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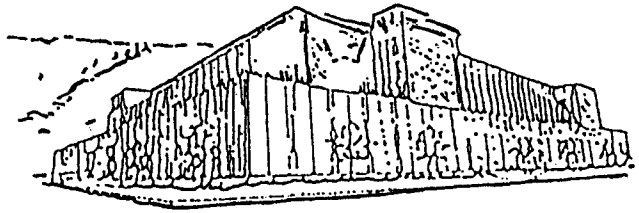
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# COME OUT EVEN

A SEASON OF RODEO AND WILD HORSE WRANGLING IN WYOMING

by

Ian McCluskey

B.A. The Colorado College, 1995

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science

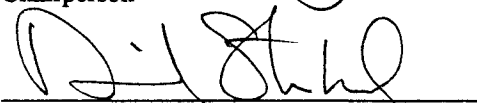
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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Between college and graduate studies, I spent a summer season on the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range. I had volunteered to research the mustang herd, to jot field notes, and to monitor the health and behavior of the animals. What I didn't know at the start was that the last roundup of wild horses had ended in disaster. What I couldn't have known then were all the days I'd ride in the summer heat and dunk my head in cold creeks and dream of skinny dipping with girls I'd known, or all the nights I'd stumble through dancers in bars, reaching my arms for someone to catch me, the nights I'd sleep in the backseat of a Cadillac, in a graveyard, or weeds.

All people and events are rendered to the best of my ability and memory. Some of the names have been changed to protect the guilty—never mind the innocent.

I'd like to thank Don Snow, my chair, as well as the members of my committee. Special thanks to Rachel Wray for the use of her computer, her technical support, and all her loving efforts like stealing paper, typing, and tolerating many, many late nights. I'd also like to send a special dedication to my late-friend Ben Algren who once said. "If we were all smart, none of us would drink, smoke, fall in love, or think—we'd all be dull and healthy "

## PROLOGUE

Wyoming was once an ocean floor and I swear it still is. Imagine the blue sky as water and the strips of clouds as the froth of waves, and you will see the sky churning up against the cliffs, spraying with spit and hail, crashing over the rims of mesas, then rising in mist and fog, cloaking the tops of mountains. I stare through the cracked windshield of my grey pickup, craning my neck to glimpse the mountains' snowfields when the clouds pulled back like low tide. "A low ceiling," pilots label it, but to me it is the underside of whitecaps.

Across the basin, wind cuts over the mesas. A single telephone wire sways like a clothes line. Tumbleweeds and shreds of plastic sacks snag on the prongs of barb-wire. The junipers shrug against the wind, rounded like riverstones, clutching in pockets of shelter. A barn leans like an old bookcase. No windows, only cracks of light between boards. Sun and sand and snow etch the wood, deepening the grain, the same way runoff gouges the shoulders of mountains. Everything soft vanishes. What remains are the few lines of wire, the shell of a '54 Chevy pickup, bleached horse bones, and the hard whorls of rocks, rubbed and polished and cast by the weather. Break one open and you'll find the thin lines of a sea shell.

But winds are the currents of this ocean now. If you set a teacup on the floor of the Big Horn Basin, between the curled stalks of grama grass and Indian rice grass, and if you left it there for a year, rain would never fill it.



## CHAPTER 1: THE FIRST WORST PLACE

Already I am thinking back. We scrape forks on plates, saw knives through chicken-fried steaks, and gulp coffee, pale as varnish, gritty as sawdust. A neon light hums like flies tapping a window pane. It's dark outside and the single lightbulb over the grill and the glint from the formica counter reflect against the window, as if we could eat and watch and eat and watch ourselves—like a family at dinner staring at a TV set, at a similar, yet different, family

I sit with a man and a woman old enough to be my parents. But they aren't. They work for the Bureau of Land Management, and I am the new volunteer for the Wild Horse and Burro program. My new boss, Linda, wears a fleece pull-over, with orange and yellow and pink zigzags and triangle patterns—the type of pattern you'd find at a McDonald's in Santa Fe. If it was wallpaper, it'd probably have a name like: *Desert Motif Number Three*. The man, Rick Ekwortzel, wears faded Levi's, stained with splotches of motor oil. His plaid, polyester, pearl-snap shirt hangs over a silver rodeo buckle. He mops a puddle of ketchup with a french fry, then reaches into his pocket and unfolds his wallet. "I got it," he says, snapping a crisp bill on the tabletop.

I'd pull my wallet, but it's empty. Ekwortzel waves his hand, like brushing lint off a coat. "Hell," he says. "Let the Feds pick up the tab—put your tax dollars to work." He glances at Linda. "It's legit, comes out of my *per diem*." He snaps a second 20 dollar bill

and slides it to me, calling it a loan, enough to get some food, so I don't starve in my new home. Earlier that day, we'd driven from the BLM office in Billings, Montana, to the base of the Pryor Mountains where I'll live in a small cabin for the summer and commute to this town, Lovell, Wyoming, for supplies.

We leave a few crumpled dollars and the loose change and the lint from our pockets on the glitter tabletop. We leave the plates with crumbs and streaks of ketchup. And the last dregs of coffee pooled in the cups. We haven't seen the waitress, a stooped Mexican woman, since she shuffled to our table with our food and tucked the ticket under the pepper shaker. As we drive away, the light from the cafe spills through the windows onto the empty street. We pass the only traffic light. It blinks yellow

Along the main street, windows are black, some boarded, most hang "for sale" signs. We stop at the Conoco. Its red sign glows across the cracked pavement to the edge of sagebrush.

While Ekwortzel pumps gas into the truck, I wander inside. Four teenagers spin the sunglass-rack, trying on pink and fluorescent three-dollar shades, laughing, puckering lips like images of movie stars they've seen beamed from satellites. A girl tosses her red hair, glances at me, then quickly looks down, pretending to read a price tag. I want to join them, to say, "Hey, I'm new in town. Whaddaya all do for fun out here?" But the two girls hang on the arms of the two boys. No doubt they've been in the same classrooms since first grade, the same brick school house their parents sat in and grandparents. They replace the sunglasses and wander out, still laughing. I'm not a lost tourist, I want to say I'll do my laundry here, I'll buy my food, I'll pick up my mail. What more can I do?

Our headlights stretch only as far as the next highway reflector. The yellow line rolls under the truck. Between the stalks of weeds, broken bottles shimmer. The hills are dark—except for one dot, like a distant prairie fire.

As we turn down another two-lane road, the light flares towards the sky. White smoke boils from several stacks, rising above grey buildings and semi-trucks. The light spills from open doors, seeping across the gravel parking lot. A semi-trailer has been backed to one of the open doors, and two young men pitch sacks. The men move mechanically: heave and hurl, heave and hurl. The bags puff when they fall, powdering the men's uniforms and gloves, faces and hair. They glow.

We cross a bridge and railroad tracks. The land tilts, rising in steps, falling into washouts, then stretching across a sage-flat. We no longer see reflectors or broken bottles, only fenceposts. After ten miles, we turn. The truck bumps over a cattleguard, then the rumble of our tires on pavement is replaced with the crunch of gravel. We jostle against each other as the truck hits potholes. The mesas have closed around us. Then the road corners around a hay field and we turn again. Cottonwood trees lean over an abandoned corral. A jackrabbit darts across the headlights.

When the road twists along a wash, the gravel turns to dirt. I look back, but only see the dust tumbling from our wake, burning red in the taillights.

Ekwortzel unlocks a metal gate, swings it wide, and trots back to the truck. A yellow sign has been nailed on the post, reading "Property of U.S. Government." It'd probably have

more words, describing fines and statutes, but the paint has been peppered with shot.

"You'll need a key," he says.

My boss nods. "We've had problems."

Earlier that day, I'd wondered why the BLM trucks didn't have any over-sized logos stenciled on the doors, like the U.S. Forest Service or a squad car. Instead, the only tell-tale label was the small, white government plates. But they were coated by mud-clumps and shadowed by over-sized rubber flaps that read, "Big Sky Country "

Linda scribbles notes to herself, listing everything she needs to do tomorrow in the office. If you looked closely at the black ball-point pen, you could read the tiny silver letters that spelled. "Skillcraft-U.S. Government." But you'd have to start digging through the emergency road equipment before you could find another government label.

"I don't see who they're foolin'," a local later told me. "Everyone knows the Feds are the only ones with enough money to fix every broken window " At the time I nodded, thinking about my old Ford truck with the spider-web cracks in the windshield. I never thought to ask *why* the government's new windshields consistently needed repair

Rolling through the gate, we arrive at my new home. a one-room cabin, with a porch. Beyond the glow of our truck's cablight, the six-foot walls of the corral slide down the hill. Earlier today, we arrived with two horses and now they are somewhere in the shadows, circling the maze of pens, slipping through the open gates, testing the ones bound by baling twine.

"I'm hoping your presence makes a difference," Linda says, glancing up from her notes. "Remember, you don't just represent yourself, or even a ranch like you're used to.

For all practical purposes, you're a government employee. You represent the entire agency "

"Yes ma'am."

"I want to make it clear. No alcohol, no guests. We'll try to get you a fleet truck, but the requisition probably can't be processed for a few weeks. When you get it, you are allowed one supply trip to town each week. You'll have to record the mileage."

"Yes ma'am."

The cabin could be warm and welcoming—maybe if smoke rolled out of the chimney, if an old cowboy sat on the porch and raised a cup of coffee. But now it is quiet, except for the clink of our horses' shoes on rocks and the wind knocking the gates of the corrals. When we stomp inside, I smell old plywood—that dry smell of chipping glue and resin. Dust rises and mixes with the scent of mothballs, Ajax, and crisp corpses of flies lining the windowsills.

The cabin has been sealed all winter, Linda says, except for last fall, when she started her job as the Wild Horse Specialist. She visited the cabin with Ekwortzel, her predecessor. At the office, I'd gleaned that he'd been demoted to a heavy-equipment operator after the last roundup of mustangs on the Pryors. Their boots tracked in the mud and manure from the corrals, so she scooped handfuls of snow on the linoleum floor and smeared the mud with a mop. I can still see the circles of the mop's path.

The linoleum creaks as I cross the floor and dump my duffel bag onto one of the three bunkbeds lining the back wall. A metal desk, two vinyl chairs, a vinyl couch with a tear across one cushion. A map, also yellow and dry, hangs on the wall. Someone has

marked the boundary of the wild horse range with a red pen. On a wooden crate sits a huge FAX machine, about the size of a television set, also coated in dust.

"That doesn't work," Linda, explains. "Or maybe it does. I think there's too much static along the phone lines. I think it sends but something gets lost. Scrambled." She scribbles her home number on her pad and tears out the sheet. "Call me if you have any problems. I'll check up on you in the next few days." She jots another note into her pad.

"I'll be around," says Ekwortzel. "That Gyp Springs Road needs bladin'. That'll take me a few days. Probably." He draws a cigarette from his shirt and taps it on the back of his thick, purple hand.

Linda clears her throat. "I don't think we have time for a break." She turns and climbs into the truck.

"Yup," Ekwortzel sighs. "She's a pistol." He glances past me, into the cabin. "Hell, maybe I'll bring you a sixer. I sure needed 'em when I had to sleep here...loneliest goddamn place on the planet, but I miss it."

The taillights ease over the cattle guard, then brake. Ekwortzel slides from the cab, swings the gates, and snaps the padlock. As the truck pulls away, the dust slowly settles. The gate groans on its rusty hinges. The corrals creak. The wind slaps the screen door

I turn back into the cabin. No coffee brews. The black wood stove is cold. Wind sucks down its pipe, scratching against the soot, rattling the rust.

I unpack my clothes into a plywood wardrobe and peek into the cupboards, finding a few cans of peaches, sliced. Some bowls and plates and cups, all unmatching, as if gathered from different garage sales. Someone has left a jar of pickles in the refrigerator and a film of mold floats in the green juice. I throw it out and sort through the papers in the desk and stuff the torn and stained and now outdated notes in the stove. I read a few Dot-matrix printed pages, titled *Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Capture Plan*. One page, unnumbered, describes "Safety and Humane Treatment" under a sub-section marked F. It states that every precaution will be taken to ensure the safety of horses during the roundup. A horse needing destroyed, it says, will be determined by the officer in charge and, using the most humane method available, disposed of according to local sanitary laws. I find no poetry in governmental prose, but my mind stumbles on the possible meanings of *destroyed* and *local*. "There will be a constant communication between all people involved," the paragraph reads. My first day of work, I didn't know what lines of communication had been crossed, lost in static like the beeps and clicks from the FAX machine. But I'd already learned that after the last mustang roundup, the District Manager retired, Ekwortzel, the Horse Specialist, took to the backroads in a John Deere grader, Linda moved her boxes of biological reports into the BLM office, and I, as a volunteer, had been commissioned to monitor the wild herds and make sure the gate stayed locked. The yellow flames lick the pages of the capture plan, curling into the soot, and casting a square of light into the center of the floor.

They might as well warm this place. After the scandal of the last roundup, there may not ever be another. The 1971 Wild Horse and Burro Act requires the BLM to remove excess wild horses from public lands. It doesn't specify how. Until the last gather,

the Pryor mustangs had been herded by cowboys. Now the BLM had hired Linda, a woman with a marine science background, finishing a dissertation on wild horses. She'd been talking about possibly using a new birth-control injection, or maybe a tranquilizer gun—anything that would get the humane groups off her back. Anything different than the old way

In one drawer, I find several framed photos. In the first, a black and white, several cowboys perch on a corral, gazing over a herd of wild horses. The caption reads: "Mustang roundup, 1911." The others, in color, show a group of wranglers on horses. "Pryor Mountain BLM gather crew: 1984," one reads. The others read the same, though different years. The latest photo shows the silhouette of a man holding a halter as he walks towards shadows of saddle horses. The horses bend their heads into grain tubs and the first light of day spills through a curtain of dust. The shadows are chocolate brown and the dust creamy, mixing in shades of sepia, as if the photo had been clipped from a newspaper in 1894 rather than a century later.

In the crew photos, the riders sit their horses, stooped forward, hands crossed over the saddle horns, lariats draped over the saddle forks. They line the crest of a hill, spotted by snow and dry grass. And they're wrapped in silk scarves and bundled in puffy down jackets, yellow and red and orange. The rainbow style of the 70s—even then, a decade outdated.

My jeans squeak against the vinyl chair. The firelight dances on the linoleum. Rain taps the roof. The screen door slaps in the wind. And I stare at the empty bunkbeds where wranglers had limped and fallen, covered in dust and sweat. Maybe they stoked a fire and stripped to their underpants. Maybe they bandaged blisters on their knees or



swabbed iodine on knuckles where a rope had skipped its dally. When the fire snaps and the snow melts from the roof and splatters on the stovetop, hissing, I imagine their voices, their laughs, their lips smacking as they slugged shots of whiskey. I picture a row of boots slumped by the stove, the snow soaking into the cement. The spurs globbed in mud, but glinting a few patches of silver or tarnished brass. The floor would be speckled by dust and pine needles and flakes of rust. Maybe a pot of coffee steamed on the stove, maybe a transistor radio tuned in a late-night country show with a DJ's voice floating over the static naming songs and sending dedications. And maybe the wranglers talked of women they had kissed on porches in far-away towns, or held at a bar dance in Rock Springs. Or maybe not. Maybe they talked about horses, as the iodine stung and the whiskey dulled the bruises.

But that night I find a box stashed under one of the bunks. It stores more papers, brochures from the local chamber of commerce, a polyester work shirt, one leather glove without a mate, and a purse. The purse is gaudy pink, plastic, and its strap had been broken and fastened with a safety pin. I can picture a woman holding this in her lap, as she sits in a bus stop. Maybe the Greyhound station in Billings. She'd have one curler still in her hair and one hand of nails painted, the other chipped, as if she'd been rushed or simply absent-minded. The type of woman you try not to sit by when the bus rumbles from the curve, because she will explain her story—and such drifters always have a story "My daughter lives in San Bernadino with her baby and she's divorced and I'm going to visit because the bastard ran off with a Mexican whore named Guadalupe." And you're not quite sure why she needs to justify a trip from one city to the next, clutching a purse

with a broken handle. And you're not quite sure if she's telling her story or only watched it happen in a truckstop along the freeway of another state.

But I don't know. Here's what else I found: An empty box of Tic Tacs, a bottle of aspirin with traces of white powder inside. A pen with the cap chewed. Four pennies. A strand of orange yarn. Inside a wallet, a picture of a toddler. It had no words on the back, but the corners had been worn as if it had been pulled from its plastic sheath many times. And there was a card for Alcoholics Anonymous and a plastic bookmark with a rainbow that said "Jesus Loves You." And another card with a doctor's name and address from some place in California called something like Pine Grove. Someone had written "Friday, 2:30," in large, looping cursive. And there was also a pair of large, pink underpants with a strip of lace around the edges. They'd been torn on the left side. And I wondered, what woman would stuff her panties into a purse? What woman would leave a purse in a cabin, at the base of a wild horse range, in a cabin where snow dripped from the roof and the fire popped and the windows rattled and the wind beat the screen door?

## CHAPTER 2: MOVING

I spent the next few days wandering around the driveway. I piled wood scraps inside to dry, then made more piles—one of rubber bits, one of baling twine, one of leather patches. I sorted screws and bolts into coffee cans, and arranged the horse medicine on the shelves. The wind still howled outside and the rain came in waves. The tack room had been a mess, like a little boy's closet. I stuffed garbage bags with beer cans, Copenhagen tins, and newspapers that reported high school games of boys who were now fathers. In every grain bucket and every corner, and under every smashed box, I found the dried remains of mice. Later, Linda warned me about hantavirus, even photocopied a government report, but that morning I swept the way the Wyoming wind scours a basin. I'd scoop the bones and hair lumps into a dustpan and fling them into the sagebrush. Then I'd grab the broom again and whisk the stale odor out the door.

After several hours, finally down to the bare cement, I lined the grain barrels against the far wall, and hung my saddle and tack in the corner. For the first time, I considered my saddle, rubbed black from hours of riding. The shiny fenders and long tapaderos swayed in the air, still churning from my sweeping. How many times had I set my saddle on a new peg? Arizona the last winter, a hunting camp in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming that fall and at the ranch headquarters during the summer and spring. A different ranch, also in Wyoming, the summer before that, and a ranch in

Montana the summer before that, and in a barn in Colorado, and in my dorm rooms at college, and even at home, back in Oregon at my family's ranch. With every move, I'd pack my clothes into my grandfather's Navy duffel. I'd box books. Keep a photo of me with a past girlfriend, Jennifer, or that horse I broke as a colt. One of her letters, a poem with flowers and hearts drawn at the top. Load everything into my grey pickup.

Everything else gets left. Give it to Goodwill. Burn it in a heap. After moving so much, only the essential stayed with me. "Never sell your saddle," cowboys say. They mean more than the saddle, of course: never lose the one object that symbolizes freedom. Go anywhere in the West and saddle a fast horse. There will always be a horse to ride.

I'd run out of road—there are only so many that spiderweb the West. I'd driven across every state, more than once. Cowtown after cowtown had been replaced by mini-malls and condominiums. I spent an entire afternoon in Jackson searching for a saddleshop and settled, instead, for an espresso. I'd seen Santa Fe, Bozeman, Crested Butte, Taos, Prescott. I'd seen campers towing snowmobiles to West Yellowstone in the winter and RVs caravanning across the Mojave in the summer like a second generation of Okies, this time with TV dishes, microwaves, and Medicare.

It'd become hell to get an honest job as a cowboy. I'd wrangled dudes and packed hunters into remote pockets of elk country—all for good money. I worked on one classic ranch, near Thermopolis, Wyoming, but the owners sold out. The new owners traveled from Alabama—into the arid Wyoming summer for a vacation home. They sold the cows.

"They don't make money," the new owner said. "I'm not in business to lose money." I think every sentence he said ended with the word "money."

Cowboying shuts down through the Rocky Mountain winters. These pauses had allowed me to go to college and work the summers. But after I graduated, I didn't have any classes to return to. My girlfriend, Jennifer, had traveled to Canada as an exchange student. Like the old time hands, I drifted south.

I thought I could escape for the winter into Arizona. I hired on a 70,000 acre cattle ranch owned by a wealthy retired man. He'd brought from Minnesota two past associates to run his office. To handle the cattle, he hired a cowboss from Nevada. This fella looked like he'd just stepped off the set of a Kenny Rogers's "The Gambler" movie in his leather vest and paisley-silk scarf and black hat with silver conchos. In fact, with his trimmed white beard, he looked a hell of a lot like Kenny Rogers himself. He packed a pistol into the high country. Said for coyotes—although I'd heard the Mexican vaqueros speak the word *lobos*.

When we had to haul stock, the cowboss had me swap old license plates from one trailer to another. We'd bounce down ten miles of ranch road, hop onto state highway for another five miles, and then pull into another section of the ranch. Technically illegal, but done by every rancher in the West. Every ranch has a graveyard of broken trucks and trailers; parts are pirated to get at least one going. We'd bolted a gate from one trailer, swiped the axle off another, and hand-welded the hitch. The accountant stormed out of the office one day, waving a handful of vehicle titles. "How do you expect me to calculate the depreciation? Now what model is this? Is it the '84 Featherlite or the '65 Peterson or the '74 Turnbow?"

I thought of a Johnny Cash song. "Well, it's a '49, '50, '51, '52, '53, '54...."

She glared at me and stomped back into the office.

The other Minnesotan, Frederick, didn't care for Westerners much either. In fact, he hated cowboys, he told us. He'd sign the paychecks, but the cowboss commanded the crew. They clashed for authority. The office manager trailed the owner's shadow like a poodle. He had an idea: make the ranch a type of Western Disneyland. Take a handful of calves each week, stage a cattle drive, then hold a branding. "That's what guests want—the whole package."

The cowboss scoffed. Every time cattle are moved, the stress reduces their weight and health—that'd cost the ranch profit. More importantly, calves are born in the spring; if they don't get vaccinated in the first week, they could die.

The argument went round and round. The cowboy crew grew restless. We'd sneak off to town to drink. Frederick, fluttering his hands and pouting, threatened to fire the lot of us. At least once a week. Every time I'd wander into the bunk house, the cowboys would look up, then resume complaining.

The ranch was in a valley, about an hour's drive from Cordes Junction. I slept in a small, adobe room with no heat but plenty of scorpions to snuggle in bed. In the mornings, as we'd dress, I'd flip on a portable heater. One day, while we were on the range, Frederick confiscated it. When I confronted him, he said, "You cowboys are supposed to be tough. You think they had heaters in 1890?"

"This ain't 1890," one cowboy growled.

One phone connected us to the rest of the world. One night I was talking to Jennifer, sitting alone in the ranch office, twisting the cord around my finger until the knuckle turned white.

"They extended my visa."

"For the summer?"

"I get a week off for Spring Break. You could fly to Quebec."

"We'll be brandin' then, movin' the calves onto summer pasture." I stared out the window at the thin branches of palo verde trees. "Why don't you come here?"

"And then what? Stay? Follow you to another ranch?"

"Do they have horses in Quebec?"

"Sure, I guess."

"Not cowboys."

"Just the urban kind."

I sighed and the sound crackled in the ear-piece. I imagined numbers clicking like a utility meter. Each minute cost almost a dollar. I could see the numbers roll and wondered about the price of stamps and why I hadn't written more, why we only seemed to talk for a few minutes every couple weeks. The weather had been cold in Quebec, she'd reported. I told her the same. We'd end each conversation: I miss you, I miss you too.

"I can't afford a plane ticket."

"I can't keep doing this."

"Doing what?"

Then she sighed. Her breath sounded like wind in an irrigation pipe. "You know when you're watching a movie and put it on pause? How it'll hold for five or ten minutes—then start or shut off? I can't stay on pause. I've got friends here. And you know what, I was trying to remember the way you smelled yesterday—how you smile—and I couldn't. I hear your voice, I read your letters. Can you even remember how I smell?"

I could smell my sweat dried on the back of my neck and the alfalfa flakes in my hair and saddle-oil under my fingernails. "Sure," I said.

"I can't."

"Can't what?"

"Just can't."

The owner walked in and demanded the phone. Frederick trotted at his heels. The accountant followed.

"Lemme just finish up," I said. "Just a sec."

"Now," the accountant said, clicking her mechanical pencil.

"Are you deaf and stupid or just stupid," hissed Frederick.

They stepped behind the boss, like bodyguards.

I said into the phone, "Listen, I need to get going."

"What did we just say," Frederick snapped. Blood veins popped across his gleaming bald head.

"Yeah, I heard," I said, then let one more sentence fall into the receiver. "I'll call you tomorrow." I set the phone back in its cradle and turned to them. Anger boiled



inside. My eyes stung with salt. As I walked out of the office, the accountant said, "How rude, how disrespectful."

At breakfast, the owner called me into his office. "We can't have a disruptive person in our business."

"Sorry," I said. "I think we had a misunderstanding."

"How could you misunderstand 'get off the phone'?"

"I've worked for a lotta ranches...I know it's important to share a phone, but I live here, work, sleep, bathe, do everything here...I've got a family and loved ones I need to keep in contact with. .you know what it's like."

"Of course I do. But it's my phone and this isn't other ranches."

"Well, if I can't have a job and a personal life, I don't know if this is the best place for me."

"I agree," the owner said, handing me a check that had already been calculated by the accountant for wages-due.

When I walked out, the cowboss had my saddle and gear. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's the breaks."

Another cowboy patted me on the shoulder. "Don't take it too bad, we're one step behind you."

They helped load my saddle and handed me a new lariat. I nodded and they nodded back. We had no more words. It was understood that we were horsemen, that we had seen the sun on the rimrock and felt our lungs cold at dawn and smelled the campsmoke from our mesquite fires and would remember all the days we drove the cattle

through the thorns and down the shale-stone arroyos. We knew things about horses we could say only in Spanish.

And now, a thousand miles away, I stand in another tack room, considering my gear, arranged and shining in the settling dust. I could walk in with a cup of coffee, as the sun cut across the floor. I could find every tool as I had set them. I could work here. At least for the summer. Come fall? I didn't know. Maybe the BLM would let me stay through the winter. Maybe I'd have to move on. Moving. Always moving. Eight different mailing addresses in the last three years. Sometimes I'd get letters with two yellow forwarding stickers.

And for what?

I had felt my fingers cold and numb wrap around a coffee cup, comb the tangles from a horse's mane. I had shivered under wool blankets while the snow kept falling. Looked across the mesas to a barely visible line: a telephone cable strung like sagging barb-wire, the fences that grid the valleys and hills. If I cut a line and held it to my ear like a seashell, could I hear a lover miss a lover far away? Could I hear a mother praise a daughter? Could I hear the clicks and crackle of words from one town to another, but not here. Not ever here. When a cloud of dust rolls from a pickup across a basin, no one looks. It is only a fence mender. Someone like me, finding only miles of more wire.

When I left Arizona, I pointed my grey truck north, along a one-lane backroad that snaked around the east rim of the Grand Canyon. The sun burned against the clouds like a candle against copper and I thought of the crumbling adobe churches with the straw roofs and the

chickens perched in the bell towers. Wooden shacks lined the road, calling out “Silver,” “Cheapest Smokes,” “Real Navajo Rugs,” in aqua letters. The wind heaped tumbleweeds into their corners, pushed them to one side, and blistered the paint.

I stopped once for a piss and once to trot up a small mesa and snap a photo of the grey truck and the canyon falling behind it in steps. The sun stained the sky, the rocks, as heat waves shimmered and a few drops of rain patted the dust. Then the rain passed. The creosote smelled like church incense.

Even with all my moving, I'd always had a next place. College followed high school. Summer jobs ended, as they do. A career follows college. But could I keep stuffing boxes, drifting from ranch to ranch for a season or until one got bought out and turned into golf links? Marriage, then kids, isn't that the plan? The anchors that keep youth from drifting? Everything I owned had been boxed and covered in garbage bags and stacked in the back of my truck. I had half a tank of gas, a AAA roadmap with coffee stains, a radio that couldn't tune in a station, and a few twenty-dollar bills for severance pay.

When the truck rounded the side of a mesa, it dropped into a valley of junipers. The rain returned, this time with a few snowflakes. I flipped on my wipers, but they only smeared the red dust. As it rained, I thought of the horses I had left and how Jennifer once drove with me across Nevada in the grey truck as we returned to college and how she'd pour coffee from my metal thermos. She'd read aloud when the radio scanner cycled through its numbers. When night fell, she'd lie across the seat, her head in my lap, knees drawn to her chest, my denim jacket for a blanket.

As the snow fell, I thought of the storm that had caught us outside of Reno, how the truck fishtailed and the tires whirled and the guard rail swerved in and out of our headlights. A Toyota mini-truck sped by, instantly disappearing into the wall of snow. "Damn death-wish," I'd said. I locked my hands on the steering wheel.

When we crawled past the Toyota, we saw a piece of metal, torn like a cardboard box. Probably a door. Then came a fender. Then the hood, crumpled. A string of orange and red plastic as if a box of Christmas ornaments had been scattered across the road.

Jennifer clutched me around the neck. "Please, let's sleep here—let's not go one more mile."

No, we might have frozen. Ahead a line of taillights stretched into the snow, behind pairs of headlights glowed. We crept on.

She'd traveled with me out of Oregon. We'd stopped in northern California where I'd interviewed for a ranch job. Next stop Wyoming, another interview. Whatever ranch I picked didn't matter to her; I'd still be hundreds of miles away, waking before the sunrise, falling into my bedroll at night, sometimes scratching a letter by flashlight. She'd wait weeks between letters, like watching the moon every night as it waxed to full and then, sliver by sliver, waned.

After twenty miles, pushing the truck through the snow in first gear, the lights of Fernley appeared. I slipped the truck down the off-ramp, nearly clipping a rail. All the motels along the highway were full. "Are we going to the next town?" She never told me what we couldn't do. I could do anything, she'd tell me. Again and again, until I almost started believing.

"We're here, that's all that matters."

We found a small mom-and-pop motel. Woke up the old lady. Got the last available room. It smelled of mold and melting snow. And we took a hot shower, let the steam rub against the mirror, let the hot work into our pinched shoulders. When she sat on the bed to comb her hair, I snapped a photo. "Dang you!" she said, snatching her flannel pajama shirt. The camera clicked again. She smiled, though annoyed.

"Just to remember this night," I'd said. Then I pulled the pajamas from her grip, ran my fingers through her damp hair and lowered her against the mattress. Her skin smelled of soap.

We watched the snow pelt the window. We watched the boot tracks melt into the carpet. "We almost died," she said, sobbing quietly into my shoulder. And somehow, we did that night. Death fixes memory like a photograph. When it snows and I drive in the grey truck, I think of Fernley. We will always be in that room, with the red carpet and the mold streaking the curtains and the snow falling. She will always wear flannel pajamas.

I thought of that night as I drove down the Arizona hill. After St. George, I could turn towards my parents and Oregon, or I could go east to Denver, to her parents' house. Call her. Say: "I'm through with ranches. Come back." I thought all of this as I drove down the hill and the snow fell harder, swirling.

Flashing lights appeared.

I eased to the shoulder, suddenly shivering.

"Know how fast you were going?"

"Nosir." I wiped my eyes.

"Eighty-five," the officer said, glancing into the cab, then at the snowflakes sliding over the garbage bags. "You moving?"

"Yessir." My voice trembled. "I gotta get home."

"Where's that?" He glanced at my registration card.

"I'm not sure."

He told me: "Slow down, son. I'll just write you a ticket for consumption of a natural resource. That don't go on your record."

I nodded.

"Be careful. I've been in your shoes. Now go home, wherever that is—but you can't get anywhere when you're dead."

North-bound on I-5, pointed towards Oregon, it rained. The wipers clacked and my breath fogged the glass. When I passed a small sign that read "TACK," I pulled off at the next exit. I thought of the times I'd drive with Jennifer from college to visit her folks in Denver. I always stopped at every saddleshop along the highway and made Jennifer wait while I ogled snaffle bits and macate reins. I'd loiter at the doors, inspecting the bulletin board. Every saddleshop in the West seems to have a board with business cards for horseshoers, trailer advertisements, and help-wanted notices. When I pulled off the highway, I turned down a one-lane road and parked at a cattle auction house.

Inside the cement hallways, it smelled of green manure, like the barn at my great-grandmother's ranch. The dusty hall had dots of drying chew-spit and buzzing flies and posters for bull semen. Black and white photos covered the walls, showing hundreds of

old men with cowboy hats and horned-rimmed glasses. The few women of the group wore rhinestone-dotted collars and their hair in beehives. It felt like walking between the pages of a 1956 yearbook.

My bootheals echoed as I walked. Could the faces see my jeans, frayed at the seams from riding? I am a horseman, I told the crooked faces. But not of your generation. The Russians aren't red anymore. The farms are condos. I date vegetarians. I knew the faces, I'd stacked their hay and sat with them at the dinner table, heaping mashed potatoes onto a paper plate and pouring glasses of iced-tea. Where had they all gone?

At the end of the hall, a bulletin board hung beside two wooden phone booths. I checked the lists then called. Charlie Brickwell at Bar Double D, Hank Shepherd at the R Lazy 7, Merle Kellsy at Crooked Fork Cattle CO. Some numbers rang without answer. Some had been disconnected. *If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please hang up and try again.* Some said, sorry, son, but we're all full for the season, thanks for askin'.

I hung up the phone, and pushed the wooden door aside. "In error," I muttered.

Then I shoved two double doors, and stepped into a café. A waitress in a white-ruffled apron said, "Just take a seat, hon." A toothless man looked up from the counter. A fan slowly rotated. The old kind, chrome and shaped like a bullet. As the waitress busied wedges of pie, as the jukebox played a Buck Owens tune, as the smell of fried eggs and toast floated from the grill, I felt as if I had stepped inside one of the photographs. The light from the overcast day filled the café with shades of grey. The farmers smoked

Bull Durham cigarettes as they read the *Cattleman's News*. The pie was always "Today's Special."

I hunkered up to the counter "Rain enough for ya?" the toothless man said.

I shrugged.

"Don't order the gravy Gives me the shits. But the coffee's damn good."

"Aw, hush," said the waitress. "Drinkin' water gives him the shits."

The old man laughed, his mouth like a gopher hole.

The waitress poured me a cup without asking and I sipped it. It was dark and strong and scalded my tongue.

The old man returned to his newspaper opened to the funny page.

Glancing around the room, I noticed more details: a calendar showing the phases of the moon, a pair of chaps hanging on a hat rack, a collie dog sleeping in one of the booths. The waitress filled my cup before it was half-empty. I thought of my grandfather I'd gone with him, the year before his death, to an auction barn in Oregon. I must have been three, but I couldn't remember. Maybe my mother had told me the story, maybe I had dreamed it. Somehow I could recall grandpa pulling a flask from his wool coat and pouring it into a coffee thermos, saying, "Don't wave or raise your arms or nothin'—you might buy us a pig."

"What's wrong with a pig?"

"We're ranchers, boy "

That was the only memory of him before his heart-attack. Now the cafe seemed to complete part of the picture—surely its smells and the calendar and the dog would blend with the earlier memory. I wondered how much of the West had changed physically—like



the cities and the suburbs—and how much had been passed over, frozen in time like the auction-barn café. Perhaps what could not be frozen was the revision of memory.

Perhaps what I sought after I left Arizona was not to return to the past, but to a memory of a barn and horses and old cowboys who I had never really known.

I leaned my face near the counter and let the coffee steam curl up to my cheek. I inhaled deeply, so I could smell only the dark coffee. I could imagine grandpa had been in this barn, sat at my stool, his boots green with manure.

The creek that ran through my grandparents' ranch turned back at the swimming hole, pulling its green water into itself before pushing it on.

"About time," the old man next to me said. He pointed at his paper. *Adopt a living legend*, an ad read. The U S. Bureau of Land Management was offering wild mustangs to the public. "Bout time they cleaned those broomtails off the range."

I frowned.

"Hell yes. Those in-bred knotheads out there runnin' loose. Takin' all the good forage. When my daddy had his place, we'd go shoot 'em. Now the government saves them for all the pony-huggers."

"Seems like the horses were here first."

"Hell. They ain't nothin' but strays. Got turned out durin' hard times. When I was a kid—that was the 30s—folks just let 'em loose. Couldn't afford to feed 'em. You go look out there—out on the Black Rock, every damn one of 'em looks like thoroughbred. Just smaller cause they're so inbred. They don't even make good kids' horses. I say keep

the government outta the whole thing and we could take care of the problem like we used to."

"With a Winchester?"

He grinned his toothless grin. "You bet."

I'd read a little about horses. Fossils of the first horse, a small, three-toed animal called a *Eohippus* had been dug up in Wyoming's Big Horn Basin. Scientists estimated the age at 50 million years. From *Eohippus* to *Orohippus* to *Merychippus* to *Hipparion*, the horse evolved into what we now know as the species *Equus Caballus*. Every one of the evolutionary stages occurred in North America, specifically in what is now the Western United States. About 10,000 years ago, horses, along with several other large mammal species vanished. The scientists still debate whether prehistoric hunting or a change in climate killed the animals. They only know that horses returned to the continent with the first Conquistadors.

From the early 1500s, horses escaped and spread across the West. They were rounded up, traded, stolen, and released. They helped the Plains Tribes hunt buffalo, helped trail cattle northward, worked in mining camps, carried the mail, fought in Cavalry campaigns, and were mixed with ranch stock. They flourished on the open range with the buffalo herds, increasing their numbers to several million.

When cities and farms covered the range, the mustangs were rounded up and disposed. When cattle increased in value during the California gold rush, thousands of wild horses were driven off the cliffs of Santa Barbara into the sea. In 1859, General Houston complained that the U.S. Cavalry could not chase the Indians a day without their eastern-bred horses getting sore feet, or growing weak without a steady supply of grain.

The solution: roundup the mustang herds and export them to Europe. The number of horses exported annually rose from 2,721 in 1884 to over 100,000 in 1902. The first World War created a larger demand and in 1916, 357,553 horses were shipped. Agents admitted that three out of every four horses shipped overseas from New Orleans died in transit.

In 1924, on the Crow Reservation, which borders the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, cattlemen who leased grazing lands offered the tribe five dollars for each horse brought in to be killed. In addition, with every wild horse removed from the range, the cattlemen promised to add a head of cattle upon which grazing fees would be paid. Between 1924 and 1940, the Crow gathered thousands of mustangs.

To the south of the Pryors, in the Big Horn Basin, one buyer shipped 22,000 horses in 1933 and 1934. He shipped 13,000 in the subsequent years. The total sum was not recorded, but no doubt it reached several thousand.

As tractors replaced horses on farms during the 20s, 30s, and 40s, the mustangs were no longer needed to replace working stock. They were hunted and sold to canneries, dropping in population to under one million. Between 1923 and 1937, U S. Department of Agriculture records show that over 105 million pounds of horse flesh were canned. Not all horses processed into dog food came from wild herds, but certainly the vast majority

By 1967, the BLM estimated that only 17,000 wild horses remained. In 1971, congress passed the Wild Horse and Burro Act, placing the protection of mustangs into the hands of the Secretary of Interior. Without natural predators, the horse population again increased. Scientists calculated the rate at up to 20% per year. The BLM began to

gather the horses and offer them to the public for adoption. But some folks, like the old man in the café, would like to see all the mustangs removed.

"Well," I said. "Even if the mustangs are strays, ain't we?"

"Ain't we what?"

"Strays?"

He squinted. "Boy, I was born here and my daddy and his daddy too."

"Horses were still here longer."

He tugged his sun-spotted earlobe. "But they ain't worth nothin' now with the government law. When I was a kid, during the winters, we'd go out on snowmobiles, shoot a bunch of them. Got a few pennies a pound. It weren't much, but it sure pulled us through. Now what's a fella to do? Sit and watch the buggers eat all his grass, drink from his stock tanks? I bet if we'd hadn't put water in, they'd of starved off."

Maybe so. The largest herd of wild horses lives on the Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. During a drought in the 1980s they grew weak, fought at the water tanks, and crippled each other. Several died. To try and save the horses, the U S Air Force shipped 18,000 gallons of water

But maybe the horses aren't as much to blame as the spread of cities across rangelands, the fences pushing mustangs into desolate mountains. In the last century, we'd killed off their natural predators. We'd turned scrublands into alfalfa fields, forests into wildlife preserves. But the National Park Service officially considers mustangs as non-native animals and has, like the old ranchers, driven herds into box canyons and mowed them down with rifles. To people like the toothless man in the café, mustangs serve no economic purpose and are only hangovers from a bygone era. And maybe, if there is no

longer space for wild horses, maybe we should let them pass. In the book *The Wild Horses of the West*, Walker Wyman states: "It is better to look backwards to that which once was, and cease thinking of perpetuating that which does not exist." He suggests building a bronze monument, life-size, of a stallion, some mares, and a few colts.

With mustangs gone, ranches folding, maybe they should add a statue of a horseman. Writers have been eulogizing the disappearance of cowboys for the last one hundred years, but for the first time, I thought maybe the predictions had finally come true. Cattle ranching in the West will most likely continue another century, but the use of horses—particularly wild horses from the range—might have already passed. I needed to find out.

I wondered if there were any jobs working with wild horses for the government. I read over the BLM adoption notice, copied the number, and called. The BLM ships most of the captured mustangs to a holding facility in Susanville, California—about 150 miles from the café where I'd stopped. I told the woman I'd like to drive out, help brand and vaccinate, that I had experience on ranches, that I wanted to help, even volunteer. She said I had to be a government employee to work in the corrals and that it was too dangerous—too much of a liability risk—to let a volunteer handle a mustang.

"Know any place that needs help?"

"No," she said. "We just don't have the budget."

Before I hung up, I asked the name of the national program director. I remembered what my uncle had said: talk to the decision makers, skip the secretaries.

So I called Tom Pogatchnic at the national office in Reno. I told him my experience, my interest in horses. "Heck, just give me a pair of binoculars and a notepad, I'll collect field data."

