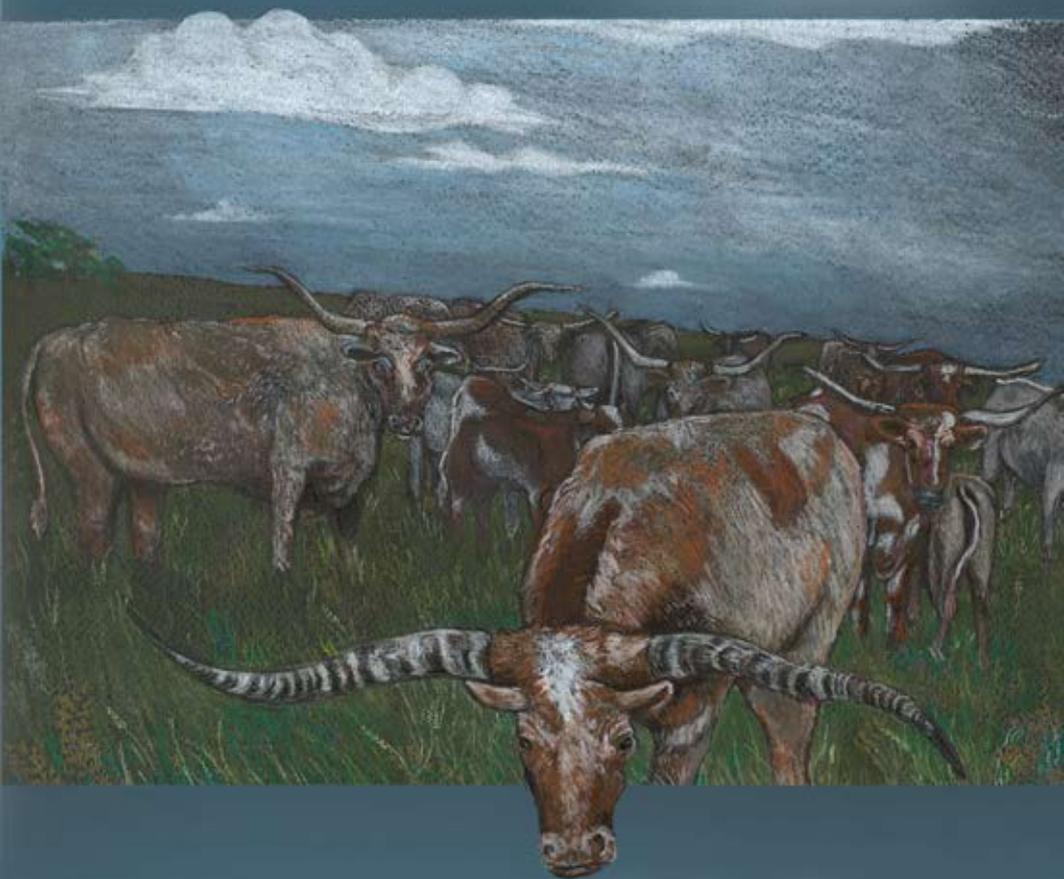


Along Shadowed Trails



Eunice Boeve

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Dedication



In memory of my brother,
Daniel “Danny” Goyen.

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1



The night shadows dimmed Josh's view of the man riding up behind his mama's adobe. Instinctively he ducked behind a small scrub bush. A lot of the men who came to see his mama did not like to see a small boy hanging about. They got funny looks on their faces and some kind of shuffled their feet, looking everywhere but at him.

Mama didn't want him around either. She would tell him to go play, her smile gone, her hand pushing at the air, pushing him away.

Some of the men paid him no mind at all, or else they teased him, grins smeared across their faces. They asked him where he got his curly hair, or if he had a horse, or if he'd been roping any longhorns lately. They usually teased him about things like that, but sometimes they teased him about something he didn't understand. He could tell by their grins and their voices that they were poking fun at him. Even before Mama could come out and send him away, he'd back up and turn and run toward the bay. At the water's edge, he'd grab up pieces of wood washed up on shore or anything else he could get his hands

on, sometimes just fistfuls of sand, and hurl them out into the waves, until his arm was tired and his anger gone.

He wondered why the man with the long, pale hair that hung down from beneath a wide-brimmed black hat, had not left his horse out on the street in front of the saloon, instead of tied up behind Mama's adobe. He wondered why the man stayed so close to the walls as he moved around to the door and why he turned to look over his shoulder every few steps. Did he think someone was following him, or did he not want anyone to see him?

