



The Call of the West

by Barbara Stephens

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Noreen Akins rubbed a piece of ice from her tea against her neck and down her chest. The droplets eased the heat that rose from the 96 degree temperature of a late August afternoon in Parson's Basin, Texas. The barren wasteland stretched for miles, and pump-jacks dotted the landscape every forty acres, some forcing out the blackness, others frozen, their dinosaur-shaped heads a reminder of an era of dark rich soil. Noreen sat in her blue sundress in a rocking chair on the porch in anticipation of Clarence Massey's arrival.

One of the reasons Noreen returned to Parson's Basin was because she missed Texas men. In particular, men with grit that came from branding cattle and tending to oil rigs. Men who regardless of their knowledge of some "feminist movement in the east" still wanted to charm their women by removing their hats and opening doors. Not cowboys per se of the "wild west" so often depicted in Hollywood versions, but oil men of 1970, who had a cunning sense of the future and a respect for the past. They bargained and some would say connived, but she saw them as visionaries who wanted to maintain their Texas roots, but also relished holding the eastern part of the United States in the palms of their hands.

Once Clarence closed his car door and bounded up the stairs two at a time, she was prepared for the excuses and dreams of a wildcatter, a Texas independent oil man.

"Honey, Mitch says I have a chance on some leases near McCamey if I go right now."

Clarence Massey had a tall, lanky build and he always wore a suit, even when he was exploring land for oil production. Instead of a tie, he wore a bola with a Texas-shaped tiger's eye clasp. His Russian heritage gave him a large nose, an angular face, and a sense of sophistication, but once he opened his mouth, he spoke like a West Texan, jaw clamped shut, lips barely moving. His grandfather claimed he worked on Santa Rita No. 1 when it burst from its hole and put West Texas in the oil business. "Bested those damn Dallas boys," Clarence would quote him. His own father tried to steer his sons away from the business. Every night he would come home with oil, sand, and mud caked on his clothes and remind his two boys that one day they would be doctors or lawyers. "Have clean fingernails," he used to say. Stephen, the elder one, listened, became a doctor, and left Texas for the California coastline. But Clarence followed his father to work when he was a small boy, was swatted with a switch in order to finish school, and when he turned eighteen encouraged Buzz Ricker to finally lease his land for a drilling. When he found light crude oil, it created a reputation for Clarence. But he'd been in a dry spell for twelve years now.

Noreen smiled at him and ignored his tapping finger on the beam of the porch. "Then you best go." She wished for the love-making they had planned; however, when he was focused on oil, then his bedroom performance languished.

Clarence squeezed her shoulders and kissed her forehead. His cowboy hat rested in his hands. "You could buy into this one, Sweetie. As small as $\frac{1}{4}$ if you wanted." He wiped the dust from his snakeskin cowboy boots and ran a comb through his hair.

She found in Clarence a nice mix of the “ah, shucks” kind of innocence and a heart that was eager to wrap itself around her, but also willing to let go if needed. After graduating from The University of Texas with a humanities degree, Noreen couldn’t wait to leave the Lone Star State. She hitchhiked around England and France with some friends and believed she had raised herself above her homeland. Wine every evening, French bread chosen from a woman’s cart, literature and political debates about Vietnam—all contributed to her desire to be sophisticated—anything but Texan. She even lost her accent, working hard to enunciate the difference between *pin* and *pen*. But as in any journey one takes away from home, she felt a tug to return. Perhaps it was after Roger, an aristocratic Englishman, decided she was “just too American” for him. Or maybe it was simply time. For when she returned, her parents seemed endearing rather than intrusive. And their Texas stories caused her to laugh and yearn for what they had. Therefore, when she saw an advertisement for a librarian in Parson’s Basin, she applied and got the job. Small town librarian, much like her father—a small town pharmacist—100 miles west of her.

“I suspect I could.”

She had no intention of investing with Clarence. Noreen was raised in a family elevated and doomed by the Texas oil business. When she was a child, Johnny Harper, a well-known wildcatter in the area, convinced her father, Riley, to lease his land right behind the pharmacy and next to their house for oil speculation. Riley was mesmerized by the oil rig scaffolding, dusty and sweat-stained men, and astute geologists that scattered themselves across the old ranch land that his father had owned and eventually parceled out. When the men found the black gold, he was no longer a pharmacist, but an oil man. He made money to send Noreen to Europe, and to finance her “whims” as only a father could for his only girl. But when the well dried up and additional attempts to find oil brought up dusters—one dry hole after another—, it crushed her father. Noreen’s mother, a schoolteacher, weathered the highs and lows, brought home a paycheck, and soon Riley remembered how to be a pharmacist again.