He told to call the Nevada State Director, Lili Thomas. When I spoke with her, she mentioned that a new horse specialist had been hired in Montana. "Just outta academia," she said. "She'd probably like working with a student."

I called Linda Coates-Markle at her office in Billings. "I'll have to run it by my supervisor," she said. "But it sounds good. I could sure use some data." I agreed to call her again once I returned to my parents' house.

In a few weeks, Linda invited me to live on the Pryors. She could offer a cabin, a government saddle horse, and maybe—just maybe—a small stipend. Again I loaded my grey truck, knotted garbage bags around my boxes, and drove to a new job.

### CHAPTER 3: ENOUGH LAND TO STAY ON

Linda arrives in the afternoon and wants to ride. I still wear my spurs, but have turned my government horse, Indian, back into the corral. "You don't have to come if you're too tired," she says without looking up from her notepad. But I walk back to the corral with halters, catch Indian and Linda's horse, while Linda slips on a pair of English riding jodhpurs.

On the other Wyoming ranches where I worked, we'd ride from "dark to dark." Each hand had four or five horses in his string. We'd always saddle a fresh horse. But the government has only provided Indian, so I throw my saddle on his back again.

I toss Linda's saddle on Mouse. "Thanks," she says. "Damn thing weighs more than my dressage saddle." Before she came to the Pryors, Linda ran the stables at Oregon State University. For years she competed and coached English dressage; the whole western riding, she explained, was totally different, totally new.

Linda holds her reins tight, the English way; my reins swing against Indian's neck. As we trot down a steep bank, our horses tuck their haunches and slide. Indian stumbles on a rock, jerking up his head. If I'd had his reins tight, he'd have rolled ass-over-teakettle. So we continue, slowing to a walk when we climb, then bumping back to a trot as we travel across Turkey Flats.

The flat spreads at the base of the Pryors like a petrified delta of a river. It narrows into Big Coulee—a canyon that splits the horse range between Burt Timber Ridge on the west and Sykes Ridge on the east. At the base, we trot in the wide sandy bottom. The channels of sand part for islands of larger rocks, and downfall polished grey like drift wood. But no water flows here.

The cliffs close in, narrowing and climbing. Junipers cling to the sides, but the walls are mostly smooth. Big Coulee snakes deeper into the mountain. My legs are now warm and sweating and I glance at Linda, but she grins. So we continue.

The cliffs tower higher, until the sky is only a crack of blue. The walls have closed together so tight that Linda and I can't ride side by side. We pass an old wooden gate, as tall as a corral fence. It's open and leans against the rocks. The horse's hooves are muffled by the soft sand. It's cool at the bottom of the canyon.

After a few hundred yards, we notice pieces of another gate. And then, a few hundred more yards, where the canyon twists around a bend, a third gate leans against the rocks. This is what Linda wanted to see. In the 70s, and perhaps a hundred years earlier, mustangers would close the last gate, like plugging one end of a pipe. They'd chase a herd of mustangs towards the canyon. The fleeing horses would escape into the sandy wash, like rabbits into an irrigation pipe, rather than scramble up the steep walls. As the riders pushed them hard, the horses would only follow the lead mare, not glancing to the sides as they galloped through the open gates. Thinking that they could climb out of the coulee past the narrow, they'd slam into the last gate. By the time they wheeled around, the cowboys would leap from their mounts and lock the first gate.



The middle gate became a funnel, like an hour glass, letting one or two mustangs slip into the lower corral where a rider would then rope them. From photos stored in the Billings Resource Area Office, I learned that the BLM used this trap to capture wild horses during the 70s. The public would arrive from nearby towns and watch the BLM horse specialist, Lynn Taylor, rope each animal. Standing on the cliffs above, they'd point to the horse they wanted, and he'd snare it.

It's a practice perhaps as old as the relationship between humans and horses. In the West, the Comanche first developed this method. They'd drive wild horses into a box canyon, then snare the ones they wanted with loops tied to the ends of long poles.

Of course, it didn't always work. Consider a letter sent to Parley Paskett, perhaps one of the most experienced mustangers, from his father during World War Two:

Boy that Johnny is a good hand. We hit those mustangs perfectly and before they knew it we all piled up in the wings close to the corral gate. The stud hit the net wire and broke his neck, also a black mare did the same. One bay mare hit the wire and slid under it. She got up unhurt and got away I roped a sorrel two-year-old stud and Johnny got a yearling stud, sort of gray in color We couldn't have done any better.

Paskett's father and his "good hand" Johnny were no doubt expert riders and ropers. They couldn't have done any better, although they killed as many horses as they captured.

There were far crueller ways to catch mustangs. One involved simply shooting the lead mare and the stallion, then swarming on the confused horses, trying to rope as they circled. Or another way was to catch a lead mare and wrap a horseshoe around her front foot. She could walk with it, but when she ran, it would bruise her opposite hind leg. Or a mustanger might sew her nostrils with rawhide or pinch them with barb-wire, so she couldn't draw enough air to run. They'd leave her for a year, then chase her band in the

spring, catching them because she'd slow their escape. Or maybe a rider would set a trap with a rope anchored to a log. A snared horse would drag it until they became too exhausted to flee. Sometimes the mustangers would find the horse, dead of thirst, where the log had wedged between rocks.

I think of the men who had ridden in the canyon as Linda and I rest under the shelf of the cliffs. I picture the mustangs, circling and kicking and squealing. And I see the riders on well-trained ranch horses slowly tract with a mustang, then cast a loop. It sails through the air, slaps the neck of a mustang, flips over the ears, settles around the neck, just as the horse leaps, cinching tight with a "zzzzzzzz" as the rawhide burns across the rope. In one smooth motion the rider's hand wraps the other end of the rope around his saddle horn. Another rider swings around, casts, and flips a rope up over both hind feet. As the two riders back, the wild horse stretches, unable to move. Nostrils flaring. Sweat dripping from its belly. The eyes rolled white. And shaking. Certainly it would shake.

But when a horse is "headed and heeled," it can't move, it can't fight, and so cannot hurt a man or itself. The rope horses must be calm and strong. The ropers must be swift and accurate. It takes skill. Years of skill. And secretly, as I sit in the canyon, I want to be one of those riders. I want to pick a small grulla mare and rope her and keep her for my own.

I want to be Lynn Taylor in the 70s and Will James in the 20s and the Comanches a century before. We would be horsemen, not hunters. We would sweat and so would the horses. The ropes would burn both their fetlocks and our palms. But only for that day. We would take only a handful of horse to ride and turn the rest back to the desert. And these new horses would carry us and soon we would heal.

I think this as Linda and I trot back to the cabin, as the saddle creak and as my knees burn with blisters. We move with the horses, but my thighs begin to ache. I haven't eaten for a day or taken a sip of water. The canyon opens before us, and the late-afternoon sun slants sideways, casting our shadows onto the cliff walls, like images of passing warriors.

This time of the day everything turns golden, and the horses pick their heads and move, swinging each leg in a smooth stride, and we float over the saddles, letting the reins drop, guiding the horses with the press of a knee. Linda leads the way home and Indian gladly follows.

Linda bumps Mouse into a gallop. Indian breaks his stride too, and the rhythm changes from the up-down to a rolling like a rocking chair. Our feet stretch beside the horses' girths. And the breeze of our moving lifts their manes. We race faster and faster, sliding around each bend of the coulee, kicking up sand and feeling the sun warm our faces. I reach out both hands as we raced, lifting them like wings. In complete balance, in complete rhythm. The Western historian, J Frank Dobie, described it as "the cooperation between carrier and carried, flesh conforming to flesh, spirit blending with spirit, intelligence recognizing intelligence."

When we near the cabin, we slow. The horses drop their heads and we move with our shadows falling behind us, trailing over the sagebrush. My legs curve around Indian's sides and my hips move as his shoulders move as the shadows move.

As the sun slips into the mesa, stretching its red like a blaze of grass across the prairie and curling up in smoke, we rub the sweat from our horses' backs and stretch our legs as we walk the horses to the corral and latch the gate at dark and limp toward the

single lightbulb buzzing over the cabin door. And Linda smiles with the red dust in her wrinkles and says, "Yes, I think I like riding Western."

Linda bumps Mouse into a trot and Indian follows. Across the basin, wisps of clouds stretch. "Mare's tails," they're called, but today they look less like the strands of a tail than the thin puffs of dust that rise from our hoof-fall. We move easily across the flat, clipping the stalks of Indian-rice grass and side-oats grama, and when we cross a dry wash and our horses clatter up the crumbling bank, the alkali billows like chalk.

We ride across the flat, then through a gate that reads, "Property of U.S. Government: This gate to remain locked at all times." Linda tells me that the Tillets might have left it open when they moved their cattle across the horse range, then up the Bad Pass Trail, towards the Dryhead. So I let Linda pass through the gate, then nudge Indian to the fallen barb-wire gate. I think of how easily a horse could catch a foot in the fallen wire, slice the fetlock. Uncoiling my lariat, I swing, cast a sideways loop like a heel catch, then pull the wooden post to my saddle. Bumping Indian around to the gate post, I lean over in the saddle, hook the gate in the bottom loop, pull the gate tight to the post, then slide the top wire loop. As I turn Indian towards Linda, she smirks. "Nice trick."

"I hate getting off a horse unless I have to."

While we ride, we slide down washes then scramble up the banks, trotting through the big sage, leaning side to side, swerving our horses around each bush like skiers on a slalom course. Our horses' sides shine with sweat and the dust sticks to our faces, while the saddles squeak and the coils on my rope slap and the fringe of my chaps flips back and

forth. Ahead, the hills stretch towards the cliffs of Cottonwood Creek. Above the clouds stretch behind us like the settling trail of our dust. All around, the sage smells sticky-sweet. We ride for an hour this way.

When we hit another fence, we turn along it and continue to trot. Linda wants to check for any gaps. A regular enough duty on any ranch, but today she wants to investigate rumors of mustangs "accidentally" wandering off the range onto the private hay fields.

The fence ends at a cliff. The wires have been knotted around the boulders. We turn, following a thin trail up the canyon wall; it stretches on across Demijohn flat, then ends on the jagged lip of Cottonwood Canyon. "Guess the horses would sneak out lower," Linda decides, twisting in her saddle and scanning up the flat where it gathers a few dark patches of mountain mahogany and piñon. Beyond the shrubs, the grass continues to climb into strips of pines, then on, into the clouds that blanket the mountain.

Retracing our path, we open another gate and this time I have to dismount because the wire is too tight. Linda thinks we can aim straight across the low hills, rising like beach dunes, and then hit the corner of School-House Flat, saving at least forty minutes of riding. I follow her down the two-track road.

We let our horses walk and the shadow stretch before us. The sun shines on the grey leaves of the sage and on our horses' dusty flanks and across the valley, it catches the cottonwoods, flickering like tarnished copper.

Then the two-tracks of dirt turn into a rough road and we continue, as our horses hang their heads, as our reins sway, as the hooves thump slowly on the gravel. And the legs of the horses, cast in the shadow, stretch long and narrow. The fading sun warms our

leather chaps, but the darkness creeps from beneath the sage, pooling in the clusters, and then seeping over the soil.

Indian flicks his ears. Ahead, a flat-bed truck rattles down the road, churning a slow rising plume of dust. By the time it reaches us, the shadows have spilled across the road, soaking over the images of our riding, like a tide against the dunes. The driver has clicked on his head-lights, and they glow when he stops, catching the currents of falling dust in their beam. He opens the door and we halt. Linda folds her hands across the saddle horn, while I dismount. I remember a story of an old rancher stepping out of his cabin to greet a horseman. The rider leaned over and asked for something—maybe directions, maybe a tin of water. When he reached his hand down to shake, the old man clasped it, and jerked him from his saddle. "I don't mind you asking," the old man said, "but, by god, don't look down at me when you ask."

So we stood, this man and I, while Linda sat her horse. I pushed my boot toe in the dust. The man propped his shoulder against the truck's hood and glared at Linda. He wore a faded army jacket and work pants and gloves. His hair was silver and long and tangled as a pad of steel wool. "Can I help you?" he asked.

Linda introduced herself, but the man grunted. "I know what you are," he said. "Now get the hell off my land." Linda apologized, told him she was new and thought we were still on government land and just wanted to ride back to the cabin. "Didn't you cross a gate?" the man asked. He opened the truck's door and twisted his body behind the wheel, popped the emergency brake, then drove past us. As the tires grumbled on the gravel, I heard him say, "You'd think the government owns enough goddamn land to stay on it."

As we rode on, Linda told me the man, Joey Diggs, had moved into the ranch below the Tillet's place. He'd been crippled in a work accident and took pain killers for his back and purchased the few hundred acres with money from the insurance. As she spoke, we passed down the road, where a fence angled to the borrow ditch, then followed the road. Across the stubble of grass, we could see the forms of horses move, bunched together, heads down, picking over the dried dung for seeds. We rode, and saw more horses, at least half as many mustangs as lived on the 36,600 acres of the Pryor Range.

"He adopts as many horses as he can," Linda said. "But I don't know how he can afford the ones he's got." I watched the horses shift between themselves, pushing their thin heads between the gaunt ribs of the others. Some would squeal and kick, then the shifting horse would stop, hang his head, and wander to another pile of dung.

"He feeds out hay all year—has to," Linda said, "Claims all his horses are tame enough to handle, even has names for them, but I don't think so. He wants them wild. Says he's saving the horses from us."

On the eastern side of the range, along a similar barb-wire fence, the Tillet family keeps a herd of some 50 duns and buckskins. They, like Diggs, don't trust the government to preserve the Pryor mustangs. In a way, I can't blame them. In 1964, the BLM announced that they needed to remove all 200 wild horses from the Pryors, to save them from starvation. But according to the locals, the horses were as sleek as ever. The ranchers gathered and protested the planned roundup, blocking BLM action for four years.

In 1968, though, the BLM began constructing a corral in the southeast corner of the range, directly across from the Tillet's pasture. The second gather plan proposed three

alternatives: to remove every mustang; to remove all but 15; or to remove all but 35. It added that all horses would be captured, and none would be released unless a private group agreed to "sponsor" the Pryor herd and provide the resources to conduct annual gathers. The local ranchers and a handful of Lovell residents formed the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Association.

Most of the members, being horse breeders, knew that too few wild horses would cause in-breeding. In the wild, the stallions banish their offspring as soon as they reach sexual maturity. The young mares will join other harem bands, while the young studs will buddy-up in bachelor groups, roaming together, practicing their fighting skill so that eventually they can challenge an older stallion and steal a mare. Any population, as a rule of thumb, needs at least 50 breeding adults in order to avoid genetic loss. If the BLM cut the herd to a few dozen, the horses would surely weaken and, eventually, disappear.

The locals continued to protest the BLM's plans, arguing that the horses had been around as long as anyone could remember and weren't bothering anyone. Allegedly, the BLM had made plans with the Montana Game and Fish department to remove the horses in order to clear habitat for transplanted bighorn sheep. Each hunting license could bring thousands in revenue while the horses, after all, could only bring a few cents per pound at a cannery

As the BLM finished the construction of the corrals, the locals brought the issue to the attention of national horse groups, like the International Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Burros, the Animal Welfare Institute, the International Society for the Protection of Animals, and the Humane Society of the United States. After letters and pleas to congressmen, and after the BLM managers continued to turn deaf ears, the



Humane Society, represented by a Washington law firm, went before the District Court for the District of Columbia. (The National Environmental Policy Act, which requires federal agencies to make public all plans with significant impacts to the environment, had not yet passed through Congress; the horse activists had little, if any, legal rights to contest the BLM's discretion.) But the district judge ordered the BLM representatives to swear, under oath, that there was no present plan to trap or remove any wild horses without public forum.

The issue drew the attention of a young newswoman in New York, working for ABC. When her special report aired, thousands of citizens—mostly school children—flooded the BLM offices with letters. In response, the Secretary of the Interior declared the Pryor Mountains the first wild horse range in the United States.

A few years later, in 1971, Congress passed the Wild Horse and Burro Act, placing the mustangs under the control and protection of the BLM. Since then, the Billings office conducted 17 gathers, removing on average 25 horses. Only once, during the extreme winter of 1978, did the population drop below 100 horses. The last roundup before my summer in the Pryors was the largest, taking 51 animals from the range. But that doesn't count the foal that was killed.

When I talked to one of the wranglers involved with the gather, he scowled and kicked a rock with his boot. Apparently a woman from a film crew noticed the foal's mother in the corral, then went snooping around the range, until she found the corpse. I asked another BLM employee who had volunteered to help with the adoption of the corralled horses. When the woman reported the foal, the wranglers said they didn't know anything. One story went that the foal fell off a cliff while running towards the corrals,

another claimed that it must have been left behind and wandered off a cliff in the dark that night. "No one knew and no one was talking," said the BLM employee.

"We tried to keep it hush-hush," the wrangler said. "That was the main mistake."

And I think of Ekwortzel and the mornings he'd pull up to my cabin at sunrise with the grumble of the of road-grader's diesel engine, and how he'd leave it running while sat on the porch, smoked a cigarette, and sipped a weak cup of Folders. When he laughed, he growled from his gut that hung over his champion team roping buckle. He'd swipe his grey hair and tug down the bill of his ball cap. Most of his caps had labels from local feed stores, or horse barns. He'd laugh and tell me of the ropings he'd won and the nights him and the boys would raise hell at the Diamond J, the last bar on the edge of Lovell, and how they'd drive back to the cabin with a case of beer and whiskey in to-go cups. A few times he'd invite me into town and buy me lunch with his *per diem* allowance. He'd call the waitresses by name and they'd call him "Hun," and pour his coffee.

"We liked the boys when they came for the roundup," the old woman at the Lovell Chamber of Commerce told me. "They sure livened this place up."

Later that summer, when I sat with him on the cabin's porch, he looked across the corrals and rubbed his bristled chin. "You work this for 17 years and everything goes smooth as silk," he said, exhaling the words with his cigarette smoke. "Then some woman with a camera raises cane. What business did she have? We had a job and we did it. She couldn't work this stock." Then he spit. "She couldn't."

As Linda and I ride back to the corrals, the wind shifts and the gates clank, and I am thinking about the roundups and the BLM and the public, and I can't blame the locals, not Joey Diggs nor the Tillets, for questioning the BLM's handing of the mustangs. But in

the darkness, as I pull my wet saddle from Indian and rub my hand on his back and pick his hooves and dab iodine in the nicks from rocks and scoop an extra tin of grain, I am thinking about the forms of the horses beyond the range fence, mulling and pawing at the dust, picking over dung, and huddling together, waiting for another load of hay.

It's snowing a spring drizzle, not rain, not snow, not sleet. Perhaps the Intuits have a name for such snow, but I don't. It falls like a white mist—almost like an Oregon rain, where you can't actually see it raining, but everything is wet. The blues and greens of the sagebrush blur, color soaking color like water-color paints on wet paper. In the distance, the twisted junipers look like blots of ink.

We climb out of the draw and without any noticeable shift in the wind, the snowflakes vanish. Dropping my reins, I let Indian lead; his ears and nose can detect mustangs better than my squinting eyes. The reins swing loosely, patting back and forth against his neck. Tempered by hundreds of hours at this beat, the leather of my saddle softly squeaks like an old wicker rocking chair.

We're on Turkey Flats, pointed down a trail marked by hoof-prints. In the center of a horse's foot is a triangle called the frog. But it looks less like a frog than a primitive petroglyph of a darting storm swallow, beak pointed and wings angled back. Sometime after the last snowfall, several horses have passed this way, scraping black triangles into the white—like a sky of birds in flight.

When we crest a rise, Indian jumps. The saddle thrusts me up and then drops away. A rein rips across my palm. For a split second, both Indian and I hang in mid-air,

suspended as the mist. My legs lock and reflex twists me center to the saddle again. I snatch the slack from my reins and then, only then, do I look down to see if we've landed.

A horse squeal echoes against rocks. Then hooves thunder down the canyon.

Indian scrambles up the rim and we arrive in time to see a band of mustangs gallop away. A grulla mare leads. Her legs are colored charcoal and stretch over the dark forms of sagebrush. And her mane and tail, streaming in the wind, are also charcoal, but her flank is a swirl of blue and brown and grey like the smoke of a just-snuffed candle. Two cream-colored mares flee behind her, their manes and tails flashing apricot. Then a palomino yearling and a foal. A stocky black stallion holds the rear-guard, turning to look at us, then squealing again, before spinning and racing after the others, dissolving into the grey.

Indian flicks his ears and snorts. As I pull a notepad from my vest pocket, he paws the ground. He whinnies, but the rumble of the wild horses has been replaced by the slush of falling snow.

Before she returned to Billings, Linda asked me to sign an "MOU," a government shorthand form called a memorandum of understanding, which, among other things, promised that I'd leave a note beside the map every morning when I rode. But the map, the three pages of government topography cut and pasted to the piece of plywood, had few names, only blue squiggles for water where there was no water overlaid by an even grid of townships and ranges, and small crosses marking corner sections.

The names of the past, handed down from Indians and ranchers, had been forgotten, or at least, not transferred to the map. There was, as I have said, Big Coulee cutting down the center of the range between the legs of Burnt Timber and Sykes Ridge. And where they fanned out like a skirt, was Turkey Flat. As I rode the foothills and mesas, I added my own names: Mouse's Knob, Wash-out Road, The Jump, The Cathedral.

And there was "School-house flat," the alkali plain where Linda and I rode past a burned foundation of a one-room school house. Between this plain and the cabin, two mesas pinched the trail. The cinder crumbled from the mesas, spilling into shallow arroyos, held only by clumps of yucca and prickly pear. And when I rode, the red dust lifted and wrapped around my horse's legs and powdered my chaps. I called this "Colorado Pass" because it reminded me of my years at college, when I'd take a black mustang through the quiet streets of Colorado Springs, when the snow fell and our breath puffed and the horse's shoes clicked on the pavement as we passed barking dogs and sleeping houses. Then we'd slip behind a locked gate, into a park called Garden of the Gods, trotting through the gambles oak and yucca. The snow dotted the red cliffs and spires and wrapped around the piñon pines like torn bedsheets. And we'd ride, until the roar of the freeway and chatter of televisions and morning news reports drifted behind us, until all we could hear were the clatter of steel shoes on stones and the snick of snow cutting across our numb ears.

But how could a name mean as much to anyone else? If they rode a horse through the narrow of these two mesas, would they know that they had left Wyoming? Here, in this shadow of rocks, where the rain never fell, but the snow blew down from the rims, would they notice the pocket of plants that grow not in the North Country, but further

south, at the toes of the Colorado Rockies, a place of indigo skies and dry snow and red, red rocks?

When I worked for a ranch in the Wind Rivers, we rode along a valley between pastures called "North" and "Middle" and "The Lower." But each pasture had several gates, and when the boss gave the morning's assignments, he'd have to clarify. "Ok, I'll ride the middle pasture, while you bring the bulls from the north and we'll meet at the lower, but not at the corner gate or the middle, but the one by the aspens, down the hill from the gate that needs fixed—we don't want to try and push the bulls through that sonuva bitch."

One day a cowboy dismounted and yanked a rusted coil from the grass. He rode with the piece of junk across his lap, while we trailed the bulls. Then at the gate, he climbed off his horse again, and twisted the coil into the wire and let it hang. "I think it come from an old mattress," he said, as we considered the new ornament to the barb-wire. "Next time the boss tells us to come here, you just say, 'Oh, you mean Bed-spring Gate.'"

So when I rode the Pryors, I began to name. But I had no words that told stories. After wandering the box canyons in Big Coulee, leading Indian so his hooves did not bruise on the sharp rocks, I noticed a small dot of green beneath a black wall. The sun had crested the cliffs and beat down on the dust and on the rocks and on the leather of my saddle. I rolled up my sleeves and unbuttoned my shirt and stumbled to the green, like a desert wanderer to an oasis. The heat shimmered off the stones, and I thought, is this a mirage? But in a cool dimple of sand, a single cottonwood tree grew, its leaves no bigger than rose petals. I knelt in the sand and scooped and soon a trickle of water seeped up. I dipped my shirt, until the pale blue denim turned dark and I dabbed it to my forehead and

then sucked. The water mixed with the dust behind my teeth and I spit and did this again. Then I scooped more and Indian dipped his head and drank beside me, snorting and blowing grains of sand and drops of water on my neck.

I thought of the Native American riders who had passed this way. Surely they would know, as I did, that a cottonwood sets its roots in shallow water. I wanted to call this place, "The small wet spot where there is no water around." Or "the hidden seep." Or "place where small cottonwood grows for a horse to find." But these names were all too long. Perhaps the natives had a single word for this type of place, just as the Inuit's single word *mitailak* describes soft snow that covers an opening in an ice flow.

So I rode on, making notes each evening on my map. I wanted to take a brown crayon and scribble over the twisting blue lines, then dot a blue marker where I had found the cottonwood. What did some man in the U.S. Geological Service office in Denver know about water and sand in this desert of cliffs? I thought about my home in Oregon, where the highest mountain was named after a lord who was second in command of the British fleet during the Revolutionary War. But we grew up also calling it Wy'east, the original name. The older stories said that it was once a chief who fought with a Klikitat chief over the beautiful maiden Loo-wit. All three were turned into volcanic peaks. Few people have ever heard of Loo-wit; everyone knows Mt. Saint Helens. And the highest point in North America, named after a president who never saw the peak, was once known by the residents as *Deenaalee*—the high one.

In his essay *The Embrace of Names*, nature writer Richard Nelson calls for a return to using native names over those ascribed by imperialist explorers. He writes:

Given time and a return to intimacy, we newcomers to this continent may yet learn to inhabit its myriad places, may yet become worthy of the gifts it offers us, may yet find the humility and grace of those who lived here for millennia before us, may yet learn to honor the land that nourishes us, gives flight to our imaginations, and pleases our highest senses. The names we choose, I believe, will be a fair measure of our success.

True, a name is not simply a label, but a story. It is a way of attaching our human experience to a place. But as I rode down the lower bend of Big Coulee, where the sand stretches wide as beach and Indian and I trot, reins loose, moving only with a creaking of leather and patting of hooves on sand, we saw the same band of mustangs. They fled. The grulla mare led, and the apricot one, and the foal and the others and finally the black, squealing and bucking. We watched their manes and tails waver in the cloud of dust then vanish. And when we followed, the clatter of hooves echoed down the rimrock.

They raced ahead, legs flying over the sage, cutting down a side canyon, then veering into another. Soon the rumble of hooves faded, and Indian and I trotted alone through the canyons, while the dust settled and the sun beat down and the stones had shifted, balancing and resting in each other's angles. And the desert was still and silent. Above a hawk swung around a thermal. We passed a small post driven into the rocks with a sign nailed across the top, like a cross of a grave marker. But the words carved into the bleached wood were not a name of a man but of a line. On the north side, it read "Montana" and on the south it read "Wyoming." It marked the invisible boundary that forms a lid to the box of Wyoming. Someone, years ago, perhaps in a capital office had taken a map and a ruler and drawn this line. But here, in the canyon, there were only rocks and sage and the hawk circling above. The horses' tacks passed straight beside the post, not swerving, not pausing.



We assign names and boundaries to the places we inhabit, as if we could order their meaning, as if we could own them. In the Bible, it is said that God commanded Adam to name to all the creatures and to have dominion over them. But what do nature and the hawk and the wild horses know of our names?

Perhaps the name of the Pryor Mountains tells it best. When the Lewis and Clark expedition returned from the Pacific, they detached Sergeant Pryor and two men to lead the party's cavvy of horses through the mountains and rejoin where the Yellowstone River merged with the Big Horn River in Montana. On August 8, 1806, Sgt. Pryor and the men camped beside a creek, which is now one of the boundaries of the wild horse range. That night rain began to fall, the creek rose, and the horses scattered. (At least that's the story Pryor reported.) In the morning, they found tracks—perhaps a war party of Crow. They followed, but abandoned the trail after five miles. With blisters and sore legs, they hiked out of the mountains to join the others. And now these mountains, and the federal range that manages the wild horses, bears Sgt. Pryor's name.

It is more than a name; it is a story of lost horses. But as Indian and I crested the trail to Turkey Flats, we spotted the band of mustangs, now specks of color, fading into the afternoon light, leaving only a plume of dust. They cannot possibly know the name of Sgt. Pryor, but care only that they have left us behind and forever, I'm sure, want to stay lost.

## CHAPTER 4: A FACE TO MEET THE FACES THAT YOU MEET

As I wheeled a cart down the third aisle, I inspected the selection of frozen dinners. What had mom advised—plenty of starch, less fat, or plenty of carbohydrates, less starch? Maybe that was laundry. Presoak, preheat.

Here's a chicken dinner for four, family size. Maybe it'd make a single meal, like many of my dinners, wrapping drumsticks in a paper towel, gnawing the meat down to the bone, then chucking the oily napkin in the fire for warmth. Nothing should be lost. I checked my list again, going from eggs to bacon to bread and then the general category "dinner." Sure, the chicken might do. I took seven, remembering Linda's stipulation that I take the government truck to town only once a week. I could have driven my grey truck, but it sucked gas like a windmill in a hurricane. If I could save a few dollars from my stipend each week, maybe it'd be enough to stretch to the next job when the summer season ended. Maybe I could hire on as a dude wrangler in Arizona. Or I'd been offered a scholarship for graduate school at the University of Montana—but I'd need money for books and supplies. Maybe even dates. After nearly a month of riding the range and talking to Indian, I was ready to make friends.

The evenings passed like this: I'd unsaddle, turn my horse back into the pen, and walk inside to cut vegetables, grate cheese, and fix a dish of enchiladas. If I set the oven

at 200 degrees, the dish would cook in 40 minutes. After changing out of my boots and spurs into shorts and tennis shoes, I'd jog out along the gravel road.

Twisting into the desert, the road rose around a bend, cut through a mesa, then dropped across a salt flat. When it caught the first folds of the mountains, I'd turn around and jog home, where the smells of melting cheese and picante sauce mixed with the dust and sweat.

I'd eat, sitting on my porch, watching bats loop silently through the glow of a Coleman lantern. The lantern hissed like air escaping from a tire, so I turned up the radio. A symphony on the public station crackled with static. I could twist the volume as loud as I wanted; I could fire a shotgun at the stars. From my porch, beyond the circle of lamp light, the desert stretched like a dark, rippled surface of an ocean. If I shouted, not even my echo would answer.

The grocery stores in Wyoming sell hard liquor and the bar at the edge of town had a drive-thru window; it's never inconvenient to drink in Wyoming. I set a gallon jug of Jim Beam in the cart. Maybe he'd make good company.

"Paper or plastic?" the girl at the register asked.

"Paper," I said, no hard choice. I'd use it to start a fire that night. It'd been getting colder in the mountains despite the coming of spring. And I'd stoked a fire the last several nights, taking the last of the split wood and even scouring the corrals for poles that had rotted and fallen. I'd prop them against the picnic table and jump, cracking them and stomping again, until the pieces could fit in the stove. But no matter, I'd chop more wood before fall. Maybe the BLM would let me stay through the winter, or maybe I'd be cast adrift again. I didn't want to think of the future. For now, a fire helped. The jug of

whiskey helped. I'd build the heat in the cabin, get it almost sauna hot, strip to my underwear, drink too much, and get sleepy. That was good and dependable. Warm and sleepy. A family-sized meal and whiskey, that might get me through the next week.

"Wouldya like me to get these bags?" the girl asked, tapping her extra-length purple press-on finger nails. She had hair like the horizons of soil; from her sod-colored roots, a strip of copper, then another tier of platinum, stained her hair. The tips were curled and frayed, like dead grass stalks.

No, I didn't need help, but smiled, politely, and let her take a bag out to the truck. "It's no problem," she insisted. "This is what they pay me for."

"Yeah," I said. "That's why you make the big bucks."

She laughed at my joke, as I took the bag from her arms and placed it on the cab's seat. Then I drove away, wondering afterwards if she could tell I was a bachelor by the food I'd picked, wondering if I should have asked her about the poster announcing a dance in town.

Peering through the dirty windshield, I could barely make out the shadowy forms of the distant mountains. It'd snow again soon, I figured, so I sped up, putting the town of Lovell smaller and smaller in my rear-view mirror

I stand at the door of the Lovell First Baptist Church. It looks like it should: a small white building, one story, a pointed roof. I'm late for the nine o'clock service. At least 20 minutes late. Peeking between the crack of the door in the entry hall, I see only three old women with powder-blue wigs singing, *March on Christian Soldiers*. By the door, a shelf

holds two cowboy hats and a few polyester coats. A small wooden table displays pamphlets with titles like: *The Bread Christ Broke*, and *Salvation is Now!*

I almost pushed the door: the preacher (a fat man booming the hymns) almost watched me take the last pew; the three old women and two husbands almost turned. But not today, no. I slip back to the truck, latching the doors with a whisper.

Then I linger on the steps of the Lutheran church. It's a large red-brick building with a steeple—the way most churches look in New England. Or maybe in a picture. Just close your eyes and you will see it, leaves on fat elms turning yellow and bells ringing. Or maybe not. Picture a tall pastor dressed in a cowl, bald like a monk, greeting families at the door, then latching me by the elbow, and explaining that today is Pentecostal and they will take the bread and wine, but I shouldn't worry because only members of the church will file down the center aisle. "We like to worship with people of the same heart," the bald pastor tells me, stooping over in his black gown. So I nod and take my place in the back pew.

It's like my mother's church in Oregon, in a way. The children squirm in the first rows, mothers clutch crying babies in the back, glancing at other women, wondering if they should slip off to their station wagons. And so we sing the hymns and hold our books, while summer light from a Sunday morning trickles through the stained glass, and the pastor calls the children unto him, embracing them in his black gowns and calls to the parents, "Christ is the only path." And he speaks of the children who will never know the blessings of the Savior and how each parent should nod and shuffle their feet and mumble the hymns because, yes, blessed are the children for theirs is the Kingdom of God.

I once took Jennifer to my mother's church and stood with the congregation and then sat and hummed *Amazing Grace*. And I rubbed her hand when the preacher called forth humility and said we are all seeds cast into the wind and that where we land does not matter as much as the love we give. Sure, maybe it made no sense, but when you sit in a pew and the light seeps from stained windows, and the old women's voices rise like wind through aspen leaves, and the hands of old men stretch towards the women who sleep with them, who cook for them, who wake each morning and smile at them, they think yes, I am not worthy, I am so blessed. And so I held Jennifer's hand and rubbed it with my thumb and watched her lips move. *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.*

But here in Lovell, the pastor dismisses the children then leads another hymn, page 145 in the Missouri Synod. Lutheran Hymn Book. And the old women sing and the men boomed their hay-sore voices and the babies cry. I think only of the smell of hay and water and sweat. Four men, middle-aged, dressed in cowboy shirts and new Wrangler jeans, march down the aisle with brass plates. The people slide money and the children toss in coins and the men march on, each so sullen and stiff. The polished cowboy boots squeak against the red carpet. The pastor wring his hands.

Then we bow our heads and pray.

I think first of my family and my grandmother, and sister and friends I once knew—especially Jennifer. If only she could sit here now, and take my hand. But then I watch the light in the windows and think about the sun and the rain and the acres of crops and the horses munching on grain. I imagine these men walking back from their fields, pulling on clean shirts and washing the dirt from their hands so they can come here and march as Elders in the church as they pass the brass plates and nod at everyone they know,

praying please Lord, maybe an inch of rain this year. Maybe not—maybe they think of their own families and the ash-trays full of smashed cigarettes and the Sear's catalogue opened to the page of new spring fashions and how, if they only prayed and tilled their fields, maybe the Lord would provide the Kenmore washer on page 435.

But I don't know as I watch the Elders bow before the pastor and chew on the wafers and sip the wine and kneel at the alter and whisper their prayers. I sit in the back with the babies. The light falls against the varnished wood. The people move like shadows cast by candles. They pray for health and kind weather and enough money for the winter and somehow we are finally together, singing a hymn I do not need to know, but sing anyway. For now we can forget our beds and our ovens and heaps of clothes wadded in a laundry hamper. Here only the singing fills our ears. We sway, still hunched over hymn books, shuffling the worn heels of our boots against thick carpet. Here the light glows red and green and the dust on our legs and the sweat on our hands mixes with our voices. The melody rises, hovers in the air, and caresses the walls.

Here is a place where the couples married, where they baptized the babies, where they asked forgiveness. Here we could all flicker like the soot in the candle bowls. With the wind beating the door, we could evaporate. And the bricks would stand, pointing to the steeple, same as always. But the bells would not ring, men would not march and pass the plates, the babies would not wail. Here we hang our hats on the pegs. Here we forget and remember Here we are born and pass.

Our voices rise to the ceiling. And we are together. If only for an hour

Another Sunday afternoon pushing a cart down the aisle of the Food Mart, piling frozen dinners and cans of soup, I nod at old men, like me, bent over a cart, elbows draped over the handles as they shuffle. Mac and cheese—yeah he cooks for himself too.

By the bakery section, I find a woman from church serving samples of a new frozen pizza. She hands me a slice and I wolf it down. She hands me another "Come back in fifteen minutes," she tells me, when she'll have another pizza baked. She winks. "It's my mothering instinct," she says. "And I can see you need some mothering."

So again I circle the aisles, shuffling my dusty boots on the waxed tile, staring at the sections of food I either can't afford or don't know how to cook. It isn't like I haven't tried. I have. When I was seventeen, I worked for the U.S. Forest Service, living in a small cabin built by the Civilian Conservation Corps. It took me almost a month to learn that you boil the water before adding spaghetti noodles. It took me almost three months to learn to poke holes in a potato before baking it. Finally, I found a system: start the potato, then boil the water, then simmer the sauce, then cut and butter the garlic bread. When it worked, the potato and noodles and sauce and bread were ready at the same time; their smells mixed through the kitchen and I carried my plate to the front porch, watched the butterflies flutter around stalks of foxglove, watched the deer wander to the creek, cracked open a beer to swig down the melting butter and hot potato. There is a satisfaction in cooking from scratch and sitting and savoring while the sun slopes into the mountains. In fact it's too satisfying. Once I learned to perfect the spaghetti dinner, I made it every night that season.

And now, in the Pryors, I turn my oven to 200 and slide a tray of enchiladas; the cheese will bubble and the picante sauce dribble and the onions turn clear. When I jog



home and stretch and wipe the sweat from my forehead, I stab the enchiladas with my fork, twirl the cheeses, and inhale. It's dangerous, I know. I haven't fixed spaghetti since.

I must have looked like a sight to any lost tourist, when I opened the door, clad only in an old red suit of long-underwear, my hair twisted as a juniper, my exposed chest sun-burned and bruised. And, of course, my dusty Stetson hat—a cowboy never receives company bare-headed. Maybe, if it had been any American tourist, they might have forgiven my appearance—apologized even—because the dew was still sticky on the sagebrush, the sky still flint grey, and the mountains still tucked in shadows. But the man was Asian—Japanese, I guessed. He wore a starched white shirt and fresh pants. He gestured to a half-folded map. I gestured him inside.

Western customs, especially in the remote pockets of the range, are had and fast. We never lock doors, in case some cowboy rides up, pulls his saddle, pitches hay for his lean horse, helps himself to an egg and tortilla, then saddles again, riding to mountains beyond mountains beyond mountains. It happens. Sometimes in summer, you offer a drink of water, or a cold beer. Or in winter, you take wool blankets from the shelf and say, “Throw down wherever” And your guest will nod, looking to the sky. The mountain mahogany will poke through snowdrifts with their black stalks. Clouds will roll down from the hills, soaking into the pines, drawing the scent of dry rosin. It snows every night.

At any ranch, you can hear people talk about riding into the hills after the spring melt, finding a rider, propped against a stump, with one side of the wood charred black.

One side of the body charred black. Before people freeze to death, they get hot. They may peel off their coats and pants. Then they get delirious. They may roll right into the flames, as if drawing an orange blanket of warmth over their blue skin.

I don't doubt it. Across the Big Horn Basin, deep in another spine of mountains, the crew was riding back to our cowcamp when a storm boiled over a ridge. Hail pelted. Lightning snapped. We raced down the valley to an abandoned shack. Turned our horses loose; there's not much else we could do. So we huddled together, while the hail hammered the roof, while the lightning popped and sizzled. Our teeth chattered. Our hands had stiffened as we fumbled with buttons, trying to push them into our crotches. Outside the lightning turned the tips of pines a neon blue. Saint Elmo's fire, it's called. And it glows and hisses like a gas lamp.

"Lightning comes up through the ground," the boss said. "Might come clean up through this floor "

We all looked down at our muddy boots and silver spurs. And I thought about the pictures I'd seen in small-town papers of a heap of cattle flung every which-way near a barb-wire fence. Sometimes the snow pushed cattle into fence corners, as the storm had driven us into the cabin. Sometimes the reports explain the science of electricity. Bodies too close together make bigger targets. I didn't know. I didn't want to know.

Eventually, someone struck a damp match. In the flickering circle of light, we could see the gleam of tin cans. The walls had been plastered with newspapers, so someone tore a strip, twisted it like a sage branch, and held it to the match. The yellowed paper caught like a dry aspen leaf. After finding a box of split wood, we lit a fire in the rusted pot-belly stove. Finally, we had light and warmth and our sweaters steamed. We

wanted to grin, but the thunder slapped against the shack. The windows rattled. The cross-beams coughed, like the sound of breaking ribs from a swift kick.

Someone, years before, had left these supplies in the shack—obviously never to return. And as we hunched our shoulders over the stove, I could imagine the past resident packing his bedroll onto a horse, lashing down a few supplies, leaving the rest. Maybe, if he could write, he might have left a note. “Wu evur finds this grub, help yerself. Yu probly need it wurst off then me.”

In Wyoming, nature unleashes her forces, whether you get out of the way or not. The rain and hail and snow and wind, I’m sure, couldn’t care less about where they cut—through a pine or through a lost visitor. So to survive, we stick together. We never lock doors. We leave extra blankets and a tin of coffee grounds on the shelf. Plenty of matches.

