

The Woman Who Shot Jesse James

—for J.B.

“Hurry up, old man, or I’ll shoot!”

Joy’s five-year-old son Jack brandished his new cap gun at the docent. Joy had given in reluctantly—okay, make that desperately—to his tearful souvenir plea in the cramped museum gift shop. Another spectacular decision.

“Jack!” Joy felt her face flame.

“Reach for the sky!” shouted Jack, undeterred. His mop of orange curls kept his undersized cowboy hat riding a little too high, despite the drawstring cinched snugly beneath his chin. He aimed the toy gun at the docent’s heart once more, unleashing a round of sharp explosions as the red cap tape popped and smoked its way past the hammer. A bluish haze laced with the metallic smell of gunpowder filled the room along with uneasy laughter from the only other people on the tour, a couple in their late seventies who had grown to look like wizened twins, complete with matching white off-brand sneakers. They were embarrassed for her. They wouldn’t have stood for this type of behavior, these relics from the spanking generation. But they had each other. Joy wondered how quickly their self-righteous resolve would crumble in the face of single parenthood.

“That’s *enough!*” Joy yanked Jack’s arm and felt a distinct pop in his shoulder socket. The gun clattered to the floor. Jack began to wail, and her three-year-old, Heidi, started crying, too, clutching a pink fleece bunny with a “Jesse James Bank Museum” patch on one haunch. What a rabbit had to do with bank robbers, Joy had no idea.

“Let’s go see Grandma,” Joy said, teeth clenched. Her mother Fran lived in Liberty, Missouri, and hadn’t wanted to spend six dollars for a museum she had been to already: “I’ll just be here on this bench.”

And she was, knitting needles reeling off another in a never-ending series of scarves on this white-hot August morning. Fran donated

most to the local homeless shelter, but Joy had dozens of her mother's creations hanging in her closet in Columbia. Joy's husband Tim had called them "fuglies," because they were so "fucking ugly." But when Jack had told Grandma about the fuglies, Tim quickly hailed them as "fuzzy *and* snuggly, both"—narrowly averting a family crisis. How they had laughed guiltily about the incident in bed later. God, she missed that.

"Museum too boring?" A hummingbird of a woman, Fran assessed the situation without missing a stitch.

Jack and Heidi nodded, snuffling wetly. Joy tried to remember why she had thought this would be a good idea: her son's obsession with the Wild West, her own need for distraction. Joy sighed. She of all people should know things never turn out how one envisions.

"It's supposed to be a place for bank robbers and no one will let me shoot or rob anything," Jack said with a dark glance at Joy.

"That sounds dumb," Joy's mother agreed, packing up the quilted bag that read 'Knit Happens.' "I hate that, Jack."

"Grandma! You said the 'd' word. *And* the 'h' word!" Jack was elated, looking at Joy for the expected reprimand.

"There's plenty more where that came from, buddy." Fran winked. "How about some ice cream? Even Jesse James took ice cream breaks."

To Joy, she said: "Take your time. We'll be fine."

Joy and Tim had thought they would be fine, too. There was the awful weekend in March eighteen months ago when the stomach pain started. They were visiting his parents, Ray and Betty, in the tiny Ozarks town where he grew up. They took him to the ER, thinking it might be an ulcer, although Tim wasn't the stressed-out kind. That was Joy's job, to consider every potentiality, put air in the tires, make sure everyone had a flu shot. Tim was not an alarmist. He went from day to day with a child-like sense of wonder, happy in the moment, which filled Joy with envy or mild irritation, depending on the situation.

Tim was also that anomaly in the world of education: a male elementary school teacher. All the boys wanted to *be* Tim, with his athleticism and scatological sense of humor: "If life hands you a piece of poop, kids, make a poop sandwich." The girls harbored not-so-secret

crushes on him; Joy had seen the way they blushed at the last meet-the-teacher night. She had stopped by with a hamburger for Tim and ended up staying. She loved watching him, so completely in his element, as he talked Cardinal baseball with the dads, flirted with the moms, and teased the girls about the rhinestones on their tennis shoes.