Clarence straddled the rocker, and Noreen played with the ends of his bola tie. He gave her a quick kiss. “A man’s got to dream, right, Honey?”

Noreen wrapped her arms around his waist. “Yes, I suspect he does.” She patted his butt, waved him off, and he scampered down the stairs, jumping off the next to last one to the ground.

Two days later, Noreen was in Len’s pharmacy picking up a prescription when she ran into Daisy Jenkins. Or rather Daisy Jenkins cornered her.

“Why, Noreen, don’t you look nice in your pink pedal-pushers.”

Daisy was not the homecoming queen of 1958 at Parson’s Basin High School, but the third runner-up. She married the homecoming king so she won anyway. Daisy twisted her hair in a beehive that made Noreen believe that the 1960s still existed in this town. Daisy’s dress was a dark blue, gathered at the waist and fitted tightly over her breasts. She dangled her matching purse and waved it as she talked. Noreen sensed Daisy’s mistrust of her, but Daisy still talked incessantly whenever they met. Today’s monologue was about her daughter

Addie's defiance about reading down near Parson's Draw.

"I told her that just because we baptize down at the draw didn't mean it was safe." Daisy laid some Maybelline rouge and eyeliner on the counter. Len waved to her from the back and Cassie, Len's teenage daughter, rolled her eyes and rang up the purchases. "I've heard about those hippies down there, smoking," and Daisy lowered her voice, "God knows what."

Noreen nodded and clicked her tongue in solidarity with Daisy, however she winked at Cassie, who almost burst out laughing. When Noreen formed the children's book club, she created a fiasco with the women from Parson's Basin Baptist Church. Daisy Jenkins, in particular. Noreen had proposed *The Diary of Anne Frank* for the sixth grade girls, and Daisy led a brigade of Southern Baptist mothers to the library. Judy Blume's *Are you there God, it's me, Margaret* received even worst treatment—Ida Anderson spit on it. But Noreen Akins, encouraged by a group of Episcopalian women, including the much respected hairdresser, Yveta Mason, purchased the books and conducted a discussion with the girls. Addie Jenkins, a spirited girl, read both books. Alice Anderson, Ida's daughter, did not, but hovered around the edge of the discussion like Tinkerbell in *Peter Pan*.

But what really got the Southern Baptist women going was her "cavorting" with Clarence Massey. Despite Clarence's inability to find oil, he was a coddled man in Parson's Basin. The quilting club invested hundreds of dollars in Clarence's speculation. He promised oil bursts reminiscent of the early years of oil discovery that prompted each woman to pull out her purse. Once when Clarence was especially desperate, he attended Sunday morning service at Parson's Basin Baptist Church and collected investments at coffee hour. There seemed to be a belief that when Clarence "struck it rich," the whole town would benefit. It happened in Henderson and Overton during the Depression. It could happen right here in Parson's Basin. Therefore, Clarence Massey was their man, not Noreen Akins'.

Daisy placed ten dollars on the counter top. "I saw you coming out of the bank yesterday. Might you be investing in Clarence in McCamey?"

"No, I don't believe so."

Daisy held her change and the brown bag of purchases in her hand. "If I were you, I'd latch onto Clarence."

Noreen noticed that her own prescription was ready, but Len was whispering to Cassie to wait. Daisy either wanted her to invest in Clarence's oil shenanigans (Noreen's word) or marry him. It would make her seem more reputable to all the women.

"I suspect I could."

Daisy stopped at the pharmacy's front door and whispered to Noreen. "Sweetie, you're giving away your milk for free. You've got to make Clarence buy the cow, you know?"

Noreen had no intention of marrying Clarence. "I suspect I could."

Daisy patted Noreen's arm and left the pharmacy in a satisfied manner that she had solved this problem. Noreen returned to the counter, stated her thanks to

Len, and paid for the birth control prescription.

Once a month on Thursday nights, the Parson's Basin Baptist Church organized a bingo game in their community hall. Preacher Ray considered it a fund-raiser for a variety of charities, but he also hoped to lure new members to his church. Noreen was raised Episcopalian and had no desire to join the Baptist church; however, she did enjoy a night of gambling—bingo-style. And she loved the irony of a church dedicated to upholding decency, virginity, and righteousness raking in money from a game of chance. This month's charity was for a church mission in Vietnam once the war was over. Noreen hoped to take home a bundle of money to extinguish that possibility. That's all the South Vietnamese needed was a bunch of Baptist missionaries bearing tuna-fish casseroles and asking them if they were willing to be "born again."

