1.5 of a manifesto and a fic or two (maybe)

by the_ocean_weekender

Summary

Alternatively: my of mice and men dump

Chapter one: A George/Slim manifesto
Chapter two: A George character analysis
Any other chapters: fic!

Notes

So I wrote an analysis for English and because my school never gave me nay homework to write a new ending or whatever, I wrote one myself. And several others too. The only question is will I have the willpower to actually get them from my head to the page.
None of the pictures are mine
Slim/George Manifesto

Explore how the language in the extract influences your view of the relationship between Slim and George

Or: How I discovered George and Slim were perfect for each other.

Have you ever been told to analyse a book for English? Well in England it’s part of the GCSE syllabus and Of Mice and Men is one of those very books. And once the reading of the book has been completed, the teachers will inevitably give you a long lecture consisting of the social context, major and minor characters and themes before giving you a question to answer for homework.

The question consists of 3 parts: part A and B about an extract form the book then part C where you have to look at something similar in another part of the novel. Part A was “Explore how the language in the extract influences your view of the relationship between Slim and George” and I wrote 3 pages full of something one step away from a shipping manifesto.

But first, a little introduction…. 

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The Characters:

George Milton
First up we have the protagonist of the novel: George Milton; itinerant farm worker and Lennie’s best friend and carer. In the era of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, many farm workers travelled across the USA in search of work. George and they have one big difference: George travels with mentally-disabled friend of many years Lennie Small. He’s a huge, childlike man with no concept of his own strength and a fondness for soft things that gets both him and George into trouble. The whole reason George and Lennie are travelling to the ranch in the first place is because Lennie tried to stroke a woman’s red dress and refused to let go when she started screaming. Accused of rape, George took off with Lennie and found them work at another ranch far away.

Street smart, mercurial and defensive, life has not been kind to George and George has retaliated by building up defence mechanism after defence mechanism. Besides promising Lennie’s Aunt Clara to look after him before she died, little else is known about George and so much is left up to fanfiction writers.

Slim

“Maybe ever’body in the whole damn world is scared of each other.”

The highest ranking ranch hand at the farm where Lennie and George find work, Slim is ‘the prince of the ranch’, the head mule driver with confidence in his abilities. He is the only person in the book who seems relatively at peace with himself and the place he is at. He is there during all of the drama.
and ensures the Boss will not find out it was in fact Lennie who broke his son’s- Curley- hand. Once George has shot Lennie at the end of the book it is Slim who knows what has actually occurred and takes him off for a drink.

Slim is just about the only calming influence that the ranch hands have and is the only one who isn’t afraid to flirt back with Curley’s wife- no one else dares for fear of being fired. Despite seeming quite open, we learn little about Slim throughout the novel and do not even know if Slim is his actual first name. He’s intelligent- like George- but has none of the aggressiveness present in the former.

How I learnt to ship it

The extract I was given was just the start of chapter 3 to George’s line of “Got kinda used to each other after a little while” but it was enough. Bear in mind, this is the first real interaction we get of the pair and George is thanking Slim for giving Lennie one of the puppies that his dog has just given birth to. Here’s my entire answer (3 pages full) and by the end I was hooked.

Slim and George are the two characters in Of Mice and Men who are simultaneously the most alike and the most diametrical. Both are of a similar age, living in a harsh world where the ability to work determines whether someone eats each day. Because of the similarity of their situations, George and Slim form a rare relationship. This can be seen when the two ‘came into the bunkhouse together’. ‘Together’ isn’t necessarily needed and implies how they were talking previously- implying a budding acquaintance.

The next part suggesting a friendship is when ‘George took his place opposite’. The preposition shows George is making an active effort to be nice and non-defensive to Slim. He could have sat further away, such as on his bed- out of the light. It has been shown previously that George is a very defensive person, so why wouldn’t he sit further away, minimizing the chance of being engaged in conversation? Of revealing his emotions? Because he wants to talk to Slim, he’s lonely; Lennie is good company and staves off loneliness and gives George a purpose, but Slim understands George. Slim understands the world and feels emotions in a more mature way than mentally-disabled Lennie. Slim and George are kindred spirits, searching each other out to stave off the loneliness. This makes the reader feels happy that the two have found some semblance of normalcy and be glad that George has found someone that he can be himself with.

Moreover, George is shown to be comfortable with Slim; he uses informal contractions like ‘gonna’ and ‘keepin’ because he feels like he is on an equal level with Slim- unlike earlier in the novel with the Boss, George does not have to be polite or formal and unlike with Lennie, George can rely on Slim to keep the conversation going; George can be himself around Slim with no pressure to act a certain way. All of this results in one once again being glad of the friendship the pair has forged.

Furthermore, there are hints that George and Slim have talked before when Slim tells George that he ‘sure was right about (Lennie)’ and there is no previous mention of Slim having overheard George talking to any of the other farm workers about Lennie, it is the logical conclusion that George and Slim have had at least one discussion that has occurred without the reader being privy to the details.
This consequently causes the audience to reflect on how situations are not to be taken at face value and also consider how the amicable atmosphere between the two workers actually makes sense. Slim, with his knowledge of everything, and George, with his years of hardship cultivating defense mechanism after defense mechanism.

In addition, Slim seems to understand how to get hardened men such as George to open up information. He ‘moved back slightly’ in an ‘invitation to confidence’. Not only this, but one could also infer that Slim is also lonely- he is ‘the prince of the ranch’ so naturally everyone will be nicer to him in order to avoid being ‘canned’- and as such wants George to feels comfortable around him. This makes the reader feels sympathetic, once again drawing parallels between the two. Also, the two are forgoing the horseshoe game that the other ranch hands are playing outside the bunkhouse to talk and it implies that socializing with the others is not important. What is important is their discussion now- Slim moves out of the light and the spotlight is on George in a way it has most likely never been before, giving him a chance to shine.

However, the differences between George and Slim are starkly seen in the very next line. The adverb ‘defensively’ shows how George is still a product of his time- itinerant workers were streetwise and emotionally repressed and Slim’s non-judgmental disposition and apparent willingness to listen are at odds to the instincts ingrained in him. George is a man who is constantly evaluating the world around him, looking for hidden motives and goals in case they prove to be a threat to him and Lennie. This invokes a lot of sympathy for him, and also pity.

George’s suspicions of an ulterior motive may be partly right as Slim tells him ‘I hardly ever seen two guys travel together’, which hints that the relationship is also a way for the jerk line skinner to satisfy his curiosity. Moreover, Slim is similar to George also in the fact that he is a very perceptive person; immediately able to gouge people and their personality. This can be seen with the quote ‘a smart little guy like you’. Once again, the reader is reminded of how the relationship between the two is well-suited, in spite of first impressions.

Also in the extract, it is clear that George is using his friendship with Slim as a means of escape from his harsh reality. We can see this when he defends Lennie, saying that his friend ‘ain’t no cuckoo’. It has been well established that Slim is the most respected man on the ranch, with almost as much power as Boss’ son Curley, yet George feels on such equal footing that he is not afraid to contradict his words. Also, he tells Slim that Lennie is ‘dumb as hell, but he ain’t crazy’. With Lennie, he uses short sentences and lots of exclamations because he is stressed from the pressure taking care of his friend puts him under. With Slim, he has found another ordinary guy to talk to, who he relates to.