There had been emergency surgery to repair a stomach perforation; a small growth was the culprit. Two days later, Fran met them in Columbia to watch the kids while Joy and Tim spent anxious hours at University Hospital— blood draws, biopsies, cat scans—until the initial diagnosis came back: cancer. Immediately, a website sprang up with meal signups. There were cards, phone calls of disbelief, friends showing up at their door with pizza and beer. They were in their thirties. How did this happen? Tim handled it with his usual sense of humor, downplaying the whole thing.

“I don’t think cancer knows who it’s messing with,” Tim said, garnering teary smiles from the wives and claps on the back from their husbands. Tim felt good, and he looked good, too, with his boyish grin and broad shoulders, his strawberry blond crew cut neat. He kept working while the doctors tried to figure out the type of cancer he had. It wasn’t a large mass. Or typical. Regular stomach cancer—adenocarcinoma—would have already spread like wildfire and he’d be dead in two months. Joy quickly learned the cancer hierarchy: things that could be dealt with (early stage prostate cancer = great odds) and things that couldn’t (pancreatic cancer = one miserable year to live, max).

When the oncologist phoned a week later, Heidi was napping, and Jack and Tim were outside playing cowboys while he cleared out some overgrown weeds from the fence. The smell he brought inside was a mix of earth, sweat and the slightly acrid odor of torn weeds. Joy watched Tim’s face for clues while he listened, his expression more curious than fearful.

Carcinoid. When Joy first heard the word, it made her laugh. Of course, part of that was just relief. It sounded “cancer-ish,” to her—like being “a little bit pregnant,” she told Tim, who laughed, too. Because it *was* good news. Yes, it was cancer, but a rare, extremely slow-growing kind. A type people could live with for twenty years before it became

unmanageable. But that was the bad news: it wasn't treatable. Along with the stomach lump, Tim had two lesions on his liver. The doctor thought he could use hormone shots to try to shrink what was there. But there just wasn't much expertise with this kind of cancer.

"Poop sandwich," Tim said, as he hung up the phone.

"Poop sandwich," she agreed. They held each other in the kitchen. Joy remembered the way the slanting sunlight had warmed her back, the smell of Tim's neck, how the air was suffused with soft yellow light: that golden moment when they knew everything was going to be all right.

"Daddy?" Jack's plaintive voice floated in through the screen window. They had forgotten him, lying in the depths of the dark green grass with just the hat and tips of his cowboy boots visible. "Can I be the bad guy now?"

Grateful for the reprieve from the kids—and ashamed for feeling that way—Joy slipped back into the high-ceilinged vault room of the bank. The silver-haired docent carried on, undeterred by his recent brush with death by cap gun, describing the James Gang robbery. It was cold and snowy on February 13, 1866, when a group of men wearing soldiers' coats rode into Liberty. While most of the men dispersed around the square to serve as lookouts, two of them tied up their horses and entered the Clay County Savings Association around 2 p.m. They warmed their hands at the pot-bellied stove and one of the men placed a ten-dollar bill on the counter and asked for change. The clerk complied and found himself staring down the barrel of a six-shooter as the man amended his request: "Actually, I'd like all the money in the bank."

Joy shivered. She pictured the robbers jumping the counter, the clerk and cashier threatened and thrown into the vault made of Missouri limestone, where one gang member cleaned out the silver and gold while the other confiscated the "greenbacks." Total take: \$60,000—roughly \$6 million today.

The robbers cleverly closed the men inside the vault before exiting, and the employees waited a few panicked moments until they felt sure the robbers had gone. In what might have otherwise been a humorous mistake, the outlaws had forgotten to spin the lock, so the clerk

and cashier were able to peer cautiously from behind the door of the unlocked vault before sounding the alarm. They saw the last horsemen riding east out of town, horses galloping, guns blazing, and the crumpled, bleeding body of an innocent bystander left in the snowy street. The James Gang rode twenty miles to the Missouri River, where the tracks disappeared.

The men and the money were never found.

After the diagnosis, she and Tim had called their friends, giddy with the good news: call off the meal rotation, no more get well cards. “Save it for someone who needs it,” Tim said.

