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Cowboy Up

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Cowboy Up

He bought his son's boots upstairs in the western Salvation Army, size four and a half. He cleaned the dust from them with two quick slaps of his buckskin gloves and even found tiny spurs under a shelf behind a spider's home. He spun the jagged wheel like a miniature propeller, and it squeaked at first, then whirled in the shimmering afternoon sunlight. As he approached the counter, floor boards creaked at the weight of his boots, and he heard the same sound within himself. His denim was tarnished the color of the soil and his face was creased and worn like a stone from a dried out creek.

"This all for ya'?" The young woman asked the cowboy, but her face had more questions for this man.

He lowered his head and gave her a humble nod then muttered, "mm-yep."

"Aren't these the cutest things."

Again, a nod.

"I'm just so glad someone's getting them. Oh, and you got the spurs too."

He tucked up his chin and brushed his left thumb underneath his Stetson reaching behind him with his other hand as if to sling a pistol.

"Oh. It's five all together." The clerk cocked her head to the side trying to look in at the cowboy but with his hat tipped over his eyes she could not see past it to his face. She popped some buttons on the old hunk of metal on the counter and a drawer blasted out, starving for green paper.

The cowboy slung a crumpled wad of cash from his back pocket.

"This for your boy?" The clerk, not a day over eighteen, dropped her head only to see the brim of his hat, and hear the husky tone of his voice from a small shadow of his face.

"See if I can teach him to ride."

"Is that down at the pee-wee rodeo thing at Rosebud Farm?"

"It is."

"That's my daddy's farm."

"Is it?"

"Shoot I ain't kiddin'."

"You're Malone, are ya'?"

"Yes sir, and it's nice to make your acquaintance cowboy."

He pushed his hat up with his trigger finger to let her see who he was.

"Damn! Well, I know you. You're Tommy Shepherd!" She jumped up and down with excitement.

The wiry man removed his hat and graciously bowed with a grin.

"The two time world champion cowboy, standin' across the counter this whole damn time." She shook her head in amazement. "My Daddy sure's gonna' be happy to see you." She slapped both hands on the counter.

He watched to see if anyone was looking at him. No one paid him any attention. They knew him years ago. But they don't talk up anyone's name when they leave the sport. Only in the highlight reels. Only the clips that show those cowboys tossed up and mashed into the ground.

"You're in town for the pee-wee rodeo?"

"I'm here with my boy, yeah."

Shoot I'll bet that boy could ride a greased watermelon off a high dive and all the way out of the pool."

The cowboy chuckled and tipped his hat to customers. They passed, asking each other who he was, and he could hear them.

"Hey, Mr. Shepherd." Malone laughed. "My daddy will be pleased."

"I was hoping it would be a nice surprise."

She stuffed his things in a paper bag. "I still have pictures from the last time you had been here." She held her hand by her thigh. "I was about this high."

Shepherd crossed his arms at his chest and laughed.

Malone now held both hands at her hips bowing her arms out to the side.

"Well I sure would like to see that boy a yours."

"He's down the street there, over by the car."

"Well, I'll get to see the two of you tonight then I hope."

"You can count on that. You look great."

"Good to see you."

Shepherd creaked toward the door, smiling and nodding to the folds in the store...

"Oh, Tommy."

Shepherd turned.

"Thanks, for coming here and everything. I know my daddy will be happy."

Shepherd winked to her, followed by a comforting grin and took long strides out to the street. Inside he could hear Malone, "That was Tommy Shepherd. The Tommy Shepherd! World champion cowboy, folks..."

Rosebud farm was on a rusty colored stretch of land, protected by a muscular red rock mountain on the north side. The stables dwarfed a small house in the center of open pastures. Red, white and blue ribbons streamed their way down the fence lines an around the center paddock by the largest barn.

The cowboy drove a black '78 Pontiac down the dusty stretch of road. His boy was belted in beside him. He spoke to his boy as the Pontiac sliced through the chalky brown air of Rosebud's driveway.

"You git your hand in real tight, see." He made a fist and held it in front of his son's face. "If you're locked in, you got the upper hand. You see, you can then dictate the moves of the animal, instead of the animal showin' you."

Clint stayed quiet and watched his father.

"You understand what I'm sayin'?" Now, now, you see what I'm tellin' you...you hold on to that mean old bastard like a son of a bitch and you tell him you're takin' him for a ride." He extended his arm, tapping the chin of his seven year old boy with that long and crooked finger.

The cowboy approached the door with his son following behind like an obedi-

ent hound. "You mind your manners in here, this man is an old friend." He pounded three times, next to the giant brass door knocker on the towering wooden door. An old Mexican woman answered and attempted to ask their business. The cowboy quickly declined her mixed English with a "no gracias" and proceeded through the living room, tugging his miniature rodeo star with him.

