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Beth Liechti

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Packers

Beth Liechti

The old, young soldier nods approval while Elsie slips on the packer boots. In a western store a few miles from the Las Vegas strip, she struts, modeling the \$100 Ropers. His blue eyes grin.

Right out of the box, the boots fit like she'd worn them for years. Comfortable, like the feel when he asked to sit by her on the beach a few weeks earlier. They clicked. Unlike her, he'd made rank fast after several tours and time in the first desert war. She's a scrapper who bucks the system; he games the system. His devil-may-care approach with bawdy jokes and stories plays to an audience. Elsie has few stories; she likes to listen to his. She wishes she was carefree like him, not straining under the weight of the rucksack strapped to the back of her brain.

Out of the blue, he says, "I'd like to buy the boots for you."

The unexpected offer strikes her as extravagant. She'd never spent that much money on boots. Maybe he expects something in return.

"Really? Maybe. Alright. But I don't want to owe you anything. You sure I won't owe you anything?"

"You won't owe me anything."

During a long-ago summer at the Two Bar Seven, Elsie bought her first boots with her own money, a pair of brown and buff Abilenes. Lately though, she could poke her finger through matching holes in the soles. The Abilenes move to the back of the closet. The new boots show up at the right time. Heavy stitching on the packers joins two shades of brown oil-tanned leather, blood red and chocolate, like the old, young soldier and his past.

Back in southern California, on many days after duty, Elsie slips on the boots and drives inland to Santiago Canyon. The supple leather snugs, dirt and pebbles don't harass her toes and ankles. Inch-high heels with a cowboy slant keep her feet from sliding though the stirrups of her Big Horn. Life-saving when her bay mare bucks at a rattler or bolts when an oak branch slaps on a breeze. For hours, she trots dusty single-track up and down rocky hills, canters grassy meadows, and inches through cold cricks. The trail eases the throb and the pinch caused by that darn ruck. She sets aside bits of time for the old, young soldier. He doesn't ride. Sometimes he drives the truck and trailer, which he loves, but he's rather reckless: sharp on the curves and fast on the straights.

Elsie passes a blue streak of this and that on the southern California coast with the old, young soldier. He makes her laugh and forget the ruck once in a while. As expected, she receives orders. Elsie hugs him 'so long.' Accustomed to moving out alone, she prefers not to take chances.

Elsie keeps the packers, they sit front and center in her closet. When she pulls them on, she reminisces about drinking and rolling her time away with that old, young soldier. A sweet memory, but then a twinge smarts as she recalls the one time he about-faced to serious, a haunt in his blue eyes, a heavy sigh in his voice.

“I was standing on the runner of the truck. I looked at Hackett. Blood spattered on him, all over the cab. His eyes were empty. I shook him. His head fell forward and hit the steering wheel.”

The old, young soldier pauses.

“I jumped off, ran, and took cover. The tanker exploded. Pieces scattered everywhere across that stinkin’ sand. There was nothin’ I could do.”

‘There was nothin’ I could do’ collides with the ruck. Like the old, young soldier, she senses most everyone humps a ruck. Heck, soldiers brag about whose is heaviest. Frequently, the gargantuan ruck on the back of Elsie’s brain cinches tighter, rubbing blisters into her consciousness. On occasion, the maniacal ruck grows superhuman arms and hurls rocks her way, hitting or tripping her. Elsie tries not to flinch. She takes cover with long hours at work followed by tall shots of tequila.

But those packers. They pull double duty in the evenings. A brush shine readies them for two-stepping over many a honkytonk floor. Along the line, she hears the old, young soldier married a blonde, uptown, civilian.

At her new duty station, the packers spend more time in the closet than on her feet. She raises her hand and deploys to the desert. Interminable hours. Little sleep. Her insides rock and roll from untreated water and missions where a wrong turn might kill or maim. Unruly tempers, stiff words; heat, anger and pain distract many by her side. She considers the old, young soldier. In an instant it seems, she returns stateside. She does her duty as the present evaporates, along with her age. The day arrives when Elsie takes off her combat boots for the last time.

She signs up for a desk job, eight-hours-a-day. Civilian life twists a different way. The packers find her feet again. Astride a black Appy gelding with an attitude, she competes on Shenandoah trail: twenty-five miles, than fifty miles at a stretch. The miles help, but she can’t shake off that ruck. Worse, its cinch tightens.

About the same time, almost as if in competition, the packers conspire. At first, an ill-fitting feel when she slips them on. Annoyance turns to uncomfortable, especially in the saddle. Uncomfortable rages into pain that shoots from the ball of her right foot up her leg, an ache that takes her breath away. Like the ruck, the bursts of pain spark without warning or routine.

No help from the doctors. One doctor acts as though he thinks the pain in her foot is really in her head. Jerk. Eventually, the pain bolts from her foot through her leg no matter what pair of boots or shoes she wears. Screaming or whimpering only irritates those around her. Pain beats desire. The packers drift to the back of the closet with the Abilenes. She turns the gelding out to pasture. The ruck pummels her days and suffocates her nights. Can she hang on?

Elsie reads on the Internet that foot pain lasting more than a few weeks should not be ignored. Is the same true for a ruck strapped to your brain? It’s been more than a few years, so she relents, and hobbles her way to Doctor Smith.

The good doctor tells her, “See here, Mr. Morton and his neuroma moved into the nerves of your foot, between the second and third metatarsal. Over time, Mr. Morton expanded his real estate. Not uncommon for someone your age, but nothing you can do to evict him.”

Vindication. The pain is real and not in her imagination.

“Well, it’s time to excise Mr. Morton and his neuroma.”

Elsie can’t say ‘Yes’ fast enough. Maybe she should be just as gung ho to lose the ruck. Under operating room lights, the good doctor cuts Mr. Morton out in less than an hour. Two weeks recovery and Elsie’s foot pain vanishes.

Why did she wait so long?

After her gait returns to normal, Elise digs around in the closet and drags out the packers. Tempting, but what if the pain survived? She inspects the dusty, twenty-year old boots. As she brushes the worn brown leather to a shine, thoughts flicker of the old, young soldier and the laughs they shared. Did he hang onto the blonde? Did he hang on?

Elsie pulls on the packers. Familiar soft leather hugs her feet and ankles. She wears the old boots for a couple hours. Walking slow, then fast. Even a jaunty two-step. Good ol’ Doctor Smith.

The doctor’s expert hands fixed her foot, but she chose to go to the doctor, and then she chose to have the doctor operate.

What if?

What if she chooses to cut the ruck loose? Would it slip away as easily as the pain severed by the scalpel? Maybe she would try.