The reader can sense how much of an impact Slim will have on George in the future of the novel, even if he himself has no idea.

But, it is at this point that we first see just how much of a juxtaposition Slim and George are. George says ‘I ain’t so bright’, and this is the key thing that makes George and Slim so different. Slim is not arrogant, but he has confidence in his abilities to work whilst George doesn’t. Slim, if not happy or content with his life, is accepting of his situation and confident in his skills. But George, with his street-smarts and emotional baggage and the pressure of keeping Lennie out of trouble and making
sure neither of them is sacked, has no one but himself. Lennie— for all of his love for George— cannot give him a confidant or reassurance. Like a child, he thinks of only himself, unable to understand the emotional needs of others and this has taken its toll on George. Not only that, but George has mood swings; one second he is defensive and close to snapping Slim’s head off and then in the next sentence he is being self-deprecating. The author does this to make you feels sorry for George, and empathize and relate with him.

Slim is from a different kettle of fish than George has been around in what is most likely years. He is neutral; he ‘neither encouraged nor discouraged him’. He is a non-judgmental character who wants to know more about George and Lennie for seemingly no other reason than curiosity and this can make their relationship very volatile from George on occasion. However, George obviously trusts Slim not to laugh at his dreams of having his ‘own little place’. This is the reason they get along so well: they understand each other and they understand life. Slim knows how to get George to talk (when he waits until George tells him the stuff he wants to know) and George wants to talk to him. Unlike with Lennie, there is no obligation for the two to be friends— how could there be, with George having Lennie’s help to fight his battles? He knows Slim would not dare put a bad word for him with the Boss should he rebuke his attempts at companionship— and talking to someone relatable and ‘ordinary’ offers the pair of them escapism from their life, where it is all just work and harsh, grueling labour. Steinbeck influences the reader into thinking that they are glad the two seem to be at the very least developing a friendship— it is one of the few sparkling diamonds in the muck of the loneliness and isolation perpetuating the novel.

Can you see why I started shipping it? And that’s just from one A5 extract! Slim is a leader, Steinbeck describes him as ‘Godlike’ and he provides George with an outlet. He is there in every key part of the novel; he’s there when Candy’s dog is shot and when Lennie breaks Curley’s hand and when they find Curley’s wife’s body. And who comforts George after he has to shoot Lennie? Slim: he takes him to get a drink and doesn’t ask questions.

Are you shipping it now?

Next up: an analysis of George in the first part of chapter one and (maybe) some fanfiction by moi.
An Analysis of George Milton

Chapter Summary

helping others with their homework since forever

- Explore the character of George in one other part of the novel

Or: How I came to love George Milton

This was the second part of the homework question I was set; analysing a part of the novel that I chose. It was a small part of the novel, as ordered, in chapter one from ‘Evening of a hot day’ to the line ‘and I tell you again’.

I wrote 7 pages for this- which was never marked. The first part was, and I got top marks but for some reason no one could be arsed to mark but I like to think the only thing that went down in quality was my handwriting which was crap enough as it was.

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In chapter one is where we first meet the two protagonists of ‘Of Mice and Men’: Lennie and George. The audience can learn a lot about George from the first part of the novel due to the language that Steinbeck uses to describe him. The first thing we learn about George is that he’s poor. He’s wearing ‘denim trousers and in denim coats with brass buttons’. Denim in 1930s America was an incredibly cheap material, worn by the poorest of the poor. This serves to make George seem real to ranch hands reading the novella in 1937, this would be as though they were reading about someone in the same predicament as them and they would immediately feel more engaged. This links to later on in the novel, when George tells Candy ‘we got ten bucks between us’. They are poor and disadvantaged, victimized by both society and the Great Depression.

Next, we meet George. A ‘small and quick’ man who is ‘dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features’. This short description gives us a world of knowledge. The adjectives ‘small and quick’ suggest someone who is streetwise and savvy, with enough of a brain to look after himself whatever the situation. This also goes hand in hand with Steinbeck’s habit of describing his characters with animal like characteristics. George is also described through his blanket roll which is ‘tight’, slung over his shoulder. This is a metaphor for the tension the smaller man is feeling. And the reader has their suspicions immediately confirmed later on in the extract when it becomes clear that
taking care of Lennie stresses George out. In this sentence, we also learn George is quite an unhappy person—seen with ‘restless eyes’. It also tells the reader that he is quite restless and jumpy; a trait possibly born from being on the run a lot and this hints at a hidden past and intrigues the reader and makes them want to know more. This foreshadows later on in the book to chapter three when George and Slim end up talking about how Lennie and George were before the ranch.

In the novel, Steinbeck often takes the time to describe the hands of his characters; in the Great Depression, you needed a good pair of hands to work, or you were liable to starve in a gutter. George’s hands are ‘small’ and ‘strong’ on the ends of ‘slender arms’. This makes him an average worker and readers in the time this book is set would find him a very identifiable person. He is the ‘hero’ of the book yet is really just an ordinary man and this would give readers—then and now—a sense of hope: Steinbeck is showing them that ‘ordinary’ people can in fact be heroes in their own lives. The theme of hands comes up again several times throughout the rest of the book; especially in the last chapter. George has just shot Lennie and cannot stop looking at the hand that held the gun.

Quickly established in chapter one is the relationship between George and Lennie and the hierarchy in place. Lennie walks ‘behind him’, implying he depends on George for everything—much like a younger sibling depending on their big brother to look after him. However, Lennie could also be seen to be something like George’s pet. The parallels between the two and Candy and his dog are there: they depend on the other to take care of them in every which way, trusting them to keep others away and get them out of trouble. If you left them on their own it’d be disastrous. They fully rely on the other to keep them alive. Readers sympathise both with Lennie for his mental impairment, but also for George, as it is unlikely he ever gets very long to worry about just himself and this makes his mood swings and sometimes harsh treatment of Lennie if not justifiable then certainly understandable and in line with human nature. George is not perfect, he symbolises the itinerant farm worker: a good man, beaten round the head by life with decent morals and disposition strained by the pressure of living.

The first words spoken in the novel are by George and it is these words we are given that sum up the two’s relationship. Though George often speaks ‘sharply’, with lots of short sentences and exclamations showing the stress and exasperation that is a constant in his life. When he says ‘you gonna be sick like you was last night’, it shows that, though he may often be sharp with his friend and annoyed, he truly does care for Lennie. George is a very loyal person and one can instinctively tell that he doesn’t just keep Lennie around in order to make it easier to find work for himself. He—in admittedly a very subtle way—values Lennie’s companionship. This links to chapter three, when George tells Slim that lonely men ‘get mean’. It shows that, without Lennie, George would be a much lonelier, aggressive person, doomed to turn into a man resembling Curley or even Carlson or Candy.