Wickets was a mountainous man. He was sitting alone, in his living room, under a giant set of bull horns mounted on the wall. Mr. Wickets had organized and sponsored many of the world championship contests but was now retired from that. There was a massive oil painting of four Indian scouts on horseback surveying a setting of the western frontier. Shepherd cherished this painting. He stopped at the door to watch the picture stare back at his friend. Shepherd bought that painting a long time ago. When the money was there. It was quiet, the air thick with the smell of cigar, and Wickets sat like a cast iron sculpture at his throne in the den.

The Cowboy entered with his son.

"There any good ridin' to be had here?"

Wickets lifted himself from his chair. An elevated grin turned into a belly laugh. The floor boards were stained oak and they all cracked as Wickets approached his guests. Mr. Wickets embraced his cowboy friend and held him. Then a hand shake. The cowboy laughed and held him in his eyes.

"Shepherd, you slippery little man." Wickets covered the cowboy's shoulder with grip of his hand. "I thought you had fallen from the end of the earth. I write you, I call, I even sent a fax to that mixed up publicity agent you used to talk to." Wickets tilted his head downward. He bent his knees and lowered his giant frame to the boy. "How are you there?"

The cowboy watched the two of them meeting eye to eye like a bear to a squirrel.

"Fine."

"Well that's fine. What is it that they call you?"

"Clint, sir."

"Clint. Well, Clint, you can call me Bill. I'm your friend."

"It is nice to meet you sir."

"Bill."

"Bill?" Clint shyly smiled and tucked his head into his fathers leg squeezing the denim firmly with both hands.

"He's got strong hands, Shepherd, you can see that already."

"Can ya'?"

Wickets pugged up his lips and gave a reassuring nod, then smiled at the sarcastic tone of Shepherd's voice.

"Are you here for a stay?"

"Just a day or two. We'll be on our way to Sacramento afterwards."

"Ah yes, you're going to see your grandmother." Wickets reached inside of his worn down leather coat and produced a piece of caramel candy and handed it to Clint. "It's good to see you again, my friend. Come, let me show you what I've done to the place." Wickets handed his friend a cigar and directed them to the door.

They strolled along the open acreage of Rosebud and Wickets pointed at

everything with his cigar before explaining it. They were between the house and the largest stable. The junior rodeo was to be held in the center paddock, nearest to them. On the other side of the barn was another paddock with a stallion in it.

"Why are the ribbons up a day early?"

"It has...become such a...a town event. Christ, I think that they will turn it in to a village holiday around here in the years to come. It's a lot of hoopla for just a one day joy ride for little boys--"

"-Turned it into a money game didn't you?"

Loose gravel kicked up some dust at their feet when Wickets stopped walking.

"Clint, my young friend. If you run over to the stable there you can take a look at that stallion we have. He's in that field there."

The cowboy watched Clint peer up at him and Shepherd dismissed him with his eyes. Clint ran to the far paddock and jumped onto the railing of the fence.

"I'm sure in some trouble Tommy."

"What are you crying about?"

"This is no joke. I'm afraid I'm in over my head."

"Oh yeah, how deep?"

"Woah, deep enough." Wickets lifted his arm up to just under his chin.

"I guess asking you for help is out of the question."

"Why? You too?"

Shepherd held his arm high above his head, bent his wrist, and flattened his hand. Totally relaxed he grinned as if he knew things would get better.

"Is that right?" Wickets scratched his head. "What about all the publicity?"

"No."

"Gone?"

"Forgotten."

"Jesus."

"Yep."

"There's gotta' be somethin'."

"Huh, like what?"

"Shit, I don't know. You gamble all of it away."

"Some at the beginning. Then, after Helen passed...well I just ran out after a while."

"What about your agent, and the sponsors?"

"Vultures."

"Really?"

"I don't really spend my life around a man who does everything in the world for personal gain. Besides it makes me nervous to talk to a someone who always has a watch on and a pen in their pocket."

"Well it probably don't make them feel real good to do business with a cowboy who carries a loaded pistol in his car."

Shepherd shrugged, then watched as his boy reached out to feel the stallion. "Careful with him." he shouted. The stallion snorted and pranced, then backed away quick, letting his eyes roll back to white. Shepherd inhaled a deep breath at a sight that was all too familiar. That horse pulled back, jerking, and whining with a high pitch that

hit the cowboy in a place close to his heart.

Wickets threw his cigar in the dirt and stomped on it.

"You gonna' tell me what happened?"

"What? With me?" Wickets shrugged his shoulders and straightened out his jacket, adjusting his overall appearance. "I got too many horses. No one wants to buy 'em. The business ain't the same anymore and I can't compete with the other sponsors." He kicked gravel over his broken cigar and ran his fingers through his silver hair. "It don't make you one bit nervous does it?"