When she entered the hall, she sat in her usual place next to Yveta Mason and Libbie Barnett. Both women were almost twenty years older than she, but Parson's Basin wasn't known for its under-30 population. Besides, Yveta made Noreen laugh. She owned Queenie's Beauty Parlor on Main Street. She had glistening red hair—not dyed—and allowed it to curl and flow down to her shoulders. She smacked gum like a cow chewing a cud, yet she stood tall in her pear-shaped body and suggested a regal manner that forgave the gum-chewing. While a garrulous person, she knew when to listen which is what made her parlor a place of gossip, but also one of confidentiality. Plus her heart was forever being ruined—her husband left her for a younger woman years ago and since then she had been having an affair with Sheriff Ratliff. Despite their attempt to conceal it, everyone knew, even his wife, and the town accepted it as a win-win-win for all three of them.

Libbie Barnett's husband just recently died of cancer, so she's getting "back out" on the town. Noreen found in Libbie an intelligent reader and lover of books and language. She was the friend you took to lunch because the conversation would be stimulating and reciprocal. However, sometimes Libbie's face would register a wave of sadness that made Noreen miss an intimacy that she didn't share with Clarence. When Libbie broke into stories of her husband, Arthur, Noreen wanted to listen for the love and hopefulness, but also wanted to ignore the pain.

At the front of the hall on a raised stage was the spinning ball full of bingo numbers. Next to it was Mickey Lampson, who volunteered each month to pick out the numbered balls. At only twenty-one years old, he had a flair for it that made all the women swoon in appreciation and lust. Mickey was good-looking in a James Dean way, muscles to die for, and if he wasn't a homosexual then Noreen had certainly lost her ability to read men. Mickey was a cattle rancher and his pump-jacks extracted some of the best light crude in these parts. He also would never invest in Clarence and told Noreen that the independent oil producer's days were numbered. "It's damn cheaper to find and produce crude oil in the Middle East than it is to do it right here in my backyard. Luckily, my pumps still have some worth." And with that information, Noreen found a way to invest in the big oil producers who were importing oil from the Middle East to the United States. And that is why she was playing bingo on Thursday nights.

Preacher Ray prayed over the big spinning ball and asked God to help them raise money for "those people in need over there yonder in Vietnam." After some

prayers for the sick, he allowed his captive audience to play some bingo.

Mickey spun the ball, stopped it, opened the lid, and pulled out a number. "I-21." The elation and sighs began. Noreen was working four bingo cards. Yveta always worked six, and Libbie worked two. Their eyes swept over the cards and placed red Tiddlywinks on the appropriate numbers. Yveta had won \$50 just last month. Noreen hadn't won in a few months, except Baptist prizes such as a necklace of Jesus on the cross or a hand-crocheted doily. Mickey held the number in front of him.

"Now, ya'll remember to be kind to each other. Especially you, Mrs. Barnett." He winked at her and she blushed and waved him off. He considered her his best teacher in high school. "B-2".

Yveta leaned over to Noreen in the pause between numbers. "I heard Clarence had a bad week over in McCamey."

Mickey did a little jig. "O-69." Now, don't go there, this here is Christian bingo."

But the snickers already had occurred even though Daisy Jenkins and her Baptist friends hissed at everyone. Mickey said it every time, and Noreen knew he loved the humor and the discontent. She surveyed her cards and found two matches. She hadn't seen Clarence this week at all. No phone calls. No spontaneous visits. She experienced this dry spell when Clarence was either busy with geologists and surveyors or he was out of town. "I had an inkling of it. What happened?"

Libbie was next to Noreen and said, "He's a good man. Just not very smart."

Yveta smiled and fluffed her red hair. "He's a good lay, yes?"

Noreen and Yveta laughed so hard even through Libbie's shushing noises that everyone turned toward her and they missed Mickey calling out the next number. Luckily, he repeated it toward them. "B-5."

"Are we playing regular bingo?" asked Yveta. "I've already forgotten."

Both Libbie and Noreen said, "Regular."

Noreen sucked in some air and sighed. Yveta probably had a bit of whiskey before her arrival. The cola that sat in front of her was the chaser. It also meant that Sheriff Ratliff probably wasn't going to be available for their normal rendezvous after bingo night.