In addition, it is obvious that George could survive on his own, whether out in the wild or in a city when he notes that the water ‘looks kinda scummy’. He is a sensible man, with a good head on his shoulders. Also, this hints at an underlying cleanliness with an aversion to dirt. This is somewhat ironic, as he and Lennie are preparing to sleep on the floor, however situations like this where commonplace in the 1930s and so George probably avoids muck where he can and puts up and shuts up when he has no other choice. Though some might think of this trait as one that is picky and
finicky, George clearly does not have very much control over his own life and keeping himself generally clean and maintaining a regular level of hygiene. This is another of these things that is relatable to readers both in 1937 and all the way up to the modern day. When people want to be in control of their lives but aren’t, they have to find control over and take comfort in the little things. It makes George seem that little bit more human and emphasises that he is just an ordinary guy. This is similar to when George and Lennie arrive at the ranch and George tells Candy ‘we don’t want no pants rabbits’. He values cleanliness and uses it as a way of having some control over his situation. Moreover, some would say that the ‘scumminess’ of the water forewarns that the book is going to have an unhappy ending.

The next thing that we learn of George is that he’s constantly on edge. Unlike Lennie he drinks with ‘quick scoops’, as if he is worried any moment now something or someone will come along and he and Lennie will have to run. This implies that he is a suspicious man, always having to look over his shoulder- most likely due to something Lennie has done because as has been previously noted, George is both streetwise and sensible. Not only this, but there is also no mention of the duo having any sort of canteen about their persons, and so this is likely the first chance of having a drink he has had since that morning. It is the ‘evening of a hot day’, and they have spent an unknown amount of time on a bus, and then had to walk in order to get to the ranch. He’s most likely dehydrated, with a killer headache and this would not put him in the best of moods; this is also possibly why he is so short tempered with Lennie later on in the chapter, though it by no means justifies it. All of this serves to make the reader pity George, and see him in a more positive light. It is also a contrast to later on in the novel. In chapter three, despite having just worked several hours in the boiling midday sun, George is in fact quite civil and even nice to Slim- not only because he has found a friend in the jerk line-skinner, but because the ranch hands have access to water.

Furthermore, Steinbeck also then shows us about the dynamics of Lennie’s relationship with George and the toll it takes on him. George tells Lennie not to drink still water ‘hopelessly’. That particular adverb emphasises and connotes a lot of things. Firstly, it infers that George has told his friend similar things numerous times in the past, and knows that the giant never remembers it. This is supported by the way George treats Lennie like he is an exasperated parent or elder sibling, but really he is both. He is Lennie’s protector and carer; he is responsible for him- thus making him like a big brother. But he also tries to teach Lennie life skills, making him much like a parent. And then, somewhere in between that, he also has to be Lennie’s friend as well. Add on to that the stigma that mentally-disabled people faced (and still do, today) and the desperation of the times, and it is little wonder that he is struggling to get the balance right. Lennie clearly sees George as his friend, most likely- and yet treats him like a parent (‘look what I done’) and is not emotionally mature to support George in the way that a normal adult would be able to, adding to George’s feelings of isolation- and he does feel isolated, for not many 1930s itinerant felt a fulfilment in the friendship department and even less had the task of caring for someone who under any other circumstances would be locked up in a mental asylum. The toll of caring for Lennie is acutely seen on the following page, when Steinbeck writes George rubbing water ‘around the back of his neck’. As we later learn, he’s spent the day (possibly more) on the run from Weed, with a man who will be lynched if the authorities catch him. Add on to that the likely possibility that he’s dehydrated and it isn’t a far leap to think George is a man stretched almost to breaking point, and Steinbeck makes his feelings almost tangible; the reader can practically feel the aches on their skin.

Likewise, chapter one also tells the audience that George is carrying around a plethora of sadness.
He ‘drew up his knees and embraced them’, and Lennie ‘pulled his hat down…over his eyes, the way George’s hat was’. George adopts the upright foetal position which, as psychology dictates, is a position that makes a person feel less vulnerable to attack. The human instinct is to breed and defend and George is defending himself against attack- both from nature and from humans. However, such an act is more commonplace in children, and as such would seem more suited to the childlike Lennie. Moreover, the pulling down of his hat low over his eyes suggests that George is tired and weary, and not just from the day he’s had, but of life. The audience comes to think of him as beaten down by life; tired of it all with no real future. Similarly, we can see evidence of George’s depression in chapter two, when he tells Slim he ‘ain’t nothing to scream about’ and also throughout the entire novella. Steinbeck says George speaks mostly ‘morosely’, ‘angrily’ or ‘sleepily’. Hardly ever mentioning a time when he seems in the least bit happy. The closest we ever seem to get it in chapter one when he sleeps out in the open because he likes it and tells Lennie ‘red and blue and green rabbits’. In fact, the only time he is described as laughing is in chapter three about Lennie and the only time he speaks proudly is about Lennie. These feelings of melancholy would have been commonplace is depression-era California and serve to make George a more rounded, relatable character.

In chapter one, George comes across as having a hard time from practically everyone. He says the bus driver was a ‘bastard’ who was ‘too God damn lazy to pull up’. People give George a hard time- even Lennie though he, admittedly, never means too. The little control George has in his life is with Lennie, except by this point their friendship has morphed into a complicated commitment- he genuinely cares and worried over Lennie, but he also accepts that Lennie prevents him from having a relatively normal life. Furthermore, as learnt in chapter three, George promised Lennie’s Aunt Clara he would take care of her nephew. And as previously noted- George is a loyal man. Provided he could block out his emotions so he could just up and leave Lennie one day and not feel so guilty that he ends up going back for him a few days later, the promise that George made all of those years ago to Aunt Clara would stop him. Their relationship still gives George some amount of control in his life, and gives him a role and responsibility and prevents him from getting ‘mean’, but though it sets him apart from other ranch hands, it also adds to his feelings of isolation and loneliness. Getting rid of Lennie might make George ‘normal’ but he would feel guilty enough to push others away and stay lonely. This all serves to make the audience sympathise with him but also identify with him, as George is not a ‘flat’ character. He has many emotions, many of them contradicting each other and he feels trapped in his life- a relatable situation for many.

In addition, Steinbeck also shows us in chapter one that George is pretty aggressive, with some severe mood swings. This is seen when he says ‘so you forgot that already, did you?’, then tells Lennie he is a ‘crazy bastard’, when just minutes earlier he was hugging his knees like a child. Lennie puts him under a lot of stress, so his short fuse is sort of understandable. He’s aggressive because he is constantly on the defensive and he comes across as bitter. But Lennie asked ‘where we goin, George?’ and it emphasises how dependent on George he is. This makes the audience recognise George. Not in his circumstances, maybe, but they recognise a decent person. Not all ‘good’ and not all ‘bad’.