So the morning the Japanese man knocked on my door, I beckoned him in. I poured a cup of steaming coffee. But he waited by the doorstep, still pointing at his map. When I handed him a cup, he shook his head, slightly. Then pointed.

“Yeah,” I nodded, now studying his map. “Burnt Timber road.” I pointed to the dark shins of the mountain. The sun had just begun to lift over their rims, cracking a strip of grey under the clouds.

The man pointed where I pointed. “Horses?” he asked.

I nodded.

Then he pointed to his car, a white rental from Billings—the same model I’d seen many times full of families with sun-burned kids, a wife nagging about hotel reservations, and a husband in khaki shorts and argyle socks yanked up to his knees declaring, “The

kids want to see wild horses. The man at the Park Service said we'd find them here." I'd explain, as I tried to the Japanese man, that the road turned after a mesa, crossed an alkali flat, bumped over a cattle guard, then faded to dirt. As it coiled itself into the foothills, the dirt became two ruts, then the ruts became moguls, then became nothing more than boulders, like a dry creekbed.

I'd driven the road in the government's 4x4 truck many times. I knew each ditch, each narrow where rain had carved the road back against the cliffs. I'd found shattered side-view mirrors, and the twisted scraps of mufflers. Plenty of flat tires with buckled rims.

Standing in the doorway of my cabin, looking at the white rental car, I frowned. I tried to tell the Japanese man about the road, about the carloads of families who stomped away, sped towards the mesa, then limped back an hour later toward the paved highway.

"Horses?" the man pointed again to the mountain.

I threw up my hands. Ok, buddy. But I'll have the coffee simmering when you get back.

A week passed without any sight of the Japanese man. I rode the low country because the snow still filled the gullies and wrapped around the pine stands in lumps, knee-high to a horse. I wanted to laugh about the man's visit—imagining his version of our encounter. He'd flown across an ocean, then into the center of the West; speaking a few words of English, he'd rented a car at the Billings's airport, driven 70 miles of two-lane highway, then 35 miles of gravel, to arrive at dawn to a small cabin, where an unshaven, undressed

cowboy greeted him with a cup of oily coffee. “Ah, John Wayne . I you biggest fan. Take-ee you picture?”

Yes, it was a stereotype, maybe not even a good one. But other than the unhappy families, I had few visitors. So I added my own caricature to the Japanese tourist, perhaps filling out the story with the comedy of a fool.

And it was this version of our exchange that rolled around in my imagination until the next week, when I rode into the highlands.

The top of the Pryor Mountains swells in slick grassy rises like ocean waves. The grass is cropped by the wind. When the sun pulls back the blanket of snow, it grows only finger-high, then is covered again. On one of these knolls, I found the Japanese man, sitting cross-legged, like a Buddha in meditation. About a stone’s throw behind him, in the shadow of a tall spruce, was an old cabin. The white rental car was parked behind it. As I rode closer, climbing up the hill, I noticed what he had been watching.

A band of mustangs grazed. I saw the tangled manes first, then the cream-colored withers, and the dark stripes down the backs. The horses pushed their muzzles through the grass, tugging mouthfuls, then taking a step. Tear, step, tear, step. Moving slowly, their long tails sweeping the purple lupine as they went.

The first horse was a mare, behind her trailed a foal, then, following behind, a dark bay stallion wandered. He raised his head, flicking his ears, and flaring his nostrils. He’d caught my horse’s scent. Squealing, he dropped his head and trotted at the mare, as if scooping her up with his nose. They galloped down the hill, flashing their tails like streamers. The thud of hooves drifted to my ears, then dissolved, like the horses, into the

mist. The pines leaned together while the fog hung low, rolling up from the canyon like smoke from smoldering leaves.

The man did not turn until I rode almost into his lap. “Morning,” I said, bending in my saddle. It creaked.

He blinked. “Ah,” he finally sighed. “Horses. Wild.”

I nodded.

“No Japan,” he said. “Only America.”

Yeah, I nodded again. American mustangs.

Maybe it wasn't that day, or maybe not the few other times I rode over the grassy hills and saw him sitting, silently, cross-legged. Maybe it was the sum of those times that now returns to memory, but I knew then that we shared the mustangs. He'd traveled to watch them. So had I. But there was more to his watching than I could understand. In my pocket, I kept a small spiral-wire notebook. I made notes. Each horse had markings—maybe a left-hind sock, maybe a snip, maybe a full blaze. Dun, grulla, bay I copied each observation. I made lists. I kept track.

I was trying to learn about the wild herds, about their family bands and alliances. But my Japanese friend, I don't know what details he saw, what he imagined while he sat. For two weeks, the winds sucked up the canyon, scraping back the snow. The mist curled around the alpine meadow, and some mornings, around dawn, I could smell wood smoke. While the man sat on his knoll, I passed by his cabin and noticed a small fire-ring and a smoke-stained teapot.

At nights, under my wood blankets, while my fire popped and crackled, while a slow drizzle gurgled in the roof-gutters, I thought of the man on the mountain. I wanted

to ride to him and ask, "How you gettin' on? Warm enough?" But I knew, somehow, that he had journeyed alone for a reason. As a boy, had he heard stories about Japan's ancient horsemen, the samurai? Was it a pilgrimage? Had he lost a wife to cancer? I didn't know and I never asked.

The Crow Indians considered the Pryors sacred land, more blessed than any other mountain range; they came to these alpine meadows to fast and to pray and to receive visions. In 1911, railroad workers built the cabin when they came to cut ties. In 1921, a rancher named Penn filed a homestead claim and it is his name you'll find on the maps. But the names now forgotten are the cowboys who waited out storms in a cabin while the lightning zigged across the sky, cracking against trees and exploding in balls of blue flame. And I can picture them afterwards, wringing water from their shirt tails and wedging wet hats onto their heads and stepping out of the door to a land soaked in rain, with the clouds still swirling around the trees, and the embers of fires still smoldering. And the wild horses, duns and grullas, blues and greys, would step through the plumes of smoke, moving like shadows. Appearing. Disappearing. One in front of the other, heads dropped and slowly swaying as they step, hooves setting and lifting, and setting and lifting, like bare hands softly slapping a drum.

Later that summer, as I pulled up to my cabin in my truck, I found an old couple petting my two saddle horses through the corral poles. They'd arrived in an aqua-blue motor home. "Aren't they just lovely," the old woman cooed. "They've been letting us touch them all afternoon." She reached her arm into the corral. The skin hung like the white fat

on a plucked chicken. My horse reached his muzzle, sniffing for grain. The husband raised a camera. "That's great, dear. Lemme get one of you with the mustang."

I wanted to point out that these horses not only had shoes, but the sweat marks of my saddle. Their manes had been combed and clipped. Nothing wild about them.

"We drove all the way from Denver too see the wild horses," the man told me, pocketing his instant camera in his Hawaiian-print shirt. "Any more of them?"

I pointed to the mountains before I could think. I pictured the Japanese man, hiking back to his cabin with his teapot filled with water. I pictured the strings of horses, moving like shadows in the mist, their tan and chestnut coats blending with the fog, dissolving in water, like ink-strokes from a bamboo brush.

So I told the old couple about the road, about the mufflers and broken mirrors. I told them everything I had wanted to tell the Japanese man when he knocked on my door.

"Oh, that sounds dreadful," the woman muttered.

"Well, at least we got to see these two."

I thought about agreeing, letting the old couple return to Denver, preserving their afternoon with my "wild" horses. But I couldn't. Maybe they'd show their family the pictures when they got them developed. "Grandma, those aren't mustangs!" a little girl might say. So I confessed.

The woman looked at the dirt. The man crossed his arms over his flower-print shirt. I glanced at the motor home, visualizing it teetering off a cliff.

"How far you say," the man asked.

"Thirty miles."

"How long?"



I surveyed the motor home again. “Five hours.”

The man worked his jaw, as if chewing on a bit of gristle—like when you don’t know whether to chew more or spit. His wife patted my horse and he whinnied. “Well,” she said, turning. “I guess you see one horse, you’ve seen them all.”

Through a notch in the cliffs of Sykes Ridge, the trail winds up a narrow canyon, choked by cottonwood and scrub oaks and heaps of rocks. We ride a trail marked by mustang prints and cattle hooves. The Tillets have retained their right-of-way to trail their cattle each spring through the horse range onto the high plains called the Dryhead.

As we ride, I imagine the herd, the bawling calves slipping behind their mothers, the mothers plodding ahead, bellowing for their babies, the babies stumbling at the end of the herd while we cowboys ride and turn the calves as they try to dash back to the home ranch. We’d swing our ropes and snare hind feet. Maybe out of boredom, we’d wager beers. Only both heels counted; snagging one was sloppy roping. A calf could kick out if both feet were inside the loop, but with only one leg caught, it’d run. The loop would lock, squeezing against the muscle and bone. Then someone would have to get off his horse, grab the calf and loosen the loop. The rider would then mount and nod at the roper coiling his rope, as if to say, “You owe me one.” And sometimes someone would snare the largest calf, a white-faced brute, and it’d bolt, tearing the rope from the rider’s hand, and we’d have to sprint after it, rope it again, or jump off our horses and grab the dragging tail of the lariat as it zipped through the sage and prickly pear. Sometimes we’d

trip on rocks or roots and have to limp back to our horses with cuts and cactus needles broken in our kneecaps.

Another game: when we snagged the biggest bull calf and he didn't yank away a rope, the rider would take a dally and back his colt, so the rope pulled the calf's legs back and the brute sat. One of us would run to it, straddle its bony spine, grab a handful of loose hide. The roper slipped his dally, the calf kicked off the rope, and bucked into the herd. We'd howl as the calf-rider toppled into a smear of green manure.

Imagine a cowboy crew miles from movies and televisions, living only with cattle and horses. Our work was our play. But we were also training our colts to walk with heads low as we swung loops, to back when we caught, to face a rope, even if a calf cut back and bucked and snorted snot. We were all learning, with every cut and every cactus needle picked from swollen shins.

I rode the narrow canyon up the Bad Pass Trail, where cowboys had trailed cattle, and the Crow had ridden back from the Battle of Little Big Horn, and Sergeant Pryor and his men hiked with blisters and wondered what they'd tell their captains about missing horses. These riders had passed as Indian and I rode, rattling loose rocks and brushing past the yellow pollen of sage. But that day, and the days that summer, we rode alone. With no one to bet beers, no colts to train, no calves to rope, no stories to form about victories in war and losses of horses.

There are thousands of basins in Wyoming where cowboys still sleep in bedrolls and gather their herds and trail them to mountain meadows. It is still called the Cowboy State and every license plate still bears the symbol of a bucking horse. In gas stations, you'll find a postcard showing a herd of cattle crossing a road and a few cowboys riding

past the idling cars. It reads: "Wyoming Rush Hour." And it's still true. And I wanted it to be, as Indian and I trotted out of the canyon and crossed a sage flat. I rolled up my sleeves and the sun burned my arms brown as the soil. My eyes creased like wood, like the men who spend a life squinting.

But here, during the summer, along the Bad Pass Road, Winnebagos and Hertz rent-a-cars line the roadside. Tourists slowly motorcade through the range, roll down windows when they spot a grazing mustang, snap a picture, and slide away. The scene resembles a zoo. A zoo without cages.

The wild horses become fixed in a photographic two-dimension, shelved in a family travel book, and forgotten. In the photos they appear only a small brown blur behind a saltbush. In the foreground, the family stands in shorts and swimming suits on their way to Horseshoe Marina. Wild horses and bikini lines.

Down another canyon, at the farthest tip of the range, a strip of cottonwoods follows a creek. Years ago, a rancher buried a pipe from the creek and ran it to a large stock tank. Now the cold water bubbles from the pipe to the brim of the tank and spills down the mouth of another pipe that slopes back into the creek. Under the water, fronds of dark-green ferns sway. Around the tank, the ground is bare and sandy, buffed clean by the hooves of wild horses. Tall piñon lean over the tank, wrapping around it like a curtain. Indian drops his head and begins to slurp, then I join. We gulp the cold water and flip our heads back and snort. The water drips from our noses and dots the sand.

Beyond the trees, beyond the rolling hills of sage, the Winnebagos putter along. Pickups pull boats. Rental cars pause for a photo. But here, they cannot see me, or my horse, or the mustangs passing silently in the tall brush.

The sun bakes the sand, and I peel off my shirt, dunking it in the cool water. And I'm wishing I had a girlfriend to show this place. We would ride from my cabin, up the pass where only other riders had gone, then here, with our legs sore and our faces tanned as teak. We'd tie our horses in the shade and strip, standing naked on the sand. And maybe we'd kiss, our lips salty. The girl's hair long and tangled by the wind. No make-up. No hair spray. When she stretched, the sun would gleam off the tufts of curls under her arms. And then we'd slip into the cool tank and soak. The creek water would spill over the edge, and the hours of riding would dissolve like the dust on our bodies. After soaking, after watching the thin wisps of clouds slip overhead, we'd stand again in the sand, letting the sun dry the drops. We'd be alone, two naked people, standing in a circle of piñon, feeling the goosebumps fade, and our hair dry like grass tousled by wind. I would be Adam, and she Eve. And we'd never want to be banished from this desert garden.

As the sun sloped beyond the rim of Sykes Ridge, the pines turned blue, then purple, then black. The cars and campers had slipped down the road, back to the campground. We dropped from the Dryhead, past the canyons, past the mesas and past the Tillet's pasture, then we turned up the road to the marina.

When we paused on the top of a mesa, we looked down at the black water in the bay, the rows of campers, and the crescent of the beach. A crowd had formed, dotting the beach. And the stars had appeared over the horizon and the sliver of the moon hung behind us. Suddenly, a red flare streaked across the night and burst, trickling to the earth

like embers from a fire. The a green explosion, then blue. Indian hopped. But I patted his side. "Only fireworks," I told him.

As we rode down the cinder slope of the mesa, the red powder rose around us, and I wondered if anyone on the beach could see us and what they'd think, our shadow of horse and rider appearing from the hills, like phantoms from the past.

We rode into the campground and through the crowds, then I dismounted and led Indian to the shore for a sip of water. A park ranger approached. "Hey," he said. "Didn't you see the sign?"

I squinted at him.

"No pets on the beach."

"This ain't a pet," I said. "This is a horse."

But he flipped the snap of his walkie-talky and pointed again to the sign. "It's the rules," he said. So I walked Indian up the grass, through the parking lot, until I found a family from church. They sat on their pickup's tail-gate, sipping beers and Cokes, holding their kids on their laps and tilting their faces to the blooming bursts of fireworks.

"Mommy, a horse," the kids squealed.

"Wouldya watch this old knot-head?" I asked. "People make him nervous."

The kids squiggled from their parents' arms and perched on the side of the truck, rubbing Indian's face. Sure, the parents agreed, they'd baby-sit my horse, and my horse could baby-sit the kids.

So I slipped back into the crowd, flapping my chaps as I walked. My spurs chimed. And I wondered: am I a cowboy ghost from the past, or merely a boy dressed as one? As I wandered, I felt like a movie extra on the set of a Hollywood western. People

pulled beer from styrofoam coolers and grilled hotdogs on barbecues and nodded as I walked around. But I could find no one else I recognized. No families invited me to share their Memorial Day picnics. No one offered me a beer. And it made me think of the same weekend, two years ago, when I rode with a crew across the Big Horn Basin.

Before dawn, we had gathered horses in the grey mist. Then we rode without having eaten for two days. At a creek, we watered the horses, then pushed on. The cows began to trail in a single column. I fell in behind. By dusk, we had dropped into a valley

We rode side-by-side now, letting the cattle trudge ahead, as if they knew the way. Down a gravel road, then along a row of poplar trees. The air turned thick and gold as honey. Puffs of dust rose behind the marching cows. The horses' heads hung low, swaying back and forth as they plodded. Down the road was a farm house with a single light bulb blazing from the porch.

When we passed, an old man stepped out of the shadow of the door. We reined our horses and shifted in our saddles. Leather with leather creaked, while dust filtered down through the last rays of the fading sun. It fell on our hands, crossed over the saddle horns, settled on our hat brims, and mixed with the sweat on the horses' sleek hides.

The old man spit and we did the same, tasting dust on our teeth.

"Wet yer whistle?" he asked, handing beers up to us.

When we turned, we rode through the tail of the dust cloud. The sweat made dark lines down the backs of our necks. We left the man, the jingle of our spurs and the clup-clop of the horses' feet sounding on the road. We are a vision, I thought. We are ghosts of horsemen who have passed and will not pass this way again.

And I saw myself again that night, riding Indian from the marina, after the fireworks had burst and fallen into the black water. As the line of cars snaked along the road, red and blue lights spun on the top of a police car. Someone had been drunk, driven off the road, and flipped his car in a gully. The string of taillights slipped by, faces pressed against windows. No one saw me pass, or heard the hollow clop of my horse's hooves as we trotted in the dry grass.

At the edge of the highway, we turned and opened a gate. As cars raced by, I heard a child yell. "Goodbye, cowboy," the voice called as it trailed into the wind with the growl of the truck's engine. And then it was quiet as we rode past the alfalfa fields. The moon had climbed higher over the dark peaks of the Pryors. And more stars, then more, until the Milky Way stretched over our heads, arching from the mountains behind us into the mountains before us. And the echo of our footfall rolled out to the hills. Bullfrogs croaked in irrigation ditches and crickets scraped their legs. As we turned down the dirt road, an ambulance siren wailed from the marina, then faded. The scraping of the crickets returned.

Indian paused, lifted his nose to the wind, and shook his bridle as he whinnied. We waited, each turning our ears to the hills. Then I touched his sides with my spurs and we rode home.

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## CHAPTER 5: ZERO TIMES ONE

Weeks on the range, followed by Sundays lingering in town, napping on the laundry-mat couch or shuffling along the aisles of the Food Mart behind a cart, put me to thinking about statistics, which I never fully grasped, even in college. But my thinking went like this: at the cabin or in a coulee of the range, the probability of meeting someone my age was zero. Sure, a safe zero; I always knew what to expect at home. But security is a dangerous siren that lured me home to sit on a porch and sip beers and watch my horses.

I remember a meditation by Franz Kafka titled "Rejection." When a woman passes a man, she means to say: "you are no Duke with a famous name, no broad American with Red Indian figure, level, brooding eyes and a skin tempered by the air of the prairie," and the man wishes to say: "...no automobile swings you through the streets in long thrusts; I see no gentleman escorting you in a close half-circle, pressing on your skirts from behind and murmuring blessing on your head..." So the imagined exchange ends: let us pass before becoming irrevocably aware of our faults. If I never asked a stranger to a dance, she could never say no. I would never be too short, my ears too big, my smile too crooked. I would never laugh and smooth my damp hands on my jeans and say nevermind. Forget it. Just forget.

Multiply zero by one and you still have zero. That much I'd gleaned from math. So one Saturday morning I found myself on the shoulder of the highway, knee-deep in

weeds, dragging a garbage bag. A handful of senior citizens, a bartender, and a motel owner marched along the roadside, like a band of hunters flushing game birds. We tossed crumpled beer cans and shards of glass into our bags. I had volunteered for the annual spring highway clean-up, organized by the Lovell Chamber of Commerce.

The morning started with us tying on orange safety bibs and taking a few white bags and munching a few doughnuts donated by the local 4-H girls club. Everyone nodded to each other, even to me. But we stood, mostly, in silence, chewing the doughnuts.

Then we walked, each person a stone's throw from the others. The sky was grey with last night's rain. The weeds poked through the grass combed over by dust and the wind of passing trucks. Every step, I'd bend down and lift a tin can or a broken bottle or a split jug with congealed pools of motor oil and cooking grease. Someone shouted, "Looks like Food Mart had a sale on Keystone Lite." We chuckled and carefully pinched shards of glass clinging to soggy labels.

Then the last bag was cinched and we wandered back down the way we'd come, looking at the weeds no longer sparkling with glass, and the rows of fat bags. And our work was done; no one shook my hand before they slipped into pickups and drove down Main.

I sat with the woman from the Chamber and she said, "Thanks," and added that it was uncommon for a government person to help out the community. I nodded as the wind swept the street and pushed an empty grocery cart into the center lane. "I guess you could hang around," she suggested. She told me the 4-H girls would have a pizza party in two hours, but then, as soon as the invitation was extended, she added, "No, you don't

have any business with girls." So I wandered down the street, hands in my pockets, the wind flapping the silkscarf into my face.

At the Food Mart, I read the posters taped to the sliding-glass doors. One mentions the dance in a place called, simply, "The Brick Hall." Another advertises the annual Mustang Rodeo and Poker Ride. There's a number, so I fish a dime from my jeans and walk down the block to Mustang Laundry.

A woman, the president of the Lovell Riders Club, tells me about the rodeo and that some volunteers from her group will show up around 3:00 to help clean up the arena. I have six hours to kill, so I drive home, along the highway, past the bags, past the fences, over the cattle guard, and to the cabin. And while I work on BLM paperwork, I am thinking about the morning, and thinking about Kafka. Who am I fooling? I want to meet rodeo riders my age, cowboys, not retired farmers who volunteer Saturday afternoons to paint rodeo stands. And I think this all afternoon, until I am back in my truck, pointed toward town.

The Lovell rodeo grounds sit on a hill, overlooking the town. There are no signs and I drive past it twice. A fence, sagging in the middle, corrals an arena of weeds. On one side is a rusty bandstand; on the opposite side are a few chutes propped against broken boards and held with twine. Paint-chips flake from the wood, while plastic bags bounce like tumbleweeds and snag on bent nails. As I wait, the sky darkens like a bruise. Raindrops splatter the windshield.

I learned from the club president that Lovell used to host one of the largest rodeos every year in the Basin. But in the last few decades, the highschoolers started going for football and track, or leaving after graduation. Down to Laramie for college, of further—down to Denver for jobs. The rodeo stopped, the club dissolved, the arena grew weeds.

If I squint into the blowing wind, I can picture a rodeo in Oregon, where a tilt-a-whirl spins and flashes over a throng of tourists, where children race in a game of tag, waving plastic guns, and a rodeo announcer welcomes everyone and thanks them and thanks the cowboys and thanks God for the good horses and fair weather. But now, in the drizzle of rain, the arena reminds me of the crumbling horse traps on the range. Like a ghost town, like an abandoned homestead, like a plow left in a field to rust. As if the world had simply stopped. Plates left in cupboards. Nails of boxes left in barns. Saddles left on racks where mice gnaw the salt from the leather

Once I was riding on the other side of the Basin, way back in the hills at least 50 miles from the nearest gravel road, across a plain broken in steps and benches. A moose trotted across the rabbitbrush. Moose sometimes travel from the mountains, across basins, to other mountains. Generally, they live near creeks, in marshes and willows taller than a cabin. As the sun blazed on the hardpan, cracked like thousands of smashed pots, as the dust rose with my trotting, as I sucked a pebble to cut the thirst, I followed the moose. Just as I had suspected, it cut down an antelope trail, into a box canyon, where water seeped from a spring and slipped through a wash of gravel and through the roots of cottonwoods. Here in this nook of the high plains, I found a corral and a barn and a two-story cabin. After watering my horse, I turned it into the corral to munch on the overgrown grass.

On the front porch, someone had taken off a pair of heavy boots. Mud still clung to the heels. Beside the screen door, the person had hung his work coat, leaving a box of matches and two bolts and three washers in one pocket. In the other pocket was a handkerchief. And from the mud, I guessed it must have been spring or late winter when the man trudged from the corral, through the rain in his wool coat, blowing his dripping nose with the kerchief.

When I walked inside, chairs had been pushed around the table, dishes had been stacked in the cupboard. And boxes of powdered milk and cans of soup and even a sack of flour the mice hadn't found. Yellow curtains hung beside the windows. On the wall was a calendar with a woman holding a bottle of Coca-Cola. It had been turned to February, 1929. Perhaps the man lost his farm in the Depression. So many folded that way. But why leave the boots? Why the jacket on the peg, waiting, as if the man would climb down from the upstairs' bedroom, cook a plate of pancakes, and then set off for the barn? Had he been sick? Had he died in bed? Or had a band of cattle rustlers or Arapahos ridden into his homestead? I glanced around the room for broken glass, overturned tables. But everything, even a box of buttons on a desk, had been left. As if the man might still return, as if he never left.

I poked my head into the bedroom, expecting to find a skeleton. But only a mildew-stained mattress, heavy with the stench of winterkill mice. So I rode out of the canyon, pausing to glance down at the house. It had yellow siding and white trim and a pointed roof, the type a man would build for a wife, not the squat log cabins of fur trappers or range riders. Had the wife ever seen this place? Did she wait in the East or in Germany or Ireland, while the man ranched and made this canyon ready? Had she died

here and the man, in grief, rode away, never to return? Whatever the true story, I could only say that the home had been left in February, 1929. In that place, it would forever be 1929.

This land we call Wyoming has always been a place for passing. The people who came criss-crossed the state, bound for further destinations. In the wagon ruts and piles of stones, it is a land of trails: the Bozeman, the California, the Emigrant, the Jim Bridger, the Mormon, the Oregon, the Overland, the Texas Cattle, and the Pony Express. Lewis and Clark blazed through the northeast corner in their search for the Pacific; Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce stumbled through the northwest corner as they fled the U.S. Army. Passing through. Moving on.

By the time Wyoming gained enough people to declare statehood, the buffalo herds had been slaughtered from several million to less than a thousand, the Indian wars had been snuffed, and Buffalo Bill had toured his Wild West Show in Europe, reenacting an already bygone era.

Yet in the 100 some years of Wyoming's statehood, its first generation of settlers left their marks, as clearly as the pueblo houses of the southwest. I wonder what it must have felt like for a Navajo to wander south and find the empty cliff dwellings of the Anasazi. The word "anasazi" translates loosely into: "those who were here before." And even if those first homesteaders, and ranchers, and cowboys of Wyoming had passed only a generation or two before, I could still see the world they left: the horse corrals, the cabins, even the rodeo grounds. As if to say, like the calendar in the empty homestead, it will always be 1929.

Thomas McGuane, author and Montana horse rancher, wrote that the history of the West has the "power to generate ghosts, and to haunt with a mythology of disappearance." He captures the feeling when he describes children rummaging through their grandparents' abandoned homes. "It's not so much the trunks and old newspapers as it is the suspicion that the old people may still be alive, that what is lost is the connection." And maybe that's why I wait in my truck while the rain rises in mist over the rodeo arena.

And maybe that's why a few old men eventually arrive with shovels and rakes and we spend the entire afternoon in the rain and wind, tugging weeds and pitching them into heaps to burn, and filling oil barrels with empty beer cans left by high-school parties. We stand and watch the yellow flames curl around the dead stalks and flicker in the rain, our faces muddy and glowing orange with the fire.

I can't say exactly what the volunteers sought for their labor that day. But I think it had something to do with the lease on the rodeo grounds that had been condemned. The land-owner wanted to tear down the chutes to make a pasture for his bulls. As I lean on a rake, a man in a sweat-ringed hat tells me this. He says the owner put his bulls in the lot and they tore up the old corrals. While the president of the Lovell Riders sought to reincorporate the rodeo grounds through the courtrooms, the old man in the stained hat opened the gates and ran off the bulls with a shotgun.

The owner marched up to him and yelled, "I'll have you arrested."

And the old man grins when he tells me: "So I jabbed that shotgun at that sum-bitch's guts and I says, 'Try and arrest me with your insides blowed out.' Real calm like. See." And the man pokes his rake into my side, just tapping like a teacher's scolding

finger. "I think he got the point," the old man chuckles. He adds that if the owner doesn't settle in court, things "might get a little Western."

But not everyone shares his defense of the frontier code. In the corner of the arena a group of three teenagers gossip. One girl, about 18, leans on her rake, smiling at a tall boy who talks about moving out of his house to live in Cody.

The boy, Brian Gifford, works for a dude ranch near Yellowstone park. "It ain't much cowboy," he says. "But the pay's better than here."

The girl pulls pink bubble gum from her lips and twirls it around a finger. Her strawberry hair presses against her shoulders, soaking the back of her t-shirt. Freckles dot her face and spill down the V of her collarbones, down. I try not to look. But the cloth of her shirt presses; her nipples, small as current berries, poked through the fabric. She's the girl I'd seen my first night with Linda and Ekwortzel. And I recall how she flipped sunglasses on her freckled nose and pouted like a movie star. Now she swipes her hair from her eyes and turns away from me, crossing her arms over her chest. "This work sucks," she says, and strolls away, not looking back, the way she had in the gas station.

"Don't mind Aubry," says Brian. Then he asks if I'm entered in the rodeo. And I admit no. And he tells me only a few kids in town actually ride. As one of the high-school rodeo team captains, he helped raise money to buy protective vests. Football team gets all the pads they need, he tells me.

We work until the rain beats against the fences and the wood gets water-logged and gates begin to fall. Puddles stretch across the arena like duck ponds. The heaps of weeds smolder.



When I drive home to my cold oven and cut open a can of soup and warm it and sip and listen to the drone of rain on the roof, I smile and think about statistics. I spin scenes in my imagination about talking with Brian more and hoping he'll suggest again I should ride in the rodeo. Maybe the red-head would find out that I was entered and would talk with me.

I elaborated these encounters until the next Saturday when I drove to the rodeo grounds, parked, and waited. The rain had passed, the sky hung low, like a flat slate of granite. The wind whipped the weeds and rippled the puddles. No pickups pulled beside me that day, nor even the next, and when I drove back to the cabin, I glanced at the red light of the answering machine, but it did not blink. And I slumped in my vinyl chair and slurped another bowl of soup, while the wind sucked down the stove pipe and coughed soot.

The next week, returning with groceries, I passed the rodeo grounds. Someone had locked a chain around the entrance gate.

Afternoon stretched into evening, when a pebble casts a shadow from one side of the road to the other. When the sun tips over the cottonwoods, and catches their seeds in the wind, turning them golden. And the heat hangs over the hay fields with swarms of mosquitoes hovering over puddles and crickets scrape their legs like violinists tuning before a performance.

I bounced down the road, thinking of the enchiladas that would melt in my oven. About the beer I'd open—how I'd wipe the foam from my upper lip and swallow, washing

down the dust behind my teeth. I'd tune the radio, catch a program through the waves of static. And that would be all, and enough.

As I rounded the hay-field's corner, I saw a pickup parked by the fence. A farmer sat behind the wheel, his elbow hanging out the window. So I slowed, trying to let my dust wake fall before I sped past. But as I slowed, I felt worse about simply passing without saying hello. I knew I should take the truck out of gear, let it coast toward the parked pickup, then just as it rolled near the rear bumper, cut the engine, let it slow until window aligned with window, then stop and push the transmission into first like setting a brake.

At gas stations, you'll find a postcard showing two trucks parked side-by-side. A rancher leans out from each window. "Wyoming's Information Superhighway," it reads. On back roads and on main streets, at gates, at railroad crossing, and along levee roads without names, people stop, as if a horseback—letting their horses catch their wind and shift in the saddle and look at the trail coming and going. In a truck, barricaded by steel and glass, it's easy to speed past another man likewise sealed inside glass and steel. It's not that way on a horse; and it's not that way on a backroad in Wyoming.

But hell, I can't say for sure. Maybe I was lonely. Maybe I really did want to speak to someone besides my horse and radio and beer. I had no idea what I'd say to this man, as my pickup slowed more, now only a few hundred yards away. I could still simply wave—a polite compromise. Yet the crunch of the gravel under the tires softened and I could see the man's shirt, the stripes, even the gleam of a pearl-snap on the cuff. He stared through his windshield, not looking around, not even glancing into his rear-view. Was he drunk or simply napping?

Suddenly, I felt foolish for stopping, yet my truck crept so slowly now that it'd be even more awkward to speed up and drive away. For some reason, I thought: one times zero always equals zero.

I cut the engine. "Afternoon," I said.

He turned his head slowly. Then he blinked. Then he nodded.

"Any trouble?"

He nodded again, then pointed his stubbled chin towards the windshield. "Been watchin'."

Then I noticed the wall of black clouds in the distance.

"Been comin' this way," said the man.

He drew a cigarette from a pack and tapped it against the flat of his hand. I pulled out my tin of Copenhagen and packed it. We considered the sky

"Yup," I said, spitting.

"Yup," the man said, blowing smoke through his nostrils. "I'm waitin' it out."

"No sense gettin' caught in the middle of the field," I added.

And so we sat, each in our trucks, me spitting, him tapping ashes from his cigarette, both of us watching the black clouds fan over the sky like ink spilled in water. And he told me he'd seen me driving before and I told him I'd been meaning to stop and we mostly just sat as the clouds seeped over the sun. Thunder rumbled down from the mountains. Then the wind suddenly swooped across the hayfield, splashing the first drops of rain. The man swept his hand out the window, gesturing to the field, and told me it once belonged to his father, but now it didn't. His family leased it for hay, he said. The

raindrops made dark splotches on his shirt. The dust on his hand turned muddy.

Lightning flashed. Then the thunder rumbled again.

The rain came down so hard, all of a sudden, the road became a river, sucking under our tires. It beat against the roof and splashed on the hoods, drops leaping so high it seemed to be raining both down and up at the same time. The man kept his elbow poking through the open window and I did the same. The wind slanted the water into the cab, soaking the dashboard, washing the dust and coffee stains. We talked about the upcoming rodeo.

I mentioned my jogging.

"Yup, my son rides broncs," he said.

I leaned further out my window. The rain streaked behind my ears and rushed down my neck.

"Real discipline, that kid," the man said. "Even got a reg-u-mented diet and does situps—every night." He flicked his cigarette out the window and it was swept into the current of the road. And he grinned, showing teeth that had probably been kicked in bar fights. "Yessir." He beamed. "My boy won fist place in Cowley."

"No shit?"

"Yeah," the man said, drawing another cigarette from its pack. "He and Bud go up to Cody. Rosco, my boy, he goes every couple days. Bud, I guess he goes whenever it suits him."

"Think I could get a ride with them?"

"Aw sure," he said.

The rain beat my hair flat. It soaked my lap, my boots, slipped down my shins, scrunching my socks. I leaned even further, like sticking my head under a shower nozzle. The man turned his engine and the truck sputtered. He folded his hands over the steering wheel, and stared into the rain. The drops slowly tapered and then the wind settled around our trucks and into the cottonwood leaves. Water gurgled in the ditch, as it spilled from the field.

"If ya don't like the weather, just wait five minutes," he chuckled. The gears growled as he shoved the truck into first.

"What's your number?"

"Merchant," he said. "Roger Merchant. It's in the phone book." Then he pulled his truck into the road and eased it through the puddles.

Hot damn, hot damn. I flipped open the phone book. Wait. Merchant...there were pages of Merchants, just as there were scores of Bishoffs, Giffords, Tillets, and Wilkersons. That year, 2,131 people lived in Lovell—about the same number of students that attended my college. The town began in 1890, the year before my college was founded. At school, I saw a picture of the red-stone building built by Col. Palmer, standing alone on the plains of Colorado, with Pike's Peak filling the background. Palmer saw growth; and now, miles and miles of suburbs and chain-stores clog streets around the campus. But here in Lovell, the population seems fixed. The names in the phonebook never change. Under each family name are husbands and wives and children grown and now parents. As if each name were a club, or a fraternity—a clan I could never gain admission to.

I find Roger Merchant's number then write it on a piece of paper. I look at the phone, then turn to my oven. Maybe I'll wait, I assure myself—maybe I'll let the farmer go home and tell his son about me so when I call, the son will say, "Yeah, I heard about you." I tell myself this for three days, always glancing at the phone, cradling it to my neck, then hanging up before the first ring.

Finally, when I call, an old woman answers. I ask for Rosco and she tells me to wait. And the seconds stretch along the crackle of the static. In Lovell, every number starts with the same three digits; you don't even have to dial them—just punch in the last four, like on a college campus.

Then Rosco's voice comes over the static. "Yeah."

Here's my rehearsed introduction: "Hi, my name is Ian. You don't know me... I live on the Pryor Range...I talked with your dad the other day..."

Rosco grunts into the phone. "Yeah."

"Well, he mentioned you rodeo."

Again a grunt: "Yeah."

Then I'm thinking: hang up. This is stupid. Why should a rodeo rider want to talk to a total stranger?

"Well?" the voice sighs.

"I was wondering if maybe I could see you ride sometime?"

I'm about to add that I've heard about his success in the Cowley rodeo, that I, too, want to ride broncs, but then he cuts in. "Sure," now talking like an old friend. "My fiancé and I are going to Cody in ten minutes—you wanna come with?"

"Perfect," I say. And slam down the phone, hop in the truck and drive 40 miles to a trailer house in Bryon. By Wyoming standards, Bryon is right next door to Lovell, although it takes me 45 minutes to get there, sliding around curves in my pickup, kicking gravel. To the east of Lovell are the Big Horn Mountains and to the west, into the Basin, are only four towns—Bryon, Deaver, Cowley, and Frannie—with a combined population under 1,300. Rosco tells me to turn at the store. I don't ask for specifics, because there is only one: a gas station on the main street, beside the Mormon church and across from a row of trailers. There's one stop sign before the next sign at the edge of town, allowing motorists to accelerate to 55.

At the trailer, Rosco's grandmother smokes an unfiltered Lucky Strike. She waves me in and I stand, hat in hand, waiting for Rosco to pack his saddle into a truck. The small room has imitation wood walls and smells of fried chicken. Then we are gone, racing down the highway. Rosco drives, while I press against the window. His fiancé, Angel, is wedged between us. We don't talk until the next town, Powell, where a few traffic lights blink yellow and we pull into a gas station. "Need smokes," Rosco says, as he climbs from the truck. He unfolds his long legs and pushes his black hat back on his pale forehead. His hair is dark against the white skin. Pock marks speckle his thin nose and cross his checks, below the shadows of his eyes. "Want anything?"

"Naw," I say. But when he returns with a pack of Marlboro's, he hands me a 32-ounce cup of Mt. Dew. I tell him he didn't need to, but he shrugs his lean shoulders.

"You're riding with us now." We speed along the highway, the beams of the headlights pushing through the darkness, over the plains of sage. Still, we do not talk.

We arrive in Cody, sliding down a back street to avoid the cluster of tourists plugging Sheridan Avenue. We slip into the back lot of the rodeo grounds. Rosco hops out, grabs his saddle, and marches to the chutes.

Angel and I stand by the arena fence. A few boys with ropes perch on the rail beside us, while Rosco shakes hands with other riders. I watch the contestants sit in their saddles, strapping on their chaps, then crushing nuggets of rosin on their thighs. They shove the saddles between their knees, making the rosin hot and sticky. It crunches like feet on gravel. Riders nod at Rosco. "Whadya git done?" they ask and Rosco mumbles something about first place and a third place last week.

Soon riders circle the arena and the announcer's voice booms welcome and thank you folks for attending tonight's performance and you'll see the tradition of the Old West as cowboys come from far and wide to test their skills against this fine stock. A lone horse gallops around the riders and the announcer talks about the spirit of freedom. Then the national anthem plays. Every cowboy clutches his hat to his chest. Old men in the stands hum the words. The horses paw and snort. And now it is time to begin.

Broncs rumble through the narrow chutes and cowboys slam gates and then lower bareback riggings onto the withers of the horses while they crash and crane their necks over the gates. Rosco helps a small blond kid cinch his rigging. The kid straddles the broad back of the horse, then shakes the rigging—a leather and rawhide handle like a suitcase. "Pull," he says, and Rosco tugs a latigo and tucks it under and through a steel D-ring. The rider slides the rigging up against the horse's withers, jerking the loose hide and mane, then pulls the slack one last time before he squats above the horse, flips his chaps



over his knees, shoves his crotch against the handle, then tucks his chin against his chest and nods. Two other cowboys in the arena snap open the gate.

As the horse lunges from the chute, the kid jabs his spurs over the horse's shoulders. The bronc dives, then launches, kicking and squealing. It arches its back, mid-air, then jolts both front legs into the soft dirt, coiling itself to leap again. The rider's head slaps the horse's back, jerked like a rag doll. His legs kick to the horse's shoulders, then snap back. Up and down, while one hand grips the handle and the other flaps in the night sky. The bronc twists. The rider flips, legs still kicking, arms flapping like featherless wings. The horse darts sideways. The rider falls through the air, then crashes into the dust.

As the horse gallops around the arena, the kid brushes the dirt from his hair and plunks his hat over his ears, raising one hand to the crowd and limping back to the chutes. The buzzer sounds and the announcer booms over the loudspeaker, "Oh, too bad. No time for that cowboy, but let's give him a big round of applause to take home."

One by one, the bareback riders flash in the arena, gold and silver chaps sparkling in the lights. The audience claps, while the announcer explains that a rider must stay on for a full eight seconds and that each horse gets 50 points as each rider gets 50 points. Each cowboy draws for stock, like a lottery—could get a weakling or a widowmaker. So the cowboys aren't really competing against each other; they pat one another on the back and say good ride and you sure tried. That horse was a bad one. When the kid climbs behind

the chutes, he helps another rider pull his rigging. "Git tough," he says, gritting his teeth like the rider. "Giv'r hell."

After the chutes have spilled the broncs, ropers sprint after a loose calf from a different end of the arena. The ropers work with trained horses, riding against a clock. The tourists clap when the announcer calls a good time. In the chutes, roughstock riders saddle their broncs. The bareback riders, finished for the night, help bronc riders pull latigos and set saddles over the horses' spines. Then Rosco calls to me.

I trot from the fence, scramble up the chute, and blink.

"Gimme a hand?"

Instantly I am on my belly, waving a wire rod between the poles, pointing under the horse's girth, fishing for the cinch. I catch the cinch ring and draw it through the cracks of the chute, slipping my fingers out before the bronc crushes them. It sways and snorts, while Rosco rubs its mane and whispers, "Easy fella, easy."

