

The Apostate
and
Other Stories
of the
Contemporary Southwest

By J. B. Hogan

Preface

The geography in this book is very personal to me. I have often traveled the roads I describe and I feel a strong connection to the ruggedly beautiful land of the desert southwest. The stories are often as harsh as the terrain itself.

I have tried to ground the stories in this collection in reality by creating and writing about real-life characters, places and events. There really is a place called the Middle of Nowhere Bar out in the middle of nowhere New Mexico. Look for it next time you happen to be on Highway 26 between Deming and Hatch.

The stories presented here are about crime and hard lives, but there's more to dig for if you've a mind to because they are also about personal redemption, even salvation – or the lack thereof. I hope that you find something in them to enjoy.

With my appreciation,
J. B. Hogan

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The Apostate

Chapter 1

Michael Wright felt the cold metal against his left temple and closed his eyes. It was a .38, he guessed. A Saturday night special. The only kind the frantic boy beside him probably could afford, or get his hands on. Damn it, Michael cursed inwardly, feeling the short barrel of the pistol drift towards his forehead.

Irrational anger at his wife pulsed through his shocked system. The stupid ring could have been picked up any time. But Barbara had to have him go get it right then. And it wasn't even ready.

Very briefly, Michael considered jumping the boy – smelly and ragged as the kid was in his filthy jeans and threadbare, once-black Anthrax T-shirt – but the boy suddenly tensed up and Michael let that idea go as quickly as it had popped into his head.

Anthrax? What the hell was Anthrax, Michael wondered. Some kind of band? A heavy metal band? Of course. Carjacked by a head banger boy and his poor white trash girlfriend up front driving. How could this have happened? How was it possible? He figured he must have snapped, gone over the edge without realizing it. Or maybe it was an acid flashback. But when Michael looked out the window, barely moving his head so that the boy wouldn't go nuts and shoot him, he saw the swap meet go by and he knew he was really where he was. Kidnapped. Carjacked. Racing out of Tucson, presumably toward the interstate. To where? Old Mexico? New Mexico? Phoenix? God only knew.

This is karma, Michael thought bitterly. Karma. Cause and effect. This was the effect from a cause he, Michael, had caused. Some time, somewhere. And the hammer had come down across the years. He knew he deserved this. He didn't want it anyway.

"Karma," he muttered, closing his eyes again.

"What?" the boy barked at him, jamming the pistol harder into Michael's temple.

"Nothing," Michael said quickly.

"What did he say, Bobby Earl?" the girl driving called back over her right shoulder.

"Nothin'," Bobby Earl told her, "he's just mumblin' crap."

"Don't you hurt him," the girl said. "You promised not to hurt him."

"He keeps his mouth shut, I won't," Bobby Earl said, grinding the .38 barrel into Michael's head.

"Take it easy," Michael dared to say.

"Shut up," Bobby Earl snarled.

"There's an overpass comin' up, Bobby," the girl said, "which way do I go? Do I take the interstate?"

"How the hell do I know, Mary Beth?" Bobby Earl yelled at the girl. "You gotta make some decisions on your own. I'm watchin' this dumb ass. Or I can shoot him and come up there and drive my ownself. Is that what you want me to do?"

"Don't you shoot him, Bobby Earl," Mary Beth cried. "Don't you do that."

"Then shut up and get us on the stupid interstate," Bobby Earl ordered.

"I don't know which exit to take," Mary Beth said, nearly crying. "Which is it? Which way? El Paso or Phoenix? East or West?"

"Go west," Bobby Earl barked, "to El Paso."

"El Paso's east," Michael offered stupidly, unable to resist a teacher's urge to correct an error.

"What did he say?" Mary Beth asked.

"I don't know," Bobby Earl answered, "but he better shut his pie hole."

"I said El Paso is east," Michael repeated softly, unwisely.

"You dumb shit," Bobby Earl said with a nasty little laugh, "lights out."