Lastly, we learn George is pessimistic. He says to Lennie ‘I ain't got nothing to do. Might jus’ as well spen’ all my time tellin’ you things and then you forget ‘em’. He is clearly angry, but one gets the sense it is more frustration than it is actual fury. George has ‘nothing to do’ and people who have needed to work all of their life find it difficult when they are suddenly unemployed as it is a totally
alien concept to them. “If you don’t work, you don’t eat today” was the motto of many itinerant workers so George’s pessimism is not in fact so foreign when the context is taken into consideration. This shows the feelings of futility that George must feel almost constantly; as if nothing he ever does ever makes a difference. Thus it is not so surprising that he has lost hope and seems to always be wallowing in sorrow. Lennie is the one constant in his life, and although he stops George getting lonely he also traps George- almost like a marriage. George has a low opinion of people and everybody seems out to make his life as difficult as possible; if he was an optimistic, happy go lucky, glass is always half full kind of person, it would seem odd and jarring. Showing him as pessimistic gives him a rounded character, affected by his experiences in life and instantly causing any reader- modern or contemporary- to feel a sense of similarity.

He is ‘real’, someone no different from any other 1930s ranch hand and any farm worker reading this at the time would feel grateful that someone understood them. That someone could write down all their feelings in a book so accurately would give them hope when there was precious little to go around.
Laughter carpeted the bunkhouse as the men played cards round the table. Not too loud. The lamp casting a harsh glare in the centre that didn't reach the corners. That suited George, curled on his bed as he was. He faced the wall so as not to have to see Lennie's empty bunk. Two weeks and it was still just as raw as it had been.

Slim came back in from his cigarette. Declined the other men's offers to join and went over to his own bed. George shut his eyes and pretended to be asleep as he passed. He wasn't in the mood to talk.
Sleep Like Dead Men. Wake Up Like Dead Men.

Chapter Summary

"summertime, and the living is (not so) easy"

Chapter Notes

title from a softer world #658

Slim opened the door of the bunkhouse, cigarette between his lips and match poised. The electric bulb cast a shadow over the hunched figure on the steps. Soft looking if not feeling.

"What you doin' out here in the cold?" he asked George, sitting next to him.

"Couldn' sleep," Slim just nodded, blew out a plume of smoke. George, as he had been doing of late, stayed silent. Minutes passed and Slim flicked the butt away but didn't move from where he was sat.

Soon, the cold air had pierced his shirt enough to be uncomfortable. And George had been out here longer than him. "Come on," he stood, offered a work-roughened hand. "Jus' because it's Sunday tomorrow don't mean we need t' be up alla night."

A brief hesitation, and second calloused hand met the first. "Awright," he murmured.

The bunkhouse door creaked back open and the two headed to their respective bunks. George turned his head so he didn't have to lay eyes on the still-empty one. The skinner settled down amongst the coughs and snores of fellow workers. "Night, George," he mumbled.

"Night." Slim fell asleep but the smaller man didn't.

No point in sleeping- he knew what he had done. Didn't need reminding.
"Ya know, there's a sayin'," Slim drawled, cigarette smoke almost engulfing him. The rain pouring down hadn't stopped most of the men still going into town. Candy was playing cards with Crooks, leaving only him and George to sit quietly out on the veranda. George didn't look over at him but Slim knew he was listening. "That you can't save people- only love 'em."

"Folk say lots of things," George muttered back, hunching further over his knees. "Nd most of it ain't never worth repeatin'."

"You hadda, George."

"So you keep sayin'."

"And so you keep mopin' and drinkin'. Ain't gonna end well- d'you really need me to tell you that?" Slim flicked the filter off into the downpour, moved the tiniest bit closer like he knew George would respond to. The smaller man hunched ever so slightly more so he was a fraction of an inch closer.

"I can' jest forget him, Slim," breathed into the wind. "He were my best friend- dumb bastard though he may have been, he were my friend. I ain't had many of those."

"Nobody askin' you to pretend he never ev'n existed," he pointed out. "But ain't nobody askin' you to destroy yerself over it, neither. You can't, George. Y' shot Lennie to keep him safe, you can't jes' throw that all away by not keepin' yerself safe."

"I know," George rested his head on the wooden railing. "I know."
what you break is what you get

Chapter Summary

family is absent, family is nothing once it's gone

Chapter Notes

Title from the national, lucky you

1927

Family was not something a ranch hand had. 'Family' became abandoned soon after becoming working age and never brought up again. The farming life didn't mold men into sensitive, patriarchal husbands. It made harsh, grubby forms driven by anger. Family went the same way as the pulp magazines and stories of cowboys and Indians.

The fire crumbled to embers and Lennie snored. George Milton stared at the lonely star visible through the leaves. Maybe, he reflected, he had in fact gotten lucky.

1937

Family was not something a ranch hand had. And George Milton was no exception to that rule. The work day had been long and he was feeling the ache in his bones. But his little jar of liniment would make him far too comfy. So he ignored it.

Slim jolted him out of the aching slumber he had fallen in to and sat down gingerly at the foot of his bunk. "You miss him," it wasn't a question.

"Course," George replied. "Ain't no other way 'bout it, I had him an' he had me."

"No one else."

"No," the word fell from his lips like a rock. "No."
silence is grubby golden

Chapter Summary

7 months afterwards, George is quiet and Slim is trying

After the first two weeks, George appeared to get over what had happened. He withdrew and the other ranch hands let him. If anyone but a select few tried to engage him in conversation he stayed silent. Even those select few got only small sentences out of him.

George Milton was now like all other ranch hands: alone. And he tried to convince himself that he preferred it that way.

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7 months afterwards, a bug went round the ranch. It was a harmless sort of one, which didn't stop anyone from working. All who caught it got on, maybe missing meals. Or throwing up behind the bunkhouse with discretion.

When Slim caught it and threw up behind the bunkhouse, he expected to get left alone. Just as all the rest of the men had been. He didn't expect for George to come and stand next to him, steady him when he swayed. "Thanks," he murmured. George had spoken maybe a handful of words to anyone in the past 7 months. And he didn't plan to break with tradition now.

Instead, he just nodded and walked back inside the bunkhouse with him.

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When George caught the bug himself, he got on with it. Just like he got on with everything else nowadays: in silence. He expected for no one to notice. He was rarely seen at dinner, now preferring to escape in sleep. And when he escaped to throw up, he expected to get left well alone. He didn't expect for Slim to come and stand next to him, much like he had done. He put his head down again as the nausea came back. Closed his eyes and pressed his palms against the now-cool wood. There was nothing left for him to get rid of, but being sick was still on the agender. Bile burned his throat and he gave a pitiful retch, hoped he wouldn't fall over. He didn't think he would be able to bear the indignity.

He felt himself sway, felt the warm hand grip his shoulder and pull him upright. The hand fell away and George couldn't quite bring himself to say 'thanks'.

So instead he gave the long fingers a tentative squeeze and Slim seemed the get it.
(And I don't mind waiting if it's for the best)

Chapter Summary

And I don't mind waiting if it's for the best
A careful heart is better than none

Slim waits, because some things are worth waiting for. And he includes George in that list even if George doesn't include himself.
Or: Through the eyes of a stranger... somewhat

Chapter Notes

Title from Reasonable Man, The National

Tommy is a good sort of worker. Average height, average build, average strength. But he's young and still with complete faith that the American Dream isn't just achievable in sleep. Slim holds nothing against him; chats a few times. That sort of youthful, hopeful naivety is a rare thing on a ranch nowadays.