I slip the latigo through the cinch and loop it back through the d-ring of the saddle. Rosco pulls from one side, while I work the other, smoothly, so the saddle doesn't list. Then Rosco pulls the rein from the bronc halter. I hold the horse's head, while he draws the rein tight, stretching it to the saddle. From the front of the saddle, he places his fist, with the thumb extended—the same way you'd gesture, "Right on!" to someone. A fist and a thumb length—that's the normal length to measure a rein. If the horse ducks his head deep between his knees when he bucks, Rosco will measure another finger or two. "What's this one take?" he asks a cowboy setting his saddle in the next chute.

"Two fists."

Rosco whistles between his teeth and measures out more rein. By now, the chutes rattle with activity. Two riders enter the arena and the announcer introduces the pickup men and talks about saddle bronc, the classic event of rodeo. But our hearts pound in our ears as we pull the latigos tighter and the riders hop and hold their arms in front of them, bobbing up and down, visualizing a ride. Chute workers drop flank straps and hook them behind the saddles.

And the chute boss yells, "Screw her down boys, you're up!"

The metal gates clatter as a rider and horse burst from a chute, but we're still fumbling with the saddles. The buzzer sounds while the pickup riders gallop beside a bronc. As a cowboy limps across the arena, Rosco steps on his saddle. He rocks just a bit, whispering, "Easy, easy." Then he lowers his body, drops his long legs between the panels and the horse's sides. With one hand he grips the rein; with the free hand, he twists the stirrups into his boots. Then he carefully flips back his chaps, raises the rein, grits his teeth, ducks his head, and nods.

The gate snaps open and the horse rolls from the chute like steam breaking from a tea kettle. It twists and bucks, throwing its hind legs to the sky, while scooping its head into the dirt. Rosco floats over his saddle. His long legs swing like pendulums from the horse's shoulders, snapping back to the saddle. His spurs ring as they rake the horse's sides. He lifts on his rein, while the other hand jerks behind his hat. Lift and reach with the spurs. Every time the bronc's front feet smash on the ground, Rosco locks his legs into the shoulders, leaning back. Then the bronc bursts in the air and Rosco's tall form crunches over the saddle, legs back. As the horse moves, it's like a dance—forward,

stretch, back, arch, down, thrust. The dust billows around the horse and rider, casting a haze across the arena, suspending the motion of the legs and arms as they crash and fly.

Then the buzzer sounds. The two pickup men charge beside the bronc. Rosco hands one the rein while he leaps, both arms extended, circling the hips of the horseman, and swinging off the bronc, into the dirt. While the other pickup man leans over the bronc and unfastens the tickle strap, Rosco jogs back to the chutes.

The announcer calls the score, as the pickup riders haze the bronc into the pens. The audience claps. But they cheer for the high score, I think. How could they know what Rosco had done? Someone once told me that riding a horse ten times your weight and strength is like being a leaf in a rapid. When a rider fights a bronc, he'll tense. When he's rigid, he'll bounce from the horse's back like a board dropped from a building; but if he is limp as a towel, he'll move like the horse's tail. Drop a wet rag from a building. It won't bounce. Riding a bronc is not to over-power an animal, but to move as it moves. To let it carry you like water.

As the announcer boasted about the toughness of cowboys who had tamed the wildness of the West, did the tourists know that Rosco had simply learned to balance and tilt his chest, arch his back, and move his legs in time to the horse? Not slower, not faster. Exactly the same.

"Well, a little closer," Rosco says as he tucks the first-place check into his pocket. "If I can keep winnin' we'll have enough to buy a few practice horses. Git enough, contract out to a few smaller rodeos, then start travelin'." Angel nods, walking beside him, hands in the

front pockets of her sweatshirt. They don't look like a couple soon to be married. While Rosco hopped around the chutes, Angel sat by herself on a bench, bowed over, elbows on her knees, holding a cigarette. They hadn't said more than three words to each other the whole night. Hadn't kissed, never held hands. If I won the rodeo, I'd grab my girl and scream and jig in the back of my pickup. But now I trail behind Rosco and Angel as we cross the gravel parking lot as seriously as leaving a funeral. Yet there is something. Cigarette smoke rises above their heads, mixing in a blue haze and whipping across the moon. They walk the same, both long-legged, both square at the shoulders. Angel was once a swimmer, I think she mentioned that night—at least her body seems to tell that story—as she marches beside Rosco. They sway the same, both tilted forward. As Rosco tosses his bags into the truck, Angel starts the engine. Efficient.

Finally, driving down a back road of Cody, they start talking. "My damn tail bone still hurts," Rosco says.

"You're getting your legs to the front end good but a little late," Angel tells him. "And you're sitting a bit too high. I bet if you extended your rein arm and got under it more, your upper body wouldn't take such a beating."

I stare at Angel. She explains the details of Rosco's ride, as if her eyes had been cameras and now she replayed the images frame by frame. She talks of release time, and adjusting angles. Rosco listens. "Yup," he says, flicking his cigarette out the window. He nods slightly. "Yeah, I see whacha mean."

At the edge of Cody, we stop at Burger King. Perhaps the only Burger King in the entire state of Wyoming—at least the only one in the Basin. "Let's celebrate," says Rosco. I'm not sure if he's kidding, because he continues to perch over the wheel like a hawk.

When we pull in, though, and a girl's voice crackles over the order-microphone, Rosco cups his hand over his mouth and imitates the static.

"What?" the girl's voice says.

"That's two..." Rosco adds his static sound. "With fries...large...."

"What!" the girl says, now yelling into the mic, her voice higher, almost pleading.

"Orange..." Rosco grins at Angel.

She rocks back and forth, holding her sides, almost crying. She punches his shoulder. Her face is tomato red. And I can't help myself, either. I chuckle as Rosco pops his head out of the window and waves at the girl. She wears the standard brown uniform with the paper hat and the order headset. She shakes her head, shrugging, tapping her mic, while Rosco cups his hands and pretends to shout. He mouths the words, "Large Orange Fries."

The girl glances to the kitchen.

As Rosco pulls the truck alongside the window, Angel ducks her face into his jacket, her nose sniffing, her sides still shaking. "You bastard," she giggles. She winks at me.

Rosco rolls down the window, clears his throat and says in a voice as low and serious as a librarian: "Ma'am, I think there might be a minor malfunction in your microphone system."

The girl tugs her earring and glances from us back to the kitchen. There's no one inside, no manager. She doesn't know why the mic quit working and if we're mad and if she'll be blamed and maybe it's her first night at this job. She has braces and zits and rings

on each finger that she wrenches around and she shifts on one foot and says, "I'm like totally sorry. Really "

"Well," Rosco says, smiling at her, "we won't tell."

She flashes her braces.

"Bastard," Angel giggles into Rosco's ear.

Then Rosco orders two Whoppers for himself and fries and a large Pepsi and Angel orders and then he asks me. "Oh, I don't need anything," I protest, although I hadn't eaten since yesterday.

"Hell, you helped me with my saddle, I won, now it's my treat," says Rosco.

"You're riding with us now " As he hands the check to the girl, he grins. He's pushed his black hat back on his forehead. "There's a right way and then there's all the other ways. I only care about the right way."

We drive home, across the Basin, past the fields of alfalfa and fields of oil wells. As we pass, the smells waft through the vents. The alfalfa smells like wet spices and cut grass and turned sod; the oil fields seep the odor of sulfur and gases and fumes, smelling half like a field of well-lubricated tractors and diesel generators, while the alkali soil and green algae burbling from the pumps smell like the hot springs in Yellowstone—like melting salt, like rotting eggs.

And as we drive, Rosco and I shove the Whoppers into our mouths and Angel leans her head against his shoulder and we watch grasshoppers jump into our headlights and occasionally we pass a single farm house, but mostly just the fields and the golden bodies of the hoppers pelting the windshield. Rosco is right: this is the way. To hurl down the highway like characters of our own movie...Rosco will be the hero to win the

big rodeo, and Angel his pretty new bride and also his pillar of support, standing on the sidelines, in the shadows, secretly taking notes, analyzing each horse. She'd play both mentor and maiden. And I'd be the young side-kick. I'd be Batman's Boy Wonder.

Rosco would take me under his wing and teach me to rodeo. And we'd drive exactly like this: pockets filled with winnings, the night mist rolling from the new dew across the pavement, the juices of hamburgers dripping from our chins. Angel curled between us.

And the tires rolling, and rolling. Lulling us.



## CHAPTER 6: LESSONS

Rosco and a little boy perch on the corrals of the Lovell Rodeo Grounds. They swat horses through an alley with their hats. Rosco hops down to swing a gate, while the boy taps them forward, one at a time, into the bucking chutes.

Dennis Gifford sits a horse in the center of the arena. He cocks a straw hat on his silver hair, leans forward in his saddle, and watches his youngest son work the chutes. Dennis contracts bucking stock to the rodeos in the Basin. Normally, the rodeo will hire pickup men, but today Dennis will swoop in after each completed ride, catching the riders from the broncs. His youngest son, Eric, will have to take his job, pushing the stock, dropping tickle straps. He watches his boy work and spits and nods, slightly, almost unnoticeable.

His oldest son, Brian, has driven from Cody for the weekend. Brian sits with a handful of other teenagers. He'd help his little brother sort the stock, but he wears an ace bandage around his knee and a metal brace. Blew it out on a bull, he said. He's out for at least a month.

Rosco jumps from the chutes, trots over, and helps adjust the stirrups on his saddle. We have to shorten the buckles by three holes. I sit in it, toes in the stirrups, swiping my legs forward and back. "Ya want it smooth," he tells me. "Your knees shouldn't pop outta the swells." Dangling the bronc rein, he has me pull it while squeezing

the saddle with my thighs. I try, but it's about as easy as dancing with a dictionary pinched between your knees.

As Rosco squats on his haunches, his long, white fingers fiddle with straps and buckles. He adjusts small belts under the seat called binds and quarter binds. "How you tune your saddle should fit your ridin' style," he says, "but ride the hoss, not the saddle. Too many guys don't." He presses me back into the correct position. "Othawise you'll get dashboarded."

I absorb the details like a soggy sponge. My hands shake as I strap on the chaps. I won't wear spurs for this practice ride, but I'll crush a pebble of rosin on the inside of my knees, rub it against the saddle, make it gum-sticky.

My hands shake harder as I lower the saddle onto the withers of a black bronc. The teenagers have slipped off the fence and taken positions on either side of the gate. While Rosco and I pull the latigos, I think of Cody. I hear the announcer introduce the saddle bronc event. Applause. Cowboys buzz around the chutes. Then it's time—my turn to climb down onto the hurricane deck. I flip my chaps back, and step carefully on the saddle. The horse shifts. His muscles ball under the saddle. I ease each leg between his sides and chute wall.

The bronc rocks to the left, pinning my foot. Wood splinters, or maybe my bones. My hands shake too hard to hold the stirrup as I fumble it around my right boot.

"Don't forget to breathe," Rosco says. He measures my rein and hands it to me. I mash it into my palm. The bronc tilts the other way, shifting its weight onto its haunches. Each motion of Rosco's white hands sweeps before my eyes. I hear the guys gripping the gate, waiting for my nod. Little Eric brushes my back as he finishes setting the flank.

I squeeze my legs. Hard, I tell myself. Be ready. My thighs knock against the leather. The horse paws. "Make it fast," Rosco shouts. I lift my arm. Lean back. Rosco's hands push me back farther. "Stay back!"

I can't see the guys anymore, only the black mane of the horse. Chin tucked, I tell myself. I hear the wood snap again as the horse pins my boot. "All right," I yell. Then the nod.

The gate clatters, the bronc leaps. It slams the ground with both front feet and kicks. My shoulders snap forward. I wrench myself back. Running and kicking, the bronc bolts for the far fence. While my free arm flaps behind me, I tug on the rein, clamping my legs around the girth. The saddle bruises my thighs, jacking me up and up, until I sail out of the seat. But I pry on the rein, forcing myself down. Again I am catapulted. I fall through air and slam onto the cante. My tailbone hits. A stirrup bangs my knee.

Don't look at the ground, I tell myself. Don't.

Finally, the hoof-fall of Dennis' horse swoops beside me. Dennis is hollering, but I can only hear the thudding hooves. Without thinking, I twist, stretching my arms. I roll over Dennis' galloping horse, stumble to the ground.

The teenagers hoot. Rosco waves. I'm smiling like I can't stop. When the guys shake my hand, it's still damp and trembling.

"Talk about hangin' on," says a high-school girl. "You can sure hang on." She's about my size, maybe an inch taller. She has a wide, pale face, with dark eyes made darker by mascara. And black hair with chestnut highlights like a horse's mane. "Think I got that on tape," she tells me, waving a video camera.

She turns to Rosco. "Gotta car? I need a pop."

"No gas."

"Fuck it."

I offer my truck, although I don't know her. The only person besides me to drive the Grey Ghost was my girlfriend, Jennifer. A matter of trust. But I know that this Wyoming girl has probably hauled gooseneck trailers since the age of 12. If she can't baby a clutch, I don't think anyone can.

She reaches her palm.

"Don't need keys."

"Nice! Now that's a truck."

After the black horse is run back into the pens, I help Rosco uncinch his saddle and change the buckles. I want to wear the chaps all day. I like how the silver and metallic-blue fringe flashes in the sun. I like the dark coffee-colored patches of burned rosin on the thighs. When I walk, the leather snaps.

Again we lower the saddle, moving in tandem, not talking, dropping cinches, hooking, and pulling the latigos. As Rosco takes the rein, I hold the bronc's head straight so he can measure. Within seconds, he's resting in the saddle, feet pushed into the stirrups.

"Wouldya tape this ride?" he asks. "My damn sister ain't back yet."

I take the camera and press record as the bronc springs from the chute. The sun prisms in the lenses. Flashes of white, flashes of sparkling chaps, the focus blurs and corrects itself. And then Rosco is flying from the bronc onto Dennis' horse.

I keep the tape running as he walks, as his chaps snap and gleam.

When Rosco's sister returns, she hands Rosco a large Pepsi and me a Mountain Dew. "How'd ya know?" I ask.

"Just a hunch," she says. "Cowboys are so predictable."

She wedges herself between Rosco and me on the rail, while the sun warms our faces and the dust settles in the arena.

"Any other takers?" Dennis shouts.

The teen-age guys shrug.

The girl drapes her arms around Rosco and me. "Looks like I got the only two riders of the day," she laughs. We sip our pops and shake the ice as it melts, while Dennis unsaddles and little Eric sorts the stock back into the holding pens. As Brian talks with his dad, they both limp to the trailer—Brian stiff legged, while Dennis stoops forward, as if he still held a saddle between his knees.

Rosco rewinds the tape and watches it through the camera. "Who the hell took this?" the sister says.

"You weren't around, Jewel."

She laughs, tilting her head back, shaking her dark curls. Not a hard laugh, but perhaps practiced, as if she had read *The Sun Also Rises* in Senior English and wanted to copy Brit when she says, "Oh rot!" She leans to me, holding a cigarette.

"Gotta light?"

I flip my hands.

Rosco tosses her a lighter, then reaches for her smoke, takes a drag, and hands it back. "I'm gonna git me some stock," he says, exhaling. "Ever since I was Eric's age, I

wanted to be a stock contractor." Sunlight spills across the arena, while the boys shuffle in the dust, tossing a beer bottle into an oil barrel. It shatters and they smash another "When I get my stock, I'm gonna have clinics for all the young kids. Maybe these punks won't show, but the younger ones, like Eric. Seen that kid ride? He's gonna be a hand. Kid like that has time. Git up to my age, your bones caint take it. I just hope I can win enough money this season, then I could buy me two practice horses from Dennis, ride over the winter. Say, you gonna stick around this winter?"

"Yeah, course I am." I don't know if I'm lying. The sun shifts through the dust in rays. I taste dust and smell the manure and hear the flies. I try to remember the taste of lemonade. Tart against the tongue, cold running down, leaving sticky-sweet on teeth. I didn't know if Wyoming had always been this way or if I was remembering something from a June day long ago—maybe the years I peddled my bicycle with scraped shins, holding a stick over the handle bars, making the machine gun sound only boys can make. Or maybe it was earlier, and my mom picked heavy apples from the trees and my dad pushed the mower through the grass and I tinkled in the flowerbed.

"Winter is the key," says Rosco. "If my back heals, I can ride three, four times a week. I figure next season I can go pro. Buy my amateur card. Whadaya say, McC? We git you ridin' like you done today...maybe we can travel together "

"I ain't very good."

"Hell, you know horses. I seen that. Those colts just quiet down everytime you touch 'em. Like you put a spell on 'em."

I smirk.

"I'm serious. That Bud. He rides all right, but he's always shoutin'. Makes horses nervous."

"And girls," says Jewel.

We laugh, then sigh, then watch the dust settle. Jewel hasn't slipped her arm from my shoulder. The sun warms my cheek and her arm warms my back. Rosco rode good today I stayed on. He'll teach me. Jewel will travel with us, filming our rides for us to study.

Dennis rattles away in a diesel pickup and gooseneck trailer. Little Eric trots around the corner of the corrals on the tall, black bronc. He rides bareback, with a rope looped through the halter "Like my new hoss?" he yells.

"Isn't that the one I rode?"

He nods. "Dad just bought 'im at auction last week. Wanted to try it out before he'd let me ride."

"But it bucks," I say.

Eric grins. "Couldn't buck off a wet saddle blanket," he says, turning the horse, bumping it with his heels and trotting into the flare of the afternoon sun.

The two-way radio in the BLM truck beeps. "Wolf, this is Ekwortzel, come in."

"Wolf here, over "

"Yeah, what's your status?"

"Need a'git a filter for the CAT, run into town, over."

"Copy that. Might as well meet at Horseshoe, get lunch outta the way "

I turned down the volume and smirked. The road crew kept their radios tuned to the one relay station that bounced radio messages across north-central Wyoming. With the Pryors to the north, the BLM office probably couldn't pick up any more than static—probably as clear as the symphonies I'd listen to on the public station from Billings. The only other BLM truck in the area was mine, and I overheard each call. "Get lunch out of the way," had become a type of code for, let's knock off, park down at the Marina, eat some greasy hamburgers and watch the women dive off the dock. When he remembered, Ekwortzel brought his binoculars.

These lunches often took a few hours, and if a part needed to be fetched from town, that usually killed the rest of the afternoon. I'm not pointing fingers. Several hot afternoons, I'd ride down from the Dryhead and sit with Ekwortzel. He'd smoke, set his binoculars on the picnic table, and swipe his hair across his forehead. He was the kind of man who would bust his ass if he were paid by the job. But he wasn't paid by the job. Some mornings, he'd pull his roadgrader up to the cabin at 7:00 am, stomp in, make a cup of weak coffee. "Drop your cock and grab your socks," he'd say. "It's been light for three hours and you're still snoozin." I'd crawl out of my bedroll, throw on my clothes, and join him on the porch. Somehow sleeping late was terribly lazy in his eyes, but he didn't mind working an hour at dawn, taking an hour coffee break, working another hour, having a smoke while he stood in the shade of the grader and considered the tires. "Startin' to wear on the backs," he said. "Probably need to go into town soon." Driving to town wasn't any more labor than driving the back roads, but at least it was something different.

I'd also started to stretch my work days with small routines. In the mornings, I'd brew a pot of coffee, wander to the corrals to grain the horses, then drink a cup and



decide whether to ride or take the truck. When Indian needed rest, I'd drive out to a corner of the range, park, listen to the radio, drink my coffee, and watch for wild horses. As the morning warmed, they'd drift up from the valleys and graze on the flats. Focusing my spotting scope, I'd pick out any identifying marks—dun, lineback, tiger stripes, left hind sock, star and snip. I'd look at my notes. If the animal hadn't been checked off my list, I'd slip out of the truck with a camera. I photographed every horse, noted the birth of foals, identified the social groups.

After several weeks, I'd learned the general areas where each group roamed. I could drive 30 mph along the curves of Bad Pass Road, glance out the window, and spot a familiar band of horses. And I'd park and listen to the radio, take notes, or wander through the sage. During the hottest hours of the day, the mustangs would stand under pines, sleeping. Or they'd graze. When I first imagined bands of wild horses, I pictured them running, manes and tails streaming, duns, bays, grullas. But day after day, I watched them eat, drink, and sleep. When they moved, they filed in a line, the lead mare first, her young, then a few sub-dominant mares, then the stallion, plodding behind, tearing mouthfuls of grass, glancing every few minutes to make sure his harem hadn't drifted. When they slipped over a knoll, he'd whinny, trot after them, then drop his head and continue to graze.

When the sun burned against the sand, I'd walk down to the creek and soak my shirt. Checking the clock in the truck, I'd say "Damn, is it only ten?"

Sometimes I'd walk slowly towards a band of horses, pause when the stallion looked up, then step. If I moved quietly and directly, they'd graze. Horses are more afraid of what they can't see than what they can. If I wandered behind them, stopping

when they stopped, moving as they walked, I could close the gap. Several times I'd sit cross-legged on a flat rock, not more than the length of a pickup away. I could see mud clumps tangle their manes and scars dot their necks. I watched the new foals nod their heads under their mothers' flanks as they nursed.

In a way, it was similar to my morning ritual with Indian. When I stepped into the round corral, Indian would snort as if he'd never seen me before, and trot away. If I stood in the center, quietly, he'd eventually grow tired of running, flick his ears, and scan the corral for a resting place. I'd step back. He'd stop. I'd back again, opening a distance of safety. He'd inch forward, while I watched cumulus clouds bunch over the mesas. Then I'd begin to step closer, stop, and step again. If he tensed, I'd wait. Then step back. If he spooked, I'd wave a rope and make him run. He'd circle and circle, until he wanted to stop, then I'd back away. By the time my coffee cooled, we'd be standing, face to face, in the center of the corral. I'd rub his shoulder and speak softly. "Now why'd ya go run off like that, shitbrain," I'd coo. He'd tense every time I'd raise my hand, as if not seeing my hand, but the shadow of a hand that had beat him as a colt.

I'd begin to rub further along his body and pick up his feet and finally saddle him. We'd have a working relationship because each day, we'd know more of each other's temperaments. We'd circle each other and move together and when I'd walk away, he'd follow.

But the mustangs only tolerated my presence. And it was not my job to gentle them, but only to watch. Sitting on a rock, I began to wonder if I had any real relationship with them. I loved their dusty colors and long tails. It pleased me to know that they existed in the same way that I'm glad that there are still parts of Alaska where no human

has likely wandered. I've never been to Alaska, but in my mind it is vast, rugged, and wild. Just as the mustangs roamed freely. If I had a relationship with either Alaska or the mustangs, it existed only in my mind, in the values I held.

One Wednesday, I received a call that a young stud had broken through the range fence and was last seen grazing beside the picnic tables of Horseshoe Marina. Linda and I drove out, walked the fence, and found an open gate. We then circled back and began to walk towards the horse. "We'll just go easy," she instructed. "Let's not stress him any more than need be."

The small dun stud glanced at us, then ran. We jogged after it, waving our arms. It clattered down a gully, but cut back, galloping around a hill and stopping at the same place we'd found him. We tried to push him again, and once more he galloped around us. Rocks stubbed our toes, juniper branches whipped our faces. We panted and blew globs of dust from our noses. We tried to stretch a rope from the gate, forming a funnel for the colt to run into. But he circled that, prancing up the shale stone, snapping his tail.

Linda crested a hill and pointed. We'd lost the mustang in one of the folds of the canyons. I waved back and jogged down a draw. After an hour, we spotted each other again. "He ran to the back of that butte," Linda said, sucking for wind. "Any ideas?"

"We need the saddle horses. And maybe some ropes."

"Out of the question," she said. "Not after the last fiasco."

"Maybe he'll wander back at night," I suggested. But we both knew that the summer heat had dried the grass and the mustangs had grazed it to the roots; on the

campground side of the fence, the stud had plenty of ungrazed bunchgrass and water. We gazed across the rolling hills and angles of rims, watching the stud wander toward the campers, tugging mouthfuls of the yellow grass.

We returned to the truck, drove back to the cabin, and loaded our horses into a trailer. At the campground again, Linda led Mouse to the open gate, then hid behind a rock. I rode around the butte to flank the mustang. He glanced up, grass stalks dangling in his mouth, and trotted away. I followed. For the first time, I felt like a cowboy again. We had a job to do and my horse moved briskly across the grass. My heels burned with blisters and I thought, you can't work a horse unless you have a horse. It has to be equal.

Linda had contracted an old-time wild horse specialist from Nevada to visit the Pryors and assess the potential use of helicopters to gather the mustangs. In his report, he wrote: "Helicopter gathers are a proven technique that has worked to gather in excess of 100,000 wild horses and burros in varied topography." When I visited with him at my cabin, he said, more directly, "The old way is hard on saddle horses, people, and wild horses. It just ain't worth breaking your neck."

An older Nevada mustanger, Parley Paskett, claimed, "Using helicopters today to run down wild horses removes both the thrill and sport of their capture." And I believed him, as Indian ducked down the wash and jumped a bramble of sage. My boot heels slammed into the stirrups, my back twisted, and in one smooth motion, my hips shifted and met the swing of the saddle. Gravel rattled down the trail. Indian's sides heaved and plunged through a wall of juniper.

I thought of the movie *The Misfits*, where a mustanger buzzes his plane over a family of fleeing horses, siren wailing, steering them onto a dry lakebed where a truck

paces beside them, accelerating. Two men stand on the flatbed, swinging ropes, then tossing them over the necks of the exhausted horses. Then I thought of Parley Paskett and how he galloped after a stallion, threw his riata, and "watched the loop sail out over the long space...The loop hung in the air—got smaller and smaller. Finally, when it was just barely large enough to allow the stud's head to enter, the loop settled over his head and immediately cinched tight..." With a sixty-foot rope, the "long space" was most likely close to fifty feet. Paskett's rope was both a practical tool and an expression; he could cast his rope as deftly as the fisherman casts a fly.

Indian clipped a rock. His legs slid from beneath us, scrambling, rolling more rocks. We tumbled forward. A boulder slammed against my knee. The sky spun. With a cloud of dust, we lurched upright, still running. Riding after the mustang, I was only as fast as my horse, only as sure-footed as his hooves. I did not hover in a helicopter, or bounce behind a truck's wheel. A helicopter is a "proven technique," efficient, and will not shatter a knee-cap. The most practical tool, when there is no joy in a horse's escape.

The mustang fled down the gully, spotted Mouse grazing alone, and whinnied. Mouse called back. The dun ran to him, slipping though the open gate.

Later, when we returned to the cabin, I sat with Ekwortzel on my porch, sipping a beer. Ekwortzel stared at the old wooden corrals. "Wasted one day chasing a horse, eh?"

My thighs ached. My knee swelled like a ripe plum. "Yeah," I said. "Ran the leather off my boots."

He shook his head slowly. "A man a'foot is no man a'tall. One good horse and a rope, I coulda got it done in ten minutes. But they didn't ask me."

Little Eric and I swing onto our horses and ride down the dirt road, following the tracks. We trot, the yellow mare I've borrowed making quick, short strides, while Eric's tall black stretches its legs easily.

We pass the tail of the riders before the first check-point. For five dollars, I have bought one poker hand. At the first stop, Eric and I lean down in our saddles and pull a playing card from a pile. "Whadya git?" he asks.

"Four'a clubs."

"Mine ain't much better."

Then we ride again. Some of the adults now walk their horses. Some stop for water. Today, at the annual Lovell Mustang Poker Ride, we'll draw one card at each check-point and we'll trot away, dust rising behind us. It's not a race. We'll only ride a few miles. Whoever draws the best hand wins a prize. The proceeds support the Mustang Days Rodeo. Eric and I won't win. We're not here to worry about poker, but to ride.

I watch the tall black's front legs kick ahead. I like to see the flash of the new shoes and know that I set them and that this horse's movement is long and natural and the boy on its back rides well.

As we pull into the lead, we wave. So long, we'll see ya. Our horses prick their ears and move, swifter, as if knowing that they are at the head of the herd. Perhaps some ancient instinct rises from their lungs, as they clip faster and longer and smoother. We wave and smile.

"You'll run the bottom of them horses out," someone shouts.

"Slow down," hollers another, raising a fist. "You're kickin' up dust."

We trot quickly, our hips pumping as we post, our reins patting the horses' necks, the metal shoes clicking. They can't catch us.

Dropping into a wash, we ride up to a small girl on a sorrel horse. "Oh great," says Eric. "Not Heather."

"Hey," I yell to her. "Wanna ride with us?"

"Aw, she'll j'st slow us down."

"No I won't," she says, wrinkling her sun-burnt nose. As we trot, she leans forward, the reins in her teeth, and pats her horse's neck. "He's a barrel horse," she says, balancing in the saddle by squeezing her knees. Her corn-silk pony tail flops on her back. Then she squints at us from under her black hat. "Wanna race?"

She spurs her horse. Eric follows. The yellow horse breaks into a gallop. The hooves slap the hardpan. We shove our arms over the horses' necks like jockeys. The manes stream. We spur and grin, catching noseums in our teeth. We're racing, side-by-side, charging down banks and splashing across a shallow ditch. Our horses seem to pull energy from an untapped reservoir. It's a well know fact that most saddle horses can't out-run a mustang. Somehow they can't leap sagebrush or dive down arroyos as the wild ones. But for centuries, domestic horses have been known to escape into a wild herd and somehow they change, carrying their tail higher, flaring their nostrils, snorting. It's difficult to ever catch them again.

We race across the alkali, our horses lathered white. They push and push themselves. And we float above them, barely touching the saddles to the same rhythm that their hooves barely touch the earth.

When horses open themselves, the rider has tapped into the wildness from their mustang ancestry. I've seen so many horses boxed in stables and ridden in tight circles and when they break into a gallop, the rider stiffens and says, "Whoa, easy now." Out of all the lazy horses, and jugheads, and those burned out on endless circles, it's rare to find one dig deeply. Cowboys give the highest praise to one who has "heart" or "try." Wyoming writer Mark Spragg describes the experience well:

I felt the rare ones reach exhaustion and reach past it to drain a last reservoir of spirit, dammed with horse pride, and when it was drained I felt them reach again and use its muddy bottom to fuel themselves, and once sat a horse that trembled and staggered and had no more to give.

Now, racing across the sage, our horses run for themselves. We drop our reins. "Take us," we laugh. Show us.

"C'mon slow pokes!" Heather giggles.

My yellow horse reaches, her legs buckle, she swoops forward, then catches herself. She slows. Heather grins, spurs her horse again, then vanishes into the dust. Straining her neck, the yellow pushes after Heather's sorrel. Then we slow, back into a gallop, into a lope, into a trot. Eric's black appears in the dust ahead. He can't catch her either.

"Guess she didn't slow us down."

Eric moans. "Dang."

As we turn down the street, about a mile from the rodeo grounds, we let our horses walk. They step slowly, still breathing hard, but their ears flick, as if hoping we'd suddenly spur them for a second race.



When we reach the arena, we draw our last card. "I got nothin'," says Eric. I show him my cards. "You got worst than nothin'."

In the distance, the first of the adult riders appear through the heat waves. Most walk their horses, chatting with neighbors, swiping bandannas across their foreheads or gulping canteens of water. When they arrive, they'll barbecue hot-dogs, and tell jokes that start: "a dog walked into a bar..." and ask about new babies and children and marriages gone belly up (*I dunno—think she had an aunt in Fort Collins, or was that Fort Worth?*) while smoke curls from the briquettes and men in polyester shirts lift hoods of new trucks (*I dunno—they say that new power-stroke has more torque than the Cummins*) and the old women gather and nod like a roost of sleeping hens. But this afternoon belongs to Heather, Eric, and me. We are the real riders, we secretly believe, as we lead our horses to the irrigation ditch.

We cup our hands, ladling warm water onto the lathered chests of our mounts. We wet them and rub them and drape our sweaty arms around their sweatier necks, until our shirts are soaked and shining with salt. As we comb their manes, they rub our shoulders with their soft muzzles, blowing. They nuzzle us, tickling with their whiskers and we giggle and pat them with kisses. As the afternoon turns the sky honey, the insects hum. Cottonwood tufts float in the air and catch in our eyelashes. And we dunk our dusty faces in the ditch, sucking the green water and spitting it at each other and at our horses. The dust rolls down our arms in amber streaks. Little Eric's face is also streaked. So is Heather's. Smearred with the warpaint of our tribe—the horse racers. We leap onto the bare, wet backs of our horses, cluck to them with our horsetalk, and ride back to the crowds of adults.

When I return the yellow mare, the owner asks, "How'd she work out?" I slip off her back, the inside of my thighs warm and damp and covered with tiny yellow hairs.

"You were right," I say. "She likes to move."

He takes the lead rope. "This horse is 22 years old. Too old to use anymore. But maybe this ol' gal still got some bottom."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I had no idea."

He grins, before leading the yellow mare back home. "Son, I never seen her look so good."

The mare glances at the tall black and whinnies.

## CHAPTER 7: THE OTHER SIDE OF SATURDAY NIGHT

When we slide through the gate, two old women at the ticket booth wave. I wave back. Rosco parks his grandma's Cadillac with the rows of trucks behind the stock pens. His cousin, Bud, climbs out of the passenger seat and stretches. Like Rosco, he wears a black hat and a pearl-snap shirt, but he's a few inches shorter, a few inches wider around the waist. He has a round, freckled face, copper as a penny, with a broad smile. The kind of smile that makes mothers hide their cookie jars. Or their daughters.

Across the arena, people file into seats, slurping on pops and unstrapping cameras from their wrists. Groups of men have arrived hours before (buddies from the gas station, feed store, or fabrication shop). They've backed their trucks against the fence, dropped tailgates, and opened coolers packed with beer. I hardly recognize the arena: the chutes have been mended and whitewashed. The high-school students have drawn stores' names on cardboard, selling advertisements to help buy new rodeo equipment. What weeds had been missed by our rakes have now been smashed into the dust by the cars and crowds and children riding their horses.

The Lovell Riders have backed a trailer near the chutes and cowboys file in with checkbooks to pay entry fees. Rosco's mom takes my check and smiles her row of cigarette-yellow dentures. She hands me a white paper square with "Original Coors" and the number ten written in red. On the counter, a wooden box displays seven silver

buckles. One has a gold figure of a bronc rider and the engraved words: "Saddle Bronc Champion, Lovell Rodeo." It gleams in the sunlight that slips through the narrow door and between the dusty jeans and starched shirts of the cowboys. I shuffle out as more contestants wedge into the trailer. Some borrow money from each other. Some use the shoulders of the cowboy ahead to scribble wadded-up checks they'd pulled from boots.

As Rosco and I walk to a pop booth, we pass a Dodge truck with a saddle in the bed. It's new, polished, and shines like a hazelnut. The engraved fenders read: "Basin Rodeo Circuit Champion." I whistle through my teeth. Rosco nods. "I'm gonna earn that sumbitch."

Bud passes us, holding a beer. "It ain't cold, but it's wet," he says, smacking his lips.

People glance at us and smile. I walk bow-legged, still sore from the practice ride. The number pinned on the back of my shirt flaps. In Oregon, my family watched the St. Paul Fourth of July Rodeo each year. I'd always wanted to walk like the cowboys, spurs dragging lines in the dust. You can tell a cowboy's event by the spurs: a bronc spur curls down with a small rowel the size of a buttercup; a bareback rider's shank pokes straight with a rowel the size of a four-leaf clover; the bull rider's shank angles in so they don't have to turn their toes as far out to grip. A small wire locks the rowel from spinning, also helping their grip. And ropers, they wear silver spurs, lighter weight, with a shank that often dog-legs up. These small details go unnoticed by the tourists, but the cowboys, they know. The curl of a hat, the gleam of a spur—these details sort the ropers from the roughstock riders. As a kid, I always wanted to wander the St. Paul rodeo grounds and have cowboys nod, knowingly.

Little Eric trots up on his tall black. "Wanna ride?"

I step into the stirrup, twisting behind the saddle, and Eric taps the horse with his short legs. We ride and wave and people snap our picture. "Sure is a mean ol' bronc," Eric teases. But I'm smiling so hard my cheeks hurt. Little girls point cottoncandy-sticky fingers. The men on the tailgates chuckle and tip their beers.

"Wanna run?" Eric asks.

My butt slides back and forth behind the saddle. "Unt-uh," I say.

He slaps his reins. The horse's hindquarters bunch and then kick. As the horse bolts, my jeans slip. I can't squeeze my legs into his flank; I can't grab little Eric by the waist. The horse jumps. The slick black hair slides through my legs. The ground hits fast.

When I stand, a hot pain shoots up my leg. I try to step but my ankle buckles. I curse under my breath, dusting my shirt and watching little Eric's body bobbing with the bucking black horse.

Back at the chutes, I sit in the dirt with the other riders. The pain in my ankle boils into my head. My face must be white—white blips float in the air, in any case. "Take one a' these," says a teenager with blond hair as he hands me a brown plastic bottle with white pills. He's the bareback rider Rosco helped in Cody.

"Sheee-it," I say. "I gotta ride. These buggers 'll knock me out."

He shrugs. "Pain will knock ya out too. Take 'um after, then."

I agree and we sit with our gear. The kid wears baggy, acid-wash Levi's with the top button undone and a string of athletic tape looped through his front beltloops. His t-

shirt displays the logo of a surf wax company. It reads: *Mr. Zogs Sex Wax, the best for your stick.*

"Surf much?" I ask.

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Nevermind."

Rosco rechecks his saddle while other riders stretch and roll athletic tape around their wrists, elbows, ankles. They haul braces from their bags and bind knees, while some help pop dislocated shoulders back into place and others smear Ben Gay over torn ligaments and others buckle kidney belts around cracked ribs. One rider searches for a knife so he can hack off a cast. "Four ta six weeks, Doc said—hell, two weeks, close enough." All lean every few seconds and spit.

"Help me set my riggin'?" the blond kid asks.

Sure. Just like Rosco in Cody.

When the rodeo starts, the Rodeo Queen and the Riders Club presidents and the Sheriff's Posse and the mounted cowboys, the barrel racers, the pickup men, the arena judges, and all the loose kids with horses (begged, borrowed, or stolen) lope into the arena, curling like a question mark. The Queen races ahead, holding the American flag. The red and white stripes flutter behind the sparkle of her pink sequins. She continues around the railing, until the entire troop of riders forms a line across the arena, facing the grandstands. When the last little girl nudges a stubborn horse, the queen kisses her horse into a full run. She leans over its neck, flapping her reins. As she passes, the men remove their Stetsons. She gallops so fast the flag, hooves, mud chunks, and sequins blur. Then her horse charges the line, slides to stop, and spins around to face the crowd. The

audience stands, even the cowboys behind the chutes. Everyone places a hand on their heart and we sing the Anthem.

I scan the rows of faces. Every man, woman, grandma, and dog have come for the annual rodeo. The blond kid stands beside me and belts the words, most of them correct. At one point he sings: "so gal-an-tree screaming." He lives in Cody, but will start college in Laramie. That's the town he's entered under on the program. Other riders have driven from as far as Billings and Roundup, Montana. Perhaps I'd be the farthest, from Oregon, but Rosco has entered me from Lovell. I'm glad he did.

As the grand entry clears the arena, the roughstock riders burst into motion.

The chute boss yells, "Screw 'em down boys!"

I bend over the bareback horse and tug on the kid's rigging. "More," the kid say I tug again. "'nuff." He jerks the latigo through the d-ring and crosses the tails around the rigging.

Before the kid slides onto the horse's spine, he asks, "Ever seen them shirts that say *No Fear*? Bullshit. Ya always gotta have fear. That's the whole point." He crunches his crotch over his rigging handle, grits his teeth, and nods for the gate.

He rides well for the first three jumps, but weakens as the horse jerks his arm. His head slams into the horses' flank. He tumbles over the horse's rump and lands, head first, in the dirt.

When it's my turn, the kid pulls my saddle, helps measure the rein, and then slaps me on the back. "Mark 'im out," he shouts.

The bronc shifts between my legs.

Behind me, Dennis Gifford adjusts the flank. "This 'un comes out fast."

The chute boss: "Let's go, ladies!"

A bronc kicks the chute. Gates rattle.

"Let's go ladies!"

I twist my arm, tightening the bucking rein. The bronc snorts. This is no practice horse, I tell myself. Be ready. Be ready.

The announcer says my name. "Outta gate three, a hometown fella—and would you look at that purty red rein—that kid has style, ladies and gentlemen..."

"Let's go!"

I mash my hat over my ears with my free hand, then raise it and nod. The bronc bolts, fast, as Dennis promised. It ducks its head, jerks my arm over the saddle. My knuckle scrapes across the leather. As the horse rears, my body slams into the swells. I try to pull myself back into the seat. By the next jump, I land over the swells, and by the next jump, I hit the horse's neck. It happens with as much force as being sucked down a waterfall. As I bounce over the horse, in the furry of motion, everything stops. I hang in the air like one of those cartoons that runs off a cliff but doesn't fall until they look down. Rearing, the horse almost flips backwards, catapulting me. I spin, my legs kicking, as if to swim from the bronc. I somersault several times. But when I land, I jump to my feet, and tip my hat to the horse. The crowd roars with laughter.

"Yes indeedy, ladies and gentlemen...what style..."

When I sat behind the chutes, listening to the clanking of bull bells and plopping of manure and the streaming mouthfuls of Copenhagen, my ankle began to throb. Bud had made a



decent ride, which he demonstrated by jumping and kicking his spurs into his back pockets. "Like kickin' yourself in the ass," he said. "That's how it feels."

Rosco wore the silver buckle with the gold rider and the word *Champion*.

The kid handed me his pills. "Take two, they're small."

Bud handed me a beer. "This'll help. Hell, best thing, smoke a bowl. I tell you what, that shit will just melt that pain, like butter, man."

"Shut up," said Rosco as he strapped the cinch around his saddle. He jerked the buckles and snugged them. "You some kind 'a hippie?"