Panhandle

Out on the Road

A gusting wind swirled erratically across the empty West Texas fields, lifting and scattering little clouds of dust that rose up behind the heels of Buddy Harris' worn and dirty boots with each step he took over the crumbling, dry land. Wisps of sand hit against the side of Buddy's face and he turned away from time to time to protect his eyes from the fine but sharp-edged topsoil.

Sometimes when the wind kicked up harder it swept over the thin barbed wire fences surrounding the dead fields, rattling the twisted metal and slapping scraps of paper and pieces of plastic sacks against rocks and posts in its way. Other times when it blew straight and hard it whistled, whistled a long, high lonesome sound that reminded Buddy of old Hank Williams songs he'd heard his daddy play years ago.

That wind sound recalled to the boy memories of further back up in the Panhandle around Amarillo where he'd gone many times with old Luke Miller to sell cattle and horses. The wind blew hard and cold there in the heart of the Panhandle and it made a man feel as alone as if he were the only person alive in the whole territory – how it must've felt when there were only Indians in the land and trail herders passing through.

While he walked along another sound began to work its way into his consciousness. It was a whooshing sound, like a ground level wind or shallow water being forded by an old car with slick, bald tires. Looking to his left, out to the two-lane highway beside which he walked, Buddy realized that a car – or truck – was approaching. As the vehicle came towards him from behind, Buddy drew his mind fully back from that distant, silent place it had been and began again to tune

into the real world around him.

It was barely gray light, another twenty minutes or so before sunrise, and he was walking by the highway outside of town, barely aware of real time or place. He stopped for a moment to get his bearings, the roar of the vehicle – he could definitely tell it was a truck now – growing louder as it neared him from behind.

Buddy looked up as the pickup shot by him, a clanking dark beast chewing up the stillness of the morning air. There were two young men inside whom Buddy recognized, but he was sure that the occupants had not done the same of him as they blew past in the early light of day. Pausing by a fence post, Buddy watched until they rounded a distant corner by a sparse stand of cottonwood trees and disappeared.

“Headin’ for the Black Toast,” Buddy declared quietly to the empty road and fields.

The thought of the Black Gold Cafe, its name an anachronism of Seco’s faded oil past and rechristened the Black Toast or Caje’s by locals accustomed to the commonly burnt breakfast toast, which was about a mile or so on up the road, made Buddy hungry. He was thinking of a plate-size pancake with bacon and eggs, coffee, and that famous Cajun toast, as Buddy’s old friend Johnny Dupree, the owner of the pickup that had just sped by him, used to call it.

It occurred briefly to Buddy that he could not remember his last meal. For a few tiring moments then, his stomach seemed to betray him and he felt as if he would have to stop until the cramping passed. But with the steadily increasing light showing him it was going to be a nice morning, calm and tranquil, Buddy kept at his slow pace, just walking, letting his hunger subside, putting itself back there with all the other things of greater and lesser significance that gnawed frequently, if not always gently, at the edges of his awareness.

About a quarter mile up the road on his right, Buddy saw a grazing field with a handful of cattle munching on ankle-high grass. Across the road to the left and up another eighth of a mile or so was a small farmhouse. The old Phelps place, Buddy thought, and probably still their cows, too.

As he neared the farm, a solitary milk cow lowed unhappily at

him and then a big German Shepherd-looking mix of a dog came rushing down the Phelps' long dirt driveway. The dog raced out onto the road barking and baring his teeth but when Buddy stopped and squared off at it, the animal suddenly halted its charge.

"For cryin' out loud, Buck," Buddy called over at the dog, "cain't you remember anything? Stop that barkin' right now."

The dog looked at Buddy cock-eyed but did quit barking. Buddy crossed the highway to the dog and slapped his hands together. The dog, slowly remembering, began to move forward again. Then it started barking again, but this time it was a happy yelp of greeting and the animal jumped all around excitedly. Buddy grabbed the big pooch and rough-housed it, petting the thick-headed creature over and over.