When the man was inside with his mama, Josh stood up and turned his attention to the horse the man had left, the bridle reins wrapped around one of the posts that held up the open lean-to where Josh often slept. He walked as close as he dared, talking softly. The horse eyed him, neck arched, ears pricked forward.

Mama had scolded him about getting too near the men's horses. "You maybe scare him and he jerk free and run away, or maybe he kick at you."

Josh stayed back out of reach and watched the horse while the horse watched him. A dark bay with black stockings on all four legs, Josh noticed a white spot on its forehead that looked like a thick letter J, like the first letter of his name, only turned backwards.

He could read and write his own name. Floss had taught him that. She said she didn't know enough to teach him how to read books, so she'd ask Birdy to give him lessons. She must have forgotten though,

because Birdy never did. Maybe she forgot too. He still missed Floss even though he was only six when she died, two whole years ago. She'd lived upstairs over the saloon with Angel and Birdy and had come every day to see him. She always hugged him against her softness and gave him his "blessing kisses" as she called them, one on each cheek and one on his forehead. She always said he was a good boy and she knew he'd grow up to be a fine, upstanding man.

Mama said his father could write his own name, but she had never learned to write hers. It pleased him to know that his name was the same as his father's. He loved to take a stick and write Joshua Ryder in a patch of soft dirt. Just looking at the name written out made him feel good and somehow closer to his father.

Mama said his father's favorite horse had been a big bay, maybe a lot like this horse with the thick white backward J on his forehead. He smiled to himself as he pretended this horse was his father's. *The redheaded man had untied the reins, and now mounted, was leaning down to help him up behind the saddle. Pressed close to his father's back, his arms around his waist, they rode away, his father urging the bay into a lope.*

Someday he would get a horse. He wished Mama would get him one now, but she said he was too young. But, shoot, he'd seen lots of boys his age and even younger, riding horses. He liked to go over to the town's main street and stand at the corner of a building, or sit back in the shadows under the wooden walkway that ran in front of the mercantile

and some other stores. Sometimes he sat there half the day, watching, listening. He liked to hear folks talk to each other, especially families, and watch the buggies and wagons and horses and riders going up and down the street. Whenever a boy near his own age came along with his father, riding side by side on their horses, he'd pretend he was the boy, the man, red-headed or not, his father.

He wished he could remember how his father had looked. Mama said he was his father's image, except his hair was black and curly instead of straight and red. He would be tall, she assured him, just like his father, for already he was nearly as tall as she was and he was only eight-years-old.

Mama said he was just a year old when his father took sick with yellow fever and died, so it was no wonder he didn't remember him. She told him the sickness came over his father while he was at a ranch near Victoria, looking to get a job working cattle and a cook's job for her.

The ranch people buried his father in the cemetery at Victoria, but Mama didn't know exactly where. She had not had money for a tombstone, and now there was no way of knowing for the ground had long since settled.

He missed not knowing his father. He often thought about where they might be now, if his father had lived. He was sure they'd be living on a ranch and he'd have his own horse to ride and he and his father would be working cattle side by side. When the work was done, they'd ride back to the ranch house where Mama would be smiling and happy. They'd sit

down and eat together, just the three of them. With his father around there would be no men coming to see Mama and no broom leaning by the door to keep him outside.

He talked to Mama a lot about his father. He wished he could talk to her about horses and ranch work, too, but she didn't know anything about either one. Orphaned as a small child, she had lived with her grandparents and they'd raised sheep. He wasn't interested in sheep.

He was pretty sure that those boys who came to town with their families, and maybe even the boys who lived here in Indianola, knew a lot about horses and ranch work. He wished one of them could be his friend. He often watched the boys outside the school building, chasing after one another, laughing and shouting.

Mama wouldn't let him go to school, no matter how hard he begged.

"Those boys they will fight you and call you bad names."

"I can fight, Mama," he'd told her. "I'm not a baby."

"You cannot fight five boys or six," she'd said. "They do not care about being fair. They will hate you for being you, and hate, it has no fairness to it."

He asked about the Mexican boys he saw on the streets. He did not see those boys outside the school. Could he play with them?

"You are white, not Mexican," she'd said. "Still you are not the same as other white boys."

When he asked why he was not the same as other white boys, she told him it was something he would not understand until he was much older.

“Do the Mexican mamas and fathers care if I play with their boys?” he asked.