"Grow up," snorted Bud. "This ain't the sixties anymore. And you ain't no role model. Hell, don't tell me about the crank you'd take on the graveyard shift and when we had to drive all night to Gillette."

Rosco jerked the zipper of his gearbag. Rosin powder gummed the teeth and the harder Rosco tugged, the more the zipper stuck. "Fuck it," he said, shoving his chaps into the bag. "I'm done with that shit. I ain't sixteen, I ain't houndin' pussy, and I sure as shit ain't no dope-headed half-ass bronc twister just fallin' off every damn knot-head horse."

"I covered my horse today."

Rosco slung his saddle over his shoulder. "Yeah, you covered it, all right. But there ain't no buckle for second place." He spit then limped back to the Caddy

Dust sifted from our hair and down the tails of our shirts. We spit dust and tasted dust and washed it with beer. Someone pinched my butt. When I turned, I saw the young woman from the Food Mart, the bag girl with dyed hair. Instead of the red apron, she

wore tight jeans and a thin pink blouse, knotted, exposing her belly-button. It had been pierced by a silver ring with a ball-bearing. "Like it? I saw one just like it on MTV, had it done in Billings last week. It's *the bomb*."

"Yeah," I said. "It's all about ball-bearings these days."

"Huh?"

"Nevermind. Hurt much?"

"At first, yeah. But I'm thinkin' my tongue next—I hear that hurts the least."

"But why?"

"I dunno. It's cool...and different. This place needs to wake up. I swear it's like everyone's asleep. I just wanna be puttin' groceries in someone's bag, then flash my tongue ring. I'd love to see the expression on their face." She had yanked her hair into a pony-tail and I noticed a line of rings running up her ear like shower-curtain hooks.

"Besides," she said. "I hear guys like tongue rings 'cause it gives great head."

She slipped her hand into my back pocket. "You goin' to tha dance?"

Bud walked around the corner of the corrals, packing his gear. "Hey, want you to meet my newest pal—he's gonna be a kick-ass bronc rider."

"Oh we've met," the young woman said, cooing in my ear. She leaned her hair-sprayed bangs into my neck and whispered, "Save a dance for me." As she strolled away, she twitched her butt, more than likely throwing a disc completely out of whack.

"Oh, you've met." Bud chuckled, poking me with his elbow. "But then—who hasn't? She's a wild one. Knows how to treat a rider—win, lose, or draw."

"What's her name?"

"Jane."

"Like Calamity."

"Exactly."

Inside the Diamond J, the kid and I pushed through the crowd. The tailgate men had drained their coolers long before the rodeo ended and had bunched into the bar like cattle to a salt lick. Some danced to the jukebox, others wandered, holding at least two drinks. A big biker slid his oily arm around me. Tattoos had blotted, red and blue, splotched like wet newspapers. "Ohhhh, hi Jimbob, have another drink on me." The kid and I drank four beers before we could elbow against the bar. More drinks appeared next to our line of empties, and more, until the beads on the fresh bottles evaporated before we could reach to them. When I tipped back to find the bathroom, my head flew across the room. I held the bar, while I reeled my brain back. Then I teetered through the crowd, where the biker latched me around the neck. "Jimmbob, you rode so good today, lemme buy you another."

Still aimed for the bathroom, floating through the pack of dancers, I was jerked off my feet by a middle-aged woman with big glasses. They were maroon or pink, depending on which way she twisted her head in the light and when she did, her neck slid nearly half way around as she peeked at me sideways, the neon flashing in her lenses like the eyes of an electric owl. She hooked into me and spun.

"Careful—I think my foot's busted."

"Oh, I admire you rodeo cowboys—you're so tough!"

I squirmed out of her clutches and fell towards the door, crashing into a small woman, almost tipping her like a vase of water. She had thin shoulders and straight, mouse-colored hair, but her nose was too large for her smallness—it bent or swelled slightly—as if it had been broken more than once. We danced (mostly because I couldn't stand, also because the middle-aged woman scanned the room for me with her blazing beacon glasses). As we swayed, I pressed her small shoulder-blades with my dusty hand. Her skin was pale and smooth as a seashell, and if I held too closely, I might crush her. Her knees wobbled and her warm whiskey breath bubbled into my neck. "I think I got a picture of your ride," she said, not shouting over the music and din of voices but somehow making her words flutter into my ear. She went to all the rodeos, she said, as a professional photographer. Or at least someday professional.

The other dancers blurred into the neon shadows. Beer glasses clinked and some shattered when bumped by elbows. She said her dad also rode rodeo and had worked on the horse range. When she pointed at two old men, I recognized them from the old round-up photos in the cabin. The one she called her father was a large, dark Indian. His name is well-known among wild horse specialists, and well respected. I've heard one wrangler say he'd "follow that man to hell." I would see him several times that summer at rodeos and he'd notice me helping the other riders and he'd laugh with Dennis. "Makin' that kid a hand, eh?" But that first night in the Diamond J, he sat at the bar and drank while his buddy weaved over to us and cut in for a dance. Leaning against the jukebox, I watched the man circle his arms around her, tight as a latigo. He pressed her face into his shoulder as they turned; I could not help but notice his arms slipping down to her back pockets, and the way he pulled her waist into his buckled-old-man hips. Grating, gripping,

wrapping himself around her, until all I could see were her pale arms moving in and out of color between the neon and his shadow. Her arms, when they flashed, were pale as alabaster.

The man at the bar, his skin was dark as a used saddle. I wondered if he was her dad by birth or marriage or pet-name. Maybe he found her, a runaway in a bus station, and toted her to rodeos and helped her with his rodeo winnings. Or maybe the purse I uncovered in the cabin had belonged to her mother. Maybe a divorce. The young woman had stayed. And maybe her nose had been broken by a horse. Happens a lot. But if she was my daughter, drunk, stumbling, and my buddy pawed her back, tracing the curve of her bra, I would...I don't know...other people's business, I told myself, stepping into the gravel parking lot.

The dance at the park was dark, lit only by a string of Chinese lanterns. Someone had tripped over a power cord or spilled a beer into the breaker box. Bud glanced up from a plastic picnic table, sitting beside Calamity Jane. "There's some fine women here," he said, trying to whisper. As I watched the forms of people dance, hip-hop music thumped from several speakers. The moon had risen over the park gazebo. The codeine had seeped into my blood, mixed with the beer, and made the dancers swirl into patches of pink and white and red. They shifted, blinding for an instant, then blending into the night sky, leaving traces like the wavering shadows you see when you stare at a flame.

About one o'clock, the sprinkler system, on its automatic timer, popped from the grass, shooting streams of water, sending everyone screaming. The dancers cleared to the

perimeter, huddled together, and compared degrees of saturation. As the people chattered, the codeine pooled over my eyes. Wandering, I searched for someone I knew to ask for a ride back to the rodeo grounds.

Someone grabbed me from behind, circled my waist with large arms, and bit my shoulder. "Wonderin' where the hell you'd got to," said Jewel as she snatched my hand and dragged me into the spray. We danced. Her shirt soaked into mine. Cold seeped into me and dulled my nerves, sinking down my spine to the ember of pain in my ankle. Her big shoulders steamed. She squeezed and pressed my shivering lips closer to her warm cheek.

Several couples slipped on the grass. Arms reached for arms. More bodies fell, struggled in the puddles, smeared slick in mud. Globbs flew. Girls squealed. Boys grabbed each other in headlocks. As we retreated, I bumped into the middle-aged woman from the bar. Water had misted under her glasses. "Like dancin' with 'er better than me, do you? Too old for you, eh?" Her hand locked my arm like a talon, as she dragged me back into the mud.

Rosco wanted to leave. He'd been circling the park for the last hour, scanning for Angel. But she had left with his mom after the rodeo. "Tell him, wouldya," she'd asked me. "I just don't want to fight about it."

"About what?"

"Oh, you know. You go out with someone and you get to that point where you're always checkin' in, but it gets so it ain't just 'Honey, I'm goin' home now,' but it's like askin' permission."

"You'd rather ask permission than forgiveness," I said. "No, wait, you'd rather ask forgiveness than permission."

"Neither," she said.

Angel smoothed her blonde hair, tucking the curl behind her ear. With her hair back, her face looked rounder. She had circles under her eyes and her cheeks, at least in the moonlight, looked like cookie dough. "Yeah," she said. Her forehead wrinkled as if about to say something about love and forgiveness. "Yeah," she said and walked away

I'd forgotten to tell Rosco, codeine stuffing my head like cottonballs.

He walked quickly through the crowd, stepping in puddles and on empty beer cans. His white hands flashed. His black hat shadowed his face. We found Bud with his head pressed against the same plastic table. He rolled his eyes up to us.

"Get up," said Rosco, kicking his boot.

"Got any beer?" Bud yawned.

"Naw Where's that fuck-head bareback rider that needed a ride?"

"Billy?" asked Bud.

"The blond kid?" I asked.

"Yeah, Billy the kid."

We found him passed out in the back seat of the Caddy. "Well, I'll be," said Rosco, "he ain't as dumb as he looks." He climbed in, then Bud, then I squeezed against the door. We pushed closer as Jewel shouldered her way in. My damp underwear chafed

my skin. As we pulled away from the pack of cars, the music and squeals faded. The string of Chinese lanterns became a line of highway reflectors.

Our shoulders jostled together, muddy, sweaty, sore. Bud flipped his Copenhagen tin from his shirt pocket, then let it plunk back in without taking a pinch. He sighed, slumped, then began to snore. As Rosco rolled down the window, the wind whirled around us, sucking away the smell of manure and grass-clippings and Jewel's perfume. She tilted her head like a wet pillow into my shoulder. Rosco smoked. He mumbled: "Check under your legs, on the floorboards, I think I've got some beers. Had to hide them from Bud." I handed him one, and opened one myself. "Smoke?" I didn't really like to smoke, but all night I had been drinking smoke. My hair reeked of cigarettes, even my teeth tasted tobacco. So I took the cigarette from Rosco, lighting it off his, like I'd seen him do with Angel. And we sat, with wet socks and bruised shins and warm beer foaming in the cans as we slurped. "Are you in this for the long haul?" he asked.

I ashed my cigarette into an empty Mountain Dew bottle. "Of course."

"No I mean for the third shift."

I exhaled smoke through my nose. It rolled around the cab and rubbed against the windshield.

"Bud and I used to call it the third shift. We'd just get ripped workin' at the plant, pullin' the graveyard shift. Used to drive my dad's jeep home from work, didn't even have a windshield. The air was fuckin' cold. And it was damp. And the heater was always on. So I had hot air blastin' and that cold snappin' my face like a wet towel. The sun would be coming up and Bud and I'd be headed back, just jackknife drunk."

He slurped his beer and took a long drag.



"I don't know. I like goin' home to Angel. But it just ain't how it was."

The wind pulled our last energy and any words out the window, into the night's scent of cut alfalfa and ditches. And thought about driving with my parents from the St. Paul Rodeo in our old blue VW van, and how my dad, like Rosco, would grip the wheel, hunched over, picking at his fingernails while the engine whined because he always drove one gear too low. I'd curl on the back seat, vibrating with the road, listening to the ping of joints and the rattle of the heater blowing warm air into my face. Those nights I could watch the rodeo or close my eyes and replay the rides of cowboys. A bucking horse suspended in mid-air. Sunlight. The smell of cotton candy. Dust, manure. Warm, rich smells like a garden after a rain. And I would even think about standing at a urinal, elbow-to-elbow with drunk cowboys. The rank stench of piss and Lysol and wintergreen snuff. I wanted to be those cowboys teetering across the lawns to pass out in horse-trailers. We'd be gypsies. Like Chris LeDoux, a former world champ, said, "Wherever we go it's Saturday night."

I began to jerk in and out of sleep. Jewel's shirt clung to mine as it slowly dried. The sky turned to day then slipped back into blackness. We might have passed the bentonite plant. The lights of the reflectors receded and the dark wrapped around us like wool blankets and Rosco continued to stare ahead. He cracked another beer. So I had one too, just to show him that we were in this together. That's what he had said in Cody. "You're riding with us now "

The scent of the river drifted through the vents then slid out the window. The tires thumped over train tracks. The beer sloshed in my stomach and the codeine numbed my

head. Visions of bucking horses floated across the Caddy's rusted hood. "We caint go home like this," said Rosco.

I wanted to invite him to the cabin—but what about Bud and Jewel and the Kid? I'd promised Linda many things, signed a contract: no booze, no house guests. "Government property," she'd said. "We can't risk anymore trouble."

We parked in the shadows of cottonwood trees, near a building with open windows, cracked walls, and broken furniture. Rosco entered without knocking and we all filed behind him. The kitchen sink had been heaped with dishes and a stuffed garbage can waited by the torn screen-door. The room smelled of congealed grease. The windows had been stained with soot, as if a fire had licked up the curtains, but dwindled before the walls caught. When Rosco returned from the bedroom, he said, "No one home." The Kid staggered to the couch and collapsed. Stuffing crumbled from the corners. Rosco and Jewel wandered into the bedroom and I heard the carpet creak and the mattress springs groan. I sunk into an arm-chair, twisted my knees, and curled into an uncomfortable ball. Bud circled the rug and flopped like a dog.

I might have slept. Or I might have tossed in the chair, clutching the arms as the room breathed. The windows slanted. Mice scurried between the walls. All I really remember clearly is bolting out of the chair, certain I'd puke. I staggered out the door and weaved through the tall grass. Dew soaked my boots. The breeze sifted through the branches.

The codeine had faded and my brain began to hurt—not a sharp burn, more like a headache from smelling paint. I saw Bud beside a tree, leaning with his forehead pressed

to the bark while he pissed. Behind an iron fence, a cluster of gravestones poked above the grass. I joined Bud. We swayed and pissed and gulped down the cold air.

I'm sure, if we could think, we would have passed out in the two bench seats of the Caddy. But the air cleared our heads, like splashing icy water on crusty eyes. When you're drunk, walls bend over you. Doors open and bang shut. Sweat beads on your forehead. And the air melts into your throat like maple syrup, until you can't breathe. So Bud and I stumbled toward one of the graves, slid down its cool side, and felt the grass cushion, but not constrict. The stars gleamed, not spinning but winking from far away

"Bud?"

"Yup."

"Do you do this all the time?"

"Do wha?"

"Pass-out in graveyards."

"Yeah," he chuckled, coughing. "Guess that's us. Graveyard dancers."

"How do you do it? When do you sleep?"

"Hell," he said. "Ya git all the time to sleep when you're dead."

I nodded, thinking about the damp dirt beneath me and the remains of ranchers and homesteaders. They must have had it worse. They knew broken bones, bad horses. I'd heard stories of cowboys getting bucked off, limping back to their cabins, then feeding their animals and finishing the chores before riding to the next ranch to have a neighbor help set a bone. I've heard stories of ranchers' wives dying in the winter and how the old man couldn't pick the frozen ground, so he had to wrap her and store the corpse under the floorboards of the saddle-shed until spring. And for what? Dignity? A self-reliance

wrought by hardship? A dedication to the old ways—making sure it goes on—like the Lovell Riders Club, like little Eric, like today's rodeo? As if the broken bones and buried family members could teach a Biblical truth of character: Love suffers long and is kind.

Bud broke my thinking. "Rosco and I work every day at the plant. Loading sacks. Always those damn sacks. They never stop. And you know what I think about?"

"Rodeo?"

"Nothin'," he said. "It's like being asleep." He had worked at the plant since he and Rosco were sophomores and he'd work there the next year and the next, he said, until he couldn't work. "I caint say until I die—I swear I already have. Only difference between bein' dead and alive...the livin' have to wake up every morning, have to go back to work. The dead, they git to keep on sleepin'."

The rasp of snoring floated through the singed windows. Somewhere an owl called for its mate. A few miles away, my cabin waited, the clean flannel sheets empty. I thought again about driving home from the St. Paul Rodeo. The last time I went with my parents, I had invited my first girlfriend. We were fourteen. And we curled into each other, ducking behind the back seat, and she let me slide my hand into her shirt and cup her small breasts. And we slept, the entire ride to Portland. I wanted to roll into the bed with Jewel and cradle her. Nothing more. Just to have again her damp shirt against mine. Just to feel her hair tickle my nose. Then I thought about the grocery girl with the belly ring. Could Calamity hold me? Or the photographer, what was she doing? Did her dad drive her home while she slept in a backseat? Did his crony stumble and prod motel keys into a door, whispering to her, "Hang on, baby?"

"Everywhere we go it's Saturday night," the cowboys had promised. This is the other side of Saturday night, I thought.

The wind scraped through the grass. The trees swayed. Bud yawned, then shifted against the gravestone. "Rodeo," he mumbled. "Gotta drink it like a beer Gotta chug it down. Right now we've got work and rodeo. In a couple years, we'll just have work."

Then he slept and did not move again until dawn.

## CHAPTER 8: REDNECK GIRLS

A pickup growls from the next block, while its headlights catch me. The redhead high-school girl from the rodeo clean-up, Aubry, sits behind the wheel of the large 4x4. She'd called me earlier and asked, if I wasn't too busy would I want to go to the dance? What do I have to lose? Another night on my porch, slurping soup, listening to the radio? My mother used to tell me: it's better to regret the things you've done than the things you haven't. Even if I was too old for a teen dance, maybe I'd have fun, maybe meet more people. Maybe I'd meet a girl I'd want to date, rather than a drunk rodeo groupie in a bar—maybe that girl would be Aubry. Zero times one, I told myself; it had become the mantra of my summer. It had become a mission.

The truck jerks to a stop, as if her legs reached for the brakes, as if her freckled arms could barely swing the wheel. I open the orange door and a mist of perfume billows out like steam from a pot. When I slide in, her thin arms crank the stick shift into reverse and the truck jitters back, before lurching again, and snapping forward.

Aubry wears new jeans and a silver heart-shaped buckle with her initial, a white blouse with the top button undone, showing the trail of freckles and white skin that steams perfume. She's pulled her hair into a pony-tail and sprayed the bangs.

When we arrive, she kills the engine and slips a jacket over her shoulders. On the back, a logo of a bucking horse advertises a rodeo team. But it's not a local team or one

I've ever heard about—more like the bowling uniforms you see on racks at Goodwill.

*1978 Chappaqua League Champions*. And maybe the name Gary is stitched on the front.

"You rodeo?" I ask.

"Sure." She nods. She couldn't enter Lovell because her horse was still training for barrels, she explains. "I saw you ride," she says, slipping her arm around my elbow as we climb the steps to the Brick Hall.

As music pours from the doors, we march up the steps like the homecoming king and queen. The clusters of teenagers part, girls hug Aubry and boys glare at me. We wait outside, as if we'd arrived far too early. The other kids stand in cliques, like at any highschool party: the football team rubs the elbows of lettermen jackets; the freshmen boys ride on each others' shoulders in a game of Chicken Fights; while the girls huddle together on the steps, watching the new arrivals, twisting their necks like birds. Each has teased her hair and borrowed her best-friend's earrings.

Aubry tows me from group to group. Names are exchanged, while I duck my head, peek from my hat, and smile. What am I going to ask—what class they like, what they want to do after graduation, their favorite ice cream flavor? Some smile at me.

"Think I saw you at the grocery store," one says. I shrug. Yeah, probably.

The football players vice-grip my hand, but then talk about their cars. They wear expensive Nike shoes, torn jeans, and ball caps. No buckles, no cowboy hats. Most sport the same haircut—shorn over their ears but looping in sandy curls to their collars.

Once Aubry has made the round, we promenade back up the stairs and step inside. Parents bunch around a punch bowl or sit at the few folding tables. A DJ plays hip-hop music, but no one dances. Aubry scans the corners of the gym. I follow. After a while,

the cold pushes the teens into the gym and they reform their circles. Aubry and I drift again, meeting people for the second time. After the second hour, a cluster of brave girls wanders onto the dance floor. The football boys claim a corner of the bleachers and slap each other each time a girl passes. The parents shuffle onto the floor when the DJ plays a slow song.

"What's this fogey music?" Aubry said, flipping her pony tail.

As the slow wails of Patsy Cline fill the gym, boys push each other towards groups of girls and the girls inch closer to the boys, until a few couples dance, then a few more. Their hands cling to each other's backs, daring to press close, to feel their partner's body sticky with nervous perspiration, swaying and shuffling feet, trying not to step on toes. When the song ends, they glance at parents, as if they'd be torn away. And when Patsy's voice belts another song, their arms reach and hold tighter.

My hands brace Aubry as we two-step, but then I slow, wanting to dance like the other kids—not a measured step but simply a sway. I pull Aubry into me and she leans her red hair into my shoulder and we spin, while the lights blink and the parents sip punch and old women rest their thick vericose legs on the bleachers and the DJ plays *Crazy* over and over.

When the music turns fast, the parents sit down. The teens now own the floor and hop like dancers in an MTV video. Aubry glances around, then spies a football player swaggering from the door to his buddies. "Be right back," she says, as she skips away.

I stand alone, not a parent, not a member of a group, so I retreat to the bleachers.

"Hey," someone says, tapping my shoulder. I turn to see a young kid in baggy Levi's and canvass Converse tennis shoes, a t-shirt, an earring. His hair was shaved all



around the bottom, but long on the top, parted like an open book on his head. "So you got the cutest girl in town." He grins.

I shrug, wishing it were true, but Aubry has slipped through the double doors into another room with the guy.

"My name's Tim," the kid beside me says. "I live over in Deaver, you know. Folks bring me. I hate this shit. Say, you got any booze?"

"Naw," I say. "You're too young anyway."

"Old enough to need one, know it?"

A drink doesn't sound all that bad, I think, watching married couples slowly turn each other, the men talking tractors by the punch bowl, while kids in the shadows secretly held hands. When I was Tim's age, I knew everyone in my class. My buddies and I would stake a corner, like the football players, and the girls would sneak up behind us and ask for dances, and we'd shrug and wander into the crowd and then slip back to our friends. We owned the dance, we believed. Whatever we do, we agreed, girls ask us, not the other way around.

Once, two girls pushed one of their friends to me, practically dumping her on my lap. The girl fled outside. "She has a crush on you," one of her friends said. The last song, *Stairway to Heaven*, began and I looked to my buddies and they grinned and suddenly I was angry at them for laughing and mad that we had made such rules. I walked outside where the girl sat, sobbing into her hands. The mascara inked her cheeks. As she looked up, I brushed her hair-sprayed curls from her face, smearing the makeup more and reached my hand to her. She twisted away "Leave me," she said, her voice trembling. Prying her hand, I drew her to me, and we danced on the front patio of cement, while the

last song floated from windows. I didn't care what my friends would say. Her sobs slowed, then she sighed, letting her body slump into mine. And I held her, tightly, to keep her from falling.

As Tim and I sat on the bleachers, I wanted to hold that girl again. I wanted every dance to matter. Every step to hold promise. And I wanted to feel the danger of a crush and the watchful eye of parents. Even then it was fun—like a game.

Once, after a swim party, two girls invited me into a shower to wash off the chlorine. We never stripped out of our suits, but just knowing that we could, that we had snuck away from the others into the guest bathroom, and could get caught. Standing under the spray of a shower with two girls: the thrill of discovery and of being discovered.

Perhaps tonight new-formed couples duck into the locker room. Perhaps they kiss and a boy fumbles his hands up her shirt. Perhaps it is enough to leave the group of boys and ask a girl for the last dance and step on her toes and apologize and she says, don't worry. Don't worry.

But tonight I sit with Tim. He peeks from his bangs and watches the couples dance. Like me. "Where's your girlfriend?" he asks.

"Beats me," I say.

"Rough, dude."

Aubry returns as the crowds file through the door. Old men wave as they climb into trucks. "See ya," they say, while wives climb into passenger seats and kick off their high-heels and pillow their heads with jackets. A few teenage couples hold hands then break apart suddenly, like sheets of ice in a river.

Aubry drops me off at the Mustang. Before I slam the door, I say, "You've got my number—give me a ring." She pops a bubble of gum.

"Yeah, all right," she says. Then she drives away. A few raindrops speckle the dust on my windshield as I drive back to the cabin. Traces of Aubry's perfume float in the cab while the radio plays *Redneck Girl*. "Redneck girl likes to drive in Daddy's pickup truck...and I pray that someday I will find me a Redneck Girl." And for a moment, I remember holding Aubry and swaying and how her hair tucked into my neck. Once I had held a girl like that as she cried. But Aubry had wandered away for the last hour of the dance; no girls whispered my name, no girls cried for me. Outside the wind scraped the sage. Maybe what matters are the brightest moments. A single dance, not the drive home, not the cold bedsheets. Just one moment—tears on a sweater, a kiss in a locker room, a hand cupping the small of your neck.

I want to roll down my window and breathe the rain. But I don't, inhaling instead the last whiffs of perfume.

Jewel and I sit at the top of the bleachers at the Cody Rodeo Grounds. There's a PRCA rodeo tonight and Jewel's been talking about getting Tuff Hediman's signature. If you saw us, sitting by ourselves at the top of the grandstand, you'd probably think high schoolers on a date, perched over the crowd and holding hands. And it's not far wrong, even if both of us are out of high school. Jewel leans easily into my shoulder and laughs and rests her head in my lap, pretending to nap while the team ropes chase steers. She stares at the stars as the summer day dwindles to dark. When it gets cold, she snuggles against my

side, pulling my jacket around her big shoulder I drape my arm around her, but it doesn't feel like a date: I'm not wondering about a first kiss, gazing down at her lap daring to take her hand or trying to say something funny In fact we don't talk or even really watch the rodeo. The riders gallop around the arena like small images on a TV screen.

A little boy hikes up to our seats and plays with a GI Joe action figure. He holds the plastic toy towards Jewel, showing her the kung-fu grip as he swings the doll's arm with a chopping motion. "He just killed you," the boy said.

Jewel smiles and taps her cigarette like a movie star. "Oh my," she says in a breathy gasp like Marilyn Monroe. "That wasn't very nice."

"Bad Joe," the kid screams and slams the toy on the bench. Then he picks it up and pushes it at Jewel, still making the kung-fu hand chop. He thrusts it into her breasts.

"Easy, fella," Jewel says and pushes him away.

Then the boy pinches her breast. "Titty twister!" he squeals.

Jewel yells at him. "Stop it, you little shit."

The boy skips down the bleachers, singing "titty twister" to himself, then he hurls the doll over the railing where it falls, bounces off a street lamp, then bounces again when it smacks the pavement. The little doll's arms and legs poke in strange angles as if it had been a real body, as if the bones had snapped. It lies in a puddle of beer and corn-dog crumbs and strings of cotton candy and cigarette butts. Then the boy skips back to Jewel and plays with a strand of her hair. "Joe's sorry," he says. "Now he's dead."

"Dead?" Jewel asks.

The boy grins, flashing two gaps from missing teeth. He's got dirt smeared under one eye and a wad of gum stuck in his hair He smoothes her curls in his grubby hands.

"Yes, but he's coming back to life. He's coming! He's coming!" And as he says this, his high voice pitches higher, almost like a squeaking door hinge. He dances around Jewel, still fondling her hair. "Oh he was a bad boy. And now he's coming back to life!" He leaps to the next seat and then hops down the grandstand, from bench to bench. People twist around, shake their heads, and turn back to watch a man dressed in a Spanish cabarello costume spin a trick rope around a palomino horse.

Before the boy slips into the crowd, a woman snatches him by the forearm and jerks him into the parking lot. We hear the boy screaming about his GI Joe and the mother snaps him again and tows him away. Jewel and I glance at each other. "Grabby little bastard," she says. "Think he learned it from his dad?"

"Learned it somewhere," I say.

The rodeo action in the arena continues and the announcer jokes with a clown who drives a car that explodes, splits in half, then spins in circles. The audience laughs and a few old women stand on their seats and point camcorders. Jewel tugs on my arm and we wander.

At the gate, where vendors sell pink hats and souvenir t-shirts and cotton candy, Jewel and I hold hands. She stops at a table where two bull fighters sign promotional photographs of bulls and Dodge trucks. Jewel wants to get a signature, so I drift over to the Copenhagen/Skoal booth and scribble a fake name and address on their mailing list in exchange for a free sample can. Then I swagger back through the tourists.

An old man stops me, glances at my boots and buckle. "Say," he says, pointed to another man standing in line for a Coke. "Isn't that Joe Beaver, the all-around champ?" The guy he points at wears new Wrangler jeans and a leather vest and a huge belt buckle

with a turquoise stone. The John Wayne hat perches on his bald head, above bi-focal glasses with clip-on shades, flipped up. There's no manure on his hat, no competitor number pinned to his shirt. No, just another tourist with two ticket stubs in his vest pocket, reservations in Yellowstone, and a wife back in the bleachers who wants a Coke to wash down the dust.

"I don't think so," I tell the man. Then I gesture towards the shadows at the edge of the corrals. A tall cowboy packs a bronc saddle back to his truck. He wears a Wrangler sponsor jacket and a black Resistol. "There's your chance," I tell the man. "That's Dan Mortenson." He was the national saddle bronc champion that year, and the year before.

"Never heard of him," the man grunts and wanders toward the other tourist in line for a Coke.

Then Jewel grabs me. "Hey look," she says, turning her jeans with a rip under a back pocket. "I got both bull fighters to sign, right across my ass." She laughs and then sprints across the parking lot. I chase her. Dogs bark. The announcer's voice echoes from the arena. A horn sounds and the crowd claps. The bull riding has started.

We weave through the parked vehicles, slipping on the gravel and mud. Then Jewel skids to her car, wheels around, and locks me in a hug. She pants. And so do I. Our chests pound as we suck for wind. "How about a kiss?" she demands.

"But I've got a chew in—"

"Hell," she says, and kisses me.

And that night we drive out of Cody, beyond the lights, through dark fields where the irrigation sprinklers chop streams of water and the crickets chirp and the smell of wet

alfalfa drifts through the vents. Jewel rolls down her window and hangs her arm in the wind. It sucks the tip of her cigarette and orange embers swirl around the cab like fireflies. The wind whips her hair in her eyes as she speeds faster. She tells me how she wiggled onto the bull fighters' laps and handed them the fat felt marker and told them to have fun. "And they did," she says. "I bet they could see my underwear through that rip."

When she draws a drag from her smoke, the orange glow shines against her cheeks, and cast shadows under her eyes, dark as her mascara. We drive on, while the yellow line slices under the wheels and the engine hums and the crickets still chirp. She flops her right hand onto my lap. And I let her keep it there. She doesn't squeeze or twirl her fingernails across the denim, just lets the weight of her hand rest. And I can feel the warmth of her palm and her perspiration seeping to my skin. And I am wondering about the little boy with the misbehaving GI Joe and his song about titty twisters and what he must watch every night in his house, perhaps one of these dark trailers along the highway.

And I am thinking that in five years this same night will pass and the rodeo will cycle through each event and a clown will drive his exploding car and the tourists will buy souvenir t-shirts and the summer heat will roll from the fields and the beams from Burlington Northerns will stretch over tracks while a traffic light blinks red over an intersection and the boy will be me and a girl will be Jewel, and he'll feel her hand on his lap and he'll reach to her, grasping at her soft breasts because he will not know that what he really needs is simply a warm hand on his skin and her hair brushing his arm and that what he will need is what we all need—not so much to hold, but to be held. But his GI Joe won't ever tell him and the girl he drives with might have her jeans torn and might

have scarlet underwear with lace and she might tell him to have fun. And he will, thinking that it's just play.

Jewel's cigarette flares as she flicks it into the wind. It sparks when it hits the pavement, then rolls, then disappears beyond the taillight's glow.

A few nights ago, Aubry and I had our second date. Like any good date, the night started with dinner; but in Lovell, that meant driving with Aubry in her Orange 4x4 to the Conoco and chomping hotdogs and slurping Cokes. She heaped chili on her dog. We sat at the plastic table, while a few teenagers drifted in and chatted with Aubry. They asked her about starting school at Powell Community College and she grinned and said, yes, finally freedom. "What's goin' on?" she asked.

"Not much. Luke was going to have a party at the lake. He's grounded. Guess he wrecked the car."

Aubry twirled her hair, puckering her lips as she sucked the straw.

"Guess there's lots of parties at Powell," one of her friends said.

"Yeah, plenty."

Then we leave and drive up and down Main. Aubry watches for cars and says slow down. She wants to see if that was Joni. No, just her brother. And we drive for an hour or two.

"Want me to take you home?"

She shrugged. "Whatever "

"What else?"



"Nothin'. That's just it. The kids have parties at the lake every weekend. It sucks. The guys drink, smash their cars. You know how many girls didn't graduate this year?" I glance at her. The light of the grocery store slants through the window, catching her red hair, but shadowing her face. Her eyes are large and dark, like a horse's. "Half," she said.

She tells me most have babies now. Some are married. Plenty not. She says she wants to go to Paris or Chicago. "That's real," she said. "Like my art."

"I've been to Paris and Chicago."

"Really? I've seen pictures...movies, you know. But I haven't met anyone who's been. I read in the paper that Wyoming is one of the only states that loses population every year, but it doesn't seem like anyone ever leaves. Different towns maybe—or Billings. Big deal."

"I saw Picasso and Van Gogh and Degas in Paris," I say.

"Really, I bet. In my art class, the kids don't even know how to shade. I have to teach them everything. At the State fair, the girl who took second—she can't even draw."

The road twists up a hill. Then it drops to the lake and to the place little Eric and I rode. By the shore, we park and Aubry wanders around, hands in her jacket, while I sit on the hood, feeling the warmth of the engine. Insects flutter through the cottonwood branches and the moon rises over the far mesas. Then Aubry joins me and we sit, shoulder to shoulder. Her hair fans onto my arm as she leans into me. We count passing satellites.

I tell her about living in Chicago in a one-room apartment on the Near-North side. And I tell her how the El trains rattled in the night and the smoke stacks belched fire and how the coal soot stained the whole town. And I tell her my bed folded from the wall and mildew stains spotted the ceiling and the radiator gurgled and hissed. In the days I'd write

in the Newberry Library as a research fellow in Western History, but every Tuesday I'd wander the Art Institute because it was free to students. I tell her of Degas' ballerina's dipping at the waist, pink tutus flashing like pastel peacock plumes. But what I really want to tell her is the nights I'd ride the train and a man with a pistol on his side would glare at me.

These men called themselves vigilantes. Every night the news reported another shooting on the trains. These men volunteered to protect the passengers, but as the cars clicked over the tracks, as the smoke stacks burned over the buildings, as the men thumbed their pistols, I wanted to be back in Wyoming. I wanted a cabin at the base of a mountain range, where I could leave the door open to a summer breeze.

The last night, before I left Chicago, smoke rose up to my 47th floor window from one of the bars below. Grease fire, I thought. That night the news reported a car bomb. Seven people killed. Suspect unknown.

And now, I sit in Wyoming, while waves from the lake slap the shore, while mosquitoes dart in my ears. The moon has climbed higher. Stars appear arching from the mountains over the truck and behind us. "I don't belong here," Aubry said, letting her hand rest in mine. I draped my arm around her shoulder, pulling her near. Smelling her shampoo. "There's no beauty here. Only beer cans."

"Have you been to the museum in Cody? There's a Chinese restaurant—we could go this weekend."

"No, you don't understand," she sighs. "Do you think I can make a living drawing for café menus?"

As I hold Aubry's hand, I think about returning to college. I could take her with me to Montana, or farther. Could I leave the sagebrush and enroll at the University of Chicago while she took classes at the Art Institute? I'd read on the couch and she could sit on the woodfloor, knees out as she bent over a drawing pad. Maybe she'd roll her hair in a bun, poke it in place with a paintbrush. Eraser crumbs would cling to her elbows.

She rubs my palm with her thumb. The crickets scrape. Wind rattles the dry grass. "I can't even breathe here," she says.

I imagine we are in France and the scent of baking bread wafts through an open window and peels the wallpaper. I'd play Rodin and she could be Camille as she sprawls on a yellow mattress, her breasts flat as she arches, hand draped back, while sun tangles in her curls. My hands would smooth the cracks as I sculpted.

We could drink wine until we hung in the silence without words, letting the candlelight be the motion as drafts cross the tides of air, letting the shadows crouch in corners, letting the furniture sit. I'd say: Absolve my tire head, kiss my eyes, and take me quietly to bed. The day would exhaust itself like a candle. As we turned, the thin trail of smoke would follow our pale bodies into bedsheets, swirl, then dissipate to darkness.

In this dream water returns to Wyoming, carrying our bodies, until we are floating above the mountains, sliding away with the tide into unknown oceans.

Aubry squeezes my hand. "You have to believe me."

"I believe you," I said.

I stand on the porch to Aubry's house, my hair wet from the shower. Smoothing my clean shirt, I peek into the window. It's dark inside. Behind my reflection, the grey clouds lift over telephone lines. Below the porch, a few pickups sit, hoods open, with gaps of rods and wires where engines had been. Aubry's family lives above her uncle's auto shop, in a room crowded by furniture. One couch is beige, another plaid. I wipe my feet on the mat and wait. Why had I set my alarm so early?

Maybe the Rose is open by now, maybe the Mexican cook flips eggs for the farmers. I'm thinking about slipping down the stairs like a Tom cat, when Aubry's mom wanders from the bathroom in her robe. "Aw, come on in," she yawns.

Inside, I blink, adjusting to the dark. There's no other windows and the walls and the ceiling dip and buckle, like a kid's fort made of old cardboard. On the walls, they've hung pencil sketches signed by Aubry. The pictures show bull riders. Each is scraped with a sharp, light stroke. But there is something static about them—and I realize that they are not drawn from memory but copied from advertisements I'd seen in *Western Horseman*. A blue ribbon has been pinned to one. It reads: Wyoming State Fair.

While I wait, I dump some coffee grounds into the maker. After the water begins to drip, it pools into the pot like discarded motor oil. Damn, I mutter, turning the can of instant coffee flakes in my hand. Aubry's father, Dan, walks into the kitchen, scratching himself through his silk heart-dotted boxers. He pours a cup, then trudges into the bathroom. The toilet seat clanks. Then the sound of him pissing. Then, "Ug, that's rank."

I keep my eye on Aubry's door, wondering what she's be wearing. Maybe the new jeans and silver buckle she'd worn to the dance, or maybe the western shirt with the silver buttons she'd worn on our night at the lake. I wear my newest and cleanest shirt. I'd even

shaved. The night before, I called her. I hadn't heard from her in a week. "If your offer to ride horses is still good, I'd like to."

"Well," she said. "Daddy hasn't got a chance to get shoes on them."

I offered to help.

"Sure, whatever," she said. "He threw his back out at work." Her voice was broken, as if someone was poking her in the ribs. "Well, I've got to go," she said, her voice on the edge of a squeal.

Aubry's parents and I wait on the couch, as I fold my hat in my hands. "Always waiting on Aubry," her mom says. Her dad yells.

When Aubry walks out of her room, she wears sweat pants and a t-shirt. "For heavens sake, you haven't got a shower?" her mom says.

Aubry shrugs and grabs a denim work coat from a peg.

Then we load into the truck. I think about taking her hand. No, not with her dad an arm's reach away. No one talks during the drive to the lake.

As Aubry catches the horses, I help her dad unload the anvil and tools. Then we set to work: Dan paring down the hooves with the knife, swiping a rasp, then moving to the anvil to shape a new shoe. He drives the nails then moves to the next horse. I follow, lifting the leg onto the stand, clinching the nails, rubbing the rasp over the sharp edges. Although teaming up makes the work easier and faster, by the time the sun crests the trees, heat begins to roll off the lake, the bugs stick to the sweat on our necks, and blood trickles from our knuckles. We stretch each time we set a foot down, twisting the muscles in our backs. Our bodies groan like tree trunks bowing in the wind.

We dunk our heads in a trough and shake like dogs. Water drips from our arms. Then we curl our cramping hands around the tools again. They jitter. We grip harder. The rasps slips off the hooves and skins our knuckles more, until our hands are sticky with blood and dust.

Meanwhile, Aubry has wandered away, probably to walk her Arabian horse.

We wait in the shade of a tree, as the sweat dries on our faces, leaving a salt film like the ring around an alkali pool. I prod a blister on my palm.

"You rodeo?" Dan asks.

"Yessir, some."

He tries to spit. "I used to. All of us did. Not like the boys Aubry hangs out with. Ain't one of them a cowboy. You any good?"

"Not much."

He rubs his hands on his pants. "You shoe pretty good."

I stare at the horizon where a gasoline truck raises a cloud of dust.

"Waitin' on Aubry," he sighs. "Story of my life."

The sun beats against the lake, making the heat waves shimmer.

"You ain't the one that called last night 'bout eleven."

"Nosir."

"Keep telling Aubry to tell them boys not to call all the damn hours of the day "

"Lotta boys?"

"Yup," and he tries to spit again but the dry saliva dribbles down his chin.

"Fending off boys from your daughter?" I ask. "Story of your life?"

He grins. "Yeah. You could say that."

When Aubry returns, Dan leads the horse to the anvil. His broad shoulders stoop down, arms dangling, as he limps. Aubry's horse is the last. The sun has climbed to the center of the sky. Flies dart into our mouths and nostrils.

Dan slowly bends his body as he picks up a front leg. Then I follow, clinching the nails, while Dan stands, still bent, hands on his knees, sucking for wind. Then we trade places. As I clinch each nail, my forearms burn. My knees tremble. Normally, it takes less than 15 minutes to shoe one foot, but by the last shoe, we've taken almost an hour on the last one. We seem so close to finished, Dan hurries as he slams the nails.

The horse jumps, straight ahead, catching Dan. He falls, under the horse. The horse's leg steps on his chest then scrambles to regain its footing, kicking him again in the ribs. I snare the halter, clinging with my swollen hand, while the horse spins circles, sweeping me like a mop, until Dan's big hand reaches up, locking onto the halter. I let go and stumble back.

"Dirty sonuva bitch!" Dan yells, clobbering the horse's head with his fist. Dan's nose squirts blood and so does a gash above the horse's eye.