They took the kids on a meandering trip to Yellowstone, driving through all the famous gunslinger towns: Dodge City, Kansas; Tombstone, Arizona; Jackson Hole, Wyoming. When they got home, Tim replaced the kitchen countertops and cabinets. They ate ice cream on weeknights. And the sex, which had always been good, was now something else entirely: ferocious and desperate and tender all at once. Like their bodies were starved for each other, whereas “B.C.” or “Before Cancer,” one or the other might have felt too exhausted, taken a pass. They had gotten their life back. Nothing could be taken for granted.

Joy had even felt strangely smug, she hated to admit, at how keenly she felt the beauty in their lives that year. It was like holding a perfectly ordinary seashell up to the light and finding rich reds and magentas and ochres where there had appeared to be simply white. While her married girlfriends guiltily confided worries (“I feel ridiculous bringing this up, after all you’ve been through”) about their weight—or, in one terrible instance, a romance with an old flame that had been rekindled through Facebook—she nodded and felt fortunate. Lucky, even!

She and Tim had dodged a bullet.

After the tour, Joy and the older couple were shunted into a room full of photos, newspaper clippings and paraphernalia. She felt drawn to a large photo of the young outlaw with the piercing dark eyes. Jesse James stared at Joy through the glass display case, unsmiling in his black suit, white ruffled shirt and bow tie, and a long-barreled revolver

held rakishly across his chest. As she moved closer, she saw her own reflection, too: brown chin-length hair pulled back in a stunted ponytail, large brown eyes, no makeup. She had stopped wearing any since the funeral since she typically cried it off. Joy put her face to the glass so she didn't have to see herself at all, only Jesse James, his gaze so full of daring at twenty.

Jesse was seated beside his brother, Frank—the bookish James boy with a penchant for Shakespeare and Francis Bacon—so unlike his devil-may-care baby brother. Yet both boys had cut their teeth as Confederate guerillas, riding with William Clarke Quantrill and Bloody Bill Anderson, avenging the Union's early takeover of Missouri with barbarous raids, lootings and burnings.

But what is a man to do when his chosen career path ends with Lee's surrender at Appomattox? Apply that skill set in another industry, Joy supposed. Why do people rob banks, the old question goes: Because that's where the money is. Plus, there's teamwork, travel, plenty of vacation and a certain cachet that comes with sticking up banks and making a successful getaway.

In their fifteen years of banditry, the James Gang held up a dozen banks, seven trains and five stagecoaches in eleven different states and territories. And they did it boldly—taunting the lawmen and others hired to find them—while endearing themselves to a war-weary public suspicious of Union rules and harboring anger at fat-cat bankers. While the James Gang lost a few men to bullets or lynchings, the two brothers were never caught. Joy's eye rested on a photo of one iteration of the James Gang standing brazenly outside their hideout, challenging anyone, it seemed, to try to find them.

About a year after the diagnosis, Joy and Tim were balancing bowls of Chunky Monkey between their knees and watching "Father of the Bride," when she noticed two large tears dripping down Tim's cheek.

"Tim? This is a comedy, remember?" When he didn't smile, she set her bowl down and shut off the TV. "What is it?"

"I'm just doing the math." He swiped his face clumsily. He wasn't a crier.

"What do you mean?"

“Heidi is almost three. And I may have twenty years if I’m lucky, right?”

Joy nodded, afraid of where this was going.

“Will I walk her down the aisle?”

He put his head in his hands, making a choking noise as Joy rubbed his back. She felt a dark pit open in her own stomach.

“I don’t want to have cancer. I don’t care if it’s carcinoid or trapezoid or hemorrhoid. I want it gone.”

There was a long silence.

“Me, too,” she whispered.

Joy discovered a row of “Wanted” posters the James Gang had inspired with its exploits. One dog-eared sheet in sepia-colored ink was from Northfield, Minnesota—the scene of the gang’s bloodiest bank heist—and contained this admonishment: “All officers are warned to use precautions in making arrest. These are the most desperate men in America. Take no chances! Shoot to kill!”

Desperate. That’s what they had become, too.

What Joy and Tim had at first seen as a reprieve, a gift, a mulligan, had begun to feel increasingly like an albatross. A time bomb. How could they make plans, knowing Tim wasn’t going to be there? Something as ordinary as planting a small silver maple in the yard could reduce Joy to ragged weeping.

