway. There was never any doubt in Puresome's mind what supper was

to be — ranchers felt that only smarty pants, eastern liberal faggits ate anything other than a good piece of meat, a slice or two of gun-wadding white bread, and maybe a bean or two. Even though Puresome sometimes worried that he might be down to his last major artery and routinely tried to avoid extra helpings of cholesterol, saturated fat, sodiums and red dye number three found in the basic Texas food groups of barbeque, meskin food and fried stuff; the prospect of a really good steak was too good to miss. And so they set off in a cloud of dust, four desperados in the front of L.W.'s pickup, fortified by refills from the half gallon jug Puresome held between his legs.

The steaks were worth the drive. Puresome and Tank got into a mutually destructive jalapeno eating contest, which ended in a draw. "Ay Chihuahua!" Puresome predicted, "tomorrow morning, it's going to be 'come on, ice cream!'"

"You know the definition of a perfect evening?" Boomer asked Puresome and Tank, who waited, knowing one was coming. "Drink something, eat something, shoot something, frabb something."

"Well, I guess three out of four ain't bad, since I've sworn off farm animals," said Puresome, "kinda like flying helicopters — might be fun, but you wouldn't want your friends to find out."

Puresome climbed into the cab of the pickup, and Tank and Boomer got into the back of the truck for the drive home. It was time for vengeance against varmints, and they had brought their shootin' arns. L.W. had his rifle in a custom rack out of sight beneath the roof of the cab; he was also responsible for manning the spotlight. Puresome had the heavy responsibility of maintaining the whiskey jug integrity watch.

Jackrabbits munching away in grainfields were wasted. A skunk came under the spotlight and was offed. Puresome emptied the clip of his 9mm pistol in the general direction of a scuttling rodent.

Puresome had been on these spotlighting expeditions before and knew they had to be carefully done because they were highly illegal, however fun. Especially when Boomer and L.W. upped the ante and included Bambi's distant, shining eyes as fair game whenever they were hungry for venison, which L.W. evidently now was. About a mile past a farm house, he had lit up a set of eyeballs of suitable dimensions to indicate frying size, slowed to a stop, and unlimbered his shootin' arn. Puresome grasped the jug and sloshed down some whiskey to ease the queeze that was starting to erupt into a full-blown case of the chickenshits.

Kablam! L.W. fired, and the shining eyeballs winked out. The ringing had just started to clear from Puresome's ears when lights went on back at the farmhouse they had passed. "Holy crap," he told L.W., "You've shot his pet deer, the one with the ribbon and little bell around his neck!"

L.W. had already started moving on down the road when car lights winked on back at the farm house and a vehicle tore out of the yard after them. Puresome grasped the jug tightly as L.W. gunned the pickup toward light speed.

Four hundred and fifty-four cubic inches of motor howled as L.W. boiled down the highway. The only trouble, Puresome noticed, was that the vehicle behind them ... and was gaining on them! Whiskey sloshed as L.W. broke hard right down a dirt road, foot hard down on the gas pedal. Behind them in the roiling dust cloud, their pursuer was...still gaining! "Ay, Chihuahua!" howled Puresome, who had been sufficiently impressed by the guy camped at their six to start offering suggestions to L.W. about jinking.

They broke left; they broke right; gravel spun out from on-the-edge break turns. But the pursuer was obviously after a guns shot and kept closing.

L.W. cranked on a desperation right turn, and as they started to steady out, the left rear tire started making ominous whomp! whomp! whomp! noises. "Etai! Japanese word for pain, we've got a flat! Puresome realized as L.W. wrestled the swerving pickup to a halt beside the road. The four bailed out of the truck into the weeds, immediately enveloped in the huge, following dust cloud.

Time went one potato, two potato as they waited for the avenging angel to come powering after them.

Time went three potato, four potato, and .... Nothing! Suddenly, a joint realization came over the four: hey. There are four of us, armed to the teeth. With a partial jug of whiskey. You want to frabb with us? Come ... On ... Down!

But no pursuer. He had mysteriously disappeared. Somewhat disappointed, the bloodthirsty quartet changed the tire and motored on back to the old ranch house.

It came as no small surprise to Puresome next morning that he had been visited by the little man with the ice pick, who had done the kind of number to his head that the japalenos were doing to his innards. In fact, all the desperados were subdued.

Many thankees were offered to L.W. The code of the country demanded that his sweet wife be nice, but Puresome caught her looking at her husband all squinty-eyed, and he knew she couldn't wait until they buggered off back to the big city.

Things were quiet, moving on down the country roads, until they came to the corner where they got the flat the night before. Where they had turned, there were vehicle tracks proceeding straight through a busted barbed wire fence and about a quarter of a mile out into a plowed field, where a great deal of digging indicated someone had gotten up to his axles in sand. The angel of death had done a four-wheel departure and not hacked the turn.

"And it's a good goddam thing, too!" Puresome brazened.

But everybody knew that, one more time, the big guy—he who looks after drunks, fools, and goofeys—had also looked after fighter pilots.

And, as Puresome had noted, that was a good thing.