"Stop!" Aubry screams as Dan jerks a front foot and binds it with the lead rope, buckling the horse's head against its knee. Then Dan stretches to his full height, like a bear, both feet braced and shoulders squared against the horse's sides. With a rush of wind, he topples the animal. It makes a hollow thud when it hits the ground.

Dan pounces, straddling the horse's head. "Don't say a word," he commands. "Ain't nothin' you ain't seen me do a hundred times."

I'd seen the technique of dropping a horse before. One way is to take a lariat and loop it around the front pastern then draw the leg to the belly and hitch the rope around

the saddle horn. Then two cowboys lean back on the rope. When it's done right, the horse simply drops to his free knee then rolls over—almost like a trained elephant in a circus. I'd also seen a man chasing a horse with a loop around its neck, trying to flip the rope between the hind legs so he could catch a back foot. That's called a scotch-hobble. I'd used it to brand new colts. But never to shoe. I'd seen too many owners rope-burn a horse, or claim that it kicked as they yanked the knots. "Trouble is," an old cowboy friend used to say, "person makes a horse whatever they are."

Aubry cries as her dad pats the sweaty flank of the horse. "Had to know who was in control," Dan grunts. His tongue touches his lip and he makes a face as if he hadn't known he was bleeding.

We were quiet as we loaded the tools and as we drove into Lovell and as we hiked up the stairs to the room with one window. I overheard Aubry's mom ask if they should pay me. "Pay?" Dan grunted. "Hell, he chose to come along. He should pay me for the education."

Aubry stomped into her room, slamming the door. I wondered if I should follow, apologize for getting mixed up in the fight. I wanted to say it wasn't your horse's fault. Dan had probably driven the last nail wrong, turning it into the soft center of the hoof—quicking it.

"Best leave her be," her mom said. "She gets like that. Needs to cool off. Gets it from her dad. Short fuse."

I nodded.



"Maybe you could stay for supper?"

"Thanks," I said. I could hear Aubry in her room, talking on the phone.

"Did Aubry ask you to the church dance?"

"Hasn't mentioned it."

"Well, I'll remind her."

She made a sandwich and poured a glass of lemon Kool Aid. I ate slowly, trying to catch the words of Aubry's conversation. Then I heard the radio click on and the phone rang and she yelled, "I got it."

"She hasn't said a word to me all day "

"Aw, never mind her. She's just mad at her dad. You know how she feels about horses. We had to put one down, an old buckskin, her first horse. Couldn't eat grain, couldn't hardly walk. So Dan put it down and she didn't leave the house for a week. Didn't ride for near a year."

"Yeah," I said. She sat with me at the table, while the afternoon light slipped sideways through the window and lit a pile of dirty dishes.

"I don't know what she'd do without her horse. She needs a cowboy like you, like her dad. You going to Powell next fall?"

"Maybe Montana," I said.

"Oh, Bozeman's not too far. You two will have plenty of time to sort things out. Learn her habits. Just remember, no one sulks like her." And her mom brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. She folded her hands on the table. I didn't want to say that I wasn't going to Montana State to study Ag, but to the university, further away, in Missoula, the hippie school, to study environmental writing. Maybe her mother was right.

Maybe I could stay, let Aubry forget about today. Maybe take her riding in the range, show her the mustangs. Maybe we could climb onto my cabin roof and watch the stars. I could spend the winter in Lovell and drive the 25 miles to Powell on weekends.

"Oh here's the grump," she said as Aubry walked back into the room.

Aubry rolled her eyes.

"Thanks for the sandwich."

Dan snored on the Easy-boy chair.

"Where's the towels," Aubry yelled from the bathroom. "I need to take a shower before six."

"Why don't you walk him out."

Aubry sighed then yelled back, "Fine."

When we stepped out of the house, we stood on the porch, staring across the row of junked cars. I pushed my toe forward, pressing her foot, the way I'd teased her at the Conoco. Instead of trying to tickle me, Aubry gazed down Main at a kid giving his sister a ride in a shopping cart. My fingers stiffened, my back muscles throbbed, and salt had found an open cut.

"What's up? Still angry at your dad."

"Naw," she said, crossing her freckled arms over her t-shirt.

"Maybe we could ride some time, maybe tomorrow."

"I don't know," she said. "I'll be pretty busy."

"Are you mad at me for helping your dad?"

"No," she said. "Don't have nothing to do with horses."

The church dance passed without a phone call from Aubry. A week later, while driving from the Mustang, I stopped at Pizza Oasis where she worked. She sat in a booth with another guy. Pizza dough flaked on her red apron. The boy glanced at me. "You rodeo?" he asked. I shrugged. Sure, you bet. "Couldn't get me on one of those crazy bastards," he said, pushing a paper plate of crumbs across the table. His hands had been scrubbed pink, smelling of oranges, but grease stuck under the crescents of his fingernails. "I drove the demolition derby," he said. "You see it?"

Aubry walked behind the counter and crushed cardboard boxes into the trash. A radio played in the back.

"Now cars I understand," the guy said. "Something breaks, get a new part. Horses...no one rides them anymore. What's the point? What's the point of proving you're good at something that don't matter no more. Now cars, everyone gets them." He nodded to the window. "Every jerkoff in this town gets a car. When it breaks, they come to me."

"You're in demand," I said.

"That's it," he said. "That's the ticket. In demand." He walked to the door, held it as he stared into the street. He turned to me, as if to say something else. I read the name tag on his coveralls. He yelled good-bye to Aubry as she stomped on another box.

"Later," she said.

"See ya, Bo," I said.

His forehead twisted. Then he muttered, stepping into the wind.

When Aubry returned, she hung her apron on a peg and offered the last two slices of pizza. As I ate, we sat in the booth across from each other, not talking. I wanted to ask about the dance. I wanted to ask about her horse. Or maybe more, I wanted her to slide beside me, push her elbow against mine.

"Give you a ride home?"

She shrugged. "All right."

We drove down the street, past the bank and hardware store. Aubry asked if I could swing by a friend's house. And I agreed, thinking maybe we could enter a party as we had at the Brick Hall, like the prom king and queen, like a couple. Or simply, we could drive longer and I could reach my hand to her and she would take it. Instead, she had me park at the end of a gravel alley between two junked cars.

"Just a sec," she said, slamming the door, trotting into a house. As I waited, I listened to the frogs and the crickets and a cat scratching a garbage can. A few figures drifted behind the window screens, holding beers. In the pale light, I could see a refrigerator. Must be a small party, I guessed, as the people slipped in and out of the kitchen for more beers.

Maybe the gas station guy with the dark fingernails was inside. Maybe a TV flickered as a circle of friends drained beer cans, crushed them, and tossed them at a lamp. The cat leaped from the garbage and slinked between the junked cars, while an owl hooted, and the cottonwood branches shifted.

Then Aubry appeared at the porch door, framed in the kitchen's light beside a guy. He wore sweat pants cut off as shorts and a tank top. She touched his arm and laughed at

something he said. Then, as she walked back to the truck, the guy slipped into the house, moved to the refrigerator, and grabbed another beer.

"Sorry that took so long," she said, climbing into the cab. She sat beside the door, not sliding over. What did she see in that guy, I wondered. Did he know about Paris or Rodin or the way sun falls through a window at morning and warms tangled bedsheets? At dawn would he rise and pull strands of strawberry hair from his pillow and hear the splash of water in the shower and know that when she left she would not return. The crumpled beer cans would circle the lamp while the TV still flickered. His friends would talk about spark plugs and timing belts. They'd always be in demand. But she'd be on a bus. Pencils and paints in a grocery bag with a one-way ticket to Chicago. She would not leap in their Cameros and chug beers and yell at the stop signs.

Nor would she ride with me over mountain passes.

I had a dream of taking her into the Pryors with Indian and her Arabian. We'd find a meadow, where the wind swells and turns off a ledge of rocks, whips up a coulee, bows the tips of pines. My horse would turn down the slope, cropping grass, swatting flies with his tail. The clouds would tumble over granite peaks. Far away, lightning would tickle a black hill of forest, while black smoke from a fire would burn coffee blacker. And under the aspen, under the waxing moon above the rattle of creek stones, I would crawl into a bedroll. The sky would open. And she'd be waiting, holding up wool blankets for me to enter.

When we stopped at the garage below her house, I killed the engine. I told her: There are those who always get what they seek, there are those who never do, and neither is so bad. Because sometimes wanting is better than having. But the worst are those who

get what they want and push it away. I told her: you get what you want, don't you. But you push it back and turn away. And turn. You are always turning. But what do I know, I confessed. I really don't know you.

"No," she said, slipping out of the truck. "You know me better than you think."

Then she hiked up the stairs and disappeared into her dark house. And I drove home, into the hills, to the cabin, to the book I'd finish that night, to the whiskey I'd sip as the fire crackled. Again I'd dream of the meadow and her hair on the pillow and her fingers spider-creeping across my chest and how I'd cup her body into mine and whisper lines from a poem. *Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know what life is, you who hold it in your hands.*

Sometimes wanting is better than having, I told myself, repeating it all the way

## CHAPTER 9: RODEO ROAD TRIPS

"Put your hat back on," Rosco shouted. He was wearing his new hat, smooth black felt slicked down like he was going to a funeral. His old one had a dent, or curled the wrong way—hard to say what blemish prompted him to chuck it for the new 20x Resistol.

"Bullshit. It's too damn hot," yawned Bud, as he stretched his legs out the window.

"Three guys in a Cadillac with no hats, people think we're teenagers out with grandma's car; three guys in black hats and they see rodeo cowboys."

"This *is* Grandma's car," Bud said, pulling a can of Copenhagen from his shirt pocket.

"Not no more. I bought it off her "

"Did wha?" Bud jammed a wad of chew under his lower lip, spilling most of the crumbs, smearing them across his lips and chin as he wiped his mouth with his shirt. He leaned forward and spit into an empty plastic bottle of Mountain Dew. The brown juice dribbled down his chin, mixed with the crumbs that had fallen to his chest, and stained his white polyester shirt, joining a lighter shade of Keystone Lite brown and Pizza Hut red—the pallet of Bud's breakfast. "How much ya pay?"

"Four-hundred."

"Not bad, considerin' the damn air-conditioner don't work."

"Just a down-payment," said Rosco. "I'll give her four-hundred more. But it's worth it. Now that we're winnin' we've got to start lookin' like it. Gotta do every thing just right." As he mashed the gas peddle against the frayed floor-carpet, he leaned forward—as if the aerodynamic angle of his body could propel the '76 Deville faster.

Rosco always drove fast, but on rodeo days he raced hell bent for leather. When he arrived at my cabin that morning, he launched the Deville over the cattle-guard, started pounding on the horn, then locked up the brakes and fishtailed a complete 360. Gravel pelted the side of the corral and sent the horses running. I'd barely thrown my bronc saddle and gear bag into the trunk and scooted into the back seat, when he again stomped on the accelerator.

"Why didn't you buy a used ambulance?" I asked. "Then you could wake up the whole Gawd-damn state of Wyoming every time we went to a rodeo."

Rosco nodded, still hunched over the wheel. The shiny rim of his hat jutted over his knuckles. White powder had hardened in the cracks of his fingers, worked in from loading sacks of bentonite onto trucks. Sweat-soaked, then dried, then solidified with blood, the texture of his skin looked like an old floorboard where years of boot heels had ground grains of sand. "Nope," he said after thinking it over. "Never heard of cowboys in an ambulance. Might jinx us."

"Not me," said Bud, dripping more chew spit. "If we had us an ambulance, I bet I could get lots of girls to play doctor."

"Shut up. Just shut up, damnit. Talkin' like an idiot. We're cowboys and we're here to win."



“Only reason I rodeo is to meet nurses.” Bud started to say something else about girls, but Rosco clicked on the radio. Static crackled over the one speaker that worked and Rosco turned it up, loud as it could go.

Unfolding a state map, I traced the blue line of Interstate 25. It cascades like a waterfall from Billings, dropping south along the Big Horn Mountains, then slides sideways around the Laramie Mountains, before plunging straight towards Denver. The other interstate arches out of Salt Lake City, across wind-swept hills of prairie, crosses I-25 at Cheyenne, and continues towards the grain silos of the mid-west to centers of commerce like Omaha and Des Moines. Truckers pause at Cheyenne to tank up on cheap gas, then drive like hell—70, 90 mph, as if their speeding headlights could slice away miles of Wyoming's sagebrush.

I'm guilty, too. My only two speeding tickets have been signed by Wyoming patrolmen. There're no short-cuts. Take a crayon and try to connect city to city; the gap between point A and B remains. If I photocopied Rhode Island eight times, I could paste them over the white spaces on the map and still not fill in Wyoming.

Normally, roadtrips work on the principle of inertia. An object at rest tends to stay at rest; an object hauling ass—like a Caddy full of cowboys—tends to move like a jet outrunning its own sound. But take Wyoming: the laws of physics and roadtrips rarely apply. Or at least they get very confused. See, first the cowboys' spirits are high—they whistle, and punch. Then they calm down enough, realizing that they're going ahead with the original plan, God willin' and the creek don't rise. Just to keep it straight, though, they

discuss all the things that will happen—the horses they'll ride, the girls they'll meet. After a while (after telling the regular lies), they turn to the radio. This works wonderfully for nearly an hour. Toes tap. Everyone sings, or shouts. Then the inevitable: the radio station starts playing the same songs over and over, the same Feed and Seed commercial, which isn't the worst part—eventually the radio fades into static.

The vehicle speeds faster. The white lines blur into a stream. Faster. The dry grass in the barrow ditch hisses beside the tires. Faster. Passengers glance at watches. Can it be we've only been driving three hours? Feels like five.

As an object accelerates towards the speed of light, its mass increases. The moods of the cowboys congeal like bacon grease. They slump against windows. Hands fall on their laps. They stare out the window. They unfold maps.

"Hey check these!" Bud walked out of the double-glass doors, wearing a pair of black sunglasses with fluorescent pink sides. "I was thinkin' aviator, ya know, like CHiPS Patrol, but then I figured the chicks go more for the David Lee Roth."

"Look out, Hollywood," Rosco yelled, as he flipped the gas tank lid and set the nozzle on the pump. "How much?"

"Only \$3.99 and they got that U2 kind Bono had in that one video."

Rosco's eyes began to narrow as he grinned. He hopped over the hose and jogged towards Bud. From the backseat, I watched them spin the sunglasses rack, trying on pairs, and finally rushing up to the counter. They sprinted out of the store, as if they'd just

robbed the place. "Let's go, let's go!" Rosco yelled. Bud chugged behind like a Saint Bernard.

They dove into the Caddy and slammed the doors. Rosco stomped on the gas. My head jerked against the seat. The tires squealed. As we whipped onto the street, Rosco tossed a pair of sunglasses at me. They were mirrored and splattered with green, pink, and orange paint. "The Anarchy in the UK look," he yelled over the howl of wind. Bud wore his pair with the pink sides and Rosco slipped on a stealthy black pair. He began to hum the James Bond theme song and we all joined in.

He reached into a plastic bag and pulled out three water pistols. We waved them out the window. Along the main street, families were unpacking folding chairs and coolers of beer. "We're America's most wanted," said Bud.

"Hey, fill mine up with beer," said Rosco. Bud cracked a warm beer that had been rattling around under the seat. It foamed., dribbling beer onto his lap and shirt. He filled the plastic gun and handed it to Rosco.

"Open your mouth." Rosco propped his knee to steady the wheel. A stream of beer hit Bud's cheek.

"Fuckhead."

"Again."

Bud opened his mouth, catching the second blast of beer.

As we rolled into town, we filled our pistols and shot beer into the mouths of anyone we knew walking down the street, or anyone who looked thirsty. "Now we're America's most wanted," said Rosco.

Every rodeo in the Big Horn Basin is like a family reunion. The Bishoff clan and the Giffords packed into the back of a pickup as it slowly cruised down the main street as if the sole attraction of its own parade. The boys waved, the men tipped their hats.

"Howdy, Ian!" Mr. Bishoff yelled, chucking a beer at me. I trotted to his truck, jumped on the tail-gate, and joined the procession. Beer cans bobbed in six or seven coolers. One of the kids held his hand in the ice-water, numbing a bad rope burn. Cowboys strolled along the street, some toting bronc saddles or rope bags. We leaned over the tail-gate and spit and slurped foamy beer and waved and everyone waved back.

After the beer, I fell in with a crowd of cowboys headed to the café. I knew Thad Dockery and Amile Shepardson from a ranch near Thermopolis, but none of the others. The leader of the herd was a large man with a handle-bar mustache and a Tennessee drawl, but went by the name of Tex. "Gaw-damn I need a chicken-fried steak," he roared. And he meant it. At the table he ordered a T-bone and fried chicken and biscuits and gravy and a baked potato. "Do that come with hashbrowns? No, well shit-fire, darlin', better throw some in too—say, yawl heard a' grits round here?"

I pulled a crumpled five-dollar bill from my jeans and ordered a wedge of cherry pie—skip the a la mode, that cost another dollar. "Hell fire and Devil's balls," Tex shouted, as he stuffed a chicken breast into his mouth. "That won't hardly make a turd!" When the waitress returned with the check, he tilted back his chair, patted his gut, then wiped his hands on his jeans. "Darlin'," he said, tossing out a fifty, "put this little runt's pie on my tab."

Tex reached his arm around her waist, tugging her into his lap. "Put a little wiggle in your walk when ya go," he said, lowering his voice as soft as rocks rattling in a bucket. She pulled away, but not hard. It was rodeo day and the cowboys would only get drunker. Sure, her ass would get pinched and pawed. She knew that the boys gazed at her blouse, tracing the line of her bra from one shoulder blade to the other, whenever she turned. She picked up half-empty bottles of beer and spit, wiped the tables, and swayed her hips. Nobody drives through town in the winter, not even the RVs hauling snow mobiles, not even the ranchers tucked away in their cabins with a freezer of elk. No, drive through this town and the sign will claim 400 people, but that's before the widow passed away, before the gas station went bust, and before the Johnsons' blue healer had another litter.

During rodeo day, families arrive in caravans like gypsies, unloading horses and children, pitching tents, and packing into motel rooms reserved a year in advance. And the waitress rushed from table to table, piling plates in her arms, smiling at another family at the door. "Just a sec', we'll clear a table right soon." The cash register chimed and she scooped pennies and nickels into the pocket of her apron. The hell with the old men staring at her chest as she shook a bottle of ketchup, the hell with the slob at table seven who grabbed her. She had tables to clear, water glasses to fill, and as she rushed, the loose change jingled in her pockets. Every penny counts.

Tex swiveled back over the table after the waitress pushed through the crowd. "See that," he said. He patted his gut, and it quivered like a waterbed. "Gotta eat up. Otha-wise you'll stay a skinny little peckerhead. Cain't get no pussy thata way."

We pack into a motel room. Tex leaps on the bed and it cracks. We laugh. "Better break it in now," he says. The others plop into chairs or sit on rolled sleeping bags. A wrinkled *Playboy* is passed. Some tinker with their riggin's. They all spit into beer cans. And more cans line the TV and the dresser. No one has flushed the toilet. All the towels are wet. Someone broke the radiator knob and it churns out heat. Flies dart from bottle to bottle. The door is open, the window too, and still the hot air hovers.

Tex peels off his striped shirt and sits back, sweating in a camouflage muscle shirt. He's watching skiing on TV and asks if anyone's ever been and adds that it's "'bout as fun as fuckin'" and someone says no way—only buckin' horses are that fun. And I picture the big man on rental skis, hauling-ass down a slope, his arms wide, an acid-washed jean-jacket flapping, showing his bib ski-pants and camo longjohns. When I ski raced in high school, we labeled these men "gapers." They were almost always drunk or stoned, and they flew down the slopes, legs and arms wide, flailing, screaming "fuckin' balls-out, dude!" Of course, they couldn't stop. They'd smash into a snowbank, or tear through a plastic trail fence, flipping ass-over-tea-kettle. We'd ski past, finding a glove, then goggles, then a pole, then a ski.... "A yard sale," we called it. And I don't know why I remember this now, but somehow it makes me think of Rosco.

At the rodeo grounds, still hours from the show, he's stretching his muscles and thinking about the roughstock, picturing his ride and how he'll stretch those legs of his all the way to the front of the bronc. And somehow that reminds me of the mornings we'd slip under "out of bound" signs and traverse across an icy ledge, then leap into the air, turning our skis down and landing in the powder and then carving a turn and the next.

Rising and falling, up and down, slicing a swiggly line through the snow. There's no "fuckin' rad, dude," just the snip-swish of the ski edges and the ice pinching your lungs and the sun burning against your face. And with each jump into the air, you fall ten feet, getting that feeling when the elevator stops; and it's the same on a bucking horse, each jump, flying out of the saddle then slamming down, twisting and reaching. Moving as the horse moves. In perfect timing. Now, somewhere, Rosco imagines this, saying to himself, "lift and spur, lift and spur."

Billy the Kid swaggers in with Calamity Jane. "Mind if I use your shower, fellas?" she asks.

"Only if I can watch," snorts Tex.

She shrugs. "Suit yourself."

The Kid blushes as he stands in the door and glances across the room then back down the stairs towards his car. Maybe he shouldn't of mentioned the room, maybe he shoulda talked Calamity into slipping down to the creek and skinny dipping. They'd been on the road, he told me—all over hell and back, as far north as Whitefish, as far south as Cheyenne. She'd watched him ride in nearly twenty rodeos in the last week, she'd massaged his shoulders and slipped into his sleeping bag each night. And he said, "You know what's funny?" And I said no. And he told me about walking right into the Food Mart and saying I'm going to Montana, wanna come with, and she did, said yes, right there, right then, flat out quit her job and hopped into his car and they drove off, together, and slept together and ate in greasy spoons along the highway together and dressed each

morning together and even brushed their teeth in a reststop bathroom together. She knew how to kiss away the soreness, he said. Like being hungry and then not, anymore. The funny thing is, he'd marry her. He would. Except the last night she danced with another cowboy, disappeared in the crowd, and didn't come back 'til dawn. "It's not like we're married," she said. Those exact words.

But now the Kid's face is red as his pimples. Calamity skips up the stairs, holding her backpack. Her breasts brush past his arm, and her hips bump the dresser and nearly spill the chew bottles. The way he stares at the nape of her neck, I can tell he's thinking about a night in the back seat of his car, while it rained in some Montana rest-stop along the highway, and how he kissed her, in that spot where the curve of her skull dimples above the spine, where the first few blonde hairs begin, curling like goose down. The other fellas, they watched her ass wiggle in her tight jeans. They didn't know. The Kid, he watched the light on her neck. He noticed the pox-scar and the bead of sweat. He knew.

While she showers, he stands with me on the balcony and we spit over the rail and hook our thumbs in our belts. And he says, "I don't know what to do. I could win every show if she was with me. But after what happened, I think I should just cut her loose."

"She always was loose," I say. He laughs. But I didn't mean it that way. I meant hanging onto her was like cupping water in your hand.

"Yeah," he says, "No sense cryin' over a whore." But I know he's lying. He stares over the rail, toward the cottonwood trees. The afternoon sun slips down, burning above the leaves, turning them scarlet and flashing on the tufts of seeds as they float through the air.



Now picture it: the girl stands naked under the spray of the shower. The steam rolls against the mirror. She wipes the mirror and brushes her hair and blow dries it. And she's still naked, bent over, and the Kid can see it all in his memory of another motel, maybe Laramie, maybe Harlotown. But on the other side of the bathroom door, the pack of cowboys sits in dirty socks and jeans that haven't been washed in weeks. They spit and flip pages of a *Playboy*. As they stare at the images of air-brushed breasts, the steam spills from the crack of the bathroom door. They hear water splashing and the hair drier. Then it clicks off. It's quiet for a while. Maybe she leans towards the mirror as she brushes mascara into her lashes. Or maybe she sits on the toilet, with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands and thinks to herself, "Now how the hell am I going to get home?" But soon perfume seeps through the door, and all the cowboys turn and they stare as she waltzes out of the bathroom with her wet towel and dirty shirt and bra stuffed in her bag. Now her hair is brushed and shines, now her lips burn red with lipstick, now her clean white shirt clings to her still damp body. And the cowboys smell the talc powder and they smell the perfume, tilting their heads back and flaring their nostrils like horses.

So the Kid watches and he knows because he's been one of the boys. He's lingered in a corner booth or by a pool table, or in the pale circle of a street lamp, peeking from the brim of his hat. He's stumbled down the street, throwing bottles, while workers dismantled the band-stand, and someone lugged a bag of broken glass to a dumpster, and married couples drifted away to their world. And the Kid, like all of us, has imagined that world, those clean sheets, that warm body curling against you, the smell of shampoo on a pillow. He's slept in a bathtub on a rodeo night while wrestling with the image of someone else's wife preparing for bed.

As he drove across Wyoming and Montana with Calamity, I don't know exactly what the Kid saw or felt. But I do know that for a week, he was no longer a bachelor mustang. For a week, he didn't sleep in a bathtub, didn't look at a *Playboy*, didn't think of someone's wife. For a week, he'd felt her hands on his shoulders and he'd kissed her neck and maybe he'd told her about his dreams and fears and maybe she listened. Or maybe not. Maybe they simply slept in the back of his car, her back to him, his arms around her waist.

He watched the sky grow dark, and listened to the squeals of children splashing in the creek, and watched the cottonwood down float in the air, and watched the clouds of mosquitoes appear and the neon lights of the bars click on. We saw a woman in a bathrobe standing in a motel doorway, calling for her child. Then Calamity brushed past him, skimmed her fingers over his arm, and whispered into his ear, "You coming?"

He glanced at me, then turned. "Yeah," he said. "Wait up."

The next day we piled into the Caddy and headed back to Lovell. Rosco pinned the speedometer needle at 55. One of the plastic pistols had a swig of flat beer that sloshed on the dash. One had been splintered when stepped on. The other had been given to a drunk at the bar. Empty tins of Copenhagen rolled across the floorboards—plus Mt. Dew bottles, and beer cans, and wadded-up packs of smokes. The heat from the engine baked through the dash, the sun caked the dirt on the windshield, and flies bumped against the back window. The breeze rolled like a creek eddy into the cab, patting our faces, but not enough to scoop the puddle of hot air from our legs. Our jeans stuck to the vinyl.

Rosco wore the champion buckle, but it was made of tin, not silver—as if it had fallen out of a vending machine at Kmart, Rosco said. Bud sat in the back, leaning forward because his shirt had torn in the back and his skin from his tailbone to his neck was one long scab like a smeared bunch of raspberries. He'd ridden well, almost to the buzzer, when the horse threw him over the arena railing and onto a hurricane fence. The twisted-wire mesh grated his back.

I hadn't fared so slick myself. When my bronc came out of the chute, it rolled against the post, shoving my leg out of the saddle. Then it dove, tossing me forward. As the bronc reared, my head snapped down met his head flying up. I smacked the dirt. A hoof clipped my forehead.

When I stood, I sucked for air and stumbled to the rail. I slipped through the cowboys, hearing the buzzer, blinking away floating dots, until I had to sit, and hold my head. That's when I realized I couldn't raise my right arm. Tugging down my shirt, I dabbed my fingers over my shoulder. The bone jutted against the skin at a sharp angle. When I tried to roll my arm, the bone scraped against my muscles with a sound like two concrete blocks rubbing.

"You'll be ok?" Rosco asked.

"Yeah," I said. My eyes stung. I wanted to put on my sunglasses but one of the lenses had popped out.

"Good," he said. "Gotta cowboy up. Not like that puss Bud."

"Blow me," grunted Bud from the backseat.

The road wrapped around a hill then dropped across a alkali flat. Wind stirred the powder, curling it through the fences and the telephone wire and through the blades of an abandoned windmill.

"Think you can ride?"

"Not broncs, not for a while," I said.

"What about work?"

"I guess." I tried to imagine climbing onto Indian with one arm.

Bud mumbled. "I wish they had some kinda medical leave. This sucks."

"Well, stay on your damn horse next time," snapped Rosco.

"It's not like I tried to find that fence, asshole."

"You don't pay attention," said Rosco. His knuckles burned white as the alkali in the haze of the afternoon sun, in the flare of the dirty glass.

"How long you think these cuts will take?" Bud thumped his Copenhagen with his thumb.

"Maybe a week. I dunno."

"Think they'll can me if I stay home?"

"No guarantee," said Rosco.

We crested another hill, then began to drop towards Lovell. I could see the new brick hospital, the lake, the alfalfa fields, and beyond, the benonite plant. Smoke slipped out of the stacks and swept to the black slopes of the Pryors.

"I'd wash up and put on a clean shirt, in any case," said Rosco, rubbing the point of his chin. "See if they notice. Just tough the sonuvabitch out."

"Think that'll work?" asked Bud.

Rosco shrugged. "Who's gonna say otherwise?"

## CHAPTER 10: WHAT DOESN'T KILL US

Sunday morning, the sun shimmers on the Big Horn River, rolling up in heat waves to the red cliffs. Rosco tugs a crisp twenty from his swim trunks, then smooths it with his long fingers. He wears a t-shirt that reads "Marlboro Racing," a ball cap, and some tattered tennis shoes, like any teenager at a beach. But the beach is empty. Tumbleweeds roll from the hills, across the withered grass, and stumble into the green water. The waves slap the bank. Rosco watches a hawk swooping across the canyon. He snaps his money again, turning it in his fingers, like he wants to spend it, but the water and the tumbleweeds don't offer much.

"Cap," he yells, "how 'bout another case?"

The Captain pulls another case of beer from the cooler and takes the twenty.

"Some rodeo," he says.

Rosco continues to stare over the water. He flicks his cigarette, then tears into the cardboard and hands me another beer.

During the last hour, the old couples sat in pews, mumbling hymns, and hushing crying babies, while Rosco and Angel and I sat on the wooden table, drinking. Our mouths are now dry as paper. My shoulder throbs.

We watch Angel wander toward the outhouse, watch her hips move, watch her reach back and tug down the elastic of her bikini. Or I should say, the Captain watches her go, and I watch the Captain, and Rosco stares at the water, slides another cigarette

from the pack and taps it absently on the table. Then he sighs. "I just don't know," he says, not looking at me. "I work so hard to get what I want, then I get it, and I don't want it so bad." He pushes his cap and swipes his bangs. The Captain wanders off, maybe to check his cartons of night crawlers, maybe to flip through a magazine.

A large woman wanders by the river with a little girl. The girl's swimsuit is fluorescent pink and glows like a neon light against the green water. Rosco drops his head and picks at a splinter. "Hell," he says. "It's the sleeping part." And I think of the trailer, where his grandma smokes Lucky Strikes and his mom fries bacon and his little brothers crash plastic airplanes and make battle sounds of screaming engines and rattling machine guns. And I see the hide-a-bed with the unzipped sleeping bag for a quilt. And I think of Angel sitting on the edge of the mattress, her blonde hair tangled, one of Rosco's shirts pulled past her knees while she draws a final drag from her smoke before crawling over him and then lying beside him, pushing her head into his shoulder, dabbing kisses on his chin and whispering, "Don't worry. Soon we'll have our own place."

Rosco glances up at me. "I envy you," he says. "You can go home and sleep alone. You can rodeo and ride and there's no girl talking about houses and kids and the money it'll take."

And I nod, not knowing what to say. Maybe it's the heat shimmering on the water, or the bruises from the rodeo, or the beer pounding in my head. Half-drunk, half hungover, I look at Rosco, trying to focus on his eyes, trying to form words in my dry mouth.

"It's the same every night," he says. Then he looks down at the table again. "I been thinking about other girls. I don't want to. I just do."

I tell him not to worry, that it's ok to look at the menu as long as you don't order—or something trite like that. I can't find the words. I just want to slip into a cave, where the sand is smooth and cool, close my eyes, and let the dark soak into my skin and slow the pounding in my temples. I envy Rosco. I could find refuge in Angel; she could smooth a damp scarf on my forehead and kiss away the pain in my shoulder.

Rosco wipes his hand across the table, sweeping the splinters and tobacco flakes onto the sand. "See the way ol' Cap looked at her?" he asks.

I shrug.

"I don't look at her that way anymore."

By noon, the sun beats from the center of the sky. The shadows creep under cars and garbage cans. Flies crawl across the windows and screen door. We sit until the ashtray is crammed with cigarette butts, until the empty beer cans roll around our feet, until Rosco pulls three more twenties from his shorts, buys a third case of beer.

A few more families have driven from Lovell, changing out of church clothes into swimsuits and smearing their kids' ears with sunscreen and filling coolers with beer and pop and ballpark franks. We watch the families cook at the barbecue grills, watch mothers smear even more sunblock on the kids' shoulders that already burn red, watch dogs sniff at tires and piss and watch the children skip into the water and squeal. Rosco's two little brothers appear and sit beside us and kick their legs under the tables at the hot air. "Let's do something," Rosco says, slapping the three twenty dollar bills. So we rent



a boat, load the beer, the two brothers, and the towels. Rosco steers, Angel reclines across the bow, and the two kids hop around.

The out-board engine chugs and coughs clouds of blue smoke, which curl around the stern and hang like the morning fog. The shovel-shaped bow splits the water, rolling it in small wakes. And with the wind whipping our hair, we smile at the cliffs, the reflection of the water dancing on our faces. We crack more beers and gulp warm foam.

One of the kids points at a big horn sheep as it springs up the ledges. Dust puffs with each leap, spilling sand and gravel down the cliffs' chutes. I watch the sun catch in the dust, watch it slant into the canyon, lighting the strips of color—mud browns, clay creams, charcoal blacks, salt whites, and cinder reds. The cliffs of the canyon rise higher than the tallest skyscraper. It took the river 64 million years to cut 2,200 feet and if I had been trained as a geologist, I could read 500 million years of geologic history. Along the lip of the rim, in the cream layer of sand, would be dust storms from the last hundred years of grazing, before the wild horse range, when Wyoming became a territory. And maybe the next layer, maybe some 8,000 years old, might hide arrowheads and stone chips left by the first humans in the Basin. The next layer might have been formed 50 million years ago, when wild horses first evolved here in Wyoming. And the buffalo. Then ten million years deeper, perhaps in the ribbon of coal, that was when the dinosaurs vanished. But the cliffs drop so steeply that my eyes quickly pass millions and millions of years, back to when the continental plates mashed together, buckled, and thrust the Rocky Mountains out of the sea. The layers below this time belong to a time of water

The boat chugs around a bend. The water, flat and bottle-green, stretches from the Yellowtail Dam, backing with gurgles and eddies over 71 miles. The government

constructed the dam the year before the horse range. Before then, a park ranger told me, the river twisted and churned, pinched by rapids. The horses could not scale the cliffs like the bighorn sheep, but when the canyons parted like curtains, the mustangs could walk along the sandy strip of shore. The ranger also told me that Crow braves rode their war ponies along the bottom of the canyon, retreating after the Battle of Little Bighorn with their wounded and fallen. They buried their dead in the caves along the river bank. And now these are buried under the green water.

I think about the dead warriors as the boat clips through the foam and flotsam. I don't know if the tribe ever removed the remains and reburied them above the cliffs. In my homestate of Oregon, when the government built the dams along the Columbia, several graves were relocated, several were swallowed by backing water. The peoples along the Columbia—the Wasco, Wishram, and Kilkitat—believed that evil spirits lived beneath the waves. At night the “wet shoes” would rise from the water and pull people into the depths. I don't know if the people of this desert had such stories about water spirits, but as we skimmed over the waves, I thought this would be the place. In the depths, the ghosts of buffalo and mustangs and warriors would rise like the silt from the sand and rocks and bones.

Rosco swings the boat, sweeping it toward a small inlet, where the rocks spill down a chute. “Here's the spot we used to jump,” Rosco says, and tells us about coming as a boy with Bud, scrambling up the rocks, like the sheep, to a ledge. Then they would leap, arms flapping, toes curled. And they'd plunge into the cold water and sink like stones,

then claw back to the light on the surface and crawl back up the rocks and leap again and again and again.

As Rosco cuts the engine, he tells the boys to hop overboard. The younger kid shakes his flat, freckled face. “You’ll take off,” he whines.

“The hell I will,” Rosco says. And he tells them to hurry before the bow knocks against the rocks.

The older kid, tall and thin like Rosco, jumps overboard and treads water with his skinny arms. “Come on, chicken!” he calls to the other brother. The chubby kid perches on the gunwale, glancing from the ripple of light on the water back to Angel. Then Rosco pushes him in, and he plunks like a pink bowling ball.

He paddles to the bank, where the skinny brother has already begun to scale. The pebbles shower from his hands and bare feet. The young brother holds his arm across his face. “I can’t go up there,” he cries.

“Climb, or I *will* take off,” Rosco threatens.

The two little bodies wiggle their way up the cliff, spilling the rocks and pulling themselves up by the twisted roots that twine from the cracks. And after we’ve emptied another beer, they perch on the ledge like two small cliff swallows. They look down at our boat and at our faces turned up to them. “It’s too high,” they both yell, their voices almost chirping.

Rosco revs the throttle—maybe to keep the boat near the bank, maybe to make the boys think about abandonment. They scratch their skinned elbows and shiver in their wet swimming trunks. “On the count of three,” Rosco yells. He cups his hand to his mouth and barks, “One!”

But now the chubby brother is crying and the skinny one is looking back at the trail, probably debating which way down is worse. It must not be too hard a choice, because he begins to back down the rocks. The chubby brother follows, sliding and rattling loose stones. The skinny one hollers, "Watch it, butt-munch!"

And the chubby one squeaks back, "Hurry up."

When they reach a narrow shelf, about half way down, they stop. "We're stuck," the skinny one shouts.

"Shit," mutters Rosco. And he shouts back that they have to climb back because they can't clear the shore from the small shelf. And the kids shake their heads and squeeze their arms around their bare chests as water drips from their hair and onto their shivering lips.

Angel takes the helm for Rosco as he tosses off his cap and t-shirt. "Looks like we've got to go rescue the numb-nuts," he says to me. I want to remind him about my broken shoulder, but I don't. I don't want to be a coward. Or maybe too many beers slosh in my stomach and tingle the desiccated cells in my head. The next thing I know, Rosco is shaking like a dog as he climbs onto the bank, and I am perched on the gunwale, as the younger brother had been, but Rosco doesn't need to push me with his hand because he's on the bank staring at me and then glancing up at two crying, dripping boys who are too scared to climb down and too scared to climb up.

So I jump and the water swallows me. I sink. I kick my legs, trying to find rocks as I descend. Above, the light turns emerald green, then indigo, then black. As I grab at the fading light, my collar bone scrapes against the raw nerves. I want to scream, but I can't swallow. I flail and kick and somehow adrenaline surges over the sharp pain in my

shoulder and I am rising and pulling myself up with my strong arm and scissor kicking with my legs, tucking my other arm like a broken wing. And then I am gulping air, and cutting my hands as I yank myself out of the water onto the hot rocks.

When I stand on the shore and catch my breath, I think, “Goddamn, that was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.” I suck for breath, bent over, hands bleeding on my knees. Then, as I turn my head, I see Rosco on the shelf, standing beside his brothers. What the fuck am I doing here? This is their world, their corner of Wyoming, the cliffs where boys leap and prove their courage. A right of passage. But not for me. I’m too old to prove anything, I try to tell myself.

But as I glance back at the boat bobbing in the still water of the inlet, and as I stare up at Rosco, I decide that I’ll have to swim anyhow. If I launch off the cliff, I could at least clear the shore, closing the distance. And if my shoulder hurt too much to swim, Angel could toss me a life preserver and circle the boat to me. At least, it made sense as I shivered on the bank, scraped and bruised and buzzed with beer. So I climb to Rosco, and we pick our way to the top, the boys reluctantly following.

At the rim, I couldn’t blame the kids for backing down. The twenty-foot party barge looks no bigger than a plastic toy in a bathtub. Angel waves and the sun glints on her watch—otherwise, we couldn’t have seen it.

Rosco backs a few paces from the edge, then tucks his head like a linebacker going for the tackle. He sprints, leaps, and then disappears. We lean over the rim. Far below, three white rings extend where Rosco punctured the water. We wait and I hear the chubby kid snifle. Then Rosco’s head pops to the surface, his dark hair plastered

behind his ears, gleaming in the water's reflection, like a sea otter along the cliffs of the Pacific.

Now it's my turn. I pace the steps as Rosco had, and then add one more. I inhale. My knees shake and my palms sting and my head reels. I glance across the canyon toward the dark mountain. If I could, I would have flown over the canyon, over the mesas, over the cottonwood, back to my cabin like a bird to its nest. I would rest there, with the cool linoleum floor. And I would nurse my wounds, pull my knees to my chest, and clutch my pillow while the shadows spun.

Rosco swims back to the boat and waves. And it's time. I suck one last breath, then sprint. The pebbles cut my feet. I think of high-school track and the long jump and with my last stride, I set my left foot against the flat lip of the cliff, spring with my stronger leg, and launch.

The air swirls around me. Locking my legs and arm, I am no longer running across the air, but now falling, falling, falling. The brown and red streaks of the cliffs blur, as my stomach rises into my neck—as if I have nothing inside of me but air.

The water crashes. Then bubbles. Maybe I'm drowning, I think. Of course I'd considered drowning before. Hasn't every teenager contemplated the pros and cons of suicide? Sitting in a car, listening to a favorite tape, getting groggy as exhaust fills the cab—that's always a popular choice. But how ugly to see the last glimpse of this world in an old rake, a coiled garden hose, and a clogged Toro lawn mower? Pills—always accessible—but what if the dose doesn't work, what if it bends you over, and makes you puke and the froth burns your throat? There's a gun—a fast way—but what if you miss? Or perhaps you try to crash the car, run it into a wall, off a train bridge.. say the

paramedics cut you out, fly you to ER, say you spend three weeks in coma—critical condition. Say you live and spend the rest of your days in a wheel chair. What would you say to yourself? What excuses could you make? You would tell yourself every minute: I did this to myself.