"That's more like it, you old mutt," Buddy laughed, rolling the dog over onto its back where it flopped back and forth in the dirt by the road.

While Buddy and Buck were holding their reunion, a man came out of the Phelps house and called for the dog. Buddy pushed Buck up to his feet and swatted him on the butt.

"You better get your old fanny back home," Buddy told the dog, who momentarily seemed unsure of his loyalty. "Go on now," Buddy added after hearing another call from the house.

The dog barked and ran off energetically towards his house. Buddy laughed and dusted his hands off on his dirty jeans. He could see what looked like old man Phelps up by the house now and he made a small wave that was not returned. Shrugging, Buddy smiled to himself and headed on up the road towards the Black Toast.

Cowboy

The pile of beer cans outside Johnny Dupree's little trailer made it look like he was the collection point for a one-man recycling program. The small refrigerator inside always had at least a twelve-pack in it and when Johnny emptied a can, he just opened the trailer door and tossed it onto the growing pile.

The trailer had an old hot plate in it for heating up pork and beans and such but Johnny preferred eating at the Los Lunas Horse and Cattle Auction Barn snack bar across the dirt road and sandy parking lot from his trailer.

His full name was John Martin Dupree but those who knew him best called him Cowboy because he was one of the finest horsemen in the southwest. He always had a girl or woman hanging around – of late a young half-Navajo, half-Mexican girl named Luisa.

Johnny had come to Los Lunas from Seco, Texas via a pretty circuitous route. Along with his little sister Kate, Johnny was a late arrival in the life of his elderly father, Preston. Preston Dupree himself was a well-known horseman in the Seco area and he raised his boy and girl on the family spread just outside the dusty Texas town. Mrs. Dupree died when Kate was only two and Johnny five and the old man raised both kids to be horse ranchers like himself.

When Kate was nine she took a bad fall from a high-strung buckskin and her health was never the same after that. She still worked with the old man on the ranch but she had complications from the accident and pain spells that nearly invalidated her.

For his part, Johnny took to the cowboy life like the proverbial duck to water. From the time he was ten or eleven there was hardly a horse he ever saw that he couldn't ride, tame, or intimidate into well-trained submission.

Like his fellow cowboys, Johnny lived day to day, never caring to have much more than a good meal or two each day, enough coin to

buy some beer, and a woman when one was needed. This life went on happily, and unabated, until the year his father passed away.

The old man had been declining as early as Johnny's high school years and though he was as old as the grandfathers of most of the other boys Johnny's age, Preston Dupree's death hit Johnny real hard. Knowing his father wasn't there to watch took some of the pleasure out of riding a three-fourths tame quarter horse full speed into the tiny fenced in plots of dirt that stood as show arenas at most of the auction houses and then putting that animal through its paces like it was the calmest, best mannered mount in the desert southwest.

Eventually, Johnny moved on to New Mexico and within a few months sent for his sister. He set her up in a decent, easily accessible apartment on the southeast side of Albuquerque and though he usually only saw Kate once a week or so, just having her nearby gave him a family base, a solid place he could depend on now that the old man was gone. Without his dad, he felt half of him had been cut out. Without Kate he didn't know what, if anything, might be left of him.

"What'll it be, Cowboy?" Sherry, the lady who ran the snack bar in the auction barn, asked when Johnny clomped up to the counter in his dusty boots. He was limping slightly from a bone spur on the side of his left ankle but it was not the cowboy way to show pain, much less talk about it.

"Gimme some of them flapjacks you got there, Sherry," he said.

It was Thursday morning and the early arrivals for the weekend sale would be coming in by mid-morning. Johnny knew he might go a long time before he'd have another sit down meal so he ordered big.

"And a couple of eggs, hash browns, a slice of ham, and toast."

Sherry raised an eyebrow at the big order but didn't say anything.

"Coffee?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How you like your eggs?"

"Broken," Johnny teased.

"Very funny," Sherry smiled back.

"Scrambled, please," Johnny winked at her.

"White or wheat on the toast?"

"Wheat."

