Smiths

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

The truth is that I am just the gunsmith and the dentist. I pull bullets from jammed breeches and teeth from rotting jaws. I am good at what I do, so folk sort of assume I can do other things as well. Like locksmithing and serving as the town doctor.

The truth is that I had attended wounds while serving in the Union army in the Civil War. God knows I attended to more wounds that any man should view, on those bloody battlefields. I knew about hygiene and the cauterizing blood vessels. I knew about stitching and dressings, and the need to change them. I dealt with my fair share of burns to. I mean blast burns, powder burns, flame burns. Clean water or urine, then dress with cotton soaked in paraffin.

I call myself a wound smith rather than a medical man. Smith is my name. Bartholomew Smith.

In our town it was mainly cuts to the hands, arms and legs, broken bones from falling off a horse, or a roof or a barstool. Sometimes the same folk would come in and you would say with a smile: “You again Jake. Time you got a new horse.”

But some people would come in again and again and it would make you weep. People like Johnny Hudson.

Kade Hudson was not his father. The fact is that Johnny’s mother was a very pretty girl and the target of every man in town well before I arrived. She was barely blooding when some cowhand got her pregnant and Johnny was the result. Unhealthy they called him, although I have seen him enough times to know that he is nothing more than scrawny, but tough.

Johnny’s mother chose Kade because he was ready to care for her despite the kid. I guess she thought that meant he was going to treat Johnny like his son, but that was never the case. Kade hated the boy. Maybe he would have been the same with his own blood, but I doubt it.

When Johnny’s mother died, he told the boy he would have to pay his own way. That meant school was over, and the boy needed to go to work. Kade apprenticed him to the local blacksmith to learn a trade and “build up some strength”.

If there is a more hateful man in our town above even Kade Hudson, that would be Sam Smoult our blacksmith and farrier. The worst of it was that they were friends together, he and Kade, and Johnny was therefore their common target.

I had never seen Johnny as a doctor before he started at the smith shop, but then he started coming in with bad bruises and small targeted burns. I know what I mean by that. He was being branded. He was small and slight, but he was tough enough. He could grit his teeth and take it.

I was not about to advise him to stand up to either of them, let alone both of them. I might have done, but only because I am quick rather than big. People knew that I could handle a gun or a bowie knife as well as I could a pair of pliers.

Anyway, I then found out that the blacksmith had decided that Johnny was not up to working at the forge. It turned out that the boy could barely lift the tongs let alone the tongs gripping a piece of steel. So, Sam had him working at his home taking the place of his late wife Gretchen.

I hoped that this meant that the beatings would stop, but I was wrong. The next thing I heard was that Johnny’s leg was broke and I should come around to the Smoult homestead. Sam was at his forge and had left Johnny lying on the bed. He was wearing a dress and a bonnet.

I said: “What is going on here, and why are you dressed like this?” But I was already pulling up the skirts to examine his leg, long and shaved smooth and showing a big bruise on the shin.

“This is what I do now,” said Johnny. “I am Sam’s housewife. It is better than the smithing, but no matter how hard I try, I just get beat up.”

“You are a whipping boy,” I said. “They vent their anger by hitting you. There is nothing that you have done to deserve this.”

“Just fix me up Doc.” he said. It was a break all right, but easy to set and splint. He would be on crutches for a while.

As I say, I am not a real doctor but there is something that makes you despair to turn your back in the knowledge that it is not going to get any better for somebody like Johnny. I just hoped that one day he could break free.

But things were going to get much worse.

Later I found out that Johnny had stood up to Sam and to Kade. He had been fixing them a meal and was still hobbling around. He was late bringing them more beer, and one of them smacked him down. Johnny went off at them. So they grabbed him and they marched Johnny down to the forge and Kade held him while Sam gelded the boy with a hot poker.

It seems hard to believe that they thought they would get away with that. This was not something that could be explained away as an accident. And there was no recovery from that. He would heal sure enough, but he would never be a full man; never have a spouse; never have a family. That is a crime by anyone’s understanding.

Sam and Kade were people that thought they could get away with a lot, but they decided to seek my help to give them some cover, by having me look at the injury and explain “the accident”.

“Not the first accident this youngster has suffered,” I said. “But the last by your hands, I swear it. If you leave the boy with me, I will not tell the sheriff what you have done. I need to try to put this right.”

They had removed the dress off of him, but Johnny still wore the slip and the bonnet, and beneath that his fair hair had grown long. I moved him into the cot that I had for patients in my living area, and I attended to his wound as best I could.

“I suppose I will be in dresses for good now, Doc,” he said. He pointed at the pile that Sam had dumped on my table as a parting “gift” for the boy. Everything from Gretchen’s closet. I guess Sam had no need of it.

“You need surgery,” I told him. “It is beyond my ability. But I hear stories about a lady surgeon up in Laramie who may be able to help. I will go and fetch her if she will come. Take my pistol and bolt the door, just in case those rascals come back.”

This woman’s name was Dr. Elizabeth Pearl. They call her doctor even though we all know that there is no such thing as a female doctor. It is a mark of respect I suppose. This woman has done good work to the extent that she is known across three states. The word was that she had learned healing from the Indians when she was a squaw in one of their tent villages, but later she studied medicine at a distance.