Then, of course, drowning—the fate of lovers. As I sink in the water, watching the colors darken, my lungs almost burst. My shoulder burns with pain. My arms stretch and pull at the water as it presses me down. I grasp at the small shimmer of the sun on the surface. My brain can't make my arms stop now anymore than I can tell my heart to stop pounding. Poor Ophelia, what did you see underwater? Did you notice the colors change? Did your heart pump your hands? Did you flail and claw? And when your lungs felt the squeeze of water, crushing, did you scream? Underwater there is only the pounding of the heart in you ears.

Perhaps the beer or the shifting darkness or the surge of dizzying adrenaline, makes me see the pale beaches of the old river, before the dam. I find myself floating down, my toes sinking into the sand, then walking along the shore. The old river channel sparkles like the Milky Way at night, but maybe it's just phosphorescents or minerals. The water ripples above like the sky. I picture the bones rising, returning to skeletons, and the warriors riding out of the caves, and the herds of mustangs galloping through the water.

Slowly I begin to ascend, then, as the light ripples overhead, I think, this is what the dead see. If only every suicide could see the way sun flickers on waves, the way wind slides over water. Bubbles rise from my nose. The water turns from black to green. The pressure releases me, pushing my body toward the surface like a dry stick of wood.

And then I am gasping, gulping the hot summer air, smelling the river and the exhaust from the boat and the sage over the cliffs and even, far away, the thick smoke from a barbecue.

I cradle my busted arm to my side and tread water with my strong one, making big sweeps, pushing the water under me. But it holds me, numbing my torn muscles and pinched nerves. It cups me like a hand. And I think about a day in Colorado when I volunteered to teach disabled Vietnam veterans how to ski. As I strapped a man into one of the sleds, he said, "Watch out for my catheter." I wondered where I had heard "catheter" before and when the word registered, I thought of soaked bedsheets and the nursing home my great-grandmother died in, how the floors smelled like medicine and cleaning products. I didn't say anything, but my face must have changed. The man looked me in the eyes and said, "Don't pity me."

And I didn't, ever again. Because that day I rode beside him on the chair lift and helped ease the sled to the top of the mountain, perched, teetering back and forth, then I tipped the sled and let gravity pull it downhill, while I skied behind, attached to a tether. By the end of the day, the man didn't need my tether. He needed only the mountain, the slick snow, and the pull of gravity. As he dipped the sled to each side, it swiped the snow, like a hawk scooping its wings into a thermal, arching in graceful swoops as it dives through the air. And I thought: when our legs are taken, we grow wings.

Again I think this, as I bob in the Big Horn River, suspended, weightless. As if my body were water in air or air in water.



I wish I could end the day at this point, but I can't. Like a bad dream, it continued: the sun baked our backs and scalded our noses, beer followed beer, we swam and joked, Angel sunbathed topless, and we watched the kids jump, scramble up the cliffs and jump again.

Angel drove the boat back to the marina and Rosco spent the last of his rodeo money on another case. "Come on," he slurred. "Let's get shitty."

Angel slipped her t-shirt over her bikini. "I'm goin' home."

Rosco folded his tan arms across his pale chest and orange bruises. "Fuck it. McC and I are stayin'—we can't quit now."

Angel drove the boys home and the sun began to dip toward the Pryors, soaking them like blood. Rosco and I drove to my cabin and sat on the porch.

When the beer ran out, we took down the bottle of whiskey. I plunked a few ice cubes in two mason jars, then we sat, swirling the amber liquor as it mixed. We considered the sun as it sank and the taste of the cold whiskey that warmed our stomachs and finally Rosco sighed. "I seen you glancin' at Angel when the boys were swimmin'."

I shook my head. My brain felt like a bucket of sand.

"I don't give a shit. Hell, if she wants to take off her top, more power to her. Fact, when we first met, we'd go up past the landing, there's this spot with trees and shade, she'd suntan buck-ass naked. That was a blast. Ever skinny dip with a chick?"

I told him I hadn't. Told him one night at a ranch in Montana the crew of wranglers dared each other to jump in the cold pool at midnight, but I had only fantasized about swimming with a girl. I could tell Rosco these things—we couldn't talk about

school or parents or the fears that kept us up at night, but women and horses... we could always share those thoughts. Perhaps the whiskey helped.

“You ever wish you could forget?”

“Forget what?”

“I don’t know, just forget so that everything is new again.”

I sipped my whiskey and poured more for each of us. “Maybe,” I said. “But sometimes I like the pain—like having it ‘cause it keeps me company... like when my grandpa died, it hurt like a hole right in the center of my chest, but every year it got less and less and sometimes I try and remember what it felt like, I try to cry and I can’t. Sometimes I just lie in bed and wish I had it back.”

“I ain’t talkin’ about pain,” he said. “There’s plenty of that to go around.”

Some may wonder why I hadn’t bothered to go to the hospital. The year before, as I rode through the Absorokee Mountains, running a herd of horses, black clouds slipped over the basin like a lid closing over a cast-iron kettle. Thunder rumbled, then the sky began to hum. Blue light glowed over our hats like halos. Rather than scattering the herd, we bunched them into an abandoned corral. A bad mistake. When lightning snapped, it struck the barb-wire fence, coursed down it, and grounded through my hand, through my heart, then through my leg.

It punched me through the air, farther than I am tall, like a sledge hammer slung at my heart. I lay on my back, twitching. The cowboy beside me was also flipped over. A cowgirl, riding some 200 yards away, was knocked off her horse. Our horses bucked

across the sage. My horse's macate rein, where it had bumped the wire, had been singed through.

For the next two days, our hearts raced like clocks wound too tight. But we never went to the emergency room. Hell, we were a full day's ride just to a gravel road, then we'd have to take a truck through 30 miles of farm roads, then another 30 miles of two-lane highway to the hospital in Thermopolis.

I did, eventually, find myself in the Thermopolis emergency room, when a sorrel morgan horse pile-drove me into a heap of rocks. My head cracked like a walnut. But I finished herding in the horses, then swayed, light-headed, into camp. They rushed me in a rattling jeep to town. "I'll try to go slow," the driver said, as the ruts slammed the jeep and our heads snapped against our chests. "I don't want to hurt you worse," the driver added.

"I don't think you can," I replied.

When we arrived, the one nurse on duty checked me in and made me change into a blue night-shirt with yellow ducks. She told me to strip off my chaps and jeans and boots and spurs. "They's a long way from my head," I said.

"The doctor has to check everything. You might be damaged *internally*."

So I stripped to my boxers, then put my hat back on and my boots. When the nurse didn't return, I hopped in a wheelchair and spun around the small, curtained room. Then I rolled into the hall. The tires squeaked on the waxed tiles.

One light glowed through another curtain, so I pushed in. On a metal-frame bed sat an old cowboy, bowed over, wearing the same silly night-shirt, his hat and boots.

"Howdy," the old man said.

“Howdy,” I said back.

“Horse bust you up?”

“Yup.”

And we nodded.

When the nurse stomped in, she clicked her ball-point pen and scowled. “Damn cowboy reunion,” she said. “When are you idiots going to let the horses win?”

“Seem to me they done already won,” said the old man.

It’s not so much the scarcity of doctors and hospitals anymore. In Lovell, they had just constructed a massive brick building. Only two blocks from the rodeo grounds. But cowboys have sewn gashes in horses, injected bulls with antibiotics, and fed pills to calves with scours. Their medicine may be simple, but it works. “If it don’t kill ya, it’ll cure ya,” old-timers like to say.

On ranches, we learn to take care of each other, from setting bones to simply taking sheep shears and imitating barbers. To an outsider, it must seem ridiculous—about as ridiculous to cowboys as sitting on a cold metal bed in hat and boots and ducky pajamas.

The winter before, when I worked in Arizona, a colt slipped on a patch of ice, toppled, and crushed the bones in my left foot. I caught my horse, climbed back into the saddle, but grimaced when I put weight in the stirrup. “You ok?” the cowboss asked. And I nodded, gritting my teeth.

So we rode on, but the blood drained from my face. I turned pale as aspen bark. Then I began to shake, so hard I almost dropped from my saddle.

A cowboy drove me the 45 miles into Prescott, where I sat and waited. Then the doctor entered, poked at my foot, asking, "Does this hurt?"

"Yes," I stammered, still locking my teeth. "Hell yes."

When he left to fetch plaster bandages for a temporary cast, the nurse instructed me to strip off my chaps and jeans and put on some pajama bottoms. These were pink with a rose pattern. I refused.

"Well you won't be able to get your pants off with a cast. You'll either have to wear these or slit your jeans." I considered my new Wranglers, my best pair, costing one day's wages. Then I looked at my cowboy partner and he grinned.

"Aw, they's so darlin'," he mocked.

"Cut the damn jeans," I said.

Call it cowboy pride. Or call it stubbornness. The cowboy who drove me to the hospital once rode bulls professionally. He couldn't afford to miss a rodeo, so he told the doctor to plaster his spur into the cast. "And he did," the cowboy beamed. "But he sure made a fuss."

Perhaps we disregard pain because we are never totally healed. On a ranch in Wyoming, in the Wind River Mountains, I spent several months sleeping on the ground, in the snow, riding all day, then chopping wood. My muscles knotted around my shoulders. My back twisted like the truck of a juniper. And my legs locked in a permanent bow of the saddle. When I wasn't riding, I limped like a 70-year-old man. I had to push myself out of chairs.

When the season ended, I returned to Oregon and my mother treated me to several appointments at a local massage therapist. The therapist started with my back, then

worked the kinks from my shoulders, then straightened my legs. After a month, I told her I felt swell, except for an ache in my chest every time I laughed or coughed. She suggested a visit to a doctor.

The x-rays revealed four cracked ribs. Must have been the buckskin that threw me several months ago.

I say all this in light of what happened next at the government cabin, when Rosco and I ran out of ice and choked down the last shots of whiskey. He stumbled off my porch and hollered, "Let's ride your horse."

"He tries to buck me off every morning."

But Rosco grabbed a halter from the bench and swayed down to the corral. I sighed, whiskey vapor curling from my mouth.

By the time I staggered to the corral, Rosco was sitting on my horse, bare back, holding the lead rope. Indian stood, stiff legged, flicking his ears.

Yes, I can be a drunk bastard. Rosco could have slipped off Indian, then turned with me and reeled back to the cabin—but I flapped my arms and screamed, "Boogie-boogie-boogie!"

Indian shot into the air. Rosco's long body floated to the stars, then crashed into the hay.

"All right, shit-head," he spit, picking straw from his hair. "It's your turn." He stomped to the corner of the corral, caught the horse, and led it back to me.

I rubbed Indian's withers, hoping maybe he'd gotten his buck out, or maybe was too nervous to bolt again. Grabbing a fist-full of mane, I tried to hop onto his back. But

he was a tall horse, and I'm short-legged. I flopped my stomach onto his spine, he danced sideways, and I spilled onto the dirt. He snorted.

"You ain't pussin' out," said Rosco. It wasn't really the words of his threat. I mean, any guy, no matter how drunk, can turn down being called a name. Names don't hurt. But the matter between us involved a horse. A cowboy can be scared of lightning, or a blizzard, or even an honest woman—but never a horse.

Clutching the lead rope in one hand and bending down for me to step on his thigh, Rosco waited for me to mount. I stepped, then flopped onto Indian's back. My shoulder burned a bolt of pain, but by reflex, my right leg swung into place. Indian leaped and kicked, then charged around the corral. Rosco hooted. "You're almost to eight," he screamed. But Indian darted sideways. I dove, head-first, into a bank of straw and gravel.

That night I lay in bed, shaking, praying to God to let me die. I had puked in the weeds and my guts churned with stomach acid. My collar bone poked sharper against my ripped muscles. The sunburn on my back blistered. My chin, cheek, hands, knees, and elbows bled. The gravel had scrapped a red raspberry from one knee, over my hip, to my bruised ribs. I was drunk and hung-over, alcohol sick and sun-stroked, fading in and out of delirium.

Each nerve shot hot electricity through every cell. My brain shriveled like a dry mushroom. The walls breathed and the roof pulsed and the chairs danced. I saw black horses in water. I saw fire burn up my legs. I cried to be dead—to just shut off my nerves and the sting of blood and the scratching vomit in my throat. A coyote licked my toes, slurping his lips, grinning his dog smile.

Could he be Anubis, the jackal headed god of the ancient Egyptians, the one who ferried souls across the river of death? When the dog blinked, it was Rosco in his Wranglers and silver buckle, but with a dog's head, and we were in a ferry floating under the cliffs of the Big Horn River. A herd of mustangs swam through the black water, ahead of us. Their eyes gleamed white.

To be home in Oregon, to be in a bed where skin did not snap and splinter when it hit the sheets. To lie in cool grass and feel rain on my face. If only I could erase Wyoming, this dark land, this empty place of beer and horses and sagebrush and sky, that burning sky that turned my bones to dust.

I thought again about hospitals and the ranch where I'd been struck by lightning. An old cowboy ran the cavy. He was short and thin as a sagebrush, with white hair poking from under his hat brim. That year he turned 74. When he rode, he was swift as a horse. He raced on his small black mare, behind the herd, leaping badger holes, his legs moving like the horse's sides, his hands hovering over its mane. But one day his cinch broke and he and the saddle smashed to the earth.

We thought we'd just seen a man die. And we walked to him, not running, but holding back, trying to prepare ourselves for the sight. Slowly he pulled himself onto his knees, then tried to stand, then collapsed. "Let me sit it off," he said, waving at the air

He didn't ride the rest of the day, or the next, but sat at the fire and told stories and sang dirty songs. Until the third morning, when he stood by the fire at daybreak, hunched over in a yellow slicker. His face had sunken and turned white as a dead fish. "I can't seem to find my appetite," he said.



We rushed him to the hospital. He stayed in the emergency ward for two weeks. When the report reached camp, we learned that he would probably live. He'd broken all of his ribs; four punctured his lungs. If we hadn't gotten him when we did, he would have died of internal bleeding.

By the end of the season, he was back on horses. But he fell again and shattered his hip. He'd hobble around the corrals on his crutches, watching the horses eat, handing them grain from his small hand. One cowboy leaned over to me and whispered, "My granddad said old Nate would ride anything you could get a saddle on." We knew he could never ride again. But we also knew he'd try, just the same.

And that night, as I shook in my bed, I was that old man. I had believed that pain could be ignored. That we could bridle our hurt like the furry of a bronc. And that, like rodeo, it wasn't so much to conquer the pain, but to accept it—to let it become our stories and our jokes and the praise we gave an old man who would soon kill himself because he couldn't linger as a cripple in the corrals, because on a horse he was always strong and graceful.

Lies, I wanted to say. Damn lies. My snapped bone and my stained hands and the purple welts on my thighs told me. The room flashed black and white. My eyes swelled then shriveled. My skin flaked onto the sheets, crumbling to dust. Coyotes yapped at the moon and the roof dissolved and I saw the stars burning above and every molecule of my body swarm to the sky like embers from a fire. I thought, this is the threshold. A human body can stand no more. The pain washed through me in white light. And I slept.

The next morning I felt like hell. I held an ice pack to my shoulder, and then to my split lip. Swallowing a few codeine pills, and drinking quarts of water, and dabbling aloe on my burns and neosporin into my scrapes, I started the slow process of healing.

## CHAPTER 11: NEW CORRALS

When Linda learned about my shoulder, she gave me a new duty. I'd drive the government truck around southeast Montana and inspect the corrals of people who wanted to adopt a Pryor mustang. For a \$125 fee, a person could take a mustang home; if they treated it humanely for a year, the government issued them title of ownership. My job was to inspect the facilities before the people picked up a horse and to check on the animals after they'd been adopted.

I was horrified. In one pasture, I walked within an arm's reach of a pair of mustangs before they limped away. "Well, I'll be," said the owner. "They're sure gettin' tame." He'd never been able to catch them and their hooves, without the polish of rocks, had overgrown and split.

At another ranch, I never did find the adopted burro. The man had adopted one because he'd heard burros make better guard animals against coyotes than dogs. "Did you pen the burro with the sheep until he bonded with them?" I asked, scanning across the horizon.

"Naw, I just turned him out—figured he'd find the sheep."

Many horses, as reported by the Associated Press, end up at slaughter houses. But it's not to turn a quick dollar, as many assume. It takes about as much money, time, and effort to adopt a horse, maintain it for a year, and ship it to a packing plant as it does to

train it. No, most people adopt with the best intentions. I've talked to them. They get a mustang for a pet, then get bitten, or kicked, or maybe they calm it enough to climb on its back and they get bucked off. The horse moves from foster home to foster home, learning to fear and mistrust humans. Eventually, someone with a broken arm or a black eye signs a one-way ticket to the packer.

There are exceptions. At one place, several miles up a rutted road, I found a mustang penned in a corral built from loading pallets and baling twine. I explained the federal regulations: At least 200 square feet, six-foot high fence, no wire. I could straddle the make-shift corral like a bicycle, but it'd probably collapse.

The husband and wife lived in a small cabin with no running water or electricity and more animals than Old MacDonald's farm. Mongrel dogs barked. Chickens wandered in and out of the door. Cats leaped from the broken kitchen appliances in the yard. A pig napped under a junked pickup. The woman pulled her long hair back and began to braid. I could smell the hair under her arms. "That mare had these pus boils real bad. We rubbed this tar on 'em, that seemed to work."

"You can't keep the horse like this," I said.

"Oh, we don't. We just let it wander."

"And you've only had it 20 days?"

She nodded. Her chin rolled like tapioca dribbling out of a bowl. Then she smiled with her two remaining teeth. "Sunshine, why don't you show the gentleman your horse?"

A chubby girl walked down from the cabin in her bare feet. She wore a pink tank-top, two sizes too small, and stained with berries and motor oil. "'Kay," she said.

Slipping into the corral, she walked straight up to the mustang, patted its head, looped a strand of baling twine around its neck, and led it to me.

She then turned it both directions, lifted its feet, then walked it to a stump and scrambled onto its back. When she straightened herself, she shifted her bottom square to the horse's spine, smiled, and clicked. The horse galloped across the field. Butterflies scattered. The mother rocked on her heels. "Yes sir, that girl rides like she got glue comin' outta her ass."

The girl spun the horse and raced back, kicking her bare feet like a Comanche. She rode better than I ever would, as good as little Eric or Heather. She slipped off the mustang and it followed her. She braided daisies into its mane and I thought about how the Native American horse tribes would adorn their favorite horses with paint, feathers, and beadwork.

"You'll have to get a better corral by your next inspection," I said. "I might not be the one coming to check."

"We'll try," the woman said. Her husband had been injured at a sawmill and they'd been living off the workers' comp.

"I'll give you a good report," I said. The girl had more of a right, in my mind, to that mustang than any other adopters I'd inspected. As I watched her wander from flower to flower, and as the mustang followed, I thought of Eric and all the horse kids, and how we need mustangs.

The western historian, J. Frank Dobie, had his beloved Buck, a bay with a blaze and front stockings. Buck was half Spanish and, like the Pryor mustangs, "could have hardly weighed when fat over 850 pounds and was about 14 hands high." A generation

before him, Charlie Russell had a little pinto named Monte. Monte weighed about 850 pounds and had "slim legs, deep chest, and short coupled back, built like his ancestors that had come from Spain with Cortez." I had Meeker, a black mustang who, though my years of college, carried me not just physically, but mentally away from the stress of school.

On snowy mornings, we would trot out of Colorado Springs, into the piñon, though the yucca, down sandy washes. Once, while crossing a rural highway, I saw a little girl stick her head out the window of a passing minivan. I caught a glimpse of her smiling face, turned rosy by the cold, as she looked back. The car's roar faded. The sound of falling snow returned. My ears burned with numb. My nose stung and dripped. As I rode, I wondered if the little girl would ever know the clip-clop of hoof-fall, or the creak of a saddle. Would she ever feel snowflakes catch on her eyelashes, while the steam of a horse's moving muscles rises from under her?

I want my grand-daughter to ride a mustang. But my desire, like all desires, is essentially selfish. Will Rogers once quipped: "The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man."

What is good for the mustang?

Nationally, the BLM adopts as many as 9,000 wild horses to the public each year. But that leaves over 6,000 in holding facilities. Let's not talk about how much it costs taxpayers. The rent is high, but that's not the point. The problem is that the horse herds expand every year, and every year the BLM transfers the "excess" into holding corrals. The horses are shipped across the country. Some find wonderful homes and more feed than the scrublands of Nevada and Arizona. Some will find a boy like Eric or a girl like Heather. But consider that the BLM has removed well over 170,000 horses since 1973.

Consider that approximately 80% of Americans live in urban areas. Fewer and fewer people have grown up riding.

On Dennis Gifford's porch, we sipped coffee, while the morning melted the frost on the last alfalfa cut of August. We rocked back in our chairs and looked across the fields towards the Pryors. Some of his bucking horses bear the coded U.S. freeze brand, indicating that they had been federally gathered and processed through the Adopt-a-horse program. When Dennis was my age, he'd ride with his dad and brothers into the Pryors to corral mustangs. They'd return most, but keep the promising ones—some for saddle horses, some for the bronc string.

"I kinda wish I coulda seen it," I confide. "Back when you coulda just ridden up there and roped a nice yearling." I wanted a connection to the past, to the mustangers.

But even those days had never been kind. In 1923, cowboy Will James wrote:

The satisfaction that I'd get at catching some wise bunch didn't last long when I'd remember that they'd be shipped, put to work, and maybe starved into being good by some hombre who was afraid of them and didn't savvy them at all. For they really belonged, not to man, but to the country of junipers and sages, of deep arroyos, mesas, and freedom.

And I am thinking of the first time I ever rode into the Pryors with Indian and spotted the band of mustangs. I think of riding after the mustangs and how the snow fell, how they vanished into it—charcoal manes and tails, blue and brown swirling like smoke and ashes and rain.

Jewel, Angel, and I sat on my porch. The girls draped their arms on the table and flicked ashes into the coffee can while I rubbed oil into a bridle and watched the horses nosing through dried manure, picking flakes of grass. The BLM hadn't requisitioned the money for more hay. I said: "I don't know if the ponies can go another day on grain."

Jewel stabbed her cigarette on the table, then brushed the ashes with her hand.

"We'll get you some hay."

"I never asked you to."

"Shut up," she said. "I want to. For the horses."

The two girls left and I finished the bridle, hung it in the tack room, then opened a beer, drank it, then thought about a second.

When they returned in Angel's truck, their faces and jeans were coated in mud.

"Had some trouble," Jewel giggled. Angel laughed too, wiping her hands. We pitched flakes of two broken bales from the back of the truck over the corral.

They'd driven down to the hay field, jumped the ditch, and lifted two bales from the last row. They both dropped the rain-heavy bales into the ditch as they struggled to push them through the wires. "Angel fell in," Jewel laughed.

The horses snatched the hay.

And we sat again, sipping beers—the girls smoking again, smeared with mud, hay tangled in their hair. "My grandpa used to own that field," Jewel said. "My dad works it. It ain't stealin'."

We watched the horses.

"No," she said. "No one owns grass, I don't care who says so. It belongs to whoever works it."



"The bales were already part broken," Angel added. "Woulda been left anyway."

Yeah, we all agreed. It ain't stealing.

"I don't care if it was or not," Jewel said.

We talked the rest of the night about horses.

To lose a home is like falling out of love. The familiar sights and sounds become so familiar you stop seeing them. The big changes—those of character—occur so slowly that you can never pin-point the specific day. For love, perhaps, it's when you don't find cold feet in bed amusing and taking a shower together crowded. With a home town, it's driving past an old grocery store a hundred times and then saying, "Now when did that become a Walmart?" or through an intersection, "was there always a light here" or "did they widen this road" or "that shopping center is new, right?" and finally one day nothing looks right, not even the school where you sat through Ms. Johnson's terrifying lessons on fraction division.

But for me, I lost the cabin as my home in one day. Five minutes, more exactly. On a Friday, a troop of Navy SeaBees descended on the Britton Springs Admin. Site. They unloaded trucks with boxes of canned tomatoes and packages of frozen beef and powdered lemonade, then marched it into the kitchen, shoved my food to the back of the fridge, gulped all my Cokes, and returned to their trucks for more. Another task-force flung camo netting across my front porch to make a desert command center for their "Chiefs." Meanwhile, their earth-moving machines—dozers, graders, dumptrucks, even forklifts—rolled across the driveway like an invasion of giant, diesel-belching termites.

Hear the engines growl, hear the barking of orders, metal clanking, hammers nailing up the netting, walkie-talkies squawking. See burly men in fatigues rushing in and out of my one-room home, see more dust churn than from a herd of mustangs in a corral. Maybe more dust than the day St. Helen's blew, maybe more dust than a windy day in the '30s.

Linda stands at the command briefing center—what I used to call my picnic table. She wears her *Desert Motif Number Three* pull-over as she stands with a combat-clad Chief. They stoop over blueprints, point, and mutter: Ah-yes...Uh-huh...right...no problem. Linda's called in the SeaBees to help construct a new corral.

Being a cowboy, by job description, means I have a more than slight leaning towards the old ways. I'd rather ride my horse to my mailbox than check my email. Rather than watch TV, I'd (I know it's arcane) read a book. To my way of thinking (and I know I'm in a vast minority), sideburns will never go out of style. For these reasons, I feel slightly duty-bound to defend the old corrals. But their only endearing quality was simply their age. And they weren't even that old.

On the range, I'd ridden down an arroyo, following the tracks of mustangs, and come across some old corrals. There're at least four of these pens still standing on the Pryor Range, although the gates have rotted off their hinges and willows have woven through the broken poles. When I spoke to Ron Hall, a wild horse specialist who worked on the Pryors in the late 60s, he reported that the traps had been around as long as anyone could remember—at least as far back as 1911, perhaps even a decade or two before.

When the BLM decided to clear the mustangs from the Pryors, they constructed a massive corral in the southeast corner of the range, near the Tillet's pasture. After the court injunction, they abandoned it. Today only a loading ramp and a pile of railroad ties

remain. The BLM then built the Britton Springs corral in the early 70s. Every few years, probably depending on budget and horse gathers, they'd add another corral. Fences joined fences the way streets in Paris wrap around older monuments. By the time I arrived, the corrals honeycombed 12 separate pens. Gates opened to some, but not to others, so the task of moving through the maze required scaling fences.

The cabin was added in the early 80s to bunk the wrangle crews. It was here that the crews slept and spit and slugged whiskey. Oiled bridles, and packed saddles to the slanted corrals. For almost a decade, Ekwortzel joined the wranglers, chasing mustangs and roping. I have clippings of newspaper photos. One shows Ekwortzel sitting a sorrel horse with a blaze. He holds the reins and a notepad in his right hand. Behind him, dust shillouttes another rider. Another photo: A wrangler, Huck Sandsness, draws a catch rope towards his saddle horn as it uncoils around a black mustang's neck. The mustang is frozen, three feet reaching, as if to leap out of the picture frame. Its nostrils flare. Its eyes flash white. Picture after picture shows riders snaring mustangs' feet. Loping around the wooden corrals, kicking dust.

This is the work of cowboys: well-trained rope horses, skillful throws, falling asleep at night, smelling of horse lather, still feeling the horse moving between your legs. It is a job I have taken pride in, and I'm sure the wranglers did as well. But that last roundup, one of the boys chased a foal. Some said it fell of a cliff. Some said the wrangler had to put it out of its misery. On ranches we watch newborn foals teeter beside their dams, we reach hands into wombs and deliver calves. But we witness death as much as birth. Some people say the wrangler had to put the foal down—as the capture plan stated—using the most humane method available and disposed according to local sanitary

laws. The only method, in that anonymous gully, was a rock. Supposedly, the wrangler brained the foal and drug it into the brush. It might not have been the law, but on the range, law and custom, or law and practicality, are all too often synonymous.

The dozers tear a swath across the sagebrush, scrapping down to the hardpan, clearing a square the size of two football fields. As the machines chug and cough exhaust, they roll the broken sage into heaps. The pollen rises in a yellow cloud. The dust swirls. As roots pop, churning in the turned soil, I see broken bones. Horse bones.

The new corrals are welded steel bars. The gates open to every pen. The design is simple and efficient. The horses will no longer be roped by horsemen, but channeled into a hydraulic squeeze-chute, the most advanced technology available.

The SeaBees swarm around the new corrals. Teams march the steel posts, while another team sets them along the survey line. The chiefs study blueprints. Then the mess-call and they pile onto the porch, stomping down the grub line in their combat boots, heaping beans onto paper plates. There will never be another night when horsemen sit, as I had, on the porch, watching the sun stain the cinder mesas, while bats looped around the telephone pole and the horses munched grain, and the saddle blankets dried on the fences and the wooden gates, swollen by rain and sun, creaked on their hinges. And soon, the dust from the machines would settle, drifting across the new swath, silting into pockets of sage, and, finally, burying the bones.

## CHAPTER 12: MUSTANG BACHELORS

We hurled down a road, rattling a wake of gravel and dust. I cranked down the passenger-side window and let the wind slap my face and roll around our laughter. The Kid kept his dad's suburban at 45 mph, even though he knew we were late for a rodeo. Jewel searched through her purse for her mascara.

Even as the sun began to turn the sky a deep blue, we could see no distant lights. Shadows of cottonwood trees spread over the road. But the withdrawing day was the only motion. The tires hummed, as if spinning in place. The mountains faded into the dark, until the world closed around us, and all I could see was sagebrush rolling along the edge of the headlights.

A pair of eyes flashed gold. "Deer," I shouted.

Maybe the Kid nodded, or maybe he said, "yeah, gotcha," but the truck still seemed suspended. The eyes became a head, then a whole body, glowing golden in our beam. The deer had been grazing in the barrow ditch where the alfalfa had spilled from the field, out of reach of a farmer's swather. After driving these backroads each evening, I had seen plenty of deer. At dawn, when the dew misted, the deer would wander to the creek and drink. So I knew that this deer wanted to finish her supper in the ditch, if we would just slow down and slip past her.

But then the Kid stomped on the gas pedal. The deer looked up. Then she jumped into the road. Behind her ran a new fawn. Deer are funny: in headlights they bolt, then freeze, then bolt again. My foot, by reflex, pushed down to hit the brakes. But the Kid accelerated.

The deer ran faster. Then we hit her. She glanced off the bumper, half twisting, making a thump like a broom beat against a rug. And we were still going, and flying across that night sky as the Kid tried to stop. He hit the brakes and the suburban lurched, skidding yards after we'd hit the deer.

He shook as he held the wheel. I jumped out and so did Jewel. Inspecting the grill, I saw that both headlights still worked. That's good, I thought, running my hand over a crack in the plastic. The radiator isn't busted, isn't shoved into the engine block. That's good. Otherwise we'd have a hell of a walk—and we'd miss the rodeo. Jewel had been stooping over the deer. She turned to me. "Where's your gun?"

"At the cabin."

"We'll have to go back and get it."

Then I looked at the deer. She lay in the ditch, half twisted, with her hind legs extended but her front legs folded under her. It was too dark to see blood or to see her sides rise up and down as she breathed. She blinked. I saw that. Shit, I said. Just standing, just watching. The Kid had wandered out of the suburban and stared into the distance. "Where'd the little one go?" he asked

"I don't know," Jewel said. "It's gone. We've got to take care of this one."

The Kid looked down at the deer. We both looked down. The eye blinked again. "Damn it," Jewel shouted. "We've got to get a gun. We've got to stop this."

We stood, all three of us, for a while. The headlights shot into the dark. The engine idled. Music floated from the radio. I had my hands shoved in my coat. Then the Kid went to the back of his suburban and grabbed an ax and walked briskly towards the deer. He'd end it, we knew. But damn it, if I had only brought my pocket knife. If we only had a rifle. Jewel and I stepped back into the shadows. And I held her—or she held me. I don't know. It was dark and the engine sputtered and we'd closed our eyes and still saw the deer rolling over the grill. When the Kid swung the ax, he used the flat end, as if he could snap the neck. It hit the muscle like a fist punching a mattress. He whacked again. And again. But no crack came, only the dull thump, thump, thump.

"Cut her throat," Jewel whispered into my shoulder. "Goddamn it, just cut the fuckin' throat."

The Kid whacked again. I circled Jewel closer. "Let him do it," I said.

And then it was over. The Kid wiped the ax in the grass and packed it back into the suburban. Then we heard the radio click off. We climbed back in, and the Kid drove, still at 45 miles an hour, both hands on the wheel. But I didn't turn the radio back on. The Kid bit his lip. "I thought I could pass them," he said.

"It's ok," said Jewel. "Forget it. We've all hit deer."

"I thought..." the Kid said again. And we continued, the headlights poking ahead of us, while we bounced down the gravel road. And we were silent for a long time. I watched the sagebrush. The Kid stared through the windshield. "I thought," he said again.

"Forget it," whispered Jewel. "Nothing we can do now."

Wind swept across the parking lot, whirling the dust, and dragging wads of wet paper. An evening storm had boiled like campfire coffee and poured off the mountains. Lightning flashed. The silhouette of the rodeo stands jumped out of the blackness. Horses squealed and raindrops pattered the boards as they trembled with the rolls of thunder and then shifted, groaned and vanished, burning candle-flames in our eyes.

A woman in a plastic poncho jogged to the suburban and rapped on the window. The wind whipped her hair into her teeth as she told us the cost of admission. "But we're entered," said Jewel. The poncho snapped.

"Don't matter. Everyone pays," said the woman.

After the lightning popped and after the thunder faded, the floodlights of the arena flickered, casting a pale glow in the drizzle. Somewhere Rosco draped his jacket over his saddle and crouched under the walkway of the stands or under a tin roof where water would pool and fall in fat drops, splashing against his black hat. Copenhagen soaked into the mud. I could see his face, thin and paste-white, with shivering lips, blue as the cigarette smoke curling into the rain.

The poncho woman tapped the window again. "Everyone pays," she repeated, but the thunder scooped her words from the puff of her breath and crushed them like empty pop cans.

We paid and drove through the mud and then walked through the mud and then stood in the mud, until our socks got soaked and our toes wrinkled and snot slipped down our noses. When the saddle bronc event started, the rain had tapered off. The lightning tickled distant mountains. The thunder rattled.



When Rosco rode, the bronc splashed across the puddles. Its legs slipped and it wrenched and Rosco snapped like a wet towel and jerked forward. The mud splattered. The horse's legs and mane twisted and then fell and skid. Rosco's black hat landed in a puddle. The horse scrambled to its feet, while Rosco tucked himself into a ball. He held his head and, after the horse galloped out of the arena, he didn't move in the mud, even when two cowboys ran to him. Their boots slurped. They ran so slowly, like running through water.

Someone screamed but the sound slipped away. The stands on the other side also slipped back, until the arena was completely dark, with one spot of light falling on Rosco.

"How ya doin'?" I asked Rosco, as we sat at a small table and watched the band. An old woman sang a Hank Williams song, while the married couples danced. She swayed in a loose pink dress, with rhinestones twinkling on the front, while a few orange and green lights illuminated the stage through the haze of cigarette smoke. "Take these chains from my heart and set me free," she sang.

Rosco sipped his beer in a plastic cup. "Hurts," he said. "Hurts like a sonuva bitch. It's been hurting since Cody, but I thought if I could just keep riding, it'd go away." He drank again, then pushed the empty cup off the table. "You try and do everything right. And then what? A stupid little horse in a hayseed rodeo busts you. I should never a' rode today," he said, now staring across the empty line of tables, past the beer booth, and into the darkness at the edge of the stage lights. "I wanted the points for the champion saddle. I thought I had it. I could even see it in the livingroom. But then one

horse, one stupid horse." We slumped over the table, our elbows pushed out. The dancers clapped and stood, waiting for another song. "You do everything right. You do everything you can. For what? Think that horse gave a shit about me?"

I thought of our night at the cabin, drunk, getting bucked off Indian. I wanted to repeat a line from a country song: "If it's a horse, ride it/ if it hurts, hide it." I wanted to say, "Hey, buddy, cowboy up." City people talk about cowboys as loners, but no cowboy can last long in rodeo alone. We need each other to keep pretending that pain is a weakness of will. We need each other to take our hurting like a pinch of chew and spit it out. "Come on," I said. "Let's let some of these pretty ladies dance with us. Take a break from rodeo. You'll heal this winter."

"Bullshit," he said. "Maybe you can, sittin' in a classroom."

"What if I stay?"

He looked me in the face like peering into a dusty window. "Why?"

"Like you said in Cody—maybe we could travel together. Win big."

"There ain't no big. I use'ta think I could git ahead in this game. I use'ta think I could set out enough money, and ride more, and the more I rode, the more money—but it don't go like that—you git on a horse and pick up some pocket change and blow it on gas to the next show, there's buying food, equipment, and God helpya if one of these bastards ever really busts ya. I use'ta think rodeo was my ticket out."

"But you're the best rider in the Basin."

He smirked, and made a slight gesture of pushing an invisible phallus into his mouth, as if to say, "Blow me some more bullshit." Rosco was, in fact, ranked as the top rider in the Basin—but it wasn't something we could talk about openly. Cowboys hate

both braggers and sycophants. Rodeo is perhaps the only sport where competitors nearly kill themselves to win and then apologize if they do.

Then Rosco sighed and slumped forward, folded then unfolded his thin hands. He turned his right palm over and stared into it. “I use’ta think about being the best bronc rider since Casey Tibbs. Get some buckin’ stock—start up a school. I guess, deep down, maybe I knew better. But at least I could aim at it. I could be loadin’ those sacks and thinkin’ about the cabin I’d build for Angel and the champion saddle and then it’d be quittin’ time. And you know what? It’s like when I was in school and I got Ds and Cs—I was never jealous of the kids who got As. But if I’d worked my ass off, studied all night, then gotten a B+, I’d be pissed I didn’t get an A. Now I’m...I don’t know...I’ve been trying to shake this injury all season. Then one horse, one stupid horse. I was so close to winnin’ the circuit. Never came closer to anything. Only thing I want now is just to come out even.”

Bud leads a pack of five cowboys to our table. He’d strapped on a large silver buckle that he’d borrowed from his dad. Small gems dotted the edges and gold letters read, *Fort Worth—All Around, 1972*. “This here’s a babe magnet,” he says when he notices my gaze. “Buckle bunnies are after cowboys who win big—maybe think they got more money. I dunno, maybe it’s just braggin’ rights. But this here is a PRCA buckle. They’ll dig that.”

“What if they see the date?”

“That don’t matter. Drunk girls caint add.”

With the others clustering around the table, Rosco had been silent. "Let's get some beer," he says, pushing his hat down. "These two-dollar cups suck."

We wander through the crowd. I scan for a girl to latch my arm and turn me into the circles of dancers. None do. Bud stops a lady. "Hey, you got a boyfriend?" he asks. "Want one?"

"Get bent," she says, and flips her hair-sprayed bangs. Bud chuckles and we continue.

I glance back, hoping again to find a girl I know, but we move like a herd of mustang bachelors, each wandering together, drawn by the bonds of the group, but secretly wishing for a female. In the Caddy, Rosco slides behind the wheel and Bud and two others squeeze into the front seat, while Billy the Kid and a tall bronc rider and another guy named Pete and I wedge into the back. Before Rosco pulls out of the parking lot, I roll down the window and call to a cowgirl I know. "Hey, come with."

She smiles and waves. "I don't need that kind of trouble."

We rattle down a street, while the traffic lights blink and neon signs fill windows and a dog trots down the sidewalk. At a drive-up liquor store, we all fish crumpled bills from our jeans and Rosco orders a case of Keystone. The woman glances into the backseat as she smooths the bills against the window, then shrugs and turns away. When she returns, Rosco hands the beer to Bud, then counts the last of the money. "Better make it another case," he says. The woman glances into the car again, sighs, and fetches more beer.

We drive, each drinking a beer, wishing the radio worked so we could turn it up and howl as we speed through redlights. We want to scream like the tires on the

pavement, we want to hurl empty beer cans into the backs of parked pickups, we want a cop to stop us. The street is still empty, the lights red, no one watches us pass. "Turn off your headlights," says the tall bronc rider.

"Why?" asks Rosco.

"For the hell of it."

Pete wants to visit the bar. "I bet we could find a fight." And then we are walking into a dark room, where two old men play pool and a few others sit at tables and sip pitchers of beer. Pete wants to find bikers, but these men didn't even turn when we entered. They rub chalk on their cue sticks and shuffle around the table. "You should be here when the bikers come through for Sturgis," Pete says, as we bunched into a booth. "I seen a fella knife a guy in the door, right there." And we turn, as if maybe a man with a grizzly-bear face and a leather jacket smashed bottles and flashed a knife. But only the old barmaid empties ash-trays and wipes the tables. In the corner, a row of keno machines beep and flash like video games.

We finish our drinks then saunter out, back along the sidewalk, strolling up the block then crossing the street, then walking down the opposite sidewalk past closed stores and boarded-up windows. Then we squeeze back into the Caddy. More beers.

Pete talks about his winter in Antarctica. He tells us that besides the handful of PhD scientists, the compound hires all kinds of blue-collars to run the diesel generators, or to maintain the buildings, to cook in the restaurants—electricians, plumbers, even TV repairmen. "Bout any job up here, you can find down there," Pete says, "excepts cowboy." He claims the wages are good and you can't spend much down there and he brought back over \$10,000 and we tell him we can't even imagine having that much and he

shrugs and says, "Yeah, I didn't know how the hell to spend it all." A new TV, VCR, a stereo, and then rodeo.

"Rodeo 'til the money plays out," Rosco mumbles.

"What about women?" Bud asks.

"Yeah," sighs Pete, "but it's like here. You can't go anywhere, so people watch movies and drink. And all I can say is never go down with a girl."

"Why?" I ask.

"Cause no one stays married down there. It drives you crazy. Eat, sleep, drink, and fuck. That's everything."

"Think you'll ever go back?"

"Yeah, I guess. It's hard to turn down steady money. I got enough bank to hold the winter and another season. Maybe I'll have to go back."

"Yeah, but we're turkey huntin' this fall," says Bud. "You hunt, McC?"

