

Dream a Highway

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Dream a Highway

by [marginalia](#)

Summary

Lefty had dreamed of the West since before he could remember, and when he wasn't dreaming he was fretting that all the adventures were happening without him, the bright big world stretching from the dirt road on the edge of their small farm all the way down to Mexico.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

There wasn't any sort of expected logic behind his name. He didn't draw his gun or cards with his left, he didn't lead with it in a knock-down fight, nor did he use it to sign his given name on the rare occasion such a thing was required. Not that anyone knew his name or his history anymore. "Left all that behind," he said.

The bartender eyed him, a scrawny youth green as they come but trying like the devil not to look it, just like so many others who had polished his bar with their elbows for a time and then moved on. "Lefty it is then," he said, pouring him a whiskey.

Lefty nodded solemnly and swallowed the drink as though completing a ritual.

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He didn't stay green for long. The day he'd left he promised his momma that he'd be a good boy and make her proud, but he just couldn't hold to one place forever, not when there was so much else out there to see.

Lefty had dreamed of the West since before he could remember, and when he wasn't dreaming he was fretting that all the adventures were happening without him, the bright big world stretching from the dirt road on the edge of their small farm all the way down to Mexico. "They aren't going to get civilized that quickly," his momma would chuckle, ruffling his hair. "There's plenty of time for all that later. You aren't done being my little boy yet."

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He started with any sort of work he could pick up. Trail jobs were the best, keeping him moving across the prairie, but when his pockets got uncomfortably light he would settle for work in town. He washed, hammered, swept, or whatever else needed doing, and when the ladies called down to him at the end of the day, he blushed and begged off, swearing he had to send all his extra pennies home.

He kept himself and his horse in feed, and that was enough most of the time. Sleeping out under the stars was the purest form of freedom to him; nights spent indoors were choked with walls closing in.

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On the night they met, Pancho had his hand in the pocket of an overstuffed and less than observant gentleman from back east. It was sheer luck that Lefty spied him in the middle of the maneuver, his long fingers lightening fast and his dark eyes bright. He charmed his way out of the saloon, no one the wiser, and Lefty followed a few minutes later to find Pancho leaning against the wall outside. "Here's your cut," he said, and quick as that they were partners.

Pancho was more adventure than Lefty had ever managed to dream up on his own. His horse was fast and his gun was faster. He kept it clean and loaded, and he kept himself in practice,

but it was a point of honor with him never to fire it in anger, and Lefty suspected he'd never fired it at a human being at all. Only he knew how much of Pancho was for show.

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From time to time they'd throw in with another crew, but they preferred working on their own. Lefty would sing himself awake, drowsy on horseback at the end of a long day, and if they were with others Pancho would tease him for it. When they were alone, though, he'd muddle through songs from his childhood until Lefty took pity on him, taking up the tune himself, bright and true.

The road was all the home either one was looking for, no ties at all except for the inevitability of getting tangled up in each other.

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They were a runaway train, pulling jobs free and loose. Every con was the same to Pancho; he didn't care about the payout nearly as much as the rush. He got the same thrill from lifting a purse as he did from getting a gang together and taking a bank, and it didn't much matter to Lefty either, until it all went wrong.

There hadn't been many bank jobs, but there'd been a few. They had pulled together a good team, an inside man, fast horses, and flashy guns to help convince any of the good citizens inside the building to not cause trouble. Until that day, it had worked.

Lefty never saw the man alive. The report from Pancho's gun still ringing in his ears, he turned as if in slow motion to see the dark bloom across the man's chest and the knife now harmless on the ground. He looked back at Pancho, stunned into silence both by the shot and by the naked despair on his face.

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Someone must have tipped off the law, because faster than the gunfire could have brought them they were outside. Pancho and most of the gang got away, but they held Lefty for three days before they told him the man with the knife had been the sheriff's brother. They didn't much care who paid for his death so long as someone did, but another member of the gang had given up Pancho's name. "We've been looking for you two for some time, son," the deputy said, "but it'll go better for you if you tell us where he is."

Lefty grinned despite himself, three days of agony brought to a close. Pancho was still free. The deputy rewarded him with a punch that as good as broke his nose and an escort back to his cell.

It was the start of a cycle where the beatings and Lefty's silence each increased to match the other. In the end they couldn't hold him, and though he wanted nothing more than to make straight for their last digs, Lefty slept out alone for three nights, moving further away from town, hoping to drive any remaining federales to boredom.

Those three nights were his own limit, though, and in the eerie light before true sunrise he saddled his horse and made for their most recent hideout, an abandoned shack. Pancho was there alone, asleep by the dying embers of the fire, and Lefty knelt beside him, reached out, and gently touched his cheek. Pancho started awake, seizing Lefty's wrist before he saw who it was, but before either had a chance to speak a shot was fired outside and there were men coming in the door.

The moment Lefty realized what they had done, knots started tying themselves in his insides. All the devils his momma had prayed away came after him all at once. Worse than his father with the strap, worse than the federales working him over in the end, worse than all of that was Pancho's face, blank and staring past him as they took him away.

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The trial was mostly for show. It went the only way it could -- he'd been foolish to believe it could be any different -- but the judge delayed the execution for a time. There wasn't anything for visitors like a hanging, folks elbow to elbow in every bar, and all the boardinghouses charging double and full up just the same.

Lefty couldn't bring himself to leave, not yet, not even with their tiny stash lighting his path out of Mexico. He made for the jail more than once, thinking he could talk to Pancho, explain how it had been, but he'd never been much good with words, and it wouldn't change anything anyway. Pancho was still dying, and they were both back to being alone.

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His momma had said once that the ones you love best are the ones who need you the most, but he didn't know which side of that equation he was on anymore. The day they hung Pancho the wind whipped around them all hard as anything, tearing away his last words and Lefty's last tears, hiding their pain in dust and offering one final bit of dignity.

Lefty turned away before the drop, but behind his eyes, Pancho danced on the breeze.

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The midwest motel bed is small and hard, the linens thin, and the stains on the ceiling all Lefty has to count anymore. He doesn't sing or pray or cry. Pancho would have said they were all the same thing anyway. Only the federales have strong enough voices to tell their story these days, and they will surely get it wrong.

He takes the odd job to keep body and soul together, he pulls the cork from time to time to even the odds, and every night he sinks into dreams where he still sings, Pancho still dances, and they're both free.

End Notes

Thanks to M as always for the beta. Title from the incomparable Gillian Welch, whose gorgeous cover of "Pancho & Lefty" introduced me to Townes in the first place.

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