“Go ahead and sit down,” Sherry told Johnny, pointing to a corner of the snack bar where several of his cohorts were holed up, “we’ll bring it out to you.”

“I do appreciate it, ma’am,” Johnny said, tipping his hat. “Thank you very much.”

“Go on now,” Sherry laughed, “fore all that cowboy politeness gets you into trouble.”

“Mornin’, boys,” Johnny greeted his cowboy friends at the corner table, “wonderful day today.”

“Can it, Dupree,” a really big Mexican kid everyone called Pancho said. “We heard all that crap you feed these women already.” The other men at the table snickered.

Besides Pancho, there was Wayne, an older wrangler, who mostly worked back in the pens, cutting out animals for the main riders and helping the vet do the required bloodletting for each horse up for sale. It was required that every horse have a clean Coggins test – which determined if the animal had what might be termed Horse Aids.

If an animal tested positive, well that was the end of that. Every horse in the general vicinity would be quarantined. It was a terrible test to fail. Luckily failures were very, very rare. Neither Johnny nor any of the other hands had seen a horse fail the Coggins, but they’d all heard the horror stories of ones that did.

Also at the table was Givers, the young yard boss who was super-organized and excellent with figures – a necessity anywhere large numbers of animals would be bought and sold. Sitting by Givers was a short, heavy Navajo wrangler whose real name was Martin Begaye but all the cowboys and wranglers had renamed him Cool Daddy because of his amazing ability to calm and handle the wildest of auction horses, even the nearly feral ones called Brumbies.

“Nice seein’ you fellas, too,” Johnny laughed, pulling a chair up beside Givers who was jotting down numbers and names in a small notebook. “What you doin’, Givers,” Johnny asked, “work stuff?”

“Yeah,” Givers replied, not looking up. “CB wants a list of everybody working back in the pens and what they’re supposed to be doing. You know CB.”

“I – CB – M, you mean,” Wayne laughed, “the guided missile.”

“Crazy Bastard, you ask me,” Cool Daddy chipped in.

“Nobody did,” Johnny joked, taking a playful swipe at Cool Daddy, who feigned fear. “You no ‘count, Injun.”

“I kick your ass, white cowboy Johnny,” Cool Daddy laughed. Johnny chuckled.

Charles Beltre was the man the cowboys called CB or ICBM, the guided missile. Beltre was the owner of the Los Lunas Livestock Auction, including the land, the pens, and the auction barn itself. He was a hard driving, self-made man and he intended to make a go of the auction, come hell or high water.

CB was renowned for his quick temper and quick decisions, which usually led to the rapid firing and even more rapid rehiring of his workers. Every one of the men at the snack bar table had felt Beltre’s wrath and forgiveness – usually more than once.

After breakfast, all the men save Pancho – who was moving hay using a four-wheel drive ATV with a forklift attachment that morning – hopped into Givers’s pickup and headed for the back pens where the veterinary testing was just beginning for the day.

The wranglers climbed the fence and dropped down into the wide pen where the vet and a vet lab tech were drawing blood from an assortment of quarter horses that Wayne and Cool Daddy quickly began to move, one at a time, through the series of chutes and gates leading up to the last one where the blood was removed, sometimes at the risk of physical injury to the animal, a lab tech, or even the vet. If a horse was particularly rambunctious or dangerous, Cool Daddy would slip a rope around its neck and head and with his powerful arms and legs and soothing manner bring the horse under control.

“Nice work, Cool Daddy,” Johnny, who had hung back a bit to watch the bleeding and to maybe ask the vet about the painful spur on his foot, called to his buddy.

“You come hold ‘im, Johnny,” Cool Daddy laughed, sweat pouring off his face. Smiling, Johnny waved the offer off.

“Hey, Cowboy,” Wayne said, nodding his head for Johnny to look behind them at a woman climbing up onto the fence around the pen. All the men turned to watch.

“There you go,” the vet, Jeffrey “Doc” Crasner, said with a laugh.