George doesn't talk to him, but Slim tells him not to take it personally because George doesn't really talk to anyone. Only Slim sometimes, and the Boss. Not Curley though, the Boss' son, no one likes Curley because of something so he stays away.

"Can he talk?" Tommy asked Slim, when he was still new. And it was a testament to his youth that he asked when George was actually in the room. The young worker had noticed a second later and-had they not been in the relatively gloomy bunkhouse- would have blushed.

Slim had shuffled the cards he held, dealt them out to the two of them and Carlson before he answered. "Sure, he can talk," he answered, calm like he always was. "If he has somethin' to be sayin', George'll say it." Tommy hadn't believed him then- even though Slim was the smartest guy he had ever met- because he had been there almost two weeks and the smaller man hadn't uttered a word he could hear. Tommy didn't think anyone could be that quiet, and he said so.

Slim and Carlson had shared a look then, one he hadn't understood. Eventually, Slim had huffed out a laugh, "Give it time, kid," he explained. "George ain't really much of a socialiser."

The expressions on the elder's faces had stopped Tommy asking any more questions about the broody George Milton. And, a week later, he heard him answer the Boss' questions. He had a quiet voice, or maybe he just didn't like being loud. A bit rough, though whether it was because of lack of use or simply life he couldn't tell. He didn't use any words he didn't have to and Tommy decided he really must not be very sociable.
It takes a while, because Tommy hasn't even kissed a girl himself yet, but he figures it out. Slim is waiting for George. Waiting for what, Tommy doesn't know. But he is waiting for something and George is part of the something. Maybe George is waiting for something that Slim is part of too but he can't work that out either. They're waiting for each other. Tommy can tell, because George talks to Slim. Admittedly, very rarely, but he talks. Not even because he has to, but when it's just them. And Slim talks to George differently than the other ranch hands. Softer, gentler, like he knows something.

Now, Slim is the smartest man Tommy has ever met, so he would probably wait for the something too. And if Slim is the smartest man he must see something in George that the others don't see. And George is so quiet and so broody it suddenly occurs to Tommy that he might not realise that he's what Slim is waiting for. But in a different way to Slim not realising. As if it isn't even a possibility, even remotely likely to happen.

For some reason, that seems a bit sad to Tommy. And he figures if Slim is waiting for something to do with George he must be a pretty unique guy.

Yeah, that was a good word. Unique.
They get out.

Not with Lennie, of course, because Lennie is... isn't.

But they get out, so George decides to sort of reward himself. And Slim, of course, because Slim has put up with him for ages now.

George and Slim did most of the work- George steadfastly ignoring how much easier it could have been with Lennie there- and Crooks looked after the horses and Candy did the easy gardening and cleaning and looked after the bitch and her puppies.

It was good.

Only it could have been better. It could be George-and-Lennie's room instead of George-and-Slim's with Candy and Crooks in the same room and all far too aware to make the spare room into an actual official guest room. Instead, it was the ghost room. Of what, well, that was personal and a man didn't ask 'bout another man's ghosts. It weren't right.

There was however, a few advantages of it being George-and-Slim's room.

~0~

One month, two weeks and five days after being properly settled into their farm, it is a tired evening. Quiet, not even because George still doesn't really talk all that much, but because a ranch is hard work; theirs or not.

A good tired, but tired.

Slim comes in from his evening cigarette- he could smoke in their room but he doesn't; a mixture of politeness and habit George would find quaint if he was the type of man to think of something as
quaint. And George looks apathetically from where he sits on his bed leaning against the wall as Slim switches his work shirt for his thin night one, puts his hat on his bedside table.

The thing is, Slim looks good, and George won't deny it, not anymore. Because being best friends/brothers with Lennie means he's a bit more accepting than most. Deep down, of course, it's mostly because that by the time he had the time to wonder if he was wrong for liking men he was too world-weary and strung out and disillusioned to really care and had just accepted it.

Maybe Slim won't mind, he reasons to himself. Because he didn't seem to when the front page was how a homosexual had gotten himself lynched in a tree.

Slim looks good.

"T' hell with it," George says out loud quietly. Slim turns and looks at him because those are quite possibly the first words he's said of his own volition in a long time but George stops him asking by standing up and kissing him.

Admittedly, it's wonky. Neither have done anything akin to this in too long and it's dirty and messy and awkwardly not quiet enough but none of that makes George not notice that Slim is kissing back.
huddle with them all night long

Chapter Summary

What did folks say again? 'Happiness is nothing if not from tragedy'?

Title from Demons by The National

They have some semblance of a thing going on. An illegal, probably immoral and disgusting thing, but a thing none the less.

Maybe their thing means George talks a bit more (to Slim only, but he is a bit less gruff with Candy and Crooks) and Slim smiles a bit more. It doesn't matter. Lennie will be dead with or without the existence of their thing and George will still secretly call all of the rabbits after his lost best friend.

Like Slim says: he did a horrible, inevitable thing in the nicest way it could happen. That doesn't and shouldn't stop him from being sort of happy and stable in his life for once.

And if, when George wakes up barely able to breathe and near tears with Lennie's name on his lips, if he keeps himself as quiet as possible so as not to wake Slim, well, he guess he deserves that.
Chapter Summary

Things can be good...
They're not

He doesn’t deserve it. Of course he doesn’t- Slim is good and strong and has the opposite qualities of all George’s bad ones.

He doesn’t deserve any of this. Not even the pleasure of tired quiet evening company of Candy and Crooks or the heavy warm weight of the bitch and/or a pup or two.

George might deserve nothing he has but he carries on taking it. Every man has sin he needs to repent for.

He can repent through the guilt though, right?
cigarettes (or the boy with blue eyes)

Chapter Summary

Everything you love will one day kill you, whether it's cigarettes, or drugs, or the boy with the blue eyes, they all kill you in the end.

Alternatively: rambling with much reference to Greek Gods.

Sometimes, George felt like Hades. Dark and beneath and dragging the Persephone dripping with gold down into the dust alongside him.

Or... he would. If they had taught that in school and made him stencil it out onto his slate and his mother made him recite it as he stood by the tall vase in the corner of the kitchen. Since when did a farm hand need to know the ins and outs of the gods of an ancient civilisation he could never visit the ruins of?

Slim gave him smiles that showed glitter and words brushed with the sins of richer men. And George treasured them, abducting every single syllable into the mine of his mind and foraging for them later on. Though by God would he let anyone else slip in to pry them from their veins and arteries. The gate leading to his heart was dull with the sharp edges of diamonds and disasters.

Slim? George nearly moaned into the thin pillow under his cheek, twisted the threadbare blanket until it was a stormy river and no use as a shield against the cool night's air. Slim belonged in the bright airy fields, George knew. Slim belonged to their ranch, this ranch, his ranch. Sure- George might keep away anyone with no good reason to come by, but Slim belonged to the ranch. He could see it stretching out, confident that his heaven would allow him to stretch his ownership as far as the eye could see and ground anyone with a strong hand on a shoulder.

If he had to, George was fairly certain Slim could contain all and every instance of chaos in their desperate, dusty country.