I suppose that I was expecting a much older and more severe woman. You think a woman with that kind of reputation might be like that. Instead, she seemed young, and she was pretty and well dressed.

She said that she was too busy to leave Laramie and that she had a young family to look after but when I told her some more about my patient, she wanted to learn more.

“I had heard that some fellow had lost all of his rod and tackle to disease and that you fixed him up and he was walking around days later,” I said, because I had heard about that.

“That man was left so he could only squat to pee as a woman does,” she said. “It was more that he could bear so he did himself in.”

“I don’t think sitting down to piss is going to worry Johnny none,” I volunteered. “He wears more dresses than pants these days.”

“I’ll get my bag,” she says. “Maybe we can get to Sherman before dark and on from there?”

She made her arrangements, and we were gone from there on horseback, with her riding as if she had been born in the saddle. We did get to Sherman and stayed there a night before heading down into Colorado and my town.

We talked about medical things on the way. She said that she had seen bad physicians and she guessed I was not one of those. She said: “The first rule of medicine is to know your limitations.” And she added: “Here I think I can do what you cannot.”

We were exhausted when we got in at my place and I knocked on the door for Johnny to let us in. I was not sure what clothes would be worn as there were items of mine that could be borrowed from my closet, but I was almost relieved that Johnny was in skirts. Beth (as she asked me to call her) still had time to examine Johnny’s injuries and change a dressing.

“We’ll make a start in the morning,” she said to the boy. “But you understand that I cannot restore you to manhood. I may be able to give you a chance at womanhood. I can tell you; it is better that being neither and a far the better way of life.”

I had to smile that a woman could say such things with no knowledge of what she might be missing as a man. I guess women just have it easy compared to we menfolk.

“I know I will never be a man,” said Johnny with some obvious sadness.

In the morning we boiled water and we boiled a bedsheet torn into strips and hung it out to dry some. She had ether and a diffuser to place over Johnny’s mouth and nose and knock him out.

Beth showed me what she was going to do. She said that the scrotum and the bottom of the penis were badly damaged by we could pull the penis down to right between the legs and stitch it there with the tip still intact, But what she found through the scrotum surprised her.

“It looks like they have plunged a hot poker in to him where a vagina would have been and it appears that by accident or design they have created a vagina here. Rather than stitch over it, it is already cauterized so we can pack it and simply arrange what is left of the scrotum to make a pretty pair of lips.”

Honestly, you would have thought that she was holding dressmaking classes. But I had to admire the skills. She cut with an eye of the blood vessels and she stitched muscle to muscle and skin to skin. It was dressmaking of a kind.

“There are Indian ways of making a vagina for a man,” she said. “They strap a stone in this spot and then a larger stone, and then a peg. Over years an indentation will appear. The male body has a space where a vagina could be, but it would take decades even to get a shallow one by the painless route. What this child has suffered has allowed that work to be done in just seconds of extreme pain.”

“He has suffered a lot,” I told her, but I did not go into details. She maybe a doctor but she is still a lady and needs to be spared the tales of violence.

When Johnny came to, I thought that original pain might be back again, but he said he felt fine.

“You should call her she, now,” said Beth. “And think about a better name than Johnny”.

And then she was ready to go. I offered to have the boy from the livery ride back with her at least as far as Sherman, but she would not accept the offer. She said: “I know how to look after myself.” And somehow, I could not doubt those words. She looked ladylike and almost fragile, but something told me that she was much tougher than that. I guess living with the Indians for a spell might have had something to do with that.

She had told me about removing the packing and fashioned something to go inside the hole. When I asked her what size, she told me to measure my own hard penis and make it just that size and shape. I made gun handles and stocks so that was not hard to do.

I like working with wood. It is more forgiving than steel and warm in the hands where steel is cold. I fashioned this thing to the measure she suggested, and I could not resist adding some details too.

Johnny suggested that I called him Jenny, and he stayed in my care and gave me his care back. He did the role that he performed for Sam, but unlike Sam I found no fault in it. Everything seemed to be perfect. I had more time for work and clean clothes and a full belly.

She seemed to be enjoying herself in the work she did. She called herself a “homesmith” – fashioning a home from what was just a house without her.

Jenny was coping with the changes just fine and sitting down to pee just like a woman should, because she had no choice.

Then one day I came back from the workshop and there was Jenny with skirts up playing with the tool that I made for her. I was mighty embarrassed, and she a little too.

She said: “Is it true that you modelled this her thing off of you own flesh and blood?”

When I said yes, she said: “Well I would sure like to try that flesh and blood for a change.”

Hot damn! That was the moment that changed my life. I have all the woman I need and she was not always a woman.

Not long after Kade Hudson and Sam Smoult got in a fight and stabbed one another. They both just bled out there on the floor in the Smoult homestead. It seemed a fitting end to the two very worst specimens of humanity.

It seemed like the signal for me to propose to Jenny so I did. Because records in the Colorado Territory were not the best there was never a question that my bride would be unable to comply. We made sure it was a proper church wedding.

The Minister made some statement about procreation. We know that is never going to happen. But perhaps in pursuit of a miracle, or perhaps for some other reason, we just keep on trying.

The End

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