“I do not know about Mexicans, but you do not speak like them and they not speak like you. You cannot be friends with boys you do not understand.”

He had often heard Mexicans talking in their language and wished he could know what they were saying. He had picked up some Mexican words from listening to the men he saw around town.

He knew a *reata*, was the Mexican word for lariat or lasso, a rope used to catch horses and cows, and *caballo* the Mexican word for horse.

He must have been five, or maybe even younger when he told his mama that when he grew to be a man he would need a *caballo* like other men so shouldn't he have one now, so he could start learning to ride?”

“Horse,” she'd said, frowning. “We do not speak Mexican.” His mama's face and voice soon softened for she never stayed cross with him. “Someday, maybe,” she'd said, smiling. “It still be many years 'til you become a man.”

He always tried out his new words on Mama and soon learned that hell and damn and son-of-a-bitch were bad words. She did not get angry with him for those words, saying only, “Josh, bad words are not for boys to speak.” The word, whore, though, was something more than a bad word, for it made Mama's dark eyes turn hard and gave her a voice that

matched her eyes. “You do not say that word! You hear me, Josh? Never!”

She would not explain why the word was so bad, but he knew he would not ever say it in front of her, again. But he would like to know what it meant. Maybe when he heard it again, he would also learn its meaning.

Lost in thought, Josh was startled when the man’s bay horse tossed his head, rattling the bridle chains. *He had better go.* The men never stayed long with Mama and he did not want the man to see him looking at the horse.

“I have to go now,” he told the horse. He could tell by the way the bay’s ears twitched that he was listening to him. “But maybe I will see you again.”

He backed away a few steps and was pleased when the horse whinnied a soft low sound. He grinned. *The horse liked him.* With that happy thought, he turned and ran down the narrow, dusty path to the water.

He had taken his fishing pole to the bay early this morning and had caught two small fish for breakfast. His mama had fried them with hot peppers, picking out the bones before wrapping them in a tortilla. Just the thought of how good they had tasted made his mouth water. He wished he had even a plain tortilla. He wished he could go back and ask his mama for something to eat, but the man might still be there, the broom still outside the door. He’d wait a while to be sure the man was gone.

He sat on the sand and watched the white-topped waves ride the dark waters in to the shore. He liked to watch the waves and feel and smell the clean air

blowing in off the sea. He liked the sounds too; the waves splashing the shore, the ships' horns announcing their arrival into port, and the many bird cries, from the piping call of the sandpiper to the gulls' harsh scream. He felt more at home here on the beach than in his mama's adobe.

He pulled up his legs and rested his chin on his knees. After a while he grew sleepy and he curled up on his side on the soft stretch of sand. The soothing sound of the waves filled his ears and he slept until the moon rose to cast a shimmering glow across the water.

When he got back to the adobe, the horse was gone and there was no broom beside the door. He lifted the latch and pushed the door open. It was dark inside. The usual smell he'd come to think of as man smell, lingered, but there was a new smell, a stronger smell that prickled the hairs on his neck.

He backed out and closed the door behind him. He looked across the alleyway toward the saloon and the outside steps that led to the rooms on the second floor. Mama must have gone up there to see Angel and Birdy. He had lived in those rooms when he was little. He remembered moving into the adobe, not how old he was, not the when, just the memory of it. Afterwards he was not allowed to go back to those upstairs rooms to see Floss and Angel and Birdy, but had to wait for them to come see him. When he asked Mama why, she'd said that some things were not for boys to know.

He decided he might as well go to bed and went around to the lean-to behind the adobe where the man

had tied his horse. He rolled up in his blanket, facing out so he could count the stars to make himself sleepy, but tonight hunger gnawed at his belly, and he was awake long into the night, never before so conscious of the moon's slow journey across the sky.

He woke with the sun and scrambled out of his blanket. *He was so hungry.* He hoped Mama had something good cooked for his breakfast. There was still no broom outside the door, so he pushed it open and stopped, puzzled. *Why was Mama on the floor? When had she come home?* "Mama," he called. She did not answer him. She did not get up from the floor. She did not move.

"Mama?"

He forced his suddenly weak legs to take small steps into the room. "Mama?" He squatted down beside her. She lay on her side, her black hair falling over her face. *Was she sick?* He touched her shoulder. It felt different, stiff, her warmth gone. He pulled back...touched again. "Mama?" he whispered.