George hated him. And then he stored away the luscious compliments and mined them in time to his work and his calloused hands and Candy's sweeping.

Hades ended up marrying Persephone, right?
the ghosts are (mostly) friendly

Chapter Summary

when a ghost is not a ghost, what does a guy do?

Chapter Notes

surprise bitch, bet you thought you'd seen the last of me
no, I got my life together somehow

Another man might be thinkin' that six months after movin' in then one of them ought really be movin' out to the spare room. 'Ain't no need for all's grown men t'be cramped together like that', Slim can imagine him saying; nodding to hisself in his nondescript work clothes with his nondescript face.

Mayhaps Slim's doin' the imagined spectre a disservice- if he met the guy in person he'd be as nice to him as he is to anyone else.

But, Slim reckons to himself as he really should be sleepin', that guy is a nondescript nobody and not one of the guys who worked to buy their land and slaved even harder to keep it going. Long and short of it is: Slim don't give a damn what any other man might or might not be thinking.

Crooks and Candy share a room because they damn well want to. Slim reckons they deserve that. Occasionally thinks it's down to livin' out his work life all on his lonesome in a lean-to that Crooks likes their current arrangement so good, but he don't never say nothin' of the like out loud.

A man has the right to his own ghosts, and Slim ain't gonna be the one to take a man's rights from him.

Speakin' of ghosts-

Slim looks over to his current arrangement. A thin and quiet occupier of the bed on the other side of the room.
Well, true to the golden rule, nor Candy nor Crooks ever ask about his ghost and Slim don't ask about George's ghosts neither. George don't ask nothin' of no one; so much so that some days Slim can go dawn to dusk without hearin' a word outta him. That ain't really a bad thing. Slim's got a learned appreciation for silence. The things a man can think even if he can't say. His mother used to look at him, standing just above knee-high enough to rest his chin on the kitchen table, and she'd tut and say "you know people too much," and she'd shake her head so harsh sometimes he'd worry her hair'd fall right on out of the bun she'd tied it back in.

Just sometimes Slim'd like to go back there to that there on house and her sitting there with her stitchin' or her washin' and tell her back that-

He ain't never been able to put into words what he wants to say.

Wouldn't be nothin' bad, 'cause his mother'd been as good and as God-fearing as she could, and done no more wrong than she'd had to do to be practical. And Slim thinks that she would probably have dealt with him liking men with no more derision than she'd ever had for him day to day.

"Your momma don't like anyone," she used to tell him, knee-high and every other height after. "But I kept you, didn't I?"

Momma was a practical woman, he reflects. What'd she do, if she were him?

'Cept Slim's ghosts include love, see, and she never had need to consider much about them such things. She loved her son, and liked him little, though more than she ever liked anyone else. And Slim had always been sure inside that she didn't dislike him because of him.

That's the problem, he decides.

Slim's a sure man, and in spite of all the changes and uncertainties he's always been certain. A Godly calm, or something like, telling him where to go and when to leave and what to say and who to say it to and what sort of a guy he was sayin' it to.

If his Momma had been proud of anything, she'd been proud of her sure son.

And if Slim has ever loved anyone, he loved that woman.
What'd she say? He ponders. Considers asking the ceiling of all things.

What would that woman be sayin 'bout her Godly-calm son bein wrought through over whether a guy more ghost than man loved him back?

All Slim can come up with is: something practical. Wouldn't even be disappointed 'bout him bein in love with anyone, least of all a man. That was one of the things that'd proved her motherhood- she'd never been disappointed in him. Woulda gone right to the heart of the problem and ordered him to put it to rights, he the only exception she'd let stay under her roof awhile as he put it to right and fixed it.

Irony is, his heart is the problem.

The thought makes his lips turn up in a wry smile, and his lungs long for a cigarette.

His heart, for the first time in his whole life, needs to know someone loves him back.

What does a guy do, Slim wonders, when a ghost ain't a ghost? When it's a man who he wishes he'd had the chance to introduce to his mother? What is a ghost that isn't a ghost?

Slim knows what George is: grieving. But if a man grieved forever then he got so he couldn't do nothin' else. And George is something else. Something that stops him becoming a ghost. Only Slim don't know what it is, and it's damn near driving him crazy.

He wants it to be that George loves him back. Don't even have to be him showing it, Slim just needs to know he does and hear it even just once and then he'll be certain and he'll know George does and he'll- he'll just know.

Right now, though, he don't know. He ain't known for quite some time. Didn't know George was gonna kiss him 'til he did. Didn't know George had come outta his grief enough to even notice him, let alone start likin' him. And though Slim knows all the other parts of him life inside out- their farm and their friends and their semi-regular fumblings under the covers in the hot air- he don't know this one bit and it's sendin' him mad in all the other bits.
He realises he's curled himself up tight as a wire and slowly unfurls himself and turns to face George's back. He's gotta think about all'a this objectively.

He loves George.

How can he work out if George loves him back?

He knows George cares, Slim thinks. Ain't no doubt whatsoever about that. He'd bet the entire farm on it, and more besides. George cares about him, and has for a long while.

Maybe George didn't start lovin' him straight away, Slim reasons. Maybe there's been signs to show his feelin's have changed.

Most obvious is George kissed him. Where before it was just that he showed a marked preferences for Slim's company above anyone else's, now he's showed an honest to God voluntary interest in him. Continued interest, if their semi-regular fumblings are anything to go by.

And George talks to him. They had a conversation not even two days ago, which George'd been the one to start. Hadn't contributed as many words as Slim had, if anyone had been countin', but they'd talked, and George don't do that with nobody but him.

(Slim don't count when he calls for Lennie in his sleep, or whoever it is George is addressing when he wakes up near screaming that he's sorry. A man's ghosts are his own ghosts.)

Which leads to the question of why George ain't said he loves him back.

Possible George don't realise he needs to- Slim's done a damn good job of maintaining a facade of his Godly-calm.

Ideally, George wouldn't need to, 'cause Slim'd just know- but there's the problem again, and it ain't changed in all the time he's been turnin' it over.

Change, Slim thinks.
George changed the whole thing, kissing him when he didn't have the slightest idea he was goin' to.

'To hell with it', George has said before he declared his interests.

Well.

"To hell with it," Slim announced- though quietly, because he thinks that for once George is asleep before he is- and he gets out of his own bed, crosses the room, and gets into George's right next to him.

He holds the smaller man tight despite the heat because else one of them runs the risk of falling out the single bunk. And it don't answer the question, but it does let Slim stop thinking enough that he falls asleep too.
your ghosts are now haunting me too

Chapter Summary

Certain kinds of knowledge rob people of their sleep - Haruki Murakami

Chapter Notes

Title from "tiptoe through the true bits" by Los Campesinos!

George wakes up screamin' loud enough to wake the dead from their graves, sayin' that he's sorry over and over, 'til Slim thinks that if the person were here they'd make him stop lest it damn near kill them and make George even sorrier than he already is.

He'll be sorry as hell for himself in the mornin' if Candy or Crooks make any mention that he woke them up and they heard him, so Slim does him a favour by sitting up too and pulling close so he's screaming into his shoulder instead.