So Joy took charge. She researched specialists on the Internet. Made phone calls. Booked flights. Soon she had Tim traveling across the country: Boston, Minneapolis, Seattle, New York. Nothing wrong in wanting a second opinion, they told each other — or a third or fourth. His parents encouraged them, too, paying for the airfare out of their savings. Finally, in Houston, Tim found a surgeon who would operate. “He’s not like the others, who see one or two cases a year. He sees one or two a week!” There was something different in his voice; she heard it a thousand miles away. A lightness. Something she recognized as hope.

After school was out, they loaded up Fran and the kids and drove south. She and Tim had been edgy with each other; Joy packing and

worrying—who would water the plants, get the mail, mow the lawn?—and Tim not worrying at all, which was driving her crazy.

“We’re not leaving forever,” he said at one point, exasperated.

“I just want everything how I want it!” she had screamed and immediately felt terrible. Tim hadn’t said he was anxious about the surgery, but surely he was. And yet Joy, yelling and crying, was the one who needed to be held and consoled.

They planned to be gone two weeks. They would meet Tim’s parents and vacation for a few days. Spend a day at one of the big amusement parks. See some rockets at the Johnson Space Center. Swim at the hotel pool. Her mom would take the kids back to Columbia; her in-laws would keep her company for the surgery and drive Joy and Tim back after his discharge.

It had been murderously hot at the amusement park. The wheels of Heidi’s umbrella stroller stuck to the black pavement as they made their way from the kiddie train to the pony ride. Fran stayed under a live oak with Heidi while everyone else piled into the log flume for the last ride of the day, Jack squeezed between Joy and Tim up front, Betty and Ray in back. Tim held Jack by the waist so he could trail a hand through the sapphire water rushing alongside their plasticized cut-out log with the stump-like benches. Near the end, a narrow trough guided their log onto a submerged conveyor system: *up, up, up*. They were perfectly level for an instant and then the log plunged with incredible speed, pushing the water into a giant spray so Joy couldn’t see anything but brilliant sunlight fractured through the prisms of water droplets. She heard Tim and Jack’s thrilled giggles. Everyone was soaked, and short, stoic Ray, who never cracked jokes, declared them “water logged,” causing a ripple of relaxed laughter. Joy slipped her hand into Tim’s.

They were at the exit when Tim stopped short.

“I need to ride the roller coaster.” He squeezed her hand. “C’mon, Joy.”

“Go ahead. We’ll take the minivan back to the hotel.” Fran loved logistical problem solving almost as much as knitting. “You two take the car.”

Joy looked at the smiling, nodding faces around her. She marveled at how, well, *normal* they all looked. Especially Tim.

“But I hate roller coasters.” Her laugh was strangled. Joy didn’t just hate roller coasters, they terrified her. “The Apocalypse” was six upside down loops, a hundred-and-twenty-five foot drop, speeds to fifty miles per hour.

“Please?”

How do you say no to the person in the world you love most? The person for whom you would do *anything*. Even if what he or she wants is something you aren’t certain you can do or be or guarantee?

You don’t. You just ride the damn roller coaster.

Later, Joy didn’t remember much about the series of spirals that had kept them plastered to their seats or the dark tunnel that rose up to swallow them after the harrowing initial drop. She only knew that Tim had laughed the entire ride, while she had never, for an instant, stopped screaming.

Near the clerk’s desk, Joy noticed a black-framed souvenir card with nine oval photo portraits from the Northfield Bank robbery: the three townsmen killed in the fray plus six men from the James Gang. There were Cole, Jim and Bob Younger—brothers who were wounded but felt fortunate to get life imprisonment rather than a hangman’s noose—and Clell Miller, Charly Pitts and Bill Chadwell, who weren’t as lucky. The latter three were sitting shirtless, arms crossed on their stiff laps, dead eyes open as if staring beyond the camera, each sporting a raw, oozing bullet wound somewhere in his pale chest.

Joy hoped their wives and mothers hadn’t seen the pictures. No one should see someone they loved like that. They looked like nothing more than little boys.