"Shit. I been banged up much worse than any bank would do me." The stallion threw up his hind legs, then pranced around the paddock. "You stay clear of that fence now, you hear? He's just showin' off for ya'." Clint nodded back to his father, then returned to the wild horse.

Shepherd spit in the dirt and dropped his cigar.

"That's a fine Cuban there buddy, you better finish it."

"You got any whiskey?"

"Wait, I'm not done about the cigar."

"I met Malone today."

"So it's whiskey you want."

Shepherd smirked at the red face of a long time companion.

"My damn daughter won't stay in school. She took her money and opened her own store...sellin' junk that no one wants.

"Junk?"

"Yeah, well, she seems to think the past will make her future. Let's have that drink before dinner."

Shepherd whistled and Clint cranked his head around with an attentive smile. Shepherd waved him in as the two men turned and made way toward the ranch house. The burning sun slowly sank at their backs, as the boy ran behind, trying to catch up.

The steak burned black and spicy over hot coals out on the porch. Malone, in the kitchen, dug her hand through a salad bowl, tossing freshly sliced vegetables with green lettuce, then adding dressing. Outside by the fire the settling dust and sleepy sun kept the two men company, while the young rider watched the fields of horses play and tufts of long grass sway in the evening's breeze. Ice swirled in the short glasses of brown water and the men spoke of their Texas past.

"You rode a big mother, as I recall, by the name of Bear Claw. Was that it, Bear Claw?" Wickets sipped from his glass and watched the sky.

"Sshht. Sona'bitch cracked my sternum in three different spots. Threw me, then put his skull square into my chest. Laid me up against them metal bars, got me to where I's just crying for help. 'Cept I couldn't say nothing, not with my chest caved in like it was. Believe me I was trying."

"Yeah, that was the last that bull ever went out, I think."

"Um hm, it was. Matter a' fact, a fell' down in Fort Worth sent me a box full a frozen steaks in the hospital sayin it was the last a' Bear Claw."

Malone listened through the kitchen window, half cringing and half amazed

that a man could live to speak of such stories.

"How 'bout that night in cow town with the Leary brothers."

"Oh, Jesus." Shepherd coughed and jiggled in his chair. "Holding you off a that tall skinny one was harder than riding any bull, that's for damn sure."

"Yeah, well I's taken him on as God intended. Fist to fist. I didn't resort to braking no whisky bottle over that big one's head, like someone I know."

"As I recall you were not the one get'n pounded and spun like some hairy Italian was making a pizza out a' you all afternoon."

"Jesus, Tommy when you turned and smashed that big one over the head he fell like a ton a' bricks." Wickets smiled and carried on. "The skinny one just opened his mouth wide in amazement, so that's where I put my fist."

They shook their heads, moved slow in their chairs, and thought silently with the birds' songs, sizzling steaks, and the rushing water of the sink in the kitchen.

"Of course it was that silly damn fool idea of yours to sponsor that gig with the mean black boy."

"What are you talkin' about Tommy?"

"I'm talkin' about Midnight, you simple son of a bitch."

"You asked to have him. So I fixed it so you'd pick him. I figured there'd be no dispute about who the best damn bull rider in the world was if Tommy Shepherd could stay eight seconds on Midnight." Wickets poured himself another and added an ice cube. "Clint my friend. Come here and listen to your daddy tell us a story. He's gonna' tell us the story of Midnight."

Shepherd sipped his glass, then finished what was in it. Then he let it alone on the table beside him, so the ice would have time to melt. Malone leaned in from the kitchen window with her ears up and ready. Wickets flipped the steaks and sat down with a full drink and young Clint crawled into his spacious lap.

"I was gettin' old. Gettin' to where my bath tub filled with ice was the only place cozy enough to lay down in. I think that bull Midnight had been rumored to've killed a man right there in the ring. Killed a rider just like that. Crippled a clown too, if I'm not mistaken. I bought a spanking new outfit for that ride; all black with tassels and silver studs. I thought I'd show 'em all. What's eight seconds anyway? I'm tellin ya', I'd watch this bull, day in and day out. He was as smooth as an oil slick, but strong. They dropped me in the cage with that ogre and I knew it was goina' be my last ride. "Cling-Clang" went the latch on the gate and ringin' bell, and woah! Hurled me up and down, then across, and over top a' him. That was it for my wrist. I coulda' rotated my whole hand around if I wanted to, the shock a' being in that dirt by myself. Holdin' my floppy hand into my arm, gasping for breath 'cause he threw me so far I flipped, hit straight on my back. I never will know how I lost my hold so fast. Never has seemed important. When you're lookin' eye to eye with the blackest, biggest, baddest bull you ever seen, you just don't do a bit of thinkin' of any sort. Just the fear. He watched me. Two spears for horns like a radar zeroin' in on me. It seemed like hours he watched me, and where were the clowns? They never came, and I couldn't move. Just held my sorry self together, finally pulled in a breath, and then he came for me. Charging! I turned to run but felt something terrible that stopped me. I didn't look down to see what it was, by that time I was in the air again, goin' around backwards this time, watching the world upside down