"It's alright," Slim assures him, trying to be loud enough to be heard over the screaming and quiet enough not to be heard through the walls. "It ain't real, George, it ain't real."

George stops screaming so abruptly that it near gives Slim whiplash. He's hot and clammy and shakin', but he ain't crying. Though Slim don't know if it's 'cause George just don't or 'cause he just can't.

Maybe, he thinks, this is what a ghost is: a man so hollowed out he can't even cry. 'Cept George ain't a ghost, is he? Not yet, anyhow, and the noises he makes might be what Slim imagines death to be like, but they're so horrible even the dead'd be scared away by them, and that thought is comforting some. Not very much, but better than nothing.

Slim's used to a life that ain't much but better than nothing. He can deal with it as easy as he can deal wit' a horse that gets all nervous.

Calmly. And gently.

"It's alright," he whispers into George's hair. "'S awright. It ain't real. None of it were real, it were on'y a bad dream."

For some reason, those last words make George laugh. Slim don't even recognise it for what it is at first- George ain't laughed in a long time, let alone for real. But he's laughin' now, and the real truth of it is harsh and crackin' and damn near painful enough to listen it almost cracks his Godly-calm down the middle.

(The horrible thought flashes across Slim's mind that if this is the truth, perhaps George'd be better off as a ghost.)

And his laugh is quiet. Above all else, everything George does is quiet and near silent if he can do a
job silent and as good as if he can't, and Slim shouldn't speak a wrong turn 'bout the dead but he could curse Lennie and Curley's wife a blue streak a mile wide. Not even a ghost could be so quiet. Before Slim knew what to listen out for in the middle of the night then he'd been certain that the gunshot hat'd exploded over the river and the valley and the mountains and all the way back even to the ranch had sucked all the noise above a whispher George could make and thrown it into the air over that damned river and those two damned corpses.

He forces his attention back to the one who ain't a corpse.

"A bad dream," George echoes, still laughing. "A bad dream, Slim, a bad fuckin' dream." He stops laughing and wheezes, and looks up at him with wide eyes and holds onto his with shaking fingers. "A bad dream," he repeats over and over and over. "A bad dream, a bad dream, a bad dream, is all i was, jus' a bad dream, and men have a damn sight too many bad dreams."

"It's alright," Slim lies. Part of him wonders if he'll wake up in the morning and look over to find the moon's washed away the last bit of whatever George had left.

"It ain't." George shakes his head. "I ain't. A bad dream, Slim, a bad dream."

"It weren't real, George."

"No." Something snaps and George stops looking at him even though his eyes don't move.

"Not none of it weren't- Lennie jus' wanted some rabbits." He blinks and then he's looking near into him.

"My dream were a farm of our own and no boss breathin' down my neck tellin' me what to do an' where to damn well do it. And we weren't never gonna get it, and I knew it. But Lennie only ever wanted to have a fuckin' rabbit- I could'a took the first fifty bucks I e'er earnt and got him a dozen Goddamn rabbits. Coulda gived him all he ever wanted and kept him outta trouble enough to get the money together for our own place. All's he ever wanted was jus' one goddamn rabbit, and now he's dead and somehow I got ev'rything I ever promised him, and all it took was to fuckin' well shoot him."

George's hand seize his shirt.

"You hadda, George," Slim says gently, pluckin' the hands off the fabric and clutchin' them tight instead.

"I hadda look after him!" George hisses back. "I hadda look after him, and keep him outta trouble, and I didn't do it. I didn't goddamn well do it, Slim."

"You did," he insisted. "You did until you couldn't. You knew Lennie better than anyone, George- it was jus' a matter of time before he did somethin' on accident, or saw somethin' he weren't meant to touch." George shook his head and looked away and Slim forced him to turn back again. "You looked after him, George. You know you did."

"I'd had one night away in town, an' I came back an' he'd been where he shouldn't and gettin' into trouble again. And I knew. I knew that, and I went played a game of goddamn horse shoes anyway. I went and played a game instead of keepin' an eye on him!"

Slim understands it all now, and he wishes he didn't. Grief and guilt are terrible things. Putting the two together can be damn near lethal, and George is just a man.

"George-" he falters, and for once he doesnot know if he ought to say anythig. "George- you needed
to- to not always be responsible for him. Lennie was a good man, and I ain't never gonna say otherwise, but he weren't easy to keep outta trouble. You looked after him damn near your whole life- you needed to have some part of it not always about Lennie."

"Lennie needed lookin' after. He needed me, and where the hell was I? I just as good as damned him for five minutes of bein' a normal farm hand."

"No." Slim's certain now- he has to make George understand. "The whole world damned him, George. For bein' how he was. For bein'- even for just bein' a plain ol' farm hand. You was fightin' a losin' battle the whole damn way, and someone oughta have helped you."

George shakes his head. Slim ain't never seen a man so distraught with not even one tear, and it's damn close to tearing him apart.

He pulls George close so he doesn't have to look at him.

"You know I'm right," he says gently. "You know. What woulda happened if you'd got your own land with Lennie- just the two of you like it was at the start? What then, George? It wouldn't have changed nothin'. There'd've come a day- sooner or later, I don't know when, but it woulda come- and Lennie'd get into trouble again. Woulda killed one of the animals on accident, or woulda wondered off somewhere, or even just knocked over a candle. What would you have done then?"

There's no answer to be had, and George buries his face into Slim's neck and sobs dryly.

"You'd'a been responsible for him for the rest of your life. Every damn minute of every damn day woulda had Lennie in the back of your head, worryin' what he'd do next. You couldn't do it all alone, and you shouldn't have had to."

"He was my friend," George whispers.

"I know," Slim murmurs. "I know he was, and it hurts so bad 'cause you're a good man. But it's like how I told you before: you can't save people, only love them."

"What's the point of lovin' them if you can't save them?" George demands agitatedly. "Why'd I go about wit' Lennie for all those years if I weren't gonna keep him outta trouble? Why do I love you now, when you're 'bout the only guy in the whole damn world who can lookafter hisself?"

He looks at Slim and crumples. Just slightly. "Is that why I love you?" he asks fearfully. "'Cause I ain't never gotta worry about you?"

Slim pulls them close so he doesn't have to look at him. "Why does anybody love anybody?" he replies. Thinks the world or the Lord Almighty or whoever is a damned bitch. But he's certain now. He's for sure fuckin' certain. "You think Lennie loved you on'y 'cause you looked after him?"

"No."

"Then give yourself the same credit, alright?"

George nods his head slowly. Slim don't know what possesses him, but he finds George's hand and grips tight. Somethin' is unravelling, he thinks. Somethin' in both of us. Like how the air gets too hot before a storm.

If George asks him why he loves him, Slim don't know what he'll answer. George has that effect on him. And he don't know how to put into words that he reckons he needed it all along, and George's the first person to ever disturb his Godly-calm. He don't know even if that's what he should say-
maybe it'd be better for him to tell George it's 'cause he's a good man, who cares even when he don't have to and he don't want to, and managed not to go the way of so many other ranch hands and disappear out of Slim's life for good.