Everything had gone well, the surgeon said. He was close to their age, with smooth dark skin. He was able to remove the stomach tumor and both lesions with a good margin of healthy tissue—insurance against the cancer’s return. Tim was young and strong; the doctor couldn’t have asked for a better candidate. A few days to get him up and moving,

and they would be on their way home. *Cancer free*. He shook Joy's hand, then Ray's, while Betty, in her Sunday best, cried with relief. Joy thought it surreal that his hand had been inside her husband's body. How weirdly intimate, that he knew Tim in a way that she couldn't.

Tim hadn't looked like himself when he came out of surgery. All of those liquid bags and tubes, the wires and sensors taped to his smooth, shaved chest and attached to a beeping, pulsing machine. He was puffy and swollen from the extra fluids, his skin stretched tight as a grape's. When he finally opened his eyes, she saw an instant of panic as he searched her face for news. Joy leaned down and whispered what she didn't dare say out loud: *cancer free*. Tim's lips, cracked and dry, formed a slow smile before he closed his eyes again and slept.

When he awoke hours later, he was in agony. His eyes were wild, hands yanking at tubes. An IV stand crashed. Ray tried to hold him still, while Joy ran for a nurse. It was just pain, she said. He needed more meds. And that seemed to do the trick, calming Tim and enabling him to rest that first night.

But the next morning, he had a fever. Not unusual, the surgeon reassured them, stopping on his way to the OR in tidy blue scrubs. The fever climbed over 103°. Tim was awake at times, but not lucid. He had blood tests; his white counts were high. The doctor ordered antibiotics for what appeared to be an infection.

The next few days were a jumble in Joy's mind. The fever raged. Tim's platelet counts and blood pressure were too high. He was transferred into the ICU, mostly as a precaution, the surgeon said. Joy didn't think to ask as a precaution against what. A staph infection was confirmed. The antibiotics weren't working fast enough. Tim's lungs and kidneys were showing signs of failure; he was put into a medically induced coma. She slept only in fitful ten-minute increments. There was an unspeakably terrifying moment when his heart stopped, Joy and her in-laws pushed aside while nurses and doctors brought out electric paddles and an oxygen bag, yelling numbers while they shocked Tim's body back to life. She remembered how his tube-riddled chest had jumped off the bed with each jolt, Betty screaming with each spasm.

Six days after surgery, things seemed to turn around. The fever dropped, blood counts stabilized. Joy and her in-laws even ventured to declare themselves cautiously optimistic. And then, later on that sunny June afternoon, Tim's heart simply stopped. The code team tried for two hours, but couldn't bring him back.

Joy could not believe it, not even when the room was cleared, the tape and tubes and wires pulled from Tim's body, the door closed, her in-laws disappeared to give her some time. Not even when she crawled in beside Tim and lay her unwashed face on his cool, quiet chest with its punctures, bruises and tape marks.

It was only after the funeral—a parade of well meaning friends and platitudes and piles of food she never touched—when she was putting the kids to bed alone that she finally understood Tim was gone.

A handwritten note from Frank James to his son while awaiting trial in Gallatin, Missouri in 1883 after turning himself in: *"My dear Rob, You are the best and dearest little boy in all the world. Your father loves you a world full. Wish I could see you right now. You must learn to ride a horse and next summer I will buy you a nice saddle. I am so glad you thought of me when you was down in the wheat field. I will now kiss you bye bye. Papa"*

The kids missed their dad, but at times and in ways Joy would not have predicted. Heidi pointed at men in grocery stores—men Joy thought looked nothing like Tim—and said "Daddy." Jack refused to take off his cowboy hat, even for baths, and asked if there were Happy Meals where Tim was. They were matter of fact: their dad was dead; he had gone to heaven.

What Joy felt was harder to verbalize. Daily, she relived every step of the decision-making process, from Tim's diagnosis to his death, and wondered where she should have said "enough." To Tim. To herself. To the doctors. Ray and Betty only said how sorry they were, how much Tim had loved her and the kids: "He would have done anything for you, Joy." But the words seemed weighted, slanted. Did he do this for her? Had she pushed him? Twenty years sounded like a lifetime now. She felt foolish and greedy and guilty that she and Tim had wanted too

much. That she was alive and breathing and he wasn't. That the kids would barely remember their father. She had consoled herself with the fact that Tim had never envisioned a bad outcome. That he died believing he could not fail.