with shouts and screams. He hit me the hardest on my way down but that time it didn't pierce my skin. Black hooves is all I remember from down there with my face in the dirt; I forgot about my wrist, didn't think much about the hole in my thigh, just happy to see the clowns, runnin'." Shepherd slung the water of dead ice cubes over the railing of the porch. "You better check on them steaks, I like 'em bloody."

The next day, it was hot. A scorcher, where the rattlesnakes had to hide in the ground because their bellies would burn like bacon on the surface. The stallion danced in the paddock nearest the barn. He kicked up dust and snorted at the incoming vehicles. the farmers in their pick up trucks and old Cadillacs convoyed across the chalky road of brown dirt.

The old woman who answers the door swept up the kitchen. Malone moved around her and set up breakfast. The old woman brought her two teenage boys to show the people where to park. They like to play cards, and whisper funny things to one another. Malone sang country music songs and cracked eggs.

"Malone, honey," said Wickets as he entered the kitchen. "You get out to the barn and help the boys with the pigs." He noticed sizzling bacon. "Of course, finish what you've already started." He smiled and scratched his enormous, hairy stomach."

"Your shirt sir." The old woman handed Wickets a pressed white shirt.

"Gracias." He slipped one arm through the sleeve. "Have you seen Tommy?"

The old woman was short. Malone spoke right over the old woman's head to answer her father. "He was up before anyone. He's out on the deck, drinking ice water."

Wickets smiled and held out his hand. Malone reached out and squeezed it. His palm was calloused and it made her feel safe. He walked to the deck and watched the line of cars file in.

"Howdy partner." Wickets gave his old friend a familiar and sarcastic expression.

Shepherd laughed at Wickets and his unbuttoned shirt. He put his coffee cup down on the table next to his hat. Moving his eyes in the direction of the center paddock he brought Wickets' attention to his son. Clint held himself against the fence. Standing on the middle rail he watched the pigs in the pen. The two men could hear them, squealing and whining.

"I used to watch my bulls before I rode them," Shepherd said.

"I know you did."

"He's a damn fine boy, you know that."

"Well, he's yours." Wickets shaded the early sunlight from Shepherd's eyes. They watched the young boy hanging from the creosoted fence boards.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

They turned to each other. Shepherd, gangly with a strong narrow face, Wickets, chiseled and broad like he was carved from a giant block of ice.

"Don't leave that boy with Helen's mother in Sacramento."

Shepherd said nothing. He looked at Wickets then turned away. The people were filling in around the paddock. Clint leapt backward from the fence. He straightened his miniature cowboy hat and walked slowly by the crowd that was filling up

around the center ring. He changed his walk to a slow strut and that made his daddy smile.

“Shoot I couldn’t do a thing like that I...”

“It’s not gonna’ get any easier.”

Shepherd stared at Wickets. He was not smiling. “Now I’ve got a commitment.”

“That’s right.” Wickets nodded and turned toward Clint. The two men faced the boy as he approached them. “And you are a man of your word.”

Malone helped to set up the pigs. Big sloppy suckers that smelled like shit. They whined and squawked. They made ill noises. Malone got dirty and smelled like the pigs but the children loved her for it.

Wickets told jokes and shook hands. He raised money and showed off his horses to people that would never buy them. He smoked his cigars. He spoke louder than the others.

Shepherd, the cowboy, watched from the judges platform. Elevated, so he could see his son. So his son could see him. He shifted his weight with his right hand holding his belt buckle. His left hand tipped up his hat so he could see better.

Clint was up for his first ride. Malone picked him up and helped secure the pig. Clint wedged his hand inside the leather strap and pounded on it, like he’d been told. He nodded and they released him.

Fast and building up speed, straight ahead, not making a single turn. Its front legs buckled. The pig and pee-wee rider hit the red dirt face first. They disappeared in a cloud of dust. Clint lifted his face from the earth. Raw, and skinned with rock and dirt.

Cry boy, Shepherd thought. It’s okay to cry now. It is never going to get easier. Now pick yourself up. Cry.

But Clint did not cry. He stood, boots wobbling in the ruts of the ground. Not one tear rolled down his soft face. He spit dirt, then rolled his tongue around his lip to clean the soil and blood from his mouth. Eyes met with his father and he smiled. Teeth soaked red and stained brown, he swallowed the rest.

Murdoch Matheson '96