"Not much," I confess. "Dad never did—you know how it is."

"Shame. We'll have to hunt out in those fields by your place."

"He won't be around," says Rosco.

"Sure he will." Bud tries to turn around in the front seat. "We'll get you a girlfriend. That'll keep you through the winter."

"Yeah, we'll get you one," Pete chuckles. "One for all of us because I tell you boys, at this rate, it's gonna be a coyote winter."

The moon hangs over rooftops. Casts a ring into the sky. Pales the streets and the metal of poles, traffic lights. On any map, this place is called a town, but that must be a map for the day. Because at night buildings line the streets, with glass and wood and

cement, hollow rooms boarded against this moonlight, against the click of our boots on the sidewalks and the puttering engine of our car—the only car on the street. We rev the engine because it makes us shout, because it throws a sound to echo on the pavement.

A female swings down the street, knees buckling. She grabs a box with last week's newspapers, then tilts and sways, tugging at her mini skirt, and slapping her forehead to brush back her hair. Our headlights catch her like a spotlight on a stage. Here is the stage of Wyoming: a sidewalk and a girl with short hair and one ear-ring lost. She weaves to the car, and flings her hand into the air, as if to wave. "Hey," the guys shout.

"Hey yuuuuuuurrrrr self."

Pete opens the door, then slips his arms around her waist and whispers into her ear. Her bare legs buckle again. She falls to him. He sweeps her into the car.

Now picture the old Cadillac stuffed with rodeo cowboys and a young woman in our laps along the back seat. Pete cradles her head in his arms and brushes down the tangles of her blonde hair. We're moving again, the tires chunking over the broken pavement, the engine puttering. Her legs flop across my lap. I'm drunk, yeah. And the moon through the windshield glows like a patch of mold. Pete strokes her hair, while I stare at a bare ankle with a tattoo of a butterfly.

Butterflies: the symbol of metamorphosis, or maybe only the designs of children's books, flying into summer nights. Maybe this girl sketched them on a school notebook. Maybe she also drew unicorns and flowers and everything beautiful of another world. .but not here and not tonight.

Mother, picture your daughter, do you know she drapes her legs over mine as I stare up her pale calves, at the pepper dots of shaved legs, over the knots of knee-caps, up

thighs to a miniskirt twisted around her hips. Yes, I see her black satin panties. We all do; we all look. I'm sorry, I want to say. But desire creeps up my spine, pricking the hair under my hat. I want to take her from the car and lay her on clean sheets. I want to pillow her head and tell her stories that end happily ever after.

"Fuckin bassstard," she moans. Rosco glances back. We gaze out the window as if to see more than the row of closed shops and the flash of a red light.

"Stay with me," Pete whispers.

"Fuckin' get me home," she says. The satin of her panties glints like rocks under water.

We find a side-street and a door unlocked which she sways toward and slaps her hair back again and then slams against the door and then falls through. Pete watches her.

We drive to the rodeo grounds. "Maybe we should go back," says Pete.

We swallow warm gulps of beer. "Yeah, I did her last year at the rodeo. In fact, she was so loaded..." Pete tells us they took her behind the rodeo stadium, several guys. And she was naked, at least from the waist, yelling fuck you fuck you fuck, and he mounted her like a stallion mounts a mare and then the others did the same and she lay on a bale of hay with her short blonde hair swiped around her damp forehead and stammered that she didn't give a fuck.

"Boys," he says, "we let that one go."

Mother, tonight your daughter found a bed. She once dreamt of butterflies.



Back at the rodeo dance, I order drinks for the gang. A man in an Army jacket grabs my arm. "You work on the horse range," he spits.

I tell him I do.

"You took my job," he shouts.

"You wrangled?"

"Naw," he says, but now he's standing and swaying his shoulders into mine. "I heard about you." He looks at me over his bottle of beer, bleary eyed. "I need that job."

Listen, I try and say. I'm a volunteer. I don't get paid. But he throws his bottle on the street. "You think you can fuckin' come here and take our jobs? You college party-waste. You think..." He reels back then snaps forward, as if to punch, but only his beer breath rolls into my face. "You come here, take everything. College kid."

Rosco and Bud step behind me, then Pete. I'm not large, but scrappy as a coyote. The guys tower behind me like grizzly bears. The man sits down.

We get our drinks and wander back to the sidewalk, under the oak trees, while the people move with drinks and form circles of conversation and drift along swirling into more circles of friends. Bud wraps his thick arm around me and staggers towards a park bench. "Hey," he says to two women. "I know you."

"What of it?" one of the women asks. They're about 40.

"Listen," Bud says. "Now listen. This here's my pal and he's the meanest bronc stomper ever and I just want to introduce him because...did I tell you he rides broncs?"

The women look beyond us, past the shadows of the oaks, past the crowds of drifting people, while Bud leans towards one and flips his head back at me. I want Bud to

stop, yet I want him to continue. I want to dance with these ladies. Nothing more. Just a dance. Something besides wandering back to the bar and ordering another drink.

"That's my husband," the woman says, pointing.

"Just a dance," Bud says.

"If he don't kick your ass, I will."

"Oh I like it when you get feisty," Bud says, reeling around, grinning, spitting Copenhagen on the crushed grass.

Jewel saves me by latching onto my arm and dragging me down a side-street to two middle-school boys. She introduces them, but I never caught their names. She says they need someone to help them as she leans into my side, drawing my chest to hers. And while the mummer of the crowd trails and the lights of the bar spins and the stars stretch over the trees, I wander down the street with two middle-school boys I don't know. One hands me a ring of keys. "It's just around the corner," he says. "The cop could still be there." He wants me to drive his dad's car from the parking lot, a few blocks away, to the dark side of the rodeo grounds. "We'll give you half," he adds.

I don't need a beer, but maybe one would be nice. That's not why I walk down an alley with a ring of keys jingling. I think of nights in high school when we dared each other to try to buy beer or waited for a bum so we could shoulder tap. Once a homeless man ran off with our twenty dollars. Too many nights we sat in parks, overlooking the lights of Portland, flicking cigarette ash and talking about getting out of the house. One night I was with a strawberry-blond on a rooftop looking across Portland and we kissed and drank wine she had stolen from her parents and the streets weaved like threads of a

quilt while the summer air floated and we kissed more and fell, dizzy. "Don't you need to get home?" the girl asked.

"I need to be here," I said. And I've never regretted it. If I could be 18 again, on that roof, holding her, kissing her lips sticky with chapstick and to watch the cars line the streets and hear the honking and the laughter trailing from restaurants and to fall with the stars spinning—gladly I would.

So now I'm walking across the parking lot, toward a car I know only by the kids' description. But it's not hard to find. There's a squad car parked beside it. The blue and red rollers spin lazily around. A cop gets out. "This your car?"

"No sir."

"I know," the cop says. He's only a year or two older than me. The starched black uniform binds his thick arms. When I glance into the back seat, the cop nods. "Yeah. Four cases. And I don't think it's soda pop. And I don't think it's covered with a blanket to keep cool."

We stand, while the moon shines and the trees rattle in the breeze. The radio in the patrol car hisses static. Each time the cop moves his arms, the uniform crackles like paper. I tell him I'm only trying to get the car to take two fellas home because they're drunk and you know how it is—we don't need any drunks driving home tonight.

The cop keys his CB and grunts some numbers. Static, then a woman's voice responds. He nods, turns to me, and says. "Let's have the keys. The boys' parents have been called." And now I realize that this town is like any Wyoming town. Everyone knows everyone. The cop knew the car without even having to check the license. I hand

him the keys, then glance down the street, where the sound of the band tinkles like wind chimes. "Only reason I stopped," the cop says. "The dumbshits left their lights on."

By midnight, the mothers had left to put kids to bed, the wives had slipped off with drunk husbands. Bud and I roam the street, stopping into the bar where Pete plays pool. Then we weave out the door and stand beside a group of drunk cowboys. I sit on the steps, rubbing the concrete like carpet. "Let me be," I say, while Bud disappears into the crowd. "Hell," he says, before turning. "The night belongs to us."

I'm walking around, swinging legs and bumping into telephone poles, when Bud returns with two of the largest women I've ever seen. Tight Rockie jeans bundle their hips. "This here is..." Bud says, turning to one. She says her name, but the lights of the street blur over her head and I am thinking of Portland and the roof and wanting nothing more than to curl into a girl I love and have her rub my hair and kiss my eyes.

"Nice buckle," one of the tourists says.

Bud hooks his thumbs in his pants and grins.

"Know why they're so big?" asks the larger one, curling her upper lip. "'Cause they're a consolation prize."

Bud grunts. "You make that up yourself? You should be in the funny papers."

I slip toward the smaller one, then, without knowing, reach my hand to hers.

"Let's dance," I say. And she agrees. As we stumble into the street, I glance back at Bud and the other woman.

While the girl and I dance, I sway in a two-step. One-two-step-step. And the band sings a Patsy Cline Song, *I fall to pieces*. I'd dance anytime to a Pasty song, with anyone, remembering dances at ranches when fiddlers would scrape rosin on bows and we'd waltz under the stars, our boots shuffling on faded barn floors and our spurs clanking. But tonight, I'm thinking of the rooftop and wishing I could press this girl to me. She smiles and squeezes me around my bruised ribs and I know that I am in Wyoming and can't pretend otherwise.

"Where ya from?" I ask.

"The South," she tells me, quietly so I have to lean my head closer. "Jeni and me rented a van, sorta saved up. We're doin' the whole West, you kna, Yellowstone, seein' a rodeo."

I sway and half-listen. She tells me she's glad they met cowboys, real cowboys, how her uncle had a horse and she could ride with me. I wouldn't be disappointed, she says.

She talks about *Little House on the Prairie* and watching *Bonanza* and how she and her girlfriend dreamed about coming West and how they stopped at Miller Stockman in Denver, bought purple jeans—the kind they show on country dance videos. "I don't kna how ta dance like this, but I can line dance."

I focus on the music, to the words I know from Patsy Cline and how they make me sad for the girls I have loved. But we have this dance, and I sway my hips to her's and she presses my back and sinks her heavy head into my broken shoulder while we spin.

"I could show ya'll our van," she whispers. "It's cozy. Real cozy."

When the song ends, I thank her, and slip off into the crowd. That night on the roof, my girlfriend and I slept, while the sounds of the city ground to a halt and the summer air turned cool and we made blankets of our shirts. I read in the school newsletter that she had found a man and married; meanwhile, I am staggering down a street in the Basin of Wyoming with the perfume of a stranger rubbed into my shirt and stretching my hands towards doorways, as if one might be home where someone waited.

Jewel grabs me around the waist. We're under the bandstand again, swaying. Her dark curls brush my face, while she laughs. "I kept lookin' for you and lookin' for you! Then someone said 'there he is,' but all I saw was a mongo fat girl and two hands on her waist... 'that ain't McC,' I says, but I look, when you turn—sure as shit—there's you, hangin' on."

I want to tell her, "No, it wasn't that way." But we spin around and I'm thinking Jewel is no different than the tourist or me. We all want someone to wake up with in the morning and brew coffee and kiss and then fix breakfast and drink water to dim a hangover and then talk about the future and pick names for children not yet born.

When the band quit, and the last of the cowboys drifted back to pass out in their trucks, Rosco and I found Bud flat on his back on someone's lawn. His new date straddled him, rocking the pillows of her butt up and down. Nearly passed out, Bud could still coordinate his hands to push up her shirt and grasp at her flour-sack breasts.

We waited for Bud at the car, until he completed his business or until his date passed out and crushed him. The smaller tourist had found me again, standing with Rosco beside his car. She kissed me.

I waved good-bye.

"That's it?" she asked.

"That's it."

She turned and walked down the empty street.

Rosco smoked a cigarette while Jewel snored in the back seat. "Damn Bud," he said. "Thinks every rodeo is a chance to get laid." We watch the Milky Way bend around the North Star; we shift and kick at the gravel. Rosco thinks about Angel, I'm sure, and the next rodeo. He taps his smoke on the side-view mirror and stares down the street. "I should leave him," he says. "We need to get going. Waste our night like this."

When Bud stumbles down the street, Rosco waits in the car. Jewel and I nap in the back seat, her head tucked into my shoulder.

Bud climbs in and slams the door. Then he twists back, over the seat, and glares at me. "Why the hell did you take the pretty one?"

"I didn't take no one," I mumbled into Jewel's hair. "Just danced with her."

"But she was the pretty one."

"You had your fun."

"She wasn't the pretty one."

As we drove home to my cabin in Pryors, the sun was about to rise. Rosco squinted, pressing his face to the glass, his white knuckles wrapped around the wheel, maybe thinking about Angel asleep on the hide-a-bed and how he would slip between the

sleeping bags and wish tonight was the first rodeo in Cody. Bud sat beside Rosco, slumped into the window, maybe thinking about the girl I danced with or maybe the larger girl who rubbed her chest onto his bare skin. Jewel and I dozed in the back seat, cupped like hands into each other, listening to the hum of the tires spin miles and miles of highway across the Basin. My cabin and my bed were waiting, but in that daze of early morning, half hung-over, still half-drunk, I thought: isn't this what youth is for—driving all night, dancing, rodeo, and, like Bud, the dream of a pretty girl that is always in another town, or dancing with another cowboy?



## CHAPTER 13: INTO THE SUNSET

"There you are," said Linda. She held a clip-board and drummed it with her pen.

My eyes stung as the sun washed the hills yellow and dew misted on the grass. I tasted dried beer foam on my lips. "I thought I had Saturday off."

"But the SeaBees are here."

"I thought you didn't want me working with my shoulder."

She frowned. "But you still represent the BLM. We can't have rumors of stumbling home at all hours of the night, sleeping in weeds."

When I had returned to the cabin, the rows of dump trucks loomed in shadows, the old corrals had vanished and the earth had been scraped like a scalp. The crews had leveled four inches of gravel across the new foundation and erected lines of metal fencing that stretched into the darkness. The camo netting fluttered in the breeze. When I pushed inside, the screen door creaked, bumping a pile of combat boots. The stench of burned beans wafted into the cold air. The snores filled the room like a cluster of semi-trucks idling all night behind a gas station. Every bunk had the lump of a man under a wool blanket, even the couch. Two men had pushed my bedroll off my bed and slept, twitching and gurgling in the type of deep sleep that comes only after a hard day of work. Wet towels hung in the bathroom and were wadded on top of the toilet. I crept back out of the cabin, wandered down to the soft dirt where the old corrals had been. The dew made the soil cling to my heels. As I walked, I inhaled the smell of damp dirt and the broken

branches of sage. I wandered behind the cabin and found Indian and Mouse corralled in a new pen. They nickered low when they caught my sent. Rubbing their muzzles, I spoke to them, but can't remember what I said.

Then I curled, like a coyote, under the dip of a sagebrush where the wind scoops a hole.

I woke to the growl of engines. Black smoke boiled from exhaust pipes. The SeaBees mulled around the porch, dressing in grease-stained tank-tops and fatigue pants pushed up by their unlaced boots. They stomped around the picnic table, heaping piles of soggy eggs onto paper plates. "Dig in," someone said. Pots had been heaped in my sink. My milk carton had been drained and tossed into a corner. "It's goin' fast," said someone else.

I stood in line and scooped lumps of eggs and hashbrown, then sat on a cooler beside one of the SeaBees. As I bent, my ribs cracked and the muscles knotted around my spine creaked and my broken shoulder scraped. It sounded like a person sitting in an old chair—springs groaning and wood sighing. The SeaBee looked at me, as if he'd seen me before but couldn't remember where. He glanced at my leather boots, dusty jeans, silver buckle, pearl-snap shirt, and Stetson pushed down to my ears. The brim cast a shadow over my bloodshot eyes, but he could probably see my stubble, made darker by dirt, and the set of my jaw, muscles locked around the corners of the mouth.

"Howdy," I said.

"Yo," he said back. "You live near here?"

After breakfast, I fell in with the crews. As soon as the SeaBees saw me heft the metal panels, we began to trade dirty jokes and chews of Copenhagen. When we paused,

sweat beaded on our skin, our leather gloves folded over shovels, sledge hammers, and tampers, we'd glance at each other and nod slightly. "Well, let's get after it, boys," the crew leader would say. And with a volley of grunts, we'd march back to work.

Ekwortzel stood beside the giant machines, drinking a pop, and talking about hydraulics. He boomed his cigarette-sore laugh, and grinned, ear-to-ear. He knew heavy equipment perhaps as well as horses—move them, work them. If one breaks, fix it. If it's ruined, chuck it in the scrap heap. Perhaps this was the attitude he'd had during the last round-up when the colt died. Push it aside, go back to work. I don't want to assume, but look at any ranch in Eastern Montana, see the rusting tractors and bent plows. There's no remorse for a useless tool.

Ekwortzel had begun the corral project, allocating his '94 budget to purchase the metal posts, and helping draft the blueprints. Now he stood in the shade of a bulldozer and for the first time since he lost his horse job, he was back at Britton Springs, supervising workers.

That's when Linda found me said we should talk. I peeled off my leather gloves, and followed her up a hill. "I was talking with Angel Thompson," she said. "I believe you know her."

"Sure. Rosco's fiancé."

"Well, I've heard that she's responsible. I'm going to have her care for the horses when you go back to school."

I kicked a dirt clod.

"I understand you had people over."

"Just a few friends."

"I understand you rode Indian—not for official business."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how much she'd heard of if she was merely guessing, hoping I'd incriminate myself.

"Well, the locals all speak highly of you. And that's good. It's a public face we haven't had for a while. But in this type of job, we can't have people talking."

I nodded.

"A newspaper team from Powell is coming soon. I thought they'd be here." She glanced at her clipboard. "Anyhow, keep an eye out. When they show up, send them to me. I'll do the talking."

The SeaBees left as quickly as they had arrived. They fanned across the dunes, stalking crumpled beer cans, while others streamed from the kitchen with the cases of beans like ants excavating their nest. After loading every cooler, crate, and metal ammo box, tearing down the camo netting, they started the diesel engines and slowly caravanned over the cattleguard. As the last truck's engine grumbled to a start, one of the cooks leaned out the window and handed me a five-dollar bill. "Sorry we used some of your groceries," he said. "But here's a fiver. I know salsa is pretty expensive these days."

I watched the convoy rattle away, dust rising in their tracks. A few stalks of old hay tumbled across the driveway. Rotten poles spiked with bent nails had been heaped behind the cabin. The metal corrals stretched toward the mountains in long corridors and perpendicular angles. Walking through it felt like wandering through a closed factory. I hiked to the crest of the first dune, then looked down at the maze. I thought about the

sagebrush behind me and how, as I rode Indian, the yellow pollen would brush against my chaps. Between rodeos and the SeaBee project, I'd been surrounded by people; now, for the first time since the season began, I was alone at Britton Springs. With the new corrals stretching the size of two football fields and the swath of turned dirt where the old corrals had stood, and with the piles of scrap wood and tire-marks from trucks, I felt as if I was seeing the cabin again for the first time.

The first night I spent in the cabin, I had pictured myself as one of the riders in the background of sepia photos. That horseman, half blurred by the rays of falling dust. .that would be me. I had ridden at ranches on green-broke colts and roped calves and dragged them to the branding fires; I imagined I would cast my rope around the neck of a mustang and sit my saddle, holding the rope around the saddle horn, watching cowboys like Ekwortzel press irons against the horses' hides. I imagined the squeals of horses and the smell of bubbling skin. Perhaps the sting of blood on split lips. Perhaps the burn of a rope yanked across my palm. The environmental writer, Aldo Leopold, once said that there are two dangers in not owning a farm—thinking that heat comes from the furnace and food from the grocery. I would add: there is a danger in living with horses, but thinking they come from a sale barn or a fancy breeding farm. Those horses have never galloped down an arroyo, dodging sage, or huddled in the pines while the snow fell, or wandered in bachelor groups, sniffing the dung-piles of stallions, biting and kicking each other, practicing for the spring when they would challenge an older male and steal a mare. Their feet would be trimmed from a farrier's nippers, not chipped smooth by rocks. They would not know the taste of water from a seep between the toes of a cottonwood, but only from a pipe.

What I wanted from the mustangs was their secrets. I wanted to know where they had lived before they found themselves circling in a corral. But most of all, I wanted to know the work of taking them from the range. I wanted to sit inside the picture dated 1911, and then to limp back the cabin, a saddle propped on my hip, my legs bowed from riding. But I had never considered what it must feel like for the mustangs.

I walked down the hill, my boots sinking in the sand, then trotting along the fence, hearing the yelps of riders. I ran faster, fleeing into the corrals, charging down one of the corridors, then stopping at a gate. Maybe a worker would snap open the gate and I'd bolt, down a long passage into the new hydraulic squeeze chute.

Valves would hiss, hoses pulse, and joints slurp, as the two carpeted-lined sides of the box would fold together, pinning the horse while men unlatched portals and reached. An electric razor would hum as the men shaved a strip of hair along the neck. They'd swab it with rubbing alcohol, then apply a freeze brand of the government registration numbers. Other hands would stab vaccine needles, or draw blood for testing. Then with a whoosh and gurgle of hydraulics, the chute would release its grip, a gate would jerk open.

Would the mustangs realize the transfer of old ways for the new? Perhaps it would feel the same—a frenzy, a panic, hands and voices, the stab of metal tools. Would they care if the men worked on foot and not from the backs of trained horses? Probably not.

I could only really understand the human side and I wondered how the next roundup would change. I wondered if dust would rise and silhouette the men as they worked the chutes. With their feet running over the gravel and not in a stirrup, they wouldn't need healed boots, but would probably wear tennis shoes. There'd be no need

for chaps or spurs and I pictured the tack room with bare shelves and empty saddle racks. And I thought again about my first night in the cabin, how the creak of old wood and smells of hay and dust made me imagine old riders slumped on the bunkbeds, bridles hanging by the door, boots lined in front of the woodstove. The old cowboys I've known have never used synthetic oils on their leather, but prefer olive oil; after they've been in a room, it smells faintly like both a barn and a kitchen.

I wandered the driveway, picking up the bits of wood and nails. "Horse might step on this," I thought. But there probably wouldn't be any wrangle horses walking down the driveway, not for a long time, maybe not ever again. The government trucks will come, and after I leave, in October, cars will arrive for the roundup and adoption. A helicopter will hover over the horses, pushing them into these corrals. They will be the first mustangs in the new corrals, the first mustangs captured since the '94 fiasco, the first Pryor horses not to be handled by men on horses, swinging ropes. This gather will go without incident.

The public will drive away with their horses and a piece of paper that says they now own a "living legend" a "symbol of our historic and pioneer past." And indeed they will own a symbol. They'll have a small horse, with strong traces of Spanish blood, and even stronger markings—a stripe down the back, stripes on the legs, narrow chest, deep barrel, steep croup—all the phenotypic attributes we assign to the "classic" mustang. Riding a Pryor Mustang must feel like owning an original Davincii instead of a museum poster. And when the owners step into a round-corral at home, they can work with a wild horse the same way as Will James did, or as I did on Wyoming ranches. The sun can crest over pines, while coffee steams in a cup and morning birds sing as the bronc snorts

and tosses his head and paws the dirt. The horsebreaker can circle the horse and with each small gesture of hands and shoulders knit the space between human and horse. It is a movement between them that connects present to the past, from every generation before—before cowboys, before cavalry campaigns against Comanche, before conquistadors, before Columbus. As long as riders can work with mustangs, the connection will continue.

Perhaps that will be enough. Perhaps, for the mustangs' sake, a wrangler will never accidentally drive a foal off a cliff. Perhaps only college-educated specialists like Linda can redesign the government program to manage the horses humanely. If the new corrals are ever torn down, maybe the construction crews will not unearth anymore broken bones. But it has a price and is as dangerous as thinking heat comes from a furnace.

During the next few mornings, I sat on the porch with a laptop computer, typing a final report for the BLM. I thought of my first phone call from the café in northern California, how I'd promised Linda a college-educated volunteer with a notepad, binoculars, and horse experience. She'd never make that mistake again but would select a biology student from a university, one skilled with computer graphing and population analyses, not a young man drifting off ranches, grasping for a chance to live a fading cowboy life—not one who'd stumble through dancers in bars, sleep in the backseat of a Caddy, in a graveyard, or weeds. Someone who made notes, filed reports. Checked in. Never



strayed from the range to chase women, bucking horses, and headlights that raced across the plains to another town, another festival.

Jewel arrived, sat beside me on the picnic table, and held my hand in her lap. The morning rose slowly as heating maple syrup, the fog slid over the alfalfa field, and our breath puffed. I could smell fall coming. I wasn't sure exactly what scent belonged to the season, but I thought it might have been when my denim jacket no longer kept me warm in the morning, and I shivered, and kept my hands stuffed in my pockets. During the night, the grass had laid down and yellowed. Frost had dug its million tiny teeth into sticks and leaves and wool sweaters. I thought of my grandma's closet with my grandfather's old work coats and mothballs and windows fogged at breakfast like a coffee pot and leaves in gutters caked like chips of rust. I thought of the sun without warmth for the first time and bubbling sap as it sucked into the ground. And I thought of an arrowhead of geese pointed from Canada, flapping their wings against the green water of a lake. I'd notice drops falling from feathers and the ring of ice in the reeds, and then I'd listen to the honking slip into the grey sky.

Jewel slipped a cigarette from her rodeo jacket. "That government lady stopped by the other day. Gave a mess of papers to Angel, all about taking care of these horses. Pretty funny. I never knew it was so complicated to throw hay into a corral."

"Red tape," I said.

She chuckled, still watching the fog slide over the field and across the ruts in the road. "Even typed it."

She slid the cigarette between her large fingers, twirling it slowly. "The lady says you're going back to college."

“Guess so.”

“You’ll come back next season, right?”

“We’ll see.”

“You gotta.”

I sighed. Draping my arm around her shoulder, I pulled her against me. My bones pinched nerves, but pain spread like luke-warm water. Stand long enough in icy water and eventually you’ll grow numb, and then numb even to numbness. I remembered the first day I’d met Jewel and how the sun soaked over the rodeo grounds and how I wanted her to stay with Rosco and me, film our brave rides and clap. Or the night we drove home from the rodeo in Cody and she rested her hand in my lap as the headlights sliced the yellow lines of the road, rolling and rolling, opening the hills and fields, until the land unfolded all around our small car while we sailed into it like a ship on a dark ocean. Had I ever really wanted Jewel, or only her presence? Had Rosco needed Angel to help him win rodeos, or did he really want her to take him away? Sometimes I wonder if men need women to save them from themselves. Perhaps only Billy the Kid came close—but even Calamity could not wait on the sidelines, holding his gear bag, or wake each morning in a motel room or in the backseat of his car at another rest stop.

I thought of the last time I drove to Mustang Laundry with Rosco, loaded our dirty rodeo clothes, and flipped on the TV. A young lady sat at one of the tables, staring out the window. “I’ve seen you,” she said to me. “Didn’t you go to the dance with Aubrey Wilkerson?”

I told her I had.

"She's in my church," the young lady said, brushing back her hair—tangled as a horse's mane. "Different ward though." Lovell has four wards in its church of Latter Day Saints.

She looked at me. Her eyes seemed too big for her face, or maybe too far apart. Her indigo eye-shadow only deepened the sockets. "You're a cowboy," she said.

I shrugged.

"I can tell." Then she flipped her hair again. "Wanna see my work?"

"Whatdaya do?"

"I stay at home. That's my job." Then she pushed through the door, into the sun, and pulled a package from the front seat of her car. When she returned, she unfolded the brown butcher paper, and removed three charcoal pictures of horses.

"That's a nice drawing of an Arab," I said.

"You can tell," she said and smiled. "I guess you can, being a cowboy and all." Her drawing showed images of Arabian ponies running through a smear of grey charcoal, manes and tails flowing like pictures on the covers of Harlequin Romance novels.

"I used to work for Gifford, the old man, you know him?"

"I ride Dennis' stock in the rodeos," I said.

"Well I worked for his old man. We used to ride the Big Horns. I love horses. Worked for free. Just give me a horse. I'd do *anything* to ride."

Rosco had fallen sleep on the couch.

The lady leaned over her drawings, looking up at me from the caverns of her eyes. Her hair hung down to the charcoal and her shirt hung down, gaping enough to reveal the

curve of her breasts cupped by the white lace. Or I should say lace that had once been pearl white, but now tinted with sweat stains. She blinked. "Could I ride with you?"

"I only have two horses at the corral," I told her. Then added, "One belongs to my boss—she don't let anyone ride her horse, not even me."

"Could I ride to the corrals? You work on the horse range?"

I told her that I did, but that it was a 17 mile ride, with gates and cattle-guards and padlocks. She asked if she could maybe borrow a trailer and meet me one morning that week. I thought of returning to my cabin, typing my report, packing my saddle and clothes into the grey truck. "I guess," I said.

Reluctantly, I scribbled my phone number on the back of one of her drawings. "I'll keep this," she said. "I won't forget. Believe me, I won't forget."

Only a few hours later, Rosco and I returned to the cabin. She had called twice. As soon as the message machine finished rewinding, the phone rang again.

"Can I come by, I want to see your horses?" she asked.

"Um, we're right in the middle of supper," I said. It was true. Rosco had been gulping down beers and flattening burger patties. He looked at me as if to ask if it was her calling. I nodded.

"Well you could come to my house," she said. "I'd cook for you. I got a VCR. We could watch a movie and get shit-faced."

I handed the phone to Rosco, telling him to talk while I checked the briquettes in the barbecue.

Rosco talked to her for almost an hour while I fixed supper. Mostly he just grunted into the phone. "Yeah," he'd say. "Oh really?" Then he hung up.

He reported what he'd learned. She lived in a small house by the bentonite plant. She happened to mention her house-mate was gone, always gone, driving trucks. With prodding from Rosco, she'd finally admitted that the "house-mate" was her husband, but that they had been married when she was 17 and he didn't love her and cheated on her and she had invited us again to her house to get "shit-faced."

Two days later, as I packed for school in Montana, she called again. This time I talked to her. "Won't you come over," she said, holding in her breath. Then she sighed. Then she cried. "I'm so lonely here." I tried to tell her it'd be ok. She choked, coughed, and cried more. "I just want to ride with you," she sobbed.

As I sat at the picnic table with Jewel, I felt her hand squeeze mine. She tilted her head against my shoulder and asked me again: "You'll come back next season?"

Somehow, then, I knew I wouldn't. I didn't know what I'd find at school, but I knew that the rodeo would continue, through the schedule of each event, moving from town to town—not by the cycles of water and grass as the range cowboys once did, but by the movement of the carnival—and the cowboys would load their saddles and crash in motels and drive all night, gulping gas-station coffee, listening to the static hum on the radio, packing chews, rubbing Ben Gay into torn muscles, popping codeine pills, drinking until they were sober or asleep and dreaming of clean sheets, perfume, and women to hold them.

Jewel rubbed my knuckle. A scar crossed where a rope had almost severed the finger. "I love you," she said.

"Don't say that."

"It's true. I'll wait for you. You could come back and we could get married."

“And what? Live in the trailer with Rosco and Angel? Do you want what they have?”

“It’d be different. You’ve got a degree. We could go anywhere. Anywhere.”

I thought of Jewel and Angel and Calamity and the young wife at the laundry mat. And I thought about driving home from the last rodeo, curling in the backseat with Jewel’s hair tickling my nose. Across the Basin, we passed through hills of wheat stubble, cut and burned, like a land of ashes, mixing with the grey light of dawn. I thought of Angel asleep then, alone on the hide-a-bed, waiting for Rosco. And I thought about Bud angry at me for taking the prettiest of three obese tourists. And what about the one I had danced with—would she have told Bud about her dream of cowboys, about the sunset she would ride away in and the house on the prairie of Wyoming? All these people, including me, seeking a warm body to curl against. Seeking somewhere to go, so by morning they would not be alone.

Along the row of telephone poles, across the plains of sagebrush, past houses with porch lights left on, I had become the cowboy of my own movie, riding into the sunset and finding myself miles from nowhere by midnight. Near dawn I’d still be driving, while the sun washed orange over the hills, barreling into its hazy glow.

## EPILOGUE

I unpinned the competitor tag from my shirt, folded it in half, smoothed its wrinkles, and slipped it between the pages of a book. The shirt smelled of dust and dried grass and horses. I folded it, too, stuffed it into my duffel, then knotted a garbage bag, and walked to the grey truck. Frost gleamed on the windshield and a fog had slipped down from the mountains, sliding through the new corrals, and rubbing my cheek and soaking into my hands, knotting them like junipers. I'd swept the tack room and dust swirled from its door, settling slowly on the empty saddle racks, over the boxes of rubber scraps and the shelf with rusty tools. Only the essential stays with—the rest is left—and once again I packed my truck and thought about the roads that wrap around mountains and stretch across basins, and the maps and gaps between towns, and the street lights that blink at midnight, the beer cans hurled in ditches, and the porch lights and barns with sagging doors, and all phones that don't ring and the boxes of letters from friends who don't live at the same address, or the papers with phone numbers scribbled and then crossed out.

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner declared the frontier “closed,” but frontier, by definition, are the pockets of the West with less than two people per square mile. Most of Wyoming is still technically frontier and we are still rattling around, waiting at intersections while a Burlington Northern lumbers along a track, a Greyhound Bus lurches from a station, and plane rises into the sky, redlights blinking.

This is the way the world moves—pulling us with centrifugal force.

I've moved to Montana for school and walk down streets under the canopy of ancient oaks, and as the snow flakes swirl from gutters, as I zip my jacket, turn up my collar, and trudge back to an apartment, I think of the hazy afternoon I sat with Rosco, my last day at the cabin, on my porch. We haven't written or called, but often I think of him and how he arrived in his Caddy, stumbled out the door, toting an open case of beer and said, "Let's get shitty."

We sat and drank and when we finished the beer, we polished the last of the whiskey and took my .22 rifle and blasted the bottles. We stood, bent from riding, sore, and broken. The spent shells clinked on the gravel, the echo of the report was swallowed by the wind. "Let's ride that government horse." Rosco insisted. "Come on, puss, we're cowboys." But we both stared at the turned dirt and the heap of sagebrush and the bleached bones.

"It's off," he said.

"What is?"

"The wedding."

He picked up a rock and threw it. The deer in the field continued to graze. The sun melted the frost on my windshield and I considered the cracks in the glass.

Rosco lifted another rock, tossed it in his hand to test the weight, then dropped it. Folding his long legs under the picnic table, he sat again, glanced at me, then stared at the dried ketchup stains. "I been thinkin' about that lady we seen at the laundry. Everyday I drive to work, I pass this brick house. I don't know if it's hers. But it's this brick place with big windows and curtains always drawn shut, and I just picture her sittin' there



watchin' those soaps and..." He glanced at me again and shook his head. "Sometimes I think that's Angel, five years from now. Got our own place. I'm at work, she's at home. Do you think I want that?"

"What do you want?"

"Anything until it catches me."

I thought of youth adrift in Wyoming. I pictured the Kid waking up on his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday in a bathtub. He would stumble to the sink and wash the mud from his face and taste beer on his teeth and maybe he would think: this is any birthday, this is any day. And he would hum in his head lyric from a Chris LeDoux song, "It ain't the years, it's the miles." He will have plenty of miles before he turns my age.

At the benonite plant, Bud heaves sacks onto a truck until the next paycheck, the next Saturday night, and maybe next year, or the next, when the bones can't heal in one rodeo season, he'll stop riding, he'll dump his saddle in the garage and drive Saturday nights out to the Diamond J and sit with the other men from the plant and take turns ordering rounds of pitchers, and he'll call to the barmaid and pat his lap and make her promises. "Aw, cm'on, honey, I'll be your personal physician," he'll say, just to make his cronies laugh.

Eventually the night catches us, all of us. The stars skim the mountain peaks, while fog creeps from creeks, and the crickets scrape. Bud stumbles out of the bar, stands in the gravel, leaning against a pickup fender, while he pisses, thinking about the night of the Mustang Rodeo when we all wore competitor numbers. And Jewel lies in bed with a husband and stares at a ceiling and mildew stains, thinking maybe she should scrub, but fuck it, she likes to trace the patterns because they remind her of the roof of a Caddy

where she curled and listened to the tires hum. Angel rolls on her side, drapes an arm around Rosco, thinking about her last kiss, and wonder if there's enough roast beef in the fridge for his sandwich. She'll think about everything she does for Rosco, but will remember the nights in Cody, when all she did was watch him ride.

Now the night catches me in Montana, thinking of Wyoming. I sit in the pale circle of a lamp, while outside, beyond the mirrored reflection of the room in frozen windows, the stars roll over the mountains. The Clark Fork River slowly wraps itself under blankets of ice, like a body beneath torn ribbons of muslin. Outside the air is crisp and a breath would steam and feet crunch against snow, if a deer passed this way. But now it is only silent. The water bends under the ice, folding currents into currents, and sighs as it swallows slush. I think of the cabin at the base of the Pryors and the grey snow clouds sliding down the canyons, rubbing frost on the windows. At night, as I lie in bed, as the wind rattles the panes, I am back in the cabin. The purse still holds the empty bottle of aspirin, the doctor's appointment card, the pink panties, torn.

I think of a psalm in the Bible: *For man, his days are as grass. The wind passes over them and is gone. And the place thereof shall know it no more.* But we still remain, like the barns and the cabins, and the calendars that always read 1929. In a motel room in Fernely, Nevada, Jennifer still walks through curling steam, holing her flannel pajamas. As hail spits over Turkey Flats, I still ride Indian. In the spotlight of the Cody Rodeo, Rosco swings his legs in perfect time to the bronc's leaps.

We have been telling stories about the West like obituaries. Charlie Russell mourned the vanishing of the buffalo and the horse tribes; Will James mourned the replacement of horses by automobiles. But barb-wire didn't end the cowboy way and neither has computers. Condominiums may continue to push into pastures. Old ranchers may sell out. Horses may become used only on weekends for trail rides. But this process has been going on since the gold miners swarmed over and divided the Spanish haciendas, since railroads replaced the pony express, since super-highways replaced railroads.

As Thomas McGuane wrote: "It's not so much the trunks and old newspapers as it is the suspicion that the old people may still be alive, that what is lost is the connection."

Saddle bronc riding and wild horse wrangling were once parts of the same process. Riders would use trained horses to capture wild ones, corral the mustangs, throw saddles on their backs, and break them. With the new mounts, they would return to the range and capture more. Now, the government has taken the role of mustanger and the small-town kids play the role of horse breakers. The government gathers mustangs to preserve the range and the herds, but does not need to preserve the skills of the old horsemen. Those skills grow obsolete and are replaced by helicopters and hydraulic chutes. The rodeo reenacts the breaking of a wild horse, but only for show. The broncs are never trained to the saddle. If they quit bucking, they get sold. The rodeo riders learn to stay on, if lucky, for eight seconds—only to repeat the performance in the next town the next weekend. They don't know which range the mustang was born on; they probably couldn't corral one if they had a chance. They, like the government, specialize.

During my season on the Pryors, I participated in both, watching the mustangs on the range, and riding one in a rodeo. But the connection between the two acts had been

severed. What I had, and what Ekwortzel and Rosco and Bud had, were only the pieces. One put Ekwortzel behind the stick of a road-grader because the old style of running mustangs had become too violent for the public. And the original method of breaking horses, although always dangerous, had gone from a way to produce a willing, trusting partner of the horse, to a circuit of driving and sleeping in cars and getting drunk, hoping for a good ride, winning money, and seeking consolation in the arms of girls with vaguely-remembered names.

Both mustanging and rodeo have become controlled by forces outside themselves. The government must answer to Congress and the public, humane groups, and environmental organizations. The rodeo cowboys, to survive, take jobs at benonite plants, live in a world of motel reservations, TV, and commercial sponsors. They may respect the broncs, admire their athletic ability, they may even take pride in carrying on a sport that began over one-hundred years ago. They may claim to ride for their own satisfaction, or as a band of untamed boys, sticking together, putting their necks on the line, but in the corners of their eyes, they see the tourists in the grandstands, they pack their gear and move to another fair. They are, in the end, actors in a Wild West drama.

When taken in whole, mustanging and rodeo are disconnected and only becoming more modernized. What remains are the isolated moments, bridging the connection to the past.

Here at school, cars sputter and steam at intersections, while snow piles in doorways and hangs on pine boughs. Kitchen lights click on and spill from windows. Smoke rises and scatters into the crisp air. Cars honk and trucks growl as the traffic lights change. I think of the Pryors. I hope that mustangs will always gallop down sandy

washes, swerving past signs marking state borders. I hope they will huddle under pines while snow powders the sage and the wind snaps over cliffs. They will paw through snow to nibble at last summer's bunchgrass. Their hair will grow thick and matted, ice dangle in their manes, and mud clump into the dish of their hooves. The old stallions will wander to the lee side of mesas to lay down and die where the rain will erase their tracks, the sun bleach the bones. And when the Chinook winds peel back the snow, the mustangs will graze, their hides will turn sleek, new foals will teeter behind mares.

Eventually the night that catches us spills us into new days and everything begins again. Wyoming was once an ocean floor and I swear it still is, drawing us in its tides. And the clouds that churns like waves and the birds that cross the sky, and the mustang bands that wander, move to patterns I will never know and do not need to know. It is enough that this world moves and will carry me.

As I sit in Montana, at a desk spilling books and papers, as I rub my eyes and pour another cup of coffee, I think of Rosco slumped on my porch with his fingers folded and his head drooping, eyes puffy without sleep, the bruises under his cheeks from the last horse that busted him. And in some way, we are still together, not rodeo cowboys, but young, like little Eric, hopping on our ponies, bareback, in the mornings when the ashes of campfires slowly cool, and the sun tips over the pines. The wind swirls the grass. And we trot with the morning sun on our backs, the light that gleams on the river, unfolds the hills, dims the ache of another hangover. We click our tongues and move with horses into a gallop, reins swaying, arms outstretched, eyes squeezed shut, feeling the horses leap and the ground fall away.