Then, two days ago, she had been pulling together what she needed to register Jack for kindergarten and found the letters. There were two of them, tucked away in the file for birth certificates, Social Security cards and immunization records. One said "Jack" and the other "Heidi," both in Tim's unmistakable hand, his poor penmanship an Achilles heel as an elementary teacher for which he compensated by using all capital letters.

Joy had always thought of heartbreak as more cerebral than physical, a catchall word that denoted hurt feelings, mental anguish. But at that moment, Joy felt a pain so sharp that she gasped. If Tim had known somehow he wouldn't be coming back, that his luck was running out, why hadn't he told her? She was his wife, and—he always said—his best friend. Would admitting fear be failure? Or if he decided he didn't want the surgery, would he have been unable to be himself, to be Tim as she thought she knew him, right up to the very end? Maybe he felt she would have been disappointed in him.

Maybe he was right.

Which is why, after the pain, she felt bottomless sadness. And she understood: there was no letter for her. There couldn't be.

The next morning, she called her mom. Could she bring the kids up for the weekend? She needed to get out of the house. Out of Columbia. Out of her head.

Jesse James likely felt the law closing in by 1882. He had moved to a small town north of Kansas City, living with his family under a false name. When friend and fellow gang member Bob Ford showed up, Jesse seemed glad to see a familiar face. But was he? Maybe he knew Bob planned to betray him, to tip off the sheriff as to the gang's next target. Bob sensed Jesse realized the purpose of his visit—and that Jesse would likely kill him at first opportunity. So when Jesse, unarmed, turned to straighten a picture, Ford drew his own pistol.

“Now or never,” Ford thought. “Get him now, or he’ll get you tonight.”

James heard the click as Ford cocked the gun, and had just begun to turn when the bullet hit him behind the ear and he fell to the floor, dead.

You can’t cheat death forever. Maybe for a year or two. Or twenty. So is it better to die by the hand of a misguided friend, a stranger or a sworn enemy? Definitely a stranger, Joy decided. An enemy would celebrate—which is bad enough—but a friend would suffer too much. Possibly forever.

Joy glanced at the museum’s antique Seth Thomas clock: a little after two! Had it really been four hours? Jack and Heidi must have mutinied. She envisioned the children squatting beside Grandma, poking her lifeless body with ice cream sample spoons. Then Joy remembered the docent said the clock had been set permanently to the time of the robbery. She had only been an hour.

She stepped into the light and heat of the square, disoriented. Had she been expecting snow? Stamping horses? Joy shook her head. It was wrong to stop the clock to commemorate a terrible crime. A better tribute would be to keep it running, ticking off the minutes, hour after hour, year after year, in spite of everything it had witnessed. In spite of all that was lost.

Joy saw the ice cream shop and the two familiar heads at a wrought iron table across from her mom, who was—predictably—knitting. Joy picked up her pace, inhaling the thick perfume of tuberose as she passed the florist. Jack and Heidi popped up like prairie dogs, scrambling from their chairs to meet her. Joy’s heart surged. All was forgiven, all forgotten.

“Mom!” Jack peered from beneath his ratty hat. “Did the sheriff catch Jesse? Or—?” He clutched both hands around his neck and stuck out his tongue.

“Nope. He got shot. By a friend.”

“His *friend* shot him?”

“I think it was sort of an accident.”

Her mother raised a quizzical eyebrow above her knitting.

“Oh.” Jack’s face clouded over for a minute. “Oh, well.”

“Want to go to the park?”

“Me, too!” Heidi put her arms up to be carried.

“We could picnic,” Fran said. “There’s a deli with great pastrami.”

“Oh, I’ll probably just have a poop sandwich,” Joy said.

“Mom!” Jack’s jaw was nearly on the ground.

“It’s actually not that bad.”

Jack threw his head back and laughed, which made Heidi shriek, too, even though she didn’t know why they were laughing. Then he tore down the sidewalk, cowboy hat bouncing, cap gun blazing, trailing smoke and noise as though he would never stop. As though they would never catch him.