"Josh!" Birdy was beside him. Her shaking hands touched Mama's hair. Birdy's hands and head shook all the time, now. They didn't used to. He often wondered what had made them start shaking, but he'd never asked. Birdy stood up and her shaking hands lifted him to his feet. "Come with me," she said.

Outside, he looked up at her. Her head was bobbing and bobbing, her hand holding his was shaking and shaking. He asked why Mama did not get up off the floor, even though he knew the answer. He had seen animals—last week a gray cat... There was blood on Mama, too, wasn't there? His mind

shied away from that thought. *No!* He must have imagined it.

If Birdy answered him, he did not hear her. She led him toward those outside stairs leading up to hers and Angel's home above the saloon.

In the room, he saw a man standing at the top of some inside stairs. Birdy let go of his hand and ran at the man, hissing like an angry cat. "Git! Git!" she cried. The man's eyes got big and his mouth dropped open. He almost fell trying to get turned around and back down the stairs. Josh tried to laugh, but a sob came out instead.

Birdy sat down and pulled him onto her lap. She held him against her sharp bones and rocked him like he was just a little baby. He wasn't a baby and he would insist on getting down off her lap, but he was so tired. He shut his eyes, squeezing back tears. When he opened them again Angel was there. Her eyes looked dark, angry, and her lips were set straight and hard. He knew she was mad at whoever had hurt Mama.

"Listen to me, Josh." Birdy pulled him away from her and looked at him, her head shaking and shaking. "Your mama has gone to be with the angels in Heaven."

"She died," Angel said. "The Law'll be here soon to talk to you."

The Law! Josh shivered. *What was the Law and why was it coming for him?* Birdy drew him close again. She looked over his head at Angel and said in a hard voice, "You got no call to worry the boy about that. Not now. Not yet."

“He’s got to know,” Angel said.

Josh was relieved when the *Law* came and it was just the sheriff. He had seen him around town and the man had sometimes spoken to him, quiet like and gentle. Even though he had to stop sometimes and take big gulping breaths, Josh told him everything.

The sheriff asked about the man who had tied his horse to the lean-to. “What did he look like, son? Did you see his face?”

“No.” Josh tried to make the word sound strong, but in spite of himself, he whimpered and had to bite his lips to keep from crying. Inside his head, the man with the long, pale hair and the wide-brimmed black hat moved around the adobe, turning his head every few steps to look back over his shoulder.

“Do you always sleep under the lean-to, son?” the sheriff asked. So Josh told him about the broom and when the broom wasn’t beside the door, he slept inside on his pad on the floor. But last night, he thought Mama wasn’t home, and he just went to sleep there, waiting for her.

“Damn shame,” the sheriff said. He turned to Angel and Birdy. “I know a widow with boys. Maybe she’ll take him ’til we can find him a place. Maybe he can work for his keep, doing small jobs ’til he grows bigger.” He paused and added, “I’ll pay the woman a little something in the meantime.”

Birdy and Angel nodded, and Birdy said, “We’ll send you the money for his keep.”

Someone brought his blanket and his extra pants and shirt and the sheriff took him to a big house where a woman lived who kind of reminded him of

Floss. She was big like Floss, but he soon found out she wasn't anywhere near like Floss had been. Floss had been nice. This woman was mean.

Mrs. Dunkirk's boys, all three bigger than he was, were mean too. Right away, they started in saying mean things to him. His mother had been right when she said white boys would call him names.

"You're just a dirty snot-nose Mexican," one said.

"Yeah, a stupid snot-nose, dirty Mexican," said his brother.

The tallest boy said he knew what Josh's mama was.

"What?" Josh asked, confused. *What could she be? Wasn't she just his mama?*

"*A dirty Mexican whore,*" the boy said, and all three began to chant, "*Dirty Mexican whore. Dirty Mexican whore.*"

Josh bit his lips and stared at the floor, fighting tears. Maybe his mama was a Mexican. She did look a lot like the Mexican women he saw around town, but she was never dirty, and she couldn't have been a whore. That word had made her snap at him, so it had to be something really bad. It was the first he'd heard that he was a Mexican, too. But he couldn't be. His mama always said he was white, just like his father. He couldn't even talk Mexican or understand it either.

At the supper table, the woman slapped a little dab of thick stew on his plate. He noticed she filled her own plate and her boys' right up to the edges, and put a big chunk of bread beside their plates. But she

must have forgotten his. He wanted to remind her, but he was afraid to say anything. Maybe when he cleaned his plate she would give him more stew and maybe then she'd remember to give him some bread. His mouth watered he was so hungry. He picked up his spoon and took a quick bite.

