

Mark Rich is a versatile man, artist, musician, literary historian-critic, poet, and fiction writer whose work ranges from dead serious to downright silly. Here's an in-between piece, a look at old-time rural life with a folktale feel. It is—ahem—Something Rich and Strange.

Dead Man Come A-Calling

by Mark Rich

I heard the door open and close with a complaint and figured whoever came in probably had one, too. I was busy right at the moment. Though not a thing was happening in the spring months of 1974, in Burns, Kansas, you would never know it from the looks of my In box.

"Tom, I don't know but that we don't have a problem," said a woman's voice. "Bob's busy right now, so I thought I'd come tell you."

"Right, Claire. Hold on." Tom had been on the phone. He got right back on it. Talking with Wayne over in Haline.

"Hi, Julie," Claire Mills said to me.

"Hi," I said back. In Burns, you got to knowing everyone. Claire had more business here than most, though, so I would have known her anyway.

Tom laughed a couple times and said something about flowers before hanging it up.

"Sorry to make you wait," he said. "You were saying?"

"Might have a problem here," she said.

Claire was wearing one of the baby-blue blouses she had a hundred of. Together with her short, straight hair, her style of dress tended to make her look young. I guess she liked it that way. Since she was younger than me, I suppose she had the right.

Her badge gave her a little weight of authority, to make up for it.

"Don't suppose you're speaking as librarian," said Tom.

"No. Library's fine." Claire's assistant librarian at the new Burns Public Library over by the courthouse.

"Then I suppose you're here as assistant deputy."

"That's right." She's also the town's first woman assistant deputy, as a part-time thing. She gets paid when there's work. I guessed there was work today.

"I don't suppose it's about that near-beer stolen from Jordan's grocery."

"I don't suppose so."

"Something worse?"

"Don't rightly know, Tom."

"Who's it to do with?" Tom said, leaning back in his chair.

Leaning back in his chair and letting his belly stick out helps him look important. He thinks so, anyway. Not being that big of a belly, it does no one any harm, except maybe himself.

Tom Chancy is town manager of Burns, Kansas. Has been for going on seven years. Does pretty well, too. Gets in on people's problems, and settles things without too much fuss.

"According to Ruth Tucker, it's old Hanks," Claire said.

"Which old Hanks?"

"The old Hanks who shouldn't seem as lively as he does, Tom, I guess you'd say."

"Ben Hanks? He's too old to be trouble for anyone, lively or not. Hasn't bothered you now lately, has he, Julie?" Tom winked at me because even though I'm forty-eight and getting flexible around the hips, the Rev. Benjamin Hanks started hanging around the office for a month last winter, dropping hints about how he might be looking. I dropped a few hints as to how I might not.

"Just old enough," I said.

"Well, really, I didn't come to talk about Ben causing trouble. According to Ruth Tucker, it's Ben's brother," Claire said.

"Doesn't have one," said Tom.

"Sure he does. Did, anyway."

"Jimmy Hanks causing trouble?" I said. "No way. Dead."