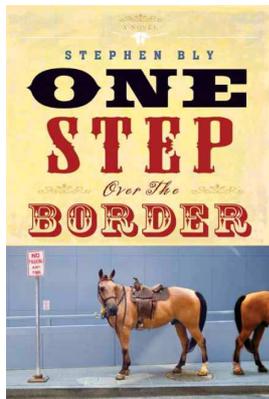


It's a romp. A road adventure. It's a romantic comedy with character. Some call it CowboyLit. Rodeo cowboy Hap Bowman's on a quest to find Juanita, the gal of his dreams. Trouble is, he hasn't seen her in 18 years. Meanwhile, he won't date any girl who's not named Juanita, which sometimes yields a heap of trouble.

"An idiot obsession," his roping partner, Laramie Majors, chides.

But Laramie agrees to spend a summer working odd jobs along the Rio Grande in one last search for the mystery *senorita*. After that, Hap promises to give up his fixation.

Meanwhile, ten years earlier, on a hot day in Wyoming



ONE STEP OVER THE BORDER

by **STEPHEN BLY**

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Central Wyoming, summer of 1996

The yellow dirt road that stretched before him reminded Laramie Majors of the countryside around his grandparent's place in Oklahoma. Miles beyond the blacktop sat their two story, white clapboard house with a front porch swing and sweet tea that tasted a bit sinful if you'd just come back from church. As a kid, those trips north lined a route of escape from the tension of home and invited him to a different world. At Grandma's house, no one yelled. No one got hit. And Mamma never cried.

But the parade of gray sagebrush, dull green scrub cedars and squatty pinon pines on the rimrock reined Laramie back to Wyoming. Yellow grime fogged after his truck like a swarm of South American ants, creeping like a disease across the fenders of his silver Chevy pickup.

Dwight Purley told him to take the short-cut through the south end of the Big Horn Mountains. But Dwight presumed Laramie knew more about Wyoming geography than he actually did. Although the blond gal with stubby pigtailed and logger's biceps at the Sinclair gas station assured him this was the right way, he now found himself grumbling over her apparent misdirections.

He questioned again if he should have stayed on the pavement out of Casper. This endless dirt road didn't have the feel of a short cut and the fuel gauge had dropped near empty. He hadn't seen a ranch, a rig, or an occupied cabin for miles and didn't know which direction to walk to find gas. He considered turning back, but the drive to make it there today pushed him over the next hill. He promised himself he

would not go back to Texas a failure. It was a promise he intended to keep.

Laramie smeared the dirt off the dash and slapped the front of the fuel gauge in hopes that it was stuck, then punched off the CD player. As he crested the hill, he slowed to a stop as two dozen pronghorn antelopes ambled across the road. They turned to gawk at his rude intrusion. He stared back at their blank, clueless expressions, wondering how many times the same look plastered his own face.

The thin blue Wyoming sky unfolded to the west. Hills gave way to rolling sage and brown grass prairie. As he dropped down into a cottonwood draw, he spied a log cabin. Its battered shake roof sported a new satellite dish receiver. Thick gray smoke curled from the chimney. A girl about ten scampered from the outhouse wearing red striped shorts, cowboy boots and a Nike t-shirt.

She waved, then disappeared into an unpainted barn.

Laramie waved back. She was the first person he'd seen in almost an hour.

Eight miles further west he reached Highway 20. He turned north and followed the green highway signs and bright hotel billboards that lured him towards Cody. He rolled the windows down, hoping to blow out some dust. And memories.

Majors parked his pickup under the only shade tree on the level street. He studied the scrap of scribbled brown paper: *Hap Bowman, 2490 Paradise Road, Cody, Wyoming.*

The home looked like a 1960s tract house, only there were no other residences. No landscaping. No parks. No sidewalks. No neighborhood improvement association. Just one dwelling in bad need of paint on stucco with fake brick walls.

The wide, empty street led to nowhere. Laramie fastened the top button on his collar and practiced a crooked smile in the dusty mirror. He knew it was time to cowboy up, to get his small talk in gear. No one discerned how tough it felt for him to meet new people.

A 1992 black Dodge truck was backed into the driveway. Behind it, on eroding blacktop, a wheelless Volkswagen van perched like a miniature diner, propped up by cinderblocks and weeds. A battered canvass awning stretched out the side. A dust devil that spawned in the vacant lot next to the faded green house seemed reluctant to leave. Laramie watched the dirt swirl a moment as if waiting for an oracle to make a pronouncement.