Libbie leaned over to Noreen. "It seems Clarence lost all of the ladies' money."

Mickey tipped his cowboy hat backwards on his head, giving him an unabashed and youthful appeal. "N-35."

"Bingo!" Daisy Jenkins hollered and waved her card in the air. Everyone groaned, but Mickey gently reminded them to avoid clearing their cards. Daisy sashayed up to the stage, and Preacher Ray checked her bingo card. When it was clear she had won, Mickey did his traditional do-si-do and danced in the arms of the winner. Noreen admired Daisy's yellow sundress as it swirled around her legs.

“Clear your boards, folks. Now let’s make an X.”

During the break, Libbie and Yveta explained Clarence’s debacle in McCamey. As usual, Clarence needed investments to set up his crew to drill on some land leased to Barry Barrows. For a decade Barrows’ land had been pulling up dusters, but Clarence sold the ladies on the deal and they invested ½ interest for five years. Across the highway, Glen Logan’s land was full of light crude oil and gas so the ladies and Clarence continued to have hope. Now he’d run out of money and the hole was full of dust despite this latest attempt to dig deeper.

Libbie heard that Daisy Jenkins and the Baptist women were giving up on Clarence. Yveta claimed that Clarence begged on his knees, and despite a few of the women’s guilt they stood firm behind Daisy’s decision. In her mind, “they would find another way to get rich off their quilting money.” Noreen feared that without the Baptist women Clarence would have to find new investors (and that was very unlikely in Parson’s Basin) or another line of business. And worse, she knew his desperation would send him to her door like a cat mewing in the rain.

Mickey rolled the ball of numbers and the second game began. After about two hours, Noreen finally won a bingo of \$50. Just enough to add to her investment. She would go to the bank tomorrow for a cashier’s check to send to her father. He was handling all the investments unbeknownst to her mother.

When she did her cha-cha-cha with Mickey, she laughed and managed to spin him around. He was surprised and yet eager to continue. They switched to a two-step and circled around the stage as if Tammy Wynette was singing right to them. Yes, she gloated a bit, stirred up the pot, so to speak, but she couldn’t help it.

Later in her house, she poured herself a little bourbon and sat in her silky nightgown in the living room. She suspected Clarence would show up any minute. Word spread quite rapidly around Parson’s Basin. When she had decided to invest with her father, he had said, “Middle Eastern crude is becoming an increasingly permanent feature in the U.S. market. You’re making the right decision.” But it bugged her to be supporting the major oil companies and squeezing independents like Clarence out of a job. She blamed Congress as any good West Texan did because they were supporting the new global economy which had created a rising cost of drilling—the wildcatter’s meat and potatoes.

Clarence would have a mixed look of boyish hurt and manly pride. Neither she liked. She gazed off to her right and narrowed her eyes to view a picture of the two of them taken this past spring at Odessa’s Oil Show. She didn’t want to feel this cold toward him. She didn’t want to be a bitch. She just wanted to get rich off the oil and live as she pleased. Not that much different than Clarence, really. She was just better at it.

She expected he would come in raving about Daisy Jenkins and how she runs the town with a Baptist bitchiness that dwindles grown men into wimpy boys. And he’d claim that a wildcatter like him couldn’t live if the Texas Railroad Commission was limiting the allowables to seven days a month. Both issues well worth getting one’s panties in a wad. However, after a night of winning, Noreen just wasn’t up for it. Sometimes she wondered about her lack of love for him—or maybe for any man. She reached for her glass of bourbon. The ice clinked

against the glass as she took a sip.

Clarence would ask her to marry him—something he did every time he was caught in a duster. She had to admit there were times she loved him—when he handed her a cup of coffee in the morning with a devilish grin that suggested they would be back in bed very soon, when he grasped her hand during a movie’s scary parts, when he mowed her backyard. However, most of the time she did not love him. She wanted to love him, but desperation reminded her she did not.

Barbara Stephens was born and raised in West Texas. She graduated from The University of Texas at Austin with a bachelors in English education and a masters in theater education. She earned her MFA in Writing from Vermont College. She also completed two residencies: The Hambidge Center and The Edward F. Albee Foundation. She’s published short stories in *Eleven Eleven*, *Inkwell*, *GSU Review*, and *Karamu*. She was a finalist in the Southern Women Emerging Writers’ Contest and received an honorable mention award from *Glimmer Train*.

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