The woman reached a long arm behind one of her boys and smacked him on the back of the head. "We thanks the good Lord 'fore we go to feedin' our faces," she snarled. She lowered her head and mumbled something under her breath and then crossed herself as he had seen his mama do at times.

That night the woman instructed him to sleep on the floor back under the table "So's I don't falls over you when I gets up to get the fire started for breakfast." He was glad to be alone. All day he had struggled to hold back tears, and now he could let them go, his face burrowed in his blanket to muffle the sound.

He lasted three days and two nights in that house. Mrs. Dunkirk still put just dabs of food on his plate while she filled hers and the boys' full, even allowing them seconds. A leather strap she'd taken to her youngest boy one day, kept Josh from complaining.

The boys continued to call him names and say that bad thing about his mother. They called him a pissant, turd-face, and a shit-head. They shoved and punched him and yanked his curly hair. "He's got curls like a girl," they said to each other with leering grins. "Bet his whorin' ma curled his hair ever' night soon's she got done entertainin' her men."

So they knew that men had come to his mama's house. That puzzled him. How could they know that?

“Hey, little girly-girl.” Leon pushed his face so close Josh smelled the raw onions from supper on his breath. “You don’t start to be a man and fight, we is gonna strip you jaybird naked and put Ma’s dress on you.” That was when Josh knew he had to run away. *Mrs. Dunkirk would never give him any more to eat and her boys would never stop being mean to him.* It terrified him and made his face burn with shame at the thought of being stripped naked and having to wear one of Mrs. Dunkirk’s huge dresses. He was sure she’d fly mad and yank her dress off him and take that leather strap to his naked bottom.

He decided to leave in the night after everyone was asleep. He would lie awake and listen until the house was silent except for the rumble of Mrs. Dunkirk’s snores, but try as he might, his eyes closed and he slept.

He dreamed he was rolled up in his blanket under the lean-to behind the adobe and his mama was frantically calling his name, “Josh! Josh!” In his dream, he scrambled out of his blanket and ran around the adobe. A huge broom stood crosswise blocking the door. As he stared in confusion and fear, a man with long, light-colored hair and a black hat, opened the door and walked through the broom. The shadowy form of a horse stood nearby and as the man mounted the animal, it took a step toward Josh, stretched out its neck and lowered its big head so Josh could see the white spot, like a thick backward J in the middle

of its forehead. Josh reached out to touch the spot and the horse and rider vanished in a puff of smoke.

He woke with tears scalding his cheeks. Wiping his runny nose on his shirtsleeve, he rolled his extra pants and shirt up in his blanket and started for the door. Hungry as always, his thoughts turned to the half of a bread loaf he'd seen Mrs. Dunkirk put back in the cupboard after supper. At supper, he'd eyed the bread, his mouth watering, but as usual, she'd just sliced off some for herself and her boys. His hand searched the dark cupboard for the half loaf of bread, touched it, and felt beside it a full loaf. He wanted to take both loaves, but he would take only the half. He was not a thief. He was just awful hungry. Letting himself out of the house, he ran down the silent streets, past dark houses, until he reached the bay.

The moon cast a shimmering light across the dark waters and tipped the white crested waves with silver. Afraid of being seen, he climbed the bank and squirmed in under a tamarisk tree where he cried until the sound of the water lapping against the shore and an owl's soft hooting call soothed away his tears and lulled him to sleep.

Joshua Ryder is eight when his mother is murdered. An old cowboy becomes the father he has never had and when he is dying asks Josh, now eighteen, to leave the ranch with their neighbor, Miguel, and get some experience working for another outfit. Riding Shadow, the buckskin he's raised from a colt, Josh comes to the Rawlins' ranch and hires on to help drive a herd of longhorns to Kansas. Martha Rawlins, the widowed ranch owner and her children, accompany the herd and she teaches Josh to read and write while on the trail. He becomes friends with the Rawlins' son, falls in love with the older daughter, and adores her little sister, Kit. Another tragedy again changes the course of Josh's life and he heads back to Texas to hunt down the man who murdered his mother.



Eunice Boeve, a Kansas resident, grew up in Montana and Idaho. She attributes her love of stories to her mother, an avid reader who read to her children as they were growing up, and her father, who wrote a book about his cowboy days in Wyoming. Sadly, her father died when she was five, and the book was never published.