An aluminum screen door hung crooked, slammed too hard, too often. A half-built front deck stretched out into sun burnt grass, its gray-bleached boards a testament to a long abandoned building project. The black dog asleep on the porch defied pedigree, but Laramie noticed a huge pink tongue hanging out.

Once again, he studied the penciled note, then surveyed the yard. He detected no horse. No barn. No corral. No run-in shed. Not even a plastic steer head stabbed into a bale of hay. Not one sign that this guy ever practiced roping.

Laramie brushed his gritty fingers through short, curly brown hair and rubbed his clean shaven chin. He took a deep breath and muttered, "Mr. Dwight Purley, you said I needed to meet this Hap Bowman. You said he could head rope a steer as good as anyone in Wyoming. I will trust you enough to knock on that door. But this scene better

improve quick, because it isn't looking real good right now."

When Laramie reached the front step he patted the dog, but the animal showed no interest in him. Afternoon heat reflected off the walls like a radiant electric heater in winter. Laramie longed for the comfort of a glass of Grandma's sweet tea or the throat clearing rush of an ice cold beer.

He scraped open the busted screen door, hesitating to knock on the peeling white paint of the wooden one when he heard a blast of angry Spanish words, followed by a loud crash and a yelp.

Laramie ground his teeth, then checked the note one more time: *2490*. He eyed his truck and considered a hasty retreat, when a man hollered from inside, "Juanita! Put that down."

Even the dog flinched when the lid to a white porcelain commode busted out the front window, scattering glass on the unfinished deck.

The wooden door flung open. A black mustached man about Laramie's age sported a black, beaver felt cowboy hat and several parallel streaks of blood across his cheek.

"Ehhh . . . Hap Bowman?" Laramie stammered. "Dwight Purley sent me to ask you about . . ."

The shorter man grabbed his outstretched hand and yanked him indoors. "Man, am I glad to see you." Then he barreled outside, the door slamming behind him.

The room reeked of garlic and dirty diapers. A divan sprawled backwards. A slice of pizza plastered the wall. Majors heard a roar from the yard and peered out the busted window in time to view the Dodge pickup spin out into the street and head south.

The bristles of a broom smacked Laramie's ear. The surprise, more than the impact, staggered him into the trash covered pine coffee table. He cracked his shin and hopped around the room trying to flee his attacker.

"Who are you?" the dark haired lady snarled. Her full lips were painted as red as her long fingernails.

"Excuse me, ma'am . . . I didn't mean to intrude . . . I just . . ."

She walloped him in the side, then jabbed his ribs with the broom handle. "Well, you did intrude. Where'd Hap go?"

Laramie hunkered behind a cluttered, mucky end table. "I wish I knew. He's the reason I stopped by. I need to talk to him."

The brown skinned woman yanked open the gauze curtain. "It figures he'd run out on me." She spun back. "What are you staring at?" She grabbed up a jar of baby food and cocked her arm.

Laramie shielded his face. "Wait, lady. Whoever got you angry, it's not me. I was told to come talk to a Hap Bowman who lives here."

"He doesn't live here."

"I guess that's my mistake."

"He never lived here. That's the problem."

"Then, I'll be leaving. I just wanted to talk to Hap. Sorry for the inconvenience."

"Inconvenience? The jerk ruined my life. Look at me. Look at me! He turned

down all of this.”

A full, stained yellow t-shirt hung outside her skin tight jeans. Bright yellow round earrings dangled even with her chin. Smears of mascara darkened her sad eyes. Slumped shoulders belied her feigned defiance.

“I’m sorry for whatever’s going on here. But I never met Hap before. I have no explanation for his behavior. I’m a roper and I was told that . . .

The pureed peaches sailed at his head. Laramie ducked. The glass jar crashed into the black iron table lamp which tumbled to the soiled green shag carpet.

Laramie retrieved the lamp and shoved it back on the table. “I take it you don’t like ropers.”

“What he did to me wasn’t right.” When she tossed her head back, a wave rolled down the massive black curls.

Laramie scooted towards the front door. “I really need to get on down the road.”

“That’s what they all say.”

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STEPHEN BLY (1944-2011) authored 120 books, including *Wish I’d Known You Tears Ago*, *The Mustang Breaker*, *Memories of a Dirt Road Town*, *The Paperback Writer*, and *The Fortunes of the Black Hills Series*. More information about him and his books found at <http://www.blybooks.com/>

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