"So," George starts, and Slim close his eyes like that's gonna do him any good when he don't have a clue what he's meant to say at the very time it's gonna mean the most. "What're you doin' in my bed, anyways?"

Slim blinks. "I was missin' you,' he answers honestly.

George laughs, and it's quiet still, but it ain't hollow the way it were just five minutes ago. It's- it's the nicest damn thing Slim's ever heard. He relaxes against Slim and presses against his side. "You'd best stay, then," he says.

'Cause it's Sunday, no one comes knockin' on the bedroom door when he and George miss breakfast. Slim props himself up on one elbow to peer at the clock, and finds it a little gone nine. He reckons it to be the first time he's ever slept in, and he ain't opposed to doin' it some more if he can wake up in the same circumstances again.

With that thought, he looks over at George, who is sleepin' safe and sound for the first time since Slim can remember, and the realisation makes him fear George is dead because it's so unusual. Even though he can see and hear him breathing, he's still fearful. But George has that effect on him, and always has done.

And now George loves him, and Slim knows for sure.

He got his answers, though perhaps in the cruelest way life could give them to him.

George loves him back.

All the other problems Slim'll let slide for a little while- Rome weren't built in a day, and those things ain't gonna be fixed jus' as easy as a cracked saddle or a broke fence.

He's hungry, though, and that's somethin' he can fix.
Slim strokes the hair back from George's face before pulling himself upright and changing out of his nightshirt. The sun comes in through the curtains a little bit, and slips a nice golden rectangle over the wall and down onto where George lies curled into the pillow.

He leaves before he's tempted to climb back into bed and never come out again.

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Two greetin's of "Mornin'" are grunted at Slim in unison as he enters the kitchen. He replies in turn, and silence falls back over the whole house.

He knows not none of them mind it, though. 'S a different silence to back on the other ranch. Comfy where the other weren't- that one crept into the bunkhouse when everyone where out in the fields and latched on in a way so's it couldn't be driven out even when the guys came back on a Saturday night shoutin' up a storm.

This silence is good. Or, at least, likeable. Friendly. What a silence should be, if there's to be a silence.

Slim likes it.

When he sits down at the table to eat his eggs, Crooks lowers his paper ever so, and asks, "Where's George?"

"Sleepin'," Slim answers, and makes himself only glance up a little, and not stare at either man at all, but he sees the look that flicks a'tween them anyway, and he knows they know George woke up screamin' last night.

But a man don't ask 'bout another man's ghosts, and he don't ask about him about those of a man who ain't even in the room, neither. It just ain't right.

(Slim knows they all got an idea of what all the ghosts they pile into the spare room are. 'Cept most'a the time they can keep the door of that room shut and locked tight, and the times when it ain't then askin' wouldn't lead to no good or anythin' anyone could fix any more. So they all leave it alone.)
They all sit in silence, and occasionally mutter 'bout nothin' in particular, and enjoy it.

***

After, Slim goes and checks on all his and George's jobs on their ranch before goin' back to check on the man in question.

He's sleepin' still, and ain't even budged an inch. Slim don't let himself worry 'bout it, though-sometimes George'll sleep straight through Saturday evenin' right to Monday mornin', and others he'll wake sometime Saturday in the dead of night and go sit out on the porch 'til well into Sunday evenin', and Slim'll wake up Sunday and find everyone's jobs done and nothin' to do but enjoy the day ahead and wonder if George'll be convinced to come to supper this time.

Slim'd empathise, only he's never known the feeling.

But he reckons it's 'cause George ain't good with havin' nothin' to do. Now, that's a feelin' he can understand, 'cause a'fore he became a man then he felt sometimes he didn't quite fit his own skin, and he'd had to learn how to occupy hisself and enjoy whatever time he got to keep as his own.

George, he reflects, ain't never had the chance 'cause he ain't never had nothin' to do. In some ways, Slim envies the man that.

He don't envy him now, though, however much he loves him. Learnin' just how you fit into the world and e'ryone in it takes it outta a man somethin' fierce, and it ain't no hardship to any of them to take on another's jobs on a Sunday, so when a man sleeps, then they let him sleep.

With no bosses but themselves, the only rule is work, and don't ask what another guy don't want to tell.

Well, Slim's done all the work he needs to've done, so he don't feel no guilt climbin' right back into bed next to George and fallin' back asleep with the certain knowledge that he loves him back.

***
The sun's near enough set when George finally comes outta his slumber, and Slim blinks himself awake from the doze he's fell into.

"Evenin'," Slim says; he can't help but bite back a smile when he sees George's hair all stuck up at the back.

George mumbles a barely-audible reply, as if talkin' more in the space of last night than he had for the entire rest of the past year has ripped any future reserves of speech out of him.

"Time's it?" he asks in the sleepy whisper that always without fail does something to Slim.

"Near seven Sunday evenin'."

George nods, turns over so he's facin' Slim more before burying into his chest with a sigh Slim knows to mean he's gonna go right back to sleep.

"You slept all day," he says gently as he tucks George under his chin and holds him close. "An' you skipt dinner yesterday, an' I know you're like t' skip breakfast tomorrow. Why don't you least try to eat somethin'?

"Not hungry," is all he gets. An' is Slim tries at tellin' him that he needs to eat 'cause he ain't that big of a guy again, then it won't get him nowhere.

Slim tries anyway.

"Not hungry," George insists. "You go eat if you want."

"I don't damn want," Slim says, feelin' as near to sulky an' snappish as he ever gets;

George seems to notice, 'cause he shuffles closer and says, "I'll try wakin' up for breakfast."

He softens. He ain't good at bein' mad for long. "I jus' worry 'bout you."
"I know." Silence, then, "Worry 'bout you, too."

Slim smiles over the top of George's hair into the darkening room. It feels like ha ain't smiled like that in a long time.

"I know. But you ain't kind to y'self, George. And I worry."

"Sorry."

"I ain't mad. Don't even rightly think it's your fault, either. But I worry."

"I know." George repeats. "I know."

Slim's just gotta accept on trust that he does, and lets the conversation go the same direction he can feel George's hand goin'.

"Do you want to... tonight?" George asks.

To his immense surprise, Slim finds that, "No," he don't, and George immediately pulls his hand away to curl round Sim's waist instead.

"Alright."

"But," Slim begins, then hesitates. He ain't hardly ever asked anythin' in regards to this area between them before, and though he's sure George'll give him what he wants he ain't sure how to ask.

"What?"

"Just-" Slim pulls both of George's hands closer and tighter, manoeuvres them to be near face to face, and settles into the mattress well as he can. "Could we jus'...?"
There's still enough light in the room for him to see George's smile before he leans even closer and kisses Slim gently. "Yes."

Slim feels a whole damn weight come off him.

George kisses him again, which means Slim of course really oughta give two kisses back jus' so it's all fair, and it goes on like that and winds slowly down with the settin' sun 'til they're both near sleepin' again, wrapped round each other tight as they can get.

"Night, Slim."

"Night, George."

***

The roosters wake Slim up the next morning alone, and when he hastily makes his way to the kitchen, George is already there cooking them all breakfast.

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