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Last night I shared a five-course dinner at the house of friends in San Angelo. Sat amongst the hosts' colleagues, teachers and professors; mingled with a lady rancher and an accountant married to a musician. Nodded at the right moments. Took care not to broach a subject related to academics, accounting or music.

The week before, the grandson working at the ranch suggested I take a trip to gather new material before going to any social functions. He said so much time had passed since I was overseas, governments had changed and new constitutions written and ratified. I reminded him that cooking and going for the mail in Mertzon lacked the excitement of icebergs crashing off the keels of sailing ships, or Chinese merchants brushing away their pigtails to exhale from ivory opium pipes.

Stricken by his criticism, I profiled the guest list. Faking knowledge in front of professors and schoolteachers is a hard act, as schoolmasters become seasoned by the master embellishments and alibis of their crafty charges. Accountants, too, meet more liars than custom officers and coffee house waitresses. The lady rancher's long experience ruled against a Boss of the Plains story. The musician

might be a prospect, but in a living room filled with guests, she would be hard to isolate.

One thing, I wasn't going to use any snake material. Two days before, I killed a rattler outside the kitchen at my maternal grandfather's ranch. As I handed the shotgun back to my grandson, the feeling hit that the shotgun symbolized the passing of the baton. The blue smoke curling from the barrel of the gun signified that my audiences are disappearing. No longer would I be the one to verbally change this western diamondback into a hideous viper coiled to bring death swifter than his forked tongue could flick away the venom dripping from his long curved fangs.

Time had come to yield the floor to my grandson. To pass the microphone, so to speak, and to roll up the script. To relinquish the gavel and drop the dramatics. To step aside for a new chronicler double-bred to tell stories from his maternal Irish blood to his connection to my family.

And he'd know fresh, alert faces eager to hear his stories. Not my crowd of old graybeards balancing on creaky folding chairs at the senior center with ears plugged by hearing aids and eyes blurred by trifocals. Be applauded and praised. Honored and photographed by the press. Not doubted and insulted by a bunch of sorehead coffee drinkers

jealous of my sighting an aardvark in the pans of the Kalahari Desert.

Before I gathered new material, I had to erase the old copy. Stories make balls inside storytellers the way popcorn and molasses stay together. In the pitch of a contest, the shelf life of the old ones becomes blurred. Take for example a 1920 model set in the time when Shack Harris followed orders to write the names of all the windmills on his daddy's ranch on the concrete tanks. Writing made Shack nervous. Shack stuttered when nervous. He spelled *Possum Well* ... well, p-o-s-s-s-u-m. Half the cowboys in Texas must have witnessed Shack's phonetic spelling, as I heard the story 50 times at least. Well, not that many times, as there weren't 50 of us who knew how to spell *possum*.

When the time came for the party I was so nervous I'd of put the "p" on the wrong end of possum. The rules of political correctness, or correct politics, were lost. I was so jumpy I'd have asked Pope Paul's opinion on Martin Luther, or the Bishop of Durham for his latest information on Henry the Eighth.

The floor opened on the new book and movie on the great racehorse "Sea Biscuit." For my turn, all I had for racehorse material was the time Sod McGuire, a plenty tough

race track hombre, hid on the roof of his horse's stall at the Angelo tracks the night before a match race. It was a good story, I thought. Sod knew his opponents were going to dope his horse. At midnight, Sod was rewarded with the opportunity to poke his shotgun off the eaves of the stall roof right on two prominent members of the local turf club.

Pleased, I shut up, to be greeted by a silence that would make a candlelight reading of the *Elegy in a Country Graveyard* sound like the backwash off the Beatles records.

My friend drove us back to the ranch in a reflective mood. By then I was used to silence. My grandson is right: I need more time away from home. Been a help to read the Sea Biscuit book. Strange how other folks' stories don't become outdated...